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SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

Between 2007 and 2010, the U.S. State Department fielded small teams in Iraq called embedded provincial reconstruction teams (ePRTs). This report examines how well the ePRTs accomplished their mission of advancing U.S. counterinsurgency efforts by helping local Iraqi communities pursue reconciliation, foster economic development, and improve public services to mitigate sources of instability.

This report notes the strengths and shortcomings of the ePRT program, incorporating the firsthand insights of twenty-two ePRT team members and one hundred PRT members interviewed by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training under a contract with the U.S. Institute of Peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John K. Naland is the executive director of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. In twenty-five years as a foreign service officer with the State Department, he has held a variety of foreign and domestic positions, including leader of the provincial reconstruction team in Basra, Iraq. He is also a former U.S. Army officer and a graduate of the U.S. Army War College.

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John K. Naland

Lessons from Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq

Summary

- Embedded provincial reconstruction teams (ePRTs) were small State Department–led units inserted into U.S. combat brigades in Iraq from 2007 to 2010 to support military counterinsurgency efforts at the local level.
- During major combat operations in 2007 and into 2008, ePRTs provided important support to military counterinsurgency efforts. As U.S. combat units wound down these efforts and withdrew from towns and cities, ePRTs did useful—but harder to quantify—work in mentoring local officials.
- Combat brigades and ePRTs generally worked well together. However, some units were unsure of how best to employ civilians. The military and civilians also sometimes had differing views on issues of short-term versus long-term goals.
- Despite problems, ePRT veterans believe that they had a positive effect in both supporting military counterinsurgency efforts and helping local Iraqi officials prepare for self-reliance.
- Interviewees identified a variety of operational problems that detracted from ePRT mission accomplishment. The Iraq ePRTs are now history, but as the United States continues to use civil-military teams in Afghanistan, these observed lessons need to be learned and acted upon.

Provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) are civilian-military teams that were first fielded in Afghanistan in 2002. A significantly modified version was introduced in Iraq in 2005. The theory was that a stable nation would not emerge unless reconciliation, good governance, and economic development extended beyond the central government in the capital city to provincial and local officials across the nation. PRTs were envisioned as a key means to achieve these goals.

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As their name suggests, PRTs focused on working at the provincial level. Initially, ten State Department–led PRTs were fielded in Iraq. As part of President George W. Bush’s New Way Forward in Iraq, the White House announced in January 2007 that the PRT program was being expanded by increasing PRT staffing throughout Iraq and fielding ten embedded PRTs (ePRTs) in three heavily contested areas: around Baghdad and in Anbar and Babil provinces. The ePRT mission was to support U.S. military counterinsurgency efforts at the district and community levels by helping local communities pursue reconciliation, foster economic development, and improve essential public services (e.g., water, electricity, and schools) to mitigate sources of instability.

Each ePRT was embedded in a U.S. Army brigade combat team (BCT) or U.S. Marine Corps regimental combat team, meaning that each ePRT was physically located within a BCT, worked in the BCT’s assigned area of operations, relied on the BCT for most logistical support, and was essentially part of the BCT commander’s staff.¹ The initial ePRTs had four personnel each: a State Department foreign service officer (FSO) team leader, with a civilian rank equivalent to either a military full colonel or, in some cases, a brigadier general; a military officer, with a rank of major; a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) officer; and an Arabic-language interpreter. At the height of ePRT activities, ePRT staffing averaged eight to twenty members and included a State Department FSO team leader, a military deputy team leader, a USAID officer, a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officer, several subject matter experts hired by the State Department from the private sector, several interpreters, and a few military support personnel.

By January 2008, there were eleven PRTs and fourteen ePRTs in Iraq: nine in Baghdad, three in Anbar, one in South Diyala, and one in North Babil. By June 2009, there were sixteen PRTs² and seven ePRTs: five around Baghdad and two in Anbar province. After the June 30, 2009, withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities and towns, the ePRTs began to draw down, with the last ones closing in August 2010. The PRTs remained, but all are scheduled to close by late 2011.³

Initial Staffing Challenges

The ePRT program had a bumpy startup phase. Over 2007, as the U.S. military sent 30,000 additional soldiers and Marines into Iraq in what became known as the surge, the State Department struggled to double its field staffing from around 300 to 600 as it stood up the ePRTs and beefed up the PRTs. While the civilian staffing challenge may sound easier than the military’s challenge, in reality the State Department faced nearly ten times the challenge when one compares the surge’s staffing increase to the total available manpower—2.4 million uniformed military versus 6,000 FSOs. Moreover, while the military’s reserve components contain personnel with private sector skills that are somewhat applicable to reconstruction (e.g., engineers, farmers, and veterinarians), the career foreign service has few such personnel.

