

IRAQ

Inside Iraq's “killing zones”

The battle for the rural belt around Baghdad is helping
to define the future of Iraq

BY NED PARKER AND AHMED RASHEED





ON THE EDGE: Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, seen above in September, is trying to defeat the militant group Islamic State while remaining in control of government-backed Shi'ite militias. On the cover, Abu Hussein, a farmer from south of Baghdad, holds a picture of his ransacked house. He and hundreds of neighbours fled their village after they were caught in fighting. **REUTERS/THAIER AL-SUDANI; AHMED SAAD**

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Shi'ite militias and Iraqi security forces, engaged in an all-or-nothing struggle with radical Sunni group Islamic State, are blasting the Sunni farmlands that encircle Baghdad with heavy weapons. Military officers call their target areas in the rural belt “killing zones.”

“In these parts, there are no civilians,” said Lieutenant Colonel Haider Mohammed Hatem, deputy commander of the armed forces around Abu Ghraib, just west of the capital. “Everyone in these killing zones we consider Islamic State.”

The death zones now scar the more than

“It's not possible to allow all these families to return to their house even if Islamic State was kicked out.

Hanin al-Qaddo

Deputy Head of Parliamentary
Committee on Displacement

200 km-long (124 mile) Baghdad Belt, as it is commonly known. Since January, at least 83,000 people, the vast majority of them Sunnis, have abandoned their homes in the rural area around the capital, according to the International Rescue Committee, an aid group. The figure could be higher, but is

impossible to confirm because of the poor security situation.

The exodus has turned the farmlands, where Shi'ites and Sunnis once lived side by side, into a no-man's land controlled by the government-backed militias and Shi'ite-dominated army.

Prime Minister Haider Abadi, a moderate Shi'ite Islamist who was sworn into office in September, has sought to curb the violence carried out under his predecessor Nuri al-Maliki. One of Abadi's first actions was to ban indiscriminate fire against Islamic State fighters in places civilians are also present.

But most ordinary Sunnis have already

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WARZONE: Iraqi security forces detain suspected Islamic State militants (above), during an operation in Jurf al-Sakhar in May. Iraqi Soldiers were still battling in the area a month later (right), around the time Shi'ite fighters (below) joined the fight. **REUTERS/MUSHTAQ MUHAMMED (ABOVE AND BELOW); ALAA AL-MARJANI (RIGHT)**



fled the Belt's rural areas for the capital or big towns, leaving the military and militias to continue to hammer places they consider to be jihadist bastions.

One such killing zone, the Sunni district of Jurf al-Sakhar, was cleared in late October. By then, most civilians had run away after months of fighting, and mortar, rocket and aerial bombardments. The military has now barred residents of the district, which lies close to the Islamic State's stronghold of western Anbar province,

from returning.

A Reuters correspondent witnessed Shi'ite militiamen setting homes ablaze during their October offensive. Militia fighters kicked and hit three suspected IS members, and then executed the men with gunshots to the head.

The battle for the Baghdad Belt will help define the future of Iraq and whether it will break up in all but name.

If Islamic State wins control of the Belt, it could launch an assault on the capital

and try to bring down the government. The group has already carried out suicide bombings in Baghdad and the Shi'ite south, mortared Shi'ite communities, and ambushed soldiers and militia fighters. It is also killing or expelling moderate Sunnis who reject the group.

If the Shi'ite militias and security forces prevail, their tactics risk permanently purging Sunnis from around Baghdad and parts of Diyala province - a mixed region to the capital's east - in effect creating a majority

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Shi'ite territory divorced from war-torn Sunni regions.

Both Shi'ite and Sunni tribal figures as well as Iraqi security officials say the militias have decided to rid the capital's hinterlands of its Sunni majority for good.

“The militias ... are trying to change the demography,” said a senior Iraqi defence ministry official. “They are carrying out acts of revenge and it is out of control. The military cannot restrain them.”

Lawmakers and government officials defend the militias' tactics. Some argue the displacement of thousands of Sunnis is an unfortunate but necessary evil.

