

LARRY SAMPLER REMARKS:

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I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to participate in these two days of events; especially with so many people with whom I've worked around the world and who I hold in such high esteem. I sincerely regret not being able to see you all and spend time "in salon" with such great minds!

By way of personal context, I have also lived and worked in Afghanistan fairly extensively since first arriving there early in 2002. I supported the Emergency Loya Jirga, which involved grass-roots efforts in every province of the country, culminating in what we would consider a national convention, and stayed to replicate that role – at the specific request of the Afghan Government – for their Constitutional Jirga or convention. I formally joined the UN Assistance Mission as Chief of Staff to Lakhdar Brahimi, then Jean Arnault as SRSGs and, upon my departure, returned to Washington where I continue to work on and in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan extensively, with engagement in other conflict or post-conflict settings such as Yemen, Colombia, Somalia, Ethiopia, and WBG. I've lived this work in the field as a Green Beret, but also as a contractor for USAID and the State Department, a DoD advisor and, most recently, a senior government official in Washington. So I've seen the problems discussed in both papers from a variety of perspectives, and hope that I can contribute something to the excellent material presented by Jennifer and Roger.

But, as a point of humility, let me note that when in the past I have spoken about Afghanistan, I make it a point to leave three empty chairs somewhere in my line of sight. One each for the international and Afghan warriors who have died to help rebirth this country, and one for the ~true~ Afghan experts who, as both Jennifer and Roger advocate, should be much more involved in these processes.

I am going to begin and end my remarks with quotes from T.E. Lawrence's "27 Articles," written after his involvement in the Arab Revolt; around 1917. It is worth noting that Colonel Lawrence was, by training, an archeologist before he was a military officer: Training that unquestionably helped him avoid some of the pitfalls that we are discussing in this conference.

“Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better that the Arabs do it tolerably themselves than you do it perfectly for them. For it is their war and you are to help them, not to win it for them.”

This quote has been repeated, in various formulations, for decades. I think that, to some degree, it's relevant in a macro way for assistance, but also specifically in the circumstances being discussed here. Because, as Jennifer noted in her paper, "Afghanistan should always be a painful reminder to policy-makers about the limits of their ability to understand conflicts and effectively intervene."

Jennifer's paper, informed by her experience living and working in Afghanistan, draws attention to an eternal debate about center-periphery, top-bottom, external-internal, donor-driven – locally led orientations for our work. She makes a strong case for better understanding of local social and political dynamics before and during interventions, but I might challenge her on how far she takes that understanding. She notes in her paper that ***“Those seeking to rebuild fragile states might save money, blood and treasure if they considered ways to make new regime mirror lived realities of the societies rather than serving as aspirational social engineers.”*** I don't, in principle, disagree with that as an

aspirational statement, but don't know that it is a template for universally-successful interventions.

There are at least two contravening pressures that are relevant: First is that the "lived realities" in – for example – Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation and years of brutal civil war and famine were not something that anyone wanted to mirror. One could argue that we could at least have done a better job of recognizing and building-upon the successful local forms of governance – formal or informal – and respected the existing power structures. And without doubt, that is sage advice.

But consider the lived realities of Afghans living in the far Western province of Herat. Ishmael Khan was, by almost unanimous recognition, a competent Governor. He managed the highly profitable border crossing with Iran, kept his city and Province clean and in order... He might have been an excellent candidate for recognizing and building upon existing local governance. However: He maintained as an element of his government what were known as "Vice & Virtue Police Officers. They enforced restrictions on music and videos that might become available in the city but, more heinously, they would detain and sometimes physically beat unmarried couples seen walking together in public, and infamously, would drag unaccompanied women to a local clinic to verify her virginity. His rule in Herat was despotic, but effective.

Of the 34 Provinces in Afghanistan at the time, I don't think any of them truly reflected an aspirational "lived reality," that either the residents would want to replicate or that donors would want to fund.

That's a nice segue to the second contravening pressure: Donor expectations. In 2002 the US viewed Afghanistan as a horribly dangerous failed state: And with good cause. And as stories emerged of the squalid conditions (by Western standards) under which most Afghans lived, there was not much to be seen in the country that was considered worthy of replication. Gender, for example, was nowhere in Afghanistan given anything like the kind of attention that modern donors required. The most progressive province at the time was probably Bamian, which did produce the first female governor in the country, and who did allow significant freedoms for their women and girls, as compared to other parts of the country. And, in my experience, Bamian was one of the provinces where indigenous mechanisms of governance were least disturbed by international interference (at least initially).

But even in Bamian, dominated by the Hazara ethnicity, they had their own despotic and brutal warlords who had to be managed by some combination of coercion and co-option.

So, while I applaud the notion of knowing and understanding local formal and informal governance and dispute resolution realities, I'm not sure that they are always going to be the best way forward when building an entire state, or palatable to donor governments. And I think that the decisions about center-v-periphery as the primary focus has to depend on the situation.

