

Jason Ben-Meir: Reconstruction that Counters Insurgency

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It is critically necessary for the United States to provide maximum support for every Iraqi neighborhood and village to develop reconstruction projects. Hundreds and thousands of new socio-economic development projects that local communities determine, manage and benefit from will alienate insurgents, and advance democracy and the withdrawal of American and international forces.

Community ownership--from design to implementation and evaluation--of local development can create vital economic, health, educational, environmental and political benefits. Alternatively, foreign-managed reconstruction 1) prevents Iraqi people from building important skills needed to advance their own development and 2) plays into the insurgency because it raises public doubt about the intentions of the United States.

Reconstruction should primarily take the form of small-scale projects that local community members control (a good strategy for post-Katrina as well). Communities decide on projects based on the social and environmental conditions they face and collectively assess. Typically, government and non-government organizations (NGOs) provide technical and other support. In the process, private-public partnerships are formed and civil society grows.

There are many challenges when communities work together to achieve their goals, especially in very difficult security conditions. However, a community-driven approach to development is highly decentralized and there are thousands of cases around the world of successful projects. With optimal funding and political will, significant advances in Iraq's reconstruction that undermines the insurgency can be achieved in months.

Local third-party facilitators are needed to catalyze and help coordinate broad participation in development planning. They facilitate group activities that help communities determine their priorities and design projects to achieve them. Schoolteachers, government and NGO personnel, community members and leaders and others can receive training to be facilitators.

Training is most effective in real situations where trainees work closely with communities. The communities that participate in the training also benefit from the experience because they develop viable action plans.

The United States needs to commit financial support for the local projects that will be designed when facilitators apply participatory planning activities with their home communities. An Iraqi agency is required for on-going technical support for facilitators and to direct funds to implement new projects.

In this reconstruction strategy, insurgents will be increasingly opposed by a growing public that experiences its real benefits. Communities that achieve their self-determined goals will not allow a base of support for insurgents, which is a sustainable way of dealing with them. Also, since local community meetings and projects will be scattered throughout Iraq and fully carried out by Iraqis, they are not optimal targets for insurgents.

The United States should make every effort to promote mass participation in community reconstruction. The local democratic processes will further empower the Iraqi people, strengthen public opposition to the insurgency and help win the war of ideas. The alternative for the United States to widespread community control of Iraq's reconstruction may be to leave the country with continuing rampant violence.

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