“It's not possible to allow all these families to return back to their house even if Islamic State was kicked out and clashes stopped,” said Hanin al-Qaddo, deputy head of parliament's committee on displacement and a member of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's political bloc. “Why? Because most of these families in Baghdad Belt were providing a safe haven to Islamic State.”

The government deployed the militias to secure the capital's main entrances, protect roads and guard flashpoints around the Belt. In the Sunni farming district of Tarmiyah, north of the capital and not far from several Shi'ite towns, homes have been destroyed by both militias and Islamic State. The military there has now walled off villages with berms to trap Islamic State, which sees the area as a stronghold.

Last week, after a suicide attack on a security headquarters, at least 250 families abandoned their homes as fighting erupted between Islamic State and the army and militias, according to a tribal leader. Having fled his own farm for Tarmiyah's centre in July, the sheikh told Reuters: “I am sitting home and praying to God for help.”

In all, hundreds of Sunni residents have disappeared in recent months, their fates mostly unknown. Shi'ite and Sunni tribal figures believe many were detained and possibly killed by the militias, while others



CITY REFUGE: Abu Hussein in the Baghdad house where he now lives with his uncle and sister and at least 30 other relatives. The family fled their homes in Karaghoul in July. REUTERS/AHMED SAAD

“There were no animals left. Just total destruction and burnt houses..

Resident of Karaghoul

were likely executed by Islamic State. They complain no one is held to account.

Several militia fighters interviewed by Reuters confirmed that Shi'ite paramilitaries had carried out kidnappings, killings and robberies.

On two occasions, once in July and once in October, mass graves with dozens of dead have been uncovered in the north of Babel province, which serves as a bridge between Baghdad and the Shi'ite sect's southern heartland. In the October discovery, 35 corpses were found inside the sewage tank of an Iraqi army base by the town of Mahaweel. Both Shi'ite and Sunni tribal leaders blame the militias for the killings. A defence ministry official told Reuters the discovery of the corpses was under investigation.

On Dec. 15 the body of the mayor of

Khan Bani Saad, a Sunni town northeast of Baghdad, was found riddled with bullets days after men in army uniforms grabbed him off a highway.

The violence has also hit food production. “More than 75 percent of the farmland areas have fallen out of use after they became war zones,” said agriculture ministry official Jameel Ibrahim. “Farms in these areas are ghost farms.”

“TOTAL DESTRUCTION”

In the largely Sunni neighbourhood of Dura in southwest Baghdad several weeks ago, provincial council member Mushtaq al-Shammari sat in a cramped office that lay behind a furl of razor wire and greeted scores of families who had arrived in Baghdad and wanted to collect the one million dinars (\$866) in compensation the government provides to displaced people.

“The families are caught between two fires: Islamic State, which asks allegiance, and then the security forces and militias,” Shammari said. “If they feel safe and secure, they will go home. If militias and security

forces stay in control, they will not.”

Abu Hussein is a 45-year-old Sunni farmer from Karaghoul, 32 km south of Baghdad. Normally, more than 1,000 families live in the village, nestled among date palms along the Euphrates River. Now the place is deserted and Abu Hussein lives in a cramped house in Dura. Younger men are too scared to leave the slum, he said, because the security forces might pick them up and accuse them of being terrorists.

Karaghoul began its drift towards peril last winter when war broke out between Prime Minister Maliki, a Shi’ite, and Sunni tribes in Anbar. When Islamic State stepped up its activities in the Baghdad Belt, Maliki called up the Shi’ite militias, heralding them as more effective than the army.

Soon after, Sunni families began reporting assassinations at the hands of the militias.

In June, as the Iraqi army crumbled in northern Iraq, Islamic State seized large swathes of land along the Euphrates, including Karaghoul. The army and militias began to hit the village with mortars, artillery and barrel bombs.

The villagers decided to leave in late July, at the end of the holy month of Ramadan. By then the bombardment was intense, Abu Hussein said. One man was wounded by shrapnel and bled to death the night before hundreds of villagers, including women and children, cleared out on foot. The fleeing families left their tractors and farm animals behind, taking with them a bag of clothes at best.

They stuck to back roads and waded through canals, afraid of both Islamic State and government fighters. After spending a night in a village that had already been abandoned, the villagers met relatives from Dura on the main highway into the capital. An old man Abu Hussein carried to Baghdad died just over a week later.

