United States Institute of Peace
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Iraq PRT Experience Project

INTERVIEW #20

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Executive summary

The interviewee was assigned to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Karbala and then to the Provincial Support Team (PST) in the Regional Embassy, Al Hillah, Babil Province. The assignment, from October 2006 to October 2007, was as the Provincial Action Officer working for a senior Diplomatic Security Officer (the latter was also responsible for Wasit Province). The Karbala PRT was co-located with the PRTs for Babil, Najaf, Wasit and Diwaniyah along with various elements of the Regional Embassy in Hillah. These were all in the same location. No one knew who was in-charge, nor knew how to relate to regional counterparts.

PRT management and support in the area were ever changing. Originally, the State Department Regional Embassy covered five central provinces. With the closure of the U.S. military bases under BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure), the PRTs were rolled into the remaining bases. Each PRT had its own senior State Department officer— a change from the Regional Embassy covering all five provinces. In Karbala, the interviewee was the only U.S. official assigned solely and full time to the Karbala government, both on the military and State Department side, for monitoring and engaging the Karbala Government; the other PRT staff members shared duties that encompassed other provinces.

Staffing of the Karbala PRT included four people: the Team leader, Project Manager, Public Diplomacy Officer, and Provincial Action Officer (the interviewee); other technical staff, such as for agriculture or rule of law, were borrowed from other PRTs. The PRT had no direct military engagement, except for the work of the interviewee to keep connected with the government.

The security situation in Karbala was precarious because of the conflicts between the various Shi'a parties and their armed groups. The interviewee had five Iraqi staff members at the outset: one was killed, two fled the country and two failed the military security test. Movement in the province was severely restricted. Meeting with provincial government officials was largely by inviting them to come to the PRT. Relations were good, but many of the Director Generals refused to come to the PRT because of security.

The PRT Karbala had a mission statement developed locally. It focused on strengthening the judiciary (the legal environment), strengthening Iraqi non-government organizations

(civil society), and supporting reconstruction; all of these are relevant to the Karbala Provincial Government. For example, the PRT held conferences for civil societies (NGOs) on the problem of displaced persons; clarified national and provincial budget responsibilities for building a courthouse and, in general, facilitated getting the different factions to talk together to solve mutual problems. The Provincial Government is largely powerless, fractionalized requiring a consensus for decisions. The Provincial Governor was relatively strong, but he did not have much control over the various departments and their Director Generals, some of them were not qualified for their positions. Third governments, e.g. Iran, had a stronger influence on activities in Karbala than the U.S. The Provincial Council meetings were often held in Farsi; Iranian economic warfare on the Karbala economy was destructive.

Accomplishments: difficult to measure. "The number of times we went out on a visit is not the measure of whether we are successful." On security dialogues: "…the sheer act of them (the sheiks and Anbari and Kalaban District Government representatives) sitting down together and showing us Americans for that brief moment they could put aside their religious differences to talk about really doing the right thing..," e,g. securing the road through Karbala and Anbar into Saudi Arabia. The meeting was organized by the interviewee and led by the Iraqis with Americans as observers only.

Other accomplishments, in summary: "I went there with my spoon in hand to move one spoonful of dirt from this side to the side where it needed to be": a bit of security, a bit of rule of law, a bit about civil society, and a bit about economic capacity building.

Lessons: PRTs are a good idea; you cannot fix problems in places like Iraq from the ivory tower of Baghdad Green Zone. You definitely need to be out there. Empty the Embassy and put everybody out in the field—building democracy from the neighborhood. Other lessons: put your ego aside and embrace whatever the team is doing; be very, very skeptical of new ideas, of changing course. Do not promise what you do not have direct control over. Be kind to and patient with the people around you and do not undermine their efforts. Reserve judgment. While your brain is focused on being afraid 24 hours a day, use what is left to focus on your job. Take care of your Iraqi staff.

On organization: make it a small team; do not assign people to a team that is not going to get out; give the team leaders the option to renew in six months; let PRT team leaders send people back. Let each PRT come up with its own mission statement; get lines of communication to function to advise PRTs and offices, for example, that new staff are coming in. On training, go out to a military base and train with the military to get a sense of its operating procedures and being exposed to mortar attacks.

Interview

Q: When were you in Iraq?

A: I arrived in Iraq on October 15, 2006.

Q: And how long were you there?

A: I was there until October 14, 2007, exactly one year, to the day.

Q: And where were you located?

A: I was assigned to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), then changed to Provincial Support Team (PST), Karbala, which is housed in the Regional Embassy office in Al Hillah, Babil Province.

Q: You were not part of an embedded PRT?

A: No. During the time that I served in Iraq there was only a temporary military unit based out of the Provincial Governance Office, at least between October and January. After January 2007 there was no permanent presence of the U.S. military or diplomatic service in the capital city of Karbala Province.

Q: What was the security situation like?

A: Similar to what is being talked about in the press today. The situation in Karbala at that time was quite precarious. As you may know, Karbala is a predominantly Shi'a province and unlike its neighboring Shi'a-dominated provinces, Karbala is a politically contested province, having a strong presence of both the Dawa Party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) Party, as it was called then, and the Sadrists. So security was quite tenuous because of the conflict between the various Shi'a political parties and their respective militant branches and armed groups. So just prior to my arriving in Hillah, a reconnaissance unit working with the Seabees on reconstruction projects had been lethally hit with ESPs on the road between Hillah and Karbala City.

And so movement to the province was severely restricted.

Q: You were not able to get out very much, were you?

A: Not at all. In fact, the only permanent presence in the province was about a thirty minute drive northwest of Hillah, just on the border, a town that, depending on which map you were looking at, was either in Babil Province or Karbala Province. It was a small, eight-man outfit. It was a METT team, Military Embedded Training Team, located there.

In total, I went to Karbala about eight or nine times my entire time in country.

Q: Describe the organization of the PRT.

A: That is interesting. The crux of my experience in Iraq was the ever-changing management and support structure that we were operating in. The Regional Embassy Office in Al Hillah had originally been designed as a State Department facility that had a

regional responsibility for the five central provinces, composed of one fifth of the Iraqi population and is predominately Shi'a: Najaf, Karbala, Diwaniyah, Babil Province and Wasit Province on the Iranian border.

And when the military units under BRAC, Base Realignment and Closure, had withdrawn from those provinces within that band, because Najaf is on the western-most border of Iraq and Wasit is on the eastern-most border, so that is a central band we are talking about, both the bases in Najaf and Karbala were closed, one in August of 2006 and Karbala in April of 2006.

With the closure of those bases, the State embedded teams that had at one time been co-located with their military counterparts were also rolled into the remaining bases. In the case of Karbala, the officer positions were never filled and so the position I came into, as the Iraq Provincial Action Officer had been vacant since April of 2006. And so that piece of the structure, the Regional Embassy Office, was intentionally designed to cover the regional aspects of what was going on in south central Iraq, and it had never been clarified how the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that were being stood up at the time would relate to or work with their regional counterparts.

And so, uniquely in the case of Karbala, we were co-located with Babil PRT, Najaf PRT, Wasit PRT and Diwaniyah PRT, as they were stood up, respectively. Diwaniyah PRT, for example, had one officer the entire time I was there.

Q: They were all in the same location?

A: All in the same location and no one really knew who was in charge.

We also had various elements of a normal consulate operating in Hillah. And no one was really sure who responded to whom; who was in charge of making the trains function and who set the priorities for those trains had never been clarified, because it appeared as though Hillah was more a result of other priorities, as opposed to a specific design or plan, which will then affect the rest of this story.

Q: But for your particular PRT, who was in charge of that?

A: I worked for a senior Diplomatic Security Officer, who was also responsible at that time for Wasit Province.

Q: Was there a senior State Department person in charge of the PRT?

A: No, we reported directly to the National Coordination Team that was at that time run by a former two-star general.

Q: But who was the head of the PRT? You had several of them together. Each one had separate heads?

A: Each one had separate heads. A State Department officer ran each one. They usually were paired up, for example, Karbala with Wasit, Karbala being the western-most province and Wasit being an eastern-most province. It was Najaf and Diwaniyah, which were both centrally located in this south central band. And then there was Babil Province, which was the most complete in its number of assigned staff.

