

Fixing Fragile States



America's cumbersome approach to interagency operations in the field urgently needs reform, centered around more powerful ambassadors and coordinated in-country policy design.

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Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has waged major postwar reconstruction campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and similar but smaller programs in other countries that harbor Al Qaeda affiliates. Continued

complex political, economic and military operations will be needed for many years to deal with the continuing threat from Al Qaeda and its associated organizations, much of it stemming from fragile states with weak institutions, high rates of poverty and deep ethnic, religious or tribal divisions. Despite thirteen years of experience—and innumerable opportunities to learn lessons from both successes and mistakes—there have been few significant changes in our cumbersome, inefficient and ineffective approach to interagency operations in the field.

We believe the time has come to look to a new, more effective operational model. For fragile states in which Al Qaeda is present, the United States should develop, select and support with strong staff a new type of ambassador with more authority to plan and direct complex operations across department and agency lines, and who will be accountable for their success or failure. We need to develop the plans to protect American interests and strengthen these countries out in the field, where local realities are understood, before Washington agencies bring their inside-the-Beltway perspectives to bear. Congress and the executive branch need to authorize field leaders to shift resources across agency lines to meet new threats. It is, in short, a time for change—change that upends our complacent and antiquated approach toward foreign societies and cultures.

THE 9/11 ATTACKS offered us a painful reminder of an old verity, which is that fragile states unable to enforce their laws and control their territory are the progenitors of potent threats that can be carried out simply and effectively. Such states provide safe havens from which Al Qaeda and its affiliates plan and launch terror attacks against the United States and other countries. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operates in Yemen; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operates across Algeria, Mali and other neighboring countries; and Al Shabab operates in Somalia. Civil war in Syria, spreading violence in Iraq and continued turmoil in Africa will most likely open new havens for similar groups.

Until now, the American response to the threat from fragile states has had three major components: First, we have greatly strengthened the control of our own borders. Second, American intelligence and military forces, particularly the CIA and the U.S. Special Operations Command, have taken the fight to Al Qaeda. Third, the United States, along with other countries and international organizations, has increased economic and civil assistance to many fragile states using existing programs and authorities.

How much have these approaches achieved? The American-led reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have been prolonged and massive, but cannot be considered successful.

A dysfunctional system of authorities and procedures hampered effectiveness. Plans were made in Washington by committees of the representatives of different departments and agencies; individual departments and agencies sent instructions to their representatives in the field; and the allocations of resources to country programs were based in large part on individual departmental and agency priorities and available funding, not on overall national priorities. Each of the departments maintained direct authority over its field personnel and resources. Short-term staffing was endemic and cooperation in the field was voluntary, with neither the ambassador nor any official in Washington below the president authorized to resolve disputes or set overall priorities. Budget resources for a particular program could not be shifted smoothly to others when local conditions changed, and congressional oversight was split among committees that oversaw only individual aspects of the overall program in a country.

Even when the president, the National Security Council and an energetic interagency process in Washington were fully engaged—as they were in later years in Iraq and Afghanistan—the results have not matched the commitment of resources. Numerous accounts by journalists and memoirs of participants have documented the interdepartmental frictions, inefficient bureaucratic compromises and delayed decisions that have hampered progress. The authors of this article know personally most of those involved in leading the

long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are to a person—whether military officers or civilian officials—diligent and dedicated patriots. They have often worked across departmental lines to integrate security, governance and economic-assistance programs to achieve real successes. However, when officials and officers in the field did not get along, the deficiencies of the system allowed their disputes to bring in-country progress to a halt. What is needed is an overall system that will make cooperation and integration the norm, not the exception.

YEMEN AND LIBYA provide smaller-scale but more contemporary illustrations of the shortcomings of today's approaches. Although American officials have gained more experience, the authorities and procedures have not changed.

Yemen is the home base for AQAP, generally considered the most dangerous franchise of Al Qaeda. The speeches of American officials paint a picture of a comprehensive, balanced set of U.S. government programs not only to attack AQAP, but also to assist the current Yemeni government with both political and economic development. In congressional testimony in November 2013, for example, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Arabian Peninsula Barbara Leaf emphasized American "support for Yemen's historic transition and continued bilateral security cooperation." She mentioned the \$39 million that the United States had provided to support the national reconciliation process, U.S. encouragement of economic reform, its support for restructuring the Yemeni armed forces, and its participation in a weekly meeting among outside countries and international organizations to "compare notes, compare approaches, and coordinate tightly." She said nothing of the American military and intelligence attacks on AQAP fighters, yet these actions are the most costly U.S. programs dealing with Yemen, and they feature prominently in Yemeni popular opinion.

