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INTERVIEW #21

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Executive Summary

This interviewee was the public diplomacy representative with the Anbar PRT, from October, 2006 until October, 2007. At the time she was there, before “the surge” of 2007, Anbar PRT operated under conditions of extreme danger and uncertainty, with a combined threat of al Qaeda and local insurgents. Unlike other PRTs, communications at the time were very limited; Internet access was restricted, and cell phones, which had become a security risk, could not be utilized. In addition, many of the local Iraqi leaders were not physically present in the province, having gone to live outside the country or in the Green zone; as a result, the PRT’s efforts to promote governance were severely impacted by the difficult logistics of meeting with the appropriate officials.

Despite the palpable danger of her assignment, the interviewee illustrates what can be achieved with a flexible approach and a command of the tools and resources of public diplomacy. While it was largely too dangerous for the PRT to engage in reconstruction and civil affairs projects, she managed, for example, to organize several visits of Iraqi leaders to the United States, despite many obstacles, including the untimely assassination of two of her grantees. She also describes her role in facilitating the visits of U.S. media to the war zone. One of her proudest achievements is the work she was able to do in the area of “women’s engagement,” helping Iraqi women to have their claims heard before the compensation tribunals. As a female diplomat, she was better placed to establish rapport with the Iraqi women than were her military colleagues, and the PRT leadership recognized this advantage. As a Moslem and Arabic speaker, this interviewee also brought unique skills to her assignment, which allowed her to serve as a cultural/linguistic informant for her military colleagues. She recounts various situations in which her greater cultural knowledge and sensitivity represented clear value added to the PRT.

The interviewee recommends that future civilian PRT members have a better understanding of the military and its hierarchy, and that the military have a better understanding of the civilian roles. She also stresses the importance of language training, an investment she strongly urges be made, given the likelihood of our long-term commitment in Iraq.

Interview

Q: Thank you for agreeing to talk about your Iraq PRT experience.

A: No problem.

Q: Where were you and when?

A: I was stationed in Anbar Province. In Anbar I was specifically staying at Camp Blue Diamond. I stayed at Camp Ramadi at times and I've stayed also at Camp Fallujah.

Q: You were assigned to the Anbar PRT?

A: Yes.

Q: And that took you to three different camps?

A: Yes, for the most part. We did have outings to several other places whenever it was necessary to go out and do some work.

Q: OK. Let's look at the structure of your PRT because the PRTs are different in size and composition of personnel. How many individuals were stationed at the PRT when you were there?

A: When I was first assigned, we had a PRT leader and a deputy leader. The PRT leader was a Foreign Service officer, the deputy leader was a colonel with the U.S. Marine Corps and then we had a political officer, a Foreign Service Officer who was stationed there as well and then we had me. I was the other Foreign Service Officer so there were three Foreign Service Officers, all based at Camp Blue Diamond. Then we had another officer. He was stationed up at Camp Fallujah as political officer and he was embedded there. We worked with him as well. We were embedded; we were probably one of the first to be embedded with the Marines so we worked with the fourth CAT, which is the civil affairs group. We had 27 Marines assigned to the PRT.

Q: What was your job?

A: I was the public diplomacy officer.

Q: All of the PRTs have some common goals; in governance, in working for economic reconstruction and development and also acting as a counterinsurgency force. How would you describe the mission of your PRT when you were there and also, I should ask at the outset, what was the timeframe that you were there?

A: Actually, it is a little confusing as far as the timeframe that I was there because I was stationed there up until, or I worked outside Anbar Province itself up until, about the second week of July and then I repositioned myself down to Baghdad so that I could follow up on some special projects that I had developed for the PRT.

Q: That was 2007?

A: Right. In October, 2006 I arrived at the PRT and in July of 2007 I moved down to Baghdad to continue to work for the PRT out of Baghdad, which was not unusual for members of my PRT. We'll go into that a little bit later as to why that wasn't unusual. I ended up kind of working as

well for the public affairs section, and for the interim cultural affairs officer while I was stationed there because the cultural affairs officer left post early. There was a need and also I felt that this would be in the best interest of the PRT as well to take care of our projects, because then I could supervise, oversee to make sure things were done in the correct way and that things got prioritized in the right way.

Q: Theoretically, there would have been two of you in public diplomacy, you and the cultural affairs officer?

A: No. It was just me. The cultural affairs officer was assigned to the American Embassy in Baghdad and she handled projects for the entire country.

Q: And she left early?

A: She left early.

Q: So by the time you left Baghdad then you assumed some of those ...

A: I assumed that responsibility in addition to following up on work for the PRT.

Q: Let's look at the first part of your work there while you were in Anbar and your job specifically was public affairs but in a more general way, how did the team leader define what the mission of your particular PRT was?

A: Well, we were really spread thin and the PRT leader, this is really an interesting question because our PRT leader was not posted there. He started off being posted at Blue Diamond and then he relocated himself to Camp Ramadi for a while and then he relocated himself later to Camp Fallujah because Camp Fallujah had a larger Marine contingency and he began traveling, doing more work with the military leaders.

Q: And less work with the PRT?

A: Well, yes. His mission took on a wider, a larger scope. It still dealt with work that was essential for the PRT in terms of doing very specific outreach and negotiations with tribal leaders, tribal chiefs, and conventional leadership for the town councils.

At the time we arrived in Anbar, I think it is important to understand that Anbar was in total disarray. It was said at the time that I got there that we were losing the battle and we weren't expected to win. Morale was at a very much all time low and Iraqis were not cooperating with us in great numbers and there was fear of al Qaeda, and local insurgents as well, and local terrorists. There were several different groups to consider up there, the al Qaeda being principally people from outside the country. They spoke in distinct accents, they might have been Jordanians, they might have been Saudis, they might have been from other countries but they infiltrated the country and they were heading up the al Qaeda force to overthrow the U.S. forces there and to undermine the government. The local insurgency or the local terrorists on the other hand, they were made up of Sunnis who were discontent with what they termed the

American occupation and they locked horns in a battle to overthrow the American system or to get the Americans out and better control the government that had been installed since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. So we had those factors to contend with.

