

# My Time in Iraq with USAID

## A Ground Truth Interview with Kirk Johnson: Part I

**Kirk Johnson** arrived in Baghdad with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in January 2005, intent on helping the Iraqi people rebuild their country. In this first of two interviews, EPIC speaks with Kirk about his experience with USAID, working tirelessly in Baghdad and Fallujah in America's attempt to rebuild war-torn Iraq. Kirk talks about the successes and failures of Iraq reconstruction and what must be done to renew confidence in U.S. rebuilding efforts among Iraqis and Americans alike.

**epic:** Tell us about your family and background. How did you become interested in public service and the Middle East?

**Kirk:** My grandmother believed that the best form of education was travel. She had been to over 80 countries by the time she died, including Iran and Iraq in the 1950s. She wanted to take all her grandchildren somewhere in the world, so when I was 15 she took me to Egypt. I was just bowled over by the trip.

I also grew up surrounded by work for the public. My dad was in public service his whole life. He was elected to the Illinois State Legislature as a Republican and served as a Congressman for about 12 years.

My mom was a policy advisor for the attorney general of Illinois. People would come to our house with their problems, and I remember my dad pulling out his notepad, taking notes while he listened to his constituents. I would end up seeing the whole process. It was quite an introduction to the way things work in America.

**epic:** Did the trip to Egypt introduce you to the Arab world and encourage you to study Arabic?

**Kirk:** Yes. A year after I came back, when I was 16, I took a course in Arabic at the local community college and over the next year I drove into Chicago twice a week to study Arabic with a tutor at the Egyptian Consul. It all kind of snowballed from there. In 1998, when I was 17, I skipped my high school graduation to attend a summer session at the Arabic Language Institute at the American University in

Cairo before I started at Georgetown that fall.

I attended Georgetown for a year, but I didn't feel stimulated.

I transferred to the University of Chicago, and it was a perfect match. Around the summer of 2001, I got a grant to study Arabic in Syria, and in my senior year of college I was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study Islamic pulp writings in Egypt. Pulp writings are books produced en masse, on the cheap. You can buy them for a nickel all throughout the region and, though they're considered among the most widely read books in the Middle East, no one had analyzed their content.

The war in Iraq started when I was in Egypt and, although I'm not like some who claimed they knew that this was going to happen, I was really opposed to the war. Around February 15th, three weeks before we invaded, I covered a Muslim Brotherhood rally for the *New York Times*. It was incredible to see and hear a million people chanting "Down with America!" In the way we went into the war, somehow we managed to lose the public relations battle against Saddam. There was clearly something wrong with our entry into Iraq if we couldn't convince like-minded people in the West, throughout the world and in the Middle East that it was a just cause.

At the time, I was reading articles about the short supply of Arabic speakers, and, since I had the skill set, I felt a sense of responsibility, even though I didn't support the war. This is my country. I thought I could pitch in on the reconstruc-



Kirk Johnson, a writer and Arabist, has worked and researched throughout the Middle East. As a Fulbright Scholar from 2002 to 2003, Kirk analyzed political Islamic "pulp" writings in Egypt. In the fall of 2005, he was appointed USAID's first regional coordinator for reconstruction in Fallujah, Iraq. Since returning from Iraq, Kirk has advocated for a safe-haven for his former Iraqi colleagues—now refugees—and others who suffered because of their affiliation with the U.S. government. He holds a B.A. with honors in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. Kirk may be contacted directly at [kwjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:kwjohnson@gmail.com).

tion in whatever way possible. USAID hired me through International Resources Group, who had the main contract for staff positions in USAID Baghdad. They called me on November 15, 2004 and by December 1st they had sent me the contract. By December 4th, I was going to D.C. for the Diplomatic Security Anti-terrorism Course, which you have to take before you go over.

