

HOW TO PREPARE FOR STABILIZATION AND STATE-BUILDING MISSIONS

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Abstract. We discuss first the value and then the feasibility of establishing a capability for state-building missions. State-building has an essential role in defense strategy, not because people want to install better governments around the world, but because effective military plans cannot neglect the question of who will take local political power after the battle is won. We argue that a state-building mission can have a better chance of success if it encourages a balanced development of local and national leadership and systematically supports a federal distribution of power across national and local levels of government. The tactical direction of a state-building mission must rely on a corps of state-building agents who can work as a decentralized team, with limited resources, to support the development of a strong inclusive political system both locally and nationally. A summary list of basic principles for a state-building agency is suggested.

The question of how stable democratic states are established is one of the fundamental questions of social science. But it is also a question of practical importance for great nations whose power to deter international threats may depend, not only on an ability to defeat adversaries in battle, but also on an ability to make tactical victories serve larger goals of political development. This note considers questions about what America could do to be better prepared for future challenges of post-conflict political reconstruction or state-building, with hope of stimulating further discussion of these questions. Even if state-building preparedness is not a salient issue in current political debates, these fundamental problems of political development and international relations deserve careful consideration by experts in government and academia.²

Any discussion of how to invest in state-building capacity must begin with two questions: is it really necessary, and is it really feasible? This note will begin by considering how a capacity for state-building could strengthen America's strategic defense capabilities, and why America should be committed to democratic state-building. Then I will suggest an alternative conceptual approach for more effective planning of future state-building missions, based on the vital importance of cultivating of national and local political leaders with a balanced federal

¹ An earlier version of this paper, entitled "How to prepare for state-building," was published in 2017 in *Prism* 7(1):3-15 <<http://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM-7-1/Article/1298260/how-to-prepare-for-state-building/>>. The sections here on problems of weakness at the center and on state-building lessons from Gertrude Bell were added in 2018.

² We might equally consider what Britain or NATO or the UN could do to develop more capacity for missions of democratic state-building. In an earlier paper (Myerson 2014), I also considered the question of what international standards might be applied to certify that state-building interveners are acting effectively for the goal of establishing an independent democratic state. (See also Myerson, 2009, and Myerson and Weston, 2016.)

distribution of power. Then, after reviewing some lessons from past history and cautionary advice from experts on intervention, I will try to summarize some basic principles that this analysis would suggest. I offer these tentative conclusions here with hope that they may stimulate a broader discussion that may ultimately yield better principles for thinking more clearly about the fundamental problems of political stabilization or state-building.

The strategic value of a state-building capability

Politicians regularly argue for investments in many areas of military capacity. Even when everyone hopes that some military capability will never be used, people generally understand that investing in such military readiness can help to keep the peace. When operational problems reveal some weakness in an essential military capability, there is generally agreement that those operational capabilities should be strengthened. But unsuccessful results of recent state-building efforts have not prompted such Americans to invest in operational readiness for state-building. Instead of asking how to prepare better for such challenges in the future, politicians have found it easier to suggest that American military strategy should simply avoid state-building, as if the effectiveness of military operations would not depend on their political consequences.

This problem is not new. In a broad survey of American military history from the Mexican War to the invasion of Iraq, Nadia Schadlow (2017) observed that US military and political leaders have consistently underestimated the need to prepare for political aspects of military interventions. Schadlow identified several historical factors that may have encouraged this attitude, including America's traditional opposition to colonialism, and discomfort in a democracy with the idea of military officers exercising leadership in a political arena.

In recent decades, opposition to the idea of state-building in American defense strategy has been hardened by a series of disappointing failures in costly counterinsurgency operations from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq. The decision in 2004 to create a State Department office for coordinating reconstruction and stabilization operations³ was sharply condemned by Justin Logan and Christopher Preble (2006). They argued that a standing office for state-building operations would become an advocate for American involvement in such missions throughout the world, pushing a costly agenda for America to rebuild every failed state.

³ The State Department's Office of the Coordinator of Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) was the predecessor of today's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which was established in 2011.

Of course there is always a risk that any investment in any defense capability could encourage those who provide it to push for further spending to use their capability. But when an operational unit is considered essential for national defense, policy-makers have generally accepted the need to fund it, with an expectation that they will be able to rely on its officers to give professional advice about the costs and benefits of using their unit in conflict. Surely officers of a state-building agency could also be expected to accept a general professional norm of giving the best possible expert advice to policy-makers, without attempting to oversell the benefits of sending their unit into action.

