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Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #37 Executive Summary

The interviewee served as one of two civilian political advisors to the Deputy Commander in CFC (Combined Forces Command) Alpha, based in Kabul, from October, 2004 through May, 2005. She attended weekly PRT working group and monthly PRT Executive Steering Committee meetings. She visited several PRTs, giving her first-hand knowledge of a variety of PRTs: multinational, coalition and U.S.-led.

In her view, the presence of multi-agency representatives (e.g. USAID, State, USDA and their equivalents from other governments) as integral parts of the PRT is very important, particularly in order to accomplish the economic development mission of the PRTs. In this regard, the interviewee praises the availability of CERP (Commander Emergency Response Program) funds in U.S. PRTs, significant resources which when properly targeted made a big difference. At the same time, several of the experiences she described show the enormity of the task in Afghanistan, where "institutions are very broken" and "corruption is rife, as is incompetence." Her description of her visit to a district chief of police in Kandahar province is a good case in point.

In contrasting the different nationally-led PRTs, she stresses that the primary differences stem from the varying degrees of flexibility given the local commander and the security restrictions imposed by some countries - notably Germany- on their forces. The interviewee notes also that the interdependence between economic development and security is well understood not only by the top military commanders, but also by the civil affairs officers on the ground. She praises the overall competency and contributions made by the Afghan Ministry of Interior officials assigned and integrated within each PRT.

During the period she was in Afghanistan, she notes that one accomplishment of the PRT Steering Committee and working group was to more precisely define the measures of success, which would then be able to serve as mileposts for all the PRTs. She also provides examples of PRT effectiveness, as in lending "teeth" to an Afghan operation to remove a corrupt official by moral suasion. Her visit to the Kandahar Ulema Council, an unusually high-tech operation with the "mullahs on-line" providing answers to queries, is another example of PRT effective engagement with an influential sector of society outside the formal government structure.

In sum, this interviewee believes the PRTs are accomplishing their mission and that they "give you a lot of bang for your buck." At the same time, she explained that the PRTs are a small part of the overall operation in Afghanistan, such that if more resources were available, it would be very worthwhile to create additional PRTs to serve those numerous areas where no international forces have as yet gone.

United States Institute of Peace
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Afghanistan Experience Project

INTERVIEW #37

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Q: When were you in Afghanistan and what was your role?

A: I was in Afghanistan from the end of October 2004 until the end of May 2005 as one of two political advisors in CFC Alpha, or Combined Forces Command, based in Kabul.

Q: I know that a portion of your mission was to provide advice on the PRTs and the PRT is the theme of our project, so let me ask you in what regard you had some experience with the PRTs.

A: My main role was providing political advice to the deputy commander, but I also helped provide a civilian view into military planning. It was in this context that I was one of the CFC Alpha people attending the weekly PRT working groups and the monthly PRT Executive Steering Committee meeting while I was part of the Secretariat. I also have visited Mazar-e Sharif PRT and Kandahar PRT and actually stayed for a few days and went on a few operations with them. I've made shorter visits to Herat, Sharana, Helmand, and Bamian PRTs, so both coalition and ISAF, multinational and U.S.-led.

Q: Okay. It would be useful to know what differences you see in terms of organization of the PRTs and the leadership. In other words, I know they're under different national commands. To what extent does that make a difference in how they operate and in how effective they are? The first question might be, to what extent do the PRTs have the same mission? And if they have the same general mission, what is that mission?

A: They do have pretty much the same mission. It is to contribute to the stabilization of Afghanistan. I haven't got that in front of me and I can't remember the exact words. But you could probably get that.

Q: It's interesting. I ask most people to articulate it because there are subtle differences in emphasis and in perhaps how they have internalized it. There is a kind of catechismic rendition of the PRT mission, which is to extend the reach of the central government, to provide stability, and to build progress in democracy, in human rights, and in women's rights, as well as to provide stability and economic reconstruction and development. All of that is quite ambitious. I think the different PRTs have placed emphasis on different aspects of that depending on their local conditions.

A: I certainly haven't seen a mission statement that referred in such detail to democracy, human rights, women's rights, etc. But the point about being a stabilizing influence and a stabilizing force and extending the reach of the Afghan government I think is common to PRTs.

