

Insecure in Baghdad: Hazards of nation building

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Getting to Iraq requires a flight from neighboring Jordan that ends with a hair-raising flourish: a 60-degree “corkscrew” turn into the former Saddam International Airport. “We have a slight missile problem,” said the impish pilot, a white South African, explaining that the tricky maneuver is necessary to avoid getting hit by a ground-launched rocket.

Fellow Americans on the Amman-Baghdad route included optimistic Baptist missionaries (“Things are improving,” said one) and earnest U.S. government and think-tank representatives who spoke about good intentions and appearances (“We have to convince the Iraqis that we’re sincere,” I overhear someone say). All brandish bulletproof vests as they prepare to make the unnerving journey from the airport to the center of Baghdad.

Once in the city, visitors enter barricaded and sandbagged offices; helmets line the walls and armed guards protect the compounds. Hotel dining rooms facing the street have their curtains drawn—protection against shattered glass should there be an explosion outside.

This is what nation-building looks like: security concerns overwhelm nearly everything else. A one-minute walk across a Baghdad street seems as if it is done in slow motion; a 20-minute drive across the city can be interminable, especially if one gets stuck in traffic alongside a U.S. military convoy, the target of choice for Iraqi insurgents.

Comparisons with Vietnam are inevitable. Other locales also come to mind. Iraq has Colombia’s constant sense of threat, Afghanistan’s warweariness, Liberia’s fatigue. Perhaps most of all it resembles El Salvador in the early 1980s: it’s a place where the patina of imported idealism cannot mask the lawlessness and brutality. As in San Salvador two decades ago, bodies are discovered on median strips, and kidnappings, disappearances and assassinations are used to settle scores.

Alexander Christof, who heads the Baghdad operations of Architects for People in Need (APN), a Munich-based agency, compared the situation to Bosnia but added, “at least in Sarajevo you could see the risk and assess the threat.”

Christof and I spent a morning visiting Hai Tarek, an impoverished and predominately Shi’ite area in Baghdad where APN coordinates relief projects supported by U.S. churches and religious groups. I asked Christof to sum up conditions in Baghdad and he replied with a one-word epithet. He recounted the numerous incidents that have hobbled the work of aid agencies in Iraq: robberies, hand grenades lobbed into or near compounds, forcible entries and burglaries.

But these acts are not what Christof and others fear most. That distinction belongs to random acts of violence—bombings in particular. Such acts define the oft-cited danger of “being at the wrong place at the wrong time.” Given these conditions, it is something of a relief for Christof and his Iraqi colleagues to do the actual work of coordinating and distributing humanitarian assistance. And there is no doubt that such aid is welcome and necessary.

What is often ignored amid the justified attention to security, military casualties, the poor postwar planning by the Bush administration, and the strained moves toward establishing Iraqi democracy is that Iraqis continue to face a humanitarian crisis. The causes are many: a string of wars, years of international sanctions and longstanding neglect by the government of Saddam Hussein.

Neglect is certainly evident on the unpaved, muddy, garbage-strewn streets of Hai Tarek. An APN-run health clinic provides the only medical care in the area. Dozens of women wearing black chadors and bearing young children wait patiently for hours to see a physician.

Mazen Mohsen, a young Iraqi physician, is not surprised by such conditions. He told me about a host of continuing medical problems. These include the looting of hospitals, the flight of trained medical personnel to other countries and a drug shortage that is forcing Iraqis to look for medicines on their own. “People are put in the position of becoming drug dealers,” Mohsen said. Incredibly, a country once envied by its neighbors for its high level of medical care reportedly has only one cancer specialization center for a population of 26 million.

Is there any good news out of Iraq? It has become a cliché to say that Iraq is better off without Saddam Hussein. Talking to Iraqi educators and artists, one gets a fuller

sense of why. An Iraqi theater director spoke of discovering “my voice” since he has been free of a menacing, brutal government. “Iraq is now mine, it’s my country,” he told me.

But even the teachers, artists and intellectuals who probably gained the most from Hussein’s downfall are incredulous at what the U.S.-led administration in Iraq has not been able to do.

“If you give people electricity, petrol and jobs, then you should have nothing to worry about,” said one Iraqi educator. He expressed a common view that the U.S. coalition committed a grievous error in disbanding the Iraqi army, leaving thousands jobless and free to vent their rage.

Leaving Baghdad, I met a Montreal-based photojournalist who was involved in a nasty automobile accident that he feared was actually a kidnapping attempt gone awry. As we spoke at the airport, we heard three explosions. They were absorbed by the girders of the heavily fortified building (whose heavy steel-lined interiors are, almost surrealistically, made to resemble Iraq’s graceful date palm trees). No harm done. Around us, the contractors, journalists, soldiers and aid workers barely noticed.