

# FORTRESS

*The new U.S. Embassy in Baghdad is the largest the world has ever known. Thousands will live inside its blast walls, isolated from the bloody realities of a nation at war. Why has the United States built this place—and what does it mean?* | **By Jane C. Loeffler**

**A** citadel is rising on the banks of the Tigris. There, on the river's western side, the United States is building the world's largest embassy. The land beneath it was once a riverside park. What sits atop today is a massive, fortified compound. Encircled by blast walls and cut off from the rest of Baghdad, it stands out like the crusader castles that once dotted the landscape of the Middle East. Its size and scope bring into question whether it is

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even correct to call this facility an “embassy.” Why is the United States building something so large, so expensive, and so disconnected from the realities of Iraq? In a country shattered by war, what is the meaning of this place?

For security reasons, many details about the embassy's design and construction must remain classified. But the broad outline of its layout says a lot about one of America's most important architectural projects. Located in Baghdad's 4-square-mile Green Zone, the embassy will occupy 104 acres. It will be six times larger than the U.N. complex in New York and more than 10



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# AMERICA

times the size of the new U.S. Embassy being built in Beijing, which at 10 acres is America's second-largest mission. The Baghdad compound will be entirely self-sufficient, with no need to rely on the Iraqis for services of any kind. The embassy has its own electricity plant, fresh water and sewage treatment facilities, storage warehouses, and maintenance shops. The embassy is composed of more than 20 buildings, including six apartment complexes with 619 one-bedroom units. Two office blocks will accommodate about 1,000 employees. High-ranking diplomats will enjoy well-appointed private residences. Once inside the compound, Americans will have almost no reason to leave. It has a shopping market, food court, movie theater, beauty salon, gymnasium, swimming pool, tennis courts, a school, and an American Club for social gatherings. To protect it all, the embassy is reportedly surrounded by a wall at least 9 feet high—and it has its own defense force. The U.S. Congress has appropriated \$592 million for the embassy's construction, though some estimates put the expected building costs much higher. Once built, it could cost as much as \$1 billion a year to run. Charles E. Williams, who directs the State Department's

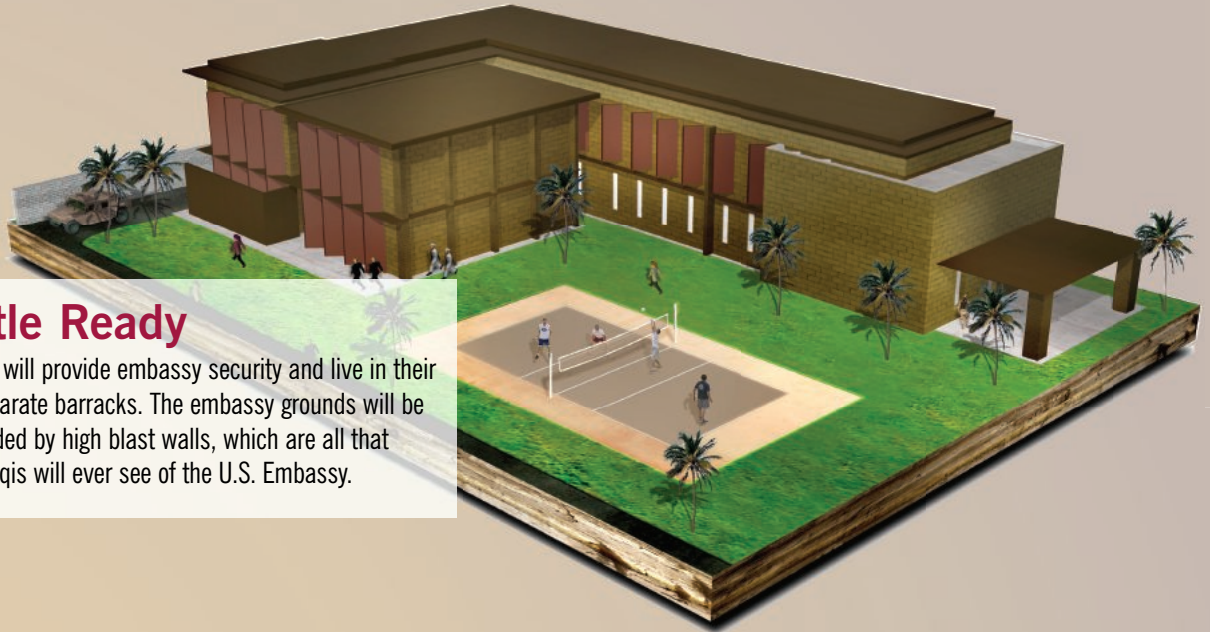
Overseas Buildings Operations, proudly refers to it as "the largest U.S. mission ever built."

But, the idea of an embassy this huge, this costly, and this isolated from events taking place outside its walls is not necessarily a cause for celebration. Traditionally, at least, embassies were designed to further interaction with the community in which they were built. Diplomats visited the offices of local government officials, shopped at local businesses, took their suits to the neighborhood dry cleaner, socialized with community leaders, and mixed with the general public. Diplomacy is not the sort of work that can be done by remote control. It takes direct contact to build goodwill for the United States and promote democratic values. Otherwise, there would be no reason for the United States to maintain its 250-plus diplomatic posts around the world. The embassy in Baghdad, however, appears to represent a sea change in U.S. diplomacy. Although U.S. diplomats will technically be "in Iraq," they may as well be in Washington. Judging by the embassy's design, planners were thinking more in terms of a frontier outpost than a facility engaged with its community. "The embassy," says Edward L. Peck, the former U.S. ambassador to

Iraq, "is going to have a thousand people hunkered behind sandbags. I don't know how you conduct diplomacy in that way."







