

Cables from the Field: A Diplomat’s Lessons from the Two Decades Since 9/11

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INTRODUCTION

I was in Colombia when the planes hit the World Trade Center, and over the next two decades I served as the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan and to Egypt, and as Assistant Secretary of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, a bureau which had programs in Afghanistan and Iraq to professionalize the police and to promote a fairer system of justice. My last assignment was Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East and North Africa, where I had a broad view of our counterterrorism efforts. I benefitted from seeing the enormous contrast between U.S. efforts in Colombia and the more haphazard approach in Pakistan and the Middle East.

The War on Terror was not a fraud. There were some extraordinary successes against the real threats the United States and its allies confronted for the past two decades. CIA analysts found Osama bin Laden; case officers saved hundreds of people; and linguists and analysts at NSA had some amazing but unheralded successes. The SEAL team that killed Osama bin Laden became a legend. Americans were also responsible for major improvements in the capacity of our allies, from training the Colombians to combat kidnappings or to protect their oil infrastructure, to intelligence cooperation during Saudi Arabia’s internal war against its domestic terrorists, to defeating ISIS by partnering effectively with the Kurds.

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Fundamentally, after 9/11, there were no more attacks on the United States. But there were some close calls. In May 2010, Pakistani citizen Faisal Shazad planted a car bomb in Times Square and was literally pulled off a plane by the FBI as he tried to flee the United States. His arrest led to information that his associates were planning to plant a bomb at a wedding at a Pakistani officers club which would have killed many civilians. A few months before, Afghan American Najibullah Zazi had plotted with friends to blow up a NY subway station. Many have pointed out that the U.S. government squandered endless resources “protecting itself” in combat zones when the United States could have just gone home, but anyone serving in the field knew that threats were real. American efforts succeeded in shattering much of the terrorist infrastructure. But just as a glass shatters and its shards end up in crevices that are hard to see, the challenge now is to have the right people on the ground in the right places to deal with the shards.

I. I LEARNED THAT WE NEED MORE CIVILIANS ON THE GROUND WHO KNOW THE ENVIRONMENT

During the past two decades, the U.S. government focused more on physically eliminating terrorists than on evaluating trends and building relationships. Short tours and rapid turnover of U.S. diplomats and military and intelligence personnel led to poor understanding of the local scene; few people could speak the difficult local languages; and building long term relationships was considered less valuable than drone strikes and technical intelligence. Paradoxically, the past twenty years made us more afraid of losing people, so we are more vulnerable now. Well intended initiatives to address these shortcomings, such as the passage of the Global Fragility Act, will fail without more and better trained people in the field, for longer periods of time. I am virtually certain that the lack of language capable personnel overseas will make it more difficult to compete with Russia and China, which now has more diplomatic missions than the United States.

This is not a new problem. Since the bombing of the Beirut Embassy in 1983, America’s diplomatic presence has been increasingly isolated behind thick walls. Based on the recommendation of a commission headed by former NSA head Admiral Bobby Inman, embassies were relocated to the edges of cities into large compounds with lots of “set back.” The State Department was probably unintentionally singled out by Admiral Inman for a punitive system called the Accountability Review Board, which demands that blame be established for loss of life or property, a system which has absolutely no counterpart in any other federal agency and makes diplomatic personnel reluctant to take risks. Still, even in dangerous countries like Colombia, USAID and military personnel worked out of local ministries, spoke the language, and were constantly in the field evaluating programs and making contacts. There were sometimes casualties, but there was also a steady flow of information about threats to Americans and to the host nation.

One year tours became common in Iraq and Afghanistan to attract staff. This meant that Americans were effectively at their posts in Iraq, Afghanistan, or

Pakistan, for a brief nine months. In some countries, American personnel never left the embassy. Senior leaders would be assigned on the basis of their knowledge of terrorism, even if they had no specific knowledge of the country and could not speak the language, as if Islamic extremists from wildly different religious and ethnic backgrounds were one big undifferentiated terrorist blob. In Jeddah, after the attack on the U.S. consulate in 2004, one year tours became the norm, and, despite having longer tours now, Americans know less about the clerics, the rural areas, and the inner workings of the royal family in Saudi Arabia than they did before. Only three people at a time in the Kabul Embassy spoke Pashto, the language of the Taliban, so there are very few people who can now communicate with the Taliban as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan. In Karachi, after American personnel were killed in a roadblock in 2006, political officers had to meet contacts in the lobby of a hotel instead of visiting them at more discreet locations. No foreigner is going to convey valuable information sitting in the lobby of the Marriott.

