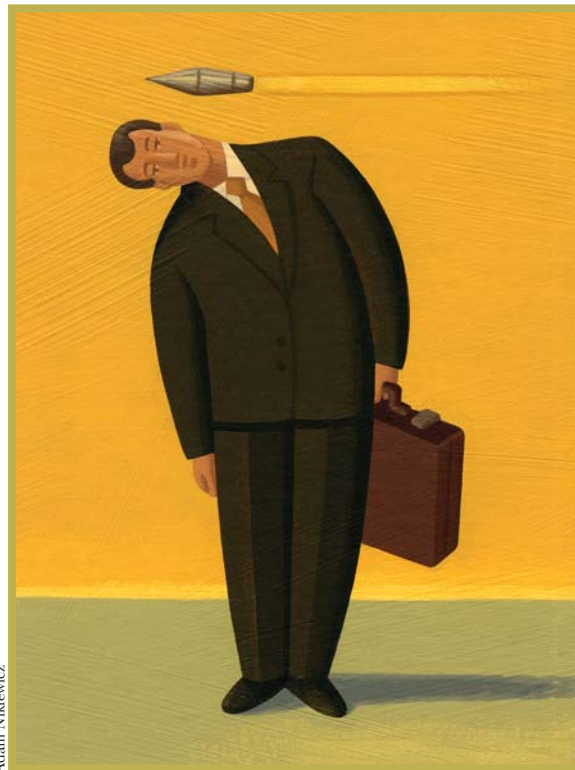


WORKING AND LIVING IN IRAQ



Adam Niklewicz

Editor's Note: We recently sent an AFSAnet message inviting Foreign Service personnel who are serving in Iraq or have done so recently to recount their experiences there. Some of their responses describe the physical, logistical and other challenges they face and how they have overcome or worked around them to do their jobs. Others focus on the texture of daily life in postwar Iraq. But they all exemplify the best traditions of the Foreign Service. Our thanks to all who shared their stories.

— Steven Alan Honley, Editor

A YEAR WELL SPENT

In the fall of 2006, I was in the middle of an exciting temporary assignment to New York during the 61st session of the United Nations General Assembly when I received a call asking if I was still interested in Iraq service. I had initially been interested back in 2004, when our Iraq project had a radically different tone; having observed developments there since, I had a lot of questions before volunteering again.

Luckily, several people at our U.N. mission had served in Iraq, not only in Embassy Baghdad but out in the field, as well. Each of them had a wholly unique experience to relate, but the common threads running through all their stories were that Iraq service would be completely different from anything else in the Foreign Service (except perhaps Afghanistan), and that everything over there is constantly changing.

As of this writing, I am the public diplomacy officer for the Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team, based in the northern city of Mosul. Before continuing, let me offer several caveats. Though I have traveled extensively within Ninewa province, I have very limited direct experience of the rest of the country, including Baghdad. Second, though we are not an “e-PRT” (i.e., embedded directly into a combat brigade), we are colocated with both the regimental and deputy commanding general’s headquarters, and we work hand-in-hand with our military colleagues. Finally, I am not an expert in either the Arab world or post-conflict situations, but am a Foreign Service generalist in the truest sense of the word.

All that said, this has been one of the best years I have spent with the State Department. Many of the challenges faced by earlier colleagues, primarily isolation and lack of support, were largely absent. I have access to a full range of communication technology, both classified and unclassified. The three phones at my desk easily allow me to make commercial, DSN and secure calls to the embassy, Washington and friends or family back in America. Three computers give me access to high-speed commercial Internet, the military’s unclassified NIPRNET and the classified SIPRNET. Additionally, we have the APO for reliable and quick two-way mail.

As the oldest and second-largest PRT in Iraq, Ninewa has developed a robust institutional culture. There has been a continuous State Department presence in Mosul going back to 2003, and it shows. Our relationships are strong across the board, whether with the provincial government, a prominent sheik, the American regimental commander or the Nepalese contractors who work in the base laundry. My experience with everyone here has been one of mutual respect.

The question of whether we are effective in Iraq should be replaced by a more urgent issue — how we can become more effective.

We are working hard to infuse operations with a sense of normality. We dress as diplomats, even if that means a slightly wrinkled suit coat after a ride in a Blackhawk. We take to heart the fact that we are dealing with a new sovereign government that is emerging from a decades-long dictatorship and a war. Our Iraqi partners are risking their lives every single day for their country and deserve full recognition for their courage. The govern-

ment here is similar in capability and ambition to those I dealt with in Zimbabwe and the Dominican Republic.