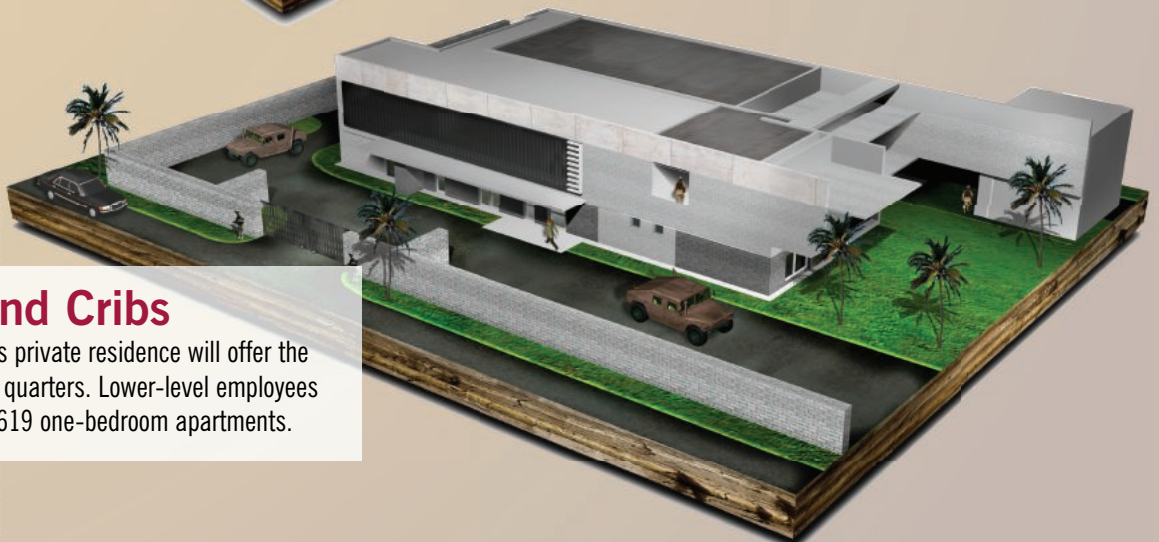
## Battle Ready

Marines will provide embassy security and live in their own separate barracks. The embassy grounds will be surrounded by high blast walls, which are all that most Iraqis will ever see of the U.S. Embassy.



## Home Sweet Home

Inside the compound, staff will feel right at home. The complex will include a shopping market, beauty salon, movie theater, and American fast food.



## Compound Crib

The ambassador's private residence will offer the most comfortable quarters. Lower-level employees will squeeze into 619 one-bedroom apartments.



# A City Upon a Hill

An embassy's precise design is classified. But earlier this year, sketches of the massive new U.S. Embassy in Iraq surfaced on the Internet. Herewith, a brief tour of Baghdad, U.S.A.



## Mission Colossal

The main embassy building will include a central atrium and a rear portion housing classified offices, including the ambassador's. Hundreds of non-diplomatic personnel from dozens of U.S. agencies will work in the annex building. The two office buildings will house about 1,000 employees.

It is tempting to think that the Baghdad compound must be an anomaly, a special circumstance dictated by events on the ground in Iraq. But, while it is larger in scope than other U.S. embassies opening around the world, it is hardly unique. Since al Qaeda bombed the American missions in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the State Department has been aggressively replacing obsolete or vulnerable embassies with ones designed under a program it calls Standard Embassy Design. The program mandates look-alike embassies, not the boldly individual designs built during the Cold War, when architecture played an important ideological role and U.S. embassies were functionally and architecturally open. The United States opened 14 newly built embassies last year alone, and long-range plans call for 76 more, including 12 to be completed this year. The result will be a radical redesign of the diplomatic landscape—not only in Baghdad, but in Bamako, Belmopan, Cape Town, Dushanbe, Kabul, Lomé, and elsewhere.

If architecture reflects the society that creates it, the new U.S. embassy in Baghdad makes a devastating

comment about America's global outlook. Although the U.S. government regularly proclaims confidence in Iraq's democratic future, the United States has designed an embassy that conveys no confidence in Iraqis and little hope for their future. Instead, the United States has built a fortress capable of sustaining a massive, long-term presence in the face of continued violence.

Forty years ago, America was forced to flee a newly constructed embassy in Baghdad just five years after it was opened, when the United States broke off relations with Iraq after the 1967 Six Day War. Given the costs of the new compound, the United States would not likely part with its latest Baghdad embassy under almost any circumstances, including escalating violence. As much as the situation there may deteriorate—the fighting already includes missile and mortar attacks in the Green Zone—the biggest problem may not be the embassy's security; indeed, it is the most impenetrable embassy ever built. Rather, the question is, with its high walls and isolation, will it be hospitable for conducting American diplomacy? **FP**