

USIP – ADST  
Afghanistan Experience Project

**Interview #29**

**Executive Summary**

The interviewee spent from October, 2002 – January, 2003 in Mazar-e Sharif, at a time when the role and structure of the PRT was just coming into existence. The goal of the civil affairs team with which the interviewee worked was to show that President Karzai and the government were legitimate, supported by the United States and the U.N., and that we supported this government in its efforts to provide democracy, stability and prosperity throughout the country.

In addition to delivering this message and to providing a visible security presence, the nascent PRT provided limited humanitarian assistance and undertook small scale economic development projects in order to “win hearts and minds” in the region. The interviewee describes at length his interactions with the area’s two most prominent warlords, Generals Dostam and Atta, and provides an excellent picture of the role these two individuals played, not only in running “Tammany Hall” style government, but in overthrowing the Taliban and in supporting one of the key U.N. initiatives at the time –the disarmament program. He stresses their importance and the necessity to gain their collaboration.

The dynamic of the relationships among the PRT, the UN and NGOs is also described. While cooperation with the U.N. was generally without friction, tensions did exist with some NGOs that opposed the fact that the military was engaged in humanitarian work. The interviewee describes his relationship with his military counterparts as one of mutual respect, highly cooperative and mutually reinforcing. The military welcomed the presence of a diplomat and provided excellent logistical support for his activities, which generally they carried out in joint partnership. For example, the interviewee was always accompanied by a military counterpart whenever he had a meeting with an Afghan leader. The interviewee’s year at the National War college allowed him to understand the military’s way of approaching a situation; his experience working with his military counterparts left him very impressed with how well the military trains and equips its people. Finally, the interviewee commented on how useful his Russian language capability was in communicating with Afghan engineers and technicians, reducing the need for constant translation, in an environment where a translator’s loyalty cannot be taken for granted.

United States Institute of Peace  
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training

**Interview #29**

*Interviewed by: Barbara Nielsen*  
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*Q: You were in Afghanistan from October 2002 until January 2003. At that time, if my understanding is correct, the PRTs were not formally in existence. Could you describe where you were and what your job was during that period?*

A: Sure. The military had already positioned its civil affairs teams in various parts of the country trying to do humanitarian work and Washington decided in the summer of 2002 that, to show support for President Karzai and to demonstrate that we recognized his reach throughout the country, it was important or it would be useful to place diplomats with these civil affairs teams to help them in their work and to symbolize our interest in supporting the President's reach throughout the country. I think the first diplomat posted was to Herat. I was the second one. I was put in Mazar-e Sharif in the north. At the time, there was a small civil affairs team, about eight soldiers, led by a Major, in Mazar doing civil affairs work. There was another team of Special Forces people doing more strictly military activities. My job was to stay with the civil affairs team, live with them, work with them, support their activities, and in turn have them help to bolster the diplomatic and political work that a State Department officer could do in the region. That meant moving into a small house with the first team that I stayed with. We were there for about a couple of weeks. They were replaced by another team and we moved to a larger compound that had been renovated for our use. With the arrival of this other team, things started to expand a little bit. By the time I left, we were up to maybe 20 soldiers and one State Department person. All of this was at a time when the military was beginning to think about how to expand and formalize the structure into what became the PRTs. The PRT concept was already circulating at this point. People recognized that small teams of seven or eight soldiers or even getting up to 20 just wasn't enough. There was a recognition that to enhance security, you needed a larger presence on the ground. The idea was to try to complement that with civilian activities in the areas of police, education, economy, and so forth to really try to make a difference on the ground in the regions. But at the time I was there, it was much more small-scale, much more informal. My job was to essentially work with these folks and support their activities, have them support the work that a political officer could do.

