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INTERVIEW #12

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Executive Summary

This interviewee provides a snapshot of the work of the only British-led PRT in Iraq, during the period June, 2006 – May, 2007, where he was assigned as the deputy team leader. Despite a deteriorating security situation, which required the PRT personnel to stop travelling to downtown Basra, the work of the PRT in building governance capability advanced nonetheless. However, the interviewee frankly acknowledges that the PRT would have been more effective had its personnel been able to interact with Iraqi counterparts by travelling to their offices, and had the security situation not posed a threat to those Iraqis willing to cooperate with the PRT. He describes the nature of the threat as primarily Shi'a insurgency groups vying for control of this very rich part of Iraq.

Nevertheless, on balance, several positive steps forward did occur as a result of PRT efforts during the period he was there. For example, the local provincial council made great strides in being able to set priorities and to carry out the mechanics of putting together a viable budget. Lines of communication were established with the ministries in Baghdad and trust began to be established between the local leaders and the national leaders, such that by the end of the interviewee's tenure, the provincial council felt increasingly confident making contact directly with Baghdad, rather than going through the intermediary of the PRT. In addition, judges were trained and began to accept that people should be treated equally regardless of their tribal affiliation. On the economic front, historical business ties with other countries in the region – notably Kuwait, but also Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, began to be revived. In agriculture, through the efforts of the PRT's Danish agricultural attaché, date palm production was being revitalized.

Operationally, this PRT was uniquely multilateral. In addition to the British leadership, there were American specialists and contractors from Australia, Canada and Denmark. The British team leader was eventually dual-hatted as the British Consul General in Basra, which gave the PRT a close tie with British policy-making as well as with the British military. This arrangement was useful, for example, in providing expertise in public affairs, utilizing the Consulate's strategic communications expert. At the same time, while receiving policy direction from London, and British government funding, the PRT was fully tied into the national PRT program, submitted the same monthly reports to the National Coordinating Team in Baghdad and received U. S. Economic Support Funds. According to this interviewee, having two masters in this sense was not a problem; on the contrary, the PRT was able to gain the benefits of belonging to both

sides.

In sum, this interviewee is optimistic that the PRT in Basra will, as intended, eventually put itself out of business as the provincial council becomes increasingly capable of budgeting, providing government services and of improving the lives of the citizens. He adds that at the time he was there, the Iraqis working with us “want(ed) us there to help them” and “were very appreciative.”

Interview

Q: Could you describe your PRT, where you were and how many people composed it?

A: Sure, my PRT was interesting because it’s the only British PRT in Iraq and the reason I as an American served in Basra was because I was here in London doing my job as a political officer for about a year, working very closely with the Brits as they were deciding what their civilian presence in the south was going to be and getting the PRT set up, etc. So when the PRT was established with an American deputy position many in Washington and many here in London in the FCO thought it would be worthwhile if I could take that first deputy slot and help the Brits get started and get the ball rolling for a year.

So I decided to do that. I did a one-year TDY out of London and I got to Basra around June or so.

Basically our PRT was fundamentally like any of the other PRTs in Iraq, in that our primary mission was to be engaged with the provincial council and work on a provincial level on the basic mandate of the PRTs, which is improvement in governance, the rule of law, the economic sector and to some extent infrastructure.

The number of people that I had working for me varied quite a bit and mostly that variance was due to the security situation. The staffing pattern if you will of the PRT or the organization chart had about thirty to forty people on it and that’s about where we were when I got to the PRT in June of ’06. However the security situation over time deteriorated to the point where in late November of ’06 we had to draw down quite a bit because of the amount of IDF, indirect fire, that we were getting in to Basra Palace, where we were located. Then it got so bad that the PRT actually had to evacuate from Basra Palace and go up to Basra Air Station, out by the airport, to do our work. So certainly, in that transition time, the PRT downsized substantially, to the point where we were about ten to twelve people, depending on how many people were on vacation, etc. But then as things stabilized up at the air station and the security situation got a little bit better, the PRT began to ramp up. When I left in late June, early July ’07, we were about twenty or so, maybe a little bit less and now I understand since that time the PRT has gotten back up to its original strength. So there was that evolution and security-based difference in the number of people that we had working with us.

The other interesting thing about the PRT in Basra is that it was really a diverse collection of people and types of people and types of experiences working down there, in

that it was truly a multilateral venture. The Brits obviously ran it and the head of the PRT was a Brit, but I was the American deputy and we had some American specialists that came down from Baghdad, as well as working very closely with the Army Corps of Engineers down there. But there were also obviously contractors from various countries. We had Australians, Canadians and then the Danish government also seconded a number of people to the operation as well. So it was truly a multilateral venture down there.