As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later explained during a joint appearance before the House Armed Services Committee, the State Department’s long-standing shortfalls in staffing and funding forced it to turn to the Defense Department to fill most of the ePRT positions. Thus while State Department and USAID career employees filled most of the initial 40 ePRT positions by April 2007, some 99 of the 133 personnel in the second phase of the ePRT stand-up were Defense Department military and civilian personnel.

Only after Congress approved a supplemental appropriation in late May 2007 did the State Department have the funding to recruit and hire subject matter experts from the private sector to staff the ePRTs and replace the loaned Defense Department personnel. Even then,

U.S. government civilians did not outnumber military personnel on ePRT staffs until early 2008. As one early ePRT member observed, “When I think of how long it took us to get staffed up—and then we had a couple of people who just didn’t fit the bill and we had to replace them—I think that was an issue.”

In the rush to staff the new ePRTs, the State Department focused on meeting the numerical targets rather than assembling the best available talent. As a result, the personnel sent to ePRTs varied greatly in effectiveness. Many private-sector subject matter experts—referred to as 3161 employees, after the section of law authorizing their hiring—performed well. Many others, however, lacked situation-specific technical skills, motivation, interpersonal skills, and the mental or physical preparation for the rigors of war zone service. This happened for several reasons. First, the State Department’s hastily organized effort for recruiting private-sector subject matter experts was a passive process that mostly limited the pool of applicants to those who learned about the positions from friends or Internet job searches. Also, the Washington D.C.-based recruiters had only a vague understanding of the specific skills and traits that were needed for the ePRTs and PRTs. As one ePRT veteran noted, “The State Department does not necessarily have great talent scouts because they do not know—take me, for instance—what a good industrial adviser looks like.” Furthermore, the position descriptions in the recruiting announcements did not always match the actual job. As one interviewee recalled, “The job description that was online and that I applied for was not anything like my [later ePRT] experience at all. That was a very major discrepancy.”

Successful applicants were hired on the basis of their written application, followed sometimes—but not always—by a telephone interview and e-mailed questions. There was no provision for conducting face-to-face personal interviews that might have given deeper insights into personalities and other factors. As one ePRT veteran observed, “We had a lot of people that you wondered about their motivation for coming to Iraq. Did they lose their job in the States and couldn’t find a job somewhere else? Were they social misfits? Were they just doing it for the cash? That caused problems.” The State Department FSOs assigned to lead the ePRTs also varied widely in effectiveness. While some ePRT veterans lauded the performances of their FSO team leaders, other ePRT veterans criticized their leaders for lacking leadership and management skills. In the words of one ePRT veteran, “The team leaders I worked with, which were three, were all brilliant minds . . . but they weren’t really well suited to lead.” Said another interviewee, “Career Foreign Service people do not by default have the experience and leadership skills necessary to lead people in this kind of work.” Another ePRT veteran explained the effect of poor leadership: “In the absence of leadership, a void was created in what was going on or wasn’t going on at the ePRT. The military is going to fill that void and they are going to move forward.”

Before Secretary of State Colin Powell instituted mandatory leadership and management training for Foreign Service members in 2004, few FSOs ever received such training, and even the training required now amounts to only one week about every five years. In contrast, U.S. Army officers receive six to nine months of professional development three or four times during their first twenty years of service. The State Department and USAID currently cannot offer their officers such extensive professional development because, unlike the military, the civilian agencies lack a funded training float beyond core staffing.

The interpreters assigned to ePRTs also varied greatly in quality. The ePRT veterans lauded many of them, but criticized others as incompetent. Problems included speaking a dialect of Arabic that Iraqis found hard to understand and having a poor grasp of English. Another problem was that, unlike other ePRT staff members, the interpreters were all contract employees and the terms of their contracts were unavailable for the ePRT leadership to review. If an interpreter declared that a certain task was not included in the contract, there was no way for the ePRT leadership to check.

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The varying quality of contract interpreters was a problem because so few other ePRT members spoke Arabic. Both the State Department and USAID have employed Arabic-speaking officers for most of their histories, but by the early 2000s inadequate funding for staffing and training left their numbers insufficient to staff even the existing positions in U.S. embassies in the nearly two dozen Arabic-speaking nations. Even after the 2003 invasion of Iraq created the immediate need for several hundred additional Arabic-speaking U.S. diplomats and development officers, not until 2009 did Congress appropriate funds to begin to boost language training at the State Department and USAID. Finally, while the State Department could have filled all ePRT team leader positions with Arabic-speaking FSOs by involuntarily diverting them from other assignments, the department decided that it would be unwise to greatly reduce the number of language-qualified diplomats serving in other nations across the Arabic-speaking world for years on end. In addition, the State Department felt that it was prudent to maintain its post-Vietnam War policy of relying exclusively on volunteers to fill its most dangerous positions.

