

The Power of Local Ties: Civilian Resistance to Sectarian Displacement in Iraq

Rhys Dubin



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About the Author:



Rhys Dubin is a Non-Resident Fellow at IRIS. He is currently pursuing his MPhil in international relations at the University of Oxford. His research project investigates armed group strategies and neighborhood ethno-sectarian segregation in Baghdad between 2006 and 2007. He tweets @Rhys_Dubin.

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Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)

American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
Kirkuk Main Road, Raparin Sulaimani, Iraq

www.auis.edu.krd/iris

iris@auis.edu.krd

[@IRISmideast](https://www.facebook.com/IRISmideast)

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Introduction

In February 2006, Ahmed Sharif's quiet life in the Hayy al-Jamaa neighborhood of western Baghdad changed forever.¹ Militants associated with al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) bombed the Shiite al Askari shrine in Samara, a town to the northwest of Baghdad. Within days of the attack on Feb. 22, reports indicate that the activities of militant groups affiliated with Shiite Islamist political factions (which had already been operating at a low tempo throughout much of 2005) had gained considerable strength across Baghdad. Al Qaeda and affiliated militias responded in kind, carving out havens of influence in eastern Baghdad, and displacing Shiite civilians en masse.

When violence reached Sharif's neighborhood of Hayy al-Jamaa, however, its impact was confusing and difficult to understand. Sharif and his family lived in a small two-block by three-block enclave, separated from the rest of the neighborhood by a large commercial street, and from the predominantly Shiite quarter of Washash by a series of railroad tracks. Nearly all the surrounding quarters were characterized by extreme violence. Al Qaeda controlled the parts of Hayy al-Jamaa to their west — an area locally dubbed “The Morgue” due to the number of sectarian killings, kidnappings, and ambushes that took place there. To the east, Washash was one of the primary western strongholds of Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army (Arabic: *jeish al-mehdi* or JAM), which frequently launched raids, mortar attacks, and cleansing operations into surrounding Sunni neighborhoods.

Sharif's small corner of Hayy al-Jamaa — caught between the two cleavages of the conflict — seemed poised to witness a similar degree of violence and displacement. But, for reasons discussed in this paper, this small corner of the city was relatively resistant to the conflict. By most accounts, nearly 80 percent of Shiite residents and families remained in place. Throughout the rest of Hayy al-Jamaa, the opposite was true. Nearly all Shiites fled east to Shiite militia strongholds, or left Baghdad entirely for the relative safety of the country's south. What explains Sharif's neighborhood's resistance to the tide of sectarian and ethnic violence that swept through Baghdad during that time?

Upon close inspection of Baghdad during this time period, the story of Sharif's enclave in Hayy al-Jamaa is not exceptional. Narratives of block-by-block variation in the level of strategic displacement and sectarian targeting are uniquely representative of the extreme violence that defined Baghdad between 2006 and 2007. This violence was brutal, unpredictable, and unevenly distributed throughout the urban landscape. This variation raises a question with broad relevance for the examination of contemporary Iraqi social and political life as well as conflict studies: Why did the displacement of

¹ Names of individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity

populations from neighborhoods take place in certain locations, but not others? Through what mechanisms and social practices were certain communities able to avoid this tide of violence?

Based on quantitative modeling, as well as extensive fieldwork interviews conducted with Baghdad residents in roughly 15 neighborhoods, this research proposes an answer rooted in the social history and composition of the urban landscape. The presence or absence of forced displacement can be traced to pre-conflict experiences of different neighborhoods, the depth of neighborly social ties, and the relative social cohesion of localities that experience violence. As armed groups pushed into new territory and sought intelligence about potential threats, the communities they encountered were not homogenous. Social capital was distributed unevenly across the conflict space.

The article argues that this feature is uniquely capable of explaining a proportion of the variation in displacement experienced throughout Baghdad. While militias used displacement to achieve their aims in localities they believed to be strategically valuable, neighborhoods with higher levels of social capital were able to leverage dense and cohesive networks to diffuse militia intelligence gathering efforts, specifically those targeting non-coethnic inhabitants of the same area. Simultaneously, the same — often older — neighborhoods were more likely to include residents with networks, contacts, and resources that would enable them to avoid potential episodes of violence.

