

# Scenes from Baghdad: Iraqi Workers Supporting DCMA

by Ms. Lisa Anderson, Contract Administrator, DCMA Baghdad

من مشاهد بغداد: العاملین العراقيين يدعمون مكتب ادارة العقود/ وزارة الدفاع

Among the hundreds making the journey to the compound every day and affecting our lives in so many different ways are 10 of DCMA's bravest, our Iraqi Foreign Nationals.

**A**long the barricades of the presidential palace in Baghdad, Iraq, a long line of Iraqi citizens forms, waiting to enter the palace gates for work. They often wait hours before entering the main checkpoint to be cleared for entrance to the compound. In a city of high unemployment and few prospects, citizens often rise before

the sun, eager to find work, no matter how menial. Among the hundreds making the journey to the compound every day and affecting our lives in so many different ways are 10 of Defense Contract Management Agency's (DCMA's) bravest, our Iraqi Foreign Nationals.

DCMA's Iraqi employees are making a big difference in the Developmental Funds of Iraq (DFI) Oil for Food contract closeout project, managed by Army Maj. Scott Meehan, DCMA Orlando. They are a small band of enthusiastic people who come

from all parts of the city and represent Sunnis, Shi'ites and Christians, yet they know and trust each other implicitly.



Only three agreed to be interviewed for this story, and only if I promised not to take their photos or use their real names. Fear of retribution is a daily fact of life here, and it's not uncommon for workers to disappear and never return.

## Brad

Brad\* walks into a room, and you can feel the energy level rise immediately. Only in his early 20s, he has a great sense of humor and is eager to talk. His range of knowledge is boundless — he's an educated man. Graduating from Al-Mansour University College in Baghdad and applying for a Fulbright Scholarship<sup>1</sup> this past year, he represents the Iraq of tomorrow: optimistic, forward-thinking and hardworking.

\*Not his real name

(Top) Arabic translation for: "Scenes from Baghdad: Iraqi Workers Supporting DCMA"

(Above) Kadhmayn, a shrine in Baghdad, Iraq, that dates back to the beginning of the 16th century and is a popular pilgrimage site. (Photo by Mr. Adil Thabit, Multi-National Forces – Iraq)

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Brad's first encounter with Americans was working for Custer Battles, a business risk consultancy firm, at Baghdad International Airport. Serving as an administrative assistant, he worked for the Iraqi-American Chamber of Commerce and Industry, often serving as a liaison between foreign and Iraqi contractors on construction projects. In this high-profile position, he rubbed elbows with high-ranking ministry officials. But, after six months, he wanted to learn more about how democracy and the American government work. Brad heard from a friend that the U.S. Embassy's Human Resources Office was accepting résumés, so he applied for a job. After waiting 40 days while officials completed a security check, he came to work for an American named Ms. Patricia Boone. As he mentions her name, his face lights up with a big smile. "She taught me so much about Americans — she was a good person," he says.

Brad was then assigned to DCMA to do database entry for DFI contract closeout. Under the

tutelage of Maj. Meehan he quickly progressed from entering data, to organizing, researching and reconciling contracts and eventually to closing out contracts. Brad enjoys working for Maj. Meehan, saying, "He wants me to understand every step of the process and how it all fits together."

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While Brad's workdays are full of activity, he returns home every night to a dark house — electricity service is sporadic at best. Not only is his family unable to use their air conditioners, but there are health issues because they often do not have hot water with which to cook, bathe or wash. "Sometimes I wish I could stay here at work and enjoy the lighting, hot food and running water and not have to return to my neighborhood," he says. "Things are bad, but they will get better. America has helped us so much." He continues, "Under Saddam, we suffered a lot. The world will never really know what we went through, but the one thing we had was security. Now, we are free, but we are not

<sup>1</sup>The Fulbright Program was established in 1946 to increase mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and other countries through an exchange of persons, knowledge and skills. For more information, visit the Fulbright Program's Web site at <http://www.iie.org>.

**(Above)** The Qasr al Faw Palace, formerly belonging to Saddam Hussein, is located west of Baghdad, Iraq, and is set on an artificial lake and surrounded by Roman-style villas. (DCMA staff photo)

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safe. Giving us our security back would be the greatest thing for us now.”

Brad says his wish is to continue working for the U.S. in some capacity, either here or in America. “I want to keep going and learning about contracting as long as I can,” he says.

### Sharon

Makeup and stylish clothing give her the appearance of a modern woman, but her quiet demeanor betrays her — she’s still testing the waters to find her place in this new world.

