

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Iraq PRT Experience Project

INTERVIEW #64

*Interviewed by: Marilyn Greene
Initial interview date: October 7, 2008
Copyright 2008 USIP & ADST*

Executive Summary

Served first in Baghdad, then as chief of staff, RRT in Irbil. The reason for the title was that the team leader was a Korean; deputy was American Department of State, and my position was essentially deputy to the deputy, a 31-61 position. The interviewee is a recently retired Foreign Service officer, who was alternately an economic officer and a management officer.

Irbil is 600 miles or more from Baghdad; travel is by air. Other communications by phone and e-mail. Irbil is subordinate to Baghdad. First I reported to NCT; later to OPA.

Although there was a U.S. military base in Irbil on the Korean FOB, our compound was not on the FOB. We were on an enclosed civilian compound, away from the FOB. The whole Kurdistan region was extremely safe. There have been zero war related casualties of Americans, since 2003.

A local guard force reported to the RSO and the RSO reported to Embassy Baghdad so it was a completely civilian situation. We were very safe.

The management officer at the post didn't report to the team leader, he reported back to the management office in Baghdad. You had the RSO who was supposed to provide security to the team, also reporting directly back to Baghdad. So there were disconnects there in that regard. (Normally, if it were a regular consulate in a non-war situation those officers would report to their principal officers at the post.)

The arrangement created confusion in terms of setting priority and moving forward with an agenda and a set of goals. Baghdad management office was set on getting the PRT onto the FOB. People posted there didn't think that a good idea. It didn't make sense.

There was not much stovepiping. There were several different military organizations and AID. We liaised with them very well. There was a certain amount of everyone getting their own orders from headquarters but we did liaise and work very closely to make sure that we were.

“Although the situation was quite secure, we did not get off compound as much as we’d have liked. We had very strict security rules that kept us on a fairly short leash. There were insufficient resources to get us out.”

The RSO was worried that if it became known that the team was moving about freely, they would become targets. That’s why they made us follow the same rules that they followed in Baghdad but basically there were any number of American citizens not necessarily affiliated with the U.S. government that were moving about freely in this part of the country.

RTI worked on Governance. There was some confusion about what their goals were. They were supposed to reach provincial governments, but the only government in our area was regional.

Kurdistan region is a decade ahead of the rest of the country, with its own form of democracy, systems and institutions. A level of self-governance far ahead of the rest of the country, but there is also significant corruption.

Rule of Law specialist was making outreach to support legislation, and was working on establishing a bar association.

One of the PRT’s big accomplishments was getting money out of the quick response fund, small grants of \$10,000 or \$25,000 to provide materials for schools, equipment, etc.

“We were teaching women basic skills – traditional house skills as well as computers and small-business skills.”

“The big frustration was being unable to get out as much as we wanted to. I think we would have been more effective, if we would have taken up office space in their government centers.”

Cooperation with Koreans could have been better. Needed permission from Seoul just to get onto the base. They were very cautious about going out because they wanted no bad PR. They had a zero tolerance for casualties. They were reluctant to go off for routine work.

Training prior to deployment had largely to do with safety. It was very good. But professional preparation was less so. People had to rely on their own career preparation.

Language training would be excellent to have. Good to have a program at post, because of all the down time people have to learn and study.

“A very troubling cultural practice is the killing of women caught interacting with men. Women who are found to have been alone with men in a non-marital situation were stoned to death on a fairly regular basis. It was very tragic, and I wish I would have known more about that before I went.”

Lessons learned: “We need more effective communication between the embassy and the province, both at a policy level and at an administrative level.”

Interview

Q: Why don't you tell me about when you were in Iraq and what your job was?

A: I was in Iraq from 2007 until 2008.

Q: Just recently home then. And where were you located?

A: The first four months I was in Baghdad at a palace and then I transferred for one year to the PRT, what we call the RRT (Regional Reconstruction Team) in Irbil.

Q: And what was your job?

A: I was the chief of staff there. It would have been the deputy team leader but we had a team leader who was Korean and the Koreans participated in the RRT because the Korean coalition forces were there and posted in the Irbil area. So our nominal team leader was Korean, and the deputy team leader was the American.

Q: And was that a State department person?

A: Yeah, it was the American team leader and I was his deputy. They couldn't have two deputies, so they called me chief of staff.

Q: And were you there in a military capacity?

A: No, civilian, State Department, limited appointment.

Q: Was this a 31-61?

