

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Truth or Campaign Rhetoric ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

It was one of those scenes you ought to be able to see in Baghdad, but probably will not for quite some time. The post-reception party for a high society wedding had taken over Amman's trendiest restaurant. There was an open bar, pounding music in the cool night air, and Saudis and Americans alike could be found dancing on the tables.

That was where I bumped into Hassan, an Iraqi-American who used to run a weekly English-language newspaper in Baghdad. His paper went bust earlier this year, bedeviled by both financing problems and security concerns. His latest project involves training Iraqi journalists to cover political campaigns.

"We have to get them out here and get started within two weeks," he roared in my ear. I shouted back that the two week time-frame pre-supposed elections going ahead as scheduled in January.

"That's a big 'if'," I yelled.

"A big 'if' indeed," Hassan shouted back.

We agreed that for now we were both happy to be far from Baghdad. Earlier, at the formal reception that preceded the loud party, the wife of a Jordanian Senator (a woman I had met only a few minutes earlier) expressed almost maternal relief when I mentioned I was not planning any trips to Iraq in the immediate future. "That's good," she said, leaning in with a look of genuine concern. "You really should not go there."

My teenage daughter has a friend at school, an Iraqi girl whose father recently went back to Baghdad on business. She says her friend is fasting out of concern for her father.

I mulled all this over when I got home from the party, switched on the news and saw the BBC's Matt Frei describe Iyad Allawi's speech Thursday to the US Congress as sounding like "a George Bush stump speech delivered in a foreign accent."

Soon afterwards Allawi was at the White House, where he told reporters that "14 to 15" of Iraq's 18 provinces are "completely safe."

Even assuming that is true (and it's not) here are a few things to bear in mind: Allawi did not name the 3 or 4 unsafe provinces, but it's fair to assume one is Baghdad – which contains at least 20% of Iraq's entire population. Another is surely Anbar, best known as the site of Fallujah. Anbar stretches from the western suburbs of Baghdad all the way to the Syrian and Jordanian borders – encompassing about 1/3 of the entire country.

If the goal of this PR offensive is to swing votes in a few key states it may well work. We Americans often seem willing to take our leaders at face value, especially when they are telling us things we would like to believe are true. Outside the US, however, hardly anyone is buying. Watching this election from afar what I really fear is the seeping away of whatever credibility the US may still have with ordinary, reasonably intelligent people overseas.

My college commencement speaker was Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist and diplomat. Eighteen years later I have only one clear memory of his remarks: We have learned, he said, that American foreign policy is a function of American election campaigns.

Perhaps it still sticks in my head because I've always hoped Fuentes was wrong, and because the nearly two decades since have usually proved him right.
