

GNSI DECISION BRIEF

Did We Miss the Golden Hour? Foreign Assistance and the Collapse of Afghanistan

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Introduction

James Stephenson former country director for Iraq for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), explains in his book *Losing the Golden Hour* that there is a short window of time – usually a year or so – immediately following the cessation of hostilities in a country during which any assistance efforts will prove successful, or not, in the long term.¹ This time frame is known as “the golden hour,” a lease from the medical field referring to the few precious minutes after a traumatic injury when proper first aid can make the difference between life or death.²

An argument can be made on the existence and importance of the golden hour in the field of foreign assistance, and that Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, as Stephenson suggests in his book, perhaps truly represented the loss of the golden hour. If we accept the proposition that the golden hour exists and matters in determining a country’s best chance at stability after conflict, then Afghanistan more than Iraq showcased the failure by the United States at seizing the opportunity to provide foreign assistance within that timeframe.

To better understand the events around the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the closing of the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan in 2021, a review of early U.S. engagement can highlight missed opportunities to foster Afghanistan’s legendary sense of independence, help the U.S. carry out more efficient interventions during crises and better plan for effort reductions and disengagements.

Background

For Afghanistan, there was a distinct and almost palpable feeling of being in a time where all opportunities for the future were possible in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002. U.S. presence and the desire to jump start the country’s stymied social and economic progress were a welcome change from decades of conflict represented by the thwarted Russian invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989, and then by the Taliban’s brutal system of governance, with years of civil war in between.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched in October 2001, as a reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Despite being primarily concerned with the capture of Osama bin Laden and dismantling Al Qaeda, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan included toppling the Taliban regime which had harbored these terrorist networks. The eradication of the Taliban also necessitated efforts for the stabilization and rebuilding of Afghanistan to prevent future terrorist movements to emerge there.

However, during the twenty years of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) the tide turned against the U.S. presence.

Ultimately, Afghan security forces, civil servants and elected officials, who had benefited from decades of U.S. funding and training, refused to even fight back against the Taliban resurgence during the announced American withdrawal in 2021, with many feeling the country using any means available to them.

Foreign Aid in Afghanistan

While there is not a chronological hard line past which any assistance effort becomes futile, there are certainly combinations of funding types that may be more appropriate depending on the situation. In the case of Afghanistan, establishing security, followed by education and the building of local infrastructures, were essential foundations for the implementation of governance procedures.³ This, however, was not always done in this specific order.⁴ Moreover, coordination among donors for directing funding towards parallel projects aimed at state building was frequently lacking in Afghanistan.⁵

¹ James Stephenson, *Losing the Golden Hour: An Insider's View of Iraq's Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007), 35-36,

² R. Adams Cowley, "A Total Emergency Medical System for the State of Maryland," *Maryland State Medical Journal*, Vol. 45 (1975).

³ Abdullah Bataineh, *Delivery of USAID To Afghanistan, 2001-2017* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 2018), 20; James Dobbins, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, Derek Eaton, and Stephanie Pezard, *Seizing the Golden Hour: Tasks, Organization, and Capabilities Required for the Earliest Phase of Stability Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), xxi.

⁴ Bataineh, *Delivery of USAID To Afghanistan, 2001-2017*, 64-65.