

In recent decades humanitarian aid has regularly been made conditional on the adoption of neoliberal economic policies. Recently, however, there has been a troubling tendency in war-ridden countries to interweave this aid, classified as “reconstruction”, closely with the military machinery of the invading powers. Afghanistan and Iraq have been the testing grounds for this militarised aid. In both countries the distinction between the US’s civilian and military activities has been completely, and deliberately, blurred.

The soils of war

The real agenda of agricultural reconstruction*

GRAIN

Asia has seen its fair share of disasters in recent years, both man-made and natural – floods, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, war. After each calamity, outside agencies have provided “aid” to put the pieces back together. For many years this aid has come with the unpublicised agenda of promoting neoliberal economic policies and facilitating the entry of multinational corporations. This remains true today. What is new in Afghanistan and Iraq is that US development assistance has also become an intrinsic part of the US military campaign. This is an alarming development. Afghanistan and Iraq are not unique cases born from unusual circumstances, but constitute a likely template for US activities overseas, as it continues to expand its “war on terror” and to pursue US corporate interests.

Afghanistan: food and bombs

When the US began bombing Afghanistan in 2001, one of its first targets was the Soviet-built Shindand airfield in the west of the country, near the border with Iran. A year later, the US took control of the airfield, one of the country’s largest,

amid accusations that it intended to use the site as a possible base for operations against Iran. Today the area around Shindand remains a scene of intense warfare between US/NATO and Taliban forces, with civilians caught in the middle.

On 21 August 2008, US planes taking off from the Shindand airfield bombarded a village in Shindand district, killing at least 88 civilians. When protesters later took to the streets of the regional city of Azizabad, the Afghan National Army opened fire on the crowd, leaving several people wounded. The protest had erupted after officials from the central government came with food aid for the affected families. “They destroyed our houses, killed dozens of people and they still send us wheat?” said Hamidullah, a local resident who took part in the protests.¹

In the war in Afghanistan, bombs and food are a package deal. At the very airfield from which the US planes launched their deadly attack, US forces had established an agricultural training centre just months before. “The agricultural centre ... allows us to build a rapport with the villagers through education and employment,” says a leader with the

* For a fuller version of this article, see *GRAIN Briefing*, “The soils of war – The real agenda behind agricultural reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq”, March 2009. <http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=217>

¹ Najib Khelwatgar and Ahmad Qurishi, “Afghan Army open fire on Shindand pro-testers, Karzai worried”, PAN, 23 August 2008: <http://tinyurl.com/42z5mr>



US Special Forces civil affairs team. “They are given a reason to think twice about allowing the anti-Afghan forces to step in and influence their lives in a negative way. The presence of this agricultural centre is a security measure in and of itself.”² The US officials say that the centre will eventually build up agricultural production for export in the area and wean local farmers away from producing poppies – a crop that still provides more security and income to farmers than the millions of dollars in foreign aid, so little of which trickles down to them. The centre is equipped with laboratories, classrooms, several fish ponds with hatcheries, vineyards and orchards. A weather station and drip irrigation system are planned. All of it is run by the US military.



Afghan workers preparing fields of the US Agriculture Centre in Shindand

To the south-east, USAID contracted the US firm Chemonics Inc. to build an agriculture centre outside Lashkar Gah, a city in the province of Helmand, another area of intense conflict with the Taliban. Chemonics is an international firm that specialises in private sector development and agriculture. It was founded in Washington in 1975, and since then USAID has been its major client.³ According to its president, Richard Dreiman: “We at Chemonics are proud to be part of Afghanistan’s agricultural and agribusiness renaissance.”⁴ Chemonics says that the location originally chosen for the agriculture centre, in a farming area, was rejected; they were instead “instructed” for “strategic military and security considerations” to establish it at the Lashkar Gah airfield, which is under the control of the UK military.⁵ It is clear that the line between the military and aid objectives has been blurred – and purposely so.

Thirty years ago, when Afghanistan was a net exporter of food, Helmand was the country’s breadbasket. The US proclaimed after the invasion that by 2007 it would once again make the country self-sufficient in food. Today that goal is as distant as ever, with Afghans still dependent on food imports and foreign assistance. This is largely because the war has continued, devastating the country’s agriculture. Rather than genuinely helping Afghans to recover their old farming skills, the agriculture centres provide a veneer of agricultural reconstruction to a military mission that is destroying Afghanistan’s food systems. They are an attempt to legitimise the military bases of an occupying power.

