



## THE SPARK OF REBELLION: EXERCISING THEIR OPTIONS

[Lamar Cravens](#)

April 9, 2014 · in [Commentary](#)



*Editor's Note: War on the Rocks is proud to publish this series on the tenth anniversary of the events they describe in 2004. This is part one of five.*

The morning of Sunday, April 4, 2004 began like any other in occupation-era Iraq. The forecast called for clear skies and rising temperatures, with none of the dust storms that could choke the sun and cover everything in a faint orange talc, and none of the blast furnace heat that made the summers unbearable. But then, predicting the weather in Iraq took very little talent. Every new day resembled the one just passed, and with nothing distinguishing them except the steady rise in temperature, the forecast for every day was sunny and hot. A real talent, however was needed for predicting the political weather, for while everyone could feel the rhetoric heating up, none felt the storm coming. If they had, they would have seen that April the Fourth would become more than just another date on the calendar. It would be the date that Iraq began its precipitous descent into eventual civil war, the date when the Bush administration's benevolent protestations of freeing Iraqis from dictatorship started to unravel and the date when America's model of international development assistance was irreparably changed.

On that date, while the Marines prepared to fight Saddam loyalists and jihadists in Fallujah, in the Sunni Triangle to the north of Baghdad, a parallel insurrection broke out in the predominantly Shia provinces south of the capital. By midnight on Sunday, April 4, the expats living and working within communities in Kut, Najaf, Diwaniyah and Kerbala provinces to establish institutions of local government and restore basic services had abandoned their offices and residences and fled to their nearest military base. America's foreign policy apparatus, in the main, consists of three complementary parts: *defense* – the Armed Forces, led by the Department of Defense; *diplomacy* – the embassies run by the Department of State; and *development* – the assistance projects led by the United States Agency for International Development. Each of these has its own importance and each receives resources from Congress in that order of priority. The relationship between them during America's direct administration of Iraq was unusual, however, with career diplomats who ran Iraq's occupation government, the Coalition Provisional Authority (or 'CPA') reporting ultimately to the Secretary of Defense, and USAID, albeit an independent agency created by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, reporting to the CPA. Also unusual was the extent to which the occupation depended on 'unofficial Americans' and even non-Americans — from troop contingents from lesser powers cobbled together into a 'coalition of the willing,' to private security companies escorting nominal diplomats, food, supplies and quite literally crates of cash, to the seemingly limitless number of international contractors presumed to have expertise in all the many systems Iraq lacked.

At the time, the largest development contract that USAID had was the Local Governance Program (or 'LGP'). The project had been designed and competed before hostilities even began and awarded on March 24, 2003, a full 3 weeks before Baghdad fell. Just like the subsequent administration of Iraq, LGP was easier to imagine than it was to implement. Under the general 'strategic objective' that 'Iraqi Citizens Benefit from Improved Local Governance,' USAID imposed on LGP a standard list of expected results, including 'increased access to basic services,' 'more transparent and participatory local government processes,' 'more effective and efficient local service delivery,' and 'more effective advocacy and participation of civil society.' It also assumed that the project would be able to accomplish these expected results in an environment of cooperation with 'liberated' (and presumably grateful) Iraqis. That assumption, however, turned out to be more complicated than imagined.

By the terms of the award between USAID and LGP's implementer, RTI International of Raleigh, North Carolina, the civilian employees of the project were only to be deployed to an undefined 'permissive environment.' But the project struggled to fill expat positions, as intermittent violence following the military's cakewalk into Baghdad in April of 2003 made it harder and harder to recruit the usual development types. With a contract calling for a specific 'Level of Effort' however and CPA head and self-described 'proconsul' Paul Bremer calling for more international civilian expertise, the

priority of the project's first year seemed to be hiring, deploying and assigning expats to field offices, whether 'permissive' or not. As the project neared its one year anniversary, it employed 221 expatriates, 145 of them Americans, with the balance hailing from such dissimilar places as the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Haiti, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Poland, Norway, Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Tajikistan, Canada, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Kenya, Tanzania, Gambia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, the Philippines, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Those 221 expats were resident in 17 of Iraq's 18 provinces, in addition to an outsized headquarters in the Green Zone in Baghdad, the fortified area formed by a bend in the Tigris River that had served as the administrative center of successive government regimes. Combined with and the support of Iraqi employees who numbered almost 3,000, this made LGP the single largest instance of U.S. foreign development assistance since the Marshall Plan.

With the nominally independent USAID subordinated to the CPA and all its new funding in country at the mercy of a slow moving Project Management Office (or PMO) run by the Department of Defense, LGP was practically the development agency's only show in town. Until it could let additional contracts, it loaded LGP with everything that it normally divided between multiple contractors, giving the project a 'soup to nuts' quality and making it unwieldy to manage. By exercising their option for a second implementation year, USAID imagined LGP fitting into a normal portfolio of specialist projects, each with a narrow remit and a manageable budget.

On March 16, 2004 USAID had formally notified the project implementer, RTI, that it was exercising its option to extend the LGP contract for a second year. It would, however, also be reducing the dollar amount of the contract by 40%, as it imagined the need for the project's assistance would diminish after the CPA returned sovereignty to Iraqis at the end of June. The good and the bad of that notice – that USAID would be continuing the project but not continuing its first year level of funding – forced the LGP management team to consider changes to the project's concept of operations and staffing pattern. On March 17, RTI's Senior Vice President and lead author of the proposal that had won the contract for the firm sent out a message to all staff informing them that:

The exercise of the option is not without pain of course. All of you are aware that there is a significant budget reduction accompanying the option year. Early this month as you know we had to implement a painful reduction in force for just over 30 of our staff. Looking at the schedule of remaining employees and the date that each of you will reach the end of a year in Iraq, it appears now that we are at a staffing level at which natural attrition will keep us within budget. Nothing is static out here, so we cannot

assure that no further staffing changes will be required, but at this point in time the prospect is good that we will not have to go through that process again.

He could not have known how wrong he was.

The project's senior managers (its 'Chief of Party' and 'Deputy Chief of Party' in USAID speak) worried about the consequences of unmanaged 'attrition' on staff morale and their ability to deliver on the ambitious plan of work USAID was expecting in their second year. They distributed a template that USAID had suggested they use to re-scope the project, and on March 19 they invited all of LGP's Team Leaders to a meeting at the Baghdad 'Ishtar' Sheraton to discuss the changes and the new expectations being placed on them. In place of the 'ski slope' model of steadily declining staff numbers assumed by the RTI Senior Vice President, they wanted a managed 'stair step' model that took an immediate big step down, followed by a second after the CPA quit Iraq that June, while still leaving the project with a stable number of experts for the remaining 9 months of its term. In the end, neither model would be realized.

March 2004 had seen an uptick in violence, with the number of incidents in the first three weeks of the month exceeding the number in the past three months combined. It began with car bomb attacks across Baghdad and Karbala during the annual Ashura pilgrimage, which commemorates the death in 680 of Hussein, the grandson of the founder of Islam, at the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Battle of Karbala that permanently divided the Muslim world between Sunni and Shia (and is the annual excuse for Sunni zealots to murder Shia whom they consider to be apostates). In the attacks that year, over 100 pilgrims had died in Karbala alone.

Then on the evening of March 9, American lawyer and women's rights advocate Fern Holland, her Iraqi assistant, Salwa Oumashi, and former U.S. Marine Lt. Col. Bob Zangas (who returned to Iraq as a civilian) were killed at a false checkpoint on the Karbala to Baghdad Road. Also, while it did not happen in Iraq, the three bombs that ripped through the Madrid Metro at 7:30 a.m. on March 11 likely caused the fall of the Conservative government and the election of the Socialist one on the 16<sup>th</sup> which promptly resolved to withdraw Spanish forces from the Multinational Force that had accompanied American troops into Iraq. And on March 20, during the day, rockets fell on the Green Zone, which at the time housed the offices of the CPA, USAID and the headquarters of LGP. One of those rockets landed outside the USAID Director's office in the Convention Center, and another hit

the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Sheraton 'Ishtar' Hotel, where the project had resident staff and planned for its Team Leaders' meeting.

