United States Institute of Peace
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Iraq/Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons Learned

INTERVIEW #151

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INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Participant's Understanding of the PRT Mission

The interviewee, a State Department Foreign Service Officer, served as team leader for the District Stabilization Team in Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, from February 2010 to February 2011. He understood the job of the DST to be to deliver development and to help create a governance structure for the district. The initial challenges in Marjah were dire, with Taliban strong and poppy business thriving at the start of his tour.

Relationship with Local Nationals

Observations: The DST worked with the district and its governor, while the related PRT focused on provincial ministries. The interviewee was out daily, meeting people throughout the district. Afghan officials were unused to providing services and reactions to DST mentoring was slow. The concept of seeking personal favors overpowered any sense of community responsibility in the corrupt, patriarchal system.

Insights: The first district governor poorly educated and needed a lot of help. His replacement was more competent, but there remained a lack of capacity. Afghan leaders had no idea how to provide basics like education or water, to make a budget or a payroll. Provincial leaders opposed some district projects because they want to be in control and are reluctant to release funding. Afghans generally have negative preconceptions about Americans.

Lessons: Great patience is required in working with Afghans. It is vital to show respect. A key activity should be teaching officials to get out of the office to visit constituents.

Did the PRT Achieve its Mission? (Impact)

Observations: The DST mission was achieved, albeit with much work done by the U.S. Marine combat unit responsible for the area. Upon interviewee's arrival, Marjah was totally destroyed. When he left, there were eight schools, healthcare centers, a district center, detention facility, government offices, two dozen police sub-stations, greater numbers of trained army and police, 120 kilometers of cleaned canals, a 30 percent reduction in the poppy crop, thousands of acres of

alternative crops, and hundreds of miles of new and improved roads. The DST distributed a booklet on Islam in the U.S. which was very helpful in correcting false preconceptions about U.S. attitudes towards Islam.

Insights: Some U.S. achievements many not be sustainable long-term. For example, any school that was built without involving the Afghan Ministry of Education will likely not have any teachers assigned to it. It was difficult for DST to communicate situations and needs to the PRT, which was removed from the actual situation and had its own fixed preconceptions.

Lessons: More resources -- both U.S. and Afghan -- should be placed at the district level. Every one of Afghanistan's 360 districts ought to have a U.S. or other Coalition-led civilian team -- even if it means reducing staffing at the embassy and at PRTs.

Overall Strategy for Accomplishing the PRT Mission (Planning)

Observations: The DST's policy was to build a community by involving the Afghans in such things as designing, staffing and placing schools and clinics.

Insights: However, involving Afghans in reconstruction planning so soon after the Taliban were ejected from the area was, in retrospect, highly inefficient. The brand-new Afghan officials had no background in planning and had no idea what they were doing. Thus, it seriously slowed the reconstruction process and compromised quality to involve the Afghan officials.

Lessons: Instead of trying to work with brand-new Afghan officials to plan the building basic infrastructure, the U.S. should have sent in an engineer battalion to quickly and unilaterally build what the U.S. thought needed to be built. At that point, the U.S. could have help the Afghans run it from there.

What Worked Well and What Did Not? (Operations)

Observations: The sustainability of work was questionable at first, but improved as more Afghans were trained and more officials bought in. The DST used short-term and long-term plans to address tactical and strategic work, and this was effective. Military cooperation with and protection of civilian team members was exemplary.

Insights: The interviewee did not relate much with the PRT thought the PRT was too removed from the nitty-gritty of needed work down at the district level. That disconnect reflects similar poor relations between Afghans at those levels. The interviewee, having previously served in Iraq, felt that the pre-deployment training he received for this tour was largely unnecessary.

Lessons: There needs to be improvements in the flow of communications and resources between the PRTs and DSTs. Development and governance should not be attempted until a security bubble is established. It is vital to get out among officials and normal people. Place resources at the lowest levels possible. Civilian team members should be armed for self-protection when in extreme kidnapping threat situations such as the interviewee experienced.

THE INTERVIEW

Q: What was your job, what dates were you there and what was your position?

