



# Revisiting Persistent Engagement and Interagency Collaboration

Major Charles Malcom Williams, U.S. Army

*Due to the nature of threats to national security, the U.S. cannot act alone. Building and leveraging international partners and allies are paramount for mission success and achieving stability in the international system.<sup>1</sup>*

— Clifford L. Stanley

*We cannot—and do not—face these global challenges alone. We benefit greatly from networks of partners and allies.<sup>2</sup>*

— Admiral Michael G. Mullen, U.S. Navy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

**T**HAT MUCH OF our strategic guidance understands the daunting task of stabilizing “failing states” and thwarting nonstate violent and criminal networks is heartening. This challenge faces joint interagency actors and our allies—chief among the latter, the nation hosting us. However, we must consider to what degree our actions and our allies’ choices have created the environment that made instability possible. There is an important difference between the “proximate cause” of the conditions that create instability and the actual “cause-in-fact.”<sup>3</sup>

The joint force has occasionally failed to understand the importance of political causation in creating instability, and has adopted inappropriate operational and tactical solutions for creating stability in pre- and post-conflict situations. Further, special operations forces (SOF), as members of the force who are first in and last out, are in the best position to correct some of these deficiencies.

Our counter-instability strategy broadly calls for persistent engagement and an indirect approach. In addition, we often hear, “It takes a network to beat a network.” The opening quotations of this article indicate the importance of this concept in a strategic context.<sup>4</sup>

## Thought Exercise: Supporting Our British Allies

A pro-Western regime is facing instability and the possibility for a full-blown insurgency. The area has typically been a British sphere of influence. However, given their current budget constraints, how might we help them return the area to a fully stable and cooperating member of the international community? The local government provides security to the population and enough individual freedom and regional autonomy that members of

Major Charles Malcom Williams is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kansas and recently completed a Masters in Globalization for the SOF Interagency Studies Program. He holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy. His assignments include joint and interagency missions in Bosnia, Iraq, West Africa, and Afghanistan.

PHOTO: Agents with the FBI and the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations search for evidence during rescue and recovery efforts at the Pentagon in Arlington, VA, 12 September 2001. A. (U.S. Navy)

the society can seek modest economic advancement and have a voice in the government. The pro-government factions enjoy the majority of the benefits from the system, and they have effectively marginalized radical elements of the population that are not content with the arrangement. These radical elements are forming an insurgency to gain control of the government and economic resources. The insurgents have recently baited the local military into attacking the population so as to turn a larger percentage of it against the legitimate government. This is part of a larger insurgent propaganda campaign to depict the British-backed government as corrupt, overbearing, and unable to provide governance to the entire population. The insurgency is currently being backed by external powers wishing to have greater influence over the area. What should our response be?

### Educating the Future Generation

To answer this question, we might examine our potential response through the lens of training and doctrine currently taught at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, whose Caspian Sea scenario pits the Azerbaijani government against an insurgent movement with backing from external forces.<sup>5</sup> Students and instructors with stability, counterinsurgency, and high-intensity conflict experience engage this scenario. They do so from the shaping and deterrence phase through the initiation of stability operations while assuming responsibilities from joint task force to brigade combat team levels of command and staff planning.

The scenario's supporting information states that the insurgency is based on the current political and military administration's corrupt policies. It depicts the ruling elite driving extravagant vehicles in the capital, while the ethnic minorities suffer socially and economically. The radical elements seek to overthrow the government to achieve equitable distribution of wealth and to obtain autonomy to unite with ethnically and religiously similar supporters in a country to the south.

The students generally responded in a manner consistent with the security tenets of counterinsurgency doctrine (as we have done in Afghanistan). Executed plans leveraged joint force security apparatuses to isolate the insurgency and its external supporter. Civil Affairs attempted to find ways

to support government legitimacy in providing essential services. Military information support operations promoted the legitimacy of the government and the illegitimacy of the insurgency. At the completion of operations, the same government was in power, but with the external actor's forces in a substantially diminished state.

