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Even Dating Is Perilous In Polarized Baghdad

Rising Tension Between Sunnis, Shiites Nearly Puts End to Mixed Relationships

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BAGHDAD -- He was a dashing young computer engineer. She was a shy student at his alma mater. They fell in love over lunch last year in the university cafeteria and promptly became engaged.

As they prepared for a future together, the couple barely discussed a subject that, under Saddam Hussein's rule, amounted to a footnote in matters of the heart: He was a Shiite Muslim; she was a Sunni Kurd.

But now those labels are tearing the couple apart. Barred by their families from marrying anyone of the opposite sect, the couple has erased one another's cellphone numbers and stopped speaking.

"There is no hope in this country anymore for Sunnis and Shiites to fall in love," said Husham al-Gizzy, a 25-year-old engineer, as he buried his face in his hands and recounted the story.

For decades, marriages between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq were as ordinary as the daily call to prayer. But the sectarian warfare gripping the country has created a powerful barrier to Sunni-Shiite romances.

Married couples have filed for divorce rather than face the scorn of their neighbors. Fiances have split up as a result of death threats. And, increasingly, young single Iraqis have concluded that it is simply easier to stick to their own kind when it comes to love and family.

In a country where intermarriage was long considered the glue that held a fragile multi-ethnic society together, the romantic segregation of Sunnis and Shiites is more than just a reflection of the ever more hate-filled chasm between the two groups. It is also a grim foreboding of the future.

"Everyone is just taking sides to prepare for a big civil war," said Adnan Abdul Kareem Enad, manager of Sot al-Jamayaa, a radio station that has aired tales of star-crossed Sunni and Shiite lovers. "You can see the polarization of Iraq in the tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in marriage and dating."

The new taboo on Sunni-Shiite romances is only one of many impediments to love in this war-ravaged country. Religious authorities have forbidden casual dating. Women fearful of the bloodshed have become prisoners in their own homes. Couples have shunned posh restaurants once filled with lovebirds because they fear suicide bombers or kidnappers.

"This is the age of cellphone love," said Omar al-Azzawi, 33, an Internet cafe owner who has a Sunni father and a Shiite mother. "If I marry someone, we'll have to get married on the phone. We'll probably have to make love on the phone, too."

Still, the burgeoning obstacles to Sunni-Shiite romances remain among the most ominous signs of the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the two sects. Although underlying tensions always simmered between Hussein's Sunni government and the country's oppressed Shiite minority, few expected them to flare so violently and so quickly after his government collapsed.

For Hameed Ayad, a 24-year-old Sunni, the disintegration of his engagement to a Shiite classmate came swiftly after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. His betrothed shocked him by expressing newfound pride in once-suppressed Shiite customs such as public self-flagellation and pilgrimages to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.

Ayad accused his fiancée of fanaticism and broke off the relationship. But to hear him describe Shiite Islam as a "backward" religion suggests that he, too, has sided with his own.

"Even if she were the last woman on Earth, I wouldn't marry a Shiite," Ayad, a recent graduate in business administration from al-Turath University, said as he picked at a breakfast of scrambled eggs and cucumbers. "You could even put her in a frame of gold, but if I will break this gold, I would find mud inside of her."

Like many young Iraqi men, Ayad is so busy just trying to stay alive that he has given little thought to dating over the past three years. "I cannot guarantee my own life," he said. "How can I get married and be responsible for others?"

So when will it be safe enough in Iraq for him to get married?

"When the rooster will lay eggs," he replied, stone-faced.

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For young Iraqi women, the isolation is often more extreme. The relentless carnage in the city so petrified Areej Abbas, 25, that she did not leave her home a single time for more than three years. She had no cellphone. No friends. No guests. All day she watched television.

"I was miserable," she said in a Sot al-Jamayaa studio, where she started working as a science show host this month in her first venture out of the house. "I probably would have committed suicide if it weren't for the satellite television."

Universities remain perhaps the safest place for a romantic rendezvous, though religious Shiites have begun to infiltrate campuses such as Baghdad University, posting signs warning about the evils of dating and promiscuity. Still, high school students now say the primary reason they want to attend university is to meet members of the opposite sex, according to a recent survey by Sot al-Jamayaa.

"It's becoming impossible to meet girls outside of the college," said Enad, the Sot al-Jamayaa manager. "Even older men now are desperate to go back to school if they are single."

But even if soul mates find each other on a university campus, sectarian differences can quickly split them apart. Many young people say it is primarily parents who are driving a wedge between members of mixed couples.

Samar Hussein, now a 27-year-old Shiite civil servant, said her parents initially rejoiced when a Sunni classmate asked for her hand in marriage four years ago. Her older brother and aunt had both married Sunnis, and the family cared little about religious affiliation.

But Hussein's family now worries about the practical considerations of intermarriage. Vast swaths of Baghdad have become no-go zones to members of certain sects. Those who do venture there face abduction or death.

"If a Shiite gets married to a Sunni guy, how will her mother be able to go and visit her?" Hussein asked. "And when the country is divided into Sunni and Shiite areas, there will be a difficult question: Will the women choose to go with their husbands or stay with their families? And the kids? Who is going to take care of them?"

She paused. "It will be a great tragedy," she said.

Hussein's parents forbid her to see the Sunni man, but she continues to trade covert I-love-you's with him on the phone. She will not break a tradition that requires parental approval for marriage, but she hopes their families might one day change. "We will leave it up to God," she said. "Maybe He will plant love between our families and show them the right way."

Many couples -- particularly well-educated, secular city-dwellers -- continue to intermarry. But even when the lovers and their parents consent to the marriage, mixed relationships are often fraught with danger.

Qais Jassim, 26, a Shiite from the Adhamiyah section of Baghdad, spent his wedding night petrified that his Sunni wife's relatives would abduct and behead him. After three months of one-on-one meetings with the woman's father, Jassim had finally persuaded her parents to support their marriage. But her cousins disagreed.

"Leave her alone or we'll kill you," the cousins screamed at him, Jassim recalled.

Such disputes, however, arise only after lonely Iraqi souls manage to find a potential mate, an increasingly daunting proposition in a country with curfews, limited mobility and the constant threat of death squads. Some teenage boys have taken to dialing random numbers in hopes that a girl will answer. Other young Iraqis have tried to connect via ubiquitous Internet chat rooms.

In cyberspace, like almost everywhere in Iraq these days, one of the first questions is often: Are you Sunni or Shiite? Give the wrong answer, and the conversation is over. Manal Hussein, a 34-year-old biology student at Baghdad University, recalled someone in a chat room inquiring about her sect.

"When I told him I was Sunni, he said, 'Okay, bye-bye,' " she recalled.

Each thwarted Sunni-Shiite relationship etches the gulf between the two groups a little deeper and foils another opportunity to produce the next generation of children with mixed backgrounds -- those living testaments to the not-so-distant peace between the sects.

Ayad, the 24-year-old Sunni who said he would never marry a Shiite, fears that Iraq has already begun a free fall into carnage.

He shook his head and pointed at a dirty white ashtray filled with five crumbled cigarette butts. "The future of Iraq will be like this," he said.

Special correspondents Salih Dehema, Waleed K. Asmaeel and other Washington Post staff contributed to this report.

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