



USIPeace Briefing

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Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq

By Robert Perito

Introduction

In January 2007, President Bush announced that the U.S. would double the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq as part of his plan for a “New Way Forward.” PRTs are small, civilian-military units that assist provincial and local governments to govern more effectively and deliver essential services. These new PRTs would be embedded with Brigade (Army) and Regimental (Marine) Combat Teams (B/RCTs) participating in the “surge” of US forces into Baghdad, Anbar and Erbil provinces. The new ePRTs would begin as four person interagency teams, but would expand to include civilian experts in a broad range of specialties. These new PRTs were staffed with Defense Department civilians and members of the National Guard and Army Reserve until funds became available to the State Department to hire civilian contractors. The process of deploying civilian experts is now underway, but the B/RCTs to which they are being assigned will return to the United States by August 2008.

One year after the president announced the creation of ePRTs, what have these unique organizations achieved? What is their future? To answer these questions, USIP convened a panel of PRT veterans who recently returned to their respective agencies after serving in Iraq. The panel included:

- Stephen McFarland, US Department of State, who served as team leader of the PRT embedded with Marine Corps Regimental Combat Team – 2 in Al Asad in Anbar Province
- Jeffrey Bakken, USAID, who served as the senior development advisor to the PRT embedded with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division in Baghdad
- Lieutenant Colonel Robert Ruch, who served as deputy leader of the provincial PRT in Baghdad, which helped established the new ePRTs in that province

Robert Perito, senior program officer in the Center for Post-conflict Peace and Stability Operations at USIP, moderated. Following is a summary of the views expressed by the panel and the audience during the meeting, which was broadcast live by C-SPAN.

Live, Work, and Eat With the Troops

In Iraq, there are 11 PRTs that were established beginning in 2005. They work with provincial governors, councils and central ministry provincial representatives. In addition, there are 13 ePRTs assigned to B/RCTs in Baghdad, Anbar and Erbil provinces. These ePRTS work with sub-provincial and municipal officials, local leaders and civil society groups in their respective areas of operations.

The B/RCTs provide life support, communications, transportation and security for the members of the ePRTs who live and work alongside soldiers and Marines and are an integral part of these units. Living and working in close quarters and under stressful conditions puts a premium on establishing good personal civilian-military relationships. Operationally, ePRTs are full participants in the B/RCTs “battle rhythm” with the team leader often functioning as a political advisor to the military commander. Team members benefit from this close association and the military’s more relaxed personal security requirements and are able to spend more time in the field than embassy officials and members of the provincial level PRTs. Demonstrating to the B/RCT commanders that ePRTs provide “value added” and obtaining military “buy in” is essential to their success.

Embedded PRTs began with the deployment of four person teams in March 2007. These teams were led by the Department of State, usually a senior foreign service officer, and included a USAID representative as deputy leader, a U.S. Army Civil Affairs officer, and a bilingual cultural advisor. Their role was to conduct an assessment of the situation in the B/RCT’s area of operations, and to work with the B/RCT commander to draft a “joint common operational plan” and recommend the assignment of specialists with the skills required to implement the plan.

Given the differing environments in which the ePRTs operated, these additional personnel ran the gamut from experts from small business developers to large animal veterinarians. Initially these specialists were drawn almost entirely from Defense Department civilian staff and from the ranks of the U.S. Army National Guard and Reserves. Use of reservists sometimes caused unanticipated problems. In one case, six colonels were assigned to one ePRT. These officers outranked the battalion commanders in the BCT raising challenges for the management of operations.

In March 2007, the State Department began recruiting civilian contractors to replace the DOD personnel and reservists with funds provided through the Iraq/Afghanistan supplemental appropriations act. After completing training, contractors began deploying to ePRTs in November 2007 and will be fully in place by summer of 2008. Most ePRTs now have from eight to 12 personnel, depending on the number and skills required to implement the operational plan. Many of these contractors did not have previous field experience in the Middle East or had not previously worked on overseas development projects. A learning period was required before they became effective in dealing with Iraqis. One exception was the Human Terrain Teams of anthropologists who provided valuable insights into Iraqi culture, tribal structures and the drivers of local conflict.