Q: Okay. You spent a fair amount of time visiting PRTs. As you did so, what observations could you make about their activities and let's say the relative success of their activities?

A: I'd like to make some general observations first. PRTs are all different but at the same time have lots in common. They all have a very similar, if not identical, mission, slightly different resource levels in order to achieve that mission. They also are in different provinces. The provinces of Afghanistan are all different. The geography is different. The circumstances are different. The level of the threat is different. That's why you see differences in the way PRTs are having to operate, to adapt to the local circumstances. Quite rightly, they do that. The core activities of the PRT are similar across the piece. All the PRTs seek to engage with the local authorities, starting with the provincial governor and the provincial chief of police and then moving out and working at district level, extending or assisting in trying to mentor the government authorities in extending their reach out into those district levels. They face a number of common challenges such as the lack of institutional capability across the piece in government and in particular in the security sector. All of the PRTs I visited were involved in mentoring and assisting the police in some form or another. The U.S. PRTs typically have quite a lot of CERP funding [Commander Emergency Response Program], which is quite significant - sums up to several million dollars in some cases - to spend on reconstruction projects. Other non-U.S. nations may not have that kind of funding, but there are still central programs that may be inactive in provinces. But a commander with lots of money can make quite a big difference in reconstruction if it's appropriately targeted. One of the things I think is an enormous positive development is the creation of multiagency PRTs, multinational as well, but having USAID or their equivalent development experts placed in PRTs and working alongside the commander with U.S. Department of State or other foreign service officers into a sort of triumvirate that can really provide some smart progress towards what the province needs. I would caveat that by saying that the scale of the task in Afghanistan is just enormous. The institutions really are very broken. Corruption is rife, as is incompetence. And this is across the piece to a greater or lesser extent. The PRTs have to, by virtue of their mission, work with what they've got by way of officials. They do lobby hard to remove corruption where they can, but there is an element of pragmatism there as well.

Q: You mentioned that it seemed a good idea to have USAID and Department of State officials and their international counterparts attached to the PRTs. Was that a principle that was difficult to establish or that had long debate concerning it? It seems pretty natural to me, and I've heard people speak positively of it, but I don't know if it was difficult to institute.

A: It's not without precedent, but having a common formula for a PRT... I think Afghanistan is the first time that this is now becoming a norm. This actually is the norm. I don't think I did see a single PRT that wasn't multiagency in that way. Inevitably, it brings its difficulties about who is in overall command. The answer to that was that the military commander would be in overall command for security purposes. The other agencies need to work with the commander for the PRT efforts as a whole, but they do have separate reporting chains of command, so there are

administrative things that need to be put in place to make sure that that triumvirate is as effective as it can be. Of course, at the end of the day, it comes down to the personalities of the individuals. But most of the PRTs – or all of the PRTs I visited – definitely benefited from working together, and they were. Every PRT where I visited had those in place before I arrived, so I can't really comment on the process of establishing it in the first place.

Q: Regarding these multinational commands of the PRTs... There is interest in knowing if there is any perceptible difference, if nations have a particular stamp on their PRT, that would be for better or for worse. Are you able to make any distinctions between an Italian PRT, an American PRT, a British PRT, and how they go about their mission?

A: I think there are differences. There is a cultural difference and that affects the flavor of things. But probably what makes more difference on the ground are the restrictions imposed by certain nations. All nations have some restrictions. Some nations have more than others in terms of what they'll let their PRT, military - and hence that includes the civilians – get up to. So, various nations with the fewest caveats – and I include the Americans and the British in this – are able to be that much more flexible in terms of what they can get out and do, who they can engage with, where they make their judgments about risk (i.e., with the local commander) about whether it's safe or not to go out to a relatively remote district, have a safe house perhaps, stay out overnight, or if they're confined geographically into how far... If you can only go a day's drive from your PRT base and you can't stay out overnight, then inevitably, you're constrained to a half-day's drive radius around that base. It does depend on the security situation in the province as well. So, I think the security restrictions imposed by countries have more effect than the different cultures. Having said that, the PRTs I got to know well were British, American, and New Zealand, and so I really am not in a position to comment on Italian, Dutch, German, etc.

