

Society

Karada, Baghdad's dying commercial heart

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

Reaching Karada, Baghdad's thriving market centre only a few months ago, is a daunting ride through a maze of side streets and alleys to evade thorough searches and long queues at security checkpoints. Once there, finding a parking place is a hassle. Wary of booby-trapped cars, residents are suspicious of any unfamiliar vehicle and insist on checking identities of motorists.

"The catastrophe that befell Karada made us very prudent. We don't want unknown cars stopping outside our homes. Some people have even fixed cameras to monitor the movement of visitors in the street," said Kazem Jawad, a resident of the neighbourhood.

The once-busy market district has been deserted by shoppers and visitors who enjoyed spending time in its many cafés since a massive bomb ripped through the crowds in July on the eve of *Eid al-Fitr*, which marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. More than 250 people were killed and 200 injured in the attack, the deadliest in Iraq's war-weary capital in years. The Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility to the attack.

■ Resolute customers continue to pack Karada's cafés despite security deterrents.

"The painful blow had a tremendous impact on life in Karada. Everything has changed. Sadness prevails everywhere, in homes, in shops and cafés, which used to cater for visitors from all over Baghdad and the governorates," Jawad added.

Stringent security measures have been imposed since the bombing,

transforming the traditionally vibrant street into a largely deserted area to the detriment of businesses and residents.

■ The once-busy market district has been deserted since a massive bomb ripped through the crowds in July.

"We feel isolated from the rest of Baghdad. Entering and exiting Karada has become a total nuisance. If the situation continues as such, many people will be forced to leave the area in which they were born, thus affecting the social fabric of the street in which Baghdad's most prominent families resided for decades," said a housewife in her 40s, who asked to be identified as Umm Mariam.

Recriminations by residents, shop owners and businesses in Karada prompted Baghdad municipality to reopen the street for 12 hours a day but economic activity failed to pick up as Baghdadis, especially families with children, refrained from going there because of severe security checks and hassles.

Haidar Lazem, a 24-year-old street vendor, said with deep bitterness: "We had a prosperous life. Every day I used to make enough money to bring food to the table and much more... The place was very popular but conditions have changed drastically... The arbitrary decisions and ambiguous security plans dealt a fatal and decisive blow to the commerce in Karada."

Mohamad Karim, owner of ready-made cloth shop for women, bemoaned what he called the "slow death" of the street. "Many shops had to close down because the owners could no longer afford to pay rent. Besides, they could hardly sell anything since the closure of the street," he said.

"The livelihood of thousands of families is at stake. We don't know



Stringent security measures imposed after the bombing in Karada turned the vibrant Baghdad district into a largely deserted area to the detriment of businesses.

(Oumayma Omar)

what to do. The government is refusing to reopen the street or to pay compensations for the losses we incurred. We are losing our businesses and income."

Baghdad municipality council member Fadel al-Chouweili said in recent statements that the situation in Karada was "extremely complicated" and that the "need for a large database for the area in addition to the difficulty of controlling people going in and out" was among the trickiest issues.

Evidence of the July bombing is still visible. More than 50 charred shops are covered with black signboards and placards, inferring a gloomy and desolate atmosphere. Mustafa Faek, a regular customer of Karada's popular Rida Alwan

café, however, insists on maintaining the habit of meeting his friends for coffee every Thursday.

"We used to stroll a lot in the alleys and enjoy window-shopping and watching the busy crowds but today we avoid walking by the devastated and blackened shops because it is such a sad and depressing view," Faek said.

Economist Maytham Louaibi argued that Karada constituted an attractive target for terrorists because of its economic importance. "The aim is to destroy commercial life in the area that includes... tens of shops and trade centres and to give the impression that life is not possible in Baghdad."

"The impact was huge but it is difficult to assess the losses in terms

of numbers because we have to take into account the drop in the value of properties and the loss of tens of jobs causing sharp unemployment among the area's inhabitants," Louaibi said.

On a more positive note, resolute customers such as Faek and Sami Jaber continue to pack Karada's cafés despite security deterrents.

"Life should go on in spite of the sufferings and pain. We have to acknowledge reality and deal with it. That's the way it should be," Jaber, a regular customer of Rida Alwan café, said.

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

Begging an alarming phenomenon in Jordan



Several children sitting on the pavement begging from passersby in the streets of Amman.

(photo by Roufan Nahas)

Roufan Nahhas

Amman

Jordan is concerned about the long-term negative impact on the rising number of children begging on the streets.

Children, including refugees, as young as six are found begging at various traffic intersections in the capital Amman, while the public is torn between wanting to do something and uncertain that helping them is the right thing to do.

According to the latest statistics from the Ministry of Social Development, about 79% the country's street beggars are in Amman with 2,945 beggars apprehended this year compared to 1,116 in 2015 and 400 in the same period in 2014.

"It is truly an alarming situation that needs to be resolved," warned ministry spokesman Fawaz Ratrot. "The ministry is working hard to put an end to this issue, especially that children are driven to the streets to beg by adults and, of course, there are several cases where children carry home-made items to sell but in fact they are begging."

■ In 2015 Jordan launched a campaign under the slogan "Begging is forbidden in Islam".

"We have caught around 6,000 beggars since the beginning of the year... Some are Jordanians while others are from different nationalities

such as Syrians and Yemenis," Ratrot said.

In 2015 Jordan launched a campaign under the slogan "Begging is forbidden in Islam", and in May 2016, the government criminalised begging, urging the public not to give money to beggars whose numbers increase significantly during the holy month of Ramadan.

The ministry recently captured a group of Yemenis who were part of an organised begging gang operating in Amman. An investigation revealed they had a leader to whom they report. Some of the collected money was wired to their families in Yemen.

At the other end of the beggar demographic is Abu Ahmad, who roams every morning between vehicles trying to sell chewing gum.

"I am 66 years old and have no one; my children left me, and today I sell chewing gum at this traffic light; sometimes people give me money without taking gum but I insist they do; others close their car window and this is not respectful," he said with tearful eyes.

"Watching little kids risking their lives in the streets and sometimes barefooted with light clothes on during cold days makes me give away some money; it is true I will never know if they are really poor or just pretending but the scene itself makes me feel bad for them," said Najat Abbasi, 44, a former teacher.

"It is not civilised (to have beggars on the street) but look at other countries; for example, the homeless in the US and Europe; poverty does not differentiate between religion, race or colour," she added. But Rowaida Nino sees things dif-

ferently. To her, begging amounts to emotional blackmail and is an easy way to make money.

"I don't trust those beggars but I feel with them because they are maybe forced to work in the streets; I help some families because I know their situation very well by giving clothes, food and sometimes money," she said.

■ Children as young as six are found begging at various traffic intersections in the capital Amman.

"Some beggars try to play with our emotions and people fall for it. It is normal to be moved by sad scenes such as a woman with a little child sitting near the garbage container, but when you know that she has rented the child per hour you are disgusted."

Renting a wheelchair or child, or pretending to have lost a wallet are some of the tactics beggars resort to in order to lure people.

Social expert Omar Mhana said begging was becoming a profession. "For some, it is a full-time job that needs a lot of skills, but in other cases it is real, true enough to turn children to drugs and crime, and girls to prostitution... But how can we tell?" he added.

On average, the daily amount of money collected from begging is between \$43 to \$494, depending on the area, officials said.

Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.