Q: This was before the surge as well?

A: Well before the surge, before the surge was even thought of.

Q: You very calmly suggested that there were some mortal threats, but I would think it would have been almost too dangerous for you to be posted there at that time.

A: It was dangerous for anyone to be posted there at that time but someone had to do the job and even for us it was interesting because much of the provincial leadership did not live in Anbar Province; they had fled for their lives and many of them had relocated themselves along with the tribal leadership outside, to Jordan and Syria, and some had gone even as far as Dubai or Kuwait so we had the leadership living outside; the governor, however, he was based there.

Q: By "there" you mean he was not outside?

A: He lived in Anbar Province and he lived in Ramadi, a very, very brave man. Also, some of the sheiks, they stayed on and remained in Ramadi and Anbar Province.

Q: So the efforts of the PRT to promote governance, what did that look like, given that all these folks, or many of them, were outside the country?

A: Well, what they did for us is we were posted all over the place and our scope of work was very flexible and our mission tended to be flexible as well. For example, one of our PRT members spent a great deal of time traveling back and forth to Baghdad where he was able to meet with members of the PRT who were living in the Green Zone or had access to the Green Zone. It was easier to meet them there than it was in Ramadi or Anbar Province or Fallujah because they were not there. It was just too frightening a place for them to be there, so he spent a lot of time negotiating or meeting with them down there.

Q: He was meeting with the locals?

A: The local leadership for Anbar who were living outside.

Q: For them to set up a meeting, it wouldn't be terribly easy for them to just come to the Green Zone, would it?

A: No, it wasn't. Many of them lived in the Green Zone or they had homes in the Green Zone because the Green Zone isn't just a place for the Americans there, the American Embassy but many of the ministries are also located in the Green Zone. You have other embassies also located in the Green Zone. There are Iraqi families who have land and their own businesses and they have possessions in the Green Zone as well, so some of these people have professions or outlets into the Green Zone.

Q: What would have been a typical day for you?

A: A typical day for me was a lot of waiting and a lot of sitting around and learning the environment. For example, I might wake up at four o'clock in the morning to the burst of bombs. I am a Muslim American so I would go down to do my prayers and everything and once that's taken care of, head off to the office, stop by the office, drop some books off or whatever other materials I was using or what have you, check my computer, then I would walk down to chow to the BX and that's where we had breakfast. Breakfast started at 5:30 in the morning; until 9 o'clock you could get breakfast. Lunch was about from 11:30 until 2 o'clock and dinner was from 5 o'clock until 8 o'clock and then we had midnight meals which were about 11 o'clock until 1 o'clock in the morning.

Q: Those were designed to help people who needed to work at night, who had night shifts?

A: We were embedded with the Marines, and they worked all around the clock. It wasn't unusual. We put in about maybe 14, 16 hour days and it would depend on what the flow or what the level of work was but we were there around the clock.

Q: You did describe a lot of waiting as well.

A: Yes. A lot of waiting in terms of using myself as an example, you know, like when I first got out there I wanted to develop a public diplomacy strategy or an outreach program for ourselves and I wanted to go around in order to learn what resources we had available and what people were doing what and what were the contact levels that we had at the various levels. So that took me to Camp Ramadi, where I saw that we had a large contingency of Marines much engaged in public affairs. They had a public affairs office; they had people who were definitely involved with this. Public affairs took on a different meaning at this level because we were also engaged with media who were extremely interested in what was going on in this particular part of the country at all times, because it is such a sensitive area. So we had a lot of media, journalists who would want to come to do stories. We had Oliver North, we had Geraldo, FOX, we had The Daily Times, we had a lot of people who were coming up and embedding. The New York Times wanted to come out and go out to the actual active war zone and see what was going on and be on the front lines. So I helped with placement; I worked with the Marines helping to place them into military groups, make sure that they had their gear, make sure that they had all that they needed to get out to do their jobs.

Q: Were there occasions when you would have to tell them, "No, I'm afraid we can't arrange anything like that" on the front lines?

A: Yes, there were many occasions where that happened. It might have been too dangerous or operations were cancelled. Also, people knew they were taking a great risk, especially in this part of the country. Anbar is one of the provinces where, --- I think the majority of soldiers that have been lost, were lost there and it was just a very dangerous place. You wouldn't realize how different the PRTs are. For example, I was just amazed when I went to a conference and I met some of my PRT counterparts and they had access to the Open Net system, which is the

computer system that we have for the State Department. They had access to their regular email, to the Internet, to the Intranet system, everything, whereas in Anbar Province, things changed over time. They even had telephones so that they could walk around and call each other and they had cell phones whereas when I first left, I had a walkman cell phone that was given to me. I also had an MCI cell phone that was given to me; I also had a satellite phone that was given to me and I also had my personal Blackberry. None of them worked. One of the reasons was security, our phone towers were blown down because so many of the cell phones were used for blowing up IEDs that were harming a great number of our soldiers and it was still a big threat. It was still a big threat, so for all the time that I was there, I had no access to cell phones.

Q: And the rest of the PRT, likewise. It wasn't just you?

A: Exactly. The rest of the PRT and the soldiers. Also, in terms of computers, we didn't have access to Open Net. We were on the military system and for the military system; it is a little bit harder because it wasn't as easy for us to speak to our contacts because they are not on the global State system. Basically, we had to mail everybody's email addresses and everything in order to, just make contact and even so the military system doesn't allow a lot of times for attachments to come through so, if you would write an article or something that you wanted to redirect to somebody, it might not be all there. You might just have to put it in the body of the email. It is a whole different system. It just wasn't based on ours and they even had their own private networks as well. We did have access to the Internet; however, from 6 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night, we could not use the Internet. The Internet system was closed to us.