Even in this friendly hearing, however, the shortcomings of American and international programs were made clear. Congressman Ted Deutch noted,

“U.S. assistance to Yemen totaled \$256 million for Fiscal Year 2013, but these funds come from 17 different accounts, all with very different objectives.” He asked a fundamental question that went unanswered: “What exactly is our long-term strategy for Yemen?”

The view on the ground in Yemen is considerably darker. Two weeks before Leaf’s testimony, an op-ed in the *Yemen Post* under the headline “Law of the Jungle in Yemen” stated:

People have lost hope in the National Dialogue. . . . Billions of US dollars are still looted in the poverty stricken Yemen with not one corrupt senior official prosecuted. . . .

Laws are only practiced against the weak and helpless. . . . An internal war is ongoing in the north of Yemen. . . . Al-Qaeda is regrouping and seeking to become a power once again . . . Safety and security in Yemen is nowhere to be seen. Government authority and presence over many parts of the country is limited, and where they are present they are almost useless.

U.S. policy in Yemen has been cobbled together in Washington through the typical interagency process. Because congressional funding for counterterrorist programs, both military and intelligence, is still flowing relatively freely, they are the largest American programs in Yemen. According to press reporting, there are two independent task forces—one military, one CIA—operating drones over Yemen, and U.S. security assistance to the Yemeni armed forces is focused on the creation of small, well-trained counterterrorist forces. The Saudis and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have promised over \$3 billion in economic support to Yemen. American economic assistance to Yemen is a small fraction of this amount; thus, the American plan must leverage the greater GCC contribution. The overall picture in Yemen, then, is one of unbalanced, uncoordinated and suboptimal U.S. and international programs based on no coherent plan.

Libya is another excellent illustration of an American assistance program that is not meeting the needs of the country. American commitment of financial resources to assist Libya has been modest: the State Department estimates about \$240 million since the beginning of operations to oust Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011. Far more money was spent by the United States on the NATO air operations that pushed Qaddafi out of power. American assistance to Libya has been spread across different government programs, depending on the other bills for those programs in the rest of the world. With few resources at their command, the country team needed an integrated plan to make the actions they could take effective, to set priorities and to leverage the actions of other countries. Yet the various American agencies working in Libya, as usual, cooperated as best they could, under no integrated plan, with little experienced leadership either in Tripoli or Washington. As crises occurred and conditions deteriorated, responses were improvised.

Like Iraq in 2003, Libya was coming out of a long and brutal dictatorship. Rebuilding the country would require extraordinary actions by the Libyans themselves and by outside countries like the United States that had helped bring down Qaddafi and had a stake in a favorable outcome. International security-support programs, including those by the United States, have been notably weak. Any doubt about the conditions on the ground ended when Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens was murdered in Benghazi in September 2012, the first U.S. ambassador to die in the line of duty since 1979. Yet it was over another year later that the United States and several other European countries began belatedly to take actions to strengthen the army and police. NATO began a program to train about twenty thousand Libyan soldiers. The program is not scheduled to be completed for many more months, and the result will be trained soldiers who perform their duties with mostly inadequate medical, communications and logistical support.

Yet this belated program to strengthen basic security in Libya still is not part of an overall plan to help Libya become a competent, functioning state. According to two experts at the Atlantic Council and the European Council on Foreign Relations, respectively:

The current western agenda for Libya lacks a political strategy and is focused almost exclusively on the training of the Libyan army. If experience elsewhere is an indication, it will take between 5 and 15 years for that to conclude. The same experience tells us that “strengthening the central government” is an insufficient goal if the country is to become stable and under the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the official U.S. activities in Libya, as described by the current U.S. ambassador, Deborah K. Jones, are directed toward “a broad process encompassing a National Dialogue, constitutional development, and governance capacity-building to increase public confidence.” In American pronouncements, there is little sense of priorities, combined programs, milestones or urgency.

THE EMBASSIES of the United States and its international partners in these fragile countries must do more than just be supportive of individual areas needing improvement. Their approach has to be selective, hands-on, tailored, flexible and integrated.

Selective: Resources are limited, and the approach needs to be sustained over an extended period of time. It should be applied only to the handful of countries in which the threat is high and host government capacity is low.