These incidents were rehearsed by the LGP National Director of Operations in a briefing to its Executive Team on March 24, once the Chief of Party had returned from a periodic rest break. The 'Ops Officers' in each of the project's four Regional Service Centers – Baghdad, Erbil, Basrah and Hillah – called into a secure number and reported on the security conditions in each of their locations. All retired military, they followed a 'traffic signal' model of threat analysis, reporting that the predominantly Kurdish provinces of the North were 'green,' while Mosul in Ninewa province was 'red' and the rest of the country was between 'green' and 'amber.' They concluded that the project's physical locations were generally 'in good shape' before shifting their attention from 'site security' to 'movement security,' their concern being the project's vulnerability on the roads.

Lamenting their circumstances, the National Director of Ops informed the RTI Chief of Staff and its Senior Vice President in North Carolina that of 3 'factory armored' Mercedes G-Class SUVs, only 1 was operational, and of 4 'up armored' GMC Suburbans, likewise they could only drive 1, since the suspension systems were not designed to take the additional weight of the armoring. Complicating matters was the difficulty of getting a broken armored vehicle repaired: a crane had to be ordered that could hoist the vehicle onto a flatbed truck, which then had to be driven to a service center in Kuwait. Under the best of circumstances, that trip could take 10 hours for the truck to clear the Green Zone, drive down the Baghdad to Basrah highway and cross the border. The increasing violence in Iraq had increased the demands on the company in Texas that did the up armoring. So, of the 12 armored cars ordered in the project's first year, only 7 had made it to Iraq, and of that 7, only 2 could then be driven. An additional three new ones sat in Kuwait, in anticipation of an overland tour of project sites by the then president of RTI, her husband and their Chief of Staff, scheduled for April 16-19. Until then, project staff had no recourse other than to travel in 'soft skinned' vehicles, with the Home Office in North Carolina insisting that at least they be obligated to wear recently acquired 'ballistic vests' before traveling.

Following that meeting, Phil Hudicourt, the Regional Security Officer in Hillah sent a notice to all expats in the South Central Region:

Effective today the use of vest with plates is mandatory for all movements when traveling in a non-armored car. PSDs will be instructed not to move the cars until all pers have their vest on.

Do not compromise safety for comfort.

So it was in Kevlar helmets and mostly new vests with metal plate inserts that the Team Leaders traveled to Baghdad in their soft skinned SUVs for their meeting at the Baghdad Sheraton on March 31 and April 1.

Just as each of the project's 4 regions had an Ops Officer, each had a Regional Team Leader, and the structure was repeated within the Provincial Governance Teams. The South Central Regional Team Leader at the time was University of Utah professor emeritus Dr. James Mayfield. A noted scholar on the Middle East, he had written a book on local government in Egypt, and knew the project's Chief of Party from when they had worked in Cairo, nearly 30 years before. Through his church, Dr. Mayfield had recruited a handful of city managers into the project, the most prominent of whom was Albert E. Haines. Because his most recent assignment had been the nation's 4th largest city – Houston, Texas – Al had been made Team Leader of the Local Governance Team for Baghdad.

Dr. Mayfield himself, though, bore responsibility for 5 provincial offices in the Shia heartland. From his office in the South Central Regional Service Center or RSC in Hillah (the provincial seat of Babil province), Dr. Mayfield oversaw project activities in the South Central provinces of Hillah, Diwaniyah, Najaf, Karbala and Kut, and he assigned and managed the Team Leaders there. A lawyer and experienced international development consultant with an especially relevant background in personnel issues, Don Seufert served as Team Leader for Babil Province, and his team was co-located with the RSC in Hillah. His longtime friend and business associate, former city manager Howard Edwards, served as the Team Leader in Kut, Wasit Province which sat on Iraq's eastern border with Iran. Gabriel Abraham, an Ethiopian American and urban planner who had worked with the Egyptian government to increase the efficiency of tourist traffic in the Valley of the Kings, served as the Team Leader in Najaf. A Sri Lankan-born, Oxford-educated human rights lawyer and legislative specialist, Vijaya "VJ" Samaraweera served as the project's Team Leader in Karbala. And only 2 weeks before, Dr. Mayfield had elevated to the position of Team Leader in Diwaniyah a Haitian American who had recently retired from the Marines. Arnoux Abraham had spent the previous winter in a tent in Iraq's northern desert. At the moment of his promotion within LGP, Arnoux could not have imagined that his most important task as Team Leader would be to lead his men out of Iraq.

At the end of March, Gabriel Abraham had to take an emergency leave of absence to tend to his ailing father, and Don Seufert sent a public finance specialist named Bruce Hutchins from the RSC in Hillah to assume temporary leadership of the team in Najaf. And to assist Bruce, Don dispatched a Palestinian Arab named Nabil Razouk to be the provincial Ops Officer in Najaf. Nabil had only arrived in Iraq a few days before. In making the assignment, Don counseled Nabil that the additional responsibility of the Ops position would be good for his career.

In addition to an expat Provincial Team Leader and Ops Officer, each of the provincial teams in South Central had other expatriate experts on staff, though their numbers varied, and each provincial Local Governance Team employed about 100 Iraqis in technical, support and security roles. They were capable of keeping project activities going while their Team Leaders discussed work plans and staffing patterns for their second implementation year at the Ishtar Sheraton in Baghdad.

Had they been able to predict the future as easily as they could predict the weather, they would have seen that a coming storm would frustrate their plans.

Photo credit: [Radio Nederland Wereldomroep](#)



## THE SPARK OF REBELLION: MAN PLANS, MOQTADA LAUGHS

[Lamar Cravens](#)

April 10, 2014 · in [Commentary](#)

*Editor's Note: War on the Rocks is proud to publish this series on the tenth anniversary of the events they describe in 2004. This is part two of five. Read part one [here](#).*

On March 31 and April 1, 2004, the Team Leaders of the USAID-funded Local Governance Program (LGP) gathered at the Baghdad 'Ishtar' Sheraton for what none of them could know was the last time. As the government agency responsible for the development assistance projects that complement the Defense Department's military efforts and the State Department's diplomacy, USAID had designed and competed the contract before the invasion of Iraq began and had awarded the project to North Carolina-based RTI a full three weeks before the fall of Baghdad. The event marking that fall – the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square – was approaching on April 9, and the Ishtar Sheraton overlooked that square.

LGP was the largest development assistance project in USAID's history. Along with the Coalition Provisional Authority (or CPA), which served as America's civilian administration of Iraq, it was part of the largest effort at rebuilding a foreign country since the end of the Second World War. As it approached its one year anniversary, LGP employed 221 expatriate staff from around the world and close to 3000 Iraqis, making it the single biggest employer of Iraqis outside of the Iraqi government.

It operated Local Governance Teams in 17 of Iraq's 18 provinces, as well as a sizeable headquarters inside Baghdad's Green Zone. In exercising its option to extend it for a second year, USAID had imposed a 40% budget cut on the project, but even so, that second implementation year alone was worth up to \$154 million. Because USAID's funding in Iraq was funneled through a Project Management Office within the CPA, it added time to an already time-consuming procurement process and so encouraged "mission creep" (it being easier for the agency to add to LGP's portfolio than to let new contracts). The cut anticipated the end of the CPA that June and the restoration of USAID's normal way of doing business, including a broad portfolio of projects implemented by a variety of contractors. So the narrowing of the project's focus entailed in the cuts was welcomed by the Team Leaders, even if it meant a concomitant reorganization of its staff. Unknown to any of the Team Leaders at that meeting – least of all the leaders of provincial governance teams in the project's South Central region – was how circumstances beyond their control would reorganize the project without them.

The meetings went well, with the Team Leaders liking the work plan template intended to give the project an overall coherence and their teams the flexibility to propose activities appropriate to their provinces. And most of all, the work planning sessions offered the Team Leaders the opportunity to determine their own destiny within a common framework, and (they thought) eliminate the randomness and unpredictability of LGP's first year.

Perhaps with a better appreciation of what was possible, the Team Leaders left that meeting unusually and almost universally optimistic. Al Haines, the leader of the Local Governance Team for the capital of Baghdad, noted in his journal that: "I thought it went very well, considering much of the uncertainty and lack of organization and direction that existed before."

The Team Leader in Karbala, Vijaya Samaraweera, summed up the consensus view of his South Central colleagues once he had returned to his office, expressing his "congratulations on a successful meeting." And after the newly appointed Team Leader to Diwaniyah, Arnoux Abraham, had returned to his team and reported on the meeting, its seniormost member, a normally taciturn and even skeptical civil engineer named Steve Blanchard, wrote in his journal: "Find myself under the intoxication of believing this mission will succeed."