Clearly, this is not always a normal posting. We travel out to meetings with our contacts in highly-armored Humvees topped with high-caliber weapons. The PRT compound is on a Forward Operating Base on the edge of an ethnically diverse and often violent city. We live and work in temporary structures, and one-fifth of the team’s members wear military uniforms. But the daily work is remarkably similar to that of any diplomatic posting, albeit to the nth degree.

Though I am excited to be going into long-term Arabic training and then serving in Beirut, I will never forget Mosul. Working in the field is extremely gratifying. If I have a chance in the future to do a similar assignment in Afghanistan or elsewhere, I would not hesitate.

Joshua W. Polachek

Provincial Reconstruction Team Mosul

THE IMPORTANCE OF RISK MANAGEMENT

I have been serving on the Regional Reconstruction Team in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government, since last November. In many ways, this is an ideal assignment: a fairly new post in a region that is both undergoing transition and eager for U.S. contact. Since 2003 there have been no U.S. casualties within KRG territory. The threat of extremist violence exists (the most recent bombing in Erbil was in May 2007), but this is a part of Iraq that attracts non-official Americans: teachers at schools and universities, business executives, even tourists.

Nevertheless, before my arrival in November, my predecessor warned me that one of the factors limiting his ability to function here was the security restrictions under

which we operate. Despite the different environment, the precautions we take are not that different from those in place in the rest of Iraq. I respect that these measures are designed to safeguard me and my colleagues, balancing protection — and the resources needed to provide it — against our ability to do our jobs.

The good news is that many of my contacts want to work with us and are willing to come to our office (a process that is easier than it would be in Baghdad). The bad news is that it can be very difficult to meet people outside the office: meetings must be scheduled well in advance; and requests are often denied or canceled at the last minute due to limited resources.

Still, it's hard to complain when I think about all of our colleagues in other parts of Iraq. We're not worrying about mortar attacks or improvised explosive devices, or fearful for the safety of the local staff and our contacts. But what *is* frustrating is that we may be missing an opportunity. As the security situation stabilizes and as the military draws down throughout Iraq, the responsibility for interaction with the local population will fall more on civilians. If we can't make that model work in Erbil, how will it be possible elsewhere?

Jonathan Cebra

Public Diplomacy Officer

Regional Reconstruction Team Erbil

ENHANCING EFFECTIVENESS

State Department employees have been working in Iraq for five years now. (I was an economic officer in Embassy Baghdad from 2006 to 2007.) The question of whether we are effective there should be replaced by a more urgent issue — how we can become *more* effective given that we are there.

How effective any of us is in Iraq depends on the usual factors: persistence, personal skills, teamwork and professional experience. Language skills help, as does regional experience. Danger, security restrictions and political circumstances do not change the fundamentals of what constitutes effectiveness — just how much of it you need, and the relative importance of the different components. Stress management and teamwork, for instance, suddenly become critical.

How we balance risk with effectiveness necessarily depends on how important the work is. Our military colleagues face this question squarely, accepting that they may be asked to die for their country. In the Foreign

Service we are not accustomed to that extreme, usually living in areas of more moderate hardship and danger differentials. Our heavy presence in Iraq, along with work in other dangerous countries, is changing our understanding of acceptable risk, and demands more from us as a diplomatic corps and from the State Department as an institution.

Organizations that operate with the level of risk found in Iraq must support employees in new and different ways than organizations in safer places. Private companies in Iraq generally do this through long vacations and very high salaries — remuneration that could change the standard of living of employees for the rest of their lives. The U.S. military emphasizes honor and service, along with full support of families, medical treatment and the nation's gratitude. The office walls of the majors and lieutenant colonels I worked with on economic affairs were covered with letters from groups ranging from second-graders to Starbucks workers, thanking them for keeping America safe.

The U.S. military, with its experience operating in war zones, also understands the need for clear goals and management in dangerous environments. At times in Iraq the clarity of some goals seemed at best aspirational, with detailed timetables based on Iraqi actions that were highly unlikely. But the underlying idea is sound: to prioritize and focus on the most important work you can do, the most effective use of time spent in a dangerous place. Strong management is itself a key element of institutional support for people in such environments.

The military also has a culture of teamwork that is critical in stressful and dangerous circumstances. Time spent in bunkers is not the most pleasant bonding experience, but it seems to work. I felt a sense of responsibility to my colleagues in Iraq, who were all under relentless pressure, far from their families and working ridiculous hours. That knowledge outstripped any sense of urgency toward the queries from the National Security Council or the calls from people claiming they were about to brief the Secretary of Defense on whatever economic issue was the crisis of the day.

