



DISPATCH FROM BAGHDAD

With Each Mile, the Divisions Deepen

By Borzou Daragahi, Times Staff Writer
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BAGHDAD — In quiet moments, especially once the sunlight has begun to fade, a passerby can almost imagine the former glory of Karadat Mariam, once Baghdad's most upscale neighborhood. Palm trees shade broad avenues. Hedge groves shield stately villas. Young men and women in gym shorts jog along sidewalks.

But such moments pass quickly. A low-flying Black Hawk helicopter roars overhead or a convoy of Humvees pushes through the 15-foot blast walls and tangles of barbed wire that surround you here in the Green Zone, the country's fortress-like administrative center.



Checkpoint

(Saad Khalaf / LAT)

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Within this surreal landscape, in mansions once occupied by former President Saddam Hussein and his deputies, U.S. officials and Iraqi politicians desperately try to build a new Iraq, making heartfelt speeches and discussing law and governance as if this were a coherent country.

But step outside, across the 14th of July Bridge, through Baghdad's neighborhoods to the outskirts and beyond, through provincial farmlands and out to Iraq's borders of mountain and desert, and another universe opens.

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Cold War-like checkpoints and concrete barriers, bursts of machine-gun fire and close encounters with mysterious bands of armed men punctuate the lives of millions of ordinary Iraqis. House by house, neighborhood by neighborhood, province by province — a tour of the streets and roads of Iraq is lined with guideposts pointing to the country's potential disintegration.

Although Iraq has seen a flowering of long-suppressed Shiite faith, a surge in religious hatred has sharpened the rift between the two main Muslim sects in key cities and rural enclaves. Iraqis are now more free to speak their minds and organize politically, but ethnic rivalries among Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens in the north fester, even as the war between U.S.-led forces and Sunni-dominated guerrillas in the west continues.

Three years after the military invasion to oust Hussein, the country's landscape betrays its fault lines, like land heaved up by shifting tectonic plates.

The streets and sidewalks directly outside the Green Zone are magnets for car bombs and roadside explosives targeting the authorities who venture out. Despite Baghdad's dangers, it's safer to melt into the disorder of the densely packed neighborhoods of the city.

The smell of burning kebabs and raw sewage engulf the air of the Karada district as you head north from the city center. Grizzled middle-age merchants emerge from shops, working prayer beads and greeting one another. Women in head scarves, daughters in hand, browse clothing shops. Karada is among the city's safest districts, the domain of moderate middle-class Shiite Muslims who are the great winners of the invasion three years ago. Yet even here, perils persist. Shrapnel from car bombs scars mosques and office buildings. Shopkeepers place roadblocks in front of their stores to prevent customers from parking, lest a vehicle explode. The roads are dominated by vehicle convoys of mysterious armed men. Some wear makeshift camouflage uniforms and drive vehicles with official-looking insignias.

Others, wielding guns and wearing ski masks, drive around without any indication of whether they represent the forces of law and order, the private militia of a political or religious leader or some more sinister group. They drive pickup trucks with mounted machine guns. They spray gunfire over vehicles to clear traffic. They wheel the nozzles of their AK-47s toward anyone who gets too close.

Beyond the relatively safe middle-class central neighborhoods, violent divisions are tearing the country apart. Neighborhoods such as Dora, Sadiya and Ghazaliya, once quiet districts of single-family homes on the city's western and southern peripheries where children could play ball in the streets and walk to and from school without fear, have become battlegrounds between Shiites and Sunnis.

Even inside Iraq's spotless new schoolhouses, the freshly painted and refurbished pride of U.S. reconstruction efforts, Shiite children have begun to sit on one side of the class, Sunni children on the other.

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"My daughter came home and asked me, 'Daddy, what sect do we belong to?' " said Shafiq Mahdi Jabouri, a Baghdad educator who belongs to a tribe with both Shiite and Sunni branches. "I was shocked. Sect used to be a joke in Iraq. Now it's a dividing line."

Shiite families living in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods have been threatened. Letters and leaflets are distributed demanding they get out. Chilling graffiti is scrawled on houses. Families hurriedly sell their homes at bargain prices and move elsewhere.