Logan and Preble do not consider the possibility of such professionalism in a state-building agency because they implicitly assume that state-building operations have been motivated only by some idealists' missionary zeal for spreading democracy. Such an argument ignores the vital fact that military operations have political objectives, so that a capacity for post-conflict political reconstruction can be an essential component of strategic military preparedness.

That is, state-building may have an essential role in American defense strategy, not because people want to install better governments around the world, but because effective military plans cannot neglect the question of who will take local political power after the battle is won. A military victory would accomplish nothing if the devastation of battle merely created a political vacuum that dangerous adversaries could fill.

A policy of avoiding involvement in post-conflict political reconstruction would profoundly limit military planners' ability to develop deterrent strategies against current threats to American national security. The straightforward way to avoid state-building would be to accept a general strategic constraint that American forces can be sent only into countries where a suitable government exists and is ready to take power. But if American military forces can operate only in countries where a well-organized friendly government is ready to assume power, then adversaries in other parts of the world will know that they are beyond America's reach. Hard experience in recent years has shown that areas of ungoverned instability can become sources of global terrorist threats.

Thus, deterrence against international terrorism requires some ability to plan a military response against attacks from terrorists who are based in poorly governed regions. In such situations, the only way to avoid state-building would be to plan a military retaliation which aims

to devastate the terrorists' bases without making any attempt to occupy territory.⁴ With no attention to post-conflict political reconstruction, however, such a military retaliation could ultimately enable the terrorist leaders to consolidate power in their region, building popular support by posing as defenders against America's destructive power.

Indeed, a basic motivation for terrorist actions may be to provoke just such crude military responses, which destroy the basic structures of local communities and drive their inhabitants to seek protection from militant leaders. So when militants perceive that they could actually benefit from an American attack on the regions where they operate, American military power is no longer a deterrent, and instead it can become a lightning rod that attracts provocative attacks against Americans.

The most effective deterrent against international terrorist attacks from a weakly governed territory may be the threat that a military response would establish a stable government that could police this territory in the future, thus destroying the militants' hopes for local power. In this sense, an investment in readiness for state-building could provide a valuable deterrent against terrorism even if this state-building capability is never actually applied.

Accepting the challenges of democratic state-building

In the past, military planners had less need to worry about post-conflict political reconstruction, when victory in battle could be followed by conquest or colonization of the occupied territory. But such imperialist solutions are considered unacceptable in the world today, and so we face new and unfamiliar questions about what a victorious army should do when its professed goal is to support the establishment of a sovereign democratic state.

It is right and appropriate that America should maintain this goal of supporting independent democratic governments when it becomes involved in a military intervention. The modern global norm for independent sovereignty of every nation is based on principles that Americans have championed since the American Revolution. Today, when America has been acknowledged as the dominant superpower in the world, we have a vital practical interest in maintaining these principles. The alternative, a policy of installing neo-colonial authoritarian

⁴ Such a strategy of retaliation without occupation has been advocated by Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco (2011). A crucial gap in their argument can be glimpsed on page 132, where they assert that "Americans' hope should be that, in the wake of such devastation, those most capable of asserting authority and taking control will quickly rise to the occasion and then prevail." They fail here to consider the fearful possibility that the terrorists who provoked the American attack could expect to take power after it.

regimes in the aftermath of any American military intervention, would ultimately provoke stronger global opposition against America's military superiority and would increase military challenges around the world. Thus, hope for American leadership in a peaceful world may depend on Americans learning how to promote democratic state-building in the aftermath of a military intervention.

Recent experience has raised doubts about the feasibility of democratic state-building, however. Is it really possible for an international intervention to support the establishment of an independent democratic state in a nation where such a government has not previously existed? The ability of victorious armies to promote political change has been demonstrated by imperial conquests throughout human history. If armies throughout history have been able to impose exploitative foreign rule on conquered populations, surely a victorious army today should face less resistance to achieving the more benign goal of establishing an independent popularly elected government. The global spread of democracy in the past century is evidence for the possibility of new democratic regimes taking root anywhere in the world. Thus, even if recent state-building missions did not achieve their goals, we cannot simply conclude that international forces are powerless to support democratic political change. Instead we must try to understand what has undermined the effectiveness of these missions and made democratic state-building seem so much more difficult than imperial conquest.