The September 2011 assassination of the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens, dramatically worsened this longer-term trend. Many people were shocked that an American presidential election could be upended by the murder of a U.S. ambassador in a distant country. Not surprisingly, government officials became even more reluctant to take responsibility for deploying subordinates to dangerous countries, and they quickly imposed additional restrictions in the wake of Ambassador Stevens' death.

Two excellent officers in Yemen who spoke Arabic and had previous experience in the country were never allowed to leave the compound. In Egypt, where security restrictions were fewer and the embassy was larger, embassy personnel were able to reach out to conservative Islamists – with whom they already had relationships – and prevent a demonstration against the embassy the day Benghazi was attacked. In Iraq, in 2020, those embassy officers who regularly interacted with Iraqis were among the sharp reduction in staff after threats from Iranian rocket attacks. The then-Secretary of State made the astonishing threat that if the rockets did not stop, the United States would shutter its embassy. As Ambassador Barbara Leaf described it at the time, such a withdrawal would have handed Iran a “propaganda victory of epic proportions.”¹

Fortunately, the reluctance to take risks and its consequences are being increasingly recognized in the U.S. Congress. During Secretary of State Blinken's confirmation hearing in January 2021, Senator Murphy asked why “18-year-old Marines were doing the State Department's job” in northern Syria.² The answer is that no one in the Department of State wanted to assign diplomats and development officers to this dangerous country after the political fallout from Benghazi,

1. Edward Wong, Lara Jakes & Eric Schmitt, *Pompeo Threatens to Close U.S. Embassy in Iraq Unless Militias Halt Attacks*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 29, 2020), <https://perma.cc/FX97-NBSR>.

2. *Nomination of Hon. Antony J. Blinken to be U.S. Secretary of State, Before the S. Com. On Foreign Rels.*, 170th Cong. 117-4 (2021).

despite the strategic and humanitarian need to do so. A single, experienced officer, Bill Roebuck, was after much debate allowed to travel with American special forces. Roebuck's work was widely praised by the U.S. military and written up in *Defense One*. He sat down with Kurds and Arabs to solve disputes. He distributed small amounts of aid; he monitored prisons and camps, which are still overflowing with ISIS members and dependents. Both the U.S. Regional Commander, General Kenneth McKenzie, and the United Nations (U.N.) have warned repeatedly that these camps are a breeding ground for radicals. Mitigating these threats, and helping civilians rebuild, require a specialized team on the ground in Syria for the long term, not a single person.

Secretary Blinken was also asked how the Obama administration had misjudged the situation in Libya so profoundly. He responded that the United States didn't understand how thoroughly Qaddafi had destroyed the country's institutions. In fact, few predicted that Libya would fracture, that it would become an ISIS battleground, or that there would be an uncontrollable flow of arms from Libya to the Sinai, Gaza, and Syria. The United States had limited ability to influence what was going on in Libya because there was only a sporadic and limited U.S. diplomatic presence. The embassy was withdrawn after Qaddafi's death, reinstated, drawn down again after Benghazi, and now closed since 2014. No one in Washington would sign off on the return of the embassy, and travel by the Ambassador was constantly debated and rejected. The strategic costs were significant. The Turks, the Egyptians, the Emiratis, and the notorious Russian militia, the Wagner group, all gravitated to Libya and their conflicts threatened to spread to the eastern Mediterranean. Libyans died in civil wars and African migrants perished as they crossed Libya. Now there seems to be a fragile peace process underway, and the United States is discussing its return to Libya.

II. I LEARNED THAT OUR MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS HAVE FAILED TO IMPROVE CAPACITY IN CRITICAL COUNTRIES

Much like the lack of civilian capacity to deal with conflict situations, the past twenty years also showed that many of America's military assistance programs need to be overhauled so our allies can better confront their external enemies. When they needed to engage in actual combat, many of them simply were not able to fight, despite decades of U.S. training and hardware. As the United States focuses on great power competition, many of our allies will have to do more on their own.

