

Society

Iraqi Safe House for Creativity a haven for orphans amid Baghdad violence

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

“I had nowhere to go except the street after losing my parents in a terrible explosion, until I met the director of this home... Since then I have a tender ‘father’ looking after me,” said 10-year-old Ahmad, who is working on developing his talent for acting. “I had the chance to participate in one movie already and am preparing to act in new ones,” he said.

Ahmad’s “home” is the Iraqi Safe House for Creativity, a private orphanage where he lives with 37 other children. His “father” is the home’s founder, Hisham al-Dhahabi, a Baghdad-based psychologist.

“I will work on making the children of Iraq protected internationally,” said Dhahabi, who has four children of his own. “I have been working with children for 11 years. Most of them suffer from depression and solitude as a result of the wars and insecurity plaguing Iraq.”

Dhahabi uses art-based therapy to help traumatised orphans cope with the chaos around them.

Iraqi Safe House for Creativity is a private orphanage founded by Hisham al-Dhahabi, a Baghdad-based psychologist.

“At the Iraqi Safe House we are treating the children by developing their talents, through art, music and painting. The programme proved to be very successful and the talented children received 27 international awards and dozens of local prizes and certificates of excellence in acting, fine arts, sports and singing,” Dhahabi said.

Refusing to call the residents of his house “orphans”, Dhahabi said

the majority of the children, who were very young when they arrived at the orphanage and had no documents to prove kinship, are officially registered in his name. “I have even produced IDs for them, a matter that makes me feel proud... They are an important part of my life,” Dhahabi said.

“**The number of widows and orphans in Iraq now exceeds 1.4 million.**”

His wife and four children were also happy to be part of the “enlarged family”, Dhahabi said. His wife “did not mind becoming the mother of 38 additional children. In fact, her attitude further encouraged me to seek support for them from local and international humanitarian organisations,” Dhahabi said.

Dhahabi’s interest in the plight of disadvantaged children started in 2004 when he first worked at the Baghdad branch of a Kurdish organisation tasked with protecting children. When one of the organisation’s workers was killed during sectarian strife in 2006, the branch closed and Dhahabi continued taking care of dozens of children by himself.

“I couldn’t leave them to face an unknown future in the hands of the state, so I pledged to take care of the children and rented a small house to be a shelter to teach them and protect them... This is how the idea of the Iraqi Safe House for Creativity started,” Dhahabi said.

The house harbours children until the age of 18 but Dhahabi’s responsibility goes beyond that as he helps them find jobs and get married through the Golden Nest programme he devised.

“We provide them with a small apartment in the beginning. The dwellings will be transferred to other beneficiaries in two years’ time, during which they would



Orphan children at the Iraqi Safe House for Creativity are trained to develop their talents in fine arts.

have established themselves and made enough savings to move out and start a family,” he said.

Dhahabi said he wants to mobilise international efforts to help protect Iraq’s destitute and orphaned children. “Iraq has succeeded in making al-Ahwar marshlands an internationally protected reserve and I will seek to have the international community protect Iraqi children from being exploited and pushed into being criminals and even terrorists,” he said.

In the last two years, Iraq has seen a surge of fighting between armed groups, including the Islamic State (ISIS), and government forces which has resulted in a dra-

matic increase in the number of orphans and widows.

Iraqi Ministry of Planning said in a report the number of widows and orphans in Iraq now exceeds 1.4 million. “The ministry has registered 600,000 orphan children aged 17 and below and 800,000 widows. The numbers, however, do not include the provinces of Anbar and Nineveh where fighting against ISIS is taking place,” ministry spokesman Abdel Zahra Hindawi said.

“The numbers are alarming, especially if we add up Anbar and Nineveh, they will definitely inflate dramatically,” Hindawi said.

Dhahabi said he had made re-

quests to the Iraqi government to provide support for his project, but the response was disappointing. “Every time, there was an excuse; volatile security, financial crisis, economic depression, etc.,” he said.

How long the orphanage’s proprietor will be able to continue looking after children on nothing more than private donations is uncertain. In the meantime, the orphans have found a haven amid the bombs and bloodshed of Baghdad.

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to the Culture and Society sections of The Arab Weekly.

Southern Egypt tribes maintain a distinct way of life

Mohamed Abu Shanab

Aswan

Abu Ubaida Essa would not have been allowed to see the woman he was preparing to marry before the wedding night had she not been one of his relatives.

“I don’t know what I would have done if my wife had not been a relative,” said Essa, in his mid-30s. “The idea that you get married to somebody you had never seen before is not easy.”

