

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

**INTERVIEW #66**

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**Executive Summary**

I worked in the Office of Provincial Affairs in Embassy Baghdad, from 2007 to 2008. Background is in Foreign Service. Arrived as civilian surge was commencing. There were 29 PRT and E-PRT teams, some 440 personnel, not including military members, interpreters, etc.

Office was located at the embassy annex in the old Republican Palace.

Got out periodically, but spent most time at the embassy. Responsibilities were broad. OPA relationship to PRTs was almost parent-child. Had shared aims -- enhancing capabilities of local and provincial Iraqi officials. OPA was one step removed from PRTs, providing policy guidance, operational support, logistical support. OPA office included about 15 people at that time. Relations were cordial, given the difficult working circumstances.

Office included two Senior Foreign Service Officers; liaison representatives from Agriculture Department; plus a military component. OPA staff was 90 percent civilian.

Effectiveness of PRT leadership and management structure must be seen in context: This was the largest civil-military operation in a generation. While all of the Foreign Service officers were dedicated (they volunteered) none had ever worked in circumstances like this, on the front lines. It was hot, uncomfortable. Dangerous. There were physical and psychological challenges. It was very tough.

Structure and organization itself will evolve and respond to changes required. It is appropriate that the State Department take the lead, because this is a political, not a military, engagement. Coordination and cooperation between military and civilian elements is essential.

Some stove piping was evident, but understandable. Agencies were asked to commit resources toward a State-led project, and wanted their views heard. Degree of stove piping depended on personalities involved. One of the interviewee's responsibilities was to minimize such conflict, and promote inter-agency cooperation. Sometimes military commanders have to remind themselves that everything in their area of operations is not

theirs to command. So there were inherent institutional tensions. That was all part of the give and take of the job.

Some competition seen between PRTs and E-PRTs, but everyone did the best they could.

Security was the principal concern, and there were different interpretations as to how to respond. Field officers want to push the envelope; RSOs are more cautious.

Given the need for security, transport resources were generally apportioned fairly. The need for security sometimes limited how PRTs were able to operate in the field. Transportation could occasionally be an issue. Security was also.

Quality of translation and interpretation services varied. Some are trained, others merely speak the language, not always interpreting concepts accurately.

Many PRTs devoted considerable energy and seed money to assisting in the establishment of NGOs and similar organizations essential to civil society. Public diplomacy program in Baghdad was active, although people in the U.S. seem uninformed about the accomplishments of PRTs.

Counter-insurgency was a prime effort of the ambassador and commanding General. It amounts to informing, assisting, consulting. Providing experience and professional capability to assist Iraqis (such as advising city managers on how to maintain infrastructure.) Basically, it's nuts and bolts stuff.

Governance work included political dialogue, respectful negotiation. Assisting people to address what they see as their responsibilities.

RTI was a component of our program. They were doing all they could to meet the responsibilities of their contract under conditions that were particularly demanding. They supplied to the PRTs a specific number of specialist positions and in general provided resources that were appreciated.

There were probably RTI Rule of Law specialists on some of the teams, because they appeared to offer professionals from a broad array of backgrounds: "We're an international consulting firm. What do you need? We'll get it for you!"

PRDCs were provincial entities with which PRTs worked in devising an appropriate reconstruction plan. Money was apportioned to each of the PRTs and, with the PRDCs, they would devise a process for project review and prioritization, in terms of funding. Conditions were attached to the money. An important aim was to include transparency and accountability.

Achievements of the PRTs: The State Department has responded strongly. Quality of people I worked with was one of most important aspects of my experience there.

At the embassy were four ambassadors or ex-ambassadors, who in some cases gave up posts to serve in Iraq. It was an extraordinary country team. There was a strong *esprit de corps* with leadership at the top, with a clear strategic focus.

Training was acceptable. Pre-departure training consisted of some cultural orientation and historical orientation to Iraq, plus a security aspect. Just one week of specific PRT orientation, which is sufficient. Plus some in-house OPA training on how to manage program funds.