Q: Right. I think that's a good point that there are differences and that each nation obviously has some decision-making power about the restrictions they put on their personnel (I guess that would be the way to think of it), yet if I understood you correctly, some PRTs might be rather multinational at one and the same time.

A: Yes. This is hearsay. I haven't been to Kandoz. But my understanding is that the Danes operate with the Germans there and the Germans are hugely constrained by their parliament in a way that the Danes aren't. So even within the one PRT, you can have the Danish guys going out overnight on what they call "MOPS" [military observation teams], typically at least a two-vehicle convoy with a team, with its own organic force protection, whereas the Germans aren't allowed to do that. You can imagine that makes a big impact on what you can do and where you can do it almost more than back at the home base town, where any nation can engage and hence do. There has been criticism of the Germans and their approach, some of it fair and some of it is exaggerated, I think.

Q: Criticism by... I was going to say, I don't read about it in the media. It's criticism from whom?

A: Criticism by other nations of this German approach.

Q: I see. Okay. Sure, well, whenever there's a difference, someone will have another opinion. That's normal. So you were involved in quite a bit of travel to the PRTs as part of your job there to see how they were functioning, is that right?

A: A bit. The visits I made to Herat, Sharana, and Helmand were accompanying the General I work for on a visit to the troops to find out how things were going on the ground and so forth. The visits I made to Kandahar and Mazar-e Sharif I made on my own. In that case, I was able to sit there for a few days and actually accompany the top Department of State rep to some meetings, to get out on patrol with the MOPS, and to see a project that they had initiated, and so forth.

Q: This presumably helped you in advising the deputy commander to have this firsthand knowledge of what was going on in the PRTs.

A: Afghanistan is just a very big country and very remote and difficult to get to. So we have to trust our commanders on the ground to make sensible judgments to further the mission that essentially President Karzai wants done in extending the reach of the central government and kind of growing a country, nation building. The military communications are fine and effective, but a headquarters like CFC Alpha should rightly not be interested in the ins and outs and day to day workings of the PRTs. But nonetheless, it's really important that we understand at the center, in Kabul, the sorts of constraints and difficulties that the PRTs are facing. When I was staying in Kandahar, I went down with one of the teams, with a civil affairs team, commanded by a military civil affairs team leader with American infantry force protection. We went down to Spin Buldak (PH), a border town with Pakistan, to view some of the projects that they were working on, which were mainly refurbishing police and customs police stations. We visited a project in progress and looked at the area... The part of the building they hadn't started on was leaky, falling apart, dirty, didn't have proper sanitation, didn't have a kitchen. It was just like a mud building basically. The bit that they had refurbished was providing some office accommodation and some sleeping accommodation and they had created a bathroom.

Q: Where there hadn't been one before, I guess.

A: Right. Exactly. That was a very practical look at giving the police a bit of pride. They had also given them some uniforms. They're providing the communications equipment and some vehicles so they can actually get out and do their job. Now, we had a meeting with the district chief of police, who was relatively newly appointed. Nonetheless, he was sat (sic) on his sofa in his office... Most Afghans' offices have a desk, but they also have a kind of sofa and coffee table area where they entertain guests... This chap was sat on his sofa right away before we called and there wasn't a scrap of paper on his desk. I really would not have been surprised to find that he was completely illiterate. He didn't have a uniform done up. He looked extremely scruffy. He really didn't know... He wasn't on top of his brief. When you asked him, "What are the main challenges you face in policing this area," really asking him some relatively non-threatening questions, he just really wasn't able to answer them. And it's always difficult working in a second language via interpreters. Nonetheless, the incompetence... And I have no evidence that this guy was corrupt as well, but he was clearly incompetent. And the PRTs have to work with people like that. It's such a slow process to talk about how the values and standards

of policing and security sector reform that Afghanistan needs, but working from such a low baseline. Many of the commanders in the police and in the customs police are linked to militia commanders, formally or informally. And Afghanistan has been so at war (years of war), all the kind of structures and institutions are broken, and everything is linked by tribal or family connections or even just militia connections from that time of fighting. Working within that kind of environment is really challenging. You need the patience of the civil affairs team in working with this policeman and also the contractors that they've employed, so there isn't really much of an industry. It's very difficult and they're working hard to create a little building industry for that area and giving local firms the opportunity to do this work, which puts money directly into the economy, but at the same time looking to help them with... They don't know what project management is. Everything runs on. A bit "manana." "Couldn't do it, it was Ramadan," that kind of thing. So it was enormously challenging.

