INTERVIEW SYNOPSIS

Participant’s Understanding of the PRT Mission

The interviewee was team leader of PRT Diyala, Iraq, from September 2009 to September 2010. She understood her mission as to work with military counterparts and Iraqi officials to increase governance capacity, promote economic development and build civil society institutions. The focus was on advising Iraqis instead of doing things for them.

Relationship with Local Nationals

Observations: She enjoyed very good to excellent relations with Iraqis at all levels, including the governor, the provincial council, and local leaders.

Insights: It was a challenge to get Iraqis to adjust as the PRT changed focus from doing things for the Iraqis to more of an advising and assisting role. Iraqis had to learn to identify their own solutions within their own legal and funding realities while no longer depending so heavily on American ideas and funding.

Did the PRT Achieve its Mission? (Impact)

Observations: The PRT was successful in launching initial steps in useful projects in areas such as governance, but there is no guarantee the progress will be sustained. The PRT completed numerous infrastructure improvements including restoring the once-thriving large public marketplace in Al-Miqdadiyah, an effort carried out through close cooperation between the PRT, USAID, the military, and the local government. The PRT also gave out micro grants through a small business development center established through the local Red Crescent office. The PRT’s work with IDPs (internally displaced persons) greatly assisted in addressing that major problem.

Insights: Even though the PRT was winding down, a civilian American presence in Diyala remained highly important and the interviewee gave increasing attention to traditional diplomatic activities such as political and economic reporting and using public diplomacy outreach to draw media attention to what the U.S. was doing to assist Iraqis.
Lessons: U.S.-Iraqi projects such as the market restoration in Al-Miqdadiyah have great potential to stabilize the security situation as well as to promote development. However, in this period of PRT and U.S. military draw down and transition in Iraq, PRTs should resist pressures to promote new projects but instead focus on completing projects that are already on the table.

**Overall Strategy for Accomplishing the PRT Mission (Planning)**

Observations: The PRT's initial work plan was not very helpful, but more of a wish list that did not distinguish among priorities or between inputs and outputs. Soon after her arrival she led the PRT in setting the priorities for each civilian unit, such as those handling governance, infrastructure, economic development and agriculture. Plans were regularly vetted with the very supportive military brigade. Productive planning conversations between the PRT and the embassy’s Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA) increased over the course of her tour.

Insights: She was able to work closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on IDP issues and with the Red Crescent office on youth programs as well as the large marketplace initiative.

Lessons: Pre-deployment Foreign Service Institute (FSI) training was only marginally useful to her as an experienced Foreign Service Officer with previous tours in the Middle East. Moreover, that training was one-size-fits-all and did not address to management challenges facing PRT team leaders. More specialized and targeted training would have been very helpful, including training that explained details about the military’s Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). Similarly, her deputy team leader, a military officer whose position required him to coordinate frequently with the embassy, should have received targeted training that covered State Department and embassy procedures.

**What Worked Well and What Did Not? (Operations)**

Observations: As the PRT changed focus from doing things for the Iraqis to more of an advising and assisting role, some PRT members could not make the adjustment or were simply not skilled at playing a support role. Logistical support from the brigade was excellent. Her PRT enjoyed robust movement support which at times enabled her team to make as many as five or six movements a day to meet Iraqi contacts. However, security was a constant concern. Halfway through her tour, after an attack on a PRT movement inflicted casualties and violence spiked in other parts of Iraq, PRT movements were reduced.

Insights: Human resources management took up much of the interviewee's time, particularly dealing with 3161 subject matter specialists. Most 3161s knew their areas of expertise, but some were poor performers or could not adjust to conditions on the ground and had to be dismissed. However, it then became a bureaucratic hassle to back-fill the vacant 3161 positions as the embassy instituted a cumbersome, ever-changing and time-consuming process to re-justify 3161 positions. This created an eight month delay in bringing on board replacements. These delays hampered PRT mission accomplishment.
Q. Please tell us where you were, what you were doing and during what time period?

A. I was assigned to PRT Diyala as a team leader, I arrived at the very end of September 2009 and I left at the very end of September 2010.

Q. What was your understanding of the PRT mission?

A. My understanding was that the goal of the PRT was to work with the military and assist the local government on the provincial and lower levels to increase capacity. Another goal was to also look for opportunities to promote economic and agricultural businesses to support the development of civil society, especially in terms of non-governmental institutions to promote the rule of law.