*Q: Could you define a little more some of the day to day activities that you were undertaking? One imagines that the civil affairs folks were doing some development work, but perhaps not with that few. If you would elaborate...*

A: Even then, the military had funds. Their mission was to go around to small villages in the area and try to identify worthy projects – school renovations, wells, small-scale infrastructure – where they could use their money to hire a local contractor, help the local economy by hiring that

local contractor, and also do some good by renovating schools or whatever. They did this in Mazar-e Sharif as well. Even by the time I arrived in October, a couple of school renovations had been done and there were signs outside saying “This was done courtesy of the U.S. military civil affairs” and so forth. So, basically, they were trying to do humanitarian work. It was the classic combination of showing the flag and winning hearts and minds. Showing the flag when they went particularly to some of the more remote villages was a chance to show local folks that there was a security presence that was not hostile to them, that could benefit them, and it was usually locals, especially in the north, where the Americans were truly viewed as liberators. The Taliban was hated, partly for tribal/ethnic reasons. So that show the flag presence was usually very welcome. The humanitarian work was often very important. A little money went a long way in these areas. Then at the same time, every time we went into these areas either in Mazar itself or in some of the smaller villages, I would meet with the local leaders. The civil affairs team would be with me. We worked totally side-by-side, hand in glove. It was a chance to deliver our message to the local leadership that President Karzai and the government were legitimate, that we supported them, that we supported long-term return to democracy, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan, and that to the extent there were others in the region – factional leaders, warlords, whatever you want to call them – who were seeking to extend their sway, the reality was, we expected those leaders to fit in with the program. The legitimate power was the power in Kabul supported by the UN and by the United States.

*Q: So your role as a diplomat presumably was to meet with the local leaders and convey these messages directly.*

A: Very much so. There were two tiers of leaders. You had people who were nominally provincial governors and mayors and people who had some measure of blessing by the central government. Then you had factional leaders, so-called warlords. In Mazar, the two main warlords were General Dostam and General Atta. I would meet, along with the military folks – I don’t think I ever did a meeting without a military colleague present – with both. We made a point of, for example, my first courtesy call was with the duly appointed regional governor to symbolize our recognition and support for the Karzai government and the legitimate paths of power. We had to interact with General Dostam and General Atta to try to get a handle on the security situation and the disarmament issue.

*Q: Let’s explore that a little bit. General Dostam sounds like a familiar name. Is it possible I’ve read about him in the press?*

A: Dostam is probably the more well known of the two, maybe the more controversial. He figured prominently in a book by a journalist named Ahmed Rashid about the war in Afghanistan that had come out in about 2001. A lot of horror stories about Dostam, some accusations that he had murdered or killed a number of enemy troops by putting them inside containers and they had suffocated in the heat. We can talk about my own judgments about the validity of some of those accusations and just what kind of a character Dostam is. He’s an interesting guy. General Atta was a more wily character, definitely not on the same agenda as the United States, but playing along with us while we were still at the time holding most of the cards.

*Q: That's an interesting point about these warlords... Thus far, I haven't encountered very many people who have worked directly with them in the way that you're describing. So, it may be a somewhat new element even though we're all aware that warlords and local faction leaders and militias and so on are a very important part of the picture in Afghanistan, but, could you flesh out from your experience just how it impacts what we're trying to do. Obviously, we are familiar with working with local government leaders, but maybe less so with the paragovernment leaders. That's why I think it's interesting.*

