

# *Social Capital* *in the Interagency Environment of Iraq*

**by Lynne Chandler-Garcia**

Commenting on the mission during his deployment as the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker stated, “Iraq is so complex, the challenge is so large, and the stakes are so great, that this effort obviously cannot be a military effort alone. It cannot be a State Department effort alone. You’ve got to bring everybody in.”<sup>1</sup> As the mission transitioned to stability operations and the military prepared to draw down, this was certainly true. The focus was on handing over the residual mission to the State Department and turning most operations over to the Iraqis. Military service members and diplomats worked hand-in-hand to synchronize their efforts and accomplish these transitions.

What was remarkable about the final phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was the high level of cooperation among military members and officials from the State Department both within the headquarters and in the field. From the start of OIF and throughout much of the mission, U.S. officials struggled with joint military-civilian operations. However, by the latter stages of stability operations, the interagency effort had dramatically improved. It seemed as if the joint effort was finally “clicking.” The difference in the interagency relationship when OIF began in 2003 compared to the final years was astounding. What accounted for this change?

I posit that the primary reason for the improved interagency effort were the partnerships military officials and diplomats established that facilitated their working relationships and allowed both sides to benefit from one another’s strengths. The term “social capital” refers to the networks and connections that people and organizations build through forming relationships. Partnership requires trust and cohesion, and these virtues can be employed to realize mutual objectives. Within social capital theory, cooperation and reciprocity are essential in building productive relationships. As social capital accumulates, diverse individuals are better able to cooperate for common goals

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and productivity increases.

Political scientist Robert Putnam most famously explained the concept of social capital in his celebrated book *Bowling Alone*. Putnam likens social capital to physical capital or human capital in that all types of capital enhance productivity. Putnam writes, “[T]he core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.”<sup>2</sup> Putnam demonstrates that the cooperation, mutual trust and support, and feelings of goodwill that develop as organizations build social capital are able to augment reciprocity and further the capacities of all those working together. Social capital allows cooperating individuals or organizations to achieve effects that they may not be able to accomplish on their own or would only be able to accomplish with great difficulty.

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As the U.S. mission entered stability operations in Iraq, Soldiers and diplomats had built a fair amount of social capital, as they lived and worked together on a daily basis. Both sides began to understand the cultural differences of the other’s organization and appreciate the unique capabilities each side brought to the mission. As relationships developed, social capital continued to grow, and partnerships further improved because both sides learned to work through their differences for the good of the mission.

As military members and diplomats drew upon the social capital they were building, a number of factors were essential in building successful partnerships. First, both sides realized that their methods differed. While it was sometimes difficult to understand and cope with cultural idiosyncrasies that separated their agencies, military and civilian team members alike learned to be flexible in adapting their work styles, while employing patience as they worked through these differences. Through this process of learning to work together, officials began to trust each other and appreciate their common goals. Both military members and civilians brought unique assets to the mission, and through capitalizing on the strengths of each component, they achieved exponential results. Upon witnessing the benefits of reciprocity, mutual respect for each other’s capabilities grew and further increased productivity. These interagency partnerships built on social capital were the foundation for the success of stability operations in Iraq.

### **Social Capital Gradually Builds in OIF**

As the term social capital suggests, it takes both time and effort to build this resource. Just as persons invest in their human capital through education and training, or businesses expend money to build physical capital, amassing enough social capital to augment productivity requires investment and energy. In the initial stages of OIF, there was little social capital built between the Departments of Defense and State. Cooperation and trust were lacking, and personnel did not fully understand the roles of each agency. As a result, unity of effort suffered.

