

IRAQ'S LESSONS FOR TRANSITION IN AFGHANISTAN

In his December 2009 speech at West Point, President Obama set July 2011 as the beginning of a process of transition in Afghanistan, where geographic or functional responsibilities are to be handed over from the international coalition to the host nation. As policymakers in NATO capitals and practitioners in Afghanistan think about transition, they can take a lesson from the Iraq experience.

The United States actually experienced two types of transitions in Iraq. The first occurred from 2004 to 2006, where responsibilities for security and governance were handed over to the Iraqis even as the security situation continued to deteriorate and even if their capacities were insufficiently developed. This approach was widely deemed a failure. The second approach began in 2007 and continues today. Six factors govern the more successful second approach. While they may be applied differently in Afghanistan, they will certainly be important considerations in the months ahead.

1. Successful transition is a gradual process, not a rapid handover.

The early experience with transition in Iraq demonstrated that the proper handover of responsibility for both security and governance took time. Iraqis learned new skills and expanded their capabilities, and the Coalition got better at setting the right conditions for transition. Partnerships, military and governmental, were an integral part of the process. These partnerships took place simultaneously throughout the country, in multiple functions and at multiple levels. In Iraq, Coalition forces partnered with their Iraqi counterparts at all echelons of command—from the platoon level, to the Division, to the Ministries of Defense and Interior. On the civilian side, Iraqis worked with Provincial Reconstruction Teams as well as with international counterparts in various ministries. Slowly, this coordinated effort not only improved security but also governance, reconstruction, and service delivery efforts from the provincial to the national level. In the beginning of the transition, much of the responsibility fell on coalition forces. Over time, responsibility was shifted to the Iraqis, first under the supervision and guidance of U.S. and coalition forces and their civilian counterparts, and later, with increasingly less oversight until the Iraqis had developed the sufficient capability.

2. Successful transition must be fact-based.

In Iraq, the Coalition leaders, military and diplomatic, evaluated the conditions on the ground to determine the actual capabilities of the Iraqi government and their security forces. Those on the ground are best suited to evaluate the empirical realities and assess progress. In the late summer of 2007, for

example, those on the ground in Iraq were the first to note the improvement in security conditions and the initial changes in government and security force capabilities. As security improved, on-ground commanders and diplomats brought other “forces” to bear—for example, Provincial Reconstruction Teams to engage Province governors and councils helping them increase spending of their budgets and distributing public goods and services; and embedded ministerial advisors to improve ministerial support to the provinces. These abilities had to be developed in the various Iraqi organizations before transition could occur. A facts-based discourse between the military commanders and diplomats on the ground and political leaders in capitals provides the proper basis to determine a rate of transition with the highest probability of success.

3. Successful transition is a mosaic, not a simple linear progression.

The mosaic of transition must be understood both geographically and functionally. In Iraq, transition occurred at different rates. For example, security improved in some parts of Iraq before others; even within large cities or provinces, some parts improved faster than others. Military and paramilitary police often improved before local police. Governance likewise improved at different rates in different areas, depending on a variety of factors including security conditions as well as the character and capabilities of government officials and the proficiency of their associate Coalition support organizations. Some provinces improved quickly; others are still fledging to this day. The same uneven development applies to the Ministerial level. As a rule, geographically it is often best to transition as locally as possible; functionally, it is best to transition specific tasks that can aggregate to larger institutional capabilities.

4. Successful transition requires creating and then accelerating momentum.

Improving security is often the best way to overcome inertia and create positive momentum. This was the case in Iraq. The counteroffensive to secure Baghdad and its environs launched in early 2007 seized the initiative from the insurgents, resulted in gradual security improvements, and stimulated momentum for further success. Initial momentum created by improved security was accelerated in several ways: faster growth—in size, capability, and confidence—of the Iraqi Security Forces; continued counteroffensive maneuvers by Iraqi and Coalition conventional and special operations forces; diplomatic engagement at the national level; and aggressive Provincial Reconstruction Teams improving local and provincial governance and reconstruction. Momentum takes time to build. Sustaining it requires continuous effort and pressure not just to expand security, but to advance in areas of governance and reconstruction.

5. Successful transition requires the proper use of timelines.

Timelines are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Deadlines spur action, but alone they will not generate progress. When improperly used, timelines are dysfunctional, for they force sub-optimal decisions in an effort to meet a given deadline—even if conditions are not set or actual capabilities exist. “Doing it fast” is often the precursor to “doing it over.” For the greatest likelihood of success, timelines must be based on ground realities and on a dialogue between the practitioners on the ground and policymakers in national capitals. The first approach to transitions in Iraq is an example of the improper use of timelines; the second, an example of the proper relationship between on-the-ground realities and in-the-capital realities.

6. Successful transition requires sufficient civil-military coherence in planning, execution, assessment, and adaptation.

The Crocker-Petraeus joint campaign plan in Iraq created sufficient coherence. Success in Iraq required coherent action by multiple nations and organizations; coherence is even more important in Afghanistan because there are even more actors. Multiple agencies, organizations, and nations must have a sufficiently similar understanding of the task and how it is to be accomplished. Sufficient coherence is absolutely required, not just among U.S. and other NATO nations, but also within the Afghan government and its security forces. Sufficiency should be the guiding principle, as the divergent views and the complexities on the ground make complete synchronization unrealistic. In Iraq, successive iterations of joint campaign plans have helped achieve sufficient coherence and unity of effort and have proved integral not only in setting the conditions required for successful transition, but also in guiding the transition process itself.

CONCLUSION

Transition, an essential component to counterinsurgency, is complex and multi-faceted. The six factors described above are interrelated. No one alone will breed success. Yet, when properly adapted to, the specific conditions on the ground and sufficiently coordinated among the multiple organizations involved, together they can generate iterative improvements over time and greatly increase the probability of the success of transitions, whether local, regional, or national.