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

ADNAN A. SIDDIQI

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is December 12th, 2023, we are beginning our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, did I pronounce your name right?

SIDDIQI: I think you nailed it. And thanks again for this chance to share my story.

Q: Let's start with when and where you were born.

SIDDIQI: I was born in Karachi, in 1959. Karachi was Pakistan's capital at that time. I was four years old when I first came to the United States, in February 1964. My father had won a Fulbright scholarship to study at Columbia University's School of Law. I don't remember much from 1964, other than the Statue of Liberty, the rides at Coney Island, and the World's Fair globe. I grew up and went to school in Upper West Side Manhattan, and then later in my high school years, we lived in The Bronx.

Q: Tell me a little about your family, how large, brothers and sisters and so on?

SIDDIQI: We trace our roots back to British India. My mother was of Mughal heritage and grew up in Old Delhi. In 1947, during the chaos of Partition, she and her extended family fled to Pakistan, as did hundreds of thousands of other "muhajirs" (Urdu-speaking Muslim migrants from North India) who had to emigrate. My father's family was based in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), about 100 miles from Delhi, and they were able to stay in India even after Partition. My father attended Aligarh Muslim University in U.P., graduating from AMU in 1956. He then moved to Pakistan, reconnected with my mother, who he knew from childhood years in Old Delhi, and they got married in Karachi in 1958.

Q: I assume at home you were speaking Urdu?

SIDDIQI: Yes, I only began learning English in school, when we moved to Manhattan.

Q: I also assume your parents spoke English?

SIDDIQI: Yes, they both did. But with each other, they mostly stuck with Urdu.

Q: Did they speak English to you at home?

SIDDIQI: With me, they spoke English about half the time. Sometimes they'd use Urdu and English in the same sentence, which sounded funny but seemed perfectly natural.

Q: Were you able to hang on to your Urdu as you moved up in your studies?

SIDDIQI: My Mom taught Urdu professionally, beginning when she was in her twenties in Karachi, and she also wrote poetry. So naturally she was adamant that I would also become bilingual. She taught me written Urdu at home, whenever she had time after work. My Urdu got even better after 1970, when we moved back to Karachi. I did sixth and seventh grade there at a Catholic school called St. Jude's. Our return to Pakistan lasted only two years though. In 1972, my mother got a job offer to teach Urdu at Fordham University, so we all moved back to New York City, this time for good.

Q: How old were you when you came back the second time?

SIDDIQI: I was thirteen. My parents put me in St. John's junior high school for eighth grade. It was a small private Catholic school, a few blocks from our Bronx apartment.

Q: What about brothers and sisters?

SIDDIQI: Two brothers, both younger than me and born in New York. One brother followed my father's footsteps; he got a law degree in Texas and became a lawyer. The other made a career out of acting, music, entertainment and so on; he lives in California.

Q: Your parents' decision to leave Pakistan in 1972, I understand the war was going on and it was fairly brutal, but were there other factors that drove that decision?

SIDDIQI: The 1971 India-Pakistan war lasted only two weeks, but for me as a kid, it was haunting. We used to stick black paper on our windows to block out the light during India's air raids. Our house shook from far-off explosions every night as Karachi's port got bombed. Luckily, nothing tragic happened. Despite the war, my school somehow stayed open, and I was able to complete seventh grade in Pakistan. We left in June 1972.

Q: Your mother takes the position at Fordham. Did your father then find a position for himself?

SIDDIQI: My father accepted a job as a Claims Examiner at a top U.S. insurance firm. But his dream was to open his own law practice, which he ended up doing, in Brooklyn, starting in 1980. I thank God though that my father was employed with the American International Group (AIG) during my high school years. It was only because of his direct insurance company connection that I was able to compete for a Starr Foundation grant in 1977. Starr was a corporate philanthropic organization that partnered with AIG. Their scholarship was a lifesaver, covering pretty much all my undergrad and grad school costs.

Q: A funny aside, did you ever go to your parents' workplaces and get an idea of what their work was like?

SIDDIQI: My father brought me along two or three times to court. I remember how he would be persistent but very polite in arguing his client's case before the judge. He didn't make a ton of money, though. Many of his clients were immigrants who would just call or show up at his office, without an appointment, to get his legal advice, and he would never charge them. I never saw my Mom teach at Fordham, but she would read out loud to me the Urdu letters she'd get from her students. Those were proud moments for her.

Q: In those years as your mother taught, did she begin to branch out into culture, Pakistani history, and so on?

SIDDIQI: My mother kind of viewed herself as a cultural ambassador. She always wore a sari, for example, even in cold weather, and even after 30 years living in the United States. She would show her American and Hispanic friends how to dress up in a sari, how to bake rotis and parathas (Indian bread). At the same time, she and my father were totally open to other cultures. They never had very much money, but they'd save up and celebrate their wedding anniversaries in places like Mexico, Turkey, Italy, Greece. They loved driving up to Lake George, Boston, Toronto, and Niagara Falls. We also did occasional trips to the D.C. area. Once we drove as far south as Tennessee and Louisiana.

Q: Was there a Pakistani community in your area when you arrived?

SIDDIQI: It was extremely small in 1964. I read somewhere that there were only about a thousand Pakistanis in the U.S. before 1970. Today it's more like a million.

Q: Not Pakistanis, but were there other Muslims in the area?

SIDDIQI: There were Indian and Bengali Muslims we knew, and many black Muslims. I had a classmate friend from Indonesia, he was Muslim. We also had many Hindu and Sikh families in our area who we'd see regularly. I'm still in touch with some of them.

Q: You mentioned when you got back your parents put you in St. Jude's as an introductory school?

SIDDIQI: No, St. Jude's was in Karachi, where I studied from 1970 to 1972. St. John's was in The Bronx, where I did eighth grade from 1972 to 1973.

Q: What was St. John's like, the student body?

SIDDIQI: It was mostly Irish and Italian. They had a tough time pronouncing my name. I started getting called Adam a lot; it was close enough and I didn't mind. My teachers were mostly Catholic nuns, very soft-spoken and friendly. They were surprised how little I knew about catechisms. But I did well overall, after feeling isolated and lost in the beginning. I ended up being co-valedictorian. Our graduation was held in a church.

Q: I assume you left St. John's in eighth or ninth grade?

SIDDIQI: After eighth grade, yes.

Q: During that time did you get involved in any extracurricular activities, music or Scouts or anything?

SIDDIQI: Not really. Like most first generation Asian Americans, I was laser focused on living up to my parents' expectations and getting A's. But I did love sports. For two years we lived in a high-rise which had a tennis court and a park area. In the evening and on weekends, I'd play tennis, touch football, basketball, and a variation of baseball, with kids from the building. I was a die hard Mets fan, and pretended I was Tom Seaver in the way I pitched the ball. The building's management wouldn't allow us to use a regular baseball, so we used tennis balls instead. Less authentic obviously, but it was still fun.

Q: I totally understand. You're reaching ninth grade. What are your parents thinking about the rest of your education? Going into public school?

SIDDIQI: I was on target to attend a Catholic high school, but at the last minute I applied to New York City's top three magnet schools, which were all public.

Q: So a decision was made to put you in public school after that. How was that decided?

SIDDIQI: It was more luck, really, than a decision on my part. Somehow, I scored high enough on the city-wide test to qualify for the Bronx High School of Science.

Q: Choosing Science, were you skilled in sciences in eighth grade?

SIDDIQI: I knew the basics, but I was no way any kind of whiz. I was fairly decent at biology and algebra. My best subjects though were social studies and language arts.

Q: So adapting to a giant school was all right for you? Were there things that astonished you or took a while to get used to?

SIDDIQI: It was overwhelming. We had over 900 kids at each grade level. And most of them were extremely smart, loud and opinionated. After years of thinking of myself as a top student, I suddenly felt stupid. It was tough keeping up with my classmates.

Q: The other thing is, going from the late 1960s into the 1970s, you have a huge counterculture in New York. Did that affect you and your family?

SIDDIQI: I don't think I fully realized what was going on. In the late 1960s I was still just in grade school. I do remember the Vietnam war protests, seeing hippies and Hare Krishna guys walking around. I remember the big New York teachers' union strike which

caused our school to close down for several days. I liked Muhammad Ali a lot and remember being upset when his boxing title got taken away over his stance on Vietnam.

Q: During the four years you're in Bronx Science, were there other aspects of school life that attracted you, extracurricular or something like that?

SIDDIQI: I liked writing, music, and sports. I wrote a few poems, plays and short stories, one of which got published in our school literary magazine. I also sang in our high school chorus. They tried to teach me to read music, but that part was always a struggle. I tried out for the baseball and tennis team, but didn't make either one. I did play though for my neighborhood PONY (Protect Our Nation's Youth) League, mostly second base and pitcher. I finally got to use a real baseball and play on grass instead of concrete.

Q: I've heard of Little League but not PONY.

SIDDIQI: The PONY League was for Bronx teenagers, and you didn't have to be very good. The city funded all costs. One of my school friends signed up for it, so I did too.

Q: Were you able to keep up your Urdu during that time?

SIDDIQI: I did. I was writing every month to my uncles and aunts and cousins in Urdu, which kept my skills up. At home, I'd listen to Bollywood songs on the radio, and memorize the lyrics. I started reading poetry and novels from my Mom's collection, and even tried to translate some Mirza Ghalib verses (ghazals) into English. And every three or four years, we'd spend the summer in Pakistan/India, where I got good daily practice in speaking.

Q: What did you learn about your family going back? Were there individuals who stood out? What did you learn?

SIDDIQI: Talking to my grandmothers, I was able to trace our roots back to about 1850. The Mughal side of my family, my mother's side, had lost everything under the British Raj. But in Pakistan, after India's Partition, they were able to rebuild their lives. My mother taught at a Karachi college in her twenties. She was the main breadwinner in her family before she married my father. On my father's side, it was his father, Mohammed Siddique, whose story fascinated me. They said he knew the Koran by heart and that he was one of the first Muslims to be appointed by the British as an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). Every few years he'd be posted to a new city. Sometimes I think my joining the Foreign Service was following Mohammed Siddique's footsteps, in a strange way. Tragically, he died in 1946, at his last posting in Calcutta, from a traffic accident. My father was only 14 and studying in a Delhi school at the time. So both my parents actually went through a lot of pain and turmoil in their childhood and early adulthood.

Q: Was the practice of Islam important to your family?

SIDDIQI: It was for my mother, not so much for my father. He was more laid back than she was. But they both fasted in Ramadan and expected me to fast as well. Ironically, they also were very much into Christmas. We would exchange presents every Christmas, and would drive to Rockefeller Center at night to see the huge tree all lit up.

Q: In the public school, were there other Muslims from the Arab world or other places?

SIDDIQI: My best friend at Bronx Science was a West Indian Muslim from Trinidad. My other friends were mostly Jewish and Asian. I used to have endless debates with them about the Middle East.

Q: Other thoughts from high school, other things that motivated you for interest in international affairs or international service?

SIDDIQI: I had great teachers, especially in Advanced Placement (AP) English and AP American History, teachers who I will always be grateful to. I was an introvert, not into doing extracurricular stuff, not the best at making friends. Three teachers, Mark Rifkin, Robert Kahn and Theresa Wolfe, helped me become more self-confident, more open. At our high school graduation event, which was held in Madison Square Garden that year, Mr. Rifkin gifted me a book of short stories by John Cheever, along with a hand-written note quoting from a Shakespearean sonnet. I'll never forget his smile and kind gesture.

Q: Then the other thing, while you're in high school, are your parents talking to you about college? What was the thinking about that?

SIDDIQI: I'm not sure if my parents convinced me or if I convinced myself, but the only college I was interested in was my father's alma mater, Columbia. I applied as an Early Decision candidate and got selected somehow. It could be because I was a legacy applicant. It certainly wasn't because of my SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) score, which was good but not great. I don't know what exactly convinced them, but Columbia College sent me an admissions offer along with a thick packet of materials in the mail. I couldn't have been more thrilled. It was a big break and a proud family moment.

Q: Before we follow you into college, one last question – were there any travel experiences or part-time jobs before you went into college?

SIDDIQI: No, most of my international travel and part-time jobs happened during and after college, not before. During my high school years, we did a lot of family trips driving up to Canada and down to southern states. I loved the mountains of Virginia. The first big trip I did on my own was to the U.K. and Western Europe in summer 1980.

Q: Let's go to Columbia. Did you live on campus or commute?

SIDDIQI: I wanted to live on campus, but they were short on student housing. New York residents like me were put on a long Waiting List. I ended up commuting from the Bronx

my first two years. In my third and fourth years, I was finally able to get "Off Campus" housing. It was a small room, but just a few blocks away from my classes.

Q: Going from even a large high school to a very large university, did you have to adapt? What were your impressions?

SIDDIQI: I was expecting Columbia to be similar to Bronx Science in terms of academic standards and competition, and I was happy to find that it was. I made the mistake though of taking the maximum number of credits allowed per semester. My goal was to complete my Bachelor's in three years and my Master's in one year, using the A.P. exam credits I came in with, and signing up for graduate courses that counted towards both degrees. I was ultimately successful in pulling it off and getting my joint B.A.-M.I.A. program done in four years. But I was constantly behind in my assigned readings, and I had almost no social life. I made the Dean's List a few times, but I probably didn't learn and absorb as much as I should have. There were two required courses that all Columbia College undergraduates had to take as part of their core curriculum, regardless of their major. One was Contemporary Civilization (Western thought and philosophy) and the other was a combination of Literature, Art and Music Humanities. Completing the "Core" was a Columbia tradition dating back to 1754. I got mostly B's. I just couldn't keep up with all the reading assignments. We were expected to read something like 200 pages a week. I realized too late that I should have gone for a lighter schedule and course workload. That's what all my classmates chose to do, and they were smart to pace themselves.

Q: Given how you were studying and how much time that took, I don't imagine you worked at all during that time.

SIDDIQI: I worked occasionally, part-time and during summer breaks, as part of my Work-Study financial aid package. One job was with Columbia's American Language Program for incoming foreign students. Another was as a Research Assistant in the Political Science department. Work-Study was minimum wage, but it helped me buy books on the syllabus and cover other small expenses that my scholarship did not.

Q: How did you decide where you were going to go? Europass and back-pack around?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, in those days that was the ultimate cool thing to do. A two-month Eurail Pass cost just $280 and allowed you to hop on and off any train in Europe at any time. I wanted to go with friends but ended up traveling solo. This was May-June 1980, after I received my Bachelor's. I was only 20, and my paperwork to become an American citizen was still in process. Because of my Pakistani passport, I had to apply for visas to England, France, Italy and four other Eurail Pass countries. Traveling by myself in Europe was challenging. Just finding a place to stay, and changing currencies, was a regular headache that I had to deal with every three or four days whenever I got off a train in a new place. What saved me was my "Let's Go Europe" guide, which not only had a list of cheap places to stay and interesting places to visit, but also provided a traveling student perspective. My trip changed me a lot. It forced me to talk. For someone who wasn't naturally outgoing, I had to communicate constantly with strangers, and often

in places where very few spoke English. On trains and in youth hostels, I met many Americans my age from California, the Midwest, Texas. They would surprise me by always beginning with the question "where are you from?" When I'd respond "I'm from New York," they'd follow up with "No, I mean where are you really from?" They viewed me as a foreigner. Meeting those Americans in Europe made me feel more American, strangely enough, even though they couldn't figure me out. Two weeks after I returned from my trip, I officially became a U.S. citizen. At my citizenship swearing-in, I was thrilled to be among scores of other diverse people. I remember our repeating the oath together before the judge, and everyone cheering and shaking hands. Just three months after that life-changing day in 1980, I voted in my first U.S. presidential election.

Q: Was there a particular country that really attracted you?

SIDDIQI: I liked England. I had relatives there who put me up for a couple of weeks and we bonded very quickly. I liked Spain, Austria and Italy as well. In Paris, I relied on my high school French to survive. It was a struggle at times, but the French appreciated it.

Q: Was this trip after college?

SIDDIQI: Yes, this trip happened right after I graduated from Columbia College and got my B.A. My big thrill at graduation was getting the Charles Beard Prize that year in Political Science, along with a check for $150. It was for a paper I had written for an African Politics course, using dependency theory to explain the post-colonial economic challenges Kenya struggled with in the 1960's and 1970's. I still had a year to go, at that point, to complete my M.I.A. at Columbia's School of International Affairs (SIA).

Q: Were plans solidifying that summer for graduate school?

SIDDIQI: Yes. I had already enrolled in the joint degree five-year program by then, which I somehow ended up finishing in just four years, as I mentioned earlier. Somewhere around 1979 and 1980, I seriously became interested in diplomacy as a possible career. Professor Ainslie Embree was an influence. He was my instructor for Contemporary Civilization as well as my dean at Columbia's South Asia Regional Studies Institute. A renowned India scholar, he served at one point in New Delhi as the U.S. Mission's senior Cultural Advisor. I also continued my interest in languages. I took courses in 19th century French literature and introductory Arabic. And I had another professor, Stephen Rittenberg, who taught me the Devanagari script, allowing me to be able to read and write Hindi, and not just speak it. Meanwhile, I was surrounded by people who wanted to talk foreign policy. I joined students who protested apartheid and Columbia's corporate investments in South Africa. When Yasser Arafat and Zia-ul-Haq came to speak at the U.N., Columbia students protested that as well. Events like those pushed me toward the idea that I could have a role to play in promoting dialogue and understanding. When I got selected to Columbia's "International Fellows Program" (IFP) in 1980-81, that was another door that opened. I joined 20 other Fellows on a two-day faculty-guided trip to Washington, D.C. We met staffers from Congress, the State Department, the Department of Defense and the National Security Council.

Q: You heard about the Foreign Service; when did you take the exam?

SIDDIQI: I took it three times, in 1980, 1981, and 1982. The first time, I didn't pass the English part, and that was a shock. Here I thought I was good enough to be a professional writer, and there they're saying I don't have the English score for it. (Laughter) It was a tough exam. Tons of multiple choices, and never enough time to read and answer them all. I took it again the following year and I improved. I passed both written parts, but then I didn't pass the oral. The reason I failed the oral is because they tested for management skills, and I barely had any. I had had a couple of work-study experiences, but that was it. In year three, I was finally able to pass all three parts. By then I had started working in midtown Manhattan with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ) International, and I knew a lot better how a professional office works.

Q: Okay, so you graduated and went into the publishing house.

SIDDIQI: That was totally by accident. I came out of Columbia naïvely assuming I'd be in high demand and could pick and choose. But New York's economy in 1981-1982 was in recession. I found the going tough. I had no connections aside from my professors. So I did a lot of randomly answering ads in papers. When a Fortune 500 company, HBJ, showed an interest in me, I jumped at their offer. It was for an entry level marketing coordinator job in their School Textbook division, for $13,000 a year.

Q: What did you do in the meantime?

SIDDIQI: I got increasingly frustrated. Sat at home in the Bronx and began having serious doubts. At one point, I was willing to take any office job, whether it was in my field or not. I accepted the offer from HBJ because even though it was publishing and sales, there was an international angle to their operation. Also, I figured I'd be around authors and editors, which would be intellectually stimulating and might get me a foot in the door as a writer. HBJ was headquartered on Third Avenue, walking distance from the Grand Central Station and the United Nations. My job was to help market school texts to American international schools and U.S. Department of Defense schools (DoDDS) in Europe and elsewhere. HBJ depended on those accounts, because once a school adopts your textbook, they'll keep ordering it for five years or longer, for all their grades and classes. It was a lucrative business, but it also gave everyone a good feeling that we were furthering quality American education. There was lots of stiff competition though, from equally giant publishing giants such as Macmillan, Prentice Hall, and McGraw Hill. So our advertising and marketing had to be timely and effective. I really enjoyed my 18 months at HBJ. I got to learn about advertising, outreach, and customer service. The skills I picked up were critical to my finally passing the Foreign Service oral exam.

Q: You got through. What were your thoughts about what sort of work in the Foreign Service you wanted to do? Was it public affairs?

SIDDIQI: I didn't have a choice, really. All passers were placed in one of possibly five "cones" based on their score on different parts of the test. I scored well on the culture, art, literature, history portion. So they put me in the public diplomacy (PD) track, which at that time meant joining USIA, the United States Information Agency. I remember feeling a little disappointed, because it wasn't the State Department. But looking back now, I think the recruiters got it right in my case. USIA was a natural fit for me.

Q: You get in in 1983?

SIDDIQI: Yes, September 1983.

Q: What's next? Did you go to Washington, or was there anything in between?

SIDDIQI: One funny thing I forgot to tell you. I hadn't told my bosses at HBJ that I had passed the Foreign Service exam. They had plans to move their entire office and staff permanently from New York to Orlando, Florida. They wanted and expected me to move with them, and they offered me a promotion as incentive. I didn't tell them I had this other log in the fire. Suddenly, for the security clearance check, the State Department sent someone to my boss in New York to interview him about me. My boss felt blindsided. He took me aside and said, "Adnan, I had an interesting visit today from somebody in the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), and they wanted to know about you. Do you want to tell me something?" So I had to spill the beans. He was genuinely happy for me, Christopher Kerr was his name. He joked, "Don't worry Adnan, I didn't say anything bad about you." The timing worked out. But Chris and the HBJ gang were disappointed to lose me, I think. When I got to Washington, D.C., I had no idea what I was getting into. I knew what ambassadors did, in general, but I had no idea what junior Foreign Service officers did at U.S. embassies, or what exactly USIA did in terms of foreign policy, besides Voice of America (VOA) radio and Fulbright exchanges.

Q: The ambassadors and no other Foreign Service officers, you didn't have anybody who helped you as a mentor?

SIDDIQI: No, no one. When I was packing my two bags and leaving for Washington, I didn't even know that there was going to be an officer swearing-in ceremony.

Q: You get down there, you know you're going to orientation. What was that first experience like, in orientation? Did you feel you were getting enough introduction that you were confident about being able to go to your first post?

SIDDIQI: USIA's Junior Officer Training (JOT) Orientation took about four months. We were headquartered at 301 4th Street SW (State Department Annex building SA-44), across from the Voice of America (VOA). In an incoming class of 15 USIA officers, I was the youngest at age 23. I later found out that I also was the first Pakistani American they had ever hired as a Foreign Service officer. We had very little overlap with the State Department's entering junior officers who were training separately across town.

Every day at USIA was different and fascinating. Our JOT Training Coordinator, a USIA officer named David Grimland, was a Turkey and Balkans expert. We had lots of good back and forth every day. He invited us to his home in Chevy Chase to meet his family. And he organized a two-day Off-site Retreat in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. That's where the 15 of us formally were told which country we were going to be assigned to.

Q: As you're going through the process, do you recall anything about your preparation at school or going to Europe or the creative writing or the radio that was helpful?

SIDDIQI: I think all of those things were helpful. By the time I joined USIA, I had done that two-month trip through Europe on my own, and at HBJ I had had a lot of public relations and business interaction with U.S. booksellers and clients. And I was already coming in with several foreign languages. I had Urdu, Hindi and French, and I had taken a couple of Arabic courses, just for fun, at Columbia. Still, in comparison with other officers in my incoming class, I was a neophyte. Some were former lawyers, others were university professors, military veterans, activists from NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). In class, I decided I better not even mention my brief private sector stint at HBJ. They'd have just thought "Seriously? What does this kid know?" (Laughter)

Q: Meanwhile you had some Urdu.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, but it didn't do me very much good, except qualify me for a slightly higher incoming salary. There was no demand for Urdu in the Foreign Service in 1983-84. It was not considered a target or priority language like Russian, Chinese, and Arabic by the U.S. government. We were still in the midst of the Cold War, China was emerging geopolitically, and tensions in the Middle East were once again on the rise. No one in USIA gave my Urdu/Hindi fluency a second thought in those early days.

Q: So the four months were all in Washington.

SIDDIQI: Correct. We had experts who would come in and speak to us every day. I took tons of notes those four months. And then came our small, informal "Flag Day" at Harpers Ferry. The way I got assigned to Yemen was totally a luck of the draw. The process was, we were handed a list of fifteen posts that needed junior USIA officers. My classmates and I each had to prioritize them from 1 to 15 in a secret ballot. I put Caracas and Bonn on top, but USIA gave me my fifth preference, which you would think would be some glamorous place, but it was Sanaa (laughter). My parents, brothers, and friends were all shocked when they heard. The only thing they had heard about Yemen was that it was poor and very isolated. They thought I got a raw deal. And they kept asking, why didn't they give you Saudi Arabia or some other "nice, rich" Gulf country instead?

Q: You're lucky they didn't give you your fifteenth choice.

SIDDIQI: That's so true! I think Yemen was 14th or 15th on other people's lists, which is why I got it. I wanted adventure, and trying a place I'd never been to. Everyone in my class wanted Western Europe, but to me that wasn't nearly as interesting. I had heard

intriguing stories about Sanaa from a USIA officer who had recently been posted there, former Public Affairs Officer (PAO) to Sanaa, James Callahan. It was obvious from his excited voice that he loved Yemen and the Yemeni people. He convinced me to bid on it.

Q: Did they give you any preparation to go to Yemen?

SIDDIQI: At least some Arabic was required, preferably a certified score of 2/2 on the State Department's FSI (Foreign Service Institute) scale. My two semesters of Arabic in college made me too good for the beginner's class at FSI, but not good enough for their intermediate class. So USIA sent me to a commercial language school in downtown D.C., Inlingua, instead. My tutors were two Syrian brothers, one a medical doctor by training and the other a mechanical engineer. They were very friendly and informal. I asked that we devote some of my listening and speaking drills to chat literature and listen to songs. That's how I first got exposed to great singers like Om Kalthoum, Fayrouz and Abdelhalim Hafiz. Inlingua made language learning fun. In just 7 months, I reached FSI's required 2/2 level, way earlier than USIA expected. In July 1984, I headed off to Yemen.

Q: You're going to North Yemen, this is before Yemen joined the northern part with the southern part?

SIDDIQI: Yes, the U.S. Mission was located in Sanaa, North Yemen, officially known as the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). South Yemen was separate, and was known as PDRY, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. It was very pro-Soviet, and ruled by the Yemeni Communist Party. Its capital was Aden, a former British colony. We did not recognize PDRY and had no diplomatic presence in Aden. It was off-limits to us.

Q: When you went out there, what was your initial position?

SIDDIQI: USIA only had two officer slots in the country; one was the PAO, the public affairs officer, the other was his or her deputy, which often went to an Entry Level JOT. U.S. Information Service (USIS) had a small office about two miles from the U.S. Embassy. I was the JOT, but I was de facto the deputy PAO. We also had an American OMS (office management specialist) and eight Locally Employed Staff (LES). Interestingly, all our LES were either half Ethiopian or half Somali. Yemen had many Africans, as well as Egyptians. I also saw a surprising number of Chinese workers.

Q: How big was the embassy?

SIDDIQI: It was a mid-sized U.S. Mission, led by Ambassador William Rugh, who was an Arabist and a former USIA officer. In addition to USIS and State Department officers, we had a fairly large USAID (United States Agency for International Development) mission. We also had about 20 U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. Outside the Mission, we had U.S. private contractors who ran the American Institute of Yemeni Studies (AIYS), and who taught at the Yemen American Language Institute (YALI).

Q: What were your responsibilities when you arrived?

SIDDIQI: I'd like to talk about my arrival first, if you don't mind. Up in the mountains, Sanaa's airport had very few international flights coming in. I flew in on Yemenia Airlines, I was the only American on the plane. I go down the steps to disembark, feeling sorry for myself and wondering what I had gotten into. But then out of nowhere an American guy comes up to me and shakes my hand. It was my new boss, PAO Frank Ward. We had exchanged letters, but this would be our first face to face. He said he had gotten a badge from the Yemenis to get onto the tarmac, and then he just cheerfully grabbed my bags. He drove me to his house, introduced me to his family, fed me a home-cooked meal. Then he drove me to my Embassy-leased house, and got me settled in. Frank did all that on his own. He could easily have sent a local expediter to meet me, but instead he came himself. I couldn't have asked for a more caring boss or colleague.

Q: As you arrived there, was personal security an issue?

SIDDIQI: Going in, I had no clue that things could be dangerous. I guess I should have done more reading in advance. I soon realized from reading the Yemeni press that there was a lot going on that was worrisome. Ali Abdullah Saleh's hold on the country was tenuous. An army colonel, he constantly had to negotiate with rival clans and tribes to stay afloat. Our Embassy's Marines and Regional Security Office (RSO) made sure that all newcomers to post, like me, went through crisis response training. I'll never forget the day we had to show that we could repel backwards down from the roof of a three-floor building. That was really scary and tested my nerves. It was also kind of scary just seeing Yemeni men of all ages walking around with jambiyas (curved daggers) around their waist; the daggers were part of their national attire and considered a prized possession.

