

## USIP - ADST

### Afghanistan Experience Project

#### **Interview #50**

##### Executive Summary

The interviewee is a foreign national employed by the Berger Group, an international construction company that is working in Afghanistan. He is a veteran of the Special Forces in his home country and has worked in security and business administration for many years. He has been in a senior leadership position in Berger's security office in Kabul for about two years and plans to remain there for at least another year. He oversees a subcontracting security firm that provides security services for Berger at its work sites around Afghanistan. The security firm employs a couple dozen international employees and approximately 3,000 Afghan security guards who provide the physical security at Berger construction sites around the country.

The subject identified improvised explosive devices (IED's) hidden alongside or under the roads being reconstructed as the number one security issue for the company. Trained "sweepers" inspect all building sites several times each day, trying to detect explosive devices before they can be detonated. These crews do a good job. He mentioned only one case in which such an IED exploded killing and injuring construction crew members.

Almost all of Berger's projects are in remote rural areas, and before construction begins the project engineer contacts the local PRT to introduce himself and get a briefing on the local security situation. The interviewee thought highly of the PRT's, whether under U.S. or ISAF command, and found them to be indispensable in providing information and support to Berger's construction supervisors and security experts like himself. He emphasized the close collaboration between all elements of the reconstruction effort -- Afghans and international staff. His recommendation for enhancing PRT operations was to beef up the Team's personnel to include additional specialists (such as in security) in order to make the reconstruction effort even more effective.

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

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Interviewed by: Mike Anderson  
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*Q: Would you just give me a little background on yourself as to where you come from, what you're doing there?*

A: I originate from (foreign country). I've spent most of my time in Special Forces, then after that I was doing business management and development and now I'm in Afghanistan doing exactly what I was trained to do.

*Q: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what your job consists of there in Afghanistan?*

A: Yes, I'm working for a prime contractor and we do have subcontractors working for us providing security and I check the level of effort to ensure that the security provided is adequate and also do all daily reports, weekly reports, managing people from my office, in the field.

*Q: What kind of work does the company you're working for do? I mean what is it that you really are trying to provide security for?*

A: Well, we do mainly construction in Afghanistan in rehabilitating facilities that after the 25 years of the Russians have been here and the Taliban that's been here, that's our main focus is doing construction work.

*Q: What sort of security threats do you face there and if you could be specific, maybe cite a few instances of where you had to deal with the security problems?*

A: The biggest threat level where we encounter now is IEDs [improvised explosive devices] on the road. You've got your vehicle born IEDs, you've got your suicide bombers, different sides and different locations. We really encountered for the most part IEDs on the road which they leave you like pretty presents. Either you do a sweep at night and we do a sweep in the morning, but you still find those pretty presents that have been left for you.

*Q: So, in other words people come at night and bury these things or put them in some place where you can't see them readily and then they explode when your crews are working there?*

A: Normally what they do is they will either do it at night, late in the afternoon or early in the morning, but we do have sweep teams that go out early in the morning and at night. They either leave the IEDs in culverts or they bury them under the ground or alongside the road in ditches. Its just sometimes difficult to pick them up, but so far we've been lucky that our sweep teams are performing their job adequately.

*Q: So, you have not yet had an actual explosion where you've had to deal with casualties and so on?*

A: We use the local forces in Afghanistan and we had a couple of incidents where our two vehicles have been hit and we had casualties, but we took them to the hospital and we lost say maybe one, three or four people that was unfortunate.

*Q: In other words, it's a threat that you are constantly working on. It's obviously not one that you can totally overcome, but what are these sweeps that you use? What do they consist of? How do you go about that?*

A: We have vehicles that do the sweeps in the morning as I said before the work crews go out and those people check the road in normal soft-shell vehicles, but the people are trained to look in the culvert and clear the roads. We know where all the work crews are going to work the following day and those people perform those tasks. You just sometimes are lucky that nothing happens to you, but I have confidence in the people doing the sweeps in the morning and at night.