Many ePRT veterans, especially FSOs who are accustomed to being fluent in the language of the country to which they are assigned, said that additional predeployment Arabic language training would have been very valuable. Of course, Arabic is among the most difficult foreign languages for English speakers to learn, so predeployment training would need to be dramatically lengthened to provide significant additional language training. The shortest Arabic familiarization course offered by the State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) lasts seven weeks and provides only rudimentary proficiency. Achieving working fluency requires a year or more of training.

Ongoing Staffing Challenges

Personnel challenges did not end after the initial staff-up period. Although most USAID officers and some subject matter experts stayed for longer than one year, most other ePRT members, like most PRT members and U.S. Embassy staffers, were on 365-day tours. This required recruiting successive waves of replacements over the ePRTs' four-year existence. The hiring process for subject matter experts typically stretched for four to six months as successful applicants underwent security and medical checks and then predeployment training. After completing this long process, some of those who deployed to Iraq proved unsuitable and either curtailed their tour at their own request or were sent home mid-tour by their employing agency. Those factors constantly pressured State Department recruiters to find new personnel and led to frequent staffing gaps in ePRTs.

As a result, despite the State Department's prudent policy that an incumbent could not depart until the replacement arrived and was oriented, such overlap did not always occur. This led to loss of continuity. Mission accomplishment was further harmed if the staffing gap lasted weeks or months, as total ePRT staffing was small even at full strength. As one 2009 ePRT veteran of an extreme example said, "We had a huge turnover in leadership. . . five [interim] team leaders in six months." An ePRT leader contrasted his twelve-member team with the much larger brigade and noted that "because of the staffing imbalances in different sections," his team found it difficult to keep up with the brigade's "round-the-clock meetings."

In numerous cases, key positions, such as that of rule of law adviser, went unfilled for six or more months as Washington struggled to fill the job, often after a current employee unexpectedly resigned or was fired. In that case, since there was no float of unassigned but available replacements, Washington had to start from scratch in recruiting, vetting, and training a replacement. As a result, as one interviewee observed, "the ePRTs are very small [so] you would find someone who might not be carrying their weight, but the team leader

was loath to let them go because even if the guy was only working at 50 percent capacity, 50 percent was better than zero if the guy was gone.” One ePRT veteran noted that staffing gaps required ePRT work plans to conform to available staffing instead of having staffing conform to work plans.

Another cause for loss of continuity was the policy of granting civilian ePRT members three twenty-one-day-long rest and recuperation (R&R) vacations during a one-year tour; in contrast, BCT soldiers were allowed one trip home during their nine-to-twelve-month deployments. The civilian agencies adopted this generous R&R policy for ePRTs, PRTs, and the U.S. Embassy staff, believing that, without this and other benefits, sufficient numbers of volunteers might not step forward to spend a year in a war zone without their families. Needless to say, repeated three-week-long absences significantly harmed continuity of effort and interrupted momentum.

Little depth of bench in ePRTs made continuous staffing more of a challenge. At larger PRTs, other staff members could cover responsibilities during vacations and other gaps. The one-person-deep staffing at ePRTs made this impossible. With ePRT members working seven days a week, twelve or more hours per day, it was very hard for other team members to pick up the slack for an absent colleague. Said one ePRT veteran, “There was no backstopping. When I left [on leave], one of my colleagues would either double his workload or things would just be on hold.” The end result was that, after subtracting time spent on leave, in initial orientation, and in final out-processing, the effective length of a one-year ePRT tour was closer to eight months. Iraqi officials and other local contacts noticed the frequent rotation of civilian and military personnel, as a steady stream of new American faces passed through their offices. As trust in Iraq (as elsewhere) is built up over time through repeated personal interaction, the arrival of each new ePRT staff member reset the local trust meter to zero. As one ePRT veteran observed, “Every year [brought] a new generation of Americans and new relationships to be established and . . . some of the more candid [Iraqis] would tell us of their frustration.” Looking back on their year-long tours, numerous ePRT veterans say that the standard tour should have been at least eighteen months. Said an ePRT team leader, “Much of my time was spent learning what was going on. By the time I felt fully functional I had to leave.”