National leaders planning the strategy for the invasion and post-conflict phases of the campaign did not make a concerted effort to include State Department officials. This was problematic because the military component needed the expertise offered by civilians in order to plan for the nation-building operations

that followed the invasion. Further, as a small contingent of State officials arrived to assist with the post-invasion conflict, some military leaders seemed to rebuff the civilian component. Retired Colonel John Martin, who served as the chief of staff for the first interagency headquarters, described the welcome he received from the military as “underwhelming” and expressed that the interagency effort was certainly not a priority.<sup>3</sup>

The former commander of coalition forces Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez recounted numerous interagency difficulties as he struggled to establish stability after the invasion. Sanchez portrayed the civilian-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the military as “knocking heads.” Beyond the personality and cultural conflicts that stymied the mission, the CPA was extremely understaffed and did not have the manpower to govern and rebuild Baghdad, let alone the rest of Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Without a baseline of trust and cooperation between the military component and the CPA or, in other words, a basis of social capital between the two agencies, progress was haltingly slow which had a profound effect on military forces who found themselves trying to conduct reconstruction and governance operations with very little experience or expertise.

Soldiers saw a need and with a “can do” attitude stepped into the void to implement reconstruction strategies. While these efforts were laudable and achieved some effect, overall, the lack of social capital within the interagency effort resulted in delays and inefficiencies in reestablishing order and stability. Brigadier General Peter Palmer, the chief planner for the military headquarters in 2004, explained that the military effort was “not teamed well” with the CPA, and from his perspective, both strategic and operational opportunities were lost as the military and civilian components learned how to work together.<sup>5</sup>

By mid-2004, Multi-National Force-Iraq

(MNF-I) Commander General George Casey and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad began to establish the groundwork for a fruitful interagency effort. Having seen the challenges Soldiers faced in the initial phases of the campaign, these leaders mutually understood the need to better synchronize efforts. Khalilzad described their motto as “One Mission, One Team,” signifying their common goals and the need for an integrated military-civilian effort.<sup>6</sup> Casey and Khalilzad laid a foundation for building social capital.

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In late 2005, joint operations in the field improved with the introduction of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). PRTs were small, civilian-led units whose members possessed the requisite reconstruction and governance expertise to assist military units in the field. However, just as the interagency process was initially difficult at the strategic and operational levels, when the PRT concept was introduced, there were growing pains as both military units and PRTs adjusted to their roles and learned to work together. Many service members had little to no experience working in an interagency environment and, therefore, had little appreciation for the expertise offered by the civilians. Without understanding the PRT’s purpose, some commanders sidelined

the civilian component. Further, logistical arrangements for the PRTs fell to the ground units, and many Soldiers viewed the PRTs as a burden rather than an asset. Likewise, civilian diplomats were often distrustful of the military, fearing Soldiers were more likely to shoot first and practice diplomacy later.<sup>7</sup> With the PRT concept just taking hold, relationships were fragile. Military units and the newly launched PRTs had not yet built enough social capital to sustain meaningful partnerships. It would take time and effort to build a foundation of trust, respect, and mutual admiration among these diverse teams that would allow productivity to flourish.

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The necessity of building social capital proved to be correct. At the urging of commanders, PRTs and ground forces started to work together to sort out logistical arrangements and responsibilities within the battle space. As they worked through challenges, partnerships began to form and social capital began to build. Soon, reports from the field indicated that units and PRTs were starting to enjoy productive relationships. The military unit provided transportation and security for the PRT members so they could work within the Iraqi communities. Military members appreciated the knowledge lent by these civilian experts as they embarked on civil-capacity projects.

General David Petraeus took command of MNF-I in January 2007 and three months later, Ambassador Ryan Crocker took the lead for Embassy operations. Both leaders emphasized unity of effort among military and civilian organizations. The close personal and professional relationship cultivated by the two leaders inspired cooperation both within the headquarters and on the ground. To guide a collaborative interagency effort, MNF-I and the Embassy published a joint campaign plan (JCP) and directed that joint operations be the norm. This cooperative relationship continued into 2009 and 2010 as General Raymond Odierno took command of MNF-I. Odierno continued to focus on a whole-of-government approach and his subordinate commanders stressed the need to put PRTs in the lead for stability operations.

