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## The Closers, Part IV: Civilians in the Build Phase

Gary Anderson

“You Americans should not leave. Iraqis are incapable of governing ourselves. Within a year after you are gone, there will be chaos or another dictatorship. You are capable of ruling us; Iraqis are not”

-Farmer Jamail, February, 2010

I was coming to the end of my tour. My conversation with Jamail that day was the last I would have with him. Nearly a year earlier our Governance Team had found the market area of Zaidon in a state of near chaos with a lethargic population, filthy and unpaved streets strewn with rubbish, and a pile of ruins where the milk collection plant had been. Without the collection plant, the dairy industry was depressed. That last day, the streets were clean and lighted, the potholes were gone, and solar lighting made night shopping possible. Business in the shops was booming and the once hostile populace was eager to talk and gossip with us. The foundation for the new milk collection facility had been laid, and it was scheduled to reopen within a year; indeed, it did open in early 2011.

None-the less, my conversation with Jamail depressed me. My job was not just to rebuild. It was to build up the local and national government in the eyes of the population. Jamail’s words echoed those that I had heard too often that week in my farewell tour of the Abu Ghraib Qada’a which I had become fond of despite its challenges. We’d tried hard. When we sent out our Mobile Rural Support Teams (MRSTs) all carried the logo of the Abu Ghraib government. We had tried our utmost to give the Deputy Governor (Qaimaqam) and the Qada’a council credit, but the people saw through the ruse. They knew who was paying the bills and supervising the real work. Leadership by example can only go so far.

In the northern part of the district we had tremendous success in getting the canal system functional again, but it was also obvious that the Americans in general, and I in particular, had been the driver. The object of the exercise had not been to get me recognized as the “Lawrence of the Canals”, but to show that the national and local governments could work together to build a new Iraq. In effect, they did remarkably well at this; but their reluctance to mix with the rabble at regular intervals made me and my team, the only regular faces that the public saw consistently.

In many ways, we Americans had fallen into the same pattern of conquest that had repeated itself for several millennia. The conqueror rolled through and decapitated the existing Mesopotamian leadership, replacing it with something in his image. The conqueror then set off on a charm

offensive to woo the population; which is much easier than martial law. In this we were not far different from the Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, Arab Jihadists, or the Turks. Only the Mongols ruled by sheer terror; their rule had been brief and counterproductive. Iraq has always survived and likely always will. Perhaps that is the best we can do.

I wanted to let my thoughts and my views on lessons learned sit for a while and see what happened in the country of Iraq before putting them down on paper. This was particularly true of the Build Phase which was just beginning as I left Abu Ghraib, although it had stated earlier in those areas that we had designated as “hot spots” and put particular emphasis on such as Jamail’s Zaidon where it had been well underway since November of 09.

It would be logical to conclude that civilians in the Build Phase would be transitioning to the lead, but there are several factors which make the transition situation much more complicated that it would seem at first glance. There are a number of reasons for this.

## **Security**

In counterinsurgency, security is everything. Without it, you are in the clear phase forever, which was the problem in Afghanistan until the Petraeus era began there. In Abu Ghraib, the transition of responsibility for security remained problematical until the day I left. It appears to have finally stabilized as this is written in the spring of 2011. Abu Ghraib’s Iraq garrison was in near continuous turmoil for the year I was there. The brigade that was responsible for the district, the 24/6 Iraqi Army Brigade, went through four changes of command in the year that I was there. The first commander was relieved for corruption and brutality, the second was injured in a terrorist attack during his first month on the job and refused to venture outside his base; he was relieved by a competent commander who was soon displaced in one of the Maliki government’s frequent shake ups to ensure regime control of the military. The fourth was an iron fisted autocrat who had thoroughly alienated the civilian population by the time I left.

All of this was thoroughly frustrating to the commanders and staffs of the two U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams that our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) was partnered with. They were firm, patient, and professional; however the chaos in the Iraqi ranks was debilitating. I’m told that the situation has since stabilized, but it was a long slog.

The situation was worse with the local Iraqi Police Brigade. In the spring of 2009, the Abu Ghraib national police garrison was nearly totally ineffectual. The Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) let them alone because they posed no risk. Some officers were actively AQI; others were not showing up for work or merely drawing paychecks.