A: Correct.

Q: So you have been in the State Department for your career?

A: I had just retired before I went.

Q: Okay, and what was your background in the State Department?

A: Foreign Service Officer. I was off and on an economic officer and a management officer. I switched career cones midway.

Q: What was your PRT's relationship with the OPA, the Office of Provincial Affairs? You were right there, so you were close by, right?

A: The Office of Provincial Affairs had broken out from the old IRMO, so the Office of Provincial Affairs inherited some of the embassy elements that were out in the provinces. This RRT, Regional Reconstruction Team, was operationally active. It was originally set up as an AID mission in Irbil.

Q: How far is Irbil from Baghdad?

A: It isn't even on the road. You can't go directly unless you had a military flight. How long is it in distance? It's the northernmost region of Iraq so I would guess it's 600 to 800 miles.

Q: When you were with the RRT, were relations with the NCT and the other offices somewhat difficult?

A: It was by telephone and e-mail. We were subordinate to them. When I got there we were reporting to the National Coordinating Team. Later, that became OPA..

Q: What about the U.S. military commands?

A: There was a U.S. military base in Irbil on the Korean FOB, our compound was not on the FOB. It was off the FOB.

Q: It was not a military compound then?

A: Where we were residing, and our office space, was a civilian compound, but it was enclosed.

Q: How safe were you there? Was that an area that was secure?

A: The whole Kurdistan region was extremely safe. There have been zero casualties, war related casualties of Americans, since 2003. There were some accidental deaths but no casualties of war.

Q: Can you describe the civilian and military chain of command within your PRT or between the PRT and the military?

A: This is what was so unusual about the way the State Department normally does business within a post. At this post you had the management officer who was supposed to serve the post, didn't report to the team leader, he reported back to the management office in Baghdad. You had the RSO who was supposed to provide security to the team, also reporting directly back to Baghdad. So there were disconnects there in that regard. Normally, if it were a regular consulate in a non-war situation, there would be a dotted line back to a parent office but those officers would report to their principal officers at the post.

Q: What's your view of the effectiveness of that organization?

A: It created, I don't want to say conflicts of interest, but it created confusion in terms of setting priority and moving forward with an agenda and a set of goals.

Q: Can you give some examples of that?

A: For example, the management officer reported back to the management office in Baghdad and it was the management office in Baghdad's sole and exclusive goal to get our compound relocated from where we were off the FOB, back onto the FOB.

Q: Was that a good idea?

A: Well, the security office thought so and the management office thought so. The people that were posted there didn't agree. I have to be careful with how I word this because the perception back in Embassy Baghdad was that we were fighting it, and we weren't. We were trying to point out how it didn't make sense. And it became very difficult to make those points without making it seem like we weren't toeing the official line. Do you see what I'm saying? So I just wanted to give you that caveat.

Q: Given the fact that you have State Department, AID, military, all types of people together, did you experience the phenomenon of stovepiping, or did you observe it?

A: Well I guess that's how you would describe that chain of command thing that I was just talking about. There were several different military organizations and AID. We liaised with them very well. There was a certain amount of everyone getting their own orders from headquarters but we did liaise and work very closely to make sure that we were. My boss, the deputy team leader, was given the overall responsibility for management of U.S. policy initiatives in the whole three provinces and there was a fair amount of coordination.

Q: How many people were part of the PRT?

A: We had, I think, a dozen or so officers. These were State Department officers, and there were two or three different military organizations there in our compound, but they didn't play a military role in terms of providing security or fighting combat. There was one that was a direct liaison to the local government, the regional government, and there was another one that was semi-military. I'm not sure what their purpose was, but they had secure communications, classified communications that we didn't have within our compound so that's where we would go to use that. On the FOB there was a border team that would go out to the border and monitor events on the border and they had contacts that they used. And then there was a civil affairs team. And there was a logistics team on the base that supported the American soldiers that were there.

Q: How did you observe the members of the PRT relating to one another? Was that good interaction?

A: For the year that I was there, I would say yes. The time previous to my arrival there were, because it was a small post and there were personal frictions, so there were issues in that regard. But in general while I was there it went pretty well.

Q: Were you able to get off, off of your compound and out into the area and among the Iraqis as you wished?

A: Not as we wished, no. We had very strict security rules that kept us on a fairly short leash.

Q: Was it because there weren't enough security vehicles and guards to take you out?

A: That's debatable. I would say that the initial answer is yes. There were insufficient resources to get us out.