Q: How did you divide responsibilities between you and your boss?

SIDDIQI: All JOTs were expected to do 10 to 12 months at their first overseas post. We basically were there to be trained, and to learn by doing. PAO Frank Ward was very thoughtful about including me in his Embassy meetings, and about introducing me to his Yemeni contacts. He handled most of the press and media side, and he also took the lead in reporting back to Ambassador Rugh and USIA Washington. I got to do U.S. speaker programs and manage our library. Frank also put me in charge of our big Election Day event in November 1984 when we invited Yemenis to come see U.S. democracy in action, and learn more about President Reagan's electoral victory. Later on, I also did programs with students learning English at our Yemeni American Language Institute (YALI), which was part of the USIS compound even though it was USAID-funded. One unique aspect of the worldwide JOT program was working for three or four weeks at a time in other Mission sections. The idea was to give us entry level officers a better grasp of the big picture. I was able to work on special projects in Consular, General Services (GSO), the Political/Economic section, and USAID. My rotations through those sections helped me a lot in understanding the breadth of FSO work. Consular was my first rotation. We timed it so that I didn't have to spend time at the visa window, because I didn't have the training to issue visas. In Washington, they gave me just three days of consular training as a USIA officer. It gave me a general idea about visas, but that was it.

Q: You have to have, when you arrive, a consular appointment letter or something from the Department of State that says you can be a consular officer, because there is a bit of control of U.S. documents, passports and other things, and you have to be able to vouch for them. If you don't have this separate consular appointment, you're not supposed to be doing any consular work.

SIDDIQI: Exactly. So realizing I was of little use at the visa window, the consular chief in Sanaa, Lisa Piascik, asked me to work on American Citizen Services (ACS) issues. I accompanied her on a couple of important trips outside of Sanaa. We traveled high and far for days at a time to remote villages to check up on former and current U.S. green card holders. According to our records, these were Yemeni citizens and their families who had emigrated to Detroit, Michigan back in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, had worked at Ford and other motor companies, and had then come back to live in Yemen. We had a whole database of them in Consular, but many of the names and addresses were unverified. To make sure U.S. Social Security checks were going to living, bona fide recipients, we had to conduct spot checks. We'd drive to these remote villages and go knock on people's doors, asking to meet with so and so on our list. We caused quite a stir, but I think our speaking Arabic helped reassure them. In some cases, the U.S. social security recipient had died in Yemen and their checks were not being cashed. In a few other cases we uncovered fraud, where people did try to cash U.S. checks that were not meant for them. We gathered a lot of useful information for Washington on the two trips I went on. If you're interested in more details, I'd recommend you read Lisa Piascik's account in her ADST (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training) interview. She mentions me at one or two points in her very interesting narrative.

Q: She was going out to deliver Social Security checks or the cash from Social Security?

SIDDIQI: I think so, but I think the main reason was to make sure our data would be updated and accurate. For me personally, it was a great chance to get out and see Yemeni farming culture from up close. The village elders who received us were very warm. They would invite us to their modest homes for lunch. And they made sure we were safe.

Q: The other thing I wanted to ask about that, going to those areas – there is a book about the Maria Theresa "thaler" (dollar), these silver thalers that ended up as currency for a long time, and a lot of Yemenis stored and hoarded them from the late 1800s as a kind of currency. Did you run into that?

SIDDIQI: I did, I ran into that in the old souk of Sanaa, where they were selling those silver dollars to our Peace Corps volunteers and other Americans looking for old souvenirs. The antique sellers had a whole stack of 19th century Maria Theresa silver coins. I bought a couple, but I don't have them anymore, unfortunately. I learned later that many fake coins were also being made and sold. The economy of Yemen was almost all in the black at that time. Yemen was very cut off from the rest of the world, and very little foreign investment was coming in. They had just discovered oil in the Marib region

when I was there. Texas-based Hunt Oil was given the rights to drill. But Yemen's economy overall was extremely limited. They mostly sold guns and grew qat.

Q: Speaking of that, you mention there was oil – had coffee begun to be produced there?

SIDDIQI: Yemenis like to drink coffee, as do most Arabs on the Peninsula. They'd been producing coffee as a cash crop since the 1600s, when they were under Ottoman rule. The beans were grown in the highlands near Taiz and exported to Istanbul through Yemen's old Red Sea port of Mocha. That's how Mocha coffee became known and famous. I had a chance to actually visit Mocha when I was in Yemen, and also visited the neighboring town of Zabid, where they say Algebra was invented. Yemen has so much rich history. It was once part of the Kingdom of Sheba, that's why they have so much in common with Ethiopia and Eritrea, like qat chewing. For more on the history of coffee in Yemen, and how a young Yemeni American has been trying to revive it as a cash crop for export, there's a very interesting book I recommend called "The Monk of Mocha." It was sad to see that most farmers, when I was in Yemen, seemed to prefer growing qat instead of coffee. The demand for qat was huge. All the government officials and journalists we met chewed qat. It was everywhere, with multiple varieties for sale.

Q: Is this a good place to break? Then pick up with the rest of your tour in Yemen?

SIDDIQI: Sure. I still have some more stories about Yemen. See you next time.

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Q: Today is January 12th, 2024, we are resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi, and you're in Yemen, 1984?

SIDDIQI: Yes, I was there for almost a year. I got there in September 1984 and left in August 1985.

Q: You're a junior officer trainee, so in theory you go through every section. Do you recall that, are there anecdotes you recall from that time?

SIDDIQI: I went through four or five of the Embassy sections before I returned to Frank Ward and USIS. I started off in Consular, where I spent the first few days shadowing the Consular chief and getting to know how the visa interviewing and issuing process worked. I didn't personally have the authority to issue visas, but just seeing Yemeni applicants at the visa window and hearing their stories was useful. The best part about Consular was my accompanying them on trips to remote mountain villages, as I mentioned last time. We had an experienced Yemeni driver, thankfully, who made sure we didn't plunge down into a stepped farm or ravine. The roads were all unpaved and narrow, with no lights, no signs, and no guard railings. I did some interesting field trips during my rotation with USAID as well. They had some important agricultural development projects going on in the Ibb region and wanted to generate wider public awareness about them. Since they had no press staff of their own, I took a USIS staffer

with me; we took photos and interviewed some of the Yemenis and contractors who were working with USAID. The trip got us some good, positive coverage in local papers. The town of Ibb also had a convent run by some American and international nuns. When we stopped there for a few minutes, we ran into their VIP visitor that day, Mother Teresa. I didn't get a chance to talk to her, but just being with her in the same room seeing her was a thrill. After my USAID rotation, I did two weeks each in the Embassy's Political-Economic section, and its General Services Office (GSO). At each place, I gained insights into the Mission's work and did what I could to generate public support for the United States. I'd draft press releases and other Embassy statements, supported by materials received from USIA Washington, and then distribute them to Yemen's official Saba (Sheba) news agency. Saba would pass on our stuff to local media for publishing.

Q: The majority of media was print media, or did they have radio or TV?

SIDDIQI: They had a very fledgling operation in radio/TV, run by the Ministry of Information. No English channels, all in Arabic. We found that if we gave them U.S. news clips in English, without Arabic captioning or dubbing, they wouldn't use them.

Q: How widespread was literacy?

SIDDIQI: It was not widespread at all. The educated middle class in Sanaa was quite literate in Arabic, for example people who worked in business and government and academia. But as soon as you get into the old marketplaces, or the hinterland, it was rare to find Yemenis who could read and write Arabic well. If you wanted to make an impact as a diplomat, it would have to be face to face conversation. At that time, my Arabic was good enough to break the ice with new contacts. But for substantive dialogue, where agreements or a plan forward needed to be reached, I had to rely on my LES (locally employed staff). That said, my Arabic steadily got better during the 11 months I spent in Sanaa. My Yemeni contacts seemed to like the fact I was named Adnan and that I knew a bit about Islam's history. I'd remind new contacts that the tribes of Arabia descended from two brothers, Adnan and Qahtan. That line would often be a good ice-breaker.

Q: Speaking of Islam, you were raised Sunni, I imagine?

SIDDIQI: Yes, technically speaking, I was raised Sunni. In real life though, we never saw any difference between Sunni and Shia. We self-identified simply as "Muslim."

Q: Was there a Shia presence in Yemen? Was that for any of your calls a problem?

SIDDIQI: Most Yemenis in Sanaa and the northern regions were Shia. They called themselves Zaidi. The country was ruled by a secular president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. He may have been Shia, but you'd never know it from his speeches. He was an Army colonel, a young tough guy, who had the support and allegiance of most of the tribes and clans. There was never the kind of religious-based conflict you see now in present-day Yemen between Shia and Sunni. Their main problem was economic underdevelopment.

Q: What did you use as an icebreaker? Were there particular kinds of conversations or activities?

SIDDIQI: Frank Ward and I mainly focused on winning hearts and minds with opinion leaders, such as government officials, media, and Sanaa university faculty. We were still in the middle of the Cold War, and Washington viewed Yemen as vulnerable to Russian and Chinese influence. To raise America's profile and expand people-to-people connections, our office relied on USIA-funded exchange programs for students, faculty, and others who we thought one day might become stars. Almost every leader I called on wanted to know how people on their staff, or they themselves, could qualify for a travel grant or scholarship to the U.S. We also sent some Yemeni scholars, with USIA's support, to the American Studies Research Center (ASRC) in Hyderabad, India.

Q: You talked about the outreach to them, the cultural aspect, and so on. There must have been other aspects as well.

SIDDIQI: We did a lot of direct outreach to young people, through the Yemen American Language Institute. YALI was co-located with USIS and its classes were supervised by us, but it was a USAID "Transfer of Technology" project. YALI students were all from Sanaa University's engineering and science departments. They came to YALI for intensive English courses as part of their pre-U.S. departure preparation. USAID provided the funds, students, and contract teachers. USIS provided the facility and general oversight. I would regularly go over to talk to the teachers and students. A few of the YALI teachers were Peace Corps or spouses of Embassy officers, but most of them were Yemeni. They needed more native English speakers, so I would volunteer occasionally. I'd answer questions about New York City and American schools and universities. For beginner students, I even screened some old 16 millimeter silent films that USIS had in storage. Charlie Chaplin became an instant favorite. YALI was a remarkably successful place given the daily stresses of living in Yemen. One funny dilemma we had to deal with was what to do with students who came in dressed/armed with their traditional daggers. Asking them to leave their daggers at home would have caused a public relations uproar, so Frank and I arranged instead for a special dagger closet to be built and installed at the USIS/YALI compound entrance. It kept the peace.

Q: It was a relatively small program because it was a small country; did the department or Congress ask you to justify it? In other words, what is the value, what are we getting out of it?

SIDDIQI: USIA had to justify its budget requests to Congress annually. Each USIS post worldwide based its request in accordance with its Country Plan (CP), drafted by the Public Affairs Officer. Our CP for Yemen when I was there stipulated the audiences we planned to reach out to, the institutions and organizations we would partner with, and the desired outcomes we were shooting for. We reported back to our home geographic bureau every quarter on what goals we hit, or did not hit, during the prior three months, and what additional resources we needed, if any. We were very much concerned at that time about Russian disinformation that was being amplified by some media outlets in Yemen, and

the growing number of construction projects funded by China and built with imported Chinese labor. We worried also about Saudi Arabia's push to spread Wahhabi Islamic ideology. The Europeans were, like us, very much involved in trying to win hearts and minds. The Germans were sending scholars to Yemen to help with historic preservation, such as the restoration of ancient Koranic manuscripts. ACOR, the American Center for Oriental Research based in Jordan, would send teams of archaeologists out to Yemen, coordinating with USIS, the Yemeni government, and AIYS. I had a chance to go on some of their digs. We looked at the half-buried Temple of Sheba which Wendell Phillips, an enterprising American, had first excavated in the early 1950s. I also saw one of the teams partially excavate an ancient grave that they initially had thought was 5000 years old and contained treasures. But by their third day, they were disappointed; they discovered that the gravesite was "only" a thousand years old, and the person who was buried there was neither rich, nor historically significant.

Q: Were the Yemenis themselves interested in archaeological work?

SIDDIQI: The Yemenis were interested in the temple of Sheba ruins, which was a UNESCO world heritage site. But by and large they didn't have resources to invest in historic preservation. Our government didn't devote much funding to that sector either, but we viewed ACOR's interest as positive for our bilateral relations. And because these were American scholars going to remote areas that required permits, an Embassy officer like me was obliged to accompany them, along with a Ministry of Antiquities official.

Q: You've talked about all of the sections but political/economic. Did you do any work there?

SIDDIQI: I don't remember that rotation much. I think I may have gone on a few official calls with the Political officer, where I was the notetaker at the meeting. I got to see some of the cables they wrote. I also got to spend some quality time with Ambassador Rugh. He was an Arabist, which I had begun seeing myself as becoming, eventually. He was very supportive. We went once to Bani Matar to publicize a USAID water project that needed to be inaugurated. I was the media coordinator and Embassy press release designate. The school where the so-called press event was happening was so poor that they had only one microphone, connected to a big old horn, the kind Edison used when he invented the gramophone. I still have an iconic black and white photo of that scene, with the little Yemeni school boy, barefoot, holding the mike up to our ambassador.

Q: Speaking of that, did you wear local attire or was it all business suits?

SIDDIQI: It would have been really funny if any of us had tried on local attire. We mostly dressed smart casual. There was almost no occasion that required a tie or suit.

Q: Now the other thing is you mentioned the ambassador was a bit of a mentor and some of the other officers were too. Did they talk about where you might go next, what would be a good career move, that sort of thing?

SIDDIQI: Certainly Frank Ward was a mentor, along with Ambassador Rugh. There were also officers back in Washington, such as the USIA regional director and deputy director for the Near East, who were looking out for me. They liked my performance in Yemen, and were the ones who offered me an onward assignment to Saudi Arabia. The job they offered was Information Officer (IO) in Riyadh. It would mean overseeing press operations not only in Riyadh but also advising our USIS staffs in Jeddah and Dhahran. So it was a big step up for me, I really couldn't say no. As part of the deal, I asked for extra Arabic training, preferably at the State Department's regional Arabic language school for U.S. diplomats, the one in Tunisia. They agreed, but they said it could only be for three or four months, after that they'd pull me out. So I got orders to direct transfer from Sanaa to Riyadh via training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) field school in Tunis. Within three months there, I passed the FSI test. By October, I was in Riyadh.

Q: Before we go to Riyadh, have I missed any questions about anecdotes or experiences in Yemen that were either interesting or helpful for you in understanding Arabic culture and how to work through Arabic culture to get your job done?

SIDDIQI: There was one weekend trip I took which kind of backfired on me. I remember it as my first rookie mistake. The trip was with the newly arrived director of the American Institute of Yemeni Studies (AIYS) in Sanaa. He wanted to visit the northern city of Saada, a place I had never visited. Saada was famous for having a small Yemeni Jewish community, and a U.S.-style hospital built with USAID funds. What I didn't realize at the time, though, was that the city was run by Houthi tribesmen carrying Kalashnikovs who were outside of Ali Abdullah Saleh's sphere of control. Seeing the situation could be dangerous for us, I asked the American hospital at the last minute to put us up for the night. The doctors there said "Fine, we don't know who you are, but we see you've come in the Embassy car so we'll help you out." I was relieved and thought I had done well in coming up with a solution, but when I got back to Sanaa, I got summoned by the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). Apparently, I had crossed some lines and had some explaining to do. He said, "Adnan, I learned from the hospital that you and your group overnighted there. We never go there unless it's an emergency. You should have told us in advance that you were going to try and do that." That difficult conversation was a real wake-up call for me. Within a few days though, I was back in the DCM's good graces. My boss Frank Ward had just left post for his next assignment, and the Embassy and USIS needed me as the interim, stopgap PAO. I remained the acting PAO and ran USIS on my own for most of that summer. I then departed Sanaa for Tunis.

Q: If that sums up the tour in Sanaa, then you've completed your language studies in Tunis and you're ready to go to Saudi Arabia, to Riyadh. That's 1985, and you're going to be the information officer. How large was the embassy and your section?

SIDDIQI: The Mission in Riyadh was huge. Our ambassador was Walter Cutler and the PAO was R. Ellsworth (Bob) Miller. USIS Riyadh had a PAO, an IO (me), a CAO (cultural affairs officer), and three other American staff. At U.S. Consulate Jeddah and U.S. Consulate Dhahran, we had experienced branch public affairs officers who were also USIS. They reported to Bob Miller and coordinated closely with the IO and CAO.

Q: Your initial briefing, security and any other considerations that the embassy wanted you to know before you begin?

SIDDIQI: They wanted us to be aware of sensitivities in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, the commercial ties, the regional security priorities, the need for continued Saudi support in the Middle East peace process. At the same time, we had a range of issues we disagreed with the Saudi government and media on, like human rights, women's rights and so on. Every time USIS messaged on democracy and freedom issues, it was like walking on eggshells, given we needed to keep the overall strategic partnership intact. Programming directly to emerging women leaders was a big challenge. During my two years in Saudi Arabia, I never had one face to face conversation with a Saudi woman contact. I could call them, but for in person programming I had to rely on my local USIS women staff to organize and attend those events. All I could do as the IO was to develop the plan, line up the budget, and listen to readouts. Then I'd write the reporting cable. (laughter)

Q: Go ahead, with the media environment there, what were your contacts and so on? Who did you operate with, in the information sector?

SIDDIQI: There were three or four major Arabic-language dailies and news magazines that I worked with. There was also state-owned television and radio. Almost all local media organizations were subsidized or dependent on government support. So they were reluctant to do any kind of investigative reporting or any editorials that deviated from the official line. There was both direct censorship by gatekeepers at the Ministry of Information, as well as daily self-censorship practiced by individual newspaper editors. It was difficult to get them to cover our U.S. policy statements unless they reinforced what Saudi leaders were thinking or saying. To support discussions on democracy and human rights, one work-around we used was to talk about how democratic movements in Eastern Europe and Latin America were on the rise. We'd raise the example of Ferdinand Marcos and how awful things were in the Philippines because of his autocratic rule. That was stuff that the Saudi editors were willing to print. It was all indirect, and we left it to Saudi readers to read between the lines and reflect on their own choice of government. The PAO and I hosted representational events at our residences regularly to build our contact base. All USIS officers at that time were housed in individual villas, with plenty of space to entertain guests. Many of my Saudi contacts were U.S.-educated. They didn't agree with some of the religious and political restrictions they were under, but they didn't feel they could speak out, or even needed to. I got invited on radio a couple of times to talk about USIS programs and exchanges. During VIP (very important person) visits from Washington, I would coordinate between the Saudi PTT (postal telephone and telegraph), Saudi TV, and traveling U.S. press who needed Saudi telecommunications assistance.

Q: You're working with various media. Riyadh as the capital must have had a larger consular area in which you would travel and go to some of the smaller areas and so on. Was that any part of your work?

SIDDIQI: No, not for me personally. If you look on the map there are not many cities

within driving distance from Riyadh. We were surrounded by desert. The plus side of that was I got to go on several desert treks with American friends, and overnight in tents under the stars. One of my friends had a telescope which enabled us to see the Milky Way and Halley's comet. The "Red Sands" area outside Riyadh was ideal, because there was almost no light pollution. With the naked eye, you could see different star constellations, as if you were sitting in a planetarium. The Saudis would also invite us to various campsites and camel races, with their elaborate tents, rugs and feasts of rice and lamb. That said, it was very rare for any of us to be invited to a Saudi home. They enjoyed coming to my house, but I almost never got to see the inside of a Saudi home. Jeddah was a bit more open in that sense. I got invited to the home of Khaled Al-Maeena once, the editor of Jeddah's English-language newspaper "Arab News," but that was the one exception that I recall. Otherwise, it was very hard to get to know Saudis personally.

Q: What about press exchanges or media training for Saudi journalists or so on?

SIDDIQI: When I was in Yemen, we had a U.S. media trainer come out, a Lebanese-American who spoke fluent Arabic. But in Saudi, they were much less interested in professional media training. Because they already had modern broadcast and publishing facilities, they didn't see the need. They did like receiving U.S. video content from us, as long as the topic was non-political. USIA and VOA would send us short snippets of Americana and glimpses into American society and culture that we'd pass on to Saudi TV for rebroadcast locally. They occasionally participated in USIA's live WORLDNET dialogue programs, which was cutting edge at that time. Through WORLDNET, Saudi TV journalists were able to pose direct questions to State Department and other USG (U.S. government) officials in Washington. Those interactive dialogues were hard to set up at Saudi TV because of their packed program schedule and internal clearances. Also, dozens of countries wanted to get in on WORLDNET, not just Saudi Arabia, and the timing with our eight-hour time difference between Riyadh and D.C. had to work. Much easier to do were the audio-only interview programs PAO Bob Miller and I used to organize and host at our residences. Those would only require a basic conference phone set-up, with USIA Washington recruiting the appropriate U.S. expert or speaker that met our particular post's needs. USIA often would also produce a video of the speaker three or four weeks in advance and mail it to us for screening on the day of the interview. That way our guests had a better idea of who they were interviewing by phone and what his or her general views were on the designated topic or theme. USIA called these program opportunities "Electronic Dialogues." They allowed us to easily program in Arabic, with a professional translator in USIA Washington providing consecutive Arabic-English interpretation for our invited guests whose English was weak. Occasionally, we'd arrange an Electronic Dialogue for a single Saudi media outlet, which would result in a much lengthier, thoughtful article afterwards. We often lined up U.S. speakers who knew the Middle East well. Once we had Harold Saunders, who was involved in the 1978 Camp David peace talks. We later programmed Jack Shaheen, who had come out with a book on how Arab-Americans were being depicted in Hollywood and the American press. Saunders had credibility because he no longer represented the U.S. government; he could speak his mind and still talk with some authority and knowledge about America's ongoing role in the region. Our Saudi guests really enjoyed

our Electronic Dialogues. They'd often stay late to chat with us and other guests about the program.

Q: You're there for three years; how did you handle the international events going on outside of Saudi Arabia? Was that of interest to you or to them?

SIDDIQI: I was there from October 1985 to February 1988, so that would be two years and four months. I don't recall any huge crises involving Saudi Arabia during my tenure. There was a Shia-led mob attack on Mecca at one point, but the Consulate in Jeddah handled press inquiries on that. In Riyadh, we had visits by Secretary of State George Shultz and Richard Murphy, the Assistant Secretary of State for NEA (Near Eastern Affairs). And we hosted a historic White House-organized visit, which was a first for me, when Vice President George H.W. Bush came to officially open our new U.S. embassy. Bush did the ribbon cutting and I got to shake his hand. That was a big thrill.

Q: While you're there for two years and change, were there skills and talents you acquired that were valuable for you later?

SIDDIQI: My boss, PAO Bob Miller, was very hard-charging and demanding, but also very experienced. It was sometimes hard to keep up with him. He didn't know Arabic, but he was a good manager, and he wasn't afraid to change things around. For example, when we weren't getting very many placements in Saudi newspapers, he asked me to find out what the issue or problem was. My staff and I had been sending out over 100 copies of USIA's daily "Wireless File" to journalists, an in-house publication that we'd receive in the early morning from Washington via dial-in computer. The Wireless File was chock full of up-to-date and interesting news, but the Saudis weren't republishing any of it, and when I'd call my editor contacts over the phone, they would reaffirm they liked it and wanted to keep receiving it. Under his guidance. It was only after I began personally visiting the newspapers, at Bob's urging, that I was able to find out why the Saudis wanted our stuff, it was because they liked our big yellow envelopes and were recycling them for their own needs. I also saw our Wireless Files stacked up in huge piles, with no one assigned to go through them or to pick out articles and texts that would be of interest to Saudi readers. Bob immediately came up with a solution that worked. He and I developed and launched three new USIS Riyadh outreach publications to supplement the Wireless File. These were short newsletters that we'd distribute weekly and bi-weekly, adapting English and Arabic materials from the Wireless File and other USIA publications. Within a few weeks, we saw our placement numbers go up, because editors were now actually reading and absorbing the info we were sending them. I credit Bob for opening my eyes to the possibilities, and for getting me to focus on bottom line results. Bob also encouraged me to use my Arabic and knowledge of Islam to go see people and institutions we didn't have much in common with. So during one of my visits to Jeddah, I decided to go with the Consulate's USIS press assistant to the holy city of Mecca to call on the editors of two national, pro-Islamic newspapers based there. Mecca was about a 90 minute drive from Jeddah. The funny thing was that no one at the papers knew what to make of me. They had met American Muslims before in person, but never an American

diplomat. Also, I confused them a bit by speaking Arabic and looking South Asian. We had some friendly exchanges, and I got them to agree to stay in closer touch with us.

Q: That about takes me to the end of questions. The only other thing at this point, you talked about the professional aspects. Were there personal aspects or experiences that are salient in your mind? Friends you made in Saudi society and so on?

SIDDIQI: Riyadh was very international. I made a lot of expatriate friends: American, British, German, Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, and so on. I got to know their countries through those contacts. They worked in other embassies, in universities, hospitals, oil and gas, banking, aerospace, etc. But because of the "mutawa" (religious police) being everywhere, men and women couldn't comfortably meet in public places. So all the friendships and socializing happened at diplomatic residences and inside gated communities. I adapted well as a single guy who spoke the local language and was Muslim, but for most American families and women, Riyadh was a hard place to live. Aside from trips to the desert and sports on the compound, there wasn't a lot for them to do. No public movie theaters, no museums or parks. But I personally enjoyed my time at post. I had amazing colleagues at USIS and the Embassy who were a joy to work with.

Q: How did you organize or seek your next post?

SIDDIQI: I had gotten an award for my work in Riyadh, and USIA saw what I could do with my Arabic. It made sense to keep me in NEA. There were two possible onwards of interest to me. One was Marrakesh, Morocco, where I would be the only USIS officer as a branch public affairs officer and would pretty much run my own shop. The other was Tunis, where the PAO there needed an Information Officer (IO). I bid on both jobs, hoping for Marrakesh. They gave me Tunis instead. I was still happy, since I knew the country from my three months of language training there right before Riyadh. Being posted there, in summer 1988, turned out to be a big turning point, more on that later!

Q: Are there any departure stories or any other anecdotes I've missed in Riyadh?

SIDDIQI: Our Cultural Affairs Office in USIS did some good, groundbreaking stuff which I got to observe from up close. They invited, for example, a U.S. country music band to come and perform in the country. Since public venues were officially off limits, we programmed the group at the Ambassador's residence and the PAO residence, for invitation-only VIP Saudi officials and media. Those concerts were smash hits. They introduced a genre of American music that many of the Saudis had never been exposed to before. The band members all wore Texan hats, boots and cowboy outfits, and our guests said they were delighted by the goodwill and ambiance. A few months later, USIA sent us a classical music performer, flutist Linda Wetherill. She gave a series of concerts in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dhahran which were equally well-received. And through Linda, we engaged Saudi women, many of them connected to the royal family. For me, those programs showed that Saudis were not as closed or stern as they sometimes appeared to Americans and Westerners. There really was some scope for mutual understanding.

Q: We still have time, let's follow you to Tunis.

SIDDIQI: Right. But to qualify for Tunis, I had to get up to speed in French first.

Q: I thought there was a choice with the North African/Arab countries to speak Arabic or French?

SIDDIQI: Ideally, USIA wanted its officers in North Africa to have some background in both Arabic and French. So after Riyadh, I did about four months of French at FSI in Rosslyn, Virginia. I picked it up fast because I had done some French in high school.

Q: You arrive in Tunis, it's 1988. This is already after the election where George H.W. Bush becomes president. Did that create different expectations or tools an IO officer would use?

SIDDIQI: I got to Tunis in July 1988 and George H.W. Bush got elected that November. As the IO, I helped amplify local media coverage of the presidential campaign and then the Embassy's big U.S. election day event which we held at the Hilton. As my staff and I did in Yemen four years earlier during the 1984 U.S. election, we emphasized the U.S. democratic process, the role of polling, the peaceful transition of power, and how the two political parties fared in down ballot Senate and governor races. In Tunisia, we were dealing with a strongman, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who just a year earlier had overthrown the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba, in a bloodless coup. Despite his crackdown on the opposition, Ben Ali enjoyed a honeymoon period the entire three years I was in Tunis. Part of my job was to assess media and public opinion, and to report any changes or trends back to the Embassy and Washington. We relied on USIA's professional exchange programs to cultivate greater media freedom and independence. Our journalist grantees benefited a lot professionally from their three to four weeks in the United States. But they had to walk a fine line when they returned to their jobs in Tunis.

