The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

STEPHEN KONTOS

Interviewed by: Dan Whitman
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INTERVIEW

Early Life

Q: So, we're now recording. This is Dan Whitman talking to Steve Kontos. We are in separate cities, but we are both sharing the day of July 17, 2020. We have not met, but I see that we have a lot of things in common. Steve, your bio shows very clearly that you've done a bifurcated career in the best sense. You've been involved in military and State Department endeavors, and I think that your stories are going to show us how they can work together rather than how they have, in the past, at times worked parallel to each other but not exactly together.

So, what we try to do, usually, is we start as early as you're willing to do so. May I ask how life began for you: your place of birth, your schooling, the type of family that you came from? May I ask that?

KONTOS: Sure. It's relevant to my later career. I was born in Washington, DC. My father worked for what was then the International Cooperation Agency. It later became USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. Early on, not long after I was born, my father continued his overseas career, and we were assigned several places overseas where I went to school.

We lived in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, for about two and a half years, from 1958 to late 1960. Then, we were in Nigeria for three years, '61 to '64. After that, we returned to Washington, where my father continued working for USAID. We then moved to Pakistan, where we stayed for two years. At that point, my parents decided I should go to a boarding school in the U.S., so I ended up going to Phillips Academy, located in Andover, Massachusetts. After graduating from Andover in 1972, I went to the University of Chicago.

Q: Okay. Many would say that Phillips may be the best secondary school in the United States. Let's just acknowledge that it's way up there in its renown.

KONTOS: Except it didn't become co-ed until after I left, unfortunately. We did have a girls' school a few hundred yards down the road, so not all was lost.

Q: Okay. Now, the unflattering official term for what you were is an "embassy brat." I'm sure you're a little bit tired of that title, but can you tell us, if you can remember— As a child, you were four when your parents took you to Ceylon. What do you think was the result of this lifestyle in you? Some people are lifted up by it, and some are annoyed, and others really turn away from it. Where did you fit into that?

KONTOS: I was a little bit of both. For a small child, it's unnerving—maybe traumatic—to be uprooted, particularly after you have made friends and gotten familiar with your surroundings. So, I'd say that in Ceylon and Nigeria, those were hard moves. But moving around got to be routine. I didn't know anything else. At some point, it became an expectation. I didn't want to be in the same place for too long, which you could say had a direct link to what I ended up doing as a career.

Q: That's very interesting. Some people end up going to one extreme or the other on the graph. Not many are right in the middle, as you seem to be. It seems as if this lifestyle made it more conceivable that you would go into the things that you did later in Montenegro, Germany, and so on.

KONTOS: Perhaps going to college in Chicago tipped the balance. I was only too happy to get as far away as I could from Chicago after having gone to college and graduate school there, as well as working in between. So, when I had opportunities to go overseas, which I did in the private sector, I seized on the opportunity. It was a welcome transition.

Q: Yeah. So, Chicago— You were a little bit stir crazy or whatever in Chicago. Was this because of Chicago, or because of your own inner need and expectation to be moving all the time?

KONTOS: Both. I think being in Chicago made me understand that I wanted to get moving, and I wanted to be overseas. I guess it's relevant that at Chicago, I ended up, like everybody else in college, casting around, looking for what to major in and focus on. After witnessing the mid-1970s oil embargo and other turmoil in the Middle East, I thought, heck, why do the standard liberal arts thing when I can try to learn Arabic and specialize in the Middle East? Coincidentally, my father at that time had been detailed to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency [UNRWA] as the deputy commissioner general, resident in Lebanon. I traveled to Lebanon a few times in the 1970s, which also whetted my appetite to do more in the Middle East.

Q: So, your father was based in Lebanon and that region. Were you able to visit during that period?

KONTOS: To visit Lebanon? Yes, several times in the 1970s. I think the last visit I made was in 1974, just a year before the civil war started in earnest.

Q: Right. So, you were learning Arabic and visiting Lebanon. So you had the bug, we could say, the Middle East bug.

KONTOS: Yeah, I'd say that's right.

Sudan—Private Sector Work

Q: Now, you said a minute ago that things started in the private sector. Is that right?

KONTOS: Yes. After graduate school, I worked at a law firm in Chicago as a paralegal, and as I said earlier, I wanted to get the heck out of there. I was making good money and it wasn't a bad job. But I ended up going to the Sudan on a short-term contract for a U.S. multinational corporation called TENNECO, which no longer exists. TENNECO first hired me on a six-month contract to do a feasibility study in 1982. So, I went to the Sudan, did my research and report, after which they asked me to stay on and elaborate on the study, as well as other tasks. As my contract kept getting renewed, I ended up staying longer. The reason why they did that— I don't want to digress, but it's a bizarre story.

TENNECO had started a pilot farm, the Tenneco Sahara Agricultural Venture, in the far northern part of Sudan, known historically as Nubia. After building the farm infrastructure—irrigation canals, workshops, electricity generators, et cetera—and starting to grow crops, TENNECO's management had to decide what to do with the whole project. They figured I had a little bit of Arabic, wouldn't cost much, and could help them determine if there was any possibility of turning this experiment into a going commercial enterprise. It was never really intended to be commercially viable, or at least didn't start that way; but once they had established the farm, they wanted to make a go of it.

Q: What was TENNECO's line of business? Were they in agriculture, mainly, or in various development fields?

KONTOS: It was agriculture and many other things. As a diversified multinational, the corporation had numerous subsidiary companies. Some of them still exist. For example, the company acquired International Harvester, which became Case International, manufacturing farm tractors and construction equipment. TENNECO's parent company was the Tennessee Gas Pipeline Company and had significant oil and gas interests, with exploration and production facilities in various parts of the world. The food and agri-business subsidiaries owned thousands of acres of farmland in California, and their expertise in irrigated commercial farming was applied to the Sudan project. That's a story in and of itself, but I'm not sure you'll want to digress into that.

Q: I would love to. Were you tempted by the private sector? Did you feel that this might be your future?

KONTOS: I don't know if I thought that far ahead, but yes. Keep in mind that TENNECO hired me as a short-termer. I was not a corporate man; I was on contract. I was supposed to work only overseas, which was fine by me. Eventually, the whole TENNECO venture in Sudan folded, after I had spent four years there. Once I was done with TENNECO, I did consulting work for a couple of other U.S. agri-business companies working internationally. I was trading on my TENNECO experience, but still focused on the Middle East.

Q: So, six months became four years?

KONTOS: Yes. That was okay with me. There were a lot of factors involved in that. TENNECO needed somebody who was flexible and could do the work. But more importantly, I met my future wife there. She was also working in the Sudan on a contract with USIA [U.S. Information Agency]. Jan Miller—you may have met her after she joined the Foreign Service in 1987. She'll do her own oral history, so you should be able to hear the other side of the story.

Q: So, you were based in Khartoum?

KONTOS: Yes, though I traveled frequently to the farm project in northern Sudan and occasionally to Egypt in connection with the marketing studies. By 1984, TENNECO's management decided to jettison the pilot farm and get out of the Sudan. Things were getting worse in the country. The civil war had started again. The Jaafar Nimeiri regime was going to hell in a handbasket. Nimeiri introduced strict Sharia law, intensified political repression, and decimated what little economic activity there was. The whole country appeared headed for collapse, so TENNECO decided to pull the plug. But they still wanted the pilot farm to survive as a viable commercial enterprise. So, my job was to try to get somebody to buy it and take it over, but that took a long time.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Were you able to do it?

KONTOS: In a manner of speaking, yes. That's another story. I did finally finish up with TENNECO in 1986, after which, as I said, took on some other short-term consulting jobs, which took me to other parts of the Middle East.

Q: You were in Sudan for four years, so I have to ask about your impressions. I'm sure you're following the water issue now between Ethiopia and Egypt with Sudan in the middle. Water is a crucial commodity, and becoming harder and harder to come by, actually, in the Horn and in Northeastern Africa. What is your recollection? You had neighbors and colleagues. You were using your Arabic, I would guess. How do you remember Sudanese society, apart from politics, apart from the private sector? What was life like in Khartoum and your various travels?

KONTOS: Khartoum was a difficult place at that time, just because it lacked a lot of basic infrastructure, essential commodities, and so on. One of my most vivid memories of

life in Khartoum was queuing up at night to get three or four gallons of gasoline the next day for my weekly ration. There were terrible shortages, because the Sudan was dependent on so many imports but lacked the hard currency to pay for them. Luckily, I had a lifeline through Jan, who had access to the U.S. embassy commissary via her job with USIS [United States Information Service]. So, that made life easier. But getting around the country was very difficult. I used to travel back and forth from Khartoum to the north to visit the farm project. Flights were intermittent. They would often get cancelled. I might be stranded for a week or two at a time in one place or other and unable to get out, particularly in the north. There was very little infrastructure; there were no paved roads. A few times, I had no option but to take local buses from the north to Khartoum—a fourteen-hour drive over rough desert tracks.

So, it was a little bit like a private sector Peace Corps, especially in the north. We lived on a compound with mud brick houses and lived off the local economy, eating local food. I hung out with local people and spoke only Arabic. I travelled in connection with my work up and down the Nile River valley and the surrounding area, which was interesting in many ways. I don't know what it's like now; it probably hasn't changed much. It was very primitive. There were no roads, no electricity except small generators, no telephones. People were dependent on the Nile or shallow, hand-drawn wells for water. Farming was done largely by hand, with the help of animals and simple machinery. The TENNECO farm was an outlier—the only one in the entire region that was fully mechanized, with sophisticated irrigation and farming techniques.

Q: Were friends and family saying to you, How could you be stir-crazy in Chicago but not in northern Sudan, where there's no infrastructure? Did people say that sort of thing to you?

KONTOS: Well, that's just it. It was much more interesting. This was all new. You asked about the society and the people. The Sudanese, I found, were the most pleasant, hospitable, easy-going people that I think I've ever encountered.

Q: Many have said that, and in my three days in Khartoum, I found the same. It's funny. They have such bad press with the civil war and what is now South Sudan and Darfur. There are people who've never been there who find that it appears to be a hostile and gloomy sort of place, and yet people are really so forthcoming. You're not the only one who's had that feeling, of people who've lived there. Interesting.

KONTOS: Well, I think they're very hospitable to foreigners, certainly where we were working in the north. They appreciated what we were doing, because most of the people around the farm project saw it as a benefit to them. They thought that one day, the TENNECO project would lead to more development and more jobs. We did pursue some projects that involved the local farmers, though with mixed results. I wrote an analysis of one of these for the *Middle East Journal*, entitled "Farmers and the Failure of Agribusiness in Sudan," published in 1990, later reprinted as a book, *Sudan: State and Society in Crisis*, edited by John Voll.

There was a lot of interest and positive feeling at the time, so it was easy to live there. Again, it was such an interesting environment where I really had to speak Arabic and learn the local culture. So, it was good preparation for what came later, and a great first overseas experience, not least because that's where I met my wife.

Pakistan and Life Married to Another Foreign Service Officer

Q: Right. So, these were your early days. This was your discovery of living and working overseas. Well, you lived in Ceylon, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria and Pakistan. But this was your first time really making a go of it on your own. It must have been thrilling. It sounds thrilling. And meeting your wife— There must be a certain nostalgia for that period, a period of discovery. Did you feel you had a plan for life, or did things just sort of happen in succession? Did you go from one possibility and offer to the next, or did you see a master plan in what you were doing?

KONTOS: There was no plan. I never knew how to plan until after I got married.

Q: Okay. That is the case with most Foreign Service officers.

KONTOS: After that, I became very meticulous about planning, but not before.

Q: Well, we do need to hear about that, maybe along the way. Or, if you have general comments— How did marriage change your approach to exploring the world? Did it limit or increase the possibilities? It added another factor, obviously. I imagine you wanted the experience to be positive for Jan as well as yourself, so maybe your options were a little bit different. Is that fair to say?

KONTOS: I'm glad you asked that question. That's directly relevant to my Foreign Service career. It did change things, of course in a positive way, but also in a very concrete way. I mentioned that Jan was on contract to USIS in the Sudan, where she was the director of the English Language Program. USIS then had a whole English teaching institute in Khartoum. From there, it was a fairly easy step for her to be hired by USIA as a regional English language officer. But I'm not going to steal her thunder; we'll leave that for her own oral history. She joined USIA as a Foreign Service specialist [FSS] in 1987. So, the die was cast.

At that point, I think I had just taken or was lined up to take the Foreign Service exam. I simply let that process take its course. I didn't seriously think about the Foreign Service until after my wife joined, and then luckily, I completed the whole sequence of steps to qualify and be selected. Within two years, in February 1989, I was sworn in as a Foreign Service officer.

Q: A most interesting year for so many different reasons. In fact, when Jan became not a contractor but an employee in 1987, that kind of lit the fuse under you, I guess, to take the exam. Is this pretty much what decided you in favor of giving it a try?

KONTOS: Yes, pretty much. Let's say the fuse was lit, not necessarily by me, but yes. I was signed up for the exam and having taken it and gone through the written test, at that point, I knew that she was joining USIA. So, I thought, okay, I should see this through. Luckily, I was able to pass all the hurdles and eventually join the Foreign Service.

Q: That's a happy story. Does this mean she had to go to DC in 1987 for training?

KONTOS: Yes. We were in DC at the time, and then, luckily for us, she was assigned to DC at first. I was working intermittently and traveling from DC overseas. Then, in 1988, she was assigned to Pakistan.

Q: Oh, Pakistan came later. Wait, were you in Pakistan as a child?

KONTOS: Yes, I was. So, she was in Pakistan in 1988. Then, after I joined as a junior Foreign Service officer, I bid on Pakistan—with no competition, of course, because no one wanted to go there—and was sent to Lahore for my first assignment.

Q: Okay. Was she in Islamabad or Lahore?

KONTOS: She was in Islamabad.

Q: So, you weren't exactly together, but pretty close, I guess.

KONTOS: Pretty close. Then, in 1990, the one consular officer in Islamabad shipped out, and they had a vacancy. The DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] there saw fit to move me into that position. So, I moved to Islamabad for another year.

Q: Fantastic. So, the system had some wisdom and some empathy in making things work out for you. It sounds like it was a win-win, both for you and for the embassy.

KONTOS: Yeah. They got an Urdu-speaker. I had tested and had taken Urdu at FSI [Foreign Service Institute] for my original assignment. It helped that the DCM was herself half of a tandem couple. Certainly, the move improved our morale.

Q: Oh, yes. There are lots of stories of the system doing the opposite, at that time, and kind of ramrodding, but this is a very good, happy story. So, I take it that you were in flux between '87 and '89. You were on the road, trying to catch up with each other. It must have been a little bit uprooting, but then by '89, there you were, together in Islamabad.

KONTOS: Yes. Now, to go back to your original question as to how being married affected our lives, you've probably heard other FSOs [Foreign Service officers] talk

about the whole tandem FSO conundrum and getting assignments in the same location. That really shaped a lot of what we did afterwards. It was all about trying to plan ahead and figure out how to get assigned to the same place at the same time.

Q: Right. USIA was pretty good— Wait, were you USIA or State?

KONTOS: I was State. Jan was USIA. I entered the Foreign Service in the consular cone, although, as you see from my CV [curriculum vitae], I did only two consular assignments during my entire career.

Q: Right, and that's not unusual, from what I've seen.

KONTOS: So I hear.

Q: Of course, in 1999, all of this changed, but when USIA was separate from State, it might have been easier to get tandem assignments, because there was no question of one supervising the other. There were no ethics issues. Do you think that made it easier to get tandems where you needed them?

KONTOS: Not really. But it's true that, after 1999, we did have a single personnel system. So, if we were bidding on NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] assignments, we had one set of HR [Human Resources] people who handled both assignments. In any case, I don't think USIA was around long enough for us to make any judgment as to whether it was easier or harder.

Q: Right. So, Jan got ten years of USIA, I guess, which is a good amount of time. A general question: For the following assignments, were you always able to get a tandem when you wanted one?

KONTOS: No. Rarely. Unless we went to Washington.

Q: Oh, rarely? This is definitely interesting, because many of the readers of this transcript will be people considering the Foreign Service who really want to know, how does it work? So, when you were unable to get a tandem assignment, how did life proceed?

KONTOS: Well, often we would go with the default option, which was Washington, DC. We always had a backup plan. Of course, we preferred to be assigned overseas, and early on, we opted for assignments that were not at the same post but perhaps nearby. For example, my wife ended up in Amman, while I was in Jerusalem. But traveling between the two had its own complications. Then we had a similar assignment to nearby posts in the Balkans. She was in Sarajevo, and I was in Montenegro, the capital city Podgorica. But for actual tandem assignments overseas, we only did one, which was in Sarajevo. It helped that the DCM in Islamabad was able to transfer me from Lahore to Islamabad for

one year, and I was with Jan in Tunis for about a year while I went through the FSI advanced Arabic language program, and she was starting a three-year tour there.

Q: Yes. I see in your bio that you were DCM. That happened pretty quickly, eh? I see that that's kind of at the beginning of what— No, I take it back. From '89 to '07, I see in bold those various different assignments.

KONTOS: That's about right. It was a little more than halfway through my career.

Q: From Amman to Jerusalem, they're geographically very close, but crossing the border at that time was still complicated, wasn't it?

KONTOS: Yes, very. It depended on which side you were coming from. I can say without question the difficulties were imposed on the Israeli side. The Jordanian side was easy to traverse, especially for diplomats. It was easier since I was accredited in Israel, for me to come and go that way and back, rather than for Jan to come to Jerusalem. She needed special permits to cross the bridge over the Jordan River, an entry visa, and so on.

It was a little easier for me. All I had to do was call ahead to the Israeli border station, but there was still a lot of rigmarole at the bridge, the Allenby Bridge. I don't know what they call it now, but Allenby Bridge is the name most people know. So, I had a lot of practice navigating all of that, though I was never able to crack the code on the Israeli side. That meant spending an hour or more each time dealing with the Israeli bureaucracy, especially when coming in from Jordan. When I was leaving from the Israeli side, it was a lot easier. They generally waved me through, which was fine.

Q: Right. I don't know if there was a code. I think it was just heightened vigilance at all times, I guess. So, how many times were you able to be together? Was this a two-year assignment in Jerusalem?

KONTOS: It was a three-year assignment.

Q: Were you able to regularly get together?

KONTOS: Yes, most of the time.

Q: Okay. That's great.

KONTOS: But there were complications. For example, our weekends were different.

Q: Of course. Friday is the day off in Muslim countries, is that right?

KONTOS: Yes. So, the weekend for Embassy Amman was Friday–Saturday, and then in Israel, Saturday is a day off, and the embassy and consulate took off Sunday. My problem was that Friday afternoon, while I was still at work in Jerusalem, the bridge would shut

down for Shabbat. The Israeli side of the border crossing would shut down early so that people could get home before sundown. That means that if you didn't cross the bridge by early afternoon you were stuck on the Israeli side until the following afternoon. So, most of the time I didn't get across until Jan's weekend was nearly over.

Q: You couldn't take off Thursday? Did that ever happen?

KONTOS: Yes, we burned up quite a bit of annual leave doing that. Thanks to my diplomatic status in Israel, there was nothing really that barred me from crossing most days, even when there were security problems. For example, in 1998, after Saddam Hussein threatened to fire Scud missiles at Israel, the Israelis curbed cross-border travel; and the embassy, of course, for security reasons would bar U.S. government employees from visiting Israel. However, I was usually able to get over to Amman, and that kept us going.

Q: I've heard many comments, and I'd be interested in your reaction. Officially, the embassy, which was in Tel Aviv, and the consulate in Jerusalem—now it's the other way around, right? I've heard comments about the American staff in each having very different points of view, based, possibly, on what their environment was. It's an oversimplification, I think, to say that Tel Aviv Americans were more pro-Israel and Jerusalem Americans were more interested in a two-state solution. Did you notice actual differences in opinions of Americans between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv?

KONTOS: Yes, I think so. It's inevitable because of your clientele. The consulate in Jerusalem was essentially the de facto mission to the West Bank and the Gaza Palestinians—particularly the West Bank. Most of our contacts were with Palestinians, whereas the official contacts were from the embassy in Tel Aviv to Israeli Foreign Ministry. So, the Tel Aviv staff, just by nature of their social circles and who they interacted with, naturally would be sympathetic to the Israeli side, although there were people in the embassy who were, I would say, uncomfortable with some of the things they saw the Israelis doing. There were experiences that we had with the Israeli security services that really soured people. But I can't get into details in this medium.

Q: I ask this as a former USIA person. Isn't it curious that many people become empathetic, sympathetic, and in favor of the individuals that they meet on an everyday basis? This is the purpose of the Fulbright-Hayes legislation—mutual understanding. Isn't it interesting that people's intellectual and political point of view sometimes comes from where they happen to be? Anyway, that's just a reflection. It says something about the value of being with other people. You get to understand them, and conversely, the people you don't see every day— It's easier to be estranged from them.

But anyway, that's a philosophical point. We can move past that. I've seen that in less tense situations, like Scandinavia. Everybody dislikes Swedes— They have these stereotypes. When you're in one of those countries, you inevitably begin to get the point

of view of the people in that country. I saw that. So, Jerusalem and Amman. You were consular at that point. Jan was RELO [regional English language officer], is that right?

KONTOS: Yes.

Q: So, the pattern of your life— Here you are, about a third or a quarter into your career. What were your expectations of what might come next? Did you have any idea? What would your wishes have been, if you could have said, boom, magic wand, we both want to be in country X? Did you have such discussions?

KONTOS: Sure. We were always scheming and plotting when assignments came up. I was very intent on getting out of consular work, so I was looking at options to curtail from Jerusalem. It was a pretty grueling job. I was the visa section chief, and we did visas for everybody—Palestinians, Israelis. We had a very busy American Citizen Services section. Sometimes that bled over into my life, particularly if I was duty officer. So, yes, my wife and I were always scheming to figure out what would come next.

So, from Jerusalem and Amman we were looking for somewhere to go. We weren't consciously trying to get out of the Middle East at first, but later, we were. Somehow, Bosnia came up on the radar. We were both able to get good assignments there, and I was not going to do consular work, so that was a natural choice. The scheduling fit for both of us, and we knew we couldn't spend our entire careers in the Middle East. We needed to get a foothold in another bureau, so it was a logical step, and Sarajevo gave us that chance.

Rebuilding Bosnia After the 1992–1995 Balkan War

Q: Now, it sounds like you were in Bosnia just before the horrible period there, is that right? You were there '90, '92, something like that?

KONTOS: No, it was roughly six years after the war ended, almost ten years after Yugoslavia broke up. The war in Bosnia lasted from 1992 to late 1995, ending officially with the signing of the Dayton Accords in November 1995. Jan and I arrived in Sarajevo in the summer of 2001. The war was still very much in evidence, though on the surface, things were coming back to life. Many parts of Sarajevo had been rebuilt, but there was still a lot of damage visible, and obviously, the war was fresh in people's minds.

Q: Yes. A sidenote is that I was hoping to be in Sarajevo myself at about that same time. We would have worked together. It didn't happen, obviously, but it seemed to me so fascinating. There are the three religions right there, the crossroads. I was never actually in the region, but we think of the Bosnians as the innocent victims. I'm sure that was not always the case. But there was something so terribly appealing, to me, about Sarajevo, and I was always very sorry I never made it there. Am I right to regret it?

KONTOS: You're right that it would have been a very interesting assignment. My wife and I liked it there, though it was also difficult in many ways. But when you mention the three religions, I start to worry. Before the war, the Bosnians used to tout their ethnic mosaic as an attraction for tourists, describing Sarajevo as the "Jerusalem of Europe." After my three years in Jerusalem, whenever I heard that, my heart would sink. Jerusalem is not the model you want for any multi-ethnic community. We can talk more about Jerusalem later, if you like. In Jerusalem, there was constant tension; none of the various communities got along with one another. I'd think to myself, Seriously, you aspire to be another Jerusalem? No thanks.

Q: In fact, were there similarities? Sarajevo's bad times, I guess, came from outsiders—from Serbs, maybe. But in terms of a community, was it indeed comparable to Jerusalem? I know two of them collaborated and were very helpful, one to the other. What was it like in 2001 and beyond?

KONTOS: Sarajevo was not as ethnically complex as Jerusalem, which had various Jewish sects, Christians, and Muslims, mostly Sunni. Sarajevo didn't have quite as much diversity, but still, the tension was there. The Bosnians fought an all-out war pitting their different communities against one another. It was only towards the end that, under international pressure, the Croatian government began to help the Bosnian Muslims, although Bosnian Croats were hostile to the Muslims and had committed some of the worst atrocities against them. Jerusalem had its own rounds of conflict in centuries past, but there was not open warfare among all of them at the same time, as in Bosnia. We spent our entire assignment in Bosnia trying to soften that tension, soften the edges, trying to create a unified state and national government. At least two of the communities opposed that approach, so it was very difficult, at least professionally. On a personal level, people were hospitable, especially in Sarajevo, and there were some in each community—whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim—who were perfectly reasonable, not the hardline nationalists portrayed in the media. But you still had both types. You had to watch out. Of course, the hardline types could be pleasant in person. Like all Bosnians, they loved to socialize, they loved to drink, and they could party and have a good time, but under that veneer, there was real hostility.

Q: So, it sounds like the problems did not only come from the Serbs. Even within the community, there were tensions that you actually saw. Now, you were Law Enforcement Affairs assistance coordinator. I'm imagining that the country team must have worked very closely to try to make Dayton work. Was that the mission, to try to make Dayton actually work? Was the country team all involved in this? Was it well coordinated? I guess I'll ask it that way.

KONTOS: Yes, in my opinion. It had to be. But it wasn't just the U.S. mission. It wasn't just our country team. You had the Office of the High Representative [OHR]. At that time, you also had SFOR [Stabilization Forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina]—NATO forces that were essentially a strike force ready to act if trouble broke out. I don't think

they used the term "peacekeepers," but they were there to keep the peace, ensure that the ethnic militias disarmed and help with reforming—and integrating—the Bosnian military.

There were numerous international organizations, too—the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe], the European Commission [EC], and the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina [UNMIBH], as well as various privately funded non-government organizations. The UN mission had an important role at the time, providing civilian police trainers assistance in resettlement of refugees and displaced families, de-mining programs, and many other functions. Bosnia had all these different international players trying to do good, and often running into one another. So, it wasn't just friction among the Bosnians. There was friction among the U.S. and other members of the international community—the Europeans, the UN, the military, and so on. There were many arguments over roles and responsibilities, the best approach to take with the Bosnians—in short, clashes over policy, personalities, turf, and often just trivial matters.