Sunnis living in Shiite neighborhoods have been "disappeared" — abducted in the dead of night from their homes by uniformed men purporting to belong to the security forces. Their bullet-ridden bodies turn up several days later, discovered by schoolchildren playing near railroad tracks or empty lots, or never at all.

Militias and neighborhood watch groups are armed with the AK-47s that are as common in Iraqi households as ashtrays. Mosque preachers call neighbors to arms with frantic cries of "God is great!"

The detritus of three years of war appear on the city's outskirts as the urban sprawl peters out into countryside. Burnt husks of trucks and skeletal remains of car bombs litter the road. Buildings are pockmarked with gunfire. Electrical towers felled by saboteurs lie ailing on the farmland.

Sunni-led insurgents, adopting a classic guerrilla strategy, have turned all critical highways leading in and out of the capital into kill zones, in effect cutting off the central government's ability to apply its authority on the provinces.

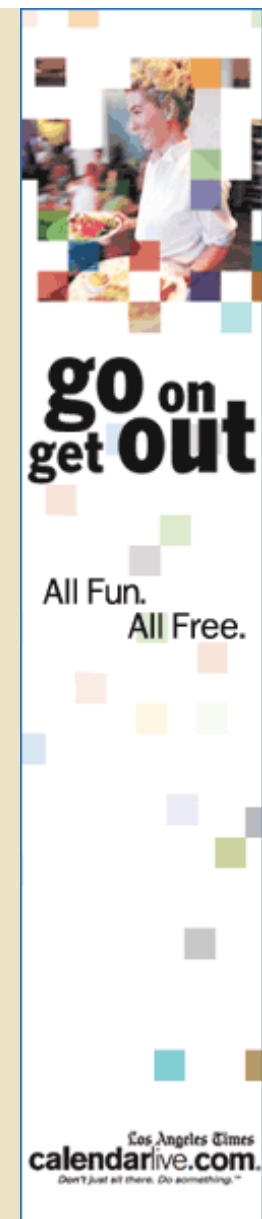
Travelers almost always encounter some roadside horror: Emergency workers load police officers bloodied in a bomb attack. A blown-up oil pipeline spouts an apocalyptic torrent of fire hundreds of feet into the sky. Masked gunmen stage impromptu checkpoints demanding identification cards, pulling out those from the wrong tribe or named after a Shiite imam and shooting them.

To the west along the highways to Syria and Jordan, the insurgency in Al Anbar province continues to rage, a conflict between Sunni Arab fighters and Americans that has turned lively riverside cities into battle-scarred ghost towns. Sparsely populated Al Anbar has claimed more than a third of the 2,300 U.S. military personnel who've died in Iraq.

In towns such as Ramadi, the tension is palpable. U.S. Marine snipers occupy rooftop positions keeping "eyes" on alleyways and streets. Men wearing black ski masks appear behind the broken windows of abandoned buildings across the streets, firing their AK-47s at the troops. From the mosques, clerics routinely call for jihad against the Americans.

But Iraq's next front may be unfolding elsewhere, away from the gaze of authorities, just beyond Baghdad's outskirts, in tiny hamlets crisscrossed by collapsing, disease-infested agricultural canals and dirt roads.

Here, in a large crescent of farmland north, east and south of the capital, insurgent violence aimed at security forces and Americans has melded with centuries-old tensions between Shiite and Sunni.



Hussein and previous Sunni rulers back to the Ottoman era encouraged Sunni tribesmen loyal to the central government to settle among Shiites, forming a protective barrier against potential invaders from Shiite-dominated Iran. As a result, sets of Sunni households lie next to sets of Shiite households. These mixed areas, where sectarian tensions are overlain with indecipherable layers of tribal codes and rivalries, have slowly become a powder keg.

"We are even afraid of each other," said Samir Abdel Qadir, a 37-year-old Sunni merchant from Baqubah.

Caches of bodies turn up. Bombs detonate beside makeshift mosques and markets in dirt-poor villages. This year, in one particularly gruesome attack, a suicide bomber targeted a funeral near Baqubah, killing as many as 36 people. In tiny country hamlets along dirt roads, houses have emptied, and occasionally caravans of Shiite families can be seen heading to Shiite areas out of fear for their lives.

