Policy Briefing Note

Capacity Development in Post-Conflict Fragile States
Experience in Afghanistan and Iraq

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Introduction

Capacity development\(^1\) is a central feature of many programs supporting the reconstruction of post-conflict fragile states. These efforts are usually designed and funded by donors such as USAID, the UN, DFID or the European Commission, and are carried out by consulting firms such as Chemonics, Adam Smith, DAI and others.

Some capacity development initiatives can be significant: one of the programs funded by USAID in Iraq, the Local Governance Program (LGP), had a budget of almost $600 million for the first two phases of its provincial-level work from 2003 to the end of 2008. Its federal-level counterpart, the Tatweer project, had a budget of over $300 million for its first phase ending in late 2010. Both LGP and Tatweer (and other similar programs) are likely to continue beyond 2010, but at somewhat reduced levels. With the world’s attention shifting away from Iraq toward Afghanistan, a similar scale of expenditure can be expected as part of the “civilian surge” in that country. This is likely to cause a number of problems that will be discussed later in this paper in the section on Afghanistan.

The purpose of most post-conflict capacity development programs is to increase the performance of the host country’s government so it can better serve the public, and in so doing increase the legitimacy of the state. This also is a key feature of most counter-insurgency campaigns – according to the US military, “…victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government’s legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency.”\(^2\)

While capacity development programs in Iraq and Afghanistan are receiving significant amounts of money, these sums are a fraction of the cost of military operations in these countries. In counter-insurgency work it is understood that only about 25% of a successful campaign relies on weapons, while the other 75% relies on something else – a broad range of non-military activities that are designed to improve living conditions in the society. Capacity development is a big part of that other 75%.

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\(^1\) Capacity Development has many definitions. An example: *The process of developing competencies and capabilities in individuals, groups, organisations, sectors or countries which will lead to sustained and self-generating performance improvement.* (AusAID 2004)

This paper will first define a number of components of Capacity Development, and then discuss some of the circumstances in Iraq and Afghanistan that impact on the effectiveness of initiatives to increase the performance and legitimacy of their governments.

**Components of Capacity Development**

Although the term “capacity development” is widely used in the international development and nation-building field, like “governance” it is a complex and ill-defined area of practice.

The following table illustrates various levels and dimensions of capacity development, any of which can be the focus of analysis or intervention to increase a system’s performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Activity</th>
<th>Dimension of Analysis or Intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
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**Levels and Dimensions of Capacity Development**

Capacity development can focus on any level of a system – from the distant environment of which the system is unaware to the visible context (such as global markets, monetary policies or political structures) through to complex multi-agency administrative systems or single organizations, their sub-units, teams and individual staff, and to the unseen internal environments deep within the consciousness of the individuals in the system.

The various dimensions of capacity development can be described as follows:

- **Values:** The beliefs, cultures, attitudes, incentives and motivations of the people in and around the system.
- **Structure:** The system's structure – its legislation, governance and policy frameworks and power relationships. This is sometimes called the institutional framework: roles and relationships and the formal and informal rules that guide the interaction of a system's members.
- **Skills:** The capabilities and competencies of the system's members defined on at least three levels: knowledge, attitudes and behaviors.
- **Resources:** The tools, budgets and other assets available to the system.

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3 This section on Components of Capacity Development © Andy Tamas, 2004. Used by permission
4 For a summary of system levels see "System Theory and Community Development" in the Samples section of www.tamas.com. (http://www.tamas.com/samples/samples.html)
• **Operations**: How a system actually works – its formal and informal leadership, decision-making and management mechanisms, strategies, business processes, accountabilities and other aspects of its functions.

• **Performance**: What the system actually *accomplishes* – the results of its activities.

Strengths in any of these sectors indicate areas to reinforce to improve system performance. Weaknesses in any of these components will limit a system’s ability to meet its objectives. Both strengths and weaknesses are potential points for capacity development inputs. Sustainable change in a system requires ownership and perpetuation of the intervention by the system’s members.

### Capacity Development in Iraq

Much of the capacity development carried out by development programs in Iraq has focused on training public servants in topics such as strategic planning, project management, procurement, budgeting, leadership, human resource management, strategic communications, and other similar subjects. This focuses primarily on the “individual” level and the “skills” dimension of the capacity development framework in the table above. The *Tatweer* project, for example, reports that over the past several years they trained some 90,000 federal-level public servants in a range of subjects, using a combination of foreign advisors and locally-trained ministry personnel.