Q: And that was because of too much other traffic?

A: Exactly. I was able to get special permission along with one of my other PRT counterparts, or two of my other PRT counterparts. We were able to get special permission to have access to the Internet but it was like, almost like a Presidential order, getting a Presidential order to have access and even then, if we traveled away from our post for any significant amount of time, like a couple of weeks, without using it, our systems would be closed or locked up and we would have to go through a great deal of effort to reestablish or reopen those systems again.

Q: So it was not a small operation in that regard.

A: Not at all.

Q: How often did you travel? You would, I would imagine, have to go out and see some of the projects that the civil affairs groups were working on. Enlighten me about that.

A: Well, unfortunately, we weren't able to, at the time that I was there, I was not able to travel that much to see civil affairs projects because it was too dangerous and we didn't have much going on. I was there at a time when even a project as simple as helping to remove the garbage, was complicated. It was very important but at that time, the locals were too afraid because they were being shot or intimidated for just picking up garbage so it was difficult to find or engage people for even this activity when I was there. It was also very difficult to have people that

really wanted to engage or to directly work with Americans because they might be seen as collaborators and they might be assassinated.

Q: And that was not only a hypothetical concern, I am sure.

A: Right, it was a very real concern, even for the Iraqi leadership. People did not want to be seen with us or talking to us or working with us so it was a very difficult, it was a very difficult time period.

Q: I can appreciate that. You mentioned some government officials who were courageous men; they were living in the province?

A: They were living in Ramadi in their homes. Their homes were protected by U.S. military and I really admired them because they often replaced assassinated predecessors and had to deal with the kidnapping of close relatives. I remember one official who was an engineer. He was not a politician and he just stood up to the plate and said, "This has to be done and someone has to do it." The first time I met him, I saw this very passionate man talking in Arabic about democracy, something, a concept he had never seen before or he couldn't even really imagine, but he was talking about his deep faith and his belief in democracy. At that point I knew -- and also I used to listen to people outside, the locals, some of whom would refer to him as being the equivalent of a dead man walking. I wanted to send him to America to see democracy, to see the potential of what his country could be because I knew that it would mean more to him if he could taste and touch it and hold it and see it and feel it and it would give him a stronger conviction. I wanted him to see the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and what he was working for. I talked with him and asked him if he would be willing to travel to America, because he had never been there before in all of his life and he had never even imagined going there. He asked me: "was it possible?" And I said, "It is possible. We are going to make this happen."

And it took a while but we were able to put this trip together and it became larger because I envisioned a trip for him and a few of his colleagues and we ended up sending a group of about eight along with the PRT leader and they came to America. They came at a most significant, important time back at the end of October of 2007. They had a chance to meet with the President of the United States, although they had met with the President in Ramadi and in Anbar Province and in Baghdad on other occasions and they had talked before.

Q: Really?

A: With President Bush. Well before the surge, this leadership had forged together and decided to fight al Qaeda and to fight the insurgency. They joined forces to help America and to help themselves to fight the insurgency and to put this down and to say: "this is not the country that we want; this is what we want." So I thought that this was really significant and this happened before the surge.

Q: The group was one that you put together and official, was one of the leaders of the group?

A: He was the reason for the group to me.

Q: He sounds like a real visionary, able, apparently with confidence, to see what success might mean.

A: Yes. He was a strong and very forceful man and very impressive, indeed. I remember I had a few public diplomacy “goodies,” by which I mean I had one of the Outline of America series.

Q: I am familiar with those.

A: I had it in Arabic so I was able to give him a nice new set, all in Arabic, so that he had the economic, government, and history volumes. He had economic literature, and he was just thrilled by this. And then I had some, I knew that he had young children so I had some books from my Arabic library that was a project set up by MEPI.

Q: MEPI meaning?

A: The Middle East Partnership Initiative. This is a high profile program set up by the President of the United States to reach Middle Eastern leaders and these books were created by Scholastic. They were really good books in English that were appropriate and they were translated into Arabic for children.

Q: High school age or younger?

A: Younger, primary school, early readers, young readers. I was able to give him some of these books. I had some coloring books and I had bought crayons but the coloring books were in Arabic and English and at first I didn't have crayons and I said, “What's coloring books without crayons?” I was able to get some crayons for them. I gave those to him.

Also I had gone to Mecca before for Hajj and from Hajj I had brought back a small, electronic Koran. It was worth a couple of hundred dollars and I bought maybe about five or six of them and I had water from the holy stream in Saudi Arabia; at one of the points there where one does Hajj or umora, they drank from this. So I had these and I gave this man an electronic holy Koran which just mesmerized him. To think an American had this, he was just in shock.

Q: It was quite a symbolic gesture, but I would think it would be something he really appreciated.

A: Oh, he did. It was really appreciated and actually this is really nice because it was something he could carry with him. It was pocket sized. He could put it in his vest pocket and he could use the headset; it had a headset so he could listen to the Koran being recited to him while he was traveling in convoy or on a helicopter, and you could read it as well. And it had a back light to it so that you could read the words and it was translated into English and French and Arabic.

Q: How do you use yours?

A: I use mine basically in English and I listen to the prayers in Arabic.

Q: That's fascinating. A really popular item, I would think.

A: Oh, he loved it. And then I gave him some holy water from Saudi Arabia, and this kind of fascinated him and, whenever he came he would make a point to visit me. From there we struck up a friendship and we would spend time on the side just talking about potentials or possibilities. I think this is where it helps to be, it helped me at least, to be a seasoned PD person because I know what our products are and I know what the possibilities are for what we can do and also how to get it started even if you don't have the wherewithal, in which case you might not know that you are looking at a project or that you are looking at something that could be turned into a possibility. So I knew that these things were there; I knew just how to work the system or work him into the system and how to make suggestions or to listen to him in a way that would help with our outreach.

