



No Exit

The Kafka-esque story of the U.S. translators being held against their will in a Kuwaiti hangar.

BY YOCHI DREAZEN | OCTOBER 3, 2013



Faycal Maroufi, a U.S. military translator from Florida, has spent the past three months confined to an American base in the deserts of Kuwait. The local authorities have promised to arrest Maroufi if he leaves the compound, and American officials have so far been powerless to help. Maroufi isn't wanted for a crime or accused of wrongdoing. He, like more than 50 other U.S. citizens, is instead being effectively imprisoned in Kuwait because of a nasty and complicated business dispute between an American contractor and its local partner.

The histories of the Iraq and Afghan wars are littered with cases of low-paid contractors from countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan being kept in the war zones against their will by companies that forced them to work seven days a week and sometimes confiscated their passports to ensure that they couldn't return home. The current standoff in Kuwait appears to be the first time that large numbers of American citizens have faced a similar predicament. The contractors are caught in the middle of a fight between two large companies, a battle they didn't choose and don't fully understand. For all intents and purposes they're under house arrest despite not doing anything to deserve it.

Maroufi and his colleagues are currently living in hangars on Camp Arifjan and Camp Buehring, the two main U.S. bases in Kuwait, and using lockers and curtains to carve out small slivers of personal space. Their makeshift barracks are infested with bedbugs, and the nearest bathrooms are in trailers several minutes away. They aren't allowed to access the bases' military hospitals or leave the country for personal emergencies. One employee lost his mother but was blocked from returning to the U.S. for the funeral; another lost his father but was similarly confined to the base by Kuwaiti authorities. Iowa resident Majdi Abdulghani was arrested at the Kuwait City airport as he was preparing to board a flight back to the U.S. to see his ailing mother. He was jailed for a week.

"We are prisoners here," Maroufi said by phone from Kuwait. "We're pawns in a fight between these two companies. I want to go home and be with my family, but instead I'm stuck here, and I don't know when they'll let me leave."

The linguists are now trying to get even. Late last month, Maroufi and 18 colleagues filed a lawsuit against their employer, Global Linguist Solutions, or GLS, a U.S.-based firm that has a piece of a \$9.7 billion Pentagon contract to provide translation services to military personnel across the Middle East. GLS is a joint venture between defense contracting giants DynCorp and AECOM, so Maroufi and the other plaintiffs sued them as well. Joe Hennessey, their lawyer, says he plans to ask for damages "in the tens of millions of dollars, if not higher."

GLS and DynCorp declined to comment, citing the litigation, but GLS argues that the Kuwaiti subcontractor, Al Shora General Trading and Contracting Co., bears full responsibility for what has happened to their employees. Al Shora couldn't be reached for comment, either. However, the company's owner, Reham Aljelewi, **told Stars and Stripes** earlier this year that she no longer wanted to work with GLS and accused it of making false allegations about her firm to various Kuwaiti officials.

American military and civilian officials say they're doing what they can for the contractors, but have gone out of their way to emphasize that the entire crisis boils down to a fight between two private companies.

Ron Young, a spokesperson for the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, which oversees the GLS contract, said the military was working with the State Department to find a way to get the contractors out of Kuwait. But he stressed that the "current situation regarding the American linguists in Kuwait is a legal matter under Kuwaiti law."

A State Department official said the American embassy in Kuwait had "reached out to Kuwaiti government officials at a variety of levels in order to seek clarification and identify a path to allow the citizens to depart Kuwait or otherwise address the matter." The official declined to say whether Ambassador Matthew Tueller had personally lobbied the Kuwaiti government to allow the contractors to return home.

The dispute stems from a Kuwaiti law that requires foreign firms to partner with a Kuwaiti company, or "sponsor," which is responsible for obtaining work visas for individual employees. GLS had initially partnered with Al-Shora, but chose to work with a different Kuwaiti company when its initial contract ended last year and the firm decided to submit a bid for a new one.

Here's where things get tricky. According to the lawsuit, Al Shora warned GLS that severing the relationship could lead to legal problems for their contractors. GLS, the suit says, "made a conscious business decision" to do so anyway. GLS, for its part, said it had to sever ties with Al Shora because the Kuwaiti firm refused to submit a formal proposal for a share of the new contract. GLS says that Al Shora's managing director, the sister-in-law of the country's prime minister, responded by threatening to "destroy" the American company.

Things soon deteriorated even further. GLS says that Al Shora promised to transfer all of the U.S. contractors to the company's new Kuwaiti sponsor, but never did. Instead, Al Shora told Kuwaiti authorities that Maroufi and the other GLS contractors had failed to show up their jobs, violating the terms of their work visas and putting them in breach of Kuwaiti immigration law. GLS said it tried to negotiate with Al Shora to rescind the allegations, only to have the Kuwaiti company demand \$22 million in exchange for doing so. When GLS refused to pay, the Kuwaiti government began arresting individual contractors like Abdulghani, the Iowa resident trying to return home to see his sick mother.

The lawsuit claims that after the arrests of Abdulghani and a pair of other contractors, Maroufi and his remaining colleagues found themselves effectively under house arrest at Buehring and Arifjan.

"They were trapped because they could not venture out beyond the compound for fear of arrest by Kuwait authorities," the lawsuit states. "Moreover, the Kuwait government would not issue exit documents or other papers to such plaintiffs because they were considered to be in the country illegally."

Three months later, the bulk of the contractors remain marooned at the bases. The Army flies aircraft in and out of Arifjan and Buehring every day, and it's not clear why the military doesn't simply take the contractors out of the country on their own. It's also not clear why the U.S. government, which sells large quantities of weapons to Kuwait and once went to war to restore its independence, isn't doing more to pressure the Kuwaiti government to let the contractors leave. For the moment, only a lucky few have managed to do so.

Nada Malek has worked for GLS in both Iraq and Kuwait since the summer of 2010. This past February, her husband developed serious health problems and was put into an intensive care unit, but she was told she couldn't return to her home in Nevada because of the fight between GLS and Al Shora. Malek's husband eventually recovered, but she suffered a bigger blow last month when her son tried to kill himself. Staffers from the office of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid interceded on her behalf and she was finally allowed out of Kuwait. She returned home last Sunday.

Despite her family problems, Malek is paradoxically one of the lucky ones. The remaining contractors don't have powerful political allies and face the real prospect of being stuck in Kuwait for months as the new lawsuit winds its way through the U.S. legal systems and back channel talks with the Kuwaitis plod forward. This Saturday is Maroufi's birthday, and he will spend it thousands of miles from home.

"I still don't believe that I can sit in my backyard and watch my husband take care of our garden," she said. "I still feel like I'm stuck in Kuwait."

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