



USIPEACE BRIEFING

Evaluating Iraq's Provincial Reconstruction Teams While Drawdown Looms:

A USIP Trip Report

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December 2008

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SYNOPSIS

Two USIP specialists recently traveled to Iraq to examine the effectiveness of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Their primary findings were that PRTs play a critical role in facilitating the expenditure of Iraqi funds on Iraqi reconstruction and development. Moreover, the PRTs perform a range of secondary tasks that contribute greatly to the broader US civilian-military effort in Iraq. However, PRTs face a number of administrative and security-related challenges (despite improvement in certain areas) and are also engaged in a number of long-term development activities to which they are poorly suited. This *USIPeaceBriefing* describes the effort.

INTRODUCTION

Since their 2005 inception in Iraq, PRTs have struggled to fully define their mission, overcome structural problems, learn to work alongside their military counterparts and assist Iraqis down the path to self-governance and stability so that U.S. forces can withdraw. While the concept was born in the Afghan conflict, PRTs in Iraq bear little resemblance to their Afghan cousins, which are led and largely staffed by military officers. PRTs in Iraq are largely civilian-led and are required to address a host of issues including local governance, economic and women's development, health, agriculture, rule of law and education. In this respect, they resemble mini development task forces, harnessing civilian expertise sourced from the U.S. and augmented by military civil affairs officers.

The experience thus far has been bumpy. The State Department and its Baghdad-based PRT coordinator, the Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA), have encountered enormous challenges in locating and deploying qualified professionals to staff the PRTs long enough to make impact and justify the huge expense of providing for their accommodation, protection and transport. Once deployed to a PRT, typically co-located with a military brigade on a forward operating base (FOB), team members must learn to operate in a combat or post-

combat environment for which most have scant preparation. Isolation, limited transport, generous leave policies and the inevitable constraints of trying to accomplish tasks in a conflict zone further frustrate the efforts of even the best intentioned PRT members.

So, in light of such hurdles, a number of questions arise. Are PRTs effective? Should their activities continue even after the military resources that support them are withdrawn? If so, how? Do Iraqis value their presence, especially since that they no longer come bearing money and projects? Will the institutions PRTs have dedicated themselves to empowering outlast them?

USIP staffers Rusty Barber and Sam Parker recently traveled throughout Iraq to pose these and other questions directly to PRT members and their military counterparts. Their report, part of an ongoing USIP review of the PRT program in Iraq, follows.

CAPACITY-BUILDING

Building the capacity of Iraqi government institutions to provide essential services and rebuild Iraq's infrastructure has become the PRTs' central goal. As their name implies, in the earlier days, PRTs were devoted in large part to "reconstruction," i.e. infrastructure projects, typically large scale. Now, as was repeated in nearly every interview, the PRTs are out of the "bricks and mortar" business and have taken on more of a consulting, advisory role in which Iraqis increasingly take the lead.

This change comes as part of a broader policy shift toward the U.S. spending less money in Iraq and "helping Iraqis spend their own money." Washington is substantially reducing the primary U.S. funding vehicles for Iraqi reconstruction—Economic Support Funds (ESF) and Quick Response Funds (QRF)—as well as the military's Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP). Nationwide

USAID programs are also being reduced. The U.S. is pushing hard for Iraqis to take more responsibility for their own development.

Budget execution

Assisting provincial governments and central government ministries with the execution of budgets is the cornerstone of the PRT effort to build Iraqi capacity to provide essential services. The basic strategic concept behind this effort coincides with the broader US civilian-military counterinsurgency (COIN) and reconstruction effort embodied in the Unified Common Plan (UCP). This plan holds that as essential services improve and more money flows into the Iraqi economy, a virtuous, peaceful cycle will follow that will make Iraqis less inclined to turn back to the insurgency and cement the security gains of the past two years.

The PRTs are the pressure point where the U.S. helps Iraqis push as much of their own money as possible into infrastructure, essential services, and economic development. Due in significant measure to PRT efforts, execution of Iraqi budgets has improved dramatically over the past 18-24 months. This role is critical to the U.S. mission in Iraq and is the primary strategic justification to continue the PRT program.

PRT assistance in budget execution takes primarily two forms: helping Iraqis develop and execute governing processes and strengthening the “connective tissue” between local governments and Baghdad.