Q: Over time, if I'm not mistaken, Ben Ali also had a son who had become connected to bribery and even drug running. Were you and the embassy aware of this, were there aspects of that in the local press?

SIDDIQI: I personally was not aware. I remember American and European press reports accusing Ben Ali's wife and her family of fraud and corruption. The economy was built on crony capitalism, and politically, the country had become a police state. There were police everywhere who were ready to arrest any men who had a beard or looked Islamist.

Q: What were your principal responsibilities as the IO there?

SIDDIQI: One was to support Ambassador Robert Pelletreau in all of his outreach activities. The ambassador was a North Africa and Middle East expert and did a lot of interviews and briefings for visiting American and Western press. I would arrange those meetings, record the sessions, and take notes. Pelletreau spoke both French and Arabic, and was incredibly knowledgeable. During my time at post, he led the famed U.S.

dialogue with the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization). The PLO, you will recall, was headquartered in Tunis after it was chased out of Beirut in 1985. So a second responsibility I had was to help with press inquiries and manage information flow relating to those very first and historic U.S.-PLO talks. I coordinated closely with the Ambassador, PAO Richard Undeland, and the Embassy political counselor on that.
A third major role I played was when the first Gulf War broke out in August 1990 and Tunisian media sided strongly with Saddam Hussein. I was one of the few core officers the Ambassador kept with him in Tunis as most of our Embassy personnel and their families evacuated. The government had to use additional barriers and special forces to prevent crowds from marching toward our embassy. I had Arabic and French, and we needed to win back public opinion during the Iraq war. That's why I was chosen to stay.

Q: This was your first exposure to the Western press but if I recall right, once Ben Ali gets in there's some loosening of restrictions on the press. Did that give you more opportunity to interact with them, to have some influence on how they were reporting?

SIDDIQI: I was able to call on editors, and they, in turn, often came to my house for receptions and events. I also had good conversations with officials at TAP (Tunisie Afrique Presse), the state-run news agency, and Tunisian radio and television (RTT). The difficult part was getting Tunisians to get out of their circle of comfort, to say something different from the government. One news magazine, "Réalités," was semi-independent, but it used its freedom to criticize us and our policies, which was a little frustrating. Meanwhile, there was a new Arabic language daily, "Al-Shorouq" which some in our Embassy felt was an Iraqi government mouthpiece. When the war ended, I nominated and sent some of Tunisia's most pro-Saddam supporters to the United States on USIA's International Visitors Program (IVP). It worked out okay. They returned to Tunisia much better informed. And pretty much all of them went on to more influential positions.

Q: One of the things an information officer always has to do is go and spank media outlets that do nothing but criticize the U.S. Were you able to change any of the negative reporting on the U.S.?

SIDDIQI: We did boycott a couple of outlets that persistently published disinformation. We would stop sending them our USIA Wireless File, for example, and we left them off of Embassy guest lists. That signaled our displeasure with the way they were covering the Embassy and the United States. But most of the time my approach was to hash out differences with them in private. I would do it face to face, or in a phone call. To write to them formally would have backfired, since they could easily publish our letter and then point to it as an example of U.S. interference. Also, it would have been hypocritical for USIS to complain about anti-U.S. or pro-Saddam commentary given our strong support for international press freedom. My approach was to keep our powder dry as much as possible, try to get these journalists and editors on our side, and try to reason with them.

Q: The reason I asked about Ben Ali's son, this guy was named Habib Ben Ali and he was connected to drug trafficking, money laundering. He was tried in absentia in France; that occurred shortly after you left Tunisia, but I wondered if that story, that knowledge was

making the rounds and creating friction in how we had to deal with the Tunisian government.

SIDDIQI: What I recall was that the U.S. press was very critical of Ben Ali for his human rights record, the way he handled security, the way he was turning the country into a police state. I'm not familiar with the Habib Ben Ali story you're referring to.

Q: What you mentioned about the increased security and arrests – did that affect getting permission to talk to news outlets outside the capital?

SIDDIQI: There was no travel required in my job, as all Tunisia's national media was centered in the capital. I did travel to Sousse and Kairouan frequently, but that was all personal travel. Did I mention yet that I got married in Tunisia? That happened just a year after I got to post. My future wife was working in the USIS cultural section when I met her. She was a former American Field Service (AFS) exchange student to Wisconsin, and a rising star at the embassy. We hit it off right away and ended up having two weddings, the first in Kairouan in June 1989, and the second in New York, three weeks later. When we finished home leave and returned to Tunisia as a Foreign Service couple, my wife had to resign her position with USIS and look for a new job as an Embassy spouse. But for me, my marrying a Tunisian was a boost professionally. I was able to expand my reach, as contacts began to view me more and more as someone they could invite to their homes, and have frank conversations with.

Q: Were visits from Washington VIPs valuable? You always get visits, but did they do anything useful for the work you were doing?

SIDDIQI: In theory, yes, they're useful, but I don't think we had any major VIP visits during my three years. Part of the reason was because of the Gulf war breaking out, the tensions on the street and in bilateral relations, and then the Embassy evacuation. That said, I did bring in U.S. academic experts every year under USIA's American Cultural Specialists program, and those guys were extremely effective as media trainers. We programmed them for three-week intensive seminars at CAPJC (Centre Africain de Perfectionnement des Journalistes et Communicateurs), which was under the umbrella of the Ministry of Information and partially funded by Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation. Its director was a real dynamo and welcomed American trainers to come and engage with Tunisia's most promising young journalists in country. CAPJC's mandate was regional, so he also brought in French and Arabic speaking participants from across Africa, not just Tunisia. In one of the USIS-CAJPC seminars, the theme was investigative reporting. Our U.S. team explained how to do it, how you avoid getting in trouble and still push the envelope. They then assigned class participants to spread out across town to do research, conduct interviews, and develop real news stories for the final exam. Our partnership with CAPJC was the only center of its kind in the Arab World at that time. And we used the most modern methods. In my second year, we did a seminar for radio journalists with a different training team; in year three, we did TV reporting.

Q: You mention now the relatively rapid change in the information revolution, the internet and so on, and receiving news literally on your desk almost in real time eventually. How did that change your job?

SIDDIQI: Our job required us to keep up with information technology (IT) changes, but it was hard to find time for training. Whenever we went back on home leave or R&R (rest and recreation) travel to the U.S. we'd sign up for PAO, IO and CAO "tradecraft" courses offered at USIA and FSI, as well as courses on how to do word processing and emails using Wang computers. When I started in Sanaa, we were all still using electric typewriters and carbon paper for making copies, believe it or not. In Riyadh and Tunis, I learned from Embassy colleagues about the latest in phone and computer technology. Expectations in Washington were on the rise, it was a revolutionary period in some ways.

Q: Speaking of revolution, before we leave Tunis, this is all going on and you have quite a set of skills – French, Arabic, a lot of background in the Middle East, Islamic cultures and so on. Were you ever tempted to take those skills and go private? Go to a private media organization?

SIDDIQI: No, that never occurred to me. I was thrilled and proud to represent the U.S. abroad, especially during the post-Gulf War period. We had so much at stake and there was so much public distrust and misunderstanding. I felt I already was in the right place.

Q: One question about your work in Tunis, all the groups you contacted and your network – were any of them Pakistani? Did you have a special connection with any Pakistanis in any of your posts?

SIDDIQI: I don't think I ran into even one Pakistani in Tunisia or Yemen. There were plenty in Saudi Arabia, including dozens who worked in the U.S. Mission as local hires. I used to speak to them in Urdu and we'd go have lunch at Pakistani fast food places in Riyadh. But in Tunis, no one looked like me. My wife's family members, at first, weren't sure what to make of me. They recognized Adnan as an Arabic name, but they weren't sure I was Muslim, initially. There's a phrase in Tunisian Arabic used to describe the most distant place on earth. They'd say "This person is from 'al Hind wal Sind'; translated, 'al Hind' meant India, and al Sind meant the Indus river, in other words, Pakistan. So to my prospective in-laws, I was literally from another planet. You can just imagine what the dynamics were when our two families first met one another. (Laughter)

Q: Are you prepared to end the story of your time in Tunisia?

SIDDIQI: Almost. I still need to give a shout out to USIA's film acquisition department. It was because of them and their partnership with the MPA (Motion Picture Association) that my office was able to participate in the Carthage Film Festivals of 1988 and 1990. The biennial Carthage Film Festival, with the Tunisian government's support, was one of the biggest gatherings in all of Africa for regional and international film producers, actors, and enthusiasts. For USIS, it was an opportunity to showcase a recent, high quality American film, preferably one that conveyed American values and would remind

everyone of Hollywood's worldwide importance and impact. The Festival would publicly screen its participating films throughout the capital region for two weeks every two years, and a panel of judges would award prizes at the end. Since organizers didn't have much success getting anyone from Hollywood to attend, my office got films for them instead, which were loaned to us from USIA on an exclusive basis, through the MPA. USIA had to get its lawyers involved to close the deal with MPA, to make sure copyright, intellectual property protections, shipping and handling, insurance, and public screening agreements were all agreed to and signed off in advance. In the 1990 Festival, we screened *Field of Dreams*, the iconic baseball movie starring Kevin Costner, and in the 1988 Festival, we brought in *The Milagro Beanfield War*, starring Sonia Braga and directed by Robert Redford. The two films were very different in style and content, but they both depicted aspects of American society and history that were not previously known to most Tunisians. And both movies had hopeful endings, that's always a plus!

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Q: Today is January 25th, 2024, we are resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, you have the floor. You're still in Tunisia.

SIDDIQI: Yes, we left off in the middle of my three-year tour at U.S. Mission Tunisia. The big turning point for me personally was finding someone amazing and getting married at post. It kind of happened very quickly. She was a Tunisian outreach program assistant at USIS and fluent in four languages. She was also an alumna of American Field Service (AFS), having done her senior year of high school in rural Wisconsin, where she lived a year with an American host family. So besides being work colleagues, she and I shared a passion for cross-cultural dialogue and travel, and we connected on many levels.

Q: What year?

SIDDIQI: We got engaged in May 1989. Her family wanted us to get married in her hometown of Kairouan, which was problematic since my parents wanted the wedding to be near them, in the United States. We ended up doing two separate ceremonies, two weeks apart, in summer 1989. The first wedding, Tunisian-style, took place in Kairouan in late June, and the second happened in New York two weeks later, U.S. and Pakistani style. We faced quite a few curveballs in between. When we went to her hometown, for example, the religious authorities wanted an official "no objection" letter from my boss, the PAO. Then later, for the signing of the marriage contract, they wanted an American officer from the Embassy to witness it. Luckily, I was able to get the FSI Tunis director William Granara, who was fluent in Arabic, to drive down to Kairouan and play the role of best man. It was interesting how the Tunisians equated the U.S. embassy with my family and wanted my colleagues involved. The day after the contract, I then had to scramble quickly to get my wife on a plane with me to New York, where she and I could do the second wedding that I had promised my parents we'd do. Kudos to USIA and the State Department for helping me get through it all, from Arabic document translations, to travel orders, to arranging my wife's green card, and then her expeditious naturalization.

Q: When you say expeditious naturalization, could you take a moment to explain how that works?

SIDDIQI: The State Department has a step-by-step process for when American diplomats marry or choose a foreign spouse, that they can accelerate the process of getting their spouse naturalized as an American citizen. And since I was due for home leave travel to New York in summer 1989, they were extra quick about it. When we came back from home leave as a married American couple, my wife resigned her local position and was able to get a new Eligible Family Member (EFM) position in the Embassy's Management section. Meanwhile, towards the end of 1989, USIA offered me PAO Khartoum as an onward. I would be their sole USIS officer in Sudan, and the job required good Arabic. I knew living and working there would be tough, but I liked the idea of running my own shop, so I said yes. I had promised my wife's family that I wouldn't wander too far from Tunisia, at least early in our marriage, so Sudan checked that box for us as well.

Q: Then you arrive there in 1990?

SIDDIQI: No, I finished my three-year Tunis tour in July 1991. My wife and I reached Khartoum the following month. By that time, we also had our first child with us.

Q: Going as PAO, did they increase the size of the public affairs section given that it wasn't long after the coup that put in Al Bashir?

SIDDIQI: No, there was no scope for an increase. I was basically being sent to Khartoum to "hold the fort," as my USIA NEA deputy director put it. I was the lone USIS officer, and Debra Smoker-Ali was the Executive Assistant. Debbie knew Sudan well and I relied on her a lot, especially on budget issues; she later joined the State Department and had a great career as a Management Officer. The Sudanese staff consisted of 19 LES.

Q: Your immediate supervisor is the deputy chief of mission?

SIDDIQI: Yes, that would be DCM Joe O'Neill, I think Sudan was his last tour. My ambassador was James Cheek, and then a year later it was Donald Petterson.

Q: When you arrive, what are they telling you, things that you need to focus on?

SIDDIQI: The front office was very much concerned about Bashir's autocratic rule and his close partnership with the National Islamic Front (NIF) party. The Embassy wanted me to help rebuild Mission contacts with civil society, especially pro-democracy individuals and academic institutions. They also wanted me to push back against Bashir government propaganda and to get us some positive headlines for a change. I started calling on newspaper editors personally. In their offices, I found them accommodating and open to talking with me, even those who were very pro-Bashir/Turabi. I felt during those discussions that there was room for some give and take with them, a possibility for informed dialogue amidst all their negative public rhetoric. Because of those meetings, they agreed to receive our daily distro, some of which they used and republished. On the

academic side, the professors and scholars I met were highly talented and articulate folks, but they had to lay low because of Bashir. They said in the 1970's they had a lot more freedom and contact with the Embassy. They wanted my help, advice, and support.

Q: As part of this, were your exchange programs active?

SIDDIQI: Because of the Gramm-Rudman Act and its cost-cutting impact on all USIS posts, our program and exchanges budget was very small. We had no American Fulbrighters in country and only a handful of Sudanese Fulbrighters who traveled to the U.S. Our International Visitors Program (IVP) allotment was also very small, with only four or five Sudanese traveling on that program per year. There was a constant worry that our J-1 exchange grantees might not return. In addition to budget considerations, I think that was another reason our exchanges volume was low compared to other NEA and Africa posts. I was very happy though with the few emerging leaders that did travel to the U.S. and who were able to benefit academically and professionally from the experience.

Q: As you did in Riyadh, the wireless file or other news reporting you got in, did you select and give a summary, or how did that work?

SIDDIQI: I think if I had stayed longer in Sudan, I might have developed a localized product like that. But because I was the lone USIS officer, I was juggling ten balls at once and didn't get to innovate much. Also, my LES information assistants were young and inexperienced. For even the most straightforward taskers, I had to teach them.

Q: Did your wife work?

SIDDIQI: She did. She worked about 18 months in the Embassy as the EFM program assistant to the Refugee Officer (RO) at post. Her office reported to the PRM bureau in Washington and was focused primarily on Sudan's internally displaced persons (IDP) problem and the hundreds of Ethiopians and Eritreans who were gathered in refugee camps in the southeast, waiting to be processed for resettlement in the United States. She used her Arabic daily and she went on two long road trips to the border to visit the camps and interview the refugees who were eligible to participate in the U.S. refugee resettlement program. She had to liaise with United Nations (UNHCR) personnel working there, as well as with the U.S.-based International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Q: Given how small the embassy was and how small your section was, was there a lot of interaction in the country team? Did you consult with the political and economic officer about the kinds of activities you would do that would support the overall embassy efforts?

SIDDIQI: I was buddies with the political counselor, Mahlon "Jim" Henderson, who had been acting PAO at some of his previous posts and would often visit us in USIS and speak to our contacts. Jim and I did joint representational events sometimes, and he made sure that I got invited to rep events for Political section contacts hosted by the Ambassador and DCM. And whenever I would be out of the city or the country, Jim would happily cover USIS for me. I also coordinated a lot with the USAID Mission,

making sure they got good press coverage for their projects. In general though, I often found that I was the lone voice of optimism at the Embassy's weekly Country Team meetings. Almost all the other sections and agencies viewed the Sudanese with distrust, based on the anti-U.S. bias of local media and their combative dealings and conversations with the Islamist government. They felt strongly that we were all in real danger, and that we should limit our outreach activities and internal travel given our tense bilateral relations. So when I would talk about the wonderful conversations I was having with artists and musicians and deans and professors and how much they wanted to help improve bilateral relations, I became the outlier at Country Team. I had no problems making Sudanese friends during my tour, and I really believed at the time that the NIF would collapse, and that Sudan's pro-democracy elements would re-emerge. In retrospect though, my U.S. colleagues were right about their analysis, and I was wrong. Although my two year tour in Khartoum went relatively smoothly, the next PAO that came in after me was evacuated, along with more than half the Embassy, because of terrorist threats.

Q: Yeah. Speaking of that and how oppressive the regime was, were you involved at all in the human rights aspects?

SIDDIQI: In an indirect and very limited way, yes. We nominated and sent Sudanese intellectuals and independent writers, for example, on a number of short-term exchanges to the United States and to neighboring countries where we had U.S.-supported libraries. I kept my distance though from human rights advocates and government critics, as I didn't want USIS to be perceived as somehow aligned with opposition voices and parties. The Political Section was the lead in our Embassy's dialogue with the opposition.

Q: Also of course the Darfur war is beginning to bubble. Did you begin to see aspects of that? Was the embassy at all involved as that began to develop?

SIDDIQI: I never made it out to Darfur or Juba or Port Sudan. Travel outside Khartoum was treacherous and most roads were unmarked and unpaved. The farthest south I got from Khartoum was El Obeid, in the state of Kordofan, and the farthest north I ventured was Atbara. I went to both cities to escort and introduce a U.S. speaker/teacher trainer who visited us for several weeks under USIA's worldwide English Language Fellow (ELF) program. The ELF's workshops at government-run teacher training institutes went very well. They got me out of Khartoum, and I got to see different parts of the Nile as well as long stretches of desert, and the ancient black pyramids of Meroe. Since there were no gas stations enroute, we had to take our own petrol in huge blue jerry cans. Very bumpy rides, bone-crushing almost, but we got a sense of what life was like for people outside the capital. Many of the local bureaucrats, teachers and educators we engaged with were bright, energetic, and serious about their jobs, including many talented women.

Q: Obviously under the Bashir regime women were not permitted very much public presence. Were you able to do any programs with women?

SIDDIQI: I developed a good relationship with a private university called the Ahfad College for Women. It was one of the main independent institutions we wanted to

cultivate. You're right that women had it tough under the Bashir regime, but the women faculty and students I met at Ahfad spoke their minds freely and seemed upbeat about their future. I sent a couple of Sudanese women, emerging leaders, to the U.S. on short-term exchange programs. I wish I could have sent more, but our budget was very limited.

Q: Now 1991 is the first Gulf War; did that affect you?

SIDDIQI: The Gulf war affected me very early in 1991, when I was in Tunis. Half the embassy or even more, got evacuated back to DC, but I got to stay in Tunis as a designated "essential" officer. Since my wife was Tunisian-American, the Mission agreed to keep her at post as well. The local situation had become very grim, the Tunisians were in the street protesting and for the first time, repeating anti-American things they picked up from pan-Arab, pro-Saddam media. That was kind of a shock to hear and see given Tunisia's long history of being pro-West. By the time I got to Sudan, in mid-1991, the Gulf war frenzy had dissipated a bit. Whenever I called on editors in Khartoum, they seemed more concerned about Israel and the Palestinian issue than Saddam Hussein.

Q: As with Tunis you had some interesting experiences. Were there some in Khartoum that you recall that were really telling?

SIDDIQI: One ground-breaking initiative we took was training editors and news producers at Sudan Television, which had become a predictable mouthpiece for the government under Bashir but was still very influential. They actually came to us first, saying they really needed technical help with their news broadcasts, could USIS help? They admitted their news programs were boring and not very slick. I was by now used to Sudanese contacts asking for some kind of support, and funding that I didn't have, but what sold me on Sudan Television's request was they were willing to provide in-kind support, including covering all hotel and meal costs. That was a clear signal they had their Ministry's green light and approval. I reached out right away to USIA's American Cultural Specialist (AmCulSpec) office and asked them to recruit Andrew Stern from UC Berkeley, the same U.S. professor/TV media trainer I had used two years earlier at the CAPJC regional journalist training center in Tunis. I already knew Andy would be perfect to work with, that he knew the Arab World, and would be able to connect well with the Sudanese. He brought two other top U.S. trainers with him, and they were basically embedded with their trainees for three weeks at Sudan TV facilities. He would report back to me every couple of days on their progress, and it was clear that the Sudanese TV news participants were super-focused and open to American ideas. For me, the partnership way exceeded our mutual expectations, benefiting both countries. The TV station hosted a farewell reception for the visiting U.S. team, which they excerpted and broadcast that same evening. I and other Embassy colleagues got to speak on camera, which during that tense period was quite extraordinary. We showed that if you put the right professionals together in a room or studio, they're not just going to talk about how to produce a news program, they'll also talk about which story or lead to prioritize, and what content would most engage a viewing audience, what would raise people's

consciousness? Andy and his team got to these kinds of freedom of expression issues as they discussed news content and editing and camera angles and audio and lighting.

Another colorful visitor we hosted was a freelance singer/musician named Billy Stevens. Billy was from North Carolina and had been marketing himself to U.S. embassies around the world as a low cost, high impact "one man band." He had a strong track record of connecting well with foreign audiences, and he could talk in depth about the origins and evolution of different American musical genres, from slavery days onwards. When he first wrote to me offering his services, I was skeptical that a solo performer could wow the Sudanese with just a keyboard and harmonica, but that's exactly what he did, singing old hits from Elvis, Bob Dylan, James Brown, and The Beatles. He performed at the DCM's residence and mine, where dozens of our key contacts, including media and government officials, could see him. The electricity at my house went out in the middle of Billy's concert, but he didn't mind at all and sang just a little louder over the steady hum of our generator. My deputy area director David Good happened to be in Khartoum that week and loved the program. He got to see what we could do on a shoestring budget.

Q: There was a USAID contingent; did you work with them as well? Did they have their own public affairs staff, or did you provide the public affairs support they needed?

SIDDIQI: They drafted their own press releases; I think they had one staffer designated for local media outreach. USAID was in the same building we were in; they occupied the three floors above us. We helped them on some of their public messaging, but not always. Our biggest joint venture with USAID actually had nothing to do with media. The Embassy's Regional Security Office (RSO) had determined our offices at Kuwaiti Towers needed an upgrade to meet rising threat levels. Both the USAID director and I, along with Management, were immersed for weeks in the security upgrade, and I had to quickly learn how to deal with facilities protection and new construction issues.

Q: Speaking of which, in some Foreign Service posts you have what would now be called a panic room, probably in your time just a fortified room with a strong door and so on. Was that part of the security improvements?

SIDDIQI: We had a very pro-outreach Assistant RSO named Sebron Toney who made sure we and USAID got the protection we needed at our jointly shared facility. Stronger doors and the creation of a hardline were a high priority. Installing those reinforced doors at Kuwaiti Towers was a real challenge though. They were too large and heavy for work crews to take up via our stairs, so the local contractor had to find and bring a heavy duty crane. This in a city that barely had any paved roads or reliable electricity or phones, if you can imagine. The crane lifted the U.S.-made security doors, one by one, and somehow angled them through our fourth floor office windows without smashing anything. My staff and I held our breath the entire time, as did the spectators below and the private company employees that also worked in that building. The irony is, despite all that hard work and investment, USAID and USIS ended up moving out a few years later.

Q: And of course being a separate building, you did not have Marine guards.

SIDDIQI: We had no Marine guards at our location. Since Khartoum's landline phone connections were often down, we communicated with the Embassy through call radios.

Q: Another officer I interviewed who lived in Sudan mentioned that there were messenger services, where you could send something unclassified to the embassy or to contacts; did you use those as well?

SIDDIQI: My PAO driver went at least twice daily to the Embassy to pick up and drop off cables, memos, mail and other unclassified documents. And of course, I and my staff also had to go to the Embassy regularly to attend meetings. USIS had its own fleet of cars, so our moving around was not dependent on the Embassy motor pool's schedule.

Q: I've come to the end of the formal questions but often there are surprises that I can't anticipate in an officer's tour; what have I overlooked?

SIDDIQI: You know, we talk a lot these days about promoting diversity and empathy in the workplace. In Khartoum, I had staff that needed to be trained, others that were nearing retirement. We had both Muslims from the north and Christians from the south in the midst of a North-South civil war, and there was ethnic and tribal diversity as well. Some of my staff were coping with malaria or caring for sick families at home. I found I had to be very patient and understanding with them given the pressures and hardships that most of them were under. Mission officers had to adjust to local cultural norms and expectations. For example, we had to allow Muslim staff to take time off to pray twice a day, first around noon, for about half an hour, and then around 4:00 p.m. for the second afternoon prayer. I found that routine perplexing, and I was always worried about our team falling behind. Because it's not just the time that you use to pray, it's also getting ready for it, getting intellectually and emotionally prepared, and then having to refocus on work afterwards. I was told this was all stipulated in local labor law and the whole country operated that way. In reality, things did slow down throughout the capital every afternoon. Media and government officials especially would take siestas because it was too hot to do anything else, often over 40 degrees Celsius. A lot of the meetings I had with contacts ended up happening either in the morning, or between 5:00 and 8:00 p.m. So really it was me and other Mission officers who had to adjust to Sudan's work routine and people-to-people rhythm, and to keep LES motivated. I did as much as I could to train colleagues who needed it. With USIA worldwide budget cuts on the horizon, I updated several LES position descriptions to protect the staff and got some upgrades.

The other surprise I had was getting to meet Sheikh Hassan al-Turabi, the Islamist politician and NIF party leader who was said to be as influential as Bashir, if not more. I spoke to Turabi a couple of times during rep events hosted by the Ambassador. He was pleasant, funny, and spoke perfect English. I found out later that he had lived for a period in the U.K. and France, and graduated from the Sorbonne. He didn't act or talk like an angry Muslim Brotherhood type. He took issue with a lot of what we and other guests were saying around the dinner table, but he was polite and seemed calm and reasonable.

Sometime later, I think it could have been our July 4 event, I also ran into opposition leader Sadiq al-Mahdi. He was Sudan's last democratically elected prime minister, the Umma Party leader who was overthrown a year earlier. What was striking about Sadiq was how tall he was. He seemed very cool and sure of himself, even though his party was banned and was under constant government surveillance. He said that Sudan was just going through a bad phase, and that he would win if elections were ever held. I think Sadiq did ally with Bashir later for a bit, but then there was another falling out. Ironically, Turabi also fell out of Bashir's good graces after a few years and ended up in jail.

Q: Did you and your wife have any children while you were there?

SIDDIQI: We brought our first-born with us to Sudan in 1991. Our second son was born in 1992. My wife flew from Khartoum to Tunis to have the baby there. For me, getting away from post was harder; there was no paid/authorized paternity leave for FSOs in those days. I couldn't get to Tunis in time for the birth and got the good news via fax. Later that summer, my wife and two kids rejoined me in Khartoum. My mother-in-law came as well. She had recently lost her husband and was willing to become part of our nuclear family for a while. I was very grateful to her for doing that. She helped raise our kids, not only in Khartoum, but in other countries as well. Equally important, her joining us allowed my wife to continue working full-time, and to develop her own career.

Q: At some point you're thinking about the next tour. How did that come about?

SIDDIQI: After three straight overseas assignments, the consensus at USIA was that I should come back and do a domestic tour. I was OK with that and got an incredibly good offer to lead USIA's 24-person Near East/South Asia (NESA) Wireless File team. As branch chief, I was responsible for the English and Arabic Wireless File products that USIA was sending daily to its 41 posts in the NEA region. I had to make sure that White House, State Department and other official texts and news were accurately and quickly passed on to our posts, PAO's and Ambassadors abroad, not only for their own background and policy usage, but also for their forwarding on to foreign governments and media. In addition to Arabic translators, I supervised several writers/contractors who would attend and cover U.S. government-related events in Washington and then write original articles that could be included in the daily File. It was a huge step up for me.

Q: As part of that job, did you interact with the other elements, Voice of America, other broadcasting or news parts of the U.S. government?

SIDDIQI: Voice of America (VOA) was right across from USIA in southwest D.C. and we coordinated daily. While their radio newscasts were straightforward, their weekly editorials were heavy on opinion and required vetting. VOA would send their drafts to me for inclusion in our Wireless File, and they used to reach out to State and other concerned agencies at the same time for parallel clearances. Sometimes their proposed editorials about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf and Afghanistan took more than a day to clear, as they had to be especially vetted and carefully worded to reflect official policy.