Q. So your role as a team leader was to do what exactly to achieve these objectives?

A. The PRT was made up of a lot of different people, which made it a very complex organization to manage. You had military, Foreign Service Officers, there were other federal government employees and there were the subject matter experts. Some of the federal government employees had no overseas experience or very little experience working with other government agencies and most of the subject-matter experts had very little overseas experience or very little experience working with governmental institutions. So what I saw my role as, was trying to get this body to work together as a team and to set out strategic priorities that we could achieve over the near and the longer term.

Q. How would you characterize your relationship with local Iraqis you worked with?

A. We had very good relations with them. We had regular meetings with the governor, the speaker of the provincial council, and various numbers of other provincial councils. Since we had people stationed throughout the province, we also met regularly with the heads of local government councils and local mayors. So we had excellent relations with them. They were very forthcoming with us and willing to meet with us.

Q. What was the nature of your interaction with them? I know it must have been different with each person, but how would you characterize it in general?

A. We were going through something of a transition around the time I arrived, so this was really a priority for me, as well as for the embassy – to switch from doing things for the Iraqis to more of an advising and assisting role. The transition was to get them to identify solutions, and for us to play more of a supportive role, rather than always being out there pushing solutions on them. So this entailed quite a bit of change for some members of the PRT, who really thought that their job was to effect change, rather than to assist the Iraqis to come up with solutions that met their particular circumstances. I think that this also entailed some change for some of the Iraqis that we dealt with, because they were used to a certain amount of American largess, especially from
the military, in terms of military resources. Our goal, and we were very lucky to have extremely supportive military partners, was to get the Iraqis to identify solutions within their own regulations and budget provisions. And that we would come in and support that, as necessary, to either meet urgent needs that they could not meet immediately, or to help them think through the process of how to obtain the resources that they needed. We began to shift much of our focus in terms of the resources that we had available to us, to supporting nongovernmental institutions.

Q. Could you give an example of a program or an activity that you turned over to the Iraqis?

A. One of our most successful programs was in the days when the military was conducting a counter-insurgency campaign. It was quite common for various area commanders to go out and purchase water tanks, water treatment facilities, water trucks, pipes, etc, and basically do all of the work for them. I was very fortunate, because about the time that I arrived, the brigade commander, who came in shortly before I arrived, was interested in using his resources not for one-off projects, but to support enduring capacity development. So rather than drawing all kinds of plans and presenting them, we started to involve the Iraqis at the lowest levels in identifying what their needs were. “What are your needs? Water? OK. What do you need exactly? Tell us how you want this designed. You have to run the traps, to run it through your system. You guys need to be speaking to the directors general -- the representatives of the national level ministries, who actually control a lot of the resources. You all need to be advocating for these projects, with the provincial council, and with the provincial government. We want you to participate.”

If there was a case where we funded something, we made great efforts to make sure that the bidding process was done as cleanly as possible and that people were not secretly benefiting from this. We insisted that local officials oversee project-implementation along with us and actually sign off on the projects. So that actually did help them develop some of what their needs were. On the other hand, we really started pushing the local councils at the provincial government, to talk to each other about what their short, medium and long-term development needs were. By the time I left – and I’m not saying that we ended up getting them there entirely, but they were actually doing this. When we compared how the 2010 budget was handled as opposed to the 2011 budget submission, there was a complete change. What happens is that the province comes up with its wish list and then submits it to the national government. For 2010, the provincial government basically drew up the list, got the provincial council to sign off on it and submitted it. There was not any consultation. With the 2011 budget, in part because of what we had done, the local officials were reaching upwards to make known their needs to the provincial government. The provincial government was actually asking for contributions and for project submission ideas from the local governments. So we had a much cleaner process that went on. I think that it was something we were able to use not only monetary resources that were available to us, from the military, but the specific expertise of PRT members in coaching, advising, and giving moral support – or even not letting them get away with the easy way of immediately running to us, because they knew it was easier to get money out of us.

Q. Staying on the subject of contact with the local nationals, do you think there are ways that those interactions could have been more productive?

