

LES Bravery in the Middle East

Locally engaged staff (LES) are DFAIT's eyes and ears on the ground. Resourceful and well connected, they perform crucial jobs while providing important continuity and acting as an embassy's corporate memory. In emergencies, LES are even more critical, meeting their responsibilities in the face of hardship, uncertainty and even danger.

"Anyone who has worked abroad will appreciate the work that our LES do," says Canada's ambassador to Libya, Sandra McCardell, who closed Canada's mission in late February amid unrest and before the coming NATO mission. "Probably the most difficult thing I did was to tell my locally engaged staff that I was leaving and that they were staying behind."

Stefanie McCollum, the management consular officer in Cairo at the time of the recent crisis in Egypt, says that for many of the mission's 60 LES, "The revolution was an upheaval never before witnessed in their time, and it was greatly disturbing." Homes were being vandalized and robbed, vigilante roadblocks were being erected and LES were worried about friends and family, she says. Yet they came in to help with evacuation efforts.

LES drivers shuttled staff, citizens and supplies back and forth through Cairo, braving dangerous roads and disregarding curfews. LES delivered mattresses and bedding so staff could sleep at the office, and LES consular staff provided invaluable expertise and support to the operation.

"Without the knowledgeable LES speaking the local language, leveraging their networks of contacts and providing exceptional service, our embassy would be severely hindered," McCollum says. "Much in the Middle East is about who you know and how well you can communicate with them."

Support of LES is especially critical in a small mission. McCardell says that most of her mission's eight LES helped at Tripoli airport with the first evacuation of Canadians from Libya, when there were only three Canada-based staff on the ground. Even her nanny and a cleaner, both contract employees, carried Canadian flags aloft so our nationals, in the crush of events, could identify and reach the Canadian contingent.



LES drivers and dispatchers in Cairo, who were vital during the unrest, are given recognition awards. (L to R) Drivers Maged Mehany, Mamdouh Hassan, Ahmed Abdel Hamid and Awadallah (Mohammed) Abdel Zaher, Ambassador Ferry de Kerckhove and dispatcher Hani Fayek.

"Members of your staff put themselves at risk and in personal danger to help Canadians," says McCardell. "They are vulnerable simply because they have worked with an embassy and have an association with foreigners. But then you get on a plane and say 'goodbye.' One of the most challenging things I have had to do was manage my own sense that somehow I had let them down."

In Cairo, several LES have been recognized with awards for their extraordinary efforts in the crisis. "But all LES have struggled and tensions remain, as the situation is uncertain and unpredictable," McCollum says.

"It's a difficult time for our LES across the region," she adds. "Seeing your country upended is troubling and, for many, nerves are wearing thin. Regardless, they put on a brave face, hope for normalcy and come to work every day, optimistic that their country will be changed for the better."