

A 'Sense of Purpose' in Troubled Places

As winds of change blew across the Middle East last spring, Marie-Thérèse Helal was applying for a new position at the Embassy of Canada to Libya for her next rotation.

For Helal, 36, the application was a leap of faith that all would return to normal at the Tripoli mission, which had closed at the start of the NATO campaign. It also signalled her interest in taking on a challenging assignment in a complex region at a critical time in its history.

Those at such posts find the work difficult yet satisfying and an opportunity to instill Canadian values of peace and democracy while trying to make a difference in the lives of individuals and the world around them.

"It's crucial that Canada be in these places—and it's a valuable experience for us, as well," says Dennis Horak, 51, head of mission at the Embassy of Canada to Iran, in Tehran. He arrived in Iran in

2009, following the disputed election that brought violence to the streets, including those around the chancery while he and other staff were there—indeed, watching from inside. "I saw some pretty nasty things."

Tehran today is a demanding post, with frustrating curbs on personal freedoms, especially for Horak's wife Sally. The city is overcrowded and heavily polluted, he says, and relations are "fraught with problems and difficulties," affecting issues such as getting visas for Canadians coming to work in the mission. Yet it's a rewarding place to be.

"Iran is at the centre of a lot of major international and regional issues, and it's important for us to have a window on that, to be able to give our perspective," says Horak, who joined DFAIT in 1987.

"We give a human face to what Canada is about," adds Helal, who is currently in Arabic language training to prepare for an assignment in Tripoli starting in 2013. The new regional position is focused on enhancing political reporting and understanding of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

A native of Montreal, Helal became interested in world affairs at a young age. She attended Lester B. Pearson College in Victoria, B.C., worked in development jobs abroad, studied international relations and joined DFAIT in 2003. Her career has included a posting to Turkey, where she covered the 2008 Georgia-Russia conflict and travelled to Northern Iraq, as well as short assignments in Afghanistan and at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN. "I need to have a sense of purpose in what I do," she says.

In Libya, Helal will join Maher Doleh, the embassy's new senior trade commissioner, who assumed the position in the fall of 2010. Doleh's start date was to be in 2012, but he was asked to come to the mission early, from a posting in Riyadh. He flew in by military plane in late September, with just four days' notice, to re-establish the commercial section. "It was a pretty sudden move," says Doleh, 30.

The mission in post-conflict Libya has been temporarily raised to the top of the five-point hardship scale, a ranking established under the Foreign Service Directives that reflects conditions and establishes allowance differentials.

Tripoli has also become an "unaccompanied post," with staff living solo in a compound, amid the sounds of celebratory gun- and anti-aircraft-fire in the surrounding city each night. But Doleh says it's "exciting to see the reality on the ground," and the commercial possibilities are endless. "It's a little like the Wild West," he says, "They need everything here."

In rebuilding the country and re-establishing trade, Canada is seen as a "well-respected partner," and we can have an influence, he adds. "People want a modern, transparent, corruption-free system and society, and they're trying hard to accomplish that."

Marie-Thérèse Helal in Merv, Turkmenistan in 2009: "We give a human face to what Canada is about."