But basically, I think there was a fair degree of consensus. It wasn't just preserving the Dayton Accords. Dayton was a means to an end. The end was creating a unified state with a functioning central government. The problem in Bosnia is that you had, because of Dayton, a Bosnian-Serb entity—Republika Srpska and a combined Muslim-Catholic or Bosnian-Croat entity called the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within each of these, there were separate cantons or districts. Each of the cantons had its own politics and its own localized government. So, there was terrible fragmentation within the country, and the internationals were constantly battling this fragmentation and trying to get the Bosnians to work together. I don't think we have time now, but if we come back to the subject of Bosnia, I can describe a couple of examples of this, when we really had to break through just to get people to do simple things together as a group.

The divisions between the Serb and the Federation entities, the cantons, and the national institutions affected all segments of government and society, whether it was law enforcement, defense, the economy, education—which was a big issue—return of refugees, foreign affairs. Every aspect of life was ruled by these differences.

Q: And your particular role in law enforcement, did that span the areas you've just mentioned, or was your job more specialized?

KONTOS: I would say it was a lot broader than I ever expected. The rule of law was really the common denominator for almost everything we were trying to accomplish in Bosnia, because there was such corruption in various segments of society, whether it was education, the medical system, the economy, the judicial system. For sure the police were corrupt, even the military. Corruption, abuse of authority, and organized crime in general were rampant in Bosnia. Weak central authority and lack of cooperation between the entities and cantons exacerbated the situation. It was tailor-made for organized crime and nationalist politicians to exploit it and take advantage of these differences.

Q: What was the role of the Department of Justice in Washington at that time? Were they able to give you resources and ideas?

KONTOS: Department of Justice [DOJ] did indeed have a role. They didn't give us funds. No domestic agency really has overseas resources. They get it via the Foreign Affairs budget, that is to say, State Department appropriations. So, a lot of my job involved managing different appropriations and doling out the money. We had a fair-sized DOJ presence, led by a federal prosecutor detailed to the embassy from the state of Hawaii. DOJ also sent retired or active U.S. federal and state judges to lead short-term training sessions for Bosnian officials. In addition, we had a large police training program, staffed and managed by DOJ, called ICITAP, the International Criminal Investigative Training and Assistance Program. We also had short-term FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] agents detailed for three- to six-month assignments. We even had an INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] special agent, who ended up staying in Sarajevo even longer than I did. He was assigned as an adviser to the newly created national border protection service.

Q: What was the chain of command? Did they answer to you, or did all of you answer to the front office?

KONTOS: Well, a little bit of both. The front office, of course, had so much to deal with that they delegated a lot to me. I basically had to oversee all of the law enforcement training staff, plan the budgets, request funds, and so on. The DOJ units had their own chains of commands, but I provided the policy guidance, and if anything was unusually difficult, then we would go to the DCM or, as necessary, the ambassador. But I had to keep the DCM and the ambassador up to date, so I was pretty much in daily conference with each of them, either small meetings with the key staff or country team meetings.

Q: Well, that's a delicate and huge portfolio. What I'd like to do, Steve, is make sure that we have time to get into this and maybe do it next time. Before we do, let me just ask— I don't know much about the region. I guess Dayton left Sarajevo with a sort of tripartite system, and there was supposed to be a rotation, and it never really worked very well, from what I've heard. Let me ask a left field kind of question: If Richard Holbrooke had lived longer, how do you think he might have wanted to make adjustments in the way Sarajevo was set up after the war period? Is that a fair question? Well, it's not a fair question.

KONTOS: It's a fair question. I don't know that I can answer it. I think that all of us—Holbrooke included—eventually wanted to migrate away from the tripartite system. The problem is that there was no will or desire among the country's leaders, particularly among the Bosnian Serbs, to do that. It would happen only if there was substantial pressure from Serbia and from the international community in general. We did our level best, and there were a few times when the Serbian government actually did lean on the Bosnian Serbs, with positive results.

An example was when they got serious about tracking down some of the major war crimes figures, like Radovan Karadzic, Ratko Mladic, and others who led the so-called ethnic cleansing. But how various Bosnian factions and the government of Serbia were able to navigate these demands is a complicated story. Again, to accomplish our long-term objectives, it was necessary to build up a functioning, unified state in Bosnia and to strengthen its national institutions—that is to say, law enforcement, judicial and legislative systems that have real authority, as well as a stable economy, educational system, and so on. They're still fighting that battle today.

I think Holbrooke would probably be a little bit depressed because so little in Bosnia has changed to this day. The political system hasn't changed, because the ethnic leaders and nationalists continue to cling to power and preserve their influence. If Bosnia's citizens can get the upper hand over the nationalist leadership, weaken their hold on power, and make real changes in the country's constitution, then I think there's hope. The European Union [EU] still thinks that by holding out the prospect of membership in the EU as an incentive, Bosnia will change, but the Europeans have been trying this for years now and haven't gotten anywhere.

Q: That's kind of how I understand it. Again, I'd like to get much more into this next time. Did the Bosnian Serbs feel they were outnumbered and would be excluded if they were not in a tripartite system? Was that what was going on?

KONTOS: Well, I'm sure the Bosnian Serbs claimed they were discriminated against, and that the international community favored the Muslims, but really, no. They had a considerable amount of power, and they were for the most part able to block major reforms. Unlike the Bosnian Muslims and Croats—or Catholics—they have retained firm support from Serbia. If it wasn't the government of Serbia, then officials in the government were acting unilaterally to help their Bosnian Serb counterparts.

In later years, after I left Sarajevo, Russia began to play a bigger role as a spoiler and actually encouraged Bosnian Serb separatists. The Croats, of course, looked to the government of Croatia for support, but have become less explicit about their separatism now that Croatia is part of the EU. They don't want to make waves with the European Union. Croatia must stick with the EU consensus, but the Serbs have no such restraint.

Q: Well, that's fascinating. This is too complicated and important and dramatic for us to be able to get through all of this today. So, I suggest we stay on this theme next time. If you were to generalize or make a broad statement—Americans, in their foreign policy, tend to favor central entities, as you've just said. You've said that the national nature of Bosnia would function better if there were a more robust national government. Europeans sometimes see it as the opposite. They sometimes see autonomy as something more in line with ethnic divisions.

I don't know if there's really a difference between the way Americans see this and the way Europeans see this when they're both well-intentioned, but I'm just going to ask this for

my own sake. It's a question I know I cannot answer. I might suggest that, if you want to, we can take up the subject next time. Do Americans have a tendency—I won't say a bias, but a tendency—to be more in favor of centralized systems than regional autonomy? Just a question—

Q: This is Steve Kontos and Dan Whitman. It is July 24, 2020. Steve, we last had you in Bosnia. Let's pick it up from there.

KONTOS: We can talk further about the question of autonomy. Going back to my experience in Bosnia, it was clear—certainly at the embassy level—that there were many different centers of power and authority in the country. Jacques Klein, who was head of the UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina used to recite a ditty that went something like, "Four religions, three ethnic groups, two entities, one state."

There were also ten cantons in the Bosnian Federation. Each canton had its own ministries and offices, which of course multiplied the opportunities for corruption. To counter this, the international community worked hard to establish a stronger, more accountable central government. The toughest nut to crack was rule of law at the national level. The Republika Srpska and each canton had their own court systems and law enforcement authorities, which were not necessarily accountable to anyone. Our objective was to establish a more accountable legal system with national-level oversight and, if necessary, national-level enforcement. We tried very hard to do this, and it was painful, to say the least. In the two years I spent in Bosnia, I think we made a little progress, which I can describe in more detail if you want to go into that.

Q: Last time you mentioned that there was not perfect overlap between the following: the High Representative, EU, SFOR, OSCE, the UN Mission. Any more comments on this many-headed monster? I guess you could say that everybody meant well, but there must have been some sort of centrifugal forces with so many different outside entities. You said that was a challenge. Any more comments about that?

KONTOS: Sure, I could talk a lot about that. There was friction, of course, between all of those organizations, which everybody tried to paper over or mitigate as best they could. Fortunately, the U.S. had a unique position in that we were the biggest contributor to the NATO force. We were the major financial contributor. We were providing a large amount of aid, and most important, the Bosnians tended to listen to the U.S. more than they would listen to anybody else. So, I had the sense that we were—at least for the time that I was there—first at the table. It was important that we had close relationships with the key players.

With SFOR, of course, the commander was an American, which made things easier. For a while, in 2000 and 2001, one of the subordinate general officers was David Petraeus. He wasn't the SFOR commander. At that time, he was a brigadier general, in charge of the SFOR J-2 section or intelligence unit. I met him a couple of times about law enforcement issues, notably a wide-ranging investigation of a corruption scandal involving a Bosnian

Croat bank that was involved in all kinds of illegal activities. There are lots of side stories to all of this.

We tried to keep as much unity, purpose, and coordination with the major players, those being the European Union, SFOR, and, most importantly, the Office of the High Representative, which was a specific entity set up under Dayton. In effect, the high representative had powers of decree throughout Bosnia. Paddy Ashdown, who was high representative for much of the time that I was in Sarajevo, used those powers pretty liberally. We worked together with Ashdown and his staff to impose a number of laws, most importantly sweeping reforms of the criminal justice system. The Bosnians couldn't agree on a much-needed new criminal code or criminal procedure code, or they actively opposed it. So, in the end, Ashdown simply imposed these reforms on the country.

Q: Three things come to mind. First of all, why do you suppose the Bosnians were listening more closely to Americans than to these other entities? Is it because we were paying more, or because the Europeans had failed them, or why?

KONTOS: I think those are both factors that favored the U.S., but don't forget that we were the ones who brokered the end of the war. It was U.S. diplomacy, backed by military power that ended the war. I can't say that the conflict was settled definitively or that there was a comprehensive peace, but at least there was a ceasefire and a shaky peace. Moreover, at the time we are talking about—after the 1995 Dayton Accords up until the early 2000s—the U.S. was acknowledged as the preeminent player on the world stage. So, there are lots of reasons. Of course, the Bosniaks, that is to say the Bosnian Muslim section of the population, felt that we had bailed them out. We had saved them in the end from getting wiped out by the Serbs and Croats.

Q: Well, there comes a fourth question, but let me give you all of them at the same time. We who were just reading the papers, at the time, saw that while distrust and hatred were developing in parts of the Middle East, we had friendly and positive relations with Muslims in Bosnia. Now, I don't know if that was done as a policy or was a fortunate unplanned outcome. We were told that we were assisting Muslims in Bosnia partly because it was the right thing to do, and partly because it might give us a bit of positive image in other Muslim countries. Any comments on that?

KONTOS: I think both of those are true, to some extent, though I don't think these were the driving factors of U.S. policy in the Balkans. At the time, I think our goal was basically to establish stability in the area and help Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular, develop into stable democracies and free economies after emerging from years under Communist rule.

But there was a big component of our efforts aimed at the Muslim community, especially after 9/11, to strengthen ties and build bridges in the Islamic world. There was a lot going on—not so much in my domain, but in Public Affairs, Cultural Affairs, education, and so

on. We did a lot of outreach to the Muslim community. That's somebody else's story to tell, though.

Q: Sure. If you have names to suggest, that would be great.

KONTOS: I do. My wife, Janet Miller, was very much involved in that and led a lot of those efforts, actually in the course of two tours. She was first in Sarajevo as CAO [Cultural Affairs officer], and then later assigned as PAO [Public Affairs officer]. She'll do her own oral history sometime, and I think her time in Bosnia would be a high point.

Q: That's great. Other names? You mentioned Petraeus, you mentioned Paddy Ashdown and others. Then there's Holbrooke lurking in the background. First of all, did Holbrooke visit while you were there, and what did Bosnians think of him?

KONTOS: No, he did not visit while I was there. I'm trying to think of where he was.

Q: He was in AFPAK [Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan], I guess.

KONTOS: No, that was quite a bit later on. I think he may have been the UN ambassador for a while. I kind of lost track. Then he resigned. I know he was in the private sector after the end of the Clinton Administration, but to answer your question, no, I don't recall him visiting while I was in Sarajevo. We had the usual round of congressional visitors and senior State officials. I don't recall that we had many high-level visitors during my time, but more came later on.

While I was in Montenegro, I think Hillary Clinton visited Bosnia as secretary of state. Joe Biden visited as vice president. Jim Steinburg, who was deputy secretary, came to Bosnia several times and even visited Montenegro.

Q: It sounds like a hyperactive and very productive period. Just for historic record, Americans who have worked with Holbrooke had a love-hate relationship with him. Do you have any sense of how Bosnians viewed him? Was he a benefactor? Was he an intruder? These are all subjective terms, and there may be no real answer to that, but I thought I had to ask.

KONTOS: I don't remember any detailed conversations with Bosnians about Holbrooke. My impression was that the Bosnians generally—or at least the Muslims—did like him. They saw him as the architect of the bombing campaign that turned the tide of the war. The Bosnian Muslims also, being good Slavs, probably had some suspicions too, wondering what deals he cut with Milosevic or even with Karadzic or Mladic. I don't recall whether Holbrooke ever met directly with either Karadzic or Mladic. Perhaps he talked to Karadzic once or twice early on, but the main negotiations were with Milosevic, who fronted for the Bosnian Serbs. Holbrooke, of course, also shuttled between Tudjman, the Croatian prime minister at the time and Izetbegovic, the Bosnian Federation president.

So, I think there was certainly grudging praise for Holbrooke, but also a little bit of mistrust. No one was satisfied with the Dayton Accords, because they didn't really settle anything. Dayton created two entities in Bosnia that are still at odds with one another, and the tension among the three main ethnic groups hasn't gone away. I think most Bosnians felt they were given a half-baked solution, and the job isn't finished.

Q: Yeah. There's an irony here, because Dayton was kind of a miracle in that it did anything at all, and yet it certainly was imperfect. Did they seem ungrateful for Dayton? Did you feel that Dayton deserved more approval than it got?

KONTOS: No, I wouldn't say people were ungrateful. I think it depends on which community you talk to. The Bosniaks were grateful that the internationals were there to keep a lid on things and, as they saw it, to try to improve their standing within the Bosnian state. I think the Bosnian Croats were ambivalent. They still gravitated towards Tudjman and Croatia. And, of course, the Bosnian Serbs resented the international presence. They didn't like Dayton because it limited their power and influence. In fact, the Bosnian Serbs did everything they could to undermine the Dayton Accords and the intent behind Dayton, which was to reform the Bosnian government and the laws to create a more sustainable state.

So, again, it depends on which community you talk to. Among the Muslims, there was high regard for the U.S. The Croats were pretty indifferent, though they respected U.S. military power and diplomatic influence. It was the Bosnian Serbs who really would have loved to see our backs and to get the international community out of the region.

Q: Yeah. In fact, we did evacuate from Belgrade, right? I forget when that was.

KONTOS: That was during the war in Kosovo when NATO began bombing. NATO and U.S. aircraft bombed Belgrade specifically, among other places inside Serbia, so that too stoked up resentment all through the Serb community.

Q: Yes. Now, a subjective question. You can take it or— The whole concept— We often think of this as an ethnic conflict, and I don't know if that's an oversimplification. You mentioned, a moment ago, good Slavs. You said it, I think, ironically, meaning that the people of that area were by nature distrustful and skeptical of things that other people did, always looking for a backstory. I have written down here three possible components: culture, personality—that is, the spoilers, like Milosevic and others—and ethnicity.

Are you able to take on that question of what really caused the conflict? Was it all three of those things working together? When we look at so-called "ethnic conflicts" in Africa, say, we find that it's actually more a matter of personal individuals who manipulate vulnerable populations where there were ethnic differences without conflict. This may be esoteric and subjective, but again, I thought I would just put that out there if you have any comments. What actually caused the conflict in the Balkans in the '90s?

KONTOS: That's a huge question, and there are a lot of books on it. I'm trying to think of personal experiences that helped define for me how the Bosnians—all of the communities—saw things. Generally speaking, there were people like Karadzic and Milosevic who were adept at exploiting fears among Serbs, particularly in rural areas. And I think a lot had to do with economic power, acquiring control of resources and land.

I hate to bring this up, but there have been conflicts between the three ethnic groups for a long time. You saw this in World War I, and again in World War II. There was this whole mythology of one community being the victim of another. So, leaders—people with influence, opinion leaders, whatever you want to call them—played on this victimization very well. Their objective was to consolidate their own power and influence. There was a well-defined elite in each of these communities that expected to benefit by confronting the others.

What I saw personally is that there were not many obvious differences among the communities. Their language was pretty much the same. Their social habits, their cultural expectations, their outlooks were much the same. We always heard that, before the war, they used to socialize with one another. They loved to drink, even the Muslims. They celebrated one another's holidays, and there were many inter-ethnic marriages. So, the lines were quite blurred until the war. But even while I was there, I noticed the way people spoke and acted was similar, regardless of their religious and ethnic background. It was their mindset, what they valued, and how they reacted to foreigners and so on.

They loved to party. All three communities would drink at all hours of the day. It was common that I could go to any canton for a meeting and be offered my choice of either slivovica, which was the home-brewed plum brandy that everybody had, or some kind of imported whiskey. This might even be at nine or ten am. Time after time, this happened among the Bosniaks, the Croats, and the Bosnian Serbs alike. It was little things like these that convinced me they were much the same.

Then, on the more macabre side, one of the stories I heard concerned findings by the International Commission on Missing Persons [ICMP] that was exhuming mass graves all around Bosnia. Many Bosnian civilians—Muslim, Croat, and Serb alike—were unaccounted for and feared dead. So, the international community set up a commission to investigate and identify the remains of persons exhumed. The ICMP had world-class forensic analysts and was well equipped and funded. The analysts built up a database of DNA [deoxyribonucleic acid] records, with the idea of using them to identify bodies and at least determine whether they were Bosniak, Croat, Serb, or whatever. But they soon found they couldn't tell the difference between ethnic groups from forensic analysis because their DNA was so similar!

So, there are numerous common traits and customs among the ethnic groups, but in spite of that, they went to war against one another in the most awful way. I suppose you could say that about other regions of the world. I don't know about Africa, say Rwanda; but

look at Northern Ireland. How different are the Northern Irish Protestants from the Irish Catholics? Even in Syria and Iraq, there are Shiite and Sunni Muslims who are ethnically Arab and probably have many more similarities than differences. So, in Bosnia, the ethnic conflict was in many ways artificial, but it has a long history.

Q: Sure. It sounds as if demonic, powerful individuals were able to manipulate vulnerable populations, but I guess no single answer really describes the whole thing. You mentioned Petraeus and Ashdown. Again, for the historic record, what is your recollection and your judgement of those two individuals? You interacted with them quite a bit. They are very key people in this period and this part of the world. Any comments about how effective they were in meeting their objectives?

KONTOS: I can't say I interacted with either one very much. I think I met Ashdown once or maybe twice, but I certainly spent time with his staff. Petraeus and I didn't overlap by much. I think he was there for less than a year after I arrived. The one thing I do recall is meeting him while I was on a visit to SFOR with the director of ICITAP, the Department of Justice law enforcement assistance program. Petraeus was well informed about the different organized crime groups in Bosnia, the corrupt enterprises, the kingpins, who was doing what. So, we found that we didn't have to spend a lot of time briefing him or bringing him up to speed. I'd really have to think back to the content of the conversation, but it had to do with how we were tracking and identifying some of the major organized crime figures.

I would say the organized crime does tie into the whole dynamic of the war, because Bosnia and its three communities have always had sort of *Godfather*-like figures in the community who were wealthy, who somehow had acquired influence and control over areas of the country. They worked hard at establishing their criminal empires, usually built on smuggling operations. Human trafficking was a big problem too, and there were lots of other ties into organized crime, say extortion rackets, narcotics distribution, fencing stolen goods, and so on. You'll probably find it in a lot of books, but one of the myths that grew out of the war was that throughout that time, even during the heaviest fighting, the organized crime groups cooperated regardless of ethnicity. They traded and sold weapons, ammunition, fuel, and other commodities to one another across the battle lines. So, on the criminal side, there was indeed inter-ethnic cooperation. We knew Bosnians were capable of cooperating, just in the wrong way.

Q: Yeah. Fascinating. I'm going back to your bio here. Let's see. Islamabad, Sarajevo—I'm wondering, is it time to give some "in the rearview mirror" comments on your Sarajevo stay? You did a lot, and you were working with the DOJ on policing and prosecuting, I think. You were really enhancing the rule of law. This is a big accomplishment in a post-conflict situation. I get the impression that cooperation in the U.S. embassy was quite tight and quite positive, but among the various international entities, it was less so. People did what they could. Do you have any other recollections that would give a focus to your period in Sarajevo?

KONTOS: Sure, yes, there are. One thing that often comes up in accounts of that time was the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the U.S. That had an interesting spillover in Bosnia. There was a fringe group of foreign jihadis in Bosnia, most of whom had come to Bosnia in the mid-1990s to support the Muslim side in the war. There were probably several hundred of them who established themselves in those years, settled in Bosnia and were hidden in the woodwork, so to speak.

Their presence became a major obsession after the 9/11 attacks when Bosnia came up on the radar in Washington. A lot of that concern centered on several Islamist organizations, like the Saudi High Commission for Relief, which was said to be a private NGO, and another one called Al-Haramain [Islamic Foundation]. There was suspicion that they were covers for more nefarious activities, including support to terrorism, money laundering, and other criminal activity.

Up until September 11, 2001, the embassy had devoted considerable attention and resources to strengthening the rule of law and redefining the Bosnian state. But then we were suddenly thrust into this war on terrorism, and specifically to rooting out the jihadis in Bosnia. The two were not necessarily in harmony. There was an instance in which—I think it was covered in the media, certainly in the Bosnian media—the internationals, like OHR, the UN Mission, and others, were able to track down a number of probably seven or eight people whom the internationals believed were planning terrorist attacks. Based on intelligence from international and local sources, SFOR raided, with local police as a cover, several Islamist establishments. They found weapons and explosives, though not an unusual thing for anyone in Bosnia, along with some signs of preparations for attacks on Western targets.

After the arrests, the Bosnian Federation agreed to deport them to their home countries at the urging of the U.S. That was done via a legal process that was without precedent in Bosnia and which sparked a lot of controversy. I think that at some point, the high representative was involved, and intervened with the local authorities. So, eventually, some of these suspects were packed off, but that ultimately made things more difficult for our mission in Bosnia. Here we were touting adherence to the rule of law and trying to establish a more credible legal system, yet in our rush to deal with the terrorist suspects, things may not have been done exactly by the book.

Q: Well, this was done worldwide, I think. This was an issue.

KONTOS: Yes, it was. We were just one theater of many.

Homeland Security After September 11, 2001

Q: Yeah. But that's a good reminder that, partly because of its Muslim population, Bosnia was suddenly important in U.S. policy for a new reason, not just because of a regional war, but because of its place in a worldwide terrorist movement. Let's see. That was

9/11/01. I don't see it on your bio, but at some point, you moved to the Hill with Pearson. Was that during that period?

KONTOS: That was after I left Sarajevo.

Q: And when was that? Was that '01?

KONTOS: My wife and I returned to Washington, DC in 2003. We were always casting around for good assignments, and I figured the Pearson Fellowship was a viable way to take an extra year looking for something worthwhile.

Q: Should we talk about your experience on the Hill?

KONTOS: I don't think there's a lot to say, except that I was one of the last people among the Pearson Fellows to be assigned that year. There are about twenty Pearsons assigned every year, and by the time I got to Washington, most of the plum assignments were taken, particularly the staff positions with key senators. It seemed most FSOs were not anxious to work in the House of Representatives, so HR begged me to do something in the House, perhaps for more balance. I looked around to see if there was anything interesting and ended up joining the Majority staff of what was then the Select Committee on Homeland Security. The Congress had just passed legislation establishing the Department of Homeland Security, and a lot of work was still needed to define its authorities and the roles of its various components.

Q: —and maybe go back if necessary. The "interagency," you were saying, was the buzzword. The question was, was it working? Looking backwards, when we think of the interagency, we think of it, generally, over time as a failure. There were many departments, the executive branch, and the Hill involved in counterterrorism. You saw this from various points of view, from the House Select Committee on Counterterrorism and then also over at DHS [Department of Homeland Security]. Can you comment, again, because we may have lost a little bit of it, on the interagency as you saw it?

KONTOS: Sure. There may have been collective failures, and maybe small successes. I saw both. At that time, after *The 9/11 Commission Report* came out and the Homeland Security Department legislation was passed, it was all about trying to synchronize efforts among the agencies. I guess you could say that the most overused phrase at the time was "eliminating stovepipes." There were a lot of efforts to do this. DHS was one. The NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center] and DNI [Director of National Intelligence] were some of the others. All of these came out of the 9/11 experience.

My role on the Select Committee and later at S/CT [Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism] was to synchronize the international functions of DHS with our foreign policy and build closer ties between DHS and the State Department. There are a lot of international aspects of DHS operations that people don't necessarily think about—Customs and Border Protection, the immigration system, transportation security,

and even federal emergency management. At the time, DHS was beefing up name checks and passenger name recognition—checks on airline passenger manifests—and many other measures, focusing heavily on border control. There was certainly an intelligence side to this, too, both domestic and international.

Within the new Department of Homeland Security, several agencies had quite a bit of international presence and interaction with foreign governments. Customs and Border Protection [CBP] was one. CBP, along with Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] and the Citizenship and Immigration Services Agency [USCIS] were new, reconstituted from the former Immigration and Naturalization Service and Customs Agency. The Transportation Security Agency [TSA], the Coast Guard, and the DHS front office each had their own international affairs units as well. None of them was very well integrated within DHS, much less with other federal agencies.

Q: Yeah. Of course, there were a lot of stories about name checks where there were embarrassing failures. Individuals with Muslim names—Muhammed, Ismail—were being incorrectly picked out. These were things that came to the attention of the public, and I think the public was generally agnostic about this whole thing. I think they saw that there was more coordination needed, and this wasn't a purely successful effort. I think most Americans wanted this to go forward and to work, but there was a lot of perception of lack of coordination. Anyway, when you were there, were you at the DHS headquarters on Nebraska Avenue?

KONTOS: I visited there frequently, but no, I wasn't based there. I would visit the other places, too, particularly Customs and Border Protection. I also had quite a bit of interaction with the interagency National Counterterrorism Center. I remember we spent a lot of time going around and around about the No Fly List. There were particularly vexing problems, as you said, with individuals, but especially with American citizens on the No Fly List who were effectively barred from returning home from a foreign country.

So we spent weeks coming up with a process for repatriating American citizens. I have to give credit to not only the National Security Council [NSC], but also the newly created White House Homeland Security Council [HSC]. They tried to make some sense out of this and force the different agencies to cooperate. While I was with S/CT, I also spent a fair amount of time working on two NSC Policy Coordinating Committees to come up with a national maritime security strategy and aviation security strategy.

Q: Okay. And you were in and out of the NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center], you said? I've actually never been there. I guess it was a very controlled environment, and everything that happened in there was classified. Because I've never been there, I'm curious. The NCTC was set up after 9/11, correct?

KONTOS: Yes, correct.

Q: Okay. And it is in northern Virginia. Did it ever see itself as the hub of the wheel of the interagency on this?

