

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The Safest Places to Vote ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

It is one of the many perverse aspects of this month's Iraqi elections that the safest places to vote are probably going to be outside Iraq.

Iraq's independent election commission and the International Organization for Migration are setting up voting centers in 14 countries outside Iraq. Iraqi expatriates and people who can prove that they once held Iraqi citizenship will be able to vote at centers in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iran, Jordan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and the United Kingdom. These 14 countries were selected because they are thought to have unusually large concentrations of expatriate Iraqis. Iraqis living in other countries can also vote, but will have to assume their own travel costs to one of the registration/polling centers. Registration is scheduled to take place January 17-23 and voting January 28-30. Voters must register and vote in the same center.

Unsurprisingly a high level of security and a certain amount of secrecy are going to surround all of this. Here in Jordan, where the Out of Country Voter Program is based, media officials are helpful, but they will only meet reporters in a restaurant, hotel or café. For "security reasons" officials will not tell you where they've set up headquarters, and if you do find out they won't let you in.

Security aside, however, the officials are very helpful, especially since the program is being assembled in a rushed manner.

"In an ideal world, for an operation of this scale, you'd like to have a year of preparation time," says Monique de Groot, the OCV program's head spokesperson. As it is they will have just over two months: Iraq's interim government and the IOM signed the memorandum of understanding governing the program only on November 11.

"The main challenge is time," she says, "but we're confident we can pull it off."

It also has a fairly comprehensive website (www.iraqocv.org) available in Arabic, Kurdish and English (though why someone decided that the English version of the site should come up as the default home page is a bit puzzling). De Groot says the staff is growing rapidly and will probably reach several thousand by the time voting actually begins. If the program is successful the core staff will probably begin preparations to run similar elections for later rounds of Iraqi voting (a parliament, a president) tentatively scheduled to take place over the next 18 months.

IOM and the Iraqi government estimate that there are some 4 million expatriate Iraqis and are preparing to process between 500,000 and one million out of country voters. All of the ballots will be counted – unlike, ironically, some parts of the United States where absentee votes are

only tallied if they might change the final outcome of a contest.

It is a measure of the fear surrounding these elections that the OCV website bends over backwards to assure potential voters that adequate security will be in place for out-of-country voting. Early plans to transport the ballots to Baghdad and count them there have been dropped. Counting will now take place in the same countries where the ballots are cast. With so much uncertainty surrounding the election in Iraq itself, this may prove to be one of the most important absentee votes in recent history.

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