The provincial-level work of the LGP project provided training to members of Provincial Councils in all 18 Governorates on topics such as decision-making, project management, and other subjects relevant to their operations. Like *Tatweer*, over the years they also worked with thousands of Iraqis.

Other donor-funded programs that are active at the sub-provincial level have worked with members of district councils and municipal governments to help increase the performance of their organizations. Again, these programs reached thousands of Iraqis in those systems.

While training is an important component of capacity development, it will not, by itself, bring about significant improvement in the performance of a bureaucracy. Other factors such as business processes, supervision practices, the organization’s structure and its relationships with other organizations have an impact on performance. In most development projects these other essential factors are rarely the primary focus of attention.

Perhaps one of the reasons many development programs focus primarily on providing training is that it is an activity that is relatively easy to carry out and measure – all that is required is to take attendance in a workshop and the contractor can report to the donor that they have trained a certain number of people. This is sometimes called “butts in seats” – a measure of how many attended a session. Most donors seem to be satisfied with these numbers: they can report to their senior management that a certain number of
people received services as a result of their expenditures, and the funding agency is content that its money has been well spent. However, effective capacity development is not that simple.

What is considerably more difficult to measure is the effect of these inputs on the operations of the systems they are meant to serve – while training might well have been provided, its impact on the performance of the learners’ organizations may not be evident. This question was raised by the Minister of Planning of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) when a Tatweer advisor boasted about their project having trained over 20,000 KRG employees over several years. The Minister’s impatient response was, “So what?!” He wanted to know what impact these inputs had on his systems, and the advisor was not able to provide that information.5

This question, with its inadequate answer, could have occurred in many of the areas where donors were providing training as their main capacity development inputs to strengthen the government. Part of this problem is associated with challenges in capacity development in any country or organization, while other aspects of this problem are associated with the current conditions of Iraq as a post-conflict state.

Although Iraq’s public administration was once among the most advanced in the region, a series of events since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s contributed to a marked decline in its effectiveness. It has continued to function, but it has become bloated and its ministries operate at a much-reduced level. A key element that is difficult to define is a profile of the performance of these large organizations. Without such a baseline it is impossible to determine the extent to which inputs such as training are improving services to the public.

To measure the performance of an organization it is necessary to first define what it is supposed to be doing, and to have a host of measures in place that make it possible to achieve these results. These measures are indicated in the table above – an appropriate legislative framework and structure, relevant strategies and policies linked to a budget, effective business practices, adequate resources, and above all, client-centered values and a service-oriented attitude throughout the system. These are a challenge to achieve in any country, and even more so in Iraq where many of the required skills, structures and procedures have not yet been re-established.

There is another deeper factor that adds to the challenge. One of the characteristics of a post-conflict society is that much of the population has been traumatized by the war6 and many people suffer from a form of collective post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms of this disorder include a loss of trust, intergroup conflict and an unwillingness to admit inadequacy, especially in public. All these characteristics make it difficult to carry out an objective analysis of the performance of individuals and the systems they manage.

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5 Personal observation, KRG Ministry of Planning meeting, 6 December 2009.
For any capacity development input to be effective and sustainable it needs to build on what already exists in the organization. What often happens in development work is that a donor brings foreign expertise into the country to strengthen local systems, using skills acquired through years of work in a variety of environments. In many cases in Iraq, advisors have difficulty defining the culture and operating methods of the organizations with which they are working and adapting their inputs to these realities, with the result that their services often do not mesh well with existing operations. While language is a factor in this issue, even advisors who speak the language can have difficulty matching their inputs to local requirements.

Although Iraqi public servants are eager to learn current global best practices in their domains and seek out opportunities to work with foreign advisors, there are persistent difficulties in having foreign inputs achieve desired results – programs are usually designed outside Iraq, and Iraqis themselves have difficulty defining their requirements in terms that foreign advisors can recognize and respond to in an appropriate manner.

An added complication is the donors’ need to demonstrate achievements to keep their operations in business. In the push for measurable indicators funders demand to see that something is taking place. As noted earlier, the consequence is that contractors are often obliged to measure inputs rather than outputs so the money continues to flow. The well-known management principle, “you get what you measure and reward,” applies in this situation, and contractors report on how many people attended training sessions, even though real improvements in the government’s performance continue to be difficult to assess.