KONTOS: Sorry, was it the hub of the wheel?

Q: Did it see itself that way?

KONTOS: It may have, but the other agencies didn't see it that way. The NCTC didn't have command authority over other agencies, and it certainly didn't have control over the other agency budgets. So, only to the extent that the White House would knock heads together and make people cooperate did the NCTC have influence. After a time, as the NCTC was more developed, it provided data to populate the No Fly List and other U.S. government watch lists.

Q: Would you say they were part of the IC [Intelligence Community] or in touch with the IC? How did they fit?

KONTOS: Yes, they were. They were and they are.

Q: Okay. So, at least geographically, it shows where they are on the organigram. Was this a very large group? I don't know. Was it a vast bureaucracy?

KONTOS: No, not at the time, but this was early on. I don't know what it is now, but at the time, there were probably—I'm just guessing—a few hundred, though a lot of them were detailed from other government agencies, including from State. There were probably many technical people, because the NCTC ran extensive databases and was heavily dependent on information technology.

Newly Independent Montenegro

Q: Yeah. Okay. Now, if you want, we're at three o'clock my time, and we can get you over to SCE, South Central Europe. Is that what they called it, SCE?

KONTOS: Yes, South Central Europe. That was just a short assignment. I filled in a gap as deputy director for a summer, and then went into language training. From FSI, I went on to my DCM assignment.

Q: That's a big story, to be a DCM so suddenly. That's a dramatic change and a huge leap forward. Plus, you went back to the Balkans; you were in Montenegro. So, we want to dig into that assignment.

KONTOS: What was interesting about Montenegro, of course, was that it never really existed as a modern, independent country until 2006. Before then, the U.S. had a small mission in Podgorica, the capital. It wasn't even a consulate, but a representative office.

But suddenly, within the space of six months, it became a full-fledged embassy, starting almost from scratch.

Q: Yeah. I guess the minimum is communicator, chief of mission, DCM, pol/econ [Political and Economic Section], and PD [Public Diplomacy]. Is that the minimum?

KONTOS: More or less. There was already some infrastructure because the mission had been there for a while. Before the war in the mid-1990s, there used to be just one person, maybe a PD person, assigned there when it was a branch post. Later, particularly during and right after the Kosovo War, Montenegro became important to the U.S. policy of imposing sanctions and isolating Serbia, so State assigned more diplomats, while USAID ramped up economic assistance.

Q: Do I remember correctly that Serbia considered Montenegro part of Serbia? Does that sound right?

KONTOS: Yes. By the time Kosovo broke away, all the former Yugoslav republics except Montenegro were independent—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia—with only Serbia and Montenegro linked together. But the Montenegrins had always been relatively independent. Although they didn't formally break away when Yugoslavia disintegrated, they certainly carved out more autonomy, and they operated more or less as an independent entity despite the best efforts of the Serbs to keep control. However, the Montenegrins have always been hard to control. There was a short-lived Montenegrin kingdom during World War I, but that later joined with Serbia and, after the Second World War, the Republic of Yugoslavia. Montenegro had its own flag, which dated back to when there had been a Montenegrin king. In any event, because of the rugged mountainous terrain, the Montenegrins were never really brought under heel by anybody—not by the Turks, not by the Austrians, Serbs or anybody else.

Q: But by Tito, yes.

KONTOS: It was always a little bit wild and woolly. I wouldn't say it was tribal, but it was definitely broken up. There were areas of the country that were remote and hard to reach, so Montenegrins always had a sense of independence.

Q: You were there for two years, from '08 to '10. Would you say they had an acute sense of nationalism or national identity? How did the people see this process, this creation of a new state? Was there patriotic fervor?

KONTOS: Yes, there was support for independence among a majority of the population. Well over 50 percent voted in favor during a 2006 referendum. But there were differences, because—as in Bosnia—there were mixed communities. You had Orthodox Serbs—people who considered themselves Serbs; you had Orthodox Montenegrins. The two orthodox groups actually had separate churches, with their own hierarchies. You had an Albanian community, a small Slavic Muslim community and a tiny Catholic (Croat)

community. Once again, you saw the same tensions operating as elsewhere in the Balkans, but these didn't lead to civil war. The Montenegrins managed to keep a lid on things, despite the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. There was never any sort of open fighting among the various ethnic groups in Montenegro, but there was tension, as I saw years later when I was there.

Q: Okay. Now, the country— I've never been in the area, but it's said to be beautiful, with mountains and coasts. How did you enjoy your two years there?

KONTOS: It was great! Montenegrins prided themselves on being the Switzerland of the Balkans or something like that. They touted the country as a tourist destination from the start, with pristine mountains and rivers as well as a spectacular coast. Whitewater rafting got to be a big thing, and there was good skiing in the winter. The coast was a smaller version of the Croatian coast, with medieval towns and beautiful beaches. So, they saw themselves as a hot tourist destination and were already working to build that reputation when I arrived.

Q: You said, "Switzerland of the Balkans." Did Slovenia see itself that way also? Was there any competition, so to speak, between Slovenia and Montenegro? They were both tourist attractions.

KONTOS: No, they were in different leagues. Slovenia is very much a first world country, while Montenegro is still aspiring. Although they're both small, Montenegro is really small, more isolated and less developed. There are fewer than a million citizens in Montenegro. Slovenia is more domesticated. It's old-world Europe. In Montenegro, they billed themselves as wild and pristine, but still in Europe's backyard. You could drive down from Germany or Austria and in a day or two be right there in the wilderness.

Q: Did that work? Did the tourism industry flourish?

KONTOS: Yes. They did pretty well. Visitors usually hesitate to take chances on the unknown. Tourists go with what they know, and if there's any whiff of instability or problems, they stay away. Montenegro was always fighting that whiff of instability, that uncertainty: "Oh, those Balkan countries." They were part of Serbia, they were involved in terrible wars, atrocities, war crimes, and so on. So, Montenegro is trying to overcome that history. I think, on the whole—and I haven't been back since I left—they've succeeded pretty well. They adopted the Euro as their national currency. They aggressively promoted their tourist destinations, and they were pushing hard for membership in NATO and the European Union. In fact, they have already succeeded in one of those—finally joining NATO in 2018. Nearly fifteen years after independence, Montenegro seems to be cementing its reputation as a stable European country with a great coast and beautiful mountains.

Q: Any comment on why Europe recognizes Montenegro as NATO and maybe someday EU where it does not recognize Kosovo? Any comment on that?

KONTOS: The problem with Kosovo is that there's still a conflict. It's no longer a hot conflict, but Serbia and Kosovo have still not settled how they're going to coexist. So, that's an open wound, whereas the status of Montenegro is completely settled. There was no issue with their independence. All of Europe and most of the rest of the world recognized Montenegro. The move to independence was done through an open, transparent process via referendum. The majority voted for independence. When Montenegro eventually declared independence, the Serbian government shrugged it off and did not try to reverse the outcome. Having escaped conflict, Montenegro was an easier sell to the members of NATO and probably will be to the EU.

I think the problem for Montenegro and certainly with all of the Balkan countries as they queue up for NATO and the EU membership, is their weak governance. Again, we get back to the rule of law. There's a lot of corruption and organized crime in the Balkan countries, and Montenegro has probably been at the forefront. It is a real problem. For generations, they made a way of life from smuggling and operating on the fringes. So, Montenegro must overcome that legacy, which is probably the country's biggest impediment to serious foreign investment and foreign trade.

Q: Do you think they'll make it, as a country so tiny?

KONTOS: Yes, I think so. Other tiny countries have succeeded and offer good models. Perhaps Montenegrins see their country as another Singapore or Dubai—who knows? There's definitely enough of a national identity, enough resources and wealth, to ensure that the country is sustainable in the long run. Even though there is still a risk of ethnic conflict, I think the demographics are such that it won't happen.

Q: Any comments on the internal functioning of the embassy, which as you said went from a handful of Americans to eighty-six Americans and local staff. That's a giant leap in a short amount of time, which you had a big role in administering. I don't think you'd done anything quite like that before. Any lessons learned?

KONTOS: Sure. First, to clarify, there were less than twenty Americans. Even so, it was a really hard job, and moreover, I would never want to be in a brand new embassy. There were a lot of growing pains. One of the conditions that went with the job at the time was that congressional approval was required to establish a new foreign mission. I think there may have been a lingering hangover in Congress related to all the new missions that were set up in the former Soviet Union. So, establishing a new embassy in Montenegro wasn't an easy sell, and some senior official at State reportedly pledged that, if Congress approved the new embassy, we wouldn't ask for additional money to set it up.

Q: And somebody believed that? Wow.

KONTOS: That's what I heard. We were starved of resources, and that was definitely our biggest single problem. The mission had a wide range of operations, so we became very

creative making things work with minimal support. We had to depend on our embassies in Belgrade and Zagreb for Human Resources, Budget and Fiscal, Information Management, and other administrative support. We also lacked a consular section. The Montenegrins really wanted a functioning consular section to issue visas locally so they wouldn't have to travel all the way to Belgrade or Zagreb to apply for U.S. visas. But we didn't have a dedicated space for visa processing or secure communications lines needed for name checks. The embassy as a whole had no classified communication and no proper CAA [Classified Access Area]. In the early days, there was no marine security detachment. The chancery building was a "lock and leave" facility. That means the last one out had to secure the entire building. So, there was a lot of improvisation involved, which made it interesting, but also very wearing on the staff. You never knew if things were going to work or not.

Q: Right. I'm guessing that things more or less did work.

KONTOS: There were fits and starts, but we eventually did start issuing visas, and we did finally sort out our serious IT [information technology] problems. One of the biggest constraints was our dependence on computer servers located in Embassy Belgrade. This dated back to the old days when Montenegro was a tiny constituent post. Everything had been based in Embassy Belgrade, so we had to cut those connections and install new servers, as well as reconstitute other administrative services previously based in Belgrade.

Q: Yeah. Well, you say it was quite wearing and tiring, but looking back there must be some contentment. This is a major achievement, to stand up an embassy, and you did that. That's very significant, Steve. Should we head onto Heidelberg, or should we leave that to next time?

KONTOS: Why don't we hold off for now? I don't know that there's a lot to say about it. Going backward in time, there might be more to say about the earlier experience with the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

Palestinian—Israeli Peace Talks Before the Oslo Accords

Q: This is Steve Kontos and Dan Whitman. I believe it is the thirtieth of July 2020.

KONTOS: Let's cover the couple of years from 1991 to 1993 when I was assigned as the desk officer for Palestinian Affairs. At that time, the position was located in what was then known as NEA/ARN [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Arab Region North], which covered Jordan, Syrian, Lebanon, and Palestinian Affairs. Unlike other desk officer positions, I had no U.S. mission or foreign embassy in Washington to cover. Much of what I did, especially in the early days, was reporting and analysis on the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] and other Palestinian groups. At that time, the U.S. had no relationship with the PLO. There was supposedly a "dialogue" that was on and off, depending on how the PLO and its constituent groups were behaving. The relationship

was at a low ebb after Yasser Arafat had appeared to support Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990. But in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the U.S. was able to cobble together in Madrid the very first peace conference among Israeli and the Arab delegations, including one from the Palestinian territories—i.e., West Bank and Gaza.

Q: Yes. I was there, Steve.

KONTOS: I was not, so that's a gap you can cover, I'm sure.

Q: Well, not in substance. I was mainly a gopher, but I remember it all very vividly. It was quite an event.

KONTOS: It was. As I recall, the Madrid conference took place in October 1991. I was just starting my assignment in NEA/ARN. After the Madrid conference, the participants talked of continuing what they had started, but nobody could figure out where, with whom, how it would be structured, and so on. After a lot of back and forth between the different sides, it was agreed negotiations would continue in Washington, hosted by the U.S. All of this materialized by early 1992. I don't remember the month now, but I think it was in the spring of 1992. This began successive rounds of negotiations that I think ended up totaling nearly a dozen, a month or two apart, lasting until early summer 1993.

So, it was a long and painstaking process. My responsibility, which added a lot to the desk officer's portfolio, was to serve as the department's liaison or handler for the Palestinian delegation. The Palestinian delegation consisted entirely of West Bank and Gaza residents. No PLO members were allowed. The role of the PLO, of course, was a huge point of contention between Israel and the Palestinians. So, the delegation consisted of probably about twelve to fifteen prominent people from the West Bank and Gaza. The leader of the delegation was a Palestinian doctor, named Haider Abdul Shafi. I think he was also an executive of the Palestinian Red Crescent, in addition to a practicing physician. Then there were other prominent Palestinians from around the West Bank and Gaza, though virtually none of them were known internationally. A few of them, for example, Saeb Erekat and Mohammad Shtayyeh, later became key figures in the Palestinian Authority.

The better-known Palestinians, notably Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, were not accepted by the Israelis as negotiating partners and so were relegated to the margins. The PLO was even more in the shadows—all painstakingly negotiated with the different sides. Obviously, the Israelis wouldn't talk to certain people on the Palestinian side. They would have nothing to do with the PLO, and so on. At the beginning, to make negotiations more palatable to the Israelis, the Palestinians were lumped together with the Jordanians as a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

It was very clear at the beginning that the Israelis would talk to the Palestinians if they formed part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. That lasted for a long time—well into 1992. After months and several rounds of negotiations, the Israelis agreed to talk to

the Palestinians separately. There was a complicated backstory to this, which I won't get into.

The negotiations were slow and painstaking. In the early days, it took numerous rounds of talks—each one a week to two weeks at the State Department—just to hash out mostly procedural details—who would be in the room, how would they decide the agenda, and so on. Sometimes outside events threatened to derail the negotiations. One in particular that stands out was Israel's December 1992 deportation of more than four hundred Palestinian activists, including Hamas members, from the territories to the Lebanese border. The Lebanese, however, refused to admit them, so the entire group was forced to stay out in the open, exposed to bitter cold winter weather. They remained confined to the no-man's land on the border for a period that ended up lasting for months. This drew widespread international condemnation as a grave violation of the Geneva Conventions, but the Israelis backed down partially only after coming under extreme pressure from the U.S.

My role in Washington was to make sure the Palestinians were ready to participate in the talks. Their visas and travel arrangements were taken care of, they had transportation to and from the conference site, security was lined up, et cetera. I also had the role that every desk officer has—meeting the delegation as they arrived at the State Department, taking notes in bilateral meetings, acting as a messenger, and, of course, reporting on what I heard and saw. There was intense media coverage of the talks, at least at the beginning, so there was always a press stakeout at the State Department. I remember seeing myself on television a few times, the doorman-diplomat, meeting the Palestinian delegation and escorting them through the C Street entrance of the State Department to the conference area on the first floor.

But for all the hoopla, little was accomplished during that time. There were a lot of backstage negotiations, because the Israelis wouldn't talk directly to the Palestinians and so on. There were probably as many bilateral meetings—U.S.-Palestinian or U.S.-Israeli and then with the other delegations—to try to shepherd this whole thing along and broker solutions. I'll pause for a minute in case you have questions.

Q: I do. Did the U.S. have any sort of plan? You're describing bi-laterals and sessions that went on procedurally. Did anybody have a vision of how this might work?

KONTOS: Yes, but it was vague and closely held. Our mantra—at least publicly—was that the solutions were entirely for the parties to decide. The U.S. role was merely that of an honest broker. We wanted the parties themselves to come up with their own plan for a lasting peace. But again, behind the scenes, there was a lot of collaboration between the U.S. and each delegation, especially with the Israelis, to work out a path forward. On the American side, after the early involvement of the White House and the secretary of state in Madrid, it was primarily Dennis Ross, Dan Kurtzer, and Edmund Hull, later replaced by Aaron Miller, who were the sages—the guiding lights, if you will—for all of this. They were involved on a daily basis trying to keep the talks going and make some

progress. There were a lot of close calls when we skirted the edge of failure. When one or another delegation walked out, Dennis Ross or Dan Kurtzer would call someone to try to smooth things over. It was touch and go, really, for almost a year. Only in late 1992 did the Palestinians and Israelis sort out their procedural differences and begin more substantive conversations. The election of Yitzhak Rabin and a new government in Israel in July 1992 no doubt helped open the door to real progress. I had the impression that Rabin's predecessor, Yitzhak Shamir was never interested in serious negotiations or conceding the least bit to the Palestinians.

To answer your question about the vision, though, I think it was always understood—and I think this even dated to Madrid—that for the Palestinians, there would be an interim-phase agreement—that is, a temporary phase—and the final status issues would be put aside for future discussion, say, after ten years. This was obviously a big sticking point with the Palestinians, and it came up in every round of negotiations. They would push the final status issues: "What about Jerusalem? What about refugees? What about the settlements?" And the Israelis would kick it back saying, "Well, that's a final status issue." They would go around in circles on this. But the procedural issues were many, and some of them were trivial and ridiculous. I'll tell you one story in a minute.

Q: We know that nothing came of this. Looking back at it, Steve, would you say that the U.S. should have had a vision, rather than just letting them decide? We know that letting them decide was a failure. How else might we have done it?

KONTOS: Many years later, you can say it was a failure, but at the time, they seemed to be making progress. They did end up with the Oslo Accords, which were a real breakthrough, so I don't suppose you can say it was a total failure. I think, again, that the U.S. side took great care not to be seen as imposing anything, particularly on the Israelis. It was fresh in the minds of everybody what George H.W. Bush had done just before the Madrid conference, which was to threaten to withhold loan guarantees from Israel if it continued building settlements in the Palestinian territories.

Q: But they never did compromise. Did he ever act on that?

KONTOS: That's a matter of record. The loan guarantees were held for a period of time, and as the negotiations proceeded, the issue was resolved. So, during the time after the Madrid conference, I think there was progress. They weren't even talking to one another at the very beginning, but by the end, they were talking about substantive issues. What was unknown to those of us on the front lines of these talks—especially members of the Palestinian delegation—was the secret negotiation going on between the Israelis and PLO in late 1992 and 1993.

I have no doubt—although I never talked to anyone from the delegation after the Oslo Accords were announced—that they were bitter about the secret agreement, because they felt that, had they persisted, they would have gotten a better deal. I may have heard indirectly that they believed they could have made more progress with the Israelis,

without the PLO or Arafat getting directly involved and creating a back channel that undercut them. Arafat's actions cemented their mistrust and intensified the bad feelings between the PLO, who were considered outsiders, and the Palestinians from the territories, who were the insiders.

Q: Yeah. Well, of course, we now know that it must have been very discouraging, making all that effort. You said there was progress; at least they were talking. But actually, nothing concrete came out of it, correct?

KONTOS: Well, although nothing came directly from the negotiations in Washington, they did set the stage for the Oslo Accords. A lot of the things they had been talking about in Washington, at least regarding the interim phase, were probably covered in Oslo. But what Oslo did was to firmly set aside all final status issues in exchange for the PLO—Arafat included—returning to the West Bank. There were many other elements, too, but to me, that was, in a nutshell, the key element.

Again, I believe the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians were really pushing for some sort of acknowledgement of final status issues, not simply putting all of them aside for some vague future date. That's where everything went wrong in subsequent years. Nothing was ever resolved on final status issues, despite a last-ditch effort by Bill Clinton in late 2000. Later on, of course, through successive Israeli governments and certainly under Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel continued to create facts and created its own version of final status. But that came much later.

Q: Right. Tell me about Arafat. History has not been kind to him. He's seen by many as a spoiler in all the many, many attempts. What was your impression?

KONTOS: Unfortunately, for all my involvement in Palestinian affairs and then my three years in Jerusalem, I never actually met Arafat. I saw him once during an orthodox Christmas service in Bethlehem, but never actually sat down with him. While in Washington, I did meet other PLO figures who worked behind the scenes with the Palestinian delegation. A few senior PLO officials were involved with the negotiations in Washington, another dance that was carefully choreographed by Dan Kurtzer and Dennis Ross. Basically, the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians insisted that the PLO be connected to the negotiations and that it be involved. They eventually agreed that a few PLO officials who were considered a little more moderate and weren't linked to any terrorist acts would be allowed to come to Washington during the negotiations. They could advise the Palestinian delegation but not actually set foot inside State Department premises. And they never did.

Q: Who do you think actually represented the Palestinian people? Did any of these factions really, truly represent the people?

KONTOS: Probably not, although I think the official delegation in Washington tried hard to be inclusive. There was no democratic process. Nobody voted. There was no

referendum. But they tried to get a diverse group of people representing different areas in the occupied territories—for example, Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah—all the parts of the West Bank, and then Gaza, of course. There weren't any delegates representing the Palestinian diaspora in the bilateral negotiations because the Israelis blocked them, but one or two attended the subsequent multilateral talks on water resources, refugees, environment, arms control, and economic development. There was also factional diversity in the Palestinian delegation to the bilaterals. Within the PLO, which is an umbrella organization, you had Fatah, the Democratic Front, the Popular Front, and others. The delegation tried to include some of these groups. Delegates were not actual members of these groups, because that created tricky issues with U.S. laws, not to mention with the Israelis. But there were people in the delegation associated with those factions.

The head of the delegation, Haider Abdul Shafi, was widely respected. He was sympathetic to Fatah, but never considered an actual member. Faisal Husseini was another one seen by Palestinians in the territories as a leader, though independent of any factions. Then, of course, there was Hanan Ashrawi, who was respected among Palestinians, though sort of a Johnny-come-lately or whatever the female equivalent is. She was probably more popular with the Western media than with the Palestinian rank and file. But the delegation did what it could to legitimize itself and did so in a short time with few resources. I think they did well, considering how little they had to work with.

Q: Hanan Ashrawi had been educated in the U.S.—I think in Virginia—and was a brilliant spokesperson and had a frankly fantastic presence. I don't know how the Palestinians saw her, but I remember it the same way. She came off very positively in the Western press. Some of these groups that you've mentioned were designated as terrorist groups. What's your own feeling about these various groups? Do you think that all of them had to be there in order for there to be a chance of a good outcome? In rethinking that, would you have been more selective about which delegations to accept?

KONTOS: Well, it wasn't for us to decide. We had to enforce the U.S. government's legal standards defining terrorist organizations and membership, though there were waivers, and we did use them. But we had to leave it to the Palestinians to decide who should represent them and navigate their decisions as best we could. If they weren't aware at the beginning, they learned eventually all about our laws and regulations. Under the circumstances, the delegation did pretty well to balance all the varying demands—from the PLO, the Israelis, the U.S., and, of course, the Palestinians in the territories.

I want to go back to some of the key people in the delegation. I sat in a lot of meetings with Haider Abdul Shafi, Ashrawi, and the others in the delegation with Kurtzer, Miller, and Ross. My role, basically, was as notetaker, handler, and general overall fixer. But with the many bilateral meetings, it was interesting that Faisal Husseini, for all of his reputation and titular leader of the delegation, really didn't have a big role. He was soft spoken and didn't say much. He generally let the others speak for him. After a time, I

think there may have been health considerations, because he stopped coming to Washington early on. Another factor may have been the Israelis' continued refusal to accept him at the negotiating table, because he was a resident of Jerusalem. The Israelis considered Jerusalem their territory, so wouldn't recognize Palestinian residents of the city as legitimate negotiating partners.

Hanan Ashrawi came to Washington for every round, even though the Israelis also refused to sit with her at the table. There were a few others in the delegation who were quite outspoken, for example Ghassan al-Khatib, Suad al-Amiri, Sa'eb Arikat, and, of course, Haider Abdul Shafi. It was an interesting cast of characters. Some of them are still around. For example, Mohammad Shtayyeh, who is now the Palestinian Authority prime minister, was chief of staff for the delegation. Shtayyeh wasn't even a delegate then; he was there to provide administrative and logistical support. He and I were essentially counterparts.

As far as the PLO was concerned, I mentioned there were a few people who accompanied the delegation to Washington. The most prominent was Nabil Shaath, who was U.S.-educated. He might have even had a green card, because I know he had adult children who were in the U.S. There were a couple of others, for example Hani Hassan and Akram Haniyeh. They came to nearly every round of negotiations and stayed for the full duration of each one. Under guidance adopted when so-called PLO-U.S. dialogue had been suspended in 1990 after less than two years, I was not permitted to talk to them except exchange pleasantries. The Palestinians usually got a suite and rooms at the Ritz Carlton on 24th and M Streets NW. I have no idea who paid for that. It was probably some Gulf connection brokered by the PLO, which itself was not too badly off financially. Shaath and the others would set up at the Ritz and supposedly directed the negotiations, keeping in close touch with Arafat.

The few times I saw Shaath were at the hotel. I spent plenty of time with the actual delegates, often bringing messages and documents back and forth between Kurtzer and the delegation in preparation for the next day of talks. Shaath and Hani Hassan played key roles behind the scenes, but I can't say whether they knew about the Oslo channel and hid it from the rest of the delegation. I suspect they didn't. The one person instrumental in the secret Oslo talks but who never came to Washington was Ahmad Qura'i, one of Arafat's most trusted subordinates. Qura'i was high-ranking in the organization and personally handled the conversations with the Israelis on behalf of Arafat. This was pretty much unbeknownst to us at the time, although I had hints of it. I can't talk more about the sourcing, because it's classified. By early 1993, I knew there was something going on, but I couldn't put a finger on it. The Palestinian delegation never mentioned anything about it. I don't think they were aware of it. The rounds of negotiations in Washington continued all the way up until April of 1993. We were preparing for yet another round in June, I think, when the news of the Oslo channel broke. Then, in September of 1993, there was the famous Rabin-Arafat confab hosted by Bill Clinton at the White House, when they signed the Oslo Accords.

Q: Okay. So, you were still at the desk when Oslo took place in '93?

KONTOS: I finished my assignment on the desk in July 1993, so the news had just broken. Unfortunately, I missed the big White House event. Had I hung on for a few more months, I would have been the desk officer and helped with the signing ceremony, but by that time, I was in Tunis starting a year of Arabic language training.

Q: Okay. Let's see. You were doing Arabic because of your follow-on, right?

KONTOS: Yes. I was going to Abu Dhabi.

Q: Abu Dhabi. Okay. Let's see. So, language in the fall of '93, is that it?

KONTOS: Yeah. It was the two-year Arabic program. I passed out of the first year, because I already had Arabic, but I didn't quite get the 3/3 level when I tested, so I was entitled to take the second year in Tunis, and NEA readily agreed, so I did. Then I went on to Abu Dhabi.

Q: So, late '93 to late '94 in Arabic, is that it?

KONTOS: No, it was August '93 to when we tested. I think I tested in early June and then left. I was in Abu Dhabi by July or August. Silly me. What a time to arrive in Abu Dhabi.

Q: What am I missing? What should I know about Abu Dhabi in 1994?

KONTOS: Well, let me go back to the Palestinian-Israeli talks. There's a lot of interest there. I said earlier that the Palestinians and Israelis—and Jordanians, early on—spent hours going around in circles to figure out who would be in the room, the shape of the table, the lunch hour, time out for the Shabat, and so on. It was silly stuff, but it's in every diplomatic playbook. There was one incident that I'll never forget, which really kind of drove it home and showed that they could be creative when they wanted to be.

