

Closing the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

A Ground Truth Interview with Dr. Lisa Schirch

EPIC visited **Lisa Schirch** in early March to discuss the shortcomings of the U.S. national security strategy and its impact on the lives of millions of Iraqis. Lisa took a break from her meetings with members of Congress and sat down with us in her Capitol Hill office to explain how an approach to U.S. foreign policy that leverages strategies of development, diplomacy and defense can help build a peaceful, prosperous and secure Iraq.

epic: Please tell us about yourself and your experience in Iraq.

Lisa: I have been teaching conflict transformation and peacebuilding for ten years at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), and throughout that time I have worked with local partners in a variety of regions around the world to prevent violence and build peace.

One of my specialties has been teaching a course on peacebuilding and development, specifically how to incorporate peacebuilding into development projects like building schools and micro-credit programs. In August 2005, I traveled to Kurdistan in northern Iraq to give a workshop on that topic for Iraqi development workers.

These Iraqi development workers recognized that they had an opportunity to bring groups together across lines of conflict to learn participatory decision-making processes while they were building a water well, a health center, or some other community development project. One worker told me, “Development work in Iraq not only builds wells and job opportunities. With each development project, Iraqis work together and by doing so we help lay the democratic political foundations for communities that can solve local problems through dialogue rather than arms.”

They also linked the development work to unemployment. They told me, “The young men in Iraqi villages have little to look forward to – unemployment, humiliation, and war.” They said, “The insurgents find them easy to recruit. Development work in partnership with communities offers them job opportunities and a chance for earning respect and dignity in ways other than through the gun.” I don’t think

most Americans understand the sense of humiliation and frustration at the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure and the presence of foreign troops. I heard over and over again that the sense of humiliation is widespread and is a real recruiting tool for insurgents.

And it is linked with unemployment. In some parts of Iraq unemployment is between 50-70 percent. Can you imagine what U.S. cities would be like if we had that many angry, frustrated, unemployed people sitting around? Job creation is clearly essential and community development projects try to address those needs.

One development worker, for example, told me how he brought Sunni and Shia leaders in a village together to decide where a water well should be located and how the water should be used in a community. Imagine Sunni and Shia community leaders standing around a well talking with each other: this is a picture of what reconciliation – and true security – can look like in Iraq. Another woman I worked with in Iraq told me that security for Iraq doesn’t land in a helicopter. She said, “It grows from the ground up.” I heard that over and over. Peace and security can come to Iraq, but it will be through locally-owned projects where people use conflict resolution processes to bring Iraqis together across lines of conflict for the betterment of everyone’s families.

epic: Your most recent effort is your work with the 3D Security Initiative. To give us some context for better understanding what you are doing, can you describe the current



Lisa Schirch is the Program Director of the 3D Security Initiative and an associate professor of peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. A former Fulbright Fellow, Lisa has worked with communities and government leaders to build peace and security in Lebanon, Iraq, Taiwan, Ghana, and other countries. She is the author of 5 books on peacebuilding and conflict prevention including: “Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding”, “Strategic Peacebuilding” and “Dialogue on Difficult Subjects”, set to be released April 2007.

U.S. approach to foreign policy and global engagement?

Lisa: The best way to understand it is to look at the gap between the rhetoric and the reality. In the 2006 National Security Strategy, the Bush administration laid out a three-pillared approach to security and foreign policy: Development, Diplomacy, and Defense, or, the ‘3D approach.’ In other countries where this approach is used, including Canada and the UK, leaders make genuine efforts to employ and provide appropriate funding for all three dimensions of the plan.

In U.S. strategy, a gap has developed between what we say and what we do. The clearest example is this: Though we say that development plays an important role in security, our defense budget continues to grow while our development budget is shrinking. In Iraq, this means that we will spend our money on a military surge, rather than a surge in development or diplomacy.