That said, most U.S. military tours were also only a year long and some units stayed only nine months. Furthermore, while ePRT positions typically turned over one by one throughout the year, giving new personnel experienced colleagues to turn to for guidance, the military sent an entirely new unit to replace the departing unit. When that happened every nine to twelve months, ePRT projects often stopped for weeks or months as the new BCT commander moved to put his stamp on things and the new military movement teams that provided security to the ePRTs figured out their new area of operations. Said one ePRT veteran, “The constant in-and-out cycle [of military unit rotations] does not work for the type of programs that an ePRT needs to do. It’s extremely inefficient and the only reason any program survived would be that the ePRT outlasted the unit rotations and we did everything to keep something afloat while they [the military] were changing out.” In addition, as one ePRT veteran noted,

What was happening was that these military units were there [in Iraq] for a year, they went back to the States or their home base for a year, and then came back to Iraq. A lot of times they came back to their same area of operations. They basically just picked up where they left off. But things had changed in a year. I think that the fresh set of eyes that the civilians brought helped, especially when they were not confrontational because everything depends on personalities.

The ePRT staffing processes did not consistently produce adequate numbers of capable people well suited for the unique challenges of ePRT service. Some of these problems stemmed from long-term structural shortcomings of the State Department. As one ePRT

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team leader put it, “[The military] with their hierarchy, resources, and ability to plan . . . focus on problems and bring resources to bear. Whereas the State Department is often catch as catch can, or late to the show with resources that are insufficient.” Said another ePRT veteran, “The State Department . . . is not as well equipped as an institution for field work . . . If the State Department wants to pursue PRTs as a model for development, diplomacy, governance, and postconflict stability, then they need to adapt as an institution.”

Mission and Operating Environment

The ePRT mission differed from that of the PRTs. As one interviewee expressed it,

The PRTs focused on the provincial level, working with the provincial government, trying to build capacity and help them develop their processes. The embedded PRTs focused more on the districts and the communities to provide them with an ability to run their councils and provide good governance to their citizens and provide development opportunities for their communities.

This ePRT mission evolved during its four years of existence. The initial mission was to provide advice and program management in support of BCT counterinsurgency efforts while implementing short-term, quick-effect projects at the district and municipal levels. Later, as the nature of the U.S. military’s involvement in Iraq changed from counterinsurgency to training and advising, most ePRTs shifted focus to include longer-term, capacity-building efforts aimed at helping local Iraqi officials become self-reliant. That evolution can be traced in the excerpts below from interviews with ePRT veterans:

- “Our mission was to support our soldiers in creating a situation that brought stability to the area. Basically when an area was stabilized enough so that we could get into it, our mission was to go in and look for immediate-impact activities: employment generation activities, quick disbursing type activities . . . to jump-start economic development, provide stability . . . and have our soldiers shot at less and encounter fewer IEDs [improvised explosive devices].”
- “We were essentially a counterinsurgency operation. We were charged with helping to build . . . credibility of the [Iraqi] government among the people . . . Prior to us becoming embedded, for the most part, if a school was needed or a clinic was needed, the [U.S.] military would just use CERP [Commander’s Emergency Response Program] funds to undertake the construction or to fix the road. One of the things that we were trying to do was to partner with the [Iraqi] government in the sense that . . . we will build the clinic if you [local Iraqis] work with the provincial level of government or the [national] ministry level . . . to make sure that the clinic would be supplied and have appropriate staff.”
- “At first [the ePRT mission] was counterinsurgency. We were an adjunct to the military counterinsurgency effort. At some point, we transitioned to something beyond counterinsurgency that was generically postconflict reconstruction.”
- “We are actually going from counterinsurgency operations to sustainable development to handing off to Iraqis—and that is our exit strategy.”

Those ePRT members who served in 2007–08 during the full-blown counterinsurgency phase tend to point to more tangible accomplishments than do later veterans. Said a 2007 ePRT veteran, “I think the ePRT was successful at achieving its mission. . . . One of the things we were supposed to do was to help stabilize this Sunni stronghold where there had been quite a bit of fighting between American forces and al-Qaeda in Iraq. We were pretty successful.” In the view of a 2008 veteran, “We successfully achieved our mission, if you’re tracking incidents of significant violence against the brigade. We did fourteen of these quick-response Iraqi assistance programs, about \$4 million. . . . The record shows that there was a significant reduction in violence. What was the chain of causality? I don’t know, but I

think we were successful.” Another 2008 veteran observed, “We achieved our mission during the Baghdad surge, and post-Baghdad surge, the counterinsurgency effort, where we did things that certainly led to a measurable degree of security.”