That began to change in May 2009 when a new IP Brigade Commander for Abu Ghraib was appointed. He was energetic and a “take charge” kind of guy. Pretty soon things were moving along. He was attempting to fire and root out absentee cops and known AQI sympathizers. He held regular meetings of his local station Chiefs on Saturdays, Saturday in Iraq is what Saturday is in the U.S., generally a no work day. An energetic young American MP Lieutenant was working hard to improve training standards as well as living conditions at the police headquarters.

However, the price for increased efficiency was a rising casualty rate. If you are being targeted, it means you are doing your job. The locals had told me that I was high on the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) target list; that I was in that category was the sincerest possible acknowledgment that I might possibly be doing something right. Eventually, as the Iraqi Police turned up the heat, they became more increasingly targeted by AQI. Unfortunately, this came at a time when the Iraqi government was trying to play down violence. In addition, many of the local IP casualties were caused by sloppy security procedures such as sleeping on post and poor construction of their checkpoints from a security perspective. We tried to help, but both the Defense and State Departments had restrictions on what they could do to help internal security forces.

Eventually our competent and hard working police commander was transferred, and by the time I left, a permanent replacement had not been named. All of this tended to weaken the security posture. Although by early 2010 Abu Ghraib was ready for the Build Phase from a civil perspective, the Iraqi security forces still needed American mentoring.

The point here is that the transition from the hold to the build phase may not be a smooth one even in a given district, and it certainly will appear to be disjointed nation-wide. This isn't a showstopper, but it will be something that we need to take into consideration as we plan any future drawdown. There is a tendency to want to put phases into neat boxes. That simply "*ain't gonna happen*".

## **Governance**

As with security, it would be advisable for the Host Nation Government to take the lead in this area during the build phase. However, here too, not all areas of governance will be ready for the build phase simultaneously. This appears to be particularly true in Afghanistan where the goods and services provided by the central government often lag far behind those provided by the provinces, where the hold phase has been in effect for some time. In these provinces, there is usually a great deal of Coalition supervision of the provincial government whereas the Central government doggedly resists adult supervision by its allies.

This does not mean that the build phase cannot go forward; but, if the ultimate goal is to emphasize the legitimacy of the national government, a handover of responsibility to the national, provincial, and local governments is the ultimate desired end state.

As I ended my year tour in Iraq as the Senior Governance Advisor for our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team I found this to be the case. Farmer Jamail's comments at the beginning of this section pretty much sum up the attitude of most of the citizens of the District that I talked to in my final weeks. Iraqis generally have a tendency to see the glass half empty rather than full, and they had become very cynical about their own governing class. They were quick to credit us, even in instances where we had merely providing funding for locally initiated projects. It was frustrating that the government entities that were doing a good job, or at least trying to, were tarred with the brush of the corrupt and incompetent, of whom there were still far too many.

Our local Abu Ghraib Council was probably as ready to take over responsibility for those functions, within its scope of influence, as it ever would be. Unfortunately, the local government had many limits on what it could do. The local governing councils were an American invention. As with the Japanese governmental system, most power in Iraq was with the central government or the provinces. Local District Councils had no real money beyond their internal operating budget which was provided by the national government.

The local manifestation of the Provincial Government was the Qaimaqam or Deputy Governor (This roughly equates to a county manager in our country). As I have mentioned previously, I thought him to be one of the more competent and effective civil servants that I worked with during my tour. He was not without his faults. He was unduly influenced by tribal pressures, and that resulted in some questionable decisions on his part. Overall however, he operated within what I considered to be an acceptable area of patronage and graft. His primary action arm was the Public Works Office (Belladiya), which took care of trash collection and minor road repair. This arm took a lot of mentoring, but as I left, I felt that it was as good as it was going to get in the foreseeable future.

The local manifestations of the national government were the most problematical and varied the most in their effectiveness. As mentioned earlier in this series, they perform most of the functions done by local governments in the U.S., ranging from police and fire, medical, parks and recreation. The central government also handled national infrastructure such as oil, electricity, drinking water, and the irrigation system. The previously mentioned Iraqi Police were also a federal function.

Their level of competence ranged from pretty good to hopelessly corrupt and inept. The local irrigation chief was a solid citizen who worked hard to improve the canal system and reduce violations; more on that later.