All this does not mean that broader organization development activity is completely overlooked in the push to demonstrate something measurable. The Tatweer project, for example, attempted to measure these broader impacts in terms of assessing how many ministries had established systems to manage their training and development programming. However, it is difficult to demonstrate the service-related impacts of these organizational development inputs, and the numbers are not nearly as dramatic as the thousands of employees who attended training sessions, so those figures are consistently used to define the achievements of the project.

The donors are as much a part of this problem as the contractors, who in the final analysis are simply doing what they have been asked to do by their funding agency. USAID in particular is notorious for its tendency to measure inputs rather than results, and its insistence that these inputs are indicators of the effectiveness of its programming. The above-noted impatient “So what?!!” query by Kurdistan’s Minister of Planning indicates that governments receiving these inputs can have quite a different view of this matter.

Another challenge with capacity development in Iraq has been the unintended negative side effects of well-intentioned security initiatives led by the US military. In some provinces the military established close relationships with traditional tribal leaders and
persuaded them to order their fighters to stop supporting the insurgents. This brought relative peace to the regions in question. However, this peace came at a price in terms of perpetuating corruption and retarding the introduction of modern forms of governance, one of the primary aims of capacity development.

There is an inter-generational conflict in these regions: younger leaders and government officials who were attempting to introduce more modern forms of administration had their hopes dashed by seeing the older generation’s traditional practices, which included cronyism and nepotism, reinforced by the military’s support for the established tribal structures and their older forms of leadership. This contributed to cynicism regarding the invader’s intentions and the capacity of the Iraqi administration: peace came at the expense of some of the population’s perception of the legitimacy of the government.

While there is no doubt that security is a prerequisite for stable governance, effective governance is also a prerequisite for long-term stability and security. Perpetuating obsolete personality-based forms of administration by supporting traditional tribal leaders can hamper the emergence of institutions based on democratic values and the merit-based processes that are part of a modern society. This has major implications for policy design. The younger generation of leaders should receive considerable support, since their values are likely to prevail as the passage of time removes many of their elders who were happy to receive the US military’s support and the funds that went with it.

**Afghanistan**

Capacity development in Afghanistan is quite different than in Iraq due largely to the differences in baseline conditions in the two countries. Iraq’s education levels and infrastructure are far more advanced than in Afghanistan and its administration covered the entire country. Although the Afghan government in the 1960s and 70s was functioning at a level comparable to other developing countries at the time, its rural areas were not fully integrated into a national administrative structure, a disconnect that has persisted over the years. Challenging factors which both countries have in common are a tribal, chief-oriented culture and a legacy of a Soviet-inspired centralized, controlling and bureaucratic approach to public administration.

Within the existing system some Afghan civil servants did what they could to provide services under sometimes trying conditions. For example, prior to the Taliban takeover of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 there were reports of municipal public servants diligently struggling to keep the city’s gas system operational, working throughout the winter in offices where the glass had been blown out of the windows – a commitment to be valued.

However, with a literacy level among males estimated at about 35%, and with women at about half that figure, the pool of skilled human resources upon which to build a national administration is much smaller than in Iraq where literacy levels have been about 90% or higher for decades.
One consequence of this lower level of capacity is that there are relatively few educated people in the country who can lead and operate the civil service, and the large scale donor-driven inputs that are part of a “civilian surge” can easily overwhelm the limited absorptive capacity of existing systems.

For example, in 2005 the teacher training unit of the Ministry of Education could absorb only $10M of the $120M that donors were making available to strengthen this key element of the country’s education system. The deputy head of that unit wanted to do much more than they were doing, but was constrained by his supervisor, an older and relatively uneducated man who was set in his ways and who prevented him from making the changes required to significantly increase the number of teachers they trained.

In response to this bottleneck the donors (USAID, the Japanese and others) set up a teacher training program outside of the Ministry of Education – it greatly increased the number of trained teachers, but did not, in itself, improve the Ministry’s capacity to do the work. With the appointment of a new and energetic Minister of Education the situation improved dramatically: there was a significant increase in the number of teachers trained each year, from 381 students in 4 teacher training colleges in 2002 to approximately 30,000 in 37 teacher training colleges in 2008. Also, in 2008 this increase was accompanied by a concerted effort by the new Minister of Education to institutionalize the uncoordinated donor inputs being received by the Ministry and maintain strong leadership and control. This indicates that with strong leadership and appropriate values, locally-driven donor coordination and the cooperation of major donors, significant increases in capacity can occur in a relatively short time.

