

Iraq bleeds: the remorseless rise of violence and displacement

by Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner

“I will never believe in differences between people,” the young man said. “I am a Sunni and my wife is a Shi’a. I received threats to divorce her or be killed. We have left Dora now [a once-mixed, now Sunni-dominated neighbourhood in central Baghdad]. My wife is staying with her family in Shaab [a Shi’a area] and I am staying with my friends in Mansur [a Sunni area]. I am trying to find a different house but it’s difficult now to find a place that accepts both of us in Baghdad.”

This comment by a young Iraqi artist to a friend in Baghdad last summer captures the essence of the painful paradox that grips Iraqi society nearly four years after the 2003 invasion triggered a colossal upheaval. On the one hand, Iraq is a society where different ethnicities, cultures, religions and sects have mixed and mingled for centuries, where people worked and lived side by side. On the other, it is a country that is now increasingly riven by terrible sectarian violence – violence that has forced millions of Iraqis to flee their homes, either as refugees to neighbouring countries, or as internally displaced within Iraq.

A history of living together

Living together is a natural part of life in Iraq. The Mesopotamian plain

is a historical melting pot. Modern Iraq reflects this. The three great cities – Baghdad, Basra and Mosul – have been cosmopolitan centres of commerce and learning for centuries. There may not be any official statistics but there are large numbers of mixed marriages in Iraq – up to a third of all marriages, according to a March 2007 article in the *Washington Post*. Indeed, many of the country’s tribes – including some of the most powerful ones – consist of both Sunni and Shi’a.

True, the regime of Saddam Hussein played on differences between Shi’a and Sunnis, as well as between Arabs and Kurds, aggravating the tensions that exist in any multicultural society. But when in 2003 the horrors of that regime were swept aside, many Iraqis yearned for a normal life: security, due process and the

rule of law. This was especially true of Shi’a communities, which had suffered so much under Saddam.

Even today, many ordinary people still do not think in terms of civil war. What they see is not neighbour against neighbour but armed thugs on all sides brutalising civilians. People have tried to protect their friends and neighbours. Shi’a displaced from Mosul and Falluja, interviewed in Diwaniya in June 2006, told of Sunni families who had sought to protect them, and who had in turn been targeted by Sunni radicals. Similar stories came from the other side: we heard, for example, from residents of the Hayy al-Jaamia area of Baghdad about an incident in which a local Sunni grocer was killed by Shi’a thugs and when his Shi’a neighbour protested, he, too, was murdered.

But the situation is hardening. Violence is reaching deeper into society. More and more ordinary people have ties to the radical groups. In many neighbourhoods, it is a case of being either with them or against them. And if the latter, the consequence is to flee or, often, to be killed. And once kin and loved ones join a radical group, the whole family is entrapped.



This Iraqi woman fled her home town after a mortar attack killed several children.

UNHCR/K Brooks

The hard-liners

Since the bombing of the holy Shi'a shrine in Samarra's Golden Mosque in February 2006, successive waves of attack and retaliation have washed over the country. The Samarra bombing marked the end of the restraint with which Shi'a had faced escalating attacks against them. Now the violence is from both sides. The weapon of choice of Sunni militant groups is the car-bomb, while extremist Shi'a death squads detain, torture and murder people.

The violence is neither spontaneous nor popular. Whether you ask political actors or ordinary Iraqis in the street, including those displaced by the violence, the view is that more extreme religious fronts drive both the violence and the resulting displacement. These groups are the Office of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)¹ on the Shi'a side, and the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI)² and the Islamic Party on the Sunni side.

Hard-line leaders on both sides view the violence and displacement as an extension of existing historical trends. Shi'a leaders point to a history of anti-Shi'a repression by

Sunni leaders in Iraq. "The Shi'a are being killed since the death of the prophet. In fact we can't see any difference between the Umayyads³ and Saddam or the current radical Sunni leaders," said a SCIRI official, interviewed in Najaf. Similarly, a Sadrist official in the Baghdad neighbourhood of Shuala declared: "The plan is clear to us. They want to eliminate the Shi'a in Baghdad and Diyala so they can establish their Taliban state in the Sunni areas."

For hard-line Sunnis, the very essence of the situation is sectarian: they see the 'new' Iraq as a creation of US and Iranian interests – a place where Sunnis no longer belong. "The plan for Southern Federalism allows the Shi'a political coalition to control the oil in the south and leaves the Sunnis isolated and poor," said an AMSI official in Mosul. For a Sunni Waqf Committee official in Baghdad, the anti-Sunni attacks are "an organised plan against the Sunni Arabs." "This has led us to question who is really responsible for the Samarra bombing," he added – a fine example of how, in times of extreme violence, a blend of paranoia and bad faith can replace rational discourse.