Q: Was your British head a military or a civilian person?

A: That varied as well. When I first got there the British head came in on a contract, through their PCRU, Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit, which is kind of the equivalent of our SCR. He had quite a bit of experience in Iraq, but he was there as a contractor through the government. Then he left in about December and they had a couple of people fill in from DFID (British USAID equivalent) and other places but then finally what they decided to do I guess in about March of '07 was to dual-hat the head of the PRT with the deputy consul general, as the Brits also had a consulate down there. And that was good, because it put one foot of the PRT into the actual British policy making arena, which tied us in far more closely with what was going on back in London. So that was a good strategic move on the British part.

Q: You mentioned initially that the full strength staffing was thirty to forty.

A: Again, depending on the types of projects we had going on and the number of people we had on vacation. As you can imagine, the leave patterns when you have that many different types of people in terms of contractors and people from different agencies, the leave patterns have to be managed very carefully. I would say between thirty and forty, when I got down there.

Q: What was the civilian – military breakdown and what other specialties did they represent?

A: Sure, there was far more civilian than military. In fact we only had two or three military slots assigned to the PRT. Basically in governance we had about 10 to 15 people working with us and most of them were contractors, contracted through the Foreign Office and some through AID. These are governance specialists who had experience, many of them had worked in Afghanistan before, others in different parts of Iraq, others in different parts of the world, working on various governance projects. And then we had a rule of law section with, again, when I started, probably about ten people working and these tended to be a combination of lawyers and police and former police employees from various countries as well, Danes and Brits mostly, in that case. Then on the economic side, again, a number of people who specialized in developing economies and most of them came through contractors.

And then infrastructure tended to be where we had the military employees, because there is where we worked most closely with the British military down in Basra, because the civ-mil part of the British Army down there, the J-9 part, were doing a lot of short term

construction projects, things like fixing roads and painting schools and fixing hospitals and things like that and our infrastructure people working on some of the more long term things in terms of capacity building so that the local council could run its own affairs, there was that nexus there between the military working in the PRT and the military working directly for J-9. So we had I guess two or three military people in our infrastructure side, as well as a number of civilians.

Q: The J-9 is a British designation?

A: J-9 is an element of the military structure and they're basically the people who do infrastructure, who do the civilian-military effects in terms of when a combat unit would go in and let's say take a town or secure a town or region the J-9 people, the civ-mil effects people, would go in and do things like build up the roads and do something for the schools, in order to try and do the "hearts and minds" aspect of the conflict. So there was a lot of interface between our infrastructure people and them in the military there, particularly when we moved up to the air station, because at that point we were co-located with the military so there was quite a bit of interaction then between our guys and the military guys.

Q: I'll ask you to develop the security angle a little bit. You described how things deteriorated and obliged you to move. Would you define a little more the nature of the threat? Who was causing you to have to move?

A: The threat was two-fold. When I first got there we were going out into town to have meetings with the provincial council in various locations in downtown Basra, in the provincial council offices as well as for rule of law things we'd go down to the main court house, to various sub-ministry buildings, to police stations and things like that. But it became increasingly dangerous for us to do that.

Just as a little background, in southern Iraq, in Basra, there's really no Shi'a-Sunni conflict. There are some Sunnis down there, but it's basically all Shi'a down there and it's basically various Shi'a insurgency groups that are vying for control of what will be probably a very rich part of Iraq, because most of the oil and the only port for the country is down there in Basra. So there's a lot of what amounts to basically almost organized crime, but it made it very dangerous for us, because obviously these groups had a vested interest in not seeing the legitimate authorities get more powerful. So being associated with them, it became tougher and tougher for us.

The threat became higher, to the point where we had a number of our vehicles fired upon and when we finally decided not to go downtown any more is when we had one of our armored vehicles RPGed. Luckily our guys were already inside the building, but it was a close call. So we had to, at that point we decided not to go downtown. We remained in Basra Palace but we only had our meetings with Iraqis coming in to see us in the palace and of course that's not quite as efficient and not really the way to do the best job you possibly can, but we had to make a judgment call on the safety of our own personnel.