Matching capacity development inputs with absorptive capacity is an ongoing struggle particularly when large-scale (and costly) military operations are required as part of a counterinsurgency campaign. Pressure from the military to speed up the development process can be counterproductive and may retard the steady growth of appropriate local administrative capacity.

This challenge was described in a recent report on governance in Afghanistan:

International military forces in Afghanistan are increasingly using rapid disbursement of assistance to post conflict areas as a way to win the “hearts and minds” of Afghans and defeat the insurgents. But even though these programs may generate some support from those who directly benefit, there is little evidence that this approach creates long-term sustainability, let alone good development outcomes. A coalition of development organizations stated in a recent report that development projects implemented or funded by the military.

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often “aim to achieve fast results but are often poorly executed, inappropriate and do not have sufficient community involvement to make them sustainable.”

Just as the central government’s overwhelming dependency on international assistance makes it harder for the government to cultivate local support, so too does the direct provision of assistance by international military forces separate local residents from the need to work with and participate in the broader national government. PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) were initially conceived as short-term mechanisms for rapid aid delivery, but they remain powerful political actors within the provinces. Their continued presence outside the government structure at best does little to build Afghan government capacity and expertise, and at worst it actively undermines the central government by establishing a parallel structure through which local residents can appeal for resources.

This critique indicates that the way the military tends to pursue short-term security-related objectives undermines long-term sustainable capacity development and ultimately contributes to failure in achieving the desired effect of helping establish a sustainable, stable society. This is similar to the problem mentioned earlier in the section on Iraq where the military’s security-oriented support for traditional tribal leaders brought peace, but at the same time it contributed to perpetuation of corruption and retarded the emergence of governance patterns and institutions that reflected modern democratic principles.

The Paris Declaration requires donors to coordinate their inputs and to channel their funds through the host government to strengthen its institutions and increase its legitimacy. While some donors are operating in this manner, most are not, with negative consequences for increasing the government’s capacity and legitimacy. This is discussed in a recent report:

We currently have a conflicting approach to Afghan governance. The United States and the international community support Afghanistan’s central government and civil service, and yet in the interest of immediate results they regularly bypass the government in favor of key local powerbrokers, favored actors, and local militias outside of government who provide them with intelligence, security assistance, and aid project implementation.

No quick fix for long-term stability exists, however, and these militia proposals ignore the realities of Afghanistan—the tribal system no longer serves as a

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10 Cookman & Wadhams P 34
strong organizing structure for many individuals and hasn’t for decades for some areas. The Taliban insurgency has only accelerated this deterioration of the tribal system by targeting tribal leaders. Further, circumvention ultimately weakens the government and fragments the political system without establishing any coherent, sustainable alternative.

Supporting the creation of local, accountable, transparent governance will require patience. But it will also require development and government experts who understand the Afghan context and how to support the creation of sustainable outcomes. Civilians, preferably Afghans, should lead these efforts. The military is not the appropriate organization to be implementing these programs due to its training and culture focused on short-term stabilization. The military has played an essential role entering areas where security does not permit government officials, humanitarian organizations, or unarmed individuals to enter. But political outreach and policy responsibilities should be handed over to civilians as soon as the security situation allows.

While this report stresses the role of civilians rather than military personnel in designing and carrying out development activity, this is not as straightforward a solution as it might seem. There is competition among donors whose advisors sometimes provide conflicting advice to their Afghan counterparts, and there is no mechanism whereby Afghans can systematically assess the competence and performance of foreign advisors. Also, there are limitations among Afghan civil servants, even within the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC), the main agency supporting capacity development in the government. Many of these senior officials in IARCSC lack the skills to understand and apply the improvements suggested by capable technical advisors. There are a limited number of Afghans who can design and manage projects, and capacity development efforts based on using skilled Afghans returnees as coaches and mentors have been only partially successful.

