



Interview with Mr Christian Willach, one of guest speakers of CIMIC Seminar II held in Kraków, a former military with a vast experience in working in Afghanistan and civil-military cooperation.

AG: How did you like the CIMIC Seminar?

I found it quite interesting in general. There were parts of it that were trying to get participants coming from different starting points with regard to CIMIC knowledge to at least one playing field and the same knowledge base. I think that is a good start.

What were your addresses to the training audience about?

I had two briefings. One on Afghan and International Community Perceptions of ISAF – because it is a little bit contrary to how ISAF sees itself and how ISAF would love to be seen at

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least by some parts of the Afghan population and some parts of the international community. It was a briefing about perceptions, not necessarily facts, but rather how certain people perceive ISAF. And as a provocative type of briefing it was indented just to get people thinking, to get a discussion going. I do understand that some participants, especially those who have been to Afghanistan with ISAF might not agree with everything or even feel offended but that was exactly the purpose – to get them thinking about self-perception, about the cause-and-effect that may not always be perceived in a similar way by an ISAF soldier and a local Afghan somewhere in the field.

The second presentation was about the security sector reform; it was basically the rundown of what had happened before in Afghanistan, what is happening now, what are the challenges and opportunities and, of course, one of the main aims was to describe the diverging points of view on effectiveness. It is because from our point of view certain aspects of the security sector reform are highly effective because they support, as it is stated, the transition strategy, whereas a part of the Afghan population see it in a completely different way and perceive it as being very negative.

What are your experiences related to Afghanistan?

I spent 6 years in Afghanistan. I went to Afghanistan for one tour with the military. I was the first commanding officer of the outpost in Taloqan, responsible for Takhar province. Then, I worked there as a civilian for non-governmental organisations, United Nations, European Union.

Was it difficult for you to change from a military into a civilian person?

Initially yes because I started working for the NGO community which had a very peculiar view points on the military. Later, working for UN and EU, was not that much of a big change because it was still referring to policy and strategy level so you more or less talked the same language. That was relatively easy.

How about your cooperation with the Afghans?

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When I was paid for by the UN and I was officially a UN staff member, I worked for the Afghan Minister in his compound in a completely Afghan environment. I was an analyst for a programme called DIAG, which is the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups and it was a dual type position. One was a type of a political advisor to the Minister; the other part was information collection, analysis and then feeding it back into the Afghan government system primarily focused on the analysis of the network of commanders of illegal armed groups. It is a very interesting job.

What do you think of Afghans as a nation and did you enjoy the cooperation with them?

That was quite an eye-opening experience. And if you define an Afghan to me first, I will try to answer the question. According to a study I read years ago, Afghanistan has one of the, if not the most, complex social fabric of all countries in the world. I just know that after six years of being in Afghanistan the only thing I know for sure is that I do not know anything. Someone I know very well who has lived and worked in Afghanistan for 30 plus years still says: 'I'm just a beginner here; I don't really understand the culture and the dynamics. I can probably interpret it better than a lot of other people but at the end of the day I do not understand what is going on sometimes'. This just gives us an idea of how different the social setting in Afghanistan is. That is one of the things I tried to bring across in the perception point, it is all about the social process – how you grow up with all the outside influences that shape you as you are, the way you think, your logics, that whole kind of process is just so fundamentally different in Afghanistan than it is to ours. I am not saying this is better or that is better; I am just saying it is extremely different. So things that make a complete and utter sense to us may seem completely ridiculous to the Afghans and vice versa. That makes it so incredibly difficult for us to work there because we always see things through our lenses, through our logic and we often forget that it actually does not have to make sense for us; it has to make sense for the Afghans.

A diversity of Afghanistan must make it quite a challenging country for CIMIC personnel to work in.

You have to understand two mindsets and you have to speak two languages. In many development and diplomatic entities one word might mean one thing and the very same word in a military context, used by soldiers, could mean something very different. When a civilian and a military talk to each other they often use the same terminology and they think they know what the other one is saying but they are actually talking next to each other without ever reaching a real consensus. They are talking about apples and oranges but they both think they are talking about strawberries. It may be quite funny for an outsider but when you think that the outcome of such meetings actually might affect real life somewhere then, of course, it is not so funny

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anymore. So CIMIC personnel have to be able to understand both sides and that is sometimes very hard and very difficult.

Does it work?

I think parts of CIMIC work very well and there are parts of CIMIC that do not work that well for many reasons.

Is your CIMIC experience related to Afghanistan only?

No, I have done five missions with the military. And three of them were CIMIC, also in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Can you see differences in CIMIC work among Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo?

Absolutely. Bosnia CIMIC was about building houses, schools; it was a very infrastructure type of CIMIC. At that stage I was a 1st Lieutenant so my perspective was at a frog level but at least from our national perspective CIMIC fulfilled exactly the political directives. We were very effective; we put down the infrastructure a lot faster than the civilians ever could, the military forces created some form of stability and security.

Kosovo was not easy – I found it very difficult because there were no clear directives, at least none were communicated to me – at that stage a Captain or a Major. CIMIC was constantly redefined and everyone used it as they thought it should be used, at least at the times when I was there.

Now in Afghanistan some nations use CIMIC quite extensively on the project level but over the years they have learned that this actually is very counterproductive because it disrupts things, like the district development plan which is a long term planning done on the civilian level with the local government. When the military comes in and says 'we're going to build a school there',

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it disrupts the whole process balance, village against village. I think most of them have learned that by now so it is a positive development. On the other hand, even if there were genuine intentions to help, CIMIC's work did a lot of involuntary damage in the initial years because of the approach lacking coordination.

What kind of advice would you give to CIMIC personnel?

If I were to give one sort of line of advice it would be - don't be sure of yourself, don't always assume whatever you are doing is right. Take a step back, try to look at what implication is that having on either international community or the Afghan counterparts, be it the population, be it the local government. At least try to look at it from their point of view. Do not always assume that your way of looking at it from a military perspective is automatically the same as their point of view. If that were a universal CIMIC thing, I am pretty sure we would have a lot less prejudice on both sides.

How about a recently developed Comprehensive Approach in NATO; does it change much for CIMIC?

It does not change a thing for CIMIC. In my point of view the big change in CIMIC over the last 10 years is – basically and luckily – more and more emphasis put on getting away from a project work. My very personal point of view is that project work should not be military work at all because – let's face it – we are not good at it. We are not humanitarian actors, we are not development actors but there are people out there who are professionals. And we would not let them lead a military operation either. It is more towards liaison work, civil situation assessments, trying more to work together from the tactical over the operational up to strategic level to synchronize instead of trying to coordinate things. I think it is the right direction CIMIC is generally going to.

How are you sharing your vast experiences?

I did some briefings for some ISAF troop contributing nations, I lectured in Denmark at the officers' school, I lectured a lot for the German Military Forces and I was a Subject Matter Expert at the Joint Force Training Centre in Bygdoszcz. I can basically be very provocative and try to get thought processes moving, that is the only thing I can do.

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