The Baghdad of 2020 is very different than the Baghdad of 2006 – 2007. The recent violence and targeted killings in 2019-2020 are the product of an ongoing crackdown against activists and protestors on the part of the ruling militias, and have little to do with neighborhood-level or sectarian dynamics. Nonetheless, violence within and between urban neighborhoods divided along ethno-sectarian lines remains a very recent memory. Looking to conflict dynamics in Baghdad during the 2006 – 2007 period provides potential resources for understanding and responding to such situations as they emerge in the future.

Armed Groups in Baghdad after the Invasion

Before turning to specific neighborhoods in Baghdad, a discussion of the broader dynamics of violence and armed actors is warranted. In the tumultuous post-2003 period, numerous groups saw opportunities to gain demographic and political advantage in the newly sectarianized environment. The 2006 bombing in Samara escalated that process by legitimizing the use of violence and accentuating a sense of a collective communal threat against the Shiite community. Armed groups sought

political power by seizing territory in the strategic capital city under the banner of protecting affiliated ethnic communities.

Moqtada Sadr's *jeish al-mehdi* (JAM) was likely the most powerful non-state armed group operating in Baghdad at the time. Sadr, the scion of a powerful religious family, had by this point managed to position himself as the effective spokesperson for a large segment of disenfranchised, largely lower-class Iraqis, who neither benefited from the Baath regime nor from its ouster after 2003. Importantly, given Sadr's political ambitions, JAM operated as one of several tools at his movement's disposal — including parliamentary politics, protests, and service provision.

Insofar as it operated as an armed group, JAM functioned as a highly effective tool for seizing territory. Made up largely of the same dispossessed Shiite youth, hailing primarily from Sadr city and other *sarayif* (former slum neighborhoods populated by rural migrants from the country's south), they rapidly expanded their sphere of influence after 2006. Though the group itself was quite fragmented, its operations had a unique organizational logic, largely justified under the ambit of protecting at-risk Shiite communities: First, units would destabilize predominantly Sunni or mixed areas by disrupting their socioeconomic fabric, methodically attacking shop owners and other local notables as a way of forcing residents to flee for lack of supplies. Second, they would use those newly acquired zones as bases for further expansion.

Unable to amass the same number of fighters or civilian supporters as Sadr, AQI head Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other leaders instead focused simultaneously on consolidating their position in Sunni majority neighborhoods — often along the urban routes to Anbar — and mass casualty attacks (IEDs, car bombings etc.) targeting both Shiite civilians and U.S. forces. Zarqawi was explicit on the latter point, publicly announcing his desire to kill Shiites on a number of occasions. This category of violence was designed to stoke sectarian tensions towards the end of forcing American troops out of the country. Though Sunni militias were often composed of small bands of geographically dispersed fighters (originally set up as “The Insurgency,” almost exclusively to fight American troops), they nonetheless gained a foothold in key areas of Baghdad through intimidation, assassination, and bombings.

Variations Across Neighborhoods

The present research focuses on the relationship between neighborhood age and forced displacement based on the assumption — informed by sociological literature on urban networks — that older neighborhoods, especially in a city with the development history of Baghdad, are much more likely to have longstanding familial and social networks of trust, mutual engagement, and familiarity. These older neighborhoods would also be more likely to house residents with access to resources