We used to do these negotiations on the first floor of the State Department, just to the left as you walked in the C Street entrance. There are several conference rooms down there, pretty grim, windowless rooms. Perhaps that was deliberate. We would spend every day for a week or two weeks tending to the negotiations. In between sessions, everyone would mill around in the hallways and corridors, which are not very big, so the delegates—Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians—were all thrown together. The other delegations, the Syrians and Lebanese, were in other parts of the building, so we didn't see them. They didn't mix.

I think it was during the second or third round of talks. By then, I think they might have split the delegations, so the Jordanian and Palestinians delegations had started meeting separately with the Israelis. One day, everyone was out of the conference rooms for a

break or returning from lunch. The Palestinians and Israelis all filed into their conference room as usual, but the door stayed open. After about ten or fifteen minutes, they all walked out again. The Israelis said, "We're leaving. We can't work with these guys." The Palestinians were saying, "The Israelis are making ridiculous demands." We then learned that when they went into the room, one of the Palestinians was wearing a Palestinian flag lapel pin on his suit jacket. So, the Israelis said, "Thank you very much, but we're not going to talk until that pin comes off." Of course, the Palestinians weren't about to agree. So, here we were, negotiations about to collapse because of a lapel pin. I was in a panic, as was the rest of the U.S. team on the floor— Did you ever run into Patrick Kennedy?

Q: Oh, sure, of course.

KONTOS: Patrick Kennedy was at that time the administrative coordinator for the Arab-Israeli negotiations. He was in charge of all the preparations, arrangements for the conference sites, logistics, and so on. Patrick, as you know, can get really wound up. So, here we are, Patrick, me, and a couple of the other officers. None of the senior U.S. people were there. We were tearing our hair out, at our wits' ends, wondering how we would explain to Dennis Ross and the seventh floor that the peace talks had just failed on account of a lapel pin.

Q: Well, Dennis Ross I don't think would have been surprised, actually.

KONTOS: No, he was not. But here we were. We called up to Dan Kurtzer, and Kurtzer called Eli Rubinstein, the Israeli delegation head. Then he called Haider Abdul Shafi and the Palestinians at the Ritz, Husseini and Ashrawi. They were arguing back and forth, and I think Kurtzer actually came down to the corridor outside the conference room. But everyone kept milling around, muttering that this was the end of the road. Everyone is going home.

So, in the middle of all the hand wringing, we suddenly saw the Israelis and Palestinians walk back into the conference room, sit down, and close the door just like normal. They stayed inside for the rest of the afternoon as if it were just another session. Outside, the Americans were scratching their heads, wondering what the heck just happened. Then we noticed dozens of suit jackets in the break rooms. Each delegation had a room to use as a lounge between sessions. We realized the two delegations must have agreed that everyone would take off their suit jackets. So, they all went back into the conference room in just their shirt sleeves, no suit jackets, which meant, of course, no lapel pins either.

Q: That's a good one.

KONTOS: This was the story of our life for about a year and a half at least. It was little stupid things like this that could quickly turn into a crisis, but then we would somehow manage to get around it. Everybody was very much into posturing, and they never missed an opportunity to score political points. Another incident, when I got into trouble with Hanan Ashrawi, happened several rounds later, probably in 1993. Now, I sort of regret

that I followed protocol, but our instructions were clear. One rule was that when all the delegates were coming into the C Street entrance, the heads of delegation would get priority. They alone were given the courtesy of entering via the center aisle and bypassing security, while the others would wait.

I was escorting Ashrawi back from a meeting she had had with Dan Kurtzer in his sixth-floor office. As we walked into the C Street lobby, I saw the Israeli delegation coming in led by Eli Rubinstein. Because she was a senior member of the Palestinian delegation, she had been allowed to enter via the center aisle. But she did not have the same status as the head of delegation. On seeing Rubinstein, I followed protocol and nudged Ashrawi toward a side exit. I don't know if he saw her, but she definitely saw him. Within an hour, Dan Kurtzer called me into his office and asked, "What just happened? I got this stinging calling from Ashrawi complaining that you refused to let her meet Rubinstein." I said, "Dan, this is just what you told me to do. Those were the instructions." He replied, "Yeah, you were exactly right. She's really steamed, but you did exactly what you were supposed to." But to this day, I believe it would have been fascinating if I had forgotten the protocol rules and then witnessed the face-off between Rubinstein and Ashrawi as they collided in the center aisle.

Q: Yeah, sometimes that's where contacts are made when they're not really intended. What's the term for that, when people meet? Not track two diplomacy. There's a term for it, when people meet outside of the formal talks. Track two—

KONTOS: As I understand it, "track two" is terminology that came into vogue later to describe shadow negotiations between non-official parties, such as academics or NGOs. You could think of it as a simulation of actual negotiations, intended to point the way to possible resolutions. In any case, the Oslo channel wasn't what I would think of as track two, but instead a backchannel between Rabin and Arafat and their trusted associates. Again, by early 1993, I had the impression that the talks in Washington were making headway. But to go back to what I said earlier, the delegations in Washington were constantly hung up on final status issues versus interim status. I remember the Palestinians making the same declaration in every round of talks. They repeated it to us in our bilats, and I'm sure they did with the Israelis. They said, "We will not allow the interim status to become the final status."

Q: Understandable.

KONTOS: But that is exactly what happened with the creation of the Palestinian Authority, which after almost thirty years, has only limited control and essentially no acknowledged sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza. Perhaps that was the game plan all along for the Israelis. I think the U.S. objective was just get something done and break the impasse. The Oslo Accords were themselves very significant. But the failure was that, after Oslo, we couldn't get any further. We couldn't do any more to resolve the differences between Israel and the Palestinians, and things soon started to deteriorate. The Second Intifada began in September 2000, just a few months after I finished my

assignment in Jerusalem. That really set things back. Then, a more extreme nationalist Israeli government took hold, while Hamas and other Palestinian radicals came to the fore. But in the mid-'90s, particularly with Rabin as prime minister, the two sides had a real chance to push the negotiations and do something significant.

There are conflicting accounts of President Clinton and his last-ditch effort before he left office, but I was in Jerusalem at the time and wasn't involved in that. I don't have any insights on what happened there. That all took place in the U.S. As you well know, we do all the reporting from the field, and diplomatic initiatives overseas are usually well-documented in cable traffic, but when things happen in Washington, they're almost never reported widely. Likewise, with the Israeli-Palestinian talks at the State Department, we never really did any reporting. I remember writing internal memos or summaries for the NEA Front Office, but those were more like issue papers, not reporting cables or accounts of what happened.

Q: That is a loss. The media were saying that that Clinton effort— Of course, we don't really know what was going on, but apparently, everything Arafat wanted was given to him and then he walked away. I don't know if that's true, but that's the story the media picked up. They made him an offer he couldn't accept, or something like that. It's very sad, this business, because a lot of work went into it, and a lot of people were trying their best. It's a pity that nothing came of it. Well, let's see. We get to Abu Dhabi next. Should we do that next time? I'm looking at your bio here. I guess I don't see where that comes in. Should we take a rhetorical break between your work on the desk and your work in Abu Dhabi?

The United Arab Emirates

KONTOS: I don't know that I need to spend a lot of time on Abu Dhabi. We can probably do it in about five minutes. From 1994 to 1997, I was the only political officer at the embassy, so I served as the de facto political section chief in what was a small mission at the time. Our main concerns were Iran and Iraq. Back then, the UAE [United Arab Emirates] saw—and still sees—Iran as an existential threat. They often point to Iran's occupation of three islands in the Gulf—Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs—as proof that the Iranians have designs on UAE territory.

At the time, our priority with Iraq was enforcing UN sanctions, primarily the embargo of Iraq's oil exports. There was a food for oil program, but that permitted only limited international trade with Iraq. A specific goal for the U.S. mission in Abu Dhabi was curbing sanctions-busting trade by UAE-flagged or UAE-owned ships. The embassy spent a lot of time tracking these down, protesting to the Foreign Ministry, and seeking legal penalties against the owners. Oftentimes, when these ships were detained by the U.S. Navy or by others acting under UN resolutions, they would be diverted to the UAE. We always pressed the UAE to take legal action, to de-flag or confiscate ships and prosecute the owners. Most of the time, our efforts had little effect.

So, these were our main issues. There was not anything earth-shaking or reporting that would influence policy-making in Washington, apart from those issues. Of course, there were many interesting things about the Emirates. It had a very small population. There were many more foreigners in the UAE than there were citizens. The actual number of UAE citizens was not public and was a constant matter of speculation among foreign diplomats. I remember doing painstaking research to find out what the proportions really were. I succeeded to some extent, though it was a closely guarded secret in the UAE. Suffice to say that the official census or figures, which put the number of non-UAE nationals at about 80 percent—almost all of them guest workers in the UAE—and about 20 percent UAE nationals, was a sizable exaggeration. The numbers are more skewed than that. I won't say what they are, because that was a classified report, but I can say there are far fewer UAE nationals than the government lets on. When you look at the really influential emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the number of their citizens is miniscule.

So, the UAE has a shallow foundation, let's say. The country has a total lack of natural resources except for oil. The population is dependent on desalinated water. It's amazing to drive through the Emirates and see lush gardens and miles of highway with trees planted alongside. They're all watered with drip irrigation, and I think that's almost all desalinated water. It's a fragile existence and a tiny population. Yet the UAE has developed into a regional power over the years and made the most of a difficult geographic situation.

Q: That is very interesting. I have a three o'clock call, Steve, but what comes after UAE? Should we get that on the docket?

KONTOS: We already talked about it. From the UAE, I went to Jerusalem. We talked about that earlier, and we talked about Bosnia where I went after Jerusalem. So, I think this clears the decks, and we can start on Syria and ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] next time.

Conflict and Stabilization Operations: Aiding Opposition to the Syrian Regime

Q: Today is, let me check— It's the thirty-first of July with Steve Kontos and Dan Whitman. On we go. I think we were going to get to Syria in this conversation, but let's go from where you were. Jerusalem, Bosnia, UAE. I'm going in the opposite order. Where would you like to start, Steve?

KONTOS: I think we'll get into the meat of it by starting with the CSO [Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations] assignment and what happened after that.

Q: Okay. So, here we are. You're with CSO. I'm forgetting what year that was.

KONTOS: I started in 2012.

Q: Okay. Let's go from there.

KONTOS: It was a two-year assignment in Washington. CSO is the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization Operations. It was a new creature, a new invention for State. The bureau had only been in existence for about a year when I joined. It had first started about seven years earlier as S/CRS, which was the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. The problem was that nobody could really figure out what to do with it. In the early days, it had little support from Congress and minimal funding. State's leadership knew only that, in the connection with the second Iraq war, there was almost no State Department or USAID role in the post-war planning. Civilian involvement was sorely needed for successful stabilization operations, which led the U.S. government to create this capacity in the State Department.

I joined at the time the old S/CRS was reorganizing as a new bureau, CSO, and updating its mission. The new assistant secretary, Rick Barton, had been involved in Democratic Party politics and was a political appointee. But he had also been a UN ambassador in the past and had links to the NGO community.

Q: Right, he was one of those who created OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] in USAID, and on that basis, was chosen to be Obama's CSO person. CSO, as you say, or S/CRS was created by Condoleezza Rice—created, but not funded. That was one of the original problems. It had a very shaky start. So, under Obama, I'm interested to hear how things went from your viewpoint. Rick Barton had a USAID past and was a very able person. So, you were assigned to CSO, and that ended up being a Syria-related assignment, is that right?

KONTOS: Yes, exactly. Well, it happened like this. I originally came in as deputy director for Africa Operations. I did that for about a year. It was a standard deputy job, supervising, day to day, all the Africa staff, of whom there were probably anywhere from twelve to fifteen people. Sometimes it was more, depending on contractors and staff detailed from other Federal agencies. On a couple of occasions, I was assigned to lead specific projects, for example, trying to provide stabilization assistance to Libya, even though it was a non-permissive environment and only a skeleton staff at the embassy that could rarely leave the compound. It's an interesting story, too, but I'll skip over it for the moment.

Since 2012, CSO had been providing a significant amount of non-lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition in its campaign against the Bashar al-Assad regime. This, of course, was connected to the Syrian Revolution, which began in 2011 after a series of violent repressions and crackdowns on peaceful protesters in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The confrontations between the regime and mostly Sunni protesters became progressively more violent during 2011, becoming a full-blown rebellion by the end of the year. At the beginning, the anti-government demonstrations were spontaneous, but later the protests became more organized and widespread. The protest movement eventually turned into an armed insurrection as Syrian soldiers joined the opposition and civilians took up arms.

From 2012 to 2015, CSO provided about 135 million dollars in non-lethal assistance to a variety of recipients. I'll go into the details when I describe my assignment. But it's important to note that by far the largest share of the bureau's resources was devoted to its program supporting the Syrian opposition.

There was a staff in Washington of a dozen or more people working on the Syria program and ten or so people in the field. CSO assigned its more senior staff to lead the field team because, along with supervisory responsibility, the job required close coordination with our embassy and consulates in Turkey, other U.S. agencies, Turkish and other foreign officials, and of course a wide range of Syrian opposition contacts. Each deployment averaged six months, so after more than a year of operations, going into the middle of 2013, CSO had cycled through its senior officers in the Near East section of the bureau and wanted to bring in someone new. The Front Office asked me, since I had Middle East experience, Arabic language, and was willing to go overseas. So, in September 2013, I deployed to Turkey to be based in Istanbul as the field team director. I'll pause there in case there's anything you need for context or anything I should fill in, any questions to answer.

Q: I don't see any. I guess I would just ask— You said you had people in the field, but there was nobody specifically assigned to Syria, right? It was just too dangerous.

KONTOS: Correct. No official Americans were permitted to cross into Syria, and American citizens were warned not to visit. It was too dangerous. The U.S. never questioned the sovereignty of Syria as a country. The problem was with the existing regime. But there were diplomatic implications of sending people in without any real permission from anybody.

Q: Right. I guess you'll get to this, but I'd be interested to know the CSO field team's relation to the government of Turkey. The government of Turkey, I believe, was very concerned about Syria going south, and wanted to try to staunch the damage. Perhaps they saw CSO people as a positive presence, but I guess you'll get into that.

KONTOS: Managing the relationship with the Turks, especially keeping them properly informed, was a big piece of the job. We had to get their permission for a lot of our activities, because so much involved cross-border operations—for example, shipping equipment and supplies into Syria for opposition activists and arranging for activists to enter Turkey for training, meetings, and conferences. There were also routine matters, such as import licenses, customs and tax waivers, visas, and many more. So, yes, dealing with Turkey was a big part of the whole operation.

Q: So, were the Turks understanding and maybe cooperative? Did they actually provide resources or help in any way?

KONTOS: They did. Not directly, but indirectly. Of course, they were already making a huge outlay to support some three million Syrian refugees. To take just a few examples, they helped provide security for the U.S. team, though this was not something that we saw directly. They also expedited deliveries of our equipment and supplies into Syria for the opposition, not to mention import licenses and customs permits to transit Turkey. We were basically dealing with a normal country with its own laws and regulations, not to mention an extensive bureaucracy. The Turkish government seemed to have many of the same problems with interagency coordination as we do in the U.S., and sometimes different Turkish agencies worked at cross-purposes. Below the surface, we had to contend with differences or rivalries among Turkish officials. Some supported the multinational effort to strengthen the Syrian opposition. Others were ambivalent or even opposed to it. So, whether we were dealing with visas, residency permits, transit of supplies and equipment or security arrangements, particularly if we were near the border or working with Syrian counterparts, we depended heavily on the Turks for support.

There was a whole other layer of Turkish involvement when it concerned the Syrians themselves. We were dealing directly with Syrian opposition activists and, in some cases, representatives of the more moderate armed groups, usually people in leadership roles. The Turks kept close tabs and sometimes blocked our interactions with Syrian contacts. Most of the time, however, the Syrians were able to move back and forth across the border and stay inside Turkey. This was essential to the success of our operation. As I said, we operated with Turkish consent and sometimes direct assistance. But that support would ebb and flow, depending on what was happening politically or on the ground in Syria. There were not a few instances when we had significant differences with Turkish officials, sometimes local, sometimes at the national level. We saw first-hand examples of Turkey's labyrinthine bureaucracy, perhaps not talking to one another, and providing different answers about movements to and from Syria or restricting our activities. So, it was a constant challenge, really, to stay on top of it all and keep things running smoothly.

Q: Yes. Why would they want to put restrictions on CSO, which was doing everything, I think, that the Turkish government agreed with?

KONTOS: Well, again, there were different elements within the Turkish bureaucracy. Let's say the Foreign Ministry was enthusiastic about one of our projects or initiatives. That message might not get to Customs Bureau or the Ministry of Trade or the immigration office and so on. We had to fight different battles with various elements of the Turkish bureaucracy, some of whom were more helpful than others. Once in a while we would get hung up getting licenses or permits—sometimes to transit large quantities of equipment or allow our NGOs to work in Turkey—and ask the ambassador or the DCM in Ankara to weigh in with whichever Turkish office was giving us problems. So, it was a complicated operation. Looking at the bigger picture, the Turks agreed with our overall strategy of support to the moderate opposition in Syria, but on the ground, at the tactical level, there was a whole mosaic of different factors and influences at play.

At the higher level, I think Turkish officials wanted to keep a lid on the international support for the Syrian revolution. They wanted to keep control of the campaign. They didn't want us or anyone else to be getting out ahead of them. This certainly came into play with the Kurds. The Syrian Kurds were more or less on the sidelines of the revolution at the time and not a big part of our program. But when we did anything involving Kurdish activists, it obviously raised all kinds of problems with the Turks. I can say more about them if you like, but our support for Syrian Kurds was minimal, partly because the Turks made it so difficult and partly because Syrian Kurdish politics made it even more difficult. But let's set the stage a little bit. Again, let me pause if there's any question you want to follow up.

Q: Well, you mentioned Kurds. We know that the Turkish government is quite hysterically opposed to Kurdish separatist movements. Did the Turkish government see Kurds as one monolithic group? They claim that the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] is a terrorist group. Did they see all Kurds as an existential threat to them? Did they make a distinction between the PKK and other Kurds?

KONTOS: To some extent, they distinguished between the PKK and others at the time, but they were still suspicious of all Kurds. I remember we had some projects that included Syrian Kurdish activists who were helping the opposition. In one case, they had set up a local radio station and were trying to expand their programming. We were training some of their staff to give them the basics of, for lack of a better term, democratic norms, as well as how to set up an organization, how to keep transparent financial accounts, and so on. We had a lot of difficulty, even with those few individual Kurdish contacts, just getting them across the border from northeastern Syria into Turkey and getting them back with the modest equipment we gave them—laptops, satellite phones, that kind of thing. We always had difficulty helping our Kurdish beneficiaries, whether because of the Turks or because of the main Kurdish political party in Syria, the leftist PYD [Democratic Union Party].

Q: What sort of problems?

KONTOS: Well, again, the Turks might not allow them to cross the border. Sometimes, if we gave them equipment to carry back with them into northern Syria, Turkish border guards would confiscate it. Then we'd have to track it down and lobby to have it released to our recipients. As for the PYD, they made life difficult for independent activists and others they saw as potential political rivals.

Q: It sounds like the Turkish government did not want you helping Kurds in any way.

KONTOS: It's difficult to generalize from our experience because these incidents happened in the field, usually at one or another border crossing. It may be that some Turkish border police or customs officers took it upon themselves to harass Syrian Kurds without necessarily any direction or order from Ankara or from a senior level official. Sometimes we were able to resolve these problems; sometimes they dragged on. Again,

we had a lot of difficulties, because I think that within the Turkish bureaucracy itself, they were conflicted. There were interagency rivalries, and they didn't always talk to one another or agree on decisions. This spanned every aspect of what we did.

I need to describe in general terms what our assistance entailed and what we aimed to accomplish. So, bear with me. Our overall strategy was to empower the moderate Syrian opposition. This will get more complicated as we talk about it further. There were different elements of the Syrian opposition, ranging from actual moderates—university professors, civil servants, businessmen, and so on—to radical al-Qaeda-affiliated people. At the extreme end of the spectrum was an organization called *Jabhat al-Nusra*, or the Nusra Front, which had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and, like it or not, was also probably the most effective fighting force among all the Syrian rebel groups. ISIS was also part of the mix but not really part of the revolution against the Syrian regime. All of them welcomed foreign recruits, though only a few, especially the more radical groups, had the financial resources to support foreigners.

The U.S., and CSO specifically, was trying to empower the moderate opposition inside Syria, but also exiles outside the country, especially in Turkey. We focused on activists in Syrian communities, with the aim of establishing some form of civilian control over the armed groups, unifying the opposition and creating a single front that could stand on its own and perhaps even establish an interim government. Our holy grail was the transformation of a disparate collection of rebels and opposition activists—moderates, that is—into a unified political and military force that could be recognized as a legitimate alternative to the Assad regime. Opposition leaders outside Syria did in fact create an interim government in late 2013, but it was half-baked, poorly organized, and most of all, lacked the support of most activists and fighters inside Syria. Nobody, including the U.S., ever recognized it officially for those reasons, although we and other international backers provided modest financial support and encouraged its leaders to build bridges with the "internal" opposition, meaning those actually inside Syria.

The rebels were a varied set of players from different provinces in Syria, different communities. To put it simply, our objective was to link them together in a unified movement that would force Bashar al-Assad to negotiate a transition to a new Syrian government. At the community level, we tried to foster creation of a legitimate form of local governance, usually local councils composed of individuals acknowledged, if not actually elected, as community leaders. The local councils, in turn, would "elect" provincial councils, a higher level of governance, which would feed into a national level interim government. So, on paper, it was logical and made sense. When we discussed it with the Syrians, they said, "Yes, this is perfect. We get this."

In practical terms, it meant training, equipping, and financing local and provincial councils comprised of civilians in rebel-held areas. With our assistance, the expectation was that the local councils could establish themselves as legitimate authorities, and in turn, legitimize the provincial councils, and ultimately opposition leaders at the national level. So, working with the local councils was key to our strategy. Many of the local

council members started out as protest leaders and organizers. As the armed elements drove out the Syrian police, military, and other regime officials, the locals were left to their own devices to govern themselves, manage municipal services, run the schools, staff clinics, and so on.

We helped them do that through our training and material assistance in different communities. At the same time, we hosted conferences to bring different local councils together and encouraged them to network, collaborate, and eventually set up provincial councils that would have wider authority and serve as conduits for resources provided by the international community.

As we continue, I'll describe CSO's programs, then we can talk more about the underlying policy.

Q: Right. So, I take it you were not actually able to cross the border, and you did all of your work from Istanbul?

KONTOS: Negative. We had a complicated circuit in order to spend as much time as we could with the Syrians who came from the inside. We were based in Istanbul, largely because the consulate had the facilities and the space, and security was important. It was more secure in Istanbul than near the border. In addition, many of the exiled Syrian opposition leaders and activists resided there. However, we spent a fair amount of time at the U.S. consulate in Adana, which was the jumping off point to areas that were even closer to the Syrian border, particularly the city of Gaziantep, due east of Adana. Gaziantep is also about sixty miles north of Aleppo and near one of the main border crossings from Syria into Turkey. At the time, Aleppo and the surrounding region were mostly in rebel hands, with local and provincial councils led by opposition activists. Another area of interest for us was Antakya—Antioch in ancient times—where many of the rebel military units had their supply depots and rear headquarters. We visited Antakya, but less frequently, because of the security risks. There were two major car bomb attacks there in 2013, not to mention numerous smaller incidents. We were also concerned about threats in Gaziantep, but it wasn't as dicey as Antakya.

A few of the staff were based in Adana, but the facilities weren't adequate. The access to classified was limited, although we had occasional access to DOD [Department of Defense] facilities at the nearby Incirlik air base, and the space was cramped. There was an ongoing debate over moving the whole START operation to Adana, but that never happened for a variety of reasons. So, we kept the odd arrangement involving the circuit from Istanbul to Adana and then to Gaziantep.

A typical week would be, say, Monday in Istanbul to catch up with cables and paperwork, as well as the consulate's weekly staff meeting. We also met opposition people in Istanbul, particularly the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Many of the diplomatic missions we partnered with also based their Syria experts in Istanbul. Then there were our implementing partners. We relied heavily on grantees—international and U.S.

NGOs—that did the actual work of training and equipping the Syrians, and they too were based in Istanbul. So, we had a fair amount of administrative and logistics work in Istanbul. On Tuesday, I would fly to Adana, participate in a START [the Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team] weekly staff meeting, after which everyone would fan out to Gaziantep or sometimes Antakya. We'd spend the rest of the week in Gaziantep, changing hotels frequently. We had to vary our routines, vary where we stayed and carefully choose where we met Syrian contacts. At the end of the week, we returned to Istanbul for the weekend, and then the whole cycle would start again.

Extensive security procedures were a major part of our operations. We faced potential threats from agents of the Syrian regime, as well as Islamic extremists, primarily ISIS. The field team had a dedicated DS [Diplomatic Security] officer and kept in close contact with the DS offices in Adana, Istanbul, and Ankara. Whenever we traveled to southern Turkey—often weekly to Gaziantep—we had to file a detailed travel plan, with the names of Syrian contacts with whom we would meet, and then wait for permission from DS to proceed. We were required to stay at different hotels on each visit to Gaziantep, report our movements and inform DS when we were wheels up returning to Istanbul or Ankara. No overnight stays were permitted in Antakya. We also had to take extreme care with our computer security, especially use of the Internet, because Syrian intelligence—with Iranian and probably Russian help—was adept at hijacking internet sites, hacking into laptops, and tracking cell phones. Electronic surveillance was a particular threat to our Syrian contacts, not to mention a risk to our own work. Still, opposition activists depended on the Internet for information and communicating with one another. I also recall at least one instance in 2014 when hackers penetrated the electronic records of our U.S. grantees. But the danger to our contacts inside Syria was far greater. On several occasions, the regime bombed meetings of opposition activists inside Syria after its surveillance tracked Internet messages and cell phone traffic to pinpoint the locations.

All of this was pretty much unprecedented—for State to help manage a revolution, back an armed insurrection, and work directly with local activists seeking to replace the existing regime. A lot of attention and money went into this. So, what did the money go for? As I explained, a significant amount was for training local councils and trying to expand their networks, create new local councils, train their leaders and staff, and equip them with what they needed to communicate, organize, run municipal services, and build support in their communities. USAID, particularly its Office of Transitions Initiatives [OTI], was also heavily involved. For example, OTI provided heavy equipment for maintaining infrastructure—streets, electricity grids, water supply, sewage, waste disposal, et cetera, as well as supplies and equipment for schools and clinics. Improved municipal services were a key element in building support for the opposition-led local councils and strengthening their legitimacy. One related program was training and equipping Syrians in rebel-held areas as civil defense teams, that is, to carry out search and rescue operations after regime bombing attacks. As more teams formed, they established a network to support one another, becoming known collectively as the White Helmets.