**epic:** What was happening in Iraq and the U.S. when you arrived in Baghdad for your tour of duty with USAID?

**Kirk:** When I got to Iraq, I was right in the thick of things. The November 2004 U.S. elections had just been held, reelecting President Bush for a second term, and within days the Marines pummeled Fallujah. I arrived in Baghdad to find the Iraqi people cheering us on, excited about their upcoming national and provincial elections on January 30th. The Green Zone was teeming with journalists and congressional delegations.

At that point, most people believed that Iraq's elections would turn out as planned, consolidating people along nationalist lines. No one foresaw how the elections would help speed up the sectarian divide in Iraq. For the most part, there was still hope that the U.S. would be able to successfully finish its work.

**epic:** As a USAID employee, what were your areas of responsibility?

**Kirk:** During my first position as an information officer, I responded to requests for information from USAID Washington and from offices inside Iraq. That meant befriending a lot of people to get needed information as quickly as possible. I didn't have any authority then, and for a long stretch I was the youngest person in the mission, which impacted my job significantly.

Part of my job meant mastering knowledge of USAID's \$5.2 billion portfolio, and that was a pretty large undertaking. I also ran the public affairs office for several months, identifying news stories and talking to journalists.

Since I had started studying USAID and tracking the war from the U.S. before I left, I thought I'd be able to dive right in when I arrived in Iraq. But once I got there, I was shocked at how little I really knew about the country and what was happening on the ground. Professionally, my job left me feeling under-stimulated and under-challenged. I'm

not even sure anyone at the mission in Baghdad knew I spoke Arabic when I first arrived.

**epic:** What surprised you most once you were in Baghdad working with USAID?

**Kirk:** For one thing, there was no way to prepare for the snake fights between USAID and the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office (IRMO), the overseeing agent of Iraq reconstruction.

In terms of ranking authority in Iraq, IRMO technically manages USAID and its work. But since USAID is doing development projects, I found the mis-

sion directors were very indignant about needing approval from somebody who didn't have development experience. That created a lot of tension in our corner of the Green Zone.

In my opinion, USAID wanted to be at the table in Iraq to such an extent that it grasped at almost anything it could get. It took on the types of projects it hasn't managed in decades, like restoring huge power plants. This was to its detriment.

**epic:** Who was in the Green Zone with you? Did USAID employ any Iraqis?

**Kirk:** There were around 50 or 60 Americans and a few dozen Third Country Nationals (TCNs) from aid missions throughout the world that helped run USAID Baghdad. In total, there were between 100 and 120 personnel when the office was fully staffed.

Living in the Green Zone were 10,000 Iraqis who moved in during the "Shock and Awe" operation in 2003. They remain there today, though they're not employed by USAID or the U.S. government.

Those Iraqis who are employed by USAID don't stay in the Green Zone at night, except for a handful of maintenance men. Most have to go home in the Red Zone at the end of every workday. These people take a huge risk in working with Americans.

**epic:** What was your impression of the quality of journalism in Iraq?

**Kirk:** Television was, in my opinion, fairly worthless at covering reconstruction; there were just too many complexities, and T.V. journalists could not adequately cover them in their short time on the air.

"It's not impossible to do development and reconstruction work in Iraq. As I said before, there are pockets of success. But it is impossible to do it if you don't fund the successful projects and continue to repeat the failed ones."

But some dedicated journalists were there, including the *Los Angeles Times*' T. Christian Miller and the *New York Times*' Jim Glanz and Dexter Filkins. These men understood the intricacies and minutiae of Iraq reconstruction and were able to cover it well in their reporting.

For example, Miller covered reconstruction contracts in Iraq. It probably wasn't a beat that sounded terribly interesting at first, but it led him to discover with precision how money was wasted in Iraq and how priorities were misidentified in the early days of the reconstruction.

It's true that there are many unreported or under-reported success stories in Iraq. However, this is not entirely the fault of the journalists working on the ground. In my experience, the U.S. government was its own worst enemy in terms of getting success stories out because it doesn't want exposure on projects unless they are absolutely pristine.

Because I worked in public affairs, I worked my tail off to publicize successful projects. But my efforts were usually quashed because, as I learned, we were operating under a sort of "zero exposure" policy, which effectively curtailed our ability to speak frankly about the challenges of intra-war reconstruction.