Q: I think you have made a good point there in terms of public diplomacy activities. Many of us are familiar with them, but it must have been very difficult to send, for example, those international visitor groups that you arranged. Were you able to send some other groups like them?

A: Yes. It was very hard to do recruiting there because it was hard for us to get out, but I worked with our team members and I developed a recruitment bio sheet because this is the basis for us to start any project. We didn't have this information coming from Baghdad and we had very little contact with Baghdad, so I created these things so that we could have our program set up and then I could plug this back into Baghdad's or into the larger system in Washington, if necessary to get this off the ground.

So traditionally once you recruit the eight people, we also recruited three Fulbright grantees. We also recruited two Humphrey grantees and we also recruited, I think it was about three or four more participants for other IVLP (International Visitors Leadership Program) programs.

Q: Those folks were students or professors?

A: Professors or people who wanted to go on for higher study.

Q: I know the Humphrey is a degree program, usually a master's degree in a field of applied technology.

A: Sometimes, or sometimes the recipients were midlevel professionals. A lot of times they were mid level professionals who wanted to go on for non degree programs. They might want to be trained or get more specialized training in a particular area.

Q: Were they telling you, "Well, I'd really like to do this but it is just too dangerous. Am I at risk to go to the U.S.?"

A: Well, in Iraq that's very common for all of our programs and in all the provinces, in all the areas. It was very common. Unfortunately, in Anbar Province it was very much a reality. We

were able to recruit there, but I did not say that we were able to reach fruition with all of our people or projects.

One of the greatest young men that I know who was working with the police force and fighting so valiantly with them, he was also a young lawyer and he was recommended highly by the military and also by our PRT members - my team members who had participated with him on training or outreach programs or in debriefing the prisoners and working with police recruitment. We had signed him up for one of the crime and terrorism prevention programs and he was able to come down to Baghdad for his interview and after returning home, waiting for his program he was brutally assassinated at his home.

Q: Do we know who killed him?

A: Al Qaeda.

Q: And he was simply guilty of being associated with the United States.

A: Well, he was with the police and like the governor or like any high profile official; he was a marked man, too. That was one.

We also had another very high profile person. He was one of the leaders, actually, one of the founding fathers and the leader of the resurrection group which helped to bring the tribes together and to turn the people against al Qaeda. He was slated to go as part of the provincial leadership team to the United States and he was assassinated. I think that was the shot that was heard around the world. It hit the press here and it was everywhere. His brother, luckily I had signed his brother up, who was also a sheik in his own right and a powerful leader, but I had signed him up to go on the program so they had decided that they weren't going to travel at the same time because they felt that they needed someone to stay back to deal with the insurgency issue because this was before the surge and we were mapping out the strategy. Later, when his brother was assassinated, he was weighing whether or not he would go and I said, "Let's just push things forward, just in case." We got his name, we got his bio information, we got his passport information, and we got everything we needed to slide it in. We pushed the paperwork through and he decided in favor of accompanying the group. I set it up for him to be "choppered" from Fallujah, or from Ramadi, with an escort and by that time I was working in Baghdad and that's particularly why I enjoyed working in Baghdad, so that I could set up a reception center and receive him and give him a comfortable place to be while he was working out the paperwork for his visa.

Q: Which would take maybe how long?

A: It's a long procedure still. The basics, things that we just can't get around since 9/11, nor do we want to, but with just the basic security checks that are in place, that could take anywhere from a day to three months or longer.

Q: Now someone wouldn't stay in Baghdad all that time waiting for the results?

A: No, but we had the passport, we had the information that we needed and we had his signature on all the paperwork that we needed to move on ahead. Once we had all that taken care of and the visa, we got the passports back to all the group members, as they needed them. This trip really required a lot of special handling. We had to arrange for military “choppers” to bring these leaders down from Ramadi and Fallujah and from all over to Baghdad. We had to coordinate their stays and their visits including where they were going to stay while they were in Baghdad. Basically, we set up hotel arrangements for them in the Green Zone at the only hotel in town.

Q: The only hotel in town?

A: Basically, the only hotel.

Q: And it was guarded by whom?

A: We had Americans posted there but also it was basically guarded by the Iraqis because it is a local Iraqi hotel.

Q: And then they flew out?

A: And then they flew out on, I think they flew out on an Iraqi flight, a regular Iraqi flight, on the Iraqi civilian side of the airport. The American military operates basically out of the other side of the airport along with the Iraqi military and that’s where all official Americans and the majority of Americans fly out. Journalists would fly in to the other side, the civilian side, whereas we are flying into the military side.

Q: Did you have to meet journalists flying in to the civilian side?

A: No, I didn’t because I wasn’t based in Baghdad. So I didn’t have to. I doubt that we would have been allowed to because for us, just being on the civilian side would have just been a great risk to anyone being outside of the Green Zone and in the Red Zone and at the airport. That would have been considered a tremendous risk and one the government probably would not waive or would not accept.

Q: I can understand that and I am thinking that every movement of your visitors would have been risky and that their trip to the airport would be without Humvees.

A: A lot of the journalists, they had their stations that they had there and they had locals that they hired. They hired local gunmen; they hired local bodyguards, and they had their own armored cars or non armored cars. They are a lot more low key than we are but they take their own precautions. For me to accompany them would just be like painting a target on the journalists because I would show up with probably an escort, with a Blackwater escort, heavy armor on as well or heavy protective armor.

Q: I am interested to ask a little bit about your relations with the General and the other military folks, because you said you were working with them closely. As a civilian with I guess not too much military background, how did that work for you?

A: Well, I was really thrilled. I mean, for me this was really a dream come true. The closest I had come to military experience was when I was in ROTC in high school and I had made it up to the rank of lieutenant colonel, so I felt like I was in my element. When I went off to college, at that time they did not allow women in the ROTC at the university level.