A: It was interesting. It was the most interesting part of the job in many ways. It was complicated, complex, and morally fraught. But what we have to recognize... Part of our job as diplomats is to recognize the reality on the ground before you decide how you're going to shape it. The reality on the ground was that these folks had tremendous influence militarily and politically. They had through their clans and ethnic structures a lot of sway over local populations. Having just fought a war to get rid of the Taliban, we had to be aware that any effort to directly take on these warlords could mean another war that I don't think we were particularly ready or eager to fight unless we absolutely had to. So, I think the idea was, can we co-opt and work with these folks and bring them on board to our agenda or do we have to challenge them and confront them directly? The period I was there, we were in the period of testing the ability to make them work on our terms and it was quite clear that they were awed still by the U.S. military and the U.S. military presence. They recognized the power realities in Afghanistan. No one was going to challenge us directly. So we were in a good position to make them work to our agenda. By and large, they did, although clearly behind the scenes they were each looking after their own welfare, their own political base, their own agendas. But in public and in terms of talking the talk at least, they were saying the things we wanted to hear. The other thing to bear in mind, particularly with Dostam, is that these were people who had been instrumental in toppling the Taliban. The U.S. defeat of the Taliban began in northern Afghanistan when elements of the CIA and the Special Forces linked up with General Dostam's forces and in a real remarkable military maneuver swept in, took Mazar, and then eventually brought down the Taliban by coming down from the north. Dostam had a reputation of having played all sides in the conflict during the Soviet occupation, during the Taliban era. He had decided to become our guy for as long as it suited him, but that suited our interests as well. We visited with some of the Special Forces people and with Dostam some of the places that had been scenes of fighting. These are unbelievable landscapes. Someday somebody will make a movie about these battles and nobody will ever believe the kinds of military encounters that took place until they see it. The way that we were able to use small teams to link up with these local indigenous forces and pull off this victory was remarkable. It was not written in stone that it would happen. It was very risky. We had to remember as we dealt with Dostam that he had been very important in helping us achieve our strategic aims in toppling the Taliban. Related to that was that the military especially felt indebted and linked to Dostam. To the extent folks in the State Department might have a different view about Dostam, then we were in a position where the military and the State Department might have slightly different views about his past, his present, and his future. In my own view, over time, it came to me that Dostam was still a player who on balance we could work with and it was not worth our while to confront him directly because we were still in a position where he needed to play our game and could not afford to challenge us. He had some very cosmopolitan, erudite, articulate, intelligent advisors with whom I had some discussions. I brought up one episode where Dostam had been accused

of torturing and killing a soldier. I was assured up and down that these were total fabrications, that this journalist, Ahmed Rashid, had never witnessed this, that he had himself come back later to admit that this was second or third hand information. Anyway, one will never know for sure, but there was enough ambiguity about Dostam and enough other factors having to do with his support for what we were trying to do, the fact that he needed to play our game, that he still had utility in terms of trying to achieve our goals in the north, that it was not in our interest to try to cast him out or challenge him directly.

*Q: The job of warlord is a little bit foreign to me. Obviously, this gentleman, for example, is a general. Does he have a military background and then, by virtue of his strong persona, creates an army around him under his leadership? How does a warlord become a significant force?*

A: I think the fact that Afghanistan had been at war for 30 years means no leader had come to power without having had some exposure to or involvement in military activities. All of the factional leaders are also military leaders. Every faction is armed and somebody has to control or direct that armament. But there are also clan and tribal leaders and there are clan and ethnic structures that go way back and these people just happened to be at the top of that pile. Ethnic issues are still very fraught in Afghanistan. A guy like Dostam doesn't just command an army and he doesn't just represent the top Uzbek in the area. He controlled... It's like Richard Daley in Chicago. It's Tammany Hall. He controls the bennies and the money. He skims off the customs revenues at the border and develops pots of money that are then used to support his supporters. It's not rocket science. It happens in every country. It happened in our country. That's the way things are still structured in Afghanistan, or were at that time. The challenge for us is to try to end these little fiefdoms and give the central government control of the nation.

*Q: So at this time, these were the relatively early days of post-Taliban Afghanistan, and you mentioned that it had been determined that the PRT structure should grow with the addition of – were they more civil affairs officers?*

A: What they did was, they doubled up. Instead of one eight-member civil affairs team, which they called CAT A, they created this kind of a combination of maybe two civil affairs teams and one element that was supposed to be a little bit more in charge of operations at headquarters, sort of staff operation. This essentially meant an ability to double their outreach in terms of civil affairs teams going out and about.

*Q: That's what I was thinking. The mandate that I've heard for the PRTs, and we're talking about the precursors for the PRTs, was to perform activity in the area of promoting democracy, which in itself was a fairly large mandate, to help organize elections, provincial or local council elections perhaps, advance human rights, advance women's rights. In addition to that, you had the economic development side that you alluded to. The third component was legal structures including courts, prisons, police training, and so on. During the time that you were there, with albeit a smaller structure, were the activities that the civil affairs folks were trying to carry out largely economic, or did you also engage in some of these others?*

