The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY

May 13, 2007

The Flight From Iraq

By NIR ROSEN

I. Roads to Damascus

At a meeting in mid-April in Geneva, held by António Guterres, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, the numbers presented confirmed what had long been suspected: the collapse of Iraq had created a refugee crisis, and that crisis was threatening to precipitate the collapse of the region. The numbers dwarfed anything that the Middle East had seen since the dislocations brought on by the establishment of Israel in 1948. In Syria, there were estimated to be 1.2 million Iraqi refugees. There were another 750,000 in Jordan, 100,000 in Egypt, 54,000 in Iran, 40,000 in Lebanon and 10,000 in Turkey. The overall estimate for the number of Iraqis who had fled Iraq was put at two million by Guterres. The number of displaced Iraqis still inside Iraq's borders was given as 1.9 million. This would mean about 15 percent of Iraqis have left their homes.

Most of this movement has occurred in the last two years. An outflow began after the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003. But since the upsurge of violence following the bombing of a Shiite holy site in Samarra 14 months ago, the flight has been large and constant. It now reaches a rate of up to 50,000 people per month.

Many of Iraq's neighbors initially welcomed the refugees. These countries were motivated by self-interest as well as by generosity. Certain political refugees, like Baathist officials, who were among the first to leave Iraq, had a political use in negotiations with the American-led occupation and the Iraqi government that succeeded it. And the well-to-do early refugees — those who could meet Jordan's requirement of $100,000 in the bank to qualify for a residency permit, for example — brought much-needed capital. But the numbers and the welcome became unsustainable: Jordan and Egypt have made it very difficult for Iraqis to enter, and even Syria, with a long history of welcoming refugees, has passed regulations, like restrictions on the purchase of property and on access to free health care, that are intended to ensure that Iraqi refugees are only temporary residents. Iraq's neighbors take the position that Iraqi refugees are not in fact refugees at all, because refugee status enables refugees to make claims on the host country. Iraq's government has itself taken roughly the same position, because it cannot afford to acquiesce in the loss of its population or acknowledge its own failure to provide security. The United States and Great Britain, as the principal authors of the current war, have been urged by rights activists to shoulder responsibility for the war's refugees — a responsibility they have so far evaded. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the principal international body for refugee issues, succeeded in finding new homes for just 404 refugees in the first nine months of 2006 and says it hopes to resettle 20,000 by the end of 2007. That would be 1 percent of the current total. The agency's fund-raising mark for 2007 is $60 million — for humanitarian relief rather than resettlement — of which it has so far raised only half. As with the war itself, the situation of the war's refugees is at once dire and full of dangers for the region and the world — and no one seems to know how to resolve it.

From the Iraqi perspective, the greatest loss has been the flight of the professional class, the people whose resources and skills might once have combined to build a post-Saddam Iraq. It seems, however, that precisely because they are critical to rebuilding Iraq and less prone to sectarianism and violence, professionals are most vulnerable to those forces that are tearing Iraq apart. Many of them are now in Syria. An hour's drive from Damascus, in Qudsiya, there has grown up an Iraqi neighborhood complete with a Baghdad Barbershop and an Iraq Travel Agency. Off one alley, in January, I entered a hastily constructed apartment building, rough and unfinished, the concrete and cinder blocks slapped together. The carved wooden doors to each apartment were in stark contrast to the grim, unpainted hallways. Inside one such apartment lived a doctor named Lujai — she refused to give her family name — and her five children. Omar, at 15, was the oldest; the youngest was just 2. A family-medicine specialist, Lujai arrived in Qudsiya last September from Baghdad, where she had her own clinic and her husband, Adil, was a thoracic surgeon and a professor at the medical college. They were the same age and from the same town (Ana, in Anbar Province), and they had been married for 15 years when Adil was murdered.

Right after the invasion of Iraq, Lujai told me, Shiite clerics took over many of Baghdad's hospitals but did not know how to manage them. "They were sectarian from the beginning," she said, "firing Sunnis, saying they were Baathists. In 2004 the problems started. They wanted to separate Sunnis. The Ministry of Health was given to the Sadr movement" — that is, to the Shiite faction loyal to Moktada al-Sadr. Following the 2005 elections that brought Islamist Shiites to power, Lujai said, the Sadrists initiated what they called a "campaign to remove the Saddamists." The minister of health and his turbaned advisers saw to it that in hospitals and health centers the walls were covered with posters of Shiite clerics like Sadr, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Shiite religious songs could often be heard in the halls. In June of last year, Ali al-Mahdawi, a Sunni who had managed the Diyala Province's health department, disappeared, along with his bodyguards, at the ministry of health. (In February, the American military raided the ministry and arrested the deputy health minister, saying he was tied to the murder of Mahdawi.) Lujai told me that Sunni patients were often accused by Sadrist officials of being terrorists. After the doctors treated them, the special police from the Ministry of the Interior would arrest the Sunni patients. Their corpses would later be found in the Baghdad morgue. "This happened tens of times," she said, to "anybody who came with bullet wounds and wasn't Shiite."

