

## **Iraqi House-Swap Business**

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As more and more Shia and Sunni are displaced by the violence, a market in housing exchanges is emerging, complete with estate agents and short-term contracts.

Sundus Abdul-Fatah says she is still unsure whether she was right to leave her home in Baquba, where she and her late husband raised seven children.

A resident of the Yarmuk neighbourhood in the Sunni majority town 65 kilometres northeast of Baghdad, 30-year-old Abdul-Fatah fled with her family to the capital after Sunni insurgents killed her husband and threatened her children unless they all left.

She only had time to take a few valuables, moving to her sister's until she could find somewhere to live - a problem facing many Iraqis displaced by the escalating sectarian conflict.

"It's hard to leave a house you built and spent your life in, with all your best memories. But death is dreadful," she said through tears. "The image of my husband getting killed in front of the house pushed me to flee with my children, because I feared they will face the same fate. I had to leave everything behind."

Thousands of families have now been displaced by both Sunni and Shia insurgents. Abdul-Khaliq Zangane, a parliamentary deputy and member of the parliamentary committee on displaced and migrants, says that through November 2006, around 100,000 families had been forced from their homes.

As a result, a new phenomenon has emerged: Sunni and Shia families swapping houses. Real estate agents provide lists of available property, facilitating swap arrangements.

When Abdul-Fatah heard about the housing exchanges, she immediately started looking for a Sunni family displaced from the capital willing to take her house in Baquba. After many enquiries, she found a real estate agent in the Mashtal neighbourhood of southeastern Baghdad with a list of uprooted Sunni families looking to swap properties.

She made a deal with a family that had left the neighbourhood after receiving threats from Shia militants. According to their arrangement, the two families agreed to exchange their houses until the security situation gets better, each taking their own furniture.

Abdul-Fatah feels more secure in a Shia neighbourhood where children still go to school. "Life is not easy in Baghdad because in the beginning everything was unfamiliar for us, especially living in a house that is not yours," she said. "But I began to feel safer, since the neighbours are from the same sect as me and some of them have been displaced just like us."

"House swaps are going well," said the real estate agent who arranged the deal. "So far, we have housed more than a hundred families in Baghdad and the suburbs without any problem, and both sides are satisfied."

This agent, who declined to give his name, refused to say how he gets lists of displaced families, citing security reasons. But he says that families trust each other because there is a written agreement that guarantees both sides' rights.

Other families, doubtful of such deals or suspicious of the agents, try to find a partner directly by putting the word out among relatives and family friends.

Sabihe Mohammed, a 55-year-old pensioner from the Shaab neighbourhood, was told to leave her house by Shia militants. She immediately obeyed because her daughter-in-law's family was recently killed by militants.

"I don't know who told the militias where we live but I know that Mehdi Army gunmen roam alleys of the neighbourhood looking for Sunni families," she said. She now stays for short periods with friends or relatives, carrying only her identification and other official documents.

After a month, through the relative she was living with, she was introduced to a Shia family who had to leave the al-Jamiaa neighbourhood.

They each agreed to take the other's house for six months, but left their furniture because many people have been attacked by militants while moving household belongings.

A day after moving house, however, Mohammed was shocked when militants came round asking her who allowed her to take the house and what had happened to the Shia family that lived there.

They demanded to see her identification, and told her to obtain permission from a nearby mosque to live in the house, although later they relented and left her alone.

"I felt as if no one wants to house me in Baghdad, even in Sunni neighbourhoods," she said. Every day, there are clashes and constant mortar fire nearby, and she and her new neighbours rarely talk to each other.

"I feel I was wrong to take this house but what can I do? I had no other choice while winter and cold weather was approaching," she said.

Kurdish and Christian families are also being displaced. According to Zangane, the parliamentarian working on displacement issues, hundreds have been forced to leave the neighbourhoods of Dora, Shule, Amin and Sadr City. Many of them, he says, go off to live with relatives and friends in the more stable northern provinces of Kirkuk, Erbil and Duhok.

As an infrastructure emerges to help people relocate, many Iraqis have become suspicious that political groups are involved in the process.

Several displaced Shia families told IWPR that they have gone to the offices of the Sadr movement because, in some neighbourhoods, houses abandoned by Sunni have been turned over by the Mehdi Army

to uprooted Shia.

Similarly, in the Sunni majority neighbourhood of al-Jamiaa in western Baghdad, Sunni insurgents have offered to house the displaced relatives of local residents in homes abandoned by Shia. Otherwise, the properties are offered to homeless Sunnis living in mosques.

Prime ministerial adviser Maryam al-Rayis insists the house swaps are not part of any official policy. “Shia or Sunni political sides might be playing a role in housing displaced families, but not a major one,” said al-Rayis.

Zangane’s parliamentary committee provides tents for displaced-persons camps and helps with re-housing and other assistance, working in collaboration with local and international non-governmental organisations. But he acknowledges that the response is well below what is needed.

“There’s little proper action because of the security situation and administrative corruption. Six million dollars have been allocated to aid the displaced while the actual need is 20 million.” For the large number of families displaced so far, he says, “It is a catastrophe, like a tsunami.”

Zaineb Naji is an IWPR contributor in Baghdad.

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