This mixed success was due in large part to the conflicts between Afghans who had remained in the country throughout the civil war and the Taliban era, and those who had left and then returned after 2001. The two groups had uncomplimentary names for each other (such as “dog washers” and “snakes”) and there were marked differences in pay levels, with the returned Afghans who were hired as mentors sometimes earning more than ten times as much as their counterpart senior level government employees. Although relying on Afghans who have been trained overseas is a popular capacity development strategy, special recruitment and operational support measures are required to ensure productive relationships are established between skilled returnees and the public service executives they are expected to coach and mentor. Most donors do not put these measures in place, resulting in sub-optimal performance of their programs.
Conclusion

Encouraging capacity development in Iraq or Afghanistan is a challenging activity indeed. Not only can there be problems in managing relationships among donors and with host country counterparts and their systems, the mere presence of agents of the international development community can cause as many problems as they solve. A typical situation is the negative impact on host country systems (such as the health sector) when doctors leave their jobs in hospitals to work for higher salaries as drivers and interpreters for development projects. This pulls much needed talent out of the host country service network as key personnel seek better opportunities to support themselves and their families. Strategies are required to limit what could be an exodus of capable professionals from systems that are facing plenty of difficulties in addition to retaining essential personnel.

One of the more difficult aspects of capacity development is matching inputs to the operational realities of the host country’s systems. A seasoned development specialist put it this way: “We arrive here and meet a few times with a group of Iraqi officials, dump a bunch of things on the table that we hope they might find useful, and then walk away, hoping they’ll pick it up and do something with it, and we have no way of knowing whether they do or not.” Although this may well be the case in some projects, fortunately it is not universal. Other projects achieve a close working relationship with host country personnel and advisors’ inputs are able to mesh well with local operations – this takes considerable flexibility on the donor’s part, and a good interpersonal relationship between foreign advisors and local counterparts.

When there is committed host country leadership and donor coordination, as in the case of the Afghan Ministry of Education and its teacher training program, it is possible to see significant improvements in government capacity in relatively few years.

Even with committed local leadership there is a limit to how much growth the system can handle: At times it is better to encourage the host country system to take up a few relatively elementary components of the range of potential offerings, and to initially scale back the size and scope of technical assistance and funding inputs so they more closely match the capacity of local systems. This incremental approach makes it possible for host systems to increase their absorptive capacity in a way that steadily expands their scope of service to the people.

There also are cultural factors to take into account, characteristics of the people that can make key things more difficult to achieve. For example, the introduction of an employee performance management system in the civil service presumes employees are able to discuss managerial dynamics in a rather dispassionate way. This seemingly

straightforward capacity development issue is not always as simple as it seems. When cultural factors are coupled with the wide-spread traits produced by prolonged exposure to war and chaos, this condition which is similar to post-traumatic stress disorder can make a basic process surprisingly difficult. For example, there is a saying in Dari, one of the main Afghan languages, that, “To ask why is to start a fight.” It is virtually impossible to carry out employee performance evaluation without asking “why?” – this type of cultural and psychological issue can make a difficult situation even more challenging, and needs to be incorporated in project design and operations.

These complex factors related to the conditions of the people and systems in Iraq and Afghanistan need to inform policy development and project design. There are equivalents in any society in which foreign agencies are working with host country systems to increase their ability to serve their people. Helping increase the capacity of government to provide services, and hence strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, is an essential factor in helping establish a stable, secure and peaceful state – this is the ultimate goal of all military and non-military actors in both Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere. Well designed capacity development inputs can achieve the increases in system performance required to convey to the people that the government is indeed worth supporting as their country proceeds along the difficult road toward peace and stability.
Introduction

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Civil Service Reform in Post-Conflict Fragile States
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Introduction

Post-conflict reconstruction calls for efforts that are considerably more challenging than those normally associated with managing a stable state. Not only must the public service keep the education, health, water, energy and other systems running, the damage caused by the conflict needs to be repaired. While the donor community can provide some of the required funds and technical assistance, the bulk of the work falls on the shoulders of the country’s government and its bureaucracy. These institutions are usually struggling to rebuild their own operations while they do what they can to provide services to the public.

In the midst of these challenges it is often found that the civil service requires modernization, in that its legislative frameworks and modes of operation can be as much a part of the society’s problems as a part of the solution to the country’s ills. This can be a complex and politically-charged task due largely to the fact that a job in the civil service provides not only security in an insecure environment – a person who moves into a senior position often gains access to considerable resources that they can dispense as they wish.