A: My job was team leader for the District Stabilization Team; the acronym is DST, in Marjah. That's in Helmand Province. I got there on February 6, 2010 and I left February 17, 2011.

Q: You worked closely with the PRT there?

A: Well the PRT was up in the provincial capital. It was called Lashkar Gah. So the PRT basically handled the entire province in Helmand River Valley, which is basically the main geographic feature where all the people live in Helmand Province. It had nine districts. So I was in charge of the district team for one of those districts.

Q: Do you feel comfortable in commenting on the performance of the PRT? Or would you like to stick with the DST?

A: Sure, with the caveat that I only went up there maybe once every two months. There was so much work to do at the district level that I really didn't worry about what was going on at the PRT. They certainly provided us with support every once in a while, but most of my support was obtained directly from Embassy Kabul or from the U.S. Marines. The U.S. Marines, what was known as the Battle in Marjah. It was the battlefield close to that time frame. So I would say, in terms of outside people, not talking about the Afghans, of course, which would be Afghans 100% of the time, but with my outside contacts I worked with the Marines 80%, I worked with the embassy 10%, and I worked with the PRT 10%. The PRT was fine.

I think the problem the PRT had was -- and this was in all the districts, all nine colleagues that worked in the districts – we all thought that the PRT was literally moved away from the nitty gritty at the district level. The district level was where the battle was really being fought for the hearts and minds, to use that horrible cliché. There was always a difficulty by those of us who worked at the district level to get across to the very well meaning people of the PRT, exactly what was needed and what was happening. They tended to view things through an earlier prism, which made it difficult. But like when we explained the situation in education or in government or in health care, it was sometimes difficult to get through those preconceptions. I think that was the most difficult thing and I don't think I was alone in that. I think all the districts had that challenge with the PRT. All of us, and I think this is common, that we have a field headquarters type structure. We always felt more resources should have been put down at the district level instead of the provincial level. The provincial level, of course, felt completely opposite because they said, "well, we're working with the provincial government, and that's really where the battle is going to be won or lost." We think it's going to be at the district level. So there was that level of tension that occurred in Iraq where I served and I think it occurred in Afghanistan.

Q: How many people were on your DST?

A: The DST there were seven civilians and seven military, so a total of 14. I was State Department. We had one fellow from Department of Agriculture. We had one fellow from USAID. We had two, what we call implementing partners. How do you describe them? They were not-for-profit organizations created to deliver either services or to build contracts in a difficult environment like Afghanistan or Iraq. There are several of them like ASI, Afghan Stabilization Initiative, etc. We had a USDA guy, we had a USAID guy, we had two civilian contractors, or implementing partners, and then we had two people from the British development agency.

Q: How would you describe the mission of the DST?

A: The PRT was in Lashkar Gah and the DST was down in Marjah. My team, the DST, our job was basically – we had two missions. That was to deliver development and also to deliver or buy - to create a governance structure for the district. You have to understand what Marjah was. Marjah was completely run by the Taliban up until February of 2010. The Taliban walked the streets, they controlled the poppy fields. They basically were the government. So when the Marines went in on February 14, 2010, they had a terrific fight on their hands, because that was where the poppy was and the Taliban didn't want to give it up because that was their payroll. So they had this terrific fight which lasted all the way until late summer of 2010, and what the DST did was, the DST was the civilian/military effort to deliver both development and governance.

Q: How did that job differ from the PRTs mission, except in scale?

A: The PRT basically did it through the provincial entities, so each ministry in Kabul had a representative in Lashkar Gah, Education, social welfare, justice, interior, agriculture, etc. So they would work at the provincial level. At the district level is much more basic. At the beginning of the term, we only had two Afghans there. No, we had four. We had the governor, we had his assistant, and then we had one guy who worked with tribal issues, and another guy who worked in services. It was kind of a small team. That built up over the year until now they're at about 20 I guess. The Afghan district level government is about 20 persons. That doesn't count the police. There are about 350 police, and there's also about 600 army (ANA), but I consider those security services and not government per se.