So that was one type of threat. The other threat, which was I suppose far more disturbing, was the pretty steady rocket fire, Katushka rockets, fired at us from downtown Basra into the palace and some various parts of the outlying regions as well for some of the bigger rockets and they became increasingly accurate and we had a number of injuries and one fatality on the American regional embassy office, which was just next door. So at a certain point, as I say in late November, we had to make the decision to pull the PRT out and move up to the air station.

Q: I imagine this is fairly complex, but let me ask you a little more about the Shi'a insurgency groups/organized crime. Were there many different Shi'a groups affiliated with tribal leaders or were they reasonably united? To what degree were these folks simply criminals without any particular ideology, other than their own interests.

A: There were a number of fairly organized groups. The Sadrists, who are basically the largest sort of Shi'a insurgency group in Iraq, they were there, as well as the Fadilah group, who were supporting the governor and then a number of smaller sort of splinter groups as well, more tied to some of the local tribal leaders and all of them very much aware that it was a struggle for dominance in basically downtown Basra, that each of them was trying to prevail and the Brits were really seen as sort of another group, another competition, if you will, towards being the most dominant group down there. So the Brits were targeted as much as any one group targeted [**the others**]. So it was an interesting dynamic.

Q: Meanwhile, your objective there is to be working with the provincial government. Let me ask you for a little more detail about what you hoped to achieve as your mission and how far you were able to achieve it.

A: The main purpose of the PRT, I always liked to say, was to put itself out of business, because what you want to do basically is get the provincial government to such a stage where they can handle the basic requirements of their citizens in running a government. The idea is not to get them to a point of perfection, where they're sort of running a government like a state government that we might think of in the United States, but really just the basic things in terms of being responsive to their constituents, being able to put a budget together. Another very important aspect was giving them the capacity to reach out to Baghdad, to the central government, so that they could access and utilize the money from the central government that was rightfully theirs, that was rightfully the province's. And of course rule of law, another very important aspect and we spent a lot of time on police training as well as with the lawyers, training judges and lawyers in Basra on some of the very rudimentary issues in terms of rule of law and fairness and human rights.

Again, things we may take for granted, but very important for the development of Basra and trying to overcome the many years of neglect, really, of the province that they underwent, of course during the war but even beforehand, because Saddam Hussein, who was a Sunni, perceived the south as a place where he would have very little support and he had enemies and therefore Basra was a much neglected area for many years. So there

was a lot of development work, a lot of confidence building work, that we were engaged in with the local councils to, again, get them up to a rudimentary level.

We had quite a bit of success, but you kind of have to redefine your notion of what success is and what progress is in terms of the rate at which you're developing the province and just what their capacity is. But small things like being able to put a budget together and having judges who recognize that people need to be treated the same no matter what tribal group they come from, these are areas where we have made progress and continue to do so. The PRT is still there and continuing to work with the local council and the local leaders and in small ways is continuing to move ahead.

It made it difficult for us in Basra, as I said before, even after we moved up to the air station we still couldn't go downtown because of the threat. So the Iraqis always had to come to us, they had to come to our offices to have meetings and try and develop a program, which put them at some risk, too, because they were being watched by the militias, by the insurgents. So they were really putting their lives at risk and some of them lost their lives for doing that, but they have committed to working with the PRT, to bettering themselves and to one day being able to do it themselves and so in that way we were able to make progress.

Q: How would you describe the caliber of your Iraqi counterparts? Obviously they're very courageous, but what was their background?

A: They were very brave in what they were doing and for the most part a fairly capable group, particularly some of the engineers, many of whom were educated in the West, some in the UK, a few in the U.S. The judges, also, many of them had Western training as well and were well versed in some of the basic concepts of rule of law and justice. So we had a pretty good foundation upon which to start.

There was, on the economic side, not quite that good a foundation. There was very little banking there, banking in terms of how we think about it, in terms of lines of credit and ATM machines and things like that; it just really didn't exist. So we were starting from a fairly low level there but trying to get some international interest in opening banks and I believe that as I was getting ready to leave there was a Kuwaiti bank interested in opening up in Basra.

So it varied from sector to sector but there was a fairly sophisticated civil service infrastructure there. I think the important thing was the recognition by the council that it could be done, that they did have the capacity to run things themselves. They recognized they needed help from us and were willing to put themselves at risk to get that help. I think that, more than anything else, was the most important thing, that desire to utilize what we were offering them to move forward.

Q: I know some PRTs have been very helpful, I gather, in acting as a bridge between their local government officials and officials in Baghdad. Was that something that you were involved in as well?