On Sept. 2, 2006, Lujai's husband went to work and prepared for the first of three operations scheduled for the day. At the end of his shift a patient came in unexpectedly; no other doctor was available, so Adil stayed to treat him. Adil was driving home when his way was blocked by four cars. Armed men surrounded him and dragged him from his car, taking him to Sadr City. Five hours later, his dead body was found on the street.

As she told me this story, Lujai began to cry, and her confused young children looked at her silently. She had asked the Iraqi police to investigate her husband's murder and was told: "He is a doctor, he has a degree and he is a Sunni, so he couldn't stay in Iraq. That's why he was killed." Two weeks later she received a letter ordering her to leave her Palestine Street neighborhood.

On Sept. 24 she and her children fled with her brother Abu Shama, his wife and their four children. They gave away or sold what they could and paid $600 for the ride in the S.U.V. that carried them to Syria. Because of what happened to her husband, she said, as many as 20 other doctors also fled.

In Qudsiya, Lujai and her brother pay $500 a month in rent for the three-bedroom apartment they share.

The children attend local schools free, but Iraqis are not permitted to work in Syria, so they depend on relatives and savings for their survival. Twenty-five members of their family have fled to Syria. Four days before I visited them they heard that a Sunni doctor they knew had been killed in Baghdad's Kadhimiya district, where he worked. He was married to a Shiite woman. "He was a pediatric specialist," Lujai told me. "We needed him."

In some ways, despite the ethnic and religious motives of most of the Iraqi factions, the Iraqi civil war resembles internal conflicts in revolutionary China or Cambodia: there is a cleansing of the intelligentsia and of anyone else who stands out from the mass. The small Iraqi minorities — Christians and such sects as the Mandeans — are mostly gone. The intellectuals and artists are gone. Abu Ziyad, for example, is a 60-year-old artist, a Christian, who used to have his own gallery in Baghdad's Karrada district. Soon after the Americans arrived in 2003, he began to be threatened for reproducing the human image, which is forbidden by Islamic law. His gallery was burned in August 2004, and the violence seemed to be growing — and growing out of control. Neighbors were killed, houses exploded, with little evident pattern. "You go shopping in Iraq and an explosion happens, and you see a man dead on his steering wheel," Abu Ziyad told me when I met him and his wife in January in Damascus. "We got headaches from the smell of blood and explosions in Iraq," his wife added. In October 2004 their house was set on fire as they slept, and they escaped only by climbing from their roof to their neighbor's. On the front wall of their house someone had scrawled, "Collaborators."

II. A Portable War

Unlike Damascus, Cairo seems to have been able to assimilate Iraqi refugees without much fuss. It is a vastly bigger city, and the number of Iraqi refugees there is much smaller. And Iraqis are familiar with the Egyptian dialect from the many popular soap operas and films produced there. Cairo is not unlike Baghdad, in some ways, and many of the refugees in Egypt are Baghdadis. They also tend to be Sunni — and the Egyptian government has made anti-Shiite statements in the past. In mid-April, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Misriyun cited security sources as saying that Egypt was withholding visas from Iraqis for fear of Shiite proselytizing. This may have been merely rationalization, but it does indicate the understandable fear that Iraqi refugees will bring their sectarian war with them.

I met Muhammad Abu Rawan in February at the small Internet cafe he runs in Cairo's Medinat Nasr district, near the restaurant Baghdad Nights. Off the busy main street, tall, leafy trees shade quiet neighborhoods. Muhammad was an air-conditioner repairman in Baghdad until he and his wife, Lubna, both Sunnis, fled last year. Lubna lost her father in 2004 when the Americans killed him; he was driving away from a roadblock and somehow aroused suspicion. "He did not have time to close his eyes before he died," Lubna told me, because there were so many shots in his body. She showed me pictures of his bullet-riddled car, with holes in every side. We were talking in their sparse apartment. Flower patterns decorated the sofas and carpets, while on the walls were pictures of a forest, a beach and a lake.

In Baghdad, Muhammad lived in Dora, a Sunni district — which meant that the Shiites there were targets. When Muhammad picked up a wounded Shiite from the street and took him to the hospital, he said, he found himself targeted by the Sunni militiamen who shot the man. They told him they would have killed him were he not himself a Sunni; as it was, he was forced to move out of Dora. Muhammad's sister was married to a Shiite man, he told me, and they had many friends and relatives who were Shiites. The company that Muhammad and Lubna worked for was owned by a Sunni man, with branches in Baghdad and Basra. In

Basra, they told me, 20 members of the company were kidnapped. The 7 Shiites were released, and the 13 Sunni employees were murdered. In Baghdad, however, the violence went the other way: the company's Shiite lawyer was killed by Sunni militiamen. The owner himself belonged to the al-Omar family, a name that gave him away as Sunni, and thus his company was known as a "Sunni company." He fled Basra to Baghdad because of threats; after more threats, he fled to the United Arab Emirates.