Hands-on: The United States and other international partners cannot simply transfer money to government departments in fragile states, as it will likely be stolen or misused. Instead, they must take an active role in building competent local government organizations that can use increased resources effectively. American and other international operators cannot train local organizations to be replicas of their Western equivalents, or models of counterparts in other countries; conditions are too different. Likewise, they cannot simply fly in for a two-week stint and then head home; there will be no follow-through. Experienced, carefully selected and trained officials who can

influence host officials and build local capacity without causing resentment are essential.

Tailored: Sometimes existing security or law-enforcement organizations or judicial systems can be strengthened; other times they must be created. Sometimes putting the national finances of a country in order will unleash economic growth; other times training and economic support in a particular region of the country are vital. Sometimes training and assisting central government officials is important; other times it is competent provincial officials that are essential for success. The key to a tailored approach is for the American representatives in a country to have the authority and responsibility both for planning and for carrying out the plan.

Flexible: Requirements are always dynamic in fragile states. Plans need to be revised quickly in response to events on the ground; money and personnel need to be shifted quickly to meet new problems and to take advantage of new opportunities.

Integrated: Integration depends on setting a common set of priorities across all programs. Once security forces stabilize a city or region, improved governance and economic opportunity must follow immediately, or the security gains will be wasted. Integration depends on realistic sequencing of different programs. Unless the judiciary and prison systems are improved along with police forces, criminals will be released or tortured after their arrest. Policemen can be trained or retrained in weeks and prison systems can be improved quickly, yet training a core of judges and lawyers takes years. There must be practical interim plans that will ensure progress.

Finally, current operations to capture or kill hardcore Al Qaeda members need to continue, without stirring up local resentment that will make it more difficult to make the necessary longer-term improvements. However, these operations need to be consolidated and integrated into an overall plan in each country.

THERE IS duplication, overlap and sometimes competition between the traditional military operations of the Department of Defense and the covert paramilitary operations of the CIA against Al Qaeda. To fully understand the issue, it's important to be clear about the significant difference between clandestine and covert operations. A "clandestine" operation is one that is secret, and no government official is to talk about it. Clandestine operations are routinely conducted by the Department of Defense, and on occasion by other U.S. government agencies. A "covert" operation is one in which the involvement of the U.S. government is to be kept secret, to the point of official denial. The CIA has generally conducted covert operations, and an executive order gives this preference, but the basic legislation authorizes them to be conducted by other departments or agencies as directed by the president.

Although geopolitical conditions have changed fundamentally since the Cold War, when covert operations were originally authorized, there has been no serious consideration of updating the authorities for covert action. The 9/11 Commission's recommendation to assign paramilitary operations to the Department of Defense was not adopted either by Congress or by two successive administrations. The result has been continued complicated, duplicative and costly operations against Al Qaeda. It has only been experienced, dedicated and mission-focused operators in the field that have permitted the current system to work, and their successes have obscured the need for clarity and simplification. This recommendation should be seriously revisited based on our experiences of the last decade.

Two types of armed operations against Al Qaeda are the most important: raids and armed drone strikes. For raids—the helicopter raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad is the best known—all the operational skills are in the Department of Defense, mostly within components of the Special Operations Command. Yet, there are often questions and disputes about whether they should be conducted as clandestine traditional military operations commanded by the secretary of defense under Title 10, or covert intelligence operations controlled by the director of the CIA under Title 50.

In reality, the president has the legal authority to order these operations under either title, using either organization. In 2011, the president decided to authorize the Abbottabad raid, entirely conducted by Department of Defense personnel, as a Title 50 covert action, under the control of the director of the CIA. It was a “clandestine military operation” conducted under authorities that were designated for “covert action.” There was never any reason or intention to deny the role of the U.S. government—the primary rationale for covert action—once the operation commenced and inevitably became public. To the contrary, government officials were running for the microphones as soon as the helicopters returned from Pakistani airspace. Fortunately, experienced military commanders made all the tactical decisions, and the raid was a success. Had anything gone wrong—the loss of a helicopter and the capture of its crew by Pakistan, or a dispute between CIA officers and special-operations officers during the raid, with each group appealing to its own chain of command—the results could have been quite different.

For armed attacks by drones, the CIA and the Department of Defense have set up duplicate organizations, each authorized by separate legislation. There are reasons for the current arrangements. The bottom line, however, is that it is the Department of Defense that is established, trained and authorized to kill enemy combatants. For reasons of competence, accountability and effectiveness, the armed drone campaign should be assigned to the secretary of defense, with the entire intelligence community, including the CIA, playing an essential role in identifying, prioritizing and tracking the targets.