For additional research along these lines I think some case comparisons between the intervention in the Balkans beginning at the end of THAT brutal war in 1996 and the intervention in Afghanistan in 2002. The former had been a strong central State, with clearly identified sub-national identities until Tito's death: At which point the State began to fail and political national identities (and grievances dating back to WWII) began to emerge. This in direct contrast to the Afghan experience, where there were also strong sub-national identities and a recognition and loyalty to a national identity as well. What there was not in the Afghan experience, however, was any positive experience with strong central governance. So the international experiences in those two settings were quite different and, perhaps, instructive.

I think Jennifer also does an excellent job of identifying the different perspectives and motivations of State-building exercises. The US in the year 2002 was not interested in being “aspirational social engineers.” We wanted a State that could police its territory and prevent malign actors from using it as a launching ground for international attacks. Some of you may recall that the initial ISAF – International Security Assistance Force – was extremely limited in geographic and substantive scope: Securing nothing more than the city of Kabul, and with no State-building mandate at all. Likewise, the UN Assistance Mission in those early days was still staffed by devoted UN personnel who had served with the UN Special Mission, under the Taliban and, while geographically dispersed, were still quite narrow in substantive scope.

A key takeaway for me from Jennifer’s paper was that we should not “stumble” into state-building exercises, because that tends to exacerbate the intellectual failings that she identifies in her paper. With deliberate planning for a state-building exercise, we could identify the local networks and nodes on which to build a new system of governance. But when state-building evolves as a form of mission-creep on the part of donors, we wind-up using the wrong tools to do the wrong things with far too many resources and far too many marginally-competent people and institutions.

Jennifer’s recognition of the dangers of “building states when the state is the problem” is astute. But it also represents another recurring dilemma for the development community: Enduring resources will not be forthcoming from established donor states without building a recognizable Westphalian State with which to engage. Humanitarian assistance is well-and-good, but the heavy lift of institution-building must – in the eyes of most donors, I believe – result in a State.

I think Jennifer’s recognition of the tendency of well-meaning international actors to “misdiagnose the landscape” is spot-on. It’s why I think more scholar-soldiers like Lawrence – and like those men and women who braved not just the hardships of Afghanistan, but also the scorn of fellow scholars to support the Human Terrain Teams in Afghanistan – are essential. Her descriptions of the evolution of customary authorities in local settings to being “more participatory” or democratic merits more thought and discussion: I’m not sure I’d agree with that. And, of course, our observations of a country as large and diverse as is Afghanistan might mean we were just watching different communities evolve differently (If only this were an in-person conference I would love to hear more of her experiences in this regard).

Jennifer discusses briefly some of the implicit biases that social scientists bring to these post-conflict situations. But beyond that, there are enormous expectations set by – in the US – our Congress. Many of you are probably familiar with the challenges represented by earmarks in funds provided to USAID. There are literally USAID Mission Directors who receive their annual budget with Congressionally-mandated earmarks that ~exceed~ the total amount of the appropriation!

There are also serious problems with time-delimited funds. In the US system, to my knowledge, appropriated funds are never more than 2-year money; and most often are annual funds. So you have 1-year money, appropriated to a 5-year contract, in a country with a 2 decade problem.

It’s a bit like being told to water delicate new vegetables in the garden, but handed a 6” firehose with fire-fighting water pressure. Unless one can find an intermediary bucket – like the UN Trust Funds discussed yesterday – you risk completely overwhelming the object – whether vegetables in the garden or local organizations in a host country – with the resources they need, but provided in toxic quantities and under ferocious pressure.

I do think that a take away from this conference might be the need to explore, further validate, and then encourage implementation of effective and credible intermediary instruments: That can spread the huge amounts of money that donors typically dispense in bulk over both time and in smaller, more manageable increments to local projects deemed appropriate.

I've not done Jennifer's paper justice: I commend it to you all as an excellent perspective featuring academically-sound concepts, leavened with and informed by her time and research in the field.

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Roger's paper makes some of the same points, so I'll try and focus on different observations. I think Roger's assertion that "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 is brilliant. It's not a new observation, or unique: But I think it's spot-on and a key takeaway from this conference.

But... the devil is in the details. While I was at the State Department I was the Deputy Coordinator for Reconstruction & Stabilization: An office created at the Assistant Secretary level within the Office of the Secretary of State to manage these kinds of interventions. One of the first bureaucratic remedies we proposed was the creation of a sort of "proconsul," who could lead a truly interagency approach to state-building. And one of the sub-elements of that recommendation was "political officers" who would be distributed into the field, to engage at the most tactical levels of the host country, and to develop the kind of granular understanding of local social and political dimensions that both Jennifer and Roger identified. We envisioned these officers as being language-trained (yes, it takes time, but so does state-building: We should have the time needed), and they would be there for at least a year at a time.

