

GENERATION FAITHFUL

# Violence Leaves Young Iraqis Doubting Clerics



Johan Spanner for The New York Times

Muath, 19, a Sunni, joined an insurgent group in Baghdad last spring to help support his family.

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**  
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## Correction Appended

BAGHDAD — After almost five years of war, many young people in [Iraq](#), exhausted by constant firsthand exposure to the violence of religious extremism, say they have grown disillusioned with religious leaders and skeptical of the faith that they preach.

### Generation Faithful *Skepticism and Anger*

This is the second in a series of articles examining the lives of youth across the Muslim world at a time of religious revival.

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In two months of interviews with 40 young people in five Iraqi cities, a pattern of disenchantment emerged, in which young Iraqis, both poor and middle class, blamed clerics for the violence and the restrictions that have narrowed their lives.

“I hate Islam and all the clerics because they limit our freedom every day and their instruction became heavy over us,” said Sara, a high school student in Basra. “Most of the girls in my high school hate that Islamic people control the authority because they don’t deserve to be rulers.”

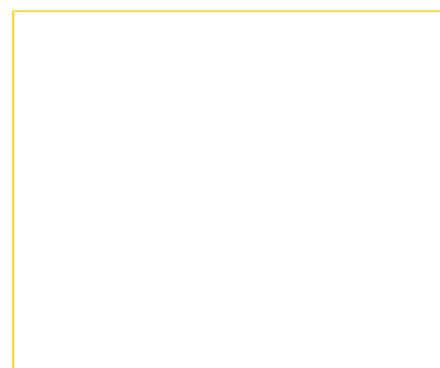
Atheer, a 19-year-old from a poor, heavily Shiite neighborhood in southern Baghdad, said: “The religion men are liars. Young people don’t believe them. Guys my age are not interested in religion anymore.”

The shift in Iraq runs counter to trends of rising religious practice among young people across much of the Middle East, where religion has replaced nationalism as a unifying ideology.

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Johan Spanner for The New York Times  
The youth prison wing of the Iraqi police compound in Baghdad. Many young people have taken part in Iraq's sectarian violence.

While religious extremists are admired by a number of young people in other parts of the Arab world, Iraq offers a test case of what could happen when extremist theories are applied. Fingers caught in the act of smoking were broken. Long hair was cut and force-fed to its wearer. In that laboratory, disillusionment with Islamic leaders took hold.

It is far from clear whether the shift means a wholesale turn away from religion. A tremendous piety still predominates in the private lives of young Iraqis, and religious leaders, despite the increased skepticism, still wield tremendous power. Measuring religious adherence, furthermore, is a tricky business in Iraq, where access to cities and towns far from Baghdad is limited.

But a shift seems to be registering, at least anecdotally, in the choices some young Iraqis are making.

Professors reported difficulty in recruiting graduate students for religion classes. Attendance at weekly prayers appears to be down, even in areas where the violence has largely subsided, according to worshipers and imams in Baghdad and Falluja. In two visits to the weekly prayer session in Baghdad of the followers of the militant Shiite cleric [Moktada al-Sadr](#) this fall, vastly smaller crowds attended than had in 2004 or 2005.

Such patterns, if lasting, could lead to a weakening of the political power of religious leaders in Iraq. In a nod to those changing tastes, political parties are dropping overt references to religion.

#### 'You Cost Us This'

"In the beginning, they gave their eyes and minds to the clerics; they trusted them," said Abu Mahmoud, a moderate Sunni cleric in Baghdad, who now works deprogramming religious extremists in American detention. "It's painful to admit, but it's changed. People have lost too much. They say to the clerics and the parties: You cost us this."

"When they behead someone, they say 'Allahu akbar,' they read Koranic verse," said a moderate Shiite sheik from Baghdad, using the phrase for "God is great."

"The young people, they think that is Islam," he said. "So Islam is a failure, not only in the students' minds, but also in the community."

A professor at Baghdad University's School of Law, who identified herself only as Bushra, said of her students: "They have changed their views about religion. They started to hate religious men. They make jokes about them because they feel disgusted by them."

That was not always the case. [Saddam Hussein](#) encouraged religion in Iraqi society in his later years, building Sunni mosques and injecting more religion into the public school curriculum, but always made sure it served his authoritarian needs.