A. Yes. When I was working with my people, some of my people had the tendency to go in and
basically say, “I am here to help you...what do you want from me?” To me, that was just too open-ended because the Americans generally had a very good idea of how things worked in the United States and their default mode was to say, “Why don’t you do it this way.” What I counseled my people to do was to really serve as the initiator, again, by forcing them to bring up what their needs were, and to identify what worked, what would work in their particular situations, and what their own regulations were, and then come up with options that they might want to think about rather than fully-fledged plans for action. I think that some of the Americans tended to go into this with the mentality that “we can do it all” and “this is how you do it.” However, generally, through time what we have found out – and I am not talking about my PRT in particular, but PRTs in general – was that if we did things without ensuring that they were fully on board, it would not work in the end. They would disown it, they would not understand it, and they would not make provisions to operate or maintain it properly. So we were really pushing the responsibility on them as much as possible. A lot of this, it really does go to more of advising and trying to draw people out with what their ideas were; and to get them to know what their own laws and regulations and processes were.

Q. Would you say that your PRT achieved its mission, as you had defined it?

A. I would say that we were doing a good job. Now, some of the improvements that we saw, in terms of governance capacity, were the initial steps that had to be taken; and whether they were sustainable over the long-term, that’s the big question mark. You know, would they continue that? Because Iraq had a history of centralized government, there was not a good understanding of the give and take of political life – OK, you lobby for a project this year and you don’t get it. Well that’s life. Try again next year. Or think of ways that you can make your presentation more urgent in the minds of those who have the funds. And what are the levers that you could use in your situation?

I think one of our most successful programs that we had was perhaps not a governance program at all; it was one that started before I arrived and is still continuing now, I think. The overall goal of that was to bring stability to an area that had really been destroyed by fighting between coalition forces and al-Qaeda in Iraq. This was in the marketplace of a town called Al-Miqdadiyah, this was our suk project. That suk, that marketplace, had at one time been the largest in the province, and one of the largest in Iraq. However, it was totally destroyed in fighting. It had gone from a situation where there was something like fifteen hundred merchants in the marketplace to the beginning of 2008 when only one was operating. So the PRT, the military, USAID and the local government all cooperated, and it was a great program. We first of all, concentrated on rebuilding the physical infrastructure of the marketplace; and of course a lot of the funding for this came from the U.S. side. But it was a wonderful example of intergovernmental cooperation between USAID, the PRT, and the U.S. military. That had helped a lot of the merchants actually come back and re-open their business. I think about four hundred of them re-opened their businesses because of the improvements and the physical infrastructure.

But it was not enough to help the rest of the merchants to re-establish their businesses, because they did not have access to capital to do so. Credit was not widely available to smaller and medium businessmen. Therefore, we, the PRT and the military, worked to set up a program, where we gave micro grants to merchants in the area. We did this by working with a reputable
NGO (non-governmental organization), the local Red Crescent. We worked with them to establish a small business development center. USAID contributed to that by giving them funds and training as to how it would operate. It was very much a partnership, where the business development center went out and did surveys of the suk, and got pictures of what was there, and we worked with them to develop application forms for the micro grants. The military was strictly involved with this, because they have controls on how their money can be spent. We ensured that the recipients were given business training before they actually got the money to ensure that they would spend the money, not on cars or merchandise, but on the capital to make the physical improvements to their shops. We first started issuing these micro grants in February of 2009 and I think I heard that there were about thirty left to do. We also gave micro grants in two tranches so that we could go and check to make sure that they were actually proceeding according to what they were supposed to be doing. This actually worked – we issued about 1500 to 1700 micro grants, which were almost five thousand dollars each; just about everyone opened a business. Each person that opened a business basically hired an average of one to two people. The supporting businesses that were generated in terms of tiling and electrical work gave a big boost to the economy, and so it really helped to support a source of living for thousands of people in that area – and it did help stabilize the security situation in that area. Merchants began diversifying what they sold. They began banding together in little guilds to make improvements to their particular area to infrastructure that we hadn’t taken care of, so it was a very successful enterprise for us. Now, whether those jobs will all be enduring, who really knows? We don’t know. That is something that we very much want to be able to measure, and as I was leaving we were starting to take those steps. But it was so successful, that we actually went into two other areas of the province that had a history of sectarian tension, to begin the same type of program. We worked with the small business development center to actually make improvements, for example to give some banking training, so that on the happy day where banks would offer credit, people would be used to having bank accounts, they would know how to deal with the bank, and they would be comfortable not just dealing with the cash economy. This was probably our most successful program. If affected thousands of people, and again I am saying “we” a lot, but not just the PRT, but I also mean our military colleagues and the Iraqis that we worked with through the small business development center. They were really, really good partners for us.