Q: With whom did you interact in terms of Afghans in the district?

A: The district governor. We had two district governors in sequence of course. The first was a good guy. His failing was he was functionally illiterate, so it was really hard to set up government structures when your governor can't handle the paperwork, so we had to do all the paperwork for him, which kind of defeated the purpose of a local government. But then about halfway through our year there he was replaced at the provincial capital with a new guy who had some experience in government. He had worked in the ministry of counter-narcotics and he had also been a colonel in the earlier Afghan army, so he had some management skills and he had some familiarity with governance.

The big problem at the district level, and I think at the provincial level too, is lack of capacity. These people, because of the tough times they've been through for almost 30 years – first it was

the Soviets, then they had the civil war, then they had the Taliban, and then they had these huge operations to kick the Taliban out – so these people have been through a lot in the last 28 years. There's no capacity. If you tell them to supply clean water to the people or you tell them to run a school system, or you tell them to run a health system, they just look at you. They go yeah sure, but how do you do that? So that's what we did most of our year. Most of our year there all of us had a lot of experience in development, a lot of experience in governing mostly in the Middle East, some in South East Asia or Central Asia, and we would guide these people, and when necessary provide them resources both monetary and training and equipment. So you would interconnect the activity, you'd teach them how to make a budget, you'd teach them how to hire teachers, you'd teach them how to pay a payroll, you'd teach them the various things that go into making a district level government. It was actually a lot of fun. Other than the assignment I had in Iraq it was the best time I had in the State Department because you're taking something from almost absolute zero and you're building it up. It's really very gratifying.

Q: You saw some achievement?

A: Oh yeah. It was terrific. You know there were a lot of setbacks. Probably the hardest thing was our security was mostly provided by the U.S. Marines and later on a greater and greater role was played by the Afghan National Army. Those guys took all the hits and they were the ones out there fighting the insurgents; the ones who got hurt, and that was probably the hardest part to see these young kids, both American and Afghan getting hurt. They are trying to build a new country. That was quite painful.

Q: Were there some agreements or outcomes that resulted from these meetings with the district governor? Were those commitments kept, met?

A: I don't remember the commitments or agreements because we were there as advisors and also resource providers. Certainly, whenever you go to a conflict zone, the locals want everything now, which is impossible. The Coalition made a decision at the very beginning that wherever possible you would build a community by involving the Afghans. So you would involve them in designing the school, you would involve them in staffing the school, you would involve them figuring out where the health clinics should go. The benefit of that approach is you would be able to bring them along with you as you build the infrastructure of the district. The bad thing is they don't know what they are doing at the beginning. It slows everything down to a glacier. If I could ever rewind the tape and do it all over again—and I tell this to senior officials at both the PRT and the Kabul level—especially a place like Marjah, the Marines went in Feb. 14th, they cleared out and started building development and governance. But what I think we should have done is, instead of trying to build the very basic infrastructure i.e.: schools, police headquarters, a police station, a district government center, health clinics, building the roads and cleaning the canals - there were six major infrastructure objectives. Instead of doing it with the Afghans, I would recommend just bringing in a battalion of Seabees or an engineering battalion and just doing the whole thing in two months. Just bang, bang, bang. Putting it only Seabees or the Army Corps of engineers can do and then transfer that to the emerging Afghan government and let them start.

What happened was, for the first six months, the Marines were fighting for control. It really took that long because the Taliban really wanted to keep their poppy. But once the security bubble