There were several other components to our assistance. One was helping the opposition media—independent, homegrown media outlets scattered around northern Syria, mostly informal radio stations. Activists were also doing a lot via the Internet, especially putting out videos to document battles, regime atrocities, and such. So, we provided them with equipment, training, and—very important—security protocols to protect them from the threats of computer hacking and even bombing by regime aircraft. As I mentioned before, the Syrian regime, with Iranian support, was good at hacking, either to disrupt opposition communications or gather intelligence. Radio transmitters, laptops, and cellphones could be traced, and their locations bombed or raided. For safety, activists moved around often and relocated their transmitters. To ensure better protection, we provided encrypted satellite phones, not just to media staff but to members of the local councils and senior officers of the opposition Free Police.

There were even bigger components of our program. We were concerned about ways to maintain security and public safety in rebel-held communities. The local councils started organizing independent police, many of whom had been police officers under the regime but defected or simply continued to work after senior regime officials fled. The Aleppo Provincial Council took the further step of consolidating all the local police units into the Syrian Free Police, later expanded to include Idlib and Latakia Provinces. In cooperation with the UK and Denmark, we provided training, as well as much of the non-lethal equipment they needed: vehicles, laptops, radios, office equipment, office supplies, and so on. The U.S. also led the way in providing cash stipends to each police officer, though this became one of the most difficult parts of our assistance to implement. We can come back to that later. During the year I was in Turkey, the Free Police expanded to cover nearly 150 police stations in Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia Provinces, with close to two thousand police officers supported through our program.

Finally, the component of our assistance, which involved the largest financial outlay, was non-lethal support to the armed groups. That's a whole story in itself. I can't get into all the details because of classification, but there's enough in the media for everyone to know there was significant U.S. support to rebel militias, both covert and overt. Our piece of it was to cover the non-lethal side—supply trucks, ambulances, construction equipment, communications gear, medical supplies, and food provisions. We did not provide stipends, rather in lieu of that we delivered enough food packages each month to feed not just the fighters, but also their families. In addition, we provided training in inventory management for the Free Syrian Army [FSA] logistics officers to help them set up an efficient supply chain for the frontline fighters. The non-lethal aid to the armed groups took up a lot of my time, because it was important to get right.

Q: So, resources— CSO did not have a lot of material resources, I think. You mentioned working with USAID. Can you go over what were the sources of the funds that you needed to supply these things, and how closely did you work with USAID?

KONTOS: We worked with our USAID counterparts almost daily. We were pretty much hand in glove with them, as well as with State Department refugee affairs officers, and others. What's important to point out is that although CSO was the first on the ground, the others soon followed, and Ambassador Robert Ford, the accredited but "exiled" U.S. ambassador to Syria, became the apex of all of this.

Ambassador Ford decided that we needed some sort of coordinating mechanism, so the State Department, USAID, and everyone else concerned created the Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team, START. This was a specialized interagency group based in Turkey, most working from Istanbul, with others in Ankara and Adana. All of them were working together on the overall program of support to the Syrian opposition. What began as a CSO initiative eventually became START, coordinated among State, USAID, and the other agencies providing assistance to the rebels.

By the end of 2013, the various members of START had written up a joint strategy that defined our common objectives and who was doing what. The strategy was put into a cable sent to DC at the beginning of 2014. Washington gave the thumbs up, and the funding was approved more or less as we had proposed. At the time I was in Turkey, CSO's programs were in the range of a hundred million dollars total. USAID, mainly the Office of Transition Initiatives [OTI] and Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance [OFDA] had additional funds, as did the State Department's Bureau of Refugee Affairs and Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [DRL]. U.S. assistance included large amounts of food and medical aid for Syrians who were displaced, as well as those resident in areas under rebel control. It was a huge effort coordinated by START, the director of which was a senior USAID officer named Mark Ward. He was in that position for at least two years—there when I arrived and there when I left.

Q: So, this might be a very good example of an interagency effort actually working, because there are many examples of where it did not work so well. Would you say that this was a model for interagency cooperation?

KONTOS: Yes, for sure. It's a model people are still looking at. What I can say is that in my experience, the interagency, which I've encountered in a lot of places—certainly in Bosnia and in Turkey—worked well in the field. The country teams or START—whatever coordination we had going in the field—usually worked smoothly. It was when Washington got involved that things would go off the rails. If I have any advice for someone trying to deal with the interagency, I would say give the field the resources and let them take the lead. They know the particulars, and they will work it out. We did.

I don't want to spend a lot of time explaining the logistics of our operations, but we were in constant touch with one another, even though we were dispersed around Turkey and occasionally Jordan. Mark Ward made a point of bringing the staff together regularly. Everyone traveled to weekly staff meetings, usually in Adana or sometimes in Ankara or Istanbul. He kept close tabs on what everybody was doing. Those of us who were there long enough established good relationships with the other START members. I had

excellent relationships with USAID folks—OTI in particular—even though in Washington, CSO and OTI are often seen as rivals.

We also worked closely with embassy and consulate colleagues. As I mentioned earlier, there were all sorts of problems with the Turkish government. We often had to rope in the embassy political section or the principal officer in Adana to help iron things out with the Turks. So, the embassy and consulates had to be looped in to what we were doing. There were other USG elements dealing directly with the armed opposition that I can't specify, but we dealt pretty closely with them, too. We had to operate with a common understanding of which armed groups were vetted and took priority for U.S. assistance.

Q: What about the EU and UN? Was the US on its own here?

KONTOS: Absolutely not—the U.S. had a lot of help from allies and partners. This was another success story for CSO and START. We kept in close touch with other foreign missions, especially those from Western Europe. The U.S. was not the only government interested in helping the opposition make headway against the regime. There was a significant European effort, primarily through bilateral channels. The EU itself provided humanitarian assistance but didn't provide direct support to the rebels, as there was no EU-wide consensus on opposing the regime. But we coordinated frequently with individual governments to help the opposition and even combined forces on some programs. Although CSO started the program of assistance to the Syrian Free Police, the UK and Denmark soon took on equal shares, coordinating closely with us to agree on priorities, types of support, and our collective messaging to the Syrians. Western European governments also helped with other key lines of effort, like training the local councils and supporting some of the armed groups. Likewise, early on, CSO cooperated with the Turks in providing equipment and training to the White Helmets, Syrian volunteers who were basically first responders after regime air attacks.

Q: These were Syrian citizens organizing themselves, the White Helmets. Is that correct?

KONTOS: Correct. In every case, it was the Syrian activists organizing themselves, and we helped them. Once there was a kernel of organization, we then funded training and provided equipment. In the case of the White Helmets, it was specialized training, equipment for rescue operations, ambulances, and other vehicles. This was one of CSO's first programs. Our program, implemented by a Turkish NGO, AKUT **(***Arama Kurtarma Derneği*), eventually trained more than a dozen teams from different rebel-held areas in Syria. CSO was successful insofar as we transitioned out of the program and turned it over to other sponsors, primarily the Japanese and British.

Q: Okay. Now, it's so weird to think of Robert Ford sitting in Damascus. I know he had to leave shortly after the revolution began. It must have been excruciating to be in that position, perceived by the host government as insubordinate and undermining its control. Any comments? How did Robert Ford navigate this extremely difficult task that he had?

KONTOS: Ambassador Ford was the linchpin for this whole thing. He and I knew one another, but we didn't spend much time together. By the time I arrived in Turkey to join START, he was close to finishing up. He had been withdrawn from Damascus in late 2011 but continued working from Washington and travelling to the region frequently to meet with opposition leaders. By the end of 2013, he began turning over his responsibilities and was succeeded in early 2014 by Daniel Rubenstein, who had the title of special envoy.

Q: When Ford left Damascus, basically, the embassy shut down, right?

KONTOS: Well, not exactly. The physical embassy shut down shortly after he left, but he continued as the accredited ambassador, and in effect what happened was that the few people left in the embassy transferred to other posts in the region and became our channel of communication to the Syrian opposition. What started out as a very informal, small-scale operation liaising with the opposition turned into a big effort, providing political and diplomatic support, as well as logistical and material assistance.

You have to remember, at the time, the U.S. was trying to reach some kind of negotiated solution in Syria. This eventually led to talks in Geneva between the regime and representatives of the opposition. Our ultimate goal was, first, to create a credible and recognized opposition-led interim government and then to negotiate an arrangement that would lead to a transition from the Assad regime to a more inclusive government.

Q: Yeah, that didn't get very far.

KONTOS: Ford was heavily involved in this diplomatic effort, insofar as the U.S. and its partners were helping legitimize the Syrian opposition by building up its popular support. He was very interested in what CSO did, because our staff had such close ties with activists inside Syria. He was constantly—especially before I got there, when he was still in his primary role—calling our junior officers and asking them, "You had a conversation with such and such. Tell me more about it," or, "Can you pass a message on to such and such?" So, he was very much involved in those communications.

Another name that I should mention, someone who really ought to do an oral history if he hasn't already, is a guy named Haynes Mahoney. Haynes Mahoney had been the DCM in Damascus, and then moved to Istanbul after the embassy closed. He was in Istanbul when I arrived, and we worked together pretty much the whole time I was there until he retired in the summer of 2014. He was our main channel to the Syrian opposition leadership, especially the exiles. Perhaps I didn't mention earlier that most of the prominent opposition figures resided in Istanbul, where many wealthy Syrians had fled as the Assad regime became more repressive.

I mentioned local, provincial, and national-level opposition. The national level was primarily expatriates, especially those in Istanbul. They considered themselves the leaders of the movement, and we led them along. They eventually formed or tried to form

the Syrian interim government. So, it was mostly these people that Haynes was constantly talking to, trying to maneuver, trying to convince, trying to unify and smooth over differences. Haynes also had contacts among some militia commanders. He and Ford were the primary conduits, but Haynes was doing this day in and day out, whereas Ford was in Washington and a little bit further removed.

Q: So, officially, he was DCM Damascus living in Istanbul?

KONTOS: I'm not sure what his official position was. I think that at that point, it was a Y tour, perhaps as a senior adviser for NEA or something like that.

Q: Okay, sure. I've been in touch, actually, recently with Haynes, so I hope to get some follow-up on that. This is great. Well, we know how it worked out. A lot of effort went into this, with a lot of good people and resources. Was it Assad himself who was the only reason why this did not give the results that we wanted?

KONTOS: Sorry, you mean the U.S. policy?

Q: Yeah, all of your good efforts and resources. Of course, today, the situation is deplorable. What was it? Why did it turn so bad? Was it just one individual, Assad?

KONTOS: No, of course not. The regime was close to collapsing, but there were many reasons the opposition couldn't prevail. Most important, the opposition failed to unify. They were fragmented and constantly at odds, if not openly fighting one another. Most of the armed groups didn't trust one another and failed to concentrate their forces effectively or create a unified front. That's the short version. There were a lot of factors behind this fragmentation, some of which I witnessed personally.

When I was there, the rebels still had the upper hand militarily. They controlled almost all of Aleppo and Idlib provinces, as well as Raqqa and Deir az-Zour. In those areas, Syrian military units still under Assad's control were confined to a few bases and enclaves of regime loyalists. Rebel militias had also seized significant parts of Hama and Latakia provinces. I think West Aleppo was still under regime control. The regime also held the road connecting West Aleppo to Damascus and some towns in between, but this control was very tenuous. It was the same further south in the Hama Province and even some areas around Damascus. But with help from Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces, the regime was starting to stabilize its positions, although at that point it controlled less than half the country. Things began to change significantly in 2014, largely because of the rapid advance of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. The large-scale deployment of Russian forces in 2015 probably sealed the fate of the moderate opposition.

ISIS fighters and supporters had been present in Syria for some time—that's another story we can get into, but perhaps not in detail right now. ISIS was nominally part of the opposition. However, they were playing an entirely different game. There was a whole range of opposition fighters or just fighters out there. As I mentioned, some were more

extreme like the Jabhat al-Nusra faction, which was linked to al-Qaeda. There were other radical Islamic groups, and ISIS was viewed for a time as just another one of many armed groups. But ISIS was different, and they had a plan. They were slowly undermining the opposition, especially the moderate groups, attacking them and assassinating moderate leaders. They were going after journalists, media broadcasters, and prominent activists. So, slowly, there appeared this fifth column within opposition territory that was starting to put things on edge and disrupt normalcy, let's say, in the opposition-held areas. By early 2014, ISIS was openly attacking more moderate groups and seizing towns. ISIS fighters were becoming more aggressive throughout northern Syria, especially in Deir az-Zour Province and northern Aleppo.

At the same time, the regime was going hard after the moderates, too. The apocryphal story that our opposition contacts repeated again and again, was that the regime never attacked ISIS. Regime forces never bombed ISIS bases. They didn't attack them. They didn't intervene if ISIS advanced into areas contested by the opposition. Instead, the regime focused all its effort on the moderates. Why was that? In my opinion, the regime saw, and ISIS also saw, the moderates as their biggest threat. Why were the moderates the biggest threat? Because they had legitimacy. They had popular support. They had local councils, whose members were selected by a free and transparent process. Moderate activists were doing things that nobody else was doing, and their democratic processes, such as they were, were popular. So, the extremists were afraid of them. Assad was afraid of them. That's why both went after the moderates. Of course, they also saw the fight against the moderates, by extension, as a way to strike a blow against the U.S. and its Western allies.

So, you had ISIS, you had opposition fragmentation. The regime was clinging on with the help of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. Russia, at this point, had not intervened directly. The other piece of this story was opposition confidence and morale. I don't think the rebels ever quite trusted us, particularly after summer of 2013. You remember President Obama's so-called "red line" after the regime's first big chemical attack? Every opposition person, man and woman, that we ever talked to criticized Obama and harped on the fact that he never followed through on his warning. They argued that had Obama done so and taken significant military action against the regime, that decision could have galvanized the various fighting groups and perhaps enabled them to tip the balance against the regime. So, there was an undercurrent of distrust of the U.S. and its allies. If the rebels couldn't depend on the U.S., they would have to be on their guard and seek alternatives for financial and material support.

That suspicion played into some of the other international rivalries that added yet another layer of complications—for example, differences between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on one hand and Qatar on the other. Each side supported different armed groups among the rebels and, by doing so, contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition.

Q: Yeah. Very ominous, and we know that things turned pretty bad after that. Let's see. No particular questions, Steve. This must have been really hectic, very challenging, and

nerve-wracking. What was your sense, during the time you were there? Did you think the opposition might in fact get the upper hand? They never did.

KONTOS: We knew that it would be a long haul. We believed from the get-go that if the rebels were able to unify and coordinate their efforts, they could get the upper hand. The potential was there. We really struggled to make that happen, and also to help them consolidate their control and their hold over areas they controlled. Again, our political objective wasn't necessarily a military victory, but rather to bring the regime to serious negotiations and to set up a transitional government. I don't think we ever aimed for a decisive military victory, but enough progress on the battlefield to pressure the regime into negotiating concessions.

Q: Would Assad have responded to that, if there had been more military success from the opposition? It seems like he's the most stubborn person one could imagine. Would he have negotiated ever?

KONTOS: The regime did negotiate. They didn't get all that serious, but there were two rounds of talks in Geneva, one of which occurred while I was in Turkey, and one of which was scheduled the summer I left. I don't know what ultimately happened except that the Geneva talks made no progress, but I distinctly remember the first round. Like the early rounds of the Palestinian-Israeli talks I described earlier, most of it was just posturing and trying to get some sort of public relations advantage over the other one. But the fact is that Syrian regime officials did show up. They didn't talk face to face with the opposition delegates, but I'm convinced that had the rebels made a little more military progress in 2014, then perhaps by the second round, the regime might have talked more seriously about a political transition.

Q: That's very sad. At what point did the Russians come in? Much later, I think.

KONTOS: Yes, I think it was the latter part of 2015. We were then in the thick of the fight against ISIS. I imagine both the Syrian regime and the Russians saw the international campaign against ISIS as a golden opportunity, because we were focused entirely on defeating ISIS. By 2015, we were doing very little for the anti-Assad opposition apart from trying to enlist them against ISIS. So, the regime and its foreign backers thought they could make quick work of the moderate opposition in northwestern Syria. As it turned out, it still took them a couple of years, but they nearly achieved their objective. With the help of heavy Russian bombing and reinforcements from Iranian-supported foreign militias, they essentially leveled eastern Aleppo and drove out the rebels by late 2016. That took the wind out of what was left of the opposition.

At the same time, the storyline the Assad regime used repeatedly was that the rebels did not represent a genuine, popular movement. They were instead just a bunch of terrorists and extremists. They would point to al-Nusra or ISIS as, "The real opposition that we're dealing with." They dismissed the moderates as an insignificant part of the opposition or simply as terrorists who lied about their moderate ideology. So, the regime's mantra was

that this was a fight against terrorism. Its strategy aimed to create that reality, despite evidence to the contrary. Regime forces and their backers gave priority to destroying the moderate groups, while leaving ISIS, al-Nusra and the other radical groups for the future. So, after the moderates had been destroyed, they could say, "We're just fighting radical terrorists. Back off. Leave us alone, or better yet help us."

Q: Wow.

KONTOS: The regime's narrative progressed over time, and after Aleppo fell, it had pretty much created that reality—that is to say, a rebel front dominated by Islamic extremists. The moderates were mostly decimated, leaving al-Nusra as by far the most powerful rebel force left in northern Syria. The Kurds also had a formidable military, but they were not aligned with the anti-regime opposition. Theirs is a much different story.

Q: Right. Well, this is such a sad story. The moderates that you met, did they blame Obama or the U.S. in general for leading them on and then abandoning them?

KONTOS: Yes. They didn't put it in quite those terms, but they did fear that we were abandoning them and hoped we would change. They would say, "You're not giving us enough support. You need to give us more weapons, more money, more equipment, and so on. Give us more diplomatic support." They were especially insistent about getting anti-aircraft missiles to counter regime air attacks. They constantly pleaded, "Give us shoulder-fired missiles so we can shoot down the regime helicopters and stop the barrel bombs." And, as I said, Syrian activists universally blamed Obama for not following through on his threat to retaliate against the Syrian regime if it used chemical weapons.

Q: Why did the U.S. not provide anti-aircraft missiles?

KONTOS: I can't really get into the details, but obviously, from what you saw in the media and from the previous U.S. experience in Afghanistan, there was a real concern that if we provided portable anti-aircraft missiles [MANPADs], we'd risk losing control, and al-Nusra or ISIS might get hold of them. This goes back to the story of disunity and fragmentation among the opposition groups. They often attacked one another and would steal one another's equipment or "reallocate" it at gunpoint. There were even instances when significant amounts of our non-lethal aid—trucks, food, medical supplies, and so on—were stolen or looted by armed factions that we did not support. The U.S. doesn't have a good track record of protecting this stuff, while the Syrians themselves failed to come together and create a dependable, effective military force capable of defending its own supply depots.

Q: Right. A pretty sad story. Next time, I think we want to try to get further into this. You were in Istanbul, you said, for one year and then another year. Was that how it was?

KONTOS: No. I was in the field for just one year, until September of 2014, after which I came back and rejoined CSO's main office. At that time, the U.S. government was just

starting to react to the rapid ISIS advance into Iraq and Syria. The department set up a task force in September, and I started a month later as the task force coordinator. At the beginning of 2015, the task force was disbanded and its functions taken on by a newly created Counter-ISIS Coalition office in the NEA Bureau. I served as the deputy office director from that time until July 2017.

Q: Okay. So, back home, so to speak, in NEA. Okay. Let me suggest we get into that and your move September of '14 in our next conversation. Does that make sense?

KONTOS: Yeah. Definitely.

Q: We are now recording. This is Steve Kontos talking to Dan Whitman, and it is August fourteenth, 2020. Yes, we were talking about Syria. Later today— This dramatic news of Israel and the UAE comes later, if you have anything to say about that, but we were talking about the very discouraging and confusing years of 2013–2014. Aleppo, the opposition, seemed to have had some hope in Syria. We now look back at that with some sadness, but let's pick it up from 2013 or 2014, wherever you would like to take it, Steve.

KONTOS: I don't recall how much I said about the Syrian opposition. We talked about it in various ways.

Q: You were saying how fragmented it was.

KONTOS: Yes. It's important to explain why they were so incompetent and why they failed. There were a lot of factors, but again, lack of unity was really their main handicap. They had weak and fragmented leadership. There was a gap between the opposition in exile and the opposition inside the country. They didn't trust one another. The insiders, whom we talked to regularly on our visits to Gaziantep and elsewhere near the border, dismissed the exile leadership as the "five-star resistance," referring to their tendency to hole up in five-star hotels in Istanbul or the Gulf and so on.

So, there was not much respect or communication between the inside and the outside opposition. The U.S. objective, however, was to create a unified opposition, and we worked hard to link up the two, get them to communicate with one another, and set up a process by which the activists on the inside, who actually had some popular legitimacy through their local councils and provincial councils, could then, in turn, somehow endorse or provide support for leadership on the outside and, ultimately, an interim Syrian government. But the two never quite connected, so the Syrian Interim Government in Turkey didn't make much progress. Interim Government officials, associated primarily with the exiled opposition, seemed to lack strong connections with people inside. We tried to convince the exiled leaders to go into Syria, even for a short time, to address the locals, to try to forge those connections, but only on one or two occasions did anyone actually do that. I don't think the exiles trusted the people inside, and of course they were afraid they might be captured or killed by the regime.

Even the inside opposition activists were divided, in many cases drawing support only from their hometowns. Very few of them had backing from outside their own districts. The same was true with the militias. The militias, the armed opposition groups, tended to be local and didn't trust one another. As a result, they were reluctant or refused to submit to any central command.

The noteworthy exception to this among the armed groups was one, of course, that we had no dealings with: that was al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda-associated group. Al-Nusra was a bit more ecumenical insofar as they drew support from different parts of Syria and were better disciplined. Unfortunately for us, they were the most effective fighting force among all the opposition groups. I'm not counting ISIS as an opposition group. Not only was al-Nusra effective against the regime, but it regularly attacked or co-opted other rebel groups in an effort to consolidate power. We tried hard to create a united front among the opposition groups, particularly by channeling our assistance to the Free Syrian Army, which served as a loose alliance of moderate rebel militias under the overall command of a former colonel from the Syrian Army who had defected to the rebel side.

Q: When did Robert Ford leave? What year did he leave? Was it before this?

KONTOS: As I mentioned earlier, he left Damascus in 2011 but continued as chief of mission for Syria—based in Washington—until the beginning of 2014.

Q: Right. When he was in DC, if I remember, he was still ambassador. Did the embassy exist after he left? Were there FSNs [Foreign Service nationals]? What was there, where there had been an embassy?

KONTOS: There was a mission of sorts. I think I mentioned last time that a few of the FSOs went to Istanbul, particularly Haynes Mahoney, who had been the DCM in Damascus and then became a point of contact for the opposition in Turkey. The FSNs either fled into exile or stayed in Syria and went to ground. A small number of GSO-types [General Service officers] continued looking after the embassy building.

Q: Was there discussion about— What you're talking about sounds like nation-building or running a country from the outside. There were sovereignty issues. Were there discussions about whether the U.S. government should have been creating or encouraging opposition in a country where we did maintain an embassy? Isn't that very unusual?

KONTOS: No, we did not have an embassy in Damascus. Basically, our position was that the regime had lost legitimacy, and the people of Syria had to come up with a process of their own to replace that regime. The opposition was essentially the means by which that would happen, whether it was through negotiation with the regime or by pressuring Assad into surrendering power.

Q: Was there discussion about the U.S. government versus the UN [United Nations] doing this sort of thing?

KONTOS: The UN was in an awkward position, because it still had relations with the Syrian regime and was also running emergency assistance for displaced Syrians through regime lines. So, the UN tried not to jeopardize that relationship, but the consensus among Western European countries, Arab countries—particularly in the Gulf—and the U.S. was to support the opposition in an effort to bring the regime to the negotiating table. Starting in 2013, the UN hosted talks in Geneva between the regime and opposition representatives to come up with a negotiated solution. Our expectation was that the talks would lead to a new election and replace the Assad regime with a more broadly based government.

At least in theory, this remained U.S. policy, and there was a lot of support, I think, among Western countries for this view. The weakest link in the strategy was the Syrian opposition. Despite the significant international backing, we were unable to build the opposition into a truly credible force or a viable alternative to the regime recognized by the international community. Western countries provided material support to the Syrian Interim Government, as did some of the Arab Gulf countries and Turkey, but none of them ever got to the point of actually recognizing the interim government. In effect, we were caught in a sort of limbo between the regime and this weak Syrian opposition.

Q: It's a very sad story. Looking back, knowing what we know, have you ever thought about what you would have thought would be a better way of doing this, or was it simply an impossible task?

KONTOS: I'm not sure there was a better way. I think it was a matter of increments and trying to build unity and keep the opposition groups together. We tried hard to build links between the local councils, the provincial councils, and the exiled leadership, hoping the provincial councils would together be a force to reckon with and either join the Syrian interim government or vote for candidates who would lead the interim government. That, of course, was all among civilians. The key to success, however, lay with the armed groups. We tried hard to follow a similar course, to unify them as much as possible and to create at least, if not a unified military force, enough interdependence so that they wouldn't fight or otherwise undermine one another.

One of the ideas I punted was giving the FSA more control over distribution of our supplies and equipment. Since the Free Syrian Army was not really recognized by anyone as an umbrella command—no one swore allegiance to the commander or recognized its role as a common front against the regime—my suggestion was that we turn the FSA into a logistics hub. The moderate groups depended on us for millions of dollars' worth of non-lethal aid: food, medical supplies, vehicles, trucks, ambulances, construction equipment. The idea was to enable the FSA to distribute and deliver all our assistance so that each of the armed groups would be beholden to the FSA. It would also strengthen FSA command's ability to coordinate military operations against the regime by

prioritizing supplies to specific locations on the battlefront. But because the FSA lacked experienced logisticians, we trained them. We trained their logistic officers, gave them laptops and software to track inventory and started planning how they would create a logistics hub for the fighters in the field.

Our efforts with the FSA began to fall apart in December 2013 when the extremist group *Jaish al-Islam* (The Islam Army) seized the FSA supply depot, stealing much of the materiel. With the help of international pressure, the FSA managed to recover some of the equipment. But the damage was done, because rebel fighters lost what little confidence they had in the FSA command. We tried to pick up the pieces, but the interagency consensus was that the best solution would be to supply individual militias directly. So, by the spring of 2014, CSO began providing non-lethal supplies and equipment to nearly a dozen vetted groups. It was about then that ISIS started coming into the picture. That changed the whole dynamic of the conflict and, with it, our own priorities.

Q: Yeah. So, in the middle of a fragmenting opposition, with USG [United States Government] trying to make that better, suddenly there's a wild card with ISIS. You said you were reorienting. Was there a priority, now, of being versus ISIS more than strengthening the opposition? Were we trying to do both things at once?