The stereotype of the brilliant diplomat working individually on an insightful, long telegram falls apart in a place like Iraq. Instead, what makes sense is agreeing to go to a meeting in a dangerous neighborhood because you trust your supervisor's judgment of its importance, and you know that if you don't agree to go, someone else

in your section will have to do it. The military trains and deploys groups together, and I can just imagine how this reinforces a sense of responsibility to each other, and increases their effectiveness.

The State Department and the U.S. military have different cultures for a reason: we have different mandates and strengths. I attended many meetings in Baghdad that would have been much more difficult if the U.S. had been represented by soldiers instead of diplomats. If State employees are going to be in war zones, however, our institution should learn from the military's experience in supporting and preparing its staff for work in dangerous environments.

In Baghdad, the safest place in the Green Zone is in the Republican Palace, which currently houses the embassy. But much of the most effective work is done outside the embassy, requiring difficult decisions on how to balance risk and effectiveness.

We all work with colleagues who have returned from Iraq, some still dealing with the effects of life there. Many of us support the work through service in neighboring countries, or do more work with fewer resources as people and funds are diverted to our mission in Iraq. Worldwide, we face similar decisions as to how to balance risk and effectiveness, as our embassies respond to real increases in risk levels with higher walls and smaller windows. These decisions will have consequences for our effectiveness, which ultimately can also affect the risk we face overseas.

I hope we are able to decide as an institution how to handle these challenges, and how we can best support each other in doing so. This past fall, we finally had a Service-wide discussion of the costs and benefits of directed assignments to Iraq. State Department leadership, AFSA and members of the Foreign Service should focus now on how best to support our colleagues assigned there.

Alyce Abdalla
FSI Student

“PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES,” IRAQ-STYLE

Hilarious as the 1987 movie of that title was, traveling in Iraq — whether by Blackhawks, C-130 aircraft or armored vehicles — is serious business. Breaking your glasses while suiting up in the 40-pound Individual Protective Vest because you absentmindedly left them in a pocket is just one of many hazards. Your riding

suit includes helmet, safety glasses, ear protection and Nomex flame-resistant gloves, which come in handy if your vehicle burns because of an IED or accident.

Operations sergeants are your travel agents and security forecasters, setting up your itinerary and providing wise travel counsel. Normally, 96 hours' notice is required to secure a seat, and flights canceled are not rebooked by your friendly airline. So travelers must be proactive and cultivate good interpersonal relations to get a new flight. My worst experience involved a 14-hour delay at the now-closed Griffin Helipad at Camp Victory when trying to fly to Fallujah on a Marine aircraft. After four canceled flights and sleeping on the floor, I finally got on a 4 a.m. flight.

Ground travel is normally frowned on for good reason, but my job requires daily runs to the provincial capital of Baqubah and weekly “outings” to Abu Sadia, Khalis and Muqdadiyah. While these trips are nearly always uneventful, two merit comment.

After we attended a meeting with the mayor of Khalis, the company commander asked about taking a “side trip” to see the leader of the area Concerned Local Citizens group. This excursion in a 22-ton Stryker took us into an area still being secured near the Tigris River. During the meeting, we heard shots from a CLC checkpoint. We rapidly vacated the rooftop of the Iraqi Army post and boarded the Stryker for what I thought was the trip back home. Instead, we offloaded at the checkpoint, where I stayed behind while the commander took his platoon and the CLC on a foot patrol to find the shooter.

The other memorable trip was from Muqdadiyah to Abu Sadia in an armored Humvee. After an IED disabled the Stryker ahead of us, the track commander gave the command to stop and report damage from what he believed to be a second IED, and instructed everyone to look for others. As it turned out, the single explosion was so loud that the reverberation echoed in the valley and had bounced back from behind us, sounding like a second explosion. Because I did not have the broken intercom headset on, tracking the sound was easier. It is important to speak in a confident voice at a time like that, and I informed the commander that there was only one explosion. I will always remember the clicking of the metal sprockets from the overhead gun turret scanning the road ditch, houses and fields for signs of a complex attack, a distinctive sound.

FOCUS

When we finally arrived in Abu Sadia, a normally quiet village where the Civil Affairs Team had made excellent progress, we had another surprise waiting for us: a protest. White Arabic-script banners hung from every wall and one across the gateway stated in English: "Coalition Forces Must Appease Our Demands to Stop Sit-In." Apparently an Iraqi element had come in the night and arrested several of the local sheiks' relatives. The meeting to resolve the protest was attended by the local battalion commander, the mayor and a single sheik. The rest of the city council boycotted the meeting, holding a sit-in by the gateway, during which one of our sergeants and a local policeman became involved in a very animated discussion. As soon as the main meeting broke up, we all hopped into our vehicle for the trip back. This was not a day to be left in town. Travelers must stay alert in Iraq.