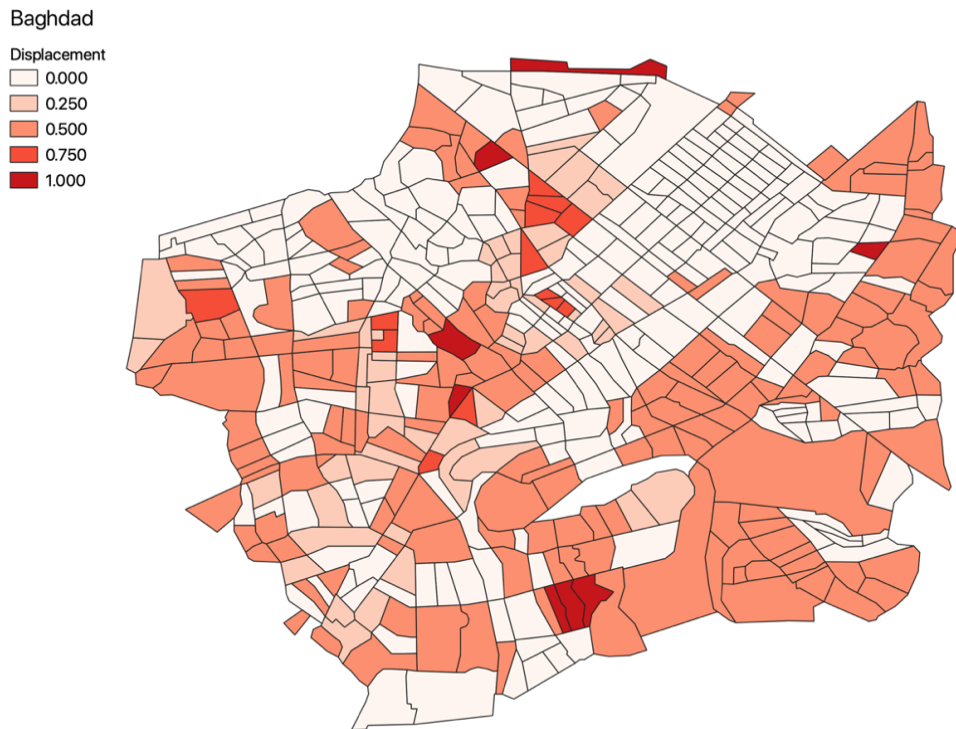
and contacts — both in government and armed groups — that might enable them to resolve disputes peacefully, without recourse to violence or forced displacement.

This intuition was confirmed through quantitative modeling: Older neighborhoods were indeed systematically less likely to experience high levels of conflict-related displacement. Importantly, these results hold when keeping a number of other local factors constant, including levels of violence, the original sectarian majority of the neighborhood pre-2006, the spatial layout of neighborhoods themselves, wealth, displacement in surrounding neighborhoods, proximity to militia strongholds, and the presence of U.S. and Coalition military bases.

The quantitative analysis is compelling but leaves key questions unanswered. We are left wondering how precisely neighborhood age reflects differing levels of social capital, as well as how social capital actually functions to prevent sectarian displacement. The methodology therefore relies heavily on fieldwork to decipher the context-specific mechanisms that link neighborhood-level networks and activism with positive conflict outcomes. In this particular paper, the research highlights one comparison. It concerns two geographically proximate blocks in western Baghdad: al-Arabi in Mansour (high social capital), and several sectors of Hayy al-Jamaa (primarily low social capital).

Neighborhood 1: Al Arabi

Al Arabi was constructed as part of the Mansour district in the 1950s — a relatively wealthy oasis in the western part of the city. Many of its residents moved away from rapidly aging sections of the Old City for the promise of modern housing. By the 1980s, the neighborhood was very well-established. A resident of the broader Mansour area until the 1980s recalled it as “genteel and modern...You still see large houses, big houses.” Prior to the U.S. invasion, it was also described as a center of Baghdadi high society. “There were two prominent clubs — the Hunting Club and the Mansour Club,” one resident explained. “The intelligentsia would go to them.” By 2003, the neighborhood had enjoyed decades of elite status within the city, with residents that were generally well-connected to both formal and informal sources of leverage and power within the state.

Displacement levels in Baghdad between 2006 and 2007 (percentage of population)

Another key element of the district's social fabric was the presence of old, multigenerational families. The resident who left in the 80s explained that, "Our neighbors...had been there for as long as my family had. There wasn't frequent movement in and out." These roots bred a kind of intimate social familiarity described by multiple interviewees. "My grandmother would know the whole family. As long as she knew their last name, she would know who they were. Buildings might have been remodeled or rebuilt, but people stayed in place," said another. A separate resident of al-Arabi described a similar — though slightly less genteel — version of the same narrative: "My grandfather was a hardcore communist. Him and his friends would sit and bullshit for hours. They'd been sitting together drinking, smoking, playing poker for years, ever since he moved to the neighborhood. He couldn't hate those people."

