A Visitor’s Guide to Baghdad’s International Zone

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Written by tourists for the tourist
A comprehensive guide to local landmarks and history of the International Zone (formerly the Green Zone) in Baghdad, Iraq.
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A Little Background

The Green Zone is a 5.6 sq. mile (9.01 sq. km) area in central Baghdad that is the main base for Coalition and Iraqi Government officials in Iraq. Its official name is the “International Zone” or in local parlance, the IZ. The contrasting “Red Zone” – “red” signifying danger – refers to anything outside the Green Zone, in practical terms these days the whole of Iraq with the exception of parts of Kurdistan. Both red and green terms originated as military designations.

The area -- made up of most of southern half of the Karkh District of west-central Baghdad -- was originally home to the villas of government officials, several government ministries, and a number of palaces of Saddam Hussein and his family. It was the nerve center of Ba’athist Iraq.

The region was taken by American forces in April 2003, in some of the heaviest fighting in Baghdad. In the lead up to invasion, Saddam and most of the other residents of the area fled fearing arrest by Coalition forces or reprisals by Iraqis.

The abandoned buildings were not only attractive to Coalition forces, but also to homeless Iraqis. Among these were individuals who had lost their homes in the conflict, but most were urban poor who had been homeless or in slums before the war and saw moving into the abandoned houses as a sizeable increase in their standard of living.

There continue to be some five thousand of these Iraqis living in the Green Zone. But as the present Iraqi government has consolidated its authority, the Ministry of the Interior has begun attempting to evict squatters from government properties.

Because many of the buildings and compounds have changed hands several times since March 2003, very few IZ residents know anything about the buildings and monuments that surround them.

So this is a small attempt to unravel some of the mystery, and debunk some of the urban legends, of our small town in big Baghdad.

Streets and “Squares”

After crossing the suspension bridge from the Red Zone you will come upon the first “square” in this guide. First, the circles which – ironically enough – are actually known on Baghdad maps as “squares.” There are three principal circles in the center of the IZ. The first – and the one you have arrived at, commemorates the July 1958 revolution which overthrew the monarchy. It is, appropriately enough, called “14th of July Circle.”

The second, nearest the Monument to the Unknown Soldier, is called Oman Circle.
The third, bisected by the street that runs between the ar-Rashid Hotel and the Baghdad Convention Center, is Haleb Circle – named after a city in Syria.

The street running from the USAID compound/Liberty Pool around past the Palace through to 14th of July Circle is Haifa Street.

At 14th of July Circle, Haifa Street becomes al-Kindi Avenue which cuts north before the Khair River and under the expressway to Dimashq Street. It is named after the al-Kindi District through which it runs. Al-Kindi is named for noted 9th Century scientist, mathematician, physician and calligrapher Abū-Yūsuf Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī.

The street running from the 14th of July Bridge through 14th of July Circle and out past the ar-Rashid Hotel is 14th of July Avenue (S. Arbaʿat Ashar Tammuz).

The street running from across the Jumhuriyyah Bridge and between the ar-Rashid Hotel and the Baghdad Convention Center is Yafa Street.

The street forming western border of Zawra Park, between the parade ground of the Swords and the Adnan Palace, is Zaytun Street

A Word of Caution

First off, security is and continues to be a priority while moving about the IZ. Not only for yourself, but also for the many facilities, missions and organizations that call the IZ home.

As you move around the IZ you must keep fully aware at all times the security climate along with that of the buildings being guarded. Many of the places mentioned in this booklet are off limits to the casual traveler. Many are in very bad structural shape and are considered dangerous to enter and others are not considered open to visitors unless arrangements have been made.

As with many facilities in Iraq, entering any compound or guarded building must be done with extreme caution. Guards, whether military or not, can shoot then ask questions. Requesting permission from building occupants or the IZ landlord, the Joint Area Support Group – Central located in the U.S. Embassy Annex complex, is highly recommended.

While traveling you should, at all times, observe the force protection posture of the facility or base you are entering and be aware of ingress and egress routes, shelters, and safe areas wherever you go. The biggest threat in the IZ is indirect fire and missile or mortar attacks. You should plan accordingly before venturing out.

Also, never travel alone or without good communications. Someone other than those traveling with you should know where you are going and when you will be back. If
there is an attack of some type, you need to call your contact immediately to let them know your status, otherwise, there is a good chance you could go without medical care or be considered missing and a phalanx of security will be looking for you.

The Lay of the Land and this Report
Moving about the IZ is a fairly easy venture. Unless you crash through a very visible and well marked gate, you should have no concern about accidentally venturing into the red zone.

Starting at Camp Prosperity and following the main road that runs between the new U.S. Embassy Complex and FOB Union, this book will take you through the present U.S. Embassy Annex complex, past the combat support hospital, and through “Little Venice” and the U.S. Embassy Chancellery, the U.S. Agency for International Development and Ministry of Defense compounds. You will then double back past the former Council of Ministries building past the crossed swords and Monument to the Unknown and finish back at Camp Prosperity.

FOB Prosperity

As-Salaam Palace is located on the site of the former Republican Guard Headquarters, which was destroyed in Operation Desert Storm. Construction of the Palace began shortly after the conclusion of the war. The destroyed Republican Guard was built in 1928 by the British as the home for the King of Iraq.

Begun while sanctions were in effect, construction of the four-story palace and lush grounds was completed in September 1999 at a cost of about $100 million. It was used primarily to house foreign dignitaries, and was located just off the Qadissiya Expressway which runs from the airport to the IZ area. The 814,000- square meter complex included orchards (orange, lime, date and other fruit trees), a series of artificial pools, lakes, and ponds, outdoor patios with freestanding hearths, and related out-buildings.

The United States attacked the palace by air in 2003, hitting it with seven guided bombs. The evidence of those strikes is readily apparent today in the ravaged dome and upper floors. Looters struck next, making off with everything including the toilets.

In mid-September 2004, as part of an Army-wide effort to give its facilities around Baghdad friendlier connotations, and try to resolve the issue of constantly-changing facility names, the old name Camp Highlander was renamed FOB Prosperity, with its Arabic equivalent “Camp al-Izdehar”.

In April 2004, the Camp was the home of the 1/161st Infantry Battalion, from Washington State’s 81st Infantry Brigade. Although they have long since departed, their touch remains. Street and lake signs still stand referencing Washington
geographical features, such as one near one of the ponds that reads “Lake Issaquah.”

The hallways and rooms of the main building are a maze of plywood boards dividing the large palace interiors into living quarters, offices, storage spaces and a small 10-room gym. One of the largest dining facilities in the IZ was located in the central reception hall until December 2005 when construction of a new facility was completed outside on the grounds. The old DFAC has become the camp gym.

One of the camp’s lesser-known claims to fame is that one of parking lots is also the temporary resting place of some of the “Big Giant Saddam heads” that once graced the top of the nearby palace. Three of the colossal busts showing Saddam in a military uniform and wearing a replica of the golden dome of Jerusalem as a helmet stand in a row in a dusty field surrounded by tanks.