Mission accomplishment by ePRTs after 2008 is less clear. A key date was the June 30, 2009, withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi towns and villages to outlying forward operating bases to prepare for complete withdrawal from Iraq by the end of 2011. Around that time, the work of some ePRTs and BCTs began to diverge, as the military continued to measure success in security gains while ePRTs began to focus on preparing Iraqi officials for the day of governing without U.S. advice and funding. This happened as the State Department, through both U.S. embassy guidance and FSI predeployment training, began to emphasize to its field teams that the forthcoming withdrawal of U.S. military forces required a change from doing things for Iraqis to preparing Iraqis to do things for themselves. Instead of the U.S. stepping in to fund, design, and build a school or water treatment plant, as had been done since 2003, the new task became to mentor Iraqi officials to get them to use their own nascent planning and budgeting mechanisms to provide for their citizens’ needs. Such long-term capacity-building efforts were inherently more difficult and harder to measure than were earlier quick-effect bricks-and-mortar projects to improve essential services.

PRTs generally found the transition to longer-term projects easy, given that they were working with well-established elected provincial officials. The ePRTs had no elected local governments with which to interact. Local Iraqi officials lacked a popular mandate, had very limited powers, and had little funding from the provincial or central governments. This made the task of capacity building more difficult. At the same time, numerous ePRT veterans observe that many U.S. military commanders at the BCT level and below showed no sign of transitioning from a “get the bad guy” counterinsurgency mind-set after 2008. This was especially true of active-duty units that had been engaged in heavy combat several years before; they returned to a much different operating environment that they sometimes did not immediately recognize or adjust to. Said one interviewee, “As civilians in a commander’s battle space, we couldn’t really tell the commander, even though we tried, that we were farther along than straight-up counterinsurgency and that we should try to build civilian government capacity that would be sustainable over time.”

Numerous interviewees expressed frustration that some military units remained focused on quick, short-term projects while civilian agencies increasingly focused on trying to foster Iraqi self-reliance. Said a 2010 returnee, “The ePRT . . . tended to look at what we were doing in terms of longer-range development goals. . . . The military . . . has a timeline for projects that is much shorter. As a result, you end up with a bunch of these ‘feel-good’ projects—building a clinic, paving a road—doing these things that don’t necessarily dovetail into a larger, more comprehensive plan.”

Many ePRT veterans felt that the military spent too much of its CERP funding on unsustainable projects. While tallies of CERP disbursements were a perfect quantitative metric for citing on military officer evaluation reports, the figures said little about the effect of the spending. Said one 2009 returnee, “Commanders are given the responsibility to spend as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time because they’re only there for a short period before the new brigade arrives. Commanders are evaluated on how close to that dollar figure they hit.” Another ePRT veteran equated CERP spending to the Vietnam War-era body count as a misguided metric for success.

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Civil-Military Relations

Some interviewees acknowledge that the sometimes significant shortcomings of the State Department-led ePRT effort—uneven leadership, hit-or-miss staffing, inadequate funding—

negatively affected how the military viewed and cooperated with ePRTs. Said a 2009 veteran, “When you say the State Department is in the lead [for reconstruction], and for every one dollar that the Army brings, the State Department brings a penny, any competent observer will tell you that the biggest bank book is actually in the lead.” Another ePRT member succinctly summed up many soldiers’ frustration after the State Department was designated as the lead federal agency for reconstruction: “Lead federal agencies need to actually lead.”

Cultural differences between civilians and the military also sometimes strained relations. A frequent theme in the interviews of ePRT veterans was that the U.S. civilians and military often worked on different time horizons. As one interviewee explained, “The military had their own objectives and most of them were very near-term objectives [like] ‘What can we do to stop our soldiers from getting killed?’ . . . Whereas the State Department came in and said, ‘what can we do to give these [Iraqi] people the opportunity to build their capacity so when we are gone they can continue?’” These different time horizons sometimes led to problems. One ePRT veteran observed that “the ePRT did its thing, the Army did its thing, and sometimes they were complementary and sometimes they were at odds. This was true when I’m trying to teach the ministry of water official how to do this on his own, and the military comes in and does it for him.”

