

Travelogue of a trip to Erbil from 12 to 15 April 2008

After several months of preparation, in March 2008, we, Meyer-Reumann Legal Consultancy from Dubai and Rödl & Partner from Nuremberg, had finally received a license in the Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) for a joint company named Roedl, Meyer-Reumann Middle East Ltd. I had immediately begun to make provisions for annexing further offices in the region to the DIFC office. First of all, I had resolved to reactivate our office in Erbil. Our office in Erbil had been deserted for several months since our local lawyer there, Mr. Ali Ghazi, had curiously preferred to return to our office in Bagdad. However, a good client from Erbil had suggested a new lawyer. The office was still there, so that the prerequisites for attempting a new beginning were not bad. Some declarations by a notary public and notarizations had been obtained right away so that we were able to do the job properly.

The departure to Erbil was scheduled for 2pm on 12.04.2008 from Terminal 2 at the Dubai International Airport. My companion, Dr. Saad Darwish, who had already accompanied me in 2006, had already arrived at the airport by 8am. Those familiar with the Kurdistan Airlines flight, however, were already prepared for a delayed departure. This was indeed the case. Instead of a departure at 10am, we left at 2pm and arrived in Erbil at around 4pm. The flight time was approximately 3 hours and the time difference one hour. When passing passport control in Erbil, I realized that I had obtained my visa for Iraq in vein in Dubai. A visa was no longer required for Germans. Clearly this had also escaped the Iraqi consulate in Dubai.

At the airport, we were picked up by Mr. Horst Martsch, who has been running a business with his father within the scope of the German-Kurdish relations for years. He took us to the relatively new Helin Plaza Hotel, a mid-range hotel, but which completely met our expectations. Due to slight water damage in the bathroom, I had an automatic footbath in the entire bathroom. Against my expectations, however, the footbath was removed shortly before my departure.

At the hotel, the senior Mr. Martsch was already waiting for us and he had also brought along a Mr. Massoud. We immediately began to plan the next few days. Visits to the bar association, the Department of Justice, the Department of Trade, the investment authority and the Department of the Interior were on the agenda. In addition, the lawyer referred to us by a client introduced himself. The first impression (as well as the subsequent impressions) were positive. Mr. Martsch

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and his son obviously had an excellent network in Erbil. There was nothing they could not give advice on. Mr. Martsch had come to Erbil as a result of his friendship with the Kurdish leader Massoud Barazani. As I was able to discern in the coming days, he was well-known everywhere. However, he was commonly known not as Siegfried Martsch, but as “Siggi Barazani”.

We concluded the evening with a Masqof-meal at the Sheraton. Masqof reminded me of my travels to Bagdad during the embargo, when we had frequently enjoyed masqof by the Tigris. Masqof is a fish roasted on an open fire, in which the type of fish can vary. We were served carp. The cityscape of Erbil had not changed much since my last visit in October 2006. Of the 3.7 million inhabitants, 1.2 million were state employees. Of the remaining working population, about 70% are said to be unemployed. The electricity supply remains catastrophic. Ordinary citizens receive about 2 hours of power, even though they are promised 8 hours. Even the privileged on average do not receive more than 8 to 11 hours of electricity per day. The rest has to be supplied via personal or communal generators. However, not many people can afford this, as diesel is also expensive. For each car, 40 liters of fuel are now available per week (in 2006, it was 30 liters). It is also for this reason that scrap vehicles are not deregistered. Their license plate is attached to other cars for a new tankful. The rationed fuel costs 20 cent per liter, fuel bought on the black market costs 60 cents.

On the following morning, our next visit was to the bar association, where I met the president again, Mr. Kakaresh Al Nagshabandi. He again promised his full support and sent us to the Department of Trade’s authority responsible for registering companies, where we were welcomed with open arms by Ms. Perwin, the director of the registration department. We were once more promised full support. Our elation was dampened, however, when we were told that the approval of a branch would require the approval of the Minister of Justice, but that this was temporarily not obtainable as a new law for branches was expected soon. The Department of Justice therefore became of particular importance.

The afternoon passed with meetings at the Department for Mineral Resources, located at the Council of Ministers, where we talked about tendering in the legal sector. In the evening, we were invited by a representative of the German Embassy, Mr. Volker Fey. His lamb chops were an absolute secret recipe. We were pleased to find out that the German Embassy in Iraq is planning to open an office in Erbil. We felt that our decision to open an office in Erbil had been validated. Of all the foreigners actively involved in Kurdistan, the Austrians deserve special praise. They have had an office of the delegate of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber from day one. Austrian Airlines serves Erbil three times a week and is the star of the foreign airline companies. The Austrian flag is flying high!

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The following morning, Monday, we were at the Department of Justice at 10am to solve our “small problem”. However, our conversational partner had other appointments to keep at short notice and therefore did not appear at the Department that day. Instead, we saw many leading public officials who had all previously been judges at the Supreme Court in Erbil. They now managed various departments at the ministry. Amongst others, we spoke with Chief Justice Rizqar Mohammed Amin for a while, who had led the trial against Saddam Hussein as presiding judge but had stepped down in early 2006 due to the prejudice he himself detected as a result of external pressure. Amongst other things, he addressed the subject of what compensating the relatives of the 5,000 Kurds killed with poison gas in 1988 by Saddam might look like. The Kurdish government had just submitted a respective application in Bagdad. Today, Judge Rizqar is president of the judicial association in Erbil.

We also had a longer conversation with the managing director of the Association of Chief Justices. When I finally left the Department of Justice, I felt like I had personally met all leading public officials with the exception of the minister. The minister was on a business trip in Lebanon. The public official responsible for us was the only one who had not turned up.

Next, we visited the Investment Board. There, we met the manager of the department responsible for industrial plants and free zones. He also offered us his full support for our project. He was pleased when we explained to him that we were ourselves working on a investment guide for Iraq and Kurdistan. He urged us to also involve the departments for public relations and for foreign investors. I resolved to make good use of his offer of support. At the Department of the Interior, we met Mr. Tariq Rashed, who had just completed a dissertation in his spare time. Mr. Rashed was also pleased about our interest in Kurdistan and offered to use his influence at the Department of Justice right away. His offer was promising.

We devoted the rest of the time to reviving our deserted office. We managed to establish an internet connection with our host in Abu Dhabi with my laptop. Mr. Azad Haji was given a quick introduction to our computer system, our legal database and some of the programs. However, he will require some days to be able to reasonably find his way through the jumble of documents.

At around noon on 15.04.2008, our stay in Erbil came to a close. We headed for the airport. Our days had been filled with many interesting conversations, new impressions and relationships, from which we had plenty to expect in the future. With the lawyer Mr. Azad Haji, we had won a good colleague, so that overall, we had the impression that we had turned a new page in Erbil regarding the development of our local office.

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