There was no one officer, one senior State Department officer, in charge of the Regional Embassy Office Al Hillah. It had at one time had a Regional Embassy Director, senior officer. However, with the advent of the PRTs and the strategic decision not to continue with the Regional Embassy Office program, the role had come to rest on the shoulders of the PRT director for Babil Province, for a couple of reasons: one, because historically that had been the relationship, the person who was responsible for the Regional Embassy Office usually also engaged very closely with the government of Babil, but also because it was the most fully staffed PRT.

So it was a bit disorganized, to be perfectly honest. You had three officers who were almost equal in level, in seniority

Q: They were all State Department people?

A: All State Department people. One was a former State Department officer, who was responsible for Najaf; he had left the State Department and came back as a 3161 contractor but was very senior. We had an active Foreign Service Officer (FSO) who was relatively senior as well and then a Senior Foreign Service Officer from Diplomatic Security who was the PRT director or leader.

Q: And then each of them had a deputy?

A: No. During the time that I was responsible for Karbala, I was the only U.S. Government asset solely assigned to monitoring and engaging the Karbala government, both on the side of the military and on the side of the State Department. Everyone else had shared duties and encompassed other provinces.

So my team had the following pieces. This is really important to understand: we had a Team Leader who was responsible for two provinces, Karbala and Wasit. We had a Provincial Project Manager who was responsible for Karbala and Wasit. We had a Public Diplomacy Officer who shared her time between Karbala, Najaf, Wasit and Diwaniyah. That is on the State Department side.

On the military side, which is important also to understand and be aware of, the brigade that was responsible for my area of operation, Karbala Province, was also responsible for Najaf, for Babil, for certain parts of the southern crescent of Baghdad and at times had to respond to events going on in Diwaniyah. This brigade had had one of its combat units stripped from them and sent to Anbar, where the fighting was quite violent at that time. And so our brigade was also down several thousand men.

I came back in May for my sister's graduation and I was really angry when I came back, because I found the normal daily life, in which it did not seem like anyone realized we were at war. I went to the Department and stopped in the Near East and Asia (NEA) Iraq office and one of the senior officers there said, "Hey, so, how is that surge going for you?"

I said, "The surge, sir, does not appear to have taken into consideration the two thirds of the country that is Shi'a and, more important, has stripped us of this combat unit. It seems as though when the plan for the surge was designed nobody actually laid down a map of where you had State Department officers assigned and where you had military assigned and what would be the impact of moving everyone to the middle, because we now really do not have the military capability to maintain security on the roads to facilitate our movement, even if it is with Blackwater, not with the military."

Q: Were there any military persons under the senior State Department people?

A: No, because the unit that was responsible for Karbala was also responsible for an area, which is the northern part of Babil Province, which is the southern belt of Baghdad, far more important than what was going on in Karbala, both politically and militarily. And so the PRT I worked for had no direct military engagement, except for the work that I did to keep us connected.

Q: Let us talk about the staffing of the PRTs. What kind of people, what jobs did they have? Were there technical people?

A: We had a Project Manager who had served on a PRT in Afghanistan. He is a brilliant, very thoughtful, person, but also quite informed about how a PRT should work, the strategy one should use to organize the PRT and organize the work of the PRT, because the amount of work, it is infinite, so where do you start and how do you keep your expectations and your efforts focused to accomplish things, as opposed to starting 85 things and never going anywhere?

We had a very capable Public Diplomacy Officer who was spread so thin. In reality, public diplomacy is a lot about the officer being able to engage with the community. There was no coming and going from Karbala Province and so there was not really a mechanism by which she could engage with the community. So probably a great officer to have in Germany or in Tunisia, but perhaps not the best use of a person, putting someone in danger in a place like Karbala, where we did not have access to the province.

I thought that the choice of having a Senior Diplomatic Security officer as a team leader was both a strength and a weakness. It was strength in that he really understood evaluating and taking into consideration the security situation and making decisions about movement. But the point of a PRT is not to be on the road. The number of times you go out on a visit is not the measure of whether we are successful or not.

Q: We will come back to that. That is an important point. Did you have technical

people in agriculture or rule of law?

A: We oftentimes borrowed, clandestinely, from the Babil PRT. But directly assigned to Karbala, no. We were four people and only I was full time working on Karbala the entire year I was there.

Q: And the other three people were?

A: They had their time split between Wasit Province, for the most part, both the team leader and the project manager, who was responsible for managing the various types of funds that were out there, for mega-reconstruction projects. And then one-fourth of a Public Diplomacy Officer.

When I joined the team we had one staff person. It is really important to note that until October 2006 there was very limited and sporadic engagement between the Regional Embassy Officer in Al Hillah and Karbala. It was mainly on regional issues. When all the other governors were being invited, they would invite the governor of Karbala. But it was not a regular and steady engagement designed to build capacity and strengthen democratic systems and institutions in the province, nor was it in any way related to building economic productivity in the province.

At the time the USAID officer that was assigned there was assigned regionally and because of the same security restrictions and complications, he was also confined to the base in Al Hillah. We had backed ourselves into a situation where our partners, our implementing partners, did not want to come to the embassy to meet with us, because of security issues, but then we could not get out to see them for those same security reasons, which meant, when I was leaving, they were trying to implement videoconferencing to talk to an office that was no more that five minutes away, because we could not keep driving back to that office to meet with them, because we were putting them in harm's way. It was like "Who's on First?"

Q: Was there a mission statement? They talk about having some sort of mission statement.

A: By the time I left they had put together some sort of mission statement. But the State Department, in my humble opinion and I have not been around for a very long time, is caught in a kind of unusual position in Iraq. It is really as simple as deciding: are we reporting on history or are we making history? If we are making history, then we need the military to finish doing their job and make it safe for diplomats to go out and build capacity, because building capacity cannot happen from behind a desk. If we are reporting on history, then we might as well have the people back here in Washington and fly the Iraqis who you want to listen to to the United States to record whatever they are saying, because we put ourselves in a position in Iraq where… (I am not an expert; I can only describe what I experienced,)

Q: That is what we want!

A: We put ourselves in a position where we have to…, this is how I would explain it to people, if they come to see us then they are protected in some way. Either they are protected because they are coming to tell us what we want to hear, or they are protected because they are affiliated with somebody who is granting them the opportunity to come meet with us at the embassy office, Iraqis. So it is very difficult from behind a prison wall to see what any sort of thing we are throwing over the wall, how it is going to impact, who is it helping, who is it not helping.

I've been in the Middle East before. I was in Saudi Arabia in 2001. But I would freely admit that I'm not an expert on Arab culture, especially Iraqi culture, much less Shi'a Iraqi culture post-Saddam.

But after a year of being there I believe that I could have been in Omaha trying to do the same job, because you are never going to get good at detecting the subtle differences if you are only hanging out with and working with and corresponding and engaging with Americans.

The two crucial issues here were: security, which made it a non-permissive environment and the management structure meant that there was chaos in the lines.

Q: Let us go back: you say there was not a mission statement? There was nothing that was provided from on high or you developed locally?

A: We did have a mission statement locally. We wanted to build capacity. We had come with it, as our little team. Our mission statement had to do with building capacity and strengthening institutions.

Q: This was for the PRT?

A: This was for the PRT. We were focusing mainly on three very specific things: strengthening the judiciary, the entire legal environment; strengthening non-governmental institutions, civil society; and supporting reconstruction as much as possible.

Q: And working with the provincial government?

A: The provincial government would appear in all three of these areas, because in the case of supporting civil society it is encouraging and supporting

Q: Let us talk about that part of it now. What did you do in supporting civil society?

A: We tried to do a lot of different things. With civil society, we attempted to meet with and engage various organizations operating in Karbala Province.

Q: Iraqi organizations?

A: These are all Iraqi organizations. Specifically, we held a conference at the Regional Embassy Office on civil society and engaging civil society and charitable workers, etc, because of a problem with displaced persons in Karbala Province. The violence in Baghdad had become unbearable for the Shi'a living there, in Sadr City and elsewhere. Many had migrated south to the Shi'a provinces, from which many of them had been displaced several generations before under Saddam.

So these displaced were not able to register, there were a lot of social services that they were not able to access because they had left their province of origin and so there was a lot of controversy between the existing inhabitants and those arriving. So we coordinated with the Provincial Government to start engaging these civil society organizations and allow them to help address this problem.

And the conference was quite a success. We had representation from about thirty or forty Iraqi civil society organizations. We had representation from various departments of the provincial government. Here's the caveat: so they all get together at the regional embassy office, they all speak, they have lots of good speeches, provide lots of great statistics, show their capacity for doing these things and then they all go back to Karbala and we have no idea if anything ever happened from it.