Organizationally, ePRTs report to the U.S. ambassador through the embassy’s Office of Provincial Affairs, which provides policy and security guidance and administrative support. However, ePRTs operate with a great deal of autonomy and are not micromanaged from

Baghdad. They coordinate their activities with the provincial-level PRTs but do not report or take guidance from them on their operations. This arrangement has caused some consternation on the part of the provincial PRTs, which are not always aware of what the ePRTs are doing or may not agree with their evaluations of local conditions and personalities.

Providing the Civilian Side of the Counter-Insurgency Mission

Provincial level PRTs are focused on a successful core mission: budget execution. They have assisted Iraqi provincial governments to develop budgets, obtain funding from the central government and use the funds to implement development projects and provide essential services. In their first year, ePRTs have yet to identify such a central endeavor. Instead, ePRTs have worked to establish personal relationships with local officials and representatives of civil society and assessed the problems with governance, employment and basic services in their areas. They have also tried to connect district and sub-district government units to provincial authorities and the central government. In this regard, they have trained municipal leaders, encouraged the formation of district and sub-district councils, and promoted tribal engagement. This important level of government was largely beyond the practical reach of the provincial level PRTs. Integrating these local units into the overall governing structure is essential for success in Iraq. Embedded PRTs have worked on resolving local differences and promoting reconciliation among tribal groups. They have also met with civil society groups and helped promote their work.

Embedded PRTs have sought to promote economic development at the local level, utilizing quick disbursing funds from the military's Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), the State Department's Quick Response Funds (QRF) and other programs. Given that it is often better to disburse small amounts of money quickly than large amounts after extended delays, ePRTs can provide grants of up to \$25,000 on their own authority. In many cases, these funds are used as "down payments" to encourage Iraqis to utilize their own unspent government resources. In Anbar province, the ePRT reconditioned one room in a courthouse so Iraqi justices could hold trials. The Iraqi provincial government eventually used its own money to refurbish the rest of the building. Embedded PRTs have also been involved in opening business development centers and promoting small business through micro-grants. They have also established agricultural banks, renovated hospitals, and opened women's centers that provide information on legal rights, health and employment opportunities.

Among the major challenges for ePRTs are public affairs, public information and dealing with local and foreign media. Little is known about the activities of ePRTs both in Iraq and in the U.S. One reason for this is the danger to Iraqis if it becomes known that they are working with Americans. Moreover, the goal of ePRTs is to improve the image of the Iraqi government by allowing Iraqi officials to take credit for providing services and improving public wellbeing. At the same time, it is important that both Iraqis and Americans understand that ePRTs are providing valuable assistance that makes a difference in Iraq.

Future to ePRTs Uncertain as B/RCTs Return Home

The lack of overall strategic objectives for the ePRT program and its experimental nature has meant it has been difficult to develop metrics for success or to make judgments concerning the efficacy of the program. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ePRTs have made a good start and

have generated much goodwill among Iraqis. Those who have served in ePRTs believe they are making a valuable contribution.

Starting in March 2008, the five B/RCTs that participated in the “surge” will return to the U.S by the end of July. This rotation will coincide with the deployment of civilian specialists and result in the need for the fully staffed ePRTs to find new homes. At least three alternative scenarios have been advanced and other solutions may be found depending upon circumstances. Provincial-level PRTs may absorb personnel from some ePRTs. Alternatively ePRTs could be re-assigned to remaining military units. Finally, ePRTs in secure areas might transition into regional embassy offices, consulates, or other traditional U.S government institutions as hostilities diminish and Iraqis become better able to manage affairs at the provincial and local levels. Whether the current downward trend in the level of violence continues will likely determine the future of ePRTs in Iraq.

Further Reading:

Perito, Robert. “[Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq](#)” (*USIP Special Report* No. 185, March 2007)

About the Authors:

This USIPeace Briefing was written by Robert Perito , senior program officer in the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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