



GNSI DECISION BRIEF

Did We Miss the Golden Hour? Foreign Assistance and the Collapse of Afghanistan

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James Stephenson former country director for Iraq for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), explains in his book *Losing the Golden Hour* that there is a short window of time – usually a year or so – immediately following the cessation of hostilities in a country during which any assistance efforts will prove successful, or not, in the long term.¹ This time frame is known as “the golden hour,” a lease from the medical field referring to the few precious minutes after a traumatic injury when proper first aid can make the difference between life or death.²

An argument can be made on the existence and importance of the golden hour in the field of foreign assistance, and that Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, as Stephenson suggests in his book, perhaps truly represented the loss of the golden hour. If we accept the proposition that the golden hour exists and matters in determining a country’s best chance at stability after conflict, then Afghanistan more than Iraq showcased the failure by the United States at seizing the opportunity to provide foreign assistance within that timeframe.

To better understand the events around the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the closing of the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan in 2021, a review of early U.S. engagement can highlight missed opportunities to foster Afghanistan’s legendary sense of independence, help the U.S. carry out more efficient interventions during crises and better plan for effort reductions and disengagements.

For Afghanistan, there was a distinct and almost palpable feeling of being in a time where all opportunities for the future were

¹ James Stephenson, *Losing the Golden Hour: An Insider's View of Iraq's Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007), 35-36.

² R. Adams Cowley, "A Total Emergency Medical System for the State of Maryland," *Maryland State Medical Journal*, Vol. 45 (1975).

³ Abdullah Bataineh, *Delivery of USAID To Afghanistan, 2001-2017* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 2018), 20; James Dobbins, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, Derek Eaton, and Stephanie Pezard, *Seizing the Golden Hour: Tasks, Organization, and Capabilities Required for the Earliest Phase of Stability Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), xxi.

⁴ Bataineh, *Delivery of USAID To Afghanistan, 2001-2017*, 64-65.