Imperfect as the ePRTs may have been, however, ePRT veterans felt the military could have been better partners after 2008. As one 2010 returnee observed, “From the military perspective, there was a fundamental misunderstanding of what the civilian interagency brings to the table. Leaders from brigade commander on down to team or squad leader didn’t really understand what it is we were there to do and how to leverage our abilities and resources.” Said another, “Some military personnel didn’t know how to use us.” That said, another ePRT veteran acknowledged that “the State Department might not always do the best job of conveying the purpose of what we are doing to our DOD [Department of Defense] partners.” It may also be true that, as BCTs began to shift focus from counterinsurgency to training Iraqi security forces, they found ePRTs to be less relevant to meeting BCT goals.

Security

Embedding ePRTs in BCTs linked unarmed civilians to the soldiers and armored vehicles needed to transport them to meetings with Iraqis or to inspect project sites. Observed one ePRT veteran, “The best part of being on an ePRT was having military support to go out and keep our appointments.” Movement security typically consisted of heavily armed military members escorting ePRT members in a convoy of tactical combat vehicles, such as Humvees, mine resistant ambush protected (MRAP) armed vehicles, or Strikers. Unarmed civilian ePRT members wore body armor and helmets while in transit but, especially after 2008, often removed them before walking into their Iraqi counterparts’ offices for meetings.

Many ePRT veterans lauded the military’s provision of movement security, especially commending the young soldiers and Marines who sometimes waited outside in 120-degree heat while ePRT members met indoors with Iraqi counterparts. But some ePRT veterans cited problems: “Transportation was the biggest problem. . . . We were embedded with a brigade and it depended on the personality of the colonel in charge. If we had a colonel who said, ‘We want to build capacity and we have civilians here to do it; we’re going to take them anywhere they need to go,’ then we didn’t have any trouble with transportation. We had a colonel, however, that did not provide enough support.” Another ePRT member said that his team sat motionless for six weeks because the military withheld movement support due to personality conflicts between the unit commander and ePRT leadership.

As levels of violence receded in 2008, some ePRT members felt that arriving at a meeting in combat vehicles escorted by heavily armed soldiers was off-putting to local officials.

Said a 2009 returnee, “How do you build relationships with communities when you show up in their village with MRAPs and soldiers all walking around with a gun in their hand? . . . What [locals] see is an occupation force that runs roughshod over everything.” Said a 2010 returnee, “when a Striker shows up on your doorstep, you know you are at war. We were trying to empower the local civilians, at least from the ePRT standpoint, yet you show up in war vehicles.”

Another post-2008 trend ePRT and PRT members observed was Iraqis’ growing preference to interact with U.S. civilians rather than military members. As grateful as many Iraqis are for the U.S. military’s removal of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in 2003, six years later many felt a growing fatigue at seeing heavily armed U.S. military members walking into their offices, and increasingly favored ePRT civilians as the public face of American engagement. Said an ePRT team leader who returned in 2010, “I had a number of our interlocutors tell me . . . how pleased they were with seeing the civilian side of the U.S. presence. . . . They specifically associated more interaction with U.S. government civilians with the normalization of the relationship.” The policy of having civilians lead ePRTs and PRTs in Iraq—a model not followed in Afghanistan, where most PRTs are currently military-led—facilitated the U.S. strategy of transitioning to Iraqi civilian sovereignty and a more normal government-to-government relationship between Iraq and the United States.

Logistical Support

Another reason for embedding ePRTs in BCTs was to place the responsibility for housing, supplying, and feeding ePRT members in the hands of the military’s robust logistical support infrastructure. Clearly, the ePRTs could not have been fielded in such a short time frame if the State Department had been called upon to create the required infrastructure from scratch. This close association between civilians and the military invariably resulted in ePRT members gaining admiration for their military counterparts. Said one, “Being embedded, we were living and working like the military, which gave me a new appreciation for the work they do and the lives they lead.”

That said, differences between the civilian and military cultures caused friction. Said one ePRT veteran,

In the military . . . all these guys had been on multiple rotations and they were pretty battle hard. . . . They were very rough and didn’t take kindly to weakness. . . . They were quick to judge someone just because they arrived and were awkward for a week or two. That affected coordination, because if they decided they didn’t like you, you would not get in the vehicle and you would not get a pad or a pen or a computer.

Most ePRT veterans’ logistical complaints concerned telecommunications. As one interviewee said, “An ePRT is a very specialized outpost that needs to have specialized communications and that was not provided [by the State Department] because the presumption was made that the military would provide it and the military just did not have the capacity.” There were still problems even when the military provided computers. To communicate with the U.S. Embassy, many ePRT members used a secure but unclassified computer network. The military, on the other hand, worked on a classified computer network. As a result, military members checked email from their ePRT counterparts on the unclassified network only infrequently.