Shiites, considered to be an opposing political force and a threat to Mr. Hussein's power, were kept under close watch. Young Shiites who worshiped were seen as political subversives and risked attracting the attention of the police.

For that reason, the American liberation tasted sweetest to the Shiites, who for the first time were able to worship freely. They soon became a potent political force, as religious political leaders appealed to their shared and painful past and their respect for the Shiite religious hierarchy.

"After 2003, you couldn't put your foot into the husseiniya, it was so crowded with worshipers," said Sayeed Sabah, a Shiite religious leader from Baghdad, referring to a Shiite place of prayer.



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Religion had moved abruptly into the Shiite public space, but often in ways that made educated, religious Iraqis uncomfortable. Militias were offering Koran courses. Titles came cheaply. In Mr. Mahmoud's neighborhood, a butcher with no knowledge of Islam became the leader of a mosque.

A moderate Shiite cleric, Sheik Qasim, recalled watching in amazement as a former student, who never earned more than mediocre marks, whizzed by stalled traffic in a long convoy of sport utility vehicles in central Baghdad. He had become a religious leader.

"I thought I would get out of the car, grab him and slap him!" said the sheik. "These people don't deserve their positions."

An official for the Ministry of Education in Baghdad, a secular Shiite, described the newfound faith like this: "It was like they wanted to put on a new, stylish outfit."

Religious Sunnis, for their part, also experienced a heady swell in mosque attendance, but soon became the hosts for groups of religious extremists, foreign and Iraqi, who were preparing to fight the United States.

Zane Mohammed, a gangly 19-year-old with an earnest face, watched with curiosity as the first Islamists in his Baghdad neighborhood came to barbershops, tea parlors and carpentry stores before taking over the mosques. They were neither uneducated nor poor, he said, though they focused on those who were.

Then, one morning while waiting for a bus to school, he watched a man walk up to a neighbor, a college professor whose sect Mr. Mohammed did not know, shoot the neighbor at point blank range three times, and walk back to his car as calmly "as if he was leaving a grocery store."

"Nobody is thinking," Mr. Mohammed said in an interview in October. "We use our minds just to know what to eat. This is something I am very sad about. We hear things and just believe them."

### **Weary of Bloodshed**

By 2006, even those who had initially taken part in the violence were growing weary. Haidar, a grade-school dropout, was proud to tell his family he was following a Shiite cleric in a fight against American soldiers in the summer of 2004. Two years later, however, he found himself in the company of gangsters.

Young militia members were abusing drugs. Gift mopeds had become gift guns. In three years, Haidar saw five killings, mostly of Sunnis, including that of a Sunni cab driver shot for his car.

It was just as bad, if not worse, for young Sunnis. Rubbed raw by [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#), a homegrown Sunni insurgent group that American intelligence says is led by foreigners, they found themselves stranded in neighborhoods that were governed by seventh-century rules. During an interview with a dozen Sunni teenage boys in a Baghdad detention facility on several sticky days in September, several of them expressed relief at being in jail, so they could wear shorts, a form of dress they would have been punished for in their neighborhoods.

Some Iraqis argue that the religious-based politics was much more about identity than faith. When Shiites voted for religious parties in large numbers in an election in 2005, it was more an effort to show their numbers, than a victory of the religious over the secular.

"It was a fight to prove our existence," said a young Shiite journalist from Sadr City. "We were embracing our existence, not religion."

The war dragged on, and young people from both the Shiite and Sunni sects became more broadly involved. Criminals had begun using teenagers and younger boys to carry out killings. The number of Iraqi juveniles in American detention was up more than sevenfold

in November from April last year, and Iraq's main prison for youth, situated in Baghdad, has triple the prewar population.

### Different Motivations

But while younger people were taking a more active role in the violence, their motivation was less likely than that of the adults to be religion-driven. Of the 900 juvenile detainees in American custody in November, fewer than 10 percent claimed to be fighting a holy war, according to the American military. About one-third of adults said they were.

A worker in the American detention system said that by her estimate, only about a third of the adult detainee population, which is overwhelmingly Sunni, prayed.

"As a group, they are not religious," said Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone, the head of detainee operations for the American military. "When we ask if they are doing it for jihad, the answer is no."