In addition to VOA, USAID, the Department of Commerce, and some other U.S. government offices would send us materials for possible inclusion in our NESA Wireless File. It was all high pressure and deadline driven, but luckily I had Yaro Bihun as my deputy. He was a Civil Service employee with many years of Washington experience, and he was a former journalist. He and I would talk every morning and afternoon to be sure our English and Arabic speaking staffs were in sync and I learned a lot about management and leadership from him. Yaro was soft-spoken and personable, but he also was detail-oriented and never missed a beat. Since I enjoyed editing and writing, I would sometimes join him on the computer to edit and clear the articles being sent out. Our writers were very fast and knew their stuff, and a couple of my Arabic translators were writers as well. Even though they were USIA employees, they all saw themselves as fair-minded reporters who were trying to accurately summarize whatever we had going on inside the Beltway, or at the United Nations in New York. We were counted as accredited journalists and had badges that let us attend U.S. government press events. I had the privilege of being in the crowd when President Clinton, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat spoke on the White House lawn and shook hands committing themselves, symbolically at least, to the Oslo peace accords. A few months later, I was again at the White House, this time to watch the visiting Indian prime minister and President Clinton engage. Nearly all the questions from the U.S. press were on domestic politics. Narasimha Rao just kind of stood there awkwardly, probably wondering if the reporters would even notice him.

You might recall my wanting to be a writer when I was talking earlier in this interview about my high school and college years, and my first job at HBJ Publishers in New York. This Wireless File job was close to that dream, in a way. I was editing staff-written stories, attending key news events, running up to Capitol Hill, spending quality time with journalists and newsmakers. When Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salah came to the U.S. to speak, I interviewed him and authored my own piece for the Wireless File, leveraging what I knew about him and Sudanese society from my days as PAO Khartoum.

Choosing what went into each day's NESA Wireless File was sometimes difficult given competing bureau and agency interests and the sheer volume of U.S. news and texts available for our use. I was getting phone calls every morning from USIA's Near East and South Asia area offices asking for their materials to be included and expedited. My office belonged to USIA's Publications (P) bureau which had its own priorities, so it was a bit of a balancing act. We also had regular requests coming in from PAO's in the field wanting us to cover this or translate that, usually smaller events happening in Washington that affected their countries, in particular. And then there were regional conferences in the Mideast where we were expected to send our own staffer to interview U.S. officials. The field was very vocal and opinionated about what we were putting out, and so was my own staff. When I sent my top Arabic writer/translator to Egypt to cover an international summit, his interviews and coverage were an instant hit. But once his trip ended, I had a different and unexpected management challenge on my hands. The Lebanese and Egyptian Christians on my staff wanted to know why I had opted to send a Palestinian Muslim to Cairo instead of one of them. They just assumed I wanted to promote the one Muslim on my staff. My boss, a senior FSO, backed me right away and told them my

choice was well-reasoned and correct. He was a Latin America hand, but he knew the Middle East well enough to empathize with the diverse staff challenges I faced every day.

Q: In the wider world, not in North Africa and South Asia, you have the end of Communism. Was that of interest, were you doing stories on that?

SIDDIQI: We occasionally used stories from the European branch of the Wireless File and translated them into Arabic, so that our audiences in the Middle East could get more information on why and how communism was failing in Eastern Europe, on events in Moscow, and so on. USIA also produced a monthly publication called "Problems of Communism" which was sent to Embassies and PAO's worldwide to counter Russian disinformation. Multiple offices were making editorial decisions on content and tone. Within NEA/SA, we mainly focused on articles that were pro-democracy and pro-free market, and not too overtly anti-Russian. As one senior NEA officer commented at a regional PAO workshop I attended, "This is no time for us to do an end zone dance."

Q: You were at the beginning of the Clinton administration; the vice president, Al Gore, was taking on a job called Reinventing Government; typically, that meant reducing size. Did that affect you?

SIDDIQI: It did. We suddenly were being expected to downsize and delayer, and to basically do more with less staff. USIA began by starting to cut slots in Washington that were traditionally reserved for FSO's coming back from overseas. For my Press and Publications (P) bureau at USIA, they changed our name to the new Information (I) bureau, and they changed the Wireless File's name to the Washington File. They converted and trained Office Directors to become "Team Leaders," which was a totally new concept to increase staff input in decision-making and boost morale. My branch chief's slot was turned over to a GS-14 Civil Service print specialist, and I was shifted over to a different office on a different floor, to a mid-level desk officer position that required knowledge of our policies in the Gulf states and Iraq. I didn't have a choice, and I remember being upset about having to leave my Washington File colleagues and staff after just one year. It was an uncomfortable and unpredictable time for everyone. I remember one of our "I" Bureau leaders at a town hall urging us to embrace change and adopt a new goal and motto, which was: 'if it ain't broke, break it.'" (laughter).

Q: The other slogan was the peace dividend. That also tended to have an effect on diplomacy in general; in other words, "we don't need to sell America anymore, we won the Cold War, we don't need as much of a voice as we did before, because people understand that we're the sole superpower now." Did that also affect USIA or your job?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, that's true. Congress had that view about the peace dividend, that post-Soviet Union, we no longer needed an informational arm of the U.S. government or large USIA programs. Our USIS field officers were arguing the opposite. They were saying "No, this is exactly the time to double down and consolidate the gains we just made, to really amp up people-to-people ties and dialogue." I had the same view. To me, it was obvious we still had plenty to do in terms of winning hearts and minds, especially

in the Arab-Islamic world. But we had very few advocates for public diplomacy in Congress.

Q: Let's move with you to that desk officer job. How did it differ from what you were doing in your previous office?

SIDDIQI: I spent about 10 months there. I was the desk officer for five Arabian Peninsula (AP) countries – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, plus Iraq. It wasn't a job I was initially very excited about. I enjoyed working with the large staff I had at the Wireless File and the special newsroom buzz we had there. It was also a great feeling to see and witness a finished product, one that I had a hand in managing and producing, going out every evening from Washington to our U.S. Missions overseas. As a desk officer though, my job was more mundane, mostly talking to PAO's in the field and chasing down the resources they needed. Like the four other USIA desk officers in NEA, each covering a different sub-region, I got invited to a lot of policy and program planning meetings. I was also sent on Temporary Duty (TDY) to my Gulf region for over a month. I was the acting PAO in Doha for a while, and from there I was sent on to Kuwait to help post with handling U.S. press during a major President Clinton visit.

Q: What would be a typical activity for you? It's somewhat amorphous, being in a policy position. How did you interact with the rest of USIA or with the State Department?

SIDDIQI: We're talking now late 1994, early 1995. A typical activity for me was helping get messages out concerning Saddam Hussein, who still had a large following in the Arab World despite losing the Gulf War. We worked to point out to the Arab World how Saddam was continuing to commit human rights and environmental abuses, such as his brutal campaign against the Marsh Arabs living in and near Basra. I coordinated with our policy officer in USIA/NEA Michael Anderson, State/NEA, and others to assemble compelling evidence, such as "before and after" aerial photos showing how Iraq's marshlands were being drained by Saddam's army, over time, to wipe out the Marsh Arabs. Then I'd forward the images and text to Worldnet Television, Voice of America, the Wireless File, and other USIA publications and outlets for worldwide amplification.

Another public affairs campaign I played a part in was Mission Saudi Arabia's "50 Years of U.S.-Saudi Friendship" commemoration. Along with other historic images and documents, we publicized and republished an iconic 1945 photo of President Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz seated together, the one where they're meeting on the deck of an American navy ship. That photo turned out to be a real hit with the Saudi public. The U.S.-Saudi relationship required constant cultivating because there was always something happening in the news or in policy where we and the Saudis disagreed. That 1945 photo, and others like it, were a good reminder to the Saudi public about the history and depth of our strategic, military, commercial, and people-to-people ties.

Q: Did you also interact with the front office of NEA? Did you begin building contacts and networks with the country officers and deputy assistant secretaries?

SIDDIQI: No, not very much. Remember, I was in a separate building in Federal Center southwest, several metro stops away from Foggy Bottom. My principals up the chain were the ones trekking over to the State Department to meet with Assistant Secretaries and their deputies. I think I went over a few times to meet with State/NEA desk officers. Occasionally they would come over to USIA to meet with me and anyone who was visiting from my region, like a key PAO or an International Visitor (IV) group.

Q: I had a secret reason for asking you this question, for asking you about this interaction with the front office and so on. You're beginning to hear now the proposals of merging USIA with State. It's still in its infancy but Jesse Helms is already working to reduce the size of the State Department and integrate the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and USIA, and USAID, he wanted it all integrated. Were you beginning to think that you needed to be more plugged in to State Department colleagues?

SIDDIQI: I think we were at the stage where we were all in denial that integration was going to happen. (Laughter) There was this general perception at USIA that State did policy and we did people-to-people relations. Whereas they were going after specific, strategic goals advancing U.S. national interests, our mission was more on resolving conflict, fostering dialogue, and building programs that helped societies on both sides equally. If you ask USAID what their mission is, they'd have a slightly different angle to foreign policy as well, where the growth and development of other nations is seen as a long-term U.S. national interest. USIA and USAID shared the view that we really needed to focus on civil society and helping young people and women in developing nations find their feet, find their voices, because that was for the greater good, great for both democracy and free markets. We had this crazy idea that even if the audiences we engaged rose up to become democratic and then started disagreeing with us on policies, that that would be okay, that friendly disagreements with us were still better than their continuing to be poor and suppressed. We wanted to "tell America's story, warts and all," and we made sure to program U.S. private citizens overseas who expressed their own opinions freely. When I first heard about the State-USIA merger idea, I really thought it was mixing apples and oranges. I was hoping the momentum would lose steam, and that other senators in the Administration and Congress would find a different way to appease Jesse Helms.

Q: How was this churn moving you? Were you aware of how USIA management wanted to move you around, wanted to apply your skills, or was it a little less than plan, in other words was it more sort of serendipity?

SIDDIQI: I felt a bit like a small boat tossing in a storm. My two years in Washington reminded me how much more satisfying it was to work overseas. And frankly it was alarming to see our budgets and staff in Washington get downsized. NEA offered me a very good onward as PAO Kuwait. I think that was a natural step after my desk officer job that included supporting Mission Kuwait and dealing with Iraq issues. But I also very much wanted a post where my wife and two young kids and mother-in-law would feel comfortable. There was a Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) job that happened to be opening

up in Rabat at the same time as PAO Kuwait. Even though Morocco was a hardship post, it was a better fit for my family on many levels. So I asked for Rabat and NEA agreed.

Q: In the case of Morocco, again you could use French or Arabic?

SIDDIQI: Correct. USIA designated all its North Africa posts as French-Arabic, meaning you needed one of the two languages to serve there. I had up-to-date FSI scores in both.

Q: Is the Arabic in Morocco a little more difficult given how far away it is and there are influences of the Maghreb and so on?

SIDDIQI: Yes, you're right about that. My training was all in modern standard Arabic and I found the local dialect of "darija" hard to pick up and understand. And I noticed that Moroccan Arabic was hard to navigate even for native Arabic speakers who were not from North Africa. My fallback was using French to keep conversations going. My spoken French was okay, not as good as my modern standard Arabic, but good enough.

Q: In your calls and activities, did you need a local employee to interpret?

SIDDIQI: In all my overseas assignments, I made sure to keep my locally employed staff accompany me on calls. They would of course be helpful as interpreters, but my main reason was I wanted their advice on program and protocol matters and I also wanted them to grow as public diplomacy (PD) professionals. I had an excellent cultural affairs team at USIS Rabat. They, along with PD counterparts at Consulate General Casablanca, introduced me to scores of interesting and valuable contacts across the country. Several of those contacts went on to become key leaders in the private sector and government.

Q: How about your family, how well did they assimilate or were there any issues there?

SIDDIQI: My wife is fluent in Tunisian Arabic, so assimilating for her was easy. The Moroccans thought very highly of Tunisians in general, and that opened doors for us. But my wife also wanted to work full-time. About three months into our tour, she saw a great job vacancy for an EFM (eligible family member) at the U.S. consulate in Casablanca. It was a Consular Associate job, but the position required six weeks of mandatory training at FSI in Washington. The Mission's management counselor was willing to cover my wife's tuition costs, but said that all other costs would be out of pocket, including airfare, hotel, and any other costs in Washington. It ended up costing me quite a bit, but the investment was well worth it in the end. My wife passed all her FSI exams, came back to post with a Consular commission, and quickly became an integral part of the visa adjudication team in Casablanca. The consulate was a 75-minute train ride from our home in Rabat, which wasn't easy for her, but she did the commute every day for three and half years. As an experienced and successful Consular Associate in Morocco, she never later had a problem landing a consular job overseas or in Washington. Even now, 30 years later, she's still going strong as a Civil Service official and team leader in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Mission Morocco basically launched her career with State.

Q: I've been interviewing high-level officers in AFSA (American Foreign Service Association). Did you ever try to request AFSA to help you in providing a service to your spouse, in other words to cover her costs for training, anything like that?

SIDDIQI: No, it never even occurred to me to ask AFSA for advice or support. We kind of just accepted post Management's decision as gospel. There's a lot more support for EFM hiring and training in State now, I think, than back in the mid-1990's.

Q: How about education for the kids; by now they must be school age.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, the Rabat American School (RAS) was excellent and really helped get our two boys jump-started in their early grades. For three of my four years in Morocco, I also served on the school's board, as the U.S. ambassador's representative. I enjoyed that very much. It helped me get to know how American international schools operate.

Q: A lot of FSOs who join the board relate difficult stories or personalities, sometimes difficulties in just agreeing on the curriculum. For you it went smoothly?

SIDDIQI: We certainly had our share of difficult board meetings as well. People were mostly congenial, but it was hard to come to agreement sometimes. Curriculum issues were contentious, that's true, but we also debated about entry and exit points, security, personnel, budget, construction, tuition hikes, when the school calendar would begin and end, faculty training, and whatever concerns parents, teachers or the community had. Through it all, we usually found common ground. At graduation each June, RAS invited its full board to sit on stage as the seniors got their diplomas. Once or twice, I had to sit next to Driss Basri, Morocco's controversial minister, who had a kid in the school and was an honorary board member. Basri was notorious for his crackdowns on dissidents. Being that close to him felt awkward. I think I just said a quick hello and looked away.

Q: I assume he was minister of the interior.

SIDDIQI: Yes, that's right.

Q: All right. This is all of the context of the job; obviously there was a great deal more to it. What were the kinds of programs you were running, the most important, the ones that had the most money?

SIDDIQI: Our Fulbright exchange program was a huge deal and took up a good chunk of my time. I was the ambassador's representative on the binational board of MACECE, the Moroccan-American (Fulbright) Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange, and functionally I was also the Commission's vice treasurer. That required almost daily program, policy, and decision-making input from me. It was a multi-million dollar two-way exchange funded by both governments, and we had a lot riding on its success. Fulbright Americans teaching and working in Morocco depended on MACECE for all their in-country needs. Meanwhile, my Moroccan colleagues on the board wanted to make sure the exchanges to and from the U.S. directly benefited Morocco's development.

A second hat that I wore as CAO was representing USIS and the Mission on the board of Morocco's American Cultural Association. The ACA was a privately-run, not-for-profit umbrella organization that financed and managed American Language Centers (ALC's) in 10 cities around the country. The 10 centers were originally launched and funded in the 1970's by USIS. After a few years the Centers became popular and self-sufficient, and the ACA got officially recognized as an NGO. As the only U.S. government board member, I would see ACA's ten ALC directors at quarterly meetings, and I'd visit their cities and centers when I could. The ALC's helped satisfy the growing demand for English, and the Moroccans loved the fact that many of their teachers were native English speakers. For me in Rabat and the USIS PAO in Casablanca, the ten ALC's across Morocco made our jobs a lot easier in terms of organizing joint programs and outreach.

Q: Sure. We're at the end of two hours; would this be a good place to break?

SIDDIQI: Sure, I've got three or four programs I'd like to touch on when we pick up again. One thing I forgot to mention about the Fulbright commission, was that it was the first time I had to let a person go, the American executive director who was recruited and hired by USIA before I arrived in Rabat. I had to deliver the bad news to him, because he was fully expecting a renewal of his contract. I really felt sorry for him. He was pretty accomplished as a U.S. scholar and professor, but I had no choice but to pull the plug.

Q: As a cultural officer, I faced that as well and it's never pleasant.

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Q: Today is February 8th, 2024, we are resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, we're in Rabat; what year?

SIDDIQI: I arrived in the summer of 1995, and did four years in Rabat, until mid-1999. As I mentioned earlier, I had both French and Arabic going in, and was very much ready for the assignment and looking forward to it.

Q: Given how much you studied both French and Arabic, did they stick with you? Are you still able to use them today?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, pretty much. I kept a 3/3 level in French and Arabic throughout my 40-year career. After Rabat, I served in five other posts that required French or Arabic. Even now, I use those languages whenever I speak to my in-laws. I can feel I've gotten a little rusty since my retirement, maybe I'm now a 2+ level in both? I need to practice more!

Going back to my MACECE Fulbright director story, the incumbent was a nice guy, but he had virtually no experience in the Arab World. I was, de facto, his supervisor, but it seemed he was almost never at the Commission when I needed him. He also didn't seem very interested in managing the Commission's staff or submitting reports on time. Instead, he was spending his time and energy giving talks at local universities and building up his own academic credentials. For three months I tried to get him to focus

through gentle reminders and counseling, but things never improved. I went to my PAO and said "I can't in good conscience support a contract extension." My PAO said fine, but it's on me as the CAO, and I would have to be the one to give the executive director (ED) the bad news. Also, he wanted me to directly deal with ECA (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs) officials, and the Moroccan MACECE board members, to convince them, to get their involvement and support, and then to start recruiting for a replacement ED right away. That all had its twists and turns, and overall took about six months from start to finish. We had three good applicants for the ED position who made the final cut; we ended up offering the job to an American expat who I already knew, and who was fluent in Moroccan Arabic, the ALC director in Fes, Stephen "Daoud" Casewit. Hiring Daoud was probably the most consequential decision I made during my four years in Morocco. Hard-working, well-liked by the Moroccans, an accomplished scholar on Islam and a proven manager of people and resources, I never had to worry about the Commission again. Of course, by suddenly plucking him out of ALC Fes to fill the ED vacancy in Rabat, that left a hole at our key partner center in Fes. Luckily, I was able to persuade my USIA-hired English Language Fellow (ELF) in Fes, David Amster, to take the job that Daoud vacated there. That last-minute personnel move was a win/win for everyone, since David's ELF contract was one-year, non-renewable and he really wanted to stay in Morocco. You know, too often we can only point to very short-term victories in public diplomacy, where we bring in a speaker for a week or two, they have good conversations and events, then they leave and then you go on to the next thing. But here, in Rabat and Fes, I was able to make personnel moves that paid dividends in our people-to-people relations long-term. Daoud stayed as Fulbright director for eight years. David did almost 20 years at ALC Fes. I was proud and happy to see them succeed.

Q: That's fantastic. Take a moment to describe the composition of the Fulbright board; who was on it?

SIDDIQI: We had six Moroccans and six Americans on the board. The chairman was a senior Moroccan professor from Mohammed V University who also advised the Ministry of Higher Education. The treasurer and one other Moroccan board member were influential deans at Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AFI), and were themselves Fulbright alumni. AFI was launched and funded by the king and it was, and still is, the only private, American-style university in the country. On our end, USAID's deputy director was vice chairman, and I was the vice treasurer and Ambassador's ex officio representative. In addition to a Casablanca-based U.S. businessman, we also had the ALC Rabat director and the head of the Tangier American Legation Museum on our board.

Q: You said the government of Morocco provided some funding. Did the U.S. government provide some as well?

SIDDIQI: Yes, it was about fifty-fifty, with our total program and operating budget coming to around three million dollars a year. King Hassan II took a keen interest in Fulbright, as did the Ministry of Higher Education and all of Morocco's major universities. American funding came in quarterly tranches through USIA's ECA bureau. It was about the same level every year, subject to Congressional approval.

Q: Over the time you were there, you mentioned that the first executive secretary wasn't being consistent in terms of what the embassy wanted to accomplish. What were your goals in terms of exchanges? Were they more heavily weighted towards science, technology, environment, or was it more about cultural exchange? When you were considering and recommending candidates, what was going through your mind?

SIDDIQI: The Moroccans were very much interested in sending students and researchers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and business. Our U.S. side thought that was fine, but that we should also cover areas like rule of law, human rights and democracy. Our Board did not get directly involved in selecting individual candidates, but we did take a close look at research proposals and extension requests to make sure they were well-reasoned and in line with broader U.S. and Moroccan goals.

Q: This is part B to the February 8 session with Adnan Siddiqi.

SIDDIQI: To finish answering your previous question, yes there was a natural divergence of view on whether to invest more in liberal arts or in STEM. On the Moroccan side, they very much thought of Fulbright scholarships, teacher exchanges, and university linkages with the U.S. as a way to reward scholastic achievement and speed up the modernization of their country. Finding Americans who could come teach STEM in Morocco, in French, was really difficult. Meanwhile, a lot of Americans applying to Fulbright wanted to study Arabic or Islam, or to do research on some cultural or ethnic aspect of Moroccan society. We had many top-notch scholars come through who knew their stuff and how to connect. Whenever I hosted a talk or panel discussion at my house in Rabat, I'd invite a few of them to engage with my contacts. They were lively additions to our events, subject matter experts who were just as effective as any USIS or Mission-sponsored speaker.

Talking about our star U.S. Fulbrighters reminds me of the time my office invited and hosted another fantastic group of students, the Young Ambassadors from Brigham Young University (BYU). This was a thirty-member performing arts group that traveled at least once a year overseas. In early 1996, BYU reached out to us, saying they wanted to partner with us on a 12-day, 6-city Young Ambassadors tour of Morocco, and that they would cover a good chunk of the cost. All that post had to provide was assistance with their lodging, meals, program venues, ground transport, and potential government and private sector co-sponsors. Planning took months, especially lining up in-kind local support, but it all worked out well. BYU's stage performances of a musical titled *In the Neighborhood* were amazingly entertaining and well-done. Even more important from our USIS perspective, the plot and songs wonderfully reflected what it was like growing up in a small town in the U.S. in the mid-1950s. The Moroccans really liked the show and the "family values" message. The only social topic we asked BYU to avoid was religion. We were aware that the main reason for their trips overseas was to spread awareness about their Mormon faith, but for the Mission and for the Moroccans, that was a red line. BYU said "Fine, but will you allow us to go into orphanages and rural areas where we can talk about our message?" We said what you do on your own time is fine, but we won't be part of that scene. So out of the 12 days in country, they took a couple to do that,

as part of their philanthropy and charity work. Looking back, I think BYU was probably one of the most complex and impactful music programs I ever had a role in. I was lucky to have Cultural Specialist Dominique Benbrahim on my team. Dominique was Belgian, married to a Moroccan, and she was great at outreach planning and programming. USIS Casablanca's cultural assistants were equally incredible.

Another U.S. university singing group we co-sponsored was Harvard's "Din And Tonics," an all-male choir. The Dins were on tour in Spain and wanted to come over on the ferry to see Morocco for a few days. In exchange for a couple of free performances, we helped them with their internal transportation. Their concert at the DCM's residence in Rabat, which they performed dressed in spiffy tuxedos, had VIP guests enthralled.

At our ambassador's urging, we invited a blues and country singer that he knew and liked, John Mohead. John and his band had a busy schedule in Memphis, but they agreed to come out to Morocco for a few days and perform for free. USIS picked up their airfare costs, and a couple of local co-sponsors covered all the rest. We were surprised and thrilled to see Moroccan audiences take an interest in American country music, a sound and vibe they weren't at all familiar with. And even though understanding John's southern drawl was probably a challenge for many of them, he struck a chord with them.

In fact, many American performers would come to Morocco on their own, for tourism or to meet friends, not just American university students, and would be perfectly happy to offer their services to us for a nominal fee. There was a wonderful classical violinist named Jack Glatzer who'd come every year. He was a master at performing Bach and Paganini and had fascinating slide shows to accompany his talks and recitals. Jack was based in Portugal, so it was cheap and easy for him to come on his own. From my end, I was happy to put him up at our house in Rabat to cut down further on program costs.

We also showcased African American and Hispanic American heritage. Through USIA's Arts America, we brought in classical guitarist Jose Passalacqua who talked about his Puerto Rican roots. We collaborated with the Sacred Music Festival in Fes every spring. U.S. participation at that Festival was symbolically a big deal for the Moroccans, and we were able to co-sponsor amazing U.S. gospel singers like the Blind Boys of Alabama.

Once we programmed Fred Garbo and the Inflatables; this was a two-person, husband and wife, acrobatic team that bounced around the stage inside huge, colorful, oddly shaped balloons. I guess they were made of some kind of rubbery synthetic material that no one tried using in dance before. Anyway, they were creative, funny and athletic, and our audiences loved them. For me, anytime I could pack an auditorium full, make new contacts, and have Moroccans of all ages think good things about Americans, that was a win. So was all the media coverage we'd see the next day.

That reminds me, I forgot to mention the increasing pressure my office, and USIS posts in general, were under because of Vice President Gore's "Reinventing Government" initiative and push to justify all federal expenditures. The 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) mandated all federal agencies to document how their activities

led to actual results and were linked to benchmarks and strategic plans. In the case of USIA, which was already under pressure to downsize, all USIS officers had to show what we achieved in moving the public opinion needle. Not just every month or quarter, which is the way we used to report back, but as soon as a particular program or exchange ended. Our reports didn't have to be longer than a paragraph or two, but they had to cite tangible examples of impact, things like audience numbers, what wider foreign policy goals we advanced, opinion leaders persuaded, positive news coverage generated, and so on. It was hard writing about cultural programs because often we couldn't honestly gauge at the event itself, or even a week or two later, how much headway we made. In the case of our Fulbright and International Visitor exchanges, it could take months or years before an alumnus did something positive and compelling that we could trace back to their USIA-sponsored trip and experience. In any event, I got tasked by my PAO to edit and compile our weekly public diplomacy highlights reports to Washington, and to make sure that each highlight from USIS Rabat and USIS Casablanca included a credible bottom line "GPRA result." Beyond satisfying Washington's requirements, the reports were a great motivator. Every week, our staff could read in detail the good things they accomplished.

It's hard to believe looking back now, but we almost got Michael Jackson to perform in Morocco. Michael and his entourage visited Casablanca in the summer of 1996 to check out possible venues for a mega-concert that same fall. He triggered a media frenzy, and I was only able to get within 10 feet of him. Unfortunately, the Casablanca concert idea never happened, as Moroccans were wary about all the security and crowd control measures that would be needed. Michael ended up performing in Tunisia instead.

I also got to shake hands and get photographed with my childhood idol Mohammed Ali at one point. He came to Rabat as the king's special guest and to do some charity work. He dropped by one day at the Embassy for a few minutes to say hello to our Mission staff.

Q: Oh, wow. Okay.

SIDDIQI: Probably the most significant program initiative my office took, was in the area of higher education reform. The Moroccan government wanted to change their way of doing higher education. They told USIS and the MACECE board that they wanted their universities to adopt aspects of our U.S. model, which they saw as more successful than the European or French model they had since independence. The Ministry of Higher Education wanted to do a multi-year project with us, thinking we had abundant funds and expertise to collaborate in that sector. We told them we don't do faculty training writ large or infrastructure developments, per se, but we could help their cause in incremental strategic ways. I offered to bring in a university management official or two as U.S. speakers, but they said, no, no, we want something more intense. We want Americans that can spend weeks on the ground with us, that can address some of our specific issues, such as how U.S. universities gain accreditation, how they do admissions testing, and how they ensure that universities are also research institutions that contribute to the economy. They had our heads spinning with the sheer number and complexity of the goals they wanted to achieve, not to mention the possible price tag. I reached out to my

USAID colleagues for ideas, since they were the only office in the Mission with deep pockets. They said they had no budget for higher education, so I then contacted TIEC, the Texas International Education Consortium based at UT Austin. TIEC president Bill Franklin was delighted to hear from us, and happy to partner. So for a good, I would say, seven to nine months, TIEC kept sending experts to the Moroccans. They were all good, doing workshops with reform-minded Ministry officials, university presidents, deans, and department heads. And even though any kind of change on the higher education front required political will and Parliamentary legislation, we succeeded in widening support for the U.S. model, and planting some seeds. In parallel, we were able to send a group of 10 Moroccan vice chancellors on a specially-designed three week International Visitors program to the U.S., where they spent quality individual time at a variety of U.S. universities, private as well as state-funded, liberal arts colleges as well as those that were technical and STEM-focused. Some vice chancellors came back to Morocco with new agreements to do university linkages, joint degree programs, and faculty exchanges.

Q: You really covered everything, unless you know there's a personal anecdote about traveling around that you know, really you find compelling about your story there.