Processes

The main obstacle to budget execution is that Iraqi officials lack knowledge of critical processes such as budgeting, management, planning and administration. PRT specialists teach, mentor and coach their Iraqi counterparts in these areas (based in substantial part on what the PRTs have learned about the Iraqi

system). The PRTs' primary interlocutors are the provincial governor and his staff, the provincial council (PC) and the provincial directors general (DGs) of the central government ministries. Each province has a Provincial Development Strategy (PDS), developed in collaboration with the PC and DGs, which sets the priorities and parameters for service provision and reconstruction in the province and is the guiding document for planning. The PRTs work hand in hand with these officials to help coordinate all their essential service and infrastructure projects in the context of the PDS.

“Connective Tissue”

The PRTs help strengthen the “connective tissue” between provincial governments and the central government, primarily by helping the PCs and the DGs coordinate their efforts. This synergy does not always happen on its own for a variety of reasons: many officials are new and inexperienced, the PCs have not historically been empowered in Iraq and political and personality differences often inhibit effective coordination. Many PRT members and Iraqis interviewed cited the PRTs' “convening power” as one of its most valuable assets and an essential part of the effort to improve governing capacity and budget execution. The PRTs help facilitate clearing bottlenecks that the Iraqis are having trouble resolving on their own. The PRT acts as a trusted third party, mediates disputes, and coaxes projects along when they stall.

Often the PCs and the DGs will be well coordinated and trouble will arise because the central government is not reacting—either because of miscommunication, incompetence, corruption, or for political reasons—to release money to the provinces or take needed administrative actions. In these situations, the PRT can encourage its Iraqi counterparts to take their case to Baghdad themselves, often supplementing with pressure from the PRT through the embassy. For example, Rule of Law (ROL) officers on some PRTs complain that Iraq's Chief Justice has been slow to fill judicial positions and has otherwise

impeded the progress of ROL development in Iraq. In such cases, the PRT, through its contacts in Baghdad, will pressure judicial authorities to act.

Some PRT members acknowledge playing the “connective tissue” role in the past, but insist they have evolved beyond this function. Others worry that continuing to play this role creates a dependency on the U.S. presence that will result in the central government resuming its neglect of certain areas once the PRT leaves. It is clear that the PRTs are concerned about creating this dependency, and are quick to affirm the new mantra that their job is “to work themselves out of a job.” But this can prove difficult in practice.

PROBLEMS WITH CAPACITY-BUILDING

The Federalism Problem

It is important to understand the daunting nature of this effort to build capacity and the challenges facing the PRTs. First, there is a historical lack of provincial- and local-level autonomy—federalism—in Iraq. The PC, the PRTs’ main interlocutor and the institution the PRT seeks most to empower, has never played a meaningful role in Iraq. This problem is even more extreme with respect to the sub-provincial districts (qadas), which have played even less of a role than provincial governments. More extreme still, within the city of Baghdad, the ePRTs (PRTs embedded with military brigades) work with Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NACs) and District Advisory Councils (DACs). These bodies were created out of whole cloth by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2003. The PRTs thus empower essentially brand new institutions.

This PRT focus on local institutions is not so irrational as it may seem, however; nor is it entirely based on a U.S.-centric belief in the importance of federalism and local autonomy. PRTs take their cues from Iraqi law in this new focus: the Iraqi constitution and the Provincial Powers Law (passed by the Iraqi parliament this year and scheduled to go into effect once provincial elections occur). Although both documents are the product of imperfect and unrepresentative

processes, they are nonetheless the law of the land. Both devolve even more power to local governments more than is currently the practice.

Building relationships, not institutions

Even where the PRTs have successfully improved capacity—in terms of government coordination, project implementation and budget execution—it is difficult to argue that they are engaged in long-term institution building. Rather, they primarily build relationships and facilitate interactions between various Iraqi officials for short-term progress. What will happen when these individuals leave office—for example, through elections? Many PRT members opined that, in such circumstances, PRTs will essentially start from scratch.

The environment of highly factionalized political competition—in which every group seeks its own narrow advantage—further undermines institution building. PRT members frequently complained that their counterparts are motivated more by graft and the division of spoils than by any expressed interest in long-term development. Moreover, while the PRTs typically engage with a small, self-selecting slice of the set of political actors, the future of the institutions they aim to strengthen will depend in large part on political forces beyond the PRTs' view.