*Q: Are these the Afghan people that are doing the actual sweeping?*

A: That is correct, yes.

*Q: Okay. So, they're familiar with the terrain usually and they can detect something if it is out of the ordinary.*

A: You normally work with dust roads, not really solid roads, but they come from the area so they know what the roads look like if there's been tampering with the road. We've got expert security coordinators on the ground who are fairly experienced as well and they just render that little bit more assistance and keep training and teaching them what to look for as well. The normal IEDs that they use in Afghanistan is your improvised devices which have been here for 25 years, so they are not using any new kind of IEDs, they use what they actually got in Afghanistan and its pretty much predictable.

*Q: Okay. Do you ever have contact with the provincial reconstruction team offices there where you're construction is going on?*

A: In every location that we work there are 18 established PRT teams in every province that we work. So, our main focus is before we start the construction site, before we do

any sort of surveying of the road that we're going to build, we go to the PRTs. We introduce ourselves, make contact with them and it's worked up to now. They render us assistance. They come to our campsites. They do normal patrols and they provide information. If you do not establish a contact with the PRT you'll be in the dark.

*Q: What sort of information, I mean, what is the effect shall we say of making contact. You say you'll be in the dark. Are they sharing intelligence with you or what?*

A: Once we put our resident engineers on the construction site, which will then manage the construction camp, his first line of contact is with the PRTs. So, he is onsite everyday, 24/7. He needs to have those lines of communications set up with the PRT, what they actually do is for the normal day to day operational stuff and also they go and visit at least once a week. Our security coordinators do basically the same. They don't share intelligence, but they will share information.

*Q: Okay, yes, that's what I mean. If there's a threat in the area, they're usually a pretty good source of information about it?*

A: Yes, that's normally. We have the communications set up either by cell phone if it works in the area or via the \_satellite phone or via radios. So, that works perfect.

*Q: Okay. Then you're constructing mainly roads and that probably puts you out, that is to say the people who are working for you are out in the countryside, is that right or do you do work in urban areas as well?*

A: We normally work on the remote sites out in Afghanistan so that puts us fairly out in the remote areas. The urban areas we're not really into rebuilding that, but our construction sites are mostly on the remote sites.

*Q: You're recruiting people from the local area to actually do the construction work and also to provide security. Is that how it works?*

A: Just rephrase that question to me again.

*Q: Well, I'm wondering if the workers who are working on the project, doing the actual construction work are also from the immediate vicinity, is that how it works?*

A: Yes, normally you do have tribal areas in Afghanistan, so you really need to use your immediate people from the area. If you take Kabul and you put those people working maybe in the north, there is a tribal dispute and those people will not get along with the local villages, so you tend to use the immediate people, which know the area for you.

*Q: Can you tell me how the company goes about hiring people or who do they contact to find workers?*

A: Well, security is being controlled by the ministry of interior.

*Q: In other words, if you want to hire somebody, you go to the ministry of interior and they then send people to you? Is that how it works?*

A: That is correct. Everybody is assigned by the ministry of interior either as a general commander for specific regions and he has troops assigned to him as well. Once you approach the MOI, they will activate the commander and he will activate his troops in the immediate area, which is assigned to him.

*Q: It appears that the people who are working for you could actually be part of the security threat. In other words they might actually have guerrilla ties. Do you have to look at these people? How do you clear them? Is that something again the ministry of interior does?*

A: That is correct. They all need to be vetted by the MOI before we actually take them on.

*Q: The first selection of people who are going to work on your projects is done by the Afghan government basically?*

A: That's correct, on the security level, yes. On the construction level its mainly unskilled local villagers that you use on your construction sites which provides them with income for their families and then all the contractors or subcontractors are international.

*Q: Okay and so I was thinking of the workers themselves on the site, how are they hired? Who decides who is going to get a job?*

A: That's the subcontractor who employs them and they also are all being vetted through them. It is a system that exists in the camp that they've got some sort of a hiring board that they use unskilled labor for the roads or wherever they actually need them.

