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## With Steel and Asphalt, Bridge Helps Seal Baghdad's Division



Eros Hoagland for The New York Times

A footbridge in Baghdad connects one Shiite neighborhood, Greihat, with another, Kadhimiya, across the Tigris River, allowing travelers to bypass Sunni areas.

By ANTHONY SHADID  
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**BAGHDAD** — On a bend in the Tigris where caliphs summered when Baghdad was the City of Peace, the pontoons came first. Steel and asphalt followed. Now, two years on, the Greihat Bridge, a gesture of wartime expediency, has become permanent, traversing the river, joining two Shiite Muslim neighborhoods and, some fear, going too far.

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The footbridge's rationale is mundane: to carry Shiites from Greihat to the sacred, gold-leaved shrine in Kadhimiya, bypassing routes through Sunni neighborhoods. Its symbolism is momentous, though. Traffic is already channeled around sectarian fault lines. Blast walls besiege every neighborhood. But the Greihat Bridge, just 15 feet across and 575 feet long, is possibly the first piece of infrastructure built to reflect and accommodate the reality of a divided Baghdad, suggesting the permanence of what has been wrought.

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"It's a symbol of war," said Mohammed Kasim, a photographer and filmmaker.

[Winston Churchill](#) once remarked that "we shape our buildings and afterward our buildings shape us." The same could be said for the Greihat Bridge, which tells a story of

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Baghdad's present and its past, a city defined by the vagaries of power, where bridges — named for revolutions and martyrs, architecture and faith — are signposts of rulers' authority.

"We design our city and the city designs us," Muwafaq al-Taei, an architect, said, nodding, offering his own version of Churchill's words. He went on, conflating centuries and rulers. "The story of Baghdad is always a political story, a completely political story." He paused again before refining his idea further.

"The story of Baghdad," he said finally, settling on his thought, "is the story of infrastructure."

The bridges in Baghdad, long scenes of protest, intrigue, triumph and often tragedy, have a resonance here. The Two-Story Bridge will always evoke the reign of former President [Saddam Hussein](#). The Martyrs Bridge still recalls the site where police opened fire in 1948 on a Communist Party protest, rallied by a woman whom an old communist remembers as "a virtuous prostitute." But none is perhaps more meaningful than the Greihat Bridge, the 13th and last to be built across the Tigris.

The Greihat Bridge was first envisioned by Abdul Karim Kassem, the nationalist officer who overthrew the monarchy on July 14, 1958, a date taken as the name for one bridge. It was a part of a greater vision for modernizing the city, but even then, Churchill's aphorism intruded. The plan was shelved by the bloody coup of the [Baath Party](#) that overthrew Kassem in 1963.

"For political reasons, they stopped that bridge," Mr. Taei said. "With it, you would have united Shiites on both sides of you. So with his death came the death of the bridge."

No ruler since Kassem has left his mark on Baghdad like Mr. Hussein. His monuments may be the most visible and perhaps vulgar; the plan for his Victory Arch, some say, called for actual Iranian skulls. Much of the infrastructure he presided over recalls the city's now-faded ambitions of Persian Gulf prestige. And he indelibly redrew the city's geography, nurturing neighborhoods on the western bank of the Tigris — Amiriya, Hamra, Jihad, Khudra and so on — that in time became Sunni bulwarks.

"Those who control power always try to control the city through demographic changes," said Saad Eskander, the director of the National Library and Archive.

"Soon the Shias will control the city," he added. "In fact, they already do."

In that, Baghdad is unlike any other Arab capital. Black, green and red flags of Shiite piety flutter under solar-powered streetlights, which cast a pallid glow on slogans for Imam Hussein, Shiite Islam's most revered figure. A square named after Saladin, the Sunni hero of the Crusades, was renamed after Malik al-Ashtar, a loyal companion of Ali, Imam Hussein's father, whom Shiites consider the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. The Two-Story Bridge, that icon of the former president, is now a preserve of a group loyal to Ammar al-Hakim, a Shiite leader. The Martyrs Bridge carries traffic through an arcade of columns plastered with portraits of [Moktada al-Sadr](#), a radical Shiite cleric.

And, in the upheaval unleashed by the United States invasion, Greihat was built, joining two Shiite locales by circumventing the staunchly Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiya.

"The problems started between the people, and that meant there was fear," said Jassem Ali, carrying his 6-year-old son, Hassan, as he crossed the bridge. Religious lamentations drifted across the river, eddying lazily in a soft winter sun, along banks where so many

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corpses once washed up that residents refused to eat fish from the Tigris.

“To go to Adhamiya meant you had to consider dying,” Mr. Ali said. “There was so much killing there.”

In Beirut — another city divided by sect — color, flag, portrait and symbol draw its borders, in a claustrophobic contest to lay claim to territory never solely Lebanese. More and more, the same goes for Baghdad, with the Greihat Bridge an example writ small. It is unmistakably in Shiite territory, from its flags and slogans celebrating Shiite saints to the fear that prompted the construction of a structure both utilitarian and ideological.

“This is the reality today,” Heidar Ali, an army sergeant, said as he crossed the bridge, past barbed wire, curbstones newly painted in yellow and white and streetlamps on pedestals of Baghdad’s ubiquitous brick.

Construction began in 2008, at a cost of almost \$1.1 million, said Shawket Khadum, a spokesman for the Ministry of Construction and Housing. In past months, electricity, lamps and solar lights were installed, and restaurants like the Tigris Beach were built at its entrance. Officials say it will soon be expanded to permit cars to pass to Kadhimiya and its shrines, bustling with a building boom. Until then, the traffic of pedestrians stays brisk through the day, imbued with a sense of security in their isolation.

“The events,” Azhar Mohammed said, using a euphemism for the war, “are still here until now. No one’s forgotten. A lot of people still have pain in their hearts.”

She passed pilgrims carrying carpets and cooking oil, a man in a wheelchair and a woman who went by Um Ali, corralling her three children.

“We can’t go to Adhamiya anymore,” she said, “but we can still cross the bridge.”

*Duraïd Adnan contributed reporting.*

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