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TAGS: PHUM, PREL, ASEC, AMGT, IZ
SUBJECT: Snapshots from the Office: Public
Affairs Staff Show Strains of Social Discord

SENSITIVE

1. (SBU) Beginning in March, and picking up in mid-May, Iraqi staff in the Public Affairs section have complained that Islamist and/or militia groups have been negatively affecting their daily routine. Harassment over proper dress and habits has been increasingly pervasive. They also report that power cuts and fuel prices have diminished their quality of life. Conditions vary by neighborhood, but even upscale neighborhoods such as Mansur have visibly deteriorated.

Women's Rights

2. (SBU) The Public Affairs Press Office has 9 local Iraqi employees. Two of our three female employees report stepped up harassment beginning in mid-May. One, a Shiite who favors Western clothing, was advised by an unknown woman in her upscale Shiite/Christian Baghdad neighborhood to wear a veil and not to drive her own car. Indeed, she said, some groups are pushing women to cover even their face, a step not taken in Iran even at its most conservative.

3. (SBU) Another, a Sunni, said that people in her middle-class neighborhood are harassing women and telling them to cover up and stop using cell phones (suspected channel to licentious relationships with men). She said that the taxi driver who brings her every day to the green zone checkpoint has told her he cannot let her ride unless she wears a headcover. A female in the PAS cultural section is now wearing a full abaya after receiving direct threats in May. She says her neighborhood, Adhamiya, is no longer permissive if she is not clad so modestly.

4. (SBU) These women say they cannot identify the groups that are pressuring them; many times, the cautions come from other women, sometimes from men who they say could be Sunni or Shiite, but appear conservative. They also tell us that some ministries, notably the Sadrism controlled Ministry of Transportation, have been forcing females to wear the hijab at work.

Dress Code for All?

5. (SBU) Staff members have reported that it is now dangerous for men to wear shorts in public; they no longer allow their children to play outside in shorts. People who wear jeans in public have come under attack from what staff members describe as Wahabis and Sadrists.

Evictions

6. (SBU) One colleague beseeched us to weigh in to help a neighbor who was uprooted in May from her home of 30 years, on the pretense of application of some long-disused law that allows owners to evict tenants after 14 years. The woman, who is a Fayli Kurd, says she has nowhere to go, no other home, but the courts give them no recourse to this new assertion of power. Such uprootings may be a response by new Shiite government authorities to similar actions against Arabs by Kurds in other parts of Iraq. (NOTE: An Arab newspaper editor told us he is preparing an extensive survey of ethnic cleansing, which he said is taking place in almost every Iraqi province, as political parties and their militias are seemingly engaged in tit-for-tat reprisals all over Iraq. One editor told us that the KDP is now planning to set up tent cities in Irbil, to house Kurds being evicted from Baghdad.)

Power Cuts and Fuel Shortages a Drain on Society

7. Temperatures in Baghdad have already reached 115 degrees. Employees all confirm that by the last week of May, they were getting one hour of power for every six hours without. That was only about four hours of power a day for the city. By early June, the situation had improved slightly. In Hai al Shaab, power has recently improved from one in six to one in three hours. Other staff

report similar variances. Central Baghdad neighborhood Bab al Mu'atham has had no city power for over a month. Areas near hospitals, political party headquarters, and the green zone have the best supply, in some cases reaching 24 hours. One staff member reported that a friend lives in a building that houses a new minister; within 24 hours of his appointment, her building had city power 24 hours a day.

8. (SBU) All employees supplement city power with service contracted with neighborhood generator hookups that they pay for monthly. One employee pays 7500 ID per ampere to get 10 amperes per month (75,000 ID = USD 50/month). For this, her family gets 6 hours of power per day, with service ending at 2 am. Another employee pays 9000 ID per ampere to get 10 amperes per month (90,000 = USD 60). For this, his family gets 8 hours per day, with service running until 5 am.

9. (SBU) Fuel lines have also taxed our staff. One employee told us May 29 that he had spent 12 hours on his day off (Saturday) waiting to get gas. Another staff member confirmed that shortages were so dire, prices on the black market in much of Baghdad were now above 1,000 Iraqi dinars per liter (the official, subsidized price is 250 ID).

Kidnappings, and Threats of Worse

10. (SBU) One employee informed us in March that his brother in law had been kidnapped. The man was eventually released, but this caused enormous emotional distress to the entire family. One employee, a Sunni Kurd, received an indirect threat on her life in April. She took extended leave, and by May, relocated abroad with her family.

Security Forces Mistrusted

11. (SBU) In April, employees began reporting a change in demeanor of guards at the green zone checkpoints. They seemed to be more militia-like, in some cases seemingly taunting. One employee

asked us to explore getting her press credentials because guards had held her embassy badge up and proclaimed loudly to nearby passers-by "Embassy" as she entered. Such information is a death sentence if overheard by the wrong people.

