Australian Embassy – Baghdad

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Introduction

Australian Embassy Baghdad

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Ambassador (2015.08 -): Christopher Langman

Protection for the Australian Embassy in Baghdad was provided from 2003 to mid-2011 under *Operation Kruger.* Subsequently responsibility was handed over to a Dubai-based private security contractor.

After the 2003 invasion Australia set up its embassy – or representation office – in the Babil district, Baghdad (across the river to the south of the international zone). The SECDET element, tasked with providing security for Australia's diplomatic representatives was based in a building next door to the embassy. It was this barracks that was the target of a large car bomb attack in January 2005 (part of a series of attacks that day linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq). Following the bombing, which claimed the lives of two passers by and wounded 2 SECDET personnel the embassy was moved temporarily to Camp Victory (A major US base near Baghdad international airport).

The embassy was based at Camp Victory until March 2005 with the construction of a new Australian embassy finishing in late 2005. The new embassy and adjoining apartments for the Australian diplomats is in a former Baath Party building within the international (or green) zone.

In 2011 33 soldiers guarding the embassy were withdrawn, and embassy security subsequently was to be provided by a Dubai-based private security company.

In June 2014 the government announced the deployment of "a small detachment" of ADF troops to protect the embassy and prepare for any evacuation that may prove necessary.

The embassy story

Australians injured in Iraq blast, Cynthia Banham, The Sydney Morning Herald, 20 January 2005.

> "Two Australian Defence Force personnel were injured in a car bomb explosion outside Canberra's embassy in Baghdad yesterday, an attack Australian officials said appeared to have been directed at the defence force barracks next door. The bombing took place at 7.05am Baghdad time and is believed to have killed three Iraqi passers-by and injured seven others who were outside the embassy, which is located in a fortified compound.
>
> It was just one of four car bombs which exploded in the city yesterday, killing at least 26 people and wounding 21, the US military said. A group led by the al-Qaeda ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi later said it had carried out suicide bomb attacks, according to claims on the internet. Statements on the internet from al-Qaeda Organisation for Holy War in Iraq said members of the group's "martyrdom squadrons'' struck the locations. About 25 minutes after the first explosion, a blast near the Iraqi police headquarters in central Baghdad killed five people. A third explosion in targeted an Iraqi army base, killing two and wounding five, after a vehicle drove up to its gates at about 8.30am and exploded. The fourth killed two civilians and two Iraqi soldiers at a military complex.
>
> The attacks come in the lead-up to the Iraqi elections on January 30. In recent days, insurgents have stepped up attacks on Western targets and Iraqi security forces and candidates. AAP reported last night that Australia's ambassador, Howard Brown, also said the attack was aimed at the barracks housing Australian soldiers. There were reports the windows of the military barracks had been blown out.
>
> The Defence Department issued a statement saying two defence force security detachment soldiers had suffered minor injuries and were receiving medical treatment. "Their injuries are not life-threatening and they are personally contacting their next of kin. Australian and coalition soldiers, along with the Iraqi police, have secured the incident site." Australia has a security detachment of 120 personnel in Baghdad who protect Australian workers in the embassy. There were eight staff in the embassy at the time of the attack, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Affairs Department said."

BBC report of the same attack: includes map that indicates the location of the attacks - and location of Australian embassy at this time.

Australia abandons Baghdad embassy, moves diplomats to army base, Asian Political News, 31 January, 2005.

> "Australian has abandoned its embassy in a high-risk part of Baghdad and moved its diplomatic personnel and their military guards to a U.S. military base following a bomb attack near the embassy, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Monday. The relocation to Camp Victory, a major base near Baghdad International Airport that serves as headquarters for both the U.S. and Australian military contingents, follows the Jan. 19 suicide attack near the embassy in which two Iraqis were killed and two Australian soldiers injured.

''We have been concerned, particularly from Jan. 19 with the attack on the Australian Embassy, that we move the staff to Camp Victory, which is where they remain,'' Downer told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio. He said there are plans to subsequently relocate embassy personnel to temporary facilities inside the secure international sector known as the Green Zone until a new embassy to be constructed there is completed.