Most post-conflict countries do not have well established administrative systems and a transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion process that is linked to results-based employee performance management and evaluation. In the absence of these and other similar mechanisms people of influence can acquire positions where they can enrich themselves and engage in flagrant nepotism and cronyism. While there are honest and principled individuals in these systems who do not abuse their power, there are others whose values are questionable and who take advantage of opportunities to misuse their authority, and in so doing they may well perpetuate the inequities that contributed to the inter-group tensions that fuelled the conflict.

To reduce these tensions and establish an effective administration that can rebuild the country, considerable work is required to strengthen the public service, the prime instrument of the reconstruction process. Over the past decade attempts have been made to reform and modernize the civil service in both Afghanistan and Iraq – selected highlights of these efforts and their associated challenges are described in this note.
Afghanistan

In the 1960s and early 70s Afghanistan’s government was functioning at a level comparable to a number of other developing countries at the time. However, over a 30 year period of conflict culminating in the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001, the country’s institutions, most of which reflected a centralized Soviet model of administration, had deteriorated to the point that they needed to be rebuilt from the ground up. As part of this work the World Bank and others supported an ambitious reform of the civil service.

A number of new institutions were put in place that reflected global best practices – among these, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) came into being in 2003 and was headed by an energetic and capable Commissioner with a commitment to rebuild government in a modern yet culturally appropriate fashion. Accompanying the creation of IARCSC was the preparation of a new Civil Service Law. Although some skilled Afghans were involved in the process, virtually all of the substantive work was done by international advisors, many of whom were on short term contracts.

IARCSC was designed to introduce modern civil service principles and practices early in the reformation of the Afghan government. It had a number of boards and departments, including:

- Independent Appointments Board
- Independent Appeals Board
- Civil Service Management Department – functions included implementation of public administration reform, design and monitoring of human resource policies, and civil service training and development
- Civil Service Secretariat – functions included strategic communications, and monitoring and coordinating program implementation

Over the intervening years the Commission undertook a number of major tasks, such as a Priority Reform and Restructuring program and a complex Pay and Grading initiative, that began to bring a measure of rationality and order to the public service. However, what is of special interest is the effect of political interference on its operations. This interference is one of the characteristics of post-conflict states which have not yet developed the norms and institutional frameworks that protect civil servants from such pressures.

In the early years of IARCSC’s operations there was a creative and energetic spirit among staff and a commitment to taking advantage of the newness of the government to institute significant reforms. However, its work soon began to interfere with senior politicians’ desires to secure jobs for people of their choice, and Commission staff received frequent requests to overlook competence in their staffing and appointment decisions.

The first capable and committed Commissioner and his even more energetic and principled assistant were able to make considerable progress in the first few years. However, this changed over time: the Commissioner was shifted to another ministry, and the assistant was appointed to an ambassadorial post. The Commissioner’s replacement was a relatively uneducated former
warlord who did not demonstrate the values consistent with his new position. Efforts to have him removed were not successful, in part due to the Commissioner’s network of friends in Parliament who would cause considerable difficulty for the President if he were replaced. The Commissioner and other members of the Board were said to be some of the major offenders in applying pressure on recruitment panels to overlook applicants’ merit and select the candidates of their choice. IARCSC staff reported that the early energetic spirit of contributing to a creative nation building exercise gradually left the agency, and many of the more capable employees departed as well.

The new civil service law, which was drafted to global standards, went through a review process in which senior politicians and bureaucrats significantly changed and weakened its provisions, resulting in legislation that provided a sub-optimal foundation for the operation of the Afghan public service.

In 2010 substantial efforts were underway to rebuild the Commission and increase its effectiveness as an instrument of public sector reform. A major impediment was finding a suitable alternate post for the Commissioner so he could be replaced by a more capable person. It was hoped that over time the Commission would steadily increase its effectiveness and come to realize its potential as a key element in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

However, political pressure and appointment of inadequate leadership retarded the country’s reconstruction process, with serious consequences. Years were lost which contributed to the lack of legitimacy of the Afghan government and created a climate in which insurgents operated progressively more freely and with increasing levels of local support. In this case political interference in hampering the Commission’s work contributed directly to prolonging the war.

Political interference and lack of capacity among civil servants were not the only challenges. Early efforts by the Commission to use donor funds to provide civil servants with a living wage were blocked by the World Bank and the IMF, which imposed conditions that did not recognize the reality of post-conflict reconstruction. As has been the case in other similar situations, their fiscal strategies directly contributed to corruption among civil servants, the police and others, further damaging the legitimacy of the government and fuelling the insurgency.

