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Desperate Iraqi Refugees Turn to Sex Trade in Syria

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

MARABA, [Syria](#) — Back home in [Iraq](#), Umm Hiba's daughter was a devout schoolgirl, modest in her dress and serious about her studies. Hiba, who is now 16, wore the hijab, or Islamic head scarf, and rose early each day to say the dawn prayer before classes.

But that was before militias began threatening their Baghdad neighborhood and Umm Hiba and her daughter fled to Syria last spring. There were no jobs, and Umm Hiba's elderly father developed complications related to his diabetes.

Desperate, Umm Hiba followed the advice of an Iraqi acquaintance and took her daughter to work at a nightclub along a highway known for prostitution. "We Iraqis used to be a proud people," she said over the frantic blare of the club's speakers. She pointed out her daughter, dancing among about two dozen other girls on the stage, wearing a pink silk dress with spaghetti straps, her frail shoulders bathed in colored light.

As Umm Hiba watched, a middle-aged man climbed onto the platform and began to dance jerkily, arms flailing, among the girls.

"During the war we lost everything," she said. "We even lost our honor." She insisted on being identified by only part of her name — Umm Hiba means mother of Hiba.

For anyone living in Damascus these days, the fact that some Iraqi refugees are selling sex or working in sex clubs is difficult to ignore.

Even in central Damascus, men freely talk of being approached by pimps trawling for customers outside juice shops and shawarma sandwich stalls, and of women walking up to passing men, an act unthinkable in Arab culture, and asking in Iraqi-accented Arabic if the men would like to "have a cup of tea."

By day the road that leads from Damascus to the historic convent at Saidnaya is often choked with Christian and Muslim pilgrims hoping for one of the miracles attributed to a portrait of the Virgin Mary at the convent. But as any Damascene taxi driver can tell you, the Maraba section of this fabled pilgrim road is fast becoming better known for its brisk trade in Iraqi prostitutes.

Many of these women and girls, including some barely in their teens, are recent refugees. Some are tricked or forced into prostitution, but most say they have no other means of supporting their families. As a group they represent one of the most visible symptoms of an Iraqi refugee crisis that has exploded in Syria in recent months.

According to the [United Nations](#) high commissioner for refugees, about 1.2 million Iraqi refugees now live in Syria; the Syrian government puts the figure even higher.

Given the deteriorating economic situation of those refugees, a United Nations report found last year, many girls and women in “severe need” turn to prostitution, in secret or even with the knowledge or involvement of family members. In many cases, the report added, “the head of the family brings clients to the house.”

Aid workers say thousands of Iraqi women work as prostitutes in Syria, and point out that as violence in Iraq has increased, the refugee population has come to include more female-headed households and unaccompanied women.

“So many of the Iraqi women arriving now are living on their own with their children because the men in their families were killed or kidnapped,” said Sister Marie-Claude Naddaf, a Syrian nun at the Good Shepherd convent in Damascus, which helps Iraqi refugees.

She said the convent had surveyed Iraqi refugees living in Masaken Barzeh, on the outskirts of Damascus, and found 119 female-headed households in one small neighborhood. Some of the women, seeking work outside the home for the first time and living in a country with high unemployment, find that their only marketable asset is their bodies.

“I met three sisters-in-law recently who were living together and all prostituting themselves,” Sister Marie-Claude said. “They would go out on alternate nights — each woman took her turn — and then divide the money to feed all the children.”

For more than three years after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi prostitution in Syria, like any prostitution, was a forbidden topic for Syria’s government. Like drug abuse, the sex trade tends to be referred to in the local news media as acts against public decency. But Dietrun Günther, an official at the United Nations refugee agency’s Damascus office, said the government was finally breaking its silence.

“We’re especially concerned that there are young girls involved, and that they’re being forced, even smuggled into Syria in some cases,” Ms. Günther said. “We’ve had special talks with the Syrian government about prostitution.” She called the officials’ new openness “a great step.”

Mouna Asaad, a Syrian women's rights lawyer, said the government had been blindsided by the scale of the arriving Iraqi refugee population. Syria does not require visas for citizens of Arab countries, and its government had pledged to assist needy Iraqis. But this country of 19 million was ill equipped to cope with the sudden arrival of hundreds of thousands of them, Ms. Asaad said.