*Q: What I was thinking is there some kind of a traditional tribal leader there of some sort and that individual will say, you, you and you go work on the road or does everybody have an equal chance to apply for a job?*

A: The local villages where the tribal areas exist, they do have elders and they do have community people so you actually have to approach the elders. They know everybody in the village and everybody gets a fair chance and an equal opportunity as well, but you need to approach the right people in the village. You cannot just go into the village and say I need you and you and you, but you need to speak to the district commissioner, speak to the elders, speak to the governor and he will have his people assigned to you.

*Q: Do you in your job have contact with the people like that or is that something that's handled by the security subcontractors?*

A: Mainly by the security subcontractor, but I normally go out once a month and

establish contact with the governor himself.

*Q: The governor. Now, are the security subcontractors themselves international companies of some sort or are they Afghan companies or what are they?*

A: They're internationally based, but the biggest employment factor is local Afghans.

*Q: I see. Well, this seems to work pretty well then. You've found that you've had pretty good success with your security and maintaining these kinds of structures in place?*

A: I certainly agree with that statement, yes and I would say its working well for us.

*Q: We just had this election here last Sunday. Did you notice, did this have any effect on your operations there? I guess you probably had to call the day a holiday anyhow for the election, but what else would you say is the effect of that?*

A: We just called the election day a holiday to give the Afghan people working for us the chance to go and vote and surprisingly enough that was a fairly quiet day. I think over 50% of the people that was registered went to vote and surprisingly as I said there were few incidents.

*Q: Yes, very quiet, well, that's good news certainly. You work with the ministry of interior, you work with the PRT, sometimes you work with the local tribal chiefs and so on if they are there, how does it differ in different parts of the country? Are your operations are all over Afghanistan or concentrated in one part?*

A: We're situated all over Afghanistan, north, west, east and south.

*Q: In some places you say you have to deal more with the tribal leaders and others you don't? Is there some places that are more, let's say tribal and others that are less so?*

A: If you take the map of Afghanistan it's been divided into 34 provinces and every province has got its different tribal attitude and different tribal leaders. So, every province you work in is a different approach.

*Q: When you start let's say working in a place you haven't worked before, how would you go about getting started and getting your construction and your security in place?*

A: Our first contact is establishing whether there is a PRT in the area. We will then contact the governor, the elders, the village people, district commissioners, the local police chiefs and we will go and sit down with them and discuss whatever we need to do.

*Q: So, you say if there is a PRT in the area, so you have worked in areas where there are not PRTs?*

A: Every area that we work in there is a PRT established.

*Q: Oh, there is, okay. That would be one of your initial points of contact. How do they differ? I guess some PRTs are more security oriented, others seem to have more of a reconstruction orientation. Do you notice any difference in the way they operate?*

A: Not particularly, no. We do have U.S. military PRTs and then we've got Swiss PRTs, Italian PRTs, and so on.. So basically they work on the same page because they have projects to complete in the province that they are situated in and basically what we construct is first on the agenda for them so they can move about in the province much quicker.

*Q: The funding for the projects that your company does, is that coming directly from the Afghan government or does some of it come from the PRTs, how does that work?*

A: Most of our funding is from donor money.

*Q: Is from where?*

A: From donor money.

*Q: Donor, donor, I'm sorry. I didn't hear that. In other words the donor could be a government, it could be a private, like a world bank or something like that?*

A: That is correct, yes.

*Q: Now, your projects are they strictly let's say for the government, you get donor money, do you find for instance that sometimes you might be working on a project that's funded by AID or World Bank or something like that and you would have to work with their security people and their bureaucracy?*

A: We've got really one security provider and the money is all funded by USAID.

*Q: Oh, for the security is by USAID?*

A: That's correct, yes.

*Q: It doesn't matter whether the project itself is funded by somebody else, but the security money is actually USAID?*

A: Yes, our whole project is put together under a certain contract number which money has been donated to USAID. We work under their umbrella so our security provider has been selected; this has been done previously two and a half years back, so that's the people that we stick with. Money has not been donated by the World Bank in our particular contract as such.