The Gulf countries had become the largest single buyers of U.S. military hardware and training in the world. Others, like Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Afghanistan were major recipients of taxpayer funded military assistance. Without question, Arabs and South Asians have bravely confronted terrorists. They deserved American support. But the military shortcomings became more obvious as the traditional terrorist infrastructure evolved into new threats, like ISIS. Other new challenges were similar to the insurgency in the Sinai, which

was prompted by local grievances among the tribes, extremists from Libya and Syria, and the unrestricted flow of arms from Libya.

In some countries, like Yemen and Iraq, a laser-like American focus on specialized counterterrorism units ignored the failings of the broader military institution, which ultimately made it difficult for the counterterrorism units to succeed. In other countries, neither the local military nor U.S. assistance had evolved to address new threats. This was particularly true in Egypt. The Egyptian military, which had received \$47 billion in U.S. military assistance, could not defeat 1,000 insurgents in the Sinai Peninsula. Instead, the insurgency was contained by air cover and intelligence from the Israelis. U.S. military assistance had been directed at expensive co-production of tanks and armored personnel carriers, which the Egyptian military did not need. Once Egyptian officers returned home from U.S. training programs, they were generally reassigned, so valuable training was lost.

In Saudi Arabia, decades of assistance did not seem to help the Saudis defend themselves from cross-border attacks from Yemen, which were initially from primitive Houthi rockets fired against border cities. The Saudis were also terrible at offensive operations against Yemen. They apparently had limited capacity to channel intelligence into operations. This became increasingly acute when it was clear that Saudi pilots were almost indiscriminately attacking civilian targets. One expert explained that the Saudis would receive reports of targets from inside Yemen, but they had no system to evaluate if the informant provided good information in the past. The officer on the scene was under pressure to take the report at face value, so they instructed the pilots to attack, regardless of the consequences. Now, the Houthis are better trained and equipped by Iran than they were in 2015 and far more capable of reaching Saudi cities and oil infrastructure with their rockets. It is entirely possible that military assistance programs in countries like Saudi Arabia will never be able to overcome political and cultural constraints, but at least we need an honest conversation about the prospects going forward.

III. I LEARNED THAT TERRORIST DESIGNATIONS ARE OFTEN COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

Terrorist designations are often worthy of skepticism, achieving little to stop terrorists but doing much to constrain the U.S. government and humanitarian organizations. They cause confusion inside the government and encourage turf fights because of overlapping jurisdictions among the Departments of State, Treasury, and Justice. And they grew into a web of legislation which lacked coherence and often undercut other U.S. objectives.³

These designations were originally designed to restrict American assistance to designated terrorist groups. They have been extensively litigated, most

3. Emilia Columbo, Judd Devermont & Jacob Kurtzer, *Mozambique: The Problem with Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) Designations*, CTR. FOR STRATEGIC & INT'L STUD. (Mar. 12, 2021), <https://perma.cc/WTW3-PB5F>.

importantly in *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, which supported the designations.⁴ But on the ground, these restrictions often do not make sense. American officials debate the legal ramifications of assistance to courageous health workers in a beleaguered village under ISIS control. How does a small NGO working with displaced people in rural Pakistan certify to its parent funder that no terrorists are involved? Although somewhat relaxed, aid groups have to certify that their assistance is not going to terrorists, which may be possible in Latin America but is more difficult in northwest Pakistan. These restrictions mean that that assistance is more often funded through large contractors instead of potentially more effective local organizations. Recently, the previous administration declared the Houthis in Yemen to be a terrorist group. This would have done nothing to constrain the Houthis military efforts but would have discouraged banks, trading companies, exporters, and assistance organizations from delivering urgent aid to Yemen.