Ambassador Howard Brown and two staff members were being guarded by 120 Australian army personnel at the embassy before being moved. Downer did not say when the move to the military camp took place, but a convoy of Australian light-armored vehicles was attacked Wednesday as it was carrying Australian officials on a stretch of road between the city and Baghdad airport. That suicide bomb attack left eight Australian soldiers wounded, two seriously."

Baghdad embassy cost blowout is $9.5m, Sydney Morning Herald, 17 February 2005.

"Taxpayers face a $9.5 million blowout in the cost of Australia's new embassy in Baghdad, as diplomats prepare to move into offices previously used by Saddam Hussein's officials.

A Senate estimates committee on Thursday heard the original price of $3.5 million in May 2003 had blown out to $13 million, mostly due to freight costs and security features. They included a ram-proof cement wall, hardened perimeter building walls, vehicle traps, bomb-proof glass and a reinforced roof.

The opening of the new embassy, within the well-guarded Green Zone, may allow the government to close down the old embassy and relocate members of the Australian Army security detachment, known as SECDET, based next door.

Department of Foreign Affairs overseas property director Peter Davin told the committee the new embassy, formerly used by Saddam officials, was being refurbished at a cost of $4 million, with the balance devoted to security improvements. "There have been re-evaluations of the level of security required for that site to reflect the local environment, which have escalated the amount of work to be done and increased the cost," Mr Davin said. He said construction was expected to be completed in May and the five Australian officials, currently in temporary quarters at Camp Victory, would move in about July.

The old embassy was opened during Saddam's reign in a suburban area on Baghdad's Karradah Peninsular, several kilometers outside the Green Zone. Next door is an incomplete multi-storey apartment building used as a SECDET base. Australian diplomats vacated the embassy on January 20 after a car bomb exploded nearby injuring two soldiers and killing two Iraqis. Since then they have worked from Camp Victory, the major US base and home to the Australian military headquarters.

Defence Minister Robert Hill said the military assessment was that the 120 members of SECDET, whose principal job was diplomatic protection, should be left where they were. Senator Hill said their building was heavily reinforced with a good view of the surrounding area. "An alternative option clearly was that we move SECDET to Camp Victory as well and then move them again, in due course, from Camp Victory into the Green Zone," he said. "That has a range of risks attached to it. "All of these matters were considered and the professional judgment was that the best location for that security

force at the moment is where it is."

Small numbers of SECDET troops were with the diplomats inside Camp Victory and at the site of the new embassy. The estimates committee heard the diplomats had only left that camp four times since their move - twice by vehicle and twice by helicopter. One return trip on January 26 almost ended in tragedy when insurgents attacked the convoy with a car bomb. Two soldiers were injured.

Bassim Blazey, head of the Foreign Affairs Iraq Task Force, said the security situation meant officials only undertook essential travel. He said they moved only on advice of SECDET officers, who assessed the overall threat situation and planned the time and route of proposed travel and the mode of transport. "They absolutely can come back to us and say the threat is too great, the trip should not be undertaken and we will take that advice," he said."

Australian Embassy Moves to International Zone, Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Media Release FA24, 1 March 2005.

"I am pleased to announce that the Australian Embassy in Baghdad moved into the International Zone today. Embassy staff will live and work from temporary premises in UK Embassy facilities until the permanent Australian chancery is completed later this year.

The Australian Defence Force Security Detachment continues to provide security for the Ambassador and his staff. That our Embassy and diplomatic personnel have stayed safe is testament to the ADF's skill, professionalism and training. Paramount in the planning and execution of the Embassy move was the safety and security of our diplomatic and military personnel. A precipitous reaction to the recent attacks on the Embassy and ADF personnel would have endangered them even further.

I am grateful for the support of the UK and US during this difficult time.

Australia will continue to support Iraq and the Iraqi people and the democracy they so bravely voted for on 30 January. The Government's decision to deploy further ADF troops is an integral part of that support. The murderous thugs who carried out the terror attack on civilians, police and National Guard volunteers in Hillah have no plans for Iraq other than to plunge the country into bloody chaos.