Muath, a slender, 19-year-old Sunni with distant eyes and hollow cheeks, is typical. He was selling cellphone credits and plastic flowers, struggling to keep his mother and five young siblings afloat, when an insurgent recruiter in western Baghdad, a man in his 30s who is a regular customer, offered him cash last spring to be part of an insurgent group whose motivations were a mix of money and sect.

Muath, the only wage earner in his family, agreed. Suddenly his family could afford to eat meat again, he said in an interview last September.

Indeed, at least part of the religious violence in Baghdad had money at its heart. An officer at the Kadhimiya detention center, where Muath was being held last fall, said recordings of beheadings fetched much higher prices than those of shooting executions in the CD markets, which explains why even nonreligious kidnappers will behead hostages.

"The terrorist loves the money," said Capt. Omar, a prison worker who did not want to be identified by his full name. "The money has big magic. I give him \$10,000 to do small thing. You think he refuse?"

When Muath was arrested last year, the police found two hostages, Shiite brothers, in a safe house that Muath told them about. Photographs showed the men looking wide-eyed into the camera; dark welts covered their bodies.

Violent struggle against the United States was easy to romanticize at a distance.

"I used to love [Osama bin Laden](#)," proclaimed a 24-year-old Iraqi college student. She was referring to how she felt before the war took hold in her native Baghdad. The Sept. 11, 2001, strike at American supremacy was satisfying, and the deaths abstract.

Now, the student recites the familiar complaints: Her college has segregated the security checks; guards told her to stop wearing a revealing skirt; she covers her head for safety.

"Now I hate Islam," she said, sitting in her family's unadorned living room in central Baghdad. "[Al Qaeda](#) and the Mahdi Army are spreading hatred. People are being killed for nothing."

### Worried Parents

Parents have taken new precautions to keep their children out of trouble. Abu Tahsin, a Shiite from northern Baghdad, said that when his extended family had built a Shiite mosque, they did not register it with the religious authorities, even though it would have brought privileges, because they did not want to become entangled with any of the main religious Shiite groups that control Baghdad.

In Falluja, a Sunni city west of Baghdad that had been overrun by Al Qaeda, Sheik Khalid al-Mahamedie, a moderate cleric, said fathers now came with their sons to mosques to meet the instructors of Koran courses. Families used to worry most about their daughters

in adolescence, but now, the sheik said, they worry more about their sons.

“Before, parents warned their sons not to smoke or drink,” said Mohammed Ali al-Jumali, a Falluja father with a 20-year-old son. “Now all their energy is concentrated on not letting them be involved with terrorism.”

Recruiters are relentless, and, as it turns out, clever, peddling things their young targets need. General Stone compares it to as a sales pitch a pimp gives to a prospective prostitute. American military officers at the American detention center said it was the Qaeda detainees who were best prepared for group sessions and asked the most questions.

A Qaeda recruiter approached Mr. Mohammed, the 19-year-old, on a college campus with the offer of English lessons. Though lessons had been a personal ambition of Mr. Mohammed’s for months, once he knew what the man was after, he politely avoided him.

“When you talk with them, you find them very modern, very smart,” said Mr. Mohammed, a non-religious Shiite, who recalled feigning disdain for his own sect to avoid suspicion.

The population they focused on, however, was poor and uneducated. About 60 percent of the American adult detainee population is illiterate, and is unable to even read the Koran that religious recruiters are preaching.

That leads to strange twists. One young detainee, a client of Abu Mahmoud, the moderate Sunni cleric, was convinced that he had to kill his parents when he was released, because they were married in an insufficiently Islamic way. General Stone is trying to rectify the problem by offering religion classes taught by moderates.

There is a new favorite game in the lively household of the young Baghdad journalist. When they see a man with a turban on television, they yell and crack jokes. In one joke, people are warned not to give their cellphone numbers to a religious man.

“If he knows the number, he’ll steal the phone’s credit,” the journalist said. “The sheiks are making a society of nonbelievers.”

*Kareem Hilmi, Ahmad Fadam, and Qais Mizher contributed reporting from Baghdad, and Iraqi employees of The New York Times contributed reporting from Basra, Falluja, Baquba and Mosul.*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: March 6, 2008**

*A front-page article on Tuesday about the religious disillusionment among young people in Iraq carried an incomplete list of reporting credits. In addition to three Iraqi reporters who contributed from Baghdad, where the article was written, Iraqi employees of The Times interviewed residents in Basra, Falluja, Baquba and Mosul.*

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