

## **A city is redrawn by the death squads, bombs and beheadings**

**Sectarian bloodshed has torn Baghdad into a patchwork of ghettos**



**A man runs down a street warning people to flee shortly after a twin car bomb attack at Shorja market in Baghdad**

Deborah Haynes and Ali Hamdani

The Iraqi grew accustomed to seeing at least one dead body in the street every morning when he left his Baghdad flat for work.

His neighbourhood, known as Saddam District before the invasion and, ironically, Peace District afterwards, had become the site of gunfights, kidnappings and public executions as an avalanche of sectarian violence hit the city.

“There was heavy gunfire at night. The shops were shut. Rubbish and sewage was everywhere. The compound was a war zone,” said Omer Nouri, a Sunni Arab who fled to northern Iraq in February last year with his wife and two-year-old son.

He returned nine months later after hearing that the killing had subsided, only to find that the new security came at a price. His neighbourhood, like many others in Baghdad, was no longer a mix of Sunni and Shia families living side by side. An ugly wall divided the two sects and Iraqi soldiers kept the peace.

Mr Nouri’s experience offers a snapshot of what has happened to the capital since American tanks rumbled up the highway five years ago and the giant statue of Saddam Hussein in al-Fardous Square was brought crashing down. Once one of the most modern and cultured cities in the Middle East, Baghdad has been left with many of its landmark buildings destroyed and roads broken in the invasion — the obvious cost of war. A more fundamental change has also taken place.

The sectarian bloodshed that erupted has transformed the ethnic map of this previously diverse city of Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Turkmen and, for a while, even Jews.

Much of Baghdad is now divided along sectarian lines defined by a patchwork of concrete walls, barbed wire and checkpoints. Indiscriminate killings, targeted murders and forced displacement have also left families emotionally scarred.

Mueen Hamed al-Kadhimi, chairman of the Baghdad Provincial Council, believes that it will take a long time to fix the physical and psychological damage. “Many displaced people who have suffered will not want to return to their neighbourhoods,” he said. “We now have the phenomenon of Shia Arabs selling their house to Sunni Arabs and vice versa in different districts . . . It will be very, very difficult to return the Baghdad map to how it used to be.”

The bombing of a revered Shia shrine in Samarra, north of Baghdad, in February 2006 inflamed the sectarian killings, with the Sunni extremists of al-Qaeda clearing neighbourhoods of Shia Arabs, Christians and anyone else who opposed them, while Shia death squads hunted down Sunni Arab families in majority Shia areas. Almost 92,000 families were forced to leave their homes and move either to another part of the city, elsewhere in the country or abroad. Thousands more people were killed, many of them tortured, their bodies strung from lampposts.

Mina al-Ta’e, whose father was executed by Saddam, rejoiced when the regime fell. “I couldn’t believe that we were finally able to have a satellite television and a mobile phone,” the 26-year-old bank employee said. “I was dreaming of a life full of freedom, joy, entertainment and prosperity.”

Barely two years later her hopes were in shatters. Ms Ta’e and her mother fled their home of almost 20 years in Amariyah, a notorious al-Qaeda-run enclave in west Baghdad, after a Shia neighbour was beheaded in front of his parents in June 2005.

Renting their house to a displaced Sunni family that was escaping to Ameriya from a Shia district, they found cramped accommodation in nearby Mansour, which was relatively safe for both sects. Within months that also changed.

“Assassinations started in Mansour targeting government officials,” Ms Ta’e said about the once-smart district that contained Saddam’s favourite restaurant, which was bombed by the US military, missing the President by minutes. “Many shopkeepers were killed and there were repeated car bombs as al-Qaeda and other Sunni groups sought control, but Shia militias from the adjacent Shia neighbourhoods fought back.”

About six months ago the Iraqi Army moved in, erecting checkpoints and closing roads. As a result, shops started to reopen but the main street is still largely deserted. Last week five US soldiers were killed in a suicide bombing outside one of the stores, underscoring the fragility of the security gains.