Q. Do you think the situation on the ground in Diyala is now closer to not acquiring a U.S. PRT presence?

A. Yes, well, we often used to wonder if they still need us. I think there were political reasons for us to be there, to continue to wave the American flag. During the time I was there, we took on more of a traditional diplomatic role, and this was something that all the PRTs did in response to the embassy. We began doing much more in the way of public diplomacy, such as claiming credit or advertising what we had done, getting the word out about our good works and doing political and economic reporting. We tried to do some, not cultural events, but certainly press events for whenever we did anything. I often wondered, as we all did on the PRT “is our presence here keeping the Iraqis from getting down to their own business?” or “are we a crutch for them to turn to because we have resources they can more easily get a hold of than they can in their own government?” There were a couple of areas where I feel we were quite helpful. I think the PRT’s presence was required in the area of support for the return of internally displaced people. Because of al-Qaeda in Iraq, several hundred thousand people were displaced from
Diyala province. After Baghdad it had more departures than any other place in Iraq. We worked very closely with the embassy, which was tied into the national level government, and we also worked with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to suggest projects, help them monitor projects, to push the provincial and local government to advocate for their own needs. So I am not sure if that would have happened if we had not been there. Certainly, we were huge enabler for the embassy and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, who would not have been able to get around the province without us.

Q. What advice did you give to your replacement?

A. My replacement and I had a week overlap. I mentioned that we had been very careful with our supporting brigade to use our money for projects that were really necessary, not to just be a feather in someone’s cap, or to spend money because the military had it available, or whatever. When that brigade left, the brigade that came in had two provinces it was responsible for. So it had fewer people to actually manage projects. What I told him was, “Do not be drawn into ginning up new projects. What you need to do is complete the ones that are already in process.” Because with our old brigade we had taken our time in evaluating what we had on the table and in putting forward projects, and there were a number of projects that were handed over to the new brigade. A new military unit coming, they always want to make their mark. I think there was this tendency, this thinking, but once they were on the ground after a month or two, then they saw that we really do have our hands full with managing the ongoing projects. But again, my advice to him was, “Keep a lid on both the military and on PRT members from putting forward new projects because Diyala PRT is going away, and this brigade is also going to be drawn down excessively, and you do not want to leave unfinished projects. Everything takes much longer than you think it will in Iraq. So if you think it will be a quick 90-day project, double it. Don’t let your availability of funds drive your agenda. Only do what you need to do.” That was my primary advice to him.

Q. Getting to the question of planning – what was your overall strategy for accomplishing the mission and how did you relate to the higher levels of the planning process in trying to do that?

A. We did have a work plan and the format for that changed about halfway through my time there. The work plan was not very helpful at all, because people kept putting things into it, and nothing ever came out, so it became like a wish list. It really had very little meaning. So, what we did was driven by a request from OPA (Office of Provincial Affairs). It took me a long time to figure out what everyone on the PRT was doing and what the most important things were, because it really is like standing in front of a fire house. You have all of this stuff going on, and it’s hard to say what is more important. Often times, people on the PRT were unable to really say themselves what was important. They would give equal importance to everything that they were doing. After I had been there – I got there in the beginning of October – by mid-November we actually sat down, and again this was driven by a tasking from OPA, we determined what our top priorities were in each of our lines of action over the next eighteen months. We did this as a group, so it was not just one unit of the PRT saying, “We are going to do this.” Every unit contributed to it in a way.