In 2001, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a right-wing militia in Colombia, was designated a terrorist group. I concurred in that designation. It was useful to put pressure on AUC supporters, whose wives wanted to travel to Italy to buy handbags and whose families would vacation at Disneyworld. Supporters were sometimes prominent figures who could be embarrassed by a terrorist designation. To state the obvious, this is not true of many Middle Eastern terrorist groups, like the Houthis, Hamas, or ISIS, whose families are not traveling to Disneyworld. These designations were no doubt useful in allowing the Treasury Department to go after the assets of these groups. But it spun off a number of consequences. The most troublesome, which I first saw in Colombia, was that U.S. government officials and international officials were initially prohibited from engaging with the groups to encourage them to stop being terrorists. It is extremely difficult to have a negotiation and develop a post conflict settlement with a “terrorist group.” This was a serious constraint in the early days of the Colombian peace process and led to bitter interagency fights. Tellingly, after twenty years of fighting, the Afghan Taliban have never been designated a terrorist organization, although they have directly threatened the United States far more than many on the list, because it would impede possible negotiations.

There have been non-sensical spinoffs. The Immigration and Nationality Act had a variant which punishes members of organizations that have “promoted violence in the past,” whatever that means. This provision has caught-up intended immigrants to the United States who belonged to pro-American groups like the Kurds, or several Pakistani political parties, groups vigorously opposed Islamic terrorism and very friendly to the United States. Members of Congress have addressed the Kurdish issue, but a more comprehensive approach led by the National Security Council staff is needed to straighten out the designations and clarify how they should be implemented.

4. 561 U.S. 1 (2010)

IV. I LEARNED THAT THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE INVESTED MORE RESOURCES AND EXPERTISE IN MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

The United States has generally taken multilateral diplomacy for granted. Particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States could generally get its way in multilateral affairs by simply being the world's superpower. As the United States became absorbed in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in great power competition, U.S. attention to this essential infrastructure of foreign policy waned, although there were important exceptions during some administrations and in some fields. As the U.S. domination of the multilateral system gradually eroded, China filled the vacuum, largely at U.S. expense. The shocking ability of China to exercise more influence at the World Health Organization (WHO) than America did – something that would have been inconceivable ten years ago – was a wake-up call with far reaching consequences.

The United States can no longer dictate what takes place in these organizations simply by showing up. Arguably, issues like climate, water shortages, which will be particularly acute in the unsettled countries of the Middle East, and combating disease will require more, not less, international cooperation. Fortunately, rebuilding America's influence in the multilateral system is not wildly expensive, in money or personnel, nor bureaucratically complex.

Fundamentally, both the United States and the United Nations need to do a better job of explaining why the multilateral system warrants American support. The multilateral system, largely the UN and its specialized agencies, but also regional organizations like the Organization of American States or the African Union, is often misunderstood in the United States. The abiding rhetoric among the U.S. public is that the U.N. system is expensive and wasteful. Certainly there is waste, and in peacekeeping operations there have been inexcusable lapses in oversight and accountability. However, the amount spent on U.N. agencies is a tiny fraction of what the United States would have to spend if it undertook most of these multilateral functions alone. The United States contributes twenty-two percent of the U.N. budget, about \$10 billion a year—by comparison, the United States was spending \$10 billion a month in Afghanistan in 2009.

The WHO, much in the news recently, maintains a worldwide presence with a budget less than some large American medical centers. The United States pays twenty-two percent of the WHO's regular budget of about \$2.4 billion a year, and the United States also historically has provided several hundred million more in voluntary contributions. For comparison, the United States spends \$7 billion on the Centers for Disease Control, \$34 billion on the National Institutes of Health, and \$5.9 billion on the Federal Drug Administration. The amount of money at issue when the Trump administration pulled out of the WHO was less than \$200 million. No one knows how many American lives or how much economic activity could have been saved by more effective international cooperation on Covid-19. In addition, the United States has a history of paying late, and in the past, not paying at all, to the regular U.N. budget, further undermining U.S. influence.

The multilateral system contributes in fundamental ways to prosperity for ordinary Americans, but the specifics of these contributions are often buried in websites with rosy words about international cooperation and pictures of smiling aid recipients. U.N. peacekeeping efforts prevent the U.S. military from having to step into conflict situations; the International Atomic Energy Agency inspects Iran's nuclear facilities; and the International Telecommunications Union (now led by the Chinese) sets important technical standards. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime plays a critical role in tracking the worldwide trade in precursor chemicals, essential to American counter drug efforts. Humanitarian agencies, like the World Food Program or the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, prevent famine and disease which, quite apart from the cost in human life, incite wars and political destabilization. These are functions which have a direct impact on the health and safety of Americans.

