

## **Comment: Still Walled In**

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Whether built by Saddam or the US, walls remain the most visible reminder of Iraqis' sense of exclusion.

The old brick walls of the Saddam regime are gone. But new ones made of concrete – some put up by the United States-led Coalition, others by politicians, embassies, or commercial firms – have arisen in their place.

Under the former regime, the towering walls encircling the homes and country estates of Saddam Hussein's family symbolised how the regime sequestered the wealth of the nation.

I was particularly familiar with two sets of those walls.

I worked for a year fixing air conditioners in the al-Faris al-Arabi (Arabian Knight) Club – 10,000 hectares of lakes, forests, meadows and palaces that served as just one of Saddam's many residences.

The club was surrounded by a double wall studded with guard towers.

I was also well acquainted with the walls running all the way along the 15-kilometre highway to the airport. Because the linked linked the Republican Palace in central Baghdad with the presidential compound outside the city, it was commonly used by convoys of official cars.

It seemed that Saddam felt safe only when he erected more and more walls around him.

But those protective walls gave the neighbourhood where I live the appearance of a prison.

After the fall of Saddam's regime, many Iraqis living nearby began tearing down the walls. Many homeless families ripped them apart and used the bricks to build new houses.

Others helped bring down the walls just to get rid of any symbol of the former regime.

One of my neighbours, Karim al-Jibori, took his hammer and went out to the wall - "to rid ourselves of oppression and slavery", he said.

Unfortunately, though, we have not rid ourselves of walls altogether.

Once, Abu Nawas street alongside the Tigris was flanked by green trees and a central strip planted with flowers. Gardens, children's parks, grilled fish restaurants and nearby cafes stayed open until the early hours of the morning.

But the street was also the location of two United Nations organisations and several hotels now frequented

by foreigners and Coalition officials – all of whom are targets for insurgents. As a result, silence has descended on Abu Nawas as the recreation areas have been replaced with cement, barbed wire and parked tanks, and the trees have been uprooted to stop the resistance using them for cover.

That how many of Baghdad's streets look today.

Neighbourhoods alongside Coalition headquarters in the Green Zone or near other official buildings now fall under the shadow of tall concrete barriers.

Metal mesh stretches over bridges to prevent resistance fighters from tossing bombs onto vehicles passing below.

Entire neighbourhoods like al-Mansour that are favoured by embassies and foreign companies are crisscrossed with private roadblocks and have become no-go zones for ordinary Iraqis trying to visit friends and family.

One day you may have access to a road or neighbourhood, only to find the next day that the way has been blocked because of an attack.

Iraqis may realise that the reasons for building walls have changed. But the walls themselves are still a sign that the powers that be – which we can neither see nor argue with – can take control of any part of our city that they want.

Those trying to turn Iraqis against the Americans can point to the walls and say, "Is this all they brought us? Is this freedom?"

The regime may have changed, but walls – the most persistent and visible symbol of our lack of freedom – remain walls.

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**Focus:** [Iraq](#)

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