Part of it was because of poor security conditions, and that was a legitimate concern. For example, in 2004, after successfully completing a telecommunications project, we held a public ribbon-cutting ceremony to commemorate its completion. Within a month, it was blown up. Then, at the Kerkh water plant in Baghdad, an IED blew up under the plant manager's trailer and several workers were assassinated and dumped at the entryway.

These events had a pretty significant impact on the United States' position on putting an American face on any reconstruction project. And I agree with considering the potentially lethal consequences of exposure, but if we can't claim credit for the work that we're doing, then it raises an existential question about the purpose of that aid and creates challenges at home in cultivating support for projects on the ground.

**epic:** Considering the security challenges, you have two ways to operate in the field: Either blending in, which can only be achieved with Iraqi nationals, or embedding with the military. Do you see any other options?

**Kirk:** Though it has its own challenges, blending in has been the most effective way to operate. But, as I learned, it doesn't work well for major infrastructure projects because many of the highly-trained Iraqi engineers, who are needed to manage these projects, are either in jail or left the country. Though we would have liked to use teams of experts that knew the equipment and proper procedures, they weren't

around, so we had to rely on Iraqis who didn't really know how to handle these things – and oftentimes weren't able to accomplish much of anything.

Still, USAID had to spend its money – roughly \$5.2 billion countrywide and \$50 million for Anbar – and it had to get projects on the books. One way was through so-called "make work programs," which were supposed to help generate employment and, thus, mitigate conflict. According to the records for projects in Fallujah, USAID hired thousands of Fallujans from neighborhoods throughout the city to clear rubble from the streets. It was intended to give them a choice between the financial incentives of participating in the insurgency - since there's a lot of pay for laying IEDs or sniping at our guys - and getting paid for hard labor.

I transferred to Fallujah in 2005 and, though the projects had been supposedly up and running for months, I couldn't find anyone actually clearing the rubble. When I started asking questions, I found out there was no collection point, so there was no way to ensure that the piles weren't just being moved from one corner to the next. There were no controls to make sure that Fallujans were being hired and that others from outside the city weren't just being trucked in. There was nothing to guarantee that the subcontractor actually hired people and not just backhoes to do the job more quickly and with less people.

These 'mitigating conflict' programs were chimerical, at least in Fallujah. My questioning soon brought strong pushback from folks in Baghdad, who didn't like that I was second-guessing their programs.

**epic:** Why did you transfer to Fallujah?

**Kirk:** When I had arrived in Iraq in January 2005, I was intent on helping the Iraqis rebuild their country, and I was excited to put my Arabic skills and knowledge of the Middle East to good use.

But seven months into it, I felt like I was just pushing papers. My job wasn't stimulating or challenging. And I couldn't stand being in the Green Zone, where I rarely spoke Arabic and found it hard to tell whether or not I was actually in the Middle East. I felt insulated, but not in a good way, like I was being cut off from my driving reason for being there in the first place.

In August, I told the mission director that my job was driving me nuts, and I asked to be transferred. She said, "How would you like to go to Fallujah?" And that was that.

There was a big piece on Provincial Reconstruction Teams in the March 2007 issue of the *Foreign Service Journal* entitled, "Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map." It essentially said that the State Department will send people out to form a PRT without

proper training or enough manpower to fully staff it. But, again, it allows them to put it on the books.

In my cynical days, I sometimes think that one of the main reasons I was sent to Fallujah was so that the mission director could say she had someone there.

While in Fallujah, I worked on a proposal to shift the “conflict mitigation” program from rubble removal to one for clearing irrigation canals. The city is situated on the Euphrates, giving local farmers acres and acres of lush farmland for growing crops. But the land was not being used because the people were dependent on a government-funded ration system that distributed free food. The program was costly for the Iraqi government and deprived local farmers of the incentive to grow crops and raise animals because there was no demand for their food. The farmland was basically going to waste, overgrown and poorly maintained.