Q: Were you protected by the military?

A: No, we had a contractor. It wasn't Blackwater, it might have been Triple Canopy, let me think about it. Blackwater was the one that got in trouble in Baghdad and Triple Canopy was the one that provided the local guard force. This was another one. It was a contractor, they were very professional and took their job very seriously. They followed... Remember when I mentioned that we didn't think we were in particular danger there. The RSO was worried that if it became known that we were moving about freely that we would make targets of ourselves, that's why they made us follow the same rules that they followed in Baghdad but basically there were any number of American citizens not necessarily affiliated with the U.S. government that were moving about freely in this part of the country.

Q: In your capacity as the de facto deputy, did you have relations with Iraqis, either in the provincial council or tribal leaders? Did you need to get out and meet with those people?

A: The team members had established relationships in three provinces in the region. I would say that my relationship more had to do with the regional government which was a tier in between the provincial and the national.

Q: Where were their headquarters?

A: Their offices were in Irbil, the capital was in Irbil, so we had fairly close relationships with high Iraqi officials.

Q: Did you go to their offices or did they come to you?

A: When we went to events it was usually on their ground but, on occasion, they were not opposed to coming to see us when it became necessary.

Q: In some cases people have said Iraqis did not want, first off, a bunch of big black Suburbans coming up to their offices and they did not want to be seen going into the American base. Was that the case?

A: What I would say is they were very sensitive to our movements and the style in which I moved. But what I found was that there was a perception within the public that we needed it. Kurdistan was so much more stable than the rest of the country, the government wanted to project that image. When we showed up in our big, obvious Suburbans, it wasn't quite an insult but it did bother them. To the extent possible they asked if we could tone it down.

Q: Were there any Iraqi security forces involved?

A: No, we weren't allowed, we had to use our contractors.

Q: Did you have a public affairs person on your PRT, and what kind of outreach did they do?

A: Cultural and media, and as much as they could across the board.

Q: With Iraqis or with American media?

A: With locals.

Q: What was the message they were basically trying to convey?

A: It was just the policy line from Baghdad and from the administration. From Embassy Baghdad. And the cultural events they were just trying to bridge the local people, the Kurdish people, with the Americans.

Q: One of the goals of the PRT is to bolster moderates as a counter-insurgency effort. How did your PRT function in that regard?

A: Well, virtually everyone was a moderate in Kurdistan. The insurgents were not in that part of the country and part of that is because the local authorities did such a good job winning the hearts and minds of the people. In that regard they didn't need our help, they considered our presence to be heavy handed, though they definitely love the United States and were pleased for us to be there.

Q: In governance, did you have some governance specialists on your PRT?

A: The AID mission had contract people working on governance issues.

Q: Was that RTI?

A: Yes it was.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about how they functioned and whether they were effective in their governance work?

A: I would say there was a slight amount of confusion between what their contracted goals were, and that from Baghdad the perspective was to reach out to the provincial level, however the only effective level of government where we were located was the regional government, which consisted of three provinces. The provincial government role was stifled by the regional government. So there were these issues of, “who is our real target audience here and how can we help them develop governance?” Because the region had a 10-year head start on the rest of Iraq. Since the end of the first Gulf War the Kurdistan region has been semi-autonomous.

Q: And did they have a rudimentary system of democracy?

A: I would say that ostensibly it was more than rudimentary. They had free and fair elections, they had elected leaders, they had open institutions. They also had, unfortunately, a fair amount of corruption and the people had a feeling that “we have to vote for the party that’s in power or else.”

Q: So they did have a bureaucracy and they had mayors and institutions and offices that were set up and working?

A: Yes, they did. But I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a bureaucracy. But they had a level of self-governance that was way above other regions.

Q: Were the tribal leaders part of the system?

A: Yes. Some of the tribes participated more closely with the government and others less with the government. Some of the stronger tribes had independent business interests, the ruling parties, there are two ruling parties in the Kurdistan region, and they have tribal roots.

Q: What was the PRT’s relationship, if any, with the Provincial Reconstruction Development Committee?

A: I’m not sure, I’ve heard of it as an organization but I’m not sure what the structure of it was.

Q: So you can’t really evaluate whether it was effective. What about Rule of Law? Was this different than Governance, with regards to police and courts and so on?

A: We had a Rule of Law specialist, and he was definitely making outreach to support legislation. The right kind of legislation. Off the top of my head I can’t remember what

kinds of laws but it was mostly judicial structure, making sure that the courts functioned, had resources, had policies, procedures.