This is compounded by the relative inexperience of the PRTs' Iraqi counterparts. The war has created an almost entirely new political class with little experience in governing. Many of them are appointees who owe their posts to political patronage, but have little idea about what they are doing. As one interviewee said, “the people who used to run this country are simply gone.”

In response to these challenges, some interviewees recommended that the PRT shift its focus to lower-level, civil service bureaucrats with more staying power than politicians and their appointees. Currently, the PRTs devote a large measure of their effort to the legislative branch in provincial governments, the provincial council. The PC's main role in service provision, however, is drafting

capital investment budgets for projects whose operations and maintenance will ultimately be controlled by central government ministries. The true executors of service provision are thus the DGs. In addition to not being quite as susceptible to political change, these offices also have more institutional stability and institutional history.

Iraqi reluctance to accept advice without projects

The shift toward a purely advisory, capacity-building role poses an underlying question: If the US stops paying for projects, will the PRTs' Iraqi counterparts be inclined to take their advice? Do they see the PRTs' capacity-building role as valuable enough to keep the PRTs around?

So far, the answer seems to vary widely from province to province. As one OPA official put it, "It is a sign of maturity for a PC to ask us for advice instead of projects." Interviews with PRT members confirmed this dictum. In some cases, like Najaf and Baghdad, where the PC is more developed, it views the PRT as a sort of consulting firm. In this case, the PRT provides expertise when asked by the PC but does not proactively set PC priorities and is generally more passive. As an official on the Baghdad PRT said, "The Iraqis used to come to our meetings. Now we go to their meetings."

However, these "mature" PCs are anomalous. The norm appears to be that most PRTs' Iraqi counterparts see the PRTs primarily as a source money and projects, or as a means of squeezing more funds out of Baghdad. As one PRT official put it, "We are essentially bribing them to listen to us." In areas where U.S. spending has been particularly heavy, locals have impossibly high expectations and a sense of entitlement about what the U.S. should provide for them.

The Local Governance Program

Finally, a major obstacle to the PRTs' efforts toward capacity building relates to the Research Triangle Institute's Local Governance Program (LGP). This is a large, Iraq-wide, USAID-funded training program to provide technical training in planning, budgeting, management techniques and software to local Iraqi government officials. LGP is mostly implemented by Iraqi staff while expatriate RTI employees on each PRT location manage and monitor the program on a province-by-province basis. These employees are essentially collocated with the PRT, and do not report to the embassy, but rather to RTI.

The USIP staff could not evaluate the performance of the LGP program, although anecdotal reports indicate that Iraqis are quite pleased with it. However, many PRT staff expressed frustration that they have little idea of what RTI does—whom it trains, what the training consists of, etc.—despite the fact that RTI expatriate staff are located on the PRT. RTI cites security concerns as the reason for not being forthcoming about its activities. However justified these concerns might be, this extreme degree of “stove-piping” is counterproductive. The PRT's and LGP's missions are, stated in a general way, identical: improving governing capacity. LGP tends to focus more on the technical side, whereas the PRTs focus more on the management. It is illogical and inefficient for these two efforts to remain separate and uncoordinated.

PRTS AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

In a heavy counterinsurgency (COIN) environment (such as Mosul and parts of Baghdad), a PRT's role differs sharply from one in which the U.S. security mission has largely ended (such as Najaf and Muthanna). Most provinces fall somewhere on the spectrum between these two extremes, and thus the relationship between the military and the PRT takes some sorting out.

PRTS IN COIN MODE

When the military is engaged in COIN, it implements a range of “non-kinetic” operations designed to garner the support of the population, inject money into

communities to spur economic development and keep fighting-age males employed. In this environment, reinforcing short-term stability gains is the top priority. The sustainability of these gains, and whether they are conducive to long-term development, are secondary considerations.