Q. The military members of the PRT as well?
A. Yes. Well, it is the economic and agricultural section, the governance section. What I looked for was ways to cross-fertilize each one of those priorities so that governance was not doing something without support from the infrastructure unit. How do we link the econ and agricultural people to that? What about the rule of law? So they became kind of mutually supporting in a way, and that also led to a re-organization of the PRT in February, I guess, where we had a separate infrastructure unit, governance unit, so I joined those two units together and made them one, which made a lot of sense because the infrastructure is all governance; it is all determined by governing authorities anyway. So that really helped. It also really helped keep us clear on what the direction we were going in and needed to be in – and it helped us prioritize in each of those lines of action, what are our top three priorities, which in turn drove the work plan. “Let’s make an effort to clean out this work plan. If you are not doing anything with this, or if it does not meet our objectives, get rid of it. Don’t keep it on because it is a nice thing to do someday when you have time.” Part of that also involved trying to determine what we logically could do, what we realistically could achieve. There were a couple of people on the PRT who often had difficulty defining the difference between input and output.” The fact that they are meeting every week is not really an act. It is still an input. The effect of that meeting is – we want a clear budget process, but do not determine the outcome by the amount of effort you put into it. The fact that you are having five meetings a week is not a measure of your success. Claim credit for whatever success you have by all means, but do not beat yourself up if something is not working out the way you wanted it to, because you are not the primary actor on this. To sum up, identify what you can reasonably work on, and how you get there. Then make sure you are really clear about how you are measuring the outcome. You need to be prepared to walk away from something that is not working.”

Q. It sounds like you were pretty much given overall guidance from the embassy and OPA, then set your own priorities and got buy-in from OPA and the people above you. Is that true?

A. Yes. Definitely. During the time that I was there, OPA became much more involved. The first time we sent in our work plan, these were done on a quarterly basis. Nobody said a word. Then there was a change in the format and when we sent in the revised version, OPA came back after vetting the document with various sections in the embassy with suggestions or feedback, so, the embassy became much more involved. They did not ever say, “No, you cannot do this,” but they became much more involved in saying, “OK, you have identified this as something you are going to do, but you are not defining how you are actually going to get to that.” They did not want to have just a paper document; they really wanted to measure what they were doing and what we were doing, too.

Q. At the same time they did not say, “We want you to do this and take this as your priority” rather than something else you might have wanted to do?

A. No. We were free to set our priorities because we were the ones on the ground, and we knew the situations. So there was never any problem from the embassy on that end at all.

Q. To what extent did the military members of the PRT or the military people in the brigade, play into your planning process, procedurally and in terms of the substance of what you were doing?
doing?

A. The military members who were directly assigned to the PRT, who were part of the PRT, we used them as a support element to handle our management and administrative work, which was without end in terms of leave requests, how do you get people from here to there. The brigade commander had assigned an entire battalion to support us, so we incorporated officers from their battalion into each of our lines of action. Now, these officers were generally lieutenants or captains, and some were quite young. So, we were the ones actually drawing up the plans. We vetted everything that we did, we ran it by them, and they were OK with it. They did not ever say, “You know, this is crazy.” But again, that was because there was really good communication between the two of us, and the brigade colonel was really good about saying, “PRT is in the lead” on civil capacity development. So they really did look to us. With that said, they were extraordinarily helpful in helping us plan out steps, such as “how do you get to your goal?” So we cleared everything with them and we never had a problem with them. They were terrific.

Q. The projects that they supported were ones that you knew about and had some input into?

A. Yes. The majority of the projects were actually carried out in the field, at the outlying bases and we had a PRT member station at each one of those bases. That battalion that supported us, they actually had people out there too. So they became the project managers. We were in each other’s hair constantly, so coordination was not a problem. The PRT members always made sure that the land-owning battalion commander bought into the projects. The battalion commander always made sure that the PRT was fully on board too, and in fact, there were cases where a PRT person out in the field would say, “This is not working, let’s drop it, we need to drop this,” so the battalion commander took the advice. We had a very good relationship with that brigade.

Q. How many of these outlying bases did you have?

A. The local governing units were called Kadaas; they are kind of like counties. There was basically a base in each of the Kadaas. So there were five, including Ba’Qubah, where we were, the capital city. Ba’Qubah Kadaa was supported from our base, but we had one person who did nothing but work in that. One of the other big things that I did in terms of strategic direction was making sure that our people stationed out on these outlying bases were fully brought into the big PRT. When I arrived, it seemed to me that they were kind of off doing their own thing, and that people in the economic unit did not necessarily consult with the Kadaa guy out in al Miqdadiyah, which I insisted on. I actually brought the Kadaa unit. When I made this reorganization change in January, when I brought together infrastructure and governance, it also meant bringing in the Kadaa people into that governance unit too – they were all tied in together. So we had people out in each of those bases. Over the year, all of those bases except one were closed down. So as they closed down, people were brought back to our main base.

