

*Remarks for local-authorities session 5 at Chicago conference, May 15-16, 2020*

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I have argued that a balanced relationship between institutions of local politics and national politics can be vital for democratic development, and the promotion of such a balanced relationship must be a primary concern for any state-building mission that has promised to uphold democratic sovereignty in the recipient nation. Where the state has been weak and unreliable, people must seek protection from groups that have force in their community, and a strong democratic state cannot be established without broad support from leaders of these local groups that people trust. A new state can earn such local support by allocating a substantial share of public funds and responsibilities to autonomous local councils, so that local leaders throughout the country can have a stake of power in the new regime. I will argue now that, to promote such decentralized power-sharing, a substantial portion of state-building assistance should be directed by a team of local political coordinators whose job is to encourage inclusive coalitions for local governance.

Both among senior government policy-makers and among academic political scientists, there has been a tendency to focus just on national political development. When foreign state-building assistance is focused only on developing the capabilities of the central government, the result can be a highly centralized state that implicitly threatens local interests and alienates local leaders in many parts of the country. Insurgencies can grow in communities where local leaders feel that they have no stake in defending the state. But when a new state's vulnerability to such insurgencies is reduced by foreign assistance, then the state's national leaders might actually prefer to keep the benefits of power more tightly concentrated in a smaller circle of friends and active supporters. This narrowing of the political base can perpetuate the regime's dependence on foreign forces.

These problems can be seen in the recent history of Afghanistan, where America has fought its longest war to support a centralized presidential regime. In Carter Malkasian's 2013 book (p178), he described a successful state-building template that involved recruiting some respected local leaders, helping them to organize a local militia, and funding local projects for them, so that they could offer protection and patronage for people who supported them in defense of the state. When this template was applied in the Garmser district of Afghanistan's Helmand province, the recruited leaders were able to stabilize their district, but only until the President's office intervened to take power away from them, and then the local political settlement completely unraveled.

This state-building strategy failed, I would argue, because the centralized Afghan state made no provision for any power to be exercised by autonomous institutions of local politics, and so there was no way to protect local political deals from national political interference. As long as any local authority could be dismissed by the President at any time, there would be large

regions where nobody would have any real incentive to lead their neighbors in defense of the state.

On the other hand, we may look to Libya since 2011 for an example of a state-building intervention that 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.

According to Frederic Wehrey's 2018 book, 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. Thereafter, local militias had regular resources to maintain forces which could dominate 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.

Of course, the largest share of the security budget was needed by the elected national government to recruit a new national army. But advocates for balanced democratic development could have recommended that some substantial fraction of the security budget (perhaps 40%) be distributed to local councils, to support a local political process for establishing security in each part of the country.

Any foreign assistance for such local political development should be directed by a local coordinator who can monitor local politics and allocate this assistance to encourage the formation of an inclusive coalition for local governance. But I would argue further that these local political officers, as a team, should also play a key role in determining the overall strategy of any mission for democratic state-building.

When the goal of an international intervention is to support the development of a sovereign democratic state, the strategic direction of the intervention should depend on regular input from the political leaders who will be competing for power in the new state, both at the local and national levels. Realistic goals for a democratic state-building mission can be determined only in a process of negotiations with the contenders for local and national power in the state. Thus, a democratic state-building mission should take vital strategic direction from a decentralized team of local political officers who are actively engaged with national and local leaders in every part of the country. If instead a state-building mission takes its political direction from analysts in Washington DC (or in an isolated "Green Zone" fortress), then it must expect to be seen as a threat to the country's independence.

For example, it was not until six months after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that the Coalition Provisional Authority had a network of local political coordinators in every province and began soliciting weekly political reports from them (Dobbins et al. 2009 p27, 259; Sky 2015 p7-72).

Violent insurgencies took root during these months of misdirection. I would suggest that, as a basic principle of strategic planning for any such state-building mission, a network of local political officers should have been ready to go to work in every part of the country from the first week of the occupation, and the mission's political direction should have depended critically on these local political officers' reports and recommendations from the second week onwards.

A useful comparison may be found in the previous state-building mission in Iraq, after World War I, when a British invasion led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq, which governed from 1921 to 1958. Gertrude Bell wrote in 1920 (p122-125) that the British occupation of Iraq had just 5 senior British officers in its central administration, which may be contrasted with central concentration of administrators in Baghdad's Green Zone in 2003. Instead, the British administration in 1920 relied on a decentralized corps of about 70 local political officers who had experience serving as district commissioners in the British Empire. Although they came with an invading army, they formed an administrative network that could monitor and respond to local political forces throughout the country.

In a recent paper (Myerson 2019), I examined the basic operational principles that the British used to establish political order in countries all around the world in the late 19th century. Frederick Lugard, one of the last great colonial state-builders, wrote 100 years ago that there were 3 essential principles of state-building: Decentralization, Cooperation, and Continuity. Let me suggest how these principles could be applied to democratic state-building in the 21st century.

Lugard's principle of Decentralization referred to the devolution of wide powers and responsibility to a local political officer in each part of the country. When the goal of foreign assistance is to support political development, then broad power over all foreign assistance in each district should be delegated to one local political officer, who can oversee the allocation of aid to local groups. Then Lugard's principle of Cooperation stipulated that these local political officers should use their power over foreign assistance to promote the formation of a broad inclusive coalition for local governance, by directing aid to local leaders who cooperate with each other and with the national authorities.

Local political officers should be expected to work full-time in their district for a term of one or two years, but then they should be rotated to other districts (so that a local officer cannot establish independent personal authority anywhere). Thus, for Continuity, Lugard recommended that each local political officer should report to a supervisor who has long-term responsibility for a province that may contain the districts of just 3 or 4 local political officers, and these provincial supervisors should be actively involved in formulating the long-term strategic direction of the whole state-building mission.

Such local political officers could be compared to the diplomatic members of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in recent state-building missions. But these local political officers should have authority to direct all foreign assistance in their locality, and they should be clearly expected to use this authority for encouraging the formation of a broad coalition of local

leadership that can exercise power constructively within the new national political system. Furthermore, the local political officers and their provincial supervisors should serve as the principal source of advice and guidance for top policy-makers in formulating the state-building mission's overall political goals and strategies.

A key difference between the old colonial state-builders and today's democratic state-builders is that a state-building intervention today needs a clear exit strategy. Within a clearly limited number of years, the interveners' goal of supporting political development must give way to the normal principle of international respect for national political independence. Then, during a period of transition, the portion of foreign assistance that is directed by the team of local political officers should be reduced gradually from 100% down to 0; and other independent aid organizations should be encouraged to fill in wherever needs are identified by the new state's national and local authorities.

*The ideas in this note are developed further in:*

- R. Myerson, "Standards for state-building interventions," in *Economics for the Curious*, edited by Robert Solow and Janice Murray (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pages 174-188; also online at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/std4sb.pdf>
- R. Myerson, "How to prepare for state-building," *Prism* 7(1):3-15 (2017), and <https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/prepare4sb.pdf>
- R. Myerson, "State-building lessons from the British Empire" (2019), <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/sblessons.pdf>

*Other references:*

- Gertrude Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1920); reprinted by Forgotten Books (London, 2015).
- James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle, and Siddharth Mohandes, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (RAND, 2009).
- Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922; 5th ed. 1965; reprinted by Routledge, New York, 2005).
- Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (Oxford, 2013).
- Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (Public Affairs, 2015).
- Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2018).

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<<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/conference2020/>>