



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Peace Building in Dangerous Places: The Work of Civil Society in Conflict Zones” United States Institute of Peace 09/14/2010

The United States Institute of Peace held a panel discussion today that included four of its successful grantees. The event was moderated by **Andrew Blum**, a program officer at the Grant Program and opening remarks were delivered by Ambassador **Richard H. Solomon**, president of the USIP. The panelists for the event were Dr. **Abdel-Mitaal Girshab**, of the Institute for the Development of Civil Society in Sudan, **Masood Karokhail** of the Tribal Liaison Office in Afghanistan, **Aari Mohammed** of INSAN Iraqi Society, and Dr. **Maria Emma Wills** of the Historical Memory Commission in Colombia.

Solomon opened the event by noting that **the work of the panelists was "path breaking."** He said that the insights of the panelists would be adopted into USIP's best practices and training because of their effectiveness. He went on to note that USIP is not like a normal think tank, due to the congressional requirement that 1/4 of its budget be spent on activities like the ones undertaken by the panelists. He concluded by saying that USIP values "...analytical work based on real world experiences."

The first to speak was **Abdel-Mitaal Girshab**. He began by saying that without the aid of international organizations, he would not have been able to attend the event. His organization focuses on democracy education, capacity building for civil society, and social/ multicultural development in Sudan. **The current conditions in Sudan allow for only "very limited democracy,"** Girshab said. The media is controlled by the ruling party (NCP) and, as a result, his group also works to get information to women and the young who are often marginalized. Girshab said that while his group is watched by the government's security forces, they still seek to educate politicians, as well as civilians, about democracy development and good leadership. His group, through the grant given to them by USIP, was able to **set up interactive workshops to help build the skills and knowledge of the women and youth in Sudan.** Girshab noted that **traditional social structures make it hard for either group to speak out when in the presence of older males.** He said that his group had successfully created four or five groups of "peace promoters," who now travel around the country promoting non-violent conflict resolution.

Karokhail began by talking about a group of tribal elders who traveled to Kabul to speak with his organization in 2004. After speaking with the elders, his organization came to the conclusion that little had been done to build institutions in the south and that they would basically be starting from nothing. His group has since focused on a range of issues, beginning with research and analysis. This was necessary because **thirty years of war had halted any serious inquiries into the "power dynamics" of Afghan society.** Next, Karokhail's organization focuses on capacity building, or how to make institutions work for the local population. Finally, they focus on **natural resource management; an issue that Karokhail said was an underappreciated component of unrest in the country,** as well as an opportunity to build trust and confidence with rural populations. The security situation makes work

dangerous for all NGO's in the country because they are seen as "soft targets". He said that in 2004, many NGO's avoided working with foreign militaries but that his group decided that they had to work with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the military because they were already in the community. Karokhail focused on **the importance of "flexibility"** in his organization's work. He stressed that NGO's must learn how to work with all of the constituencies present in Afghanistan. The flexibility even extends to the time of year that you work on projects, with winter being better than summer due to the lull in fighting. He also made a point to say that, while international donor groups like programs that deal with "modern civil society," his organization chose to focus on "traditional civil society," This entails working more through tribal and religious leaders, rather than civil servants.

Headquartered in the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk, **Aari Mohammed's** group focuses on peace building and conflict resolution. He said **that bridging divides between the different ethnic and religious communities in Iraq had become especially important since the bombing of the al-Askiriya mosque in Samarra in 2006 and the subsequent violence.** While focusing on training programs, his group also seeks to establish a network of NGO's that share information and perspectives on the conflict. Mohammed seemed wary of the media in Iraq, saying that different outlets were beholden to different parties. He even suggested that one of the major hurdles confronting NGO's was the perception of partisanship due to the fact that many organizations serve only certain communities. This brought him to **the need to create a "spider web" of communication between different groups.** He also called for a more "participatory approach" and said that one of the more valuable services that his group provides is simply a space for Iraqis of different faiths or ethnicity to sit down and talk.

Wills stated that the "war" in Colombia is not over; it has simply changed. Her talk focused primarily on the effect corruption has on governments and how conflicts often change over time. She spoke at length about **the need to create a "historical memory perspective" in countries where conflict is prevalent.** She also pushed for an "emotional historical narrative" to help members of a stratified society empathize with their fellow citizens.

Blum began the Q&A by asking the panel about the most productive relationships they have had with international organizations and what aspects of those relationships were the most helpful to their efforts. Karokhail and Girshab flipped the question by focusing on negative experiences that they have had with international groups. Karokhail detailed **the problems with the use of contractors who are "interested in time sheets, not outcomes" and said that organizations are helped immeasurably by having their own personnel on the ground.** Girshab complained about the bureaucratic process involved in working with the E.U., joking that it takes "three months" to understand the application forms. He called for a **simpler, more interactive way for local groups to work with international groups.**

Mohammed responded that some donors "give you a pre-set plan" and then expect everything to be solved in six months. He went on to compliment USIP for allowing creativity and adjustments in their programs. Wills commented that, in Colombia, international groups have actually acted like a shield for local groups due to the hesitancy of the paramilitaries to kill foreigners due to the subsequent media attention.

Blum then asked how the panelists and their organizations weigh the risks of operating in dangerous areas. All of the panelists answered with a variation of **"work with the locals."** Wills said that her group calls women's organizations in areas where they want to work to see if it is safe. Girshab emphasized transparency and non partisanship to build trust and also advised (with a smile) that NGO

workers control their tempers at checkpoints. Mohammed agreed with Girshab while stressing the importance of relying on the local police forces for security to avoid the appearance of partisanship. Karokhail answered that neutral ground, in the geographic sense, was an extremely important tool in his dealings with Afghan tribes.

The next two questions dealt with managing ethnic or religious conflicts in communities and how the move to a multi-polar world has affected the panelist's organizations. Girshab and Mohammed both emphasized the need to be inclusive in workshops, being careful to include average people from as many communities as possible. Both believed that this would help to slowly dissolve the differences between people. Mohammed added that much of the strife in Iraq is fomented by partisan media and politicians, not the common people. Karokhail described Afghanistan as a "victim of a bi-polar world" but explained that some Afghans miss the simplicity of dealing with only the Soviets instead of 40 members of NATO. He went on to say that **regional powers are increasingly important in the world**, but particularly in Afghanistan where Pakistan, China, Iran, and India all have great influence on events.

Blum ended the event by noting that for all the differences in the situations facing each of the panelists, there were many commonalities. Foremost among the commonalities was **the necessity of having "on the ground" knowledge of the situation, followed closely by having a constructive relationship with the local population.**