The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that the UK and US deploy in the Afghan countryside with increasing frequency serve a similar purpose to the agriculture centres. Some of the PRTs are called Agricultural Development Teams, and they

have a specific agricultural mission. Apart from the questionable intent to teach Afghan farmers about how they do things in Iowa or Texas, these teams, composed mainly of soldiers from the National Guard, also make critical contributions to military operations. “It helps in the military kinetic part because it involves cooperation of the local population, and intelligence resources can be brought to bear”, explains Army Major-General King E. Sidwell. “It makes friends when you might not otherwise be able to make friends.”⁶

Agribusiness grows on the battlefield

The support between the military and agricultural work runs both ways. While agricultural reconstruction facilitates US/NATO military operations, the military operations push forward the agenda of US and other foreign-based agribusiness corporations by creating a context where they can easily put pressure on the government to adopt neoliberal policies. The war provides these corporations with both a lucrative short-term market in the blossoming “reconstruction” industry and an opportunity to integrate Afghanistan into their global production networks and markets in the long term.

Seeds are at the centre of these processes. In 2002, 34 organisations were brought together, under the banner of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and with US and Australian funding, to form the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan (FHCRAA). The Consortium completely bypassed the rich heritage of farmers’ varieties, which would have provided the basis for genuine agricultural reconstruction. Instead, it distributed seed from Pakistan and set up seed multiplication programmes

2 A US Special Forces civil affairs team leader, quoted in Anna Perry, “Afghan Agricultural Center Contributes to Better Security”, American Forces Press Service, 3 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/br3zlc>

3 See “Chemonics International”, Washington Post, Post 200 – Top DC area businesses, <http://tinyurl.com/dds7eh>

4 “Chemonics announces scholarship at Afghan AgFair”, Chemonics’ website, 20 February 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/ddvsqd>

5 Chemonics International Inc., “Lashkar Gah Bost Airport and Agriculture Center, Helmand Province, Afghanistan: Environmental assessment”, October 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/ajn82e>

6 Quoted in Army Staff Sgt Jon Soucy, “Missouri Guard’s Agricultural Mission Grows in Afghanistan”, American Forces Press Service, 23 December 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/couxfb>





Goats and occupying army cross paths in Afghanistan

7 See ICARDA's web page about the FHCRAA. <http://tinyurl.com/c8793l>

8 J. Dennis, A. Diab and P. Trutmann, "The Planning of Emergency Seed Supply for Afghanistan in 2002 and Beyond", a draft concept paper prepared for the Tashkent Conference, 2002. <http://www.afghanseed.org>

9 GRAIN, "Seed laws: imposing agricultural apartheid", *Seedling*, June 2005. grain.org/seedling/?id=337

10 SeedQuest, news section, "Message from the President of the newly formed ANSA", 24 October 2008 <http://tinyurl.com/b9to3g>

11 See Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Iraq buys 200,000 t of Russian wheat from Glencore", *Arabian Business.com*, 25 September 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/bngmvl>

12 Policy Archive, "Iraq Agriculture and Food Supply: Background and Issues", June 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/br6dmd>

13 Cargill, the biggest global trader of agricultural commodities, is a multinational corporation registered in the US. <http://www.cargill.com/>

14 Focus on the Global South and GRAIN, "Iraq's new patent law: a declaration of war against farmers", *Against the Grain*, October 2004 www.grain.org/articles/?id=6

15 It should be noted that since the invasion the US has sought to dismantle former public programmes which provided subsidised inputs, including seeds, to Iraqi farmers, and that the provision of seeds by US forces is seen as a temporary measure before a "free-market" seed system takes over.

Rebuilding Iraq

Iraq is widely known as the "cradle of civilisation", with its farming systems dating back thousands of years. But what is important today to most US government officials is that Iraq is the number one destination for its hard red winter wheat exports and a top destination for its rice.¹¹ It is a US\$1.5bn market that wasn't accessible to US companies before the invasion, because of the sanctions.¹² Indeed, controlling the development of Iraq's agriculture and food systems was so important to the US that in the early years of its occupation it brought in Dan Amstutz, an ex-Cargill executive and a veteran insider with US trade delegations, to be in charge of this sector.¹³

The US came into Iraq with a heavy agenda for reforming all sectors of its economy, including agriculture. There it implemented a blueprint similar to the one in Afghanistan, albeit on a larger scale and with more flagrant profiteering by US companies. In one of its orders, the CPA abolished agricultural subsidies and opened up the agricultural market. Not surprisingly, the country was flooded with cheap imports, and local food production collapsed. Just as in Afghanistan, changes in seed laws were seen as crucial. However, whereas in Afghanistan it was at least the central government that enacted the new laws, in Iraq farmers' rights to save seeds were struck down by the infamous Order 81 during the last days of the US's Coalition Provisional Authority's rule.¹⁴

Dan Amstutz was put in charge of the USAID's Agriculture Reconstruction and Development Program for Iraq (ARDI). At the top of ARDI's list was wheat, Iraq's most important food crop. Amstutz facilitated the import, multiplication and distribution of certified wheat seed¹⁵ and set about liberalising and privatising Iraq's wheat sector, and its Public Distribution System in particular.¹⁶ While the chaos following the US invasion made an immediate sell-off or dismantling of Iraq's wheat sector impossible (and illegal under the Geneva Convention), ARDI tried to push the Iraqis down the alternative path of neoliberal reforms that could arrive at the same ends while sidestepping political sensitivities and immediate practical problems.¹⁷ Whatever the eventual outcome, the combined devastation of Iraq's wheat production and the opening of its wheat markets to US imports, both brought about by the US invasion, has yielded billions of dollars for US grain companies.

