

August 24, 2008

Fear Keeps Iraqis Out of Their Baghdad Homes

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

BAGHDAD — When Jabbar, an elderly Shiite man, stormed out of his house here in June wanting to know where all his furniture had gone, the sharp look of the young Sunni standing guard on his street stopped him cold.

The young man said nothing, but his expression made things clear: Jabbar had no home here anymore.

After Iraq's sectarian earthquake settled, his neighborhood had become a mostly Sunni area. Instead of moving back, he is trying to sell the house while staying in a rented one less than a mile away in an area that is mostly Shiite.

It is not an unusual decision. Out of the more than 151,000 families who had fled their houses in Baghdad, just 7,112 had returned to them by mid-July, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration. Many of the displaced remain in Baghdad, just in different areas. In one neighborhood alone, Amiriya, in western Baghdad, there are 8,350 displaced families, more than the total number of families who have returned to their houses in all of Baghdad.

The reasons for the hesitation are complex, based on dangers both real and imagined. In most cases, Iraqis say they feel safe with their neighbors but are not sure about other residents. Some are afraid of the new guards on their blocks. In rarer cases, they cannot face neighbors who they suspect helped in killings.

In the patchwork of today's Iraq, there are many exceptions. But for now, returning families in many areas are still a trickle, indicating that even though sectarian killings seem to have ended, the distrust they sowed lingers. And while most Iraqis are trying hard to put the ugliness of the past behind them, moving their children back to areas where killings once raged is the ultimate act of trust that many parents — at least so far — seem to be unwilling to risk.

The neighborhood teenagers were the worry for Jabbar, who, like other Iraqis interviewed for this article, agreed to be identified only by his first name. The teenagers brought the war to his family's block in a few disastrous days in 2006, scattering leaflets that told Shiites to leave or "we will use swords to cut your necks." Within days, the area was unlivable, and the family escaped with only the belongings that fit in the trunk of their car.

Jabbar was lucky. He lost no one. But he remembered the boys, friends of a well-known family. Their father distributed food stamps and knew people's addresses.

Security improved, and this spring Jabbar began to look into moving back. His wife visited their house with a female friend first. Women, seen as less threatening, often carry out risky family missions, like getting food

stamps, in dangerous areas.

She returned with mixed news. On the bright side, their furniture was still there. But there was a darker flicker: a young man from the local Awakening Council, the new Sunni group paid by the American military to guard the neighborhood, made her feel uneasy. He told her that he knew her sons. He asked how she was going to protect them.

When the family visited the house several weeks later, all that remained was an old VCR. Jabbar had no proof, but he suspected the young Sunni guards on his block had taken the rest.

“The street was empty except for them,” Jabbar said. A short time later, two Shiites were killed a few blocks away. Then, a Sunni renting a relative’s house received a threatening letter. When he told the neighborhood guards about it, they asked him to prove his Sunni identity and then told him to disregard the letter.

“From that moment, I felt I could not go back to my house again,” he said.

In an indication of the immense complexity of today’s Iraq, the Sunni sheik in charge of the forces in the area, Abu Saleh al-Aghedi, says that Shiites are returning and gets angry at the suggestion that sectarian prejudice still lingers. But there are hundreds of men under him, and not all of them necessarily share his thoughts or, for that matter, obey his orders.

In the words of a retired Sunni civil servant, Qais, who was displaced in 2006, “You trust your neighbor, but you don’t know who is five or six doors down.”

Iraq has come a long way since 2006. People are moving relatively freely between neighborhoods, driving to work, visiting old friends and picking up food stamps in areas where the other sect lives. Some Iraqis say the trouble facing returning families has more to do with simple economics than sectarian prejudice.

It was poor Sunnis from farmland south of Baghdad who came to live in the elegant, empty Shiite houses in Amel, a neighborhood in southern Baghdad. One of the houses they occupied belongs to Hazim, a 37-year-old Shiite, who seethes at the thought of their refusal to leave.

“If you asked me six months ago, I would say it was sectarian,” he said. “Now I assure you it’s not. They just feel better living in our big houses.”

Even Sunni residents looked down on them. A Sunni friend told Hazim that the squatters were “barbarian, dirty people” and encouraged him to return.