Q: What were you trying to have happen, or hoping for?

A: What we were hoping for is better coordination; let the various civil society organizations do their job, providing assistance. There was a lot of controversy between the displaced persons department of the Iraqi government and its representative ministry office in Karbala, kind of putting the kibosh on civil society organizations from giving out blankets and stoves and things like this. So there was a lot of kind of pushing and pulling. Instead of expending energy on helping the displaced they were fighting amongst themselves.

That is a big problem, because the displaced persons issue is problematic for voting. We were constantly threatened with a potential provincial vote during the year I was there, which never happened. Because if we could help the Karbala government integrate the displaced persons, then we are legitimizing the violence in Baghdad and legitimizing the continued [ethnic cleansing], we were supporting breaking up Iraq into three parts, by allowing each individual [ethnic or religious grouping] to go back to where it finds itself in the majority within the provinces. As more and more Shi'a were to leave Baghdad and the central areas to the north of [the majority-Shi'a provinces], this would further foment the argument for dissolving Iraq as a state and letting it fall into three parts.

And so the international aid organizations and the local Iraqi Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were caught in a very precarious position. The people who were being displaced should not be the victims of this larger policy, but, at the same time, we did not want the Karbala government to absolutely ignore addressing the problems of unemployment, of hunger, of putting these kids in school and it had tertiary effects and side effects.

Q: Helping those may encourage more and make them more established, settle down?

A: You do not want them to get too established, because ideally you want them to go back to Baghdad when it is safe. And from these communities the militias were recruiting foot soldiers. And so it was very important for civil society organizations, Iraqi and otherwise, to get in there and provide aid to counteract the various militant groups that were recruiting from the ranks of the displaced.

Q: And so you were trying to promote coordination?

A: Coordination and some coherent strategy and mission, so we were all on the same page.

Q: Do you think that happened, or somewhat?

A: I do not know, because one of the last times I tried to go to Karbala, I was trying to go to a subsequent meeting, a follow-up conference that was held in Karbala city on this topic and we were turned around at the border.

So, yes, there is a very specific story about how the events in January 2007 changed the operation of the Karbala PRT.

Q: Can you characterize these Iraqi NGOs? What were they like?

A: I do not have much to say about them. I would meet with them as often I could.

Q: Were they large organizations?

A: I do not know. I did not meet with them enough. They could come under the guise of a conference, because there were so many of them that were going to be there. But for them to come individually put them and their leadership at risk. And so for the time that I was there, I focused specifically on the judiciary and the Provincial Government and the Municipal Government. My colleague who was the Project Manager was the one who organized this conference, but he, too, ran into this same problem of not being able to engage regularly with the NGO community based in Karbala, for their security.

Q: But there were many of them?

A: There were thirty that came. That represented both international, the local branches of international NGOs, like the International Organization on Migration (IOM); I do not recall the others. Some UN-related NGOs were there as well. A pretty big showing.

Q: You said you had another role: working on the rule of law, the judiciary. What were you doing there?

A: That was really interesting. That was my pet project. The judiciary was the branch that was least supported by the Provincial Government. They were very much caught in this Catch 22 of the way that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and subsequent laws had been written in the Iraqi constitution, in that insofar as the ministry was responsible for, had a certain chunk of the budget.

Q: The ministry of ?

A: Whatever, this any ministry or any ministry had a chunk of the budget and then each province had a chunk of the budget which was allocated to the same categories as exist at the national level, each ministry.

But it was never clarified who was responsible for building something. So, for example, a courthouse: a courthouse has a lot of different parts in it. It has the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Prisons. Each of those various ministries has a department head in the province, which gets a chunk of money from the province as well. But it was never clarified whether they are supposed to use national ministerial money to do projects and build things, or the local, provincial budget to build things. And since that had never been clarified, it was a stalemate, one of the worst bureaucratic standoffs I have ever seen. "You do it!" "No, you do it!"

The case in Karbala is that the prison was too small for all the people they were detaining; they did not have enough room. The judges were being threatened. They did not have the proper technology and equipment and training for police officers assigned to support judicial activities so that the judiciary could conduct investigations, etc.

And so the Provincial Government came to the judges with the attitude of "You have your money from your ministry. You do not need to ask me for money to build a court house or get trained or to educate or this, that or the other." And the Ministry would come down and look at the judges and say, "You have provincial money. That is what you are supposed to be using that for."

So these guys were caught in kind of a precarious situation and were being threatened. The Sadrists had offices in front of one or two judge's homes. So they were threatened. They had difficulty operating. They were understaffed. So now you understand the problem. What did we do?

Actually, we started engaging with the judges and chatting with them; this perked up the Provincial Government: "Wait a minute. The Americans are meeting with our judges. If the Americans are meeting with them, we need to meet with the judges first, because we do not want them to know anything we do not know or to have influence that we do not have."

That in and of itself made a difference. For the first time the Provincial Government had recognized the judges' efforts to improve rule of law in the province, that had never happened before.

At the time there were also a lot of kidnappings going on. There were Sharia courts. So there was concern that people that were being detained by regular uniformed people. Nobody knew what had happened to missing individuals. Was it the National Police or were they taken by the Provincial Police?

So through a long series of meetings and discussions and heart-to-heart moments with the legal officials we convinced them that it was a good idea to have a detention hotline and to have a database that kept track of the detainees: who was being kept, who was not? Even though this was supposed to have happened at the national level under the CPA, in practice it had not really rolled out to the provinces. Before I left they actually implemented a phone line, a landline, they had a position, a person at a desk with a computer that was theoretically tracking detainees.

I never could go and see the prisons, the database, the desk and the phone line. You could call the phone line and someone would answer. But I never was able to go and see whether that really happened.

Q: You were not allowed because of security, or because they did not want you?

A: No, because of security, I could not get there.

Q: You worked with these people long range, somehow?

A: Yes, they would come visit me.

Q: Come visit you, but you could not visit them?

A: I could not visit them. But, on the same note, I had a few of the meetings with the municipal leadership, the municipal directors, and district directors. I brought them all in to come meet me, those that would, half of them would not, half of them would. And in one of those meetings it became apparent that there was a security issue on the border between Karbala and Anbar, which, by the way, does not take a genius to guesstimate that there would be a problem there, given Karbala-Shi'a, Anbar-Sunni. So that is easy to figure out.

But through a series of meetings and talking, we were actually able to get a Sunni delegation, the U.S. Army, a couple of sheiks and a couple of district members, the important, key players right on that border, to come and meet with their counterparts from Karbala.

On rule of law and security we had moments of accomplishing a meeting, accomplishing a conference, getting them to talk to each other. But I was not able, for a variety of reasons, to follow up on these initiatives. We would get the momentum going, but I could not follow the swing of the pendulum, I could not go out to the border and see the border and see the frontier between Anbar and Karbala and see what they were talking about.

Q: You have any understanding of whether any of your initiatives from the conferences got picked up?

A: No. That took place in July and I was told about it by a local official with whom I had become very good friends, that they had had meetings, that they had met with one another and I believe it, he has always been quite honest and forthright with me. While you can attest to the fact that they had meetings, but I do not know what that means. That means different things in different cultures.

Q: There was a third area that you were talking about working on.

A: Right.

Q: Civil society, rule of law and then there was a third. Those were the program areas you were working in? Personally? Did you meet with members of the Provincial Government?

A: Regularly, as regularly as security would permit them to come to the compound.

Q: But only if they could come and were invited to come? And how was your relationship with them?

A: It was pretty good. I was never easy on them. Some were very difficult for me to deal with because of their potential, possible involvement in an incident that took place in January. I was very good friends with others. In fact, some of them wanted to award me something on behalf of the Provincial Council. I said, "No, I do not want awards. I want you to continue this working relationship with the newly arriving officer" who I unfortunately could not introduce; we did not have any overlap.

But we had a very good working relationship and I could call on them at any time and get an honest appraisal of things

Q: What's your assessment of the capacity of the Provincial Government?

A: It is largely powerless. For one thing, let us be realistic, in the United States something like 12 to 15 per cent of senators and congressmen are women. Imposing on a place like Iraq that 25 per cent of their representative bodies be female is bordering on the absurd. The society is not geared in such a way that these women can really make a huge difference. We should require that some women participate, but that is a big percentage.

