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Building Confidence

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Najat is an Iraqi woman with the patience and self assurance many men in the present time do not have. Her story is one of nation building, the personal sacrifice and effort required of citizens in this new democracy, man and woman.

She began her career as a flight attendant jetting between the capitals of the world on the wings of Iraqi Airways, then entered the world of journalism and pursued her higher education. She married a man in the Iraqi diplomatic corps and gave birth to four girls; the eldest born with a disability.

In 2003, her husband died under mysterious circumstances during the fall of Saddam's regime. She found herself widowed with four children in a Baghdad apartment stripped of its furniture by looters who left nothing but the walls and a front door too flimsy to prevent night intruders.

Then a member of the U.S. military helped provide her family with shelter inside the Green Zone.

Najat began her first steps with the international corporation Washington Group based in the International Zone, as the Green Zone came to be called. There she worked in administration and accounting for eight months. The work in this company, which concentrated its activity on general contracting and project implementation, gained her new experience.

She found the courage to establish her own small firm with the little money she had. She founded her firm in the Green Zone where many companies and international organizations working in Iraq are concentrated, and where there was the possibility of bidding on small contracts or tenders.

The first contract her firm won was to provide a limited number of printers.

"Once briefed by the contracting office, I went immediately to the center for the sale of computers in the center of Baghdad," Najat said. She began a tour of shops to determine prices. She took her four daughters along, afraid to leave them at home. "Whenever I stood at one office and engaged in talking with the bureau on rate prices, they left me and started to move in different directions like free birds," she said. "That made me worried about them, and so I started my research [with them gripping] my hands."

She provided printers for a period of time and then she turned to contracts for debris removal and cleaning inside and outside the IZ. She began with 100 workers in the most heated areas of Baghdad where many contractors refused to bid for the work.

There were bids from four other contractors to compete for the contract. "I was the only woman among them," Najat said, adding that the contracting manager was surprised she would compete for the work in very violent areas of Baghdad. "When he noted my insistence and competitive prices, which were much less than others, he awarded the contract to me to implement," she said.

Thus she began a new phase of work, moving from inside the Green Zone to work in areas of Baghdad abandoned by many contractors for many reasons, including death threats or extortion by militias, elements of Al-Qaida or other armed groups that accused contractors of treason for cooperating with U.S. organizations sponsoring the reconstruction process.

Najat employed 100 workers for cleaning the Adhamiya neighborhood where she and her workers have been threaten with death by armed groups. All that did not discourage her or prevent her from carrying out her work.

Her work brought her closer to the people of the area. She managed to convince them that the work was being done for their sake, not for the contractor's profit, but in order to

clean up their neighborhood and make it a safe environment free from disease. This encouraged the local population to cooperate with her, bringing word of the location of bombs planted by the armed groups to force her to leave.

Najat succeeded in fulfilling the contract and winning the hearts of people. After that she carried out a number of cleaning contracts in other areas, such as Dora and Fadhel, where groups also tried to hinder and delay the reconstruction campaign.

In addition to the cleaning contracts, she has executed more than 400 projects; the latest a \$1 million renovation of a supermarket building. Other ongoing work includes the \$678,000 rehabilitation of Lion's Square in central Baghdad and paving roads leading to Al-Kifah.

Najat never forgets the efforts of Azza Hummadi from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region Division who sincerely encouraged her and other female contractors to enter the male-dominated realm of general contracting. Hummadi is a project manager and women's advocate.

To date, brave and industrious women like Najat have executed reconstruction contracts in Iraq amounting to \$18 million. But in addition to brick and mortar projects that they are accomplishing, they are building a nation as leaders, Hummadi said.

"The Iraqi woman has played an important role in the Iraqi community," Hummadi said, pointing out that Iraqi Minister of Municipalities Naziha Al Dulaimi in 1958 was the first Arab woman to hold a ministerial post. "In the new Iraq, there are many women in both important legislative and executive positions. The importance of the Iraqi woman goes from the active effect that she makes in the family as a basic unit in the community all the way to the highest levels of government."