Thus, in full COIN mode, PRTs tend to play a supporting, advisory role for the military, providing them with civilian expertise they would not otherwise have access to and offering suggestions on how to shape operations. Since COIN and long-term development are not altogether mutually exclusive, the PRTs often advise the military on how to undertake COIN in a manner conducive to long-term development and stability. As one member of an ePRT working in a COIN environment in Baghdad said, “The military is the blunt instrument; we provide the fine tuning.” Nonetheless, in COIN environments, the military has the unambiguous lead, and freely ignores PRT’s advice if, in their judgment, security concerns dictate.

When functioning properly, the PRTs also lead efforts to tie U.S. non-kinetic efforts to local governing institutions such as the PCs, sub-provincial governments and the DGs. This ensures that the COIN efforts are conducive, to the extent possible, with these institutions’ own plans for the province, making the long-term sustainability of these projects more likely. The military has its own contacts with Iraqi officials. When there is a sound relationship between the PRT and the military, the military defers to the PRT; when the relationship has soured, the two entities develop parallel relationships with their Iraqi counterparts, often resulting in miscommunication and inefficiency.

One PRT leader whose team appeared to enjoy a positive relationship with the military in a heavy COIN environment related his own view of interacting with the military. His approach was to first acknowledge the obvious and accept the PRT’s junior status in view of the army’s preponderance of forces and the imperative of establishing security. In that context, he provides his best advice, often strenuously, but supports the military’s ultimate decision and employs his

team in implementing it. According to him and his military counterparts (who were also interviewed), this approach established trust between the PRT and the military, and as a result, the military deferred to his judgment more often than they would have otherwise.

We also encountered cases in COIN settings in which the relationship between the military and the PRT was dysfunctional and mistrusting. In these cases, the PRT is sidelined while the military drives the non-kinetic effort. It is hard to ascertain why these poor relationships occurred, other than to attribute differences to “personalities” (as was the common explanation of those involved). However, it is clear that, whether right or wrong, if a PRT is territorial and does not defer sufficiently to its military counterpart, the military, in COIN mode, always prevails. The PRT is badly outnumbered, dependent on the military to operate in the province, and will not (and should not) be able to override the military when security concerns are at stake. For the PRT to be effective, it must acknowledge its subordinate status.

Transition out of COIN

As stability is established, and there is less imperative to use immediate measures to “win hearts and minds,” the military’s heavy focus on non-kinetics should end and the PRT should gradually assume greater responsibility for reconstruction and development. At a certain point, especially once security for a province has been handed over to Iraqi forces, the mission theoretically becomes entirely civilian-led. As one PRT leader put it, the PRT becomes the supported organization as opposed to the supporting organization.

Many PRTs fall in the middle of the spectrum between full COIN and full civilian-led assistance missions. In many cases, the PRT complains that the military continues to undertake unnecessary non-kinetic operations, largely due to inertia, and stymies development. For example, it makes sense in a COIN environment, for the military to create trash-collecting programs to inject money into local

economies and employ young men. However, at a certain point, these ad hoc initiatives interfere with or replace local Iraqi efforts to institute regular trash collection. Another example is the military's use of microgrants to Iraqis. In a COIN environment, it makes sense to make small grants to gain local support and spur short-term economic growth. However, as security improves, these programs have less utility because they interfere with efforts to develop local lending mechanisms and create the wrong set of expectations among the population.

Coordination

Historically, Iraqi reconstruction has been hampered by the failure of the U.S. and of local governments to get central government buy-in on their infrastructure and essential service projects. Anecdotes abound of how the U.S. military or the PRT decided to build, for example, a school or a clinic that remained empty because the ministries of Education and Health did not fund staff and maintenance. In some of the more egregious instances, the military implemented projects that the Iraqis had already budgeted for and even already constructed. While many on the U.S. side are inclined to blame the central government for not fulfilling its responsibilities in these cases, it should be easy to understand the Iraqi view: the U.S. has placed an enormous financial burden on the Iraqi government without seeking its input. Iraqi officials rightly believe that they should decide the locations of schools and clinics, keeping in mind their other national commitments, funding constraints and long-term objectives.

Based on the sheer number of such examples, the U.S. has learned a number of costly lessons. As a result, the PRTs play a productive role in rationalizing the reconstruction process while facilitating greater Iraqi participation and leadership. In cases with a heavy military presence engaged in a high degree of non-kinetic reconstruction, the PRT (when it functions properly) links the U.S. military and the PC and DGs.

