



Senior trade commissioner Maher Doleh in front of graffiti that lines walls around Tripoli as an expression of Libya's new-found freedom - photo: Stefanie McCollum/DFAIT



Dan Maksymiuk (left) and Dennis Horak in front of the Canadian embassy in Tehran. The building dates to before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when it became known for the covert rescue by Canada of six American diplomats. - photo: J. Michel Byrne/DFAIT

Dan Maksymiuk, 35, a Global Security Reporting Program officer in Tehran who's also had postings or served on temporary duty assignments in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Kabul and Bamako, says he goes into such hot spots with his "eyes open" and is optimistic about what Canadians can accomplish.

"Iran is a place where we are tested to the limit of our skills as diplomats, and where we can see every day the contribution that DFAIT makes to Canada's security," he says. "Every person that we speak with, from senior officials to students, gives us a chance to advocate Canada's values in a closed society—and communicate back to Ottawa what people in this country really think."

Catherine Bloodworth, 35, a foreign service officer at DFAIT since 2004 who has taken a one-year position as a political officer in Libya and who served for three years in Kabul and Kandahar, says that long hours, hardships and restrictions in such missions are the norm. "But you're never bored."

Nevertheless, progress can be slow and frustrating—"You can't go thinking you're going to solve all the problems while you're there," Bloodworth says. It can be hard to meet local people in an environment where there are security concerns, she says, and family at home in Canada sometimes worry.

"I spent my 30th birthday in a lockdown," she says, recalling having to stay within the embassy compound in Kabul because of a security alert. "Someone brought in an Afghan birthday cake."

Dennis Horak says that despite "being in some strange places throughout the Middle East," the closest he's come to danger was in 2005, when he was posted to London, where he was three stops away from the subway train that was hit by the terrorist attacks on the city's transportation system. "You never know these days," he says.

Helal, a member of the executive board of the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers, says the organization is studying the problems faced by foreign service officers in challenging circumstances. "It's important for the department to adapt to this new reality," she says, and it's also critical for individuals to get training and support to make good judgment calls in the field. "I'm the first person responsible for my safety."

She says that posts like Tripoli are key "to understanding the world we live in," so we can develop responses that enhance safety and stability in the region. "In a stable and peaceful world, we are all more prosperous."

Helal is learning Arabic, her sixth language, in order to better understand the intricacies of the local culture and to reach out to a greater number of people, which will ensure a better appreciation of our country there, she says. "You leave an image of Canada behind, and it's important to be conscious of that."

"We give a human face to what Canada is about."