Neighborhood 2: Hayy al-Jamaa'

Hayy al-Jamaa's (English: the university neighborhood) history bears a striking resemblance to al-Mansour in general, and al-Arabi in particular, but with a notable divergence. The first homes in the area were built around the same time, in the 1960s, for a similar demographic: As the name suggests, it was meant primarily for upper-class professors from the University of Baghdad and other institutes of higher education in the capital. The vast majority of residents and their families were educated and economically prosperous in comparison to the rest of the city.

Still, the neighborhood's solidification into a cohesive, durable neighborhood was short-lived — at least in comparison to al-Arabi. In contrast to al-Arabi, where the vast majority of residents remained in place until at least the early stages of the 2006-2007 sectarian violence, by 2003 many of Hayy al-Jamaa's residents had left the country, driven by the economic hardship of UN-imposed sanctions in the 1990s. By one resident's account, nearly 75 percent of the original professoriate that made up the neighborhood's former inhabitants had left by 2003. These absences left room in the neighborhood for internally displaced Iraqis, especially those affected by the urban fighting that characterized the early years of the American occupation.

As a result, by 2006 the neighborhood was comprised largely of a hodgepodge of different residents: enclaves that had remained since the area's founding, maintaining their social networks and original ties to universities and academia, and others who were recent arrivals from outside the city, with scarce historical or familial ties to the locality itself.

Comparing Two Neighborhoods

From multiple accounts of residents in both neighborhoods, we see numerous similarities between both al-Arabi and Hayy al-Jamaa: First, though al-Arabi/Mansour was generally seen as more elite, both areas were founded around the same time, with originally similar foundational social structures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, they are geographically proximate — less than a kilometer away from each other — essentially sharing an administrative border. Third, their initial experiences of violence during the sectarian conflict are quite similar, with high levels of targeted and indiscriminate violence perpetrated by militias on all sides.

In the early days of the sectarian conflict, both neighborhoods witnessed intense violence due to their vulnerable locations. "Our house was right on the border between Washash and [the main part of] Mansour" explained one al-Arabi resident, meaning that al-Arabi would be in close proximity to the cross hairs of nearly every major episode of combat, including American troops seeking to root out al-Qaeda strongholds, and various militias jockeying for control of neighborhood boundaries. Hayy al-Jamaa was similarly exposed, with a steady flow of armed actors and activities unfolding in and around the neighborhood.

As the conflict endured, however, differences would arise. Al-Arabi — with its multigenerational families, links to powerful actors within the state apparatus, and ties of reciprocal responsibility and familiarity — exhibited a capacity to absorb the shocks of the violent conflict overtaking the city. "People there didn't care much about the sectarian divide. We didn't want to mess with it. Nobody here wanted to kill their neighbors," said a resident. In contrast, Hayy al-Jamaa experienced a phenomenon

of forced displacement and a fragmentation of its social structures: “When the refugees from Falluja and other parts of the city started to arrive, things started to get worse for the Shiites there,” said one resident. In Hayy al-Jamaa, nearly 75 percent of Shiite civilians were displaced. In al-Arabi — though displacement certainly occurred — only 25 percent of Sunnis left their homes. In nearly every interview conducted with members of both communities, evidence of social capital’s presence and absence was in turn connected to that central outcome.

In the case of al-Arabi, one incident highlighted by two separate interviewees effectively illustrates the causal link between evidence of social ties and low levels of displacement: On a routine sweep of the neighborhood during which JAM militia members would collect a “tax,” a Sunni resident refused to hand over the required sum (roughly 5,000 Iraqi dinars). The situation escalated to the point where the man (widely known in the neighborhood to have mental health issues) slammed his front door, only to return with a gun that he pointed at the fighters, threatening them and demanding that they leave. The confrontation continued until one of the interviewee’s grandfathers (who knew the family of the man threatening the JAM militia members) arrived to intervene. “My grandfather heard what was happening and came out. It seemed like the whole neighborhood was speaking with the JAM men, saying, ‘Come on guys, you know he’s not mentally stable, just leave the family alone.’” Despite the entreaties of the neighbors, the Sunni man refused to leave his house. Instead, he called a known Sunni commander from a neighboring area, requesting help. Fighters quickly showed up and proceeded to block the road with several vehicles. Finally, “after a lot of negotiations, they [JAM] eventually let al-Qaeda take the man away to a different neighborhood. They gave the family five or six hours to clear out,” he said. “It only went down that way because the neighborhood spoke with those JAM leaders. [Instead of killing them] they just said the whole family had to leave.” While this eventual outcome was a form of displacement, it illustrates a number of the strategies available to communities with high levels of social capital.