One of the busts was dismantled and is slated for shipment to an Army post in the United States. The other two may soon follow. Due to operational security issues, photos are no longer allowed near the busts.

**Clock Tower**

Built to commemorate the Arab Summit of 1980, the octagon shaped clock tower was of major pride to the Hussein administration. It is reflected in paper money, propaganda artwork and by the fact that Saddam used it as his own personal museum.

It became a sniper position used by Iraqi forces in March 2003 and received heavy fire which destroyed the clock mechanisms. The rest of the building has since been restored and is now the home to the Criminal Court of Iraq. Access is very limited and is only allowed through a single door on Al Kindi Street.

**As-Sijud Palace**

The turquoise-tile domed as-Sijud Palace sits on the north bank of the river/reservoir in the Janain District. It was known as the “New Presidential Palace,” to differentiate it from the “Old Presidential Palace” to the northeast.

The palace and grounds are currently occupied by Republic of Georgian coalition forces and named FOB Shavnaboda.
Two different compounds flanked the NPP in its heyday. Along the river west of bridge and east of the NPP was the “Tigris Compound” which housed the government’s top echelons: the Revolutionary Command Council, Regional (Iraqi) Leadership, and Saddam's son Uday. West of the NPP to just over the small Khair River was the Qadissiya Compound, housing government ministers and their party parallels.

The Palace compound lines the north bank of a man-made reservoir created by removing the eastern third of the oddly-named Umm al-Khanazir Island (“Island of the Pigs,” formerly used as a holiday park for Saddam’s security forces) and constructing a levee from the remnants of the island to the shore near the 14th of July Bridge. A large pumping station near the western foot of the bridge pumped water from the river through a filtration system into the east end of the reservoir to provide clean water for the lake.

The reservoir’s purpose was purely recreational. It provided a cleaner, reliable source of aquatic recreation (swimming, boating, and fishing) for the children of the elite whose houses lined the north bank.

**FOB Union**
Across from the as-Sijud Palace is FOB Union, a coalition military encampment that takes in the former Ba’ath Party headquarters and barracks belonging to the Presidential guards. At the far western end of the compound is a blue domed mosque looking structure that is really a tomb for the founder of the Ba’ath Party, Michael Aflaq.

**Ba’ath Party HQ**
A large imposing yet unfinished structure, the “world headquarters” for the Iraqi Ba’ath party was about 70% completed when the war broke in March 2003. Cranes were still working up to the beginning of the campaign and provided sniper positions for Iraqi forces as the coalition troops entered the city from the airport. The building was to have a large central dome and great hall, which are still left unfinished. Today the outer corridors have been completed but little else. Enter the central door on the south side of the building and you can see where one of the missiles collapsed the ornate ceiling. It also gives one a good perspective on how poorly constructed most of the embargo era buildings were.
Michel Aflaq Tomb
Between the former Ba’ath Party headquarters building and the tomb lie a 1970s era set of buildings, partially destroyed, but also partially inhabited. The Tomb itself was built shortly after Aflaq’s death on June 23, 1989. Born in 1910 born in Damascus, Syria, to a middle class Greek Orthodox family, he is considered the ideological founder of Ba’athism, a form of Arab nationalism. He was educated in the westernized schools in French mandate Syria, where he was a star pupil. He then went to university at the Sorbonne in Paris where he first developed his ideals. He tried to combine socialism with the vision of a Pan-Arab nation. He became committed to Arab unity and the freeing of the Middle East from Western colonialism.

He is probably the most influential person on the career and life of Saddam Hussein. Through Aflaq’s efforts, Hussein was able to gain the confidence of party officials and with his prompting Hussein rose quickly through the party ranks eventually becoming President of Iraq and party leader in 1979.

When he died in 1989 in Baghdad he was given a state funeral. Saddam Hussein claimed that on his death he converted to Islam, but many who know him do not believe this claim as he was always a staunchly secular modernist thinker.

New U.S. Embassy Complex
As is with many of the operations within the IZ, the new U.S. Embassy complex is not open for any type of viewing or touring. Even though it is a massive project, information is very limited on the construction site. The following April 14, 2006, Associated Press article made an attempt at giving the local public view of the project:

New U.S. Embassy in Iraq cloaked in mystery
Baghdad locale, slated to be completed in 2007, to be largest of its kind

The Associated Press
Updated: 5:45 p.m. ET April 14, 2006

BAGHDAD, Iraq - The fortress-like compound rising beside the Tigris River here will be the largest of its kind in the world, the size of Vatican City, with the population of a small town, its own defense force, self-contained power and water, and a precarious perch at the heart of Iraq’s turbulent future.

The new U.S. Embassy also seems as cloaked in secrecy as the ministate in Rome. “We can’t talk about it. Security reasons,” Roberta Rossi, a spokeswoman at the current embassy, said when asked for information about the project.
A British tabloid even told readers the location was being kept secret — news that would surprise Baghdadis who for months have watched the forest of construction cranes at work across the winding Tigris, at the very center of their city and within easy mortar range of anti-U.S. forces in the capital, though fewer explode there these days.

The embassy complex — 21 buildings on 104 acres, according to a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report — is taking shape on riverside parkland in the fortified “Green Zone,” just east of al-Samoud, a former palace of Saddam Hussein’s, and across the road from the building where the ex-dictator is now on trial.

The Republican Palace, where U.S. Embassy functions are temporarily housed in cubicles among the chandelier-hung rooms, is less than a mile away in the 4-square-mile zone, an enclave of American and Iraqi government offices and lodgings ringed by miles of concrete barriers.

5,500 employees at the embassy

The 5,500 Americans and Iraqis working at the embassy, almost half listed as security, are far more numerous than at any other U.S. mission worldwide. They rarely venture out into the “Red Zone,” that is, violence-torn Iraq.

This huge American contingent at the center of power has drawn criticism.

“The presence of a massive U.S. embassy — by far the largest in the world — co-located in the Green Zone with the Iraqi government is seen by Iraqis as an indication of who actually exercises power in their country,” the International Crisis Group, a European-based research group, said in one of its periodic reports on Iraq.

State Department spokesman Justin Higgins defended the size of the embassy, old and new, saying it’s indicative of the work facing the United States here. “It’s somewhat self-evident that there’s going to be a fairly sizable commitment to Iraq by the U.S. government in all forms for several years,” he said in Washington.

Higgins noted that large numbers of non-diplomats work at the mission — hundreds of military personnel and dozens of FBI agents, for example, along with representatives of the Agriculture, Commerce and other U.S. federal departments.

They sleep in hundreds of trailers or “containerized” quarters scattered around the Green Zone. But next year embassy staff will move into six apartment buildings in the new complex, which has been under construction since mid-2005 with a target completion date of June 2007.

Iraq’s interim government transferred the land to U.S. ownership in October 2004, under an agreement whose terms were not disclosed. “Embassy Baghdad” will dwarf new U.S. embassies elsewhere, projects that typically cover 10 acres. The embassy’s 104 acres is six times larger
than the United Nations compound in New York, and two-thirds the acreage of Washington’s National Mall.