A: I would say that our focus was the reverse of what you just described. It began with the security and legal piece. Then the social and political infrastructure was far beyond our ability to

be involved in. It was probably a little premature at the time. Things were still evolving at that point. The first and foremost of what the teams were doing by their presence was helping to avert clashes between rival factions, General Dostam's people and General Atta's people. People knew that if groups started fighting, bad things could happen to them, including in a worst case scenario, that the Special Forces would go in in a B-52 and bomb the combatant elements. That never happened. Well, one time, I heard that it happened in the area where I was. The civil affairs team and I were never involved in that. But the first part of what we were doing was simply helping to calm the situation and demonstrate that there was a security presence in the region. Related to that was, we met with the police chief in Mazar, for example, and first got into the idea of trying to beef up police structures. The police structure there was pathetic. The nominal Afghan police structure was powerless in the face of the militias. They had no weapons, no cars, no radios. So one of the very first things we did was try to find a way to get them some of that equipment. At that point, the Germans had just been put in charge of police support in Afghanistan as a whole, so we tried to channel some requests that way. In the time I was there, nothing dramatic materialized, but I'd like to think we got the ball rolling a little bit towards... Security was first and foremost. People were looking at it. They were just coming out of a very tense conflict situation. You had different tribal elements, especially in Mazar, all kinds living together in different parts of town. It was kind of a tinderbox. It wouldn't take much to ignite conflict. It was that visible security presence that we contributed first and foremost.

Then the economic development part – again, a little money went a long way in that area. Every one of these little schools, we'd have projects or wells or whatever, was really appreciated and really made a difference. Kind of being tongue in cheek, I developed a theory at one point that the way to promote reconstruction in Afghanistan was to build roads and give everybody \$100 because the Afghans were the most resourceful, energetic, unself-pitying people I've ever met. They just needed half a chance now. And the infrastructure, the roads, just the ability to move from one place to another, and then that will take care of it. I'd say I'm a skeptic of scientific development. I think a lot of what AID does is way too tied up in the infrastructure that supports the contractors and doesn't really deliver money to where it's needed. I honestly believe if you just give them the cash, the Afghans would be a lot further along than where they are today. But that's another story. Again, I think the security and the economic development parts are where we were making the most difference. Democratization and elections – we weren't really in an election mode at that point. It was still too early. But I will say that I had a number of discussions with General Dostam where... We did a couple of disarmament trips. He would get on the stump in these various places and deliver extremely eloquent speeches about how now was the time to disarm and we all had to support the government of President Karzai and blah, blah, blah. It was very obvious to me this guy is a gifted orator and has all the makings of a leader. I told him, "Run for office. Be a politician. You've obviously got the makings of it." What's not clear about Dostam is whether in his own mind at that point he was just kind of ready to retire. His family was in Uzbekistan and in Turkey. It's not clear how wedded he was to being part of the Afghan future or not. I believe since then... Well, he did run for President. I'm sure he was a viable candidate. He didn't win. That was probably for the best. But he definitely had the makings of a real politician.

*Q: Or chief of police or something.*

A: Well, you wouldn't want to put a factional leader with so much baggage as him in charge of a unit with weaponry. It might be difficult for people to believe that he would exercise his power fairly. But maybe.

*Q: I guess that would be the same problem that he would have as a politician.*

A: Well, but as an opposition leader or as a vice president, he's a very persuasive speaker. He's one of those people you recognize is a leader and people will follow partly because they were afraid of him, but partly because he was a very dynamic figure.

*Q: You mentioned AID and the German effort to train the police. At that time, were there many either NGOs or other government organizations at work? If so, to what degree did you interact with them and how was that relationship?*

