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INTERNATIONAL POLICE ASSISTANCE: DEMOCRACY, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Summary: This briefing provides an overview of recent research on International Police Assistance. Firstly the relationship between policing and democracy is examined. While international missions have been successful in supervising police agencies to support emerging democracies, their power and influence means they can become an obstacle to police forces responding to needs articulated by local citizens. Secondly, the wider political context is of major importance, and so technical reforms without democratic state-building are of limited value. Finally, where international deployment is appropriate, suitable pre-mission training on different understandings of the police role, working across languages and cultural differences, is essential to maximise effective and legitimate delivery of police assistance.

INTRODUCTION

This briefing identifies issues in international police assistance including limits in what can be achieved in relation to democratising the police and the importance of preparing those officers deployed for the political and cultural contexts they are likely to encounter. Scottish officers have served as part of UN and European missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, as Milne and Thompson (2012) observe, the Scottish government is directly involved in funding overseas policing missions, including a close partnership with the Sri Lanka Police service. Assessing those contexts in advance should inform whether, and what kind of, police assistance is appropriate. We bring together several independent projects on international police assistance. Aitchison and Blaustein (2013) have researched different phases of international assistance in Bosnia, including major multi-lateral and European Commission projects, and community-level work through the UNDP. Here, Himmler draws on interviews with the heads of the Department for International Police Missions and the Department of International Police Cooperation and officers of the German Federal Police who have served on overseas missions. O'Shea has submitted a doctoral thesis on police reform in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia and has worked as a researcher on international police assistance for the Scottish Government.

CURRENT ISSUES

International Police Assistance and Democratic Policing

One of the key aims of international police assistance is the development of police agencies appropriate for democracies. A history of analysis of the relationship between policing and democracy goes back to David Bayley's (1969) work on India. The research on police in developing and post-conflict countries and the relationship between police and state-building is a more recent phenomenon, but a body of work now covers Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe and South America. Evident in this work are two distinct ways in which the relationship between police and democracy can be imagined, which are not immediately clear when the two are combined under the general terminology of 'democratic policing'. Firstly, the police can serve as promoters and protectors of, or obstacles to, democracy. Where political democracy is taken for granted, or has not faced

recent challenges, the police functions that support it are likely to be less visible. But in new or emerging democracies, the protection of key political rights such as freedom of expression, of assembly, and of the electoral process is an important dimension of police work. Aitchison and Blaustein (2013) characterised this as 'Policing for Democracy' and it is built upon an even-handed and effective provision of a minimum level of security and protection of rights. A second aspect of the relationship between police and democracy is the extent to which the police are governed in line with democratic principles. Reviewing a range of research papers on democratic policing, the relevant features identified all relate in one way or another to an idea of responsiveness, and so we characterise this form of policing as 'Democratically Responsive Policing'.

Responsiveness is understood in two ways. Vertical responsiveness covers the way in which the police are more or less directly responsive to the public. This can include such simple things as responding to calls for service, and making it easy for such calls to be made, but extend to ways in which public preferences and priorities regarding policing can be articulated and help to shape what the police do. Horizontal responsiveness recognises that the police are responsive to a range of other institutions and organisations. These include, but are not limited to, local and national government, inspectorates, courts, international police organisations (Interpol, Europol). Democratic structures require an appropriate balance between vertical and horizontal responsiveness, and within horizontal responsiveness, between a diverse range of actors.

The distinction between Policing for Democracy and Democratically Responsive Policing is not just an analytic one. Separating them out helps to establish useful boundaries for overseas police missions. External assistance appears to be better suited to the former. While Aitchison identified a number of early successes in establishing and sustaining a police presence supporting Bosnia's fragile post-war democracy, he and Blaustein note that the EU, as a powerful, external actor, with its own interests in policing and security, risks becoming the dominant focus in shaping police policy, marginalising the concerns of Bosnia's citizens. Certain assistance programmes, operated under the auspices of multi-lateral development organisations, but at arms-length, show more promise in supporting frameworks for vertical responsiveness and for horizontal responsiveness that encourages a focus on local knowledge.

International Police Assistance and Political Context

O'Shea's work on police reform in former Soviet states and developing countries suggests that maintaining a strong focus on the initial development and protection of state capacity should also be prioritised over certain technical dimensions of overseas police training missions. International assistance often focuses on police training introduced to improve community relations and improve accountability. Whilst important, this can obscure problems rooted less in a history of repression or poor training, and more in contemporary issues of corruption, political leaders' lack of interest in reform, and weak state control of the police. Technical assistance and training are likely to have little impact where these problems exist. Rather, efforts should focus on developing political reformers' capacity and maintaining pressure on political leaders to enable and enact meaningful reform.

In practice, assistance tends to focus on reorganising, training and equipping police (Bayley, 2005). Often it is based on a theory of 'reformed police' developed by Western police experts who may know little of the organisations they are trying to reform or the societies in which they work. For example, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) initiated a Police Assistance Program in Kyrgyzstan in August 2003 to, amongst other things, improve the quality of investigations, increase capacity for drug interdiction, and introduce community policing methods (Lewis, 2011). After ten years, the programme has largely failed because these reforms depend on genuine and effective domestic political support, absent in Kyrgyzstan (Marat, 2013). Since 2003, two presidents have been deposed, high ranking officials and presidential family members have been involved in extortion and the drugs trade, while police are widely corrupt and active in organised crime.

