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The First Step: Conquering Paranoia [1]

Amman, Jordan

At a small dinner party a few days ago a woman who works at the American embassy here spent much of the evening explaining what a dangerous place Amman is. She could not go into details, of course, but she had received briefings. In the five star hotel where she lives she has carefully concealed her nationality from the staff. This place is spooky, she said, much worse than her last post. In the interests of keeping the conversation confidential I will not name the country where she used to work, though I will say that unlike Jordan it has been the site of several recent terror incidents and has a reputation for a high level of street crime.

I remarked that during a six week stay in Baghdad this summer my hotel was hit by a missile, mortared twice, and saw three car bombs go off in the immediate neighborhood. We heard gunfire every single night (and most days), traveled in armored cars and only by sheer idiot's luck did not get blown to pieces one morning at a checkpoint entering the Green Zone. Perhaps I'm jaded, I said, but after all that Amman seems pretty quiet. Well, she said, the problem was that I did not see, hear and know the things the embassy does. If I did, I'd be scared too.

Conversations like these remind me why I've never regretted not taking the Foreign Service exam. Who would want to live in the state of permanent paranoia so many US government employees abroad seem to inhabit?

More importantly, how on earth is one supposed to sell Middle Easterners on the idea that the United States is an essentially benevolent power that wants to help them, while also looking over one's shoulder, constantly fearing that the objects of your largesse are planning to kill you?

Don't get me wrong. The Middle East can be a dangerous place. Amman is not Baghdad, but it isn't Oslo either. But if our diplomats – particularly the ones who work on aide programs and in public affairs – are bring drilled in paranoia night and day how are they supposed to spread the good word about America?

Over the last generation we have turned our embassies into bunkers and closed most of our libraries and cultural centers (a decision made as much on security as financial grounds). And now we wonder why no one sees things our way?

I'm not saying I have a solution to this problem, but surely there is a way to keep our people safe without walling them off from the societies they are supposed to live in, understand, help and explain to the folks back home? Perhaps one element of a successful public diplomacy campaign has to be finding a way to make America, as represented by its embassies and diplomats, less forbidding, and a bit more approachable.