

GNSI DECISION BRIEF

Did We Miss the Golden Hour? Foreign Assistance and the Collapse of Afghanistan

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November 6, 2024



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Introduction

James Stephenson former country director for Iraq for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), explains in his book *Losing the Golden Hour* that there is a short window of time – usually a year or so – immediately following the cessation of hostilities in a country during which any assistance efforts will prove successful, or not, in the long term.¹ This time frame is known as “the golden hour,” a lease from the medical field referring to the few precious minutes after a traumatic injury when proper first aid can make the difference between life or death.²

An argument can be made on the existence and importance of the golden hour in the field of foreign assistance, and that Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, as Stephenson suggests in his book, perhaps truly represented the loss of the golden hour. If we accept the proposition that the golden hour exists and matters in determining a country’s best chance at stability after conflict, then Afghanistan more than Iraq showcased the failure by the United States at seizing the opportunity to provide foreign assistance within that timeframe.

To better understand the events around the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the closing of the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan in 2021, a review of early U.S. engagement can highlight missed opportunities to foster Afghanistan’s legendary sense of independence, help the U.S. carry out more efficient interventions during crises and better plan for effort reductions and disengagements.

Background

For Afghanistan, there was a distinct and almost palpable feeling of being in a time where all opportunities for the future were possible in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002. U.S. presence and the desire to jump start the country’s stymied social and economic progress were a welcome change from decades of conflict represented by the thwarted Russian invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989, and then by the Taliban’s brutal system of governance, with years of civil war in between.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched in October 2001, as a reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Despite being primarily concerned with the capture of Osama bin Laden and dismantling Al Qaeda, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan included toppling the Taliban regime which had harbored these terrorist networks. The eradication of the Taliban also necessitated efforts for the stabilization and rebuilding of Afghanistan to prevent future terrorist movements to emerge there.

However, during the twenty years of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) the tide turned against the U.S. presence.

Ultimately, Afghan security forces, civil servants and elected officials, who had benefitted from decades of U.S. funding and training, refused to even fight back against the Taliban resurgence during the announced American withdrawal in 2021, with many fleeing the country using any means available to them.

Foreign Aid in Afghanistan

While there is not a chronological hard line past which any assistance effort becomes futile, there are certainly combinations of funding types that may be more appropriate depending on the situation. In the case of Afghanistan, establishing security, followed by education and the building of local infrastructures, were essential foundations for the implementation of governance procedures.³ This, however, was not always done in this specific order.⁴ Moreover, coordination among donors for directing funding towards parallel projects aimed at state building was frequently lacking in Afghanistan.⁵

Acting quickly can yield much better results and establish a more functional system in the long term, with greater returns per investment. However, conditions like corruption – endemic in Afghanistan – thrive on the fast utilization of funding without careful oversight.⁶ As a result, it is critical that spending and investing be accompanied by constant monitoring coupled with institutional flexibility in directing funding (or redirecting it, if needed).⁷

The lack of monitoring ability and flexibility derived from excessive and fragmented oversight was a problem in Afghanistan, where the U.S. Congress, the USAID’s Inspector General Office, contractors, the U.S. Army, SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), the United Nations, and Provincial Reconstruction Teams were all involved to some degree in the process.⁸ Flexibility in allocating funding characterized the Iraq assistance program to a greater degree from the start, for example, with the simpler – albeit still regulated – disbursement of captured assets of the Saddam regime (Commander’s Emergency Response Program or CERP) for humanitarian purposes, in addition to U.S. funds.⁹ An identical fund was established for Afghanistan only in November 2003 for FY 2004, and the amount allocated to Iraq’s CERP continued to vastly surpass Afghanistan’s at least until 2010.¹⁰

In addition to preventing a more flexible and effective utilization of funds by local U.S. officials on the ground, the top-down control that characterized U.S. assistance to Afghanistan also tended to sideline local Afghani informal authorities – a consequence of a lack of understanding of local traditional culture, society, and customs.¹¹ This also resulted in the delegitimization of the central Afghani government in the eyes of the population and the failure to achieve a sense of national unity.¹²

Additionally, the lingering question concerned whether Afghanistan could even absorb the large funding amounts it received. Iraq, on the other hand, as a very large crude oil producer, maintained a steady amount of revenue that did not lead to the fiscal collapse that crippled Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal.¹³

Lastly, it is also important to highlight that sustainable peace and reconstruction cannot be achieved by foreign assistance alone. However, it needs to act in concert with all the arms of DIME (Diplomacy, Intelligence, Military, Economy) regardless of the timeframe.¹⁴

Aid by the numbers

Raw numbers suggest that perhaps the major mistake in the Afghanistan foreign assistance plan was, first and foremost, underfunding in the first few years of U.S. involvement.¹⁵ In fact, during the first year of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the U.S. provided \$508 million in non-security related effort – from anti-narcotics to disaster relief.¹⁶ In fiscal year 2003, the amount of foreign assistance increased to \$983 million. These are astonishing numbers, though not when compared to the amount of funding provided to Iraq. Just a year and a half following the commencement of OEF, the U.S. invasion of Iraq began in March 2003 with Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) essentially bifurcating U.S. attention and focus. Regardless of the rationale for either of the engagements, the American focus on Afghanistan dipped in correlation to the start of OIF – a significantly larger endeavor in terms of resources than Afghanistan.