Countering excessive centralization in state-building

In a classic study of counterinsurgency, David Galula (1964) emphasized that the essential goal of counterinsurgency warfare is to build a political machine from the population upward, and he also observed that political machines are generally built on patronage. Successful stabilization will depend on the new regime developing a political network that distributes power and patronage throughout the nation. As the US Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2007, appendix A-26) has suggested, winning "hearts and minds" may actually mean convincing people that they will be well rewarded and well protected when they serve as local agents in the regime's political network.

The effectiveness of a government depends, not on its general popularity, but on its ability to command the active efforts of supporters and agents who enforce the government's authority throughout the nation. Against threats from a violent insurgency, the government's active supporters must be motivated by a confidence that their loyal service can indeed earn them

long-term rewards and protection from the government.

If a community were occupied by an army that planned to impose permanent imperial rule, then its officers could offer promises of long-term rewards and protection to any local leader who served the new regime. But in a mission of democratic state-building, a popularly elected government is expected to take sovereign power from the occupying army, and so its officers cannot make any long-term promises to local supporters. Such promises can be made only by leaders of the new government.

Thus, if a state-building intervention is to establish a government that can stand on its own, its political leaders must develop networks of supporters that are wide and strong enough to defend the regime against those who would take power from it. There may be some regions where government supporters are not a majority, but a strong state needs at least some active supporters who will maintain the government's authority in every part of the country. If there are communities where the regime lacks any local supporters, then these communities can become a fertile ground for insurgents to begin building a rival system of power with encouragement from disaffected local leaders.

However, the hard work of negotiating with local activists to build an inclusive national political network can be expensive and tedious for a national leader. If foreign military support could enable a national leader to retain power without making so many promises to recruit supporters in remote communities, the leader might prefer to do so. Thus, foreign assistance can perversely encourage a national leader to keep the benefits of power narrowly concentrated in a smaller circle of supporters, neglecting remote areas, and this narrowing of the political base can perpetuate the regime's dependence on foreign forces. This basic impetus for excessive centralization can explain the paradoxical observation that vast international efforts to support a state may ultimately seem to weaken it.

Once we understand the problem, we can try to identify a solution. Foreign support may increase national leaders' desire to concentrate power more narrowly around themselves, but the distribution of power in a democracy can be regulated by constitutional rules. In particular, constitutional provisions that devolve a substantial share of power to locally elected officials of municipal and provincial governments can help to ensure that every part of the country has some popular local leaders who have a real stake of power in the regime.

Thus, a state-building mission can have a better chance of success if it supports a federal constitution that distributes power across national and local levels of government. Just as the

feasibility and cost of a residential construction project would depend on its architectural plan, so the feasibility and cost of a state-building mission can depend crucially on the constitutional structure of the state that is being established. To counter the tendency of foreign assistance to increase national leaders' bias toward centralization, foreign interveners need to actively encourage some decentralization of political power.

Of course, constitutions and legal systems are only as strong as the willingness of political leaders to enforce them. So the primary goal in effective state-building should always be to encourage a balanced development of local and national leadership in the new state. Too often in recent state-building interventions, American policy-makers have instead focused primarily on developing the capabilities of the national government from the top down.

Learning from the past

In 2002, America supported the creation of a centralized presidential government in Afghanistan, a country which had a long tradition of decentralizing substantial power to traditional local leaders. In subsequent years, America and its allies paid a heavy price to support the regime. When power became concentrated in the capital, there were many rural districts where nobody felt any personal political stake in the government, and so its authority could be maintained only with help from foreign forces and their financial subsidies.⁵

In Iraq, the successes of counterinsurgency in the Sunni-majority provinces after 2006 depended on local leaders' expectations of achieving some share of power in locally elected provincial governments. But America disengaged from Iraq's provincial politics as U.S. troops were withdrawn, and then sectarian political maneuvering in Baghdad led to a breakdown of federal power-sharing in the Sunni provinces, which opened the way for ISIS's advance in 2014.