REPORTING ROLE

PRT's report to Baghdad and Washington about political, economic and security developments in their provinces—an obviously beneficial but rarely discussed function. Senior policymakers and military officials highly value the information they get from the PRTs. On a political level, these officials analyze winners and losers and project trends for political development in their provinces. PRT members also monitor security flashpoints and scout for the military, a particularly useful role in areas where the military has a light footprint. On an economic level, officials in Baghdad said that were it not for the PRTs, they would have little idea of how much money was being spent by Iraqi ministries. (The Iraqi Ministry of Finance, for both technical and political reasons, is unable or unwilling to provide this information, but this information is readily available to the PRTs.)

DIPLOMATIC ROLE

PRTs are valuable diplomatic representatives to provincial governments. It is highly unusual, if not completely unprecedented, for the U.S. to have independent diplomatic contacts with such low-level and numerous governmental entities in a foreign country. In the current environment in which many U.S. interests depend on the course of Iraqi political development, it is valuable for the U.S. to have these points of diplomatic contact to nudge Iraqi politics in a direction that serves Washington's interests.

Moreover, the PRTs can bolster provincial governments as alternate nodes of power to pressure Baghdad. In certain cases, PRTs have facilitated provincial government interaction with the outside world and circumvented the capital. The clearest example of is the construction of an international airport in Najaf, the Shiite holy city that is the destination for Shi'a pilgrims from all over the world, particularly Iran. The Najaf PC long sought to build this airport but could not get central government support. The Najaf PRT then provided expert consultation on the procedures required to establish an airport up to international standards.

The PRT also provided credibility to attract international investors. The central government has signed onto the project now that it has such obvious momentum. Overall, however, the central government has little visibility and has shown scant interest in—the PRTs’ work.

A parallel diplomatic role the PRTs play is that of referee: they shed light on the activities of local leaders and promote transparency. This trend is most apparent in the significant and pervasive issue of official corruption. The Iraqis interviewed were frank in their assessment that many Iraqi officials are corrupt and only the U.S. presence keeps them moderately in line. In addition to corruption, this U.S. “reining in” extends to restricting local governments’ political persecution of their opponents, marginalizing key social actors such as journalists and civil society organizations and a range of other functions. As one Iraqi put it, “PRTs are the shield for the democratic experiment in Iraq.”

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Most PRTs have a Department of State (DOS) public diplomacy officer. While serving on PRTs, however, public diplomacy officers have shifted away from their traditional role of promoting a positive image of the U.S. toward promoting a positive image of the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governments. Secondarily, the PRTs also try to portray a positive image of the U.S. In this regard, one career USAID officer expressed his amazement at how unusual it was for the U.S. to be involved in so many projects without “branding” them, as would be standard practice in a typical development mission.

ADDITIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Pursuing Targets of Opportunity

PRTs perform a wide range of development activities in addition to government capacity-building and budget execution, which are more social and economic in nature and oriented toward a broader concept of “human development.” Specific examples include agricultural collectives; small businessmen’s unions; women’s

craft groups; teacher education programs; training in microindustries such as apiculture and chicken farming; public health education programs; community water-treatment programs; media training; and vocational and technical training for prisoners and widows.

Such activities tend to be unfocused compared to PRT efforts at government capacity building and budget execution. Most of the time these projects are not tied to local government institutions, are not part of a coordinated strategy, and lack an obvious mechanism for their long-term sustainability. In military parlance, they are “targets of opportunity.” They are often the result of short-term PRT staffing assignments (usually one year), with broadly stated guidance. As one interviewee said, “We try to find small ways to be helpful.”

The broader development activities described above are certainly needed in Iraq, but the short-term nature of the PRTs and DOS staffing difficulties make them poorly suited to the task. In a traditional development environment without PRTs, such human development activities would be part of a USAID-sponsored or multilateral development mission and implemented by international NGOs and contractors. These activities would be part of a long-term development plan by organizations with more relevant expertise and experience than the DOS. After the US military withdrawal and the end of the PRT program a more typical development mission along these lines will likely remain in Iraq.