On the ground, many of the initial challenges of implementing the PRT concept were resolved, and military members and civilians were learning from experience that cooperation was critical to success. Further, the surge strategy not only increased military boots on the ground, but also significantly augmented the civilian component. As more civilians entered the theater and Soldiers on their second and third tours became more familiar with working in a joint environment, social capital accumulated and interagency relationships thrived.

As the U.S. military entered its final years in Iraq, the social capital amassed between the military and civilian components made productive interagency operations possible. However, this accumulation of social capital was a painstaking process that required a concerted effort on both sides to patiently work through personality and cultural impediments. Although working toward the stability of Iraq was the shared goal, members of each of these agencies had different viewpoints and tactics for achieving this goal, which oftentimes created a clash of cultures. The process of building social capital and forming partnerships was demanding.

Even minute cultural differences such as jargon and meeting styles posed challenges. However, as the teams jointly overcame obstacles, social capital accrued. A brief analysis of how U.S. personnel worked through these cultural disparities illustrates the process of building social capital in an interagency environment.

### **Building Social Capital through Resolving Cultural Differences**

As is often quoted, “Defense is from Mars; State is from Venus.”<sup>8</sup> A host of cultural differences challenged the process of building social capital as military and civilian officials realized just how much their work styles differed. The first obstacle encountered was often simply a difference in personality-based approaches. The military command structure is dominated by “Type-A” personalities that are driven, ambitious, and sometimes even impatient. Commanders lead large contingents of troops and must achieve measurable results in a short period of time. Further, in conflict situations, service members must act decisively in order to save lives. This context lends itself to the rank-based and results-oriented military culture.

Personality studies of military leaders indicate that behavior preferences of commanders tend toward sensing, thinking, and judging rather than feeling.<sup>9</sup> This is not surprising given that commanders must perform in high-stress, combat situations where the ability to quickly assess the situation and make decisions is paramount. On the other hand, the personality traits encouraged within the State Department are adaptability and sensitivity.<sup>10</sup> Like their military counterparts, foreign service officers must be dependable and resourceful leaders, but diplomats tend to eschew strict rank orders and are more apt to foster a community of peers rather than rank.

Civilians with little experience in a military environment often were taken aback by the

strong personalities they encountered within the armed forces. As one PRT member put it, “they [civilians] were overwhelmed by the very well-disciplined behavior of the military, and the way the military can give orders and be very effective without having much substance. Because they wear a uniform and they shout a lot, very loudly, they carry the day.”<sup>11</sup> Another civilian working with the United States Agency for International Development described his

**“Defense is from Mars;  
State is from Venus.”**

military cohorts as only knowing one speed, “and that is a thousand miles an hour, full steam ahead.”<sup>12</sup> This individual found it very difficult to engage in deliberate planning because the brigade was moving so quickly the civilians could not keep pace.<sup>13</sup>

Military members working with the PRTs agreed that the civilian and military timeframes did not mesh. One military officer stated that the military takes ten minutes to make a decision that a State official would take ten days to make. He said, “Time moved differently for the Iraqis, the State Department, and for the military, and that clashed on a regular basis.”<sup>14</sup> A “Type A” military officer equipped with a “can do” attitude tended to move forward at full speed to achieve quick and measurable results. Although effective, military personnel sometimes overwhelmed their civilian counterparts. Likewise, service members found civilians to be painfully slow to make decisions and take action. It was not until the two teams began to work together that they realized they both had good intentions, just different styles for achieving results.

With differences in dominant personality traits, it was expected that working styles would greatly diverge. State officials generally take a

long-term perspective for stability operations. When strategizing, diplomats consider many perspectives and spend considerable time brainstorming and deliberating in a flexible and informal manner. While discussion is also encouraged within the military process, in a war zone, time is of the essence and debate is limited. These differences affected partnerships within the headquarters and on the ground. Military leaders at all levels found themselves needing to exercise patience, a trait seldom embraced by service members, in order to foster productive partnerships with State Department representatives.