Following the template distributed at the Team Leaders meeting, the teams were expected to complete their work plans and return them to headquarters by Sunday, April 4. Most were never

submitted because on the day they were due, Hell broke loose and Iraq caught fire. The pressure had been building for days.

On the 31st, the first day of the Team Leaders' meeting, four members of the State Department's security provider, Blackwater USA, were ambushed and killed in Fallujah. The bodies of [Scott Helvenston](#), Jerko Zovko, Wesley Batalona and Michael Teague were then burned, dragged through the streets and hung from the supports of a bridge crossing the Euphrates. Images of jubilant Iraqis celebrating in front of the mutilated bodies spread through the Internet and the press, inflaming public opinion in the United States and directly precipitating the First Marine Expedition's assault in response, what has come to be known as the First Battle of Fallujah.

That battle began after dark on the night of April 4, but with the city cordoned off, an attack imminent and the attention of the U.S. military diverted, followers of the rabidly anti-American cleric Moqtada as Sadr seized upon America's distraction to open a second, Shia front.

Sadr, the son of a prominent Shia scholar allegedly murdered on the orders of Saddam had yet to finish his religious education, but he had already long been a thorn in the side of the Coalition. Using his position as the scion of a famous family and his access to microphones during Friday prayers, Sadr had emerged in the fall of 2003 as Iraq's staunchest opponent of the American occupation. In addition, the 30 year-old "boy imam" had founded a private militia of loyalists named after the "messiah" of the Shia denomination's end times theology, the Army of the Mahdi (*Jaysh al Mahdi* in Arabic, or "JAM"). On March 28, fed up with Sadr's constant haranguing, CPA Administrator L. Paul Bremer issued an order shuttering Sadr's mouthpiece newspaper, *Al Hawsa*. In response, in an especially bellicose sermon on Friday, April 2, the boy imam urged his fighters to resist. The subsequent arrest of his lieutenant, Mustafa Yacoubi, provoked further outrage, and by the time Sunday the 4<sup>th</sup> rolled around, Sadr loyalists, inflamed by what they considered an affront not just to their leader but to Islam itself, gathered in Najaf.

In the often derided "coalition of the willing" the U.S. led combat operations in places like Fallujah while lesser powers maintained order in places that had been pacified. So in the initially welcoming and predominantly Shia South and South Central regions of the country, the British oversaw the southern port of Basrah, the Italians looked after Nassiriyah, the Ukrainians were given responsibility for Kut in Wasit province on the border with Iran, the Poles had responsibility for Karbala, and the Spanish looked after sleepy, rural Diwaniyah and the center of Shia authority, Najaf.

But if the southern half of the country had welcomed the invasion and were initially grateful to the Coalition for ridding them of Saddam, Sadr and his followers were ingrates or opportunists, and on Sunday, April 4, protests by his partisans in Najaf quickly escalated into a confrontation with Spanish troops. Each fired on the other in a melee that killed at least one Coalition soldier and perhaps as many as 20 Iraqi protesters. By the time those shots were fired, an open Shia rebellion was already well underway.

The South Central teams were managed from a Regional Service Center (or RSC) in Hillah, Babil Province, so named for its proximity to the ancient ruins at Babylon. The provinces in that region included the Shia holy sites in Karbala and Najaf, from where Sadr ran his organization, along with neighboring Diwaniyah and Kut. The Regional Team Leader in the RSC was Jim Mayfield, professor emeritus at the University of Utah who had appointed the men to the provincial offices, each of which consisted of a technical Team Leader and provincial Operations Officer. In Hillah the Team Leader was Don Seufert. Don's best friend and long-time business associate, Howard Edwards, served as Team Leader in Kut. Dr. Mayfield had appointed recently retired Marine, Arnoux Abraham to the position of Team Leader in Diwaniyah, and "VJ" Samaraweera was the Team Leader in Karbala. When Dr. Mayfield had been on R&R, and the official Team Leader for Najaf had been out of the country on emergency leave, Don, as acting Regional Team Leader had appointed a public finance advisor named Bruce Hutchins to be Acting Team Leader in Najaf. To assist him with operational issues, Don had also sent along a newly arrived Palestinian named Nabil Razouk. All would have to be evacuated as Iraq caught fire, reminding the project's headquarters (then waiting for second year work plans) of an old expression: "Man plans and God laughs."

In Kut, the Mahdi Army attacked police stations and fired on the CPA compound, which was located in a hotel overlooking the Tigris River that ran through the middle of the city. In Karbala, they similarly attempted to overrun government facilities. In Sadr City, (a predominantly Shia slum in Baghdad that was once called Saddam City but, after the invasion, was renamed after the boy imam's murdered father), Sadr loyalists took 3 police stations, prompting the newly arrived First Cavalry Division of U.S. Army to attempt to take them back. In doing so, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav came under extraordinarily heavy fire, losing eight soldiers in the process, while an additional 50 were injured before fighting died down and the police stations were returned to Iraqi control. These incidents only fanned the fires of resistance and encouraged Sadr's armed acolytes to turn their attention to softer targets.

Although the National Director of Operations of the Local Governance Program had reported only days before that the project's residences and offices were 'generally in good shape,' the expats and

Iraqis employed by LGP were considerably more vulnerable than CPA locations or military bases, living as they did within communities, usually in large Iraqi family homes that typically had multiple bedrooms to accommodate several generations sharing the same roof. Even though they had armed guards, those guards were most often local men hired more as a means of generating employment than on the basis of their military skill. Thanks to years of war and sanctions – as well as, especially, Saddam’s suppression of the Shia rebellion after American forces expelled Iraqi troops from Kuwait in the 1990s – whole communities needed jobs and a whole generation of young men needed the dignity of earning a living. So the project bet on a kind of soft protection, assuming that by giving young men employment, it would get loyalty in return (and reliable “intelligence” of any threats brewing in the area).

This “soft security” posture was applied with special care in Karbala. After a car bomb was detonated in the governor’s office complex on December 27, 2003, the Team Leader relocated the project’s offices and accommodations to a site outside of the claustrophobic city center. Through consultations with their neighbors, patient explanation of the focus of the project on restoring basic services, and a respectful attitude (as well as through the confidence and connections of some of the Iraqi staff), Vijaya had managed to win over his neighbors and continued to meet with them periodically to resolve differences and seek their advice. In the main that advice consisted of a request to keep the residences from appearing to be military compounds, specifically dissuading the team from erecting guard towers or sandbagging their garden walls. VJ’s accommodative approach of being a good neighbor put him at odds with his expatriate security advisor and forced him to make a choice – either listen to his expat advisor or listen to his Iraqi one.

Ali had been assigned to Vijaya from the Regional Support Center in Hillah (at a time when there had been no expat personal security at all) and had been with him ever since. The trust they had developed made VJ’s choice an easy one. Besides, with family connections in Karbala and with the ability to pass anonymously in Iraqi society, Ali had advantages that no foreign security officer could have, including, most notably, the ability to gather intelligence about the general security climate from sitting in cafés and going to the mosque. And so VJ put his life, along with the lives of his two Australian bodyguards and that of his Ops Officer, a Bangladeshi national and retired Army Major, Firoz Siddiqi, into Ali’s hands.

Separately, Vijaya sought the guidance of the Governor and the Chief of Police on what posture the project should adopt for the Arba’een commemoration, which follows Ashura by 40 days and, that year, would fall on Saturday, April 10. Immediately upon returning from the Team Leaders’ meeting on April 1, he had contacted the governor’s office, and on the morning of Sunday, April 4, met

personally with the Governor and the Chief of Police. Their talk centered on the likelihood of another attack by Sunni extremists on Shia pilgrims. Because of the car bombs that had killed over 100 Shia pilgrims walking their way to Karbala on March 2, the three of them feared a repeat of the Ashura bombings and so resolved that the most prudent course of action for LGP was to avoid movement and close its offices in observation of the Shia day of mourning a week later. More worried about Sunni on Shia violence, none of them anticipated any trouble from Sadr, and comfortable with their decision and unaware of the tension in Najaf, Vijaya returned to his office unable to know that it would be for the last time. Later that same day, as Sadr's militia attacked Iraqi, CPA and LGP positions across the south, it would be Ali who urged VJ, Firoz and their 2 Aussie PSD to flee.