In any event, several of the high ranking officers and majors, they were the ones laying out the charts and planning the courses and the movements for many of the leaders, the local leadership. They were meeting with many of the local tribal chiefs.

Q: And you went with them when they had a meeting with the tribal chiefs?

A: No, I did not. I did not go with them when they went out. However, I was able to talk to them about how to engage them when they went out.

Q: What kind of things did you clue them into?

A: We talked about Islam, we talked about cultural aspects, we talked about, when Saddam Hussein was executed they wanted to know what to really expect, what it was going to mean for this part of the country and why. When he was executed, many of the locals from that part of the country thought that he was assassinated.

Q: They were Saddam supporters?

A: And that was a stronghold of the Sunni. So we were able to talk about those cultural points. We would talk about the differences of being Shia and being Sunni and why there is a difference and what it meant. We were able to talk about differences within the Shia sect and within the Sunni sect, because a lot of people see Islam as just one big monolith, but no, it is not.

Q: Is there something peculiar about the virulence of the two sects fighting each other? I say peculiar because I am going to suppose that there are other countries that have Shia and Sunni and they tolerate each other.

A: Well, for the most part when Saddam Hussein was alive you had a great number of Shia who intermarried with Sunnis and Sunnis who intermarried with the Shia. This is a patriarchic society so things follow along the male line. So if a male Shia marries a female Sunni, she is considered to become pretty much Shia and her children will be Shia, because they follow whatever the father is, whereas if the Sunni man marries the woman who is Shia, it would mean that her children would become Sunni and that she will either follow pretty much her tradition or not; she can follow the Sunni tradition or the Shia tradition. It was not that much forced; I think that was one of the things about the Ba'ath Party, it was really apolitical and a-religious. They really didn't take a strong focus on religion in the sense that they are right now.

Q: The way the government is now?

A: Yes, as things are right now, the focus is not the same.

Q: I'm reminded of something I read that in earlier years, there were families that had intermarried and neighborhoods where there were Shia and Sunni coexisting.

A: Sure and even among the Christians. For example, the young woman in the article, her mother was Christian and her father was Sunni and he was part of the Sunni leadership.

Q: And then he was ostracized, I guess, when he married and eventually, he converted to Christianity?

A: No, he never did convert. There are a lot of things in the article that could not really come out, because she was Muslim and she left Islam and became Christian and they posted her picture, her family posted her picture in order to have her assassinated or killed for the honor of the family. To this day she has an honor kill put on her. Not only did she have an honor kill but because she was Delahni, the Mahdi army and the Shias were looking for her to hunt her down to kill her because she was part of the notorious Sunnis that had been some of the most vicious towards the Shia. At the same time, the Delahni tribe in Anbar Province was hunting her down because they saw her working with us as being treacherous. Al Qaeda was also hunting her down because she knew the various accents and could tell who did not belong in the region and she was easily able to identify them. So she had al Qaeda, she had the Sunni insurgents, she had the Shiite insurgents and she had the Musianis all searching for her to kill her and her family. Even now, when she goes to Amman, Jordan, even now, she is still under a bit of threat because any Muslim is obliged to strike off the head of someone who has left the religion. Islam doesn't accept reverts, or someone to leave the religion.

Q: She might say she was born a Christian.

A: She wasn't. She was born; you are born whatever your father is.

Q: Oh, I see. Well, that takes us a little far from the PRT.

A: But it goes back to the culture and that's why getting her out was one of the missions the Marines left for me when they left because they said, "We couldn't do it and we need your help; we don't leave any of our people behind. We need your help. Can you help us get her out? And you have all of our resources." So when I needed flights, they made sure that I had whatever the Marines needed to give me, I had it. Most of this they could not write in the story because it put her under greater risk.

Q: Right. That adds yet another layer of complexity, another dimension to what you were doing there and it's fair to ask what were some of your accomplishments during your year there, perhaps in the area of reconstruction?

A: Yes, reconstruction and also outreach, basic reconstruction. I think that is important because I worked also with a group of Marines in the area of “engagement.”

Q: Engagement? You mean?

A: Women’s engagement. They don’t like to talk about this and as a matter of fact, you won’t get them really to talk about or to do articles about how they are specifically going out to reach women or trying to engage them because they feel that it is too sensitive and it is too dangerous right now. Another female colleague and I worked a lot together on women’s engagement. We went out a lot together to some of the claims groups or to hospitals or to clinics.

Q: Claims? Somebody burns your house and you go and ask for compensation?

A: Claims are, for example: There was a woman whose house was blown up during the war and unfortunately, her daughter was cooking in the kitchen. The daughter died at that time and the woman’s home was basically destroyed; she had two daughters left who were in school. She had a son: half his face was blown off from the local insurgents. Al Qaeda blew up her husband’s truck because they felt that he was doing too much business and her husband as a result or as a consequence was like a vegetable, unable to work. Her six bedroom home that she had lived in was completely destroyed. She was living in a one bedroom or a one room flat with her two daughters, her son, another son who was 21 who dropped out of school to help support the family and her husband, who was just totally disabled with post traumatic stress and everything. She had been coming back and forth to the claims court for three years. It had not been resolved.

Q: So you were able to get some resolution?

A: Helping to translate and also helping to work with her and also helping to influence the women’s military group to realize that they needed to do something more to put a human face to it, to let the Iraqi women know that they felt their pain.

Q: These were the women soldiers among our military?

A: My mission was basically to let them know that it wasn’t going to work, to come in fully armed, with your guns on your hip and your M-14 at your side and tell the Iraqi women how you feel for them. You can’t do anything for them and you are not there to do a darned thing for them; you are just there to listen. So, I tried to get the group to be a little bit more helpful. And we were able to do that. And so this woman, for example, she just wanted to get her claim heard and they had been giving her the runaround and eventually, by the end of that day I was assured that she was going to be heard, her claim was going to be heard and she was going to be seen , right off.

