

Return to Baghdad

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My Baghdad trip starts with a visit the Sulaimaniyah Bazaar to buy a hijab and an abaya - a long black coat that shall cover me from head to toe. These will be necessary whenever I am to leave the highly secured Green Zone, which, home to embassies, media organisations, and government buildings, will be my base for the next fortnight.

It is my first visit to the capital since I left in May 2004. Apart from occasional stop-overs at Baghdad International Airport, I have restricted myself to the much safer Kurdish region in the north that borders with Turkey and Iran. In the relative safety of Sulaimaniyah, IWPR has set up its training center for journalists from all over Iraq.

In 2004, when I was working as a reporter in Iraq, I lived in a rented private home in the predominantly Christian, central Baghdad neighbourhood of Arasat. I roamed the streets on foot or in my own car I had brought over from Germany - a blue 1987 Volkswagen Passat station wagon.

I had no security guards, just a translator who would sit in the passenger seat and guide me through Baghdad's labyrinthine neighbourhoods while reading the local headlines to me. In pursuit of stories, I traveled from Zacho on the Turkish border to Basra down at the Shatt-al-Arab; from Baquba in the far east to Hit on the Euphrates river in Anbar in the far west.

Now, four years later, the only area of Baghdad considered "safe" comprises a mere 7.7 square kilometres.

The official name for the Green Zone - a patch of land on the west bank of the Tigris - is International Zone, or IZ. However, most people still use its old name, to contrast this sealed-off part of Baghdad with the Red Zone beyond the blast walls and the barbed wire.

I call it Badge City, because different coloured badges, issued by the US embassy, determine who you are and where you can go.

The red badge, which is issued to labourers working on one of many construction sites, grants access on foot, at certain times on certain days. The green or blue badges allow wearers to enter by car with up to 15 people, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

On my second day, I get my own badge from the military's Combined Press Information Centre. With it, I can walk around on my own, although I'm still thoroughly searched at each checkpoint and need an escort to enter most official buildings.

During my stay in Baghdad in 2003 and 2004, I barely ever ventured inside the Green Zone, except for the occasional press conference or to organise an embedded assignment with the military. Now, unfortunately, leaving it has become the exception.

Some journalists still stay at hotels in the Red Zone which have checkpoints of their own. Most media outlets with permanent bureaus have houses or compounds, resembling miniature versions of the Green

Zone. ABC, CNN, FOX News and NPR share an area called Media City right outside the IZ, while the BBC and Reuters are housed in a highly secured street near the Palestine Hotel.

Dropping in on a colleague spontaneously is next to impossible. Visits are planned well ahead, and when people come for dinner, they usually spend the night.

One of my friends has a yellow badge which entitles him to enter the airport to pick me up and escort me into the Green Zone. The infamous airport road - or Route Irish, as the military refers to it - seems calm as we drive the 12 km from the airport to the nearest entrance of the Green Zone.

We go straight to the Green Zone, through Checkpoint 12. My friend presents his yellow badge and says the magic word "Escort" which opens the gates to the Forbidden City to me. I am asked to leave behind my passport; we have to take out the batteries from our cell phones; get out of the car and leave open the trunk, hood, doors and then step behind a blast wall for a body search. Meanwhile, the car is checked with dogs trained to sniff for explosives, with mirrors and by manual inspection.

Twenty minutes later, the barrier opens and we can proceed.

The world I step into reminds me of a video game. Bizarre vehicles speed past - camouflaged tanks, trucks with mounted rapid fire guns, an SUV with signs that warn "Danger! Stay back 100 metres" on the rear. Black Hawks hover over my head.

Now, after most Coalition troops have withdrawn, the security business in Iraq is more global than ever. All official buildings have additional checkpoints, manned with contractors from all over the world.

While most people I knew four years ago have left the city and now live in Amman, Dubai or Damascus, I cannot wait to get out and have a look at the Baghdad I know. Or knew. I want to see how much of it is left.