Image credit: Alexander Augst



## THE SPARK OF REBELLION: HUNKERING DOWN

[Lamar Cravens](#)

April 11, 2014 · in [Commentary](#)



*Editor's Note: War on the Rocks is proud to publish this series on the tenth anniversary of the events they describe in 2004. This is part three of five. Read parts [one](#) and [two](#).*

April 4, 2004 was a deadline. Following a meeting of the Team Leaders of the USAID-funded, RTI International-implemented Local Governance Program (or 'LGP') in Baghdad on March 31 and April 1, the teams were supposed to submit work plans and staffing plans for the project's second year. Few did, however, because on the same day that they were due, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force commenced what came to be known as the First Battle of Fallujah. Taking advantage of America's distraction in the Sunni Triangle north of the capital, Moqtada as Sadr, the nation's staunchest opponent of the U.S. occupation, launched his own grab for power in the Shia heartland. The expat teams resident in the South Central provinces of Hillah, Wasit, Diwaniyah, Najaf and Kut were the softest targets of that insurrection, as they lived and worked "outside the wire" in communities (instead of "behind the wire" from the security of military installations).

In Najaf, the Acting Team Leader, Bruce Hutchins, relocated his team to Camp Duke. Acting on the advice of an unfamiliar staff, he relocated them quickly, so quickly in fact that they complained of being forced to leave personal possessions behind. In their haste, they also left behind a large amount of cash in the project safe.

With reports that something was going to happen, the team of expats in Diwaniyah led by Arnoux Abraham consolidated into one location, the largest of three houses they had rented. Its large, fenced backyard prompted their French Legionnaire guard to dub it “Versailles.” The team consolidated at their faux chateau late in the afternoon of April 4. By 1900 hrs a mob of approximately 40 Sadrists appeared in front of the project’s original residence (which had been converted into something the team optimistically renamed the Diwaniyah Learning Center, where Iraqis could take free vocational education classes in management, accounting and computer usage). Facing a growing crowd, the Iraqi staff at the Learning Center radioed the team, informing them that the mob was demanding to know “where are ‘the Americans’?” (even though it was a multinational team with members from Peru, the Philippines, Jordan, Kuwait, Poland, France, and New Zealand, as well as the United States). Trashing the Learning Center, the mob then moved to the project’s offices, which they similarly destroyed. Ripping the hard drives from computers, they broke and completely obliterated the paper records of the city dating back to the 1920s – plats, blocks & lots, water lines & sewage lines – in short everything required for urban planning and service delivery improvement. Ironically, these records had been lent to the project by the city fathers to digitize and preserve them.

As the mayhem continued and the mob moved to a nearby and already abandoned residence, “Team Diwaniyah” contacted the security detail of the local representative of America’s occupation government, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). They requested extraction, and later that evening, a couple of pickup trucks driven by Dominican soldiers on their first international peacekeeping mission pulled up to “Versailles” to rescue the contractors holed up there. The Dominicans had “up armored” their trucks themselves, standing quarter-inch steel plates on edge in their payloads, enough to protect anyone riding in the back from small arms fire. In those pickups and in two of their own soft skin SUVs, the eight-man LGP team fled to the CPA camp, located on the site of the Diwaniyah Teaching Hospital. With wide spaces between its buildings and set back from a major road, the Teaching Hospital had attracted the Marines when they took the city the previous year, and they handed it over to the Spaniards who succeeded them. The CPA set up shop there in the fall of 2003, and the Teaching Hospital continued to be the office of the resident Governance Coordinator for the province when the Spaniards established the much larger Camp

Espana south of town and delegated oversight of the CPA offices to the Dominicans, who now called the site of the Teaching Hospital Camp Santo Domingo.

As Team Diwaniyah settled into its new accommodations, Team Karbala was also facing the same difficult decision of whether to stay or go.

Following reports that the Spanish had fired on a crowd of protesters in Najaf, Ali, an Iraqi security officer with family ties in Karbala, informed the Team Leader there, Vijaya "VJ" Samaraweera, that Sadr's militia was mustering in a small town called Hindiyah on the border where Babil and Karbala provinces met. In his estimation, Ali told Vijaya, the militia intended to attack Iraqi government and CPA positions in Karbala. Thinking it better to be safe than sorry, the team contacted the CPA, which dispatched a team of Blackwater operatives who gave Vijaya, along with his Bangladeshi operations officer, Firoz, and their two Australian guards a total of 20 minutes to gather their things and go. Without instructions from headquarters or guidance from the Regional Service Center and in the absence of a formal evacuation plan, the Karbala expats had made their own determination of how to notify staff and counterparts, how to distribute project equipment among trusted staff for safekeeping, where to lodge an additional two soft skin SUVs to prevent them from being stolen and where to hide a small stash of liquor that belonged to the expats (which, although legal to possess in Iraq, nevertheless might offend the sensibilities of formally tee-totaling Muslims). With all those decisions made and with responsibility for securing the premises, project files and equipment entrusted to Ali, Vijaya, Firoz and their two guards departed the villa, none of them imagining that they would never return. Reaching Camp Juliette just about midnight, Team Karbala settled down for what would be a 12-night ordeal.

Back at Camp Santo Domingo in Diwaniyah, the civilians on the team spent their first night on the floor of a dormitory in the Teaching Hospital, while Dominican soldiers ran in and out and the team's expat guards, its Team Leader and Ops Officer ventured out to fire weapons into the darkness. As the streets of Diwaniyah rang with small arms fire, civil engineers Steve Blanchard and Ali Mas'ad, agriculturalist Juan Sevilla and public participation specialist Rudolfo Ticao contemplated their fate. Unable to sleep on the bare floor, they were offered a private room from an American reservist detailed to the Dominicans. Around 0200 hrs on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> the group relocated to this second floor room, where Steve taped cardboard over the windows to prevent light from seeping out and identifying their location as a potential target for an RPG. On the night of the 5<sup>th</sup>, they again slept in the reservist's room, and on Tuesday the 6<sup>th</sup> they were moved again, eight men still sharing a single room.

By that time, Sadr loyalists had succeeded in overrunning Iraqi positions in Najaf, Karbala, Kut and Diwaniyah, and that night the team suffered the most accurate mortar attack they had yet seen. At least five shells fell near them that night, three of them landing within 100 meters of their new residence and the closest only eight meters away. As that closest shell whirred in their direction, the team of civilians, all of them wearing Kevlar helmets and whatever body armor they had brought with them, dropped to the floor of their second-story apartment just before it exploded.

In his journal, a reflective Steve observed: "What a rapid change in just five days, from preparing to launch a broad new array of programs aimed at operating government, improving communication and public input, to living hunkered down in a military base, contemplating evacuation."

Earlier that same morning, April 4<sup>th</sup>, the Team Leader of LGP's Governance Team in Baghdad likewise contemplated his departure. A man of deep faith in an environment that tested faith regularly, Al had received an invitation from his church to lead a community outreach mission in the U.S. That Sunday morning, before the fighting broke out, Al wrestled with when he would tell his staff. He first learned about the troubles that would dominate the day when he was prevented from getting to a weekly church service inside the Green Zone due to what he described in his journal as "massive demonstrations." Protestors loyal to Muqtada as Sadr rallied against the CPA. His militia, the Mahdi Army occupied three Iraqi police stations in the Shia slum in the capital, renamed after his father. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division of the U.S. Army went into Sadr City to retake those police stations, but encountered fierce resistance that left eight soldiers dead and up to 50 injured before the stations could be reclaimed. Unable to travel, Al decided to tell his translator and his secretary about his new assignment and that because of his duty to his church (and not any disappointment with them) he would be leaving.

As he described the scene in his journal, "We all cried!" Al went on to record what other Team Leaders would have recognized as the true reward of their work:

I love those two like my own children and without sounding boastful because I am not, they both pointed out that they have never been happier nor had more hope than since they came to work here.

As the project had given so many of the Iraqis it employed hope for their future (and not merely a salary), Al recorded how one of the women took the news of his leaving:

She cried and told me that she is again losing hope because so many are returning to the States. She received a threat call last night. I think because of the terrible circumstances that they and so many others have had to live in, death is not something they fear.

Being abandoned, however, was.