Somaliland, since its separation from Somalia in 1991, offers an example of successful state-building that contrasts starkly with the repeated failures of internationally sponsored state-building in Somalia. The state in Somaliland was established by a series of negotiations among local leaders from every part of the country, without international support (Bradbury, 2008). In these negotiations, the participants' status as local leaders always depended on their maintaining broad popular approval in their respective communities. But in Somalia, once a leader became

⁵ For example, see Carter Malkasian's (2013) history of the struggle for Garmser in Helmand Province. Malkasian (p 178) described a successful counterinsurgency strategy in which the essential key was to offer some real authority to selected local leaders. But with no constitutionally protected local autonomy, political manipulations in the capital could nullify these locally negotiated power-sharing agreements, and so hard-won gains were lost.

part of the internationally sponsored state-building process, he could expect external recognition and subsidies that reduced or eliminated his need for broad popular backing (Harper, 2012). Such leaders in Somalia then built weak states that could not govern without foreign support.

The contrast between Somalia and Somaliland shows that international sponsors of state-building can do more harm than good when they support leaders whose positions do not depend on some form of local political recognition. This may be a good reason to promote democracy, but local accountability might not be through formal elections. Although the Somalilanders ultimately chose to introduce popular elections for positions of local authority in their constitutional system of government, the foundations of their state were initially organized by leaders whose positions depended on traditional clan institutions.

British military intervention into Sierra Leone successfully ended a long and brutal civil war in 2002. The empowerment of elected local councils in towns and rural districts throughout Sierra Leone has contributed to the long-term durability of the new democratic government since this state-building mission.

The best example of a successful state-building mission that avoided the trap of excessive centralization can be found in America's own history. During the Revolution after 1776, Americans instituted the Articles of Confederation in which power was principally distributed to the thirteen locally elected provincial assemblies. This decentralization of power created some difficulties in financing the war effort, but it gave the American Revolution a broadly distributed political strength that was essential to its ultimate success.⁶ In 1776, every community had at least one respected leader, its local assembly representative, who had a substantial vested interest in defending the new regime. One may imagine, however, that the outcome might have been very different if France, in agreeing to provide essential military support for the American cause, had insisted that the new republic should centralize all power under George Washington's national government.

It is sometimes argued that America's efforts at state-building have suffered from a naive assumption that foreigners would welcome democracy like Americans. But history suggests that the actual problem may have been a failure to recognize that people everywhere are like Americans in having local political interests that are as vital to them as their national politics.

⁶ This point is discussed further in Myerson (2015).

Problems of weakness at the center

Of course, the founders who wrote the U.S. Constitution understood that a strong political system is not built by decentralization alone, but by a balanced development of national and local government. Leaders at the local level should have some autonomous power to provide public services for their communities, but leaders at the national level must have supreme power to serve and protect the broad interests of the entire country. In successful federal democracies today, autonomously elected sub-national governments commonly control between 25% and 50% of total public spending. As a rough rule of thumb, one may suggest that any fraction in this range could be considered a balanced distribution between local and national governments, depending on the allocation of responsibilities to each level.

The international intervention in Libya since 2011 is the important recent case of a state-building mission that has failed because of too little support for building central capabilities of the national government. From the beginning of international support for the Libyan uprising, a lack of coordinating leadership among foreign interveners allowed some of them to compete in supporting and arming factions against each other, thus creating a patchwork of rival militias across the regions of Libya. After international interveners enabled the destruction of Qadhafi's regime, their failure to introduce any stabilization force on the ground in Libya meant that they could do nothing to help a national government to enforce its authority over these rival militias.

A decisive moment in Libya's post-Qadhafi history was in December 2011 when the transitional government initiated a system of payments to local militias from oil-funded accounts in the national bank.⁷ Thereafter, local militias had regular resources to sustain their forceful domination of their communities, and they used their power to prevent elected leaders from reducing these payments or establishing effective civilian authority over them. But history might have been very different if the new Libyan regime had instead distributed funds for local security forces to elected local councils, allowing them to determine which local militias should be integrated into a municipal police force. Indeed, a regular state-building doctrine of cultivating a balanced development of local and national politics could have suggested that some substantial fraction (up to about half) of the budgeted funds for security forces should have been used to empower local councils in this way, while the balance of the security budget should have been used by the elected national leadership to recruit trusted militia forces into a new national army. Of course, such a system would have favored militia leaders who were aligned with a governing

⁷ See Frederic Wehrey (2018, p 86).

majority coalition in local politics or national politics. But such selectivity is essential for political control over the use of force, and any militia leaders who were unable to align with a governing coalition in either local politics or national politics could have been compelled to acquiesce by these coalitions.