But keeping him away turned out to be in other people’s interests, too. He tried three times to return, but he said a corrupt police officer from the area — who was supposed to be coordinating the move but instead was turning a blind eye to looting — prevented him. The displaced Sunni families are comfortable, Hazim said. The Americans are paying them as Awakening members, and with several sons on the payroll, the money is almost enough for a family to live on. It is the Americans, in Hazim’s opinion, who stand between him and his house.

What would happen if the Americans left?

“What time is it now?” Hazim said, sitting in the sparsely furnished living room of a relative’s house on the Shiite side of the neighborhood. “Two o’clock? By four, I’d be back in my house and no one would say a word to me.”

Those who do return often find transformed blocks full of unfamiliar people. A Shiite man, 30, who returned to his old house in Amiriya as a trial in June said “70 percent of the neighborhood is new people,” Sunnis displaced from Shiite areas.

The neighborhood is better. Islamic supremacy graffiti is scribbled over. Wanted posters show the faces of people suspected of belonging to the insurgent group [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#). Bodies no longer litter the streets. Still, the Shiite man, too afraid to allow even his first name to be used, said he felt unsettled. A displaced Sunni neighbor, in a moment of candor, assuming the man was Sunni, complained about Shiites, saying, “Why aren’t they letting us go back to our houses in their neighborhoods?”

Several weeks later, the man decided to give up on his old neighborhood. His wife is having a baby, and they did not want to take the risk. He had an uncomfortable memory: the Sunni extremists who used to run Amiriya taught cruel songs about Shiites to children. His nephew came home singing one once.

His hesitation does not extend to his friendships. His best friend is a Sunni, who aches over what happened, he said. They are separated only by geography.

Some neighborhoods are having more homecomings, like in Saidiya, an area in southern Baghdad, where the war came late and hit both sects simultaneously, and Adhamiya, in northern Baghdad, where family ties go back generations.

In Topchi, a Shiite neighborhood in western Baghdad that had only low-grade sectarian hostility, impoverished Sunni families are returning in the hope of receiving a promised state aid payment. A Shiite businessman from Saidiya, an upper-middle class area of merchants, government employees and former army officers, remembers noticing graffiti against Shiites (“rejecters”) and Sunnis (“apostates”) appearing on its walls at the same time.

That meant that people from there had less resentment and fear to contend with. In contrast, his wife’s family, moving on the same day from another area, had three male family members shot dead by Sunni radicals as they moved furniture.

Then, in June, an elite unit of the Iraqi Army set up a checkpoint just yards from the businessman’s front door and he decided to move his family back to the neighborhood. Though his particular area is still mostly Sunni, it does not have Awakening Council guards, only Iraqi Army soldiers. His wife, ecstatic about the checkpoint, offered the soldiers snacks of okra and rice.

“It was a joyful feeling,” she said, sitting in her newly renovated living room, its walls painted sea green. “The government is finally protecting me.”

That confident response is more typical of Shiites, whose sect controls the state. Though Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) rose sharply in the estimation of Sunnis when he battled a Shiite militia this spring, a deep

insecurity remains.

The retired Sunni civil servant, Qais, said the city's new concrete walls and sectarian separations might be ugly but were the ultimate guarantee of his family's safety. For eight months his car did not leave his new neighborhood, Amiriya.

"In this new situation, staying where you are is safer," he said. "No one can come to you. No one can ask you to explain yourself."

"Things are calm now," he added, "but we don't know what will happen in the future."

Moving was an eerie game of musical chairs. He walked through Shiites' living rooms, looking at their furniture, photographs and even computers. His wife refused to live in a stranger's house, so they hunted for a contact. They gave their own house to distant acquaintances, Shiites displaced from somewhere else, for a token fee so that marauding Shiite militia members would not tear it apart.

Qais says he has little faith that the government will be able to undo that tangle, and he is now trying to sell his house. But as a Sunni, he is in a weak position to bargain.

"The area is Shiite now," he said. "When they learn I am Sunni, the price will fall."

Jabbar has the same problem. His house will fetch less than half of its value. He is leaning toward a solution that he does not like talking about: swapping with a member of the opposite sect.

"It's very shameful to say it," he said, "but it's a new phenomenon in Iraq now."

Reporting was contributed by Riyadh Mohammed, Mohamed Hussein, Anwar J. Ali, Abu Sejad, Abu Zaineb, Ali Khatem and Ahmed Khatem.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