Q: The development angle to any of these projects is probably not the principal reason they're being undertaken.

A: You mean development in terms of-

Q: In terms of economic development. At least I've come to conclude that, yes, if we make a contribution to the economic development of the country, that's very good and desirable, but we're trying primarily to show that a central government can work to their advantage and that when folks come out from Kabul they achieve positive results for the people in the area. So even a minor incremental improvement in the police station, if you will, would make a positive impression even though we all know that what they had was pretty terrible and what they're left with isn't so great, but it's just incrementally better than what they had.

A: Yes. The challenge they face is that you can take all these little steps but you have to deliver real improvement. I disagree that economic development is not one of the aims. It may not be the primary aim, but given the choice... When you hear this from General Eichenberry right down to the civil affairs chap on the ground who's been talking to his development advisor – let's do things the right way; let every dollar we spend and let all our time be working on developing Afghan capacity across the piece. All of the military at every rank would draw you the diagram about security and economic growth. Then the circle goes from one to the other to the other, showing how closely dependent they are. Unless they can set the conditions for economic growth, you'll never get the stability. It was really good to see how the military completely understood that.

Q: Yes. I'm reminded though, the U.S. was doing economic development in Afghanistan in the early '70s, of course, well before the most recent 25 years of war, and we didn't exactly finish that job. Obviously, it wasn't the top priority at that time perhaps either. But I realize that economic development is, let's say, a process of maybe at least three generations, so 60 years if everything's going smoothly. Then when you have a war, you're looking at a very long commitment. So it is important how we define our objectives so we can measure our success accordingly.

A: Right. The latter is really difficult. One of the things that the PRT working groups were working on were measures of success. How can we actually tell what is making a difference in order to get smarter about how to get the best bang for your effort.

Q: That's a very nice topic. Tell a little more about what you were doing in that forum.

A: Well, I don't know where the work's got to because it was a work in progress, but the coalition forces and ISAF forces were trying to work together to agree on strategic objectives, the end state, that they were all aiming for. I have to say, there was general agreement. You might disagree with a word here or there because of course all these things have to then be staffed through diplomatic channels, such is the fate of NATO operations. But the agreement on what we were trying to achieve was relatively easy to come by. The next step was to say, what are our milestones on the way? What are the steps? So, for example, if you want a province which is entirely run by Afghans with fully functioning institutions, if that is your end state, a milestone on the way might be a full complement of police. They've got the right number of police, that they are trained, exercised, and capable. So there are a number of interim markings. They were agreeing on that. Then in terms of measures of success, this is where I left and they were working on defining exactly what that would mean. The idea being that if we could agree on a common view of what that would be, then PRTs would be able to learn from each other in a way that is quite difficult for them because they are pretty geographically isolated. Commanders do facilitate conferences for PRT commanders to come in and exchange experiences. Of course, they do get lots of visits. But the more we can do of that, the better.

Q: Right. A particular PRT commander is going to be involved in his PRT for a year, is that right?

A: Yes. It's less for some nations. The Americans do a year. The Brits only do six months. Most nations... I don't think anyone does longer. But the development reps. and Department of State reps. might do longer. But say about a year.

Q: Do you see that as something of an impediment? It's realistic, the amount, but...

A: It happens right across the piece. People in embassies are turning over. People in the normal conventional troops are turning over. UN forces are turning over. And of course the poor old Afghans, who are there for the duration, of course are constantly having to brief in a new set of people. It's always going to be a problem. But you can take measures to mitigate it as far as possible. So, a good handover period, having plans and a common understanding of end states and objectives and work plans and planning for that sort of continuity can make it a lot easier.

Q: Was your group involved at all in developing – I'll call it a "PRT manual," which I understand there is not such a thing, where individuals could refer to this and get a good idea of what was going to be expected of them? Maybe they did all that before they even set foot in Afghanistan.

