



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The Project on Middle East Democracy and the International Republican Institute

From the Ground Up: Assessing Efforts to Promote Local Democratic Development in Iraq

1225 Eye Street, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC, January 24th, 10:30AM-12:00PM

The Project on Middle East Democracy and the International Republican Institute hosted a panel discussion on **how US actors could best support local democratic development, what obstacles are faced, what type of programs have been effective/ineffective over the past 4 years, what will happen with these initiatives if US troops are withdrawn, and the lessons drawn from Iraq for future post-conflict reconstruction efforts.** Panelists include **Christopher Holzen**, Resident country director in Iraq for the IRI, **Erin Mathews**, Washington, D.C.-based Director of the Iraq Program for the National Democratic Institute; **Paul Hughes**, Senior Program Officer in the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations, and **Ambassador Joseph Saloom**, Advisor to Amb. Satterfield and former director of the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office. The discussion was moderated by **Thomas Garrett**, Director of Middle East and North Africa Program for the International Republican Institute (IRI) and **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy.

Andrew Albertson started off the discussion by emphasizing the importance of bringing together these development officials in order to discuss where their strategies and goals overlap and where tensions lie.

Amb. Joseph Saloom addressed the essential role the “Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)” play in creating federal structures with adequate resources and increased autonomy. He **noted the importance of a “bottom-up” strategy which included interacting with Iraqis outside the Green Zone and strengthening links between the local and regional governments with the central Iraqi government.** Saloom named a program currently in place, the “Provincial Reconstruction Development Program,” that gives local Iraqi leaders economic resources which they themselves choose how to allocate, saying **“our job is not to build things, our job is to build the capacity for Iraqis to build things.”**

When asked why the Iraqi government had been unable to spend their budget Saloom responded that the government was very new and inexperienced, officials were afraid of being prosecuted for corruption and the number of approvals required to spend money was very high, but 2007 had proved to be much better than 2006 regarding budget spending.

Christopher Holzen, attending via a live video teleconference feed from Amman, Jordan, said that the NGO community must use a more “sophisticated media component” that would extend

the reach of their messages. He then remarked on **the success of the current use of grants that are structured as contracts in order to hold individuals and organizations accountable for their spending and “weeds” out the ones who are taking advantage of the system**, although when asked if this system was universally used, he answered that it only pertained to the development of civil society, one of IRI’s three programs (along with governance and building political parties). He also noted the success of programs that provide information and bring diverse groups together, which “brings down walls” and allows them work. Programs that do not recognize or understand the “political sophistication” of Iraqis are less successful. **“People are afraid to be with us,” Holzen said, citing “fear” as the biggest obstacle**, along with difficulties in logistical operations and difficulties in following up on projects. He concluded by comparing Iraq to an airplane about to take off on a road that was under construction, the airplane hoping the road would be completed by the time it got to the end.

Holzen responded to a question on the current efforts to create province to province dialogue outside the national government by naming the “Local Governance Association” that had been created for the exact reason of promoting provincial dialogue. When asked about the lack of discussion on southern Iraq, both Holzen and Matthews answered that programs were being implemented in the south, but due to the dangerous nature of this area, publicity for them has to be kept limited to protect both the programs and the people in them.

Erin Matthews stressed passing “training” and “advocacy” skills to give the people a way to distribute information at a local level. She believes that **in order to support democratic development one must understand the community’s needs and civilian concerns, help connect local governments to the national government, use alternative logistic methods when personal contact is not possible and have “local level engagement with long-term commitment.”** Matthews agreed that one of the biggest obstacles was the fear of the Iraqis to cooperate with international institutions. She also named logistical difficulties, mistrust of media and government, and finding neutral space as other obstacles. The lessons to be learned from Iraq, according to Matthew’s experience, are the importance of keeping strong relationships at local levels, strong communication, and “drawing on prior resources” for help and input.

Paul Hughes noted that USIP’s mission is peacemaking not promotion of democracy, but added that **democratization is the “key” to achieving peace**. He agreed on the importance of engaging at a local level and paying attention to what is happening in order to address the problems and provide long-term stability. Hughes points out that **due to acts such as murder, rape, and ethnic cleansing, that often are present in conflict zones, governance becomes stalled and democratization is halted, because people then become focused on revenge**. He suggested the use of the “undemocratic” method of “power sharing” between groups even if they had not necessarily won an election in order to help with stabilization. He encouraged bringing diverse groups together to create joint goals and “joint action plans.”

In answering a question about the relationship between NGOs and the military, Hughes replied that occasionally the military calls upon USIP’s expertise to help the PRTs who sometimes do not possess the required staff for the job.