It is very easy to start a political party in Karbala. Two people get together, and you are a political party; it is very factionalized; things have to be done on a consensus basis. The laws that were written under the CPA to manage, to give an order and structure to the Provincial Council were, in practice, not applicable. And so you have a lot of people who really have nothing to do. In the case of Karbala, in particular, there are other, third

governments that have a much stronger influence on activities in Karbala Province than we did.

Q: Third governments? Referring to whom?

A: Specifically? Absolutely, Iran. Iran's biggest and most important consulate was based in Karbala Province. And I had reports back from other people that I chatted with that half the Provincial Council meetings were held in Farsi.

And more important, the economic warfare being waged by Iran in Karbala was absolutely destructive to whatever economic base existed in Karbala Province.

Q: What do you mean by economic warfare?

A: They were dumping all sorts of basic products necessary for any country to function. They were dumping bricks and bricklike construction materials. Dumping chicken, poultry, and eggs. Dumping, at prices that local producers and growers could not compete with.

Q: You understand why this was taking place?

A: Absolutely. Karbala is home to important shrines; back before Islam split officially, the Persians were the ones that had been subjugated by the Arabs under Muslim law. So when Imam Ali attempted to assume the caliphate of the Muslim world, because he had been kind and treated the Persians as equals, the Persians really fought for him, supported him. So Iran holds Karbala in a particularly esteemed place in its political heart.

And so, yes, Iran is very active and far more engaged on all levels of society, never mind all the pilgrims, all the Iranians that were finally able, having gotten rid of Saddam, now all these Iranians could go and worship during *Ashura* and the various Shi'a holidays in Karbala.

And so forget wondering if Iran had any political intentions. They are just natural societal linkages because they have money and they are willing to spend it in Karbala.

Karbala's economy is based largely on agriculture, but difficulty with water shortages and electricity shortages and lack of fuel and good seeds and hydration, etc, agriculture was falling to the wayside, barely subsistence at that point. The governor of Karbala at one time had claimed that they were producing at only thirty per cent of capacity. Imagine if the United States only produced at thirty per cent of its agricultural capacity. Karbala is part of the three or four provinces that are the breadbasket of Iraq.

So tourism became fundamental for any sort of income generation at the local level. Any type of service provider is going to depend on tourists. Where are the tourists coming from? Iran.

Q: Let us go back to the Provincial Government. It is interesting, what you have said, but what kind of administrative capacity did they have?

A: They had a relatively strong government, but it did not have much control over the various departments.

Q: These are the Director Generals?

A: The Director Generals (DGs) needed to be capable people and there were definitely members of the Director Generals group that really were not qualified to be in the positions that they were holding.

Again, if you meet with somebody once a month, in the case of being assigned to Iraq, there are at least three months that you are out on leave, because you have got roughly three months of leave time during your stay there. What I am saying is, as an officer serving, you could estimate that there are three months of the entire year that you are not at post, between two and a quarter to three months; and especially in some cities where helicopter traffic to Baghdad is very scarce and very rare.

And so you meet with high government officials once a month and you are out of pocket for three months. I met with high government officials maybe 15 times, 20 times, the entire time I was at post. With the various DGs, I tried to meet with them at least once, all of them. But many of them refused to come and visit because of the security implications.

Q: Again, the only way to meet was for them to come to see you. So they had to take the initiative to come?

A: At the peak, we would go from having one employee, when I started, to having five employees. But during the time I was there one was killed, two fled the country and two were fired because they did not pass our security requirements.

Q: These were Iraqis?

A: The staff member, my guy who got killed, he was incredible, brilliant, that is the guy that we needed running things, not working for me. I would send him to talk with the baddest of the bad guys; people I knew were behind the killing of American soldiers. He was on top of it and he would get out there; he went to every district mayor, when I wanted to meet with all of them and engaged the right guys and got my appointments. But I could not pick up the phone and call them necessarily, because I did not speak Arabic. I had no staff, no Iraqi staff. So my guys would come in from the field and have to translate for me in front of this person, who may or may not have linkages to some other group. I know they did, because it ended up in the staff member's death.

Q: But, on the administrative capacity such as managing budgets, planning, making decisions about projects and so on, did they have any of that?

A: No, a lot of squabbling. From what I recall of the Provincial Reconstruction Development Committee (PRDC), which had to do with allocating the big money for major projects, they would come up with a plan and then we would get the plan approved and then they would come back and there were problems. Some departments were better than others and overall it is clear that there are well trained people in Iraq, but many of the ones who were well prepared were not given the authority and the power that they needed to be able to do the work, because there were militias that were active that sometimes usurped the role of the government —in other words, to show the people that the central government was ineffective and incapable of providing for their needs.

And so there was constantly, not sabotage… but there was an effort on the part of a lot of groups out there to undermine the efforts of the Central Government and the Provincial Government. And so overall I would give the entire Karbala government a C on management and administration, if I had to give it a grade.

It has been seven months since I have been back and I know that the Energy Ministry in Karbala had had a very, very capable Director General, but he had been promoted out of the way, so that another political party could put their guy in there and everyone was complaining about him. And this was at a time when several south central provinces went off the grid. They just stopped making use of the national grid over hijacking electricity off the national grid. There was all kinds of electricity piracy going on, but difficult, again, to keep track of because if you cannot get out and go to the Ministry of Energy in the Provincial Government and chat with those guys and go and see what is going on, then [you're reduced to reading] what Reuters said on the topic.

Q: Were there any training programs for the provincial council?

A: There were. There was a program run by Research Triangle Institute (RTI), Local Governance Program (LGP). During the time that I was in Karbala I saw the results and efforts of those guys once or twice.

This is what I was telling you earlier. Our implementing partners had security issues that put a barrier between us. So I rarely saw the group hired by RTI to work in Karbala. I regularly heard from various Provincial Council members that the materials for the training were inadequate, that they were not culturally sensitive and that they were not useful, because they were doing things like Power Point training and how to have a meeting training and they were using Power Point slides that had images of people on them and how true is that; it is impossible for me to tell. But when I would go to my USAID counterpart, they could barely handle their workload for their province, much less a province that they were never going to get back into. And so perhaps they have been able to do a lot more.

Q: "They" is who?

A: USAID, because USAID was not, at that time, at least in Hillah, directly connected to the PRT. They had their own regional thing; that changed towards the end of the time that

I was there, with a new person, but at the time when I was there the answer from USAID was, "Do not go near our implementing partners, and do not try to engage them. This is none of your business."

Q: So now we are talking about RTI being the implementing partner?

A: Partner, yes. I could not engage them. I would report back whenever any of the Provincial Council members would complain about the training, but I never heard anything good or useful out of that.

Q: So there was this compartmentalization within the U.S.

A: Stove piping like I have never seen before.

Q: You understand why USAID was so reluctant?

A: I hesitate saying this, but the person that was there was not properly prepared for the job that they would have and the management structure had not encouraged and required good cooperation. When Hillah was regionally focused and the USAID component was regionally focused and they behaved like a consulate everybody knew how to deal with that, because there was one person in charge. But as soon as you had three or four PRT team leaders and a regional USAID structure, they did not have cohesive or properly aligned touch points as they would like to say in marketing. So they kept missing each other.

There is a fine balance. When you are there for a year you kind of get a sense for what you are doing. When you are there for two years, you are crazy.

Q: What does that mean?

A: First, it is hard to live being afraid 24 hours a day. While I was there we were mortared on our compound that was 800 meters long and maybe 400 meters wide, we took incoming mortars, on that teeny tiny little compound, at least once a week during the time I was there. You never knew when it was coming or where it was coming from and there was nothing you could do about it, because we were an embassy office and so therefore we do not respond to incoming fire. We would not fire back.

Two, you never knew when somebody was going to die, when some crisis was going to happen and the human mind can deal with that for only so long. And so when I say that between a year and two years, somewhere in there, the law of diminishing returns ceases to apply.

What I mean to say is that at a year you finally have a sense of what you are doing and maybe making tours a little bit longer would be a good idea, because you are now in the swing of things and would allow for an easier rotation. But if you are there for two years, you are so affected by living in constant fear, by the challenges of working in that

environment, that you are not in a position to be mentally flexible enough to deal with new folks coming in. And so there is a certain degree to which you cannot let people, especially in a project implementing capacity, stay there for too long, because they cannot keep up with the new arrivals. The "idea fairy" that bites everybody at some point during his/her tour: "Oh, I have this great idea! We are going to do this new thing!" and completely derails what everybody else has been working on, because that inevitably happens and you need to be mentally flexible to be able to ride those highs and lows.

Q: When you talk about provincial agriculture being important, did you have a PRT program in agriculture?