A: Yes, absolutely. About halfway through my time there we started to build those links between Baghdad and Basra and it was quite eye-opening. We took a small group of the provincial council and sector working group officials up to Baghdad to meet their counterparts and it quickly became apparent to us that these people had never met each other; some of them had never talked to each other and didn't even know their phone numbers or that this sort of ministry offices existed. It was quite incredible. So this was the idea, to plant that seed and to establish the lines of communication and establish trust, quite frankly, between the local government in Basra and the Baghdad authorities.

That was something we started and that continues to this day and Basra is beginning, well, not beginning, it's well on its way to being able to execute its budget effectively so that it continues to receive its money from the central government. That was something that we did concentrate on towards the second half of my time there.

Q: And how would you evaluate the level of progress, let's say, in establishing the necessary trust, realizing that you're only working in a one-year time frame, which is short but ...

A: Well, it certainly grew while I was there. As I mentioned before, Basra and Baghdad historically -- and when I say historically I mean certainly during Saddam's time-- had very little official communication and if they did so it was almost on a negative basis, in terms of Saddam issuing some edict that would cut off electricity or something like that from the south so there would be more for the north and for Baghdad. So there was that level of trust to build up between the two bureaucracies, which we could see growing as time went on and as the number of direct personal contacts started to grow.

For instance, initially the only time that the Basra provincial council would make contact with Baghdad was through us. They would call us in the PRT first and say, "We want to discuss a certain project" to put up a school or build a bridge or something like that and they would call us first. Towards the end of my time there, that became less and less. They started to learn that they could call and make contact directly with Baghdad and receive answers and discuss intelligently issues of funding and project management. So, again, slow progress but steady progress. You could really see that over time.

Q: You mentioned that the economic foundation was one of the weaker aspects in the local area. Were there some business leaders as well that you worked with?

A: Yes, but the businesses all were very small. There's a Chamber of Commerce there and there are business associations, but it's all very small, trading type businesses and a lot of it is small family businesses. There's nothing wrong with that, but the idea in truly getting a development scheme going is you've got to get a banking system and you've got to get international investors interested in coming in and priming the economy to get it going.

It's been very hard and I think it probably still is in a very nascent stage, basically because of the security situation. The most fundamental issue for a businessman is if he's going to invest he needs to make a profit and he needs to be assured that he's going to put his money into a venture that's going to pay out. And with the security situation as it is in terms of the still influence of the militias there, international businessmen aren't yet confident enough to put their money in in a big way. It's starting, it's starting in a small way, but there's a long way to go on the economic side.

One of the things we tried to put in, and it's still an idea but I'm not sure how far along it is, was to establish an international investment zone up near the airport, quite close to the British military base, so that international business people could come in into a secure environment where there would be offices and hotels and things like that and talk to the local Baswari businessmen and get things started that way. But even that was difficult, given the security situation.

But hopefully as the Iraqi security services themselves start to take over responsibility for the security situation down there the situation will change and enough stability will come in so that international business, and when I say international it's really regional investors, Kuwait is obvious, but Turkey has also expressed interest, obviously the Saudis and others are really looking to develop regional interests.

Q: And what about Iran, speaking of international neighbors?

A: Sure, Iran, especially in the south, is definitely an influence. I think it's no secret that some of the insurgents were assisted by Iranian elements; I don't mean from the Iranian government but certainly some of the groups in southern Iran. I wouldn't overestimate the Iranian influence down there, though, because, again, the last thing that some of the groups want down there is yet another group to deal with in terms of gaining control.

But, yes, Iran exhibited that negative influence but also there are trading relationships on the border that are many hundreds of years old between the groups down there. And so there was low level bartering and business relationships on the border there. But thus far I haven't seen any evidence of Iran wanting to come in and play a real positive role in the long term development of a strong Basra, but that may change, too, over time.

Q: Now since you were with a British PRT, did you have any relationship with, the other PRTs, which looked to the Provincial Affairs Office or the National Coordinating Team. Were you also serviced by them?

A: Oh, yes, absolutely. We were tied into the national PRT program and we submitted monthly reports to Baghdad in the same standardized format that the other PRTs did. We did receive money through the American program, through the ESF, the Economic Support Funds. In fact, the first year when I was there I handled about \$40 million out of that fund for capacity building. The American military would do what it could, especially on the Army Corps of Engineers side of things, to support us as well. So, yes, we were very closely tied in with the Americans.