One of Abu Hussein’s neighbours, an elderly woman who now sleeps on a kitchen floor in Dura, returned to Karaghoul for a



VANISHED: Sheikh Moayad al-Alwani, a tribal leader who went missing in July, attended a 2008 meeting of leaders and Iraqi security forces in Baghdad. **REUTERS/SHEIKH AYAD AL-JABOURI/HANDOUT**

“Farms in these areas are ghost farms.

Jameel Ibrahim

Agriculture Ministry official

few hours in October armed with a formal letter from the Iraqi security command granting her permission to visit the village. She saw army and militia patrols, she said, and a collection of scorched homes. “There were no animals left,” she said. “Just total destruction and burnt houses.”

Abadi’s spokesman, Rafid al-Jaboori, says the new prime minister is working hard to protect Sunni civilians and bring the militias under formal command. He said Abadi stood against any efforts – whether Sunni or Shi’ite – to cleanse areas of one sect or the other.

“In June, we all thought when this conflict broke out.... there will be a major sectarian cleansing in Baghdad.... this did not happen,” Jaboori said. “What happened is the Iraqis managed to form a national unity

government pursuing an agenda of reform.”

But in private, some Shi’ite and Western officials concede that with the army so weak, Abadi faces a tough task. “This is a country in the middle of a brutal civil war,” a Baghdad-based foreign diplomat said. “I am sure Abadi would love to bring the militias under control. But how can he when they are defending Baghdad against Islamic State?”

“KILLING INNOCENT PEOPLE”

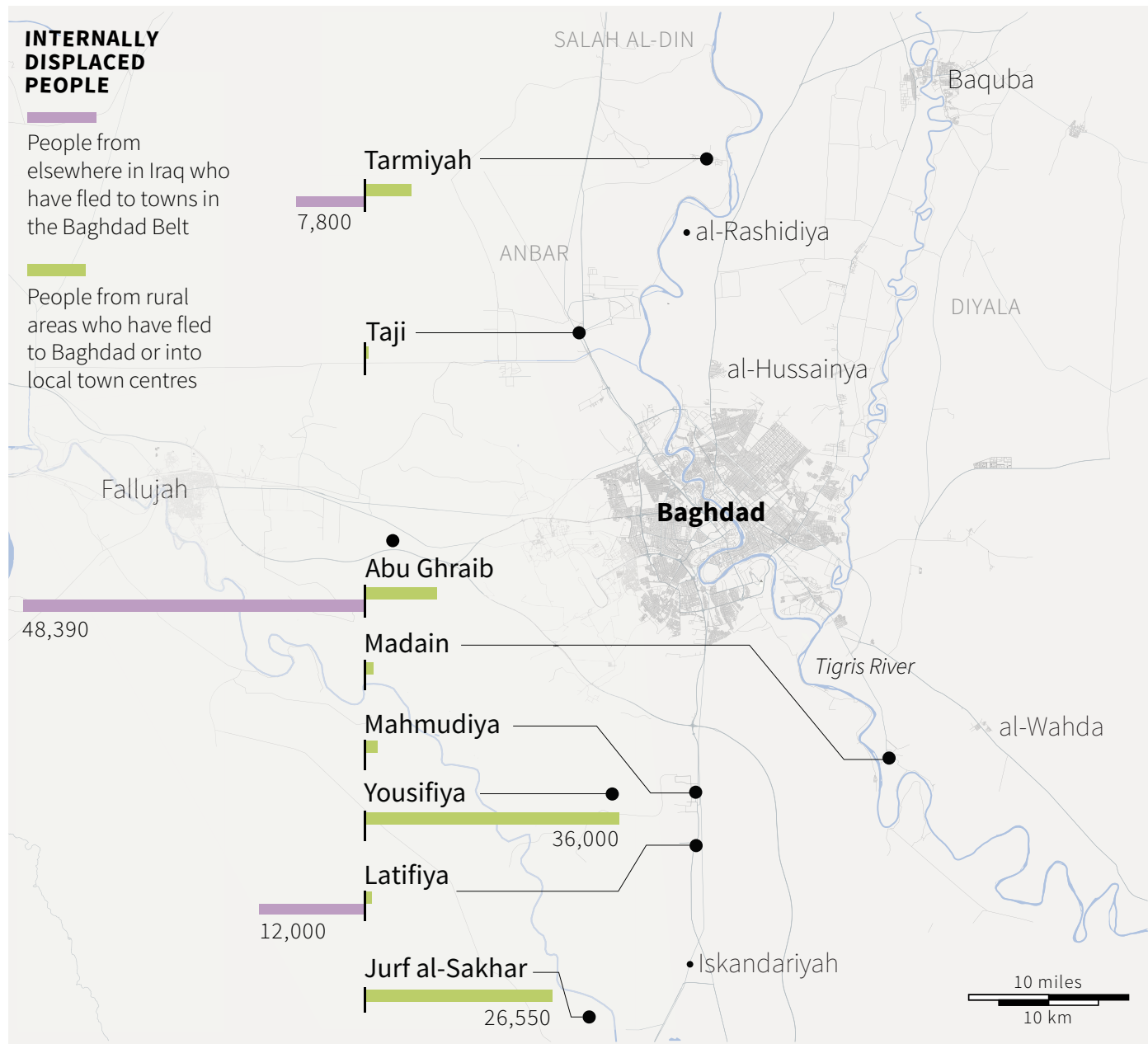
One day in October, two Sunni cousins in the town of Latifiyah, about 38 km south of Baghdad and close to important Shi’ite religious shrines, described how Islamic State moved in. The sound of artillery pounding the nearby town of Jurf al-Sakhar echoed in the distance, a huge woomph every five minutes or so. A government Humvee with shattered windows cruised by.