The next day, an Iraqi-American on Al's team, Imad Jonaby, met with Sadr City Council members in a "business as usual" visit to try and get basic services restored. By the 6<sup>th</sup>, however, with much of the Shia heartland under the control of the Mahdi Army, Al noted in his journal that one RTI employee in the predominantly Sunni province of Baquba had been killed. Following an incident at Baghdad University he suspended the continuation of activities under the project's citizen participation component there, wishing to avoid any further confrontation and loss of life. Aware of what was happening across the rest of the country and concerned about what would happen to his Iraqi staff should it be discovered that they had been working for "the Americans," Al also ordered all names and any and other identifying marks removed from project documentation so as to give the staff a chance at anonymity if they were stopped on the street or, worse, if the compound were overrun.

Camp Juliette in Karbala in the meantime was under the control of a detachment of Poles, and – in Vijaya's view – a particularly imperious CPA Governance Coordinator John Berry, who acted like the *viceroy* of the province. The relationship between the State Department official and Vijaya, who led a project that both formally and practically was not under the direct control of the State Department, would have been difficult under any circumstances. In this case, however, different attitudes towards the reconstruction of the province and mutual and open contempt for one another only complicated matters.

For instance, one key source of tension between them involved the Provincial Council. One of LGP's first tasks soon after its arrival in country was to establish a multitude of local councils, from the neighborhood to the district to the provincial levels. By July 2003, the project (working alongside civil affairs brigades and involving the local community) had assisted in the formation of 88 neighborhood councils in Baghdad alone. But in November 2003, the CPA, ordered what it described as a "refreshment" process in response to complaints that these original councils lacked legitimacy because their members had not been elected. Throughout the country, CPA Governance Coordinators (often with the assistance of LGP) determined procedures to increase the

inclusiveness of local councils in the absence of an electoral law or an accurate and up-to-date census. In Karbala, however, Berry just sacked the Provincial Council and appointed a new one of his choosing. Then, in February 2004, dissatisfied with his choices, he replaced them a second time, an act that led to a public outcry in Karbala and changed the counterparts with whom LGP worked for a second time in three months.

With the LGP team now dependent on the CPA for its housing, food service, communications and security, the already strained relationship grew even worse. Vijaya and his Ops Officer Firoz were allowed to camp on the floor of the CPA office, but only after the office staff had left for the night, and only until any of that staff returned the next morning. The security situation added to their discomfort. For example, one night shortly after their arrival, heavy artillery fire forced the team into a concrete “duck & cover” bunker. Named after the advice given to schoolchildren in the 1950s about how to survive a thermonuclear attack from the Soviet Union, the “duck & cover” bunkers were too low to stand up in. They also had no place to sit down, other than the sand, and leaning against the walls was strictly prohibited because while the thick concrete could protect occupants from the shrapnel of any shell that exploded nearby, the walls could also, ironically, amplify the shockwave of its concussion, causing internal bleeding to anyone unlucky enough to be in contact with them when the shell exploded.

With fighting going on outside the base between the Coalition and the Mahdi Army and passive aggressive fights going on inside the base between the project and the CPA, Vijaya wrote emails to the Regional Service Center in Hillah and to headquarters in which the only progress he could report was the progress of his despair.

Things would only get worse.

Photo credit: [maysam pourghasemi](#)



## THE SPARK OF REBELLION: A CARD CARRYING SPY

[Lamar Cravens](#)

April 15, 2014 · in [Commentary](#)



*Editor's Note: War on the Rocks is proud to publish this series on the tenth anniversary of the events they describe in 2004. This is part four of five. Read parts [one](#), [two](#), and [three](#).*

On April 4, 2004, the Marines attacked Fallujah in the Sunni Triangle north of Baghdad. Taking advantage of America's distraction in that area, militants loyal to Moqtada as Sadr rose up against the occupation in predominantly Shia areas in Baghdad and the South and South Central regions of the country. With most of America's occupation government, the Coalition Provisional Authority or "CPA," safe "behind the wire" of military installations, Sadr's Mahdi Army attacked the "soft targets" of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Local Governance Program. LGP had expats resident in communities in 17 of Iraq's 18 provinces. But by midnight of April 4<sup>th</sup>, most of the LGP teams working in the South Central region had abandoned their houses and offices for the security of their nearest military base.

By April 8<sup>th</sup>, the Mahdi Army would have effective control over most of the South Central region. Yet as late as April 7<sup>th</sup>, with expatriates remaining in Hillah being sent to headquarters by convoy, the LGP regional Finance Officer, evidently on instructions from the RTI Home Office, sent out a badly timed email entitled “Evacuation Checklist.” Fully four of the project’s five South Central teams had already been evacuated and were hunkered down on military bases when the Finance Officer forwarded the advice of the Home Office on what to do before they evacuated. The Team Leader in Karbala, Vijaya ‘VJ’ Samaraweera reacted with disdain from his enforced confinement on the Polish Camp Juliette:

Surely, Finance jests! Has any Bean Counter faced evacuation under extreme conditions? I doubt it; otherwise, this 12 item plan would not be forthcoming, at least not in the form presented. There is nothing in the plan that reflects a genuine concern for the security and welfare of those from whom action is demanded. But, then, why should one expect human feelings from the Bean Counters?

Back in Najaf, however, Finance was taken seriously. Nabil, the Palestinian Operations Officer on the LGP team there, who had only started his job a week before (and was evidently worried whether he could keep it) took the ‘Evacuation Checklist’ message to heart and left Camp Duke to return to the project’s abandoned residence. In addition to the money left in the project safe, the team also had personal documents in the residence, including Nabil’s passport. No sooner had he arrived at the house, opened the safe and reclaimed its contents, however, he was kidnapped. With a hood placed over his head so he could not see where they were going and with his hands bound behind him, Nabil was stuffed in a car and driven across the city. He was dropped off at a house with a small, walled garden, in the corner of which stood an outhouse.

A Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem, Nabil was Arab but Christian, not Muslim. Nevertheless, he pretended to be Muslim in pleading with his captors for his release. Doubting him, the kidnappers tested him by insisting that he pray with them, watching expectantly for him to make a mistake in ritual or in the prescribed number of prostrations. More damning for Nabil, however, was the documentation he had reclaimed. In their haste to spirit away their captive, his kidnappers had not searched him thoroughly and did not discover that the passport he was carrying was Israeli. When he first arrived at the small house with a small garden, he begged leave to use the toilet. His captors allowed this, going so far as to untie his hands and – once he was alone inside the outhouse – to permit him to remove his hood. Sitting on his haunches, Nabil looked up. The outhouse had no roof. Above him he saw sky, and knowing the position of the outhouse in the far corner of the garden up

against its back wall, for a moment he contemplated trying to climb out and run away. But when one of his captors wondered what was taking him so long, his reverie of escape ended. Nabil begged a few moments' patience during which he was able to destroy his passport, leaving it behind before covering his head with the hood again and notifying his keeper that he was ready to come out.

As the weekend approached, excuses for violence accumulated. Wednesday the 7<sup>th</sup> was the anniversary of the founding of the Baath Party in 1947; Friday the 9<sup>th</sup> was the anniversary of the fall of Baghdad, what the Americans had dubbed "Liberation Day" after the statue of Saddam in Firdos Square had been torn down from its pedestal. Because Friday was a day off in Iraq, the CPA had moved observance of this day of liberation to Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup>, leaving Friday open to rabble-rousing sermons from the country's mosques and declarations that the anniversary, far from being celebrated, should be condemned as the beginning of a foreign occupation. That appeal to militancy was growing each week as the anticipated return of Iraqi sovereignty from the CPA at the end of June drew closer, raising pressure among those jockeying for power. And in a coincidence of religious observations that, under better circumstances, might have formed the basis for ecumenical harmony, Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup> was also Arba'een – the 40th day following the 10<sup>th</sup> of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram, when the Imam Hussein was killed – while, to practitioners of Western Christianity, Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> was Easter.

Without much regard to the calendar, LGP sent people out of country as security allowed. Careful to avoid use of the word "evacuation," project leadership employed the less final-sounding euphemism, "relocation." With four of their five teams in the South Central region stuck on military bases, "Ops" attended to moving the rest. Their security provider drove project staff yet to be attacked in the South region of the country across the border into Kuwait, an airline contracted to the CPA flew teams from the North region to Amman, Jordan, from where the project put them on commercial flights to Kuwait, and the LGP leadership ordered all but an unlucky 13 "essential" personnel out of the country. Those remaining 13 were mostly left to manage the project from its Green Zone headquarters (and to negotiate with the RTI Home Office and USAID whether the project was to be reorganized or closed). But project leadership was unable to do anything to help its teams on military bases. The armed forces would have to do that, when they could.