In fact, in the year of the U.S. arrival, allocations to Iraq amounted to almost \$3.85 billion in assistance alone. Further, in fiscal year 2004, standing at \$1.94 billion, annual U.S. funding allocations to Afghanistan were roughly twenty-three percent of the equivalent funding provided to Iraq (\$8.65 billion), a country similarly populated and smaller in size. Iraq's more robust tradition of a functioning central government certainly provided an advantage that Afghanistan lacked. Nevertheless, while funding to Iraq continued to increase in the years immediately after, then decrease starting in 2007, allocations to Afghanistan grew only gradually, matching those to Iraq in the first year of the U.S. invasion only in 2007. Although the involvements, the conditions on the ground, and the challenges in the two involvements were different, it is worth noting that by 2011 – ten years after the fall of the Taliban – the U.S. had redoubled its resources in Afghanistan. Was it too late to provide decisive funding amounts by then?

It is arguable that the incremental assistance to Afghanistan, while enough to keep the country going in some way, was not enough to lead to the building of basic infrastructure and stimulate economic growth that would ensure self-sufficiency.¹⁷ In short, Afghanistan became dependent on this financial life-support by the U.S. and other donors, and later increases in funding did not build upon any base.¹⁸ In the case of agricultural assistance, for example, Iraq enjoyed advice and abundant funding, while Afghanistan simply did not receive enough. Partially because of this, the U.S. was never able to successfully eradicate opium farming in the country, then having to spend more on counter-narcotics efforts.¹⁹ Achieving stability is

difficult when basic conditions of success such as the existence of an economic base and structures of civil government are lacking, as was the case with Afghanistan. However, shortcomings in monitoring by the donors of foreign assistance can also determine a moral hazard by its recipients, who feel unmotivated in achieving actual progress.

Foreign assistance can be best understood as a sub-component of the DIME toolkit, falling between the Diplomacy and the Economy instruments. It aims to demonstrate the generosity of the American people to those in need throughout the world, with the final aim of ensuring international stability, and therefore, security.

Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime, the magnitude of global crises and civilian suffering have only increased. From Kyiv to Khartoum, the world looks to the U.S. for assistance. Ultimately, as Dobbins et al. write, “experience indicates that actions taken during the early weeks and months of a post conflict stability operation set the mission on a trajectory that, if trending downward, becomes increasingly difficult to correct.”²⁰ Previous examples of U.S. foreign assistance can help illuminate its enormous potential when it is intelligently carried out and preconditions of success (such as structure of solid government and civil society) subsist. Funding to Japan and Europe particularly in the aftermath of World War II almost eighty years ago stands as the best models of foreign assistance that helped jump-start some of the strongest economies and resilient partners of the U.S. today. Sadly, Afghanistan does not represent a successful model of postwar foreign assistance. It can be argued that the basic conditions for any successful reconstruction effort in Afghanistan never existed. However, the way significant funding was applied years after the beginning of the U.S. effort, on top of being mismanaged, certainly contributed to dooming Afghanistan to its fate.

Decision points:

- 1. Recognizing the costs in terms of funding and lives lost and risked, how can the U.S. better engage DIME resources to truly commit to the long game needed to build sustainable peace in multiple post-conflict countries simultaneously?**
- 2. What is the right mix of U.S. resources needed in the early days of any post-conflict situation to take advantage of the golden hour?**
- 3. While taking advantage of the golden hour may be tantamount to “knowing it when you see it,” how can U.S. policy makers be more cognizant of adequately capitalizing on these opportunities?**

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- ² R. Adams Cowley, "A Total Emergency Medical System for the State of Maryland," *Maryland State Medical Journal*, Vol. 45 (1975).
- ³ Abdullah Bataineh, *Delivery of USAID To Afghanistan, 2001-2017* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 2018), 20; James Dobbins, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, Derek Eaton, and Stephanie Pezard, *Seizing the Golden Hour: Tasks, Organization, and Capabilities Required for the Earliest Phase of Stability Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), xxi.
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- ¹² Sopko and Young, "The Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Its Security Forces," 13.
- ¹³ Bizhan, "Aid and State-Building, Part II: Afghanistan and Iraq," 1022.
- ¹⁴ Carreu, ed., "Lessons from USDA in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Prism* 1, no. 3 (June 2010), 148-149; Dobbins et al., *Seizing the Golden Hour*, xx-xxi.
- ¹⁵ Dobbins et al. admit this in a RAND Corporation analysis. See Dobbins et al., *Seizing the Golden Hour*, 85-86.
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- ¹⁹ Carreu, ed., "Lessons from USDA in Iraq and Afghanistan," 141-142; Brinkley, "Money Pit," 18.
- ²⁰ Dobbins et al., *Seizing the Golden Hour*, xix.