Lessons learned: Never say “Never again.” I received an unexpected message asking me to go. It was unexpected, but the only answer I felt I could give after giving it some thought was to go on over and I’m pleased that I did. Certainly it was not easy from any perspective, but I feel all the richer for it. A year was certainly long enough for me. I think it is for most people on the teams.

### **Interview**

*Q: You were with a PRT, is that correct?*

A: I was in the Office of Provincial Affairs in Embassy Baghdad, which oversaw and supported the PRT program.

*Q: Since returning to the U.S., are you still adjusting?*

A: I am, but at least I’m enjoying it so far. I’m in the middle of a lengthy home leave, the first time, ever. I’ve been enjoying myself.

*Q: That’s good. So you were with OPA in Baghdad, with the embassy?*

A: Yes, at the embassy annex. It was the Republican Palace. The embassy was under construction.

*Q: Did you get out frequently, or did you spend a lot of your time in the embassy?*

A: Principally in the embassy, but we did travel as much as we could to all of the PRTs.

*Q: There were how many at that time?*

A: That’s when they were in the midst of some marked expansion. I arrived there basically as the “civilian surge” was just commencing. 29, when you count up the PRTs, the EPRTs and the provincial support teams.

*Q: And how many people, approximately?*

A: Well, directly State Department, they reached the number of about 440, but then there were other, military members, interpreters, translators, things like that, other specialists.

*Q: What exactly were the parameters of your responsibilities at OPA?*

A: They were actually very broad. I arrived in the latter part of 2007 and OPA had been established in late spring of the same year. There was a predecessor organization, but OPA was the new one, beginning in May of 2007. They had a series of directors in the initial months.

*Q: What was OPA's relationship with the PRTs?*

A: That's almost a parent-child relationship, with all of the problems that ensue in those things. We shared the same aim -- to do what we could to enhance the capabilities of local and provincial Iraqi officials to meet the heavy responsibilities of self-government. So what the teams were facing in the field, we were one step removed from that and were their principal point of policy guidance, operational support, logistical support.

*Q: How many people were actually working at OPA?*

A: In October, when I arrived, it was difficult to get a firm grip on the numbers, because it had been continually evolving. But I'd say there were about 15 there at that time.

*Q: Did you find that relations among the members were functional and cordial?*

A: Yes, given the extraordinary circumstances under which we were working.

*Q: What specialty areas were represented in the OPA?*

The Office of Provincial Affairs is an embassy office. There were two FSOs, both from the senior ranks. Then we had liaison representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a military component also. There was a mix of 90 percent civilians within OPA.

*Q: Were these 31-61s, or were they actually civilians who were working there?*

A: There were 31-61s, there were contractors and then there were Foreign Service Officers.

*Q: Looking from your position at OPA to the PRTs, how would you rate the effectiveness, in general, of the PRT leadership and management structure? You might also describe the structure, actually how it worked, in terms of personalities and assignments.*

A: You're talking about my whole year there?

*Q: I know some of them were more functional than others and that this might have been personality-driven.*

A: Right. I think questions like this are important, but also it's difficult to convey them accurately unless you provide some sense of the context in which all of us were working and the challenges that were before us.

This is the largest civil-military operation in a generation. We haven't done anything like this since the 1970's.

It's pertinent to know that the team leader positions were to be filled initially by Senior Foreign Service Officers, from the O-1 to the senior levels, all of whom were obviously public spirited because they volunteered for this assignment, all of them professionally accomplished, if they've reached the colonel or flag ranks in our Foreign Service, but none of them have ever worked in the circumstances in which they found and continue to find themselves working on the front lines.

It was hot. It was uncomfortable. There were many physical and professional and psychological challenges. So while it was one of my responsibilities to be non-judgmental, to judge these guys was very difficult to do, because of very tough circumstances.

