Fostering Stability in Conflict Zones
An Interview with Assistant Secretary of State Rick Barton

YJIA: You are the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) for the United States—that sounds like a tremendously difficult job! What kinds of things does your job entail? What do you focus on day-to-day, and what are some of your greatest concerns?

Barton: We’re concentrating on places that matter to the United States, and that we think we can make a difference ‘right now.’ So there are some places that matter to us that are not quite ripe, where we might be more likely to get someone killed than to do something good in, and those would not be in our focus area. As you know, we’re spending about eighty percent of our effort on election-related violence in Kenya; in fact, we’re just about done with that assignment. We’re also working on the peace process in Burma, and we’re concerned with the ethnic minorities around the emerging homicidal violence in Honduras and the northern parts of Central America. Furthermore, we’re trying to strengthen the non-violent opposition in Syria. So, that’s really the heart of our work at the moment.

Another thing that takes effort is the building of a team and the building or expansion of partnerships everywhere we can, because the first qualification for doing this kind of work is knowing that it’s way too big a job for you alone—and the United States alone. So we need to have partners, meaning everything from the multilateral community to bi-laterals to non-profits to the business community . . . we also reach out to women’s groups, youth—wherever we think we can help make a difference. And the last thing we’re focusing on is, “How do we make ourselves more agile, more innovative?” This is important because we didn’t really have the instruments, the mechanisms to be as operationally successful or as fast as we have needed to be, and so that’s something we’re working on every day as well. So there is internal and external work, but the reason we exist is to try to break cycles of violence in places that really matter to the United States.

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Ambassador Rick Barton is the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations. He also previously served as the Co-Director of the Post Conflict Reconstruction Project for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and was Deputy High Commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). He recently returned from a diplomatic mission to Burma.
YJIA: One of those places that matters to the United States is Burma, and you recently returned from a trip there. What would you like to share with us about your trip? What policies do you think will be effective in Burma with regard to preventing conflict and encouraging stability?

Barton: Well, the United States really has an advantage in Burma, in that we’re really trusted by most of the major parties. The reformers in power in the Burmese government like the model that the United States represents, especially the prospect of economic progress and increased rights. So we have friends on the majority side, and we also have friends within the minority ethnic groups that we have helped sustain in the refugee camps and in the various countries that they have had to work out of, so we have one huge advantage there.

The U.S. policy on Burma is pretty simple; we want the political process to open up, we’d like to have a peaceful resolution to the longstanding ethnic conflict, and we’d like to do an increasing amount of business with Burma. The toughest of those three pieces is to make the peace process successful. And that’s the piece we’re really working on the hardest: to get the parties together in the most productive way by bringing them together with humanitarian mine-removal action. We find that the presence of land mines, and the suffering by all sides, is something for which there is a joint interest in addressing. And so what we’re doing once again is following major U.S. policy and then bringing it to life in the most practical way we can.

YJIA: Shifting focus to the Middle East, one of the least stable and most conflict-ridden countries in the world right now is Syria. Can you speak on the role the ongoing conflict in Syria has, and will have, both in neighboring countries as well as in a post-Assad Syria? Do you feel the recent gathering of the Arab League in Qatar will result in initiatives that could positively impact Syria?

Barton: This is a real tough one right now because it feels like a stalemate and there are even some dangerous, negative trends. Obviously the neighborhood is of great importance to us because we have so many key allies there, such as Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. But we haven’t really figured out how to break through where we are. I do feel that the next couple of months are critical to seeing whether some of the liberated areas are going to be able to deliver the conditions that those citizens need most, in particular public safety and a return to some degree of normalcy. We normally find in these places that those kinds of things are the hardest to do because the police and military have generally been on the regime side, so you don’t have a good base to build off of, even though we are seeing thousands of regime defectors being regarded as credible in the liberated areas. But we have to make them more capable.

The other thing that is typically missing there is there is no liquidity in their local ad-hoc governing councils, so they don’t have any revenue streams. So we have to find a way to stabilize the police and others maintaining the public order and public safety, otherwise you end up with lots of militias and other made-up groups doing that work. And obviously those groups are already apparent in Syria. So that’s one area we’re focusing on right now, although we have a fundamental challenge, which is just to get to know the Syrian opposition better and get to know more of them. And
that's just indicative of what we need in the early stages of all of these cases: a better understanding and a better analysis of the case. Anything good that can happen in the region is welcome, obviously, and I think in the case of Libya we found that the Arab League, for example, was extremely constructive.

**YJIA:** What is the long-term role that “smart power” emanating from the international community—including regional governments, coalition groups, aid organizations, and NGOs—play in worldwide stabilization efforts?

**Barton:** Ultimately, a solution has to be a local one, and the earlier that the international community engages at the local level, with individual citizens, to civil society, to organized opposition, the better. In most of these countries we believe that there is a silenced majority, a large group of people who are generally not happy with the way things are, or the predictable opposition. And in many cases this involves large parts of the population, such as women and youth, but it could also include minorities in the business community who are being discriminated against, etcetera. A smart power approach would entail going to the people first and finding ways of making them immediately more capable, not necessarily with training, although that might be useful sometimes, but simply by finding ways for them to implement good ideas. That’s what we’re stressing in our work, but that’s still not the norm in the international community. At the same time, let’s not overestimate the level of sophistication you might find in some of these locations.

