



Recent USAID Developments in Iraq

James Kunder, Acting Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); Kent Larson, Director of the USAID/Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Team Office in Baghdad

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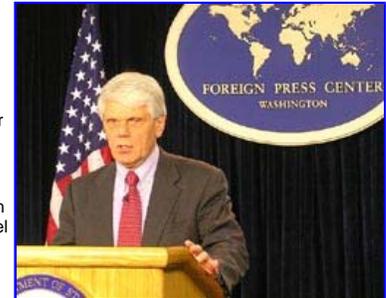
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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Foreign Press Center. We have with us this morning James Kunder, who is Acting Deputy Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development. He has also previously worked for the Save The Children foundation and is the Director of Legislation at the U.S. House of Representatives.

Along with him is Mr. Kent Larson, who is a USAID Foreign Service Officer with extensive experience in both the former Soviet Union and most recently, Iraq. They're here to talk to us today about Iraqi reconstruction and with that, I turn it over to Mr. Kunder.

MR. KUNDER: Thank you very much. I'll just make a couple of brief opening comments. I just returned on Monday from an eight-day visit to Iraq, primarily to represent USAID at the Dialogue for Economic Cooperation. These were high-level Iraqi-U.S. Government bilateral talks on economic progress in Iraq. And while I was there, I had the opportunity to review the USAID programs in Iraq.



My general observation over the past week is of continued momentum towards Iraqi sovereignty and towards Iraqi reconstruction. This space that has been opened by the military surge, the space that has been opened both for Iraqi Government officials and for foreign aid agencies from the United States and other countries, has contributed towards progress in the three major areas of U.S. foreign assistance to Iraq. Those, we characterize by their Arabic names as Tatweer, Izdihar and Inmah(ph).

The Tatweer program is a U.S. Government capacity-building program working with Iraqi officials to increase Iraqi Government capacity at the national and at the provincial levels. The Izdihar program is a program targeted at creating the conditions for sustained economic growth and economic opportunity in Iraq. The Inmah(ph) program is characterized - is targeted specifically at improving and modernizing the agriculture sector in Iraq which was selected because agriculture is the largest employer in Iraq and promises to be the largest employer for the foreseeable future.

I'll stop there. I'm more than glad to answer any questions about the dialogue on economic cooperation, the high-level talks themselves between the Iraqi Government and the U.S. Government about USAID programs in Iraq or about my visit there. At this point, I'll turn the podium over to Kent Larson, who has been supervising USAID's programs in Iraq for the last year and a half, specifically in the area of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, where U.S. Government officials, including USAID, are working to implement the programs I just described at the regional level throughout Iraq. Thank you.

MR. LARSON: Good morning. As Mr. Kunder said, I have been in Iraq for about a year and a half. Most of that time, I spent on the - as the USAID representative on the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team. For the last two months, I have been managing the entire USAID Provincial Reconstruction Team program, so I'll be able to provide some comments on how we take our national level programs, how we take our large programs and make them work to assist the Iraqis in developing their own capacity to better govern their countries, to better develop their economy.

The keystone of USAID programs is that we work directly with Iraqis. This is all progress that is driven by Iraqi Government officials, Iraqi businesspeople. So I'll be pleased to answer your questions as they come up. Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: Thank you. And if you would, as you ask your questions, please identify yourself and your organization before you pose the question. Do wait for the microphone so that we can get all of your comments for everyone, please.

Questions? Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Thank you. Jens Borchers, German Public Radio. What are the top priorities for reconstruction in Iraq as far as USAID is concerned?

MR. KUNDER: By far, the single highest priority is increasing Iraqi Government capacity and linking Iraqi resources to the solution of Iraqi problems. I mean, I think all of us have noticed, if nowhere else, at the gas pump that oil is now at \$104 a barrel. There are increased Iraqi revenues available to meet reconstruction needs within Iraq. And as has been widely reported over the last couple years, there have been issues in getting those funds flowing down to the Provincial level.

