

What does it take to rebuild a state?

by Paula R Newberg

This question, raised countless times in the post-World War II, post-colonial and post-cold war periods, is taking new shape in Afghanistan today especially among donor states and international organisations concerned about Afghanistan.

The US, among others, has argued strenuously - both before forming a global coalition to fight terrorism and now, while maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan but resisting a major role in what it derisively calls nation-building - that it is possible to distinguish between establishing security and building political stability, and between physical rehabilitation and the process of democratic reconstruction. But rebuilding the Afghan state must mean reviving political life in the Afghan nation. If it does not, Afghanistan's recovery will be compromised and regional stability will be hard to assure.

In 1989, the last time war in Afghanistan might have ended in something resembling peace, the US and its allies tried to manipulate local loyalties to decide who would rule after the communist government fell. They failed, and the corrupt, ineffective governance that followed prevented Afghan citizens from rebuilding or running their country. Their actions also led, in part, to the rise of the Taliban, whose puritanism - proclaimed if not always practised - found support among those who felt abandoned by those aid providers who used commanders as middlemen in the provision of humanitarian assistance. The gravity of this error cannot be underestimated. Although saving lives is always paramount in times of crisis, the essence of a complex political emergency is the intricate nexus between politics and economics: if the process of providing assistance does not take account of the political consequences of aid, recovery will not occur.

Effective and enduring reconstruction always strikes a balance between local initiatives to build political trust within and among communities and national ones to create public goods for the entire country. Afghans are familiar with the former: in the absence of a state, the UN and its partners have worked with thousands of villagers and townspeople to salvage resources for farming and irrigation, urban renewal and, critically, removing landmines from populated areas.

Critical as these efforts are, they cannot rebuild and sustain an economy to keep Afghanistan intact. This is where nation-building and state-building intersect: by creating physical infrastructure, social services and an environment that addresses Afghan needs under the governance of Afghan citizens. To complement the bottom-up strategies of community development, Afghanistan requires top-down strategies to help rebuild its state. It also needs arbiters to keep competing interests at bay and to help Afghans reacquire political voice after long years of deprivation. By default, and occasionally by demand, this is the role that the international community today plays in war-torn states like Afghanistan.

Establishing, or re-establishing, the moral authority of a state is exceptionally difficult and Afghanistan faces enormous challenges. The 2001 Bonn Accord orchestrated under the auspices of the UN, which remains the custodian of its implementation, sets out a process for enfranchising a future government while establishing an authority to manage the initial process of reconstruction. But Afghanistan is still seized with an

American-led campaign that is premised on cooperation with motley military commanders and leftover politicians, people whose stake in retaining power contrasts sharply with the vision of a democratic, representative government that drives the Bonn Accord.

The choices that confront the Afghan Interim Authority, the transitional authority that is intended to replace it in mid-2002, the UN and a host of donor states are vast indeed. UN models for reconstruction and development elsewhere, however unevenly executed, offer some lessons for Afghanistan.

Learning from the past

When the UN has stood in for a state in the absence of a functioning government, it has learned the critical importance of resolving social and political conflicts before they balloon out of control. In Kosovo, some security and stability have been achieved for some Kosovars and Serbs as rehabilitation proceeds to non-urban areas. At the same time, however, the indeterminate status of Kosovo - a political grey area reflecting the indecision of UN member states and Belgrade rather than solely the difficulties of achieving harmony among Kosovo's residents - has limited the reach of recovery. The lesson: politics - international and domestic - and reconstruction - short and long-term - travel hand in glove.

In the West Bank and Gaza, the UN has tried over many decades to respond to crisis while also staving off potentially dangerous regional instabilities - in part by simply sustaining its presence while others have been more fickle. Its mixed bag of responsibilities has often been pursued without clear priorities. The lesson here is also one about the indelible imprint of politics on recovery: if political goals cannot be achieved - whether short or long-term - then recovery is unlikely to succeed.