For instance, the Acting Team Leader in Najaf, Bruce Hutchins, would be flown by military helicopter from the base there to the helipad at the South Central headquarters of the CPA in Hillah. The headquarters was a small hotel on a tributary of the Euphrates River that overlooked the ruins at Babylon, which before the war had been a popular spot for local weddings. It was called "CPA-SC" at the time. Exiting the chopper, Bruce was met by LGP's Hillah Team Leader, Don Seufert, and

both would travel to Baghdad by convoy in the project's vehicles. Howard Edwards, the LGP Team Leader in Kut, would also leave Wasit province by military helicopter, but he was flown to the Green Zone and dropped off at the T-wall barricaded landing zone or "LZ Washington." With their departure from South Central (and subsequent transfer to Kuwait), only the teams in Diwaniyah and Karbala remained stranded, while the fate of Nabil was as yet unknown.

During the crisis, LGP project leadership convened 2 status check meetings a day. At 0800 and 1800 hrs the project's senior managers and the Acting National Operations Director would gather in "the small conference room" and review progress made over the preceding half day. Those evening phone calls were always joined by the Chief of Staff of RTI, its Senior Vice President and Home Office Manager for the project, relevant staff and, not infrequently, the RTI President. During the 1800 hrs call on Thursday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, while the field reported the successful departure of several convoys of expats and their relocation to Kuwait city, the meeting was interrupted by an operations officer who ran into the room announcing that Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* television had just gone live with breaking news. Images first released on Iranian TV claimed that forces loyal to Moqtada as Sadr had captured an Israeli spy. The report included still pictures of Nabil's driver's license and a discount card from a grocery store in Jerusalem. Within minutes of the images of appearing on *Al Jazeera*, the same news broke on CNN, and when reported over the conference call line to the RTI Home Office, everyone on the call fell silent.

LGP had long suffered from the accusation that it was a front for Israeli intelligence. In part due to the level of paranoia stoked by Saddam to keep his potential opponents off-balance and keep them from forming alliances, and in part due to deeply ingrained cultural prejudices, LGP had worked hard to earn the trust of its suspicious beneficiaries. On more than one occasion, when introducing themselves and their activities into a new community, staff and Team Leaders had been asked, "What does that 'I' in RTI stand for?" With Nabil's kidnapping and the revelation of his nationality, leadership both in Baghdad and in North Carolina assumed that all was lost. Their pessimism only deepened when calls to the Regional Service Center in Hillah revealed what the Iraqi staff were hearing: after the *Al Jazeera* broadcast, a mob had seized Nabil and was carrying him down to the city square in Najaf to appear before a hastily assembled Islamic court. Knowing how the insurgents who attacked the project's offices in Kut and Diwaniyah had rifled through records and stolen hard drives, Ops ordered that the hard drives from the computers left in Hillah be pulled and destroyed, and that project staff abandon the premises. The Bulgarian security guard left on site after the expats departed and Dr. Mayfield's Iraqi deputy both ultimately defied the order, preserving the RSC. Unable to know that their order would be countermanded, LGP's leadership knew that the death of one expat would be the death of the project, and concluding that end was inevitable, ordered that all

of the project's international staff (even those in provinces unaffected by the fighting) be sent out of country as swiftly as possible. In their haste to avoid risk they ironically increased it.

At half an hour past midnight, the Team Leader in Baghdad, Al Haines received a call, instructing him to send the next group of expats on the Baghdad Local Governance Team to the airport later that morning. By 0130, he had contacted them all and at 0800 on Friday, April 9<sup>th</sup>, he sent them down the seven mile stretch of highway from the Green Zone to the airport that was rightly described as the "World's Most Dangerous Road."

That Friday, insurgents turned the always treacherous Baghdad International Airport (or "BIAP") road into a shooting gallery. A 26-vehicle fuel convoy was attacked and two soldiers, seven U.S. truckers and three Iraqi truck drivers were all killed. Another soldier, [Keith Matthew Maupin](#), and an American trucker, Thomas Hamill, were also kidnapped. Although Pfc. Maupin was eventually murdered, the trucker escaped on May 2<sup>nd</sup> and made it back to the United States, where he appeared on national television recounting his harrowing tale. Al Haines' team members were luckier, but just barely. The six-car convoy they were riding in also came under attack, and the car the Baghdad Team's experts were riding in was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device, the armoring of the vehicle being the only thing that kept its occupants alive. Had it been a soft skinned vehicle, all surely would have died. So all who made it to the airport that morning, even those who were not Christian, had reason to think of that Friday as "Good" Friday.

At noon the same day, CPA Administrator Paul Bremer held a press conference. An hour or so before imams across the country would deliver their weekly sermons during Friday prayers, Bremer announced a cease-fire of the Marines' assault on Fallujah. The murder and mutilation of the Blackwater security detail on the 31<sup>st</sup> had generated a good deal of sympathy for the Americans amongst those Iraqis who hoped for the reconstruction of their country, but much of that initial sympathy had been lost in what many Iraqis considered to be a disproportionate response by the U.S. military to the atrocities. The Iraqi Governing Council had made such an argument to Bremer, pointing out the numbers of civilians trapped by the fight, ultimately persuading him to agree to the cease-fire that permitted up to 70,000 women, children, aged and infirm to evacuate the city. The next day, Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Marines extended their unilateral truce to permit humanitarian aid into Fallujah and secured the city's hospital to ensure that the assistance was used as intended.

Coincidentally, Sadr too called off his militants to permit Shia pilgrims to walk to the shrines in Karbala for the commemoration of Arba'a'een, which also fell on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

From Karbala, Vijaya reported what he heard from his Iraqi staff in an email to headquarters, turning on his caps lock for emphasis:

SADR LEADERSHIP HAS DIRECTED MILITIA/KARBALA FOLLOWERS TO  
“CEASEFIRE” FOR 48 HOURS FOR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES TO BE CONDUCTED  
BY PILGRIMS SAFELY. THEY ARE TO ATTACK ONLY IF THE C[oalition] F[orces]  
ATTACKS THEM.

THE “CEASEFIRE” EXPIRES IN 48 HOURS AND THEY WILL HIT ‘HARD,’  
ACCORDING TO THIS INTEL. IF THIS IS INDEED CORRECT YOU WILL HAVE A  
48 HR WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE US OUT OF HERE.

Unfortunately, for Team Karbala, by the terms of USAID’s contract with RTI, the Local Governance Program was to be self-sustaining in every respect – housing, food service and security – and even a personal appeal by headquarters to the Blackwater command center in Baghdad to extract the Karbala expats by private helicopter had been refused. No one would accept liability for the civilian development workers. Their confinement would continue.

And though no one knew it at the time, so would Nabil’s. In the end, no kangaroo court was convened in Najaf, perhaps because the propaganda value of an alleged spy was considered greater than the consequences of executing another Arab. Whatever the reason, Razouk survived and inquiries started filtering back to the preserved Regional Service Center in Hillah as to whether they might like him back. Asking price? \$1 million dollars.

Photo credit: [Expert Infantry](#)



## THE SPARK OF REBELLION: A RESERVOIR EXHAUSTED

[Lamar Cravens](#)

April 16, 2014 · in [Commentary](#)



*Editor's Note: War on the Rocks is proud to publish this series on the tenth anniversary of the events they describe in 2004. This is part five of five. Read parts [one](#), [two](#), [three](#), and [four](#).*

A rebellion against the American occupation in Iraq had begun on Sunday, April 4, when militants loyal to Moqtada as Sadr attacked Coalition and Iraqi government positions in Baghdad and across the South and South Central regions of the country. Being the softest of targets, the offices of the USAID-funded Local Governance Program (or LGP) had been overrun, with hard drives pulled and data helpful to getting basic services again destroyed. The expat teams of four of the project's five provincial offices in the South Central region had all abandoned their residences and were hunkered down on their nearest military base, enduring nightly mortar attacks and suffering as supplies (and patience) dwindled. While all hoped to get out of the fight, the military had more pressing matters to attend to in putting down the rebellion, and when a Palestinian Operations Officer was kidnapped in Najaf, the revelation that he held Israeli citizenship led project leadership to order the relocation of its remaining, resident staff.