Supervising a Staff At High Risk

12. (SBU) Employees all share a common tale of their lives: of nine employees in March, only four had family members who knew they worked at the embassy. That makes it difficult for them, and for us. Iraqi colleagues called after hours often speak Arabic as an indication they cannot speak openly in English.

13. (SBU) We cannot call employees in on weekends or holidays without blowing their "cover." Likewise, they have been unavailable during multiple security closures imposed by the government since February. A Sunni Arab female employee tells us that family pressures and the inability to share details of her employment is very tough; she told her family she was in Jordan when we sent her on training to the U.S. in February. Mounting criticisms of the U.S. at home among family members also makes her life difficult. She told us in mid-June that most of her family believes the U.S. -- which is widely perceived as fully controlling the country and tolerating the malaise -- is punishing populations as Saddam did (but with Sunnis and very poor Shiites now at the bottom of the list). Otherwise, she says, the allocation of power and security would not be so arbitrary.

14. (SBU) Some of our staff do not take home their American cell phones, as this makes them a target. Planning for their own possible abduction, they use code names for friends and colleagues and contacts entered into Iraq cell phones. For at least six months, we have not been able to use any local staff members for translation at on-camera press events.

15. (SBU) More recently, we have begun shredding documents printed out that show local staff surnames. In March, a few staff members approached us to ask what provisions would we make for them if we evacuate.

Sectarian Tensions Within Families

16. Ethnic and sectarian faultlines are also becoming part of the daily media fare in the country. One Shiite employee told us in late May

that she can no longer watch TV news with her mother, who is Sunni, because her mother blamed all government failings on the fact that Shiites are in charge. Many of the employee's immediate family members, including her father, one sister, and a brother, left Iraq years ago. This month, another sister is departing for Egypt, as she imagines the future here is too bleak.

Frayed Nerves and Mistrust in the Office

17. (SBU) Against this backdrop of frayed social networks, tension and moodiness have risen. One Shiite made disparaging comments about the Sunni caliph Othman which angered a Kurd. A Sunni Arab female apparently insulted a Shiite female colleague by criticizing her overly liberal dress. One colleague told us he feels "defeated" by circumstances, citing the example of being unable to help his two year old son who has asthma and cannot sleep in stifling heat.

18. (SBU) Another employee tells us that life outside the Green Zone has become "emotionally draining." He lives in a mostly Shiite area and claims to attend a funeral "every evening." He, like other local employees, is financially responsible for his immediate and extended families. He revealed that "the burden of responsibility; new stress coming from social circles who increasingly disapprove of the coalition presence, and everyday threats weigh very heavily." This employee became extremely agitated in late May at website reports of an abduction of an Iraqi working with MNFI, whose expired Embassy and MNFI badges were posted on the website.

Staying Straight with Neighborhood Governments and the 'Alasa'

19. (SBU) Staff members say they daily assess how to move safely in public. Often, if they must travel outside their own neighborhoods, they adopt the clothing, language, and traits of the area. In Jadriya, for example, one needs to conform to the SCIRI/Badr ethic; in Yusufiya, a strict Sunni conservative dress code has taken hold. Adhamiya and Salihiya, controlled by the secular Ministry of Defense, are not conservative. Moving inconspicuously in Sadr City requires Shiite conservative dress and a particular lingo. Once-upscale Mansur district, near the Green Zone, according to one employee, by early June was an "unrecognizable ghost town."

20. (SBU) Since Samarra, Baghdadis have honed

these survival skills. Vocabulary has shifted to reflect new behavior. Our staff -- and our contacts -- have become adept in modifying behavior to avoid "Alasas," informants who keep an eye out for "outsiders" in neighborhoods. The Alasa mentality is becoming entrenched as Iraqi security forces fail to gain public confidence.

21. (SBU) Our staff report that security and services are being rerouted through "local providers" whose affiliations are vague. As noted above, those who are admonishing citizens on their dress are not known to the residents. Neighborhood power providers are not well known either, nor is it clear how they avoid robbery or targeting. Personal safety depends on good relations with the "neighborhood" governments, who barricade streets and ward off outsiders. The central government, our staff says, is not relevant; even local mukhtars have been displaced or coopted by militias. People no longer trust most neighbors.

22. (SBU) A resident of upscale Shiite/Christian Karrada district told us that "outsiders" have moved in and now control the local mukhtars, one of whom now has cows and goats grazing in the streets. When she expressed her concern at the dereliction, he told her to butt out.

Comment

23. (SBU) Although our staff retain a professional demeanor, strains are apparent. We see that their personal fears are reinforcing divisive sectarian or ethnic channels, despite talk of reconciliation by officials. Employees are apprehensive enough that we fear they may exaggerate developments or steer us towards news that comports with their own worldview. Objectivity, civility, and logic that make for a functional workplace may falter if social pressures outside the Green Zone don't abate.

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