

# Iraqis hope changes allow return home

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**BAGHDAD, Iraq** - Threats by Sunni gunmen forced Akram Farah, his mother and seven siblings to flee their home in northern Baghdad. Four months later, the Shiite student is confident that measures announced this week to reverse sectarian cleansing will make it possible for him to return home.

"God willing, we will be back home next month," said the 23-year-old physics major.

That seems optimistic, given the immense problems in returning substantial numbers of people to their homes in a city that is still by no means secure.

Nevertheless, enabling people to return to their former homes is a key Iraqi goal of the Baghdad security operation. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government has said those living in homes belonging to displaced people have 15 days to clear out so their rightful owners can come back.

With the security operation just beginning, there is little sign so far that many people are returning home. Instead, once-thriving neighborhoods are now seemingly empty of people. Many streets are blocked by mounds of dirt or concrete blocks to guard against car bombers. Many stores are closed. Services, such as garbage collection, are nonexistent.

About 30,000 families - or about 180,000 people - have fled their homes in the Baghdad area during the past year to escape sectarian violence, according to the International Organization for Migration. They include both Sunnis and Shiites and are among nearly 400,000 who have fled their homes across Iraq since last February, destroying the city's mixed religious character.

Making it safe for thousands of people moving back into their Baghdad neighborhoods is a monumental task - especially when the streets are still not secure.

It is also unclear how many Iraqis will trust government assurances that this time, they will be protected against militias and sectarian death squads.

Last week, local authorities in the Shiite district of Sadr City returned a mosque to the Sunni community and invited Sunni families who fled the area to return.

"A mosque cannot carry out its function without worshippers," said a prominent Sunni cleric, Ahmed al-Samaraai. "I cannot guarantee that any of those displaced from Sadr City will return."

Despite the 15-day deadline, an aide to al-Maliki said the resettlement program will be implemented district-by-district only when military commanders consider the areas safe.

"I think it will be a long and gradual process," the aide, Sami al-Askari, said. "People need to feel safe and see plenty of troops on the streets. I expect those with limited financial means to be the first to claim back their homes. The ones with adequate incomes may never go back."

Al-Maliki has said those who don't hand over homes to their original owners or provide proof they are living there with their consent would be tried under the country's tough anti-terror laws. But one of his aides, Bassam al-Husseini, acknowledged this may not be much of a deterrent considering the deplorable state of the court system.

Touring this city of 6.5 million offers stark testimony to the challenges ahead.

Nearly every facet of life here has been affected by the brutal sectarian killings and cleansing.

The student body at the large Baghdad University campus in the Sunni district of Azamiyah has become almost exclusively Sunni. The university's main campus, located in a Shiite area but close to Sunni strongholds across the Tigris, has a mixed student body.

By contrast, Mustansiriyah University, where Farah studies physics, now has a mostly Shiite student body. The university is in a Shiite area, many of its Sunni students having transferred to Baghdad University or stopped going to class altogether. The Mahdi Army, a Shiite militia blamed for much of the sectarian violence in Baghdad, is also active on the campus.

With the civil service now dominated by Shiites, government departments fly Shiite banners. Their walls are plastered with portraits of top Shiite clerics, keeping many Sunnis away. Sunnis, fearing kidnapping or worse, pay Shiites to handle their dealings with government departments.

In west Baghdad, the districts of Qadisiyah, Yarmouk and Mansour have become no-go zones for Shiites. Motorists avoid many streets, especially in Yarmouk and Mansour, because of snipers.

Months of police raids and Shiite militia kidnappings have prompted many people in the once affluent Qadisiyah neighborhood to leave - some to Jordan and Syria. Pro-Shiite graffiti, some praising militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr and others condemning a prominent Sunni cleric, is scrawled on the walls.

"They want to make Baghdad Shiite," said Abdul-Qader al-Obeidi, a 45-year-old Sunni taxi driver who escaped with his family when Shiite militiamen stormed his house Feb. 5. "They came in broad daylight wearing police uniforms. ...There is no one to protect us from al-Maliki's government."

Bayaa, next to Qadisiyah and Yarmouk, is a nominally mixed area, but its residential streets are either exclusively Sunni or Shiite. Anyone who ventures down streets controlled by the rival sect risks death.

Just west of Bayaa lies Amil, where Sunni and Shiite gunmen still battle for control.

Still, Farah, has faith in reconciliation.

"I think we will all be together again," the student said.