The limited equipment that the State Department provided to ePRTs, including cell phones or satellite phones, often did not work. Many ePRT interviewees commented on this as one of their top obstacles. Said one, “We were actually struggling for Internet access or telephone access. . . . Phones were not working. Internet, you’d have no coverage sometimes for days or a week at times. So that impacted our level of performance.” Even as diplomats, development officers, and especially interpreters depended on cell phones to communicate

As grateful as many Iraqis are for the U.S. military’s removal of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship, many felt a growing fatigue at seeing heavily armed U.S. military members and increasingly favored ePRT civilians as the public face of American engagement.

with local contacts, the military employed cell phone-disrupting electronic countermeasures to protect against certain types of attacks.

A frequent theme in the ePRT interviews was a perceived lack of support from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and, sometimes, from the PRT in the area. In the words of an ePRT interviewee who departed in 2010, “I think if most PRT members were being honest, they would talk about the lack of responsiveness from the Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA) at the embassy. There was a lack of awareness about what was needed in the field. I got more support from my military counterparts than I got from the embassy.” Said another ePRT veteran, “You really had a sense with Baghdad PRT and OPA that they either didn’t know you existed or didn’t care that you existed.” More generally, one ePRT interviewee observed, “On the battlefield, the civilian is always in a position where the Department of State never provides the same resources as the Army does for its people.” Of course, frontline ePRT members had little understanding of the pressures and constraints on PRT leaders, embassy officers, and Washington decision makers. Nevertheless, this perception of being neglected by higher headquarters—a feeling rarely seen in today’s frontline military personnel—was detrimental to ePRT staff morale and effectiveness.

Project Funding

Defense Department project funding far exceeded State Department or USAID project money. As one ePRT veteran put it, “The Army had resources that are orders of magnitude beyond what the State Department could bring to bear.” An ePRT leader in 2008 observed, “I was an ATM machine, but, in comparison with the military, I was not spouting out very big bills.” A 2010 returnee added that “the Army brought all the money. So, I’d say the Army has done most of the good.” Given the disparity between military and civilian project funding, some ePRTs focused on, as one ePRT veteran put it, “helping [the military] to spend money better and making projects more sensible.”

Defense Department CERP money typically funded projects costing up to \$500,000 and, in rarer cases, up to \$2,000,000. In sharp contrast, most State Department project money came through the Quick Reaction Fund (QRF), which covered projects costing up to \$25,000. QRF money was initially easy for ePRTs to access, but the process later became slower and more bureaucratic. Said one ePRT member,

I think the QRF program in Iraq, in 2008 in particular, was at its prime because it gave each PRT a revolving \$200,000 cash fund and it gave the PRT team leader the authority, the sole authority, to spend that money up to \$25,000. By 2009, the Inspector General had gotten into it and discovered some problems. OPA was brought in by mid-2009 to approve everything and the team leader no longer had sole approval authority.

Furthermore, in April 2009 Congress communicated that it wanted the Iraqis to start paying at least part of the bill for new projects. OPA did not receive clear guidance from Washington as to what exactly that meant, so it instituted a rule that Iraqis had to share at least half of the cost of a QRF project. This made it more difficult to undertake a QRF project with the typical Iraqi counterpart office, which was still short of funding from the central government. Eventually the QRF approval process included not only OPA, but numerous other embassy offices, slowing the process. As a 2009 ePRT returnee put it, “[QRF rules] seemed to be very arbitrary or capricious at times where you couldn’t figure out why they would approve one project but refuse another.” Concluded one interviewee, “I realize the need for accountability there, but . . . the more funding and programming is decentralized the better.”

Unsurprisingly, some ePRT members lamented their relatively limited resources. As one ePRT leader said, “If we had more personnel and funding for meeting local needs, we could have focused resources more effectively. That would have improved our standing and maybe

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increased the likelihood of local leaders and residents listening to us and welcoming our presence.” Discussing the reduction in availability of QRF funds, one ePRT member noted, “No money, no influence.” Most USAID project money came through nationwide programs designed to be implemented over years to produce a long-term, sustainable effect. The military did not always understand why such funding could not be used for short-term, quick-effect projects. Said one ePRT veteran, “You need to look at any project in terms of one to three years, [but the military forces] want a quick win on their deployment cycle, and they’re looking at weeks, maybe months. So, in that sense, we could be at loggerheads.”