**Estimated cost of over $1 billion**

Original cost estimates ranged over $1 billion, but Congress appropriated only $592 million in the emergency Iraq budget adopted last year. Most has gone to a Kuwait builder, First Kuwaiti Trading & Contracting, with the rest awarded to six contractors working on the project’s “classified” portion — the actual embassy offices.

Higgins declined to identify those builders, citing security reasons, but said five were American companies. The designs aren’t publicly available, but the Senate report makes clear it will be a self-sufficient and “hardened” domain, to function in the midst of Baghdad power outages, water shortages and continuing turmoil. It will have its own water wells, electricity plant and wastewater-treatment facility, “systems to allow 100 percent independence from city utilities,” says the report, the most authoritative open source on the embassy plans.

Besides two major diplomatic office buildings, homes for the ambassador and his deputy, and the apartment buildings for staff, the compound will offer a swimming pool, gym, commissary, food court and American Club, all housed in a recreation building.

Security, overseen by U.S. Marines, will be extraordinary: setbacks and perimeter no-go areas that will be especially deep, structures reinforced to 2.5-times the standard, and five high-security entrances, plus an emergency entrance-exit, the Senate report says. Higgins said the work, under way on all parts of the project, is more than one-third complete.

**14th July Circle and Statue**

The 14th of July statue and Square, the avenue and the nearby bridge, are all named in honor of the July 14, 1958, military coup led by Abdulkarim Qassim which overthrew the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy and created the Republic of Iraq. The date is not, as many believe, the day the Iraqi Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party took power – that was to happen in on July 17, 1968. The party itself was founded by Michael Aflaq on April 7, 1947 (see FOB Union).

The statue was made by Iraqi artist Miram Al-Sa’di and unveiled in 1963. It portrays four Iraqi soldiers moving forward toward the Presidential Palace with a fifth fallen signifying that of the soldiers that took part in the coup attempt, one in five were killed.
14th July Bridge

The 14th of July (Arba‘taashar Tamuz) Bridge was Baghdad’s first suspension bridge, and was built to link the Karkh and Karradah districts on either side of the Tigris River. It was named in honor of the July 14, 1985, military coup led by Abdulkarim Qassim which overthrew the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy and created the Republic of Iraq.

It was damaged during the first Gulf War, but was never repaired by the former regime. After an engineer’s survey showed it was unsafe for use, Coalition forces closed the bridge when they entered Baghdad in April 2003. When the bridge was closed, people had to spend an extra twenty minutes to drive to the next nearest alternative.

Repairs to the bridge were made over the summer, and the bridge was reopened to traffic after a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Oct. 25, 2003. The newly opened route went a long way towards alleviating traffic congestion on the east side of the river, but that benefit was short-lived. A bomb attack in central Baghdad on Nov. 13, 2003 prompted the Coalition to close the Bridge until mid-2004 when it re-opened as a tightly guarded control point into the International Zone.

Drive toward the bridge and on the right before you begin to cross the bridge is an exit taking you to the waterside. You can either turn right or left depending on where you want to go next. Right will take you to a canal road that is the closest unprotected road to the Red Zone, which is across the Tigris River. It is probably the only unobstructed view of the Red Zone and the Tigris you can get – but it is also totally unprotected with little to no cover – driving out there is at your own risk.

To the northeast of the bridge is the entrance to FOB Freedom.

FOB Freedom

FOB Freedom is another coalition military base, the smallest in the International Zone. You can only enter with proper ID, but it is the home of the former Iraqi Military Officers Club which is now called “Freedom Rest” and is used only for military personnel on intra-theater leave. Access to the compound and pool is limited to those with a completed DA 31 leave form. On the FOB, there are several Iraqi merchant shops and a local approved restaurant serving Iraqi food.

Republican Palace (U.S. Embassy Annex)

The Republican Palace is also known as the Presidential Palace or the “Old” Presidential Palace to differentiate it from the New Presidential Palace located to the southwest. It is the largest of the palaces commissioned by Saddam Hussein and was his preferred place to meet visiting heads of state. Sited on
the western banks of the Tigris River, Iraqis contend that its site on a bend in the river was chosen because a microclimate exists there making the area slightly cooler than the rest of the city in summertime.

The domed building, with its two sweeping wings, measures about a half mile in length. The middle wing, with its blue dome, was first built in 1957-58 of Iraqi sandstone from Nissan Governorate. Designed by a team of British and Iraqi architects for the Iraqi monarchy, the architecture is understated by stately. It was badly damaged in January 1991 and rebuilt in a year. Saddam had his name inscribed on every 50th brick as seen in an open space of wall near the north wing entrance.

Renovation in the late 1990’s nearly tripled its original size by adding a large wing to both the north and east of the building. To the northeast corner of the compound near the Tigris River are the remnants of a former Republican Army base that is one of the few undeveloped sections of the current embassy grounds.

The United States spared the palace during its “shock and awe” raid in the 2003 liberation of Iraq, aside from small attacks on January 18, 19, 22 and February 13. The palace briefly housed the Coalition Provisional Authority, and now temporarily houses the U.S. Embassy.

In early December 2003, Iraqi contractors removed the giant Saddam Hussein heads from the Presidential Palace. All four were placed in two storage areas face down in two small dirt plots to the south of the Palace.

Believer’s or the Bunker Palace

There are a lot of misconceptions about this facility including that it was build deep in the ground, that Saddam lived there over a long period of time and that it went undiscovered for a long time. All three are wrong. Basically the palace is a cap over the whole bunker complex itself. Knowing that it was a bunker, and in possession of the plans used to build it, the U.S. deployed B-52s to hit the palace with eight two-ton bunker buster bombs. The eight bombs did explode in the building rendering it a shell of what it used to be. But the attack did no damage to the bunker itself, due more to the architectural and engineering abilities of the German firm that built it rather than the weakness of American armaments.

"It could withstand the shock wave of a nuclear bomb the size of the Hiroshima – one detonating 250 meters away," said Karl Esser, a security consultant who designed the bunker underneath Saddam's main presidential palace in Baghdad in an interview with Reuters in 2003. A retired Yugoslav army officer who helped build other bunkers for Saddam, Esser also told
Reuters that the shelters were impenetrable and could survive an atomic bomb.

The palace bunker can accommodate 250 people and has two escape tunnels, one of which extends 200 meters to the Tigris River. It was completed in 1983 by German firm Boswau & Knauer, which merged into what is now the Walter Bau-AG building group. At the time, Esser was a consultant for a German government-sponsored civil protection body and had his own company, Schutzraumtechnik Esser GmbH, which supplied equipment for the bunker. Construction took place at a time when western companies were legally supplying Saddam with arms and equipment during the 1980 to 1988 Iran-Iraq war.

According to the local Iraqis, Saddam used the bunker less than eight times but maintained a staff to manage its elaborate water, cooling, air filtration and electrical system. The "bunker busting" bombs failed to penetrate the bunker because they first had to go through the palace built directly above it. The palace above provided protection so the bunker could only be cracked by troops. Another interesting aspect of the structure is the two false floors built above the bunker itself. Three feet separate both floors which are made of 10 inches of steel-reinforced concrete thus tricking the “smart” bombs and causing them to explode prematurely.