**YJIA:** For example?

**Barton:** For example, in Burma, they spent decades closed off from the world. I met with a student group out there, and none of them had cell phones! And that’s very unusual. Even in places like Somalia, people have access to cell phones. But in Burma, because the government wanted to restrict cell phone access, they made SIM cards that cost something like two thousand dollars. That price is going to be down to three dollars in the very near future, and that market will change radically, almost overnight. This alone won’t make a sophisticated market, but what we found in Burma is that people realized that they have been shut off from the world for years, and they are very eager to learn. So we have to share whatever knowledge we have, whatever knowledge is within reason, and try to figure out how to move that faster, so if we’re looking at even a very practical issue, like monitoring a cease-fire, which is something they want to do with local people, we have to get the means to do that (like cell phones) into their hands as soon as we can.

**YJIA:** This next question goes back to a topic you raised in your response to our first question. Of course universal, global stability would be ideal. Until then, how should the U.S. government triage crises and ongoing stabilization efforts? What regions, countries, and/or issues should top the policy agenda now and in the future?
Barton: The simplest way is to establish whether or not it is of strategic importance to the U.S., which is best placed to take the lead in the case, and do we know what is actually going on in the place? Because in a lot of these places we don’t always have the best intelligence. So we would seek to build a kind of independent analysis, which would lead us to whether we should get involved at this time. We would also consider if we could focus on what was important in a certain place. The Libya situation is more of an international case, with the UN in more of a leadership position. The United States is obviously a major player in the development of Libya, but the nature of the initial intervention suggested that it was going to be a more international effort.

YJIA: The CSO’s One-Year Progress Report was released to great acclaim earlier this month. What do you think were its greatest successes and most formidable challenges? Can you speak about goals for 2014?

Barton: I think our greatest success is that we have been in a “proof of concept” year, and I think we’re proving the concept! So we gained credibility within the U.S. government, and we’ve shown places where we’ve really been able to make a difference. I think of the Kenyan case where there was a feeling there were hot spots leading up to the election, the political class was a negative force in the preparation for the election, and that the police would not be up to the task of handling problems if they arose. We helped to focus the U.S. government on that larger challenge, and we framed in a way such that, no matter what program you were running in Kenya, this was the greatest national challenge. And then we offered a way to get the multiple assets that the U.S. government has, everything from aid programs to horticulture programs to people who were working directly for the election, to provide a kind of “early-warning” system for the police. In this way we helped make the police more capable without the police actually having to do anything other than getting more engaged, and having tens of thousands of Kenyans all over the country basically informing the police of danger any time it came near. So I think we showed that we could help drive focus, that we could find very practical and creative things to do, and that we could use innovation to make a difference. In this case, we were able to activate over 100 Kenyans and, after six weeks or so, put them into dozens of organizations, thus making Kenyan society that much more capable of dealing with this problem, even if there was not going to be huge improvements in the police or the political class.

YJIA: You previously served as the U.S. Representative to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). This year, the ECOSOC will organize its work for the Annual Ministerial Review around the theme, “Science, technology and innovation, and the potential of culture, for promoting sustainable development and achieving the Millennium Development Goals.” If you were given free rein to effortlessly change one aspect of current policy related to sustainable development, what would it be and why?

Barton: [jokingly] What a gift! The one thing I would put forward, which ties back into what I’m doing in this job, is to just expand the ownership and the opportunities of individuals. Sometimes we get too caught up in the governments that they are living
under as well as other things. But some of the most popular programs in the U.S., historically, have been in the form of direct assistance, whether that is Social Security, veterans’ benefits, and so on. Sometimes I think we over-design the programming and we don’t build on the needed capacities as well as we should.

YJIA: You are fluent in Spanish. What impact has being able to speak a foreign language had on your career? How much emphasis should language study have in programs that focus on international affairs?

Barton: It definitely helps in understanding cultures, spending enough time in a place that you can see how different people think. You can do this inside the U.S. too, obviously, the emphasis in the Midwest might not be the same as it is in the South because the pacing is different or whatever. So language helps you pick that up a little bit. And in learning the language, you get a sense of the culture and people and sort of what their motivations are. But it’s also terrific to have the language because it gives you additional insights. One of the things I’m almost totally dependent upon every time I travel, is a good translator or interpreter, and when you have someone who doesn’t get your sense of humor, or that doesn’t pick up the subtleties of an exchange, you lose a lot and you’re less likely to develop rapport. Language is an element that makes your diplomacy become real.

YJIA: In addition to your many leadership positions within the United States government, you have also taught at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School. In what policy area have you found there to be the largest gap between theory/academia and practice? Do you have any suggestions for how to bridge this gap?

Barton: It really has helped me a great deal to be able to take a step back out of practice and to think and test theories. For example, some of my criticisms of the way I think we do business in the U.S. government are derived from having had not only a number of years teaching at Princeton but also experience in a think tank, where I had to apply my research more directly because my funding cycles were really dependent upon generating good ideas that the market wanted to fund. So having the comfort of being in academia where I didn’t have that pressure, to the think tank world where I was sort of halfway between academia and practice, and then to put it all into practice and see if it works, well that has been a really privileged position.

YJIA: Just this afternoon, you had a phone call with Dr. Shah at USAID. How important are interagency relationships to your job?

Barton: Very important! Anything that we’re doing is too big for us to achieve success on our own. A key to success is, who do you know and how well do you play with them? There is also an issue of leverage, and to be successful you have to get more mileage than you can with your own tread.

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