Planning

There is no accurate single description of how ePRTs developed their operational work plans. Certainly all ePRTs started with the same strategic-level direction issued jointly by the U.S. ambassador to Iraq and the commander of multinational forces in Iraq (later U.S. Forces-Iraq). They also received general and ongoing guidance from various U.S. embassy offices. Some ePRTs received input from the PRT in the province where they operated. However, such strategic-level guidance left a great deal of room for each ePRT to determine its own day-to-day tactical plans and priorities. Thus, the planning process at any given ePRT was largely driven by the personal and professional strengths and weaknesses of the ePRT leader and BCT commander. This resulted in a wide range of experiences. One ePRT interviewee said he “was very much impressed with the planning”; another interviewee at a different ePRT said “there was never any guidance at the ePRT level, which meant that we did a bunch of good deeds and reported on them.” One interviewee said, “We had brilliant coordination with the brigade in which we were embedded”; another said that “the ePRT did its thing, the Army did its thing, and sometimes they were complementary and sometimes they were at odds with each other.”

The planning process at any given ePRT was largely driven by the personal and professional strengths and weaknesses of the ePRT leader and BCT commander.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The ePRT program is now history and the last provincial-level PRTs in Iraq will close at the end of 2011. The United States and its coalition partners still employ civil-military teams in Afghanistan, with twenty-seven PRTs and thirty-eight smaller district support teams spread around the country. The American PRTs in Afghanistan differ in organization and structure from those in Iraq, however, in that they are led and staffed by military personnel with a smattering of civilian agency representatives. Given their ongoing field mission, it is important to be aware of the Iraq experiences and the lessons learned. In the future, it would be helpful to keep in mind the following considerations to maximize the effectiveness of civil-military teams deployed in stability operations:

- **Provide the State Department with the contingency resources, both human and financial, needed to undertake field missions.** In Iraq, the State Department undertook to stand up the ePRT program months before Congress had approved adequate funds. It also took the State Department a year to fully staff the ePRTs with civilians because it lacked available personnel. As a result, the initial burden fell on the already-stretched U.S. military to provide both the civilian and the military part of the Iraq surge.
- **Provide an integrated civilian chain of command so that ePRTs report through the PRTs to the embassy.** Trying to coordinate a combined total of twenty-six ePRTs and PRTs exceeded the effective span of control of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Having ePRTs report through their respective provincial-level PRTs would improve program coordination and ensure consistent reporting to the embassy from the field.

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- **Provide State Department–led teams with sufficient, quick-disbursing financial resources for projects that are equivalent to those available to the military.** The State Department’s QRF mechanism became slower and more bureaucratic over time and was dwarfed by the amount of project funding available to the military under CERP. The agency with the largest budget and the quickest access to funding makes policy. Giving the State Department the responsibility to lead without the required resources is counterproductive.
- **Provide field team leaders with concrete goals and objectives in coordination with the military.** The initial four-member ePRT teams were expected to figure out what to do once they arrived in the country. It is imperative that future teams deploy with clear goals and objectives and operational guidance that has been coordinated in advance between the State and Defense Departments.

In January 2007, the State Department was ill-prepared for the White House order to create the ePRT program. Yet despite the ePRTs being the product of hasty planning and ad hoc staffing, the teams were successfully fielded and offered important support to U.S. military counterinsurgency efforts during major combat operations in 2007 and 2008. Accomplishments in 2009 and 2010 are less clear as ePRTs transitioned from focusing on tangible, quick-effect projects to more difficult-to-measure and longer-term efforts to increase governance capacity and foster economic development. Nevertheless, most ePRT participants in the 2009–11 PRT interview project felt that the ePRT program was successful and deemed their own efforts worthwhile.

Notes

1. PRTs, in contrast, set their own priorities and reported to the U.S. Embassy while being paired with but not attached to military units (ranging from brigade to division) that operated in the province that the PRT covered. PRTs had larger staffs than ePRTs—between twenty and sixty or more—and were usually led by a more senior State Department FSO, with a civilian rank equivalent to a brigadier general.
2. There was one PRT in every province except two relatively peaceful northern provinces.
3. This report features excerpts from interviews with Iraq ePRT veterans conducted in 2009 and 2010 by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training as part of a broader Iraq and Afghanistan PRT Lessons Learned Project sponsored by the National Defense University’s Center for Complex Operations and supervised by the U.S. Institute of Peace. Of the twenty-two ePRT interviewees, eleven had been subject matter experts hired by the State Department from the private sector, five were USAID officers, three were State Department FSOs, and three were USDA agricultural experts. Interviews averaged sixty to ninety minutes in length. This report also draws insights from interviews conducted in the same project with more than one hundred Iraq PRT veterans who commented on many issues that affected ePRTs and PRTs.



**United States
Institute of Peace**
2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037
www.usip.org