The bunker ceiling itself is made of steel-reinforced concrete up to 22 feet thick. It included an air purification system, water system, an extensive array of halls, bunkrooms, kitchens, restrooms, and showers at the two entrances that were specially equipped for biological contamination. Even though the palace above took the brunt of the attack in March 2003, the bunker itself was left unscathed except for a weakness that could have proven its undoing. During the extensive bombing, water pipes, that served the palace above, broke, flooding parts of the bunker. Even today, some of the rooms still have an inch of putrid water teaming with some type of biological life and laced with mushrooms.

One of the most interesting engineering aspects of the bunker is its double-shelled construction. The structure itself is relatively high for a shelter of its kind because the water table is so high in Baghdad and the structure is built less than a mile from the Tigris River. The ceilings of the various rooms are only a foot below ground level. The architects compensated for this by building a “plug” or 22-foot thick top on the bunker facility and built it 14 feet in from the outer walls of the palace inside this superstructure was the bunker itself. It was built with four-foot thick walls that are separated from the outer walls by a two-foot gap and held in place by a system of rubber connectors and industrial springs. Similar to the construction of the San Francisco City Hall building, it was built to diffuse the shock of any bomb that hits the palace above.

Esser stated in the Reuters interview that he remembers giving Saddam a personal tour of the bunker's features, which include a water tank, electricity generator, air filter, a 30-square-meter command center and a so-called electromagnetic pulse protection system to shield electrical circuits from the impact of an explosion.
Saddam stayed in the shelter a few times but when the troops of the 3rd Infantry Division arrived, they found the place wide open and abandoned.

The palace itself has been thought to have been a Ba’ath Party headquarters and was even called “Believer’s Palace” because people believed it was a palace (do a Google search on the name and you will note that Saddam’s bunker is the main feature). It was really a bit of both. The Ba’ath party was all-consuming and everywhere – omnipresent from birth to death – teaching all that the party and the “Arab-socialist” revolution was all that mattered. All things come from the party and all things in the party come from “the light of Iraq and pride of all – Saddam.” The building itself was little more than large meeting and reception rooms and, of course, the bunker. Judging from some of the items one can scrounge from the rubble, it was still pretty opulent in its own right.

The term “Believer” comes more from the inscription on the entrance that reads, “Do not believe what you may hear from outside the homeland oh children of ancient Mesopotamia. You only have to look to your leader, President, leader, struggler Saddam Hussein – believe only what he tells you and take all else as rumor and lies.”

The main room of the building was a large five story rotunda which was probably a very dramatic space. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling and the walls were covered in carved marble and highly decorated plaster. The room itself took two large hits that left it in total ruin but still structurally sound. It is an eerie feeling to stand in the middle of a 25 foot crater (one of two) and gaze up at the absolutely complete destruction around you and still find pieces from the crystal chandelier intact with the gold ties still in place.

No one is sure what the Iraqi’s are going to do with the palace and bunker. It would be nearly impossible to tear down the bunker since it is so extensive and massively built and burying it is not an option because of the 25-foot high plug.

The words of the architect still echo through the empty corridors and sleeping rooms of the bunker when he gave Saddam the initial tour, “He was satisfied,” said Esser. “He was totally friendly. He was wearing civilian clothes and looked like an ordinary civil servant but you could tell he was important because everyone immediately went quiet when he started talking. In the end it's not just one person getting protection, it's several people, it's the palace staff as well. I just see it as an achievement of bunker technology.”
Former US Embassy Compound
Built toward the end of the monarchal period, the former US embassy complex skirts the side of the present U.S. Embassy Annex Palace and is across the street from Believers' Palace. Just to the north of the large gate that crosses the road in front of Believers' Palace, it is a complex of three large white buildings that, up until the early 1970s, housed the U.S. Embassy. When the United States fell out of favor with many of the Arab Countries over the Arab Israeli conflict in the mid-1970s, the U.S. Ambassador was kicked out of the country and the property ransacked for everything, including doorknobs and plumbing fixtures. Still legally U.S. soil, the Iraqi government chose not to take over the property despite its ideal location.

All that is left of the structure are the main office area, staff quarters and the Ambassadors house on the waterfront. The grounds are overgrown and the buildings totally gutted.

The British Support Unit complex and the British Embassy are located adjacent to the old U.S. Embassy and can be accessed by the road just north of the compound.

Further north of the old embassy, on the left side of the main road is the local hospital, Ibn Sina, which is also known in the IZ as the combat support hospital.

Ibn Sina Hospital
Formerly an exclusive hospital and clinic for Baghdad’s governing elite, it presently serves as the IZ’s combat support hospital.

The hospital is named for Abu ‘Ali al-Husayn ebn-e Abdollah ebn-e Sina-e Balkhi (Arabic/Farsi: ﷺ ﻋﻠی ﻋسد ﺑﻦ ﺑن سينأ). Born around 980, he was the author of 450 books on a wide range of subjects. Many of these concentrated on philosophy and medicine. He is considered by many to be "the father of modern medicine." His most famous works were The Book of Healing and The Canon of Medicine, also known as the al-Qanun (full title: al-qanun fil-tibb). His Latinized name – Avicenna – by which he is known in the West, is an anglicization of Ibn Sina, the short name by which he was known in Persia.

After passing the hospital, take a right at the traffic circle and you now face the entrance to Little Venice. A left turn before going through the gates to Little Venice will take you to the Liberty Pool, the USAID compound and Phoenix Base.
**Little Venice**

Probably one of the oddest named parts of the IZ, Little Venice is the neighborhood between the former US Embassy complex and the U.S. Chancellery building. It is believed to be nick-named Little Venice because of the many cement waterways, bridges and fountains that adorn its streets and park.

Once the playground of high ranking Iraqi officials and Hussein family members, it is now the private home to the leaders of the current Iraqi government and a number of others who are either associated with the U.S. military or governmental presence. It includes buildings such as Uday’s love palace, with a pool and a big outdoor screen for watching movies; the homes of Saddam's daughters; and various other large estates all surrounded by fountains and large pools in a park-like setting.

At the far north end of Little Venice is the U.S. Chancellery where U.S. citizens can renew or apply for a passport and do other types of visa business. Access to Little Venice is controlled. A U.S. Embassy ID card or U.S. military ID is required to enter.

Back on the main road (Haifa Street) heading toward Assassins Gate you can see various compounds including USAID, the United Nations and embassies and organizations of several other nations. Access to these areas is only allowed on a “have business” basis. This area encompasses the Ministry of Defense and FOB Honor, home to the Iraqi Army 6th Division. This area also includes a number of monumental structures from the former regime. Most notable is the pyramid-shaped, former Council of Ministries Building and the massive “Great Hall of Meetings” palace.