Q: Were there already procedures going on, arrests and trials and convictions?

A: Absolutely. Whether or not it would have met any standards that we had was an open question but there was a huge body of local law.

Q: And the PRT did assist in developing some of these things?

A: Yes, and I remember one of the things that he was working on was establishing a body of professional attorneys

Q: Like a bar association?

A: Yes, the way it worked was that all Iraqi attorneys that were not Kurdish could practice in Kurdistan but Kurdish attorneys that were not necessarily Arab were not eligible to practice law outside the Kurdistan region.

Q: Is that something that's eventually going to happen throughout Iraq, that this line between Kurdish ...

A: It had more to do with a legacy from the Saddam Hussein era, but I don't know what the solution is, whether it will be a short term solution or whether it will take several generations, but the idea was to get them to qualify for the National Bar Association.

Q: How did the PRTs relate to training run by the Multinational Security Transition Command? That had to do with your Korean leader right?

A: They didn't get off the base much. The things they did, they had a vocational school on the base and it was very good at training people. What it was less effective at was placing people in the field that they were trained in. So they would teach people computer skills, for instance, but to find them a job in IT? You had to know somebody. It's not the skills you have, it's who you know. They could place them in jobs but not necessarily in their field. Toward the end, the government started to get reluctant to just take on more and more employees because the public sector was already heavily burdened with employees and all the international institutions were encouraging them to promote the private sector and take them off the government payroll so it was kind of a catch-22. And then in the private sector, I mean the private sector was nascent but it wasn't fully developed so it was hard to find jobs for these people that were trained. They had baking schools, they had mechanic schools where they taught people how to operate and maintain heavy equipment, generators, it was a very good school.

Q: If you were asked to list the achievements of the PRT, could you give a list of five or six specifics that you can point to?

A: I can say that we did get a lot of money out of what they called the quick response fund, so we would go out,

Q: Was that CERP?

A: No, it was not CERP, it might have originated in CERP but it was a small piece of it. They gave us money to give small grants, \$10,000 grants or \$25,000, as opposed to two million dollar grants. We would go out to NGOs all over the three provinces and provide training for women, we would provide materials for schools. A lot of times the schools existed but they didn't have any equipment, so we would send them computers, and those kinds of things. That's what we were very successful at. Another thing was, we had a very close relationship with the regional government. They wanted a stronger relationship with the United States. We were very effective in reaching out to them.

Q: Can you talk a bit about those NGOs, the women's groups and other kinds of NGOs and international groups were you working with?

A: There were like centers where women who were being battered could go to.

Q: Were they teaching business skills?

A: To a certain extent, they were teaching things that were more traditional for women like sewing, but they were also teaching computers, giving them an environment where they could learn professional skills as well, that they might not have access to in a private school because it would be more male-oriented. We did some cultural events.

Q: Were there business groups, chambers of congress, agricultural groups?

A: Yes. I remember a committee came up from Dahuk and it was sort of a business group. Organized chambers of commerce, I'm sure they must have had them on the local level, but the regional government had an investment board but we really didn't get too involved with them directly, we didn't necessarily agree with all their tactics.

Q: You were talking about the achievements of the PRT. You talked about working with those groups and I sidelined you. Can we go back to that list?

A: We did reach out to the media as well.

Q: Were there any areas where you were totally frustrated and didn't feel like you could do what you wanted to do for one reason or another?

A: Just getting out and doing more is what we wanted to do and we were so severely restricted. I might have misled you earlier when I said officials would come and see us if it was the only way. But it was really a last resort. It wasn't their first preference. In fact I think we would have been more effective, and they were willing to do this too, if we would have taken up office space in their government centers.

Q: Would that be something that you would recommend for the future?

A: Yes, I think if the embassy security officers were open to it, I know the Kurdish government would definitely allow us to have an office over there.

Q: You're talking about the embassy in Baghdad right? Whereas you're over in this area...

A: It was a different mindset and a different situation. It was a totally different situation and we had a hard time getting them to understand that, us getting out would not necessarily have put us at more risk than us staying home.

Q: Did you feel that the members of the PRT were appropriate to their positions?

A: We got very dedicated people who were team players.

Q: Were their skills well-matched to their jobs?

A: Well this is how we differed from some of the other PRTs. Because they had a lot of technical expertise like medicine or health sector or technical engineers or something that helped city planning. We didn't have it and we didn't need it. The people that we got were more like political reporting officers and they were very suited to the work that we had.

