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From Militants to Policemen: Three Lessons from U.S. Experience with DDR and SSR

Summary

- Consolidating the legitimate use of force in the hands of the state is a vital first step in post-conflict peacebuilding. Transitional governments must move quickly to neutralize rival armed groups and provide a basic level of security for citizens.
- Two processes are vital to securing a monopoly of force: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration and security sector reform. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) involve disbanding armed groups that challenge the government's monopoly of force. Security sector reform (SSR) means reforming and rebuilding the national security forces so that they are professional and accountable.
- U.S. experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo yielded three crosscutting lessons: go in heavy, tackle DDR and SSR in tandem, and consolidate U.S. capacity to implement both tasks in a coordinated, scalable way.

“ In post-conflict environments, considerable international military and civilian capacity is needed to go in heavy and implement DDR and SSR in tandem . . . as the U.S. prepares to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, the relevant agencies across the U.S. government should consolidate their collective capacity to do DDR and SSR at scale.”

In the aftermath of war, consolidating a monopoly of force is a critical first step. New governments must neutralize insurgents, militias, organized gangs, and other armed groups. Apolitical, effective national security forces must be organized to provide security to citizens. Basic peace and stability smooth the way for a host of peacebuilding activities, including reopening schools, rebuilding infrastructure, and restarting the economy.

Securing a monopoly of force involves two interlocking processes. On the one hand, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is needed to disband armed groups that challenge the government's monopoly of force. On the other hand, security sector reform (SSR) is necessary to reform or rebuild the national security forces. The security sector not only encompasses the military, police, and coast guard, but also the civilian-led institutions that oversee and support the armed forces. These security sector “governance” institutions include the ministries of defense and interior, national security council, legislative oversight bodies, judiciary, and prison system. Budget, personnel, and policy oversight help ensure that the armed forces remain professional, apolitical, and accountable to the people they are sworn to protect.

U.S. experience with DDR and SSR is considerable but checkered. The pace of U.S. nation-building interventions accelerated under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, including Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999) Afghanistan (2001), Liberia (2003), and Iraq (2003). Lessons learned from past U.S. nation-building experience have only rarely been carried forward to

the next intervention, at considerable cost. Of course, DDR and SSR must be tailored to each post-conflict environment. Yet, there are important, cross-cutting lessons that could inform and improve future interventions. Three notable lessons are: go in heavy, tackle DDR and SSR in tandem, and consolidate U.S. capacity to implement DDR and SSR at scale.

Lesson Number One: Go In Heavy

There is no “good” time to start DDR and SSR. Securing a monopoly of force is the first step on a long road toward peace. DDR and SSR activities necessarily begin in highly uncertain and unstable environments. Distrust may be high and fighting sporadic. Funding is often uncertain and donors dilatory. Identifying local partners and vetting ex-combatants are notoriously murky enterprises. Establishing a legitimate government that is empowered and able to implement comprehensive institutional reform may take months. Flawlessly implementing DDR and SSR as soon as a peace agreement is signed is an unattainable ideal.¹

Nevertheless, it is vital to start quickly and go in heavy. A so-called “golden hour” often exists when peacekeepers first arrive. Violence tends to lapse. The population takes a hopeful breath. Delay, half-measures, or “light footprints” risk devolution into chaos, as Iraq and Afghanistan painfully demonstrated. However, if adequately planned and resourced, a peacekeeping force can move quickly to capitalize on the lull, with a huge payoff.² Neutralizing spoilers, establishing basic security, and starting integrated DDR and SSR programs are easier and less costly at low levels of violence than in the midst of an insurgency or full-scale civil war. However, a quick, comprehensive response requires early inter-agency planning and a significant upfront commitment.

The U.S. interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo under the Clinton administration offer a telling counterpoint. In Bosnia, the 1995 NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) had a constrained mandate. IFOR was required to enforce the military aspects of the peace agreement, but not the broader civilian tasks. Without a clear, comprehensive civilian component, IFOR scored initial military successes but struggled to build a lasting peace. Eventually, President Clinton expanded the NATO mandate and timeline to include institution-building activities like police training and judicial reform.³

This lesson informed U.S. operations in Kosovo a few years later. In 1998, as NATO’s air campaign over Kosovo slowed and a peace agreement crystalized, 18 U.S. agencies came together in an inter-agency working group to hammer out a reconstruction plan. Among the 14 mission areas were the police, military, and justice system. Reinforced by a supplemental funding bill passed by the U.S. Congress and close cooperation between the UN Mission in Kosovo and NATO Kosovo Force, troops and civilians were deployed to Kosovo to begin reconstruction quickly and comprehensively. Going in heavy with both a broad, inter-agency mandate and resources paid off.⁴ Unfortunately, this lesson was not carried forward under the Bush Administration. Instead, the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq resembled that in Bosnia. Only after losing significant ground from a security standpoint were troop levels belatedly increased and reconstruction efforts broadened.

Lesson Number Two: Tackle DDR and SSR in Tandem

Traditionally, DDR and SSR have been viewed as linear and therefore approached in that order. In fact, the demobilization of former fighters and the creation of new security forces are complex, mutually reinforcing processes. DDR programs typically offer ex-combatants two choices: reintegrate into civilian society or join the national armed forces. Both tracks will fail unless DDR and SSR are planned and implemented together. Combatants will be reluctant to relinquish their weapons if they are not confident that the new national security forces will be restrained from abusing their

power. Moreover, unless the national security forces are restructured, trained, and subjected to operational, budget, and policy oversight, militia members may don new uniforms but continue to operate in a partisan manner.

