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Tea and Politics: Scenes From Our New, Awkward War in Iraq

By Sarah Stillman

Since the official 'end' of major combat operations in September, what's become of the 50,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq? Some are ducking the occasional mortar fire that still falls on U.S. bases. Some are running marathons and [making music videos](#) to keep themselves from going stir crazy. But many are engaging in an ambitious form of soldiering-turned-diplomacy known as "key-leader engagements" (KLEs), an increasingly central part of the U.S. military's long-term strategy in Iraq.



KLEs, as defined by the Military Review, seek to use informal meetings and "[friendly, ordinary conversation](#)" with local Iraqi power brokers as a tool for "altering the opinions and attitudes of the [Iraqi] population" and pursuing "information objectives." Translation: drink a little tea, smoke a little hookah, maybe ride horses or tour a local soap factory. Ostensibly, these new ties can be cashed in for counterinsurgency mojo - the right to swap intel with Sons of Iraq militiamen, say, or to broker the construction of a solar-powered water treatment plant.

I had a chance to witness these kabuki missions up-close several months ago, when I rode along on a key-leader engagement to Tikrit. It was a mundane eight-hour mission with the 2-32 Field Artillery to visit local big shots at the outskirts of Saddam Hussein's hometown. (Apparently, his legacy dies hard; in the marketplace, Arabic graffiti still reads "Paradise for the hero Saddam," and watches emblazoned with his face are hot commodities.)

The typical KLE starts with a safety briefing from a sergeant: in our case, what to do if we get hit by a "frickin' IED" or experience a "frickin' vehicle rollover." Then comes a snack load-up. Because these missions often entail waiting around for hours in hot parking lots and palm groves, the guys in my assigned vehicle come prepared with a copy of Maxim and a cooler filled with Rip-Its, plastic-wrapped

honey buns, and Jack Link's Teriyaki Chicken Nugget Jerky.

"It's the Beverly Hills of our A.O. [area of operations]," explains Major Pat Proctor of our destination, the neighborhood of Al Alam. "They were the first ones in Sunni Iraq to get in on the ground floor of the Coalition presence, and they're rolling in dough because of it." But the lobbing of Russian grenades at passing American vehicles remains surprisingly common - even now that U.S. convoys drive with big white signs attached to their bumpers reading: "Iraqi Partnership Provincial Approved Convoy. Thank you for your patience and support."

Our first tea-and-goat-chops stop is at the home of Mohammed Ibrahim, a skinny, well-dressed Iraqi contractor in his early thirties who's reaped hundreds of thousands of dollars from the American presence. He's invited us to a feast on his living room floor with an ornery tribal leader of the local Awakening Council.

As we drive up to Ibrahim's sprawling concrete home, we pass his lush fields of sunflowers, okra, corn, and melons. But the thick canopy of fruit trees surrounding the compound is too difficult for our Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, which weighs some 26,000 pounds, to navigate. We knock down a few power lines, snap the branches off pear and pomegranate trees, and run roughshod over the pricey new ditch that Ibrahim had been building.

We park and head inside. *A Bronx Tale* is playing on a giant TV set. Tea is poured. The feast begins, along with the chitchat, which is really why we came here in the first place.

"Hey Mohammed," says the command sergeant major, "I think we destroyed your ditch."

"That's OK."

"We also took out a few power lines."

"OK, no problem."

"But don't worry," says Lt. Col. Robert Cain, the unit's commander. "I've got a project for you: how about you raise all of the illegal power lines up five feet?"

Everyone laughs, and I assume it's a joke, a chummy mea culpa. But when I hear Ibrahim's back-story, I reconsider. Like so many locals in Al-Alam, he's desperate to avoid an American withdrawal, since he's made a fortune playing jack-of-all-trades for U.S. forces - as a power line putter-upper, a latrine cleaner, you name it. He first started working for the Americans as an interpreter in 2003, in his mid twenties. At the time, most Tikritis were rallying around Saddam, or else were too terrified to be counted among the pro-American "collaborators." On the local U.S. base one day, Ibrahim scored a job emptying soldiers' Port-A-Potties, and he worked his way up from there to bid on and win a construction contract to help build a local school with Coalition dollars. After that, one contract spawned another, until Ibrahim found himself where he is now: running a veritable reconstruction empire in the neighborhood that handles everything from the desalinization of local farmland to the erection of a mega power line stretching all the way across the surrounding desert to Tuz, not far from Iran. If Al Alam really is the Beverly Hills of Tikrit, Mohammed is the Fresh Prince of Bel Air, and it was cooperating with the U.S. that got him there.

The feast arrives on big silver platters: goat, chicken, stuffed grape leaves, cantaloupe. We sit cross-

legged on the floor and eat, as they chat some more about the power line project funded jointly by U.S. taxpayers and the Iraqi government. Then we pile back into our vehicles and head out, wreaking more havoc on Ibrahim's ditch and knocking down some more power lines. Our driver sighs, "Could we have found a route with more wires?" The wire problem gets bad enough that we have to stop to disentangle ourselves. The whole convoy is wrapped up, Medusa-style, in the same power lines that the Americans have been trying desperately to erect since the war began.

Eventually, we move on to the home of the late Lt. Col. Ahmed Subhi Al Fahal, a [brash Iraqi counterterrorism officer](#) who was killed by a suicide bomber outside a jewelry store last December. "It's important that his family know we still care," explains Maj. Proctor.

It's not long until Lt. Col. Cain is sitting in a neon lawn chair outside his former ally's house as the dead man's tattooed mother, "Mama Ahmed," cries and berates him about the delayed trial of her son's killers, then asks for medicine for her headache. The "engagement team" sips tea and tries to convince Mama Ahmed to be patient - "The rule of law has to work its way out." Meanwhile, a few enlisted guys run around with the widow's kids, doling out the star-shaped tubes of Hannah Montana nail polish that were sent along in an aid donation package. "No dad," Col. Ahmed's young widow says to me in English, pointing at her five-year-old daughter who is now painting my nails. "Dad dead."

We leave after a few hours to head back to the U.S. base. We've eaten some tasty, if stomach-churning, goat. We've downed two cans of Rip-It each. We've sweated ourselves into Chris Farley territory. Lt. Col. Cain and his command sergeant major have spent the day chatting with an impressive troika - a blinged-out contractor, a former insurgent, and a grieving mother - and can come away with a dose of good will for a range of projects. Mission accomplished; key leaders engaged.

For many of the 50,000-some U.S. service members who remain in Iraq, this is what the conflict has become. It's often awkward, boring, and slow. But as they sip tea and stroll the palms, U.S. soldiers are still risking their lives, and sometimes losing them.

Sgt. David J. Luff, a 29-year-old from Hamilton, Ohio, was shot late last month by a sniper while on a key leader engagement in the same neighborhood of Tikrit we rolled through for tea and politics. The U.S.-led conflict in Iraq may have entered a "drawdown," but it's still a war.

Image: A soldier from the 4th Battalion, 64th Armour Regiment of the US army, receives a cup of tea from an Iraqi man in Baghdad. By Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty.

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