*Q: What about the structure itself, with a State Department person in charge, a military deputy and then on down. Did you think that this was an effective organizational setup, or would there be ways that it could be adjusted?*

A: I'm certain that it will continue to evolve and respond to changes that are required, but it was a joint civil-military operation. State Department had the lead, so it was appropriate that the PRT team leader be the leader of the program, because it was an essentially political engagement. But our aims certainly were not achieved if there wasn't close coordination and support among all of our partners, particularly the military.

*Q: Did you observe what they call agency stove piping among the PRTs?*

A: I think that the agencies that did participate in the program in some respects were understandably proprietary. They were asked to commit their resources, be they material or personnel, toward a project and this was State Department-led, so they wanted to make certain that their views were appropriately heard. There's always a natural tendency sometimes to see stove piping, but I think a lot of that could depend upon the personalities involved.

*Q: If it did occur, were you called upon to try to straighten things out?*

A: Yes, that was essentially one of my responsibilities, to do what I could to promote effective interagency collaboration.

*Q: Was it difficult sometimes for maybe a high level military person to take orders from a lower level State Department person without resentment?*

A: Well, first off, in the military there is respect for rank and they are aware that the PRT team leader is a Senior Foreign Service Officer and that we are not directly in their chain of command. But obviously there are times when there are resources that are in your area of operation that are in many respects kinetic. And sometimes military commanders have to remind themselves that everything that is in their area of operations is not theirs to command.

So there were inherent institutional tensions. That was all part of the give and take of the job.

*Q: What sorts of relationships did you observe within the PRTs and the EPRTs?*

A: It's probably best understandable when you consider that it's a workplace, but an extraordinary workplace. And in any workplace, you and I know the tensions that inevitably exist. Hopefully, people are always aiming toward the same objective, and that was what we tried to assist our teams in developing -- a sense of purpose and strategic objectives -- and they would be focused on that.

Again, that's up in the clouds. Getting down to it and dealing with it on a day-to-day basis, that's what I think is extraordinarily challenging. I think everyone did the best they could under the circumstances in which they found themselves. That may sound very Pollyanna-ish, but these guys were living history out there.

*Q: In terms of the EPRTs, what was the relationship with the Brigade Combat Teams?*

A: They were actually part of it. They were embedded. Every PRT worked or was partnered very closely with the military units in the areas in which they served. But the EPRTs were specifically embedded in a particular brigade and it was essential that there be a strong sense of partnership between the EPRT leader and the brigade command.

*Q: Was that generally the case?*

A: That was the aim to which they all worked, I think. To say that it actually was realized in all circumstances would be disingenuous.

*Q: There's a question about the level and nature of the threat and I understand it's going to be different all over the country, but maybe from your standpoint there was kind of a trend or an overall picture that you could describe in terms of the kinds of security challenges that the PRTs and the EPRTs were dealing with?*

A: That was the principal concern. You would have to say so, given the constraints that those conditions imply and there's all sorts of institutional tugs. Naturally when you get out in the field, officers might like to push the envelope. Fortunately there are RSOs

assigned to the PRTs. They're the security professionals and if they say something is imprudent, you have to listen to them.

*Q: Were you involved in allocating resources, depending on the security threat, the transportation security and making decisions about who got how many vehicles and so on?*

A: Given the pace at which we were working and the volume of subjects that crossed our desks, I would have to say the resources generally were apportioned almost pretty much equally, on a size-of-team basis. They weren't really lacking for resources. There were committed human resources.

We had available to us some project development money, called our Quick Response Fund (QRF), and it was designed to be as streamlined as it could be in those circumstances and almost designed as we were forging ahead. But there were other resources that teams could tap, and did tap into with frequency. There was close collaboration between the PRTs, the E-PRTs and the brigades in the use of brigade CERP money, the Commanders Emergency Response Program.

*Q: Were Iraqi security forces involved at all, in terms of providing security?*

A: No, we didn't work, in the PRTs, with Iraqi security forces.