**Hammurabi Statue and the Ministry of Defense Compound**

South of Assassins Gate, inside the IZ, there stands a statue devoted to Hammurabi. Made by Mohammad Ghani, it is dedicated to the Babylonian King who founded one of the earliest empires in human history and created a legal system that would be repeated throughout the ancient world.

According to an entry in Wikipedia:

“**Hammurabi was the sixth king of Babylon. Achieving the conquest of Sumer and Akkad, and ending the last Sumerian dynasty of Isin, he was the first king of the Babylonian Empire. Hammurabi reigned over the Babylonian Empire from 1792 BC until his death in 1750 BC (middle chronology; 1728-1686 BC short chronology; dates highly uncertain). He was born in 1810 BC. It was he who first gave the city of Babylon rule over Mesopotamia.**”

The Ministry of Defense compound is only open to those doing business with the Ministry. The MOD building was mostly rebuilt after the March 2003 entrance of coalition forces. Originally built in the 1920s by the British, it housed the Iraqi Parliament until the 1970’s becoming the command center for Iraqi Military Forces after a new parliament facility was built by the former regime. A handsome facility on the outside and ornate on the inside, the building is still a target of frequent mortar attacks by anti-Iraqi forces.
FOB Honor

FOB Honor is the site of one of the most recognizable buildings from the “shock and awe” campaign waged in March 2003. The entrance to FOB Honor lies directly across from the Ministry of Defense. Access is only granted to those with proper MNF-I/DOD identification since the base is now home to the Iraqi Army 6th Division.

Hall of Meetings

As you drive in FOB Honor’s main gate, the massive Great Hall of Meetings will be directly in front of you. As the name implies, the facility was built as a massive meeting hall for the former regime. Built during the embargo at an extravagant cost of over $100 million, the building housed 20 small to large meeting-lecture halls and was heavily bombed in the early days of the 2003 war. If you enter through the middle front entrance you will enter the large hall. To the right is a large mural of Saddam with only the top half still visible. To the left is a large bronze relief showing Saddam above Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi leading the Iraqi army to triumph.

Go back out the front entrance and go south toward the large pyramid building and enter the large southern entrance to the HOM. There, directly inside the southern entrance, is a vestibule whose ceiling is painted with scenes from a battle during Desert Storm. The painting depicts the defeat of U.S. forces and triumph of Iraqi troops and tanks. To the right of the entrance, in a side room is a mural of Saddam with the face missing.
Exit the building and turn to the left (south) and you will be walking toward a pyramid shaped building made famous by CNN during the early days of the war – the Council of Ministers (COM) building.

**Council of Ministers Building**

Built in the mid 1980's, this facility housed most of the ministers of the former regime. Tariq Aziz, Foreign Minister, had most of the third floor to himself and his support staff. Entering the building through the front entrance and up a large ramp, you are taken into a great domed room. The building was lined with dark thick wood paneling that, when bombed, caught on fire. For the most part the building is completely gutted and somewhat dangerous to venture through without a flashlight. To the right of the great hall is a staircase. Take it to the top of the building for a dramatic view of the Baghdad.

The building took the spotlight during the recent war because most of the journalists covering the war worked out of the Palestine Meridian Hotel which is just across the Tigris from the Ministry of Defense. As noted in a March 22, 2003, article in the San Francisco Chronicle:

*It was impossible for foreign journalists to assess the damage because they were prevented by Iraqi security from leaving their hotels, the Palestine and the Al-Mansour. The hotels, a half-mile from some of the targeted areas, became the world's eyes on Baghdad, with reporters, photographers and TV cameras surveying the apocalyptic scene from the upper floors.*

There are even a number of web sites on the building including: [http://www.kokogiak.com/thatboxinthecorner/iraqi_building.html](http://www.kokogiak.com/thatboxinthecorner/iraqi_building.html).

The smaller badly damaged buildings to the south of the COM were used as guest facilities for visiting ministers.
Upon exiting FOB Honor, turn right and take the first right at a traffic circle. The road eventually turns into the Qadissiya Expressway and out to Route Irish, but a right turn at the traffic circle will take you to the heart of the buildings that comprise the current Iraqi government: the eight-story Iraqi Government Building, the Baghdad Convention Center, Ocean Cliffs and the Al Rashid hotel. The entrance to this area is restricted – especially when the Iraqi Council of Ministers is meeting – and proper ID is required. Of all the buildings in the area, the Al Rashid Hotel is the only one you will probably be allowed access unless you have business in the other buildings.

**Iraqi Government Building**

Built in the early 1980s, the building is decorated with artwork honoring Iraq’s various industries. Once the home for the Ministry of Industry and Military Industrialization, it is now home to the Iraqi Governing Council. At one point, the Military Industry Ministry was run by Saddam's son-in-law, Hussein Kamel. Kamel escaped to Jordan in 1995 only to return back to Baghdad with promised of forgiveness – a promise that ended three days after their arrival. He refused to surrender to Saddam's security forces and was killed after a 13-hour stand off at his house in Baghdad Feb. 23.

**Convention Center**

Built in preparation for the 1980 Arab League Convention, the Convention Center and Al Rashid Hotel were meant to be seen as the new and modern Iraq. Formerly the “Saddam Convention Center,” the Baghdad Convention Center is presently the site in which the Council of Representatives meets. A colorful mosaic of wolf-like monsters rings the grand lobby of the Baghdad Convention Center. It depicts the monsters with the American flag attacking stoic Iraqi troops, who are supported by doves of peace and SCUD missiles. It is abstract enough to go unnoticed, but it carries regime slogans in Arabic and portrayals of famous Saddam landmarks.

**Al Rashid Hotel**

The eighteen story al-Rashid Hotel is the only hotel in the International Zone. Built in 1983, it is named for Haurn ar-Rashid (Arabic: هارون الرشيد) the fifth and most famous of the Abbasid caliphs who ruled from 786 to 809. His court was memorialized in the book *Arabian Nights: Tales from One Thousand and One Nights*.

A favorite haunt of the Ba’athist elite, the hotel gained broader notoriety during the 1991 Gulf War when CNN conducted their newscasts from the hotel. Between the Gulf War and the 2003 liberation of Iraq, the building was the main housing facility for Western businessmen and diplomats in the capital, as well as the foreign press.
A mural depicting U.S. President George H.W. Bush with a look of hate on his face was inlaid onto the floor at the lobby entrance after the Gulf War. This was intended for visitors to walk over his face to enter the hotel, an Iraqi sign of debasement. The mural was removed by U.S. soldiers after the 2003 invasion.

After the invasion, the hotel was converted into a base for the Coalition and the American military. It once again gained fame on Oct. 26, 2003, when rockets struck the hotel while U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz was staying there. He was unhurt, but American Army Lt. Col. Charles Buehring was killed and 17 others injured.

It was not the last time the hotel was hit. Its location right on the border between the Red and Green Zones, coupled with its height, makes it a popular target for small-arms, automatic and mortar fire.

The interior is currently a shadow of its former glory. There are two operating restaurants on the ground floor, as well as a collection of Iraqi gift and memorabilia shops (each selling collections of Saddam currency, jewelry, antiques and other bric-a-brac).

