

What not to wear, Baghdad-style

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The young women of Baghdad acknowledge that there are more serious concerns in Iraq these days than hair, clothes and makeup. But they also say that there might be nothing quite as exhilarating as stepping out of the house in a pretty dress, hair flowing freely behind them, behaving as if their country had not been shattered by war and dominated by religious conservatism for much of their lives.

"For girls," said Merna Mazin, a 20-year-old Baghdad University engineering student, "life would be tasteless without elegant fashion."

What Mazin calls elegant fashion bears little resemblance to couture or to the skin-baring summer street clothes of the West, of course.

It was 40° C in Baghdad on a recent day, but Mazin was wearing a multicolored sleeveless dress over a pair of jeans. A long-sleeve black shirt covered her arms.

Her black hair, with subtle blond highlights, was free of a head covering, however — not a small victory for Mazin, a Christian who wore the traditional Muslim woman's head scarf for two years to avoid being singled out by Islamic militias.

Although her clothes might attract attention during a summer day in New York only because they looked so uncomfortably hot, in Baghdad Mazin is one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young women whose freedom to develop a personal style is a signal of a thawing in Iraq's cultural conservatism.

After the US-led invasion in 2003, women here found their fashion choices largely dictated by clerics during Friday prayers and enforced by armed militia members who would threaten, kidnap or even kill those who were provocatively dressed. That was defined for quite some time as any woman who was not wearing an abaya, the cloaklike covering meant to conceal the shape of a woman's body completely.

Women who were threatened for wearing Western-style clothes were often forced to quit their jobs or school and retreat home, sometimes for years.

But now that security has improved in Baghdad, the capital, some young women have begun shaking off their abayas and started dressing more like the women they see on satellite television channels beamed to the city from around the world.

Most of those testing the limits are college students with only dim memories of women's fashions before the war. They still represent a small proportion of women in the city. Most women, by and large, continue to wear plain black abayas.

Sitting in a student lounge at Baghdad University recently, Mais Mowafaq, 20, was wearing a head covering. But the rest of her outfit, though quite conservative, could have gotten her killed a few years ago: an ankle-length black skirt, a long-sleeve black shirt and a long silver necklace over her shirt.

Mowafaq said that during the worst of the sectarian violence she had begun to wear an abaya after a neighbor warned that she risked being kidnapped, or worse.

"Militias did not want women's bodies to be visible, because they thought it might charm men," she said. "Charming men is a sin."

And it deserves being killed for?"

Mowafaq said she had also stopped using cosmetics, which many young Iraqi women regarded as a necessity even during the most dangerous period.

"All my rouges and other makeup stuff expired, and my mother refused to accompany me to shops to buy more," she said. "She told me, 'This is not a time of makeup. This is a time of bombs.'"

Dua'a Salaam Sabri, 23, and her sister, Riam, who is 16 but looks several years older, remember when the only real danger associated with dressing in the fashionable clothes they favor was the aggressive flirting they encountered from boys on the street.

"I will give my eyes for your beauty," they said men would tell them.

But in 2005, two carloads of militia members drove up as Riam was walking home from school with her father. The men tried unsuccessfully to kidnap her as punishment for not wearing what they called "respectable clothes," she said. At the time, she was wearing her school uniform, a long skirt and a T-shirt.

The next day, her mother, Bushra Khadhom al-Obeidi, bought the daughters their first head coverings and abayas.

"As abayas became more popular, they also became very expensive," Obeidi said.

Riam dropped out of school, and the sisters said they began to suffer psychologically.

"You see how skinny I am?" Dua'a asked. "That's because I couldn't eat. I was sad. We were sitting at home and couldn't go anywhere."

They have recently started going out again, but typically only in the company of their mother. And they have reverted to their old styles.

Dua'a was wearing a tight jean skirt that fell to her knees, while Riam wore a body-hugging white top and a snug denim skirt. Each exposed her arms and legs, which is uncommon here. For now, their abayas hang in the closet.

At Fashion Away, a shop in the Karada neighborhood that sells women's clothing, the owner, Hussein Jihad, said he sold only traditional garb until a few months ago.

"We are adapting to the situation," he said. "When the situation was bad, we offered only long skirts, and when the situation improved, we started bringing in modern clothes."

The shop sells tight leopard-print tops, sleeveless blouses and other designs yet to appear with regularity on Baghdad's streets. It also offers a US\$35 miniskirt. Jihad said that he had bought 50 miniskirts two months ago and that only one was left.

Hiba, a 20-year-old engineering student at Baghdad University who asked that her last name not be published out of concern for her safety, said the unsettled times had tested her creativity.

As she studied for finals in the student lounge recently, she was wearing a black lace head covering, paired with a knee-length jean skirt over white leggings. She was showing a hint of bare leg, from just below her knees to the top of her black Mary Jane shoes.

"I like to mix my fashion between secular and Islamic, so I guess I am a modern veiled girl," she said, smiling. "The militias did not succeed in preventing me from primping, but my final exams are."

Below: Riam Salaam Sabri, 16, pictured in Baghdad on May 19. Above: Sabri wore more conservative clothing while security in Baghdad was poor, but now she feels safe in Western clothes. PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICES

While they've yet to don bikinis, some women in Iraq are exercising their freedom to wear less conservative clothing