SIDDIQI: Of all the countries I served in during my career, Morocco was my favorite. It was such an aspiring place with its stunning beauty and moderate blend of east and west. I spent four years there and saw some amazing places, but I still couldn't visit all the fascinating towns and historical sites I wanted to. One of my sons liked the country so much that he returned 20 years later to work in Casablanca as an adult. I tell all my friends and family that if they have a bucket list of places to visit, Morocco should be on it.

Q: You've talked a little bit about how your family settled in and so on, but what were you thinking about in the year before you're about to leave? Because that's when you have to submit your bid list, right?

SIDDIQI: It was originally a three year assignment in Rabat, and USIA and the Mission agreed to extend me for a fourth year. I really enjoyed my job, and my wife was doing great as Consular Associate in Casablanca. We had two boys going to RAS, and we wanted to give them as much school continuity as we could. We left Morocco in summer 1999. I was able to land another branch chief/office director type job in Washington, this time in ECA's Office of International Visitors. It was a natural follow-on for me, as Mission Morocco was well-known in the bureau for nominating and sending exceptional IV grantees to the U.S., and I think they credited me personally for some of that. I started Washington in August, and on October 1, USIA got merged into the State Department. The IV program got renamed officially as the IVLP, the International Visitors Leadership Program, I guess to show Congress a strategic rethinking. In practice and reality though, the content, style and purpose of the program stayed the same, as did our personnel and grant relationships with NGO partners. Everyone at State and all our Ambassadors in the field were big fans of the IVLP, even more than Fulbright, which was their second favorite exchange. They all saw first-hand the utility of bringing up and coming leaders from all walks of life to the United States for face-to-face conversations and networking

with American and international peers. Many IV's were first-time visitors to the U.S., and had never experienced home hospitality, so the program really showed them something new about American society. My office directorship let me experience the whole process from stateside. I was responsible for hundreds of grantees coming from the Near East, North Africa and South Asia. I led a five-person Civil Service team of program managers that, in turn, liaised with our 40-plus posts overseas as well as the many specialists in ECA and the NGO community that organized the program stateside.

Q: How much of the exchanges were post-requested, and how much were basically Washington telling you these are the exchanges you're going to have?

SIDDIQI: Well, it was a little bit of both. Some of our posts had specific Mission goals that we could only help them address through smaller, very tailored Single Country Projects (SCP's). You'll recall that's how I was able to send ten Vice Chancellors from Morocco a year before to the U.S. as a single IVLP group, when I was CAO Rabat, focused only on higher education reform and university linkages. To answer your question though, I was always plugged in to what the NEA and South Asia area offices at State wanted to do, policy-wise, through IVLP. We accommodated them as much as we could, knowing that we also had to do programs that covered worldwide priorities and themes that were of interest to the Secretary of State, Congress, and the White House. Every summer, ECA would send a worldwide cable to all U.S. embassies listing a menu of IVLP programs, with specific themes, that they could choose from. The 20 or 25 themes usually met most post needs. If not, a post had the option of proposing an SCP or an individual IVLP program for their nominees. But all these programs would be the same length, and they would typically always involve visits to four or five U.S. cities.

You might recall in the summer of 2000 the Camp David summit President Clinton hosted, the one that almost resulted in a Mideast peace deal between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak. Well it was around that same time that we in ECA were implementing our own IVLP program aimed at Middle East bridge-building. We weren't able to persuade any Israelis and Arabs to travel jointly to the U.S. on an IVLP, so we did the next best thing, which was to work with our posts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem on an SCP involving a mix of Israeli Arabs and Jewish Israelis. The Arabs were all Israeli citizens, but they were minorities within Israel. They weren't Palestinians, but they had sympathy for the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and getting them to participate was not easy. I briefed the eight person group in Washington and also traveled with them to Los Angeles. Now, office directors usually don't do accompany IV's to other U.S. cities, but I was curious to see how the group members would get along while sharing flights, vans, meals, and hotels. We spent a whole day at the Mediation Center of Los Angeles (MCLA) which was intense. Meanwhile, back at Camp David that same week, President Clinton, Ehud Barak, Yasser Arafat, and teams of negotiators were meeting to try and finalize a possible, breakthrough peace agreement. My IVLP group of Arabs and Israelis were really fixated on the progress reports coming out of Camp David, and many of them were optimistic. But by the time they returned back to Israel, the summit had ended and failed. The goodwill and constructive dialogue I witnessed within our IVLP group was, to me, a hopeful sign, but in the larger scheme of things, it was a drop in the bucket.

Q: Yeah, those were the fits and starts that ended up not really coming to fruition.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, it reminded me of when I was in Morocco, I'd been approached by the Seeds of Peace (SOP), the American NGO that began offering a summer camp in Maine every year for middle and high school students from Israel and the Arab World. Lindsay Miller, Aaron's wife, was hoping Morocco would participate, and she asked if USIS could help set up some of her Ministry of Youth meetings. The Moroccans turned out to be very interested, and even now they're a participating country. I actually sent my own two boys to a Seeds camp as well, the 2006 one, when they were 16 and 14. By that time, Seeds was also programming Indian and Pakistani kids, to navigate through their conflicts and differences. My kids were familiar with both the Arab-Israeli and Indo-Pak dynamic, through my own background and work, so I thought it would be good for them.

Q: What did your kids say about it? I'm curious. What were their reactions?

SIDDIQI: My two kids went to the 2006 camp, well after my time in Morocco. Honestly, I don't think either of them enjoyed Seeds very much, at least not the serious, political part. I think they went assuming it would be 24/7 fun and games, and not so heavy on conflict resolution and story-telling. They knew the histories of Jerusalem and Kashmir, but they didn't have strong personal opinions or feel emotionally vested in either of those perennial regional flash points. I see my two sons now as young adults though, and I can tell that they absorbed quite a lot from camping six weeks with Israelis, Palestinians, Moroccans, Pakistanis, and Indians. My eldest son became a Foreign Service Officer like me, and is now doing his third assignment in the Middle East. My younger son got a Master's degree in education and has taught at schools in India, Morocco and Turkey.

Q: Let's go back now to your job in Washington. What about the other countries and their IVLP programs? You had, I don't know, 20 countries or so under your supervision?

SIDDIQI: As I mentioned earlier, I had excellent program officers in my branch, and they did the hard work of liaising with the posts and countries, and making sure each of our IVLP projects went smoothly. Every Monday, one of my colleagues or I would go meet with our grantees at their Washington orientation, and that was always a thrill. I'd go over their U.S. program, and how their participation advanced our mutual interests. I'd urged them to talk to as many Americans as possible, collect email addresses, and keep in touch with their U.S. contacts to keep the dialogue going long-term. The South Asian grantees were easier to program in the sense they nearly all had good English and didn't need translators or interpreters. It was more complicated with our IVLP visitors from the Middle East and North Africa who needed full-time escort-interpreters in Arabic, French, and occasionally Hebrew. One of my roles as manager was to make sure we matched the right interpreters with the right group or individual, since they would have to spend so much time together in the U.S. during weekday meetings and weekend cultural outings.

Q: Were there differences in topics and emphases?

SIDDIQI: Well, I'd say for the five South Asian countries, they were more interested in development topics, things like public health, disease control, public administration, higher education. Our programs for Arab countries were heavier on U.S. foreign policy, rule of law, press freedom, tolerance. Our rule of law programs allowed us to segue into discussions about the court system, transparency, accountability, and free and fair elections. democracy, all rule of law topics that many of our participants couldn't openly talk about in their home countries. Through many of our IVLP exchanges, ECA and our posts were able to really get to know some of the region's emerging change-makers. Many of them wanted to partner with our Missions afterwards. Building on that idea, ECA added a liaison and follow-up office for IVLP and other exchange alumni.

Q: Speaking of alumni of these programs, did any of them go on to become influencers in their native country?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, many of them did become influential, and they also stayed connected with us, over time. The year I was there in ECA, in 2000, the bureau organized a two-week, VIP commemorative exchange program to mark IVLP's 60th anniversary. Each post/Embassy was asked to nominate their most accomplished IVLP alumnus to go on that program, and then their geographic bureau would select one finalist for their region. So, in the end, a very exclusive group of five or six "star" alumni got invited to the U.S. for the program. NEA chose former Jordan prime minister, Dr. Abdelsalam Al-Majali. Back in 1969, Al-Majali came to the U.S. as an IV, later became Jordan's minister of health, and then in the 1990's, he rose up to become prime minister. I was happy to help with Al-Majali's 2000 repeat IVLP trip. He was very articulate in talking about the program, how IVLP impacted him personally and strengthened his ties with American policymakers. We went together on his Washington appointments, and I also connected him with new people at a reception my wife and I hosted in his honor. So, yeah, if you look at IVLP's influence in the Arab World, and globally, it's been significant. Another individual prominent alumni I knew was Nizar Baraka. He was a relatively unknown Moroccan economics professor when my Rabat staff nominated him in 1997. After his IVLP, Nizar went into politics and rose to become Minister of Equipment and Water.

Q: Now, the other thing is, during this time, in the early 2000's was that the ECA bureau itself was changing, and the IIP international information programs office was also changing. And then separately, the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs was essentially the spokesman of the department. Were there internal changes going on that affected you?

SIDDIQI: I think if I had stuck around for a second year in ECA, and not gone back overseas, that I then might have seen some of those internal institutional changes you're referring to. One way that I benefited from USIA-State consolidation was that I could now bid on, and compete for, all kinds of different jobs in the State Department. Before 2000, USIA officers were essentially locked into the public diplomacy (PD) track, and we couldn't compete for DCM, political, management, or economic officer jobs. So, while I was in Washington and thinking about onwards, I was open to something new. As it

happened, an immediate job vacancy popped up in October 2000, at FSI Tunis. FSI Washington needed a director there ASAP, preferably an Arabic speaking FSO with management skills. I figured it was right up my alley. I talked to the PAO at Mission Tunis, who knew me from USIA/NEA area office days, and he supported my bid. Long story short, I was able to get the Embassy and FSI Washington to back my candidacy. My bosses at ECA were surprised to hear I wanted to curtail, but they agreed to my request.

Q: I see, okay, yeah, of course, because by then, the formal integration of USIA into State Department had been completed.

SIDDIQI: Exactly.

Q: And of course, you just said at FSI, it really was not as noticeable to have a PD officer as a language school director. But are there any recollections you have about how that worked? Do you know whether there were any concerns at FSI about it?

SIDDIQI: Well, at my interviews at FSI, I emphasized to them how I loved learning and using Arabic, both socially and professionally. And they knew that I was a graduate of FSI Tunis and that I had done three years earlier at post as the USIS Information Officer. The concerns from FSI's end, if you can call them that, were my inexperience in language training/pedagogy, and supervising a large and diverse group of teachers and students/officers. Supervising teachers was totally new to me. A couple of them remembered me fondly from my time as an FSI student back in summer 1985, but most of the folks on the faculty were new to me, including teachers from Iraq and Syria. And, of course, you know, how teachers in general are, right? They love to disagree. I quickly discovered I couldn't run FSI like I did a USIS or ECA staff. My teachers wanted in on every decision I made, from proposed changes to the class calendar or curriculum, to what outside speakers we'd invite to chat with students in Arabic. My State Department students were also quite demanding and opinionated. Getting their buy-in and keeping them all pulling in one direction every day was challenging. Never had a dull moment!

Q: Did the style of teaching change? Did the evaluations show students gaining fluency?

SIDDIQI: When I was an FSI Arabic student, we used a standard textbook that was developed and approved by the Department. By the time I returned 15 years later as the director, the curriculum and classroom conversations were more free flowing. Nearly all my teachers were experimenting with different sources and methods, and the thick green books that I was taught with, way back when, were no longer mandatory. Their ability to customize and adjust was great to see, but it led to some students wanting to learn only from Mr. X or Ms. Y, i.e. the teachers whose styles and personality they subjectively liked. I think they just viewed some of our teachers better than others in getting them the speaking and reading skills they needed to pass the final FSI test. I had my hands full as director, keeping everyone satisfied. Things were going OK, but then 9/11 happened. We all watched the attacks on CNN. It was 9:15 a.m. Eastern Time, and early afternoon in Tunis. We had to cancel the remaining classes that day and send everyone home. Over the next several weeks, U.S.-Tunisia relations got steadily more tense, and anti-U.S.

demonstrations began popping up in the streets. The Embassy went on Authorized Departure, and many FSI students and their families elected to go back to the U.S. Even when the students did come back, they were still very upset and distracted by all the bad news.

Q: Oh, my goodness, yeah. Were you instructed by higher ups about how to conduct things as these issues went by, or was it pretty much up to you how to adapt?

SIDDIQI: Well, I was a member of Country Team and therefore in regular touch with the front office, the DCM, the ambassador, the management counselor, and the regional security officer. They all took steps to ensure the safety of our students and our FSI facility. We were located in a quiet suburb about 10 miles from the Embassy, and part of the reason we were outside the Embassy was because at FSI Tunis, you could just stroll out of the school during lunch break or after class and practice using Arabic with random Tunisians, in stores and cafes, and so on. Our location was great for cultural immersion, but it was a constant concern in terms of security. In addition to the Mission, I also had to stay in constant touch with FSI Washington officials who also were advising me. We had to change and suspend some conveniences that our students had gotten used to, such as receiving their mail and packages at our facility. They all now had to trek to the Embassy to get their mail. There were also new rules on reporting personal whereabouts to the Embassy and traveling outside Tunis on weekends. These were all good precautions, but some students viewed them as burdens and were reluctant to comply. Our RSO and Management Counselor met with our students as a group to address their concerns over the changes in routine. We did additional security drills as well. That was our new reality.

Q: Yeah. Wow. So, in the end, how long did you stay there?

SIDDIQI: I did about two and half years there, from November 2000 to June 2003. In spite of all the uncertainty and crises I had to deal with, it was overall a positive experience. We had a great house for hosting receptions, near the marina. My wife and mother-in-law were able to reconnect with their family, and my kids liked their school.

Q: Yeah, and your kids were with you? Or were they back in the U.S.?

SIDDIQI: The kids were with me as well. I forgot to mention that we added a daughter in 1999, when we were posted to Washington. So by this time we had two boys and a girl.

Q: The kids were going to school at the American School.

SIDDIQI: Yes, that's right, my sons were in their middle grades when they attended the American Cooperative School of Tunis (ACST). My daughter was not yet school age.

Q: This is obviously very early, but at this time, were you beginning to hear any rumblings about an Arab Spring?

SIDDIQI: Nothing obvious, but there was a hint of discontent in some middle class circles, like the media and academic contacts I knew from when I was IO in Tunis ten years earlier. They were originally upbeat about the Ben Ali regime, but by 2001, he was 13-14 years in power, not allowing any opposition, and becoming more and more autocratic. In some ways, it had become a police state. But people tolerated him because they feared the alternative would be even worse. They saw the awful state that Algeria and Libya were in. They had this problem of a dictator, but economically they were OK.

Q: Right, right. Did Washington provide you enough support? Were there gaps in the Washington support network?

SIDDIQI: I had good support from my bosses and colleagues at FSI Washington, they were totally plugged in to what was happening on our end. They were also in direct e-mail contact with my students, offering them advice and support. They also came to Tunis at least once a year as part of their oversight responsibilities. While we didn't agree on every management or personnel-related issue, I appreciated their ability to get me the budget and resources I needed. For example, they were helpful in helping me build a small in-house studio at FSI Tunis to do on-camera interviews of students. The idea was to try and replicate an Arabic TV talk show or one-on-one media interview atmosphere. As a former PAO and IO myself, I knew there were a lot of tough policy questions our students would face at their onward NEA assignments, and I felt our new module would be good prep for those kinds of combative future encounters. FSI Washington agreed and sent us the extra funds we needed to buy video cameras, lighting, and other equipment. We make the module voluntary; whoever wanted to try it out, we'd make it part of their regularly scheduled speaking class. One of our FSI teachers became very good at imitating Arab TV journalists. Spoofing Al-Jazeera, we dubbed our channel "Al-Jazra," which in Arabic means "the carrot." That part was in good fun, but the class was serious.

Q: Was there anything unique or different about the people preparing for different assignments? Because, you know, you're preparing some for Public Diplomacy ,and others for political and economic jobs, and some students were from other agencies?

SIDDIQI: All the students were there to get a strong foundation in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the version that's taught and used in written form in all Arab World countries. The final FSI-administered Arabic test that our students had to take at the end of their one-year course was also in MSA, meaning everyone had to have a similar basic vocabulary. That said, every student knew that they needed enough specialized vocabulary in Arabic to do their onward jobs. The couple of students we'd get each year from the Department of Defense for example, the ones who were going to be Foreign Affairs Officers (FAO's) assigned to U.S. Embassy Defense Attache Offices, were more interested in developing their reading and listening comprehension abilities. They were used to learning language from a computer screen and in audio-visual labs, and wanted me to give them more and more software to practice on. It was hard persuading them to just pick up an actual newspaper or to go find a random Tunisian to chat with. I had the impression that they wanted to learn Arabic without ever having to deal with Arabs. My State Department students, on the other hand, needed strong speaking skills to do their

onward PD, political, and economic jobs. They were much more adventurous in going out of the classroom to use and practice their Arabic. Later in their careers, several of them went on to become Ambassadors, Consul Generals, and DCM's in the Arab World.

Q: Were you also teaching people who would become either interpreters or translators?

SIDDIQI: No, that was not our mission. As far as I know, the State Department only employs native speakers when it hires interpreters and translators overseas and in Washington. That said, I'm sure some of our students ended up in situations where they were the only American in the room that knew Arabic and had to translate something.

Q: The same thing's true in any embassy where you have a strong language skill, right? So what have I missed? Are there anecdotes or stories that I failed to ask you about?

SIDDIQI: Well, one post-9/11 development I wanted to mention was that demand for Arabic-speaking FSO's started rising, and we needed more teachers, preferably teachers who knew Iraqi Arabic. The best teacher we found was an Iraqi lady married to a Tunisian. That posed a bit of a moral dilemma for us, given her background. In the end, we ended up hiring a non-Iraqi citizen. At that time, it was just too problematic for us to hire someone with an Iraqi passport, even though she was based permanently in Tunis.

Q: All right, would you like to pause here?

SIDDIQI: Sure, I think that would be good.

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Q: Okay, today's March 14th, 2024, we're resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, you're in Tunis, directing FSI. Did you want to wrap up? Any other information?

SIDDIQI: No, I think we can move now to my next assignment, which was the Air War College (AWC) in Montgomery, Alabama, at Maxwell Air Force Base. The AWC was one of five war colleges in the U.S. which partnered with the Department of State to provide leadership training every year to select mid-level FSO's. The roster at National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, D.C. was full in summer 2003, so I bid on AWC instead. My State Department mentor there was Earl Scarlett, a former DCM. Earl and his wife were wonderful in getting my family and I acclimated and settled in.

AWC was a sharp detour and departure from anything I'd done before. I was interested in doing something that would take me to the next level in terms of my value and relevance to the Department. In my daily seminars, I was shoulder to shoulder with captains and lieutenant colonels, officers who were on track to become colonels and generals. I quickly found I was a minority among them, not just because of my ethnic and religious background, but also because of my political views, which were often very different.

Q: Could you give an example of how you differed, or how the military officers reacted to things? What was the kind of information they wanted to know, versus your approach?

SIDDIQI: A lot of our discussions centered on U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. I personally was most interested in "Phase four," i.e. the post-war reconstruction part and transition to civilian rule. But that was still way in the future, and in 2003-04 we were still in Phase three, the warfighting part. What alarmed me was the way my professors and classmates would routinely refer to Arabs and Muslims in the region as "the enemy" and "the bad guys." All my years in New York, traveling throughout the Mideast, and debating all types of people, taught me to avoid over-generalizing and stereotyping others. It never occurred to me to call Iraq or China or Russia or Iran, an "enemy" of the United States, or "evil." All those countries had great civilizations at some point and were friends with the West. But those were terms that AWC students and faculty routinely used, it was their language of patriotism. They'd all erupt in applause when we'd watch a video of the latest successful U.S. missile or drone strike. Meanwhile I'd be silently worried about who actually got killed and how many innocent lives might have been lost under all that fire, smoke and debris. With their 24/7 focus on warfighting and "carrying out the mission," I guess my colleagues almost de facto had to look at post-9/11 conflicts as "us versus them," good versus evil, and believer versus non-believer. For me, that majority perspective was hard to relate to and accept. I was continually surprised by how much God and Christianity shaped the worldview of the officers and personnel I met. Not all of them were Islamophobic, but a lot of them spoke that way. I was hoping the international students/colonels in my seminar would offer up more nuanced views, but they rarely spoke up. I could only conclude that they didn't want to argue and were just happy to be at AWC on a prestigious program.

I also was surprised by how my classmates just assumed and took it for granted that the U.S. military was the driver and implementer of American foreign policy. Many of them knew very little about the State Department, or what U.S. Missions and diplomats did overseas. It gradually dawned on me that maybe that's why I'm at AWC, to share an alternate State Department or civilian view with them. I was swimming against the mainstream though. Their typical reaction to my comments was "Here he goes again!" In their eyes, I was the East Coast liberal, the pacifist guy who always went against the grain. They were always cordial with me, but I'm sure many of them wondered who is this Muslim Indian guy with an Arabic-sounding name, and how did he wind up with us?

That said, I had fun studying at AWC and to at least pretend to be a writer and scholar again. All of us had to draft a 40-50 page professional paper to graduate, and I did mine on Yemen. Sanaa was my very first assignment with USIA, as you'll recall, so analyzing Yemen's strategic importance to the global war on terror was well within my comfort zone. I got an A for that paper, and I also presented it in person at a faculty-only meeting. The moderator commented it was the first time they heard from a U.S. diplomat who had had on the ground experience in Yemen, and who had spoken with Yemenis face-to-face.

Another of our graduation requirements was taking a Regional Studies class that focused on a single, vital sub-region of the world where we had U.S. bases and ongoing national security interests. I elected to join the Southeast Asia seminar, which involved the study

of Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. I didn't know much going in about that region. The assigned readings were really interesting, especially the ones about Singapore and its amazingly rapid transformation from a poor developing country into an economic powerhouse in just a few decades. In the fall of 2003, AWC organized a Capstone trip for all five Regional Studies seminars simultaneously. Each geographic group flew in a different direction out of Maxwell Air Force Base to visit their assigned sub-region.

Q: Once again, this is in Southeast Asia that you went for?

SIDDIQI: Correct, the ASEAN region. We were a group of fifteen AWC students, plus two faculty. We spent ten days total in southeast Asia, three days each in Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. We visited military facilities and got briefings from host governments and independent think tanks on military cooperation with the U.S., maritime relations, that sort of thing. We also got to meet U.S. Embassy officials who provided their perspective. One of the funny things I learned in traveling with AWC was that they seemed to be following a different clock than I was. They'd tell everyone, for example, to be ready for departure from the hotel at 5:00 p.m. I'd show up in our hotel lobby at five minutes to five, or ten minutes to five, and find that every single one of them was already there. They'd ask me worriedly what had happened to me. This disconnect happened on two or three occasions, until I finally figured out that for any scheduled departure, AWC expected me to be in place, on duty, as it were, 30 minutes prior. Anyone arriving 15 minutes before the designated time was a late straggler and in their doghouse. So that's U.S. military discipline for you, always one step ahead and prepped for contingencies.

Q: Did any of the military officers in your class have a deployment to Iraq?

SIDDIQI: I don't recall meeting any students who had actually been deployed there. They all certainly seemed to be very familiar with what was happening in Iraq though.

Q: Okay. I was in National Defense University, at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), which is now called the Eisenhower school, from 2008 to 2009. Many of the military officers there had already served at least one tour of duty and some of them two, in Iraq. They had really extensive knowledge, on the ground, of what was happening in Iraq at that time, the George W. Bush surge, and so on. It sounds like the period you were at the Air War College, it was still a bit early for them to have been deployed.

SIDDIQI: Right, I was at AWC from 2003 to 2004, five years before you were at ICAF. My classmates at AWC were mostly Air Force pilots. They were flying in from other parts of the Middle East, doing their reconnaissance or bombing missions, and then returning immediately back to their bases. Their Iraq deployments were therefore far shorter than Army folks who had boots on the ground. My pilot classmates were vocal about theory/strategy, but they didn't share much about their own prior war activities.

Q: In the classes that you had, you mentioned that there were military officers from other branches. Do you recall their interactions? Because obviously, the Air Force has a

certain set of tools, assumptions, they have their way of doing things. Were there things that you saw that were of interest and value to you?

SIDDIQI: Besides the Air Force and the Army, my classes included officers from the Navy, National Guard, Coast Guard, and Marines. And in addition to warfighters, we had officers specializing in management and logistical support. We even had a Navy chaplain in my seminar who was extremely interesting to talk to. We had good camaraderie in our seminar, but occasionally you'd see the competition among them come out, with someone joking that "obviously" their own service was tougher or smarter or more lethal than the others. One thing I didn't appreciate until I came to AWC, was the extent of built-in overlap. For example, I had always assumed that all U.S. planes belonged to the Air Force. I had no idea the Army had its own planes and pilots, and so did the Navy. And both those services also had integrated air capabilities. I flew once with an AWC group to the Navy base in Norfolk, Virginia. That was eye-opening as well.

Q: Okay, then the only other question I have is, given the interactions you had with the military officers, were there any other networking opportunities you had with them later? Was the AWC experience in any other way valuable later on in your career?

SIDDIQI: Yes, it was. I think in general that any war college experience is valuable, especially for FSO's hoping to serve eventually in a senior State Department position. My AWC experience came into direct play five years later when I served in U.S. Mission Baghdad as Information Officer (IO) from 2009 to 2010. There, I had a lot of direct contact with U.S. military personnel, including their media monitoring and MIST teams. That said, I'm not sure how useful the AWC was to me in terms of my own growth as a leader. The way we lead people and teams inside the State Department is vastly different from how the U.S. military operates. Our civilian culture, the way we plan, strategize, and come to decisions is different. Succeeding as a State Department leader was still something I had to figure out on my own, through trial and error, across several years.

Q: And of course, being a leader in the State Department means you have to be able to lead both civil service and foreign service and there are distinctions between the two.

SIDDIQI: Exactly, and working with the interagency too, which is another challenge.

Q: All right. So it sounds like we're coming to the end of this year at the Air Force War College. Where did you go next?

SIDDIQI: Well, at this point, I wasn't sure which direction to go, career-wise. I now had some Southeast Asia knowledge which I didn't have before, but I didn't know anybody in the State Department's East Asian bureau. I also didn't want to spend a year or two learning a new language before going out to an East Asian post. As luck would have it, a great PD job became available in the South Asia bureau, Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) in New Delhi. Of all the different aspects of public diplomacy, culture and education was probably what I was best at doing. I felt that especially during my earlier tours in Yemen and Morocco. I found it inspiring to try to win hearts and minds, find common ground

through the arts, exchange programs, historic preservation projects, and academic seminars. That said, the CAO India job was going to be a longshot, there were 16 bidders on it, from what I recall. Luckily, I had some key backers in Washington who knew about my past PD work in ECA and NEA. I also kind of fit the profile they needed in summer 2004, someone who could do outreach to India's Muslim communities, where there was a lot of misunderstanding about U.S. policies vis a vis the Islamic world.

I knew that trying to change any Muslim minds was going to be hard, but I was thrilled by the prospect of finally being able to use my Urdu. By the time I joined AWC, I'd completed 20 years in the Foreign Service, but somehow, I still hadn't done South Asia. That all changed with my assignment to New Delhi, where Urdu and Hindi were not required for Mission officers, but where skill in one or the other was widely welcomed. With that in mind, right after I graduated from AWC, I signed up for four weeks of Hindi brush-up training at FSI Washington. By the time I got to post in August, I was FSI test-certified in both Hindi and Urdu. You'll recall I had learned the Hindi script back in my college days, when I was at Columbia. Now, I just needed to pick up an additional 100 or so key vocabulary words, terms and phrases that were commonly used in Hindi and not so much in Urdu. I think I was the only U.S. diplomat with a 4/4 in both Urdu and Hindi.

CAO New Delhi was a dream job, and I ended up doing four years, from 2004 to 2008. With five Assistant CAO's and about 50 locally employed staff, our CAO unit and American Center/library was probably the world's busiest. In addition to directing the Center, the Fulbright Commission, and Muslim outreach, I was the Public Affairs Section (PAS) liaison with our branch public affairs officers at the three U.S. Consulates in Mumbai, Chennai, and Calcutta. I was on the phone with them at least twice a week to make sure we were all in sync. Our ambassador was David Mulford and our Country PAO was Mike Anderson, who I'd worked with in 1994-95, when we were both at USIA.

