

## **HARD AID: FOREIGN AID IN THE PURSUIT OF SHORT-TERM SECURITY AND POLITICAL GOALS**

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Facing serious crises in the Middle East and beyond, Washington is again turning to foreign aid to help advance urgent short-term security and political priorities. This so-called hard aid entails goals and challenges that are distinct from traditional development and humanitarian aid programs, but Washington is relying on existing aid systems and structures to pursue such work in crisis countries like Syria and Yemen. While this ad hoc approach is administratively and politically convenient, it reduces strategic effectiveness and undercuts long-term development efforts. Both legislative and executive action should be taken to redress these failings.

### **Ramifications of the Current Approach**

#### **Conflation of hard aid with developmental aid reduces short-term strategic impact.**

- Staff must rely on ill-suited conventional programming tools and systems.
- Scarce resources and uncertain roles fuel bureaucratic infighting and inefficiencies.
- Programming is hampered by low risk tolerance and cumbersome requirements.

#### **Key strategic questions go unanswered.**

- Are there clear, attainable strategic objectives—or is this just aid as symbolism?
- Are there sufficient resources to achieve these clearly delineated strategic goals?

#### **The long-term development effort is undermined.**

- The prioritization of immediate needs changes funding allocations and staff priorities.
- A focus on short-term U.S. interests changes how American aid is perceived abroad and justified by legislators.

### **Principles to Guide Reform**

**The line between hard aid and traditional developmental programs is blurry and complex, but the differences between the two are real and consequential.** Systems, strategies, and expectations should reflect this.

**Clarified institutional roles and responsibilities will improve impact, beginning with the designation of a lead office for hard aid program implementation.** At present, the most effective tool in these environments is the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives.

**Hard aid is a tactical tool.** It is not a substitute for military action or diplomatic engagement, and should be just one component of an effective overarching strategy.

**Strategic plans and goals must take funding realities into account.** Policymakers must identify clear goals, and ensure that they are realistic given available resources.

**Achieving short-term goals in chaotic environments requires maximum flexibility and creativity.** There must be greater appetite and reward for sensible risk taking. Administrative hurdles intended for traditional assistance should be modified as appropriate.

**The pursuit of short-term goals must not come at the expense of long-term development.** Explicit high-level affirmation of the strategic importance of long-term development programs—even in crisis countries like Yemen—would begin to even the balance between short-term and long-term priorities.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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