But of course we had a dual reporting line, because all of our operational expenses and much of our political direction was also driven from London as well and from DFID, their AID equivalent. So we kind of had two masters if you will but it was never really that much of a problem. What we tried to do was gain the benefits of both sides and utilize the resources coming from both sides to drive our program and I think we did that pretty effectively.

And the structure that we had in the PRT was able to effect that, in terms of we had the British head but then me as the deputy, so the Americans felt confident in channeling the money down that way and that they had a State Department guy to keep an eye on it. And it remains that way today. My successor is also a State Department employee.

Q: And what kind of things were you able to do with your \$40 million?

A: Well, the main purpose of the \$40 million was, as well as the physical projects that were put in place, the real purpose of it was to drive the capacity building effort. So, in other words, when I made the presentation to the provincial council on the ESF money, I basically told them, "There's \$40 million here you can spend. There are very few conditions on it, except that you have to decide yourselves, with the input of your sector working groups and based on the needs of your citizens, what projects are going to benefit from this \$40 million."

And it took them a long time, because this decision making process is not something that they've been used to for the past thirty years or so and so it took them a while to get together and decide what projects were the priorities, but they did, even though at times it was frustrating for them and they actually asked us, the PRT, can't we decide for them how to spend it. We said no, that's not the purpose of the money.

So they eventually came up with a number of diverse programs, everything from repaving roads to putting in new water pipes to building new small courthouses in some of the areas that didn't have them, new police stations, just a whole range. They took some of the money to rebuild the central market, a whole range of programs that did exactly what this stuff is designed to do, which is to better the way of life of the people in Basra and, at the same time, turn the provincial council into an actual functioning government that the people will look to to make improvements. So that worked out.

And that wasn't the only money we had. We had money as well coming through the military. The Brits gave quite a bit of money, too, through something they called the Better Basra Program. So there were a number of funding streams that we had and put to good use down there.

Q: Everyone that I've spoken with has said that money really wasn't the problem, there were plenty of possibilities to get funding. Presumably at some point there would be a gradual shift to Iraqi money being utilized in the same way that U.S. money was being utilized?

A: Absolutely and I'm hoping that now, it's not quite a year since I've been there but it's coming on a year, I'm hoping that now we will see the day where there's very little international money doing this stuff and it's mostly Iraqi money, because, after all, there is oil being pumped out of Iraq and it's, what, a hundred dollars a barrel now and it should be being put to good use. And that's the idea exactly, is to get the central government to draw up its budget and to allocate the money to the provinces on an as-needed basis and for the provinces to go out and get that money and to execute their budgets, to put the Iraqi money to good use. So I know the donor community is still in there quite a bit and we've got quite a big AID program there, but, yes, there's no reason that in short order all of these things can't be funded from Iraqi money.

Q: Speaking of outside donors and international organizations, many of the PRTs worked with agencies like, RTI is one and a number of others, were there any such relationships in your experience?

A: There were indeed. RTI provided many of our governance contractors, our governance experts. We also had some from a similar organization that the Brits have called Interplan and there may have been some others, a Danish one as well. But basically what they brought to the table was expertise. Their role was not to bring vast sums of money or anything like that. They provided, through government contracts, the experts to help the Iraqis move their process forward. Yes, RTI was a big partner.

Q: And how effective were they?

A: They were great, yes. The people that they sent down to Basra, at least, I found them very capable and very well experienced and gained quickly the respect of their Iraqi counterparts and worked very hard. Yes, I had a good experience with them.

Q: Okay, I gather throughout the country, some places that was the experience and in other places it wasn't quite as positive.

A: I heard that there were some problems with RTI with sharing information and programs that they had developed. There was some issue on how much they actually shared with the other PRT members. But in our case we were working on such a day-to-day level that they basically gave us pretty good access to what they were doing. So, yes, we had a pretty good experience with RTI.

Q: And were they physically located with you when you moved to the air base?

A: No. They were first located in downtown Basra and then even when we went up to the air base some of them stayed downtown as well. But then the security situation got pretty dangerous for them as well, so they relocated up to Baghdad. So we basically had a remote relationship with them then and they would fly guys down into Basra from Baghdad on a fairly regular basis.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you're an engineer by training. I'm curious to ask what in your background you thought best equipped you for this assignment..

A: To be honest with you, when I came to London I had no idea, even in the back of my head, of going to Iraq. It basically was because I was here as a political officer and Iraq joint commitments was part of the portfolio I'm handling here in London. In other words, I was doing this for a year and the British civilian component was developing and I was working so closely with them on it, that really is why I went.

