The Meaning of Safety

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Instructor's Comment:

I F A GRENADE IS TICKING in a room full of people, the room is unsafe. Once the grenade goes off, and everyone is dead, the room is finally "safe," because suddenly the death rate drops from 100 percent to zero percent.

When we read in newspaper headlines that tourists feel safe travelling to Iraq[1], we might believe that "safety" means something like zero percent death—safety as a number.

But Iraqi refugees here in Amman, Jordan, describe safety as a direction, a partitioned area in social or physical space. In a physical sense, safety is one side of a wall, the *in*side.

For a lobster, the inside of his shell is safe, the outside is not (until he is thrown into boiling water . . .)

If a wall is built in Baghdad, the question of which side is safe depends on your religion.

If you are Sunni, the Sunni side is the *in*side. If you are Shiit, the Shiit side is the *in*side.

If you are Christian, neither side is safe.

In other words, social spaces, like sectarian identity, determine the safety of physical spaces. And social spaces are shaped by ever-changing micro-histories, politics, and fear. So at one time and place, being a Sunni is safe. At another, it is unsafe. And while time and place change, one's Sunni-ness cannot.

Thus it is by the flip of a coin that one lives on the inside of a wall, or on the outside.

"Someone called us from an unknown number. They said, 'If we find you inside your house, we will kill you and rape your daughters.' So, our house was no longer safe. We left right away," said my neighbor, Omar (name changed). His experience reiterates the narratives of countless others.

But the thing about social spaces is that they aren't real. Like money, or words, they quickly lose their validity in a new physical space. When refugees cross the border into Jordan, they seem to shed their social spaces, more or less, and mutually occupy the *in*side of a new country. (Omar lives safely next to his Sunni and Shiit neighbors.)

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[1]Associated Press, "First Western tourists visit war-torn Iraq: Despite explosions near her hotel, one tourist says she feels safe," Travel News on msnbc.com, March 21, 2009, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29811859/

This phenomenon has come as a surprise to some experts, who feared a spillover of sectarian violence into countries surrounding Iraq. How can people, who would be killing each other three hours away in Baghdad, be living peacefully together in Amman? It has something to do with the fact that social space is also *shaped by* physical space . . .

But there is more to safety than physical and social space. While refugees may have shed their physical and social dangers at the border, they have not shed their emotional terror.

Once hot water invades the lobster shell, the safety of *in*side is damaged for good. Iraqis, traumatized by the death threats and destruction they experienced at home, are now unsafe inside their own minds.

Children's graffiti on the inside wall of a courtyard.

"I am afraid to go out and buy groceries, or when I arrive I am disoriented and can't remember what I came to buy. I can't concentrate on anything," said Ghada (name changed), a 24-year-old Mandean now living in Amman.

Ghada was threatened in Iraq when she refused to wear hijab. Her best friend was killed for the same reason, and her neighbor was murdered by the same militia that mistakenly murdered her uncle instead of her father . . . So Ghada has every reason to be afraid of violence, even here in Amman where she is physically "safe."

For Ghada, and many like her, safety is on the *in*side of a partition, and until she feels safe *in*side her own mind, the war isn't really over. I am seeing firsthand that the invasion of Iraq is still taking place: minds have been invaded by trauma, families invaded by violence, and the safety of *inside* invaded by the terror of outside.

If a grenade is ticking in a room full of people, the room is unsafe. Once the grenade goes off, and all the people are dead, the room is finally "safe."

It is our failure to understand the real meaning of safety that has us counting dead bodies instead of damaged minds.