What might we conclude from all this? What are the long-term prospects for this arrangement? The exercise of force by the joint and multi-national armed services demonstrated the U.S. commitment to its allies. Beyond this, the country is currently stabilized, although in a somewhat worse condition due to the fighting and the money expended on the counterinsurgency. Should we consider this mission successful? The proximate cause seems to be resolved—insurgency and external force defeated. Yet, was this proximate cause also the cause-in-fact?



(U.S. Army, SPC Keith Henning)

**A British Army officer, assigned to the 8th Armored Engineer Squadron, talks with a U.S. Army Special Forces company commander assigned to the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan, as they assess a compound for a new Afghan National Police headquarters in Sangin District, Helmand Province, 9 April 2007.**

The answer is a resounding “no.” At no point did any of the intervention change the political institutions to resolve any of the underlying grievances or conflicts over the distribution of political power that created the insurgency.

## **Problems with Our Indirect Approach and Persistent Engagement**

The authors of the recently published *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, demonstrate that without breaking the “vicious circle” of “extractive governments” there will be little chance for permanent stability. They provide evidence that governments do not act as they do out of ignorance of proper public administration. These governments act to consolidate power by supporting their constituencies, and the extractive rather than inclusive nature of their economic model reasons it is in their best interest to suppress those outside of their constituency in order to maximize their constituents’ “share” of the “profits.” Patronage politics or cronyism is at the core of *all* fragile and failing states.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this appears to be true in all sovereign states—even the United States. The difference is that in the United States and most other developed nations, the rule of law and governmental accountability mechanisms give the populace recourse to correct egregious attempts to extract wealth from the population. This system prevents widespread dispossession of wealth and oppression of minority political factions.

Pinpointing patronage politics as the cause-in-fact of fragile nations is not a comforting conclusion. Yet, patronage politics has been the elephant in the room in Afghanistan and in most other fragile nations where SOF and interagency actors are engaged in shaping operations.

The success of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy is contingent upon a legitimate government partner. Field Manual 3-24 says, “Political factors have primacy in COIN.”<sup>7</sup> However, in practice there is insufficient discussion of supporting a government’s legitimacy by improving its accountability and decreasing corruption.<sup>8</sup> We often look past these factors as matters of cultural reality and leverage the country’s dominant patronage networks to reach areas of interest.

Ultimately, the dominant power lacks credibility or it would not require our assistance, and that alone should raise questions as to the utility of relying on it in these cases.

If political factors have primacy and extractive patronage networks are the cause-in-fact, the joint force cannot afford to look past these problems and only focus on security or supporting the government with resources. Our indirect approach in shaping and stability operations is commonly understood to be the “whole-of-government” approach, supporting the host nation government with training and resources while remaining in the background so that the host nation can at some point stand on its own.

Outside of pure security cooperation, this indirect approach is a failure. Our support only increases the

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government or military’s ability to extract more from marginalized factions, and this support can be viewed as U.S. consent for this behavior. At times, we correctly identify a marginalized population and support that location with some type of development project. However, without support from the government, those projects quickly fall into disrepair or are never staffed. They become monuments to the inequality suffered at the hands of a corrupt government and an embarrassment to U.S.-supported efforts. Furthermore, we place quite a lot of emphasis on winning the information war. We publicize snapshots of the partner nation providing services and justice, but with few observable deeds, these campaigns easily become discredited as propaganda.

The main reason we have adopted this approach is that the strategic communication of persistent engagement overshadows a nuanced operational and tactical practice of persistent engagement. These governments are the allies of the United States and have invited it to support them. Corruption and inequality are delicate subjects that would require us to judge and in some way condemn their behavior. For fear

of offending our host and damaging the relationship, we would rather ignore the elephant as a matter of cultural reality lest we undermine our persistent engagement.