In Cambodia, Bosnia and East Timor, the international community has fostered recovery by creating an authority to oversee political transition. State bodies and non-governmental organisations have moved from peace accords to rebuilding states and, ultimately, holding elections. In each case, rights protections have been put in place, along with significant investments in rights education, in order to forestall renewed conflict. There is no doubt that the international presence has seemed very large – thousands of white relief vehicles indelibly mark the landscape. But in each instance, the duration was extensive, and the human cost and physical devastation caused by conflict and indifference were enormous. These are additional reasons why local governance over reconstruction, undertaken with care, sensitivity, balance and judgement is extremely important: to ensure that, once begun, recovery can be sustained.

Challenges in Afghanistan

Each of these undertakings has encountered significant obstacles; each has succeeded only to the degree that it has created an intersection between recovery and political change. All have required big money. Afghanistan will require even more. It has almost no fiscal reserves – except for \$4.5 billion in pledges (a fraction of the per capita investment in Kosovo and Bosnia) – and its population remains scattered in the wake of internal displacement and long-term exile.

Building trust between the international community and Afghanistan is therefore a prerequisite for building trust among Afghans: to enable Afghans to build a credible and

lasting state and to forestall local disappointments caused by misguided development policies which could readily fragment the country again. This is where the decisions taken by the international donor community during the early transition phase of reconstruction are extremely important, in two related ways.

First, if donor states persist in old practices by refusing to cooperate in shared funding for basic recovery, then the capacity of the central state will be constrained to the point where it cannot fulfill its essential functions. When donors – whether bilateral, multilateral, governmental or non-governmental – insist on controlling resource allocation by resisting coordination and, even more, cooperation, they compromise not only the physical tasks of reconstruction but also the political and security prerequisites for recovery.

Second, when donors cling to equally old habits by negotiating separately with individual power holders across the country – and in the case of Afghanistan this means warlords who have arms, militia and past records of repression – the central state is again jeopardised. The fallacious equation, between localised or decentralised development, on the one hand, and, on the other, empowering local commanders whose existence is predicated on foreign backing rather than popular support is dangerous for all parties. Respecting the basic principle of popular sovereignty is a practical prerequisite for ensuring respect for individuals and communities. Without it, it will not be possible for refugees to return and for all citizens to participate in the process of recovery.

The international community will not sustain the early impetus of recovery planning unless it respects the state institutions it has helped to create. In the case of Afghanistan that means underscoring (and underwriting) the Afghan Interim Authority created under the Bonn Agreement so that the writ of the state can extend beyond the limited confines of the capital city. Supporting the processes that empower a transitional authority will make it possible for government to work in, and with, the entire country. International organisations must therefore change their long-ingrained

habit of acting as if the state did not exist, and take specific steps to strengthen Kabul's hand in determining the pace and structure of refugee return and the broad contours of the humanitarian response. This is an essential element of state-building and should define the political environment in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

A viable central state, supported materially and politically by the international community, can help keep outsiders at bay. Over the course of the past 25 years, Afghanistan's domestic divisions have allowed its neighbours (now frontline states in the global war against terrorism) and occasional patrons to take advantage of its political vacuum to further their own ambitions. Whether on behalf of the Taliban movement, the old United Front, the newly empowered Northern Alliance or displaced political leaders, this accumulated interference has emboldened regional leaders to think of Afghanistan as their own. If civil strife is not ended judiciously under neutral international auspices – and if recovery is not organised with similar impartial support – then Afghanistan will be the puppet of foreign powers or a vulnerable, war-divided territory ripe for illicit pickings. Either consequence would be a recipe for inevitable regional conflict.

After the Romans routed the Germanic tribes at the end of the first century, the historian Tacitus observed: "They made a desert and called it peace." Modern Afghanistan has long suffered the impositions of outsiders but, this time, recovery is simply too important to be left to foreigners. If Afghanistan is to survive its latest fate and if central, west and south Asia are to survive with it, then the international community needs to ensure that Afghans have the right and opportunity to make their deserts bloom.

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Afghan girls back in school in Kabul