*Q: Would you say that overall the PRT personnel were able to operate in the field satisfactorily?*

A: Again, I guess it would depend upon one's perspective. There were limiting factors that affected all of the teams. Transportation could occasionally be an issue. Security would also.

Other key aspects of logistical support, such as interpretation and translation capabilities that were appropriately professional -- and by that I don't mean to criticize anybody that is placed in the hard position of interpreting -- but there are professional interpreters who are trained and then there are others who speak the language and people presume that they will be able to interpret with accuracy, and that's not always the case.

*Q: Are you talking about the BBAs? They were professionals, were they not?*

A: Right. No, I was speaking of basically almost anybody who was placed in the position serving as a translator or interpreter. And while they could be capable with the language, that doesn't mean that they would be expert interpreters.

The BBAs, by nature of their linguistic strengths, teams would fall upon them to serve as interpreters at times as well, but their principal focus was more specific, thematically oriented. They'd be working in business development or agriculture or economic assistance or whatever.

*Q: Please describe the PRTs' relationship with international and non-governmental organizations.*

A: Many of the PRTs devoted considerable energy to assisting in the establishment of NGOs and similar organizations that we see as essential elements of civil society. And given the circumstances under which those Iraqis have lived -- and just not the last seven years, but over the last 27 years -- we assisted in the development of NGOs. So that would be an interesting statistic, I imagine we might have it back in OPA, to see if we have a take on how many NGOs were assisted by very small seed money.

*Q: In terms of public affairs, did the PRT movement try to get its message out to either Iraqis or Americans? What was the focus of their message?*

A: I think there was a very active and professional public diplomacy program in place in Baghdad. That said, I think that the story of the PRTs, which I feel privileged to have been part of, is not familiar to most people here in the States.

They really don't know that there have been essentially three generations of Americans serving at one time: people in their 20s, people in their 40s and people in their 60s and beyond that are serving on the PRTs. These are civilians who have been at the point of this spear, so to speak, for quite a long time.

I think the program really accelerated over the last 18 months or so, but by then everyone was just so tired about news from Iraq.

*Q: Counter-insurgency is another aim that you were working on.*

A: Counter-insurgency, is certainly a key element of the mission strategy that both the ambassador and commanding general and their teams had developed, out with the people and responding to immediate needs. It's nothing that does not reflect common sense.

*Q: How would you describe the focus of the counter-insurgency, if it isn't arming people to kill bad guys?*

A: No, basically it's informing, it's assisting. In some respects I think you might consider the specialists as consultants. They're expert consultants and they're there providing their experience and professional capability and doing what they can to assist city managers in Iraq to be able to maintain appropriately all their infrastructure. Basically it's nuts and bolts kind of stuff.

*Q: What was the focus of efforts in the area of governance?*

A: Basically, political dialogue, respectful dialogue and negotiation. We can't teach this. It's just assisting people to address what they see as their responsibilities of the moment

and you can't help but admire so many of the Iraqis who have assumed positions of public responsibility. People forget that there are people doing all this work on the ground.

*Q: Did you work with RTI extensively?*

A: RTI was a component of our program.

*Q: How would you evaluate their performance?*

A: I think as with all of us, they were doing all they could to meet the responsibilities of their contract under conditions that were particularly demanding. They supplied to the PRTs a specific number of specialist positions and in general from what I recall in conversations with team leaders who had a much better perspective on the actual individual performance on the teams than I did back in Baghdad, many of them were appreciative of the resource that RTI provided.

Generally, we presume they were carefully vetted by RTI and AID and they were out there to do some work. And if there were occasions when personnel had to be replaced and that was true among contractors, among 31-61s, among Foreign Service Officers, then you did what you could to make the changes as smoothly as possible.

*Q: Did these folks work with the Rule of Law people, or was it a separate effort?*

A: I think there were probably RTI Rule of Law specialists on some of the teams, because they appeared to offer professionals of a broad array of backgrounds: "We're an international consulting firm. What do you need? We'll get it for you!"