So how can the United States rebuild its influence in the multilateral system? First, the United States needs to reorganize its internal management of multilateral affairs to make it a higher priority. Within the U.S. government, a multilateral assignment has historically been less career enhancing than working on important bilateral issues. Within the U.S. government, American representation to the U.N. Security Council is considered the most important position, followed by international peacekeeping, and then participation in the specialized agencies of the United Nations. At the State Department, the bureau that handled international organizations, despite some dynamic leaders, was not seen as a peer to State's regional bureaus. A recent Heritage Foundation report on the reform of the State Department recommended the appointment of an Under Secretary for Multilateral Affairs. In almost every other country, the person who handles these issues is one of the highest ranking officials in the Foreign Ministry. American diplomats and government officials are also generally uninformed about the U.N. system, so when they ask for support for U.S. objectives for the U.N. annual meeting, the foreigner they talk to almost always knows more than the American does.

There should also be a career track for American diplomats and other U.S. officers specializing in multilateral affairs, just as there is in many other countries. This will be controversial within the U.S. government because most of these multilateral positions are located in nice places, and many will ask why someone else should get regularly assigned to New York or Geneva while they are serving in Baghdad or Port au Prince. A multilateral specialization within the U.S. government could be combined with details to U.N. agencies in the field, in Port au Prince or Baghdad. This would not only deepen the knowledge of U.S. diplomats and other American officials about the U.N. system but would usefully expose them to on-the-ground experiences in countries where their American diplomatic colleagues are confined to fortress embassies.

Second, the permanent assignment of Americans in staff positions in the U.N. system also needs more focus. Americans have historically sought management positions at these agencies, and certain positions have been "reserved" for

Americans. Instead, Americans need to be recruited at entry level and assigned to field positions where the real work of the U.N. agencies takes place.

Third, strategically, the United States has never done a very good job of developing longer-term strategies for the specialized agencies, even the large ones. This would in the first instance involve identifying potential agency leaders and cultivating them, just like the United States does in important countries. Potential leadership candidates would be evaluated and identified much earlier in the electoral process. In many multilateral elections, the United States has often struggled to decide which horse to back, often because of internal disagreements, so decisions were taken at the last minute. Ambassadors in the field would receive instructions to approach the host nation to vote for “so and so” or on “such and such,” demanding the Foreign Minister be contacted on Sunday afternoon. Not surprisingly, one of the key determinants of a successful multilateral election is persistent, serious campaigning by the candidate herself, and her own government, supported by adequate staff. The United States can assist in providing logistical support to candidates.

Fourth, one of the most frequent and justified criticisms levied at the multilateral system is that it unfairly criticizes Israel. This has been particularly true of the Human Rights Council. But a 1990 law demanding U.S. withdrawal from agencies if the Palestinian authority is a member is more than thirty years old. A lot has changed in thirty years with both the Palestinians and Israelis. Israel now has relations with Egypt, Jordan, several Gulf countries, and less formal economic and security ties with other Arab countries. It is time for a review of this law.

CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, I've learned that information, not physical barriers, keeps us safe. We often did not have enough civilians in the right places. After Benghazi, we were even more reluctant to assign people to dangerous locations, so we knew even less. Second, our military assistance programs need an overhaul, because many of our allies cannot fight and do not know how to integrate intelligence and military operations. They will have to do more on their own as the United States focuses on great power competition. Third, our fixation with terrorist “designations” and their bureaucratic offspring did little to impede terrorists but did a lot to impede our ability to aid civilians and to bring conflicts to an end. Fourth, while the United States was distracted by events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and great power competition, China gladly assumed many of our historically important leadership roles in multilateral organizations. By making multilateral affairs a higher priority, elevating its career value, participating at all organizational levels, more strategically managing these relations, and recognizing that it's okay for old enemies to become new friends, the United States can reclaim invaluable influence in the essential infrastructure of foreign policy.
