Return to Baghdad, epicentre of Islam’s growing divide

The 2003 invasion toppled Saddam Hussein. Did it also trigger a new wave of sectarian violence across the Middle East?

BY SAMIA NAKHOUL
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The last time I left Baghdad I was on a stretcher.

It was April 11, 2003, four days after U.S. troops pushed into the Iraqi capital at the end of a lightning campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein. American forces had pounded Baghdad for weeks and as U.S. tanks raced into the city, I became a casualty alongside scores of Iraqis.

On the day Baghdad fell, I was waiting for an Iraqi surgeon to operate on me to remove shrapnel and bone fragments from my brain. He saved my life.

Soon after, as I was airlifted by U.S. Marines to a field hospital on the Kuwaiti border, I looked down at the American armoured columns fanned out across the city: the end to another troubled chapter in the history of the Middle East and the start of an even more unpredictable time.

Late last month, a decade after I was evacuated, I finally returned, not just to confront difficult memories, but also to seek a hint of the region’s future.

Iraq is broken, its society splintered. Sunni and Shi’ite Iraqis have resumed the gruesome sectarian violence touched off by the invasion. The U.S. occupation, sold as a way to end Saddam’s brutal dictatorship, end the threat of weapons of mass destruction, and usher in peace and democracy, instead fuelled longstanding hatreds between the two rival branches of Islam – first in Iraq and now across the region.

Over the past few years, the religion’s Sunni majority and the Shi’ite minority have clashed in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Two weeks ago in Egypt hundreds of Sunnis fired up by hard-line preachers lynched a group of four Shi’ites, including a religious leader, before dragging their bodies through the streets. In Syria, what began as an uprising against the rule of Bashar al-Assad has turned into a sectarian war, sucking in players from across the Middle East, whose borders were arbitrarily drawn by British and French colonial officials a century ago.

In retrospect, the invasion of Iraq proved a pivotal moment in the centuries-old balance of power between the two sects that emerged from a schism in Islam 1,300 years ago. Iraq is the first major Arab country to be run by Shi’ites in more than eight centuries. That has emboldened Iran, which is also run by Shi’ites (but is Persian), and startled Sunni leaders and populations.

In Baghdad the divide between the two sects is made concrete – literally. The capital’s government buildings are sealed off by blast walls to shield them from suicide bomb attacks, which now threaten to become as numerous and deadly as at the height of the sectarian blood-letting in 2006-07.

Some residents point out new trees along the airport road, blast walls removed and public spaces restored. There are small shopping malls and hospitals under construction.

To my eyes, though, Baghdad looked like a city scarred by death and despair. The sense of fear among ordinary Iraqis, exhausted and traumatised by the foreign occupation and years of fratricide, is overwhelming. Across the capital lie abandoned houses. Foreign embassies in the city are inundated with people seeking asylum or emigration visas, to follow the more than two million who fled after 2003.

On four days I drove past a refurbished public park for children, in Abu Nawas Street along the Tigris river, once the throbbing heart of the city. It was empty every day; so were the many coffee shops along the street.

Many of the luxury villas that line the Tigris have acquired new occupants as violence forced Shi’ites and Sunnis to seek sanctuary in neighbourhoods where they form a secure majority. The grand palaces and villas

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Senior Western diplomat
of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen have different occupants too, usually from the new class of Shi'ite leaders and their panoply of bodyguards and militias.

The physiognomy of the capital has changed. The Sunni face of Saddam and his minority regime has given way to the iconography of Shi'ism. Posters of Ali, the first Shi’ite imam, and his martyred sons Hussein and Abbas, line the walls along main roads. Shi’ite prayers, long silenced under Saddam, blare from loudspeakers at mosques, prayer-halls, and militia vehicles.

Iraq’s government is now headed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shi’ite Islamist from the Da’wa party, which fought a long and costly underground campaign against Saddam. It has done little if anything to reconcile Sunnis and Shi’ites.

Maliki has repeatedly responded to accusations of autocratic behaviour by saying he came to power in a democratic election rather than a military coup. Iraq needs a strong central government, he argues; giving strong authority to provinces would undermine central power.

Maliki’s media adviser Ali al-Moussawi said that the Shi’ite-Sunni divide under Saddam existed only in the power structure but not within Iraqi society. Mistakes by U.S. occupation authorities and the post-Saddam government had led to the schism, he said. Moussawi also blamed sectarian violence on the intervention of al-Qaeda-linked “terrorist organisations” which follow the most austere Sunni brand of Islam and which played the biggest role in sectarian incitement in Iraq.”

At the same time, animosity and mistrust have grown poisonously under the Maliki government, which looks to many visitors more like an umbrella for Shi’ite militias and para-militaries than a central authority for all Iraqis – Shi’ites, Sunnis and Kurds alike.