After leaving the government area, turn left at the traffic circle and head toward the Monument to the Unknown Soldier on the Qadissiya Expressway.

The Monument to the Unknown Soldier

Park in the designated area and ascend the long sweeping ramp to the tomb itself. Keep in mind that both MNF-I and the Iraqi government view this as an important historical and commemorative monument, all respect and dignity should be maintained while visiting the monument. You will probably be accompanied by one of the resident Iraqi Soldiers who will show you around the recently cleaned up monument.

The first thing to note about this monument is that, despite being popularly known as the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” it is not a tomb at all; it does not contain a body. Hence the official name: Monument to the Unknown Soldier.

Built in 1982, the monument was designed by Khalid ar-Rahal, and is said to have been inspired by the glorification of a martyr from the Iran-Iraq war. What looks like to many as a flying saucer frozen in mid-flight, it actually represents a traditional shield (dira’a) dropping from the dying grasp of an Iraqi warrior.

The main structure is shaped like a low, truncated cone of 250 m diameter. It is surrounded by slanting girders of triangular section that are covered with marble.
Red granite-stepped elliptical platforms lead to the dome and sculptures on the top. The repeated circular and elliptical motifs are thought to echo the ancient city walls of Baghdad, which were circular.

The 550-ton cantilevered dome represents the dira'a and is 42m in diameter and follows an inclination of 12 degrees. Its external surface is clad with copper, while its inner surface features a soffit finished with pyramidal modules of alternating steel and copper. A large water basin and fountain envelop the back of the dome where it meets the promenade.

Beneath the dome is a red glass cube sheathed in sculpted aluminum. Most visitors mistakenly believe the body of the Unknown Soldier lies within this cube. Actually, the coffin-shaped metal box inside the cube represents the Unknown Soldier.

The steel sculpture to the left of the dome is meant to resemble the Minaret of Samarra. The Minaret of Samarra was one of the most ancient and famous sites in Islamic architecture and was patterned after the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia. The sculpture at the Monument to the Unknown Soldier is entirely covered with Murano glass panels fixed on stainless steel arms which light up at night in the national colors of Iraq (White, Green, Red and Black). Before the 2003 war, a spotlight shone skyward from the central tube.

A stairway leads down into the body of the monument from behind the cube. In the wall on the first stair landing is the Bismillah, the phrase that begins every sura of the Qur'an except the 9th: Bismillahi r-rahmani r-rahim (“In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful”). Below that was an inscription by Saddam Hussein, but it was removed in December 2005.

The stairs continue down to two huge doors which pivot on central axes. Passing through the doors, you enter the museum in the body of the monument. At its center is a large column which supports the cube above. Upturned swords imbedded in glass blocks spiral upwards around the column.

Around the column are rows of acrylic display cases which resemble coffins. Similar cases are arrayed on the room’s wall. They once displayed items such as the sword of the commander of the Arab forces at the Battle of al-Qadissiya and Saddam’s personal machine gun. A blue glass band runs the upper circumference of the room, echoing the fountains on the top of the monument.

The monument, which once figured prominently on the regime’s 10,000 dinar note, fell into serious disrepair after Liberation. The site’s power plant was looted, or rusted and stopped functioning; the fountains went dry and the basins cracked. Concertina wire festooned the promenade. The grounds were overrun with weeds and undergrowth, and in some places were actually flooded by two small broken water mains which lead to the growth of rushes and a large population of frogs which would begin a raucous croaking every night about the time of the maghrib prayer.
In the fall of November 2005, the JASG-C, managers of the IZ, began a project to rehabilitate the monument in time for Iraq's Armed Forces Day Jan. 6, 2006. The grounds were cleaned up, a sprinkler system installed, and landscaping redone. The entire structure was cleaned, repaired, rewired and relit. The T-walls that separated the grounds from the buildings on the north side of 14th of July Avenue were removed.

**Crossed Swords Monument ("Hands of Victory")**

Destined for wrecking ball as soon as the property is turned over to the Iraqi Government, the Crossed Swords monument is probably the most visited and photographed in the International Zone.

The Swords of Qadissiya, also called the “Hands of Victory” or, as they are known by most, the “Crossed Swords,” are a pair of triumphal arches. Each arch consists of hands holding crossed swords, and mark the entrances to a parade ground that was constructed to commemorate Iraq's supposed victory in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

The official name of “the Swords of Qadissiya” is an allusion to the historical Battle of al-Qadissiya in 636 A.D. (Arabic: معركة القادسية, *Maʿārak al-Qadissiya*). Qadissiya was the decisive military engagement fought between the Arab Muslim army and the Sasanian Persian army during the first period of Islamic expansion which resulted in the Islamicization of Persia and the resurrection of Mesopotamian civilization under Islamic rule. This battle has gone down in Iraqi history as a god-given sign of Arab superiority over the Persians.

While the emotive power of the battle has been used throughout Iraqi history since, the most notable use was the dubbing by Saddam Hussein of his eight-year war against Iran as *Qadissiya-Saddām* (“Saddam's Qadissiya”). The first instance of this naming occurred April 2, 1980, six months before the outbreak of hostilities, on the occasion of a visit by Saddam Hussein to al-Mustansiriyyah University in Baghdad. A bomb attack the previous day at the university had injured Saddam’s vice-president, Tariq Aziz. Saddām blamed the newly-founded Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and, drawing the parallel to the 7th-Century battle, he announced:
In your name, brothers, and on behalf of the Iraqis and Arabs everywhere we tell those [Persian] cowards and dwarfs who try to avenge al-Qadissiya that the spirit of al-Qadissiya as well as the blood and honor of the people of Al-Qadissiya who carried the message on their spearheads are greater than their attempts.

The theme of Saddam leading a new Arab conquest of the Persians permeated the Iran-Iraq War. Paintings, speeches, coins, paper money, street names, poetry – all ran rife with Qadissiya themes. The freeway beginning at Oman Circle and running through the IZ's Checkpoint 12 and beyond to Baghdad International Airport is called the “Qadissiya Expressway.”

In 1986, two years before the war's end, the government of Iraq began the construction of a festival and parade ground in Zawra Park, near the extensive presidential complex in the center of Baghdad. Known as Grand Festivities Square, it is comprised of a large parade ground, an extensive reviewing stand and pavilion, and the two crossed-sword arches.

The Crossed Swords were the largest manifestation of Saddam’s Qadissiya theme. Iraq's leading sculptor, Adil Kamil, was commissioned to design the arches. His design consists of a pair of massive hands emerging at 45 degree angles from the ground, each holding a 140-foot long sword. The swords were designed to be the highest triumphal arches in the world, two and half times the height of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

The swords are modeled after the sword carried by the victorious Arab general at the Battle of al-Qadissiya. A small flagpole flying the Iraqi flag rises from the point where the swords meet – 40 meters above the street. On the swords beneath the flagpole, the Bismillah (see page 20) is written in raised metal lettering.