USAID in Iraq

The current relationship between the PRTs and USAID is problematic. USAID has a number of national, well funded development programs such as Inma’ (agriculture), Tijara (private sector development) and the Community Stabilization Program (training and education in vocational skills). Nearly all PRTs have USAID program officers whose jobs are, in part, to monitor the performance of these national programs in their provinces. In theory, the USAID representative’s location on the PRT helps to integrate these national programs into the PRT’s

efforts. In practice, however, as was described above with the USAID-funded LGP program, such significant integration rarely occurs.

Some USAID officers on the PRTs said that they had little insight into national USAID programs, since they are mostly run by local staff and there are security issues in interacting with them. Moreover, USAID officers on the PRT have no authority over these programs: their role is limited to monitoring and reporting, and all authority lies with USAID in Baghdad. Often even the separate USAID programs lack coordination. As it stands, the development work done as part of USAID's national programs and that done by the PRTs run on largely parallel tracks.

STRATEGIZING

The Maturity Model

The only objectives provided to PRTs are in a set of metrics known as the maturity model, which measures provinces' performance in five areas: rule of law, governance, reconciliation, political development and economics. These are broken down into detailed subsets. The PRT leader, in consultation with the rest of the staff, ranks them according to medium- and long-term sustainable progress. In addition to the maturity model, each PRT and its military counterpart develop an annex to the UCP. In this ranking, the PRTs draw both from the broader UCP and especially from the provincial development strategy (PDS), the development blueprint created by their Iraqi counterparts.

The maturity model is a useful tool in theory. Its logical and well-scaled categories and descriptions convey a clear and comprehensive picture of what a functioning province would look like.

The problems with the maturity model are in its application, as would be inherent in almost any assessment system. First, it is subjective per the individual perspectives of team leaders. Second, while all team leaders want to see their situations improve to demonstrate their team's success, a range of factors

outside the PRT's control impact the province's maturity. Third, the model is limited because the PRT is only privy to a certain amount of information in the province. Finally, the PRT simultaneously evaluates the province and judges its functionality. Is it possible to gauge how the province would function without the PRT?

OPA delegates strategy to PRT leaders

Beyond the maturity model, however, OPA provides limited policy guidance. It deals with logistics, human resources and material support. When PRTs look to Baghdad for policy guidance, they generally do not look to OPA. PRT members look to their functional counterparts in the embassy: ROL looks to the national ROL program; economics looks to the coordinator for economic transition in Iraq (CETI); governance looks to the political section, etc. However, interviewees reported that, when they had questions about their work or needed a contact with (or to put pressure on) a central government ministry and turned to Baghdad, often the military most actively addressed their concerns.

Hence, formation of strategy and specific work plans is delegated almost entirely to the PRT leader. On one level, this approach makes sense because individual provinces vary significantly and pose distinct challenges. In this light, it would be difficult for OPA to add much value beyond the general precepts they provide in the maturity model. However, this approach makes leadership absolutely critical to the PRT's success.

A related point is that without a strong leader, there is very little structure and guidance that the PRT can fall back on. In the PRTs in which interviewees complained that the team leader was weak, the effect was obvious. PRT staff tended to improvise, finding "targets of opportunity" and generally focusing on things they were interested in. As a result, their work was not tied to an integrated strategy and was thus unlikely to be sustainable. This was in addition to the obvious morale problems that result from poor leadership, particularly in a combat zone.

Improvement

OPA appears to have made substantial progress in appointing strong team leaders. The State Department does not traditionally develop leaders (as the military does) and thus, early on, encountered numerous difficulties with weak team leaders. OPA has striven to bring on stronger team leaders, including former DCMs (Deputy Chief of Mission) of embassies who possess significant management and leadership experience.

Moreover, many longtime PRT members noted improvement in guidance from OPA compared to the early days. One interviewee, who had served in one of the first PRTs from its inception, claimed that they had basically “parachuted in” and only pursued “targets of opportunity” without even a pretext of strategy. Another credited OPA for improving their strategic guidance, saying that DOS lacks a long-term culture of planning like the military and thus is not organizationally suited to strategic planning, especially in a complex, difficult and fluctuating environment.

HUMAN RESOURCES PROBLEMS

PRT human resource policies have come under fire since the program’s inception. These include failure to recruit individuals with the appropriate skills, exceptionally generous leave packages and weak PRT leadership. They pose a massive obstacle to PRT progress and effectiveness. For the sake of fairness, it should be emphasized that OPA has progressed in a number of areas. This success is particularly commendable when it is factored in that in late 2007 OPA had only 12 employees, a tiny staff to deal with the range of OPA’s tasks, only one of which is HR.