The majority of Iraqis have shown through their courage and determination that they wish to heal the wounds of recent decades and set the nation on a course to peace, national reconciliation and economic development. Australia and the international community must support them in their goal."

Iraq - Construction of Staff Residential Apartments in Baghdad: Budget 2006-07, Alexander Downer and Mark Vaile. Joint Media Release, 9 May 2006.

"The Australian Government has approved $14.4 million over two years for the construction of residential apartments on the current chancery site in Baghdad, Iraq. The security of the Australian Government's operations overseas is paramount. The project will provide safe, secure and reasonable quality accommodation for the Australian officials serving in the difficult operating environment in Baghdad. The project will be funded from existing departmental appropriations and is expected to be constructed by September 2008."

The Australian pool in Baghdad, Youtube Video

The Embassy before and during the war

Iraq: Parliament of Australia, Senate Official Hansard, No. 5 2003, 14 May 2003.

"Senator McGAURAN (Victoria) (7.20 p.m.)—I rise to speak in the Senate tonight to pay tribute to the courage of, and for a job very well done by, Mr Kareem Chullur, the Iraqi caretaker of the Australian Embassy in Baghdad. During the war, and particularly over the past several months, Mr Chullur and his 13-year-old son defended the grounds of the Australian embassy, particularly against the gangs of looters who decimated other embassies in the district. It is worthy to note that those other embassies were the Yugoslavian, Dutch, Greek, Sri Lankan and Cuban embassies. They were all looted and ruined during the days following the fall of Saddam's regime.

To protect the Australian embassy Mr Chullur removed the brass plaque naming the embassy and the police sentry box from the front of the embassy. With the help of his neighbours he barricaded the street with old drums and scrap metal. It was a great initiative by our embassy protector, Mr Kareem Chullur, and his son. Keeping a vigil every night with an AK47 he had managed to obtain by exchanging civilian clothes with fleeing Iraqi soldiers—a bit of bartering on the street—Mr Chullur would often scare off all the `Ali Babas', as he called them, by firing shots into the air.

Mr Chullur's bravery was first reported in an article in the Melbourne *Age* newspaper. This story prompted me, and no doubt many others, to write to the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Ashton Calvert, to ask that the department ensure that the appreciation of the Australian people be extended to Mr Chullur for this most selfless of actions. Since this time, Mr Chullur has been visited by Australian officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, including Mr Glenn Miles, who is the first secretary at the Australian embassy in neighbouring Jordan and responsible for the embassy site in Baghdad. The embassy has been closed since the 1991 Gulf War, and right to this point, now that it is open again, Mr Chullur has guarded it. Mr Chullur was presented with a certificate of appreciation by Mr Glenn Miles, some back pay and a bonus for his good work as a sign of gratitude and thanks.

It really is a wonderful story, a magic moment in the fog of war, because Mr Chullur followed in his father's footsteps when he replaced him as caretaker of the Australian Embassy in Baghdad in 1992, which, as I said, had been closed since the 1991 Gulf War. He meticulously attended to the embassy almost on a daily basis, keeping the grounds and the condition of the embassy in the best way he could—in a pristine condition no

doubt. Mr Chullur is known for his warm and friendly feelings towards Australia. He has proudly on many occasions displayed to his neighbours and others his official letter of appointment to the position of caretaker. Mr Chullur summarised his feelings towards Australia and the war in Iraq in the following way when he said:

I have nothing because of Saddam and all his wars but, thank God, I have survived. The Australians have been good to me and it is my duty to protect this place until they come back to Iraq.

Well, Mr Chullur, we are back—as you know. It is gratifying to hear the news that Mr Chullur has been recognised and honoured by Australia for his loyal work. I am sure we all extend to him and his family our appreciation for his loyalty and commitment. On behalf of the Australian Senate and the Australian government I thank him for a job well done and wish him, his 13-year-old son and his family well for the future in their newfound freedom."

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