Sharon\* is an optimistic young woman who graduated from Al-Mansour University College in Baghdad with a degree in management and systems analysis. She has worked for DCMA Iraq since April 14, 2005, doing a variety of administrative tasks within the DFI Oil for Food project, including checking contract documentation, scanning files and closing contracts. When asked about whether she enjoys her job here, she says, “This type of work is a continuation of what I did before as an executive secretary. We are being trained to take over this responsibility someday when it becomes part of the new Iraqi government,” adding, “Maj. Meehan is a great supervisor and friend. He has taught us so much about contracting.”



\*Not her real name

**(Above)** A balcony inside the Qasr al Faw Palace, formerly belonging to Saddam Hussein, located west of Baghdad, Iraq. (DCMA staff photo)

Sharon has a great desire to be part of her country’s transformation. Even with its current problems, she “love[s] everything about Iraq, even the trash,” she insists with a laugh. Sharon has a deep love for her country’s cultural delicacies, which include *tikka*, a dish made of barbequed cube steak, and *maskoof*, fish smoked in orange wood. “If you walk along the river you can smell it coming from all of the restaurants there,” she says. “There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world.”

When asked what she doesn’t like about Iraq during this time in her life, her answer is its lack of security. “Someone drives me to work every day,” she explains. “I worry all the time about being kidnapped or worse. I never know what is going on or what is going to happen. I can walk by a car where I live, and it will blow up.”

Sharon also says that the war has changed Iraqi culture. “People are so very kind,” she says, “but our situation has changed the souls of so many.” She said Iraqis were suppressed for so long that many seem to have a hard time dealing with having so much freedom at one time. “I see my people struggling with living in society,” she says. “Now they can do and say anything, and they must learn to control it better.”

Sharon, like so many others here, is angry about the insurgency and death of innocent victims. “Those people are not us. They don’t want us to succeed as a country, but we will.” She continues, “We waited so long for someone to help us. When Americans liberated Iraq, it was the greatest day in the world.”

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### Sam

Sam\* is a quiet man, often lost in deep thought, who loves Iraq for the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and the beautiful mountains. His piercing green eyes have pupils that turn into black pinpoints of intensity when he talks about issues that are near and dear to his heart — his country, his family. Sam graduated fourth in his class from Turth College in Baghdad with a bachelor's degree in English literature/language. He also attended agricultural college and is currently applying for his master's degree.

Although he has family in San Diego whom he would like to visit, Sam's first encounter with Americans was while working for his uncle, an Iraqi businessman, selling minutes on Thuraya cell phones to the soldiers. He would approach the soldiers, total strangers, and ask them if they wanted to buy airtime on his phone, waiting patiently while, one by one, they called home.

**In April 2005 he began work at DCMA Iraq doing contract administration and auditing. "This is what I like best because I like solving problems," says Sam.**

While selling minutes, Sam met a U.S. Army soldier by the name of Isaac, and they became friends. It wasn't long before Isaac asked Sam to work as an interpreter for the unit, which was conducting house-to-house searches. Sam said the pay was \$10 a day, or 30,000 dinars, which was a lot of money. Sam was living side-by-side with soldiers in field conditions, eating meals ready to eat, sleeping in tents and traveling by armored vehicle convoy — it was a life-changing experience. He learned there was more to the English language than he realized as he was taught phrases like, "You bet," "What's goin' on?" and "My bad." When his unit demobilized, the soldiers expressed their gratitude by giving Sam an



Army Commendation Medal for his work. "I still get e-mails from some of those guys in my old unit," he says.

Since working for the U.S. Army, Sam has also held several civilian jobs, including a position at the Iraqi Assistance Center, where he supervised the compensation center responsible for distributing reparation funding to anyone harmed by the U.S. Army operations. Sam left this job, saying, "It was very hard for me. Sad story after sad story — it really got to me." He then served as director of assistance, distributing funding at the Women's and Children's Issues Center, a non-government organization that acts as a liaison for international charities and organizations. In April 2005 he began work at DCMA Iraq doing contract administration and auditing. "This is what I like best because I like solving problems," says Sam.

However, Sam's enjoyment of his job is overshadowed by his deep concerns about security and the safety of his family and country. "First was the Iran/Iraq war, then Desert Storm, now this war," Sam says. He sees the future as a series of persistent problems among sects that is not going away soon. "We cannot change the hearts and minds of the insurgents," Sam explains. "They are all about 25, uneducated, using God as an excuse to kill innocent people. To stop this we have to change the mentality to reflect these times, not the times of thousands of years ago."

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(Above) The Qasr al Faw Palace, formerly belonging to Saddam Hussein, is located west of Baghdad, Iraq, and is set on an artificial lake and surrounded by Roman-style villas. (DCMA staff photo)