

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #7

Executive Summary

The interviewee is the program officer on the Afghanistan desk at USAID in Washington. He worked with Afghanistan in the early 90's with the UNHCR in the refugee camps and has been working on Afghanistan since September 11, 2001.

He speaks the local language fluently and, because of his physical appearance, he "blends in" with the local population. For this reason, he explains that people are more likely to tell him what they think as opposed to what they think we want to hear. He expresses the view that PRTs have been a "great way of doing business... , a perfect opportunity to get the military more involved in doing development should we want to go down that path, and a great way for people who would otherwise be stuck in Kabul to get out [into the countryside]." However, he also points out that from the perspective of an Afghan villager, the PRT is a "fortress" belonging to an occupying power. In the interviewee's words, the villager believes that "whoever is waving the flag now is just the last in a series of people that have occupied his land." In contrast to the conventional wisdom that PRTs are extending the writ of the central government, the interviewee disagrees, saying that because PRTs do not fly the Afghan flag, they are not viewed as an arm of the central government, but rather as an occupying entity, albeit one that people are happy to have in place because the PRT has helped security in some respects. In addition, the populace appreciates the tangible economic benefits of the PRT presence, in terms of development projects.

The interviewee paints a graphic picture of how security concerns impacted his travel. A very imposing "expedition force" of some 62 defense personnel in heavily armored vehicles was required to escort his group of four civilians in order to make a visit to a school and clinic we had built. He describes the intimidating impact this show of force had on the local population.

With only 5% of the AID budget being spent at the PRT level, the interviewee put the role of PRTs in perspective vis-a-vis the rest of AID's mission in the country. In addition, the interviewee described the collegiality between the civilian AID officials and the military working together in the PRTs, as well as the "grudging acceptance" that the other NGOs in the field accorded the PRTs doing development/reconstruction projects. Finally, the interviewee observes that one source of frustration for him was the failure of some of the civil affairs soldiers with whom he worked to grasp the fact that development takes a very long time. They simply had very unrealistic expectations of how long it required to train teachers, public health workers and the like.

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

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*Interviewed by: Barbara Nielsen
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Editor's Note: The interviewee is based at USAID Headquarters in Washington but has had extensive experience on the ground in Afghanistan, both before and since establishment of the PRTs.

Q: This project is trying to compile lessons learned. Apparently the concept of the provincial reconstruction teams is considered innovative, if not controversial. Maybe you can offer some opinions on it. It is an experiment or an experience in civil- military cooperation. I think that's the angle that we're trying to explore and one where Washington policymakers would have some distinct opinions. People in the field might have another set of opinions. So, what we're looking at today is your experience -- that would be your historical experience and your present experience. You said you are the USAID desk officer, but if you could delineate your functions...

A: I'm actually the program officer on the desk, not the desk officer. The desk officer was on her way over here, but I think she's in a meeting someplace else. I've been working with Afghanistan since shortly after September 11th. I worked with Afghanistan in the early '90s as well. I actually was working with UNHCR on the refugee camps back in '92, so I have a lot of history with the country. I speak the language fluently. Plus, I blend in.

Q: Are you of Afghan origin?

A: No, I'm not, but I tend to have a lot greater access to certain situations and I get a much different understanding because people actually tell me what they think as opposed to what they think we want to hear. I've heard Afghans make this distinction. When I've asked them, I've said, "Why are you telling me this but you're not telling..." They say, "You're our brother. You're not a foreigner." So, that is an advantage that I have. But as far as advantages, there are two ways of looking at it. It is a total advantage if we're looking at it from the perspective of policymakers here in the United States or even people, coalition American people, working in Afghanistan, primarily because we have a presence all over the country and technically and theoretically we should be able to feel the pulse of the country based on what's happening in each of the 17 to 22 PRTs. I've lost count of how many there are currently.

Q: I think there are over 20 now.

A: Right. Those are currently operational.

On the flip side, from the perspective of an Afghan villager.... This is something that very few people actually take a look at because everyone is always talking about how wonderful the PRTs are. I'm not disputing any of that. I'm just saying, flip it over and take a look from the perspective of an Afghan villager who has lived in Bamian all of his life. You come to this structure that is the PRT that's set off a little bit outside of town, if not in the middle of town. In Bamian, it's actually on a hill overlooking the rest of the valley. And it's a fortress with lots of concertina wire and the Heskell [phonetic] barriers and American flags everywhere.

Q: I was going to say, when you say "structure," I thought "military camp." Is that what it looks like?

A: Right.

Q: Is it a military camp?