A: There is a PRT manual and it was created by ISAF, the NATO force, but it has been adopted and disseminated to a certain extent by the coalition. It contains a number of annexes of bits of

guidance that have been put together and agreed at the high level on how PRTs should cooperate, for example, with the counternarcotics effort.

Q: Does it also describe how to go about cooperating with your local governor or working with the local governor?

A: Yes. I mean, there is guidance there of a general nature, cognizant of the need that you need to develop specific relationships with the specific situation. It's not the same across Afghanistan. Some governors are largely absent, for example.

Q: And how about the local militia leader, the local warlords? I don't know that there is a prescription for that either, but I guess there must be...

A: There definitely isn't. This is where PRTs have to basically tread a very fine line. Once they have troops for force protection, they are not a war fighting outfit, they are not equipped to engage with Taliban or any other insurgents, nor are they equipped to take on a warlord. So they have to rely on powers of persuasion.

Q: Yes. Have you seen how that works in practice? I have heard some rather nice examples where the local warlord – and I have trouble quite imagining this individual – sounds like he's become a diplomat after many years.

A: Are you thinking of Dostam?

Q: Well, you know, that's who I was thinking of, but I wasn't going to say that.

A: Yes. I don't know how much the PRT directly were part of that persuasion. But certainly the PRT in Mazar is a classic example of a PRT with military force protection that has to tread that line very carefully. They've got a number of competing warlords up there. I think that they've engaged really successfully with them in brokering ceasefires in some cases, fighting in Fariah (PH) province. Twice they've had to do that. In not refusing to speak to Dostam at all but engaging him in a way that "You understand why we're here and this is our mission and this is what we're doing," taking quite a robust line. There was an example of one of Dostam's men who was up at the border crossing point in the north, Heratan (PH), and the PRT went along with the government officials to lend credibility to the removal of this corrupt official, which was done. It took several days, I might add, of negotiations, but they definitely played a real positive role there.

Q: How did that actually play out? You have a group of PRT... These were PRT civilian affairs people?

A: Not in this case. The British forces don't have any civil affairs specialists.

Q: So it was British forces, but not from the PRT then.

A: Yes, they were. They were the PRT. There was the PRT commander (He took his foreign office representative) and a force protection team. It was quite a small group.

Q: Were you part of that group?

A: No, I wasn't there.

Q: So the group went up and met with the official and had dialogue for several days, in the course of which the official was persuaded that he had a new job elsewhere?

A: Not quite. As far as I know, the group went up with – I'm not sure if it was the provincial governor or the district governor, but they went up with the governor and it was the governor who had said, "This official has to go." They were working with the police chief. The Afghans did the negotiations. The PRT contributed their teeth to it.

Q: Which was kind of a moral suasion piece?

A: Yes, absolutely. That is exactly what they were doing.

Q: It sounds like a vignette or maybe an anecdote, but actually it can be revelatory of just how local government institutions are taking shape in this amorphous framework, ...

A: And also how exposed PRTs are.

Q: Indeed. It's not clear-cut that, okay, that's what their mission should be or on their to do list for a given day, but I guess it falls to them according to what the commander decides.

A: Yes.

Q: Very interesting. Now back to some overarching aspects which you might have been involved in in terms of funding. The question always comes up, are the resources adequate for the mission? The missions vary a lot, but you did allude to the CERP funds. In general terms, how would you evaluate the adequacy of resources available to the PRTs?

A: I would say that they are pretty light. There are two arguments here. One is more the British policy, which is that PRTs are there as a stabilizing influence, they are not there to do the reconstruction. That is for the ground people to do. So they don't give more than just a very small amount of money to the PRT. Nonetheless, the PRTs have been praised on many occasions for being one of the most effective in the work that they do. Another view is that the PRTs are there and they can do an awful lot of good by spending dollars on worthy projects and do a lot of good that way. I have to say, I've seen examples of both. It's difficult to say for sure. I think as long as the projects are advised by a development advisor, somebody who really knows that it's important not to just build the clinic but think about its staffing and medical supplies and its sustainability and all the right questions, then it doesn't really matter that much about the boundaries.