A: On AID, I believe that already at that point there had been an interest in having AID put people in the regions with the State Department officers, but they weren't able to find bodies. So, AID was not present. We had a lot of dealings directly with NGOs and with the UN, UNDP, which often played a kind of coordinating role among the NGOs at least in terms of providing a venue where everybody could meet and so forth. It was actually a very interesting dynamic, at times an unfortunate dynamic. There was a very... NGOs had different attitudes about the idea of the military being engaged in humanitarian work. Should people with rifles and uniforms be out there helping to rebuild schools and wells and so forth? The opinions ranged from begrudging agreement on the part of some NGOs to just outright and total disapproval and disengagement, for example, by the International Committee for the Red Cross and Medecins Sans Frontieres. We understood where they were coming from. Their argument was that this would ultimately compromise their neutrality and make it difficult for them to do their job - if Afghan villagers saw people in American army uniforms coming in one day and delivering aid and then Medecins Sans Frontieres the next, how long before you started to see one side or the other caught up in a conflict? So, we understood where they were coming from. On the other hand, the reality was, some of these areas that needed aid were off-limits for security reasons and the military could go in and deliver aid to places the NGOs could not. We're talking about some places that had not gotten a bag of wheat in two or three years way back in the mountains. We need to recognize how bold these civil affairs teams were. They would get a vehicle and a GPS and their own provisions and drive off three days into mountains on very treacherous roads and go to villages that had one rooster; that was their village asset. It was very important what they did. The NGOs, some of them recognized it. And it wasn't anything personal. They just didn't think it was appropriate that the military be doing humanitarian work. It got to the point around Christmas time where there was some confusion... At the UN office, everybody had a little mail slot and the civil affairs team got an invitation to a Red Cross Christmas party. We thought, "This is nice." There had already been a little bit of friction about whether we should be going to their events or not. We went. Then the next day, I got a call saying, "Could you come and see the Red Cross chief?" I went with one of the military guys. We were politely informed... We were asked, "Why were you at this party? We have told you we don't want the military to have anything to do with us." That was a low moment, I thought. I know this is a serious issue and there are real arguments on both sides, but I thought this was carrying it a little bit too far.

*Q: I don't know what the status is today. It probably depends on whether the civilian agencies can have access to the remote areas.*

A: That's part of it, too. Because the situation is still fraught in terms of security, there are some areas that NGOs have just pulled out from. In Mazar at the time, one NGO convoy had been attacked. The payroll had been stolen and a woman had been raped. Because of that, the embassy had declared that it was sort of treating this one area as... We weren't going to authorize aid projects in this area. It became pretty clear as the investigation proceeded that this had been an inside job. It was also clear that one of the factional leaders, a subordinate to General Atta, was probably responsible for this. We put a lot of pressure on Atta to deal with this. It wasn't really satisfactorily resolved in the time I was there, but we started to move back towards the view... The argument I was making to the embassy was, "It's more important to get the aid back there now. We've sort of isolated the problem. We're pretty sure that you're not going to see a resumption in these kinds of attacks. Punishing Atta and his people is separate, but meanwhile, let's not hold up the full aid." But that hadn't yet been completely resolved by the time I left. So, the NGOs were very vulnerable. We all have to respect what they do because they do it unarmed with commitment and principle and there are some wonderful people out there doing this kind of work. But the challenge is to see if there's a way for their activities and the military commander's to dovetail. It's probably an ongoing thing. There's no clear-cut answer there.

*Q: Tell me about the civil affairs team in terms of the background that they brought.*

A: These were reservists. Both teams I worked with were from the DC area, Maryland, Virginia. They were young. The second team I was with included two women, a sergeant and a specialist.

*Q: By "young," we're talking about 20s?*

A: Yes.

*Q: They're not the 44-year-old professionals.*

A: That tended to be more the Special Forces people, who were also reservists, but they tended to be a little bit older. These were very committed young people who had to totally disrupt their lives to come out and do their duty and face the prospect on going back home of being called up yet again to be called up to do this. So there was a very high degree of commitment. I just found them very impressive, very resourceful, and very positive. I had just come from a year at the National War College and I was already pretty high on how the military tries to approach these things. It was a great opportunity to go from the National War College, where you see all this being discussed at a high level from the top down, and then to see from the bottom up that it was consistent with what I was seeing at the National War College. What was being talked about in theory was being put into place in practice. The military is extremely well trained. They're well motivated. They don't get enough recognition and appreciation.



There are some in the military who think that... It's obviously in the nature of the military structure to try to control all aspects of activity. What was smart about the National War College approach and what I experienced from most of the people I dealt with on the ground was a recognition that the political and economic elements, that's not the army's specialty. At a certain point, you need to turn over some of this activity to others and there is a place for diplomats and development people. I was very much welcomed and treated with respect. They recognized the role of a diplomat and all that. But there are some who basically would like to monopolize the whole equation. That was a minority and ultimately the military leadership recognizes that it's okay for the military to branch out a little bit into humanitarian work, but they shouldn't try to become another AID, another State Department. There is a place for what they call "purple" teamwork of all the different services and then interagency elements working together. "Purple" refers to a different combination of uniforms.