Kamil used photographs of Saddam as his model for the design of the hands. When Kamil died in 1987, with the monument incomplete, his position was assumed by fellow artist Mohammad Ghani. Ghani personally took an impression of one of Saddam's thumbs, and the resulting fingerprint was added to the mold for one of the arches' thumbs.

The arches were made by an international consortium led by the German foundry H+H Metalform and included the British company Morris Singer Founders. The guns of Iraqi soldiers – “the glorious martyrs” – killed in the Iran-Iraq war, were used to make the alloy from which the arches were cast. Each blade weighs 24 tons.
As a further embellishment, the helmets of 2,500 Iranian soldiers killed during the war are held in metal nets at the base of each hand. A cursory inspection of the helmets shows many are pierced with bullet holes. Additional helmets are buried in the concrete road surface like small speed bumps so that can be continually “trampled” by vehicle and pedestrian traffic.

When Saddam inaugurated his triumphal arches on Aug. 8, 1989, he rode under them on a white horse. The choice of mount carried a triple allusion: first, to the steed of Hussein, the Shi’ia hero martyred at nearby Karbala in 680 (an admittedly odd choice for a Sunni), second, to the steed ridden by the victorious Arab general at the Battle of Qadissiya, Sa`d ibn Abi Waqqās; and third, to King Faisal I (Saddam Hussein also wore the same ceremonial attire the king wore during official state ceremonies).

The monument was not destroyed during the 1991 Gulf War, although General Norman Schwarzkopf wanted to correct that oversight during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to Gen. Schwartzkopf:

I had spoken to Powell regularly throughout the day . . . .At ten p.m., I called to give him a final update. I was tired; at the end of the conversation I heard myself say how much I'd like to blow up the giant Saddam statue and the Victory Arch in downtown Baghdad. The Victory Arch, a monument to the war against Iran, was a huge sculpture of two hands, said to be Saddam's, holding two swords crossed. We'd spared both the statue and the Victory Arch during the air campaign because they weren't military targets. To my surprise, Powell was all for it – although he suggested we check with the President first. Pentagon lawyers vetoed the idea a couple of days later.

The Crossed Swords have become the routine backdrop for everyone’s “Look Ma, I’m in Baghdad” photo op.

The stadium that spans the parade ground was built at the same time to seat dignitaries with air conditioned seats, a large restaurant in the ground floor and a helipad out the back entrance. There was once a large museum located under the east wing of seating but has since been gutted by fire. A few charred remnants remain guarded only by a sign proclaiming “Museum of Presents to H.E. the President.”

**Adnon Palace**

Once an art exposition center, Adnon Palace is now the home of part of the Ministry of Interior. The palace sits at the far west end of the crossed swords. The Palace was built in 1994 as a monument to Adnon Khayrallah, a lifelong friend, cousin and confidant of Saddam Hussein. He served as Minister of Defense and died in a mysterious helicopter crash in May 1989.

Adnan Khayrallah ‘s death is generally attributed to a public disagreement with Saddam over an affair
Saddam had with the wife of the head of Iraqi Airways. As the brother of Saddam's first wife Sajida, the Defense Minister sided with his sister's complaints when the affair became public knowledge – a betrayal in Saddam's eyes. Saddam's uncle Khayrallah also expressed unhappiness with the situation. Soon after, Khayrallah Tulfa was stripped of his possessions and then, coincidently, his son was killed in a helicopter crash that is widely believed to have been arranged by Saddam.

The building itself was designed by Saddam's architect, Ali Hassun Al Jaduri, who used squared engineering paper to draw out a building that seems to be something out of "Battlestar Galactica" episode. Both the palace and the grounds are now closed to the public.

Other Sites in Baghdad

Baghdad International Airport

Baghdad International Airport is located approximately 16 kilometers west of Baghdad. The airfield is a joint civil-military airport, with a civil international terminal on one side and a smaller military ramp on the other. The airport is served by a Class I runway 13,000 feet in length and a second runway on the military side of the airfield measuring 8,800 feet. According to the "Gulf War Air Power Survey," there were also eight hardened aircraft shelters as of 1991.

Formerly "Saddam International Airport," the airport was constructed with the assistance of French firms between 1979 and 1982 at a cost of over $900 million dollars. It was designed to accommodate both civil and military operations, and can handle up to 7.5 million passengers per year and aircraft of all sizes. The passenger terminal consisted of three gate areas, each named after the capital of an ancient empire: Babylon, Samarra, and Nineveh. These gates have since been renamed to simply A, B, and C.

The airport also had its own VIP terminal, which had a luxuriously furnished and decorated lounge, conference room and bedroom. This terminal was used by
Saddam Hussein to welcome foreign leaders and other people of important significance.

The airport was one of the prime acquisition objectives of U.S. forces during the 2003 Invasion.

Forces from the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division launched an assault on the morning of April 4, 2003. Early reports suggested more than 300 Iraqi troops had died in the assault. The airport was successfully captured and renamed “Baghdad International Airport” by U.S. Central Command. Although the name was changed in the invasion’s wake, Baghdad retains its former International Air Transport Association airport code of SDA (some airlines use the code of BGW).

A British C-130J aircraft launched a display of flare countermeasures just prior to being the first coalition aircraft to land on the newly reopened military runway at Baghdad International Airport on July 1, 2003. The military runway was bombed by coalition aircraft and had been closed since the beginning of the war. Thanks to the help of the U.S. Air Force’s 1st Expeditionary Red Horse Group and the 447th Expeditionary Civil Engineering Squadron, the runway has been repaired and is once again operational.

An Iraqi Airways Boeing 737 made a test flight from Amman to Baghdad on Aug. 24, 2004, reopening the commercial side of the airport.

**Route Irish**

“Route Irish” is the nickname of the 12 kilometers stretch of east-west highway linking the International Zone to Baghdad International Airport.

The “Winged Man” statue at the airport end of the route was made by Iraqi sculpture Badri Al Samarra. It commemorates poet and inventor Abbas Bin Firnas. He formulated theories of human flight in the 9th century and conducted experiments on aerodynamics.

The highway gets its nickname from the fact that in January 2005, the “Irish Brigade” was given the job of safeguarding the route. The Irish Brigade, also known as the "Fighting 69th," is the modern U.S. National Guard unit that descended from the 69th New York State Volunteers which was formed at the beginning of the American Civil War.

The highway is a four-lane road with a 50-meter wide median, and was formally named by *Jane’s Defense Weekly* as “the Most Dangerous Road in the World.” Between Nov. 1, 2004, and March 12, 2005, there were 135 attacks or hostile incidents that occurred along Route Irish.

Route Irish has six major intersections. Each of these has been assigned a corresponding checkpoint number by Coalition Forces to facilitate command and control. Entry Control Point 1 is located at one end of the highway near Baghdad International Airport. Checkpoints 539-543 follow the road east going into downtown. The point at which the highway enters the IZ is known as Checkpoint 12.
While still the subject of considerable hype, Route Irish was actually cleaned up by the summer of 2005. The number of incidents has dropped considerably so that driving Route Irish is now safer than driving in Baghdad.