A: As I was leaving a new program was being implemented by USAID countrywide. However, it was never going to affect Karbala, at least in its first iterations. We had access to a regional agricultural specialist, but there were great conversations that I attended in Baghdad about reengineering Iraqi agriculture to be on high yield, high priced, high value items like raspberries. You can grow raspberries in Iraq. At that level, in Baghdad, talking about these big plans of reengineering an entire agricultural society's staple products so that they would be net importers of grains and rice and they would be net exporters of raspberries for the entire region, great idea. "The idea fairy" bit him.

In practical terms, the agricultural specialists were not connected to that plan. In our case they were not connected to our PRT. They were not connected to any sort of tangible output. They were 3161s, which were thrown into country, given a great paycheck, no resentments there and told, "Go fix agriculture! But we are not going to measure you on how you are going to do that."

So the programs that existed were stray dog eradication, because they had problems with dogs being loose and feral and rabid; talked about doing trash pick-up in Babil Province; programs that we could not go out and see if they were happening. We did not have funding to encourage that they happened. Was it really important for us to go out and pick up trash right now? Getting people to grow enough vegetables and fruits so that they can feed the people of Iraq probably is a bigger priority.

Q: You mean your agriculture people were working on the trash project?

A: Yes. Not Iraqis, I am talking about our people. The PRT agriculture specialist had a program for doing trash collection in Babil.

To come back to management being an issue, because he is a 3161, because his contract is managed in some ivory tower miles and miles and miles away from where his work is being done or her work is being done, as the PRT team leader of that team, I could not even make use of him. He only worked on Babil. He had no interest in expanding his responsibilities, had no managerial carrot or stick. He was designing Arabian-style horse racing programs.

Q: So there was no mission statement that articulated what was to be carried out?

What he was supposed to do?

A: No, there was not. Nothing at all. Nope, not from on high, because, again, the link between reengineering an entire agricultural system of production, never mind cold storage, anyway, a whole bunch of reasons why that would not have worked, there was no link there. There was no link at the cultural level; I am sure that if you talked to people from that team they could give you better information on what was going on in the Babil team, but from my perspective, where I sat, Karbala had orchards, Karbala grew tomatoes, grew all kinds of things, we did not have any sort of support in that area.

We also asked for tourism support. We wanted to have a tourism conference and I wrangled with my colleagues for a long time on this. In fact, I made sure that it did not happen, the conference on tourism, because how do you talk about tourism if you do not have security? How can you talk about developing an infrastructure?

Develop your services infrastructure. So let us focus on services: banking, restaurants, hotels, because if you get the services functioning in a country, then the tourism will naturally follow. It is a result of, not a means to.

Never mind, does the American government want to get entangled with Iran directly on religious tourism, something we do not understand at all, for the Shi'a? Probably not. There are probably better places for us to put our energies. But everyone in Iraq is bit by "the idea fairy;" the ideas usually are completely opposed to whatever things you have been working on. And because there was no clear management, there was no mission, no clear vision. And it is hard. This is not the ambassador's fault. It is the fault of, it is everybody's fault, a little bit, because you have to buy into and fall in love with your mission, so that you can honestly and objectively compare whatever idea comes up from the new guy that just arrived to this mission and say, "They do not go together," so we throw away the new idea, we stay focused on the work that we are doing.
That did not happen, because there was not enough continuity.

Q: You imply there was fairly frequent turnover.

A: Yes.

Q: How frequent, would you say?

A: I happened to arrive with the same tranche and so a bunch of us arrived all at one time and the people that we replaced had already left. In my case, the person I replaced had left in April.

Q: So there was no overlap?

A: There was nothing. There was no handover manual. In fact, I have found that to be the case throughout my career in the State Department is that we do not do well, on the whole, on passing the baton. We throw the baton back on the [track] and hope that the

next guy can [pick it up].

Q: Good point! In the reconstruction area, what was happening? Were there a lot of local reconstruction programs in your PRT?

A: There had been a lot of money. There had been some twenty million dollars that was being put towards reconstruction. This is not my area, but one of the problems that happened is that money that we were using to rebuild things, we had to have eyes on and after January 20th we no longer had access to the province and so many projects were stalled and the only way that we could was by the U.S. [Army Corps of Engineers] sending their Iraqi hired engineers, who were very capable, by the way, to go and check out the sites. The projects were progressing slowly. However, it was very difficult to get new projects on line.

It was virtually impossible for me to get the military to use their Commander's Economic Reconstruction and Development fund for anything, because the brigade I was working with wanted nothing to do with Karbala. They had had some soldiers killed in a really horrific way and they pretty much shut down any interest or activity in Karbala, except for that METT team that was on the Babil border.

And so I cannot speak to reconstruction. I never was able to see anything. I was told periodically that things were getting finished and that buildings were being built.

Q: What kinds of projects?

A: Electrical, a telephone exchange, various health centers. We had stopped building schools by then, because for some reason the U.S. government did not think it was important to pay attention to education. That was my baby project at the end; my education support effort.

Q: What was that?

A: It was pretty amazing. I went out to everybody I knew in the United States and overseas and I asked them for school supplies. I wanted to build a link between schools in the U.S. and schools in Iraq, in Karbala, particularly and I wanted to collect learning materials, because if we have any chance of fixing this country, it is with the generation of kids that are in school now.

And I had ambassadors send me science kits from our embassies in Europe. I had schools in the U.S. send U.S. Constitutions on parchment paper and pencils and notebooks. Can you imagine it? It was amazing. I had boxes arriving through the APO every day and I was sorting stuff out. And the day that I went to go and deliver the stuff to the Iraqi Army so that they could then go and deliver it to the schools, a irregular uniformed group turned our convoy around and we almost were in a gunfight, which would not have been a good way to end your tour. I understood later, about five months later, the stuff that we had collected was finally delivered to schools by Blackwater going

into Karbala and delivering it.

We had been pressing the Karbala government to pay attention to educating its people, pay attention to their kids that was really important. We talked about this a lot with the Provincial Council Chairman. "Democracy is not for you. It is going to be for your kids and your grandkids." I used to give him a hard time about this all the time.

Q: Was there a Provincial Reconstruction and Development Committee?

A: Yes, that is the PRDC; the Program Manager ran it. I did not regularly attend those meetings, because for most of the time that I was there the head of the Reconstruction Committee for the Provincial Government would not attend our PRDC. He was not interested in it. And if you look at the millions of dollars they were getting from their government, versus the pennies that they were getting from us at that time, the time while I served in Iraq we had no flash money to go out and do projects. Most of the money for the PRDC had already been allocated, so all we were doing was maintaining projects, we were not coming up with new ones. As I was leaving, more money had come in for that.

We had no money to support anything that I wanted them to do, which is a good thing, because we were buying peoples' allegiance and interest in doing things our way. We were not cultivating a real organic relationship with democratic institutions. And so not having money meant that they were talking to me because I had something useful to tell them, I had something useful to bring to their attention, for them to think about, in a way that they had not thought about it. But I could not buy them off; I could not build them a new school or a new courthouse. I had to build those relationships purely based on, God, I do not even know how that happened. It was very much about what are the right things to do for your people. That was the conversation.

Q: But the PRT did not have a budget of its own?

A: The PRT had no budget. The PRDC had money that had already been allocated. The PRDC met on a monthly basis. The PRDC was dissolving. In August my boss leaves. In June the Provincial Project Manager (PPM) that we had had through most of the time I had been there was reassigned to set up a PRT in Wasit Province. So Wasit goes out to Camp Delta. And so I lost my staff, I lost my team. By then one of my foreign service nationals (FSNs) had been killed or my local contractor had been killed, so all of our local Iraqi staff had gone underground.

So after July of 2007, operations for us were pretty much, everything came to a screeching halt, because I did not have a team leader until several weeks later, they felt like months, but several weeks later. I had a PPM, a Provincial Project Manager, but he had been an agricultural consultant who had lived on a farm, that is why he was an agricultural consultant and now he was running this big budget.

Q: Big budget? What do you mean?

A: Maintaining and monitoring the projects. I do not really know much about the process, but what I recall is there were lots of spread sheets and tracking the costs of materials as they changed, because inflation was just skyrocketing in Iraq and so projects that had been bid out a year before that were now coming into activity, the goods and services required for those projects, the prices had gone out of control. So just his work on this one province fully occupied his time.

Q: These were central projects that he was supposed to monitor?