Q: It does raise the question, what about those areas where the development advisors cannot be? It logically falls to-

A: PRTs do try and have access to a development advisor, even if they're not co-located. I think most of them have that. So that also makes it more difficult if you are sharing your development advisor with another PRT. But nonetheless, it's important. It's critical. But in terms of resources, PRTs are very light and they do not cover that much of the geography. Afghanistan has vast tracts of little valleys with desperately poor people who haven't seen any international forces at all, except perhaps some have flown over. It's a huge country and PRTs are very small. So, if you had more resources, I'd create more PRTs rather than bulk up the existing ones.

Q: Okay. That's a nice point. I will put this in the context that the AID people have said that support for PRTs represents five percent of their Afghan budget. I realize AID in any case is not putting its eggs in the PRT basket. It so happens that PRTs are our focus, so we're not concerned about the 95% perhaps. But when you say that it would be a smart move to create more smaller PRTs, I think that's a valid-

A: Not smaller, but more of the existing kind.

Q: Not smaller than they are, but more PRTs which happen to be smaller than large forces in these valleys.

A: Smart PRT commanders know what USAID programs are going on in their area, whether they be national programs. They know what NGO programs are going on in their area. They leverage that to fill a niche. Nearly all the PRTs in some form or another have been working with the governors to try and get them to create a plan for their province which looks at the development priorities – who is doing what. There is an effort going on in the center, in Kabul, amongst the ministries to do that and to essentially create a normal financial planning process and an overarching development strategy, but most PRTs were encouraging governors to do that. In the first days, what's the plan? What are you talking about? Governors more or less are heading in that direction.

Q: Right. Okay. You mentioned that you attend monthly Secretariat meetings?

A: The PRT ESC [Executive Steering Committee] is chaired jointly by the ministry of interior and General Eichenberry. It may be that COMISAF – Commander of ISAF forces is a third chair. I'd have to check. But the minister of interior chairs the monthly meetings essentially with one commander sat on each side of him. In attendance are quite often the minister for rural development, the minister of reconstruction and rural development, and the minister of finance, maybe other developmental-focused ministers, and the ambassadors from the primary PRT contributing nations – represented the U.S. ambassador, the British ambassador, the German ambassador, the Thai ambassador, and so on and so forth – plus people like the Japanese ambassador, and lead nation ambassadors, which may or may not be the same. That meeting takes place monthly in order to look at PRT policy guidance across the piece. This is where the multinationality thing basically has to tailor in with what the Afghan government wants.

Q: Well, that's a good thing actually.

A: Yes. It's a forum basically where they can discuss issues relating to PRTs across the board.

Q: Right, because the Afghans of course don't have representatives in PRTs.

A: They do. It's not all PRTs, but the vast majority of them have a representative from the ministry of interior.

Q: How does that look actually?

A: There's a chap called General Patang, who is a General in the Ministry of Interior with responsibility for PRTs and it's his responsibility to find suitably senior competent MOI officials who can work in those PRTs. They normally have their own office. They'll be part of the routine of the PRT in consultation in terms of security sector reform.

Q: Okay, well, that's new. I have not yet encountered anyone to tell me that there was an Afghan rep., although in my general description, there is provision for something like that. It seems like a good thing that they should have them. You're saying that in principle they are represented in virtually all of them.

A: Yes. In actuality, they are-

Q: And in fact you've seen them.

A: In principle, they should be in all of them.

Q: Yes. Well, I will ask more pointedly in the future because it hasn't come to light up until now.

A: I have to say, they are somewhat of a mixed bag. It's an ongoing process of work to A) fund them – not a problem for the Americans, but quite a problem for some of the nations, to include them, which is a security and force protection issue, to accommodate them appropriately, to factor them into operations, to make sure that they are of sufficiently high quality to be a general good contributor. I've come across... The Kandahar PRT, it just so happened I went and visited during a Muslim festival, which was kind of stupid-

Q: Actually good for local culture.

A: Yes. Well, yes, except I didn't go, but anyway... The MOI representative, I didn't get to meet him because it was essentially a Muslim holiday and he was away with his family having the picnic that they all have. So I didn't actually meet him, but the PRT could not have spoken more highly of him. I saw where his offices were. They talked about how they included him in their work in development with the police... They've actually got a police training and advisor team in that PRT who work full-time with the police. It was a really good example of success.