KONTOS: No, we weren't. There was an explicit decision in August 2014 to devote our resources to defeating ISIS. Suddenly, we were telling the armed groups receiving U.S. assistance that the main objective was now to push back ISIS, rather than fight the Syrian regime.

Q: How did that go down with the opposition, taking orders, so to speak, from the U.S.? Did they agree with that approach?

KONTOS: They never did agree. Some went along with the change in U.S. policy to get more weapons and supplies, but ultimately the U.S. failed to create a united front against ISIS, at least among the mainly Arab militias that we supported. I remember Syrian activists telling us constantly that the Syrian regime was worse than ISIS and that our priority should be its overthrow. The regime, they argued, was responsible for far worse crimes than ISIS, and they'd recount atrocities committed by the regime all over Syria.

Q: In a way, that makes sense. Was anybody in the USG inclined to see it that way?

KONTOS: I don't think so. If they did, that view was quickly swept aside, because from the president on down, starting in August 2014 the top priority was to defeat ISIS. That was about the time I left Turkey and got involved in the counter-ISIS task force in Washington. But before going into that, it's important to explain that ISIS didn't just suddenly appear. ISIS fighters were present in Syria—many were former AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq] fighters who had fled across the border—and formed one among the many armed

groups in the opposition-held areas of Syria. Except, unlike the others, they weren't doing much against the regime.

Our opposition contacts repeatedly told us that ISIS and the regime were collaborating against them. They never produced any real evidence, not that it would have been easy to come by, but did point to the fact—and this is true—that the regime's air attacks, barrel bombs, and missile barrages rarely targeted ISIS positions. Even after ISIS took over a large part of northern Syria, the regime continued offensive operations and aerial bombing—whatever they could to destroy the moderate rebels that we supported. I didn't hear of any significant regime military operations against ISIS while I was in Turkey, and only much later, when ISIS began attacking Syrian Army bases, did the regime act. So, it seems plausible to me that for the first two or three years of the revolution, the regime and ISIS had a tacit understanding that they would not attack one another. Our contacts also asserted that Bashar al-Assad had ordered the release of hundreds of extremists, including ISIS members, in a 2011 amnesty. Opposition activists were convinced this was a deliberate effort by the regime to undermine the revolution.

From the time that I arrived until the time that I left, we tracked a steady pattern of ISIS attacks on opposition leaders, particularly inside Syria—local council presidents, journalists, anyone they saw as giving legitimacy to the moderate opposition. ISIS was particularly intent on targeting the independent press, especially those whom we supported via our Free Syrian Journalists program. Our recipients had radio stations, internet platforms, and even a TV station. ISIS went after them to steal or destroy their equipment and silence them.

Both the regime and ISIS were doing this. We had no evidence that their actions were coordinated, but certainly the objectives were the same. In my opinion, the regime and ISIS were more afraid of independent activists and journalists than anything else, because those people had a lot of popular support. They had, probably, more legitimacy among the local public than anyone else in Syria—more so, obviously, than the regime, and more so than any armed groups. These were homegrown civilian activists and locally formed committees who organized themselves to create something better in the areas where the rebels had seized control from the regime.

Q: Yeah. We did not have boots on the ground. These were the people dying and being killed, and they resisted the U.S. suggestion to go against ISIS versus the regime. I can imagine there must have been bitter feelings, people being asked to do something that got them kidnapped and killed and prevented them from pursuing their own agenda, which was to work against the regime. I'm not questioning that the USG approach probably made sense, but do you have any sense— What were the feelings among those who were on the ground being kidnapped and killed?

KONTOS: Well, they appealed to us constantly for more support against the regime. It's hard to separate the civilian opposition from the armed opposition. Often there was an uneasy relationship between them, but the civilians recognized that the armed opposition

needed to succeed. In any case, the armed groups and civilian activists alike pleaded for more military assistance, particularly antiaircraft weapons to shoot down Syrian helicopters and aircraft. In their eyes, ISIS was the lesser threat. At first, ISIS pursued a more covert campaign targeting individual activists and small-scale military operations, particularly aimed at capturing weapons and supplies. But our Syrian contacts frequently warned us about ISIS, especially the numerous so-called "sleeper cells" throughout Syria that could be activated any time to occupy territory and undermine the legitimate opposition. Any U.S. actions against ISIS in Syria at the time would obviously have been beyond the reach or authority of the State Department, but there were other agencies that might have carried out such activities. We shared information within the mission about what we learned about ISIS from our contacts and how it might affect the campaign of the armed opposition.

Q: So, I'm guessing that the legitimate opposition, then, had a double agenda. They told you that their main target was the regime, and you told them that ISIS was a greater priority.

KONTOS: Well, that was a bit later. U.S. policy did not shift explicitly until after August 2014. Until then, we were focused on the campaign against the regime and trying to create conditions for productive negotiations in Geneva. This was still our priority in the middle of 2014, however, ISIS suddenly revealed its true intentions, not just covertly but overtly, pushing deep into Iraq and occupying large parts of northern Syria.

We were already hearing about ISIS attacks on other rebel groups in early 2014, as well as attempts to occupy parts of northern Aleppo. Several rebel groups banded together to push ISIS back towards the Iraqi border. But in July 2014, after ISIS captured Mosul, along with a stockpile of heavy weapons abandoned by the Iraqi Army, we realized it was just a matter of time before ISIS deployed some of that weaponry in Syria to crush resistance. It was a worrisome scenario. ISIS was well equipped, well financed, and had a rapidly growing number of fighters. By August of 2014, things looked pretty bad. In Iraq, ISIS had pushed far to the east, almost to Baghdad. In Syria, it had captured Raqqa and Deir az-Zour provinces and was advancing further west, well into Aleppo province. The U.S. did what it could to rally the FSA and other moderate rebel groups to redeploy away from the front with the regime and establish a solid defensive line against ISIS in eastern Aleppo Province. It was crucial for the moderates to stabilize their lines in eastern Aleppo quickly before ISIS cut their supply route from the Turkish border. If ISIS forces had succeeded in capturing this route they would have strangled the Arab opposition in a short time.

Q: So, did they in fact transition, or were they doing both? There must have been a few weeks or months at least where they were facing two fronts, the regime and ISIS.

KONTOS: They were fighting on two fronts. They had to hold their lines against the regime in Aleppo, with an eye on protecting the rest of the territory they controlled in western Syria. The regime occupied less than half of Aleppo province. Much of the area

surrounding Aleppo City and to the south towards Damascus was in opposition hands. Some of the rebel militias refused to redeploy, putting more pressure on the remaining, mostly moderate, forces that wanted to stop ISIS. The moderate groups hurriedly transferred the bulk of their forces surrounding Aleppo City to the area around the town of A'zaz, which is the main transit point inside Syria on the road to the Turkish border, connecting to Gaziantep.

The Syrian rebel forces barely managed to hold A'zaz after ISIS nearly encircled the town and, by September, were able to recover more ground from ISIS. At that point, ISIS had started to retreat and consolidate its forces, perhaps because the U.S. had initiated the bombing campaign. ISIS leaders must have realized they were over-extended and needed to dig in. So, fortunately, at that point, the ISIS advance into western and northwest Syria came to a halt while its fighters consolidated their positions in Raqqa and further east.

Q: So, the much-discussed Obama approach— In retrospect, there's been much said about his reluctance to do more. Do you wish that the U.S. policy had been more active and involved in the conflict, as you look back?

KONTOS: I'm sure there's more we could have done to help the Syrian opposition. But I think our success would have been limited by the difficulty of uniting the opposition factions. Again, we're talking about U.S. support for the moderate opposition. There were other, more radical elements that we had nothing to do with. We always had to keep a delicate balance between helping the moderate opposition and preventing any of our assistance ending up in the hands of terrorist groups, like the al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra. As for ISIS, it wasn't really a factor in our policy until mid-2014, but perhaps it should have been. I don't believe there was a lot more we could have done to prevent the emergence of ISIS in Syria, but there are others who may say differently.

Q: The opposition was begging for material and lethal support. Do you wish we had given more?

KONTOS: Sure, though I didn't have enough visibility into the warfighting to understand what exactly we could have provided. Some items were quite sophisticated, like TOW [wire-guided] anti-tank missiles. The problem is that we would give them things, and then they either failed to deploy it, or they might even lose it, as happened with some of the equipment stockpiled at the Free Syrian Army depot. So, we had to walk a fine line. Perhaps there were a few more things we could have done. Obviously, the Syrian regime bombing was a big problem. We had to figure out some way to deal with that, but the concern, of course, was that—as with the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan,—portable surface to air missiles could be captured and fall into the wrong hands.

We were really in a difficult position there, and I think we had to go step by step. If there were armed groups that proved themselves truly capable and trustworthy, we might have pushed the envelope a little bit to give them more. The one or two of the groups which received the TOW missiles used them pretty effectively, but over time could not attract

sufficient recruits and gradually became weaker. That's the kind of support which incrementally could have increased the pressure on the regime, but it had to be done in lockstep with political and economic pressure, squeezing the regime through sanctions, discouraging outside support for Assad, and a lot of other things.

Q: Which we now know never worked. The barrel bombs— Was there discussion of a no-fly zone [NFZ] implemented from Turkey? Why did we do that in Iraq but not in Syria?

KONTOS: The Turks, not to mention the Syrian opposition, begged for a no-fly zone. But we drew the line, because there was no international basis for doing so. It would not have been possible to do it through the UN. Moreover, I don't think that at that point, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] would have agreed either, although the major Western governments were sympathetic to the opposition. It just wasn't possible to create any kind of international mandate that would justify enforcing a no-fly zone, so we had to search for other ways. The Turks, of course, probably had the capability to shoot down helicopters or planes from within their own territory, but obviously, they didn't want to do that. That would have created a state of war between Turkey and the Syrian regime and a real risk of drawing in Hezbollah, Iran, and even Russia.

Q: Okay. I'm trying to absorb this, because I really don't understand how we could be so deeply involved, supplying material, giving political advice, trying to unite an opposition, without a mandate, but not doing a no-fly zone because there was no mandate. I don't understand it, but then, I'm not knowledgeable about the region or the drawbacks that that would have taken.

KONTOS: There was a lot of discussion at State about a no-fly zone, and again, I think the consensus in the end was that it wasn't feasible. There were a lot of considerations that went into that judgment. That would be an excellent question to put to Robert Ford if you ever do an interview with him. As for a "mandate" to provide assistance to the opposition, it was the Syrian rebels who were involved in kinetic action against the regime, not us or our allies. If a U.S. or other foreign aircraft took direct action against a Syrian plane or helicopter, the conflict would have risen to a new level, an escalation that might have had numerous unintended consequences. The only time the U.S. did cross this line came much later, in 2017, when Donald Trump ordered airstrikes in response to regime chemical attacks on towns held by the rebels. Perhaps you can understand why our Syrian contacts complained so bitterly about President Obama's failure to make good on his warning to the Assad regime if it crossed the so-called "red-line" of deploying chemical weapons.

Q: Yeah. We know what Samantha Power would say. She must have been gnashing her teeth. She was very angry, I think, to see some action, but not the type of action that would really bring some type of success to— Anyway, it's sad and frustrating, and I know that everybody was trying to do their best. You can only do so much when the people inside the country are unable to agree on anything. That's understandable.

Now, it seems to me that nothing positive ever happened with U.S. policy in Syria from 2011 to present. Is there any example of some type of resolution? Is there any hope or any cause for optimism at this point?

KONTOS: Well, the situation has evolved a lot since I left. We're talking about a period of six years since I left Turkey. There were two key factors in my judgment. First was the rise and fall of ISIS and then, second, the vacuum left by the effective departure of the U.S., which diplomatically crippled us, leaving us little leverage to improve things. The Trump Administration essentially washed its hands of Syria and left all the other players to their own devices. I find it ironic that, for all its concern about Iran, the White House seemed unable to grasp the importance of Syria to Iran's regional ambitions.

So I would say, no, there were no long-term, strategic successes in Syria. Everything that has happened there, except for the defeat of ISIS, was mostly the result of actions by others. That's not to minimize the accomplishment of the U.S. in defeating ISIS and ending its territorial control in Iraq and Syria. But this was more of a reaction to a crisis than a strategy. Where the Syrian regime and the country of Syria are concerned, we've for the most part taken a back seat. One could argue that this retreat by the U.S. left a permanent zone of instability in a region of critical strategic importance. Whatever has happened there in the last few years has mostly been in our absence, unfortunately. But the fight against ISIS was very much driven by the U.S., and in that sense, we were successful.

The Global Campaign Against the Self-Proclaimed Islamic State

So, we are at 2014. Then you switched over to NEA. Is that right? You were in CSO [Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations], at the time, and then transferred to NEA.

KONTOS: In 2014, I was still with CSO. Not long after I returned from Turkey, CSO loaned me out to the Counter-ISIS Task Force. Starting in October of 2014, I was the coordinator for the Counter-ISIS Task Force on the seventh floor. The task force worked under the combined direction of NEA—Ambassador Maura Connelly, who was hand-picked by NEA Assistant Secretary Anne Patterson, and the Special Presidential Envoy for the Counter-ISIS Coalition, retired U.S. Marine General John Allen. So, I moved into the State Department Operations Center, where the task force was allocated one of those cramped little conference rooms. We shoehorned at least a dozen people who, along with General Allen's staff of half a dozen or so, set up and then managed the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS.

Q: Was this, in fact, a 24/7 operation?

KONTOS: No, it wasn't 24/7 but worked one to two shifts per twenty-four-hour period, depending on the demand. Our job was to build diplomatic support for the global

coalition: first, persuading foreign governments to join and, second, convincing them to provide military and humanitarian assistance to Iraq. The task force was not involved directly in the military campaign, which was remarkable in that it came together so fast. More importantly, the military campaign against ISIS, especially air operations, involved an unlikely alliance of the U.S., NATO partners, and half a dozen Arab countries. That was a real coup for Secretary of State John Kerry who, in August 2014, convinced the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, and Morocco to deploy fighter aircraft alongside those of the U.S. and its Western allies—notably the UK, France, Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, and Australia, among others. But enlisting the Arab countries to join the military campaign was vital to demonstrate that the fight against ISIS wasn't anti-Muslim, but rather a broad-based effort by the civilized nations of the world to eliminate a movement that exploited Islam to justify its crimes.

That was the beginning of the Counter-ISIS Coalition. After General Allen was appointed, also in September 2014, the National Security Council tasked the interagency to come up with a comprehensive strategy to defeat ISIS. One of the key parts of the strategy was the creation of an international coalition to destroy ISIS and its sources of support. It fell to the task force to do the necessary legwork and sign up as many nations as possible. We spent hours and hours working on this, getting information out, and seeking pledges of support. With the help of State's regional bureaus, we communicated with almost all our embassies abroad and made calls to countless foreign missions in Washington. By November 2014, at the direction of Secretary Kerry, the task force was consumed with organizing a big international conference that the U.S. would host in December in Brussels. The sixty participants in the Brussels conference became the sixty founding members of the Global Coalition, which by 2020 had expanded to more than eighty members. I've heard that historically this was the biggest international coalition ever assembled. All our work after 2014 was devoted to care and feeding of the Coalition.

Q: Okay. Now, the Coalition— Was this like herding cats, kind of like dealing with the opposition in Syria? Was there a uniform approach? How did this work? Sixty countries sounds like, potentially, sixty different directions.

KONTOS: It sounds like a nightmare, but it was surprisingly easy, because there was such unanimity about eliminating ISIS. No one doubted that ISIS had to be wiped out, and we never really encountered any difficulty, certainly not in the early days. I'll tell you more about that later. There were some minor differences among members, but very few, remarkably. In any case, all the members agreed on what had to be done, accepting the essential lines of effort proposed by General Allen. Not long after the Brussels conference, members agreed to form working groups to coordinate each line of effort. I'll describe those in a minute. More than twenty nations joined in military operations or provided other types of military support. Many more ponied up significant financial contributions—billions of dollars for humanitarian assistance and, later on, stabilization assistance. The remarkable thing is that there was no treaty or charter establishing the

Coalition. General Allen eventually produced a declaration of principles, but members didn't actually sign it.

Q: ISIS has been declared vanquished and dead many times, but every time it's declared to be dead, it's not. What is the current status of ISIS?

KONTOS: ISIS no longer controls territory in Iraq or Syria and has faded elsewhere, except perhaps in Africa and Afghanistan. In most places, it's no longer an effective fighting force. It's been fragmented and decimated. There are small groups of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria mounting—particularly in Iraq—hit and run attacks and assassinations, like the old days before 2014. ISIS ideology is not the beacon that it was to young Muslims all over the world, and ISIS is not attracting recruits the way it used to.

The organization still has some resources, evidently enough to sustain pockets of fighters in the Levant, and then there are sympathizers and groups in various parts of the world, some more effective than others, particularly in West Africa and Afghanistan. But many of them no longer pose a serious threat—for example, in Libya or the Philippines, not to mention Iraq and Syria. I won't say they've been completely defeated, but they've been seriously damaged militarily.

Q: What was it that succeeded? There was military action or kinetic action. There were also social media campaigns and efforts to provide options to youth at risk. Of the various things that the Coalition did, what was it that worked the best? Was it military interdiction?

KONTOS: The military campaign was crucial, but by itself, without the other lines of effort, it would have been far more costly in lives and resources. To understand this, it will help to define the lines of effort. They went something like this: There was, of course, a military campaign. There was the whole counter-financing effort, aimed at cutting off ISIS revenues and its ability to raise money, control money and use it to pay fighters, buy weapons and so on. That was the second line of effort. There was a third line of effort devoted to curbing the movement of foreign fighters, tracking them wherever they went and capturing them. Fourth, there was a media or messaging line of effort aimed at countering ISIS propaganda and publicizing Coalition successes, especially the progress the Iraqis themselves made against ISIS. Finally, there was a stabilization line of effort to jump-start the recovery of areas recaptured from ISIS. Most liberated towns and villages were devastated; infrastructure destroyed; and basic services nonexistent. So, the idea was to help these communities recover at least basic services and functions, like water, electricity, schools, hospitals, and medical supplies. We wanted to help them survive and recover so that they could begin the process of rebuilding. In Iraq, that required billions of dollars, and the Coalition probably contributed over two billion dollars for stabilization in Iraq. Northern Syria, of course, was another recipient of stabilization assistance.

Each of the civilian lines of effort was coordinated via a working group comprised of Coalition members who, in effect, volunteered to participate. Perhaps the most interesting aspect was the leadership role played by governments other than the U.S. The counter-financing group was co-led by Italy, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. The foreign fighters working group was co-led by the Netherlands, Turkey, and U.S. This group attracted by far the most members—over sixty, as I recall. The United Kingdom and U.S. co-led the communications or counter-ISIS messaging group, while Germany and the United Arab Emirates co-led the stabilization working group. The military campaign was coordinated primarily by U.S. Central Command or CENTCOM, which hosted liaison officers from each participant military, both in Tampa and in the field. Despite some early opposition by CENTCOM, the Pentagon led so-called political-military consultations on a regular basis among officials in participant defense ministries.

All these lines of effort were intended to complement one another. Were any particularly important in turning the tide? Certainly, the military efforts were crucial. The Iraqis themselves did the bulk of the fighting, suffering many casualties in the process, but Coalition air support, intelligence, supplies, equipment, and training were key to their success. It was the military defeats, I think, that deflated and delegitimized ISIS, because so much of their mystique was built on their battlefield victories. Obviously, they were not well-liked as governing authorities and had little genuine popular support in areas they occupied. They ruled through fear and intimidation but also worked steadily to indoctrinate youth, especially young men and boys who would be pressed into fighting units. ISIS also attracted recruits with generous pay and other incentives.

The group's access to money, much of it looted from banks and businesses in areas it occupied, not to mention extortionate taxes on the local population, was crucial to its expansion. It also raked in millions from selling crude oil from the production facilities it seized in eastern Syria. Coalition members zeroed in on suspect financial transactions, imposing sanctions, arresting currency traders, shutting down exchanges, and confiscating property linked to ISIS. Coalition aircraft also bombed oil production facilities and hundreds of trucks transporting oil that ISIS had sold to the Damascus regime. So, ISIS was slowly starved of cash, which in turn degraded its military power.

Coalition efforts to stop the flow of foreign fighters demanded constant sharing of intelligence and law enforcement coordination. This was perhaps the most difficult nut to crack, because individual governments were reluctant to share intelligence secrets with such a wide group. The foreign fighters working group had the most members of any working group, many of whom lacked intelligence sharing agreements with the U.S. and others. It also stretched the idea of inter-agency cooperation. Most governments had different institutional arrangements for dealing with border security watchlists and international law enforcement cooperation. One of the Coalition's break-through initiatives was enlisting Interpol to create a widely available database of suspected ISIS supporters and recruits. As the Coalition-backed military campaign shut off ISIS access to the outside world, the measures agreed by the Foreign Fighters Working Group prevented new recruits from making their way to the ISIS heartland.

As for public messaging, I don't know that our efforts were all that successful in discouraging new recruits and sympathizers. As time went on, Coalition members recognized that it didn't make any difference what Western governments said. The important thing was what Muslims themselves said and how they reacted. The messaging effort became more astute in mobilizing local Arabs and Muslims to counter ISIS propaganda. The Coalition backed a media hub in the UAE, the Sawab Center, which after a year or so in business turned out to be pretty effective. The U.S. counter-messaging operation evolved into the Global Engagement Center, now embedded in the State Department. Among other things, the UK stood up a multilingual Coalition website, theglobalcoalition.org.

Q: That's a valuable analysis, because whether it was a failure or a success, looking at what the elements were is extremely useful. I'm looking at your bio. You were there for three years in the Coalition Office. It must have been quite discouraging, at times, because we know how it ended up. I know everyone was doing their best, but it must have been disheartening at times. Was it?

KONTOS: It certainly was discouraging in the early days because ISIS kept advancing, and its atrocities seemed to get worse and worse. The Iraqis were not well-organized at first, and there was heavy fighting just to recover areas that never should have been lost in the first place, like Fallujah and Ramadi. However, by 2016, Iraqi forces were on the offensive, going city by city, recapturing areas in the Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, culminating with the 2017 fall of Mosul, after a lengthy battle in which much of the city was destroyed.

But there were some difficult times. In 2014 and 2015, ISIS fighters captured a succession of Western hostages, several of whom were beheaded, and the videos posted on the Internet. One of them I knew indirectly, a guy named Peter Kassig who had been in Turkey when I was there and sent us a proposal to establish mobile clinics and distribute medical supplies in rebel-held areas. He was known as an eccentric do-gooder providing food and medical supplies to Syrians in need. I didn't talk to him personally, but I think one of my staff did. We decided that the areas where he was operating were too dangerous, and it would be impossible for us to monitor the use of our funds. We didn't accept Kassig's proposal, but I remember thinking he was brave, bordering on foolhardy, to do what he was doing in northern Syria. This all happened, I think, in late 2013. About a year later, ISIS grabbed him and later killed him. There were many more atrocities, mostly the frequent and gruesome executions of Syrians and Iraqis, as well as kidnappings, imprisonment, and torture. One of the more widely reported incidents was ISIS' capture of a Jordanian pilot shot down over Syria, who was locked in a cage and burned to death.

Q: Yes, in the cage. I remember that.

KONTOS: By 2015, extremist groups affiliated with ISIS started to pop up in other places, such as Libya and the Sinai. So, with all this going on, we wondered how the heck we were going to be able to respond. We were playing a game of whack-a-mole and would have to find a way to pursue the fight on many different fronts at the same time. But Coalition members came together to provide support in these areas, and it all worked.

Q: Yeah. Well, great. Is there anything else that we should be talking about during that three-year period, from '14 to '17?

KONTOS: Sure, there's a lot. You asked whether there was any dissension within the Coalition. There was very little, but I do remember personally having to negotiate with the Turks repeatedly over references to the Kurds in Syria. The Kurds, as you know, started out with little support in their fight against ISIS and were under tremendous pressure. You remember how we talked about ISIS advancing into western Syria. As they did this, they took over almost the entire area populated by Syrian Kurds, capturing village after village, until finally rolling into Kobane in the fall of 2014, a Kurdish-majority town next to the border with Turkey.

The Syrian Kurds held out against a much larger ISIS force backed by tanks and heavy weapons looted from the Iraqi Army. The battle for Kobane became a symbolic event, as well as a strategic turning point. ISIS made a big deal in the media claiming this victory would complete their conquest of northern Syria, opening the way to Turkey and soon to the gates of Rome. For the Kurds, a defeat could have led to massacres and permanent displacement of much of their population. So, the battle for Kobane at the end of 2014 and into 2015 was a big deal. To prevent a disaster, the U.S. unilaterally intervened, bombing ISIS columns and airlifting fresh ammunition and supplies. I don't think we consulted with the Turks until after the fact. Eventually, we were able to get some supplies in by land, after putting a lot of pressure on the Turks to allow it. The U.S. also convinced Turkey to allow Kurdish peshmerga units to deploy from Erbil through Turkey to Kobane. After many weeks of house-to-house fighting in Kobane, the Kurds forced ISIS to withdraw and began a slow advance towards the east, beating back repeated counter-offensives. From then on, the Syrian Kurds were a crucial factor in the campaign against ISIS, essentially opening a second front that relieved some of the pressure on Iraqi forces. As time went on, the Coalition increased its support to the Kurds, acknowledging both their success in battle and the heavy casualties they suffered in the process. The creation of a combined Kurdish-Arab force, the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] made it more palatable for the U.S. and its Western allies to provide heavy weapons and ammunition to what was largely a Kurdish militia with Marxist roots.

Earlier I mentioned the big Coalition conference held in Brussels in December 2014. Special Presidential Envoy John Allen and his deputy Brett McGurk, who later succeeded General Allen, decided it was important to convene these conferences frequently to preserve Coalition unity. So periodically we would bring Coalition members together to talk about what more needed to be done, agree on priorities, plan strategy. I mentioned earlier that Coalition members did not sign any treaty or charter. Members simply

declared publicly their support for the Coalition and participated in Coalition events. But in my opinion, the glue which actually held it together was the series of communiques and statements published after each conference. The conferences themselves alternated between those involving all the members and others limited to about thirty of the major military and financial contributors. This so-called Small Group acted as a steering committee, though we never used that term in order to minimize rivalries or ill-feeling among those who were not included.

I often got roped into drafting the communiques. Brett McGurk did the first few, but later I ended up doing them. With a few exceptions, the drafting process was remarkably free of conflict. One of the exceptions involved Turkey and the Kurds. I remember that around 2016, we wanted to acknowledge the progress the SDF was making against ISIS in Syria.