There is a tendency for Western actors to attribute the host nation's flagrant mismanagement to backwardness or irrationality. Acemoglu and Robinson call this the "ignorance hypothesis," which maintains that poor countries are poor because they have a lot of market failures and because economists and policymakers do not know how to get rid of them and have heeded the wrong advice in the past. Rich countries are rich because they have figured out better policies and have successfully eliminated these failures."<sup>9</sup>

However, governments do not exercise power in this manner out of ignorance or backwardness. It is a matter of shrewd political maneuvering. Our inability to correctly identify and influence the process is an indication of our cultural naïveté and lack of regional expertise. The manner in which these governments handle our engagement is a tribute to their shrewdness.

At the tactical and operational level, our indirect approach and persistent engagement have several related flaws. Despite a whole-of-government

commitment to a networked approach, our efforts continue to be overly hierarchical and cumbersome. This limits our ability to react to pockets of instability and to adapt as quickly as threat organizations. In part, this lethargy is due to our vision of persistent engagement and the role we play as resource provider to the network. It hinges upon the notion that we must honor our commitments. This is a valid concern. However, it invariably means that we establish ties with a community based on the resources that we bring to that particular community. These resources are often tied to projects and funding.

This resource-intensive approach is far from indirect and is subject to a multitude of problems. First, it is the opposite of flexible. The planning, contracting, and execution require multiple years to be realized and are subject to corruption, mismanagement, and neglect by the receiving community and its appointed leaders as previously described. Second, it is not indirect, because teams are intimately involved in the administration of the projects and cannot break away to engage new areas as priorities change or threat organizations move out of that area. When compounded with the earlier critique of government



(U.S. Air Force, SSGT Amanda Dick)

Engineers with Combined Joint Interagency Task Force (CJIATF) 435 talk with members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) about the water system at the Afghan National Detention Facility, Pol-e Charki, Afghanistan, 29 October 2011.

management after transition and the resulting information operations failures, it is clear that the resource provider model of our indirect approach strategy is not sustainable.

## Problems in Interagency Collaboration

To be or not to be is not a question for interagency collaboration. The prevailing narrative that influences our strategic vision assumes that interagency collaboration is the best way to solve problems.<sup>10</sup> The strength of the narrative is supported by examples of failure such as 9/11, when U.S. government agencies were seen to not collaborate well enough to prevent intelligence failures. Failure catalyzed political and public stakeholders to call for a change in practice rather than a traditional enculturation process organized around success. The interagency adapted to these demands by means of regional coordination groups among diplomatic, development, and defense agencies (sometimes referred to as the “3Ds”).

Can one assume that this adaptation will yield improved results? History suggests that it will not.<sup>11</sup> Despite mandated changes in form, each agency has been slow to change its stove-piped nature in function.<sup>12</sup> This is a failure in internal integration. We have the same policy rationale that guided organizational culture prior to the crisis. Collaboration cannot make bad policy good.<sup>13</sup>

This is not the first time a narrative has failed to produce better results. Economic principles of market efficiency and structural reform undergird strong narratives for guiding action in the United States (for example in government contracting) and in foreign policy abroad. Jocelyn Johnston and Barbara Romzek’s work in privatization highlights that factors such as transaction costs and government capacity to manage contracts leave us with a gap between the narrative and reality.

The narrative for interagency collaboration suggests better solutions, but in reality the collaboration does not always yield any better performance.<sup>14</sup> Collaboration did not address the failures of the U.S. agencies’ internal integration process, so we can expect no better performance.<sup>15</sup> Strong organizational cultures should either be grounded in success or connected to a leader’s actions whose narrative moves beyond the undesirable status quo to a clearly articulated successful future.<sup>16</sup> We have neither at present.

What we do have is interagency responsiveness (adaptation) to external accountability demands and a problem-solving network whose internal integration can do little to actually solve problems. Regional interagency collaboration is now using problem-solving working groups like the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF). Since the regional interagency network functional design is like a collaborative self-governance effort, the ICAF serves as a useful “interest-based” group problem-solving session.<sup>17</sup> The process facilitates shared understanding of technically complex and divergent approaches to problem solving in a given region. It is an example of effective collaborative planning.