Discrimination against Sunnis in work and public life is widespread, diplomats and residents say, while the government turns a blind eye to radical Shi’ite militias. Army and police ranks, disbanded by the U.S. occupation authorities, are swelling with Shi’ites, including former militiamen, with some low-ranking positions reserved as quotas for Sunnis, the reverse of the situation under Saddam. While not all the grievances can be blamed on Maliki, who inherited some of those divisions, critics say he has not addressed the resentment they caused and sometimes even aggravated it.

Feeling like second-class citizens, Iraq’s Sunni minority – around 20 percent of the country’s 32 million people compared to 60 percent Shi’ites – has staged mass protests in Anbar province and across central Iraq.

Denied access to jobs and pensions, Sunnis deeply resent Maliki for ignoring the power-sharing agreement reached after the 2010 elections. It was meant to deliver a quasi-federal power sharing between Shi’ite, Sunni and ethnic Kurds, who run their own autonomous region in the north. Instead, Sunnis say Maliki has seized control of the top security and judiciary posts and used his police to target senior Sunni foes.

Tareq al-Hashemi, Iraq’s vice-president and most senior Sunni politician, is now a fugitive under sentence of death in what his aggrieved coreligionists believe are trumped-up charges of running death squads. But Shi’ite government officials blame Sunnis for the violence.

“Most of the Sunni Islamist leaders ... believe that fuelling armed Shi’ite-Sunni conflict is the best way to get back into power,” said one senior Shi’ite lawmaker close to Maliki.

A QUESTION OF COHESION

Grievances are not confined to Sunnis. Ethnic Kurds, who make up close to 20 percent of the population, are alienated by Maliki’s failure to work out how Iraq’s massive oil income – the country exports 2.5 million barrels a day – will be shared with the self-governing Kurdistan Regional
Government. With their own well-trained armed forces, the Kurds have come close to blows with Baghdad over disputed and oil-rich border areas such as Kirkuk.

“Maliki refused to share power. He took control of the whole security apparatus and justice ministry and made it an instrument of his policy,” said one senior Western diplomat. “The Kurds did not get what they were promised in gas and oil laws or a solution for the disputed territories.”

Another regional diplomat added: “This government is (supposed to be) built on partnership. Every component of the Iraqi people was supposed to be represented, but nothing happened. Once the government was formed, Maliki stopped listening to the views of his partners.”

Maliki’s spokesman rejects these charges and said government decisions are voted on, with the prime minister having a single vote. “No single sect, religion or ethnic group will be able to govern Iraq alone. This has become impossible.”

He said Sunnis occupy key positions, including the vice presidency and deputy prime minister’s office, but that some Sunni “political partners are trying to get more supporters around them to deepen the idea that they are marginalised, sidelined and unrepresented in power. Honestly, they are inciting people against the government in order to achieve political gains despite the fact that they are inside the government. This has deeply affected the performance of the government and the political process in Iraq.”

Even many Shi’ites are becoming impatient with the government. Despite the massive oil income – Iraq is the second largest oil producer within the OPEC cartel and the third biggest in the world – Baghdad has failed to deliver regular electricity, clean water, health and educational services. No official could explain to me why a country with such wealth has been unable to restore a steady electricity supply after 10 years.

Maliki’s apparent hunger for control extends to his treatment of rival Shi’ite parties, which he has sought either to split or to shut out of power. A few are starting to band together against him, sometimes with Sunni parties.

“With Maliki it is 50 percent a sectarian issue and the other 50 percent is because of his personality and determination to control all power,” said the regional diplomat.

The senior Western envoy recounted that the prime minister remains so secretive – perhaps as a result of years in exile and working clandestinely – that “when he leaves his office he locks it and puts the key in his pocket”.

That envoy is among several diplomats and rival politicians who speculate that Maliki, for all his accumulated powers, may have gone too far, potentially jeopardising his chances in next year’s general elections.

A REGIONAL CONFLICT

The sectarian nature of politics in Iraq has been brought into sharper focus by Iran’s decision to throw its military and political weight behind the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which is dominated by Alawites, a branch of Shi’ism.

Diplomats in Baghdad are convinced that Maliki tried to seize more control of the Central Bank last October, to allow his government to provide dollars to sanctions-hit Iran as part of an effort to shore up the government in Syria.

Maliki’s office strongly denied the allegations. “We have never, ever tried to transfer any dollars to the Iranians,” Maliki’s spokesman told Reuters. “We are committed to the international community’s decisions. These are pure lies... all talk about the issue is politically motivated. We challenge any party to present their evidence.”

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said his country is being buffeted by both sides in the civil war in Syria, putting Baghdad’s official policy of neutrality towards its neighbour at risk.
“How long we can hold (this together) really is a matter of further development,” he told Reuters. “Iraq is in the most difficult position in this regional turmoil and the conflict in Syria has become a regional conflict by all standards.”

Iraq has set up a “land corridor” from Iran across Iraq to Syria, according to the diplomats, “to channel arms and fighters.” Washington also believes flights and overland transfers from Iran to Syria via Iraq take place every day.