Barack Obama recalled that his expectations for Libya after the fall of Qadhafi turned out to be too optimistic because analysts had not predicted the degree of tribal divisions and the quick breakdown of administrative structures there; and he described this failure to plan adequately for developments in Libya after the fall of Qadhafi as the worst mistake of his presidency.⁸ But this failure illustrates how a state-building agency could have contributed to American foreign policy-making, by reminding policy-makers that weak capacity of central government and strong centrifugal forces of local politics must be expected as normal challenges in the political reconstruction of a failed state.

Unfortunately, after a political firestorm that followed from the September 2012 murder in Benghazi of a US ambassador, American policy-makers have become even more averse to sending diplomats out from the embassy to monitor local political developments in failed states. A state-building agency should have offered professional testimony about the extent to which risks of engagement with local political leaders in a chaotic country may be unavoidable when America's foreign-policy goals include support for political reconstruction in a failed state.

Wise warnings

Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus (2012) express deep skepticism about the ability of even the best international experts to plan a strategy for rebuilding a nation's political system in isolation from its local realities. They are appropriately critical of anyone who would claim to have a formula for guaranteeing success in state-building.

Gerald Knaus criticizes three different conceptual approaches to state-building, which he calls the *planning school*, the *liberal imperialism school*, and the *futility school*. Knaus criticizes the planning school's reliance on formulas for estimating costs of state-building, such as have been offered by James Dobbins et al (2007). Dobbins and his co-authors may have originally intended these formulas as minimal cost estimates, to warn policy-makers about the level of budgetary commitment that would be necessary for a state-building mission to have any realistic

⁸ See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* (April 2016), and "President Barack Obama on Fox News Sunday" (April 10, 2016) at <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2016/04/10/exclusive-president-barack-obama-on-fox-news-sunday.html>

chance of success. But Knaus is appropriately critical of planners who would claim that any such resource commitment could be sufficient to guarantee success. Knaus similarly criticizes the "liberal imperialists" who claim that a state-building mission can succeed when its agents act decisively to reconstruct national institutions, wielding full power to forcefully remove any obstacles to their reforms.⁹ Both planners and liberal imperialists are criticized by Knaus for over-confidence that success in state-building can be achieved by a well-planned intervention with a sufficient commitment of financial resources and military force.

On the other hand, Knaus also criticizes those of the "futility school" who believe that, by skeptically dispelling illusions about state-building, they can then dismiss any question of such interventions in the future.¹⁰ As we argued above, an effective defense strategy cannot ignore the problems of political reconstruction after a military action. Furthermore, the consequences of anarchy in a failed state can be so harmful, both to its inhabitants and to its neighbors, that other nations may prefer to invest in a state-building mission that offers some possibility of ameliorating the situation there. In such situations, Knaus would recommend considering intervention with a modest approach that he calls *principled incrementalism*.

Knaus's principled incremental approach is based on an understanding that interveners can support positive political change in a nation, but only by working with political leaders there, by encouraging political deals that advance the agenda of building a peaceful democratic state. From this perspective, the goals of an intervention at any point in time must be limited to what local allies are prepared to do, and should not be expanded to impress constituencies in Washington.

Rory Stewart emphasizes the importance of local knowledge in state-building. He notes a fundamental contrast between the level of local commitment that was expected of colonial state-builders in the 19th century and what is expected of democratic state-builders today. Where colonial officials were expected to serve for decades in a country before rising to top political positions, the democratic state-building interventions today may be led by officials who just fly in or serve a one-year tour. Stewart warns that, without a deeply rooted understanding of local political realities, modern state-builders have been prone to overselling their mission, exaggerating the adverse consequences that would follow from its defeat, and overestimating what they can accomplish with a new strategy and more resources.

⁹ Knaus cites Paddy Ashdown (2007).

¹⁰ The futility school may be exemplified by articles such as Logan and Preble (2006).

Stewart's warning against excessive reliance on international experts must include the author of this paper, who is an academic social scientist. But let me suggest that Stewart and Knaus are really arguing against over-estimating the ability of outsiders to transform a nation's political system, and for the principle that realistic goals and tactics for a state-building mission can be determined only with the involvement of local political leaders. These arguments do not intrinsically contradict a suggestion that an investment in state-building capacity should be based on some general strategic principles that can be applied anywhere.