Because of this, the irrigation canals used for watering crops were not usable and there was hyper-salination. I figured, since the rubble-clearing program was not appearing to be successful, we should shift the funds to a work program that employs Iraqis to clear out the canals and get them up and running. That would lead to an improved water flow and

would help jump-start local agriculture.

I started to get some support in Baghdad, but there was still a great amount of pressure to spend money rapidly, not sensibly. For a long time, to simply get the money spent, USAID funded almost every program it found whether or not it was actually working. That’s why it was difficult to coax USAID away from rubble-removal to take on canal clearing.

My last day in Fallujah, I was poring over an old map of the irrigation infrastructure with some representatives from the local farmers’ union, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Fallujah Reconstruction Committee. The meeting was several hours long, but it was very constructive. I was optimistic and feverishly typing a report on the meeting that would be used to solidify support for this program in Baghdad. Then, I left for what was supposed to be a short break in the Dominican Republic.

**epic:** Tell us about what happened in the Dominican Republic.

**Kirk:** Although it’s an important part of my own story, I’d rather let an essay I wrote about the accident for the *Washington Post Magazine* speak (see excerpt). Suffice it to say that I sleepwalked out a two-story window and landed on my face. The reconstructive surgery and my rehabilitation took many

### Excerpt from “After the Fall” by Kirk W. Johnson, *Washington Post Magazine*, 1/28/07

Though I should have been exhausted from the days of travel from Fallujah to the Dominican Republic, my mind was surging. I stayed up late the first night, talking more to myself than to my relatives. When I finally made it to bed, I lay there, staring at the ceiling and waiting for sleep.

...That night, I folded my jeans, placed my watch on the nightstand and crawled under the sheets. This is my last memory of that night, which I now replay as one does the moments in which a car accident might have been avoided.

Primitivo, the Haitian night guard at the hotel, later told my family what he saw. At 4:30 in the morning, he noticed me perched on the windowsill, staring off in the direction of the unfinished apartment complex. “Peligroso!” he warned, pointing a flashlight at me. Dangerous! I yelled back something he didn’t understand. Rebuffed, he continued along his night watch until he heard a crashing thud. “Se cayo!” he shouted. He fell! He raced back to find me kneeling in a pool of my blood.

...I still couldn’t explain why the accident had happened, or even how. My dad, a Vietnam vet, still insisted that I had been attacked or robbed, unwilling, I think, to accept the idea of any sort of mental failure. Friends overseas told me that Marines and diplomats I barely knew were gossiping about me -- a two-star general was overheard declaring that I had been drunk, that I was trying to get out of coming back. When people suggested, gingerly, that I might have been suffering from PTSD, I rejected it out of hand. I hadn’t worn a uniform and didn’t believe I had the right to group my injury with those who did...

I decided to accept that explanation as the most likely, despite its obvious frustrations: The most important decision I’d ever made in my life happened that night on the windowsill, and I wasn’t around to make it.

months. The doctors think I experienced a stress-induced fugue state. I later learned that my accident was related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). If the dangers and stress I experienced in Fallujah can have such an affect, one can imagine the impact on combat vets -- especially those on their third or fourth tour who have lost comrades.

The canal-clearing initiative was the first tangible point at which I felt like I might be able to make a tiny impact there, beyond just the pointless Baghdad work. But it foundered in my absence. It still drives me nuts, and it was one of the most painful things about not being able to return to Iraq.

**epic:** What criticisms and recommendations do you have for reconstruction in Iraq?

**Kirk:** One of the biggest problems I see is troop rotations and civilian staff turnover because they prevent the military and other institutions from retaining on-the-ground lessons being learned in Iraq. Instead, individuals are bringing the lessons home with them, so every new person has to reinvent the wheel.

Poor coordination and communication between institutions is also a problem. For example, the military likes to build schools in an attempt to win hearts and minds, but it doesn't coordinate with USAID, which could fill the schools with equipment, or the Ministry of Education, which would offer guidance on placement within the city.