The S/CRS effort ultimately failed for a variety of reasons. But the proconsul and political office ideas failed for very specific reasons: Parochial concerns among the interagency, and accusations that it'd be impossible to get people to commit for the time needed to truly develop the expertise – and connections – that would be required. Roger advocates later in his paper for the autonomy of political officers; for them to have "...authority to direct all foreign assistance in their locality..." But this was precisely what was objectionable to many back in Washington. And, to be honest, would require a level of dedication, length of deployment, and local knowledge that the US foreign service and military has yet to be able to reliably produce.

As an aside, a program that reflects some of what I'm sensing in Roger's paper (and perhaps less directly in Jennifer's) was the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program. It was certainly born from the same realization that Roger is making here: decentralized power-sharing requires resources being pushed "to the edge," and intimate local knowledge.

Roger's paper deals more directly with power and power-sharing issues. And it's a good illustration of why the decentralization to local leaders is so challenging. In virtually every statistical mapping area of Afghanistan there are multiple ethnic cohorts who – at one point or another – are in violent conflict with others in their area. Identifying the "best" local "autonomous institutions of local politics" was virtually impossible.

As an example, consider Mazar-i-Sharif and Balkh Province in the north of Afghanistan. Home to multiple ethnic cohorts, but most notably Uzbek and Tajik, there were two powerful leaders in competition there: Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammed Noor. They each had their armies,

numbering in the 10's of thousands; they each had their geographical strongholds and economic engines. Throughout the earliest days of the international intervention in Afghanistan they each competed for the attention – and largess – of the international community.

Afghanistan is a country with two formally-recognized languages, but over 40 minor languages and 200 dialects. There are communities that never see outsiders from October to May. Overlaid with Kuchi tribes and families that travel nomadically throughout the country. Choosing local partners with whom to work is incredibly challenging and- in my experience – rarely done correctly. And, I would add, even when it is done correctly, shifting alliances mean that today's ally is tomorrow's enemy. There was a snide saying among internationals in Kabul that “Other than family, you can never own the loyalty of an Afghan: You can only rent it: Dostum's career was certainly an example of that.

I think Roger's use of Libya as a counter example, where an intervention failed because there was too ~little~ support given to central authorities is a good illustration of the challenges of identifying – in real time – who the right partners for an international engagement might be.

I've worked on projects in Colombia in the post-peace agreement era there. The Colombian government is (or was) quite sophisticated with respect to how they managed the relationships between center-periphery, various sub-national cohorts, ex-combatants, and the international community. A change in government there has at least momentarily de-railed the post-conflict state-building in that country, but it might serve as a good example of how a capable partner in the host government can help international donors avoid some of the pitfalls discussed here today.

Roger ends his paper noting the importance of “exit strategies” for state-builders. I think his proposed approach to implementing such an exit strategy at the local level makes perfect sense: Gradually weaning the resources of the local political officers from 100% down to 0. But that's very similar to what was done – or tried – with PRTs. While most PRTs don't come close to the levels of local knowledge that Roger expects of his LPOs, the challenge would be the same: Their resources will have made them a surrogate for the State, and their departure – even if gradual – will be difficult and destabilizing.

A few generic observations relevant to both papers and our topic:

Had the international community not focused on building the center in Afghanistan, there would have been no center. When I arrived in 2002 I was told apocryphally about Hamid Karzai's arrival in Kabul. When his plane landed at the bombed-out and largely destroyed airport, as they opened the door to the plane and wheeled the departure stairway up, he was greeted by General Fahim Khan: A warlord and powerful leader during the war years. Khan is reported to have put his arm around Karzai and turn to point at his thousands of soldiers in formation (this is the part I find hard to believe actually), and noted “These are my soldiers: This is my army. Where is yours?” To which Karzai replied, “You, Fahim, You and your brothers will make up my army.” It was his protected status as a darling of the international community that kept him alive and his government intact during those first few years.

The work done by Michelle Hughes and Michael Miklaucic on licit and illicit power structures has much to offer as we consider the best – and worst – ways to distribute foreign assistance in a post-conflict setting. But, as has been noted in countless workshops on the concept, distinguishing between licit and illicit players is very much a question of perspective: Whether in Daily's Chicago, Huey Long's Louisiana, or Kabul, Afghanistan.

So, for my closing bit of TE Lawrence wisdom, I'll offer the 27<sup>th</sup> of his 27 Articles. He speaks here of "Arabs," but in my experiences around the world, it is equally applicable to Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, Houthi, Colombians, and cricket fans... I've never understood cricket fans:

*"The beginning and ending of the secret of handling Arabs is unremitting study of them. Keep always on your guard; never say an unnecessary thing; watch yourself and your companions all the time: hear all that passes, search out what is going on beneath the surface, read their characters, discover their tastes and their weaknesses and keep everything you find out to yourself. Bury yourself in Arab circles, have no interests and no ideas except the work in hand, so that your brain is saturated with one thing only, and you realize your part deeply enough to avoid the little slips that would counteract the painful work of weeks. Your success will be proportioned to the amount of mental effort you devote to it."*

Thank you for your time and for allowing me to participate in today's panel.

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