Rebuilding the Afghan civil service as an agent of reconstruction is an on-going challenge. What was a relatively peaceful post-conflict environment in 2003 with its opportunities for renewal was, in early 2010, an environment with a steadily escalating conflict. How this will play out in the coming years remains to be seen.

Iraq

The situation in Iraq is quite different than in Afghanistan. Prior to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s the country had one of the most effective public administrations in the region. Its well-educated population and advanced infrastructure were the envy of many: at the time the Emir of Dubai was reported to have said that he wanted Dubai to be like Baghdad. In 1982 Baghdad was acclaimed as one of the cleanest cities in the world.

Public sector performance began to decline sharply due to factors such as budget cuts and conscription during the Iran-Iraq war, and events since then – the first Gulf war, UN-imposed sanctions, and the US-led invasion of 2003 – had major negative impacts on what was once a fully functional bureaucracy.

It is well known that the American plan for reconstruction following the 2003 invasion was woefully inadequate, due largely to lack of coordination and incompetent direction from the uppermost levels of the US administration\(^2\). A number of assumptions were made that turned out to be wrong.

Among these was an assumption noted in a 2003 book on nation building by James Dobbins and others that the Iraqi public administration was competent and would be able to run the country’s affairs largely on its own:

“...Iraq does have some advantages for nation-builders. First, it has a nationwide civil administration that is relatively efficient. This administration needs to be rebuilt but not reconstructed from scratch. This administration, staffed mainly by Iraqis, will reduce the need for direct international intervention and will facilitate security and development across the country\(^3\).”

The back cover of Dobbins' book carries an endorsement by Paul Bremer recommending it highly to “anyone who wishes to understand or engage in such activities.” The Bremer administration is regarded as a glaring example of how not to go about nation building.

A number of controversial actions during Bremer’s administration, including his “de-Baathification campaign,” contributed to accelerating the decline of what two decades earlier had been a fully functioning public administration. This campaign removed much of the leadership of the civil service, most of whom were members – either by conviction or by convenience – of the ruling party, with major impacts on the effectiveness of the system.

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\(^3\) James Dobbins et al. (2003) – America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq. Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, p 170.
In spite of these well-intentioned but misguided efforts the bureaucracy has managed to continue to function, albeit at a much reduced level of effectiveness. Iraqis who are familiar with the civil service note that it operates in a culturally-appropriate manner that is quite different than in a western bureaucracy.

Unlike most of the other countries in the region, Iraq has not kept pace with the past 30 years of evolution of public administration methods and technology. For example, it is almost completely a paper-based system and decision-making is highly centralized rather than distributed among the various levels of an organization. There has as yet been no implementation of e-government or other more client-focused modes of service to the public. While some ministries are able to spend their budget allotments, others have serious problems with absorptive capacity and budget execution.

Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq has its own revenue generated from its oil resources, but, as noted by Collier, this can be both a blessing and a curse. In Iraq’s case this income has been used to support a social safety net and to pay salaries of a large number of people who might otherwise be unemployed and contributing to the violence that has periodically ravaged the society since 2003. It has not developed a diversified economy with a vibrant private sector that can generate employment for the bulk of the population. The civil service is by far the country’s largest employer.

The country’s budgeting process has been described as “rather elastic” – public money is allocated and moved around based on factors that are not always related to the system’s plans or performance. There is little clarity in ministries’ strategies, policies, plans and budget frameworks, and yet the Ministry of Finance continues to make funds available and, to some extent, the government’s work is getting done.

Although the administration is continuing to function at a much reduced level, there are a number of serious challenges. The current legislative framework for the civil service is a much-amended and obsolete 1960s law that does not reflect modern public sector management principles or practices, and contributes to significant problems throughout the system. These challenges include:

1. The lack of a central agency to manage the civil service
2. Uncontrolled recruitment for reasons unrelated to operational requirements, resulting in some three million employees – one of the largest per-capita civil services in the world, and which consumes far too much of the government’s budget
3. Complex impediments to right-sizing the civil service
4. An absence of human resource planning that links staffing to ministry policies, strategies, budgets and performance requirements

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5. A lack of an effective merit-based recruitment and promotion process
6. Few managers or executives with the skills to design and implement changes required to increase the performance of the civil service.