If one tried instead to assume that every nation's politics is totally unique, then a strategy for state-building in any nation would have to be totally directed by the nation's best political experts who are willing to cooperate with the intervention. But such individuals are not neutral observers. The best expertise on any nation's political culture is found among the prominent politically active citizens of the nation, and such individuals generally have an interest in maximizing the power of leaders with whom they are connected. In particular, individuals are most willing to actively cooperate with an intervention when they are politically connected with the top leadership of the regime that the intervention would support, and such experts then may be systematically biased toward recommending a centralization of power in the new regime.

Thus, an agency for international state-building needs some general doctrine, at least to avoid the dangers of excessive centralization. Knaus and Stewart teach us that this doctrine should emphasize the basic fact that a sovereign nation's political system can be transformed only by indigenous political leaders. So a general strategy for state-building is needed, but it should only provide a broad framework for developing supportive relationships with local and national leaders and for promoting a balanced distribution of power between them.

Recently (2018), the U.S. Department of State, USAID, and the U.S. Department of Defense jointly issued a *Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR)* that recommends steps for developing the U.S. government's capabilities to meet the challenges of political stabilization. The main recommendations in the *SAR* are largely consistent with arguments developed here, but there are some important differences in emphasis. In particular, the *SAR*'s key recommendation for setting "realistic, analytically-backed political goals" through "analysis and iterative planning" seems to suggest that state-building missions should be directed by a very sophisticated central office in Washington. But we have argued here that realistic goals for a state-building intervention can be determined only in a process of negotiations with local and national political leaders in the country that we are trying to stabilize. Of course, policy-makers

in Washington must define the levels of resources that America will commit for the mission. But when the goal is to build an independent state, then the tactical direction of the mission cannot come from Washington but must rely on the agents in the field who are working with the local and national political leaders of this state. This managerial structure requires a corps of state-building agents who are trained to analyze basic problems in local and national politics, and who are prepared to operate as a decentralized team, with limited resources, to support the development of a strong inclusive political system.

State-building lessons from Gertrude Bell

To illustrate the qualities that can make an effective agent for state-building, we may consider Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), who took a leading role in the political stabilization of Iraq after British forces drove out the Turks in World War I.

First, we should ask, how did Gertrude Bell, a rich heiress who only entered government service as a volunteer after World War I began in 1914, develop the skills to become the greatest state-builder of her time? For many years before the war, she had been an amateur explorer in the Middle East.¹¹ In her Arabian expeditions between 1900 and 1914, she could venture safely out from the Ottoman-controlled towns into the desert only by asking for protection from the dominant tribal leader or sheikh in each region that she traveled through. Negotiating with gifts over tea in his tent, she would ask for a guide to conduct her through his region of influence, plus an introduction to a powerful local leader in the next region of her journey. Thus, Gertrude Bell had years of practice in identifying local leaders of Arab society and in negotiating with them to earn their respect and trust. This turned out to be excellent preparation for managing of a state-building operation, as British officers in Iraq recognized when Bell arrived there in 1916.

The British occupation ultimately led to the establishment of an independent Kingdom of Iraq under Faisal, a son of the Hashemite Sharif of Mecca, whose general acceptance as King of Iraq in 1921 was substantially promoted by Gertrude Bell. To achieve this political settlement, she negotiated with local magnates and tribal chiefs throughout Iraq, hearing their concerns and assuring them that a government under King Faisal would serve their interests. Bell's ability to identify local leaders and build relationships of trust and respect with them was essential to this process. Thereafter, Faisal and his successors held power in Iraq for 37 years. The downfall of the regime under Faisal's grandson may point to a weakness of political institutions (municipal

¹¹ See Bell's biography by Georgina Howell (2006).

councils and Parliament) that should have provided a framework for continuing Bell's work of developing local political coalitions to support the royal government.