was established, what happened was, as we did everything with the Afghans who had no experience and it slowed everything thing down. We paid two prices there. One was that we kind of ignored the people because they said "You're Americans. You should be able to do everything overnight" and when we didn't do everything overnight, we they got surly. The other thing was—as I said initially—it slowed everything up and the quality controls for some of these things were not up to snuff. In fact, a lot of things had to be revisited almost immediately when they were done because of the poor construction material they used or because of the poor construction techniques they used. They didn't use enough concrete in the buildings or they used too much sand, to cut corners. You know small things like that. If I could do it again, especially when you are just cleaning out a district like we were, I would build the very basic infrastructure such as schools, police, roads, and clean the canals—I would do that under supervision and U.S. funding. Then, turn that operation over to the Afghans and mentor them as they try to pick it up. Because what we were doing was sort of like giving a kid a bicycle: instead of giving him a bicycle, we gave him the bicycle in 48 pieces and told him to build it before he can try to ride it. It was brutal just trying to watch them because they didn't know how to handle the wrench or anything. It was just painful, it took so long. It even drove us a little bit crazy. We have a joke that everything in Afghanistan takes twice as long and is four times as hard; it's true. It was kind of a joke but it had, like all joke an element of truth to it. So that would be my big suggestion: to go in there, get it over with, and then turn it over to them.

Q: Will they be able to maintain these things that were built during this time? Are these things sustainable? Will they know how to maintain the schools or keep the canals clean?

A: It is uneven. Some are sustainable. Have you ever worked with the U.S. Marines? There is nothing they cannot do. Semper Fi or whatever they say. Their regiment colonel would come down and he would be like, "Gee, I wish there were more schools." So what are you going to see the next day? You are going to see half a dozen schools. They will throw up a bunch of tents; they will grab some guy off the street and stick $20 in his pocket, give him a book and say "start teaching." That is great, and in an ironic way it is what the Afghans would love to see. But was it sustainable? Of course not, because the Ministry of Education in Lashkar Gah, was not only wasn't aware of these schools but when they became aware of the schools, they were jealous about it because here is something an outsider has done. So instead of not even being slow with it, they would work against it because it wasn't even their creation. So it is a long answer to your question, but in terms of sustainability, it all depended on how deeply involved the Afghans and what type of resources the Afghans were willing to push down to the district.

Afghanistan suffers the same thing that Iraq suffered and that is that the Afghan senior government officials both in Kabul and the provincial capital are very reluctant to release funds and resources down to the district. They like to want to hold on to it. Now whether they do so because of corruption or because they don't trust their country cousins, I don't know. But it is very hard to get pay roll, and books, and desks, and schools and water and all of the other nonsense to go to the district from the provincial capital. They just refuse to release it. So the marines step in. They step in using the CERP, the Commander's Emergency Relief Program fund or something. What it is, is an amount of money that is at the discretion of the commander and he can use it as he sees fit. What they would do is go out there and build a school. - Sustainability, it depended on two factors: one, how you included the Afghan Ministry in it and

how well the ministry themselves were willing to push resources down to the district. Some of them worked very well and some of them didn't. By the time we left we were getting a lot better. I think a lot of the early card tricks fell apart because of the sustainability question and it had to be redone. But when they were redone a second time we were a lot smarter and so were the Afghans and I would say the sustainability and success rate now is 70 or 80 percent.

Q: So you are pretty satisfied with how that worked?

A: Yes. You are talking about a place that you would not believe how rough it was. When I got in there—I got in around March 4th—we got there and the district government was four people huddling in a burned out building with gun fire all over the place. That was Marjah. There was nothing. There was poppy all over the place, there was no water, no schools, no healthcare. There was nothing. The Taliban when they left they destroyed every structure they could and planted about 800 IEDs (improvised explosive devices). So that's what we had on the first week of March 2010. When we left it, well when I left it, there is an ongoing team there of course. When I left on Feb. 17th, we had eight schools, 2400 kids going to school including 170 girls which is very unusual. It is a very conservative place. We had three health centers. We had a district center which is due to be completed in May. We currently have a temporary one that they are working out of, which is pretty good. We have a really nice one with 18 offices being built close to the FOB (forward operating base). We have a new detention facility which meets all human rights standards. We have I think we had 27 or 28 police sub-stations that protected villages all over the place. We had 650 Afghan army people who were trained and 350 police officers that were trained. We had community watch groups set out. We graded 80 kilometers of road and paved about 18 kilometers. We even cleaned and sealed about 120 to 130 kilometers of canal. We had reduced poppy crop by 30% from giving farmers 2400 in the spring and 1800 in the fall, by giving them alternative crops such as wheat cotton, fruit trees, etc. If you could do all of that, all over Afghanistan in eleven months, you would be in pretty good shape.