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Taking this deep breath was especially difficult for commanders who needed to achieve rapid results in a hostile environment. Such was the case for Colonel David Paschal who the press described as the quintessential “Type-A” personality. When Paschal led the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division into Kirkuk in September 2007, his brigade was a critical part of the successful surge effort to quell the insurgency. With violence tapering off, Paschal did not rest on his laurels but instead switched his focus to pursuing non-lethal operations with vigor. Recognizing that the PRT possessed the expertise required to maximize results, Paschal pursued a close interagency

partnership. Although he admitted that his relationship with the PRT was not perfect in the beginning, he was willing to be patient with his civilian counterparts and took the time to get to know each of the individuals within the PRT. Through fostering personal bonds, Paschal built social capital among the team that would help weather any cultural disagreements that arose. For instance, the PRT disliked calling their weekly interagency conference a “targeting meeting” due to its kinetic connotations. Therefore, the brigade began calling it the “nonlethal working group.” This small change helped build trust.<sup>15</sup> While the PRT members did not always agree with decisions made by the brigade, their accrued social capital facilitated their ability to work through differences to attain a common goal. By the end of the deployment, Paschal characterized his partnership with the PRT as “phenomenal.”<sup>16</sup> By exercising patience and flexibility as they worked through their cultural and personality differences, both Paschal and PRT Commander Howard Keegan were able to build social capital that they then employed to conduct civil capacity operations.

A further barrier stemming from cultural differences was semantic. Although many deployed diplomats were familiar with the Arabic language, they quickly realized the need to learn the jargon and acronyms of “military speak.” For instance, a civilian member of a PRT in Baghdad described the turmoil that filled his first weeks in country.

I had got all these military acronyms and things on my desk, such as an SIPR (Secure Internet Protocol Routing), and I had no idea. ...It was a bit chaotic. I had never been with the military in any way, shape, or form. I learned a lot in those two weeks about the culture—who the military were, the difference between a colonel and a lieutenant colonel and a captain, and what the command structure was. I absorbed as much of the military language as possible,

and what they were talking about when they said “targeting and deconflicting and syncing”; they meant “target.” When they said “nonlethal work,” it was their word for development and meant “targeting.” In other words, you target bad guys to do them harm, but you target a medical clinic or an irrigation system to do good.<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately, after some initial weeks of adjustment, this individual went on to report that he was able to foster strong relationships with his partnered military company. Learning the military lexicon in order to facilitate communication was a significant step in building social capital among these diverse groups. Once military and civilian personnel were communicating effectively, they were able to move forward in the effort to build partnerships.

A similar cultural barrier was the military institution’s reliance on metrics. Within a results-oriented culture, military members quantify their success through precise and measureable data. While civilian teams also tracked various statistics, the heavy reliance on metrics was often difficult to navigate. Further, many civilian officials felt that the armed forces relied much too heavily on measurable results, and this preoccupation with metrics caused the military to lose focus of the greater civil-capacity mission. The State Department’s strength was not in providing snapshots of progress as the military tended to produce, but in analyzing trends for the longer term.

At the same time, military members experienced frustration at the seeming reticence of their civilian counterparts to produce measurable results. For example, a Marine in Anbar pointed out that this was a source of consternation saying, “A military organization is very focused on its mission and what it can accomplish and what gets done. And my impression of the State Department is that they are not as concerned about what gets done.

They don’t establish metrics for themselves or measure accomplishments.”<sup>18</sup> Both Defense and State had their unique strengths demonstrating success, and through incorporating the metrics of the military as well as the trend data provided by diplomats, officials gleaned a more holistic picture of the situation. Units and PRTs who learned from each other’s techniques and shared information were able to analyze a more comprehensive operational picture.

Finally, and perhaps the most daunting cultural obstacle of all, was the process of communicating results within their respective organizations. Paschal explained that military leaders like to conduct briefings which present inputs, outputs, decisions, and the way forward. Although he understood the importance of working through cultural differences, even Paschal admitted to some exasperation when his civilian counterparts engaged in lengthy

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discussions with little measurable results. He stated, “I’m all for collaboration, but at some point you have to make a decision and move forward.”<sup>19</sup> Paschal got through these meetings with a healthy dose of patience and flexibility as he encouraged his counterparts to make hard decisions.