*Q: The security providers, how many international and how many Afghan employees*

*does that organization have?*

A: I would say about 29 internationals and maybe close to 3,000 local.

*Q: Okay. So, your contact is primarily then with the international employees of the subcontractors, is that right?*

A: That is correct, yes, I provide the guidance to their commanders and to their local troops, but that's your first line of contact, yes.

*Q: Does this subcontractor also do security work for other builders or other contracting companies or is it exclusively for your company?*

A: No, they do have other clients in Afghanistan as well.

*Q, Is there a kind of training program of some sort that they use to turn these individuals into effective security officers?*

A: Normally the international security coordinators on every site will have its own orientation and awareness course. As they move along they will orientate them as needed for specific tasks. It stays an ongoing thing until the construction is completed.

*Q: Okay. What would you say has been your biggest challenge there in terms of dealing with the security situation? Anything stand out?*

A: Yes, the biggest challenge is conquering whatever we set out to do and that's the construction. It's sometimes difficult and we work in very hostile environments in some instances. What stands out for us is the partnership that we have from our level here in Kabul down to our remote sites and the camaraderie and the family that we try to keep everybody safe and send them back home with photographs and say this is what I did. This is what we set out to achieve and this is what we're going to do.

*Q: Okay, good. How long have you been there now?*

A: It's been close to two years now.

*Q: Close to two years. So, you may remain there for some bit longer or how do you foresee the future?*

A: Futurewise, I might stay on, it depends on if something else comes up in another country, but I would like to see this contract be complete and finalized, lock the doors and walk away and say well, this is what we achieved and then go to a new project hopefully and start all over again.

*Q: Is there in fact sort of an end point to the projects that you're working on that you're involved in there? I mean do you have a kind of, if you could say, well, we're at 80%*



*there or 60% there is this something that they add new projects or try to get new projects every year?*

A: The project we're working on has got set dates. They've got construction schedules and we need to comply with that. Nothing has been added to our existing contract. That should be a new bid on the ground that comes out with a new contractor. Ours is pretty much set on every construction site that you've got a set date on construction schedules and you have to finish it within that period of time.

*Q: Would you say that changes in the political system there, I mean the election of the Loya Jirga and the passage of the constitution and the election of a president and now the election of a parliament. Do you find that these have changed in some way the context in which you're working I mean in terms of the people you're dealing with and the governors and so on? Has that made an impact?*

A: Very much.

*Q: How would you characterize it?*

A: Very much, Mike, I can see the change and if you speak to the people visiting the different provinces and how they're sick and tired of these constant incidents that happens and people that you're looking at a 20% population group that is against whatever stands for Afghanistan. People are just tired. They want peace. They want prosperity. You can see some changes. The election on last Sunday went off peacefully. The count should be finalized by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October. We should have our first parliamentary session on 22<sup>nd</sup> December. I just feel you know speaking and seeing the people and construction going on even in the mud town of Kabul is that people realize that we need to look after ourselves and step toward democracy and build up what we lost in the last 25 years.

*Q: We're really focusing on the provincial team concept. If it was up to you, how would you change it? How would you make these reconstruction teams better if you could fix them in some way?*

A: Pretty much the PRTs which are now in place, you know, if they can staff up a little bit more and achieve a little bit more because of manpower. What they set out to do and they schedule on small projects is working well I must say and I congratulate them for that and the working ways between the coalition forces and the U.S. military on different levels of nationalities is working perfect. We had problems in the beginning with communications, but that's been sorted out and everybody's on the same page. Everybody is speaking to each other. You get the same camaraderie if you go to an Italian base or if you go to a U.S. base or to a Swiss base or to a Canadian base. I just think they've done a hell of a good job. If there could be more money for them and expand the operations, it should be better.

[END SIDE] [END TAPE] [END INTERVIEW]