So were there failures and whether schools started then dissolved? Yeah sure there were several of them. But I mean the eight schools that are working right now—they are solid. They are cinder block, hard, good structures. It has a heating unit in it for the cold winter months and a sturdy roof so it will not leak. Some have furniture and some kids have to sit on the ground mats—but that's how they go to school there. They are all staffed with teachers, all the teachers are being paid out of Lashkar Gah. We have police stations near the schools to protect the kids coming and going and to protect the teachers. Yeah, it is pretty great to be honest.

Q: In terms of working with the Afghans, was there a technique or a best practice - a good approach to your interpersonal relations?

A: Yeah, you have got to be patient. They operate on a much different time standard. Everything runs late. You have got to be patient. I think that is a function that they are not used to, providing services for their people or citizens. They view the leader of the district as someone all of the villagers come to for favors. They don't understand that they are also there to provide schools and clinics and roads and water. They didn't get that so it was hard to bring them along. Also, it is hard to get them out there. You have got to teach them, show them, and go with them to get out to their people. Marjah was 120 square miles. At the beginning, our governor did was sit in

an office and waited for people to come to him. Typically when you do that, what you get is, people who want favors. That is all you are going to get and is going to end up with a corrupt, patriarchal system. So we set up security patrols because it is dangerous for him to get out there. So we set up security controls, went out there and went to all of the corners of his 120 square mile district. There were probably about 18 villages and went to all the villages, and told them how to shake hands and kiss babies and things like that. So the big thing is being patient— that is the number one thing. You have got to be slow. You have to appeal to their honor. Those in Pashtu districts are very proud people. I think they were exceptionally slow at some times. Based on what have done, but you have got to have a big respect of their character.

Q: To what extent did the PRT and the DST achieve their missions?

A: I think I am a little biased because I work so closely with it, but I think the mission was achieved quite well. At the beginning, I think the expectations were very high and there was disappointment that expectations were not met by the summer of 2010, but by the late fall and early winter of 2010, I think it was a very pleasant surprise at how well things had turned out. We had very senior VIP visits—congressmen, senators, General Petreaus, Mr. Holbrooke before he unfortunately passed away. Ambassador Eikenberry was always down there. After the very severe challenges that were faced in Marjah earlier in the year, I think they were just astonished at the progress that had occurred by Christmas 2010.

Q: Do you think the situation is any closer to not requiring U.S presence?

A: Yes I do. As a matter of fact, I think there is very serious discussion of increasing the responsibilities of the Afghan security forces and pulling back the U.S involvement. So yes, I think it is moving ahead both in the security field and in the governance field. Just last month, it was Feb. 29, a DCC (District Community Council) was elected and the Shura that elected it was over 1,200 people—1,200 elders and tribal leaders. The biggest Shura that was before that was 400-450. It was kind of funny in a way because we had a registration Shura ahead of that which also had 1,000 people. We had made lunch, which is usually chicken and bread and naan, for 400 because that's what we expected because that is the largest Shura we had ever had. When 1,000 people showed up, I tell you, there wasn't a live chicken within 10 miles of that place. We went out and killed every chicken there was. We fed them all. It was sort of like the loaves and the fish.

Q: What is the most critical component in enabling a positive transition?

A: I think getting resources from the Afghan provincial level down to the districts. That is really the biggest challenge. They do not work well together. The Afghan provincial to the Afghan district. I think the resources are there—I have never seen the books of the provincial government, but from what I understand, the budgetary money is flowing from the capital down to the provinces but I don't think it is flowing from the provinces down to the districts. So it is always a great challenge for the Afghan district officials to get their teachers paid, to get their policemen paid, to get school books paid for, etc. All of the bills that come due in order for a government to function—I think that is the biggest problem Afghanistan faces. The provincial officials— for whatever reason— whether it is because they are venal or because they don't

understand it, they are very reluctant to let go of the funds that are meant for the district level governments—and that is a problem. A lot of the times the Marines will come to the rescue, the British will come to the rescue, the Americans will come to the rescue, but it should not be that way. This is an Afghan government function and it should be funded through the Afghan budget process. The Afghan budget process, from what I have seen at the district level, has a long way to go.