Now in Cairo, Muhammad and Lubna said, they have Shiite neighbors who were expelled from a Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad. I asked if sectarian problems followed them to Egypt. "On the contrary," Muhammad said, "we are happy to see any Iraqi so we can speak our dialect." Lubna added that "the Iraqis who come here are all tired."

Not all of them are tired of sectarian conflict, though, and the Egyptians themselves may just be getting started. Muhammad's co-worker in the Internet cafe is a Shiite named Haidar. Hatred of Shiites is increasing throughout the region, and Haidar does not feel fully comfortable in Cairo. "On the street and in cabs, people ask if I am Sunni or Shiite," he told me. "They say we are infidels." One day at the supermarket, the grocer heard Haidar's Iraqi dialect and told him, "Your Shiites are infidels."

There are Iraqis in Cairo who feel roughly the same way. In the courtyard of a hastily constructed apartment complex on the airport road, I found a group of Sunnis sitting outside their small shops. Ghaith, an 18-year-old from Baghdad's western Sunni stronghold of Amriya — long since cleansed of its Shiites — had opened a small grocery. He pointed across the courtyard to his 12-year-old brother playing soccer with other boys and told me he had been kidnapped in Baghdad and held for one week. The kidnappers demanded six million Iraqi dinars. Sitting in the grocery store was Dhafer, a round 35-year-old man with a sharp nose. Originally from Baghdad's Ghazaliya district, he had been threatened by Shiite neighbors. He was given 48 hours to leave. "I brought my relatives for my protection, and weapons, and they escorted us out," he told me.

Next door to the grocery shop was a hair salon owned by a Sunni couple also from Ghazaliya. It was decorated pink and red for Valentine's Day. Its owner, Ghada, taught herself hairdressing after she arrived in Cairo with her husband, Abu Omar, and their three children. Abu Omar was a former colonel in the Iraqi Army who retired in 1999. "After the American invasion, I started to feel the Iranian influence," Abu Omar said. "Before, there were no problems between Sunnis and Shiites, but then on television we started hearing people talking about Sunnis or Shiites." Like many former military officers, Abu Omar had been active in the Iraqi resistance. "As long as they are attacking the occupiers or those cooperating with the occupiers," he said, the Iraqi resistance was honorable.

Ghada told me that Iraq's sectarianism followed them to Cairo, causing problems in their children's school. Iraqi Shiite boys beat their son Omar, she said. "He hates Shiites so much," she told me, adding that many fights occurred between Sunni and Shiite Iraqi children. Ghada told me that Egyptian customers cried with her and consoled her after Saddam's execution, and they had recited a prayer together. "The ones that Saddam killed," Ghada said, meaning Shiites, "I would go back and kill more of them. I hate Shiites."

III. The New Normal

Of the main destination countries, Syria is the friendliest for Shiites. Egypt may be ill disposed toward

Shiites, but Jordan is downright hostile. Syria is a different story, and Damascus in particular has a variety of Iraqis seemingly ready to live together. Ali Hamid, a Sunni barber from Baghdad's Shiite district of Shaab, has been working in the same Damascus shop since 2003. He explained that many barbers fled Iraq to Syria because Islamist radicals, who believe beards should be left to grow and Western-style haircuts avoided, had forced them to close their shops. "In Iraq there is a sectarian war," he told me. "Here, we all get along." He attributed this to the vigilant Syrian authorities: "Praise God, thanks to the Syrian government we have no problems. If anything happens, they deal with it when it happens. As shop owners we are not allowed to talk about sectarianism. Word spread to all business owners: You live in a different country, not your country; you have to respect their rules."

Even Moktada al-Sadr's representative in Syria, Sheik Raed al-Kadhimi, was espousing antisectarianism, even though Sadr's Mahdi Army has systematically targeted Sunnis. "All Iraqis are united and well integrated," he told me when I visited his offices in the Sayeda Zeinab neighborhood one morning. "I can say that they are like one body against the common enemy. Also I should say that Iraqis do not kill Iraqis. It is not possible. It is only those who come into the country, as well as takfiris" — radical Sunnis who anathematize Shiites as infidels — "and former Baathists who operate under the umbrella of the Americans. You see how they kill Iraqis through torture and suicide bombings." Under such conditions, he said, it was natural that "people resort to a safe place and they come to Syria."

Kadhimi's office was in an Iraqi neighborhood that has sprung up in southern Damascus around the shrine of Zeinab, granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the daughter of Imam Ali, the fourth caliph. Her brother Hussein was killed at Karbala. For Shiite Muslims, this moment, when the family of Ali was betrayed, is one of the defining moments of their history. A vast commercial district has grown around the shrine. It has become home to so many Iraqis that, walking through its streets, I felt transported back to Baghdad, where I had spent so much time reporting — back to Kadhimiya, the Shiite commercial district built around the shrine to Imam Kadhim. The Damascus streets bustled with men speaking Arabic in the Iraqi dialect, overflowing indifferently onto the road nicknamed Iraqi Street. The walls were covered with political posters from Iraqi elections past. There was a mobile-phone shop named after the Euphrates River, and there were barbershops called Karbala and Son of Iraq.

