

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

## Approaching America <sup>[1]</sup>

35,000 feet above the North Atlantic

"Too many 'terrorists' are hapless innocents" is the headline on the lead editorial in my copy of the weekend *International Herald Tribune*. Beside it a column from the *Boston Globe's* H.D.S. Greenway opines: "The image of Saddam's statue coming down has been superceded in the Muslim mind by images of Abu Gharib prison, which is seldom even mentioned in the United States any more." Below that an op-ed by Monroe Price (he's based at the other Annenberg School for Communication, the one at the University of Pennsylvania) who publishes the highly useful *Iraq Media Developments Newsletter* notes that Iraq's Interim Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, is moving to reimpose state control of Iraq's media through the formation of a Higher Media Council that will oversee the work of the neutral, FCC-style regulatory body the coalition left behind when it passed nominal sovereignty to the Iraqis at the end of June.

"(T)he new agency," he writes, "is headed by Ibrahim Al-Janabi, a close friend of the Prime Minister. Established in August, the council is in the regressive process of emulating Saddam Hussein's Ministry of Information." Actually, the process may be further along than that. A friend of mine met Al-Janabi recently and says he introduced himself as the "Iraqi Information Minister." He also handed her a business card to that effect (which I have seen).

Switching from the *Herald Tribune* to the *Weekend Financial Times* I ran across this column by Gary Silverman, describing his recent appearance on a BBC radio program:

"My ostensible subject was Europe's victory over the US in golf's Ryder Cup.... But as the conversation unfolded it became clear to me that golf was not the subject of greatest interest to my host, or to many of the listeners who sent text messages.

"What we were really talking about was the war in Iraq - sometimes indirectly, sometimes quite explicitly.

"It is a common occurrence for an American living in the UK."

This all makes rather depressing reading for the long trip from Amman to the States, though in one sense I suppose I am luckier than Silverman. The dynamic in Jordan is different from Europe. Iraq (along with US backing for pretty much anything Ariel Sharon might choose to do in the West Bank or Gaza) lurks uncomfortably in the background of every conversation one has in Amman, but Jordanians appear to believe raising the issue to be bad manners if they know you're American. It is a society in which hospitality still holds an important place.

When my nationality comes out in conversation people usually say nothing, or, like the taxi driver who took me to my daughter's school Thursday, they remind me that "American and Jordanian people are brothers. Whatever the governments do won't change that." He might not have meant it, of course, but he was also going out of his way not to make me feel

uncomfortable. Arab friends tell me how chilly a place they find the US to travel these days. I'm always impressed, and a little embarrassed, by the fact that Arabs rarely return that favor to visiting Americans.

After two months in the Middle East I will be back in the States this week. Seeing the baseball playoffs on TV will be one highlight. Watching a presidential debate that does not come on at 4 or 5am will be another. Seeing the campaign enter its final stages through the American rather than the international media will be a useful thing, especially since the election is something people in Amman do feel comfortable discussing. Good timing, then, for a brief visit to this side of the Atlantic.

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