A: It's a fortress. The one in Bamian is pretty much a collapsible fortress. It's got cabanas for the various rooms. I'm sure it can be moved from point A to point B, but nevertheless it's highly fortified. There is lots of activity and the flags are all American. I'm sure now that they're all New Zealand flags, but this was before. From the perspective of somebody who has lived in that village all of his life and has seen various jihadi groups coming in and out, followed by the Taliban, whoever is waving the flag now is just the last in a series of people that have occupied his land.

Q: You didn't even mention the Soviets, but never mind.

A: Right. Sorry. I forgot about the Soviets. So, it looks like it's an occupying power. Most people when they're talking about PRTs do not really take that piece into consideration. It's got its value in terms of getting out there. I think it has really helped us get our people out. Because of security being what it is, I'm not able to travel outside of Kabul unless I'm traveling with PRT security. The days are over when I would be able to hop in a Land Cruiser with maybe one or two bodyguards and we'd go off. I've done that in the past. I did that as late as January of 2003. That was the last time I was allowed to just drive around the country with very minimal security. It was a convoy of two cars and two shooters and that was it. And now security has gotten tighter and we can only travel with the.... From that perspective, it's really very useful to have various places around the country to which we can call up, make arrangements, and then go and visit and talk to them and try to get our work advanced. But as far as the writ of the central government, because that seems to be something that everybody talks about, I'm just offering a suggestion that perhaps we should take a look at that again.

Q: One of our objectives is to shore up support for the authority of the central government and the provinces.

A: The Russians did the same thing.

Q: What you're positing is maybe that's not what our priority should be?

A: What I'm positing is that we probably shouldn't look at that as one of the "redeeming factors" of the PRTs. Lots of people say, "Oh, it's a mechanism to get the writ of the central government out." The central government does not fly a U.S. flag. They have their own flag. The central government does not have employees that look like they're from Kansas or Iowa or the national guard of Florida or wherever they're from.

Q: So, the PRT is not viewed as an arm of the central government.

A: It's not.

Q: It's viewed as an occupying entity.

A: It is. If you will ask people, they will tell you this. They're very happy that they're there in many instances. They feel that having the PRT there has helped security in some respects. Other people see the PRT doing various projects around the country and they feel like they've benefited from that. From those obvious economic benefits or obvious tangible benefits, they'll say, "Yes, the PRT is great. We love it." because they're getting a benefit from it. But dig a little bit deeper. You ask the right questions and they'll give you a whole different reaction.

Q: I know you have a large budget and it has increased since the end of the Taliban. Could you give an idea of where you're centering your resources and what some of the differences among the provinces might be and how you fund your people into the PRT structure?

A: I have a slide that I can share with you that will show you how we program our resources. But we have a USAID representative at pretty much all of the PRTs. I think we're up to 17 representatives or something like that right now.

Q: And how was it determined at what point this person should enter? I guess there wasn't an AID representative from the beginning.

A: I think that would be a question that I would refer to our PRT coordinator in Kabul. He's the person that actually does the active hiring of the new PRT staff. The issue for him was basically when a PRT first stands up, they still need some time just to get organized from the military perspective of, okay, we're going to do this, this division's going to do that. There needs to be a little bit of settling in time before you stick a USAID person in the mix who then has his or her own needs and requirements so that once that is taken care of and they understand what they need to do, it's a certain maturity level, not in the sense of emotional maturity but a PRT maturity.

Q: To get it organized the right way and operating logistically.

A: Right.

Q: When you're determining where you might best make an impact, what are the factors you're weighing? I'm thinking, okay, AID has traditionally been involved in promoting democracy, local governance structures, women's rights, human rights on the political side, and then a lot of

economic development kinds of work. In Afghanistan, some of it is reconstruction. But what are your main efforts at this stage? Does it vary by PRT? I'm sure it does.

A: Again, this slide that I have will give you a good understanding of what we do. Only five percent of our total budget of the work is actually done at the PRT level. The vast bulk of the 95% is actually managed out of Kabul. We have very large national contracts that operate countrywide in several provinces. For example, our democracy and governance contracts operate all over the country because we're trying to promote those things. Our public health, maternal and child health contract, the Reach Project, operates in 13 provinces only because at the Consultative Group it was divided amongst various other donors; the World Bank is working in, I think, five or seven provinces, we are working in 13, the Japanese are working in X many other provinces, and thus the entire country is served. Our agriculture project is working in five or six of the heavily agrarian provinces. The Alternative Livelihoods Poppy Eradication Program is working in three of the main provinces where poppy is a problem. But those projects are handled out of the Kabul mission. Most of the people that are in the PRTs will interface very closely with the project. So, for example, the person who is the PRT representative in Jalalabad, Michelle Parker, will work very closely with the public health project representatives that are also working in Jalalabad. As she gets issues, she will forward them to those people for them to be dealing with. Michelle basically has final say over a lot of the activities that are going on in her province because she's on the ground and she knows. She has the wherewithal to find out exactly if there is a hepatitis outbreak in a certain district or whatever else it is.