The government is well aware of these challenges and, along with addressing host of other concerns such as security and rebuilding the country’s infrastructure, it has taken a number of steps to remedy the situation – examples include:

1. Passage of a new law (2009) establishing a Federal Civil Service Council (FCSC) with provisions for Councils at the provincial level and a Civil Service Institute serving the entire government
2. Drafting and initial review of a new Civil Service Law to replace obsolete 1960s legislation, which will, among other things, establish Human Resource Departments in ministries and provincial governments
3. Adoption of a comprehensive Iraqi Public Sector Modernization (I-PSM) program that will help the administration link civil service structures and operations to policies, strategies, budgets, staffing patterns and workplans throughout the government.

One of the most significant challenges impacting reform of the civil service is the nature of the Iraqi government itself. A major problem is the distribution of ministries among various political groups based on a type of quota system that ensures participation of groups who may otherwise be excluded and contribute to violence. Following each election a protracted period of back-room negotiation takes place to establish a governing coalition and define how the ministries will be allocated to various sectarian or religious groups. Once these ministries are allocated, there is a wholesale replacement of much of the senior personnel by members of that particular group.

This is similar to the practice in the US where each incoming administration reaches as much as six levels down into the bureaucracy to replace officials with their own political appointees. The difference between the US and Iraq is that whereas in the American system the appointees are all members of the same political party and as such act in a moderately coherent manner, in Iraq that is not the case – each ministry essentially becomes the property of the party to which it is allocated, and the various ministries operate almost completely independently of each other. Apparently the Minister of Finance does not pay much attention to what the Prime Minister or Cabinet wants, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs makes pronouncements about the country’s foreign policy without first consulting with the Prime Minister.

This balkanization of the country’s public administration is rooted in patterns that were set down during the Bremer administration with the intention of establishing a type of affirmative action approach to political participation that would give a variety of contending groups their share of the governance system and reduce inter-group violence. In so doing it created significant challenges for initiatives that have impacts across the entire government, such as civil service reform.

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6 Information received from a senior Iraqi official who prefers to remain anonymous: May 2010.
The election of 2010 brought more players onto the field, and the lack of a clear winner who could form a majority government made coalition-building more challenging than in the past, with an even more fragmented administration likely to emerge. This note was written shortly after the election and before a ruling coalition was formed, so the state of the next Iraqi government was not known at the time.

Although the donor community has provided the government with a number of civil service reform measures to consider, it remains to be seen exactly who “the government” will be, how it will make decisions, and whether there is sufficient interest among its various contending parties to move forward on a much-needed comprehensive civil service modernization program. If the government decides to become committed to these reforms, the following list indicates the work ahead:

1. Establish and operationalize the Federal Civil Service Council (FCSC)
2. Finalize and pass a new Civil Service Law
3. Establish Provincial Civil Service Councils (PCSC)
4. Establish Human Resources Departments in provinces and ministries
5. Review existing legislation, draft and approve supplemental legislation and regulations
6. Implement the new Civil Service law and regulations
7. Design and implement a Senior Executive Service (SES) program
8. Systematically assess and improve Civil Service operations

Some of these activities may take place concurrently.

Experience in other countries indicates these processes take a decade or longer to run their course before a new foundation is securely established for a modernized civil service. Given the Iraqi electoral cycle and the likelihood that the balkanization described above is likely to continue, reforming the Iraqi civil service is a significant challenge indeed. While capacity development work may be possible from top to bottom within individual sectors controlled by the various political parties, a cross-sectoral program such as civil service reform will require collaboration among the political groups to implement a common program affecting them all. Hopefully reason and concern for the public good will prevail over political and partisan interests, and implementing a much-needed modernization program will be possible.

**Conclusion**

The experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq indicate that civil service reform is far from being just a technical activity: the prevailing political context has everything to do with whether a modernization program is subverted and stalled or whether it can move forward. Initiatives need to take this into consideration and use appropriate methods to secure the broad-based political will required to make these efforts succeed.
In a post-conflict environment where the intergroup tensions that fuelled the war often simmer just beneath the surface, and where groups are accustomed to looking after their own interests first and using force rather than persuasion and negotiation to reach their objectives, achieving the unity of spirit and vision required to collectively decide to improve a country’s public administration is likely to be quite a challenge. Well-intentioned donors and international agencies should adjust their expectations and policies accordingly.