Every time we mentioned anything having to do with the Syrian Kurds, the Turkish delegates would get their backs up. We repeatedly tried to come up with language the Turks would accept, dancing around the fact that the SDF was doing the bulk of the fighting on the ground against ISIS in Syria. We were able to agree on language that praised the Syria campaign but didn't refer to the SDF by name. We did this after each conference for about a year or so, but after a routine event in early 2017, the Turks really dug in their heels and said, "No, we can't accept any references to Syria." This was a last-minute thing, just hours before the end of the conference and publication of the final communique. I think somebody back in Ankara looked at the statement text, which the conference delegates had already accepted, and said, "No, we won't accept this language on Syria."

I had to ask the Turkish delegation head, a deputy minister, "Are you going to stand up in front of all seventy Coalition members"—at this time, there were almost seventy members—"and say that Turkey is opposing this language that you and everyone else previously agreed to? Are you going to tell them that Turkey alone is against this language?" At that point, they backed down, but we had arguments with the Turks about the SDF every time.

Other delegations would raise minor issues that we easily resolved. For example, one of the delegations would insist, "You need to mention something about women," or someone else would ask to add a reference to the Sawab Center or condemn ISIS looting of archeological sites. We almost always agreed to write in such suggestions. If you think about it, we never failed to produce an agreed communique—not once. There was always pretty much a consensus on everything. Even though the Turks didn't want to acknowledge the SDF, everything held together, and the campaign succeeded to the point that ISIS was defeated on the battlefield and its forces destroyed or dispersed.

Q: Yeah. As you've said, though, they've kind of popped up in West Africa. I don't know if they're in the Maghreb, but they're still there.

KONTOS: ISIS was basically destroyed in Libya. In Sinai, ISIS fighters have gone to ground. There's been little action that I know of in Sinai. In the Philippines, an ISIS-affiliated group took over a city in 2016, but it was eventually driven out and its fighters decimated. But in Africa, Boko Haram, which gave its allegiance to ISIS in 2014, continued attacks in Northern Nigeria and neighboring countries. A breakaway faction of Boko Haram rebranded itself as ISIS-West Africa and within a few years became as big a threat to the region's security as Boko Haram. An ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan has likewise remained active, despite efforts by the U.S. and NATO partners to crush it. But, on the whole, ISIS is now a shadow of what it was at the height of its power, its leaders—including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—dead or in hiding, and the so-called caliphate just a bad memory.

Q: Right. So, this campaign was largely successful. That's good. Following the discouragement in Syria, at least with your help and under your administering abilities, you actually did get allies and a coalition going that did defeat ISIS militarily. That is quite something. You did this, you said, with General Allen. I guess you were frequently in touch with him, or with him all day, every day, or something like that?

KONTOS: We worked together. First it was via the Counter-ISIS Task Force, but then the NEA assistant secretary at the time, Anne Patterson, decided that all the diplomatic activities should be done through NEA. Patterson didn't intervene in our day-to-day operations, though the office director or I would go to every NEA staff meeting. We always informed NEA of what we were doing, our directions really came from either General Allen or, later on, Brett McGurk.

To be fair, the NEA region only accounted for a minority of countries in the Coalition. The majority was European. So, we had to do a lot with the EUR Bureau [Bureau of European Affairs], as well as NEA. We also did a lot with EAP [Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs] and later with AF [Bureau of African Affairs], as more African countries joined the Coalition.

Q: Yeah. I'm writing that down. So, it was really a worldwide thing. Okay, Steve. I'm looking at your bio. Twenty-fourteen to '17, you were deputy director of the ISIS Coalition. Anything to add on this before we go on to the next assignment at the Navy Special Warfare Command?

KONTOS: I think that pretty well covers it. Honestly, I don't think there will be a lot to say about the navy assignment. A lot of it was classified, all of the most interesting stuff, and I'm not sure how much there would be that's of general interest. I'll give some thought as to whether there's more to say about the counter-ISIS campaign. I think we hit the high points, but I have to say that it was probably, of everything I've done, the biggest success we can point to collectively as the State Department and the U.S. government.

Q: Yes. That's a very important point in history, actually succeeding multilaterally in overcoming a common threat. You said seventy countries, at one point, were on board. I think that's a good example of multilateralism at its best.

KONTOS: Again, the interesting thing was that there was no formal charter or any other written agreement for the Coalition. The fact is that ISIS was so despicable, we had no problem attracting members and contributions. Somehow they all came together. As cumbersome as it sounds, everything worked smoothly.

Q: Okay. You mentioned McGurk earlier. Did you report to him, by the way?

KONTOS: Not directly. Bureaucratically, we were divided up between the Special Envoy's Office and NEA. My office was in NEA's chain of command until just a few months before I left, at which time NEA washed its hands of us and agreed to fold our operations and staff into the special presidential envoy's office. Practically speaking, though, we had always been taking our directions from the special envoy—first General Allen and then later Brett McGurk.

Q: Now, McGurk very publicly resigned. He was disgusted when President Trump decided abruptly to leave Syria. Any comments on working with McGurk? He was a major figure and very highly respected by people following these things. When he left, he decided to do it publicly. What was it like, working with McGurk?

KONTOS: McGurk traveled constantly. He was on the move all the time, as was General Allen, making frequent visits to Iraq as well as other Coalition capitals. So, I didn't see much of him. My role was more like that of a chief of staff, supervising fifteen or so foreign and civil service employees. I was tied up with the day-to-day operations back in Washington. That included planning the quarterly Coalition conferences, briefing Coalition diplomats, soliciting contributions, and providing updates for State Department and interagency colleagues. But when he was there, he was universally liked among the staff and much respected for his command of the issues. He had a deep knowledge of the region, especially Iraq, and knew everybody who was instrumental in the Coalition. He kept in frequent touch with senior officials of key Coalition governments and played a vital key role in holding together not just the Coalition, but the Iraqi government itself.

The Iraqi government went through significant changes during the ISIS campaign, transitioning from Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister to Haider al-Abadi to Adil Abd al-Mahdi to Mustafa Kadhimi. Iraq also went through changes in parliament, cabinet ministers, and numerous political crises. In a September 2017 referendum, Iraqi Kurds voted for independence, though they did not follow through. So, there were several crises over the course of the counter-ISIS campaign, and McGurk went there to do whatever he could to keep the Iraqis from falling apart. So, he deserves a lot of credit, he and Ambassador Doug Silliman and, before that Stewart Jones, for holding it together.

Q: Did we have mixed feelings towards Kurdish independence, or were we simply opposed?

KONTOS: The U.S. opposed Kurdish independence. Our mantra all along was—and still is—that we support a unified and stable, multi-ethnic Iraq. So, no, we were not keen on the idea. McGurk tried to convince Kurdish leaders to shelve the referendum. But Masoud Barzani, president of Iraqi Kurdistan and elder statesmen of the Iraqi Kurds decided this was going to be his legacy, and he did it against the advice of everyone in the international community. We told them not to do it, but he did it anyway. For a number of reasons that I won't go into now, the move to independence failed, and the Kurds ended up going back to the status quo. Fortunately, none of this did any permanent damage or cause a civil war or any major conflict. So, we were able to get past it.

The referendum happened at about the time that Iraqi and Coalition forces were closing in on the last remnants of ISIS in western Iraq and pushing towards the Syria border. So, the last thing we needed was to have this distraction split the Iraqis. McGurk was good at managing these disruptions and kept the Coalition members focused, especially the Iraqis. In 2014, he and General Allen paid little attention to Syria. I remember coming back from Turkey and wondering why nobody was paying attention to Syria. It came down to the fact that we had no real partners there. It was more than a year before we settled into our informal partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces—in effect, the Syria Kurds—who made significant progress in the campaign with modest U.S. support.

Q: You talked about your gig in Turkey. You were at times in Washington and at times in Turkey, is that right?

KONTOS: No, I was full time in Turkey for a year.

Q: Oh, okay. You mentioned Washington. Was the idea when you got into this assignment, one year out and two years back? Was that the deal?

KONTOS: No, there was no formal arrangement. For overseas deployments, CSO Bureau would usually seek volunteers for six-month TDYs. In my case, because I was in a supervisory or leadership position, they wanted me to stay longer. So, it ended up being a one-year TDY. My assignment to CSO was for the standard two years, ending in 2014, so bureau principals decided to keep me on one more year as a senior adviser to work on the anti-ISIS task force. So, I was with CSO until 2015 when NEA absorbed the task force and created the Counter-ISIS Coalition Working Group, known as NEA/CWG.

Q: Okay. We're now in a new chapter from '14 to '17. The beginning of that year was in Turkey, and then after that it was in DC. This was within the same bureau, but a different experience. So, you officially transferred from CSO to NEA during your time in Washington?

KONTOS: Yes.

Q: Was that halfway through or something like that?

KONTOS: It was the summer of 2015.

Q: Okay. Did it make any difference to your work?

KONTOS: No, not at all.

Q: Okay, because it was simply a change in names. You just needed a title, but the functioning was kind of ongoing, I guess. So, you were now dealing with these issues at greater geographic distance. Were you still able to play a major role in the anti-ISIS, pro-Syrian civil society process? How did your work change by being in DC?

KONTOS: Well, the assignment changed. It was no longer focused on Syria or any one country. It was completely different, with a global focus. Whereas before we had been almost like an overseas embassy or mission focused on assistance in a particular country, we were now leading a de facto international organization with sixty to seventy or more countries and international organizations. So, it was completely different. I explained in the earlier session that the Coalition was entirely improvised. There was never any charter or official agreement. It was all done informally. The reason it held together is that from Allen and McGurk on down, we were all in frequent touch with our Coalition counterparts. And my office was responsible for all the diplomatic communications with Coalition members.

Whether to prepare for the conferences—we set up more than a dozen in three years—or to give briefings or solicit contributions, we reached out to foreign diplomats in Washington, corresponded with their foreign ministries, and of course, we always had to coordinate with the State Department country desks and interagency counterparts at Treasury, Defense, USAID, and other agencies. So, it was completely different. It was almost like being a mini-IO [Bureau of International Organization Affairs], a jerry-rigged IO. But we actually had nothing to do with the IO Bureau, because the Coalition was not an international organization and existed outside regular channels. It's important to understand that the Coalition was not created by a UN Resolution or any other official agreement. So, it was essentially an improvised and informal creation.

Q: Right. So, the sixty or seventy countries—were there some that were always there and in greater contact than others? The UK, perhaps?

KONTOS: Yes. There were several groups. Some of this gets into sensitive information, so I won't be too specific, but there was a core, very informal group of a few Western governments that were the biggest military and financial contributors. They kept in almost continuous contact. This was at the General Allen and Brett McGurk level, conversing with foreign ministry political directors—equivalent to our under secretary for Political Affairs—to plan out strategy and the major coalition conferences. That group

was never known to the wider coalition. I'm sure they guessed there was coordination among the key Western governments, but we never made it public, and we never discussed it.

Beyond that, there were various working groups and coordinating groups. The most important leadership group grew to about thirty-member governments. Even though everything was improvised and there were so many different sensitivities and egos, we clearly needed some sort of coordinating or steering group. So, officially, we proposed something with the earth-shattering, unique name of the Small Group. We didn't want to call it a "steering group" or a "leadership group" or anything that overtly indicated these members had special status. So, to avoid the whole debate and jockeying over influence and stature, we simply said, "We're going to call it the Small Group, but we're going to limit the number of members." It included the major military and financial donors, starting with about twenty governments—key Europeans, Middle Eastern governments, and Iraq, of course. The Small Group met more or less quarterly, alternating between the ministerial level and the political director level, although our under secretary for Political Affairs was not really involved. Instead, General Allen and later Brett McGurk represented the U.S. But for most of the other countries, it was the foreign ministry political directors. The full Coalition met at least annually, if not more frequently, at the ministerial level. We scripted all the conferences, usually focusing on the need for specific military and financial contributions, as well as briefings on the progress of the campaign and initiatives by each working group.

Q: Usually in Washington?

KONTOS: Yes, many were in Washington, but they often took place in other capitals, too. I should add that the functional working groups also had periodic meetings, usually quarterly, on their specific issues with their own members. Just to recap, there were four civilian working groups: one for countering ISIS finances, one for countering foreign fighters, one for counter-messaging, one for stabilization assistance, and a fifth venue for political-military consultations.

Q: I'm guessing that many of the members of the Small Group may have contributed to many or all of the working groups in addition, is that right?

KONTOS: Yes, that's correct.

Q: So, your job was the care and feeding of the Coalition to make sure it stuck together. Did you or the group— Did D-ISIS [Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS] have to pressure other governments to provide more resources?

KONTOS: Yes, we did this all the time at various meetings and conferences. It was a huge part of the job. Our office was charged with convincing members to contribute, particularly for stabilization and humanitarian assistance. We defined the needs. We got speakers to describe how funds were being spent and how they were accounted for. We

provided the agendas, the topics. We scripted the communiques and press releases afterwards. In between conferences, we did demarches to individual countries, asking for contributions. We did group demarches. We added talking points for secretary of state meetings, as well as other department principals. And, as I mentioned before, General Allen and Brett McGurk spent much of their time traveling to drum up contributions around the globe. Our office generated a lot of paper, and ultimately it was successful. I think that for stabilization alone, we probably raised two and a half billion, maybe upwards of three billion dollars' worth of contributions.

Q: Any lessons learned? How do you shake down foreign governments successfully to get them to cough up resources for a common agenda? How do you do that?

KONTOS: You just persist. You keep going at it again and again. The Coalition conferences and the public statements that came out of them highlighted major contributions. We were careful not to name countries publicly, like who was contributing and not contributing, but there were ways to do that. Usually, members would publicize their own contributions, so we didn't need to. But behind the scenes, we ran a whole cottage industry, which pressed members for contributions. It helped that there was broad public support all over the world for the fight against ISIS and no real opposition in any country to how the Coalition was conducting the campaign to defeat ISIS. Who didn't want to wipe out ISIS? So, we were lucky that we had an easy issue to work with.

Q: Right. I'm thinking, of course, about recent things we've read about NATO and the U.S. administration blaming and shaming governments for not contributing 2 percent of their GDP [gross domestic product] very publicly. This does create friction in NATO. Did it within the group you were working with? Were people a little bit uncomfortable with this, at times?

KONTOS: Not really, because we never called out anyone publicly, and we were careful not to name names except in positive cases, at least when someone made a large contribution. We, as the U.S. government, might not necessarily say anything, except to encourage and welcome contributions by all members in general. Instead, we left it to individual countries to tout their own contributions.

We often used the ministerial conferences as a platform to prod hesitant delegations to pledge contributions during the brief periods they had the floor. We would tell them privately, "You're going to be addressing sixty-plus other foreign ministers. This is your big opportunity to get on the map. Announce five million dollars in a contribution openly at the meeting. You're going to get a lot of goodwill and, of course, publicity." It was an obvious ploy, but it worked. But we never shamed anybody publicly for not making pledges. We were very careful about that. Just their presence at the meetings gave credibility to the Coalition, and we almost always had full attendance.

Q: It sounds intuitive, and it sounds perfectly logical. Now that we're seeing a totally different approach, should we stress, in this interview, that not shaming governments in

public but actually congratulating them and praising them is effective in getting them to pool their resources? I guess that's a statement I just made. I don't know. Does that sound right?

KONTOS: I think that's evident from the success we had. Perhaps there are times when you have to take a blunter approach, but this was never necessary in our case. It's something you'd want to avoid unless absolutely necessary. There's another interesting piece that I wanted to mention while we're on the subject, and that was the transition between administrations.

I have to give credit where credit is due; the whole Counter-ISIS campaign started in 2014, pretty much by the initiative of Barack Obama and John Kerry, who were personally involved in lobbying foreign governments, especially the Arab governments, to join an international coalition against ISIS. It was their personal involvement in August and September of 2014 that provided the energy and the impetus for everything that came in the weeks and months afterwards. This included the first phase of the military campaign—essentially to prevent ISIS from overrunning Baghdad—and the first big Coalition conference in December of 2014, which locked in the consensus of sixty members to work together against ISIS through the different lines of effort I described.

Q: Is it possible to say, between Obama and Kerry, who did what?

KONTOS: No, I wasn't involved in those first couple of months, because I was still in Turkey. I do recall John Kerry was calling directly to Arab foreign ministers, particularly Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE—key members of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council]. They joined up without hesitation and were involved in the air campaign at the very outset. I'm trying to think which specific Arab countries provided air support. I believe they included Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, and Morocco. Kuwait was certainly involved, but not in the air campaign. They provided facilities. I don't think Egypt did much at that point, and they stayed pretty well on the sidelines for the duration.

At the UN General Assembly in September 2014, President Obama called on other member states to join the U.S. in a broad coalition to defeat ISIS. Soon after, more than forty nations said they were to join, and the number grew to sixty by December. Obama also ordered the NSC to lead in creating a national strategy against ISIS, which was completed by October 2014 and provided the basis for U.S. leadership of the Coalition.

Q: So, you mentioned the importance of Western countries. Did that come later?

KONTOS: No, they were an important part of the campaign from the start. The major NATO countries provided both air and ground forces. Australia also played a major role in the air campaign, while other countries provided non-kinetic support—air transport, aerial refueling, ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], and so on. There were at least a dozen countries involved in the air campaign, and the overall military campaign evolved to include more than two dozen countries. In addition to air operations,

Coalition members deployed special forces, training teams, intelligence and communications specialists, medical staff, and other support personnel. More members provided weapons, ammunition, and other items to the Iraqi military and later to the Syrian Democratic Forces. Western countries were also major contributors of humanitarian and stabilization assistance.

Q: You've mentioned a few times how this whole endeavor went from one bureau to another, from CSO to NEA. It has its own character, its own identity. What about these groups—or, for that matter, special envoys—and how they fit and sometimes antagonize the established bureaus?

KONTOS: That's always an issue. Relative to the D-ISIS campaign, everyone kept pointing to the experience of SRAP, the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, as what not to do, particularly under Holbrooke. I had no contact with SRAP and no experience with it. I'm merely relating what people said and that they were critical. I won't name names, but there were senior people in NEA who explicitly said, "We do not want another SRAP." They didn't want an independent, unaccountable unit operating in the Middle East outside the influence of the NEA Bureau. We're talking primarily about the campaign in Iraq and Syria. But they quickly realized that the Coalition went far beyond their bureau, so they gave us a lot of latitude. For that matter, they gave the special envoy a lot of latitude. It's important to point out, however, that Brett McGurk was, for a period of time, dual-hatted as deputy assistant secretary in NEA, where he had been full time until 2014, when he became the deputy special presidential envoy. When he became the presidential envoy, I believe he dropped the DAS [deputy assistant secretary] position.

Q: Well, all of this implies that it has a lot to do with personalities. We know that Holbrooke personalized SRAP and rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. I'm guessing that if it had been somebody other than Holbrooke, then people would have had a different view of SRAP. You also mentioned that McGurk was well liked by his staff. Well, McGurk frankly was, bureaucratically, much more skillful, I think, and more able to maneuver with the different bureaus without bypassing them and ignoring them. I guess personal style is enormously important in these ad hoc endeavors, right?

KONTOS: Definitely. Everything you said about McGurk is true. I recall specifically that he went out of his way, whenever he came back from a trip to Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East, to provide a read-out to the NEA front office and directors. Somebody from the Special Envoy's Office was always in NEA staff meetings. McGurk's deputy, after he became special envoy, an active-duty three-star general, Terry Wolff, sat in at least once a week. Other days, my office director or I would sit in. So, we were very much linked together with NEA, and it was a collegial relationship.

Q: Well, that sounds like a good way to do business in a bureaucracy.

KONTOS: NEA had their finger on the operation through our office, because both the director and I reported directly to the NEA front office. They did our EERs [Employee Evaluation Report], and the NEA Bureau funded our operations and provided our administrative support. So, they had a grip on us, let's say.

Q: And it sounds like this was a positive thing. NEA had the collective experience in the field. These were people who knew the region. Many of them were Arabists, I guess, who knew their way around the terrain and, I guess, appreciated being informed and being involved—not just because they were ego-driven, but because they did really have equities they wanted to share. I'm just guessing that's the way it would have been. Did you say Patterson was the assistant secretary?

KONTOS: Yes, Anne Patterson.

Q: Okay. She had been ambassador in Egypt, right? And Colombia before that, I believe.

KONTOS: That's correct.

Q: I can't imagine the challenges and frustrations in dealing with NEA. It's such a difficult environment—the region itself, not the bureaucracy. It must have been challenging, fascinating, frustrating, and at times heartbreaking, I guess. It's a very important bureau.

KONTOS: Yes. Before we leave that, I have to explain our office's unusual position. We were officially part of NEA, but our day-to-day guidance and direction came from the special presidential envoy. Most of our time was spent dealing with other bureaus, especially EUR, since the European allies were so important in all the various Coalition activities. NEA was perfectly happy to sit back and let us worry about the European, Asian, African, and other non-NEA governments. Patterson and everyone else in NEA told us, "You deal with EUR and the others. That's not in our lane."

Q: Sure. So, you did that, and I'm guessing you had a positive reception in EUR, also, as a colleague.

KONTOS: Yes. NEA's mantra was "no surprises." As long as we kept the NEA Bureau informed, we had no problems dealing with the other bureaus and the governments in their regions. The Europeans were the major donors and participants in military operations, so we had constant interactions with European diplomats, always in close coordination with the EUR Bureau. Whenever we met with European embassies, we invited the EUR desk officers. They didn't always show up, but we invited them anyway. It just made life a lot easier.

Q: Again, this is a good lesson learned. The text of this interview should be a guide to people doing this type of ad hoc work. Involve the people assigned to that geographic

region. You have everything to gain by doing it, and everything to lose by not doing it. That's a good point. Well, Steve, are we getting to the conclusion of D-ISIS?

KONTOS: I think so. I'll take a minute to talk about the transition between the administrations. Most of the heavy lifting to form the Coalition and sustain it in those difficult early days was done under the Obama Administration. After the election in 2016, there was, I have to say, a lot of trepidation. I do remember at the time already having gone through a few transitions in Washington. But this one was different. There was no preparation for the change and no transition team at State. Nobody from the new administration even set foot at State for a long time.

Q: Actually, that was the case for all of State, as I remember.

KONTOS: That's correct. There was nothing, just radio silence. We had no idea of what changes in policy might be in store. We remembered moments from the campaign when Donald Trump had said, "I am going to fix it… this ISIS thing. I can do it better. The Democrats don't know how to fight these terrorists. I'm going to do a better job." We kept thinking, after a couple of years painstakingly building this large coalition and getting all the parts moving more or less in the same direction, it was all going to fall apart. But there was just radio silence. Then we started hearing that many assistant secretaries had been told not to come back to work. There were gaps in the senior leadership in most bureaus. Anne Patterson left, leaving Stu Jones to hang on a little longer as NEA's acting assistant secretary. For the most part, however, there was a long period of uncertainty.

Then, sometime late in the game, perhaps just before the inauguration, we started to see some movement. Brett McGurk and Terry Wolff briefed incoming White House officials in mid-January. I'm not sure who they briefed, but they gave them a Coalition 101 session—here's what we're doing, here's how the Coalition is organized, here's the progress in the campaign. Then we waited. We were thinking, that's the end for McGurk and Wolff. But nothing happened. After the inauguration, still nothing happened, and we went about our usual business. When Tillerson came in as secretary of state, McGurk briefed him, but he gave little indication of what would come next, so we kept doing our thing and wondering what was going to happen. Would the Coalition continue to function? Were we going to plan another ministerial?

At some point, it dawned on us that everybody involved in the D-ISIS campaign was being left alone. The new administration didn't replace McGurk or Wolff and didn't make any changes in the strategy of the Coalition. In fact, they didn't interfere in any way. Tillerson's very first major international conference was with the Coalition foreign ministers in May 2017. McGurk and the staff scripted the entire event, more or less along the lines of what we had done many times before. I'd venture to say that we were one of the few offices, maybe the only one, in State that survived intact under the new administration. We kept the same people, the same organization, the same strategy, and kept doing what we had been doing for three years already. I guess there was enough

sense in the White House to realize it wouldn't pay to disrupt a winning campaign. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The White House left us alone, and the D-ISIS team went on to stage many more successful conferences, one of which in February 2019 even included a speech by President Trump to Coalition ministers at the State Department. We raised more money for stabilization, and the military campaign made rapid progress. The offensive to retake Mosul got underway by late 2017. By 2018, ISIS had been driven out of Mosul and most of Iraq, so we were rolling along. That brought us to 2019, which saw the so-called territorial defeat of ISIS, when the group lost their last bit of territory in Syria and the self-proclaimed caliphate finally disappeared. The ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in late 2019. McGurk, however, had resigned earlier on December 28, 2018 along with Defense Secretary James Mattis, I might add.

Q: Yes, I think for the same reason. Both of them were very public. McGurk more so. Tillerson is famous for having been so cloistered, so isolated from everybody else in the State Department building. Do you know whether he had any interest in your office?

KONTOS: He did, because again, we put on his first international conference with foreign counterparts from about seventy Coalition governments and organizations. You could say we organized his coming-out party. So, yes, he did. I'm sure he was in contact with McGurk, and maybe with Wolff, who would have briefed and then prepared him for the Coalition conferences. But I don't think he was nearly as engaged as Kerry was. I remember we did more papers in preparation for Kerry's remarks and speeches to multiple Coalition conferences. Our briefing materials for Kerry were also more detailed than anything we had to do for Tillerson, which I think reflected his level of interest.

Q: Right. So, December twenty-eighth, that's '17, right?

KONTOS: Sorry, when McGurk resigned?

Q: Yeah.

KONTOS: 2018. December 2018.

Q: Ah, okay. So, he lasted almost two years.

KONTOS: More than that. General Allen was special presidential envoy for only about a year. When he left, at the end of 2015, McGurk succeeded him almost immediately.

Q: I meant two years from the inauguration.

KONTOS: Yes, close to that, right.

Q: Wow. That's something to think about. We all remember how he left and how angry he was, but we don't remember that he actually was there for a year and a half or two years. The Mattis story was another one entirely. He was publicly very disgusted with the administration deciding to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria.

KONTOS: Well, it was partly that. As I remember, it had a simple premise, which was that by withdrawing our troops—or announcing it publicly, anyway—we were pulling the rug out from under the Syrian Kurds, key partners who had done the bulk of the fighting against ISIS in Syria. In effect, we were abandoning partners to whom we had made firm commitments. That left the door open for Turkey to invade and destroy the main Syrian Kurdish political group, whom the Turks viewed as an appendage of the PKK.

There was another problem, too. We were not only abandoning the Syrian Kurds, but the job wasn't done. The situation with ISIS was unresolved. Yes, ISIS was for all intents and purposes defeated, but there were still ISIS fighters and sleeper cells in Syria. They were still a force to be reckoned with, although not necessarily controlling territory. We were just walking away without a satisfactory conclusion.