Q: How did you feel that the PRT, either this specific PRT or the overall structure, how did they do in utilizing and utilizing well the American military and civilian resources?

A: We had very little American military presence there. Our military presence was by and large Korean, and when you say how well we utilized what was there, they were not... they did not make themselves available to us.

Q: Was that okay?

A: I think that there could have been better cooperation. Even just getting onto the base we had to contact Seoul, we had to contact our embassy in Seoul Korea to allow us freely on and off their base. We did that, of course, and it worked but we didn't like to have to do that. They had a zero tolerance for casualties so they didn't want to go off the base. Of course, they had no casualties in the five years that they were there. They had one death and it was a suicide and they unfortunately had to list it as a suicide because they didn't want to list any war casualties. That was very important to their PR, their congress and their political leaders, that they had zero tolerance for casualties. They were reluctant to go off for routine work. They would go off for special occasions when they made sure the coast was clear.

Q: A little bit about training... the training that you received and observed among your fellow PRT members. Do you think it was appropriate and adequate?

A: The training that we got before we went had a lot to do with acknowledging that we were going into a dangerous situation, and the kind of self-help things that we could do to help protect ourselves and follow the rules, and that kind of thing. I would say that it was more than adequate. Professionally, in terms of accomplishing goals and objectives, I would say that most people had to rely on their career preparation.

Q: Do you think language was an important thing to have for someone going over there?

A: In this particular post it wasn't Arabic, it was Kurdish. I think only one person came to the post with any Kurdish experience, and that wasn't much.

Q: Did you have some BBAs?

A: No, we didn't have any at our post.

Q: And did you feel you needed them?

A: Most of the people we interacted with had pretty good English and when they didn't we had local staff that had pretty good English, but weren't BBAs. And when we went to meet with local leaders, a lot of times they would provide their own interpreters, so I would say it would be very helpful to have local language skills but we didn't let that become a major impediment to progress.

Q: Is there anything that you would recommend that trainers do differently?

A: Definitely have a language program at post. A lot of people had some spare time, evenings, and even if it was just to give materials, there were a lot of people at post that were willing to volunteer and teach those languages. That's as true in Baghdad as it is in Irbil but the language is different.

Q: Anything about the country that came as a surprise that you wish you had been prepared for better, about the situation or the culture?

A: There was just the one thing, and I know it's been mentioned and discussed and everything but it still has a heavy impact on people when they get there, and it's this whole concept of honor killing.

Q: I don't know about that.

A: Women who are found to have been alone with men in a non-marital situation were stoned to death on a fairly regular basis. It was very tragic, and I wish I would have known more about that before I went.

Q: How many instances are you aware of?

A: It happened dozens of times in any given year, and it's obviously a family thing. The brothers and fathers take the women out. There's a double standard because there is less incidence of men being punished in this way, but it does happen, that families take their sons out. And it's the victim's family itself that does it, not like the shotgun wedding, you're not bringing the outsider in, you're taking care of the problem at home. It's quite tragic and there are campaigns to get people to stop doing this, that it's an anachronism and there are more effective ways to control morality, but it's difficult, especially at the village level because people feel so strongly about these things.

Q: What about lessons learned? Are there some lessons that you could pass along?

A: I would say that we need to create more effective communication between the embassy and the province. Both at a policy level and at an administrative level, just to make sure that the needs are clear and the policies are unified in direction, and eliminate everybody having their own path back to Baghdad. I don't know how to achieve that, but I know that we need to.

Q: Was your path back to the Ambassador, or was it to the military?

A: It was to the OPA, the Office of Provincial Affairs. Our chain was back to the office of provincial affairs but we had a management officer who of course, now in the position I was in I had some management responsibilities, but the officer did not report to me and I didn't report to him and I didn't report to the management officer in Baghdad. There was sort of a disconnect and I think that needs to get fixed.

Q: Anything else?

A: That was the biggest one. And by the way, since I left they have decided not to move our compound to the base, which I think is smart but we expended an awful lot of energy and money resources going down that path. When we were working on it it was considered urgent and imperative and we would die if we didn't get this done so it's disheartening to those who worked on it that long and that hard. But we're happy that the decisions were made that recognized that it wasn't the correct path to pursue.

Q: You were effective in your arguments then

A: I wish I could take credit for it but I can't, I think it was more circumstantial.

#