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Doing “Whole of Government” in Stability Operations

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Effective whole of government operations¹ are critical to the simultaneous application of defense, diplomacy, and development in the conduct of stability operations² (SO). While any whole of government effort faces the inevitable challenge of the clash of bureaucratic cultures, undertaking effective whole of government operations in the difficult SO arena presents exceptional challenges. This paper suggests some important, real world lessons in whole of government operations in SO. The lessons are drawn from observations of the operations of the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that served in Iraq from 2005-2011. The focus is on those lessons that can be applied regardless of whether the whole of government teaming is through PRT like structures or any other interagency configuration, large or small.

In the same way that the fifty United States, with their diversity of governing and political structures, serve as mini-laboratories for democracy, the PRTs served as mini-laboratories for whole of government operations in Stability Operations Working from their interagency platforms on U.S. Forces' Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) throughout Iraq³, the U.S. Department of State led PRTs and their supervisory and training organizations were allowed considerable flexibility to experiment with structures and approaches to facilitate whole of government operations. These teams achieved varying degrees of success under difficult and challenging circumstances in their efforts to derive maximum benefit from their interagency mix of US Department of Agriculture advisors, U.S. Department of Justice rule of law advisors, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' engineers, U.S. Agency for International Development specialists, Army Civil Affairs soldiers, U.S. Department of State political, governance, and economic advisors, Brigade Combat Team support elements, and more. Despite the many challenges, the teams usually managed to overcome the substantial hardships of operating in Iraq and were

¹ “A whole of government approach is an approach that integrates the collaborative efforts of the departments and agencies of the United States Government to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal. A whole of government approach is vital to achieving the balance of resources, capabilities, and activities that reinforce progress made by one of the instruments of national power while enabling success among the others. It relies on interagency coordination among the agencies of the USG.” Army Field Manual (FM) 3-07, Stability Operations, par. 1-17.

In the years since U.S. forces left Iraq and the accompanying dramatic reduction in USG civilian presence, whole of government operations have become much disfavored. This seems to be a result of two driving factors. First, resource constraints drive USG reliance on contractors to implement programs through local staff with minimal involvement in or oversight by the USG. Secondly, the policy arena is increasingly dominated by those without PRT experience and those who share a conviction that all things Iraq related are disfavored. Unfortunately, the contracted programmatic efforts are not subject to the same degree of daily oversight, evaluation, and critical analysis that characterized the PRT program. As a result, dollars spent rather than meaningful outcomes tend to dominate as current metrics.

² “Stability operations work to restore stability in post-conflict situations.” United States Institute of Peace, Glossary of Terms for Conflict Management and Peace-building.

³ At the height of the PRT program, a PRT was paired with the provincial government of each of Iraq's lower 15 provinces and a regional team (RRT) served the three provinces that comprise the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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able to operate as well-coordinated, interagency platforms, capable of bringing to bear the substantial benefits of their collective capabilities.

During my six years with the PRT program as a PRT member, a PRT trainer for both the Departments of State and Defense, and a PRT strategic planner with the Office of Provincial Affairs⁴ in U.S. Embassy Baghdad, I had the unique privilege of observing most of the Iraq PRTs train, plan, or operate. Drawing on their many experiences, I offer the following list of what I consider to be the key ingredients of their interagency teaming successes:

- 1) **“Whole of Government” describes a process, not a staffing exercise** – Properly employed, a whole of government approach to Stability Operations fully leverages diverse, interagency talent and capabilities as part of a comprehensive process to analyze, evaluate alternatives, develop action plans, and implement. That process does not achieve its potential when one member, or a subset of the interagency, develops a plan and later adds additional departments and agencies at the point of plan implementation. Joint training, shared development of the mission plan, shared oversight, and joint implementation promote an effective whole of government process that truly leverages the unique capabilities and interests of each member of the interagency team.
- 2) **Focus diverse, whole of government talents on well defined, mutually supported goals and objectives** – Individual effort, dedication, and persistence - standard ingredients for success - are insufficient to achieve real interagency success in the extreme challenges of the SO environment. Actual progress in this environment requires interlocking, mutually supportive, whole of government efforts that focus the many, diverse talents of the interagency participants on well-defined and shared goals and objectives (coordination and concentration of fires). Without such a unity of effort directed toward shared goals, the infinite flood of SO challenges (danger, resource shortages, political and social obstacles, isolation, personnel changes, weather...) will frustrate even the most persistent individual effort.

