

Get Rich Quick the Baghdad Way

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The last days of the old regime provided many opportunities for poor Iraqis to become massively wealthy overnight.

Former taxi driver Ali Aziz got his big business break on April 11, just two days after the regime of Saddam Hussein fell.

Aziz witnessed a break-in at the central bank just down the street from his brother's shoe store, which he had come to guard against looters. When he investigated, he walked into chaos as different bands of looters fought each other for the cash.

A group known as the Tiswaheen Boys had blown the vault, and they were defending it against all comers. The bodies of their dead and wounded competitors littered the floor.

Aziz nonetheless managed to slip into the vault and grab 43 "notebooks" - a term Iraqis use for a stack of currency. Each one contained 10,000 US dollars.

Every neighbourhood in the Iraqi capital has similar stories of poor citizens suddenly gaining enormous wealth. Baghdad's wartime success stories have been dubbed "Hawasem" - roughly "turning points" or "moments of decision" - a play on the name Saddam Hussein gave to his final conflict with the United States.

Unlike some Iraqis who spent their new-found money on a lifestyle upgrade, Aziz reinvested his 430,000 dollars, buying an car showroom in the district of al-Nahda and sending money to his brother in Dubai, who now sends transport trucks, each filled with 20 cars, to the Iraqi city of Basra.

In the days after the war, preachers condemned the looting, vehicles cruised the city with loudspeakers urging people to return the goods to their local mosque, while wall graffiti declared "stealing public money is forbidden".

However, Aziz is unrepentant, and claims that as the cash came from a government which had denied him his fair share of the national wealth, the notebooks were his "by right".

Despite his newly acquired wealth, Aziz refuses to move out of his small, unpainted house on an unpaved street in the poor Baghdad suburb of Abu Tshir. "This is where I was born, and this is where I shall die," he told IWPR.

Aziz is not the only person who had a good war. Another newly wealthy Iraqi, who preferred not to give his name, once earned around two dollars a day as a construction worker.

"After the fall of Baghdad I went to the government car warehouse in [the district of] al-Haswa with my cousins and over four days we took 100 cars. We sold them within three weeks, making around 200,000 dollars," he said.

He said the work was especially easy because the keys were mostly left on the cars' front seats.

While this man has also elected to stay in his old home in a working-class area, he no longer works for a living.

His money is going on an array of satellite dishes, computers, air conditioners and BMWs – to say nothing of the parties he throws for his friends.

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