It was a very different experience for a political officer, because I had a lot of people reporting to me and while I have had officers reporting to me in the past it was certainly nothing like twenty or thirty, like I had down there. So that was a new experience.

I really hadn't had a job like that prior to going to Basra. Obviously some of my diplomacy skills came to the fore when trying to work with the various players in the council and trying to get them to compromise on issues. There were a lot more management and supervisory skills that came into play that I really hadn't had a chance to use before in the Foreign Service. I had done so in private industry, but not as a Foreign Service Officer. So all in all in that sense it was a good exercise for me.

Q: Some people have pointed also to their experience in other Third World environments as a good preparation for what they found in Iraq. I don't know if any of your African experience or non-U.S. living experience was useful in that sense?

A: I suppose, yes, it came in handy in terms of dealing with people who themselves are dealing from a different starting point, in terms of their economic foundation and even their experience with democracy and governance. Yes, so I suppose that did play in to some extent, but I have to say Iraq was a unique experience, but one that was very satisfying, ultimately.

Q: You mentioned rule of law was a big program that you had and you indicated training for judges and the police, but how was the work of the PRT related to what I understood to be our principal police training program, which was the Multinational Security Transition Command program? How did those two operate?

A: It was a little bit different down in Basra. Basically it was a separate program that brought in British police officials who went out as much as they could, and especially in the beginning they went right out into the police stations and worked with the police in the police stations, through interpreters, in terms of basic policing, basic day to day policing. Then there were other programs in terms of forensics and evidence collection and things like that that were done more centrally in Basra Palace and at the air station and various other locations. These allowed participants to share experiences and establish lines of communication that way. So we found that very successful.

Q: The judges, did they generally go to other countries to do the training?

A: Yes, we didn't do very much with the judicial training in Basra itself, again, because of the security situation. We tended to go out. There was a countrywide conference that the NCT organized and I believe that was up in Kirkuk or someplace like that and we sent some of our people from Basra up to that. So that was done within Iraq, but not in Basra. It was done up north, where the security situation was a little bit, it might have even been Irbil, now that I think of it, where the security situation was a little bit or actually a lot better than it was down in the south. And depending on where your PRT is you kind of have to find creative ways of getting the curriculum across, but we were able to make some progress by using different methods.

Q: Was there a standard manual for the rule of law officers to use, then, in Iraq? Even though you had British, primarily, experts, but was your rule of law program essentially the same as the other PRT rule of law programs?

A: NCT did put out a standard PRT manual which covered all of the sectors, economic, rule of law, governance, etc and to some extent there were guidelines and goals which was the model to follow. But in reality you kind of did what you could and when you could, based on the conditions. And I think all of the PRTs had very different experiences, depending on their level of contact, security situation and the willingness of the local population, the local rule of law authorities to cooperate with the PRT. So I would say probably as you're doing these interviews you'll find varying levels of success and varying levels of following the NCT formula, depending on who you talk to.

Q: It seems another element, too, was each expert, who was the hands-on person to direct the effort, had their own personality and strengths and brought their own experience. Did that also make a big difference in how they went about achieving their overall goals?

A: Absolutely. We had a British lawyer, we had a Danish lawyer, we'd interact very much with the American rule of law sector up in Baghdad. Each brought its own area of expertise to the mix and the idea was to make use of all of the resources at your disposal and try and put them to best effect.

Q: A couple of the other key members of the PRT team generally include the public affairs person and the agricultural advisor, so I'm interested to know whether you had either of those and what the programs were.

A: Public affairs we didn't have. We tried to make use of the consulate, the British Consulate; not long after I arrived they established a strategic communications person, I think they called it and what we did was try to get on the back of that and basically try not so much to advertise what the PRT was doing but helping the local provincial council to advertise itself, what it was doing, so that the people in Basra knew that these projects were going on. Again, the idea was not so much to elevate our own stature, but elevate the stature of the provincial council, so that the people knew that a job was being done for them. So, yes, in that sense we did work with the British Consulate to try and help build capacity in that area.

And then as part of our economic group we did have an agricultural advisor, a Danish agricultural advisor, as well and he was very active, particularly in the date palm production area and planting of date palm trees and then ultimately in looking for processing and utilization of the date palms once they were harvested.

Q: That is the dates or the oil, just out of curiosity?

A: Just the dates. I'm not sure what you do with dates, other than eat them, but apparently there are other things like processing. You can use them for bulk foodstuffs and I think you can even get into animal feed. Loads of things you can do with dates, apparently. And so the idea was to try and build an industry out of that.