Q. How did the international organizations like UNHCR or NGOs like Red Crescent figure into the planning process; was that more of a project-by-project consultation?

A. It was more of a project-by-project consultation. The two organizations that we had the
closest contact with were the local Red Crescent, which I mentioned before, and with UNHCR. UNHCR had a local person, an Iraqi, working in our province, but 99.9% of our dealings with UNHCR were back in Baghdad either through the embassy or directly with them. So when they wanted to come up, we supported them. We made appointments for them, we took them out, and we made suggestions as to where they should go. With the Red Crescent, that was an Iraqi organization. We dealt with them and they were quite large. The director of the organization was terrific and had wonderful contacts. He was really quite capable at mobilizing resources, so we worked with him not only on the market revitalization program, but also on youth programs. For example, USAID had money for summer youth camps. So we went to the Red Crescent and said, “Is this something you could organize? These are what our conditions are.” He came up with a plan and it was funded, and the implementing part for USAID said that the one that was organized in Diyala was the best by far throughout the country in terms of the richness and variety in the program. He was able to have camps at each of these counties and province. He was quite capable, so we also looked to him for advice on dealing with local officials, keeping in mind that we needed to have our contacts. A lot of the other NGOs that were there, we did not have much contact with them. There were a number of Iraqi organizations that we tried to work with, however, they were really small, so the projects we did with them were really small. We did not really have the resources to be able to support them any great degree. There were some other larger ones there that we did some projects with, but we never really had the people to be able to work with NGOs on a consistent basis.

Q. To what extent did the training you received before you went to Iraq prepare you for the work you would be doing when you got there?

A. Not very much. I had three weeks. One was the course offered by diplomatic security that was the driving and medical – which was fascinating – but I never drove anything other than my car on the base to get to the cafeteria. Imagine having to drive something with five thousand military people on our base – being in a situation where we would have to drive an armored vehicle was inconceivable. There was a week of Iraq familiarization, but I have served in the Middle East before. I have had many tours in the Middle East, so it was a good refresher, but I am not sure if it really added to anything to what I knew. Then there was the PRT course. The organizers, the FSI (Foreign Service Institute), bless their hearts – you are basically looking to the lowest common denominator, the people who know nothing about government work. So I felt as a team leader that it really wasn’t suited to my needs.

A lot of what I did was management and personnel work. I was not really prepared for the complexity of the different regulations governing the different employment categories of people I had on my PRT. Even just counseling took up an enormous amount of time. We had almost no training on the famous Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) that served funds. We did have some training on the Quick Reaction Funds (QRF), which were available through the funds in the embassy. But again, in reality, most of our programs were funded by CERP, and I know almost nothing about that. I did not feel that the training was all that useful for team leaders. Certainly anyone who has been in the Foreign Service for any length of time already knows what the military structure is, what an embassy looks like. I did not find it all that useful. To be honest, to be fair, I felt that they should have taken the team leaders and deputies and given them a specialized training. And for the deputy team leader, who was a military officer and
his military support element, a lot of what they were called to do was management and admin-
work with the embassy, and they had absolutely no training on State Department or embassy
procedures. A lot of time was spent just trying to gather information.

**Q. Looking at operations, what worked well and what were major impediments in accomplishing
your mission when it came to day to day operations?**

A. Personnel was a huge issue, especially in terms of subject matter experts. The 3161s (subject
matter experts) – while I was there and I think there had been a history of 3161s – for some
reason or another had not worked out. Instead of being dismissed, they were just shunted around
or sent out to outlying posts, or given nothing to do, and new people were brought on. So about
the time that I arrived, and I think the team leaders that came in the same year as I did all got the
message – that if you have a problem, nip it in the bud. Don’t treat it like a Foreign Service
Officer and counsel the heck out of it. If it is a real problem, just try to get rid of the person. So a
lot of people who were not performing did leave. However, trying to get replacements for them
became increasingly painful and burdensome. To be fair I think there had been this feeling that
people were not describing what the subject matter experts were supposed to do or were not
measuring what their output actually was. Therefore, the embassy (Deputy Chief of Mission)
began insisting on justifications for new requests or new hires, or for extensions. The problem
was that they kept changing the format for it. There was one period from November until
February or March where we just kept submitting requests for extensions or new positions.
However, we kept getting things that asked for more information. To be absolutely fair, I think
that this was a learning process for the people in the embassy, too. I think that the program was
under a bit of fire. “Are we spending all this money and what is the affect of this in the end?” So
I understand the need to make sure the people are going to be properly employed, but again, it
was very painful. In the meantime we had people leaving. The hiring process was so bureaucratic
that if someone left, it would be eight months before you could get a replacement.