Islamic State fighters arrived in the cousins’ neighbourhood in the spring, they said. They appeared at night, patrolling the

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In the Baghdad Belt, a demographic reordering

Fighting has displaced more than two million Iraqis in the past year. Tens of thousands of people who normally live in the rural belt around Baghdad, most of them Sunni, have fled their homes for the capital, abandoning the countryside to militias, Iraqi forces and Islamic State.



Estimate based on International Rescue Committee data compiled from field teams and local government figures.

Sources: International Rescue Committee; Reuters



ESCAPE: Civilians surrender after Iraqi soldiers and Shi'ite fighters defeat Islamic State militants in Jurf al-Sakhar on October 27.

REUTERS/MAHMOUD RAOUF MAHMOUD

village. “They talked sweetly,” one of the men recalled.

The night after Islamic State captured the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, the group held a parade and slaughtered lambs to win over the community. The fighters told young men that Baghdad would soon fall, handed out dark robes to the male villagers, and blew up 10 homes as a warning to local farmers. Residents felt they had no choice but to collaborate or risk prison or death.

In July, the government and militias began to target local farms with mortars and artillery. By the second week of July, most people had left. “We took the families. We locked our houses. We left the cows and sheep and drove.”

The military now says people can move back. But most houses are damaged, date palms bulldozed, and people worry about the militias, who have said they suspect some villagers of links to Islamic State. Last

week, militia fighters blew up 35 houses in two abandoned villages close by.

In more normal times, people would turn to traditional leaders for protection. But Sunni tribal heads in the Belt have been targeted as well.

One such leader, Moayad al-Alwani, was a towering man, well over 1.8 metres tall, and stocky. In June, he appeared terrified as he described how Islamic State blew up the homes of Sunnis who did not support the group, and killed moderates who spoke in favour of reconciliation. Government security forces and militias also operated in his area, he said, and were also responsible for brutal attacks.

“The country is full of gangsters,” Alwani said. “The criminals who kill the people, hundreds of different types of groups, they are all bad and the same. They are all killing innocent people.”

Two weeks after speaking with Reuters,

Alwani disappeared in the Belt south of Baghdad as he drove along a road controlled by militias and security forces. Shi'ite tribal figures who knew Alwani described him as a moderate. They believe militia fighters, not Sunni extremists, grabbed him. They do not believe he is alive.

With additional reporting by Saif Hameed, Michael Georgy and Yara Bayoumy in Baghdad; Edited by Simon Robinson.

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