Q: We now know that ISIS has metastasized in West Africa and other regions where it is so much easier for them to do their thing. You put it well; it was a territorial defeat. That did not remove ISIS, it just displaced them. Of course, I don't know the extent of their membership and resources. Well, Steve, this is really fascinating. I think we've gotten to the end point of that '14 to '17 period in your bio. Any other comments, looking back? We can do another session on your Naval Special Warfare Command assignment.

KONTOS: Sure, we can do that and wrap up the rest. As I said, there was one thing I wanted to add about the Syrian opposition and the Free Police, which I think would be of interest, and then we'll wrap up next time. We've pretty well covered the counter-ISIS campaign.

Q: This is Dan Whitman and Steve Kontos, talking on August 28, 2020. Okay. So, Steve, in our last conversation, we were talking about— We were kind of looking back at your very intriguing work at the D-ISIS Coalition Office. This was part of NEA but also kind of an autonomous office, as well. Anything to add to that before we go on to talk about Naval Special Warfare Command?

Aiding the Syrian Opposition Free Police Forces

KONTOS: There's some information I should add regarding the previous assignment, the assistance of the Syrian opposition. As you remember, there were several lines of effort for CSO's non-lethal assistance to the Syrian moderate opposition. Again, the four were non-lethal assistance to the armed groups, assistance to the free media, assistance for local and provincial councils, and assistance to the Free Police. I suppose you could consider the White Helmets program a fifth one.

The one we haven't talked about yet was assistance to the Free Police. This was a complicated program in and of itself. It's unusual for any assistance program to pay salaries, or what we called "stipends." CSO had just started the program, which included paying stipends to over two thousand police of all ranks, from the commanders down to the police officers on the beat. It included, in addition to salaries, administrative costs, office equipment, and non-lethal supplies: vehicles, radios, satellite communication, computers, and things like that. But the most important aspect was the payment of stipends.

As always with U.S. assistance, we find ways to make it complicated. The most difficult part of this program, and all our programs, was the requirement to vet the recipients. They had to be vetted for two things: one was for any connections to terrorist organizations, which were prevalent in Syria, as you know, including al-Qaeda. The other was human rights abuses, primarily linked to the Syrian regime. A lot of the police had been employed by the Syrian government, and there may have been higher-ranking officers who had been involved in human rights abuses.

So, most individuals had to be vetted. What CSO did initially for the police program was to require that people at higher ranks would be vetted and go through the background checks via a process called RAM [Risk Analysis and Management], an improvised State Department program to check various U.S. government databases. In the case of the Free Police, the limited vetting process worked for a little while, but then somebody back in Washington—I'm not sure who—decided that every police officer had to be vetted. For some 2000 police officers this was a huge task logistically. But our biggest problems came from the police officers themselves, who objected to this U.S. intrusiveness.

Q: I've been slightly involved with this type of thing with Public Diplomacy grants of lesser amounts. It's difficult or impossible to nail a person only through a database search. That doesn't really tell you much, does it? It's a reasonable idea, but extremely difficult to implement.

KONTOS: Yes, it is, and very time consuming. Plus, there are lots of associated problems with it. As you said, the data searches are only part of it. You also have to rely on your knowledge in the field and anything you pick up from your field contacts.

Q: It's an imperfect process, and there's no way— If somebody gave money to a civic organization, not knowing that the organization has some connection to some dubious militias, it's endless, to try to trace everything that everybody does. Frankly, it may be impossible.

KONTOS: This was a huge concern in Syria with all of our assistance. Everybody had to go through it. For some of CSO's other programs, journalists, local council members, and White Helmet trainees were each vetted individually, but for members of the Free Police and the armed groups, it was a little bit different. In those cases, the principle was that, since we couldn't vet every single person, we focused on the commanders, the people

responsible. Ironically, we had much less of a problem with the armed groups than we did with the police, because we were never told to vet each and every militia member.

On my second or third day after arriving in Turkey, my job was to deliver the news about the new vetting requirement to the Free Police chief and the Aleppo provincial council chairman. I dutifully went through my talking points, and of course, they immediately grasped the implications of the change. They pretty much hit the roof, warning me, "This is going to pull the plug on the whole program. We can't accept this. The rank and file will never accept it. They'll think you're gathering intelligence on them. What's going to happen to the data? Even if you do what you say, the data could be compromised and end up with the Syrian regime." So, they refused to accept the blanket vetting requirement, even if it meant losing the stipends. It took me, with help from CSO Assistant Secretary Barton and Syrian opposition leaders, months to come up with a solution acceptable to the rank and file so that we could start paying the stipends again.

Q: Did this requirement come from Congress or L [Office of the Legal Adviser]? Where did it come from?

KONTOS: I think it was the result of a cautious interpretation of requirements in the State or DOD appropriations bills. There's legislation that says that recipients of U.S. assistance must be vetted for links to terrorism and human rights abuses. The language, I'm sure, is very general, and doesn't define exactly how it should be implemented. As you pointed out with an NGO, for example, do you vet every single person who works for the NGO, or just the executive staff? What about their contacts? Where do you stop?

The way we were able to break the impasse with the police was to say that each officer would provide bio-data to the Syrian opposition government. Remember the Syrian Interim Government? It was formed in 2013 to represent the rebels and the civilian opposition. We came up with a solution whereby the Syrian Interim Government would gather all the information on the police for their records for their so-called Ministry of the Interior. The ministry, in turn, would quietly share the records with the U.S. so that we could do the RAM data-searches. So, we did resolve the impasse and resumed paying the stipends. We were lucky that there were other donors involved, like the British, the Danes, and the Dutch, who had held up their shares of stipend payments until we came up with a solution. All of the Free Police understood the internationals were trying to help and trying to find ways to do so consistent with our rules and regulations. We had all continued our material assistance during the hiatus, and when we did eventually start paying the stipends again, our cooperation with the Free Police was excellent.

Unfortunately, as ISIS began to grab territory in 2014, we had to cut off our aid to the police in those areas, primarily eastern Aleppo province. We had no choice but to tell the people in the field, "You have to get all the donated equipment out of there or destroy it. It can't fall into the hands of ISIS." Because of their support from Western governments, many of the local police were already marked and fled from their hometowns further west as ISIS advanced, taking their equipment with them. As far as we know, whatever they

had to leave behind they destroyed or hid. So, the police assistance program continued, but it was confined to smaller and smaller areas as ISIS advanced.

Q: Of course. The loyalties of the police— Were they officially working for the Syrian government, or officially for the opposition? Where did they actually lie in this confused scenario?

KONTOS: It was very confused. Many Syrian government employees in rebel-held towns stayed on the job and continued to receive salaries even though the senior people had fled. These were municipal employees: teachers, medical staff, maintenance and sanitation workers, and so on. But this pattern wasn't consistent, and as far as I know, none of the police were receiving any salary at all, which is why we agreed with the opposition that we would pay the stipends. I believe most of them were police who had defected, while some others were newly recruited. I suspect the Syrian government simply cut off salaries if they weren't able to account for what had happened to the officers. But the higher-ranking police officers were clearly defectors and experienced in their jobs.

Q: Were they recruited by the opposition, recruited by the Assad regime, or who? Who recruited them?

KONTOS: The Free Police were recruited by the opposition.

Q: The further away you were from Damascus, the more you could rely on these individuals, I'm guessing?

KONTOS: We relied on them completely. Well, I can't say "we." The opposition relied on them, but they had to be linked up with the armed groups, because they often had little in the way of weaponry, whereas the militias were far better equipped. One of our later initiatives was broker agreements with Free Syrian Army militias to not only back up the police but, more important, not interfere in their law enforcement work. I think I mentioned earlier that we began to impose conditions on our assistance to the armed groups, basically insisting that they would not interfere with civilian governance. We didn't use the word subordinate, but they had to agree that they would coordinate their activities with the local civilian councils. The police themselves, of course, came under the authority of the local and provincial councils.

Q: I mentioned geography because I know very little about this. I think of Damascus as one end of the spectrum, and Aleppo as being at the other end in terms of who was in temporary control of things. Did you find that there were geographic hotspots, or were there areas of the country where things were going more smoothly, in your estimation, than in others?

KONTOS: Yes, and the police program was a case in point. We didn't provide stipends, training, and equipment in all the areas under opposition control, but only areas where the

moderate opposition had a solid foothold and faced minimal interference. So, we went province by province. We started with Aleppo, where opposition control was firm, then Idlib and parts of Latakia. We had plans to extend the program to Raqqa and Deir az-Zour, but obviously, by late 2013, that was too risky. Even though the Aleppo Free Police commanders had close ties to their Raqqa colleagues and were starting to help them organize, we weren't able to bring the Raqqa provincial police into the program.

Q: Okay. Well, it's certainly a confused structure, and you were improvising, and admirably, I think. It was a crazy situation. You were doing some good. I think you wanted to sort of fix the situation, and that was just never going to happen. But you gave non-lethal support to opposition police, and you gave other assistance to civil society. This is very tricky, because you're working within what is supposedly a sovereign country against the wishes of its government. I get it.

KONTOS: Again, it all came down to the question of legitimacy—that is, which groups and leaders had legitimacy. As far as we and most of the international community were concerned, the moderate opposition had more legitimacy than the regime and other groups that were fighting the regime. The problem was that we couldn't reach a critical mass by which the interim government, the opposition government, was recognized by anyone. With international help, it functioned to some extent, but it was never able to establish real credibility with the people in rebel-held areas of Syria.

Our plan, or let's say our theory, was to build a framework of legitimacy stemming from the local councils. The local councils had activists who got into their positions through some form of elections. They, in turn, elected provincial council members within their provinces or governorates. But we never got to the point at which the provincial councils got together and voted on who would lead at the national level. That was the missing link.

Q: I'm guessing that between the regime and al-Qaeda or al-Nusra and ISIS, many of these guys ended up dead. Is that correct?

KONTOS: Yes, some did. If they didn't flee to Turkey, they were killed, or in some cases kidnapped and tortured. If they survived, they quit and left Syria. So, yes, between ISIS and the regime, it was very dangerous for the moderate activists. As I said earlier, the extremists and the Syrian regime alike feared the support moderates had built up in their communities, feared their experiments with democratic governance, their transparency, respect for individual rights and so on.

Q: Yeah. These guys were, I think, incredibly courageous—maybe even foolhardy—to be standing up in between these two hyper-armed and vicious extremes and trying to have something in the middle, which very sadly never took root or, as I think you said, never got a foothold. Very sad business. Well, thanks for that addition on your work with the police. That is an important added note. Anything else on that sad story before we get to your next assignment in 2017?

KONTOS: No, I think we've covered it pretty well.

Navy Seals and U.S. Foreign Policy

Q: Sure. We go on, now, to Special Naval Warfare Command, from '17 to '19. You had had three years in this really tough situation dealing with ISIS, and I guess it was time to move, and you did.

KONTOS: It definitely was time to move on.

Q: You counseled Navy SEALs [Sea, Air, and Land teams]. I'm looking at your bio. You helped plan and exercise new mission concepts. Tell us a bit. How did you land that assignment, and what were your tasks?

KONTOS: It was pretty much an accident. I knew I wanted to get out of Washington. Going overseas was difficult, particularly because it seemed unlikely that Jan and I would be able to get a tandem assignment anywhere. But there were a fair number of POLAD [Foreign Policy Adviser Program] jobs stateside. So, I thought, perhaps I could get assigned to Central Command in Tampa or another domestic command outside Washington. I bid on a couple of the POLAD jobs in Tampa. Those didn't pan out, but the PM [Bureau of Political-Military Affairs] staff knew me well enough to keep looking. One day someone called me and asked, "Since you didn't get the job you wanted in Tampa, what do you think about going to San Diego?" I had never been to San Diego and had no idea what it was like. But it seemed like a good bet, especially when I learned it was with the Navy Special Warfare Command or SEALs. So, I agreed. It sounded interesting enough, seemed to check the boxes, which were to get me out of DC and change the pace after the previous three years.

Q: Yeah, you were burnt out, I think.

KONTOS: Right, just a little.

Q: You had every reason to be. San Diego. What a delightful place. Were you a POLAD?

KONTOS: Yes. In fact, I was the only non-DOD person in the command. That's often the case with POLAD assignments. The military command brings in just one person from State to advise the overall commander. Despite my lone pedigree, I never encountered any sort of friction or pushback from other staff. They seemed to like having somebody from State there. In this case, it was important that they have somebody from State, because like most of the Special Forces, they have a lot of international commitments and probably more than thirty countries at any given time where they're deployed. Sometimes the deployments take the form of sizable task forces, as they were in Iraq or Afghanistan or Somalia. Other times it's short-term for training or combined exercises with foreign partners and so on. There were other missions, too, that are highly classified.

Q: So, these are mainly ad hoc missions? These are contingent on things that happen in the field, is that right?

KONTOS: I can't give details. In some cases, they're ad hoc. In other cases, they're more deliberate.

Q: So, the general question is, then, in one word, the interagency. You were State assigned to a military operation. I think I've used the word "holy grail." We all have tried many times to make the interagency work, and we've all seen times when it kind of works and times when it doesn't. How did it work in San Diego between State and DOD?

KONTOS: It was easier than I thought it would be. You have to remember the way the military is set up, there are combatant commands responsible for actual operations and then component commands like NSW [Navy Special Warfare], which are responsible for training and equipping the forces that go to the combatant commands. So, NSW is not directly involved in planning field missions but must prepare its personnel for those missions. So, a lot of what I did was to help them get ready and anticipate what to expect in their overseas deployments.

They had to predict what future U.S. defense priorities would be and anticipate those in how they trained. A lot of it was focused one or two years ahead. When I started at NSW, it was already clear to me that the trend for the future was going to be great power competition. This was even before the 2017 National Security and 2018 National Defense Strategies came out. So, I had to get them thinking about Russia, China, North Korea, and to some extent, Iran. This was, of course, before all the problems that arose after the Trump Administration withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], the nuclear deal with Iran.

Q: The JCPOA, yeah. So, what did you discover that your military colleagues did not know? How were you able to give value added?

KONTOS: It seemed they often didn't know why we were doing certain things, what the strategy was, and also what the context was. If they were being deployed, let's say, to the Pacific Theater, what were the issues in the South China Sea? Who are our allies? Who is on the fence? What could we expect from different countries? Who might they be training with? With whom do we want to develop military and security relationships? So, there were a whole host of political and contextual factors that perhaps they didn't think about. They just knew that in a year or so, they were going to be deploying to the Pacific Theater but not much about what to expect there.

Q: We hear these days of the South China Sea as a real flashpoint and potential conflict. It wasn't quite at that stage in 2017. How did the navy view it then?

KONTOS: We were already preparing for increased tension in the area. We knew it was coming. There were numerous signs of what the Chinese had been doing to consolidate

control over the South China Sea, which they claimed entirely as their territory. These were not always publicized but we knew what the trend was. It was clearly an area where Navy Special Forces had to up their game.

Q: We knew they were building military bases on tiny little islands that were uninhabited—

KONTOS: Actually, they weren't even islands. The Chinese built the islands on reefs, many of which lay underwater. In some cases, they're above water only at low tide. So, they built islands, which they could then claim as their territory.

Q: Oh, gosh. In diplomatic circles, I guess we yelled murder. I don't remember, exactly. There was the military presence, which was more of an implicit kind of thing, and then there were also statements, I believe, from State Department and White House saying, "Don't do this." Is that the way you remember it? Was there also a political and diplomatic activity to kind of draw a red line, so to speak?

KONTOS: Yes, absolutely there was.

Q: Who was doing that?

KONTOS: Well, the president and secretary on down. It was the topic of a conversation that I think was publicized between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping in 2015. Xi supposedly made a commitment that China would not militarize the islands, but that, of course, turned out to be a lie.

Q: Yes. We now call it a lie.

KONTOS: But anyway, yes, this was constant. We were working with Pacific Command to rehearse various scenarios to push back as the Chinese attempted to extend their control over the area. There were lots of other things going on at the time—the different dynamics involved with each littoral nation, like Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and even Taiwan. The U.S. and Japan were also lobbying Asian governments to take a tougher stand against China's territorial claims, while balancing that with the imperative of a unified front—to include China—imposing sanctions on North Korea related to its nuclear program. So, again, it was important that the navy in general, and Special Forces operators in particular, were aware of this stuff so they weren't operating in a vacuum.

Q: Well, I guess the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership was not yet dead, is that right? That only happened—

KONTOS: When I started this assignment, we were already six or more months into the Trump Administration, so yes, it was dead. The Trump Administration pulled the plug on it early on. But we were still collaborating with individual allies and partners.

Q: Any comments on what we lost by not having that agreement go through? It was initiated by the U.S., and then all three presidential candidates turned against it, including the one who created it, Hillary Clinton. Any comments? Was this self-defeating? Was there some wisdom in it? That's outside of your lane, but—

KONTOS: Yes, it's pretty much outside my lane. But I think the reversal undermined our credibility. There were many things that came later on which undermined U.S. credibility even further, so our allies and partners, whether in the Pacific Theater or Europe or wherever, really didn't know what to expect from us.

Q: Yeah. I'm sighing, because I think that's a loss. So, let's see. You did this for two years. Some of it we cannot talk about in an unclassified conversation, but I guess there were deployments and comings and goings, and you were mainly in San Diego, I guess. Does Pacific Command come into this? Is it headquartered in Honolulu?

KONTOS: Yes. I had to travel there at least once for an exercise. Most of my travel was to the East Coast, because the Navy Special Forces are essentially split into two sections, East Coast and West Coast. About half of the SEAL teams are based in Virginia Beach, others are in San Diego, and there's one in Honolulu.

Q: Who's in Newport? That's the Naval War College, right?

KONTOS: Newport, Rhode Island? Yes, that's the Naval War College.

Q: And that wasn't part of your—

KONTOS: No. We cooperated with the Navy War College to plan exercises and simulations or scenarios with them, but no, I never went there.

Q: So, comments about working with DOD? Your comments so far have been quite positive. It sounds like there was good cooperation. People turned to you, as they should, for context and background so that their deployments would make sense. You gave it a rationale and a strategy. What else were you able to succeed in doing during this assignment?

KONTOS: I didn't just deal with the commander and his headquarters staff, but I also did frequent orientations for the rank and file. These were new recruits and enlisted personnel alike, especially the SEAL teams that were about to deploy overseas. It was important to give them context, because they would show up in foreign countries and not necessarily know how an embassy operates, what the main foreign policy issues are, or how the host government differentiated between military and civilian personnel, and so on. So, a lot of it was basic Embassy 101. If you deal with a U.S. embassy, here's what you need to know. Many of them did end up at embassies. Some of them had already been at embassies, and they understood the basics. But it was important to fill in that context.

Q: Did some of them become DATTs [Defense Attachés]?

KONTOS: No. I mean, not in Navy Special Forces. The defense attachés are generally a specialized track, so they start early in their careers. The U.S. Army has a special area officer program, and the navy has a similar thing. The services career-track them from an early stage. But increasingly, military commands, especially Special Forces, have placed liaison officers at overseas posts.

Q: So, this was a very broadening experience, I think. The navy had a broad international presence. My God, it's the entire globe that they deal with. As you mentioned, it's East Coast, West Coast, the entire planet. Do you have any judgement or feelings about navy culture in any ways that it differs from other military branches?

KONTOS: That's a hard one. I should know a little bit since I worked as a POLAD for the army in Europe and the navy in California. I think it's difficult for me to judge because the Special Forces have a very distinct culture of their own. One thing that surprised me about the Navy Special Forces was that a lot of them had higher education. I recall the admiral in command of NSW telling me that about two thirds of the force had college degrees. This included the enlisted personnel, not just the officers who have to have college degrees.

Q: That's remarkable. At about this time, Admiral (James) Stavridis went to the Fletcher School, I think. It might have been before that. Did you sense any influence that he left behind? He was admirably well-read and an author himself. Did you ever run into him?

KONTOS: Sure, I knew him. When I was in Europe, he was the combatant commander for EUCOM [European Command]. I was assigned as POLAD to the army component command in Europe. EUCOM did periodic senior commander conferences, so I would tag along with my boss for those. I met him several times, and you're correct, he was very erudite. But he was also easy to get along with, as well as an excellent communicator. I remember that he was, of all people, very conscious of how the military overused PowerPoint and would shove tons of information into a PowerPoint slide. He said at the beginning of one of his presentations, "The greatest value of PowerPoint is the image. That's what you'll remember." And, in fact, all he ever showed in his slide decks was pictures.

Q: That's fascinating.

KONTOS: He would display a picture and talk about that—what was significant about it, what the takeaway was. But he never used any text. It was all pictures.

Q: That's remarkable, because the phrase, "Death by PowerPoint," I believe, is a DOD phrase. We've all seen PowerPoint with slides that are just horrible. I've met Stavridis once. He's a very charming, erudite, as you say, and really a role model, I think. He's very much a navy person. Not that he was ever in conflict with any of the other branches,

as far as I know, but when I think of navy culture, I think of him. Now, two thirds of them had college degrees? That's incredible.

KONTOS: I was referring to the Special Forces, not the navy in general. NSW was attracting a very high level of recruits who were not only intellectually capable, but also are in top physical condition. The SEALs have a very grueling selection regimen before they even get to training.

Q: They're truly elite, yes. Well, this is fascinating. I think this kind of gets us to 2019, maybe. Any comments looking backwards or forward from that point? We've made it to last year. That's pretty good. Then, you retired in '19, I think.

Another State Department Chapter, Post-Retirement

KONTOS: Yes, that's correct. I didn't totally sever my connections with the State Department; I've continued on as a re-employed annuitant with CSO, the Conflict Stabilization Operations Bureau.

Q: And you're doing that even now, I believe. I guess that's not full time.

KONTOS: Right, it's part time.

Q: And you're doing this, obviously, remotely. CSO is in Washington, and you're on the West Coast. What's it like doing this type of work remotely?

KONTOS: It's not as difficult as I thought. I had a preview of this in Turkey, traveling much of the time, working out of hotels and cafés in downtown Istanbul or in Gaziantep. So, I was used to remote work, trying to keep information at the unclassified level and improvising to communicate. After the COVID-19 pandemic shut everything down, working remotely came easily. The fact that everyone else must telework certainly creates a more comfortable environment. As it turned out, CSO has been building relationships with Combatant Commands, so I'm back as a virtual liaison with Central Command.

Q: Well, you're perfect in that capacity. CSO does tend towards unusual missions. I worked briefly there myself. It's mainly an ad hoc thing. They look at a given challenge. They kind of pick and choose the issues and the places they're going to work on. In the last couple of years, what directions have they gone in in general, whether that's geographically or thematically? I know that they sometimes work on media development, sometimes civil society, sometimes conflict resolution. What is CSO into these days?

KONTOS: They have worked hard to shed their image of pursuing ad hoc projects. The bureau has also gone through different permutations because of varying leadership styles. The person I worked for in 2013 and 2014 was Rick Barton, who had experience in USAID. He had also been one of our UN ambassadors.

Q: He was one of the creators of OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives].

KONTOS: Right. So, he had a good pedigree, and I think had good ideas for CSO. From his time on, CSO established a better balance with the rest of the department. Nowadays, CSO staff are hypersensitive to what the regional bureaus think and stay in lockstep with them. So, what CSO does is not necessarily ad hoc. It's what the regional bureaus ask for. But during this time the bureau's staff developed specialized skills and capabilities. Preventing conflict has become the watchword. The staff also have good data crunching skills. They take a lot of different sources of data from NGOs, government officials, and field reporting to figure out conflict trends, as well as ethnic or political tension and so on. They've gotten pretty good at forecasting.

But this is a difficult niche, because in some ways CSO is treading on INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] territory. In other ways, it could be duplicating the activities of USAID, PRM [Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration] or INL [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs] or regional bureaus. CSO walks a fine line balancing its work with that of other bureaus, but I think it's getting a better reputation for staying in its lane. Recent legislation has put a spotlight on CSO. This includes the Global Fragility Act and the Atrocities Prevention Act or Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act or something like that. Having some of CSO's core functions codified in legislation certainly gives the bureau more credibility.

Q: Yeah. At its origin, CSO, in former days, was a very troubled bureau. The regional bureaus didn't like it. They felt CSO was meddling and interfering. I know ambassadors sometimes denied country clearance. I'm glad to hear the department worked this out, and there seems to be much greater harmony now with the regional bureaus, INL, and USAID. That's very good news, and you're benefiting from this.

KONTOS: The regional bureaus like CSO in some ways because they see it as a source of free help, especially at under-staffed overseas posts. But one of Rick Barton's mantras was that CSO is not a body shop. If CSO staff go somewhere on TDY, it must be for a specific purpose, consistent with the bureau's mission. There has always been this tension with CSO.

Q: There's been an enormous amount of progress, I think, in making CSO work the way it was meant to when it was originally conceived. S/CRS [Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization], I guess, was its previous name.

KONTOS: CSO certainly went through some ups and downs. Before Barton left the department, Secretary Clinton pushed for the creation of a new leadership position, the under secretary of Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, known in the bureaucracy as "J." The J under secretary oversees a catchall collection of orphan bureaus—CT, DRL, INL, PRM, CSO, and so on. After Maria Otero, the first J, left in 2013, she was succeeded by a former staffer to Senator George Mitchell named Sarah

Sewall. Sewall decided what CSO was doing at the time was all wrong, especially the Syria programs. After a brief review, including a visit to the field team in Turkey, she pulled the plug on CSO's management of the Syria programs and lobbied to move them to NEA. Despite the title of the bureau given by its authorizing legislation, she decided stabilizing conflicts was a waste of resources. If CSO had to get involved in stabilizing a conflict, it was too late. She argued that CSO should be preventing conflicts before they start. She completely changed the focus of the bureau, emphasizing analytic work to identify conflict risks before they break out. NEA agreed to take over CSO's Syria programs, and most of the CSO staff who had been working on Syria were absorbed into NEA's Assistance Coordination office. A dozen or so people who had been working on Syria were folded into NEA/AC by the end of 2014.

Q: So, CSO reports to J, is that right?

KONTOS: Yes.

Q: Okay. It used to go straight to S, but I guess maybe it has a few more evolutions to go through. It sounds, though, as if it's found its role at this time. It sounds like a relatively good period for CSO, which has a lot to contribute if people will trust it. I guess that's the dilemma. You mentioned legitimacy as a concept that is very important. Even internally in the USG, there are always these questions of legitimacy and bureaus. Seen from the outside, we think of it as the USG, but there are all these complexities, which you have so ably articulated in this interview. Steve, we're at five o'clock East Coast. What do you think? Where are we? Are we in a concluding mode here?

KONTOS: Yes, I think we have covered pretty much everything. So, I have nothing further, unless you have more questions. There may be broader topics you're interested in exploring, but as far as the chronology and highlights, I think we've pretty much covered it.

Q: That's great. That really is the objective in these interviews. Whatever massaging comes later, this is raw material for you to turn into a transcript that you might want to add to or detract from. Let me just sign off. Don't hang up. This is Dan Whitman and Steve Kontos. It's still August 28, and we are concluding this interview.

End of interview