At the other end of the spectrum were the Agriculture Ministry representative and the drinking water chief; both were notorious for corruption and indolence. I was trying hard to get the drinking water chief fired for incompetence when I left, but he was running for Parliament on the Maliki ticket and was hard to touch. We finally got the agriculture chief charged with selling seed that he was supposed to be giving out, but his case has probably been lost in the byzantine Iraqi court system by now.

As we entered the build phase, we did so with a governmental structure which was at best mixed in its effectiveness. This was by no means fatal, it just wasn't pretty.

### **Rule of Law (ROL)**

In both Iraq and Afghanistan ROL is problematical. In both countries, ROL is not responsive to the immediate needs of the population, and this is a real source of discontent. In Iraq, the insurgents never capitalized on it; in Afghanistan, the provision of a responsive justice system is a Taliban strong point.

This is an area where the United States can't be much of a role model. Our litigious society is no model; our bloated and backlogged legal system is an embarrassment for most of our ROL advisors that I have dealt with. My best suggestion for us and for our clients would be to establish a circuit court system that could act as a fire brigade for those areas where ROL is most troubled. A traveling team of competent defense lawyers, prosecutors, and general law specialists for land and civil disputes accompanied by flying squads of juries of impartial and impeccable credentials would do wonders for shoring up the credibility of national, provincial, and local governance. This seems like an overly simplistic solution, even as I write it, but sometimes the simple solutions actually work. Governments are often judged by their justice systems. Kings David and Solomon in the Israel of the Old Testament are primarily remembered as good rulers because of their justice systems, as is Hammurabi in Mesopotamia itself. The British system of justice is largely emulated in her former colonies, in form if not always in spirit. Perhaps we could draft Judge Judy for overseas service.

Iraqis and Afghans that I have talked to are probably bothered by this failure of governance more than any other. The Taliban have made this a key point of their agenda. Fortunately for those of us who dealt with governance in Iraq, the opposition there never got the memo on how to capitalize on this governance weakness.

### **Business and Agriculture**

In the glory days of Communist and Leftist inspired insurgencies, economics were key issues. Taking land and resources from the elite few and re-distributing them to the masses was the primary stated cause of insurgencies from Cuba to Indo-China; economics ranked second only to anti-colonialism as the main cause of revolutions.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen; economics falls behind Islamism and tribal/sectarian conflict as a root cause. That said, unemployment and suffering among farmers remain exacerbating influences and grievances that help undermine the legitimacy of any host nation regime that we are trying to support.

Core economic issues are very difficult to deal with in the clear and hold phases of a counterinsurgency. Indeed, the key fixes to these problems are at the national level of policy and strategy. Any decisions to make key reforms can only be influenced by the United States or her coalition allies. There is little that can be done by U.S. military or civilian advisors other than to assist in expediting these reforms at the local level as they trickle down.

However, some in-extremis projects done in the build phase can sometimes be nurtured and become drivers of local economic growth. In my view, there are three questions that need to be asked regarding a project undertaken in the clear or hold phases regarding their ability to successfully transition to the build phase:

#### **Question 1: Will it help gain popular support in clearing and holding and save CF lives?**

Some "nice to do" things will clearly pass this test in the clear and hold phases, but if they don't pass this basic litmus test, they should not be done immediately. If we as civilians are putting

military lives or our own at risk to protect non-essential efforts in any given stage, we have lost focus.

**Question 2: Is this a project that the entire community wants or the “pet rock” of a local special interest?** As with so many other things, this requires that the initial needs assessment be truly accurate. If it is something the community generally wants and needs, the chances are very good that they will take ownership and establishing a stake in protecting the project. We saw this happen in Zaidon with the milk factory.

**Question 3: Can it be sustained when we leave?** This is really the question of economic viability. If it will eventually generate revenue on its own without government or foreign subsidy past the start up period, it is likely worthy of doing.

*Case 1: Why the milk collection plant worked.* The Zaidon milk collection facility project worked because it could answer all three questions in the affirmative. First, it was obvious that local farmers, some of whom had supported the insurgency, wanted this project and were willing to help defend the site if necessary; this allayed many force protection concerns. Second; it was popular with local farmers, politicians, Sheikhs, and the local representatives of the federal ministries. There were no powerful interest groups opposed to it. When the U.S. Army posed serious and questions about its cost-effectiveness, the community presented a united front in support. Finally, we could show by historical records that the old facility had been self sustaining and that it was a legitimate candidate for reconstruction as the original facility had been a clear casualty of the fighting.