**Q. You are mainly talking about the 3161s, not the FSOs?**

A. Not the FSOs. We were fine on the FSO side. We had someone from the Department of
Justice and the Department of Agriculture. That was not a problem with them either. There was a
good turnaround; it was the subject matter experts. I am not sure what exactly the vetting process
for the 3161 process was. Some of them were there because they were committed to the mission,
but I think others were there because they wanted to earn a lot of money. There were a number of
people who were not really suited to be in that kind of environment. I am not talking about the
danger, but if you have never worked overseas before…

**Q. Was it that they lacked the skill sets in the subject matter that they were supposed to be
experts in? Or was it the matter of being able to function effectively in a foreign environment?**

A. Most of them had the subject matter expertise. They knew what they were doing. But making
a city or a county work in the United States is one thing. They had the technical expertise, but
what they did not have was an understanding of development. Now we used our USAID rep to
bring that flavor to our programs, but he is just one person. He has also got USAID programs to
oversee. A lot really depends on the personality of the USAID rep. They [the 3161s] were
subject matter experts – they knew what they were doing in the United States, but operating in difficult environments such as Iraq…

Q. How about cultural sensitivity issues among the people that you worked with at the PRT – military, civilians, FSOs, and 3161s?

A. There was only one problem with one 3161 that I had. He was one of these people who is “it’s black or white, my way or the highway, got to do it my way.” But that was the only person. In fact, after that person arrived, two of the other people on the PRT would come to me and say, “We can’t let him talk to Iraqis,” so I was like, “All right, let’s get rid of him, but let’s just work with him for a couple of weeks.” So, I checked back with them and asked how he was doing. They said they wanted to keep him, because he had skills. There were a number of projects left over from the previous years that had fallen apart for one reason or another and they felt that he was the kind of person who could work very well on his own and do all kinds of spreadsheets and calculations. He did very well in getting a number of projects back on track, but then when we began losing people and we were not able to obtain replacements, he actually had to go out and talk to Iraqis. This became a huge problem. There were also problems with other members on the PRT.

Q. How about the processes and structures in place to help you achieve your goals, for example your security situation, the logistics, communications, that sort of thing?

A. We were pretty much dependent on the military for everything. We had really robust movement support from the initial brigade that we worked with. We were able to make, from the main PRT, four and in some cases five movements a day. This is five days a week and each of the PRT members that was out in the Kadaas also had a dedicated movement team. So, we did not have a problem with movements. Naturally, security being what it was, the military took a lot of care to make sure that we were not exposing ourselves to danger. You just don’t wake up and decide, “I want to go down here.” We basically had to submit our movement request to our battalion usually a week in advance. They would do all of the crunching of the information and pulling reports from the other units to make sure it was safe. So that was not a problem. Our classified communications were provided by the military. That went generally well. A number of people wanted the classified systems that were provided by CENTCOM (Central Command), they call them strategic accounts. There were a number of problems with that. I generally, and many of the other people on the PRT, used the tactical systems that were provided through the brigades, which also gave you access to all of the brigades’ reporting projects and other things that they tracked. So that was not a problem. They provided our telephone service and it generally worked – the land lines, although we all used cell phones for the most part. For the unclassified communications, the State Department provided our computers and had a contractor there to oversee our communications needs, but we basically used our commercial accounts. To be honest, I very quickly fell into the military habit of using the classified system for almost everything. That is the way they communicate, so…

Q. How about cell phone communication?

A. I was given a cell phone and I never used it. The coverage on the base was terrible, so I very
rarely used my cell phone. I had one available, but to be honest, if I needed to speak to someone or needed to make an appointment, I usually went through a BBA (bilingual bicultural advisor) or the translator to make the appointments.

