



Key Lessons from Past Operations - UN Briefing on Statebuilding

New York, October 19, 2004

On October 19, CIC hosted a workshop for the Department on Political Affairs on the lessons for state-building from Afghanistan, Palestine, East Timor, and Guatemala. The circumstances and the nature of the UN involvement in the four countries differ substantially: UNAMA has a light footprint in Afghanistan; UNSCO has had a role of coordinating other influential actors (states, IFIs) in Palestine; UNTAET represented the transitional state in East Timor for several years; and MINUGUA helped bring about and implement one of the most comprehensive peace agreements ever negotiated. The international interventions in East Timor and Guatemala represent qualified successes at preventing the countries' relapse into conflict, while Palestine and Afghanistan share a twin track of terror-fighting and state-building which has not led to self-sustaining peace. The lessons from these four experiences ought to inform future interventions and the UN's efforts to reform its strategic approach to peace-building.

Afghanistan

The purpose of the U.S. intervention in 2001 (Operation Enduring Freedom) was regime destruction, not state-building, and it used the CIA model of the 1980s of dealing with (arming, empowering) each regional commander bilaterally, thus undermining the emergence of a broader Northern Alliance structure; the transition from the terrorist-fighting mission to reconstruction or state-building is not complete.

Two warring over-simplifications are currently at play in the process of building the institutions of the state in Afghanistan: 1) CIA view that Afghanistan has always been and will continue to be a de-centralized state ruled by tribal leaders, and 2) Ashraf Ghani's claim that the people of Afghanistan want a strong central state. Because power in the provinces is being held by people with no legitimacy, the greatest challenge is linking local and regional elites in a legitimate way with the central state; Ashraf Ghani's strategy is to use the PRT process to "empower not those who rule, but those who make ruling possible."

Preliminary lessons from ongoing international assistance efforts show that the PRT process and programs such as the National Solidarity Program or the Afghan Stabilization Program empower English and Pushto speakers, thus reproducing Kabul's Anglophone Pushtun domination in the provinces. Furthermore, the model of allocating responsibility for DDR and SSR functions to different donors is not ideal because the sectors are interrelated and the implementation dynamic is not sufficiently collaborative. And finally, the embedded international advisors model in the Ministries of Afghanistan is problematic because 1) donor-ministries agendas are not public; 2) lack of Dari translators to make meaningful relationships/exchanges possible; 3) discrepancy in pay makes them unequal partners.

Palestine

Four-phase overview of the process of state-building in Palestine:

- 1) Massive UN presence through UNRWA which employed 26,000 people and delivered public services to 4 million (non-repatriating) refugees (1945-1993);
- 2) Intense security-driven institution-building with UNSCO in coordinating (not lead) role (1993-2000);
- 3) Second Intifada, Israel's call for a two-state solution, and the deliberate destruction of the physical infrastructure of the Palestinian proto-state (2000-Present); and
- 4) Planning for state-building in the aftermath of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in May 2005 (2004-Onwards).

The experience of UN involvement in the West Bank and Gaza has several important implications for UN peacebuilding doctrine and practice. Firstly, state-building (institution-building, delivery of public service) is possible without knowing the final status. Secondly, the model of "state-building as terror-fighting" (also in Afghanistan) is problematic because excessive concern with security de-emphasizes reforms for domestic legitimacy, democratization, and economic development. The model of UN institutional positioning since Oslo would translate well in other circumstances (no lead role, but helping create and institutionalize the network of powerful actors). Finally, the UN should be planning intensively for a new phase of institution-building, possibly according to a version of the state detailed in Oslo II.

East Timor

The UN role in East Timor was modeled after Kosovo (transitional administration), where the UN assumed the mantle of the state (as opposed to a political role in Afghanistan or a coordinating one in Palestine). The peace operation in E Timor is a relative success (peace is being maintained), but state-building will take much longer; the UN intervention is not explicitly designed to build the state and it more closely resembles a security and humanitarian assistance operation than a state-building one.

In spite of 27 years of rhetoric about self-determination for East Timor at the UN, at the time of the 1999 referendum, DPA was not prepared to give locals options for models of governance, alternative constitutional processes, or the legal aspects of political processes. The Timorese initially proposed a 5-10 year long tutelage by the UN (and a dual-desk model) while preparations were to be made for statehood, but the U.S. rejected the proposal. UNTAET did not accept the broad authority of CNRT (and leader Xanana Gusmao) because it did not want to replicate Bernard Kouchner's controversial move of integrating the KLA in Kosovo; Xanana was nevertheless elected President in 2002.

Important lessons from the international engagement in East Timor include the fact that UNTAET and IFIs worked under the assumption that East Timor was bereft of talent for public service. Had the UN had the capacity to assist more substantively in the area of capacity transfer and civil service training, state-building might be under way. The SRSG's misplaced concerns with "politicization" deliberately delayed discussions of constitutional matters for a year and effectively held up the World Bank's Community Empowerment Project

Guatemala

The intervention in Guatemala lacked the elevated degree of strategic interest shared by the preceding cases and benefited from being off most people's maps. There was little interest at the highest level in the Secretariat, so the intervention was handled from within DPA and the mid-ranking official charged with mediation turned outside the Secretariat for expertise.

At the time of the intervention (1994) there was a state in evolution in Guatemala, and the proposals for democratization and fiscal reform being put forth by the Church-led Civil Society Assembly benefited from international support (states friends, such as Mexico, Norway, Spain, U.S., other donors, and IFIs). The 1996 peace agreement was achieved because of a very particular set of circumstances (not least that the war was invisible in the capital), but its implementation proved more unwieldy, especially because a corrupt government ruled the country during 4 of the past 8 years since peace was signed, delaying reform. The UN Verification Mission in Guatemala is slated to close in December 2004 after 10 years of activity. Overall, the picture is mixed: MINUGUA is a good case of the UN leveraging a large support base (the scope of the peace agreement probably overshot what was possible, but this probably helped the transition/UN move faster than it might have if it had set less ambitious goals).

Key Implications for the Secretariat/DPA

- 1) DPA should continue to be primarily concerned with political decision-making on peace-building strategy issues (power, politics, political systems);
- 2) DPA would benefit from sector-specific expertise (such as constitutional alternatives, DDR/SSR);
- 3) State-building requires long-term tutelage/staying power, so UN mandates and planning frameworks must become 5-10 years (rather than 2-3);
- 4) There is a need for national civil service training capacity;
- 5) Skill, personality, leadership of SRSG are critically important;
- 6) Develop coalitions with other actors: UN can drive strategy by creating personal and institutional networks with actors and resources over which it has no formal power;
- 7) DPA/Secretariat must develop a culture for contingency planning;
- 8) DPA should maintain and increase access to country knowledge in places such as CPPF (rather than spend extensive resources to develop internal country expertise); one person can get it wrong, so best to consult multiple experts. Secretariat should have regional expertise that can draw on external country expertise;
- 9) UN needs public information capacity to a) deliver content about peace- and state-building efforts; b) create enabling environment for the emergence of free national media institutions; and c) empower politically the local actors that will eventually carry on the peace-building agenda.
- 10) Issues of politics and power (relationship between money-power-arms-society) are often negotiated in isolation from the politics of institution-building (which is deemed to be technical in nature); the disjunction will likely continue, but attempts to bridge it are necessary because state-building is an eminently political exercise which re-allocates power and resources within the society.