By focusing our money and energy so intently on defense initiatives, we hurt our institutional capacity to leverage diplomacy and development as viable aspects of this security plan. This morning I was on Capitol Hill talking about reconstruction in Iraq, and I explained that the most cost-effective efforts are those that give money to local NGOs that are doing effective work. USAID’s Community Action Program (CAP) is a great example. CAP engages local communities in very specific projects, such as rebuilding schools or hospitals. Since these are locally-owned and operated efforts, insurgent groups, for the most part, are leaving them alone. These programs have shown very high levels of success in Iraq, but unfortunately, our current funding priorities are forcing these valuable programs to be cut.

epic: You were one of the driving forces behind the creation of the 3D Security Initiative. Can you share a bit about why the organization was founded?

Lisa: The initiative is sponsored by the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. It was started as a result of our conversations with people like Khaldoun Ali, President of the Iraqi NGO Mercy Hands, and many of EMU’s partners around the world.

As part of our work over the past ten years, we’ve trained thousands of people in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Throughout our travels, we heard one question repeated everywhere we went: When were we going to take our knowledge of conflict resolution and peacebuilding to Washington DC’s foreign policy-making community? Our partners

around the world asked us to help translate effective grassroots peacebuilding efforts into concrete policy options.

The Iraqis I met were concerned with the disparity between what the U.S. says and what it does in their country. Though I had heard it from people before, this was particularly interesting because I was in the Iraqi north where, at the beginning of the war, there was a lot of support for the U.S. invasion. Now, the tide was turning, and people were becoming skeptical of U.S. intentions in Iraq. The people I met felt the war was over oil and a U.S. desire to have permanent military bases in Iraq. The U.S. claimed that it was in Iraq to protect civilians and human rights, but according to the development

workers that I talked with on the ground, U.S. military strategy was instead focused on demonstrating overwhelming firepower in hunting down and killing terrorists. And in that process, lots of civilians were being killed.

Out of this growing understanding came a strong feeling among Iraqis that people in the U.S. who are concerned with conflict prevention and peacebuilding ought to be going to Washington and talking about other ways of building security—

sort of amplifying the voices of development workers in Iraq. That’s what we are trying to do.

epic: Tell us more about the work that you do and the top goals of the 3D Security Initiative.

Lisa: We do a variety of things, but our top priority is to increase public and private investments in development and diplomacy. One important lesson that we’ve learned is that many people equate development work with charity work, so they think of their giving as a donation, rather than an investment with tangible returns. Part of our work is trying to reframe that conversation. When we talk about our work to the U.S. public or policymakers in Washington, we stress the importance of investments in U.S. security. We talk about programs like CAP and we show people that when you invest in a community development program in Iraq, there is a significant return.

Secondly, we offer very specific policy options in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. On this front, we work closely with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), a global network of NGOs formed in 2002 that has grown to include over a thousand organizations worldwide. Recently, we published a policy brief on conflict prevention and peacebuilding options in Iraq. It was our first effort in translating frontline, on-the-ground conflict prevention strategies into a policy product that members of Congress

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and advocacy organizations can use to help them talk about what needs to happen in Iraq.

The third thing we do is engage in civil-military dialogues. For the past few years, my colleagues and I have been meeting regularly with military leaders at West Point, Joint Forces Command, National Defense University and the U.S. Army War College to talk about security issues. Through those conversations, we have noticed a movement within the military toward an understanding that when it comes to security, there is an over-reliance on military strategies. In fact, many military leaders are now saying that we need greater roles for development and diplomacy.

We also do public education and encourage civic engagement with U.S. foreign policy, trying to get people to think about how U.S. security strategies affect their lives. To get our message to wider audiences, we talk to rotary clubs, churches, and universities, reaching several hundred people each month. We discuss why we need to engage the world differently to include development and diplomacy. I stress the importance of growing allies rather than killing enemies. Most importantly, I share stories of local conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts in Iraq that are yielding positive results. By showing people that the violence portrayed in the media is not all there is to the situation in Iraq, I think it gives them hope that something can be done—and is being done—to find viable solutions.

epic: Why do you think the U.S. over-uses the military dimension of the security plan?

Lisa: Good question. I think Europe is a great model for this conversation because they are going down the same path we are—they're just ahead of us at this point.

European countries went through a period where they, too, trusted and used military options to address pressing concerns. But now, they are realizing it's a fantasy to believe that firepower can solve every problem. It's a tempting fantasy, to be sure, because it sounds simple and people like simple solutions.