Q: This is a U.S. claims’ system? It is not the Iraqi court?

A: The Iraqis along with the Americans, Iraqi judges sitting along with the American tribunals.

Q: It is bicultural?

A: Exactly. Sometimes women just kind of get pushed to the side or lost in the process where you might have, 60 or 70 or 100 men outside in line waiting and there might be six women who show up and take a number. The women are pushed off to the side.

Q: I can picture it.

A: But we would pull them in to a tent to engage them and I know that the expectation when you are being pulled in is that you are thinking oh, ok. This is Muslim society. Women have their place and the men's line is longer so we should be seen right off, which wasn't happening. In fact, it didn't necessarily mean that they were going to be seen at all, or even heard. They were told: "Well, nice talking to you. Here, have a coke and have a great day."

Q: That's not very effective. You were able to change that?

A: Yes. I would speak Arabic enough so that I could get through conversations and also to make some connection with Iraqi women, because I felt, and maybe I am just being a little bit egotistical but I felt that my mission in being there was really important, because I am the face of the American people. I am not the face of the military. I felt: "I am an American diplomat here to represent the American people and here to talk to you one on one and to listen to you and to be here for you and to take the military side off of it."

Q: In other words, you brought other skills and another framework. I am reminded that some of the PRTs had rule of law folks. Did you have one?

A: We eventually got one, maybe about midterm of my being posted there. So that was another member of our team later on and he was posted in Baghdad.

Q: He was in Baghdad and made trips to your PRT?

A: Sometimes he would come down. I met him down in Fallujah on two occasions.

Q: What was he trying to do in Anbar?

A: I am not sure what his overall goal was.

Q: So you didn't work with him?

A: Like I said, I think working in Anbar at the time that I was there could have been one of the best or one of the most frustrating experiences, depending on one's perception. Outside of the team leaders, I was the only other person who spoke Arabic. No one else did, so for them to go out, they needed a translator which were, there were very few and in very scarce supply. There just was not the wherewithal to supply translators when the military needed so many for their operations. There was one political officer I knew who needed a translator, but who would go down and hang out at the claims court because there were translators there for the military and

when there was down time, he would pull one of the translators aside to help him to get out and report.

Q: Well, that was a clever way to get the job done.

A: But sometimes I felt that that could be problematic too because sometimes without knowing the true gist of the language you are not quite sure if you are being manipulated or guided or you are not sure if you are getting the real story. Even among the translators that we had, some of their English was extremely questionable because they just didn't have a high English level. Many of the translators that are working with the military are not professional translators. They are just someone who spoke a little English or learned some in high school and this is the best we can do. And yet, we are dealing with such complex issues.

Q: It would be preferable when we send our personnel if they had language training.

A: Many of our language people have already; we have run through them all. Also, like right now I find that we are posting them every place but to Baghdad when they go out of language school.

Q: Are they going elsewhere in the Middle East?

A: Yes, for more cushy assignments. In Dubai, Bahrain, Tunis.

Q: You had a lot of experience in your background I think that prepared you well for this assignment. You were a Peace Corps Volunteer and you spoke Arabic. I don't remember where you learned.

A: I studied Arabic at FSI. I also studied Arabic with, I studied a year in Washington, a year in Cairo at the American University and another year in Tunis at the third school.

Q: All of that was part of your diplomatic training?

A: I had started stumbling or studying at Arabic prior to joining the Foreign Service, when I converted to Islam back in 1981.

Q: So you have a bit of grounding and a very unusual preparation.

A: Being the daughter of a preacher, yes.

Q: That as well. From your point of view, would there have been some other aspects of training you would like to have gotten, and for someone working in a PRT now, what recommendations for training would you have for them?

A: Well, I think it is important for them to have a better understanding of the military and the military hierarchy and how that works. I think it is equally important for the military to have an

understanding of us and our role and how that works and how they must cooperate with us, and respect that role.

Q: Maybe you were there when that wasn't a given?

A: That wasn't a given and also being female made it very difficult sometimes getting about and I had to find creative ways, or unorthodox ways to get things accomplished or to do things.

Q: In getting about you mean physically moving from one place to the next?

A: Basically moving about and also just getting things done. When I first got to base, the Iraqis thought that an Iraqi woman had just stumbled onto the compound somehow and everybody was just interested in trying to find out who I was or how to help to guide me back out of the compound. And the American soldiers, they thought, of course, that an Iraqi woman had stumbled onto the compound somehow and they wanted to try to help find how they could redirect her to her right path.

Q: Then you actually had trouble convincing them that you belonged there?

A: Exactly, from the beginning and then after a while they got used to it. They knew that I was the only one and pretty soon they, the Iraqi soldiers, they became pretty good friends and they would spend a lot of time talking to me. I spent a lot of time just chewing the fat with them and learning more about them and their lives and their aspirations and what got them there or what kept them going, what made them tick. Many of the soldiers that were there, they were not Sunni; they were Shia and they were more afraid than the Americans to go out and engage the Iraqis because they knew that they were in the Sunni triangle which was a danger and a threat to them.

Q: They were also a part of the new Iraqi army?

A: As a part of the new Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, and the Iraqi locals did not trust them because they were Shia. And we did have Shia death squads up there as well.

Q: These Iraqi soldiers were assigned to guard these camps where you were?

A: They were embedded with us; this is some of the battalions that they were training to stand up and take over so that our soldiers could stand down.

Q: I see.

A: Well, here it is in action.

Q: So are you hopeful that's the way things are moving from what you observed?

A: I am worried about it.

Q: And of course, you left when?

A: I left there in June of 2007, or July of 2007.

Q: How would you say things have changed since then?

A: Well, since that time the Sunnis up in the area have decided that they wanted to cooperate with the Americans instead of killing them, so those who used to kill us and were our enemies are now on our side and we are training and arming them. And those are the sons of Anbar. There is still that strong distrust of the Iraqi army. Another issue was that the majority of the military that was embedded with us had not been paid.