When ARDI came to a close in 2006, USAID launched two new programmes – a US\$343 million Inma Agribusiness Program¹⁸ and Iraq Private

for varieties of other crops brought in from the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in Syria.⁷ According to an ICARDA survey conducted in 2002, Afghan wheat farmers are "on their own when it comes to replicating and reselecting local variety seed".⁸

The US and EU have been keen to create a seed industry in Afghanistan. Essentially this means building up a few local seed companies that can initially serve as a conduit for seed aid, and later, if the US wins the war, open the door to foreign seed companies and agribusiness. As in the rest of the world, a private seed industry in Afghanistan requires a legislative framework that creates a commercial seed market. This is done through laws that make proprietary seed sale the norm, forcing farmers to buy rather than save or share such seeds, with little protection for farmers' own local varieties and seed practices.⁹

With this legal framework in place, an Afghanistan National Seed Association (ANSA) was created in Kabul with FAO support in October 2008.¹⁰ ANSA is not the only game in town. The Taliban runs its own seed supply networks, with a similar strategy of winning the loyalty of local farmers. Either way – Taliban seed or US Army seed – the seed is certainly not "free". Both come with heavy political agendas – backed by armed forces – that have little to do with the interests of Afghanistan's small farmers. Getting their own seeds back into the hands of these farmers is the only real way that they will find their freedom.

Sector Growth and Employment Generation (Izdihar).¹⁹ Both programmes are being carried out by the Louis Berger Group Inc., one of the world's largest infrastructure and development consultancies, and they are designed to prepare the way for agribusiness investment in the food industry.

Yet, like similar programmes in Afghanistan, these agriculture reconstruction programmes also serve a military function and are immersed in military operations. The US has so far earmarked US\$250 million of "reconstruction" funds for 581 agricultural projects, more than 97 per cent of which have been paid for with funds from the Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP). Funding for agriculture reconstruction in Afghanistan is also dominated by a similar CERP, meaning that, in both cases, it is the military that ultimately decides which projects are carried out.

The USAID and other so-called civilian programmes in Iraq work with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) – modelled on the PRTs that were first set up in Afghanistan. It now seems likely that, under President Obama, the PRTs' importance to the US mission will greatly expand. According to a report in the New York Times on 3 December 2008, "Pentagon planners" are proposing "relabeling some units, so that those currently counted as combat troops could be 're-missioned', their efforts

redefined as training and support for the Iraqis".²⁰ As a result of this ploy, the Pentagon intends to keep as many as 70,000 troops in Iraq beyond 2011, which is the date established in the US–Iraqi Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for the complete withdrawal of all combat troops. This will mean that the distinction between the military and aid workers will be erased. Moreover, by agreeing to this subversion of SOFA, US President Obama has, in practice, given up on his electoral pledge to withdraw US combat troops from Iraq within 16 months.²¹

Conclusion

It would be dangerous to see what is going on in Afghanistan and Iraq as an aberration. The same merging of "hard" and "soft" power is happening with US overseas programmes in other parts of the world. Today the United States spends approximately 30 times more on military operations globally than it does on diplomacy and development under the State Department and USAID. Moreover, the Pentagon now controls more than 20 per cent of US Official Development Assistance.²² According to Betty McCollum in the US House of Representatives, the fact that USAID has to have an office of military affairs to communicate with the Pentagon "means that something has gone horribly awry".²³

It is essential for people around the world to prevent aid being hijacked in this way. Aid policies and practices need to be rethought. Some people are calling for an International Agreement on Aid to make aid real and accountable.²⁴ This has to go hand in hand with demanding demilitarisation and an end to the war in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. No matter how good aid work is, it will not contribute towards genuine reconstruction if it is also being used to reinforce the military interests of the principal donor country and to maintain its hegemonic dominance.

GOING FURTHER

GRAIN Briefing, "The soils of war: the real agenda behind agricultural reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq", March 2009.
<http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=217>

Reality of Aid: <http://www.realityofaid.org/>

Factsheet: How does food aid work?
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 See also "Iraq Private Sector Growth and Employment Generation – The Potential for Food Processing in Iraq", USAID–Iraq, 15 March 2006.
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22 Beth Tuckey, "Congress Challenges AFRICOM," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 23 July 2008.
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23 Ibid.

24 ActionAid International, *Real Aid: an agenda for making aid work*, June 2005.
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US Army photo: Sgt. David Turner



Basic inputs for Iraqi farmers – seeds, poultry and so on – are brought from outside and distributed through US military regiments