Q: Okay. But in terms of budget decisions, they're made centrally with the input from the representatives in the different provinces.

A: Right. And all of our large contracts, probably 99% of all of our work, is done through a whole very long, drawn out procurement process that we're famous for -- putting out the RFP; getting three, four, five, six bids, with the technical evaluation panel making sure that they're appropriate. I can't think of anything offhand that was awarded in any other way.

Q: So you've been able to use your usual procurement process for Afghanistan.

A: Right.

Q: You mentioned the involvement of the World Bank and Japan and I'm sure a lot of other donor countries and NGOs. Has the Afghanistan experience been markedly different because of the large presence of the American military in terms of your AID cooperation with these other donors and with other groups?

A: That's a difficult question to answer. My immediate response is, no. It is pretty much business as usual. We have our contracts. We work directly with the NGOs. They go out and implement our programs. But in the early days, the NGOs were having issues with the military being on the ground. There were civil affairs teams (I believe that's what they were. Maybe they were Special Forces) that were dressing up in civilian clothes, but they were still packing weapons. They were doing development projects and the NGOs had an issue with that because they felt that that compromised their neutrality to have people that looked like civilians.

Q: And how did that play out?

A: The NGOs kept agitating to have this stopped. I believe that that actually was stopped. But over the course of time, the NGOs have learned to work with the PRTs. They understand that the PRTs aren't going away any time soon. The NGOs actively felt that having PRTs in the areas in which they worked was detrimental and counterproductive. They felt that the military should go out and try to get the bad guys and the evil doers and that the reconstruction, the rebuilding, should be left to USAID and our NGO counterparts. That didn't really happen. The military took on a lot of small scale spot reconstruction programs.

Q: And would you say that the NGOs have changed their mind?

A: I don't know that "changed their mind" would be the right word. It's more of a "learned to live with."

Q: And from your own point of view, do AID folks have a different view in terms of working with the military? They obviously are civilians as well and they're not necessarily accustomed to being part of a military unit.

A: I think our own sense of comfort with having even simple things like guns around gradually increased; for example, in the dining hall in Kabul, people would come from Washington and they would walk in and sit down and if they were there on TDY or something, there would always be a stash of guns there from the various Marines that were guarding the embassy that were also eating in the hall at the same time. It took people a while to get used to it, but then people didn't really bat an eyelid anymore. They just kind of developed a good rapport. In the early days, if there were Marines who were not on duty and we were leaving the compound, we would actually take them with us to say, "Hey, you're in Afghanistan and you're never going to get outside the four walls of the U.S. embassy compound unless some of us take an active role in trying to get you out and just show you what an amazing country Afghanistan is."

Q: This was in which timeframe?

A: This was 2002-2003. Then it stopped. We couldn't do it any more. But they really did enjoy it in the early days. For many people, many of the Marines who had never... I don't know of any Marines except for one who was originally from Brazil, had been back to Brazil several times.... None of them had ever left the United States. They were all 19, 20, 21, whatever. We felt that these are guys that feel like they're doing something important and they are. They're guarding us. They're keeping us safe. We wanted to see if we could return the favor by taking them around, at least showing them what Kabul is like and explaining the intricacies of Afghan culture. Maybe when some of them were done with the Marines they could go on to college and graduate school and perhaps even join the Foreign Service and it would start at that time because we were catalysts for that. Interviewee #9 is a former Marine and that's exactly what happened to him.

Q: Some years ago, I presume.

A: Oh, yes, several years ago. But he was a Marine, finished the Marine Corps, went to school.

Q: Of course, the timeframe that you're talking about – 2002-2003 – these were Marines who were attached to a PRT?

A: No, these were attached to the American embassy.

Q: The embassy in Kabul.

A: Right, but when we got out to the PRTs, we always had to take military shooters with us and so we would take them out on trips. Increasingly, that's been getting to be a little bit more complicated. In October, I took a GAO audit team to the PRT in Ghazni. We arrived in Ghazni with a team of eight shooters and a convoy of two vehicles. We got to Ghazni and we went out of town and the PRT commander gave us additional op armor. They have a mean looking cannon, if not some kind of heavy artillery.

Q: Most cannons don't look too friendly.

