

## **Baghdadis Resigned to Sporadic Violence**

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They say it will continue to plague the city for some time, but won't stop them getting on with their lives.

In the six weeks since the sixth anniversary of the American-led invasion of Iraq, rising violence has turned Baghdad's mood of jittery optimism into a jaded fatalism.

The latest in a series of major bombings, mostly targeting the Shia community, killed 12 people in the Dora district on May 21. The previous day, 34 people were killed by a bomb in the Shula district.

Few believe that the capital is reverting to the days of sectarian war two or three years ago. However, most now accept that the violence which paralysed life then will in some form continue to plague the city for many years yet.

April was the bloodiest month in Iraq for more than a year, ending a period of relative calm that had raised hopes of a permanent improvement in the city's fortunes.

The month began with Baghdadis looking back on the six years that had passed since the American military entered the city on April 9, 2003.

In a street in the Ghadeer district of eastern Baghdad, Abdul Khaliq al-Shammeri watched his four-year-old grandson play with a toy gun.

"He was not born at the time of the invasion but he has grown up during the years of sectarian strife," he said. "All his favourite toys are weapons."

Shammeri, a former Iraqi army officer, said he felt pain at the thought of the past and anxiety at the future. "It is too early to be confident about what lies ahead," he said.

Under an agreement struck with the United States last year, the bulk of the foreign troops are expected to leave Iraq by the middle of 2010.

But doubts remain over the ability of the domestic security forces to take over and Iraqis disagree over whether the American presence should be prolonged. The divisions deepened after scores died in last month's bomb attacks.

In the sprawling slum of Sadr City, people implicated the US in the recent insecurity, arguing that its military needed an excuse to extend its occupation.

Abu Mahdi, a cigarette vendor in the area, said, "America is behind all the destruction in Iraq. We have to kick them out."

“The sectarian war will never end while the Americans remain. They will kill people in Sunni neighbourhoods and bomb Shia boroughs and then make each side blame the other.”

Last month, three car bombs detonated in quick succession killed 40 people in Sadr City, a stronghold of the anti-American Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Elsewhere in Baghdad, however, many felt the US military should not leave until security had improved.

“My friends and I agree that the Americans should stay for longer,” said Esraa Alaa, a college student in the Zayuna district. She said she had come to accept occasional violence as a fact of life. “I always expect a car bomb – but that does not mean I will stay at home and surrender to my fear.”

Several younger Baghdadis said they were ready to risk death in a random attack in order to sample the broader benefits of better security.

Safaa Sahib, a law student, said, “We will have bombs from time to time – and who knows, one day I may become the victim of a bombing.”

Like Esraa, he felt it was too early for the Americans to leave. “The optimism right now is fragile because our security forces are still fresh,” he said.

A young man queuing at a recently opened alcohol store in the commercial Karrada district – scene of a suicide attack in April that left dozens dead – said, “Violence will never leave us.”

He gestured to his parked car and said, “A guard from one of the [military] convoys broke the window there – but I still drive the car. You see, life goes on.”

He said he was indifferent to whether American troops remained in the country. “With or without them, Iraq is Iraq,” he said.

This April also saw the Iraqi government take full charge of paying the Sunni Arab militia groups, known as Sahwa or the Awakening, that were created by the Americans to take on the insurgents.

The fall in violence over the last year has been attributed to the willingness of the former insurgents in the Awakening ranks to be co-opted in the fight against more hardline Islamist groups such Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

However, the militia’s new paymasters, the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, have cast doubt on the loyalties of some of their leaders.

Moreover, the global fall in oil prices has led to concerns that there may not be enough revenue in the state's coffers to pay the militiamen or fulfill pledges to incorporate them into the armed forces.

"We have not have received our salaries for three months," said Husam Jasim, a teenage Awakening fighter in the Dora neighbourhood of southern Baghdad.

"The Americans are leaving us to the Iraqi government, which does not pay us," he said. "Who can blame us if we decide to rejoin al-Qaeda?"

Abdul Kareem-Khalaf, the spokesman for the interior ministry, insisted the new financial challenges would be met. "Our forces are ready to take over as soon as the Americans leave their bases," he said.

Back in Ghadeer district, Abdul Khaliq al-Shammeri said Iraqis were not yet ready to take charge, "We need more time to see if we can look after of ourselves."

As he spoke, his grandson took aim at a car number plate and missed, hitting its window instead. "I tell you, it needs more time and practice," said Shammeri.

Abeer Mohammed is an IWPR-trained journalist.

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