Q: What advice did you give your replacement when you left Afghanistan?

A: To be optimistic and have a positive outlook because you do hit problems all of the time. Things take twice as long and take four times as much effort as you originally thought. I think the big thing is to be positive and understand that these people are starting from a very, very basic level. They are scared. They had been brutalized for a very long time; and just treat them with the respect that everyone deserves and be patient with them. I am cautiously optimistic; I think they are going to make it.

Q: Great. On to planning and impact. Was there a designated planner on DST and the PRT?

A: We had two plans. It was done in conjunction with the PRT at the provincial level. We had a 90-day plan and then we had a 360-day plan. As you would imagine, the 90-day plan was for more tactical decisions like which schools to build first, how many policemen to train for each village, how to make sure they have food and water and blankets and uniforms. Where the 360-day plan was much more strategic in scope. So we had two planning devices or tools and they were done in conjunction with the PRT and with the Marines, which was critical because you had to make sure that the governance and development marched in step with security.

Q: How did you acquire situational and political awareness for the region?

A: I was out almost every single day. I was out five days a week on foot patrols; I went with the governor everywhere. I went with the district prosecutor everywhere. Basically you just have to get out there—you have to walk around and talk to people. Walk to bazaars, talk to the school teachers, talk to kids, talk to the farmers. When people come in to get wheat seed to replace poppy, talk to them, ask them why they are doing it. It just took a lot of shoe leather—you had to get out there.

Q: How about the coordination between the military and civilian elements?

A: Absolutely fantastic. As I told a brigade commander when I left, it was an honor to work with those guys. They were just unbelievable. Not only did they fight the insurgents but they also took care of us and provided our security. Provided our care and feeding. I mean we went out there with very little support. We lived with them, we ate with them, it was great. I can't say enough about it.

Q: Did you feel that your training before you went was adequate?

A: Yes I thought it was not that great, to be honest. I thought it was OK. Maybe for a first timer. I didn't even understand why I—having had a year in Iraq—but they insisted on it. It was OK. It was what they call gaming and play-acting. It was OK. I think you have to get out there.

Q: Did they give you the kind of others—the cultural awareness in the background that would have been adequate?

A: No. Not really, I don't think so. I had it before I went and from what I saw—I thought it was very artificial. I was not overly impressed by it.

Q: What about language? Do you have any?

A: I speak Arabic but that is almost useless because Pashtu is the main language and Dari is the secondary language. I used three translators and it worked fine.

Q: So you felt translation was reliable?

A: It varied. One guy was superb and the two people were marginal. You could get your thoughts across. They got better as the months went by.

Q: How did you take resources into account in planning both budgetary and human resources?

A: In terms of the DST? It was adequate. Ambassador Eikenberry once asked me "Do you have enough people" and I said "Yeah, we have enough people here." In fact, when you have too many people there, the Afghans will tend to sit back and let you do it. So keeping it lean and mean made the Afghans step up to the plate, which I think is good. In terms of money resources, the bad thing about State Department is that we don't give our officers who go out into the field an operating budget—a budget that will help you entertain and will help you pay for things like Shuras and help you hit emergencies. I think that is very important; I think every state officer should go out there with some type of operating budget. I know the Brits had one and we ended up using theirs an awful lot; they were very gracious about sharing it. I don't understand why State Department didn't do that, and neither did USDA or USAID, which I think was absurd.

Q: Ok. What worked well and what were the major impediments to accomplishing the mission?

A: I think, as you referred to before, the military-civilian cooperation worked very well. I thought the cooperation or the communication or the planning between the DST and the PRT could have been a little better. It was OK. The planning was fine and the operational planning was also OK. Like I said, I think our expectations were a little bit too rosy at the beginning. We thought we were going to have schools, clinics, and district government by the summer time and it took twice as long. It wasn't fall or until late winter when it really started kicking in, early winter.