The Iraqis have made enormous progress in their budget process in this past year and as they reported to us in the Dialogue for Economic Cooperation, their highest priority is to remove any additional impediments to getting those oil revenues linked to the solution of electrical problems, water problems, school problems, healthcare problems at the Provincial level. Now what we've been able to do is work both within the Iraqi ministries, at the central level within Baghdad, and then at the Provincial level, so to increase the capacity of Provincial governance so that what we can do is link the increased revenues to meeting the day-to-day needs of Iraqi citizens.

So while we're working in all these different sectors, economic growth, we've got micro-lending programs going to help Iraqi entrepreneurs get back in business, we've got tractor repair programs going on to support the agriculture sector. The critical central objective is to increase Iraqi capacity and link Iraqi resources to meeting Iraqi needs.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Other questions? Follow-ups? Follow-up questions? Yes, please.

QUESTION: Could you describe a little bit the situation for USAID agencies before the surge and after the surge? What has changed, really?

MR. KUNDER: I'm going to let Kent talk a little bit more about that because he's got 16 months of experience to my recent eight-day visit, but the last time I was in Iraq was about a year ago.

And certainly, in my brief time there, and that includes both trips within the city of Baghdad outside the Green Zone and then also trips to the countryside south and north of the city during the last week, the uniform message I received from Iraqi Government officials, from individual Iraqis, from U.S. Government officials, military and civilian - and also, I took the occasion to meet with the UN representatives in Baghdad and the World Bank representatives in Baghdad as well as some nongovernmental organizations - the uniform message I received was of increased space to carry the reconstruction program forward.

We're simply able to move into areas now we were not able to move previously. We're able to engage Iraqis in the reconstruction process at a level that we simply were not able to do a year ago. So my message is of dramatic change and the dramatic opening of additional space to do reconstruction work in Iraq.

Do you want to add something to that?

MR. LARSON: Sure. Well, I think even before the surge, of course, we had a very robust program and I'll speak specifically about Baghdad because I - that's where most of my experience has been. But as you can imagine, Baghdad is very large. It has not only the core of the city, but it has a large rural area.

But what I've seen since the start of the surge, say, roughly 14 months ago is that we are able to work with government officials and levels of government, especially local councils, that we couldn't get to before, or we could get to but it was difficult linking them up with our NGO partners. We have a very robust local government program throughout Iraq, especially in Baghdad. The key part of this is the access our NGO partners have directly with Iraqi Government officials. They go back and forth, they meet with each other.

Prior to the surge, it was very difficult to get people together from the rural areas. Since the start of the surge, we've been able to get representatives from all six of the qadas, the rural sort of counties of Baghdad, in for training, for example. We've been able to make sure that they have representation on all of the discussions that are being held at the Provincial Council level by Iraqis in order to look at how, for example, they're going to spend their budget.

In the past, it was difficult to bring them in. Now, in the present, they're - they have seats at the table, they're representing their constituents. We also have been able to expand programs such as micro-lending, which existed before, but they weren't existing in the rural areas of Baghdad. Well, they're there now. We have a large program called the Community Stabilization Program that works very closely with local military units, plus local Iraqi Government entities to do immediate reaction in the aftermath of kinetic military operations. Once again, those are very active in Baghdad, but they expanded tremendously in the city core and they've also expanded to the rural areas.

So that gives you some ideas about what we're able to do now that it was difficult to do before.

MODERATOR: Thank you. New York, questions or other questions or follow-ups?

(No response.)

MODERATOR: It must have been an excellent explanation. I think (inaudible). (Laughter.)

MR. LARSON: I answered all questions in my opening statement.

MODERATOR: Okay. Then I thank you for attending here.

MR. LARSON: Thank you so much.

MODERATOR: I believe our participants have time to remain if you wanted to ask them a question individually, but for our public session, that ends it for the Foreign Press Center. Thank you all for coming.

MR. KUNDER: Thank you very much.

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