Also tomato production in southern Iraq, apparently the soil down there is excellent for tomato production. So one of the things our ag people were looking at was to try and get some type of a tomato paste production going and we drew in people from Baghdad for that, from the central NCT from Baghdad, to help on that one.

Q: I guess you would need not just the agricultural expertise but you'd need some industrial expertise?

A: Yes, you'd need processing people and people to help set up factories and then people to help find markets as well and Baghdad was very good with providing that kind of expertise for us, too.

There was some Kuwait connection, too. One of our economic business guys was trying to get, as I was leaving, was trying to get a relationship between the Chamber of Commerce in Basra with the Chamber of Commerce in Kuwait, to try and get some cross business interest going there and on the Iraqi side a lot of that would have been agricultural.

Q: I thought the traditional economic mainstay of Basra would be oil.

A: Well, it is, but looking at the big picture, you can't have a hundred per cent of the people working on oil. There is a lot of agriculture as well and the idea was to try and restart date palm production which historically in that part of Iraq has been very popular but during the war, obviously, it went away, so the idea was to get that going again.

But, yes, once the oil gets going a hundred per cent again down in Basra it will dwarf anything, obviously, agricultural.

Q: Did you have any idea during the time you were there what the oil production, what per cent it reached of its prewar level?

A: No, I didn't and the reason for that is, we really in the PRT didn't get involved in the oil production issue, because that's the central government, that's a central ministry

responsibility. So the local government doesn't really get involved in that. That would be something that the people in NCT did and they had a whole mass of people up there working on the oil industry question.

Q: Okay, except to the extent maybe your provincial council would keep the feet to the fire of those Ministry of Oil folks in Baghdad, so they would send oil revenue money?

A: Yes, I suppose that will happen eventually but it's not really at that stage yet. The idea ultimately is that the oil will be produced, the central government will get the tax and other revenues off of it and distribute it to the provinces on an as-needed basis. That's the ideal, of course and, yes, the province needs to obviously protect its interests and make sure it's getting its fair share. But, also, once the industry gets going there are all the support industries and the employment and that will be a direct benefit to the local people down in Basra.

So one day, hopefully, it will turn around for them and they can get back to where they were, which at one time was quite a prosperous little area. I've seen pictures of Basra from back in the Sixties and Fifties and it was a very nice looking place.

Q: So before Saddam's time it was?

A: Well, before or just in the beginning. I've heard older people who have had experience in the region, even expats who say they lived in Kuwait or worked in oilfields and people used to come into Basra for weekends, for breaks and holidays, because they were a little bit less strict in terms of Islam, so people working in Kuwait, where there are no bars or anything like that, would come up to Basra to enjoy the nightlife there or whatever and stay in hotels and it was considered a luxury place to go. It has got a long way to go before it ever gets back to that stage, but these are things that people can aspire to and it's in the living memory of many of the people who live there. So in that sense there is some continuity.

Q: Were many locals displaced by the war? It sounds as if you had less outflow of qualified technocrats and well-educated people than some other parts of the country.

A: It's hard to get a fix on it. Because of the homogenous nature of the population down there, there wasn't the type of ethnic violence you had in some other regions. Some of the Sunnis did flee and depending on what numbers you were looking at, it was 15 to 20 per cent of the population was Sunni and when the violence started then ten per cent left or something like that. But, no, there wasn't a great outflow of people from Basra. Some left, definitely, but not like in some of the other regions, up in Anbar and some of the regions around Baghdad.

Q: So the officials you were able to work with, they had reasonable qualifications and were still in place in their towns?

A: They did, yes. As I say, in relative terms it was a fairly sophisticated group of

people that we were working with. So in that sense we did have a base upon which we could build.

Q: One thing I've omitted mentioning thus far but want to pick up on was bicultural advisors, since most PRTs had an Iraqi cultural advisor. Could you describe if you had one, that person's role and how effective they were?

A: Cultural advisor?

Q: Yes, sometimes they're called a bilingual bicultural person.

A: Yes, yes, we did have a few of them, but when the security situation got to the point where we drew down we lost them and they didn't come back, at least during the time I was there. But I understand now some of them might have come back. But while we had them, for the first couple months while I was there, they were very useful.

One of them as I recall was an engineer or had some technical background, so he was good to have around, because not only could he translate in terms of the cultural and linguistic aspects of things, but he also very much had the respect of the local Iraqi engineers because he knew what he was talking about when he would translate these things.