However, there is a lack of comprehensive means to collect data that would allow the regional coordinating body to measure the effects of their proposed solutions. This is a significant shortcoming because without feedback it is almost impossible to know whether or not the policies worked or to hold agency actors accountable for their implementation.<sup>18</sup> Our characterization of the host government as ineffective compounds accountability problems and makes it a convenient scapegoat for failed policies (though it can be partially or wholly true at times). The lack of accountability goes beyond the need to “punish” actors for bad or inefficient practices. Poor feedback means that the interagency lacks the capacity to adapt its internal processes to more effective practices and achievable objectives. There is potential for improvement by addressing this accountability problem and adjusting our narrative. Yet, we must first understand the challenges manifested in implementation at the local level.

## Challenges

The ICAF produces multiple courses for action for all 3D actors to implement in their respective interagency task forces. Given that all U.S. agencies are operating relatively harmoniously in accord with the agreement outlined in the ICAF process, we still must consider their actions in the local context. If one compares the collaborative ICAF process to the concept of “getting on the balcony” to observe the dance, then one must be wary of the pitfalls such a perspective holds: “Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place.”<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, similar to the problematic dynamics encountered by government agencies within the United States who downsize in favor of contracting, government agencies responsible for implementing policy abroad have also downsized.<sup>20</sup> They often have limited personnel to understand the cultural nuances by more directly participating in or overseeing programs in the country.<sup>21</sup> Thus, very few interagency representatives are available to move from the balcony to join the dance.

The conditions are set for an accountability nightmare. Lack of interagency oversight allows programs to be mismanaged by local government officials, nongovernmental organizations, or any other partnership established by the interagency. Since local citizens have little input into how the program is managed there, we lack a critical feedback mechanism to allow programs to be better adapted to their needs. Predictably, this short-circuits the informal accountability dynamics of the market process. The system lacks key facilitative behaviors and accountability relationships that would connect local citizens to implementation partners and the results they produce.

### ***The conditions are set for an accountability nightmare.***

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Instead, accountability mechanisms exist between the interagency and their agents. This relationship can actually weaken democratic accountability of elected officials and their bureaucracy to the public they are intended to serve. Since the interagency objectives are to both enable economic growth *and* strong governance, our strategies should look to reconnect the population with their government or relevant social institutions.

### **What Should Our Response Be?**

The concept of supporting “searchers” who find local solutions to local problems is consistent with an American narrative promoting market-driven solutions and stakeholder accountability. It will require us to tap into micro-economic solutions, rather than only macro-economic ones. Inter-

agency leaders should continue to enjoy external and internal support by adapting one successful economic narrative for another. Capitalism works—what American leader is going to argue with that? Writers, such as Malcolm Gladwell, have popularized the concept of emergence to help garner support for this adjustment.<sup>22</sup> At the micro-economic (local) level, individuals and groups have the knowledge and incentive to adapt their behavior so that workable solutions emerge from this interaction. Principles of organizational change hinge on first understanding the cultural dynamics we wish to change.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, an interagency network with limited numbers of actors in a country must harness the understanding and desire for improvement of local stakeholders.

Paramount to our success is mapping the political terrain (using some form of social network analysis), so that we can clearly understand where and when to act. The joint force has failed to adequately do this to date in most countries—particularly in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The bulk of our social mapping focuses on enemy networks, and we currently lack the manpower, training, and technical solutions to quickly broaden our approach to political mapping—to understand the *omphalos* of blue, green, and red actors. Yet, SOF is in a good position to respond.

Valuable lessons and experience have been gained by SOF operators at Village Stability Platforms, and technical solutions are in development that can be adapted to this task. The selection and empowerment of appropriate social and political actors that can build a more stable relationship between the host nation and the aggrieved population should be our indirect approach. We should persistently engage with our partners, but position ourselves at the *omphalos*—so that through superior understanding and shrewdness we facilitate greater stability.