A NEW model for interagency operations in fragile states would be strongest and longest lasting if it were established by legislation. However, much can be done by executive order, policy and practice.

The foundational process change should be to assign the task of developing a comprehensive plan for a fragile state to the team on the ground in that state, rather than to an interagency group in Washington. It is axiomatic in both business and military planning that a plan ought to be drafted by those

responsible for carrying it out. Only in American interagency planning is it done by a committee at headquarters, then passed to the field for implementation. Washington's plans are subject to pressures that often make them unrealistic and unsuitable for conditions in the field. An in-country planning team is much more likely to deliver a plan that is balanced between the short and the long term, that includes the most effective applications of the capabilities of the different departments and that realistically matches the needs on the ground. During interagency review in Washington, there will be plenty of opportunity for adding other considerations and good ideas.

However, for an embassy to submit a good plan takes a uniquely qualified and experienced ambassador with a dedicated, competent supporting interagency staff, in addition to the usual country team, comprising the representatives from the various departments and agencies.

Foreign Service officers spend most of their careers in staff positions, responsible for observing, reporting, negotiating, and making policy recommendations that are heavily weighted toward the short term and tactical. Their career pattern develops a high level of expertise, observational and writing skills, and diplomatic abilities. The leader of American in-country operations in a fragile state needs high-order managerial and leadership skills for complex program execution as well as a deep knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of other American organizations, especially military and intelligence. Some Foreign Service officers who became ambassadors have developed these skills. James Jeffrey, Ryan Crocker and Anne Patterson are among several in the recent past. However, although such training has been recommended, the Foreign Service is not geared toward producing such skills broadly. A qualification-and-selection process is needed for ambassadors to places like Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, Mali, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq to identify candidates with the experience, knowledge and stature to direct an integrated, multiagency task force.

The current manning of embassies does not include a central staff to support an ambassador in designing and implementing a country plan. What is needed

is a small, separate staff of perhaps a dozen experienced officers, drawn from different agencies, to help the ambassador formulate the plan, and then to monitor its execution to determine if it is achieving its objectives and recommend adjustments as circumstances on the ground change. While maintaining strong links back to their parent organizations for advice, support and guidance, these staff officers would primarily serve the ambassador in developing and coordinating his or her plans. Such help is beginning to be available from the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, but this falls short of an integrated interagency effort.

Within the overall integrated plan in a fragile state, the ambassador should recommend the military and intelligence actions to be taken directly against Al Qaeda personnel and units. The country plan must establish the priority and scope of these activities within the overall mission of strengthening security. It needs to define the areas in which the raids and drone strikes will be conducted and the intensity of the campaign. The overall objective is to capture or kill more enemies than are created. The ambassador should recommend whether these actions be taken as military activities under Title 10 or intelligence activities under Title 50. With special-operations forces and CIA planners as part of his team, the ambassador is in the best position to recommend both the actions themselves and the most appropriate authorities under which to conduct them. During the course of the campaign, the ambassador needs the authority to approve direct actions—drone strikes as well as raids and conventional military strikes—to ensure that they are integrated into the overall plan.

When the ambassador has formulated an integrated plan for the country, incorporating diplomatic, economic, intelligence, military and other aspects, including milestones that the plan will achieve on specified dates, it should be sent to Washington for interagency comment and for the allocation of resources—people and money. The Office of Management and Budget should participate at all levels of interagency review to ensure that budget plans are realistic. Ultimately, a resourced, comprehensive plan for a fragile state should be approved by the president.

Virtually every fragile state both affects and is affected by its neighbors. Tribal, ethnic and religious influences cross national boundaries; borders are often porous; pressuring groups in one country pushes them into others. The cooperation of neighboring states is thus essential to success within fragile states. To ensure that these factors are considered to obtain regional buy-in, each country plan should be sent to neighboring embassies (in the case of the State Department and other agencies without regional organizations) and to regional and global combatant commands (in the case of the Department of Defense) for review and comment.