Marriage to the Halayeb people is about union between two families or two tribes more than one between a man and a woman.

Essa is not the only one to respect a tribal tradition in southern Egypt that prevents a man from meeting his future wife before the wedding night. Such a tradition is one of many that distinguish tribes in the Halayeb triangle, a barren mountainous area near Egypt’s border with Sudan in the south and the Red Sea in the east.

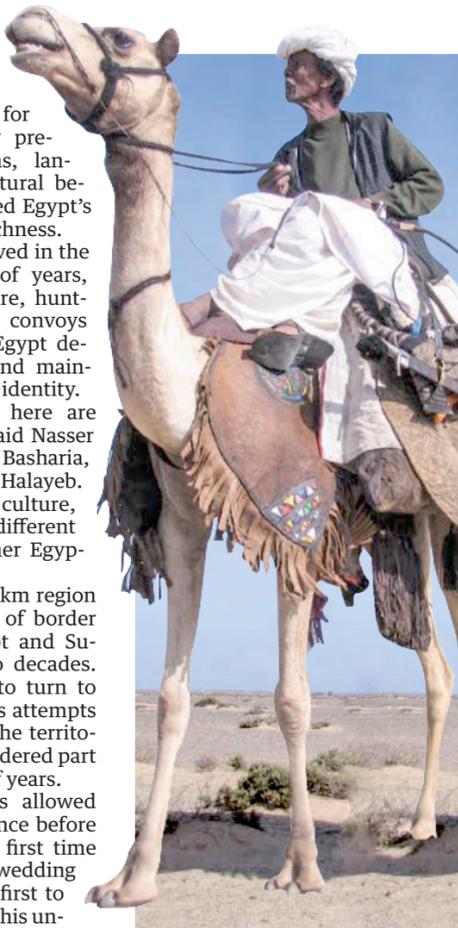
The area’s residents have been bucking Egyptian social trends for hundreds of years. By preserving their traditions, language, cuisine and cultural beliefs, they have enhanced Egypt’s cultural diversity and richness.

Halayeb tribes have lived in the triangle for hundreds of years, depending on agriculture, hunting and guiding trade convoys through the southern Egypt desert to earn a living and maintained their own special identity.

“Most of the tribes here are strictly conservative,” said Nasser al-Bashari, a chieftain of Basharia, one of many tribes in Halayeb. “We have our own culture, which in most cases is different from the culture of other Egyptians.”

Halayeb, a 20,500 sq. km region has been at the centre of border disputes between Egypt and Sudan for more than two decades. Sudan has threatened to turn to the United Nations in its attempts to prove ownership of the territory, which has been considered part of Egypt for hundreds of years.

A man is sometimes allowed to see his future wife once before marriage but often the first time they meet is on the wedding night. He is to propose first to his female cousins but if his un-



cles do not have daughters of marrying age, he is allowed to search for a wife outside family circles.

Marriage among the Halayeb people, Essa said, is about union between two families or two tribes more than between a man and a woman.

“This is why the physical beauty of the woman is far less important than the position of her family or tribe,” Essa said. “Every woman has her own beauty but here beauty doesn’t matter.”

Strangers rarely see Halayeb women, who wear loose-fitting, colourful robes and head covers. They are only glimpsed moving from one house to another.

After marriage arrangements were finalised between his parents and the parents of his fiancée, Essa had to build a home. A bridegroom of his stature has to offer several camels to his fiancée as gifts to her parents. The camels are a dowry the family seeks and the size of the request reflects the standing of the bride’s family in the tribe.

After the house was built and furnished, the wedding date was set, allowing several days of wedding festivities. A great number of guests from Halayeb,

where about 20,000 people live with most being interconnected by tribe links, showed up to share the joy.

Essa and his friends danced and sang until the early morning. He then entered his new home to find his wife waiting for him.

“It was an unimaginable moment for me,” he said. “The woman I had been waiting to come close to for months was finally beside me and under the same roof: Me and her alone.”

Essa did not have his wife to himself for long because of a tribal tradition requiring newly married wives to stay at their parents’ homes all day in the months that follow their wedding. When they get pregnant, the wives have to stay at their parents’ homes until they give birth.

Ali Doura, a researcher on southern Egypt’s culture, said Halayeb tribes have kept their traditions intact for centuries.

“Even those from the new generation have to abide by these traditions and also pass them onto their children and grandchildren,” Doura said. “This is less about marriage and more about the peculiarity of this magnificent part of Egypt and its people.”

Mohamed Abu Shanab is an Egyptian reporter based in Aswan.