Q: The Iraqis?

A: Yes. I found it quite disturbing sitting with them and chewing the fat, watching them clean their weapons that they loaded and looking at the Americans saying, "He's being paid, I bet he's got money." I hated that. But it was up to the military. They were aware of the issues and they said that it was an Iraqi problem. As a diplomat and as someone observing this, I felt like it was not an Iraqi problem; it was our problem, it was **the** problem.

Q: Well, it is threatening and I could see where it was not necessarily easy being in that particular situation.

A: Not only that but we ate separately, even though we were all in the same area, and some of the money for their food was being taken as well. So they might have a bunch of rice with a bone in it such that they were not getting as much nourishment as we were. I just keep thinking while I am sitting here watching the news and seeing how things are going that it is our problem and there is no solution for these things overnight. I know that such things are still going on there because of terrible corruption.

Q: These are large issues. In this environment, do you think the PRT was accomplishing its goal?

A: Well, I felt comfortable with my team leaders because when I mentioned it to my team leaders, the political officers, they made sure that they gave it prominence in their reporting because I don't think the public diplomacy person's reporting would get the same play.

Q: No?

A: So I conceded to them. Also, I could do some translations of things in commentaries and they would weave them into their reports. I felt really safe and I felt really good with the team that I was in. I felt really fortunate.

Q: That's important, because you are a small group of individuals and if you don't get along well, it's not going to work.

A: One was a former Air Force cadet. He went to the Air Force Academy and graduated. He was in the Air Force for six years before joining the Foreign Service; I had gone to Colorado Women's College which was the sister school of the USAFA so I felt right at home with him. One of the other young men that I worked with, he was just really bright and fresh and very sensitive about the deaths going on or the non engagement or the way things weren't working or the overwhelming nature of the situation; we would sit and chew the fat and talk a lot. We could bounce ideas off of each other so we spent a lot of time doing that as well. This man had served two tours in Iraq; he is in Afghanistan right now and is on his way back, and about to serve another tour, so two years in Iraq, a year in Afghanistan and he is going back for another year in Baghdad. The only unfortunate thing is he doesn't have the language. It's a shame because it's not like I am saying language is everything, but it is very important. I think that we are taking so many young, junior officers and putting them out there with no background and saying, "Good enough" and it could be better.

Q: And you would even say, it's a mistake?

A: I would say it would be worth it to give them the training and then send them.

Q: Because we're there for the long haul?

A: Exactly. Find the time; make it happen. We had a young man that I worked with and I remember him bringing in some very important visitors because we were going to put together a program to send a group from Sadr City to the United States, the local government leaders.

Q: Did you end up doing that?

A: We did, and this guy brought the leaders into my office and he had his bottle of water. He sat down drinking, he crossed his leg, put his foot up; he had the sole of his foot facing everybody and he was drinking off of his bottle of water and no one in the room had anything to drink. I thought, "I'm in charge" so I got up and I went and got cups, I got cold water, I got room temperature water, I set it on the table and told everybody, "Make yourself at home". I motioned to the young man to please put his foot down and go on with this meeting.

Q: Yes, they need some cultural sensitivity sometimes.

A: Yes, because he had no idea that he just insulted the entire group and even though they might say that he is an American or whatever, you never know, I mean it is like being in a meeting with someone sitting there giving you the finger. You might just say that that person doesn't know what they are doing, but you can't help but look at that person giving you the finger.

Q: It doesn't look good.

A: You might say they don't know any better or maybe they don't understand what they are doing, but you can't get over he's giving you the finger.

Q: Right. So you played a very important cultural role then?

A: I think I did a lot of little things there because it is the little things, the little things along with everything, that helps.

Q: I thank you for doing that. Those are all some good examples. It shows what we're doing and how we are doing it in our PRTs, so I want to thank you for sharing that.

A: Well, one last thing I would say, there was a person who was very over enthusiastic and sent some beautiful, colorful children's books. There were cases and cases. We had a warehouse full of them when I got down to Baghdad, but these books had also ended up in Anbar. When I saw them I just started flipping through them and I dropped the book and I just closed it. I ran over into the section with the colonels and I said, "We can't distribute this book" and he looked at it with me and I bet it was on the New York Times best sellers' list. The officer who selected this book could not read Arabic and obviously, did not understand the implications that this book would have. Al Qaeda would have thanked us for passing out the book. If you look on the Internet under The Librarian in Basra, you will see the American edition and that's the American title. In Arabic the translation is The Library Ambassador and it is a true story.

It is about a woman who was in charge of the library and it starts off with a quote from the Koran talking about how important knowledge is for Islam and seeking knowledge. The first words that Allah delivered was to say: read. This is knowledge to learn to recite and then the story goes on from there because she is taking care of books and knowledge and this is a center where people come to the library and then they start talking about the invasion and the planes are coming. "How many of us will be killed, who will be dead, how many of our homes will be destroyed, who will not be here tomorrow?" The librarian goes and she pleads her case, because she is worried about the books. She goes to one of the local governing officials and he blows her off. She goes back to the library and she starts taking books and putting them in her car and she talks to one of the neighbors who owns a restaurant and asks if he would mind hiding the books, so he starts taking the books and he agrees to hide them. All of a sudden, the Iraqis are there looking in the sky. She is looking out the window and looking at the sky and here we come, and here we come, with our planes. They show nothing but bombing and bombs dropping and fire blasts going every place and people are running and just so much disorder in this children's coloring book. And it just ends up where the library gets destroyed; the woman is like the French underground carrying the books from place to place and the story ends with her being the heroine having saved 70 percent of the collection. You made the connection; she didn't.