In Diwaniyah, on Camp Santo Domingo, Team Leader Arnoux Abraham resigned himself to the inevitability that he and the rest of the civilians on his team would never realize their plans. Instead, they prepared to leave at the first opportunity. With intermittent access to email, the team's Civil Engineer, Steve Blanchard, found out what had happened to the other teams and concluded that only one exit was open to them.

The second and final group of Hillah expats evacuated to Baghdad under warning the roads are full of IED's. They were also fired upon. Will not be conveying to Baghdad it seems. The road south to Kuwait was discarded yesterday following reports of increased activity in those sectors. It seems helicopter evacuation is our only means now.

However, as a retired Marine himself, Arnoux recognized that, with the Marines dug in in Fallujah and multinational forces fighting a sideshow across the Shia heartland, the military had far greater priorities than extracting a small team of do-gooders who probably had no business being in Iraq in the first place.

As if to underscore the point, the commander of Coalition Forces, Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez, stunned an audience during one of Bremer's daily CPA briefings by speaking up. The general usually kept silent through the briefings. Part of that was temperament, but part was his intense dislike of the CPA "proconsul" whom the general blamed for the Shia uprising. At the end of this particular CPA briefing, the normally silent commanding officer announced plainly that his priority was his troops. Though he only stated the obvious, Sanchez's unexpected announcement and blunt delivery shocked the State Department and USAID officials in the room. Had the LGP teams been there to hear it, they would have known they were in for a long wait.

What he did not know, Arnoux could guess. He and his team had resigned themselves to wait and to wait indefinitely until the situation normalized and they were again able to drive on their own, although all hopes of returning to their offices and residences had vanished when they realized that the first looters to rifle through their possessions and steal their best suitcases were the very guards and police officers they had paid to protect them. As truth was often the first casualty of war, for the team in Diwaniyah at least, trust was its first fatality.

As time wore on, the living conditions in the camps worsened. Garbage started to pile up, and the camps were running low on water. Then on April 10, an opportunity presented itself that no one expected.

Following the Madrid bombings on March 11, Spain's Conservative government was turfed out at the polls a week later, with a Socialist, non-interventionist one voted in to replace it. The new government wanted Spanish soldiers out of Iraq, and, taking advantage of the ceasefire Sadr declared to let Shia pilgrims make their trek to Karbala, the Spaniards decided Easter Sunday would be the day they left.

Acting swiftly, the LGP Team Leader in Diwaniyah notified the project's headquarters in Baghdad that he, too, intended to seize the moment and try to drive his team out. Before they could depart with the Spaniards, however, they first had to get to the Spaniards. So on the afternoon of Saturday, April 10, a small detail of Blackwater, the State Department's security provider, organized a mad dash from the Teaching Hospital to Camp España – about a 15-minute drive south of town. Restricting the civilians to one bag apiece, Blackwater operatives divided them between vehicles and made a run for it. Steve Blanchard, for his part, sat in the rear or counter attack team vehicle on the backseat with a bodyguard sitting behind him, the guard holding a machine gun pointed at the back window which he promised to shoot out at the first sign of trouble.

Fortunately for the team, aside from the bat out of hell driving protocol that was standard for private security companies, no such trouble occurred. About an hour before sunset the team of development workers and accidental terror tourists entered the Spanish base, albeit to a less than welcoming reception. After the bombings in Madrid, Steve noted a change in attitude on the part of the Spanish brigade that had been responsible for civilian-military affairs in the province since the previous September. In particular, he described an unaccustomed coolness in a once-friendly relationship with a fellow engineer.

The death of over 200 in Spain from the latest bomb insanity may be tainting their geopolitical love of the Yankee juggernaut. Inside [the camp] I met Juan Antonio, whom I have worked with, off and on, for months. There was a decidedly open distance between us. Something different from the cordial understanding we had maintained over time. Only later did I think that possibly he might have known someone or possibly blamed America for the death and destruction forced upon his land. The Spaniards had lost

less than 10 soldiers in a year of occupation in the heart of Iraq. Now the children and wives of soldiers lay in morgues. How could they not feel reprehension towards the U.S.?

On his last night in Iraq, Steve wandered around Camp España in the dark, disoriented. He was supposed to be wearing a helmet but didn't, ignoring mortar warnings. He tried to check email in a makeshift Cyber Café but couldn't, their Spanish interfaces discouraging 'gringo usage.' In the end, he retired to a bunk room where he and his 7 other refugee colleagues endured a night of surprising cold, made more uncomfortable by anticipation of what lay ahead of them the next morning on the highway to Kuwait. The journey itself was uneventful, aside from its unusual pace. Normally, when SUVs plied Iraq's highways they ran at speeds of 120 km an hour, reportedly because it made it close to impossible to hit a vehicle with a rocket-propelled grenade. But because of the heavy armored transport and fighting vehicles being driven out of country by the Spaniards, the pace of the team's evacuation slowed to what seemed like a crawl. Those with any weapons training carried arms, among them AK-47s, M 4s, and 9mm automatic pistols, both vigilant and hopeful that they would not have to fire them, while those without a service background, like Steve, drove their soft-skinned SUVs.

Anxious and attentive the whole way, and close to exhaustion from a week without sleep and 4 nights of mortars and firefights, Team Diwaniyah, along with their Spanish escorts, surprisingly drove the entire way without incident and with no stops, except for one at a large Port-a-John slum in the middle of the desert. They finally reached the border between Iraq and Kuwait at about 1500 hrs. There, Iraqi officials looked over their documents, American soldiers seized their weapons and Kuwaiti officials (with what might be considered misplaced zeal) searched the vehicles of the retreating team for alcohol. Kuwait law forbade spirits, obliging those who imbibed to conceal. So once cleared to go, the team left Iraq and entered Kuwait with two liters of bourbon.

An hour or so later, the team drove their SUVs into the rotunda of the opulent Kuwait City Sheraton where they were met by former team members and transferred to comfortable rooms where they could shower and finally sleep.

That same Sunday morning that Team Diwaniyah departed Camp España, the team Karbala, led by Vijaya "VJ" Samaraweera woke up to the only positive event of their entire ordeal. Although rations had dwindled over the week of their forced confinement, the mess hall eventually having nothing to serve them but hamburgers without buns, the commander of the Polish forces had squirreled away a

surprise: that Sunday morning the troops and the team enjoyed an Easter breakfast. The lull in fighting intended to permit Shia pilgrims to visit the holy sites in Karbala gave the team a moment's respite, but with the implication that once the city cleared of supplicants, the battle would be rejoin. Unfortunately for the team, that respite would not support their evacuation, either, as the roads were still heavy with the faithful returning from the shrines, with the Sadrist stronghold of Hindiyah standing as a bottleneck and deterrent to a flight by road from Karbala back to Hillah.

Meanwhile, due to the continuing lock down, Baghdad's Team Leader, Al Haines, could not get to the Green Zone for a hoped for 'sunrise service' on Easter morning. He stayed on his compound in the Karada District, holding a small "sunset service" on the roof of the Marble Hotel instead. In his journal, he recorded leading a few others before a "majestic" sunset:

I did quote a scripture, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." Then with emphasis I applied His condition, "Not as the world giveth". I concluded with the knowledge that I have of the love of God for us, His children and that surely He must weep over the tragedies that His children are having to suffer. We then held hands and I prayed for the blessings of the Lord to be with us and to watch over and bless the people of Iraq.

It would not be blessings, however, that a frustrated VJ flung in the direction of headquarters from the vantage of his enforced confinement on Camp Juliette in Karbala. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, he wrote:

I am now past frustration: I am angry, appalled and reached a point where I am sick of platitudes and urgings of patience. How is it that everyone else . . . is out of the SC region and not us?

On the 13<sup>th</sup> he learned that his nemesis the CPA Governance Coordinator would be flown by helicopter to Kuwait, leaving the development workers under his notional care behind and wrote to the LGP Chief of Party with a sense of resignation:

Patience is the only currency we have, the only currency we control – but it is not an inexhaustible reservoir.

His reservoir ran completely dry the following morning after another night of mortars and explosions in the city. Fed up from repeatedly trying to call the LGP headquarters Operations "hotline," a

despondent Vijaya wrote in a final email, "I want to scream." In answer to a question posed by HQ, he admitted, "no programs are functioning; contractors are asking for payments." Mindful of the implications and credibility of the project should it be reorganized and return, he advised paying them "lest our reputation is tarnished by further tardiness."