Q: How was the handover at the beginning of your tour?

A: There was no handover. I was the first.

Q: Did you feel that your team and the PRT had the appropriate skill-sets to carry out the mission? That means also were people matched to their jobs?

A: Quite well. I enjoyed all of my colleagues. They were exceptional and quite skilled at what they did. I don't know what they thought of me. Our team was not only skilled in their various areas such as agriculture and governance, but they were also very well suited to operating in a very austere environment. Marjah was tough. We lived in tents, we ate out of a bag, and we did not have showers or facilities. It was a tough, tough environment so the people that were there made do. It was like going on a camping trip with a lot of guns.

Q: What were the processes and structures in place that helped you achieve your goals?

A: These are really broad questions. Processes in place? The people the DST put together worked very well. I think you had to build your own bridges to the military because, at the beginning, they certainly didn't fully understand why we were there so early because it was a rough environment. They had questions like "What are you doing here? We are still fighting a battle here. We are not going to build schools until we clear the area". So I think if the process has to be changed at all, the development and governance, which is the job of the civilians, has to wait until at least some type of security bubble is established. To try to do that while combat operations are going on is difficult. It's not impossible for two reasons. One, you put the civilians at incredible risk and two, the local people who you need to participate are afraid to do so because they haven't come off the fence; they don't know which side is going to win.

Q: Closing question, do you have some conclusions or lessons learned that can summarize your recommendations?

A: Yes. I think every district should have an American or Coalition team whether they are Danish or British or Canadian or American. That would be very difficult because there are 360 odd districts in Afghanistan. But I do think it is very high value to work at the district level. That is where you see people on an absolute daily basis. Every day I would see at least 20 people and sometimes up to 80-100 Afghans every day. You never get that type of interface at the PRT and never get it at the Kabul level. Never! So I think the more the Afghans or developing country with a situation like this occurs again, the more they deal with U.S. and Coalition civilians, the more they deal with Coalition troops, whether it is Marines or Army or Danish or British, the better. They are operating on preconceptions just like we are. Their perceptions are usually extremely negative. I have this little booklet. It was paperback booklet and I always gave it out to the tribal chiefs, it was in Pashtu and it showed 50 mosques in America. It has a little description about where it was, who the Imam was, how big a congregation it was, and what their major social programs were—along with a nice photograph on the other page. They were absolutely stunned. They were blown away by that. Because in their view and what they had heard from the Taliban was that every single Muslim in America was in prison. That's what they heard, and that is what they believed. We had two or three Marines who were Muslim. We had a navy chaplain who was a Muslim. They spoke to them in Pashtu and did a Friday sermon. They went over as guest speakers at Friday sermons in the local mosques—it was revolutionary! It was absolutely terrific.

So my feeling is whatever resources we send into areas like this — throw it down to the lowest level possible. Don't waste resources at the embassy level, don't waste resources at the provincial level, get down into the street because that is where the misconceptions are and that is where you have the greatest impact.

One last thing—I thought we were poorly equipped and I do think one thing was a major policy mistake and that was people at the district level, State Department, USDA and USAID could not carry side arms. I thought that was foolish because we were under very severe kidnapping threat all the time. All the time. To send a person out into that environment without having a persuasive way to say no if a kidnapping attempt is made, I think is horrible. That was not the case in Iraq. In Iraq I was armed and it was my decision if a kidnapping situation developed, it was my decision how I could proceed. In Afghanistan, I had no choice. All I had was a ballpoint pen. I thought that was terrible. Many people who came out there were stunned that we were out there with so little. We were embedded with the Marines, which is what they said. They said "Well, they get their protection from the Marines." But at the district level, if you are at the bazaar or even on patrol, it can be a confusing and chaotic situation. You can be separated. I don't want to go into hypotheticals, but I think all people should be fully trained and I think they should be given the option of being able to carry a side arm, just for their own personal protection.

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