On the eve of the 10th of Muharram — the month on the Muslim calendar when the martyrdom of Hussein at the hands of the caliph Yazid's forces is commemorated — a procession organized by Sheik Kadhimi's office gathered. Dressed in black, the men were led by youths wielding immense wooden flagpoles with colored flags that they struggled to wave from side to side. Others carried framed pictures of Moktada al-Sadr and his father. It was a latmiya procession, in which the men chanted songs lamenting Hussein's martyrdom and vowing fealty to him. "We have chosen our destiny," they sang, "we are the sons of Sadr, soldiers for the Mahdi." The thousands of onlookers waited until dawn for the culmination of the events. At 4 in the morning, hundreds of men dressed in white robes met in tents. They carried short swords, which they cleaned in buckets of soap. After performing the dawn prayer they lined up, and led by trumpeters and drummers, they began a march through the alleys toward the shrine of Zeinab. They chanted: "Haidar! Haidar!" — another name for Ali, father of Hussein and Zeinab. The men and boys swung their swords rhythmically, hitting their foreheads and drawing blood, which soon drenched their faces and robes. As onlookers filmed the scene on their camera phones and the sun rose above them, the men danced in bloody ecstasy until they reached the shrine and the event ended suddenly, with people returning to their homes or

hotel rooms. In Iraq's shrine cities, I had seen such religious marches end in explosions and armed attacks. Here in Syria, the commemoration ended with the beginning of another unremarkable day. This must be what Iraqi normality is like, and now it can only happen outside Iraq.

IV. The Double Refugees

To become a refugee in the Middle East is in some ways to become like a Palestinian. Their lives are the essence of statelessness. And to be an Iraqi Palestinian, it seems, is to be doubly cursed. In a no-man's land along the Iraqi and Syrian border lie a desolate moonscape stretching several miles and, on one slab of wind-blown dirt, a collection of neatly ordered tents. When I visited in February, about 350 Iraqi Palestinians were marooned here, refugees for a second time. Most of Iraq's Palestinians had come from three villages — Ijzim, Jaba' and Ein Ghazal, together known as the Little Triangle, which were near Haifa in northern Palestine. Other Iraqi Palestinians came from the nearby village of Tira, still others from Ayn Hawd. All of these villages had been forcibly emptied of Palestinians in 1948 by the Israel Defense Forces. Iraqi troops, fighting as part of a small contingent of Arab volunteers who had come to defend the Palestinians, bused them to Iraq. As many as 5,000 refugees were granted asylum in Iraq by 1949, and they formed the core of Iraq's Palestinian population. A second refugee group had lived in Kuwait from the time of their expulsion from Palestine, then been evicted by Kuwait into Iraq after the 1991 gulf war. (Many of Kuwait's Palestinians were accused of sympathizing with Saddam's takeover of Kuwait.) By 2003, there were as many as 34,000 Palestinians in Iraq.

Under Saddam Hussein, the Palestinians, who are mostly Sunni, received subsidized housing and, according to Shiite opinion, preferential treatment. Immediately following the American invasion and occupation, the Palestinians were among the first victims of reprisals by the inchoate Shiite militias. They were expelled from their homes and often ended up in tent communities. Palestinians are now obliged to register in Baghdad once a month, but merely to approach the (Shiite-dominated) Ministry of the Interior to register is to risk kidnapping, torture and murder. So most Iraqi Palestinians are essentially illegal now in Iraq. Yet without any papers it is also extremely difficult to leave. One Iraqi diplomat I spoke to in Cairo denied that Palestinians were being singled out, insisting that they lived better than most Iraqis. He accused them of supporting Al Qaeda and building car bombs in their neighborhoods. The Syrians and Jordanians also refuse to take them in. "They want to make a point that the solution for Palestinians is not settlement in the region," a United Nations official explained to me.

In the no-man's land, near the Syrian entry point of Tanf, there were 93 women, 135 children and about 125 men. One tent said "Al Tanf Mosque," and four other tents made up a school for 75 children. This was controversial among some of the camp residents because they feared it would make the camp more permanent. One tent is a bakery, another a grocery store. Whatever point Syria is making about Palestine and Israel, it is at the expense of these few desperate refugees and the 500 more stranded a bit farther east.

Night fell quickly on the frigid camp, and in one dark tent, lighted by a small lantern, I met several men who told me their stories, their voices barely audible above the wind. They insisted that I use only their first names. Hussein, a round young man with a melancholy baby face and wearing a tan Adidas track suit, had lived with his Iraqi wife and daughter in Baghdad's Hurriya district, a Shiite militia stronghold, where he worked as a taxi driver. (His family originated in Ayn Hawd, in Palestine.) "In Iraq before the war we lived without problems," he told me. "The problems started in Iraq as the American occupation began." Hussein

was first threatened in 2005, when, he said, a letter containing a bullet and two drops of blood was sent to his house. “If you do not leave Iraq, this will be your fate,” the letter read. A second death threat was signed by the Badr Brigade, a Shiite militia sponsored by Iran and belonging to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. “They threatened me, telling me to leave because I am a Palestinian,” he said. “They think that because we are Palestinians the whole world helps us. But that’s not true. If we had an easy life, I wouldn’t be working as a taxi driver and working in restaurants sometimes. They blew up my car. Then they blew up my house.”