An integrated DDR and SSR approach was needed in Afghanistan in 2002. After decades of civil war, the Afghan security forces consisted of militias loyal to strongmen and warlords. Those militias had artillery, tanks, and rocket launchers, but little connection to the central government. Yet, the international community purposely separated DDR from SSR. Instead, at the 2002 Group of Eight (G8) conference, donors divided the Afghan security sector into pillars. One lead nation was assigned responsibility for reforming each pillar. Japan and the United Nations oversaw DDR. The U.S. was responsible for the Afghan army and Germany for the Afghan police. Initially, the DDR effort looked promising. Afghanistan's New Beginnings Program (ANBP) offered ex-combatants vocational training, business subsidies, or agricultural support in return for handing in their weapons and either joining society or the new armed forces. Between 2002 and 2005, the ANBP collected some 100,000 arms and demobilized 63,000 combatants.⁵

However, these apparent gains were not realized in the long run because of a lack of security sector reform. The Afghan Ministries of Interior and Defense remained dominated by ethnic and tribal factions. Commanders manipulated the DDR process, disarming rival militias while bringing their own troops into the new national security forces. Germany's glacial police training program turned out just 1,500 commissioned officers after five years.⁶ Meanwhile, the Taliban regrouped, rearmed, and returned from havens in Pakistan to challenge the new government. Dividing responsibility among the lead nations acknowledged the imperative of implementing both DDR and SSR, but not the need to integrate these processes in a concerted manner.

Lesson Number Three: Consolidate U.S. Capacity to do DDR and SSR at Scale

In post-conflict environments, considerable international military and civilian capacity is needed to go in heavy and implement DDR and SSR in tandem. Ten years of peacebuilding in Afghanistan and eight in Iraq have forced the U.S.—and the Department of Defense in particular—to invest in this capability. Now, as the U.S. prepares to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, the relevant agencies across the U.S. government should consolidate their collective capacity to do DDR and SSR at scale.

Responsibility for building foreign police forces and their supporting institutions was traditionally the purview of the Departments of State and Justice and USAID. These civilian agencies have been relatively successful in smaller countries, like Haiti and Kosovo. However, in larger ones, like Afghanistan and Iraq, the Department of Defense reluctantly stepped in to provide training and logistical support. With the wars winding down in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military is slated to turn responsibility back over to the civilian agencies.

The U.S. military should not let go of its expertise from a decade of disarming militias and building security forces. Time and time again, DDR and SSR have proven vital components of peacebuilding and require a rapid response and scale that only the Department of Defense can currently provide. At the same time, the U.S. should consolidate its expertise from across the civilian agencies. Future interventions will require not only combat leaders and American infantrymen, but civilian trainers, mentors, and police. Economic, health, and education experts are critical in such missions as well. Future plans must be developed through a “whole of government” approach to achieve effective outcomes.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on the panel presentation and the views expressed at a September 12, 2011 meeting of the Security Sector Reform working group. The panel included retired Ambassador James Dobbins, RAND Corp., retired Lt. Gen. David Barno, Center for New American Security, retired Ambassador John Blaney, Deloitte Consulting LLP and Melanne Civic, the Center for Complex Operations. Robert Perito, the Director of USIP's Security Sector Governance Center, moderated the panel. The event introduced *Monopoly of Force: the Nexus of DDR and SSR*, a compilation of essays by experts and practitioners published by NDU Press that grew out of a March 2010 conference organized by USIP and the Center for Complex Operations. Laporte-Oshiro is a program assistant in the Security Sector Governance Center at USIP. The Center focuses on developing security forces and supervising institutions that are effective and apolitical.

Finally, to implement DDR and SSR at scale, missions must be adequately resourced. Finding adequate funds and personnel at the outset is understandably easier for interventions in smaller countries than larger ones. Resourcing does not just refer to funding and personnel, but also time. Reluctance to intervene in failing states at the scale necessary to be successful has led Washington to limit the timeline for interventions, which can reduce flexibility and undermine initial gains. Successful DDR and SSR require the capacity to commit early and fully—or not at all.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Disarming militants and rebuilding the security sector is often the most urgent task in peacebuilding. Yet, the U.S. and international community are often reluctant to take on this resource-intensive role, particularly in the increasingly tight fiscal environment. However, in light of the democratic uprisings in North Africa and NATO intervention in Libya, the U.S. may be pulled into DDR and SSR once again. If so, the U.S. should apply its considerable experience from past interventions to consolidate the use of force in the right hands.

In conducting future operations, the U.S. should keep in mind the lessons learned from previous efforts:

- Integrate and implement DDR and SSR in tandem, ideally with a shared pool of discretionary funding
- Plan for peace early through an integrated, “whole of government” approach
- Go in heavy and invest adequate personnel, resources, and time to kick-start DDR and SSR and capitalize on early gains
- Do not allow hard-won expertise and lessons to be lost as US-led DDR and SSR projects wind down
- Integrate expertise and capacity across the U.S. government and international community, from experienced military commanders to health, economic, and education specialists

Endnotes

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3. James Dobbins, Michele A. Poole, Austin Long, and Benjamin Runkle, *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 63-72.
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5. Caroline Hartzell, “Missed Opportunities,” *U.S. Institute of Peace*, April 2011, 4-9.
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