Iraq rejects charges it allows Tehran to ferry military equipment or fighters through its territory, and said inspections of some Syrian-bound Iranian flights showed only civilian goods onboard.

But Iraqi Shi’ite and Sunni fighters are definitely heading to Syria.

Shi’ite leaders say Iraqi Shi’ites have been galvanised by the killing of members of their sect and the desecration of Shi’ite shrines in Syria by Sunni fanatics.

“The 16 million Shi’ites are dedicated to protecting their religion. We will mobilise thousands of fighters to protect our religion and shrines,” said Hussein Abou Sijad, an Iraqi who said he has fought in Syria but was on a break in Iraq.

Shi’ite leaders in Baghdad and Tehran fear that if Assad falls, a hostile Sunni government in Syria will undermine Shi’ite influence in the Middle East.

Iraqi Sunnis, meantime, sense an opening. Reinvigorated by the Syrian conflict, al Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate is gaining strength.

In Baghdad’s Sunni districts, people complain about clandestine Shi’ite militias, dressed in black T-shirts and khaki trousers, erecting fake checkpoints, checking IDs, and arresting those they deem suspect.

This is the biggest difference between 2003 and now. Then, Iraqis displayed a mixture of fatalism, defiance and hope for a better future. Now, many Iraqis have only one hope: to exit.

This feeling is most acute among Sunnis, many of whom feel they are paying a huge price for Saddam’s massacres and oppression of Shi’ites and Kurds.

“I have a son called Omar,” said one Sunni, Ahmed, referring to a classically Sunni name. “When he was born I named him Omar, but then there was no sectarian hatred like now. His name by itself will endanger his life ... I want to emigrate to the United States. We’re unwanted guests now in Iraq. I fear for my children. They have no future here.”

Ahmed, who refused to give his full name, said his Shi’ite neighbours have long departed. “It is dangerous for them to come to our area and it is dangerous for us to visit them. We communicate by phone or on Facebook.”

Another Sunni resident, Reem, 37, fled with her husband and two children to the Syrian city of Aleppo after her father was arrested by U.S. forces on charges of helping the Sunni resistance in Iraq. Now, she’s back in Baghdad, but thinks she would still be better off in Syria.

“We had to return from Syria after the fighting (there) intensified,” she said. “I regret coming back to Iraq. The situation is even worse. Sunnis are being discriminated against and subjected to oppression more than before.”

**BIGGER WARS**

For me, Baghdad revived powerful memories that were, almost literally, seared into my brain, and I could not leave before meeting an Iraqi friend, Sau’ad, who 10 years ago stayed by my bedside, day and night, as I lay wounded and burned with fever.

She arrived with her three children: Shahd, 15, Bashar 13, and Riham 10. The years of hardship and suffering had left their marks on her face. She ticked off the members of her family who had been killed in sectarian crimes, including her own mother. Her husband and she had received threats, she said, forcing them to flee their neighbourhood.

One time she had gone shopping and returned to find her building sealed and ridden with bullets, as U.S. troops stormed apartments looking for suspects. It was hours before she knew if her two daughters at home were alive.

But Sau’ad most wanted to talk about how she and her family might leave Iraq for good. Her chances of that are faint, especially with the demands of thousands of Syrian refugees, many of them seeking political asylum or emigration visas.

I had one last visit to make before I headed for the airport: the 15th floor of the Palestine Hotel, Room 1503, where the tank shell had hit as U.S. troops advanced into the capital.

Back then, I could no longer see events from the Reuters office on the 4th floor so went to the TV office on the 15th where I could see U.S. tanks take up positions on the strategic Jumhuriya bridge, nearly 2 km (1.2 miles) from the hotel. I called our desk in Dubai to report that Baghdad was falling.
Suddenly I saw an orange glow. That was the American tank shell that ploughed into our office, killing my television colleague Taras Protsyuk and another on the floor below us, Jose Cuso, from Spain’s Tele 5. I and two other colleagues were seriously injured.

When I hesitantly walked in, the Palestine Hotel was not as I remembered it, swarming with journalists, TV crews and minders from Saddam’s information ministry. It was empty except for a handful of businessmen.

The receptionist, an old-timer, was warm and welcoming. The 15th floor was shut and due for renovation, but he offered to open it for me.

The rooms were dim and dusty. Not much had changed beyond minor repairs. The blood had been scrubbed away.

I was not sure what caused me to feel I was suffocating and gagging: the smell of rot in the dusty room, the memories of that day, or the fear that the panic attacks which afflicted me for years might take hold again.

On the plane back to Beirut, I thought about all the wars I had lived through and covered: the Lebanese civil war, the 1990-91 Gulf War, the U.S. invasion in 2003, as well as the more hopeful revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya. And now Syria, which has turned into what may become the worst of all.

I cannot make up my mind which is worse: Damascus at war or Baghdad under democracy. As a friend once told me: In the Middle East wars don’t bring peace, they bring bigger wars.

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