No plan survives first contact with the enemy; success in the implementation of a plan depends on flexibility and adaptation. Yet currently those carrying out military, economic, diplomatic and other programs in fragile states have very little authority or capability to react. A change in one aspect of a plan will always cause changes in other aspects, yet because authorities in the American national-security system pass directly from departments and agencies to representatives in the field, it is very difficult to gain approval for necessary adjustments. Congressional oversight, based on jurisdiction over appropriated budgets, further hinders flexibility. Economic-development programs depend on successful security operations, yet there is no authority in a country that can direct adjustments when setbacks in one area require changes in another. No financial or personnel reserves are available to cover unexpected problems or to take advantage of surprise opportunities—the budget incentive is “use it or lose it,” whether or not a program is effective, or whether or not the money could be used more effectively elsewhere. Again, dedicated, hardworking officers and officials cooperate with each other as best they can, but the current system does not support flexibility.

The solution is to give the ambassador both the responsibility for overall progress on the plan and directive authority over the programs in country within the limits of the plan that was approved. Once budgets have been allocated to U.S. programs to strengthen a fragile state, an ambassador should be able to shift them, within realistic thresholds, as needs and opportunities develop.

THESE REFORMS will go a long way toward improving American support for fragile states and dealing with Al Qaeda groups that find refuge in them. However, additional improvements are needed.

It is only the Department of Defense that has either the authority or the tradition of assigning personnel to difficult overseas postings, whether they volunteer or not. All other agencies rely on volunteers. The result has been chronic shortchanging of the nonmilitary billets in fragile states—short assignments for officers, or the use of contractors. Authority must be granted to department and agency heads to assign their personnel as needed to support the national interest. Without this change, American campaigns in these countries will be unbalanced and heavily influenced by military considerations, since it is the military personnel who show up.

Although the Department of Defense has the authority to send personnel overseas as needed, some key skills for assisting fragile states have deteriorated within the military services in recent years. In the past, there were experienced civil engineers, utility company officials, local government administrators and transportation officials in the Army and Marine Corps Reserve. They had the skills and experience to help establish competent organizations to provide basic infrastructure in fragile states. The civil-affairs personnel in military reserve units are more junior and much less experienced now. The contractors and individually mobilized reservists that are now used to assist struggling government organizations in fragile states are inadequate for the importance and difficulty of the need. The Reserve Components of the Army and Marine Corps must reestablish strong civilian-affairs components.

Successive secretaries of state in recent administrations have made strong attempts to improve the numbers and qualifications of civilian officials sent to fragile states. Continued emphasis is needed, as the State Department still has difficulty filling even established billets in Afghanistan, language skills do not meet existing requirements in fragile states, and there are too many short-term assignments of personnel to jobs that require sustained interaction with

local officials to build trust. The State Department must continue to develop a cadre of officers who can be effective in the tough tasks of strengthening fragile states.

In virtually every fragile state, some of the weakest institutions are the police, courts and prisons. The U.S. government has very little capacity to help strengthen them. The Department of Justice has only a limited training-and-advisory capacity similar to that in the Department of Defense or the Department of State, and generally requires outside funding to mount training programs. Other countries have some capacity, but retired state and local police officers, private contractors, or volunteer judges and prison officials man the American assistance programs. In Afghanistan, the mission of police training was assigned to the Department of Defense, despite the fundamental differences between the military and law-enforcement missions. We need to develop a cadre of advisers and trainers for police, courts and prisons, and a means to supplement the cadre with qualified and supervised private volunteers.

Finally, Congress will need to establish new oversight procedures for an integrated country strategy, rather than the disjointed current system in which generals testify in front of one committee, ambassadors in front of another, and no executive-branch official below the president has the responsibility for overall success or failure to strengthen a fragile state in which the United States has important interests.

COUNTRIES WITH weak governments, high levels of poverty, and internal ethnic, religious and tribal tensions that provide sanctuaries for Al Qaeda or its affiliates will remain a perennial source of instability and threats for America and its allies. Most of the discussion of the challenges of dealing with fragile states has been dominated by abstract debates over vital American interests, fears of long-term commitments, sterile arguments over military versus civil components, disagreements over deadlines and often ill-informed applications of the perceived lessons of the U.S. experience in one country to

another. This is unfortunate. What has been missing from the discussion is an understanding of the very segmented, rigid and inefficient system under which the United States attempts to help these countries stabilize their governments and societies and control outside terrorist groups. The current system guarantees that the resources—people and dollars—that are allocated to these countries do not produce the results they could and should. The United States should likely provide more funding for its programs in countries like Yemen, Libya and Mali. However, what is even more important is for the Obama administration and Congress to improve the basic system for organizing and conducting these programs. The improvements in authorities and procedures that we recommend here will go a long way toward making America safer with a very small expenditure of additional resources. It's time to replace decades of failure with a new approach that protects American security by transforming fragile states into genuinely secure ones.

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