The OSCE, like other providers of police assistance, ignored two barriers to democratic policing. Firstly, police in developing countries often defend the economic and political interests of their patrons instead of upholding equality in law. Second, developing states may have little economic leverage over their police. Instead, police resemble organised crime groups and prey on the population for resources (Gerber & Mendelson, 2008). Training in human rights and community orientated policing is likely to have little impact on officers in countries such as Kyrgyzstan where political and police elites have no genuine interest in reform and police are paid in tens of dollars per month.

If police assistance aims to improve the safety and security of ordinary citizens in developing countries, reformers need to develop more creative means of providing assistance and be more selective about which countries are suitable for which kinds of reform. It must be based on a far greater knowledge of target societies and their police. This means ascertaining whether political elites, or at least a constituency amongst the elites, have a sense of the public interest and a genuine will to implement reform. Any willing elites must also have ownership of four mechanisms of control which states use to shape the behaviour of their police (Bayley, 1990, 2005; Andvig & Fjeldstad, 2008; Hinton & Newburn, 2009; Hills, 2007, 2009). These are:

- the legal and regulatory frameworks which specify the functions of the police, its powers and mechanisms of oversight;
- direction of police strategy and operational and tactical options;
- recruitment and promotion policies;
- economic leverage over the police

Where, instead, such mechanisms are in the hands of corrupt or repressive officials, warlords or organised criminals, effective international police assistance is not possible without intrusive and forceful intervention of the kind that is rarely possible in sovereign states.

International Police Assistance and Cross-Cultural Skills

Where training is appropriate, Himmler's interviews with the German Federal Police highlight a number of potential pitfalls for international missions, particularly relating to cultural knowledge. By definition, international peacekeeping missions are cross-cultural. In 1957, on the first evening of their deployment in Gaza, soldiers of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) fired against a minaret. None of the soldiers understood Arabic and they took the muezzin's call to prayer to be a call to civil disorder (Urquhart 1987). The incident is one of many illustrating how cross-cultural misunderstandings can lead to damaging action (see Duffey 2000). Without sufficient cultural knowledge, members of international missions can behave or react inappropriately, causing trouble, minimising legitimacy and trust and jeopardising mission success. This is also true in relation to the 'interoperability' between national contingents cooperating on multilateral missions (Clark & Moon 2001).

Many practitioners and scholars favour cultural training to eliminate or reduce the risk of such damaging behaviour (e.g. Rubinstein 2008; McFarland 2005). Himmler's research with the German Federal Police explored officers' experiences in the field and in training. All officers had served on an international police mission under either EU/UN auspices, or on bilateral police assistance missions in different countries in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Each officer identified two or three of the following issues and potential misunderstandings and conflicts between the police officers and the locals or the international colleagues:

- *Perception of duty*: The interviewees noted differences in the way the police job was conducted (e.g. punctuality, accuracy), and important differences in structures and hierarchic relations. Variations were observed in the value of the officer's job in relation to other factors in their life like religion or family.
- *Language*: In all cases, English was the primary language of communication. The English abilities of local counterparts and international colleagues varied greatly, making cooperation difficult and sometimes impossible. When working with an interpreter, there were problems with inadequately skilled interpreters resulting in missed information and slow proceedings. One officer also identified concerns about trust in relation to interpreters.
- *Social norms and values*: These were the most obviously problematic differences. How any social act is interpreted will vary and can cause unexpected offence. A colleague of one officer, who trained Afghan police, celebrated the end of the training in line with customs in his home country by throwing sweets in the air. The local police turned away. One explained, "don't feed us as we were animals!" This unanticipated reaction shows that the challenge in social norms is the unpredictability and underlying patterns.

All three areas are real challenges with regards to training. Differences in perceptions of duty are under-researched, hindering the development of appropriate training. Moreover, any training is limited by further factors tied to cross-cultural difference. The departmental heads sum this up: "We cannot change our counterpart and we don't want to change ourselves, all we can do is make the officers aware of differences".

Language is a seemingly intractable problem. The time and expense of training, the unpredictable patterns of deployment with different language needs, sustaining levels of competence over time (Ingleton 1994) and deployment in multilingual countries like Kosovo or Afghanistan all stand as obstacles. These concerns were also expressed by the interviewees.

Classically, peacekeepers are given behavioural guidelines or “travellers’ advice” (Rubinstein 2008: 11-12) to avoid conflict arising from differences in social norms. These have been criticised as superficial and failing to recognise important differences between groups in sites of deployment. The limits of this basic training were clear to one officer: “Knowing fundamental manners is worth as much as shaking hands in Germany. It’s a basic thing to do, but nothing that creates trust.” While fundamental and essential, this basic cross-cultural knowledge alone is not enough to avoid cross-cultural problems. Apart from more predictable religious differences, all the situations described by the officers were caused by minor and unpredictable cultural aspects. The limits of instructional training in this area were described by one interviewee: “Of course, you can always train more, go deeper into cultural understanding, but in the end it has to be reasonable in terms of time and costs”.

CONCLUSION

This briefing identifies a number of issues of relevance to policy makers, senior officers and trainers, and officers preparing for deployment. Firstly, if police assistance is part of a wider process of democratisation, international missions need to avoid letting their own interests drive priorities at the expense of those of the local population. Secondly, the nature of the assistance that is most appropriate will vary according to the political context, and problems of corruption, state and police criminality and under-developed democratic institutions all limit the effectiveness of police training. In these contexts, developing Policing for Democracy is a suitable first aspiration. Finally in any context in which police are deployed overseas, there is a possibility for inter-cultural misunderstandings. While a certain amount of training may help prepare officers for these, some of the complexities do not lend themselves to a ready solution. Thus selecting officers with a record of flexibility, adaptability and sensitivity, and supporting these traits through training is a reasonable preparation for deployment.

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