

Frog In Boiling Water: Baghdad Week 4



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You know that old saw about putting a frog in water, and slowly bringing it to boil, and the frog never notices until it's too late. Welcome to the new normal. I barely notice the sirens, choppers, distant bombs, and guns everywhere. It's kind of like getting used to the noise of the subway. Bush was here today, and there was a lot of chopper traffic, sirens, but otherwise, work went on as usual, for me anyway.

I'm still living in the International Zone [aka the Green Zone], and commuting to work. But we have settled on a new location for office and my living, which is another hotel in the 'red zone', we should be moving into there by early-mid-January, and then my commute will be down the hall instead of in the convoy. At that point I expect to be going to the IZ several times a week, which will be an easier schedule, less of the convoy activity.

The new hotel (Mansour) is one heavily used by government, as it is near various ministries. The Chinese Embassy is housed there, as is the Iranian, the French news wire service Agence France Presse is moving in, there's a German company of some kind in residence. There are restaurants, services... not a ghost hotel like the current one we're in.

I'm also in the process of switching to a different security company, which offers what is known as low profile travel: armored cars instead of the big SUVs with gun turrets on top. I will also have 24/7 protection, apparently the biggest worry is the threat of kidnap. I don't like it, but one way or another, pretty much everyone has it in some form or other. Either they live in compounds that have 24/7 guards, or villas with the same, or in a hotel with the same. There are a few mad intrepid souls, like a young man who writes for a blog here. He lives on his own in an apartment, and travels around town in a beat up car with a translator only. We all think he's crazy, but he's still around to tell the tale. I hope he stays that way, but it's very high risk behavior.

The Work

Work continues to be fascinating. We're heavily involved in doing the outreach for the up-coming provincial elections. There are 14,000 candidates, so clearly profiles, or equal air time, or anything like that, is out of the question. Instead we've been supporting weekly TV and radio political talk shows, discussing election related issues, or creating a newspaper supplement on elections. There are weekly election working group meetings at the Embassy, attended by the military (who are going to help provide security for the

election), the outreach/public affairs part of the military, the political affairs department of the State Dept. (our funders), USAID, various other people and organizations involved in these elections, and most of all IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems), which is the main NGO doing the heavy lifting getting the election work off the ground. I've been working very closely with them, their country director Sean has become one of my best buddies and colleagues. Sean is an Aussie, a former federal agent who somehow found his way into the NGO world of elections (he used to work for the UN); his wife and family are all in NY. It's a massive organizational task and, as I've never been involved in something like this, it's extremely interesting.

We've been negotiating for months with the Iraqi Electoral Commission (IHEC) to let us (IREX that is) run a press center for them, to have a central information venue where journalists can get the information about the very complicated electoral process, get guides, posters, sample ballots, and also be a place for press conferences. IHEC has been vacillating back and forth, they want to control the press process but aren't very good at it, the press conferences they've held at their offices have been a disaster: journalists couldn't get in, officials stalked off insulted at questions. This past week Sean finally persuaded them to let us open the center, at another hotel in town which is very secure; it's in the 'pink' zone... borderline IZ, across the street from the Iraqi Parliament.

Meanwhile our various programs appear to be attracting some attention, a candidate wanted to appear on one of the TV talk shows... but our grantee had to say no... since if he went on, then all 13,999 others would be entitled also. The Prime Minister mentioned our newspaper supplement in an interview as a good example of unbiased information. Given that it has lines like this: "With the will of the citizens of Mesopotamia, who enlightened the world with their amazing culture for centuries in ancient times, the elections will succeed," I found that an interesting comment, but am delighted for our program and hard working staff.

As a result, we are now getting flooded with requests for training and assistance, so I'm busy meeting some of the journalists in town and trying to bring in more trainers and hook up with other training organizations here. It's really fun and challenging, continuing to meet all kinds of interesting people.

The Vibe

The Embassy has just finished moving out of the Palace, the former Palace of Saddam, which has been the US HQ since the war. The Iraqis will be taking it over. The Embassy has moved into their new quarters in another part of the IZ, a massive fortress-like structure which looks and feels like a prison. No one likes living/working there, but there's no choice. I will only have to go to meetings there on occasion. Many of the people who work for the various Embassies located in the IZ never get out of the IZ at all, they live and work in this weird bubble.

We had a site visit to our office the other week by the Chief of the Political Section, a former Ambassador to Algeria, Robert Ford, who speaks excellent Arabic. They travel VERY high profile, a team of 4 extremely large men preceded him into the hotel, checked out our offices before letting him into the building, and he had to wear his flak jacket all the way to the office (I leave mine in the car, never wear it inside). He was so happy to get out of the IZ and meet some Iraqis; he loved seeing our political cartoons for the elections, he toured the news agency downstairs... it was a good dog and pony show. We discussed arranging a meeting between him and some of the local press freedom organizations we support, and when I asked whether we should arrange for it in the IZ he said, 'No no! I want to get out!'

I'm very grateful that I have a very different experience than most of them, working with a wholly Iraqi

staff, and will be living in a more Iraqi than ex-pat environment. But it's been great to start out living in the IZ, as it enabled me to partake of the extremely lively social scene, especially this time of year. Last week was the Danish embassy Christmas party (lots of fun), this week is the Italian Embassy's, while the other week was UK. And then there are just the usual Thurs. and Fri. night parties all over the place. In between we continue to have the nightly bonfires in the garden, even though it is quite cold now at night (it gets down to the 30s Farenheit, which makes me very happy). So I'm working on finding a place to crash here on weekends, so I can continue to enjoy the social life.