

In sadness or anger, Iraq is a country many do not want to go back to

Many Iraqis fled to Jordan and, for some, a return is too much to countenance



Iraqi refugee artist Saddam Al Jumaily stands next to his painting of he and his sister in Amman, Jordan. (Salah Malkawi for The National)



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To Dirar Jbouri, Iraq is a land of painful memories. Exiled in Jordan, sadness dominates.

"We knew each other for three years and were planning to get engaged," he says of his sweetheart, who was training to become a doctor at Al Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad when she was kidnapped.

"She was threatened because she was a Shiite treating Sunnis at a hospital," Mr Jbouri said.

"Two days later she was dead."

The murder occurred in April 2007, with the news being broken to him by his love's sister. Time passed but life did not get easier.

There was an increase in violence and the sectarian segregation of the capital that began with the fall of Saddam Hussein, symbolised by the toppling of his statue on April 9, 2003.

Mr Jbouri had to quit his job as a butcher because it was controlled by Shiites in the capital's Al Rahmaniya district.

Car bombs and suicide attackers had become prevalent across Baghdad and he rarely left his home in the Al Harithiyeh neighbourhood.

According to the Iraq Body Count, that time — July 2006 to June 2007 — was the most violent after the US-led invasion, with an estimated 29,625 to 31,852 civilian deaths.

Mr Jbouri finally fled to Amman in April 2010.

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Now 46, Mr Jbouri works at an Iraqi restaurant in central Amman, grilling meat and kebabs.

The Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies, in Norway, estimates there were 450,000 to 500,000 Iraqis in Jordan as of May 2007.

But many have returned home and others have resettled in other countries. By the end of December last year, there were 66,000 Iraqis in Jordan registered with the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

Although parliamentary elections are planned in Iraq next month, the country's stability remains fragile. Citizens such as Mr Jbouri are caught in limbo and lack faith that Iraq can stand on its own feet.

In 2007, he was granted refugee status but his application for resettlement in a third country was denied, for unspecified reasons. His two sisters managed to resettle in Canada.

In March last year, he married a Jordanian.

His wife has had two miscarriages and specialist medical treatment is beyond his means as he earns only 300 Jordanian dinars (Dh1,550) a month.

"In Iraq, I had my own business, I had money. I lost everything. I am grateful to be here but it is difficult to find a good opportunity at a time when Jordanians themselves do not have jobs."

Recalling how his life has changed, he appears torn by his current difficulties, scarred by the past but also adamant about one thing.

"I will never return to Iraq."

In a different part of town, Saddam Jumaily, a 42-year-old artist from Basra, Iraq's southern port city, also looks back.

He depicted himself and his older sister as children in a painting, holding hands at their home.

"We were so close and I wanted to capture her memory," Mr Jumaily said of his sister, who worked as a nurse at a public hospital before she was abducted and killed in April 2012.

He found her body after three days at a morgue. Mutilated and with a rope tied around her neck, he could barely recognise her such was the desecration.

"She was kidnapped and tortured. I identified her from a mole above her right wrist."



Iraqi refugee artist Saddam Jumaily stands next to his painting of he and his sister at his home workshop in Amman, Jordan. (Salah Malkawi for The National)

It was the main reason he left in August 2012, when he and his wife Kholoud, 37, became refugees.

The war's aftermath had already led them to leave once before.

While working as a lecturer at the College of Fine Arts at Basra University between 2005 and 2010, Mr Jumaily was threatened many times because he was a Sunni.

When he caught one of his students cheating during final examinations the risk heightened.

"You do not know whom you are messing with. I am from the Mahdi army and I will get you," the student told him, referring to the militia of Moqtada Al Sadr, a hardline Shiite cleric.

In another incident in August 2010, he found a letter with a bullet on his doorstep. An attached note said: "You Baathist, you scum, we will kill you."

Enough was enough.

A few days later, he packed his things and headed for Amman, although despite a year of effort the UNHCR declined to grant him refugee status because he was told Iraq's security situation had improved.

"We returned to Basra, and we hoped that things would change for the better but unfortunately life became too dangerous. After my sister was killed I lost all hope and fled back to Jordan.

"Iraq is destroyed and there is no hope."

He and his wife still hope to be resettled in the United States, although the visa programme for refugees has been curtailed by the Trump administration, or Europe.



Iraqi refugee Um Saad sits on the sidewalk of a street selling cigarettes in Amman, Jordan. (Salah Malkawi for The National)

Other Iraqi refugees seem to have settled in Jordan.

Umm Saad, 47, is an Iraqi mother of four who sells cigarettes and lighters in Amman. She works to provide for her seven-year-old son from a second marriage after her Egyptian husband left her. Her three older sons are in Iraq.

Back home in Basra, her first husband, a cousin who was born in 1967, fled the army after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and was arrested at a checkpoint and imprisoned.

"He looked like a monster and his ear was cut off," she said, when she first saw him after his release from Al Zubair Prison near Basra after the toppling of Saddam.

Cutting off the ear was a punishment for army deserters. A few months after his release, he died of cancer.

"Life was hard, there was hunger and poverty."

Her parents and brothers did not support her, she said. In 2014, she decided to move to Jordan. As a vulnerable refugee, she receives 80 dinars a month from the UNHCR.

She was once accepted for resettlement in the US.

"I called my father. He said I should take care of my religion since the West does not have a religion and he told me you will change. So I was afraid and preferred to stay here."

She lives in Jabal Al Joufeh, a poor part of town, paying 100 dinars in rent. She suffers from high blood pressure, diabetes and joint pain from sitting all day on a small chair selling cigarettes, earning only five to 10 dinars a day.

Yet she does not want to leave. "I don't like to travel. I am settled here."

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