

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #13

Executive Summary

The originally scheduled phone interview with subject had to be scrubbed and was later conducted via email instead. As a result, it is unusually terse, but it contains some valuable and revealing observations nonetheless. The interviewee, who assists in the management of PRTs from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, brings a unique perspective to his overall evaluation of the PRTs' successes. His succinct statement of the mission of the PRTs, i.e. to extend the reach of the central government, pulls no political punches. His subsequent answers to the development, legal system, and governance questions confirm his view that PRTs are primarily a means to a political end, and he is enthusiastic about their success: "one of the best programs we've put together in Afghanistan."

He opines that NGOs now "grudgingly accept" PRTs, while the local Afghan populace is generally favorable to them. Most satisfied is the central government. The interviewee highlights as a problem the fact that U.S. civilians at the PRTs and at the Embassy are outnumbered "10 to 1 by the military." As a result, civilian input is spread too thin and the military will "frequently make decisions without consulting [them]."

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Afghanistan Experience Project

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Interviewed via email by Barbara Nielsen
Initial interview date: May 10, 2005
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Q: In your supervisory role of PRTs, how many do you currently oversee?

A: I currently supervise 13 State employees: 10 full time Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) 1 temporary duty officer (TDYer), 1 "When Actually Employed" Contractor (WAE), and one schedule C (political appointee).

Q: Are more anticipated?

A: We have 19 slots to fill and there are 7 PRTs without State officers.

Q: Are there additional PRTs not under US control?

A: 10 of our officers are at US PRTs, 1 at a New Zealand PRT, 1 at a British, 1 at a German.

Q: What is the mission of the PRTs – is there a general mission common to all?

A: Goal is to expand the reach of the Afghan central government.

Q: How are specific PRT missions defined?

A: Not clear what this means -- each PRT commander works with his or her unit (including the State and USAID civilians) to figure out how best to support the local government.

Q: What is your role? Do you represent the PRTs collectively at meetings in Kabul, such as in meetings with Afghan ministries, with NGOs, with the U.S. military – e.g. Operation Enduring Freedom, with the UN?

A: I represent the State Department's role in what is primarily a military program -- we do lots of work with the U.S. military and NATO/ISAF.

Q: Did the PRTs have a key role to play in their regions during the Constitutional Loya Jirga, the run-up to the Presidential elections and the elections themselves?

A: Yes, as well as for the upcoming September parliamentary elections. For last October's election, PRTs were very involved in providing election security and working with local officials to be sure everything went well.

Q: Governance: How do you evaluate PRT collective performance thus far in promoting democracy, local governance, extending authority of the central government? What are some lessons learned?

A: I think they've been a huge success -- one of the best programs we've put together in Afghanistan.

Q: Economic reconstruction and development: What has been the impact of PRT activities related to economic reconstruction and development? In your view, do the PRTs seem to be well suited to these projects, or is that not their primary focus (For example, they constitute only 5% of USAID's budget for Afghanistan.)

A: The PRTs don't really focus on overall development; they are just doing the small things they can to support the provincial and central government -- if building a road, a school or something similar makes people think life is better under this system -- then their work is done.

Q: How are the PRTs viewed by the NGO community? How are they viewed by the local Afghan population, and the Afghan central government?

A: Most NGOs have come to grudgingly accept them, but they remain instinctively hostile to the concept (even if there is nothing specific to complain about). The local Afghan populace is generally favorable, or at least accepting. The central government is very happy with them.

Q: Are some PRTs involved in police training? In what ways?

A: Not generally, they may buy equipment or uniforms, but the police training program is run separately

Q: Describe the results of PRT involvement with legal system, court and prison reform. Are local courts and prisons functioning?

A: PRTs have only sporadic involvement with any of these -- again, building a courthouse or something like that, but overall reform is done by larger USAID programs. I don't know anything about the courts or prisons and how well they operate.

Q: To conclude: what is your assessment of important lessons learned, successes and failures. Would another approach be better, or is the PRT an effective way to: provide security, expand central authority, do reconstruction and development, and utilize U.S. military and civilian resources.

A: I believe it has been a real success -- I think it would be a stronger program with a firmer civilian role (it can be tough to keep up with the military and their pace of operations).

Q: What additional preparation would have made your job easier?

A: I spent six months serving as both director and deputy-- filling the other slot prior to January would have helped a great deal.

Follow-on question posed on May 17, 2005

Q: In evaluating the PRT, you say it has been a real success, but that "it would be a stronger program with a firmer civilian role (it can be tough to keep up with the military and their pace of operations") Could you give an example of what you mean?

A: Basically, U.S. civilians at the PRTs and at the Embassy are outnumbered 10 to 1 by the military – this means there are far more meetings than we can possibly cover and the military will frequently make decisions without consulting us. In other words, we get overlooked a lot.

END INTERVIEW