A: No, these are not central projects. This was a central fund. Each PRDC of each province would submit their proposed number of projects, funded centrally through a combination of Saddam money and…

Q: There was the Quick Reaction Fund of the State Department.

A: That had started to get rolling out as I was leaving. I an talking about even before that, which is the funding for the PRDC and I guess at this point I just cannot remember the name but it was from…

Q: The Transition Initiatives Fund?

A: Yes, I guess that is what it was called.

Q: Used for small projects.

A: No, those were million dollar projects, several million-dollar projects. Eighteen million in total for those.

Q: So these are probably USAID-funded projects.

A: No, this is from the Office for Iraq Transition. Before it had another name and I cannot remember what it is. It came from a central source that was an offshoot of the Embassy.

Q: This is the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office (IRMO).

A: Yes, IRMO, that is it. So these are IRMO funds through the PRDC and during the time that I was there that money had already been allocated, so it was not as though we were taking on new projects, although I do recall my colleague talking about having to get some thinking about new projects.

But running a government is not building buildings. And so, yes, we spent a lot of time focused on how they were going to spend this money we were giving them for free. Yes, they are very good at spending money. I am sure my friend's ten-year old daughter is really good at spending money, too. That does not mean she is capable of running a government.

Q: But there was this project manager that you had there that was supposed to keep track of all these projects?

A: Right and by the time I was leaving the one that I had worked with most closely had been sent out to another city. He is still there. He is great.

His replacement was overwhelmed with one province, much less the three that he was responsible for. By the time I am getting ready to leave —close to the last month that I am in country— the Provincial Support Team (PST) (because at that point we were now a PST because we were not physically located in our province) was starting to be re-staffed or staffed up more fully.

Q: Did you have a cultural advisor in the PRT?

A: No.

Q: Some of them have these

A: Bicultural Bilingual Advisors (BBAs). Right, they are bicultural, bilingual. No, there was one Department of State linguist who was shared by everyone, which meant he was highly overworked. This poor guy was pulled in every direction, because most people who wanted to talk to us about anything that were serious or meaningful would only talk to us through him, because he was sequestered on the compound with us; he is an American.

Q: Did you have a public affairs program or officer (PD)?

A: Yes, we had a PD officer. She was trying to do the visitors program and get visitors to the United States. She did some work with women's organizations and NGOs. But she belonged to nobody and yet she belonged to everyone and so her work was quite separate, in some cases, it seems to be quite separate from the PRT, because she was responsible for four provinces. So she sort of reported to us but sort of not.
And since my manager was not accustomed to having to run all these different parts of an embassy or a mission he did not really know how to make the best use of her, nor did she have to necessarily respond because she did not report to him.

Q: Did you have a Political Reporting Officer (PR)?

A: I am that person.

Q: You were writing reports back to Baghdad?

A: I was helping them figure out how to run their government. I was writing reports back to Washington and Baghdad

Q: What was your function?

A: I was the Provincial Action Officer; that means I did anything that needed to be done.

Q: And what were some of the other things you were doing? I think you have covered a lot of them, but what are we missing?

A: There is a lot of administrative stuff, too. Every time the governor was being called up to Baghdad for something, I had to engage. When the military wanted to know what was going on the province after they pulled out of Karbala Province, they counted on me to provide them with a political situation analysis. I wrote weekly situation reports (sitreps) on events going on. I had my staff monitoring activity in the province and monitoring the local papers and local media so I could report back to Baghdad.

Towards the end I provided regular translations and interpretations, because the English of my staff was less than fabulous. But they did the best they could and I got really good at understanding what they meant by how they wrote their English to provide the Embassy with reporting.

I spent a lot of time waiting for something to happen, because if you cannot get out there to do stuff, then you end up reporting on history.

Q: Any feedback on your reports?

A: No, not really. I wrote some pretty big pieces on security in the province that I thought were pretty audacious. Never heard back, I do not know that anybody ever read them.

Q: Any other major subjects you were reporting on?

A: The security dialogue between Anbar and Karbala, but never heard anything back on that, either. I heard through [unofficial] channels that somebody had thought it was interesting.

Q: Other important topics that you were reporting on?

A: The economic warfare that was being waged. I wrote a cable on the case for women, but I do not think that it ever went out. And also I was just monitoring the way that the various ministries were functioning in the province.

Q: How were they functioning?

A: Like I said, I would give them a C plus. I reported regularly that the functions of Karbala Province in general were no better than probably any other Third World country. But the security issue was preventing them from really making any major strides forward.

Q: Your relationships with the Iraqis, how did you find those relationships working out?

A: I think it is important to say, I never felt that my age, because I am relatively young, or my gender prevented people from meeting with me or talking with me. I had clerics, political types and others come in.

Q: This was all through interpreters?

A: Through my interpreter, yes. I had to have an interpreter for every meeting. I did not meet anyone who spoke English.

I thought that my relationships with the Iraqis were quite good. There was one individual whom I had hoped would go and meet with other Shi'a populations in the Gulf region to do business and promote Karbala's exports. And we were just going back and forth and finally at one point he says, "We need to talk about us first. How is your family?"

And so my enthusiasm and my exuberance for trying to do something was not a culturally acceptable mechanism. They felt comfortable enough with me to say, "Hold on, we need to catch up first." That was not a problem at all and I felt that that worked really well.

Q: Good guidance for you in your future relationships, to start off with developing a personal relationship. How about your relationships with the military?

A: One day the lieutenant colonel that I directly worked with, who was responsible for Karbala, said, "I cannot believe your boss lets you do all of the engagement with us, lets you handle all of the coordination with the military." With the help of and the leadership from the PPM, who was a West Point graduate, who had been on the military side of a PRT in Afghanistan, he knew a lot of the folks that were working in the military unit that we were going to be working with and so as soon as he got on the ground he said, "We are going to go up there and meet with those guys and start coordinating."

And as soon as that relationship was established I became responsible, because of the job that I held for maintaining the channels of communication. And it was crucial when the Provincial Governance center was attacked and four American soldiers were extracted. It was even more crucial on two occasions when there were car bombs and the threat of absolute chaos in the city and we needed U.S. military support. I was able to pick up the phone, direct line to the lieutenant colonel and the colonel I needed to deal with and said, "We need to get this, this, this and this and please confirm and who is reporting, this is what is going on on the ground."

So I could count on them. They would take me places. It was a very good working relationship, which they were a little surprised about, because I am not a senior officer. But it was a good working relationship.

Q: They were very responsive to your requests?

A: And, likewise, when they needed anything, they needed to know somebody, they needed to hear about something, so that they could make better decisions about security, I had it for them. Not only that, but they came to me to find the right people for the rest of the provinces: "Who else do we need to talk to?" I felt like I had a really good working relationship with the brigade. I even tried to get myself assigned as the [political advisor] to the lieutenant colonel, so that I could directly live on the same base with them and work more closely with them.

Q: Now how about the relationship to the higher ups in Baghdad, the embassy and USAID and all the other higher authorities?

A: I thought that a strategic error was made when the political section decided not to have reviewing authority on Iraq Public Affairs Officers (IPAOs), because it meant that IRMO was writing my reviewing statement and since IRMO does not care about reporting, then why should I care about reporting? If my job is to do reconstruction, it means I am rolling up my sleeves and I am out there working. But what the political section was interested in was my observations, my analyses and my predictions about what is going on.

So I had pretty much separate taskings that came down from on high. I never saw [any] results of these taskings. I felt like it was a lot like contemplating your navel, because I would bring folks in over dangerous roads to answer questions that they had answered six and seven times before and it would go up to the top of the ivory tower and we never saw anything come back, no policy decision, no effort.

Some activity may have been there. I may have missed it. Seeing cable traffic was also not my favorite thing to do, because my job was to engage with Iraqis.

Q: But what were the tasks that they gave you?

A: "Ask about the probability of provincial elections." About every three months we got asked about that. "Give us a report on how civil society organizations are effective or not effective within the province." How on earth would I know? I can listen to people come in and tell me what I want to hear. Here is the crux: the people who were weak and who needed power would align themselves with the United States to gain the extra push to overcome their adversary and then drop us like a wet rag.

I need to tell a story. I do not know if this is an appropriate place, but on January 20th my military counterpart was brutally assaulted and three of his colleagues were kidnapped and then later executed at point blank range. That event changed engagement between Karbala and the United States government and particularly the U.S. military forever.

Q: This person was…?