*Q: The security threat at the time you were there, how would you describe it? You've alluded to some possible incidents, but it sounds like you had a fairly permissive atmosphere for going about your work?*

A: I certainly felt so, yes. The occasional clashes that would happen were what they call "green on green," Dostam's people against Atta's people-

*Q: Those are "green on green" because it's Afghan on Afghan?*

A: Yes. In the time I was there, when you heard about these things happening, they were in remote villages and regions and not anything that we witnessed. Our pattern was to go about our business, go to meetings and so forth, in a convoy, a couple of cars. The soldiers would always have their weapons at the ready. We pretty much wore flak jackets all the time when we were out of the compound except for some office calls. But the north seemed to be a much more permissive environment than areas that bordered the Pakistan border, where rebel elements were able to operate with a little bit more impunity. When you would have occasional clashes in the regions, that's where the disarmament piece came into motion. Typically, what we would hear about was a clash in some distant area. The UN would often be the first source of information about this and they would convoke a meeting at their headquarters there in Mazar. The interesting thing about that was that the UN folks realized that the U.S. military presence was what gave them security and so the UN would bring in their representatives from Dostam and Atta saying, "You guys need to behave. You need to get your commanders on the ground to behave. We're going to send out a team to have a look and the Americans are coming with us" and our job was to say, "We're coming with you and we're going to support the UN in this. We really don't like to see these kinds of clashes happen." We'd trundle off into these areas. If we were really successful and the UN was successful, the idea in going off to a given area would be that a leader such as Dostam or Atta would come along and his job was to harangue the crowds and in turn get some weapons turned in, to start getting some of these weapons out from under the mattresses. There were two of these trips that we went on that were moderately successful, at least symbolically successful. You'd get a big pile of weapons and people would get the message that it was important to turn in weapons, it was important to get along. The cameras would be rolling and you'd have a nice image of disarmament. Some of these weapons were 100 years old. They were rusty. We knew these weren't all the weapons. But it was still, I thought,

an important beginning. Dostam was smarter about this than Atta in terms of creating some of these events and being willing to go along with the program. Atta was more reluctant. But ultimately Atta also did a couple of big time disarmament events. It created a more positive climate in terms of security.

*Q: Do you think that disarmament will come about gradually as some of these warlords retire? You mentioned that General Dostam was thinking of retiring. You don't expect someone in that field to go off and retire. But of course, if the structure is a little bit antiquated and the country moves on towards modernization, they might feel comfortable doing a series of things that would amount to a retirement, the warlord turning in their weapons, going off to live elsewhere peacefully.*

A: The key is, when people feel secure, they'll turn in their weapons. But right now, until there is a police force and an army that can provide a reasonable amount of confidence throughout the country, confidence in the sense that if there is a problem, it will be resolved fairly, not in favor of one ethnic group or another, that there really is justice and a balanced, fair police and security presence. As I left Afghanistan, in the north, people were not ready to... But there was no national police force that could do the necessary in the north. Again, this goes to why people like Dostam and Atta are in power. They're able to deliver a certain amount of security to their clan, their tribe, their ethnic group. Until people feel that, in giving up their weapons, they're not exposing themselves to being vulnerable, to being attacked and unable to retaliate, at least a couple of years ago when I left, they clearly weren't ready to turn in all their weapons. I know since then the Afghan army has developed quite a bit. There is some movement towards a national police force. I believe that there has been progress made in disarmament and that that's been a positive trend.