Q: Yes, absolutely. Do you happen to know if this gentleman speaks English?

A: I can't remember, but most of them don't. Most of them have to use one of the interpreters.

Q: Right. Okay. And your own preparation for this assignment, how was it determined that you should be sent to Afghanistan?

A: I'm a home based civil servant. I work for the ministry of defense. In Britain, we normally have military defense civil servants as political advisors, which is not the same for most of the countries who use foreign service. But I've worked with the military all my career. Our civil service is completely integrated with the military. So, every job I've done, I've always had some military on my team. I've done the staff course, which is like-

Q: Oh, probably like the Naval War College or the Army War College.

A: Yes, something like that. Ours is joint, so its Army, Navy, and Air Force. They're little forces so they're all together. So I did that. I've also worked in Whitehall in relatively relevant policy areas. Then I got three months notice. I was able to go out for a recon visit. I talked to everybody I could talk to back in the UK, including Afghan NGOs as well as our government departments and our permanent joint headquarters and all the briefings that you get. I read six books. I read as many articles as I could get my hands on and tried to get as up to speed as possible really.

Q: Okay. So, in terms of your foreign postings, you had-

A: That was it.

Q: You had not been abroad before in a similar capacity.

A: No.

Q: Depending on who I talk to, there are days where I figure an Afghanistan assignment would be very inhospitable for a woman, but then there are others who tell me, "no, it really depends where you are."

A: It does. In Kabul, many of the ministers have... They've not got dual nationality now because they've had to give that up – except Jalali. But they've spent many years in Western countries. And also, they're area so many NGOs and EU and UN and they sort of look at Western women as a kind of third breed in that they'll work with you.

Q: They might even shake your hand, right?

A: Yes. I mean, I got kissed by a chap who was a mullah.

Q: Oh, the mullah. You wouldn't expect that.

A: It was quite a shock. This was in Kabul. It's completely different. I would wear a headscarf to Afghan places until I was used to... I was in and out of the ministry of interior almost daily, so I stopped wearing one there, seeing people I knew; they knew me. But if I was going somewhere new, I would... When I was down in Kandahar, I went to visit the ulema council. I made sure that I was wearing long, long clothes and a headscarf and so forth. Nonetheless, some of the mullahs in there nearly had a heart attack on sight of a woman visiting.

Q: I was going to say, I would think that would be a very bold thing for you and for them. You might have seen them keel over right there.

A: Right. Exactly.

Q: Okay, so you were able to enter the room. Then what happened?

A: This was the visit that I paid with the Department of State rep. down there. He's a classic example of a very wise, good person doing a fantastic job down there. It was a privilege just to spend a couple of days with him. Anyway, he knows the leader of the ulema council, who he talks to regularly. So he took me along to his meeting. We spoke about what was going on-
[END SIDE]

Q: -the council leader.

A: We had a general meeting and then the head of the ulema council and his key deputies gave us a tour of their premises. The interesting thing for me was that during the Taliban era, it was places like the ulema councils rather than the government buildings that were actually used to run what they had by way of bureaucracy. So this ulema council was pretty switched on. It had IT. It had Internet. They had a kind of "mullahs online" giving people answers to things. They had a personnel department with all the records of all the mullahs with their photographs and their qualifications, to what level of religious practice they would qualify. They had a finance department looking at their records. They had a scholars department with lots of mullahs sitting on the ground reading scholarly texts. They had a library with some very old texts that they used to view the traditional justice decisions so they could look back over similar cases in the past and see what decisions had been made. It was really quite a stepped up operation.

Q: Gee. But now, of course, they don't have... It's not a Taliban regime, but they still have their technology and their capacity there.

A: I don't think they had the computers at the time.

Q: But did they lose the personnel that was maintaining this system for them?

A: They didn't have computers back then. They've got the computers since. They were using their sons as-

Q: As tech support for the mullahs.

A: Yes.

Q: Gee, that is neat. So they were apparently cooperating with the PRT in the area.

A: Yes, definitely.

Q: I'm thinking they provided justice or adjudication of disputes kind of thing?