Lacking proper skills

While acknowledging some improvement, a large majority of team leaders expressed frustration in getting staff with needed skills. Interviewees pointed out

that OPA's recruiting difficulties led to the hiring of seriously unqualified people. (One interviewee joked that the only required qualification was to be a "carbon-based life form.") As several of our military interviewees put it, the DOS "doesn't send its A-Team" to Iraq. Moreover, PRT members quickly noted that, in many cases, it is not that the people OPA hires are incompetent or lack qualifications in a general sense—many are quite accomplished. The problem is that these skills do not necessarily translate to PRT effectiveness. For example, a successful banker in the U.S. is not necessarily qualified to help establish new banking systems abroad.

Some individuals, despite significant time on the job, have trouble defining their jobs or even explaining the overall team and provincial dynamics. This problem can be greatly exacerbated by weak team leadership and staff largely left to ascertain their jobs on their own absent specific guidance or clearly defined roles. Finally, there were a range of stories about PRT members not knowing their duties until they started the job, or discovering upon arrival that their role had changed entirely—not necessarily related to their skill sets. (An experienced historic preservationist, for example, recounted being hired to help secure antiquities sites only to find herself assigned to local governance.)

Generous Leave

The extremely generous leave packages for PRT members obstruct continuity and coordination of work. These civilians spend between 16 to 18 percent of their time on leave. At every PRT, several desired interviewees were on leave, including the team leader in several cases. This is a huge source of frustration for the team leaders and especially for the PRTs' military counterparts, who receive only two weeks of leave per deployment. Many military interviewees were incredulous that this policy continues and skeptical about whether it is possible for the PRTs to accomplish anything with this structural handicap.

On a more positive note, civil affairs soldiers brought on to “plus up” PRTs are in most cases highly valued by team leaders, even if they do not bring specific expertise. They provide needed manpower, are used to working in conflict zones, possess solid generalist skills, and, like the rest of the military, are granted very limited leave.

Team leaders also complained of the time it takes to fill positions and that they do not get enough—if any—substantive interaction with prospective job candidates prior to hiring. Given the importance of personality while working in a conflict zone, such assessment is essential. Moreover, it is difficult for team leaders to terminate PRT members. Even direct contract hires get a measure of due process. The lengthy delay in bringing on a replacement itself disincentivizes termination. All of this contributes to the broader problem of a large chunk of team leaders’ time—about a third—being dedicated to internal processes.

No solution to HR problems

No clear solution to these problems exists, which is why OPA has been unable to do much about them. As an institution, the DOS lacks the expertise the PRTs need to staff most of their positions. Moreover, the PRTs’ work is so unusual that such expertise is hard to find on the open market. In addition, the assumption that generous leave packages were necessary to fill the positions may not have been tested. However, now that these packages are in place, such restrictions are not feasible.

MOVEMENT ISSUES

PRTs’ ability to move around exceeded expectations derived from previous reporting on PRTs. A majority now rely on U.S. military for transport and protection. The few PRTs still dependent on DOS contractors to provide security tend to be unhappy about it. The military has a much less restrictive approach,

allowing the PRTs to visit more places and interact with more people. In some cases, PRTs with DOS security claimed not to have enough access to their contacts to be effective. A few exceptions aside, most staff on PRTs dependent on DOS security thought the military would be preferable. Ambassador Crocker has made clear his view that Iraq should not be treated like other posts and expects PRT members to take greater risks to accomplish their mission. He has also urged team leaders to speak up if the operating environment becomes “too restrictive.”

Many refer to the Najaf PRT (which USIP visited) as the model for PRT support in the future. The province is unique because of the high level of security and stability. The only U.S. military presence associated with the PRT is a military movement team committed solely to the PRT, an Army civil affairs unit brought into augment the PRT, and a small US Army advisory unit embedded with an Iraqi army division located on the same base as the PRT but largely uninvolved with its work.