Two of Hussein’s uncles were kidnapped. The kidnappers, Hussein told me, had demanded $100,000 in ransom, but Hussein’s family did not have the money. The next day they received a phone call informing them that his uncles’ bodies were in the morgue. Hussein’s uncles had been tortured and mutilated, drills driven through their bodies — a signature practice of Iraq’s Shiite militias — and their genitals cut off. “We couldn’t even have a funeral because they said if you do it, we will blow you up,” Hussein said. “We had to bury them at night.” Hussein’s family was also given a CD containing a film of the murders. In March of last year, Hussein said, he was in his house when he heard attackers. With his wife and daughter he escaped to their roof and, from there, to a neighbor’s roof. The attackers then blew up his house. Two months later, Hussein and his family tried to flee to Syria after hearing rumors that it was accepting Palestinians. Stranded between the two borders, his wife’s family — she was not Palestinian — helped her divorce him and return to Baghdad.

Ayman, shrouded by darkness in a corner of the tent, still speaks in the Palestinian dialect he got from his family, which was expelled from Palestine when his father was 5 years old. “My grandfather was my age when he was expelled,” he said. “Now, it wasn’t Jews who expelled us, it was Arabs.” Shiite militiamen, he said, attacked his house and killed his mother and brother. Ayman fled with his wife and two children.

Yasser, a tired-looking young man with a kaffiyeh wrapped around his neck, told me he was arrested, along with his 73-year-old father, by the Iraqi National Guard. “They said, ‘You are a Palestinian terrorist’ and ‘You foreign Arabs, you destroyed us,’ ” Yasser told me. He and his father were imprisoned for 16 days and tortured with electricity. Yasser told me his nails were torn out. Then, he said, his father was electrocuted to death in front of him. “We paid to get my father’s body,” he said as he wept in the tent, “but they gave me the wrong body.” The Iraqi National Guardsmen gave him 24 hours to leave Iraq. The other men stared down silently as he sobbed. “All I want to know is where my father’s body is.”

The Tanf camp provides scant protection, and some men who went close to the Iraqi border to purchase vegetables from locals were captured by the Iraqi National Guard. “They think we are Saddamists,” one man told me. A baby has been born in Tanf and given the name Khiyam — “Tents.” “We went backward 60 years,” another resident of the camp told me. “We were born in tents. And our children will be the same.”

V. Warriors and Proxy Warriors

As in the Palestinian case, solidarity with Iraqi refugees runs up against the competitive self-interests of states. The governments that are sheltering Iraqi refugees are extracting whatever political utility they can from their guests, mainly by using them as pawns in the game of Iraqi power. Nearly every Iraqi political movement has representation in Syria. Syria accepted a variety of Iraqi dissidents during the Saddam years: persecuted leftists from the Baath Party; Muslim party leaders like Iraq’s current prime minister, Nuri

Kamal al-Maliki; and even Kurdish independence parties. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the party of Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, was started in a Damascus restaurant. Today, the Syrians are playing a complex game. They recognize the Iraqi government, but they also house members of Saddam's regime, of its security forces and of the Baath Party. They receive Shiite leaders like Moktada al-Sadr, and they meet with radical Sunnis close to the armed resistance, like Harith al-Dhari of the Muslim Scholars Association.

Syria sees the Iraqi civil war through the prism of Lebanon. Its policy assumes Damascus can manage best by maintaining contacts with every side and establishing client relationships when they seem necessary. But there are dangerous contradictions in Syrian policy. While majority Sunni, Syria is led by Alawites (an offshoot of Shiism) and is closely allied with Iran, which, in the eyes of Sunnis in Iraq and elsewhere, sponsors the very militias that persecute Iraq's Sunnis — who are often related to Syria's own Sunnis, especially in the border region. "The Syrian government is very capable of managing those issues," a Western diplomat assured me. Yet sectarianism is running high, and Syria, once a significant exporter of fighters to Iraq, may face its own blowback.

"The temptation is there," a top official at the U.N. refugee agency told me, referring to the possibility of bringing the refugees into the civil war. "The money from Bin Laden is there. If the international community doesn't help, then the other groups will, and all hell will break loose. Iraqis are sitting in Syria and Jordan where the Baathists and Wahhabis are strongest. If 1 percent of the two million can be bought, then that is very dangerous." He noted that money came from Saudi Arabia to Jordan and was disbursed there. "This problem will be with us for a long time," he said, shaking his head in frustration.

Many Iraqi resistance leaders have based themselves in the relative safety of Amman and Damascus. It isn't always clear how active they are in Iraq, or how active they expect to be, but they are a long way from giving up. What's most striking about these men is the sense that they have become trapped — militarily, at least — between Al Qaeda and its ilk, on one side, and the Americans on the other, with a dangerous Shiite-dominated, Green Zone-based government to the east and an irritable, secessionist Kurdish region to the north.