David R. Speidel

Agriculture Adviser

Provincial Reconstruction Team Diyala

PINGITY, PINGITY, PINGITY

There I was, 500 feet up and moving at 125 knots per hour in a Blackhawk helicopter on my way back from Regional Embassy Office Al-Hillah to Embassy Baghdad, where I was an information management technical specialist. We were over the built-up area of south Baghdad when I started to hear *pingity, pingity, pingity*. Are we having engine trouble? No, some of the noises are coming from below.

I don't see any new ventilation ports opening in the roof, so I guess the Kevlar floor blanket is doing its job. *Pingity, pingity, pingity*. I started counting the seconds and was into the high teens before the sounds stopped. No one was hurt, and when we got back to the LZ Washington Helipad, the crew chief did a walkaround checking for damage.

It wasn't until I was back at the office that a soldier told me that I would have qualified for a combat action ribbon if I had returned fire. Since the biggest weapon authorized for State Department personnel is the



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strongly worded diplomatic note, I suppose that telling the person on the ground from overhead what I thought of his antisocial behavior constituted returning fire with the authorized weapon.

The other way to get around is to fly with Blackwater in a Huey (HU-1). Personally, I think they got the pilots from the same museum as the helicopters. One pilot showed me the air frame tag indicating that it was serial number 7. But if you are into roller coasters, then the trip can be a real blast. They fly those things at 120 knots, about 50 feet above the ground and any direction other than the one they are currently going in. They have to do pop-ups to get over power lines and always kick in a turn on the way back down on the other side. On one 45-minute trip, a contractor not only filled a barf-bag; he filled his helmet, as well.

Travel in Iraq outside of the international zone is definitely a unique experience.

*Gary C. Benack
Information Management Technical
Specialist/Telephone
Embassy Sofia*

TIPPING THE SCALES TOWARD STABILITY

Restoring Baghdad to its former status as a center for education and commerce will be a long struggle, one not designed for Western calendars. Re-knitting its cultural fabric requires that its physicians and lawyers, professors and technocrats, entrepreneurs and clergy come back home and again form a society with security, with citizens rebuilding their civic culture.

Serving as an Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader, I recall the lessons of my Peace Corps past. These emphasize supporting community development, building human resources, facilitating project planning and implementation, and allowing people to decide their own priorities. Our work, carried out by State, USAID and Department of Defense personnel, melds the strengths of our respective agencies as we jointly employ our skill sets. In short, it is expeditionary diplomacy combined with conflict zone development. We are the civilian surge, designed to complement the military efforts of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 10th Mountain Division, the unit in which we are embedded and rely on for life support, transportation and security.

Our E-PRT, which includes specialists in city plan-

ning, industry, governance, business and finance, and civil affairs, engages local officials and members of the country's nascent civil society. As catalysts for development, we pursue objectives that reflect the various spoken needs of Iraqis: strengthening local governance, promoting economic development and job creation, providing basic public services and infrastructure, and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, such as women, ethnic minorities and internally displaced persons. Projects — from start to finish — are most effective when they reflect the priorities of the Iraqi people.

We are also working in the area of reconciliation, which is any activity that steers the country toward cooperation and away from further conflict. We engage both Sunnis and Shias, holding meetings throughout city districts to build a common understanding of neighborhood issues and agreeing on tactics to address them. Security and services go together; we identify win-win situations and implement solutions. Squeezed between Islamic extremists and legitimate government structures, traditional authorities seek political space, with sheiks engaging us in dialog to improve neighborhood security and create employment opportunities for their people.

Baghdad is filled with the dispossessed: the internally displaced, widows and orphans, Palestinians, Christians, the unskilled and the unemployed. Even a small return of Iraqis from abroad, with their capital and know-how, would mark a turning point. Anchors for economic growth and improved governance, they could tip the balance toward stability. Over time, Iraq will put its gas and oil reserves increasingly to work to rebuild its infrastructure, educate and provide health care for its people and fashion the political and economic underpinnings of a successful, middle-class society. We recognize the complex nature of this process, and do what we can to support it. This is not only in the interests of Iraq, but our own national security interest as well.

*Eric P. Whitaker
E-PRT Leader, Baghdad*

Editor's Note: Eric Whitaker and his wife, Jonita, also an FSO, represented the Foreign Service at the State of the Union address on Jan. 28. They sat in the first lady's box at White House invitation. ■