Q: Now, just as part of the background and context of your Muslim outreach responsibility, roughly how many Muslims are there in India? If my memory serves me right, it's somewhere between 200 and 300 million?

SIDDIQI: Your figure sounds a bit high. When I was there, I think Muslims were about 13% of the national population, so maybe around 130 million. There were more Muslims in India than there were Muslims in Pakistan or Bangladesh, which is kind of ironic given the original reasoning and justification for India's 1947 Partition.

Q: Yeah. And speaking of that, was the Muslim population widely distributed or more in a few of the states?

SIDDIQI: Muslims are spread out across India. In the north, our Embassy focused on the communities living in New Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Our Consulates in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai engaged with Muslim community leaders in eastern, western, and southern states, especially West Bengal, Hyderabad, and Gujarat.

Q: How was the arrival and settlement of your family?

SIDDIQI: It was challenging for my family switching gears suddenly from the U.S. to India, but by our third month we all got into the swim of things. My wife was able to land an excellent Consular Associate job at the Embassy, which she enjoyed very much. For my three children, it was their first exposure to an Urdu/Hindi speaking environment. I was happy to see them pick up a few words and phrases, and to start discovering their South Asian side. The American Embassy School was outstanding, and my eldest son was able to do all four years of his high school there. We lived in an Embassy-leased two-floor villa in Vasant Vihar. Our house wasn't close to the Embassy, or to other American families, but it was convenient for inviting and entertaining Indian contacts.

Q: Okay.

SIDDIQI: Now the other thrill for me personally was visiting the Old Delhi neighborhood of Darya Ganj where my mother and father first met as kids. My father, now retired and around 75, took me around the noisy, narrow alleyways, and pointed out his old elementary school and apartment building. He and I also did an official one-day speaking tour together, taking a train out to his alma mater Aligarh Muslim University, which he hadn't visited since graduating there 50 years earlier. My father was a real hit with the university president and faculty, and we spoke jointly with students, and even signed autographs. His unusual and successful life story resonated with people. If you go online, you can find an interview I did with the U.S. Embassy magazine "SPAN." It includes an iconic 1940 black and white group photo of my father, age 8, sitting with my grandfather at the Red Fort, alongside a dozen senior British officers. You'll recall I mentioned earlier that my grandfather had been among the very first Muslims appointed to the Indian Civil Service (ICS) during British Raj days. By all accounts, he was a remarkable guy. Unfortunately, he died young, just 6 years after that photo was taken.

Q: You mentioned you had five direct reports who were foreign service officers. Roughly how big was your unit in the Public Affairs Section (PAS), including local employees?

SIDDIQI: So, as the Embassy's Counselor for Cultural Affairs, I was the number three in the Public Affairs Section, after the PAO and the Deputy PAO. I was also the chairman of the binational Fulbright Commission, also known as the U.S. Educational Foundation in India (USEFI). The five FSOs who worked for me at the American Center were a great group, a mix of second tour officers and more experienced Public Diplomacy (PD) officers. They helped me implement U.S. speaker programs, cultural/arts programs, ECA-sponsored exchanges, library operations, alumni relations, and outreach to new audiences, including Muslim outreach. My staff and I also coordinated daily in our building with SPAN magazine staff, who reported to the PAS Information Officer (IO) at the Embassy, and the Regional English Language Officer (RELO) and regional Information Resource Officer (IRO) who reported directly to the PAO and their bureaus in Washington. We had top-notch Locally Employed (LE) CAO staff, about 50 in total.

The American Center and our public library were always abuzz with things going on. You'd walk out of our American Center and it would feel like Times Square in terms of the noise levels and hustle and bustle. Our downtown location was central to our success.

Q: Had you begun social website programming?

SIDDIQI: Not much, it was too early for social media. We had just started using online platforms and testing out our web chat capability. We didn't get WiFi in our downstairs public library until my last year in India, in 2008. What we excelled in was not social media, but what USIA's first director Edward R. Murrow used to call "covering the last three feet," meaning interacting face to face with contacts and audiences. The daily foot traffic inside our Center and library was unbelievable, and our Centers in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai were similarly hugely popular. At the same time, we were very conscious that we needed to have a PD footprint outside the capital region. We'd team up with USEFI Fulbright and student advising staff and the RELO to do outreach programs in second tier cities. We also organized some very effective Road Shows with Embassy colleagues, in state capitals like Lucknow, Jaipur, and Chandigarh. With Embassy and USAID officers as speakers, we were able to advance our networking on cross-cutting issues like trade, science and technology, public health, and environmental protection.

My role during these Road Shows, besides doing local media interviews, was to go call on the heads of Islamic "madrassas" and speak to their students. These schools were among India's poorest. We did U.S. book donations to boost their morale and offer some hope. Answering their questions in Urdu, I pushed back against complaints that the U.S. was at war with Muslims. I pointed out to madrassa leaders that my visit to them showed that the U.S. embassy cared about their education and opinion. I'm not sure how many hearts and minds we ultimately changed through this kind of in-person outreach, but we were always warmly welcomed and I'm sure they remembered we made the extra effort.

Q: Most Muslims in India are Sunni?

SIDDIQI: Both Sunni and Shia Islam have shaped Indian history for centuries. The Sunnis far outnumber the Shia, but I don't know by how much. That's something our Political officers at the Embassy tracked more closely than I did. Among North India's Sunni Muslim leaders, I know there were theological splits. When we invited Muslim contacts to our events though, like iftars during Ramadan, you couldn't tell at all who was Sunni and who was Shia. They only differed in how open they were to dialogue.

Q: Given the frictions and so on, did you have to go out and sort of correct total falsehoods about the U.S., you know, conspiracy theories and so on?

SIDDIQI: Yeah. What I most often heard was their belief that Saddam was a hero and that the U.S. was in Iraq only for its oil. They viewed the Global War on Terror as an excuse to attack and occupy Muslim countries. There were even some mullahs and imams who were still denying that our U.S. astronauts ever landed on the moon.

Beyond my supplying them with correct information from Washington, I think what worked was my own credibility as a senior Embassy officer who was Muslim, spoke Urdu, and understood their concerns. That kind of challenged their preconceptions.

Q: Now, the other thing is, as you're working, were the approaches changing? I asked you about social media, and that was a little early, but were there other aspects of the way you conducted programs, or the kinds of programs that were changing?

SIDDIQI: So, at this time, the State Department was investing more and more resources into what we called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs. These ranged from small public diplomacy grants that empowered moderate democratic voices, to youth exchanges and English training for Muslim teenagers, to the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) which funded Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Pashto training and travel to the region for American university students. NSLI was administered through our Fulbright Commission, where I was the chair, and was very good at creating channels of communication between young Americans and Indian Muslim communities. So was our countrywide ACCESS English program, an ECA bureau sponsored English teaching program which my office launched in India in cooperation with the Regional English Language Officer (RELO), and other implementing partners. ACCESS teachers were locally based Indian nationals, but many had U.S. experience, and ECA gave them additional training and resources as necessary.

ECA's most ambitious post-9/11 initiative to counter violent extremism was the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study program, KL-YES. That program enabled us to send 20-25 boys and girls every year, to study for a year at an American high school. These were kids who largely came from poor neighborhoods, madrassas, and over-crowded, under-funded public schools. Ironically, convincing Indian parents that KL-YES was a good thing wasn't an easy slam dunk when it came to persuading parents. Many of them were initially uneasy about sending their children to the U.S. for a whole year. My staff and I would engage Muslim families and school officials in person to reassure them. My wife also spoke to the parents, as a former AFS exchange student herself, from Tunisia. Her cheerful stories from her one year as a high school senior in Wisconsin helped persuade many of them.

My senior Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer Robin Diallo and senior Public Affairs specialist Mandeep Kaur were instrumental in getting KL-YES started in India. Partnering with AFS, the Mission, Ministry and state officials, and the ECA bureau, we sent about 20 Indian kids to the U.S. that first year, in 2006. In terms of recruitment strategy and getting Indian government cooperation, we learned quickly that we couldn't advertise KL-YES as a strictly Muslim outreach program, that it had to be, in principle and in practice, open to all religious and ethnic groups. That meant we had to sprinkle in a few non-Muslim, economically disadvantaged kids, which we had no problem with. The first and second years of the exchange program went very well. In year 3, we had an unexpected public relations crisis pop up. It involved one of the teenage girls we sent to the U.S. from Mumbai. I don't recall if she was Hindu or Muslim or Christian, but she had a lawyer uncle in Mumbai who she wrote to while she was in the U.S., and she

complained to him that her American host family was giving her household chores to do, and making her "feel like a maid." Instead of following up with AFS, ECA, or my staff, the uncle lawyer chose to go directly to the Indian press, and it caused a bit of a media stir. The truth and reality is, of course, that all U.S. exchange students are expected to pitch in with household chores once in a while. Helping with the laundry or the trash is part of growing up and shouldn't be a big deal, but the girl's complaint touched a nerve with Indian media. One local press article speculated that our program was a way to get cheap labor. ECA moved quickly to fix the problem from their end, placing the girl with a different host family, and convincing her to continue on with her U.S. program rather than return home. Meanwhile in New Delhi, I had the lawyer and a couple of other concerned family members over to my house to emphasize the Embassy's hope for a speedy and fair resolution. We talked about American culture and shared family values, and we reassured them that their niece was in good hands and would always be treated with dignity. By the end of the meeting, the lawyer agreed to withdraw his complaint.

Q: Lovely. Was KL-YES a limited period program, or was it expected to be continued?

SIDDIQI: It's been very popular in India and pretty much in all the countries that participate in it. I think ECA's expectation was initially that it would have to be phased out after a certain time, but overseas demand for KL-YES just kept increasing year after year. It's a win for us as well, in terms of bringing greater diversity to our school campuses and small towns. KL-YES is still being funded today, and it's going strong.

Q: For exchange programs like Fulbright and perhaps even YES, were you permitted to try to get private donations to expand them? In other words, public-private partnerships?

SIDDIQI: KL-YES was fully State Department-funded. As for Fulbright, every country was different, but in general, the program was a mix of State Department and host government financing. During my tenure as CAO and Board chair for USEFI, we saw a need for private sector donations and began talking to American company representatives based in India about possibly contributing to Fulbright. A few companies did donate funds for partial scholarships, usually in business administration or the field they were in. I think USEFI was successful with a few big corporations like Boeing and Microsoft.

Our much larger higher education issue had to do with the Indian government not putting any money into Fulbright. The original 1950 agreement establishing USEFI stipulated annual U.S. government funding and "funding from other sources," but it didn't obligate the Government of India to put any money in. This had become a sore point with Washington and our ambassador who viewed India as a rising power and equal strategic partner on many issues. It didn't seem fair that for 50 plus years we were paying for American scholars to come to India and we were also paying for Indian scholars to come to the U.S. When we tabled the idea with the Indian members of my Board, they said the bilateral agreement would have to be amended, we couldn't just expect the Indian government to start contributing under the vague "funding from other sources" clause. That kind of triggered a chain reaction of events and negotiations that led to a new bilateral Fulbright agreement signed in New Delhi in 2008. Reflecting the new

co-funding arrangement, USEFI's name was changed to the U.S.-India Educational Foundation (USIEF) and its annual scholarships were renamed Fulbright-Nehru. With the addition of Indian government funding for the first time, and increases in private funding from U.S. corporate donors, Fulbright India's budget more than doubled in 2008.

Another persistent challenge our Commission faced was the inordinate amount of time India's bureaucracy used to take to review and approve U.S. research scholar proposals. We never were quite sure whether the Fulbright visa delays were politically motivated against our people specifically, or just a case of a large backlog and short staffing within the Ministry, but the months and months of waiting led a lot of our U.S. Fulbrighters to give up and go to other countries instead. That was another key reason we pushed on getting equal partnership and greater responsiveness through a new bilateral agreement.

Q: Now, another tool being used at that time in other parts of the world was the American Corner. These were typically locations where local libraries or community centers would give you some space if you provided them with some basic computer workstations. Did you use that tool at all while you were there?

SIDDIQI: We had a very modest American Corner program in India while I was there. There were seven or eight Corners, I think, in total around the country. There were a couple of reasons we didn't have more. One was because our four huge American Centers in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, under the direct supervision of U.S. public diplomacy officers, were already doing an incredible job engaging the public. Secondly, American Spaces were administered by the regional Information Resource Officer (IRO) and her staff, and they weren't often able to travel to second-tier cities to check on the Corners. I visited the Corner closest to New Delhi once, the one located inside the Chandigarh state library, and I recall their staff saying they were having a tough time getting clients to come in and use the place. But remember, that was almost 20 years ago. The American Spaces program now is greatly improved and expanded.

Q: You mentioned that among the speakers you programmed were Indian citizens who had been to the U.S. or had a broad knowledge of the U.S. Did you work with other influencers in Indian society who were willing to work with you on cultural aspects, artists or celebrities, that kind of thing?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, we had many local partners who knew the U.S. well and were influential in education, the arts, and civil society. We had ties, for example, with the American Institute of Indian Studies, AIIS, which regularly brought in American scholars to speak and do research. We had Indian Fulbright alumni who were back in country and teaching at major Indian universities. They would host events like book launches and seminars where they'd invite me and other Mission officers as guest speakers. One of our USEFI board members was U.S. dancer and choreographer Sharon Lowen, who opened a lot of doors for us with different cultural societies. We partnered with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), the India Habitat Centre, and Indian Rotary Club members.

Q: Given how large your section was and the fact that you received leadership training right before India, were there leadership challenges? How did you overcome them?

SIDDIQI: Well, I was blessed to have a very strong staff in New Delhi. One of my ACAO's is now a Deputy Assistant Secretary and two others are DCM's. Mission India historically has attracted ambitious young officers. I'd like to think I played a role in empowering my ACAO colleagues, giving them advice and space to grow and succeed. That said, I had my hands full in terms of leading the Fulbright Commission, where there was a lot of staff and Board member turnover, and there were large capital improvement projects that needed to get done. Within my own Locally Employed (LE) cultural affairs staff, there were a few Hindu employees who it took me a few weeks to win over because they wrongly assumed I wouldn't be fair to them. I also had to deal with hard-charging PD officers in our three U.S. Consulates who often had program preferences and outreach approaches that were not fully in sync with what we were doing in New Delhi. There was also a big tug of war over which Consulate got how many International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) grants any given year. So these were all leadership challenges that I inherited and grappled with. One of the joint program ideas that my branch PAO in Kolkata and I did agree on and pulled off successfully involved Muslim IVLP alumni. It was a brainstorming conference in English, Urdu and Bengali on the global war on terror and what Indian Muslim clerics could do to counter disinformation.

Q: Yeah, interesting.

SIDDIQI: We wanted to do something substantive with Muslim opinion leaders, beyond just inviting them every Ramadan to an Embassy or Consulate-sponsored iftar. Those kinds of goodwill events were okay in bringing a few trusted people together, but they didn't get at core issues that were thwarting U.S.-Muslim understanding. We decided to organize an IVLP alumni conference for the dozens of Muslim educational and religious leaders who had traveled to the U.S. and knew our culture and educational system. They mostly all were opposed to U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they were at the same time pro-tolerance and anti-extremist. There's a good piece in the September 2006 issue of State magazine about what we achieved at that trust-building, people-to-people event. Several U.S. public diplomacy and political officers from Mission India flew down for the conference and participated. My Urdu got a real workout! We had two days of frank and open conversations, and I think everyone came out of that conference with a better appreciation for shared values and the bilateral imperative to advance security and peace, develop Muslim youth and counter violent extremism. I think our IVLP alumni came out of that conference with a lot more things to think about and renewed energy to resolve their community's problems. We also generated some good press coverage.

Q: During your time there, did you have to do a lot of work in defending Iraq policy?

SIDDIQI: Not a lot, since the Muslims I mostly dealt with were moderate, dispassionate academics who understood world politics. The Indian government and public were in general quite supportive of our Iraq and Afghanistan policy. They were as interested in crushing Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as we were, and they were dealing with Muslim

militants themselves on their border with Pakistan and in Kashmir. My difficult moments came when I engaged on and off the record with Urdu-language media. My goal was to get these angry editors and journalists to re-think their opposition toward us and publish our viewpoint. I thought that I could make some headway with them, but I found them very set in their opinions about the United States, and not very open to give and take.

Q: Did you, in that regard, ever consider having an Iraqi speaker?

SIDDIQI: No, that never came up. That's an interesting idea though. Okay. I don't think I met very many Arabs or Iraqis when I was there. But, you know, our whole speaker program worldwide is based on the premise that our messaging to foreign audiences needs to come from Americans. Our speakers, in other words, need to be American subject matter experts with depth and credibility, who can address these regional topics in a convincing way, win a few hearts and minds. Theoretically, we could have brought in an Iraqi American speaker, but no one like that was offered to us by Washington.

Q: Speaking of influencing hearts and minds, what was the evaluation, how did they evaluate you? And were you satisfied with the evaluations?

SIDDIQI: Are you talking about my American supervisors?

Q: Yeah, yeah. In other words, were they satisfied with the amount of initiative you took, in the way you branched out and used different tools and sort of advanced the embassy's ability to reach out to all of the different audiences that they wanted you to get?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, I got mixed reviews on that. In my first two years, I was out of the office a lot, either speaking at events, developing new contacts, or visiting our branch posts in India. I was nominated, in 2005 and 2006, for the State Department’s Linguist of the Year award. I didn’t win, but it was nice to get some credit for my use of Urdu and Hindi to post. During my third and fourth year in India, in 2007 and 2008, I got pulled into the whole drive of getting Indian government cooperation on Fulbright, and supporting front office priorities and Washington visitors, so I had much less time to travel and develop new contacts, the aspects of public diplomacy that I was good at and enjoyed.

Q: Right, right. Are there any other things about your posting there that I haven't asked you about?

SIDDIQI: Well, one of my interesting 2005 trips to Jammu, the state next to Kashmir. It was a no-go zone, but I was able to get a green light from the RSO. Jammu’s airport had armored personnel carriers and barbed wire fencing, and we had police escorts everywhere, as well as overnight protection at our hotel. In addition to city officials, I met with professors and students at the University of Jammu, and got their OK to participate in an ECA-sponsored on-line course that was going to connect them virtually to American professors at the University of Tennessee and students/classrooms in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The basic goal was friendly three-way dialogue/discussion, without any official U.S. speaker or moderator, the engagement would be purely

academic. So we were able to launch that project; all three sides said the discussions and classes went well.

Q: Sweet. What were your career considerations about where you were going to go next?

SIDDIQI: I was bidding on a lot of different jobs overseas. Kind of out of the blue, and at the last minute, an immediate opening popped up in Mission Paris, for the Information Officer (IO) position. I wasn't sure I had the credentials and background for it, but my wife, who was fluent in French, convinced me to bid anyway. She said, "You already have French, and this may be our one and only chance to get Europe. Go ahead and try for it, you never know, they might take you." As luck would have it, the PAO in Paris at that time was Jim Bullock, my former boss in Morocco. He helped me get the handshake.

Q: Did they give you any French brush up or were they satisfied with 3-3?

SIDDIQI: No brush up, I just retested at FSI to show that I was still a 3/3 level in French. We did a straight transfer from New Delhi to Paris, via home leave, in summer 2008.

Q: Well then, I recommend we pause here. If you recall other things about India, we can always go back there before we follow you into Paris.

SIDDIQI: Just one thing before I forget. One of the big draws we had at the American Center in New Delhi was Sunita "Sunny" Williams, the Indian American astronaut. We heard that she was in town and asked her to do a talk for young people, and to show them video clips from her NASA mission, if she happened to have any. She agreed, and it turned out to be one of our best science events. Her NASA video, showing her and other crew members floating inside the U.S. space shuttle, really got our audience revved up. I didn't have any prepared remarks, so I kind of winged it. I compared Sunita to the main character in a famous Bollywood movie I knew about, where the main character, an Indian-born NASA engineer, decides to leave the comfort of his U.S. job to help bring water and solar energy to his village in India. I made the cultural parallel as an aside, but the next day my comparison of Sunita to actor Shahrukh Khan became a media headline. Without even trying to, we helped turn Sunita Williams into a cultural icon and rock star.

Q: Beautiful, right, okay, that's a wonderful story.

SIDDIQI: OK, let's break here then.

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Q: Alright, today is April 2nd, 2024. We're resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, you were still in India up to 2008, if I recall.

SIDDIQI: Correct.

Q: Alright, so let's go back there. I think you had a few other things you wanted to mention.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, I didn't get a chance, last time, to talk about our big Jazz Ambassadors program featuring the great Herbie Hancock. Herbie came for about four days to India in January 2005. He brought with him the equally famous Al Jarreau, as well as Ravi Coltrane, the late great John Coltrane's son, who you might remember was named after Ravi Shankar. That concert program was a public-private partnership between our Public Affairs office, the State Department, Black Entertainment Television (BET), the Thelonious Monk Institute of Music, and several local co-sponsors. While in New Delhi, Herbie did a press conference at the PAO's house, a public concert, and a jazz workshop.

Q: Was the concert limited to New Delhi? Did they travel?

SIDDIQI: The group did a concert and a workshop in Mumbai right before they came to New Delhi. I wasn't there, but I think the theme was jazz education. In New Delhi, they spoke more about Martin Luther King Day, black history, and HIV/AIDS awareness.

Q: Were there local musicians who also played with them? Was that part of the draw?

SIDDIQI: They jammed with Ravi Shankar, who was close to 75 years old by then, and his daughter Anushka, who's an accomplished sitar player in her own right. That happened during the group's visit to Ravi Shankar's music center, which was not very far from our Embassy. At their public concert, there were a handful of other New Delhi-based musicians who played right before Herbie came on stage. We had a heck of a time getting invitations and passes distributed in time to the thousands who wanted to attend.

Speaking of big media splashes, did I mention yet what we did to amplify U.S. Election Day 2004? My staff had a great, out of the box idea that worked really well in attracting journalists to the American Center, and getting Indian young people excited about the election returns that were coming in. The RSO almost fainted when we first told him about the idea, but he and the front office allowed us to proceed with it, maybe they agreed out of morbid curiosity to see how it would go. Basically, we hired an elephant and a mule to make a cameo appearance. The service we partnered with used a small elephant that lived about 10-15 miles away, on the other side of the Jumna River. It took the poor little elephant all night to walk from where he was to our downtown facility, and to reach there before our morning guests arrived. The mule didn't have to walk nearly as far. Both Democratic and Republican mascots had colorful red, white and blue chalk markings, and they were OK with everyone taking photos and petting them. My staff and I got interviewed on live TV and radio, talking about the American elections and democracy, and of course we all had to field a question about the two adorable mascots.

Q: Yeah, that's an extraordinary way to bring more attention to a very important American phenomenon. At least back then there was a peaceful transfer of power. It was the same administration, with Bush getting re-elected, but people understood the nature

of the election and how it worked. You used this unusual tool, this unusual public diplomacy tool to get out some messaging on democracy, if I understand it right.

SIDDIQI: We figured we needed to do something different and festive to compete with other regional and international news, something people could easily connect with.

Another wonderful platform we had at the American Center was SPAN magazine. I think SPAN was launched by the Embassy sometime in the 1950's and it's still published every two months in English, Hindi and Urdu. The magazine's American editor worked just a few doors from mine, and she was happy to occasionally include human interest articles written by our Public Diplomacy (PD) officers. These were typically short pieces that didn't require a lot of time, research or internal clearances. One of the articles I wrote for the May/June 2005 issue was a tongue in cheek comparison of American baseball and Indian cricket, sort of like Dave Barry or Art Buchwald in style. There was a later 2006 piece on Indian American mixed marriages that SPAN asked one of my ACAO's to write, again very light, and all in good fun. At my going away party, my staff gifted me with a framed collage of SPAN covers and articles that I had had input in, during my four years. I was really touched by that, and I couldn't have imagined a better souvenir!

Oh, and one more thing that I should probably mention, before we finish talking about India, was the very interesting one week official trip that I took to Pakistan. It happened not because I was CAO New Delhi, but in my capacity as Board chair for USEFI. In April 2006, I got invited by the Fulbright office in Islamabad to participate in a regional alumni conference commemorating 50 years of the worldwide Humphrey Fellowship exchange program. The academic gathering turned out to be a very successful Indo-Pak bridge-building event, and the speakers included ECA officials from Washington, five Fulbright Country Directors from South Asia, and several Indian Humphrey alumni who came with me on the plane from New Delhi. After the three-day conference ended, I got unexpectedly roped into staying five extra days in Pakistan to help out Consulate staffs in Lahore and Karachi with their PD outreach. In both those cities. I spoke in Urdu to students, faculty, think tanks and media. I think I was a bit of a novelty for audiences, they'd never heard of a Pakistan-born American diplomat before. And the fact that I was posted to India probably threw them for another loop, I suppose. The toughest part of doing outreach in Karachi was the security environment. There were very few roads and neighborhoods at that time that were considered safe enough for American vehicles. It was a grim reality that my PD and other Consulate colleagues in Karachi faced daily.

A few weeks after I got back to New Delhi, another regional opportunity popped up for me, this time in Bangladesh. There was an urgent need to fill in for the PAO; he was overdue for home leave and had no deputy or other back-up. The SCA bureau was looking for a volunteer to be Acting PAO Dhaka, and I raised my hand. It was only for four weeks, and it was a chance to see a country that I'd never been to. My Temporary Duty (TDY) assignment to Bangladesh was a delight, despite all the rain and the traffic jams. The American Center/library staff in Dhaka were top-notch and knew their stuff.

Q: Just one quick question about communication. Is Urdu spoken at all in Bangladesh or is it all Bengali?

SIDDIQI: It's all Bengali, plus English, of course. I ran into a few older Bengalis who knew Urdu, since they grew up in the period when Dhaka was the capital of East Pakistan. One Bengali contact floored me when she mentioned that she studied at St. Jude's in Karachi in the late 1960's, the same school that I attended in 1971-72. Her favorite teachers from way back then turned out to be my favorites as well. Small world!

Q: Right. Were you, at the later stages of your time in Delhi, talking to anyone about where you were going next?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, well, like I mentioned towards the end of our last interview session, I was unsure which direction to go in next, after three years as FSI Tunis director, a year of war college and then four years of CAO work in India. I tried for a few DCM and Consul General jobs in different regions, but those bids didn't get anywhere. Then there was a job in North Africa that NEA offered to me, to manage their Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) branch office. It had a lot of budget and grant responsibility, and would have given me some good, hands-on experience carrying out strategic civil society-building projects. My first instinct was to accept the handshake offer, but a few days later, I turned it down. It would have meant going back to Tunis and doing another three years there, which wouldn't have looked great on my resume. Also, MEPI managers themselves weren't sure how long their program and funding would last, given it was a George Bush initiative and we'd soon have a new president taking over. So, instead of becoming MEPI director in Tunis, I got to be Information Officer (IO) in Paris.

A few weeks after I got paneled for Paris, and as I was still wrapping up and packing out of New Delhi, a second unexpected thing happened. An email came in from the NEA Executive Office. It included a list of three summer 2009 openings in Baghdad for which they were seeking bidders with 3/3 Arabic. They asked whether I'd be willing to bid on any of them. It seemed to be just a friendly inquiry, but was it actually an offer I couldn't refuse? That, I wasn't so sure about! I started asking myself, how do I hold on to my upcoming Paris assignment and still not tick off NEA, which had been my benefactor and "mother" bureau for most of my Foreign Service career? Should I tell NEA no, that I'm committed to Paris for three years and hope they'll just move on to someone else? Or start Paris as planned, do a year as IO there, then do Baghdad for a year, and then come back to Paris in my final year 3? I asked my future DCM in Paris what he thought about that latter idea. He was taken aback, and reluctant to say yes. I'm sure the last thing he wanted was another prolonged staffing gap in the IO position. It was a key position in terms of Public Affairs Section support to the Ambassador and his outreach activities.

Q: Was your positive consideration for Paris based on the notion that you would sort of be part of their effort to reach out to the large Muslim community in France?

SIDDIQI: I think that may have been a part of their thinking. Both the PAO and CAO posted to Paris at that time knew Arabic and had NEA experience. With the millions of

Muslims living in France, the community's opinion about the U.S. and our policies and values mattered. France 24 TV had an Arabic channel that was influential and watched widely both inside and outside France, and they did a short live interview of me once, in Arabic. The PAO had great relations with France 24 and spoke on their channel as well. The CAO, Lora Berg was, like Jim and I, a former USIA North Africa hand; and she did the most Muslim outreach. She knew a lot of the French Muslim groups, as well as key individuals. In contrast, I was more involved with supporting the front office, amplifying the U.S. elections, and preparing for President Obama's visit to Strasbourg for a NATO summit. We also had several other VIP visitors that I had to provide press support to.