Three years into their war, some were becoming introspective. In Amman, I was reunited with Sheik Saad Naif al-Hardan, leader of the Aithawi tribe in Ramadi since 1995. I first met him in his village of Albu Aitha in 2004, when he was closely involved with antioccupation forces, refusing even to tell me how many men his tribe had, viewing it as a military secret. Sheik Hardan said he had been arrested by the Americans as early as July 2003, along with 85 men from his tribe. Since I last saw him, Sheik Hardan had briefly served in the Iraqi government (as minister for provincial affairs). But he spent most of his time in Jordan. "All the leaders of the Anbar are outside of Iraq," he told me. "In the Anbar, America is killing and Al Qaeda is killing."

Like many Sunni leaders, Sheik Hardan had grown pensive about the past few years. "The Sunnis left the political process," he said. "This is our fault. Sunni scholars forbade political participation." But not all had changed. "We all support the muqawama sharifa," he said — the "honorable resistance," by which he meant to distinguish resistance warriors from the many armed people who attack civilians. "And I am part of it," he said. When I raised my eyebrows, he added, "With words." I asked if there was still an honorable resistance given the civil war that Sunni and Shiite militias were engaged in. "It still exists," he said. "You don't see how many Americans are killed in the Anbar?"

One of Sheik Hardan's companions that day, who served as deputy chief of police for Anbar Province under the American occupation, had survived numerous assassination attempts. He blamed them on Al Qaeda, which he also believed blew up his house. "Al Qaeda is not cooperating with the Iraqi resistance," he said. "The real Iraqi resistance considers Al Qaeda an enemy."

Sheik Hardan's refugee counterparts in Damascus told a similar story. There I met one of the leaders of the Anbar that Sheik Hardan referred to when he told me they had all fled. Sheik Yassin was a weathered and frail man with a thick white scarf over his head. He fingered black beads as we spoke. He led a mosque in the Anbar city of Hit but fled a month before we met and left it in the care of his sons. Hit was deserted, he told me. "The situation there has become disastrous," he said. "They hit my son's house in an air strike and destroyed his house and killed my grandson. The people of Hit are caught between Americans on one side and Al Qaeda on the other side. And the police and army do not treat people properly."

He, too, recognized the strategic Sunni error made at the beginning of the American occupation. "That is the origin of the problem," he said. "They boycotted. If they had participated with all their weight, they would not have let the Shiite militias take over the government of Iraq." He blamed the Iraqi Sunni leadership for denouncing elections and threatening those who participated. "They made the wrong interpretation," he said. "Shiites wanted to prevent Sunnis from voting, and jihadists did as well. The jihadists fight the Americans on one side, and on the other side they destroy the community. The only solution is if the Americans stop the Iranian interference." Sheik Yassin did not flee Shiite militias. He fled from Al Qaeda. "Sunnis must choose between death or seeking refuge in the Anbar, Syria or Jordan," he said.

Another opponent of Al Qaeda was Sheik Mudhir al-Khirbit of Ramadi, a former leader of the Confederation of Iraqi Tribes. The Khirbits were favored by the former regime, and in March 2003, they told me, an American air strike on the sheik's home killed 18 family members, reason enough to seek vengeance. Sheik Khirbit sought shelter in Damascus but made frequent trips to Lebanon for medical treatment. The Iraqi government reportedly placed him on its new list of 41 most wanted, and in January, on a medical trip to Lebanon, he was arrested by that country's Internal Security Forces. His affairs are now being handled by his oldest son, Sattam, who is only 18 but, according to one Western diplomat, had his father's trust and went on missions for him. I found him in a Damascus apartment. He was in a gray suit and wearing pointy leather shoes and taking business calls from sheiks well into the night. Sattam had a few days of stubble on his tired face.

In 2004, when he was 15, Sattam and an uncle were arrested in an American military raid on their home. He called the initial Sunni boycott of Iraqi politics "a big mistake" that opened the door to Shiite domination. "Now it's too late," he said. "People here, and in Amman, feel like they lost." In Sattam's view, the only way to protect Sunnis was a Sunni state that would include Anbar Province, Mosul and Tikrit. But radicals like Al Qaeda were now in control of Anbar Province, and the resistance was finding it hard to resist Al Qaeda. "Al Qaeda kills Sunnis the most, and you don't know what they want," he said. His priority was to deal with Al Qaeda in the Anbar first, then reconcile with the Shiites and then work to end the occupation. "When Sunnis in Baghdad get arrested by the Americans they feel good because it's better than being arrested by Shiite militias." Despite this, he did not show hostility to the Shiites. "My father doesn't differentiate between Sunnis, Shiites and Christians," he said. "We don't have anything against Shiites. Shiites didn't kill 18 people from our family, the Americans did."