The role of U.S. interagency leadership is facilitating this process. The United States has two sources of power that it can leverage: resources and expertise. Developing nations are limited largely by the resources they have at their disposal. While we currently lack certain cultural expertise, we have experience in developing feedback and accountability mechanisms and the ability to look outside of a host nation’s patronage networks. This



(U.S. Air Force, SSgt Barry Loo)

Members of the Paktia Provincial Reconstruction Team conduct an audit for the U.S. Agency for International Development of a hospital construction site in Gardez, Paktia Province, Afghanistan, 2 November 2010.

ability allows us to partner with people who understand local grievances against state government and develop solutions based on that understanding. We then can build and refine our social-political map to look for stakeholders who can help develop solutions to their own problems, and are at least not hostile to the government. Then we can empower them with resources (ideally, the information and social capital that comes with allying with us).

Simultaneously, we can try to leverage feedback and accountability mechanisms in the sociocultural environment. These mechanisms might not be similar in form to American ones, but in function, social organizations like tribal councils or women's cooperatives will work. This feedback can correct our interagency accountability mechanism organizational weakness. It also closes the local accountability gap between the citizens the program is designed to help and the implementation partners.

There is one critical element remaining: desired results. Stephan Page's research demonstrates that success in interagency collaborative networks is built upon a foundation of agreed upon results. The interagency might then work to organize ICAF-like working groups *inside* a country to allow local experts to agree upon the desired results. Another potential is to leverage more direct public inquiry (town hall style) as suggested by Rosemary O'Leary and Lisa Bingham to increase feedback from local communities. The agreed upon results are a baseline of feedback for desirable action. This feedback is used to inform program development and in subsequent iterations as an accountability mechanism. This process establishes a working informal accountability model consistent with U.S. market efficiencies. The local population grows closer to their governing bodies and increases overall stability of the country. The interagency actors in the country pass feedback on the process

up to the regional coordination group as an accountability mechanism to inform future planning and resource allocation.

Unfortunately, this process might not address all aspects of instability. Disenfranchised or minority segments of society might lie outside of the process. Development economist, William Easterly, acknowledges this possibility. For example, he describes the difficulty certain societal castes might have in moving into new occupational trades. With the initial success of interagency programs, we have the option to shift resources to the pockets of instability or other initiatives such as gender equality. A fully inclusive society creates greater stability, while gender equality facilitates improved economic performance.

## Revisiting the “Thought Exercise”

We now return to revisit the “Thought Exercise: Supporting our British Allies.” The question this

time is: should we support the counterinsurgency operation?

We can now reveal that the description of the political situation in the thought exercise is actually a description of the American Revolution, during which a small minority of “radicals” dared to question the legitimacy of the British monarch that can be fairly described as only moderately “extractive.” The American colonists enjoyed much more economic opportunity than most repressed minorities today. Given our initial reaction and proposed response to this scenario, how well do we really understand the grievances leading to instability?

Exercising a more mindful strategy of persistent engagement is necessary to not let these relationships drag us into supporting instability. We must understand the true nature of instability through social mapping, and then base our indirect approach on those realities to enjoy greater operational and tactical mission success. **MR**

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### NOTES

1. Clifford L. Stanley, “DOD Strategic Plan for Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities 2011-2016,” 4.

2. ADM Michael G. Mullen, USN, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Posture Statement,” before the 111th Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, 14 May 2009, 5.

3. Proximate cause is a legal conceptualization that attempts to assign causation in which reality/complexity would demonstrate that multiple factors are contributing causal factors. Using the “but for” helps to move from the proximate to the cause-in-fact. (See Wikipedia entry for an overview).

4. See Stanley A. McChrystal’s article “It Takes a Network,” *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2011.

5. This scenario attempts to provide a hybrid threat in order that officers might, at different stages of instruction, focus on deterrence, counterinsurgency, high-intensity conflict, and stability operations. It differs from the notional scenario above, which can be viewed in joint terminology as still being in a shaping and deterrence phase (phase 0 to 1 operation), JP 3-0.

6. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Random House, Inc., Kindle Edition, 2012).

7. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, December 2006 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-123.

8. Of note, there are efforts by ISAF, MISO, and interagency organizations like USAID that do attempt to influence governmental professionalism by raising awareness and appealing to honor. However, there is little enforcement or emphasis placed on the programs.