The violence gives the radical groups their *raison d'être*. The displaced

are pawns they use to further their agendas – which are strikingly similar. They seek to consolidate 'their' territory by expelling the 'others'. They try to keep some of 'their' people in the territory of the 'other' so as to maintain a claim on the local resources. In a context where the central government is facing immense difficulties asserting its authority across the country, the radical groups of all sides are able to pose as both protectors and providers to the most vulnerable. The displaced are also pawns in the internecine struggles between different groups within each of the two main communities.

As the power and influence of the radical groups increase, so too does their tendency to engage in repressive behaviour. In Sadr City, residents say they feel relief when the Mahdi Army⁴ engages in operations outside the area, because when they are not busy elsewhere, they harass people in their own area. In Washash, a formerly mixed area now under Shi'a control, Shi'a households must fly a black flag to demonstrate fealty.

Likewise, in Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods of Ghaziliya and al-Khadhra, the Omar Brigades enforce strict *Sharia* law in a fashion reminiscent of the Taliban. Smoking

is prohibited. Women are forbidden from wearing trousers and men from shaving. Penalties for transgressors are brutal – and sometimes final. Recent news from the Dora

*Iraqi refugees
in a restaurant
in Amman.*

neighbourhood of Baghdad, also controlled by Sunni hard-liners, has it that Christians are sometimes forced to make monthly \$100 *jizya* payments – a head-tax that able-bodied non-Muslim males historically paid in Muslim states.

It is, on both sides, typical warlord politics: moderates and people who speak up in opposition to the violence are targeted, intimidated and killed. The only guarantee for survival is silence.

Moderation in decline

Another ominous and ugly development is that these views are bleeding into the general public. The inhuman nature of the violence and its pervasiveness are causing intolerance and mistrust to spread, especially among the youth.

There are few voices of moderation in Iraq today. One of the few national leaders to have spoken out against the violence and specifically against displacement is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In July 2006, he condemned “sectarian chaos” (*fitna taafiyiyya*), the “mutual violence” (*onf mutaqaabil*) and “campaigns of forced displacement” (*hamlaat at-tahjiir al-qasri*). But, to the despair of many moderate Shi’a (and Iraqis in general), the influence of moderates seems to be waning as that of radical Shi’a groups and younger, hard-line leaders grows.

In response to the violence, many local communities, on both sides, are setting up vigilante-like defence committees to protect their areas. But they do not have resources: weapons, generators, fuel and so on. So, in order to function, they link

themselves to the bigger groups like the Shi’a Mahdi Army or the Sunni Omar Brigades. This only fuels the problem further, as the radical groups gain in power at the local level.



Adding to the grim picture, tribes on both sides – which were initially playing a stabilising counterpoint to the urban violence, especially in rural areas – seem to be growing restless. If open conflict erupts between tribal groups, the violence will take on an organised, popular and rural dimension that has so far, mercifully, been lacking.

Displacement on the rise

Well before the 2003 invasion, violent displacement was a major feature of the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. Today’s radical groups continue in that vein: using the violent ejection of entire populations as a tool to assert political power. The central pattern of displacement is the consolidation of territory by the radical armed groups. In essence, people flee to areas where they feel safer. Sunnis go to Sunni areas. Shi’a go to Shi’a areas. Kurds – and some Arabs – go to the northern provinces and Christians go to parts of Ninewah province. And most of those who can leave the country do so. The result: the radical groups hold sway over ‘cleansed’ territories, and have steadily increased their power.

Patterns of displacement vary. The more mixed a city is, the more sectarian violence there is likely

to be. Places such as north Babil, Salah ad-Din province, Mosul, Basra and especially Baghdad have been exceptionally violent. In these areas, campaigns to undermine mixed

neighbourhoods proceed in parallel. There tends to be less violence in areas where there is a functioning local authority – mainly the Kurdish North and the southern Shi’a towns (other than Basra).

The number of displaced is hard to estimate. The only official numbers come from the Ministry of Trade, which manages the country’s rations, but they may

underestimate the overall problem. Many displaced people do not register for rations, and all numbers for internally displaced people in Iraq are manipulated, especially those put out by the political parties. The generally accepted figure for the number of people displaced within Iraq in the year following the Samarra bombing is over 700,000. And, by March 2007, UNHCR was estimating that up to two million Iraqi refugees were living in neighbouring countries, especially Jordan and Syria. The pressure on neighbouring countries may increase as most governorates in southern Iraq have begun restricting the entry of displaced people who do not belong to local tribes or do not have kin with whom they can live.

Sectarian violence is not the only cause of displacement. Others include general lawlessness, which is closely linked to the actions of the radical groups, the lack of basic services, delays in the resolution of property disputes, and the fighting between insurgents and multi-national military operations that periodically displace thousands of civilians.