This is what I mean sometimes when I think it is dangerous to have people who don't understand the language, who don't understand the culture and some people would tell me, "Well, my FSN read it". Your FSN is going to tell you what they think you want to hear. I bought a warehouse full of these books. What do you think about it?

Q: And you took these books and got them out?

A: We got rid of them and I am just afraid that any day some of these books could still crop back up, and all they have to do is show their children the pictures and say, "See the Americans coming and bombing us and killing us and destroying our people and this woman is a hero

because she saved the books and she saved Allah's word from the barbarians'" The English translation or the English version of the book was handled appropriately. But even the military, without being able to read it and some of the other sections of the military, they could see that this was not the type of stuff that we want getting out. And it could get soldiers killed.

Q: We don't need any more bad publicity. Shifting gears somewhat, was RTI involved in your area at all?

A: I saw them there and most of them, they didn't speak the language. They didn't have the background. They were there; they came pretty much toward the end of my term there and I didn't see much of what they were doing.

Q: They weren't working with you?

A: No. They weren't working with anyone at that time, but right now we have ePRTs members there and it has expanded so maybe it's taken on a new dimension. I really don't know.

Q: Were you aware of the provincial reconstruction development team; were they a factor at all where you were?

A: I was not aware of that; we were still in the midst of a very heated war, a battle of, not hearts and minds, but just for the locals and to just turn them away from al Qaeda. We saw many of our friends killed in the area. One of my best friends there, a person who had become my best friend, she was the PAO in Ramadi and she and I were working on a project and I had even asked to be transferred to work directly with her and we were setting up a project and things to work on and I was scheduled to go back to hook up with her and I missed her. I sent her a quick email copying everyone that said "I am sorry I missed hooking up with you" and I just got the message back that she was no more.

Q: She was the political affairs officer?

A: The public affairs officer.

Q: Sometimes PAO is political affairs officer.

A: She was the first female Marine officer killed in the war.

Q: It's fraught with danger?

A: Yes. And another thing was that communication was affected because every time, whenever there was any death, the entire Internet was shut down completely.

Q: So that no one would give out the information prematurely?

A: Exactly. It is understandable. Luckily, my aunt didn't have Internet and my brother didn't have Internet at the time, so if they didn't hear from me, they didn't know. I had neither anyone to communicate with nor to worry about me.

Q: I am sure you had friends and well wishers but at least your family wasn't concerned.

A: Well, I took time to write for the soldiers. I answered a lot of their correspondence, donations that were sent to them from families, care packages and things. I took time to write to the families and sent them back pictures of the soldiers with the goodie baskets and so on. I wrote to the churches and thanked them for their thoughtful missions, and let them know how much they were being appreciated by the kids and the soldiers. I tried to fill whatever role that I could to support them; people don't understand that when you are posted at a PRT like I was, for example, I went for like two months – until I finally could leave the area and go out on R&R – without washing my hair.

While I was in Ramadi I shared a hooch. I had my own private hooch, a small one, a very small trailer with a bed and a chair in it and my hooch mate, she was a corporal in the Marines and she loved to take hot showers and we had a very small water heater. I mean it was very small and she was part of the protective detail that went with me whenever I went out and I felt like if she wanted to use all the hot water, I will go get her some, because she is standing guard on top of the humvee that I am riding in and she can have all she wants. I felt this was just a little sacrifice that I could make because God knows, she might not come back. I was honored to do that. I think people don't realize that while we were posted to Anbar, sometimes a job means I've got to clean the toilet. I mean, I literally cleaned the bathrooms; there was no one there to do it and, as a female, I couldn't go to just any kind of bathroom that was not proper. So I ended up doing a lot of cleaning that I didn't expect.

When I was up in Fallujah and was sent to quarters with a group of Marine officers, there we had field days once or twice a week and they didn't care if you were a diplomat or anything but you were out taking care of field day with them and cleaning.

Q: That's what field day is?

A: Sweeping the halls down and cleaning the bathrooms and everything. I tried to imagine an OC (Overseas counselor) or an O-1 rank officer cleaning toilets or washing, scrubbing the barracks and I just can't really even imagine that. I guess that's where I think this is a really unique experience. In some cases, we had port-a-potties all around, but I just could not get into the habit of going to them because they were just so filthy. I would walk back about 8 blocks to my can to use the bathroom. Therefore, I caused myself a lot of grief because I didn't drink enough. It was just a very difficult assignment and when you are flying or when you are out on the road a lot or when you are taking helicopters, you have to think about hygiene issues. It is not easy.

Q: I can well imagine that creature comforts were pretty scarce.

A: I've learned. I was going to do a double tour. I had actually bid on the job for cultural affairs officer but I had also bid on other jobs of higher priority and I don't know why they selected me for the cultural affairs job in Baghdad instead of some of the other places I bid on, but they gave me Baghdad and having done Anbar, I just decided it was too difficult for me to do back-to-back tours. And Anbar was the place too where we were always together. I have attended many memorial services, too many and sometimes you would hear the base call out we need blood in the middle of the night because one of our guys might have been hit and they are bringing in Iraqis and Americans who are hanging on and the hospital needs blood. And they started screaming out, "We need any O positive or AB positive or negative", so you were scrambling to run to the hospital. You were attending the memorial services for the kids and you were hearing the choppers flying in and out, all night and day. In Ramadi while I was there, it was much more dangerous there, with explosions going off maybe about 200 meters away from our beds every day.

Q: Yes, you don't get used to that.

A: You get used to it in a weird kind of way. In a weird kind of way, you get used to it.

When I got down to Baghdad, the first day I got there, we were hit by 150 rounds in the Green Zone. And I said, "Damn, the war has followed me some more." I thought I was coming to the Ramada Inn, not Ramadi. They were just sending in the first troops of the surge by that time and Baghdad was still a very dangerous place and we had a few months where it was a little quieter, I am not going to say less dangerous but a little quieter; just as dangerous.

Q: I thank you so much for sharing your insights and memories.