

SYMPOSIUM

Doing the Least Harm: How to Prevent a Post-withdrawal Resumption of Violence in Afghanistan and Iraq

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‘Sunnis in Iraq allied with US rejoin rebels’, read a recent cover story in the *New York Times*, detailing how a group the USA had paid and armed to act as a local police force is now losing its members to the insurgency. Another, a few days earlier, entitled ‘Afghans linked to the Taliban guard US bases’, highlighted how coalition money spent on local guards in Afghanistan ends up in enemy hands. These two news stories are just a small sample of the stories coming out of America’s ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: empirical support for the Darden–Mylonas argument—that an occupier should not be arming locals—abounds.

Despite ample evidence advising to the contrary, one can see the appeal for an occupier to restructure the local police and army as a way to state-build. The strengthening of local security forces is, after all, consistent with the Weberian paradigm on state-building, which is premised on a monopoly over the means of violence. Local forces are meant to offer enough manpower for effective rule while freeing up the occupier to return home or move on to conquer elsewhere. What Darden and Mylonas highlight is why this strategy fails. They attribute failure to the locals’ mixed loyalties towards the occupier—one day they are police, the next insurgents.

The authors see the quick-and-dirty move to build coercive capacity before administrative loyalty as a serious hindrance to effective governance. And given the empirical record of disloyal and duplicitous local forces, who could fault them? Darden and Mylonas instead argue that a strong nationalist narrative, inculcated at school and reinforced in the family, is the way to build a state. It is their view that nation-building is the only way to enduring state-building, and not the other way around. Consistent with classic

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views of nationalism such as Anderson's (1983) nation as an imagined community resulting from print capitalism and Gellner's (1983) view of nationalism as a demand for a unique 'idiom' attained through mass literacy, Darden and Mylonas emphasize the role of education in nation-building. Citing cases as diverse as nineteenth century nation-building in France and the Russian civil war, one could argue that their scope is not limited to state-building under foreign occupation but could rather apply to any attempts at state-building, be they domestic or foreign. Their story is theoretically satisfying and empirically convincing. But what does it imply for policy in the contemporary battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq?

Keeping in mind the short attention span of policy-makers, which is too limited to allow the requisite time for nation-building (arguably at least a generation), the main policy implication of the Darden–Mylonas argument appears to be that one should not occupy in the first place. This is an argument that holds a lot of sway and to which many—ranging from neo-realist academics to pragmatic politicians—are very sympathetic. But given that we are already in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that we are not intent on staying long enough to see a generation of Afghans and Iraqis re-educated in a new paradigm that will secure loyalty, what is second best? How do we extricate ourselves while doing the least harm?

Some insist that there is no way to get around arming the populace. Containing the insurgency and handing it off to the locals to handle is in that view the lesser evil. Guns may not be the best option, but they are not necessarily a bad one—indeed, recent research on Chechnya suggests that armed co-ethnics may actually be more effective counterinsurgents than occupiers (Lyll, 2010), pointing to an advantage to the use of local forces. In that context the assumption is that there are ways of structuring incentives to induce loyalty so that interactions with the local population are seen as iterated rather than one-shot. According to that paradigm, hardwiring a new identity through mass schooling is not the only solution. Rather, there is a range of options between arming the locals and educating them that could arguably work.

One such example involves local institution-building that is premised on targeted development aid rather than weapons and which has proved to have stabilizing effects. Specifically, interim results from an ongoing impact evaluation of a community-driven development program in Afghanistan suggest that such programs improve people's perceptions of their economic wellbeing as well as their government while also improving security (Beath *et al.*, 2011). Similarly encouraging results on the effect of aid as a tool for counterinsurgents have also come out of Iraq (Berman *et al.*, 2010). These findings suggest that handing out butter rather than guns (or pens) can actually work.

In addition, and as the authors acknowledge, we would expect state-building success to vary depending on the degree of ethnic fractionalization, the type of occupier involved in the state-building enterprise, and the type of power dynamics in the international system. Multi-ethnic states with a foreign occupier in the context of an increasingly multipolar system, the authors would argue, face the lowest probability of success; and these are exactly the types of case with which we are currently confronted in Afghanistan and Iraq. It would be very hard for a unifying narrative for loyalty, such as the one envisioned by the authors, to arise in such contexts. Arguably, that could happen only if one side had secured an outright military victory. In cases of negotiated settlements, which are becoming increasingly more likely in the post-Cold War world, each group would have an incentive to propagate its own side of the story in school books. Unless history is

written and taught by the winners, we would end up seeing a Shia narrative against a Sunni narrative in Iraq and a Pashtun narrative against one of Tajiks or Hazaras in Afghanistan. This is indeed the case in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina, where each of the three ethnicities—Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats—has their own school curriculum with different versions of their shared history. Schooling in such a context has entrenched divisions rather than consolidating a nation with clear loyalties.

Given the range of challenges discussed above, some see continued external oversight through regional institutions, such as the European Union, as a key ingredient to successful state-building. While we can see how the European Union has offered this institutional context for war-torn countries in the Balkans, it is hard to see the same effective regional role being played in the Middle East or South Asia, regions that are devoid of such institutional contexts. Neighbors there are meddlers with a known and protracted destabilizing influence. They are seen as part of the problem and not the solution.

State-building success or failure is, at the end of the day, in the eye of the beholder. The post-Cold War experience with state-building has involved a range of post-conflict states in Africa (Ethiopia and Sierra Leone), Europe (Bosnia and Macedonia), the Middle East (Iraq and Lebanon) and Asia (East Timor). Though arguably very few, if any, would qualify as established liberal democracies, none of these countries has relapsed into outright civil war to date. By that standard they are a success, and that, for better or worse, may very well be the standard we shall use to evaluate Afghanistan and Iraq once we exit.

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