Q: Let's go back a second to your consideration of Iraq.

SIDDIQI: Right, so it turned out it was quite common in those days for officers posted to Europe to be recruited or to volunteer for service in Iraq and Afghanistan. In my case, the Mission, EUR, NEA, and Human Resources (HR) worked out an agreement whereby I'd go and serve in Baghdad from July 2009 to July 2010, and someone new would be brought in immediately to backfill my position in Paris. The good news for me was that my wife could continue working at Mission Paris the entire time I was in Iraq, and my children could continue attending the American School of Paris. The bad news was I'd have to curtail IO Paris by a year, and to officially depart France in 2010 instead of 2011.

Q: Now in that one year in Iraq, what were the key things that you did?

SIDDIQI: Well, everything I did, that all of us did at Mission Iraq, tied in, in some way, with our collectively advancing U.S. military and strategic goals. I hadn't seen so many Americans in uniform since my days at the Air War College. Our diplomatic work was 24/7 high pressure, and we were under constant threat of rocket attacks. As the Information Officer (IO), I was the Public Affairs Section's number three, under the Country PAO and the Embassy Spokesman. Then we had several Assistant press officers who handled U.S. and Western media relations and inquiries. My job was handling the Iraqi media, as well as regional pan-Arab media. We produced daily media reaction reports for the State Department, the Mission, and Country Team and the inter-agency. I also helped get Iraqi journalists the training they needed to become more professional and less prone to publishing disinformation. Within my Arabic Media Unit, I supervised an Assistant Information Officer (AIO), a contract Program Assistant, and eight translators, almost all of whom were Egyptian and Syrian. During my time, we added an Iraqi Kurd translator to our unit, and he was great in helping us reach Kurdish-language media.

Q: Now, speaking of U.S. military press people, were we still embedding U.S. journalists with the military? Did you have anything to do with that?

SIDDIQI: There was embedding taking place, but those were arranged through the U.S. military, I had no personal involvement with those. Our Public Affairs Section was more involved in setting up background briefings at the Embassy, for Western journalists.

Q: All right. As information officer, did you have immediate connections with some of the Iraqi media? Were you out there talking to them?

SIDDIQI: Well, in terms of going on the record with the Iraqi media, it was normally just Ambassador Chris Hill who did so. We had a small TV studio inside the embassy which the Ambassador frequently used to tape public statements and do English language interviews with Baghdad-based Iraqi and pan-Arab media. These would typically be reporters that we in my section knew would not pose hostile questions or purposely mislead the public about U.S. policies. My staff would later add the necessary Arabic translation and subtitling. The format and ground rules worked well for both sides and resulted in good coverage. In terms of my own contact work with Arab journalists, I'd meet them at the Rasheed hotel, if they couldn't make it to the Embassy. The Rasheed was in the Green Zone and had excellent security. With Embassy RSO support, I also went a couple of times to local TV stations to call on their managers and editors.

Q: Was the outreach or the connections that you had in Iraq different between the Sunni and the Shia?

SIDDIQI: No, we didn't distinguish between the two groups in our dealings and outreach. The Iraqi president at the time was Shia and so was his Spokesperson. The popular Al-Sharqiya TV channel was headed by a Sunni. We knew we had to get out our information to both groups. I think demographically the Shia-Sunni split was 55 to 45.

Q: Any Kurds?

SIDDIQI: We dealt with a few Kurds in Baghdad, but not many. We only had one Iraqi Kurd on my team who could do Kurdish translation and outreach. Okay. In the few conversations I had with Kurds, they were very easy going and friendly.

Q: Then one other group is the other foreign press, the European press, other Middle East. Was there much contact with them?

SIDDIQI: There was some contact with those groups as well. We invited regional journalists from Al-Jazeera and Al-Hurra to our TV studio to interview the Ambassador. We had the Voice of America, we had BBC, Reuters, AFP in Baghdad, those were the key European and international outlets that were always asking us for information or clarification about Washington statements and policies. We'd include them in our press conferences with U.S. officials, such as when Senators McCain, Graham and Lieberman came through. The United Nations folks were also active in reaching out to Iraqi and regional media. They once invited me, on International Press Freedom Day, to share my U.S. Embassy statement, in Arabic. I had to speak into 10 microphones at once, so I guess it was a big deal for the Iraqis. What was funny was I got introduced up to the podium as the UNESCO representative. My statement cited the U.S. and the embassy several times, so the media I'm sure figured out who I was. But I thought it was funny.

Q: But yeah, that's not actually that unusual in large situations like that. That you know, they mess up the list and you know, you could have been announced as anybody besides.

SIDDIQI: Right. Yeah. Well, I'm just happy no one threw a shoe at me!

Q: Now as the main IO in the embassy, were you in contact, did the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) have any of their own IOs or press people?

SIDDIQI: Well, they all had Public Diplomacy officers like me assigned to their individual PRT. They all wanted me to fly out and visit them, but it was hard for anyone in our Embassy to go on those U.S. military-assisted trips to PRT's. There were so many logistics, costs and contingencies involved, not to mention the danger. I did manage to get to PRT Tikrit for two days. Tikrit was about a hundred miles north of Baghdad. And you may recall that was the hometown of Saddam Hussein.

Q: Sure.

SIDDIQI: Tikrit had a very active PRT there and a very brilliant and hard-working officer in charge of Public Affairs named Brett Bruen. He and I visited a couple of libraries to donate U.S. books, and that was one of the few chances I got to meet some average Iraqis, PRT academic and NGO contacts who had no background or interest in political debates. I was relieved to have that kind of normal people-to-people interaction, to the extent that anything in Iraq in those days could be called normal. Brett quit the Foreign Service soon afterwards and became an influential Washington-based consultant.

Q: Were there any programs that specifically targeted women journalists or empowering women journalists?

SIDDIQI: I think we may have sent a woman journalist or two on exchange programs to the U.S., but I don't really remember very many women journalists coming to the embassy to talk to us. It's a very male dominated field. And I think maybe that's related to the danger involved in just going to any place in Iraq and risking your life to cover something. Because of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, among other groups hostile to women's empowerment, I'm sure a lot of women felt they had targets on their back and that it wouldn't be safe for them to be seen with Westerners. I'm sure there were some brave Iraqi women who were reporters, I just didn't come across any of them.

Q: Okay all right, so you do your year there in Baghdad. You're now also done with Paris. What's going on with your next assignment?

SIDDIQI: I spoke to some of my friends in the Senior Foreign Service and asked them what I needed to do to finally cross the senior threshold. They thought I should definitely do a State Department tour, since the last time I was in Washington, I was with USIA. They said that you really have to prove yourself and spend time in State Department bureaucracy to show that you can be a senior leader. So, I decided, okay, I've got to focus on Washington now. I bid on jobs in a few different bureaus and ended up with a very

good management position in the Office of International Information Programs, IIP. It was essentially a return to the same bureau where I worked for USIA back in 1993-94.

Q: Yeah.

SIDDIQI: So, my IIP job from 2009 to 2010 was Office Director for the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and South Asia. Looking back now, I think that was the biggest job I ever had in Washington. I was there at a critical time, during the Arab Spring, when a wave of protests swept through parts of the Middle East and some long-ruling dictators got overthrown. My content producers, translators, regional librarians, and webmasters were getting urgent requests almost every day for U.S. policy information and official reactions to events in the region. It was a non-stop rush on our part to supply U.S. Missions with the informational tools they needed to support emerging democracy movements in hotspots like Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen.

I'm not sure I was very effective in the job, at least in the beginning. I remember staying late every day, feeling dissatisfied, overwhelmed and isolated. Part of it was because I found State's bureaucracy hard to navigate, with things not very clear on who did what. Part of it was the fact that my superiors were on a different floor and had no time to share what they were working on, or outline what I needed to focus on. Things got so busy and pressure-cooked that I didn't even have time to attend IIP policy meetings, or schedule a short trip to Central Asia, the one sub-region in my portfolio that I had never been to.

I had about 30 specialists on my staff who were mostly either Civil Service or on contract, doing things like English content production, Arabic and Farsi translations, and website maintenance. I also was the reviewing officer for several Information Resource Officers (IRO's) based overseas. I was with my writers/webmasters/translators on one floor, and my IIP superiors were on another. And then we had program officers on different floors planning U.S. speakers, and new videos and publications on their own. We were all in our own silos. One silver lining to all this was that the 2011 Selection Board recognized my work at IIP and promoted me into the Senior Foreign Service.

As for IIP, things became even more confusing in summer 2011. After weeks of task force meetings, they decided to break up large geographic offices like mine, and instead create smaller "thematic" offices that addressed specific worldwide U.S. foreign policy goals. I ended up on a different floor with a different title, and I went from managing a large budget and dozens of people to moving into a small cubicle with a staff of none. I was finally on the same floor as IIP leadership, but they had me working on budgets, results reports and strategic plans. I couldn't get out of there fast enough!

Q: Yeah, just one quick comment here. My very last year, 2012 to 2013 in the Foreign Service, before I retired, I was also in IIP. It was during yet another reorganization, I was also a supervisor of only civil servants. And the impression that I got was, IIP was the place where they threw everyone from USIA who they basically could not figure out what to do with, because the social media platforms were changing so rapidly and the inability

of the State Department to keep up in terms of outward messaging and sending experts out. Also, my office dealt with funding American corners and the instructions on how to build and maintain American corners were being developed and sent out. The various pieces of that office did not know each other until they'd been just literally thrown together. And it became difficult to figure out even how they all integrated. And eventually, IIP would become completely absorbed by the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, the spokesman of the Department, because ultimately the Department could not find a way to integrate all these different pieces in an effective way. I mention all that only because of the reorganization you mentioned, and how difficult it became for you or anyone else to manage this changing bureau that was looking for a mission.

SIDDIQI: Right, that's all very accurate and true. And so, you witnessed that yourself, just a couple of years after I left IIP. There was an institutional expectation that everyone from USIA and the public diplomacy world would just adapt, train on the job, and roll with the punches. When I started my Office Director job, I had almost no knowledge about data analytics, websites and social media platforms, and yet I was expected to manage Civil Servants who were years ahead of me on that score. What really alarmed me though was how public diplomacy was being increasingly regarded as a "tool" to advance policy rather than a platform for two-way dialogue. State's whole approach became delivering one-way messages, the more per hour the better, with little or no attention paid to listening and adjusting to what non-Americans were saying. We were collecting raw data on audience reach, for example, by measuring how many tweets we sent out or how many "likes" our Facebook posts got, but no one in IIP was responding to the online comments that were coming back to us. My four years in India, followed by the year in Paris and then the year in Iraq hardly prepared me for new, technological priorities. At IIP, everyone was talking metrics and social media strategy while I was just starting to figure out Twitter and Hootsuite. I did pick up some pointers and insights from colleagues, but citing analytics and talking "tech-speak" did not come naturally to me. At IIP strategy meetings, the few that I was invited to, I felt like an out of place dinosaur.

Q: Sure. There's just one other aspect of what was going on while you were in IIP during that period, 2010 and so on. The new undersecretary for public affairs and public diplomacy, when she came in with the Obama administration, decided to change the way all kinds of programs were evaluated, new forms, new formats, and also to eventually make them all available all around the world so that various different public diplomacy officers could see what kinds of programs were effective, how they were effective, and so on. Did that, did you become involved in that at all?

SIDDIQI: I was involved in the sense that I was one of a handful of IIP office directors being asked to implement the new approach. Both the Undersecretary and her IIP chief were former Discovery Channel executives and felt that public diplomacy could be run like a corporate marketing department. I got to meet some of the contractors who were brought in to design data collection systems that would work for Missions overseas as well as for IIP. I know the PAOs and the PD staff in the field were not very excited about the new methods and tools. They felt burdened by the extra work they had to do in terms of canvassing their audiences and collecting their comments on different programs and

then putting it into a database and then reporting that to Washington every week or two week. They had to start using a new Mission Activity Tracker, called MAT for short, which was okay as a concept but very time-consuming. And then not all the officers were trained in using MAT software. So, it fell on the ones who were IT savvy at each post to do the reporting, but they weren't the ones who were physically at the PD event or who knew how it addressed a specific Mission goal. So, MAT became a numbers game, counting heads of how many people attended, how many TV viewers were reached, and so on. MAT didn't try to capture audience reaction, and posts were reluctant to report any activity that wasn't highly successful. So, there were all these growing pains, some things got over-reported that were not really important to Washington, while other potentially more useful program and audience info never got collected and analyzed.

Q: Yeah, just as a quick example, I was in Costa Rica as all of this happened, and in Costa Rica, it's a friendly country. We do many, many programs. And I don't do them all, and I can't even attend them all. My FSNs or my locally employed staff would do many of them, and then they would send me the form. And they would tell me, look, I don't really understand this form. I can tell you what happened, but I don't really know how to input the information. So I would have dozens of these things in my inbox, and I was the one responsible for doing it so that it would be understandable when you finally sent it off to Washington. And the goal was you don't do evaluations anymore using a lot of prose. You check boxes, you indicate the kind of person or persons who were involved in the effort and so on. And then at the very end, you were allowed two or three sentences about the nature of the event and why it was important to the mission program plan.

SIDDIQI: Right, you're exactly right.

Q: And literally for every single event, no matter how small or insignificant, you had to do one.

SIDDIQI: Right, right. No, that's totally accurate. I don't know if you recall, but the MAT software also would ask, how many dollars did you spend? We also had to provide photos and links. And in the comments section, we were expected to provide a concrete result or some other evidence of effectiveness. The problem is, nearly everyone who takes the time to come to an Embassy event is already inclined to say something positive about it afterwards. Our participants and invitees are typically polite, well-meaning folks. They want to have a good relationship with the U.S. embassy and with the public affairs section. I don't think I came across a single audience feedback survey in which the person wrote something negative about a U.S. speaker or exchange. The real result or evidence can only truly be seen in that person's writings or public remarks or volunteer work, or networking or career trajectory well after a PD activity occurs. That gestation process can take weeks, months, sometimes years, and we really haven't yet figured out a good way to consistently identify and report back those kinds of meaningful PD impacts.

Q: And the one last aspect of this was what the undersecretary wanted was a quick and easy ability to go on Capitol Hill and say, see how much we're doing with taxpayer

dollars, and see how effective all of this is, because she could put it into PowerPoints and bar graphs and all kinds of things like that.

SIDDIQI: Right. Right. Like I said, it was all about raw data and numbers. And then, it was also that tendency in the State Department to only report good news to Washington.

Q: That's right.

SIDDIQI: Because that drives budget decisions. The recorded data, such as it is, reflects back on field staff and regional and functional bureaus, on how well they're doing in actually meeting their goals and benchmarks. And if there is any emerging trend line that's disappointing in any given year, those issues are kept in-house. I'm sure that's true across the inter-agency, not just at State. The goal is to get ready for Congress's key questions and be ready with solid quantitative responses, numbers, not anecdotes.

Q: Right.

SIDDIQI: That's particularly tricky with social media, because you can say that the tweet or the Facebook post reached this "x" number of followers or generated this "y" number of likes or whatever. But have we changed any minds on a particular issue? We won't know that for sure unless we have a chance to speak or write to the person. Maybe that's something that can change with artificial intelligence and more sophisticated polling.

Q: It didn't get better. I can assure you of that. By 2013, people were at sea in being able to respond quickly to the changing social media outlets, many of which today are gone. The ones that we were responding to in 2013 are not even used on the internet anymore.

SIDDIQI: Right, right. And while I was there in 2011, they got rid of America.gov, which was one of the main platforms for my IIP office to get out our articles and images for posts to use in real time. The folks pushing for IIP's reorganization objected to America.gov saying it was a static website that was hard to find on the Internet and did little to expand audiences. Shutting down that platform was a shock to everybody involved with it, as it had been going strong for many years, and posts relied on it.

Q: Yeah, I'll forbear from giving you any more examples. We could go on here for quite some time. You mentioned that you were finally promoted to the Senior Foreign Service. Did this happen right around this point when you went back to Washington?

SIDDIQI: My promotion to FE-OC happened in summer 2011, right after the peak of Arab Spring. The IIP job, plus Baghdad the year before, helped me cross the threshold.

Q: In that case, now you're qualified for a whole variety of different posts. What went next in terms of your career trajectory?

SIDDIQI: I wanted to go overseas, but for family reasons I needed to stay stateside another two years. I looked at various options, but nothing immediately popped up. Then

a colleague of mine suggested to me, hey, why don't you try for BEX, the Board of Examiners? And I thought that was interesting, because I've always liked recruiting new hires and conducting interviews. And then there was my own positive experience in taking the Foreign Service all-day oral exam in 1983. I had pleasant memories of that, of how BEX evaluators showed real interest in new applicants. They were so keen on finding out what you'd bring to the table in terms of skills, experience, ideas. I thought I could do that. The Human Resources (HR) bureau offered me the option of one or two years as a BEX Assessor. I feared that if I did two years in HR, then people would start thinking I'm done and getting ready for retirement, so I signed up for only a year. It was great working side-by-side with a team of about 20 other BEX Assessors, all talented, smart, Foreign Service professionals who wanted to give back to the Department. We all wanted to have input into recruiting the next generation of American diplomats. I always felt good about saying yes to a candidate, giving them a higher score based on their performance at the oral assessment. So that part was very fulfilling with the Board of Examiners. I also got to do a little bit of acting because, you know, you can't show in any way whether you're impressed by someone or what they said, or if they say something hilarious or stupid, you can't grimace or laugh. The fun part was informing a small handful of passers at the very end of the day, and then seeing their surprise and excitement. After hours of stoicism, we assessors could finally break into a laugh, offer our heartfelt congratulations, and tell them about next steps in the process. Those moments were personally very satisfying. So was helping BEX produce a first time ever training video for future Assessors on how best to conduct interviews. My colleagues gave me a funny going away certificate headlined “Lights, Camera, Action.” I also enjoyed traveling with them to ensure geographic balance and diversity. We spent a couple of days in San Francisco doing interviews, and another two days in San Antonio.

Q: Yeah, interesting.

SIDDIQI: After my very enjoyable and fulfilling year in BEX, I was kind of kicking myself for not signing up initially for the full two years. We’re now in summer 2013 and my goal was to somehow bridge to 2014, when a couple of senior PAO jobs were going to open up overseas. The problem was, there were no Public Diplomacy (PD) jobs in Washington that were for just one year, every PD office required a two year commitment. After a bit of scrounging, I learned that the Western Hemisphere (WHA) bureau needed a stopgap PD desk officer for 9-10 months, so I volunteered for that, as a Y-Tour.
I was kind of a jack of all trades for WHA/PDA, helping them get through a difficult period when they were short staffed. I have no real highlights to share from from those nine months. But it meant a lot to my wife’s Civil Service career and to my family for us to be able to complete four years in Washington, from 2010 to 2014.

Q: Yeah, understood. When you took the Y tour with the Western Hemisphere, was it not possible for you to get a detail assignment, say, as a Diplomat in Residence (DIR) or something like that?

SIDDIQI: I think that certainly was a viable option. But again, I was worried about the optics of it, because both the BEX job and the Diplomats in Residence job kind of signal

to senior hiring managers at State that I'm approaching the end of my career. I still wanted to be a big-time PAO, or maybe a Principal Officer or a DCM somewhere. I still felt primed for more. Even though BEX and WHA were lateral detours, they helped set me up for my next assignment overseas, which turned out to be a dream job, PAO Cairo.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Now should we go ahead and continue with Cairo? We do still have some time, or would you prefer that we break here and return?

SIDDIQI: No, we can go ahead with Cairo.

Did your family go with you at this point?

SIDDIQI: By this time my wife was a tenured Civil Service officer with the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA), so we had to get a bit creative for her to keep her job and still accompany me to Cairo. She no longer had Eligible Family Member (EFM) status. Luckily, CA and Mission Egypt agreed to send her to Cairo with me under the new, worldwide DETO program. DETO stands for "Domestic Employee Teleworking Overseas," and it was a great way to keep working State Department couples together at a given post. My daughter was high school age and lived with us in Cairo as well. My two older sons stayed stateside. One had started working and the other was in college, they'd come and visit us every year. The PAO house was in the heart of Cairo and had a huge lawn and garden which we'd use every month for entertaining and engaging with Egyptian contacts. We were shouting distance from noisy streets along the Nile, businesses, cinemas, art galleries, restaurants, the Cairo Opera House. The city and its residents had the vibrancy and variety of my native New York, which I found inspiring.

Q: You're there as PAO in Cairo, the Arab Spring for Cairo is already over at this point.

SIDDIQI: Right. It's Egypt's first year under President Sisi, a former military man. By the time I arrived at post in August 2014, Muhammad Mursi, the democratically elected president during the Arab Spring was already out of power and in jail. The country seemed to be right back where it started before Tahrir Square in terms of its political evolution.

Q: Well then, let's start with describing the size and the function of the office.

SIDDIQI: I was the Embassy's Counselor for Public Affairs from 2014 to 2017. Our Ambassador was R. Stephen Beecroft, an Arabist, and the DCM was Tom Goldberger. Both were very supportive and wonderful to work with. As the section chief for public affairs, I supervised 7 American public diplomacy (PD) officers in Cairo and a branch PAO based at the Consulate General in Alexandria. I also provided oversight of the binational Fulbright Commission (BFCE) in Egypt. In total, I was managing about 10 Americans and 60 Egyptians. The big challenge, going into the job, was security. Public opinion was largely against the U.S., and there was wide misunderstanding about the actions we took during and after the Tahrir Square demonstrations. When I got to post, the blame game was in full force as to why Egypt's experiment in democracy failed.

A good many elites in Egypt, people who were pro-American for decades under the Hosni Mubarak regime, no longer wanted to deal with us. They felt we had turned our backs on Egypt by supporting the Morsi government, which was democratically elected but a huge letdown economically. That made PD work for us a whole lot more difficult.

Q: Given this is the first year of the Sisi regime, were there particular Mission goals that you were expected to accomplish, or was that still sort of in limbo because the Embassy and the U.S. government were still trying to find their way in terms of relating to Sisi?

SIDDIQI: Well, I think there were several management goals that I had to take on because the Public Affairs Section (PAS) locally employed staff had shrunk during and after the Arab Spring. People left because they couldn't deal with the tensions involved in working for the American Embassy when Egyptian opinion was against them. Some of the staff retired, others looked for other jobs. Even the executive director at the Fulbright Commission had left, so I had to quickly find a replacement for her as well, working through the binational Board and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA).

The main expectation the Mission had was that PAS could regain some of the goodwill and public support that had dissipated after the Arab Spring. That meant rebuilding lines of communication with the Egyptian media, countering misinformation about the U.S., revitalizing the American Center as a place for dialogue, and supporting civil society, especially programs and exchanges with emerging leaders, women and youth. race against time because you know the longer you wait for a position like that the more damage you incur in terms of programs and just coordination.

Another front office expectation was that I would work closely with the Embassy's Regional Security Officer (RSO) on all Public Diplomacy (PD) programs to minimize perceived risks to our personnel. The rule of thumb was, if we're going to be somewhere, we shouldn't advertise in advance that we're going to be there. That made things difficult in terms of inviting contacts to the event, getting good media coverage. In my second and third years at post, after demonstrating to the Embassy that the environment was changing in the right direction, we were given more leeway on publicity and branding.

Q: Yeah.

SIDDIQI: One of the programs we had that worked out without advance publicity was an "American Music Abroad" (AMA) pop music group that ECA offered to PAS Egypt and other PD posts in the region. I said to the RSO, okay, if we can't do a concert where we tell people when and where, how about if our music group does a pop-up concert at a shopping mall instead? We'd have a large, already built in audience of Egyptian shoppers, young people and families, and they'd get to listen to live American music, many for the very first time. The RSO did a site visit with us, we talked with the managers at the shopping center, and we got agreement on all sides that yes, this could work. Of course, the shopping center management was thrilled to have free, high quality entertainment to boost their image and business. And so we set up a stage and amplifiers in the center of the mall, in an atrium where the acoustics were good and shoppers on

multiple floors could get clear, unobstructed views. There were no billboards saying who's coming or what the concert was about, until our U.S. band suddenly popped up and started singing American songs and talking about bonds of friendship and universal values. We had hundreds of shoppers stopping, clapping and cheering. And even though the stage was cordoned off, for security reasons, our musicians were still able to talk to Egyptians and shake hands. So, in terms of "bridging the last three feet," the goal of all PD officers worldwide, we got the job done. Pop-up concerts are not the norm, but in our Cairo case, the timing, venue, messaging and strategy worked. In my second and third years in Cairo, with the improved program environment, we were able to host incoming AMA groups the normal, traditional way, at large open air venues, with advance publicity. We brought in a rock group called "Burn the Ballroom," and a year later we programmed Chelsey Green, a remarkable jazz violinist, at Cairo's medieval Citadel.

Q: Yeah, interesting. Were you able to travel where there are American Corners? Did you go up to Alexandria, that sort of thing?

SIDDIQI: I made a few trips to Alexandria to see the branch PAO and exchanges alumni there, and participate in American Corner programs, but most of the time, I sent my cultural and press officers for day trips. I wanted all my staff to know the country, and not just the Cairo metropolitan area. I did a trip south to Aswan once, with the PAS Regional English Language Officer (RELO), to promote the ACCESS English teaching program, and I went with the Fulbright Executive Director and the Library of Congress representative to universities in the Nile Delta area. I also went to Port Suez with the economic officer because President Sisi had this multi-billion dollar idea to expand the Suez Canal to speed up ship transit times and thereby increase revenue. In March 2014, I attended the Egypt Economic Development Conference in Sharm El-Sheikh, a high Sisi priority, and we got several visiting U.S. officials and experts some great coverage.

Q: All right. Now, you're talking about a slight warming as that was happening. Were your other programs also able to flourish a bit more, the exchange programs, getting the executive director back for Fulbright and so on?

SIDDIQI: The new executive director for Fulbright who I helped recruit and hire was an Egyptian American scholar, Dr. Maggie Nassif, and she made a huge difference in winning us new friends at universities, research institutes and think tanks. Maggie and her Fulbright Commission staff were a key implementing partner for USAID and PAS as we launched the Mission's 5-year, $250 million U.S.-Egypt Higher Education Initiative (HEI). That project funded hundreds of scholarships for young Egyptian women in business and STEM fields, as well as U.S.-Egyptian university linkages. Three Egyptian ministers spoke at our public launch, along with Ambassador Beecroft and American University of Cairo (AUC) officials. We also flew in U.S. astronaut Mary Weber as a motivational speaker for young women. We live-streamed the HEI launch event on the State Department's BNET network, a first for Mission Egypt, technologically speaking.

Throughout my three years, we kept ramping up our American Center activities and library membership. The lines of people waiting to get in would often be so long that we

had to start using greeters on the sidewalk and a timed entry process to keep the intake at a workable level. We had Mission officers who'd come down to our Center, when they could, to do talks and workshops, and to join in with English conversation clubs. Our U.S. defense attaché was a very jovial people person who spoke about leadership and accountability. Our Personnel Officer did presentations on job interviewing skills, how to write a good resume. Those were all of high interest to our clientele, as were our documentary film showings, student advising sessions, and workshops on 3-D printing. I would myself go down several times in a month to either say hello to students or to join them in their group chats. I think many saw me as a role model given my background.

Q: Turn then to the relationship that you had now with media. Again, I know it was a bit frosty as you began there. And of course, the media was being more and more controlled by Sisi. How would you describe that relationship?

SIDDIQI: Well, the media liked to attend all our events, regardless of what they thought about our policies. They were curious to see what we were doing and wanted to pick up whatever news they could get. As a group, the senior editors were a hard nut to crack, and we'd end up agreeing to disagree after protracted but friendly discussions. They rarely published corrections or retractions even when we pointed out their clear mistakes. Our Information Officer (IO) and I used to constantly bug the Ministry of Information and related offices on behalf of American journalists waiting to enter Egypt with a proper visa and Government of Egypt-issued press credentials. Because of censorship and general distrust of foreign media, it would sometimes take weeks to get visas, responses to interview requests, and other Egyptian cooperation on things that our journalists wanted.

We also started doing more on social media. When I first got to post, there was very little outreach going on via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. That was because during the Arab Spring our social media messaging was widely criticized by Egyptians as either crossing the line on some issues or not doing or saying enough on issues they cared about. To break the ice and become relevant again, we started emphasizing U.S. appreciation of Egyptian achievements. For example, if there was a celebrity in the arts or music or sports or science that did something outstanding, we'd highlight them on our platforms. We would report on what Egyptian Americans and other Arab Americans were doing in the U.S. that was positive or beneficial. I remember we generated tons of likes after Hollywood legend Omar Sharif passed away and we did a Facebook tribute right away. It was all part of rebuilding the bilateral foundation of trust that existed pre-Arab Spring.