So, yes, as I recall they were a great help but, unfortunately, weren't around for much of the time I was there, so we just had to rely on the local translators, the local interpreters, for most of the time.

Q: And these local interpreters would be hired simply to do language interpretation, then?

A: That's right and obviously they were of varying capabilities and expertise. A lot of the time you had to just kind of take what was available and some of them were being intimidated as well by the militias, because many of them lived out in the town, so it was dangerous for them at times.

Q: As you look back at your year there and the different objectives that you had to consider, what kind of an assessment do you give yourselves in the PRT, so far as accomplishing your different missions?

A: As I said in the beginning, you kind of have to redefine your own view on what success is and really because of the security situation the PRT wasn't operating at a hundred per cent efficiency. What I mean by that is for the PRT members to do their jobs we really shouldn't have been holed up in the palace or the air station, we should have been downtown, we should have been down in the provincial council offices and the courthouses, etc, as we were in the very beginning when I got there.

Operating with the Iraqis coming to us whenever they could, while we did make progress,

it definitely wasn't efficient, but you have to deal with the reality of the situation and make the best of it and that's what we did and had some talented people there working very hard to keep going and keep continuity.

So all in all I'm very pleased and I feel it was a very rewarding and worthwhile endeavor, the year I was there.

Q: And I think you did mention some concrete things that the PRT was able to do. Everything isn't completed, but you had your agricultural projects and your ...

A: Sure and some of the things we take for granted, like the ability to put together budget projections on spreadsheets and make presentations about them on Power Point and things like that. It sounds just routine to us, but these were big steps for many of the people there in taking control of their own future and quite rewarding, for them and for us. So hopefully they'll build upon that and get to the point where they can say they don't need us anymore and that's exactly the reaction we want.

Q: Now, do you think they had that in the back of their minds? We did agree, we and the Iraqis, that "we really don't want to be there forever and as soon as you guys can do a, b and c, which was spelled out, we're going home." Do you think they understood that?

A: Yes, absolutely. These are like people anywhere. These are proud people and they want to run their own affairs and they want to reestablish their control. They realize they need help to do that and they're willing to ask for it. They want us there to help them for now and they're very appreciative. They don't want us there forever and that's good. But, ultimately, I think that desire, coupled with the progress they're making on the actual various facets of running the government will in fact put the PRT out of business and that's good.

Assuming the security situation's okay, it's not like the international community needs to go away a hundred per cent. There are some of the more classical development assistance programs through UNDP and perhaps AID and others can hang around, but some of these programs are far more hands off, they're just assistance programs to a local government that is running its own affairs. So gradually we can move out and allow the Iraqis to take back control of their own lives.

Q: That's what we all look forward to. It does sound as if you had a successful experience, though. You would hate to have gone and thought you wasted your time, but I don't get that sense at all.

A: The day to day feeling, what I accomplished every day, is probably one of the more rewarding jobs I've had in the Foreign Service, thus far. So, absolutely, anybody thinking about it, I'd highly recommend it, assuming your personal situation is such that you can do it, I'd highly recommend it.

Q: When you were preparing to go, is there something you wish you had been told or had been trained a little more to do beforehand?

A: The one thing I wish I had, which would have been impossible in the situation, was the ability to speak Arabic. It was great having interpreters and the bilingual bicultural assistance there, very helpful but obviously there's nothing like speaking the language yourself. But of course that would have taken two years or more. That's what our language program is for Arabic, two years. So that wasn't possible. But it was certainly something I'd like to have been able to do.

But other than that, no. As far as I was concerned they gave me a pretty good background and foundation for going out there. A lot of it it's impossible to prepare for, because the situation was so fluid. It's just impossible to know in advance what's going to happen. So you just have to be able to think on your feet and keep moving.

Q: It also sounds as if you were skillfully able to navigate the British-U.S. divide and I guess the civilian-military, which is not always the easiest thing.

A: And that was a good learning experience as well. Having worked in London for the previous year, working with Foreign Office people as well as MOD people, helped as well to know that culture a bit. So, yes, once we got out there, there was a lot of getting used to how the different cultures operate, but ultimately because we were all pulling for the same thing, it all came together.

Q: I'm sure there were challenges on a daily basis and it wasn't maybe quite as easy as you make it sound. I do want to thank you for sharing your experiences. I think it has been instructive, but also very positive and helpful for this project to get your input.

A: You're very welcome.