In Middle East conflicts, families struggle to care for elderly members

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) War and its problems are never far from Jafar Ghazi's family.

One recent night, two bodies were found on a street near the Iraqi family's Baghdad home; just days before, two children from the neighborhood were kidnapped.

But such violence isn't Ghazi's only concern. Living at home is his ailing mother-in-law, who has high medical costs and an ever-increasing need of care.

Yet Rasmiya Mohammed, who is 85, is beaming from her bed in the living room, with her seven-year-old grandson Fadl happily sitting by her side. It is a rare harmonious arrangement, at a time when older people are often left behind in war zones in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

"Thank God, everyone here loves me and takes care of me," said Mohammed, wiping away a tear. "Many people, when they become very old, become humiliated or insulted by their family, who don't care. I am lucky. . . . Even the small boys take care and kiss me."

"She is a good omen for us," said Ghazi, adding that Mohammed reminds him of his own mother, who was killed in an explosion in 2010. "When I see her, it is like a blessing for the house, and good things come to us."

The Qur'an explicitly requires wholehearted care of parents as they age, and in many countries in the Middle East three generations often live under one roof.

Wartime dislocation disrupts those networks. Among the million refugees who migrated to Europe in 2015, few elderly people were able to make the perilous journey. Many Syrian families spoke of how the oldest family members refused to leave their homes, preferring to take their chances in a war zone rather than leave everything behind for an unfamiliar country and uncertain future.

The Global AgeWatch Index ranks countries according to the “social and economic well-being of older people.” For 2015, it placed Afghanistan last among 96 countries analyzed. Iraq was 87th, largely because some 56 percent of the elderly receive a pension, a much higher percentage than the regional average.

“Because of the wars, people have not thrown out their values, but there is a storm of dust covering all these values,” says Ena’am al-Badri, a sociologist and director of Al-Selaikh Elderly Home, one of only two state-run homes in Baghdad. “Many years ago it was a source of pride to care for old people. . . . Most Iraqis feel shame if they don’t care about their parents.”

That started to change during three decades of conflict. Under former dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq suffered war with Iran in the 1980s and war in 1990 with the United States over Kuwait; it weathered more than 20 years of Western sanctions. Then the 2003 American invasion ignited an insurgency, years of sectarian killings, and eventually the so-called Islamic State’s occupation of one-third of the country.

That chain of events crushed what remained of Iraq’s social cohesion, especially after 2003, al-Badri said.

“It affected humanitarian relations between people,” she said. “It makes families kill each other. This was not the case before. These are the ruins of war.”

There are as many different reactions as there are families, and not all stories are grim tales of neglect of older Iraqis, as their sons fight and die on Iraq’s battlefields or struggle with two jobs to support extended families. But many stories reflect social changes.

“The sanctions, the wars, and the violence don’t give us time to educate our sons in good ways,” said Leila Abdul-Hossein Hamza, director of the private Mercy Home for the Elderly, a charitable organization with an adjacent orphanage run by Shi’ite cleric Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr.

“We feel sorry now for what we see,” she said of their elderly residents. “A lot of sons and daughters do not take care of them. Many die with no one to bury them.”

Homes for the elderly see many troubled cases, like that of Kadriya Saleh, who at 75 wears the all-black dress favored by devout Shi’ite Iraqis.

“I feel shame when I mention my son,” Saleh said, recounting how he was a translator for U.S. forces and then left for America in 2005.

“I never heard from him again,” Saleh said. “He never said good-bye. He could have come.”

Her two daughters do not visit, either.

“They know that Heaven is under the feet of mothers and should not say, ‘Ooof, I don’t want to care for her,’” Saleh said. “This [duty] does not exist anymore for my son and daughters.”

Yet she feels cared for at Mercy Home and doesn’t “feel like a stranger here—thank God for that.” If she didn’t have the free care and a bed? Her answer is emphatic: “I would be on the street.”

There have been improvements to the home, where rooms hold one or two residents and are often decorated with plastic flowers and religious sayings. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has twice visited the home, and there are visits by schoolchildren to learn “how to care for people,” al-Badri said. Graduation parties have been held at the elderly home.

“There are signs of hope,” al-Badri said. “There are still many people trying to recover from their wounds, and people started thinking of how to heal society again. So people are rising up to face this.”

The number of residents in homes for the elderly is tiny for a city of 5 million. This state-run home has 38 people but a capacity of 100; numbers are now limited because of a roof leak on the second floor. Most families still care for their elderly members at home.

The challenges can still be enormous, as in the case of Jafar Ghazi and his wife, Hanaa. Half her salary as a medical service worker, for example, goes to pay for medicine for her mother. They are also raising three children, one of whom receives monthly medical care. And Ghazi hurt his shoulder and back five years ago when his mother-in-law was immobile and he had to lift her.

War prevented the family from sending her to a decent doctor years ago. And sanctions kept them from sending her abroad for treatment.

“Even with all the difficulties, we will not let her down,” Hanaa said. “When we just hear her breathing, we feel happy.”