So after three days in the bubble, I cover up and join my friends when they set off for work. We pass Checkpoint 12 to pick up my passport, and exit via the Airport Highway to Qadithiya, an area inhabited by many government officials.

Blast walls dominate the scene here too. I recognise the bridge I used to take to go to Mansur in west Baghdad, but it is closed.

On the left hand, I see the church where I attended a traditional Mandaean wedding in 2004. Most members of this ancient religious minority have now fled from Iraq, and I am surprised to see the church still seems to be open.

We enter the main city highway over a bridge that takes us to Jadiriya, where my friends drop me off at the Hamra Hotel. A popular hang out for journalists in 2003 and 2004, the hotel was hit by a suicide bomber in November 2005. While none of the journalists were hurt, 17 Iraqis in the neighbourhood were killed.

The look of the hotel has not changed. The cafeteria with its 70s decor, the courtyard pool, even the Hollywood swing is still there. But there is no crowd chatting away at the poolside. Although the hotel is full, it has a deserted air.

I meet with a Dutch friend in the cafeteria. She just got back from a visit to al-Mutanabi street, which for many decades was the most famous book market in town. It now lies in ruins after being bombed in March 2007.

"It's heartbreaking," she tells me. "Most stores are closed, there a very few people, and I did not feel safe to stay longer than 15 minutes."

We decide to have lunch at Rukn Jadiriyah, a restaurant across the street from the hotel. Both covered in black and with sunglasses, we cross the street with my friend's translator and enter the family section.

"You can speak," he tells us, "but please keep your voice down when you speak English."

Our translator orders the food, and although the waiter realises that we are foreigners, he pretends that we are regular guests. The place fills up, and two families sit at the next tables, but nobody really pays attention to us. At least from a distance the cover seems to work. Our food comes - Chicken Biryani, soup and appetizers - and we relax. After 40 minutes, we head back to the hotel.

Later, when my friends come and collect me, I ask them to take me on a little tour through Arasat and Karada. I want to see the neighbourhood I used to live in, the restaurants and shops nearby. The street is empty - it's Friday, the Islamic weekend. Scores of shops are empty, as many of the Christians who lived here have either left the country or moved to the north. We pass by the Syrian restaurant I always used to go to. It is still open and busy, but my friends don't want me to leave the car, so we drive on.

As we cruise through Baghdad, I feel like watching a convalescent patient who is slowly, very slowly recovering from a life-threatening disease. A patient of whose survival one cannot yet be sure.

The only street full of life is Karada Jauwa, a traditional trade and market place in downtown Baghdad lined with little Kebab stalls, bakeries, art galleries, cell phone shops and clothing stores. Apart from the numerous police checkpoints, Karada looks just like four years ago.

A week later, we go out for a drive, after having lunch at a friend's house. We visit Zeyouna, a mixed neighbourhood in east Baghdad where the landlords from my last stay used to live. They have left the country, and when I see their area, I understand why.

Rubai´a street back then was a lively street with coffee shops, restaurants, internet cafes and boutiques. Today, garbage burns on the street, and only a few families are out strolling.

We go back to Karada Jauwa, from where we will turn to re-enter the Green Zone. This street buzzes with life, teenagers and families enjoying the warm evening out. For a few moments, I hope that the ailing patient might fully recover.

We drive the short distance to Checkpoint 8 and wait to enter.

Two minutes later, a car speeds to the gate. A man gets out and yells, "Two casualties, quick, we have to go to Ibn Sina hospital!"

Through the open window, I see two men in torn uniforms, covered in blood, on the back seat.

"An IED [improvised explosive device] went off in Karada Jauwa," someone tells us. The American soldiers let the car in and escort it with a humvee to the military hospital in the Green Zone.

Only later at night when watching the news, we realise the full extent of the attack.

After the explosion, a suicide bomber walked into the crowd that had rushed in to help. At least 68 people were killed, and dozens were injured. We must have missed it by just a few minutes.

All of a sudden, the 7.7 square kms of Badge City do not seem so stifling after all.

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