There are different categories of sectarian displaced. Sunni Arabs from majority Shi’a areas are the group that has grown most dramatically since the Samarra bombing. Shi’a

from majority Sunni areas have been under pressure since before the fall of the former regime. Many Sunni and Shi'a Arabs whom the Ba'ath regime settled, often forcibly, in the mainly Kurdish North as part of its aggressive Arabisation programme were forced to leave in 2003 and 2004. Minority groups forced to flee from both Sunni and Shi'a areas include Kurds, Christians, Turkmen, Sabean-Mandean, Roma and third-country nationals, especially Palestinians. The minorities are often prey to criminal gangs rather than sectarian ones, because they are viewed as having little in the way of protection, unlike the Sunni, Kurds and Shi'a.

How do people cope?

The majority of the displaced stay with family, friends or simply people from the same community. Others squat in public buildings. There are far fewer displaced in camps than with host families. People in camps are the worst off because of poor shelter and sanitation conditions. For the most part, families seem to have stayed together but an important social impact of displacement is increased child labour.

To obtain a ration, displaced people must register with the Ministry of Trade. For a number of reasons – lack of documentation, insecurity, lack of trust in the authorities, pride – many displaced apparently do not register. This holds especially true of people who can avoid the camps because they have relatives they can stay with or simply because they can afford to live without help.

The difficult living conditions trigger much anger against the government. Local authorities are acutely aware of this. Local authorities at the provincial and district level are generally more effective than federal ministries. Every province has a displaced committee and an operations room.

The Iraqi Red Crescent is the primary national aid agency dealing with the displaced. They work mostly in the camps and collective settlements – the only non-sectarian group with real structures and a countrywide presence. Local communities sometimes also support the displaced through informal

committees in neighbourhoods and local mosques. International assistance has in recent times been minimal, and also not very visible, because of the security situation.

Dim prospects

It is hard to grasp the impact of the sectarian violence. Neighbourhoods that were once hard to tell apart are now separated by a no man's land of deserted streets and shuttered buildings. Transporters must change lorries and drivers to ferry goods from territory to territory. Roads are closed to one group or another. Worst of all, Iraq's educated elites are fleeing the country – many have given up hope and are seeking resettlement in third countries.

Though it seems unthinkable, many people fear that the sectarian violence may get even worse. There are fears that artillery could be used to target urban areas designated for ethnic cleansing. The radical groups, while becoming more violent, may also be fragmenting, making it even harder to find a political solution.

The outcome of the government's Security Plan and the US surge are still not clear. But few of those interviewed were very optimistic. A young Sunni man from the Shi'a neighbourhood of Shaab told us that the Mahdi Army had made itself scarce of late but "we know they will be back." Ominously, there has been increased intra-communal violence – Shi'a on Shi'a, Sunni on Sunni – as the radical groups splinter and local leaders vie for power.

Across the country, displaced people, Sunni and Shi'a, say that sectarian displacement is on the rise, and chances of returning home are – for the foreseeable future – slim. "The government wants us to go back to our houses in Baghdad," one man said. "I called my Sunni neighbours and they told me the insurgents are still using our house for their operations. How can we go back?"

People are beginning to integrate the violence into how they live. Fear now dictates which market you shop at; where you go to hospital – or even whether you go at all; whether you send your kids to school; what passenger you take in your taxi,

and where you are willing to take him; which friends you see...

There is a new job in Baghdad today. For a fee, certain people will scour dumps and river banks to find the body of your missing loved one. How long can people live with such violence and not be permanently scarred?

"I wish they would attack us with a nuclear bomb and kill us all, so we will rest..." an Iraqi said to a *New York Times* reporter, after a 3 February bomb in a Baghdad market that killed over 130 people and wounded more than 300 others, "We cannot live this way anymore. We are dying slowly every day."

Increasingly, displaced people see what happened to them as a reflection of deep-seated political divisions in the country. The violence is causing lasting change to Iraq's social and demographic make-up. That is what the radical armed groups on both sides seek to achieve.

They are succeeding.

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This article first appeared, in a slightly different form, in the April 2007 issue of the UNHCR magazine, Refugees, No 146 'Iraq Bleeds' – a special issue devoted to the millions displaced by the Iraq crisis. The magazine can be obtained in hard copy direct from UNHCR, or downloaded in html or pdf formats from www.unhcr.org

1. www.almejlis.org

2. <http://heyetnet.org/en/index.php>

3. The first dynasty of the Islamic caliphate

4. Mahdi Army (Jaish al Mahdi), a military force created by the Shi'ite cleric, Muqtadfa al-Sadr