A: It swivels around on the top. So, we had four of those. Our convoy of two. But the four of those were filled with about 10 soldiers apiece. So we had 40 extra soldiers, two convoys of our own vehicles, and then two more vehicles of Afghan Militia Forces [AMF]. And there were 16 of them. Sixteen of them. Forty of the soldiers. So that's already 56. Plus eight more of the shooters that we brought down with us. So that's 66 right there.

Q: Right, and your party – that is, those who were not involved in defense....

A: Was just four. We had 66 people. And that doesn't really leave a light footprint, especially since it was in the middle of Ramadan. So we had gone to the village chief's house. He wanted to give us tea, coffee, whatever. And he offered us lunch, not realizing that parked right outside this compound was this whole fighting force. We said, "No, we can't do it." He said, "Yes, actually, you can eat lunch because you are travelers. You've just come from Kabul. Under the Hagib [phonetic], you are allowed to eat if you are a traveler during Ramadan." Okay, fine. What about those guys? He was just floored. He was like, "Oh, yes, I only have one goat that I can kill. It might not be able to feed all of those people."

Q: I suppose they had their MREs anyway.

A: They did have their MREs, but none of us chose to actually eat because we felt that if they couldn't be part of it, then we shouldn't really create a hierarchy.

Q: Right. I've lost track now. The purpose of the expedition was for you to go and visit the village chief?

A: The purpose was actually to take a look at a school and a clinic that we had built. So we showed up outside the school and the clinic, which were adjacent to each other, with this

expedition force. Instinctively, the women kind of pulled their burkhas just a little bit closer and the children just a little bit tighter. I saw this happen.

Q: I can picture it. It's what you would expect, sure. So this is part of the challenge of doing these reconstruction or development projects, to carry them out with an entourage which is pretty remarkable, daunting. One hopes that the situation will change.

The civil affairs, the military folks who were charged with doing civil affairs projects, did you have some experience working with them and was it an easy division of labor?

A: I've worked very closely with civil affairs at Central Command in Tampa.

Q: In conjunction with?

A: With Afghanistan. Many of them had actually been to Afghanistan and were coming back. But the one problem with the civil affairs people that I kept dealing with – and this might have been an anomaly – was that they didn't understand why development takes a very long time. They didn't understand why we didn't go in there, build a bunch of schools, train the teachers, build a bunch of hospitals, train the nurses, and leave. And the other pieces to that.... I'm also a public health person by background. So, it's fine to invest some money in bricks and mortar and to build the actual clinic. Training health workers takes a very long time. Doctors in this country have to go through four years of college and then four years of medical school, which is already eight years, before they're actually even licensed to dispense any kinds of drugs. Then they go on and specialize for at least two years at an internship followed by a specialized residency. So that's already 12 years right there. And they said, "Well, yes, but you can go ahead and train people. An RN degree only takes two years." True. But people who are RNs have already passed high school and they go on to community college to get an RN degree, and you're starting at a level where they've already had at least a high school education. The vast majority of Afghan women have not had a high school education. So, it's really hard to even start at that level. This was lost on a lot of people in Central Command.

Q: These folks at Central Command....

A: Had actually returned from a year in Afghanistan.

Q: Right. And the civil affairs function, is it reservists?

A: They are reservists. And this one person that I kept having ongoing dialogue with was a high school librarian. He said, "Well, you know, there's got to be a better way to do it. Why can't we just...." The need for a slow, methodical approach was not computed.

Q: And that was your experience there.

A: That was my experience there. Other places, I find civil affairs officers really do understand. I think it's just really the luck of the draw. It depends on whom you're working with.

Q: What their background happens to be. You mentioned some of them were reservists. Are some of them also active duty careerists?

A: Yes. Two weeks ago, we had a Major come by who was an active duty career civil affairs officer who was about to be deployed to Afghanistan for the third time. And she totally understood exactly what we were talking about. The common factor for both of these situations was that both of them had worked in Afghanistan and both of them were civil affairs officers. So, they don't quite get it across the board.

Q: Right. It's not a requirement for the job, as it might be if you were recruiting an AID contractor. You would expect someone to share the view that development takes a long time. . . Were there some circumstances where you thought that AID would have done a better job than the military in providing humanitarian assistance? I think that was one of the other areas they were involved in.

A: The first time the military was doing humanitarian assistance – and then to the best of my knowledge they pulled out – was right when the bombing started back in October/November of 2001. They were also dropping packets of MREs. They were yellow and had the directions in Spanish. The yellow packages looked very similar to some of the bombs that they had dropped. For some reason, they were yellow packages as well. I remember seeing somebody holding one up on C-SPAN. He was holding this up and said, "This is what we're distributing." Inside it had peanut butter and some other things. I don't think peanut butter is generally an Afghan concept. Plus, the directions were in Spanish, so they didn't really get it. A lot of those ended up coming to Kabul and were sold as souvenirs in some of the various grocery stores.