Q. How about the other members of the team? Did they have cell phones? Were they able to reach the Iraqi contacts all right?

A. Yeah. But most of the Iraqi contacts did not speak English. So, you basically went through the translator anyway.

Q. And they would use cell phones?

A. Yeah. You would see people out in the PRT area on the base looking for that sweet spot where there was actually signal that came through. The embassy also provided us blackberries, but again, it was only to access our State Department email account and I never used it. The bandwidth was not sufficient for us to access the State Department systems, unless you had a lot of time to sit around and wait for stuff to download. I used it very rarely.

Q. Were there any downsides or areas of great frustration, when it came to housing, logistics, and communications, anything in that area? Sounds like things went pretty smoothly.

A. Things went pretty well. It got really hot during the summer and the air conditioner would break down, so that became an issue. The contract, the maintenance and operation contracts were provided by a private company. Over the years, it just became this very weird situation, where the company provided the O&M (operations and maintenance) for some housing units, office space and some equipment, but not for others. For those who were not covered, they had to go to a brigade. They had one person, who was an electrician, who handled it all. It was not just us, it was also the base. It was the brigade, too – they were in the same situation. Our military support unit really worked very hard on regularizing that and bringing everything under that private contract. If it is 120 degrees out and your air conditioning breaks down, it does not help to say, “We will be there in three days.” We are basically living in tin boxes, so it easily reaches 106 degrees without an air conditioner. The same thing with the plumbing. They were kind of minor annoyances.

Q. How concerned were people at the PRT, and you yourself, about physical security?

A. It was something we thought about all the time. We went out in armored vehicles; we went with helmets and body armor. Until April (2010), I think that security was actually fairly good during that time. Beginning of April there were a number of attacks against U.S. forces. I don’t think that the PRT was separately targeted. We were just with them all the time. There was one incident in April, where one of our convoys was attacked. A soldier and a translator for the army were killed- it was a PRT movement. Three other soldiers were wounded. This was really a huge shock. Then, at the memorial service for the soldier, who had been killed, one of our other units was coming down for the memorial service and then they were hit. Luckily, there were no injuries. And then in June of 2010, in the three days, there were three successive attacks on the U.S forces. None of them involved the PRT. The last attack, there were a number of casualties.
The embassy, OPA, called me up and said, “We were looking at all of these attacks there, and the Regional Security Officer (RSO) wants you to consider not making movements for the foreseeable future.” The brigade commander, the battalion commander and I had a conversation and we basically came to this agreement that we did not want to completely shut down movements. So we basically worked out a procedure, whereby we would clear off and movements would only be made if we deemed them necessary. We came up with criteria to use, depending on what threat information came out, and we would make changes to it. I presented that to the embassy and they were acceptable with that. With that said, for the next couple of weeks there were a couple of planned movements where we did cancel the movements for security reasons. Sometimes it was because the weather was not good and you would not be able to get a helicopter in. I also made sure that the PRT members, for that initial week especially, understood that they were not to feel that they were forced to go out on movements. If they felt safer conducting their meetings on the base, and if their contacts were willing to come in, that was perfectly fine with me. But that involved me basically signing off on every movement and to work with the battalion to make sure I understood what the specific risks were and what mitigation steps were taken. So that was a problem.

Security was something that was always on our minds, and certainly at other PRTs in other places around Iraq there were incidents, where people were fired on or their movement team was fired on. In a neighboring province, a member of the movement team was killed by a sniper when getting out of a vehicle. So it was something we took very seriously. With that said, we were able to continue our business. I think one reason why we were able to enjoy success was because of the security situation. Despite the fact that it was not good by any means and I would not feel comfortable going out in a non-armed vehicle, we were able to be out and about and to do business.

Q. Are there any other comments you would like to share about your experience and PRTs?

A. No, I enjoyed it. It certainly was a highlight of my career in the Foreign Service. I was extremely fortunate to have a very supportive brigade. The military division for the northern area was also wonderful. I cannot say enough good things about the commanding general and the deputy commanding general that I dealt with and their staff – very supportive. Again, with the PRT we had really competent people, despite what I said earlier - we had a mixture of people. By-and-large, I didn’t get things done and they did. They were the ones who came up with ideas and actually did a lot of the work with the Iraqis. So this was a positive experience and I am really glad I went when I did.