The problem is that conflicts are complex; they are often comprised of economic, social, and political dimensions that need to be addressed with different types of efforts, like diplomatic initiatives and economic assistance. Military power is often unable to achieve this level of nuance. It rarely succeeds in addressing the root causes of conflict and in many cases further aggravates them. Using the military to solve the problem in Iraq is like taking a hammer to a beehive.

The key, I think, is getting our country to understand the complexities of conflict and recognize that the military option

is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The more our society understands that notion, the more apt we will be to utilize proven strategies of development and diplomacy.

epic: You mentioned that in meeting with military leaders, your arguments and approach have been well received. How has the Washington policy crowd reacted to the 3D Security Initiative?

Lisa: There are many policymakers in Washington now saying we need a 3D approach in Iraq, and in our foreign policy in general. The State Department's new Office for the Coordinator of Reconstruction and Stabilization in Iraq is an example of the broader support for this approach in Washington.

Unfortunately, because of their lopsided funding priorities, Congress and the Bush administration are creating the biggest obstacles. Diplomacy efforts have been cut and instead of using diplomacy as a tool of statecraft, it has been used as a sanction. The Bush administration is committed to a troop surge but seems not to have even considered a development surge. So the 3D approach looks more like false rhetoric. There is not budgetary support for a 3D approach.

However, there are signs of hope. In late January, commander of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, testified before the Senate Armed Service Committee and went on public record, saying that military action is not a sufficient solution for the challenges facing Iraq. He said, "Ultimate success in Iraq will be determined by actions in the Iraqi political and economic arenas."

At the end of February, the Secretary of State announced that the U.S. will sit down in regional talks with Syria and Iran to discuss the situation in Iraq. After three years of estrangement from these countries, this is a huge development in terms of U.S. diplomacy. It remains unclear whether or not this signals a larger shift in 3D priorities, but at least it is a step in the right direction.

Overall, both of these recent developments are good signs. They demonstrate that our leaders are beginning to recognize that establishing long-term stability will require a diplomatically-engaged Middle East and rigorous economic development on all levels.

epic: When you consider the current state of Iraq, how should the 3D approach to U.S. security policy be implemented? Are there any strategies that you would or would not recommend?

Lisa: First, everyone needs to understand that in Iraq there is no simple solution. The people of Iraq are going to face

challenges for a long time regardless of what strategy is used.

In terms of my recommendations, I do not believe that a troop surge is a sustainable option. From what I have heard, most Iraqis think there will be less violence when the U.S. leaves. A poll released last fall by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) found that most Iraqis want the U.S. out of their country in six months. Though they recognize that Iraq is facing a civil crisis, Iraqis believe that U.S. forces are exacerbating the problem.

Second, this notion of ‘clearing and holding’ has not been successful. The problem is that whenever you clear, you are planting seeds of humiliation and anger and inadvertently creating fertile recruiting grounds for insurgents.

Fallujah is a great example. At the beginning of the war, the people from Fallujah wanted regime change, so they generally supported the U.S. 2003 invasion. The U.S. general who was in charge of Fallujah at the time used a civilian-policing model, meaning that the military engaged community leaders in decisions and security for the city. The system was successful and Fallujah was relatively peaceful.

Then in spring 2004, four U.S. contractors were suddenly kidnapped and beheaded in Fallujah. In response, the U.S. dropped 500 lb bombs on the city—this is the ‘clear’ portion of the ‘clear and hold’ strategy—and replaced the civilian-policing model with tactics using ‘overwhelming firepower’ to intimidate Iraqis. Under the first general there were no shots being fired at U.S. soldiers, and the incidents of violence in Fallujah were very low. But after the first round of bombing, intelligence reports estimated that there were 2,500 insurgents living in Fallujah. Then, when the U.S. bombed Fallujah again several months later—in another attempt to ‘clear’—the estimated number of insurgents grew to 25,000. Sadly, this is the Fallujah we know today.