A: Yes, they did. To make a slightly more general point, the PRTs didn't just engage with the governors and the formal representatives of the administration. They also do endeavor to engage with mullahs and with tribal elders. This is where the continuity thing becomes more difficult. The PRTs are slowly getting a better understanding of who are the important people in the area and who should they be liaising with? Then they have to hand on those contacts as people rotate around.

Q: Right, yes, I understand how that would be a challenge for sure.

A: There's no map. It doesn't say... Depending on where you are... It depends on how tribal your area is. Down in Kandahar, it is quite tribal. They're trying to produce some tribal maps. This is the sort of work that NGOs are doing as well. If I could facilitate sharing that kind of information, I would always try and put people in touch. Quite often, the PRT were operating where NGOs fear to go, but they are producing things like tribal maps of which tribe is where, which helps them understand the context, helps them understand where loyalties will lie, and explain why one village is at war with the other. And it's amazing the kind of feudal structure and the way that they can maim and kill each other just from one village to the next village over water, over the path of the stream which one village claims has been diverted, or someone taking too much water, that sort of thing.

Q: Or over an incident that occurred maybe 100 years ago and they're still fighting over it.

A: 50 anyway.

Q: That is what I've heard, too, that Afghans have a very long memory, shall we say, or a long historical memory.

A: They do.

Q: Let me see if we can bring things to a nice round conclusion here. Do you think the PRTs – and you've had experience with a lot of them rather than just one – in general are accomplishing their mission? and to what degree are they effective in... I have four ways enumerated: providing security, expanding central authority, reconstruction, and utilizing their resources?

A: I actually do. I think that your investment in a country is a function of various national foreign policies and reflects the level of commitment that individual nations are prepared to put in. I think the PRTs give you a lot of bang for your buck. I think they are accomplishing their mission, which is very difficult and will take an awful long time to accomplish. I don't think

PRTs... So much more for so long has to happen in Afghanistan. We can't talk in terms of quick fixes. We need to talk about really long term investment. But they are a good way of doing those missions efficiently.

Q: Okay. And in terms of your own successes and failures, what would you like to recommend that those who are in a position of making decisions do differently to help someone who's going to be in your position?

A: Can you say that again?

Q: Well, many people say, for example, "Well, I would have liked to have had some language training" or "I would have liked to have had a year at the War College." You wouldn't have needed that. "I would have liked to have had some briefings at the Defense Department to help me in carrying out what was my job on the ground." If there were some things that you thought-

A: I would have really liked to have some language training. I didn't absolutely need it because I was based in Kabul where nearly all of our Afghan interlocutors did speak English, which was great. But I feel like, if I had had language skills to just go out and just talk to whoever I wanted to, then I could have done more. So language, definitely.

Q: What about security? Did you feel hampered by the need to wear a Kevlar vest and carry a gun?

A: No, I definitely didn't carry a gun. I'm a civilian. But I did have some British soldiers who were my drivers and who also gave me force protection, so I was free to go wherever I wanted to in Kabul. I didn't feel threatened at all while I was there. I know I was there over the winter period, which is quieter, but even when the threat state went up, I didn't feel threatened at all. Sometimes I even think that the huge defenses that you see around all the buildings makes it feel more insecure than it is. That would be a difficult decision to remove them. I do understand the need for those kind of protective measures. The places that I visited (i.e., Kandahar and Mazar-e Sharif), I didn't feel threatened at all there either. I think I felt safer out in the Mazar area, which is commensurate with the threat. I didn't go into any real dangerous places at all.

Q: At least you didn't think you were. As far as you know, they weren't very dangerous.

A: Yes.

Q: And you emerged unscathed, which we're glad about certainly. Well, I want to thank you for sharing today. It's certainly enlightening for me, but more importantly, I think it will be helpful in the project.

A: Yes. I very much welcome the opportunity to see the report when it comes out. I'm not sure I'd be able to come over to Washington unless I could find a work excuse to be there on other business.

Q: Yes, I think they ought to... Your office of defense there ought to give you consultations in preparation for your next assignment to Afghanistan. Could be, now that you're an expert.

A: Yes. Well, I have to say, if there's anything I learned more than anything else, it was that by the time I finished my seven months there, I realized just how much I didn't know. It's a life's work, it really is.

[END INTERVIEW