

## **Militants Put Brake on Car Sales**

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Car bomb fears prompt government to ban sales of vehicles favoured by the insurgents.

Car sales in Baghdad, which spiralled after fall of Saddam, are in decline following a decree banning the purchase of vehicles made before 2000 – a move partly prompted by concern they were falling into the hands of suicide bombers

Brigadier General Hisahm Abudl-Razaq, director of the al-Rusafa traffic police directorate, said the order was issued at the beginning of this year because the older models were being used to make car bombs, as militants were more familiar with them than the newer models.

In addition, he said, the government was finding it difficult to track their legal owners under its new vehicle registration system, as some belonged to the former regime and had temporary plates, and others were stolen.

But Iraqis are reluctant to buy newer models because it is difficult to find spare parts and mechanics that know how to fix them.

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime and the opening of the Iraqi economy, more than a million cars were imported. But sales have slowed and many cars remain in stock at car dealerships.

Sattar Nasir told IWPR that once he could sell 20 cars - imported from the United Arab Emirates - a month, but that sales were now almost stagnant.

Hamdee al-Majidee, who sells imported cars at the al-Assafee auto show in al-Baya'a district, said he had imported dozens of vehicles made before 2000.

"Today I sell those cars as spare parts even though it causes losses," said al-Majidee said. "At least the losses will not be as much if I did nothing with them."

Immediately after the fall of the Saddam regime, many empty squares and parking lots were turned into makeshift vehicle dealerships. Some people even used the front yard of their homes or their outdoor gardens as a car lot.

But after the government's order, the car import rate went down.

"Many importers stopped their operations after that decision by the government and this had an influence on the quality of available cars," said Wisam Abdulla, a car show owner.

He said another problem affecting car sales was the uncertainty surrounding the legality of many car ownership documents – there is a high rate of vehicle theft here - and the use of temporary license plates for cars that once belonged to the Saddam government.

At one traffic police office in Baghdad, there was a line of people waiting to have the authenticity of their vehicle documents checked.

Police captain Safaa Ismael said any car that is sold or bought must be examined at his office to check the ownership of the vehicle.

"There are some stolen cars that belong to the former government or civilians," he said. "Even some temporary license plate documents are forged and so they are illegally registered."

Nasir Kadhim is an IWPR trainee in Baghdad.

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