The ‘clear and hold’ strategy clearly failed in Falluja, and it has failed elsewhere in Iraq as well. Rather than continuing to utilize failed strategies and threatening to make things worse by increasing troop levels, I recommend scaling back U.S. forces to peace-keeping levels and increasing proven strategies of development and diplomacy to build security from the ground up. A diplomatic and development surge should be the top priority for Iraq. Those are the security strategies that are having the most success.

epic: How should the U.S. engage local communities?

Lisa: The U.S. should partner and financially support local NGOs and locally-owned and operated development and reconstruction projects. In Iraq, however, receiving U.S. funds can endanger local projects. U.S. funding should be given without the need to publicly ally with the U.S., so groups can work without USA written all over their materials. Alternatively, funding could be channeled through international organizations that still have good projects on the ground. There are good development projects going on all around the country, but funds to sustain them are drying up quickly.

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That is why the 3D Security Initiative has shown support for a letter to Congress, with over 40 other national NGOs, asking members to support this humanitarian effort. Many NGOs concerned about Iraq want to increase humanitarian aid not only because it is the right thing to do in Iraq, but also because it is the strategic thing to do to build security. It is in the interest of all parties involved to address the refugee crisis, empower local Iraqis who are trying to address the root causes of the conflict, and create jobs.

epic: Is the 3D approach to security a good strategy for addressing all security needs?

Lisa: Every situation is different, so you have to weigh them individually. But I feel strongly that there is no place on earth where a military option is the only option. There are always diplomatic initiatives needed at all levels and in all sectors of society, and there are always efforts in development and job creation that can be leveraged. That is not to say that each of the 3Ds should always receive the same amount of funding; each element must be reappraised depending on the context. But I do think that these three elements should always be present in solutions to any issue.

epic: What successes has your organization seen so far?

Lisa: We’ve seen success on a number of fronts. First off, I think that organizations in the peace movement are beginning to recognize that while they have, perhaps rightly, opposed many administration policies, the U.S. peace movement often lacks an ability to outline and articulate clear solutions or policy options. For example, the peace movement is against nuclear weapons, against war, against military spending. But what is it for? I’d like to see the peace movement and different advocacy groups start suggesting real options using conflict resolution, violence prevention, and peacebuilding programs. A couple of weeks ago, we gave our policy brief to some of the peace advocacy organizations and they found it useful in articulating what should be happening in places

like Iraq. Our success here is helping people make the link between development and security and feel more comfortable talking about development as a viable security strategy.

We are also excited about the traffic to our website, www.3Dsecurity.org. We get a few hundred new hits a week from all over the world – and we're hopeful that we're having an impact in linking development and diplomacy to security and educating people about conflict prevention and peace-building options.

From the military side, the fact that we continue to be invited to engage in discussion with military leaders is also an indicator of success. Military leaders see the value in learning what local peacebuilding organizations are doing. In essence, we are facilitating dialogue between the military and the Iraqi development workers on the ground who feel the impact of the military presence everyday.

Recently, there has been a lot of interest in alternative solutions among members of Congress, so we are meeting with

Republicans and Democrats to help them craft language for legislation and speeches. Just this morning, we met with a Republican who has been opposed to the war and we shared ideas about how he can talk about U.S. responsibility in Iraq, investing in local groups, and calling for a diplomatic surge to demonstrate our responsibility for some of the mess that is there now.

Overall, I think we've seen the most success in our efforts to get people talking to each other, and I think that's the only way we will find a peaceable resolution to the challenges facing Iraq. Sunnis, Shias and Kurds need to come to the table and listen to each other and figure out a way forward for their country. And here in the United States, as we discuss troop surges, military solutions, or even diplomatic and development strategies, we need to remember that none of us has the absolute answer, and that's why we need to continue talking to each other and to Iraqis and keep remembering that our policies in Iraq have an impact on real people; people with parents, children, lives... just like us.

THE EPIC GROUND TRUTH INTERVIEWS is a unique series of interviews with Iraqis, aid workers, returning soldiers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. To learn more about The Ground Truth, contact EPIC project coordinator Daphne Watkins at dwatkins@epic-usa.org. To subscribe, visit <http://www.epic-usa.org>

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