The al-Arabi narrative emphasizes the role played by social familiarity and access to powerful networks in crucial moments of de-escalation. It was the interviewee’s grandfather that initially responded to the disturbance — the man who, as a “hardcore communist” had sat, “bullshitting and playing poker” with the residents of the same street where the situation occurred. Moreover, by the time the grandfather arrived, the whole neighborhood was there “speaking with the JAM men,” actively engaging with the situation, not avoiding confrontation or allowing militia members to act unobstructed. Perhaps even more important was the fact that the content of civilian engagement with JAM in that moment conveyed critical intelligence regarding the family in question (“Come on guys, you know he’s not mentally stable, just leave the family alone”). Knowledge of “at risk” members of a community is key intelligence only

available to those with deep familiarity with the fabric of a given locality, block, neighborhood, or district. “People stood up for each other,” said an interviewee.

In contrast, Hayy al-Jamaa residents consistently connected the absence of social ties to higher levels of displacement. “In some of the areas near us, nobody trusted the army, military, or really each other. So, they turned to al-Qaeda” said a Hayy al-Jamaa resident. “They didn’t love the militias, but they felt they didn’t have a choice.” In particular, several interviewees highlighted a sense of “tit for tat” retaliation that emerged, particularly in areas inhabited by higher numbers of internally displaced Sunnis from Anbar province: “These Sunnis [from outside Baghdad] were forced out of their neighborhoods by Shiites, and they felt let down by the police and army. Then, they came to Hayy al-Jamaa and saw Shiites in a place where they wanted to live.” The end result was a sense of resentment, aimed particularly at Shiite residents. Without a clear sense of social cohesion or links to external sources of authority that might have diffused that sentiment within a tight knit community, it boiled over into cooperation with armed groups.

This local cooperation in Hayy Jamaa often took the form of providing intelligence or information to armed units. “People were giving information to the groups,” said one resident. “They’d deliver information about their neighbors, about their work, their background.” In the midst of conflict and state breakdown, residents in fragmented communities felt unable to rely on each other for safety, and were instead forced to fall back on the most convenient security providers available. As one resident noted, “Generally, people were enthusiastic to cooperate because they thought the groups would protect them... They believed in them as if they were their army.” The end result was high levels of civilian displacement.

What, then, do we make of Ahmed Sharif’s section of Hayy Jamaa — where a diverse cross-section of the neighborhood was able to remain in place? His quarter serves as an exception that proves the broader rule. In contrast to the rest of the neighborhood with its high numbers of displaced civilians, the several blocks that composed Sharif’s community took a remarkably different course. The old set of professors and academics managed to remain put: “Our block, maybe you could say it kept its roots,” said Sharif. “We knew everybody. You knew who lived in each house, that he was the brother of that person. Everybody was tight.” Crucially, many members of his small subsection had previous experiences of collective action. Just after American troops entered Baghdad, many of the men came together to organize night patrols in order to head off any potential looting. “The men would organize shifts. They’d sit around, and if something happened, somebody would call and say there was a robbery or something, and they’d go over and investigate,” he said. “They’d spend the rest of the time sitting around playing dominos. It really melted into one community.”

Conclusion

While more fieldwork across a wider variety of neighborhoods is needed before comprehensive results and proposals can be offered, the above case study provides important initial insight into high levels of variation in civilian displacement during the most violent periods of sectarian destruction in Baghdad between 2006 and 2007. Despite the intensity of the conflict, with multiple militias contesting nearly every neighborhood in the city, certain enclaves appeared relatively immune to the displacement and ethnic cleansing that characterized the fighting. How were they able to remain isolated from these dynamics? While individual neighborhoods or localities might be targeted by armed groups because they perceive them to be strategically important, civilians are also capable of intervening to arrest or halt that process — drawing on pre-conflict reservoirs of cohesion, connections to state or nonstate power, and trust. These results have important implications for policies and interventions designed to safeguard civilians during civil conflict, as a serious evaluation of variations in social capital could provide critical information for protection and peacebuilding efforts.

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