Q: All right. This was a regular three-year tour for you, correct?

SIDDIQI: Yes. It was three years. The Embassy and NEA offered me a fourth year, but I declined. With my daughter graduating out of Cairo in 2017 and ready to begin college in the U.S., I thought I'd be more use to the family if I transferred back to Washington.

Q: Right.

SIDDIQI: Cairo proved to be a good luck charm. I got promoted to Minister-Counselor, FE-MC, while I was there, and I even was asked to serve as Acting DCM for a bit. It was only for two weeks, but I got to chair Country Team meetings, work on non-PD issues, and attend political/diplomatic events that I normally wouldn't have been invited to.

One of the things I enjoyed most while in Cairo was hosting Public Diplomacy programs at my home. Led by my Executive Assistant Heba Aboutaleb, we organized all kinds of events in my backyard, from film showings to concerts to certificate ceremonies. During the fasting month of Ramadan, unlike other Embassy officers who hosted short, pre-sunset "iftar" receptions, I opted to do post-sunset "sohours," when Egyptian guests were more relaxed and not in a rush to get back home. The one drawback to hosting a Sohour is that it can last for hours. My wife and I didn't mind though. The idea was to keep our contacts comfortable and engaged. We also added a speaking segment to each Sohour so that our Egyptian and American guests could talk on the mic about Ramadan. It was an occasion to celebrate shared values, diversity and inclusivity and tolerance for other religions, to push back on the idea that somehow the U.S. was anti-Muslim or didn't understand Islam. All that resonated well with our audience, which often included Al-Azhar University faculty and clerics. I tried through each of my representational events to get beyond casual, polite banter. One of the things that drives me crazy when I go to other diplomatic functions is their focus on just shaking hands and exchanging business cards. I know some officers get a lot out of such receptions because they're able to zero in on the right individuals that they need to talk to and then get the 5 or10 minutes of facetime they need with them before making a quick exit. But for me, as someone interested in genuine relationship building, I really wanted additional time to get contacts to talk and share and listen. My sohours sometimes lasted until 1:00 or 1:30 a.m., long after my PAS LES support staff had already gone home. One side benefit of doing late evening Ramadan events was that Egypt's cinematic stars felt comfortable in coming to them, and of course anything we did with actors and directors was important given their influence.

Q: Interesting. Were you able during this time to establish other influencers in Egyptian society, contacts able to carry out messages or do other things for the embassy?

SIDDIQI: I can't think of anyone specifically, but almost all of our exchanges alumni were influencers in their field, emerging leaders who impacted key people in their organization and throughout civil society. When they talked to the press, or to a gathered audience, they'd often reflect on their experience in the U.S., and shared their U.S. knowledge. It wasn't something that we asked alumni to do, they'd do it on their own. Some of our most vocal alumni were disabled, or came from disadvantaged backgrounds

Q: Interesting. All right. Well, should we wrap up Egypt at this point, or is there anything else about your tour there that you wanted to relate?

SIDDIQI: No, nothing that leaps off the top of my head. But maybe when we come back next time, I can give you some more interesting stories and wrap up Egypt that way.

Q: All right, sure. Then let's go ahead and stop the recording.

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Q: Okay, today is April 17, 2024. We're resuming our interview with Adnan Siddiqi. Adnan, we left off in Cairo. Was there anything else you wanted to bring up about that PAO Cairo assignment?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, I have four or five other public diplomacy projects that I wanted to mention that meant a lot to me and that were also important to the post.

As you may know, Egyptian films are hugely popular in the Arab world, and Cairo is home to huge production houses. One of the things that we wanted to do from our side was to promote independent film producers, people who would not be dependent on government funding or even corporate funding to produce their products. And indirectly, this also would build momentum toward freedom of speech, freedom of expression, expanding the creative industries, democracy, all those good things we recognize as American values. So, my office worked with the ECA Bureau to bring American Film Showcase (AFS) speakers to Egypt every year. One of the more interesting speakers we brought in were a U.S. brother and sister team who happened to be Indian Americans. They had recently jointly produced an award-winning independent film called Meet the Patels, a 90 minute comedy about dating and immigrant matchmaking in the United States, as actually experienced by the main actor/co-producer, Ravi Patel. Ravi's mother and father are interviewed in the film, in comedic Woody Allen style, and Geeta, his sister and co-producer, also appears in the film to scold his bad dating decisions. My cultural staff and I had a great time programming Ravi and Geeta in Cairo; they really connected with the Egyptian public, with the media, and with independent filmmakers.

Q: Egyptian film is certainly widespread, but they also produce TV shows, especially like soap operas. Were you able to work with those as well?

SIDDIQI: No, not as much as I wanted. The TV show scene was a whole other area we probably should and could have explored more. We did some projects to encourage and support local independent theater, things like workshops on producing plays and scripts that had a constructive social message about pluralism, tolerance, community service. We helped an NGO to stage an Egyptian interpretation of the Broadway hit musical "In the Heights," for example. The director and Arabic script writer decided to place all the action in a poor part of Cairo, with no reference at all to New York's Washington Heights or the U.S. Hispanic immigrant story, which was our original aim. Still, audiences clapped, and the Embassy got credited as a co-sponsor. You never know how these projects promoting artistic freedom will turn out. They're almost always worth the time and investment, but it's a bit of a roll of the dice in terms of the final product.

Another area that we made progress in was historic preservation. There was a lot of concern in both the U.S. and Egypt about the growth of smuggled artifacts. Not only was it a crime, there was evidence that revenue from some of these stolen artifacts was being

used to finance terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria and other parts of the Islamic world. In 2014, it fell on my team, the Public Affairs Section, to help finalize a U.S.-Egypt cultural property agreement (CPA) that would stem the tide of Egyptian artifacts illegally entering the United States. At that point, CPA's had been established with a couple of other countries around the world, but none in the Arab world. It took a lot of back and forth and coordination with the Egyptian government, the State Department, and the inter-agency, both before I got to post, and during my three years. The U.S.-Egypt CPA finally got signed by both countries a couple of months after I departed post, and it's still in effect.

Q: There's one other opportunity sometimes that is used, at least in North Africa. It's MEPI, which is the U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, that's true, but MEPI was not active in Egypt, as far as I know. We had many useful targets of opportunity though that were not planned or on our radar and just kind of fell into our lap at the last minute. For example, some large, private media corporations in Egypt wanted to do a big promo highlighting world cuisine, and we were among about 20 or 25 embassies they invited to compete in a friendly cook-off of sorts, with prizes given out at the end. I was skeptical at first, but our senior press specialist insisted this was a golden opportunity, and our DCM also was excited about the idea of culinary diplomacy. There was not enough lead time to bring over a master chef from the U.S., so we asked the three Egyptian chefs working at the Ambassador's residence to help us out. They knew all about American cuisine because they were always preparing American food for the Ambassador's representational events. They prepared an awesome display featuring turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, apple pie, the works. Hundreds of influential types showed up, and there were fireworks and large TV screens everywhere. Our cooks didn't win a prize, but pics of them and our Embassy team got published in popular, glossy magazines afterwards. I personally got a thrill standing on stage with the senior representatives from the 20 other foreign embassies. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to taste the turkey; all our food samples were snapped up within 10 minutes!

Apart from fun, crowd-pleasing events, we also did substantive economic things to help the youth of Egypt. We partnered, for example, every year with exchanges alumna and American companies to organize Job Fairs and Maker Faires at the Tahrir Square campus of the American University of Cairo. Those events were incredibly successful in showing that the U.S. cared about the problem of youth unemployment and was willing to do something about it by facilitating on-the-spot interviews and direct recruitment.

Q: These were all goodwill kinds of events that also won us a lot of support in public opinion. Did you do public opinion polling? Were you able to get a sense of the broader Egyptian public's view of the U.S. or of the embassy?

SIDDIQI: We didn't have the tools or resources to do that when I was there. Typically, it's Washington that initiates public opinion polling, working directly with U.S. and foreign contractors, and usually focused on a narrow theme. That said, all of us at Mission Egypt had tons of anecdotal information from our contacts and alumni, as well as from comments made in print and electronic media, and feedback from social media. It's hard

to generalize, since trendlines and opinion about the U.S. can dramatically fluctuate from one month to another in Egypt, depending on current events. I did notice our staff seemed to have more access to Egyptians, and get greater cooperation from them in summer 2017, when I left Cairo, than they did in summer 2014, when I arrived.

Q: You know, I don't have any more questions because you've covered so many topics. Honestly, before I could ask these questions, you've already covered them.

SIDDIQI: That's your polite way of saying I droned on for way too long! Overall, Cairo was wonderful. I found the Egyptians were very open to engaging with us. Even if they didn't agree with a lot of the policies that we were explaining and defending, they found a way to meet us, halfway. And so that was very encouraging. And I think you see that every day in the news, how there are all kinds of misunderstandings and challenges to U.S.-Egyptian relations, but somehow the two countries always navigate through them.

Q: Exactly. And there are plenty of U.S.-Egyptian ties that don't get talked about in the press very often that go on, in the background.

SIDDIQI: Right, right, I totally agree.

Q: It sounds like you extended the embassy's ability to reach out to just about every audience we're trying to reach and, you know, build as best a bilateral relationship within your area of expertise as we could.

SIDDIQI: I was very happy about that. And you know, it wasn't just our PAS section. Almost every Embassy section seemed to have somebody in their unit who wanted to promote an aspect of American society and culture they cared about. So, for example, our assistant RSO was a big American football fan. Okay. He organized a flag football team in Cairo composed of local enthusiasts, and my press staff provided them some publicity and access to media. Similarly, when some National Football League (NFL) stars came to town to promote American football and to see the Ambassador and local sports officials, we arranged media opportunities for them as well. Other Mission colleagues were very much into baseball and had connections with Major League Baseball and Minor League Baseball. And so, when those U.S. coaches came out, they would organize youth events and camps to promote baseball, and we'd play a supportive role. In other words, everyone in the embassy had a hobby or pet interest in promoting things that they were interested in and that positively reflected American society and culture. It was a group effort, and we in PAS were involved, at least tangentially, in all those different initiatives.

Q: Lovely. Given everything that happened and your promotion and so on, there aren't going to be that many more jobs at the FE-MC level in your field of public diplomacy. So what's going on with your thinking and on where you're going to go next?

SIDDIQI: I was thinking that at this point, having led one of the most active public diplomacy teams in the world, that I was now in good shape and ready for something even bigger as an executive. Unfortunately, none of my senior bids got any traction.

Either I started too late in terms of lobbying, or I didn't know the right people in Washington who could advocate for me, I don't know. I did get a prompt from NEA to bid on Principal Officer (Consul General) Basra, but that wasn't a move that I felt I could make because it would mean a year without my family. I'd already done Iraq and felt I'd already paid my dues on that score. With no other offer or lead in hand, I basically left Cairo as scheduled in August 2017 and came back to Washington on what they call "Over Complement." I ended up spending the next nine months with the public diplomacy office in NEA. Two months in, they sent me to the U.S. Yemen Affairs Unit (YAU), based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to be Acting PAO for Yemen. I knew both Yemen and Saudi Arabia from my first two Foreign Service assignments, so it was a no-brainer. I did seven months of Temporary Duty (TDY) at the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, from January to July 2018. I kept in touch with, and helped out YAU's Sanaa-based Public Diplomacy staff who were bravely working from their homes even in the midst of war and ongoing harassment from Houthi authorities. I also churned out daily Yemeni media reaction reports for the State Department and other stakeholders in Washington.

Q: Lovely. Okay, but you do end up finding another long-term assignment. How did that come about?

SIDDIQI: After my TDY in Jeddah was over, I joined the Human Resources (HR) Bureau and became a Career Development Officer (CDO). It wasn't easy getting in, since my background in personnel management was limited, but they gave me some on the job training and I grew to like CDO work. I had about 350 senior level clients. I helped get them the onward assignments they wanted, and I addressed a whole range of personnel-related issues for them. Some fellow officers in my client pool were harder to satisfy than others, but overall, CDO was a pleasant assignment. I enjoyed giving career advice to others, even though my own career had shifted into neutral gear, or so it seemed to me.

In summer 2020, I was again looking for a good onward, and again nothing really pithy materialized. I eventually reached out to senior managers at the ECA bureau and they were able to arrange a one-year Y-tour assignment for me as a Senior Advisor. This was during COVID, so most of that time I had to telework from home. I didn't like that aspect of it; I am, and always have been, a people-to-people, direct engagement type.

By spring 2021, I was itching to go overseas again, and I got an unexpected offer from the Africa Bureau (AF) to be their next Country PAO in Abuja, Nigeria. Both Embassy Abuja and Consulate Lagos ran very busy PD operations, and Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard was looking for someone who was strong in management and messaging. I had a bit of an idea about Sub-Saharan Africa because of my 1991-93 USIS PAO experience in Sudan, but I knew almost nothing about the politics of West Africa or Nigeria. For me, there were two draws. First, I didn't have to learn another language, and second, the Mission was willing to accommodate my wife as a DETO, which allowed her to join me in Abuja and still hold on to her Civil Service job with the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Q: Besides your PD operations in Abuja and Lagos, were there any other U.S. public diplomacy platforms in Nigeria, maybe American Corners or something like that?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, so when I got there, American Corners were already a big deal. Thanks to Lagos branch PAO Stephen Ibelli and his cultural staff, we had seven very active American Corners in the southern states of Nigeria, and two more in the pipeline. In Abuja and the northern states, we had three Corners that were adequate and another two that were limited in what they could do because of overall insecurity and uneven electricity and Internet connectivity. Those came under the Abuja Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer's responsibility. Despite COVID and other challenges, we expanded American Space activities considerably during the two years that I was in Nigeria. And if you go back to a recent speech that Secretary Blinken made when he visited Nigeria, he talks about how Nigeria has the most American Spaces of any Africa (AF) post.

Q: Could you describe a little bit, for someone who's never heard of these, what an American Corner or an American Space is outside of the Embassy or Consulate?

SIDDIQI: American Centers, Spaces, Windows, and Corners are basically local libraries/educational venues that receive varying degrees of funding support from the U.S. Embassy or U.S. Consulate, with approval and guidance from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Centers typically are much larger and have Americans or senior PD LES running them, while Corners, Windows, and other smaller Spaces rely on staffing provided by local host partners under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreement signed by the PAO. More often than not, the host partner is a public university or a state-run library. The basic objective of our Centers at Embassy Abuja and U.S. Consulate Lagos was to provide a daily stream of in-person and virtual, with U.S. and Nigerian experts, to engage key government, business, media, NGO, student and youth target audiences. Those two Centers would then feed the latest program ideas to the American Spaces and Corners around the country. Every year, Embassy Abuja and Consulate Lagos would take turns hosting a two day workshop for all of Nigeria's American Corner directors. That helped us keep all our Spaces in sync.

One of the bigger cultural initiatives we had going on in 2021-2022 was getting a Cultural Property Agreement (CPA) done with the Government of Nigeria, similar to the one I had helped get done between the U.S. and Egypt when I was PAO Cairo. My CAO Madison Conoley and I were able to get that four year project to the finishing line, coordinating between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, and the ECA Bureau's Cultural Heritage Center officials, who were the Department's subject matter experts. The CPA signing ceremony in Abuja, hosted by the Ministry, brought us a lot of goodwill, given Nigeria's historic sensitivity and concerns about its illegally stolen or smuggled antiquities ending up in Western museums. We were the first Western country to signal an official intention to help stem that outflow, and it kind of stimulated the Germans, British, French and other European countries to re-think their policies.

I don't know if you've heard of the Benin bronzes, the artifacts that were produced in the 1800s within the Benin Empire and then systematically stolen and smuggled out of West

Africa by British colonialists. After the U.S.-Nigeria CPA went into effect in 2022, several U.S. museums began reviewing their Benin bronze collections and discussing internally and with the Nigerians what to do next. The Smithsonian, in coordination with the State Department, agreed to voluntarily send 13 or 14 of their bronzes, artifacts that they'd held and showcased in Washington, D.C. for decades, back to Nigeria. Our CAO went out to Abuja airport, joining Ministry of Culture officials and the Smithsonian's representative, to open the arriving crates and verify the delivery. It was quite an extraordinary and triumphant moment, public relations-wise, for both countries.

Q: Was any thought given to making copies of the bronzes? In other words, these days, you know, you could put a bronze in a 3D printer and print something that might not be metal but then, you know, cover it with metal or something like that.

SIDDIQI: That probably is the next step to make the bronzes more known to the general public. I noticed cheap replicas of Benin bronzes for sale in Nigeria's major cities. But the point that Nigerians themselves would make is that they wanted and needed the original bronzes back as part of their patrimony, and a reflection of their national cultural identity. They felt they were owed this kind of respect and public acknowledgment, that the return of these artifacts essentially corrects, or reverses, a historical wrong. This is still an ongoing dialogue that we and Western European countries continue to have with Nigeria. I know the Metropolitan Museum of Art is also interested in engaging with Nigeria on their collection of Benin bronzes, and other American museums are as well. But a lot depends on Nigeria demonstrating it can preserve, protect and display the bronzes in a manner that makes them accessible to people from all nations, not just Nigerians. And that the bronzes given back, or loaned back, don't disintegrate, or fall into disrepair.

Q: Or get stolen.

SIDDIQI: Or get stolen once again, exactly. And that is the larger issue, really, because Nigerian museums are underfunded. They barely have enough money to survive. And of course proper security requires both adequate funding and reliable police protection.

Q: But again, a fascinating part of the cultural and educational relations with Nigeria.

SIDDIQI: Right, exactly. Another fascinating dimension, I would say, is the intense interest young Nigerians have in American higher education, and in attending the U.S. college fairs we and ECA's EducationUSA advisors helped organize every year. If you look at the "Open Doors" foreign student numbers that came out, that are published by IIE, the International Institute of Education, every year, Nigeria led all African countries by far in terms of sending students to U.S. universities. Besides sponsoring quality student advising services throughout Nigeria, our Public Affairs Section also ran a modest "Opportunity Fund" grant program that helped cover non-tuition costs for qualified, middle class students, costs associated with their college applications, required admissions tests, travel to the U.S., that sort of thing. Our Opportunity Funds initiative was welcomed by the AF bureau as a cost-effective way to stimulate growth in foreign student numbers at U.S. campuses. Often these same kids were able to go on and secure

full or partial tuition waivers from some American colleges. Our universities needed and wanted foreign students to enrich their talent pool and diversify U.S student campus life.

Q: While you were in Abuja and traveling around the country, were there graduates of these programs, Nigerian graduates, who had become influencers or distinguished individuals or government employees?

SIDDIQI: A high percentage of our exchanges alumni ended up with influential jobs in federal, state, and local government. Beyond our own alumni, most successful individuals, families, organizations in Nigeria tended to have some sort of U.S. or U.K. tie or connection. One of the things that opened doors for young people aspiring to politics or business was to be able to say, yes, I traveled to the U.S. on a professional exchange program, or yes, I have a degree or certificate from England or America.

Q: Were you able to get reasonable geographic diversity, because there are so many languages spoken and so many ethnic groups in Nigeria?

SIDDIQI: Getting geographic, ethnic and linguistic diversity was certainly a goal of ours, but you have to remember, having outstanding English was a major criterion for selection into any of our programs. As a result, we tended to have higher applicant numbers from the southern states, where things were a bit more economically and politically stable, and English was a bit more widely spoken. We also had good numbers and good diversity out of the Lagos and Abuja metropolitan areas, where multiple ethnicities and religions, and better universities, were based. We had a tougher time finding qualified candidates in Nigeria's northern states, where Hausa was the dominant language, and where Muslim communities lived constantly under the threat of Boko Haram and other militant groups.

Q: Now you were doing official U.S. government programs, but did you have the impression that there were a lot of private connections between U.S. organizations or individuals in Nigeria that were simply going on, without the Embassy sponsoring them?

SIDDIQI: Well, as you know, the Nigerian diaspora community in the U.S. is huge and goes back several decades. So the people-to-people connection, and the layers of business and educational and artistic bonds between our two countries are all mostly private. Being the largest city and port, Lagos was the main hub for those connections. That's where the most bilateral media, commercial and intellectual activity was taking place, in partnership with private Nigerians based in the U.S. Lagos is where Afrobeats started, where the U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA) has an office, where AFRIF, the African Regional Film Festival, takes places every fall, attended by U.S. filmmakers.

Q: And there are also organizations that—a thriving jazz culture there as well.

SIDDIQI: Sure, sure, jazz was big ever since the 1970s, and the days of Fela Kuti. I didn't bring in any American jazz performers during my time in Nigeria, but we did sponsor a fine classical pianist named Pauline Yang and worked with local partners to

co-sponsor Jonathan Hollander's amazing Battery Dance troupe from New York City. We also co-sponsored the visit of a large gospel choir from Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Q: Anything with Howard University? I ask because just a few years ago, Howard got a very significant donation to its endowment, and it's been renovating and buying more property and putting up more buildings of all kinds.

SIDDIQI: Yeah, I think Howard is another Historically Black college that often sent people to Nigeria. I didn't see them in Abuja, but I believe they had a presence in Lagos. The NBA also had friendly ties, and used to come in search of up and coming talent. You'll recall retired basketball great Hakeem Olajuwon was originally from Nigeria.

Q: Is there a fair amount of basketball, professional basketball going on in Nigeria?

SIDDIQI: Yeah, they have local professional teams, I think, and basketball is also played at the high school level. It's right up there with soccer in terms of nationwide popularity.

Q: And women's sports is growing too?

SIDDIQI: Yes, but more in the south than up north. In the north, access to adequate and safe sports facilities was an issue sometimes for Muslim women and girls. Women's empowerment, educational and entrepreneurial empowerment was one of our major focuses in Public Affairs, and it was for USAID as well, which ran its own programs.

Our most popular program was the ECA Bureau-supported AWE, the Academy of Women Entrepreneurs. AWE local partners organized and led business training modules for Nigerian girls and women to launch small enterprises or to expand whatever project they had already started as entrepreneurs. We economically empowered hundreds of women each year through AWE. We also did online and in-person Tech Girls Camps.

Did I mention YALI yet, the State Department's Young African Leadership Initiative? That was the biggest youth empowerment program we engaged in, by far. We had YALI coordinators in Washington and on the ground in Nigeria to ensure we were nominating the best and brightest young professionals for short-term training in the U.S., people who were motivated and ready to contribute to Nigeria's development when they returned. I had the privilege of arranging a virtual meeting between Nigeria's Vice President and the executive committee of Abuja's YALI Alumni Association. We were told it was the first time that a senior government official had reached out, and listened closely to a youth organization, asking for their recommendations on economic development, higher education, civil society building, and good governance. I'm not sure what VP decisions were made as a result, but his consulting our U.S.-trained YALI youth was a good start.

Q: Wow. Yeah. Now you've talked about education and cultural exchange. What about the media and press?

SIDDIQI: We focused a lot on journalism training. Working with ECA in Washington, we brought in U.S. journalists who also were experienced trainers. We also supported Nigerian media associations that wanted to organize their own seminars and conferences focusing on fact-checking, rooting out disinformation and raising journalistic standards. The Nigerians were very appreciative of our modest investment in them, and made sure that my PD officers, as well as other Embassy speakers, were invited and highlighted.

Since President Buhari was approaching the end of his term in 2022-23, we also focused on the importance of voting, and the role of a responsible media before, during, and after an election. Any U.S. government official that would come out to Nigeria, to get whatever he or she needed done, we'd connect them with the media and ask them to say a word about the importance of a free press and a fair, transparent, peaceful election. We worked with Hausa-language radio on messaging that urged listeners to register to vote. We used social media to discuss democracy and pluralism, given the country was pretty much evenly divided in support of three different parties and presidential candidates.

Q: Now, you mentioned earlier the Nigerian diaspora in the U.S. Were you in touch with them in any significant way? Were they helpful to any of your programs?

SIDDIQI: Our public diplomacy staff in Lagos had a lot more contact with Nigerian diaspora leaders than I did. Normally prominent Nigerian American visitors did not fly up to Abuja unless they were looking for Embassy partnership or funding. We were also still in the middle of COVID and operating under social distancing protocols during my first year, so we didn't get many visitors to the Embassy or the Abuja American Center.

Q: Given you're working in the embassy, the difficulty of getting people in and out because of security concerns, that didn't create problems for you?

SIDDIQI: It did somewhat limit our ability to bring Nigerian contacts in. Luckily, there was a hotel just down the street from our Embassy where we could go and meet our contacts over coffee or lunch, without going through cumbersome security protocols. I also hosted a lot of events at my house which had ample indoor and outdoor space to chat with Nigerian contacts. It was a bit of a drive for them, but they generally didn't mind.

One of the more interesting events at my place was a dinner-discussion we organized for about 50 of our most trusted government, media and civil society contacts a week after the Nigerian election results came out. We knew they had a lot on their minds and thought this would be a good opportunity for us to just listen, as they each took turns grabbing the mike. All of us Mission officers in attendance were really surprised by how emotional the topic of elections and democracy's future was, both for the folks who said they voted, and for those who refused to vote. Many of my Nigerian guests told me later that it was a relief for them to finally get their thoughts out, in a safe, neutral setting.

Q: Yeah. It's interesting. Were you also involved in preparing aspects of the Human Rights Report, the parts about freedom of expression, freedom of association?

SIDDIQI: Our Embassy's political section had the pen on human rights reporting, but our public diplomacy officers contributed information that we'd pick up from our monitoring of the media, or from any anecdotal information shared by our contacts. I think there was a general acceptance that there was a lot to improve upon in terms of the human rights situation, censorship issues, the manipulation of opinion through intimidation and bribery. At one of the lunches my press staff organized in Abuja, we heard credible stories from women journalists about sexual violence and harassment in the workplace, stories that their editors refused to investigate and report because they feared higher-ups.

Q: While you're talking about sexual abuse, that's usually done through the political section, but did you have any activities with the LGBT community?

SIDDIQI: Nothing specifically directed at that community, but we did engage with LGBT advocates whenever they came to us. LGBT rights and concerns also came up during our nationwide awareness campaigns on domestic and gender-based violence.

Q: I have reached the end of the formal questions I have for you. Any more anecdotes that help further illustrate some of the work and some of the successes you've had?

SIDDIQI: I'm sure I've missed a lot of good Nigeria stories. Abuja was my last Foreign Service assignment, and I'll never forget the long, warm standing ovation the Embassy staff gave me at the September 2023 Mission Awards ceremony, when I got my 40 Year Certificate. It was hard to believe 40 years had passed since I took my formal oath in Washington as a newly-minted FSO. I may have been the very first Pakistan-born officer to have come up through the ranks to make it to Minister-Counselor. Even if I wasn't the first, I do feel I've been a pioneer of sorts, volunteering for the front lines, taking on some of U.S. public diplomacy's most difficult challenges in dangerous and unstable places. I've had two wonderful careers really, 16 years with USIA, followed by 24 years with State. I've had the honor of serving seven U.S. presidents while advancing peaceful dialogue and mutual understanding. And I especially am grateful to the hundreds of locally employed staff who made coming to the office every day pleasurable, and who taught me so much about camaraderie and problem-solving, tolerance and determination.

You know, I've found over the years that leadership comes in different forms, and it's not necessarily tied to how big your budget is, or how many people you supervise. Not every exceptional Foreign Service Officer needs to become an Ambassador or DCM to make a mark in our field. Sometimes leadership is reflected on a micro level, in solving a problem, or starting a best practice, or lending a hand or offering a sympathetic ear.

You know, there's a dream I have now and then which I'd like to think is kind of reflective of my role and career. In it I'm playing in a football game and I'm lined up on offense as a wide receiver. My team is down a few points, time is running short, and it's fourth down. I see myself running down the middle of the field and making an acrobatic catch and then getting hammered, first by one tackler, and then another. The refs come out and measure, and agree I got the team a first down, they move the orange yardsticks forward. I've got grass and dirt stuck in my helmet, but my body feels fine, and I get pats

on my back from my teammates. My coach on the sideline barely looks up from his chart and signals me to go back into the huddle for the next play. And that's about where the dream always ends.

I sometimes wonder why I don't dream about being the courageous quarterback or the dazzling runner who scores the winning or game-changing touchdown? Why am I the guy who's just moving the ball incrementally forward, and getting crunched doing it?

We all play different roles in the Foreign Service, and we bring different skill sets. For me, it's always been about the joy of the journey, and the advancement of the team.

Q: So yeah, that is a great place to end the evening. I wouldn't have expected, you know, someone to end on a dream sequence, but it's perfect.

SIDDIQI: It's been great sharing with you, thanks again.

Q: All right, then.

End of interview