A: As you know, there were Civil Affairs units that were assigned to each province, but

in the case of Karbala there was one officer, a brilliant West Point graduate, who came from the reserves who lived several days out of the week in the Karbala Governance Center compound and then several days at the base up in northern Babil that I had told you about.

On January 21st the PRT was going to travel down to Karbala for the very first time since we were on the ground and relatively staffed up to go meet with our counterparts and one of the reasons why we felt we could do that was because of the presence of the Civil Affairs unit that had its pulse on security. That unit was only twelve men strong. On January 20th at six p.m. an unmarked convoy similar to the convoy structure and appearance that Blackwater uses infiltrated, without any resistance, because they looked like us, had uniforms, apparently, that looked like ours, accessed the compound, killed one soldier and extracted four others and was making off with them heading east when the Babil police intercepted them, or were close enough to intercept them. At that time the kidnappers took the captive soldiers out and shot them in the back of the head.

One captain (name deleted) was sent in a Red Crescent van to Al Hillah, because they thought he might still be alive. Part of why I said security was so bad, somebody was able to get into the governance compound. The local governor had written a letter of recommendation for graduate school for Captain (name deleted). This is important for me to be able to tell this story, because I do not want him to be forgotten and the work that he did to be forgotten. He got some kids, especially one boy in particular, sent to the United States to have a very important, very expensive, open heart surgery. He had started a beehive. They cultivate bees in Karbala Province and he had [done] a lot of work, despite every type of obstacle you can imagine. He had, for almost an entire tour, done amazing things for these guys.

The structure of the convoy, the kidnappers, the equipment that they used, the method of moving throughout the province was the underlying reason why we could not move in the province. Any unmarked convoy was immediately stopped by police checkpoints. There was no way that our RSO, the regional security officer, including my boss, who was not acting as a regional security officer, was going to allow our convoys to stop at police check points, because, as I said before, one of the things I wrote about that I thought was quite controversial and quite eye opening and fell on deaf ears was the infiltration of the militias in[to] the [Iraqi] police. So you did not know if you were going to come up to a police checkpoint that was infiltrated or not. And so Blackwater would not stop at a checkpoint to be able to notify that it was us that was coming in, so therefore they should let us in. And so we were caught in a horrible Catch 22. We almost found ourselves in that position nationally in October of 2007, when the shootings happened in Baghdad by Blackwater.

I need to tell his story because what he did was the right thing. He worked with everyone. He was in the right place to do the work that he was doing. And it is a testament to the fact that we have ignored the Shi'a, largely, having put some of our coalition partners there who are not as fully resourced and funded as we are. We have followed in the footsteps of Saddam Hussein and I say that and I know how horrible it is to say that, no

one says that, because we have ignored sixty per cent of the population by not providing them the resources, with the security, with the capacity building infrastructure that they need. I am talking about the Shi'a.

And so the captain's death is a direct result of the lack of security in that province and anybody wanting to try to do something good, at least during the time that I was there, would be undermined and their lives would be in danger because anything that would make this government, that is seen as a puppet government run really by the United States, [appear] strong is going to be undermined. Let me say that again. Anyone working for a peaceful Iraq under this particular government is going to be the focus and target of subversive activities.

Q: Did you report this story?

A: Of course. It was the lynchpin of our experience. It restricted the way we could work in the province. It was very difficult at first, anytime I would meet with the Provincial Government for several months after that they would complain about how we had gone in and killed our own soldiers. "We were under threat of attack by you, because you came in and killed your own soldiers and now they are going to come after us." The elected and non-elected officials, the civil servants and military officers of the Iraqi government who probably had a hand in these soldiers' deaths, [I had] to work with them and work with them the rest of the time I was there. There is a definite point at which to send people home.

The U.S. military assigned to Karbala Province wanted nothing to do with Karbala after the deaths of those soldiers, because they never got closure, they never got the information they needed, they never had the cooperation they needed. And some would argue that, of course, anyone who would be willing to speak out would put himself or herself in danger. Who is going to protect them? We clearly cannot.

But on the other hand, the people who knew what was going on were the same people who were asking for information and therefore had no interest in incriminating themselves.

Q: Is there any other major part of the program or activity we have not touched on?

A: One thing that I said to people as they arrived at post, I said, "Because there is no clear measure of whether you are being successful or your work is having any impact, because there is not a very clear line of hierarchy in management, it will be natural for you to compete with your colleagues. Foreign Service Officers are bright, tenacious, passionate individuals who care about the work that they do and the places they do it. If you do not direct that energy, it can become its own disadvantage, its own detriment, its own defect."

The inner workings of our environment were probably the most toxic I have ever been in and I have done work in prisons in the United States and worse than prisons, prior to joining the State Department. I know what it is like to be in a toxic environment but this

was terrible.

Q: This was among the Americans?

A: This was among the Americans. So it needs to be said, I was on a compound where there were 900 people, of which two per cent of them, give or take a percentage point, were women. And there is nothing wrong with that, but there needs to be a bit of how do we prepare folks for being in that kind of environment. I went to a women's college when I was an undergraduate. This was the antithesis of that experience.

We need our officers, all of our officers, male and female, to be sensitive to be working in that kind of environment. It cannot be assumed that people know how to deal with the stress of being in an environment like that. Moreover, add on to that, in a very unbalanced gender environment. When you have as many men as you have women, the various types of personalities tend to cancel each other out. But when you have one or two women on a compound with that many men, there are lots of opportunities for problems and without good, strong leadership, good, strong management that gets everyone, all of that energy, all of that mental capability, focused on the task at hand; it becomes incredibly destructive.

Q: And you did not have that, did you?

A: No, we did not. We had nothing else to do but work. Unhealthy.

There were good leaders on that compound, had any one of them been empowered to be in charge of everyone else and kind of referee: Alcohol and vices become the only outlet for that time and energy, because there is not one guiding force, guiding light, bringing everybody into the fold.

So I think that I am quite a sensitive person and coming back from Iraq has been not so much about being in a war zone as much as coming back from being in an incredibly toxic environment, because you live, eat and sleep with the same persons for a year. Without a strong leader to keep morale and keep people in a healthy, positive state of mind, as much as possible and keep them focused, all that energy turns inward and it was extraordinarily destructive.

Q: This leads us into the next question: can you give a sense of the achievements of the PRT? Given that environment, what do you think you achieved?

A: I did not know how I was going to answer that question, because I knew that question was going to come up. There are two kinds of questions I hate to be asked about Iraq. One was "How many times did you go to your province?" because I feel I have to justify. I went five times but there is a reason why I could not go more. I would have. I was not a chicken. You know, that is big with us. I was not afraid. I was willing to put my life on the line. That is big with State Department officers.

And the other one is "Did you actually accomplish anything?" I hate those questions.

But today I ran into a senior level officer who came through Iraq to evaluate what was going on, how things are working, whether it was working. Very senior, very important, very well placed. And I had a moment when she and her delegation (there was a big group of people that came through) to succinctly and concisely tell her exactly what she needed to know about what was not working with Hillah. And I ran into her today and she said, "Thank you." She said, "What you said and how you said it resonated with those of us on this delegation" that had some very high level people "and we talked about you for a long time after we left."

And it is not about them remembering me. What really was important was that they heard what I had to say and it went back and it was directly given to the Secretary. We join because we want to do something good.

Having the Anbar-Karbala security dialogue meant that two people who would otherwise have killed each other on the streets sat peaceably in a room and it was not just that they were in a room together, it was the way that the room worked out. The marine one-star general and the army one-star general, they trusted me because the State Department trusted me in my position to set up that meeting and I put them and the team leaders in the corners of the room and I put the Iraqi delegations, government delegations, next to each other on one side of the room. I put the security elements from the various provinces sitting next to each other, Anbari sitting next to a Karbalan, on the other side of the table. I put the peoples' representatives, the sheiks, on another side of the table, Karbalan next to Anbari. And I put the District Government representatives, again, Karbalan next to Anbari and they ran the meeting. I said to my American counterparts, "If you do not bring a translator you are not going to know what is going on and that is your problem."

And so the Americans did not lead the meeting, they did not speak, except to say, "Thank you, Iraqis, for coming and doing this, which is great and letting us be part of it." It was the Iraqis who talked and they decided not to throw accusations back and forth. They focused on the present, focused on what they needed to do to secure the road that goes through Karbala, then through Anbar and into Saudi Arabia, heading towards Mecca. That is how all of them should have been, all the meetings, all the engagements.