For the PRTs, unity of effort began with interagency support for and participation in training design and delivery at the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute and the Army’s National Training Center where each of those institutions engaged experienced, interagency talent to design and deliver training. The focus on shared goals continued in Baghdad where joint U.S. Embassy – U.S. Forces Iraq (USFI) planning teams developed and revised the Joint Campaign Plan (JCP) and Mission Strategic and Resource Plan (MSRP). These documents identified common goals and objectives for civilians and military alike. The JCP and MSRP were supported by numerous Embassy level, interagency, civil-military working groups (rule of law, governance, agricultural development, planning, etc.) which brought together the numerous interagency experts and practitioners in each area of specialization to provide continuous coordination and evaluation. At the operational level, the interagency PRTs and their military partners achieved shared visions through a team approach to work plan development. Through this multilevel coordination of efforts, State, Justice, USF-I, USAID, PRTs and the Iraqis all knew, for example, the importance of forensic evidence training to the overall rule of law effort and each was able to lend its unique capabilities and resources to that effort.

⁴ The Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA), based in U.S. Embassy Baghdad, managed the PRT program.

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- 3) **Staffing should emphasize quality over quantity** –Supervision and oversight in the Stability Operations environment are difficult, at best, and bad or weak performers can mean mission failure or worse. These challenges can be effectively mitigated through the use of high quality, independent operators whose professional qualities minimize chances for substandard efforts and wasteful drain of precious mission support resources (i.e. security teams, translators, bandwidth, and programmatic funds). Small, highly qualified, agile, well-coordinated, harmonious, and motivated teams of two to five individuals, supported by well-chosen local talent, can deliver results that rival those of much larger but less selectively staffed teams.
- 4) **Maintain the interagency mix at all levels from policy to implementation**– A strong whole of government mix at the policy level alone is insufficient. Plans and programs get passed through multiple organizational levels before final implementation by the field. If the interagency mix is not maintained at each successive organizational level, the beneficial influence that any member brings to the process is too often stripped from the final product as it passes through the organizational gauntlet. The interagency mix on the Iraq PRTs (State, Defense, Justice, USAID, USACE, Agriculture, and others) worked best when it was effectively matched with an identical interagency mix in the Embassy and that mix, in turn, matched the interagency planning mix in Washington, DC. This repetition of resources on these various levels encouraged generalized, flexible planning at the strategic level because interagency planners at each level could rely on their field based counterparts to adapt general guidance to meet local conditions.
- 5) **Adapt interagency processes and structures to mirror local processes and structures** – A primary PRT mission was mentoring and assisting Iraq's central, provincial, and local governments to function effectively as a unified team for the benefit of the Iraqi people. (Under the Iraqi Constitution, Iraq's central, provincial, and local governments are part of a single system, with local implementation dependent upon effective coordination with Baghdad for funding and implementation.) PRT success was most apparent when the U.S. whole of government structures and efforts mirrored the Iraqi systems so that, for example, the PRT Rule of Law Advisors, Governance Advisors, and Economic Advisors in the provinces worked in tandem with the U.S. Embassy's advisors in the ministries in Baghdad, and in turn all of these multilevel U.S. efforts mirrored the Iraqi national-provincial-local processes. PRT efforts that ignored the established Iraqi systems, overlooked the importance of Iraqi central government participation, or overlooked U.S. Embassy support tended to produce short term results, at best. The critical vertical and horizontal linkages within the U.S. Government were enhanced by periodic U.S. Embassy conferences that brought U.S. Government interagency experts together from throughout Iraq and beyond to develop contacts and exchange information, ideas, successes, and challenges.
- 6) **Whole of government operations work best when the whole of government is informed**– For the whole of government's participation to be a meaningful part of the Stability Operations mission, all components of the U.S. Government team must be fully informed at all levels, from the field to Washington, DC. Without extensive horizontal and vertical coordination, each successive element of interagency participation brings little more than an additional layer of uninformed bureaucratic clutter. To achieve the required level of extensive, real time, and far reaching reporting, PRTs submitted weekly, informal, comprehensive reports on a computerized template. This facilitated the real time flow of information from the field, both vertically (to policy makers) and horizontally (to fellow subject matter experts throughout Iraq). The templated format allowed the individual, raw reports to be automatically disassembled and reassembled by computer into a series of subject matter reports, one for each line of operations (Governance, Rule of