As a result, schools get built in illogical places, and then they go dormant because the local communities already have schools -- they just need a bit of refurbishing. With the new schools left dormant, insurgents then move in and turn them into bases, shooting at us from behind the walls we built. In response, our soldiers blow them up. It's a cycle that, apparently, has been seen all over the country.

**epic:** Congress recently gave the President over \$100 million for PRTs. Do it's enough?

**Kirk:** I was in Iraq when the PRT concept first started getting kicked around. It seemed like a still-born, not just to me but to a lot of folks over there.

\$150 million for a year? Divided across a couple dozen PRTs? We're spending \$14 million an hour on military upkeep in Iraq. That's a huge discrepancy in funding priorities, and if you don't think success in Iraq can be achieved by military means alone, then the discrepancy should give you pause.

There's also been nothing to fundamentally resolve the institutional disdain between the civilian agencies, and \$150 million is not going to help. If \$150 million is everything

the PRTs have to bring to the table, the military is not going to pay a bit of attention to them. The military says that State and USAID have not been fully invested in rebuilding Iraq, so the PRTs are part of the response to that, pulling the Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) out of the Green Zone. The FSOs who are actually over there risking their lives deserve high praise, but I feel that they're risking their lives to implement an under-funded, reactive strategy.

**epic:** The U.S. government is going to impose benchmarks on Iraq's government. What is your opinion on this?

**Kirk:** The U.S. government's favorite explanation of reconstruction failures has always been that it underestimated the state of disrepair of Iraq's infrastructure. This is true, in part. But an excuse that points to our own ignorance is not a particularly attractive one.

Yes, there's a lot that the Iraqis need to start stepping up on, but it's a myth to think that Iraq's government has fully functioning ministries that can transfer funds to the provinces and count on their employees to implement projects. The capacity is not there.

We're building and rehabilitating public service plants, restoring them to 100% capacity for the first time in decades. But when we pass them over to untrained Iraqis, we're surprised that within months they're run into the ground. We're also bringing with us Cadillac equipment: for example, obscenely expensive generators that Iraqis don't know how to use.

Since they don't even have the capacity to move the funds, how can we expect them to have a strategic framework for spending it? Iraq's government has a massive surplus in oil revenues, and it can't even spend what it has. The banking system is still horribly anemic and the ministries are being cannibalized.

Not only that, the Iraqi government is not earning the confidence of its people by providing needed services, as governments do elsewhere in the world. Right now in Iraq, power is earned through militias. Iraq's government ministers are being played by a handful of powerful people who are moving them around like chess pieces.

**epic:** Do you think Americans are giving up on Iraq reconstruction? And if so, do you think we should?

**Kirk:** I think we're giving up on it, and I think the government's giving up on it. It's not impossible to do development and reconstruction work in Iraq. As I said before, there are pockets of success. But it is impossible to do it if you don't fund the successful projects and continue to repeat the failed ones.

I don't really see how anyone in Washington or the Bush administration could think that after spending \$30 billion on reconstruction work, \$1 billion more is going to make all the difference. Throwing money at the reconstruction plan without resolving its fundamental flaws will not change anything. There will still be the same catfights between USAID and IRMO and the same turf wars between the military and civilian presence.

If we were to do this right – and, unfortunately, I'm not sure if we have this option anymore – our president would need to have a frank conversation with the country, saying "This is going to take several more years. We've really studied the reconstruction to figure out why it went wrong. We've adapted. And now we're going to recommit, from everybody's estimate, from the World Bank estimate, another \$60 billion. And to

do that we're also going to ramp up the military presence well above surge levels so we can clear and hold it so that USAID and others can build it."

But that will never happen. The public won't accept it anymore. And I don't think this administration has the credibility to make those statements.

What I don't agree with is that we create a shell, or some un-funded semblance of a reconstruction program, where marines and soldiers are risking their lives to protect civilians who aren't bringing any real bank with them and who aren't bringing any real coordinated strategy, all the while raising the expectations of the Iraqis and their government. I don't think we have the capacity to do it full-force anymore.

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