There are so many times that I went through where the Americans talked for hours and hours. You cannot talk at someone that you want to embrace your [way of] doing things. You have to let them to come to it on their own and give them ideas along the way.

Q: You found that this was an achievement, in getting them to talk together?

A: I do not know if it ever resulted in anything else, but the sheer act of them sitting down and showing us Americans for that brief moment they could put aside their religious differences to talk about really doing the right thing, there is hope for Iraq; and, hopefully, people that are there will be able to continue with that.

Q: Did something of that kind take place in the other PRTs?

A: I do not like to talk about the other PRTs, because I was really focused on mine. That was the biggest achievement that I saw, the one that I found to be the most meaningful. Everything else was fits and starts.

I spent more time reporting back, trying to dissuade the U.S. government from continuing on a program of remote operations. I spent a lot of time formulating papers, responding to inquiries about how well they worked, because we had a team leader who thought remote operations were working really well and I felt that they were not.

Q: What are remote operations?

A: Remote operations, that is exactly what I did. I was based in Hillah but I was covering Karbala and I was depending on my staff and sporadic visits.

Q: Do you think the PRT accomplished its mission, or any aspect of its mission?

A: "Accomplished" would assume that the work is done, right? No, because I do not think a country that has been under a dictatorship for thirty plus, forty years can embrace democracy and build democratic institutions and go from being a centrally controlled economy to being a free market economy in four years. It is inconceivable to sell that to Iraqis. They never made decisions for themselves. How on earth are they expected to make huge decisions now?

So, when you ask me did we accomplish anything, I never intended to go there to accomplish anything. I went there with my spoon in hand to move one spoonful of dirt from this side to the side where it needed to be.

And I know that the American people are frustrated and they are pretty much over it, as we colloquially say, they are done with the war. But we are still in Germany. We need to remain.

Q: Did you move that spoonful?

A: Absolutely.

Q: What was in that spoon?

A: A little bit of security and little of rule of law, it was a little bit about civil society, it was a little bit about economic capacity building. But did I accomplish anything? No.

Q: Do you think that PRTs are a good idea?

A: Yes. I do not think that you can fix problems in places like Afghanistan and Iraq from the ivory tower in Baghdad and definitely not from the Green Zone in Baghdad.

You need to be out there. We need to empty the Embassy in Baghdad and put everybody out in the field. Those fifty officers that they had bumping into each other up in the political section, I am sure that the ambassador's far more knowledgeable than I am. Who am I to critique?

However, each District Mayor needs help building capacity. We should be building democracy from the neighborhood, whatever the lowest common denominator is. I could only get as far down as the District Mayors. We need to be down there working with each community leader.

And to a large extent our military was doing that, but because they were pulled into Baghdad to deal with the security issues in Baghdad, they were unable to continue doing that type of work.

Q: You have already touched on some lessons, but what other lessons do you have, lessons that you would want to pass on to people who are trying to improve the PRT program?

A: Put your ego aside and be willing to embrace whatever the team's already doing. Be very, very skeptical of new ideas. Be very, very skeptical of changing course. Lesson one.

Lesson two: do not promise things that you do not have direct control over. If you do not have the money or the signature authority on that check, then do not tell anybody you have it. Do not promise things that you do not already have. These are cultures that are old cultures, long memories. People do not quickly forgive transgressions and they have grandfather laws. If your predecessor failed to show up with something, then you are going to hear about it.

Be kind to the people around you. You are probably going to piss each other off. You are probably going to hurt each other's feelings. You are probably going to really offend the people that you work with, live with. But be patient with them, be kind. It is probably above your pay grade to decide whether or not the assets currently assigned to Iraq should or should not there. But since it is above your pay grade to decide whether they are there or not, do not undermine their effort. Work with them. That was a big thing that I saw while I was there.

Reserve judgment. It takes a little while to figure out what is going on in Iraq. Do not rush to think that you know what the heck you are talking about, because as soon as you know what you are talking about is probably when you are most wrong. Be patient. Figuring out what you are supposed to be doing there will come with time and if you are a manager, then figure out what your team should be doing there and make sure it is clear, the measure of the effort is clear. Not just a regular old EER (annual efficiency report). That is just fluffy. Over in Iraq they are completely exaggerated. I am talking about "You are doing well when?" and be able to answer that with tangible, measurable results, things that people can really wrap their heads around, because there is so much about being in Iraq that nobody can get their heads around.

You do not know what it is like to be afraid 24 hours a day until you are afraid 24 hours a day. Your brain is focused on that. How do you use whatever is left of your brain to focus on your job? It is important.

Take care of your Iraqi staff and help your American staff do a good job of taking care of your Iraqi staff, because they go home at the end of the day and they do not get to sleep in an air conditioned hooch and have three square meals a day and talk to their family on the phone and know that they are safe.

Q: What about on the organization and structure of the PRT? Any lessons from that experience? You had quite an experience.

A: If I had time with the ambassadors that I served under, I would say, "Make up your mind. Are we talking history or are we talking making history? You do not need a lot of people to do nothing, so if you are going to use a team to satisfy some senator's conscience at night, because at least we have somebody there" which is how I felt Karbala sometimes was. Check the box. We have a team looking at Karbala.

And make it a small team, because the smaller the team is, the more dynamic it is, less bureaucratic it becomes and it can focus on very specific activities. So do not keep assigning folks to a team that is not going to get out. We were getting a lot of pressure to send folks out to Karbala. Why?

I do not know how you would fix that, because they are hiring from here to try to alleviate the administrative burden on Iraq, because the people that are on that staff have never worked in Iraq and have no idea what we are trying to do there. Nor does what we are trying to do in Mosul have any relationship necessarily to what we are trying to do in Karbala. That is a broken system that has, in my opinion, very little chance of being repaired, given the current operating structure.

But give the PRT team leaders the option to renew at six months. People go out there on a year contract, they are pretty much good as gold. Nobody is going to touch them. Nobody is going to send them back, because you have a "boots on the ground" measurement, which seems to be the first measurement. "We are successful if we have this many boots on the ground in Iraq."

Let PRT team leaders send people back. "This guy is crazy." "This guy is not doing what I asked him to do." Right now, there is no direct managerial linkage, from what I can tell, I am not a manager, so I only know this from what I saw and what I heard, between the 3161 who is a contractor who is out there and the PRT team leader. Since there is no consequence, whether the 3161 does his job, does not do his job, is in the vicinity of his job, shows up to his job, then the PRT team leader does not have control and I would rather see a fourth of the number of people in Iraq but who are really good at what they do than the number of people that are there now.

Q: What about the utility of a mission statement?

A: Mission statements, at an Embassy level, when you are talking like four thousand people, like we are talking in Baghdad, is like, ExxonMobil has a mission statement and I can guarantee you that there are a lot of people who work for Exxon who: (a) do not know what it is; (b) do not care; and (c) it has absolutely no impact on their life.

Q: And what about a PRT?

A: Each PRT coming up with their own individual statement is a great idea, but the thing is that every time you have a new team you are going to have to have a new statement.

My boss came to Baghdad to retrieve me when I arrived, to make sure that I was taken care of, had a hooch, would get down to Hillah safely. He cared, because I was his only staff at the time. There was nobody else yet on the ground for PRT Karbala. Not that that level of attention to detail should be required by everyone, but if it had not been for him nobody would have known I was coming, because the lines of communication were not functioning properly to advise PRTs and offices that new staff were coming in.

Q: They did not know you were coming?

A: No.

Q: Who assigned you there?

A: I volunteered in August and got there in October. I went through the regular process.

Q: You do not know who assigned you to Karbala?

A: Oh, I do. I asked for Karbala. This gentleman who is based in NEA/I paneled me for Karbala.

Q: Did you have any training before you went out?

A: Two weeks, which included how to detect if you are being surveilled, which, by the way, when you have been out the door four times or eight times in total, surveillance detection was not an important component. What I should have been trained on is, I should have been allowed to go out to a military base and train with the military. I should have been allowed to go to Moyock and train with Blackwater, to get a sense of their operating procedures. I should have been exposed to being around guns every day, M-16s, M-60s, the sounds of guns going off all the time.

I am a civilian. I have my colleagues from the State Department saying I should be carrying a gun. You cannot do diplomacy with a gun! But I should have been exposed to what it sounded like to be in a mortar attack, because that was scary and that happened four days after I arrived.

Q: Any other big thoughts?

A: I will probably think of one later. That is all right. For now, that is enough.

Q: This will be very helpful. Thank you