"Sometimes you see whole families living this way, the girls pimped by the mother or aunt," she said. "But prostitution isn't the only problem. Our schools are overcrowded, and the prices of services, food and transportation have all risen. We don't have the proper infrastructure to deal with this. We don't have shelters or health centers that these women can go to. And because of the situation in Iraq, Syria is careful not to deport these women."

Most of the semi-organized prostitution takes place on the outskirts of the capital, in nightclubs known as casinos — a local euphemism, because no gambling occurs.

At Al Rawabi, an expensive nightclub in Al Hami, there is even a floor show with an Iraqi theme. One recent evening, waiters brought out trays of snacks: French fries and grilled chicken hearts wrapped in foil folded into diamond shapes. A 10-piece band warmed up, and an M.C. gave the traditionally overwrought introduction in Arabic: "I give you the honey of all stages, the stealer of all hearts, the most golden throat, the glamorous artist: Maria!"

Maria, a buxom young woman, climbed onto the stage and began an anguished-sounding ballad. "After Iraq I have no homeland," she sang. "I'm ready to go crawling on my knees back to Iraq." Four other women, all wearing variations on leopard print, gyrated on stage, swinging their hair in wild circles. The stage lights had been fitted with colored gel filters that lent the women's skin a greenish cast.

Al Rawabi's customers watched Maria calmly, leaning back in their chairs and drinking Johnnie Walker Black. The large room smelled strongly of sweat mingled with the apple tobacco from scores of water pipes. When Maria finished singing, no one clapped.

She picked up the microphone again and began what she called a salute to Iraq, naming many of the Iraqi women in the club and, indicating one of the women in leopard print who had danced with her, "most especially my best friend, Sahar."

After the dancers filed offstage and scattered around the room to talk to customers, Sahar told a visitor she was from the Dora district of Baghdad but had left "because of the troubles." Now, she said she would leave the club with him for \$200.

Aid workers say \$50 to \$70 is considered a good night's wage for an Iraqi prostitute working in Damascus. And some of the Iraqi dancers in the crowded casinos of Damascus

suburbs earn much less.

In Maraba, Umm Hiba would not say how much money her daughter took home at the end of a night. Noticing her reluctance, the club's manager, who introduced himself as Hassan, broke in proudly.

"We make sure that each girl has a minimum of 500 lira at the end of each night, no matter how bad business is," he said, mentioning a sum of about \$10. "We are sympathetic to the situation of the Iraqi people. And we try to give some extra help to the girls whose families are in special difficulties."

Umm Hiba shook her head. "It's true that the managers here are good, that they're helping us and not stealing the girls' money," she said. "But I'm so angry.

"Do you think we're happy that these men from the gulf are seeing our daughters' naked bodies?"

Most so-called casinos do not appear to directly broker arrangements between prostitutes and their customers. Zafer, a waiter at the club where Hiba works, said that the club earned money through sales of food and alcohol and that the dancers were encouraged to sit with male customers and order drinks to increase revenues.

Zafer, who spoke on condition that only his first name be used, refused to discuss specific women and girls at the club, but said that most of them did sell sexual favors. "They have an hourly rate," he said. "And they have regular customers."

Inexpensive Iraqi prostitutes have helped to make Syria a popular destination for sex tourists from wealthier countries in the Middle East. In the club's parking lot, nearly half of the cars had Saudi license plates.

From Damascus it is only about six hours by car, passing through Jordan, to the Saudi border. Syria, where it is relatively easy to buy alcohol and dance with women, is popular as a low-cost weekend destination for groups of Saudi men.

And though some women of other nationalities, including Russians and Moroccans, still work as prostitutes in Damascus, Abeer, a 23-year-old from Baghdad working at the same club as Hiba, explained that the arriving Iraqis had pushed many of them out of business.

"From what I've seen, 70 percent to 80 percent of the girls working this business in Damascus today are Iraqis," she said. "The rents here in Syria are too expensive for their families. If they go back to Iraq they'll be slaughtered, and this is the only work available."

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