"There was never any division between Sunnis or Shiites," said Kamil Naji, a 42-year-old from Taji. "Now, it's becoming a way of life."

Along marshy river deltas of the country's long-repressed Shiite south, a new cultural identity is being born. More so than any other part of the country, the south has been radically transformed.

The very landscape, the sights and sounds have changed. In the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, home to important Shiite places of learning, the number of religious students increased tenfold, as young clerics and scholars from Iran, South Asia, Lebanon and elsewhere come to study.

Where portraits of the mustachioed dictator once hung, now are those of turbaned and bearded ayatollahs. Numerous satellite channels have sprung up. Music praising the imams rings out from the markets.

U.S. officials have hailed the Shiite resurgence as a blossoming of a religion suppressed under Hussein. Shiites practice rituals that were long banned or discouraged, and through their raucous blend of religious ceremony and activism inject vitality into an ossified political culture.

But the Shiites' rise has created other problems. Clerics have steered the region away from Baghdad's authority. Cities such as Amarah, Diwaniya, Kut and Nasiriya have become oriented toward Iran and Persian Gulf states rather than to Iraq's traditional allies.

Organized Shiite militiamen quickly took over in the security vacuum after the collapse of the Hussein's regime, and they've never really given up power.

"Many new faces appear who are worse than Saddam," said Kamil Salman, 32, who owns a publishing house in Najaf. "Saddam wanted to stay forever. The recent ones know they will go soon, which makes them worse and more greedy than Saddam."

An airport is being built in Najaf, presumably to bring pilgrims to Karbala and Najaf, but also among the first steps in the creation of a southern oil-rich federal region under the banner of

Shiite Islam.

Shiites bring their dead to the ancient cemetery in Najaf, which by some estimates has grown 40% larger since the war began, pushing out two square miles into the desert, filled mostly with thousands of civilians killed by car bombs and bullets. With each death grows the desire to break away from lack of electricity, poor medical care and corruption that have taken hold under the post-Hussein government.

Stretching along the bountiful foothills of the Zagros Mountains in the north, Kurdistan looms literally and figuratively above Iraq. Even before the war the great outdoor bazaars of Sulaymaniya and Irbil buzzed with activity. Its universities sparkled with intellectual life. Its press rumbled with democratic yearning. And its restless public increasingly demanded a full separation from Iraq.

The war unleashed the region's economic potential. Construction cranes have sprouted. Two new airports send passengers across Iraq and abroad.

But the war also encouraged Kurds' separatist stirrings; a referendum conducted in January 2005 showed that 99% of Kurds don't identify with Iraq. As far as the rest of country is concerned, Kurdish ambition is focused primarily on one thing: oil-rich Kirkuk, which is claimed by Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens as well as a sizable Christian minority.

Some have pointed to the scattered boasts of the Kurds' armed militiamen as evidence of the Kurdish designs on the city. But it is highly unlikely that the international community, which has so long supported the Kurdish cause, would tolerate an outright military lunge for Kirkuk.

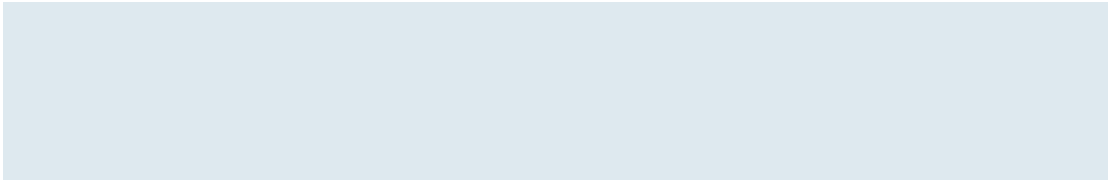
In reality, the annexation has already quietly begun.

The Kurds dominate the police force, the city council. They clean the streets. They direct traffic. By some measures, tens of thousands of Kurds displaced under the previous regime have begun swarming the city and its surrounding villages, and little by little they've pushed Arabs and Turkmens out.

"Everything is divided among four nations," said Mohammad Farid, a 24-year-old recent university graduate.

*

Times staff writers Louise Roug and Raheem Salman, special correspondent Asmaa Waguih and special correspondents in Baqubah, Basra, Kirkuk, Najaf and Taji contributed to this report.



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