Communication styles also greatly differed when it came to written communication. The State Department has perfected the technique of diplomatic cable writing. Cables contained the information that PRT leaders needed to convey

to their leadership, and were written in a style that was accessible to fellow diplomats. PRT member Gary Anderson called cable writing “a highly developed art form,” but an approach that was unfamiliar to most military members who eschewed lengthy prose and description.<sup>20</sup> Rather than try to force his military counterparts to adapt to this style, Anderson generally wrote two reports after each mission—one in a bullet format that was accessible to the military and one as a cable for fellow diplomats. While this was a time-consuming process, Anderson felt the effort paid off in furthering relations with

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military units. Without a clear exchange of ideas, Anderson could not hope to build social capital with his partnered brigade.

While military members were easily impatient with diplomatic cables, their civilian counterparts were just as baffled by the military’s preferred method of prose – PowerPoint. Diplomats were accustomed to roundtable discussions rather than briefs filled with hundreds of bullet points and matching graphics. The same PRT member who labored to learn “military speak” also struggled to keep up with the pace of briefings requiring detailed PowerPoint slides complete with updated metrics. He described the process stating,

The brigade had all of these PowerPoint jockeys running around to do different things, and you’re briefing every week or every two weeks with your slides about

what your projects are, what they’ve accomplished, boom, boom, boom, boom. ... And there’s all this pressure to brief it, brief it, brief it. There was not a lot of time. You could get sucked into this pace, this incredibly frenetic pace, sucked into running around trying to keep up with everybody...<sup>21</sup>

This was a common frustration voiced by civilians. Military commanders often responded by adjusting their battle rhythm to help build cohesion. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Steven Miska, 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry Regiment Commander, found that constant meetings crushed his civilian counterparts. Miska streamlined the schedule to a weekly, “acronym-free” interagency meeting where civilians and Soldiers could discuss holistic approaches for success. Miska found that this approach greatly increased interagency social capital.<sup>22</sup>

Military behaviors such as the language of acronyms, the heavy use of metrics, and dependency on PowerPoint briefs were indicative of the cultural differences between the two institutions. While seemingly small asymmetries, these distinctions created monumental disparities in the way military and civilian officials conducted daily business. Major General James Hunt who served as the Deputy Commanding General for Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) in 2009 and 2010, vividly described the cultural differences he encountered while trying to facilitate unity of effort. Hunt was responsible for working with State personnel to transition responsibility for rule of law and civil capacity from the military units to the PRTs. He found that State officials were overwhelmed by the sheer size of the military staffs, the intense personalities within these staffs, and aggressive military work habits that quickly buried civilians with briefing slides and frequent planning sessions. Hunt described initial meetings saying, “When we went to a

meeting, we walked in with a platoon's worth of briefers, slide flippers, and other horse-holders to talk with two or three people from State, and we were often appalled to find that there wasn't even a computer and a screen for our 150-slide briefing."<sup>23</sup> Hunt called the military component the "800-pound gorilla" that generally got its way through sheer force. However, Hunt found that this method frustrated both the civilians and the military officers within the headquarters. Different methods were required to build social capital.

Hunt adjusted his methods to reduce the number of briefing slides and metrics, and modified his expectations to allow less precise end states and more discussion. These simple adjustments smoothed relationships and furthered social capital. Hunt concluded that even though the civilian culture was very different, it did not mean civilians were ineffective. By learning to adapt, Hunt was able to make significant progress in creating unity of effort within the MNC-I headquarters during the final phases of the military campaign.

### **Interagency Social Capital Tested During Final Phases**

General Hunt's tenure coincided with the passage of the Security Agreement between the U.S. and Iraq. The Security Agreement included the December 31, 2011, deadline for U.S. troops to depart Iraq effectively ending the combat mission, while a U.S. civilian presence would remain to assist with civil capacity. Both the military headquarters and Embassy personnel needed to prepare for this transition well in advance to ensure the State Department was fully prepared to function without military support. Therefore, planning and implementing this transition were critical components of the campaign as the mission evolved to stability operations.