Q: To foreigners.

A: Yes. The going rate was \$40 a box.

Q: Wow. So we made some blatant errors initially in the humanitarian assistance arena. I guess, hopefully, the military learned from that experience and was able to do a little better later. Would you say that the level of resources that you have at your disposal, which sounds pretty important, are what you need and are adequate or is that an issue sometimes for supporting the PRTs?

A: Those are actually two different questions. I think what we have to work with for the PRTs is adequate. I think that what we have is adequate given what we are stating that we will do, but if there are other wish lists added to the smorgasbord of things that we're going to be doing or that we're currently doing, and this happens a lot, then our funding will have to increase as things are added to that list.

Q: What would you anticipate might be added? From what I've heard, the menu is already pretty extensive.

A: It is pretty extensive. Everybody wants. People want a medical school in Herat. People want all kinds of things: irrigation, structures here, there. I was talking with somebody who

wants our funding so that they can come up with a model village based on solar heating panels so that he can wire one village with the Internet to the world and then show the world that Afghanistan is actually a modern place, which is great, but it might be just a little bit too soon to be doing that.

Q: How do these ideas bubble up?

A: People call me.

Q: And these folks are people who are living here and have an Afghan interest?

A: I get calls from all over the world actually. I got a call from Australia yesterday with a similar question.

Q: I'm thinking that we do have these people on the ground who would be receiving ideas from the locality and those ideas could bubble up to be incorporated.

A: Right, and sometimes the ideas are really good. Yesterday, I got a request from somebody in Australia about what if we started to, since we have a counternarcotics problem, do controlled growth of opium for medical purposes? That's just a non-starter for a lot of different reasons. Somebody else who was a civil affairs officer came up with an idea of doing pisciculture in Afghanistan.

Q: Do they eat fish?

A: No, not to eat. For aquariums.

Q: They don't have aquariums either probably.

A: They don't, but for export. A great idea 10 years too soon.

Q: Well, people are generating ideas always. Can you think of any when you visited some of these PRTs where the PRT AID person had gotten an idea in a conversation with the local populace and it had then found its way into....

A: I'm sure I have tons of examples. I just can't think of one offhand.

Q: I would imagine you would.

A: I probably will think of one at 3:00 AM. I'll wake up and say, "Oh, that was one. Forgot about that."

Q: Well, we always give people a chance to come back with an important addition.

We haven't actually addressed rule of law at all. To what degree do you see the AID component working in police training, prison reform?

A: That's not us. I was a detail to INL.

Q: I know political officers are very much attuned to that. I don't know to what degree you are, but not at all, I guess.

A: We go to the meetings, we listen carefully, and that's about it.

Q: Okay. And how do you recruit folks for your AID slots in the PRTs?

A: We advertise internally and we get a lot of candidates. We've had other candidates that have shown up basically with development experience, with one of our other contractors or so, and have had good, solid experience. We've just picked them up.

Q: Do some of them have military experience?

A: Some do. The first deputy PRT coordinator used to be a Marine. There was a retired Foreign Service officer who's gone back out to Lashkar Gah, and he was a military officer. Another has done human rights law and abuse in Bosnia. Another officer is going to go out to our PRT and she's a rule of law adviser and decided that she wanted to go out and get a rural experience and decided that she's going to go to one of our PRTs.

Q: And she'll be asked to do what kinds of things?

A: Probably general stuff, but I'm sure she's going to have a rule of law focus in whatever she does. A USAID assistant desk officer is out at a PRT. Another USAID officer is now at another the PRT. An officer who works at one PRT used to work for a children's NGO and worked very closely with us there. He had expressed his interest with USAID. So we snatched him up just as quickly as could be. So, we've had really good success with recruitment.

Q: You're able to take people as contractors.

A: Right. PSCs (Personal Service Contracts).

Q: Based on their backgrounds. They don't have to become Foreign Service officers first and then AID officers.

Just to sum up, as you think about the PRTs – and coming back to what we said at the outset – there is the sense that this is unique in some ways in terms of our military and civilians working together.

A: It's a great way of doing business; it really is. It's a perfect opportunity to get the military more involved in doing development should we want to go down that path. It's a great way for people who would otherwise be stuck in Kabul to get out.

Q: And good for those young Marines to be exposed to the world in a much more realistic fashion. You mentioned a slide. Is that something you have ready to hand?

A: I do. It's at my desk. I'd have to print it out.

Q: okay.