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As Death Stalks Iraq, Middle-Class Exodus Begins

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**

BAGHDAD, Iraq, May 18 — Deaths run like water through the life of the Bahjat family. Four neighbors. A barber. Three grocers. Two men who ran a currency exchange shop.

But when six armed men stormed into their sons' primary school this month, shot a guard dead, and left fliers ordering it to close, Assad Bahjat knew it was time to leave.

"The main thing now is to just get out of Iraq," said Mr. Bahjat, standing in a room heaped with suitcases and bedroom furniture in eastern Baghdad.

In the latest indication of the crushing hardships weighing on the lives of Iraqis, increasing portions of the middle class seem to be doing everything they can to leave the country. In the last 10 months, the state has issued new passports to 1.85 million Iraqis, 7 percent of the population and a quarter of the country's estimated middle class.

The school system offers another clue: Since 2004, the Ministry of Education has issued 39,554 letters permitting parents to take their children's academic records abroad. The number of such letters issued in 2005 was double that in 2004, according to the director of the ministry's examination department. Iraqi officials and international organizations put the number of Iraqis in Jordan at close to a million. Syrian cities also have growing Iraqi populations.

Since the bombing of a shrine in Samarra in February touched off a sectarian rampage, crime and killing have spread further through Iraqi society, paralyzing neighborhoods and smashing families. Now, on the brink of a new, permanent government, Iraqis are expressing the darkest view of their future in three years. "We're like sheep at a slaughter farm," said a businessman, who is arranging a move to Jordan. "We are just waiting for our time." The Samarra bombing produced a new kind of sectarian violence. Gangs of Shiites in Baghdad pulled Sunni Arabs out of houses and mosques and killed them in a spree that prompted retaliatory attacks and displaced 14,500 families in three months, according to the Ministry for Migration.

Most frightening, many middle-class Iraqis say, was how little the government did to stop the violence. That failure boded ominously for the future, leaving them feeling that the government was incapable of protecting them and more darkly, that perhaps it helped in the killing. Shiite-dominated government forces have been accused of carrying out sectarian killings.

"Now I am isolated," said Monkath Abdul Razzaq, a middle-class Sunni Arab, who decided to leave after the

bombing. "I have no government. I have no protection from the government. Anyone can come to my house, take me, kill me and throw me in the trash."

Traces of the leaving are sprinkled throughout daily life. Mr. Abdul Razzaq, who will move his family to Syria next month, where he has already rented an apartment, said a fistfight broke out while he waited for five hours in a packed passport office to fill out applications for his two young sons. In Salheyah, a commercial district in central Baghdad, bus companies that specialize in Syria and Jordan say ticket sales have surged.

Karim al-Ani, the owner of one of the firms, Tiger Company, said a busy day last year used to be three buses, but in recent months it comes close to 10. "Before it was more tourists," he said. "Now we are taking everything, even furniture."

The impact can be seen in neighborhoods here. While much of the city bustles during daytime hours, the more war-torn areas, like in the south and in Ameriya, Ghazaliya, and Khadra in the west, are eerily empty at midday. On Mr. Bahjat's block in Dawra, only about 5 houses out of 40 remain occupied. Empty houses in the area are scrawled with the words "Omar Brigade," a Sunni group that kills Shiites.

Residents have been known to protest, at least on paper. In an act of helpless fury this winter, a large banner hung across a house in Dawra that read, "Do God and Islam agree that I should leave my house to live in a camp with my five children and wife?"

"Shadows," said Eileen Bahjat, Mr. Bahjat's wife, standing with her two sons and describing what is left in the neighborhood. "Shadows and killing."

In Dawra, one of the worst areas in all of Baghdad, public life has ground to a halt. Four teachers have been killed in the past 10 days in Mr. Bahjat's area alone, and the Ahmed al-Waily primary school where the Bahjat boys, ages 12 and 8, studied, may not be able to hold final exams because of the killings. And three teachers from the Batoul secondary school were shot in late April.

Trash is collected only sporadically. On April 3, insurgents shot seven garbage collectors to death near their truck, and their bodies lay in the area for eight hours before the authorities could collect them, said Naeem al-Kaabi, deputy mayor for municipal affairs in Baghdad. In all, 312 trash workers have been killed in Baghdad in the past six months.

"Sunnis, Shiites, Christians," said Mr. Bahjat, a Christian who this month moved his family to New Baghdad, an eastern suburb, to live with a relative, before leaving for Syria. "They just want to empty this place of all people."

"We must start from zero," he said. "Maybe under zero. But there is no other choice. Even with more time, the security will not improve."

It is more than just the killing that has sapped hope for the future. Iraqis have waited for five months for a

permanent government, after voting in a national election in December, and though political leaders are on the brink of announcing it, some Iraqis say the amount of haggling it took to form it makes them skeptical that it will be able to solve bigger problems.

Abd al-Kareem al-Mahamedawy, a tribal sheik from Amara in southern Iraq who fought for years against Saddam Hussein, compared the process to "giving birth to a deformed child."

As if to underscore the point, a scene of sorrow unfolded just outside Mr. Mahamedawy's gate, where an extended family gathered, full of nervous movement, and absorbed the news of the strangling death of their 13-year-old boy by kidnappers. A woman brought her hands to her head in the timeworn motion of mourning.

Even with the resolve to leave, many departing Iraqis said they consider the move only temporary and hope to return if Iraq's fractious groups are united and stem the tide of the killings.

Cars and furniture are sold, but those who can afford it, like the Abdul Razzaq family, hang on to their properties. In Khadra in western Baghdad, Nesma Abdul Razzaq, Mr. Abdul Razzaq's wife, has spent the past months carefully wrapping their photographs, vases and furniture in cloth and packing them in boxes. She spoke of the sadness of the empty rooms and the pain of having to build a new life in a strange place.

"I have a rage inside myself," Mrs. Abdul Razzaq said by telephone, as her area, since last autumn, has become unsafe for a Western reporter to visit. "I feel desperate."

"I don't want to leave Iraq. But I have to for the kids. They have seen enough."

In a quiet block in Mansour, a wealthy neighborhood in central Baghdad, where stately, gated homes are lined with pruned hedges, the Kubba family spends most of its time indoors. They have hung onto their lifestyle: three of their children study violin, flute, and ballet in an arts school outside the neighborhood despite encroaching violence.

Last fall, a foul smell led neighbors to the bodies of seven family members in a house several doors down from the Kubbas. They had been robbed. Fehed Kubba, 15, went to buy bread last year and saw a crowd near the bakery that he assumed was watching a backgammon game. When he pushed in to look, he saw a man who had just been shot to death.

But it was the increasingly sectarian nature of the violence, deeply painful to Iraqis who are proud of their intermarried heritage, that tipped the scales as Falah Kubba and his wife, Samira, considered leaving with Fehed, Roula, 13, and Heya, 12.

"The past few months convinced us," said Mr. Kubba, a businessman whose wife is Sunni. "Now they are killing by ID's. The killing around Americans was something different, but the ID's, you can't move around on the streets."

"At the beginning we said, 'Let's wait, maybe it will be better tomorrow,' " Mr. Kubba said.

"Now I know it is time to go."

Mona Mahmoud, Sahar Nageeb and Qais Mizher contributed reporting for this article.

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