As the military presence shrank, State needed to develop alternate methods for

protection, living quarters, and transportation in the field. Ensuring that these requirements were met at the same time the military was drawing down was a tall order and required frequent planning sessions among Embassy and military staff members. It was imperative that both camps came to the planning table to collaborate in an environment of open communication and full partnership. The social capital accumulated among the civilian and military components was utilized and even stretched during this decidedly demanding process.

One of the primary challenges for the Embassy was their small staff, which limited the Embassy's ability to strategize for future missions while at the same time keeping abreast of current operations. Further, the civilian component was not as adept as the military component at planning large transitions and draw downs. Planning is a core competency within the military that officers are expected to master through extensive education focusing

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on war gaming, strategy, and writing planning documents. Military doctrine outlines a formal planning process that military officers understand and appreciate. This is in contrast to the State Department where the planning process tends to be more informal and flexible. State officials do not utilize the military decision making process or other formal processes favored by their military counterparts. Instead, State planning tends to be more task-oriented, tackling problems as they arise. While these

methods were generally sufficient for day-to-day problems, preparing for the draw down and subsequent transitions required more the robust procedures practiced by the military.

To assist with the planning process, U.S. Forces- Iraq (USF-I) sent a number of its trained planners to augment the small Embassy staff and provide expertise. Initially, some Embassy personnel were reluctant to accept this assistance in fear that the military planners, equipped with aggressive “Type-A” personalities, would overreach and impose their own objectives on what was supposed to be a joint effort.<sup>24</sup> Despite this apprehension, for the most part, State officials appreciated the assistance, and rather than dominating, defense officers supported efforts. In fact, an embassy official affirmed that this support was critically valuable. He opined, “[Planning] is not an organic skill set for us [diplomats]. But the military brings it out here and it is superb, fantastic.” He continued saying, “[I]t was such a huge force enabler that we sat down with management and identified other problems [where we needed planning help]. We asked for more of these [planners]. And they [USF-I] said, ‘Sure, we’ll put them on loan to you guys’ ...I don’t know what we would have done without them.”<sup>25</sup>

These joint sessions proved to be laboratories for interagency cooperation and unity of effort. Ultimately, the process required learning from each other, reciprocity, mutual respect for each other’s skill sets, and, perhaps most of all, a healthy dose of patience as both sides of the table drew upon the social capital they had built. While the interagency planning process was by no means perfect, it was much improved from its inauspicious beginning in OIF. Partnerships and social capital facilitated this vast improvement.

The lesson learned from Iraq during stability operations was that interagency unity of effort is difficult to achieve but can be accomplished when personnel from Defense and State build a sufficient amount of social capital to facilitate their transactions. Building social capital is not an easy process; it requires time and effort from all parties involved. However, officials must persevere in building this resource because it is critically necessary in supporting the interagency process.

This lesson is applicable to the current campaign in Afghanistan. As military units draw down and prepare for a limited and diplomatic mission past 2014, Soldiers should understand that the social capital they are building with their civilian partners will go a long way in expediting the stability operations at the end of a major campaign.

Further, the importance of social capital should be considered for future combined military-civilian campaigns. Just as social capital accumulates, it can also erode once the campaign ends and diplomats and service members go their separate ways. Social capital must be maintained so that when the next interagency mission arises, Defense and State do not need start from scratch in building social capital. The agencies must prioritize interagency training and opportunities to embed within each other’s agencies so that civilians and service members can continue to build social capital during peacetime as well as conflict. Interagency assignments should be valued and encouraged. Through increased opportunities such as these, social capital will continue to build among the agencies. If partnerships such as those built during the stability operations of OIF are kept alive and flourishing, the interagency process will be that much easier during the next campaign. **IAJ**

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