VI. The Long Endgame

However reflective a mood might have settled in among the Iraqi commanders in Syrian or Jordanian exile, that does not mean they see an end to the fighting. They are getting a taste of what it means to be refugees. They don't like it. And the alternative, to them, seems only to be more war: with Al Qaeda, with America, with Iran, whether directly or not. Another longtime resistance fighter now in Damascus whom I met is Abu Ali, who was the commander of the Army of Saladin's Victory, in the Tikrit area. A short, stern man wearing a brown jacket and a sweater showing his shirt collar, he had a small mustache atop his tight lips and spoke without expression in a low voice.

He first saw the Americans on April 12, 2003, and began fighting them on May 6. "After they took over Baghdad, other cities fell day by day, and when the army left their positions, we knew it was over," he said. "There were two options: join the resistance or become refugees with no identities." People like him who had worked in the former government and military immediately began organizing. "There is no Iraqi who didn't serve in the military, and we had experience fighting Iran," he said. "By the 13th the army and Baath were falling apart, so we began organizing, gathering guns. It was spontaneous in the beginning. We worked on ambushing the enemy. It would be just a leader with two guys, a machine gun and rifles. Then we started using missiles. Those who didn't know how were trained by those who did. We had some former officers from the Iraqi Army, and they had experience. It started like street gangs and now it's an organized army. In the beginning it was a very spontaneous Iraqi movement, nationalist."

By 2004 their operations were becoming bigger and more organized, he said. "We did very good operations in Hawija, and when the first battle of Falluja happened, we fought. In the second battle, I was very close but outside of Falluja. People took care of us and fed us. We relied a lot on tribes. We are all relatives." He was concerned that his men now suffered from a shortage of guns. "Baghdad has not fallen yet," he said, "only the Green Zone is under American control. They are not achieving victory in Baghdad."

Abu Ali had arrived several days before I met him, with two comrades who were wounded and could not get treatment in Iraq. "Our people here said they could help them," he told me. The Americans had raided his home; he had not slept there for two years, stealing only occasional visits to see his family. I had been told that Abu Ali led a much publicized attack on a palace complex in Tikrit on the day Zalmay Khalilzad, then the American ambassador, attended a ceremony handing it over to the Iraqi Finance Ministry. Abu Ali confirmed this. "They expressed democracy with bullets against demonstrators," he said of the Americans. "I will keep fighting until the last American and Iranian leaves." Abu Ali added that he anticipated a clash with Al Qaeda in the future as well. For now, he worried that the resistance was becoming too public, with many people appearing on television and claiming they led the resistance. "The secret of the success of the resistance is that nobody knows who we are," he said. "If we make it public, then we will be like Palestine, 60 years and no state."

Abu Ali's foreboding was shared by two former Iraqi officers I met one rainy evening at the Jordanian home of Maj. Gen. Walid Abdel Maliki, who said he was a former assistant to the minister of defense under Saddam Hussein. With him was Gen. Raed al-Hamdani, who identified himself as a former commander in the Republican Guard. Their worries about the future had an edge. Both men, I was told, "had contacts" with the Iraqi resistance. "We never had this sort of fighting before between Sunnis and Shiites," Abdel Maliki said. "Saddam didn't believe in Sunnis or Shiites; he was tribal. Saddam didn't put down the Shiite rebellion

because they were Shiite but because it was an uprising. The soldiers who put down the Shiite uprising were Shiites." Abdel Maliki blamed Iran for the problems in Iraq. "It's a military idea, to move the battle from your land to the enemy's land," he said, and Iran sought to confront the United States in Iraq. "Iranian occupation is worse than American occupation. The only way is a military solution. Al Qaeda, the Shiite militias, the Iranian groups, have their own agenda but don't want to solve their problems. We have to attack Al Qaeda and the militias."

General Hamdani had fought in six conflicts and been severely wounded in 1991. "The hardest loss was this last one," he said. "We were given the responsibility to defend our country. We lost the war, and we lost our country." Like his friend, General Hamdani resisted sectarian explanations. "It is a mistake to think Sunnis ruled Shiites," he said. "Most of the coup attempts against Saddam were Sunni. If we have a point of view on Iraq it is as Iraqis, not as Sunnis. There are nationalists and those who are not nationalists." Although General Hamdani said he thought that the Iraqi resistance should continue its fight, he saw a larger threat. "These groups were established to fight the occupation but now think the danger from Iran is greater than from America," he said. "American national interests and the resistance's interests are the same. The U.S. did itself harm by demonizing the Iraqi resistance and anyone who deals with it. They have prevented the emergence of moderates who can sit and negotiate, and you see now, four years after the invasion, the strongest factions are Al Qaeda and not the nationalists."

General Hamdani was involved in a new political party, called the Patriotic and National Forces Movement, formed by Hassan Bazzaz last August. Bazzaz was a professor of international relations who taught at the University of Baghdad. He had left Iraq two months before I met him in February. "I just ran away," he told me. "I was afraid they would kill me." The "they" he was referring to were Shiite militias. Being a well-known professor is now a sufficient reason to be a target. When I entered his office, he was on the phone with someone in Iraq. "Where did they find him?" he asked. "Who shot him?"

