

August 10, 2007

Well-Off Fleeing Iraq Find Poverty and Pain in Jordan

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

AMMAN, Jordan, Aug. 9 — After her husband's killing, Amira sold a generation of her family's belongings, packed up her children and left behind their large house in Baghdad, with its gardener and maid.

Now, a year later, she is making meat fritters for money in this sand-colored capital, unable to afford glasses for her son, and in the quiet moments, choking on the bitterness of loss.

The war has scattered hundreds of thousands of Iraqis throughout the Middle East, but those who came here tended to be the most affluent. Most lacked residency status and were not allowed to work, but as former bank managers, social club directors and business owners, they thought their money would last.

It has not. Rents are high, schools cost money, and under-the-table jobs pay little. A survey of 100 Iraqi families found that 64 were surviving by selling their assets.

Now, as a new school year begins, many Iraqis here say they can no longer afford some of life's basic requirements — education for their children and hospital visits for their families. Teeth are pulled instead of filled. Shampoo is no longer on the grocery list.

"My savings are finished," said Amira, who is 50. "My kids won't be in school this year."

It is a painful new reality for an important part of [Iraq](#)'s population, the educated, secular center. They refused to take sides as the violence got worse. And their suffering augurs something larger for Iraq. The poorer they grow and the longer they stay away, the more crippled Iraq becomes. "The binding section of the population does not exist anymore," said [Ayad Allawi](#), a former prime minister, who now spends most of his time in Jordan. "The middle class has left Iraq."

Iraqis streamed into Jordan and Syria in 2005 and 2006, with the professional class picking Jordan. The signs on the second floor of Al Essra Hospital, a private hospital in central Amman, display only Iraqi doctors' names. The Jordanians have been relatively lenient, registering doctors in their medical unions and allowing the vast majority to live in their country without residency permits.

But by early this year Iraqis were weighing so heavily on this small country that the Jordanian authorities sharply reduced the numbers they accepted. (Rejections became so common that Iraqi Airways now offers a 30 percent discount to returning passengers who have been turned away.)

Many thought Jordan would be a stop on the way to Australia or Sweden, or a brief vacation from Baghdad's inferno. But as the months wore on, it became clear that most countries were closed to Iraqis, the war was only getting worse, and families were left stranded, burning through their savings. The Australian authorities twice rejected Hassan Jabr, a Spanish teacher who left his elegant home and garden in Baghdad after his 12-year-old son was kidnapped and killed last year. Now, with his savings gone, badly dented before he left by a \$10,000 ransom that he paid to try to get his son back, he is living off his family's food ration cards that his mother sells in Baghdad.

"We saw reality in Amman and we were shocked," he said, sitting in his spare one-room apartment in

eastern Amman. "We planned for two months."

Iraqis here have never been formally counted. A survey by a Norwegian group, Fafo, which has not been made public, is expected to report there are less than half of the 750,000 commonly estimated to be in Jordan.

But that is still 10 percent of the population of two million in Amman, where most of the Iraqis live, and aid agencies have stepped up activities.

This month the Jordanian government, under pressure from the United States, agreed to let Iraqi children without residency attend public schools, a right not extended to any other foreigners.

But the schools are crowded and the government has not yet prepared for the change, arguing that it should receive aid to accommodate it. [United Nations](#) agencies are asking for extra money to expand, at first by adding new shifts to existing schools.

Save the Children, a humanitarian group, says it has referred 4,000 Iraqis to schools recently, but the referrals do not guarantee acceptance. Amira went to the public school in her neighborhood, but was told that there was no room for her children. Private school cost her \$5,000 last year, a third of her savings.

As the middle class becomes poor, new patterns form. Zeinab Majid's okra stew no longer has meat. She buys her vegetables just before sunset, when the prices are the lowest. A stranger offered her the use of a washing machine, a gesture that nearly brought her to tears.

She came to Amman last September after her husband, a painter, had received two threats, and the studio he used had been bombed. They sold everything. Now her husband, a quiet man in small round glasses, spends his days jabbing paint onto small canvases while their boys, ages 7 and 4, watch cartoons on an old TV. "There are days when I'm penniless completely," she said, serving juice to visitors. A Catholic relief organization, Caritas, helped pay for first grade for her older son last year.

The pain of the war closes people, and recent arrivals tend to live isolated lives, dividing the community into small, sad pockets. Amira moves mechanically through her days like a stunned survivor of a shipwreck. Tears come easily when she remembers the belongings she sold, the photo albums she did not take. Her husband, a Sunni, died five days after men in police uniforms took him from his shop last year. His face was bruised and his body broken. It was 22 years to the day since they first met.

"They were after the happiness," she said, her face wet with tears. "They wanted to kill the happiness."

The United States promised to increase the number of Iraqi refugees it takes, and the United Nations has referred 9,100 Iraqis to it this year. But so far fewer than 200 have arrived, according to the State Department. Several hundred more are expected to arrive in the coming weeks.

Running out of money is frightening, and some families choose to move to Syria, where things are cheaper, or, in some cases, back to Baghdad and the war.

Aseel Qaradaghi, a 25-year-old software engineer, was pregnant when she brought her small daughter here last summer after receiving threats from Islamic extremists. Her husband, a translator for a South African security firm, stayed in Baghdad to earn money. But when he did not call on her birthday, she knew something was wrong, and only after pressing his friends on a crackling phone line did she learn that he had been kidnapped.

Now, eight months later, she is earning a small wage at a nursery, but without his salary it is not enough, and

she has applied for refugee status. If she is rejected, she will have to return to Baghdad. She does not know her husband's fate, but worries that it will be the same as her brother's, killed for working as a translator for the American military.

"I cannot allow myself to think about him," she said, bouncing her baby boy on her lap. "The moment I start to allow feelings, my life will stop. I'm afraid of the moment that I collapse."

Last week, Amira had a guest. Nada, a mother of three, whose husband worked as a deputy director of a prestigious social club in Baghdad, was preparing to move to Syria. The thousands of dollars from the sale of several cars and a house are almost gone.

"My daughter was second in her class," Amira said, her words coming hard and fast. "I traveled all over the world. I want to tell the Americans what has happened to us."

Yusra al-Hakeem contributed reporting.

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