*Q: You said that is largely a UN-driven exercise.*

A: We had a very important point about our whole approach in Afghanistan that was different than with Iraq. In Afghanistan, the structure was that the UN had worked with U.S. support to create a transitional interim government and you had kind of a partnership between the UN and the Afghan interim government which the United States quietly supported from behind both politically and militarily. So, we view our role as supporting this Afghan interim government and supporting this partnership with the UN. The UN very often was the element that on paper was supposed to say, "Hey, you different factions, behave." That meant, if you don't, the international community here (i.e., the U.S.) is going to come in and knock heads. To be sure, there were a lot of intense discussions with the UN about various approaches, but they were serious, collegial discussions- [END SIDE]

The UN office in Mazar and the UNDP were staffed by people who had been on the ground longer than anybody else, so they knew factional leaders and tribal elements. There was a British expert there. I want to say he was from Belfast or something like that. He had been five or seven years in Afghanistan. And people who had been there during the Taliban era. So, the UN was in a position to provide the kind of leadership and expert guidance that would help to keep things on track. That doesn't mean that the Americans agreed every time, but working with the UN, we found a common way forward. In a way, it was nice to have the UN be in the

spotlight and not us. We were the heavy, quiet presence behind the scenes that the people knew mattered in the end. In Iraq, there never was that UN presence, so it was a different story.

*Q: It seems like the Afghan model was a very good one.*

A: I think it was a successful formula. It started with the meetings in Bonn that produced the interim government and everything flowed from that.

*Q: We have largely covered the points that were on my mind and in my questionnaire. To try to sum up, I realize the PRT as such was not an entity, but if you could characterize how you felt the partnership between you as the diplomat and the military was and maybe describe what you thought were your greatest achievements as a group, not necessarily your personal greatest achievements, but what you felt were the highlights of your tour. And then any of the areas for improvement and lessons learned that someone coming to a PRT now as a diplomat would want to know. The fact that you'd been at the War College for a year I'm going to guess was a very helpful feature in your preparation for your assignment, but maybe there were some other things that you did to prepare that you would recommend to others.*

A: In terms of the partnership between the military and the State Department, I thought it was an extremely successful partnership. I thought it was farsighted of the military to make room for a diplomat to be with their teams. They went all out to be supportive of that arrangement logistically. That translated down to tremendous support from the teams I was with on the ground. They treated me with a lot of respect. They gave me my own little cubicle, my own room. I was the only person who had their own when we moved into this house. They provided me communications support. They really recognized that a diplomat could bring something to the equation because local leaders understood the concept of a diplomat, they liked the idea of meeting with a diplomat. It enhanced the status of the military when the two of us would go in together to meet with a provincial leader. It enhanced the military's standing and conversely I would not have been able to do my job without the military's presence and the security they provided and the "oomph" that they provided. You did walk quietly and carry a big stick when the military folks were with you. At a period when these various elements of Afghan society were very insecure and violence could have resumed at any moment, it really gave us a powerful impact to be working together like that.

I think in terms of achievements, the disarmament stuff that we got going was to me the most useful thing that we did at the time and the most symbolically important, trying to get a small little bit of momentum going towards a visual demonstration that the time had come to turn in the weapons, to work together. These stump speeches by Dostam in particular and then later by Atta that talked about how Karzai was the legitimate government of Afghanistan and everybody needed to get with the program and support him, this was exactly what we were sent out there to achieve. Again, it took a certain amount of persuasion, working together with the UN and others, but without that military presence, Dostam would never have done those things. But he wanted to please us. He knew he needed to please us. So, again, some of it, sure, was for show. I don't believe for a minute that all the weapons were being turned in. But it was a way of getting... There was a public diplomacy aspect of this that was very important, getting a visual demonstration out there that this disarmament thing started to mean something.

*Q: Were you the face of public diplomacy then?*

A: Well, when we did our first disarmament trip, I got back and immediately contacted the embassy and said, “Let’s do a press release that says we think this is a really good thing.” After a while, we did get out a statement. So, sure, the State Department person was thinking about public diplomacy. At the time, there was no national broadcasting in Afghanistan, but there were regional television stations. Dostam had his own television station. They were eager to film and we were eager to make sure these piles of weapons were filmed, so there was definitely a PD component to this.