Of course the political reconstruction of Iraq after World War I required more than one skilled political facilitator. As Gertrude Bell makes clear in her 1920 "Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia," the British administration of Iraq relied on a small but essential corps of career political officers who had experience serving as district magistrates in the British Empire. Bell (1920, pp 122-125) listed a total number of 106 local political officers who were assigned to the mission, but she remarked that this statistic included individuals on leave or in a neighboring country, and that the number of full-time political officers who were actually managing local government in Iraq seldom exceeded 70.¹² Bell also reports that these 70 local political officers were overseen by a central administrative office in Baghdad that included just 5 senior British officials (a stark contrast with the concentration of American officials in Baghdad's Green Zone after the fall of Saddam Hussein).

In her overview of the 1920 administration of Iraq, Bell indicates that each of these local political officers had primary responsibility for supervising all political, fiscal, and legal matters in his district or division. Political officers generally acted only with in consultation with a representative group of local notables, so that their judgments could achieve broad popular acceptance with minimal reliance on external force. Thus, although the British occupation of Iraq was a foreign-imposed government, its policies were shaped by decentralized network of officials who were professionally sensitive and responsive to local political forces throughout the nation. The successes of the British state-building mission in Iraq after World War I depended on the fact that the British Empire had an ample supply of such professional district magistrates for its colonial operations.¹³

Today the goal of international interventions is not to establish colonial regimes, but to establish a stable political system for an independent nation. Where colonial political officers were expected to act in consultation with local councils, today we could only expect that local councils might act in consultation with an international state-building agent. Where the power of colonial political officers was ultimately buttressed by their ability to call for punitive military action against local resistance, the influence of state-building agents today would depend instead

¹² We may note that, having 70 professional political officers in Iraq after World War I meant having about 20 officers per million people in the population.

¹³ For a colorful introduction to the training and experience of local political officers in the British Empire, see the memoirs (published 1961) of John Beames (1837-1902), who served as a district magistrate in colonial India.

on their power to bring international assistance for local cooperation. But the basic lesson that we may take from Gertrude Bell in 1920 is that the management of a state-building mission should rely on a decentralized team of agents who can negotiate effectively with local leaders throughout the country.

A tentative list of basic principles

To summarize the argument of this paper and (hopefully) to stimulate further discussion of these issues, let me offer here a tentative list of seven general principles that might help to guide the establishment of an effective state-building agency. For specificity, I discuss these principles here as if they would be applied to an agency of the American federal government, but we could equally consider applying such principles to a state-building agency that might be established by another great nation or international organization.

1. *Do not try to oversell the state-building mission to policy-makers at home.* Before an intervention, state-building agents should have a professional responsibility to make sure that leading American policy-makers understand the potential long-term costs of the intervention. In particular, policy-makers should be warned that, in failed states, weak capacity of the central government and strong centrifugal forces of local politics must be considered normal, and that state-building goals may require some risks for agents to connect with local leaders. After an intervention has begun, state-building agents should encourage American policy-makers to keep the mission's goals bounded by the limits of what local leaders can be realistically expected to do, because a state-building mission can only encourage reforms that indigenous political leaders will support.

2. *The essential core of a state-building mission is to cultivate and support effective political leadership both locally and nationally.* The defense of a democratic state against insurgency will ultimately depend on active leaders in every community who have the ability to mobilize local political supporters and who have a stake worth defending in the national regime. Effective political leaders need reputations for providing patronage benefits to their supporters and for providing public services to the wider population of their communities. To cultivate such leadership, responsibility for public spending should be distributed with clear public accountability. Development projects can contribute to the political goals of state-building only to the extent that these projects enhance the reputations of the political leaders who oversee the projects. Similarly, a military operation to strengthen the government's authority in a district is

misdirected if allied local leaders do not consider it helpful, and their views should be actively solicited in planning and evaluating such operations.

3. Beware of the danger that foreign support for a government can induce its officials to become more dependent on foreigners than on their own people. State-building interveners must continually ensure that they are supporting leaders of the host government who have a real base of popular political support, and are not simply maintained in their positions by the recognition and support of foreign interveners. Competitive elections can provide evidence of broad popular support, but there will be long intervals between elections. It may be helpful, therefore, to use a system of parliamentary responsibility, where a broad representative council has the power to replace the regime's executive officials at any time, both in the national government and in local governments.