Ms Ta’e said that it remained too dangerous for her as a Shia Arab to return to Ameriya, even though the neighbourhood is similarly encircled by blast walls and patrolled by a form of civilian security guard made up of local men, including Sunni Arab fighters who say that they have turned against al-Qaeda. Stuck in Mansour, she said: “There are moments when I wish the Saddam days would return. This makes me very disheartened because I never imagined I would miss the reign of the man who robbed me of my father when I was five.”

A surge of 30,000 US troops into Baghdad and the surrounding belts, a ceasefire by the powerful Shia al-Mahdi Army and the rejection of al-Qaeda by Sunni Arab fighters are credited with a sharp drop in violence since last summer. As a result, a sense of normal life is emerging in certain quarters of the capital, particularly on the eastern side of the Tigris river.

Shopkeepers in districts such as Karada are enjoying a healthy trade, coffee shops stay open late and families venture out once again to local parks. Signs of reconstruction, previously hampered by the fear of attack, are starting to show, with pavements being resurfaced, bridges repainted, sewage pipes fixed, schools reopened and rubbish collected.

Blast walls that line shopping streets, after repeated car bomb attacks, are decorated with signs advertising products in the stores they protect. The barriers around neighbourhoods are on occasion decorated with bright pictures. Tellingly, many of the paint jobs are green — a shade favoured by Shia Arabs. Where portraits of Saddam once hung there are pictures of Shia religious leaders, and Shia flags flutter from numerous houses, a sign of the emerging power in the new Iraq.

The hardcore Shia slum of Sadr City is benefiting from investment after decades of neglect under Saddam, while in neighbouring Shaab most Sunni families have been forced out by the al-Mahdi Army, creating yet another Shia enclave, again surrounded by barriers.

Uncertainty remains over what will happen when the blast walls that cut Baghdad are taken away and US forces pull out, with residents convinced that their newly restored peace is wholly conditional. A person would still be killed for straying into the wrong neighbourhood, they say.

Such concerns prompt Mr Nouri to use a fake identity card still because he does not want people to know that he is Sunni when passing through checkpoints in the Peace District, which was built by the former regime for government employees. Before the war this residential compound of 2,000 apartments in west Baghdad had an integrated mixture of middle-class Sunni and Shia families. Now the sects are split.

“Shia families don’t come into our half and we don’t go into theirs,” Mr Nouri said sadly. He hates the concrete partitions, but added: “For the moment, living in a prison is better than being killed.”

### **Where are they now?**

#### **Rageh Omaar**

A few weeks into the Iraq war and Britain was worried. Troops in Basra were out on street patrols, there was looting in Baghdad and – troublingly – there was an absence from the nightly news. Where, people asked in e-mails to the BBC, was Rageh Omaar? Was he in danger? Had something terrible happened to the man who *Viz* magazine described as “Britain’s best-loved bullet-dodging dreamboat”? In fact, the BBC’s man in Baghdad had simply taken a short break from reporting. But one thing seemed certain: the “Scud Stud” was now one of the organisation’s prize assets. Then he spurned it all. Having described the BBC as a white man’s club, and later claiming that his Iraq reporting covered “almost nothing about Iraqi people”, he moved in 2006 to al-Jazeera – a news organisation controversially banned from Iraq at one point after it was accused of supporting the insurgency. He now presents *Witness*, a daily documentary on the channel that showcases independent film-makers. (*Tom Whipple*)

#### **Larry Lindsey**

In 2002, few Bush Administration officials were willing to comment publicly on the potential costs of war to the United States. When Larry Lindsey, economic adviser to President Bush, suggested an “upper bound” estimate of \$200 billion in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, the White House dismissed the figure as far too high. Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Defence Secretary, even said that Iraq could finance its own reconstruction. Mr Lindsey was dismissed later that year and, in January 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, said that the budget office had come up with “a number that’s something under \$50 billion”. Congress now estimates that, by the end of this year, the war will have cost ten times that – more than double Mr Lindsey’s original, derided, estimate. Mr Lindsey went on to found the Lindsey Group, an economic advisory firm based in Washington. His most recent book, published in January, is *What a President Should Know . . . but Most Learn too Late*. (*Hattie Garlick*)