*Case 2: Why subsidized farm equipment would not have been a good bet.* In late 2010, the primary problem, aside from irrigation, faced by the farmers of Abu Ghraib was that of the rental of tractors and farm equipment. In the Saddam days, farm equipment for planting and harvesting was provided to poor famers at government subsidized rental prices. This ended when the regime fell, and an entrepreneurial group of sheikhs took over the rental business at a hefty profit margin. In a truly free market world, this would have evened out; but Iraq’s neighbor’s farmers were heavily subsidized by their governments. Consequently, they were flooding the local market with farm products that our farmers could not compete with.

When I am in the United States, I am a free market Republican, but in the heavily subsidized Middle East, I realized quickly that our local Iraqi farmers were at a grave disadvantage; my U.S. Army counterpart was in agreement. We began to concoct a scheme to provide a subsidized rental system for tractors and harvesters through the local farmers’ association. We developed a plan whereby the local farmer’s cooperatives would receive a grant of farm machinery that they would in turn rent to the locals on a not-for-profit basis. In our defense, neither my PRT nor my counterpart’s brigade had a qualified agricultural expert; we were doing the best we could with what we had.

To make a long story short, this scheme never came about because it failed to pass the three question test that I posed above. Although it would have likely helped protect U.S. troops, at that point we were deep enough into the build phase that force protection was not a serious concern. Second, it failed the test of whether the whole community would support it. The rich Sheikhs

would resist the competition bitterly, and this would likely create hard feelings at a time when we needed the Sheikhs for more pressing issues. Finally, the farmers' associations could never come up with a business plan that would assure us that they would not become as predatory as the Sheikhs. We never formally killed the plan as it was popular with the farmers. We merely let it die of atrophy.

I discussed this with my friend Jamail late in my tour, and he concurred that we had made the right choice. Jamail was an unusual farmer in that he had saved up to buy his own tractor and harvester. He was working on them nearly every time I visited when he was not actually in the fields. His philosophy was simple; "if you give an Iraqi a chance to fuck another Iraqi, he will take it in a minute," (his words, not mine). It is hard to argue with that kind of cultural observation coming from the source that it did. Jamail would have been at home in a farm in Nebraska or the Ukraine; and would have prospered in any case.

### **The Transition from Hold to Build**

The reality of this transition is that will probably be gradual and not very discernable to the eye of the layman or even to trained military or developmental professionals. It is likely something that is more attitudinal than a clear physical manifestation. It will likely appear in the attitude of the local Host Nation security forces and civil governance officials. As a district police chief begins to chafe under the advice of foreign advisors, or as a local government body resists the suggestions of governance mentors, we are likely seeing the transition point. That may not mean that they are truly ready to perform their duties by American standards, but it likely means they feel competent enough to operate using their yardstick for measurement.

By the winter of 2010, the local Iraqi Army brigade was chafing under U.S. tutoring. For reasons mentioned earlier, we did not think that they were ready for transition, but they clearly did. I was seeing the same signs with the local District Council. I wanted to disengage from daily involvement because, in my view, they were about as good as they would ever get; that wasn't great, but it was probably good enough, I wanted to concentrate on several of the local offices that represented the national government, particularly agriculture and water which still clearly needed a lot of help. This lack of uniformity is hard to fit neatly into traditional doctrinal norms, and this is why COIN doctrine has to stress flexibility. There are no easy templates to follow.

For better or worse, Iraq will likely become a template for the build phase and the transition to host nation control in future modern counterinsurgency situations. I have tried to show two things in the discussion. First, there is no typical case. What was happening to us in Abu Ghraib happened earlier or later in other permutations in other districts, provinces, and regions in Iraq, It now appears that in Afghanistan, several remote regions may even be written off as counterinsurgency candidates, and others will progress as unevenly as Abu Ghraib. Second, from a civilian perspective, there are no standardized measures of effectiveness (MOE) for when the build phase should transition to total host nation control. In the final installment, I will offer some rough rule of thumb MOE with a cautionary note that they are only cautionary.

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