*Q: Economic reconstruction and development were among the goals. How do you think that the PRTs are doing in that direction?*

A: I'm not a good judge of that. I'm also a taxpayer, and I've seen already billions of dollars that we've spent over there. How do you do development in a country that is as wealthy as this is?

*Q: Did you work with the PRDC?*

A: Well, they were the provincial reconstruction development councils. These were simply provincial entities with which PRTs worked in devising an appropriate reconstruction plan for their provinces. And the PRTs might have a relation to a relatively small percentage of that.

There was X percent of our PRDC money that was apportioned to each of the PRTs and as I understand it -- I didn't work closely with it on a day-to-day basis, so some of the details might be in error -- the teams would work with the provincial reconstruction development councils. They would devise a process for project review and decision-

making and prioritization, in terms of funding. And there would be particular conditions that were attached to the PRDC money we provide.

One of the aims, as we were working to assist the Iraqis meet their heavy civic responsibilities, was to do it as accountably and as transparently as possible and to have those qualities built into those projects.

*Q: Could you talk a little bit about what you would list as the achievements of the PRTs as a whole? Can you specify three or four or five things that been outstanding achievements?*

A: I think the State Department has responded, at least from what I can see, strongly in the time that I was there. The quality of the people with whom I had the privilege to work was one of the most important aspects of my experience there.

I've never worked with the ambassador before. I knew of him by reputation and he reached out personally to form his country team, from what I understand.

You have an embassy. When I arrived, there were four ambassadors there. They all relinquished their missions when duty called and they came over. So it was an extraordinary country team and all of those senior colleagues in turn reached out to others.

So I think there was a strong *esprit de corps* with leadership at the top, with a clear strategic focus, who had established a strong partnership with the general. As I think about the relationship that the ambassador and the general developed, I think everybody would try to aspire to that, in terms of partnership. But then personalities always intrude.

*Q: Did you observe, or have anything to do with the training? Can you make any comment about the type of training, whether it was appropriate?*

A: Well, there was pre-departure training. There was some cultural orientation and historical orientation to Iraq and there was the security aspect of it, and I can understand their pertinence.

In terms of the PRT program, there was when I went through it and I believe there still is, only just one week of specific PRT orientation, which is sufficient. You're going to be living and working in Iraq for a year. Hopefully that first week there in Washington will give you the sense of what to expect.

And we did some training, more in-house training, in the Office of Provincial Affairs, in terms of how to manage the program funds that you had and things of that nature.

*Q: But was it effective? Was it sufficient? Would you change it in any way?*

A: Well, I'm certain there always will be things you could change about it and right now the experience is kind of so fresh for me, I've only been away for a short while, it's difficult. I'd probably benefit from a bit of distance.

*Q: Finally, what are your lessons learned?*

A: Well, never say "Never" again. I didn't expect to be in Iraq. My office in OPA, was headed by my DCM from a posting in Lima a couple of years ago and I received a message asking if I'd be willing to serve. It was unexpected, but the only answer I felt I could give after giving it some thought was to go on over and I'm pleased that I did. Certainly it was not easy from any perspective, but I feel all the richer for it.

*Q: Are there suggestions for enhancing the PRT program?*

A: Well, this is one government program where we want to work ourselves out of a job as quickly as possible. I think those decisions are certainly not in our hands.

We have recruited Foreign Service Officers to fill the Foreign Service positions on the teams that will become vacant in the summer of 2009. There are 65 or 70 positions out there, and those are year-long assignments, so you could say that maybe they'll be there, from a project planning perspective, a year and a half out.

*Q: Is a year a good amount of time?*

A: I don't have an answer. This is not a long-term program.

*Q: But I mean for a person, an individual, to serve?*

A: That's a tough one. A year was certainly long enough for me. I think it is for most people on the teams.

You'll run into many contractors in Iraq that have been there for more than five years. There are people who just have stayed around. But if you have any other thing that you want to do in your life, why spend more than a year in Iraq?

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