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and Iraqi governments also presents a potential impediment to PRT effectiveness. The failure of the SOFA to extend immunity to private security contractors (such as Blackwater USA, Triple Canopy and DynCorp) could result in those companies withdrawing or substantially reducing their presence in Iraq. In such circumstances, there would be no option but for the PRTs to receive U.S. military movement support to stay in business.

CIVILIAN-MILITARY CULTURE CLASH

The interaction of civilian and military cultures is the source of much discussion and theorizing on the PRTs and always surfaced during the USIP interviews. The most prominent difference is the approach to solving problems. Military and civilian interviewees alike stressed that the military has a “fix it now” mentality, whereas civilians are more inclined to take the long view and encourage Iraqis to take responsibility.

A broader culture issue impacts this relationship. Accustomed to rank, the military is accustomed to ordering their subordinates, without question. Conversely, civilians are used to working under “consensus-based” leadership, and are more inclined to complain, as one interviewee did, that the military “doesn’t understand the difference between working ‘with’ and working ‘for’ someone.”

Many military interviewees scoffed at the generous leave, high salaries and overtime pay which PRT civilians receive. Some also chafed at the fact that civilians are allowed to drink alcohol in Iraq while military personnel are not. Also, military interviewees marveled at what they saw as the DOS’s inability to perform simple management functions and the number of clearly incompetent civilians (in their judgment) brought in to work on the PRTs.

One deputy PRT leader—a position always filled by a colonel or lieutenant colonel—recommended that the deputies should not come from the military’s civil affairs brigades, as is common, because these deputies tend to be reservists viewed as civilians by the combat brigade leadership. Instead, he argued, the deputies should be active duty, combat arms officers. In the eyes of the brigade leadership, they have more credibility in explaining PRT capabilities to higher ranks and are thus better positioned to get the PRTs needed support.

THE FUTURE OF THE PRTS

OPA is beginning a planning process to phase out the PRTs. The program depends on a range of factors, but by far the most important is the continued U.S. military presence required to support, move and protect PRTs. Many PRT leaders opined that withdrawing substantial numbers of U.S. forces would determine when their PRTs shuttered. In the nearer term, as General Odierno has stated, the military expects the PRTs and the State Department to increasingly “take the lead” in managing the U.S. effort in Iraq.

If the PRTs leave on their own terms and the military withdrawal does not force their hand, such an approach will differ by province. OPA's operating concept for when a PRT's job is complete is determined by a province's level of self-sustainability, as measured by three successive quarterly applications of the maturity model. This is problematic for a variety of reasons. First, as discussed in the model's methodology, the question of sustainability is difficult to ascertain. Second, given the political forces beyond the PRTs' control, the relationship-based foundation of much of the progress achieved thus far, and the persistent weakness of institutions like the PC, in many cases, genuine sustainability may be unrealistic and indefinable. Finally, some provinces (like Najaf) are arguably already self-sustaining, but because the PRT receives coveted exposure and diplomatic benefit out of its presence—also highly valued by the PC—the effort continues.

CONCLUSION

In the struggle to stabilize Iraq, every year has been heralded as “critical.” Yet, coming after the Surge, with provincial and national elections looming, U.S. forces due to withdraw from cities and towns, and a new U.S. administration to take the helm during a time of unprecedented domestic and international economic upheaval—2009 truly promises to be a watershed in the Iraq war. The staying power of Iraqi civil and security institutions, and therefore U.S. investment in building their capacities, will be sorely tested.

The PRTs' roles—primarily in the areas of budget execution, improving government capacity to provide essential services and as a reporting and diplomatic mechanism—should continue as long as is feasible. Getting Iraqis to spend their own money on essential services is critical to U.S. strategy in Iraq and PRT mentoring is critical to this end. Concurrently, as one PRT leader phrased it, “We can't care more about Iraqi democratic institutions than Iraqis

do.” The necessary shift now underway to position the PRTs as consultants rather than as project providers will test that dictum.



Barber (left) USIP Baghdad Chief of Party Robert Boorda (second from right) and Parker with children in a park reconstructed with U.S. funds in Nasiriya.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR POST-CONFLICT PEACE AND STABILITY OPERATIONS

USIP's Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations aims to transform societies emerging from conflict by promoting stability, democracy, economic development and social reconstruction. Daniel Serwer is vice president of the center.

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