**On the Skyline**

A number of buildings dot the horizon as seen from the International Zone. While tantalizingly close, the current security situation dictates that most IZ occupants will probably never to do more than view them from afar. Among the more prominent are the Palestine Hotel, the Sheraton Hotel, the Babylon Hotel and many different mosques.

**Palestine Hotel**

The Palestine Hotel is an 18-story hotel in Baghdad’s as-Sadun District, just across the river from the IZ. It has long been favored by journalists and media personnel.

The hotel was built in 1982 by the French hotel chain Le Meridien. It was one of a chain of five-star hotels of the same name across the Middle East. This was one of several hotels Western and other foreign media used to cover situations that developed in Iraq from the beginning with the 1991 Gulf War through the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It faces the 14th of Ramadan Mosque, a favorite backdrop of CNN’s “Live from Baghdad” broadcasts.

On April 8, 2003, the hotel was fired upon by an American tank shell, killing two journalists. On May 27, 2003, the Committee to Protect Journalists published a report of their investigation into the shelling. After interviewing "about a dozen reporters who were at the scene, including two embedded journalists who monitored the military radio traffic before and after the shelling occurred," the CPJ determined that the facts suggest that the "attack on the journalists, while not deliberate, was avoidable." The CPJ determined that the tank thought it was firing upon an Iraqi forward artillery observer when it hit the hotel. The report went on to say "CPJ has learned that Pentagon officials, as well as commanders on the ground in Baghdad, knew that the Palestine Hotel was full of international journalists and were intent on not hitting it."

Being a soft, highly visible target, the hotel periodically comes under attack by the Iraqi insurgency. Like the al-Rashid it is susceptible to mortar and rocket fire. On Oct. 24, 2005, a cement mixing truck VBIED detonated beside the hotel after two smaller VBIEDs breached the defensive T-wall ring around the hotel. While it did do considerable damage and injury to the hotel and the occupants, the effected area was minimized when the truck was unable to negotiate the breach over the rubble left by the previous VBIED explosions and therefore could not get any closer to the hotel than the breached outer ring.

**Sheraton Hotel**

The Sheraton Ishtar is the tallest building in Baghdad and the second tallest structure in Iraq after the International Saddam Tower.
Despite its name, the hotel has had nothing to do with the Sheraton Hotel chain for more than a decade. The Iraqi government confiscated the property during the 1991 Gulf War and the name has been used without permission ever since.

After it was opened in 1982, the Sheraton Ishtar was one of the most popular hotels in Baghdad. This changed after the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

While the hotel was briefly popular after the 2003 invasion with foreign journalists and contractors, its occupancy level has dropped sharply. This may be due in part to the worsening violence in Iraq, or perhaps more to journalistic preference for the camera shots available from the Palestine Hotel across the street.

**Babylon Hotel**

The Babylon Hotel is located south of the 14th of July Bridge on the river between Ammar bin Yasir Street and Abu Nuwas Street (often called “River Road”). It has 300 rooms on 16 floors and is also a popular hotel for foreign contractors and media.

**Mosques**

While a number of large mosques (“masjid”) are viewable on the IZ horizon, three stand out: the “Mother of All Battles Mosque” (Arabic: Umm al-Ma’arik), the ar-Rahman Mosque, and the Saddam the Great Mosque. The construction of both these latter two masjids was interrupted by the war, and the abandoned, rusting construction cranes still stand silent guard over the sites.

The “Mother of all Battles” Mosque was begun on Saddam’s birthday as a monument to the Persian Gulf War of 1991, when supposedly the Ba’th regime emerged victorious over the United States and its allies. Like the Victory Arch monument, the mosque symbolized a denial of military defeat and of the massive destruction to Iraqi infrastructure. This white limestone and blue mosaic Islamic-kitsch mosque was completed in 2001 in time for Saddam’s birthday.

Its outer four minarets look like the barrels of Kalashnikov rifles pointed skywards; they are each 43 meters (140 ft) high to mark the “43 days of US aggression.” The inner four look like Scud missiles, and are 37 meters (120 ft) high, to represent the year of Saddam’s birth: 1937. They number 4, for the fourth month, April; and 28 water jets in the pool beneath the minarets, stand for the 28th day of the month. All together, they make the number sequence 37-4-28, or April 28, 1937, Saddam’s birthday.

To prove his Islamic faith, Saddam displayed within the mosque a copy of the Qur’an written by renowned calligrapher Abbas al-Baghdadi, in Saddam’s own blood – 28 liters (50 pints) of blood, to be exact, said to have been donated over two years. The blood had been mixed with ink and preservatives, producing a red and brown color with a tinge of blue. This consubstantiation of the blood of the leader with the words of the Qur’an spells out the sacredness of his own blood. The gesture connotes sacrifice in the name of Islamic belief, the very thing that he encouraged in his armies.
After Liberation, the mosque was renamed the “Mother of All Villages” or Mother of All Cities” – depending on which reports you read. Some Arab citations call it the Umm al-Qurra, so perhaps “Villages” is more correct. It has since become a hotbed of Sunni opposition to the present government. The Imam, Shaykh Harith al-Dhari, is also head of the Association of Muslim Scholars. The mosque was the site of the recent kidnapping of four Christian Peacemaker Team associates who were leaving a meeting there with the Association.

A few miles from the Mother of All Battles Mosque, two other mosques are rising that will dwarf it and are the most easily spied from almost any vantage point in the northern IZ. A mosque five times the size of the Mother of All Battles Mosque was, at one time, to be built and known as the Mosque of Saddam the Great (Saddam al-Kabir); the other is the almost-complete ar-Rahman Mosque.

The Saddam the Great Mosque is visible in skeleton form on the bulldozed plain that used to be the old Baghdad airport. Begun in 1998, it was due to be completed in 2015 and was designed to be the largest mosque in the world after the Holy Mosque in Makkah and the Mosque in al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia. It is visible from the IZ as a circle of huge concrete support pylons for the central dome, interspersed with several derelict construction cranes.

The "ar-Rahman Mosque" (meaning "the Most Merciful," one of the 99 attributes of Allah) should not be confused with the mosque of the same name in Sadr City. It was built on the site of a former horse racetrack in the al-Mansour District. The building is 750 feet across (250 meters) and occupies 11 acres. It is most noticeable from the IZ because of its shape – it features no fewer than 14 domes, and looks a bit like a beehive – as well as the cranes that still ring it.

It was scheduled to be completed in 2004, at which time it would have been the second largest mosque in Iraq. The Shi‘i Hawza assumed control of the mosque within days after the fall of the regime. In April 2003, Shiite Muslims held prayers at the mosque, and chanted in one voice, "Muslims: Not Sunna or Shi‘at."

The mosque was never officially consecrated as a masjid because it would still cost a significant amount of money to complete and it still has a close association with Saddam. The present government has been wrestling with what to do with the structure. One proposal by the Ministry of Construction was to turn the domes into a series of apartment complexes. The idea was actually studied before being discarded as unfeasible.