9. Acemoglu and Robinson (Kindle Locations, 1133-1135, page 64).

10. We adopt certain priorities and practices based on internal and external expectations. The reigning narrative for the government agencies is that interagency coordination is necessary. See for example Berly A. Radin’s book: *The Accountable Juggler: The Art of Leadership in a Federal Agency* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2002).

11. Ethan Kapstein, “The Limits of Defense, Diplomacy, and Development,” *Prism: The Journal of Complex Operations* 3, no. 1 (July 2010): 21-26. William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006). Both Kapstein and Easterly cite many examples of interagency failure. Kapstein looking specifically at the 3D process, and Easterly looking at economic development and governance.

12. This is consistent with organization culture theory put forward by Schein who posits that effective organization change is based on shared success. The organizational shift was not guided by a breakthrough in successful foreign policy or interagency best practices.

13. Dr. Barbara Romzek and Dr. Holly Goerdel “guiding thoughts,” Fall 2011, Public Management and Organizational Analysis, University of Kansas, Department of Public Administration.

14. Despite widespread acceptance of the market efficiency narrative, the governmental and economic reforms in the U.S. and similar programs sponsored abroad yielded poor results. Jocelyn Johnston and Barbara Romzek. “The Promises, Performance and Pitfalls of Government Contracting,” Robert Durant, ed., in *Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

15. Easterly’s work provides exhaustive statistical analysis and peer review examples that question the wisdom of structural reform for developing economies.

Overwhelming, the reforms have not delivered substantial economic improvement, while those countries that did not follow the reform narrative generally performed better.

16. See for example: Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (Glenview, IL: Basic Books, 1995), 17. Rosemary O’Leary and Lisa Bingham, “A Manager’s Guide to Resolving Conflicts in Collaborative Networks” (Washington, DC: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2007).

17. H. Brinton Milward and Keith G. Provan, *A Manager’s Guide to Choosing and Using Collaborative Networks* (Washington, DC: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2006). See “Essential Network Management Tasks” where management of accountability is a lynchpin to determining who is to accomplish what with clear results then connected back to the agreed upon goals.

18. Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Perseus Books Group, Kindle Edition, 2002), 53.

19. Former Secretary of Defense Gates frequently cited the lack of State Department and USAID capability abroad severely limits U.S. ability to respond to problems in a nondefense manner. Personal experience found this to be true as well.

20. The same problems are then manifested as described by Elliot Sclar, Jocelyn Johnston, and Barbara Romzek—specifically, inadequate government capacity and expertise to manage the contract. A small number of people managing programs lack the capacity to effectively oversee the program. In order to cope with the problem, the interagency contracts out program implementation, but then must deal with principal-agent challenges like information asymmetry. Elliott Sclar, *You Don’t Always Get What You Pay For: The Economics of Privatization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), chap. 1 and 7.

21. Gardner’s leadership strategy of using stories as an innovative leader leverages the latent popularity of capitalism, but adds a new twist to the current macro-economic story (the potential counter story). The effectiveness or goodness is understood by the unschooled mind, where Malcolm Gladwell’s work *The Tipping Point* (2000) as a *New York Times* bestseller speaks to the more sophisticated mind.

22. See MG Michael T.Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor’s, “Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan,” *Center for a New American Security* (January 2010). Generally, there is not enough collection and analysis of civil information to produce products for senior leaders to make adequate decisions on topics such as politics.

23. In Stephen Page’s work, Vermont and Georgia collaborative groups were the most successful out of those studied, and agreement on results was a key factor in evaluating progress on the path to obtaining objectives. Stephen Page, “Entrepreneurial Strategies for Managing Interagency Collaboration,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13, no. 3 (2004).

24. This sounds very similar to Afghan shuras—to the extent that these are useful it is possible to use it as a mental model. However, Afghan shuras are a very bad model considering the lack of expertise that is usually available, and almost wholesale absence of legitimate government partners at the district level and above. In order to make this work, we need both the understanding that would come from political mapping and the ability to engage expertise that might reside outside of the region. Academics working in the capital with social connections to the region of concern might be an ideal indirect actor to leverage for good effect.