4. State-building agents should work to develop an appropriate balance between the national and local levels of government. Military assistance may be needed to ensure that the national government has at least some basic ability to command forces for enforcing its authority. However, state-builders should be ready to counter a natural inclination of national leaders to push for more centralization of power, which can become excessive when it makes the regime chronically dependent on foreign forces to maintain its authority outside the capital. A state-building mission can help to develop an appropriate balance between the national and local levels of government by supporting a reliable and transparent distribution of budgeted funds to all levels.¹⁴ But any division of power entails some potential for tension between different branches of government, until the lines of constitutional authority for each branch become generally recognized and accepted. State-building agents may help by suggesting principles that other countries have found useful for defining a proper division of responsibilities between different levels of government.

5. State-building agents should have power to direct international assistance in the regions to which they are sent, and it should be expected that at least some members of the state-building team will maintain a long-term involvement with the host nation. A state-building agent needs some autonomous authority to direct international assistance in the agent's area of responsibility, so that such assistance can be awarded to encourage political cooperation. But the ability of state-building agents to influence a nation's political leaders can depend also on

¹⁴ A sustainable fiscal decentralization will depend, as Ghani and Lockhart (2008) have argued, on the effectiveness of the national finance ministry, which must be able to distribute funds reliably and accountably under clear rules.

expectations that cooperation with the American mission will be remembered with gratitude by agents of the American government. So there should be some expectation that American state-building agents will be able to develop and maintain long-term relationships with local political leaders. Of course agents in the field cannot make unlimited promises for the US government, and state-building agents must never promise to keep any particular leader in power against the votes of his countrymen; but a local leader who responds to Americans' requests today may reasonably ask for some reciprocal right to get Americans' attention in the future. For this purpose, it may be useful to establish a general policy that at least part of the state-building team should remain involved with this country for many years after the mission, perhaps at positions in the American embassy.

6. *To train for state-building missions, agents should study local governments in different parts of the world.* A state-building agency must be ready to organize provincial reconstruction teams that could be sent anywhere in the world to support the establishment of effective local government against threats of violent insurgency.¹⁵ For such a mission to support local political development in any country, agents should bring some understanding of how local governments have been organized in other countries that have similar cultural traditions. Thus, state-building agents should have broad training in comparative local politics.

7. *A state-building agency needs sufficient funding to recruit a corps of long-term career officers who could have otherwise chosen careers in military or diplomatic service.* Post-conflict political reconstruction does not utilize expensive weapons systems, and so it has not been a profitable priority for defense contractors. But it requires some investment in staffing units that would be ready to support political reconstruction in the aftermath of conflict anywhere in the world. The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations in the State Department could be a natural institutional home for these units, as their members would need the kind of deep analytical understanding of politics and government that is regularly demanded in diplomacy.¹⁶ But state-building agents would need to focus on problems of local government and on challenges of maintaining a balanced relationship between local and national politics, which is different from the traditional diplomat's focus on national and international political issues. State-building agents would also need a broad mix of financial, managerial, and linguistic skills, along with basic military training to operate in an area of conflict. So the practical skills that

¹⁵ See Carter Malkasian and Gerald Meyerle (2009) on the effectiveness of provincial reconstruction teams.

¹⁶ Max Boot and Michael Miklaucic (2016) have suggested that state-building missions could be led by USAID, but this would require fundamentally reconfiguring USAID, which has a valued reputation for nonpolitical assistance.

would be required in a state-building agency could be different from what is generally expected in diplomatic or military service, while combining substantial elements of both.

There are at least two reasons for suggesting that post-conflict reconstruction should be the responsibility of civilian agencies, even though its mission would be complementary to the military. First, the armed forces need to focus on maintaining their ability to prevail over any adversary in any battlefield, and asking them to also prepare for political missions would be a distraction from their core military function. Second, an agent whose job is to support political reconstruction must become proficient at recognizing dysfunctional political systems and intervening to repair them. For the sake of America's civilian-led political system, it would probably be better to separate such a job from control of the world's most powerful weaponry. But civilian state-building agents would need sufficient military training to be able to operate under military command in a theater of active conflict.

In conclusion, it may be worth recalling again Galula's (2009) famous summary of the goal in state-building: *Build (or rebuild) a political machine from the population upward*. The phrase "from the population upward" should indicate the importance of developing the new regime's local political roots, but this point has not always been emphasized in practice. To put more emphasis on this point, we could suggest an expanded summary statement: *Cultivate and protect responsible local leaders in communities throughout the nation, and help local and national leaders to work together in a democratic system of political networks that reach out to the whole population*.

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