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Law, Economic Development...), and redistributed via the internet throughout Iraq and the U.S. This provided every USG subject matter expert on each PRT and their U.S. based support with a weekly, easily digestible, candid, summary report on the activities in his/her area of expertise throughout Iraq. Through this mechanism, lessons learned (good and bad) were widely shared in real time.

- 7) **Promote searchers over planners** - Much of what has been stated above could lead to a misperception that whole of government success in Stability Operations requires large, centrally administered programs. While coordinated goals and objectives are important to enable unity of effort at the local and national levels, the PRT approach of placing on the front lines highly skilled members of the entire interagency team allowed locally informed experts to depend less on the centralized “planners” and to serve instead as “searchers,”⁵ experimenting, thinking outside of the box, and tailoring the policy makers’ generalized priorities and methods to address local desires, local capacities, local needs, local resources, and other local conditions.
- 8) **Employ valuable whole of government assets sparingly** - The key strength of the whole of government team lies in the array of expert knowledge and skill: their ability to identify and communicate solutions, their ability to relate to and influence local experts and leaders, their experience in effectively communicating with policy makers, and their ability to marshal and exploit essential resources. Care must be taken to avoid underutilization or misapplication of these valuable resources – i.e., don’t field attorneys, veterinarians, and engineers to hand out soccer balls or oversee sidewalk construction.
- 9) **Incorporate substantial local assets from the earliest stages of the Whole of Government effort** - Placing U.S. experts on the ground with the necessary protections and other essential support is not practically sustainable over the long term. Planners for whole of government operations need to fully appreciate at the outset the extremely high cost (both dollars and lives) of fielding and maintaining teams of American specialists - engineers, lawyers, agricultural development experts, planners, mediators, reporting officers, governance and political development experts, and more. To extend the benefits achievable through these expensive teams of experts, they should serve primarily as trainers and mentors for a cadre of local experts whose efforts can be sustained over the long haul at a more sustainable cost. USACE provided a great example of this concept through their program to train and mentor a local engineering staff who continued to serve U.S. and Iraqi efforts well beyond the on-the-ground presence of the USACE engineers/trainers.
- 10) **Provide for continuity of effort over the long term** – Stability Operations success takes time. In the challenging SO environment, considerable turnover of personnel to sustain the effort is an unavoidable aspect of whole of government operations. This means an increased potential for loss of knowledge, loss of momentum, and loss of local support that must be constantly regenerated as U.S. personnel change over. Within the PRT program, these problems were minimized by staggered rotations, work plans, and local nationals. The staggered rotations for the USG team members were usually sufficiently gradual to allow the perception among the Iraqis that team makeup remained relatively constant. Dedicated cadres of local

⁵ [The White Man’s Burden](#): Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good. (Penguin Press HC, 2006 by William Easterly).

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nationals working for the PRTs provided actual, long term continuity between the PRT and local contacts. Work plans in turn served as guideposts for new team members and fostered a long term progression of effort, minimizing the tendency to restart the PRT mission with every rotation of USG staff.

While the PRTs are gone from Iraq, their extensive experimentation in the application of a whole of government approach to Stability Operations has much to offer whole of government teams of any configuration, mission, and area of operation.

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