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Iraq's Troubles Drive Out Refugees Who Came Back

By **JOHN LELAND**

BAGHDAD — A second exodus has begun here, of Iraqis who returned after fleeing the carnage of the height of the war, but now find that violence and the nation's severe lack of jobs are pulling them away from home once again.

Since the American invasion in 2003, refugees have been a measure of the country's precarious condition, flooding outward during periods of violence and trickling back as [Iraq](#) seemed to stabilize. This new migration shows how far the nation remains from being stable and secure.

Abu Maream left Iraq after a mortar round killed his brother-in-law in 2005. Amar al-Obeidi left when insurgents threatened to kill him and raided his shops. Hazim Hadi Mohammed al-Tameemi left because the doctors who treated his wife's ovarian cancer had fled the country.

All three joined the flow of refugees who returned as violence here ebbed. But now they want to leave again.

“The only thing that's stopping me is I don't have the money,” said Mr. Maream, who gave only a partial name — literally, father of Maream — because he feared reprisal from extremists in his neighborhood. “We are Iraqis in name only.”

Nearly 100,000 refugees have returned since 2008, out of more than two million who left since the invasion, according to the Iraqi government and the [United Nations](#) high commissioner for refugees.

But as they return, pulled by improved security in Iraq or pushed by a lack of work abroad, many are finding that their homeland is still not ready — their houses are gone or occupied, their neighborhoods unsafe, their opportunities minimal.

In a [recent survey](#) by the United Nations refugee office, 61 percent of those who returned to Baghdad said they regretted coming back, most saying they did not feel safe. The majority, 87 percent, said they could not make enough money here to support their families. Applications for asylum in Syria have risen more than 50 percent since May.

As Iraq struggles toward a return to stability, these returnees risk becoming people without a country, displaced both at home and abroad. And though departures have ebbed since 2008, a wave of recent attacks on Christians has prompted a new exodus.

Mr. Obeidi, who used his tribe's name instead of his father's name as a surname, left for Syria in 2006 after an improvised bomb exploded near his nephew, terrifying the boy, and insurgents threatened to kill Mr. Obeidi. On a recent evening in Baghdad, he had trouble controlling his breathing as he talked about the daily blasts in his neighborhood.

“There's no security here,” he said, ticking off his close encounters with guns and bombs. “I was near a female suicide bomber a couple months ago. Then I was in my brother's truck when insurgents opened fire on a bridge. My friend was killed in front of me with a knife. I've been destroyed. My mother needs an operation for her eyes, and I don't have money. We need someone to help us.”

“Feel my stomach,” he said. “It's like a rock. It's going to blow out.”

Before insurgents robbed his tool shops in 2006, he said, he earned about

\$1,000 a month and was planning to marry. But during several trips abroad he was unable to find work. Since returning to Baghdad he has struggled to find day labor, earning about \$6 a day. The woman he had intended to marry is now with another man.

He has twice paid smugglers, to take him to Austria on one occasion and to Italy on another, but each time the men took his money without helping him.

“Life was better in Syria, but I can’t work there,” said Mr. Obeidi, who is a Sunni. “Jordan was the same. Turkey was the same. And it was expensive to live there. That’s why I had to come back. But our country is not our country. It’s Iran’s country. We need someone to help us.”

The United Nations provides some transportation costs and a small stipend for families that come back, but fewer than 4 percent of returnees take advantage of the program. Most either do not know about it or think they may still want to return to their asylum country and will want the agency to help them as refugees, not as returnees.

For Abu Maream and his family, who left for Syria in 2005 and came back last year, life has come down to a choice between bad options. Syria seemed safe, he said, but he felt “humiliated” as an unemployed foreigner seeking work, selling off his possessions to keep the family afloat. Back here, he has been unable to find work, and neighbors who used to respect the family now “look down on us,” he said.

On a recent afternoon he sat in a two-room apartment with only a mattress on the floor and a few possessions in boxes. He had no refrigerator and received only a few hours of electricity a day.

“Before, we had Shiite neighbors, and there were no problems at all,” said Mr. Maream, who is Sunni. “The government created the sectarian thing,” he said, meaning that the political parties formed along ethnic or religious lines, formalizing the division. Now his neighborhood has become a stronghold for

Sunni extremists.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, his mother sitting behind him. In the coming months, he said, he will send his sisters and mother back to Syria for their safety, and he and his wife and three children will move in with an uncle in Iraq, splitting up the family. When the family would be reunited in Syria he could not say.

“It’s over; that’s it,” he said. “I’m not coming back. How can I come back? I don’t believe Iraq will have a chance again.”

Mr. Tameemi, who fought in the bloody eight-year war with Iran, said he hated leaving Iraq in 2006. “I love my country,” he said. But after years of sanctions and the American-led invasion, doctors and medicines were scarce in the country — one of the many toxic effects of displacement in Iraq.

In Jordan he found doctors to treat his wife’s cancer, but he could not find work. “They don’t treat us well,” he said.

Now, after two months back in Iraq, Mr. Tameemi is ready to leave again. Despite improvements in security, medical care here — once a model for the region — is still inadequate, and doctors have not returned. “Even if I have to sleep in the road, I want to take care of my wife,” he said.

His next plan is to apply for asylum in the United States, but he knows that the odds are against him. In the meantime, his experience has soured him on the country he can no longer call home.

“I regret coming back, but financial problems pushed me to do it,” he said. “The Iraqis don’t help the Iraqis.”

Duraid Adnan contributed reporting.