As Vijaya sank into despair, his being the last team still stranded and unable to reach Kuwait, Coalition Forces launched a counter strike against Sadr's Mahdi Army in Hindiyah. Once Hindiyah and checkpoints along the way were in the hands of Iraqi police, it opened up the possibility of finally leaving Camp Juliette. And on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>, after his patience had reached its limit and he had written his caustic final email, Vijaya was informed by Special Forces that they had received approval from their higher-ups to run the road.

While knowing that the trip would still be risky, especially as it would have to be undertaken in their soft skin SUVs, the team preferred that uncertainty to staying another night as "guests of the CPA." Although they were advised that the road between Karbala and Hillah was mostly clear, Team Karbala would still have to drive through the bottleneck of Hindiyah. Although, nominally in the control of the Iraqi police, Hindiyah nevertheless remained sympathetic to the Sadrist cause and, more threateningly, had multistory buildings in the middle of town which would expose the travellers to potential sniper fire. VJ had no higher ups of his own to ask for permission. He was responsible only to Firoz and the 2 Aussie PSD who had endured 14 days of captivity with him, and so they chose to risk the road rather than suffer another night as guests of the CPA.

Just as Team Diwaniyah did with the retreating Spanish troops, Team Karbala divided up responsibilities for driving and riding shotgun, with one exception. Vijaya, who on principle had never touched a weapon in his life, astounded his security provider and the Special Forces soldiers offering him a way out by refusing their offer to allow him to also carry a weapon.

The next morning, proceeding at a cautious pace, the convoy made its slow way up the road through the bottleneck of Hindiyah and – remarkably without incident – on through Babil province to the multinational base on the site of the ruins of ancient Babylon. There, they spent one final night before proceeding the next day to LGP headquarters in Baghdad. VJ's team was the last of the project's 17 resident provincial teams to be extracted. From Baghdad, Vijaya flew to Amman, Jordan and from there back home to Burlington, Massachusetts, where in an email on April 26, he resigned.

Earlier, on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the same day that Vijaya had sent his last email from Iraq, the expats who had been relocated to Kuwait gathered at the Moevenpick Hotel for the first day of a two-day session to discuss re-entry strategies. Howard Edwards, the air evac'ed Team Leader from Kut, had been appointed the project's Chief of Party in Kuwait, and Don Seufert, most recently the Team Leader from Hillah, had been named the head of its Program Unit. They were charged with keeping the LGP running. They would struggle, however, with the project's first experiment in "remote management," and with the mostly angry 85 expats they tried to supervise.

Mindful of the emotional trauma that the staff had experienced during their relocation, Al Haines had noted: "It is my hope that there will be counseling services available." The RTI Home Office in North Carolina had agreed, and on the first day of the two-day reentry workshop, hired psychologist Lynn Hagan to make a presentation and make herself available (at no cost) to anyone who wanted to talk to her. Some did, some did not, with a skeptical Steve Blanchard passing judgment on the whole ordeal:

Many in the group related with the message that stress is real. We should all be aware of the many forms it manifests itself in. Sleeplessness and lack of sleep, passivity and aggressiveness, loss of appetite and obesity. It's this kind of open-ended analysis that I find particularly useless, like modern-day astrology for those who refuse to rationalize the violence of the world.

The relocation to Kuwait proved to be its own ordeal. Some thought of it as going from the fire to the frying pan, while others thought of it more like going from Hell to Purgatory. All were waiting, and all were bored. Then on April 16, the same day that Coalition Forces retook Kut from the Mahdi Army, the ex-ats who had been relocated from Iraq to Kuwait were relocated once again from the luxurious Sheraton to the funky Shamiyah Palace Hotel. The move crushed morale, with many complaining about declining standards of living, and maintaining that, despite receiving \$93 a day per diem (on top of their full salaries), the city was too expensive. Some resigned; others waited until the end of the month when LGP management was rumored to be planning a massive layoff. The night before it occurred, Steve recorded:

Tomorrow the RTI hammer falls. This party will be over. 30-50 of us will be axed. Very much needed. This project is broken. So much went wrong. So idealistic – even now—with all the grand discussions of democracy and transparency. In the meantime, skilled militias plot to explode devices in

the most calculated of civic locations, extracting Iraqi blood in an effort to boil away any remaining wisps of sanity from those who wait for western government to miraculously self-assemble in the cradle of civilization.

Of the 5 South-Central Team Leaders affected by the events of April, only Howard Edwards and Don Seufert would return to Iraq in positions of leadership. Following his stint as Chief of Party in exile, Howard reentered the country as the project's Regional Team Leader for the southern provinces, overseen from Basrah. Don went back to Hillah, succeeding Jim Mayfield as the Regional Team Leader for the provinces of South Central. Their Regional Service Centers became mini Green Zones, with concrete blast walls and enhanced security that turned them increasingly into the kind of compounds that Vijaya's neighbors in Karbala had warned him against.

As for the rest, Najaf's Acting Team Leader, Bruce Hutchins, would leave; Diwaniyah's Team Leader, Arnoux Abraham, would leave; and Baghdad's Team Leader, Al Haines, would take a position with his church in Chicago, Illinois. Likewise, LGP's senior management would leave, its first Deputy Chief of Party ending his contract on his 1 year anniversary, going in the sort of 'natural attrition' he had worked to avoid. And the project's Chief of Party, after a short vacation with his family in May, announced that he wanted to leave the project by the end of July.

So too the project's kidnapped Ops Officer in Najaf would leave the project, last of all LGP staff affected by the insurrection of April.

Contrary to the rumors that circulated once his nationality was discovered and broadcast to the world, Nabil was not tried by an Islamic tribunal, nor was he executed for being an Israeli spy. Instead, his plight became the subject of intense and intensely personal negotiation. While Nabil's family was in Palestine lobbying PLO leader Yasir Arafat to intervene on his behalf, LGP Operations and Iraqi personnel in Hillah negotiated his ransom. Nabil himself would be shuffled between locations in Najaf, and as his political value diminished, his kidnappers' demands for money similarly declined. From an opening bid of \$1 million for his release and return, they eventually settled on a cash payment of \$10,000, and on April 22 – after 17 days of captivity – a wan but healthy Nabil was delivered to the RSC. With a thick beard he had grown during his time as a hostage, Nabil was forwarded on to headquarters, where, sitting in the bedroom of the National Director of Operations, he described his ordeal. Outside and unseen, a rare spring thunderstorm gathered, and as Nabil spoke, looking at no one in particular, he flinched with each successive clap of thunder. The next

morning, a clean shaven and rested Nabil departed Iraq, escorted by junior Operations officers, first for Amman, Jordan, from where he made the crossing back to Israel.

Outside the disrupted project, those whose actions determined the events of April would make decisions that affected Iraq's future. Paul Bremer, the self-styled proconsul and head of America's occupation government, the Coalition Provisional Authority, would return sovereignty to the Iraqi people in the person of an elderly judge on June 28, two days before planned. His abrupt departure, on direct orders of the White House was both praised and condemned at the time. Those who praised it considered it a clever move to deny the insurgents another opportunity to celebrate their resistance. Those who condemned it saw it as a cowardly retreat.

Moqtada as Sadr, who had provoked Bremer and whose Mahdi Army had taken advantage of the Americans' distraction in the Sunni Triangle to make its own power grab on April 4<sup>th</sup>, declared a tactical ceasefire on June 6<sup>th</sup>. His forces would regroup and resume hostilities in August, after a falling out with the Governor of Najaf, engaging the Marines in the environs of the Imam Ali Shrine on the grounds of the largest Muslim cemetery in the world.

And the First Marine Expedition that had gone into Fallujah on the night of April 4<sup>th</sup> only to be pulled back would wait through the summer. Not permitted to attack, they would stand aside and wait while Fallujah became a beacon for jihadists from throughout the region. They would wait as a hastily organized unit of the Iraqi Army – the “Fallujah Brigade” – first took responsibility for the city and then took the side of the insurgents. They would wait, in fact, until George W. Bush had been safely elected to second term before engaging in what has become known as the Second Battle of Fallujah, the bloodiest single engagement fought by the United States since the Vietnam War.

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Photo credit: [U.S. Army](#)