The Americans had just initiated their new security plan for Iraq, and Bazzaz was trying to be optimistic. "Everything must come to an end, and I don't think this will go on forever," he said. "We are not the first nation to get occupied by a foreign power or the first nation to fight among itself." But while he struggled to be optimistic, he, too, still placed hopes in the resistance. "If things get worse, then we, the people who are talking politically, will take the military option," he said. "The Sunni Arab neighbors will have to support us. The worst is coming."

VII. Shifting Blame

The U.N. refugee agency meeting in Geneva on April 17 and 18 was the international community's belated attempt to confront the Iraqi refugee crisis. Jordan's minister of the interior, Mukhaimar al-Mukhaimar, claimed at the meeting that his country was spending $1 billion a year on Iraqi refugees; Syria's deputy foreign minister, Fayssal Mekdad, claimed his country had spent $160 million in 2006. "It's the fastest-growing refugee population in the world," said Kenneth Bacon, president of Refugees International and assistant secretary of defense for public affairs from 1994 to 2001. "It's a crisis in response to an American action. This is a refugee crisis that we triggered and aren't doing enough to deal with.

"What I find most disturbing," Bacon went on to say, "is that there seems to be no recognition of the problem by the president or top White House officials." But John Bolton, who was undersecretary of state

for arms control and international security in the Bush administration, and later ambassador to the United Nations, offers one explanation for this lack of recognition: it is not a crisis, and it was not triggered by American action. The refugees, he said, have “absolutely nothing to do with our overthrow of Saddam.

“Our obligation,” he told me this month at his office in the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, “was to give them new institutions and provide security. We have fulfilled that obligation. I don’t think we have an obligation to compensate for the hardships of war.” Bolton likewise did not share the concerns of Bacon and others that the refugees would become impoverished and serve as a recruiting pool for militant organizations in the future. “I don’t buy the argument that Islamic extremism comes from poverty,” he said. “Bin Laden is rich.” Nor did he think American aid could alleviate potential anger: “Helping the refugees flies in the face of received logic. You don’t want to encourage the refugees to stay. You want them to go home. The governments don’t want them to stay.”

Since 2003, the United States has accepted only 701 Iraqi refugees. In the first four months of 2007, it took in 69 Iraqi refugees, fewer than the number it accepted in the same period in 2006.

The United States is really just beginning to grapple with the question of Iraqi refugees, in part because the flight from Iraq is so entwined with the vexed question of blame. When I read John Bolton’s comments to Paula Dobriansky — the undersecretary of state for democracy and global affairs — and her colleague Ellen Sauerbrey, assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, they mainly agreed with him. Sauerbrey maintained that “refugees are created by repressive regimes and failed states. The sectarian violence has driven large numbers out. During the Saddam regime, large numbers of Iraqis were displaced, and the U.S. resettled 38,000 Iraqis. We would take 5,000 a year at given points in time. After 2003, there was great hope, and people were returning in large numbers. The sectarian violence after the mosque bombing in February 2006 is what turned things around. The problem is one caused by the repressive regime” of Saddam Hussein. She did add, “We take the responsibility of being a compassionate nation seriously.”

What that has mostly meant is that the Bush administration has left the task of dealing with Iraqi refugees to Iraq’s neighbors. On a recent trip to the region, Sauerbrey pressed the Syrian government to keep its borders open. “That was a major part of my visit,” she told me. “Not only to keep borders open but not forcibly return them” — that is, the refugees. Dobriansky told me, “What we have asked for Iraq’s neighbors to do is maintain secure but open borders, allow Iraqis access to vital services and facilitate assistance.” The United States is helping to provide some of this assistance. Sauerbrey mentioned a program involving schools in Jordan, where, she said, there were as many as 200,000 Iraqi children of school age but only 14,000 attending school: “The parents are afraid to send their children to school because if they are noticed, there is a danger they might be sent back,” she told me. “Jordan has made it very clear they don’t want a separate school system for Iraqi children. We have to make sure that the Jordanian government is creating conditions where Iraqi families feel safe.”

There was only one category of Iraqis toward whom both Dobriansky and Saurbrey did acknowledge a specific American responsibility: interpreters and facilitators. “We are committed to honoring our moral debt to those Iraqis who have provided assistance to the U.S. military and embassy,” Dobriansky said.

That will leave everyone else to fend pretty much for themselves and depend on the kindness of Iraq’s

neighbors. Barbara Bodine, a longtime U.S. diplomat in the region who was brought in to be the temporary "mayor" of Baghdad in 2003, told me there was a simple reason for the White House's denial of a refugee crisis: "When you affirm you have refugees and I.D.P.'s" — internally displaced persons — "you are admitting that the average Iraqi has little or no expectation that Bush's surge can reverse a security situation that has spun utterly out of control. This is not a loss of faith in Iraq, per se, but in the current governments of Iraq and Washington."

Nir Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and a fellow of the New America Foundation. He is also the author of "In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq."

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | RSS | First Look | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Site Map