In terms of improvements, you can always tweak things a little bit. I personally thought that there was something nice about the flexibility that was offered by these small-scale operations. I was a little concerned when I started to see the descriptions of these PRTs, these 60 person behemoths with cubicles for every different office, Agriculture... We should remember that the scale is pretty large still in Afghanistan and we’re only going to be able to effect things at the margins and maybe our marginal utility is coming in on a very flexible basis and making a difference on the margins. I’m not sure that the value added of a large PRT... Again, I don’t know how it’s played out. I’ll be finding out when I go back there soon. But I certainly felt as I left that what we had going was pretty good and particularly when you bear in mind that the principle contribution we were making was on the security front. Let’s not fool ourselves that we’re going to be the big difference in terms of economic development or reconstruction. That was for the NGOs or the UN and others. What we were doing was providing a military/political basis for people feeling more secure.

*Q: That goes to the question of Karzai being viewed as legitimate. I was going to return to that. We just sort of naturally think of course he’s the legitimate President. But I guess that’s not a given among all Afghans.*

A: I think most Afghans were delighted with Karzai. I think most Afghans do support him. But you have this very real issue still of what can Karzai deliver and who controls the life of a given individual in a remote part of the country? I think people might in principle have felt ready to give their allegiance to Karzai, but if that threatened a local factional leader, particularly some of the more whacky ones like Ismail Khan in Herat... I think Dostam and Atta were actually some of the more moderate factional leaders. There were some nuts out there. I think that a declaration of loyalty to Karzai in some of these areas would have been a death sentence for an individual or a recipe for being cut off from the bennies, from the gravy train, from the Tammany Hall machine. So, I think people – and I still remember a feeling of tremendous faith and support in Karzai, but what does that mean if Karzai can’t deliver a school, food, water? They call Karzai the “mayor of Kabul.” The person who was delivering security and electricity and water and so forth in Mazar was either Dostam or Atta for most people at the time, permitting it to happen. The challenge was to wrest that control from their hands and put it in the hands of the central government. That meant at the same time as you wrested the control from the warlords, you had to put something in place that could deliver. That’s what wasn’t happening. The central government’s ability to deliver in the region was not materializing fast enough for 1,000 different reasons. Part of it was resistance from the factional leaders. But I

think those factional leaders didn't have the upper hand. They would have had to bow to an incoming presence from the central government and that just wasn't materializing fast enough at the time.

Lastly, in terms of the attitude and things you would bring to the equation as a diplomat to make it work successfully, I thought the most important thing was a willingness to work with the military on equal terms. There is a tendency all too often for State Department people to think they're anointed and that they are the politically savvy person who can come in and be leader and then the military is the... You have some cases where the military were treated as nothing more than chauffeurs. That is absolutely the wrong attitude. The military really do their homework. They often have as good or better political insights as the State Department people. It's just really important to work together as a team and respect each other. What I found so heartening in my experience was that that's exactly how it played itself out.

*Q: And you're, I guess, talking about not only your day to day contact with your civil affairs group but presumably you had contacts with the commanders.*

A: I had occasional contact with the POLAD in Bagram, but I didn't have direct contact with the military senior chain of command. What I did understand was that relations between the embassy and the military were often very fraught. I'm sure that, just as it was important at a place like Mazar to have a good working relationship and a respectful relationship with the military, it was probably more true in Kabul and in Bagram. Of course, the stakes were higher and levels of resources were much higher and I'm sure it was more difficult. I know it was difficult. I'm sure today there are still issues between how the military sees things and how the State Department sees things. But I think it's just imperative to work on a mutually respectful basis as a team. Each element brings a vital component to the equation and neither can do their job without the support of the other.

*Q: Excellent. So, I thank you.*

A: You're welcome. Thanks for the chance to revisit some of this.

*Q: One last question: did you have any language training for your assignment?*

A: No, I did not. I'm not a Dari or Pashto speaker. The nature of the call for volunteers was just anybody who'd be willing to go sign on up. I was happy to be chosen. I had served in the Middle East before, my first tour and had some Arabic training, which was actually a useful cultural experience for Afghanistan. And I was also pleasantly surprised to find out how far my Russian language carried me. It seemed like, especially in northern Afghanistan, pretty much anybody who had had engineering training, was a technocrat of any sort, had had some time in the Soviet Union. My Russian and their Russian was able to get us into some form of communication. But language is an issue because being dependent on interpreters, you can never be completely sure about the loyalty of an interpreter. It is really important that we have people with language capabilities out there whom we can trust.

[END INTERVIEW]