

## **Basra's Battered Culture Re-Emerges**

**Author:** [IWPR Iraq](#)

Iraq's artistic centre tries to recover from militia rule.

The unveiled female dancers shimmied across the stage in ornate red dresses, their hips and arms flowing to the drum beats of Basra's famous Khashaba music as the audience clapped along.

The performance, held by the Basra Band for Folklore Arts during a festival to honour the city being designated Iraq's cultural capital for 2009, stood in stark contrast to a festival held last year. Fearing Basra's notoriously brutal militias, the dancers then donned cloaks and veils that revealed nothing but their eyes.

Long considered the centre of Iraqi culture, Basra's literature, music and dance scene largely disappeared as Islamic fundamentalists and gangs dominated the southern city in recent years. Fundamentalism and fear of armed groups persists, and cultural institutions are a shambles.

But observers say Basra's richly diverse culture is slowly re-emerging amid improved security that has contained militia control of Iraq's third-largest city. Artists and residents say shows by groups such as the Basra Band for Folklore Arts, which performs traditional dances, are evidence that Basra is reclaiming its roots.

"I thought Basra would need a lot to regain its freedom and revitalise cultural institutions paralysed by fundamentalists," said Talib Abdulaziz, a writer and poet in Basra. "But I now realise we have made enormous strides."

Basra is home to Iraq's largest port and an eclectic mix of conservative Shias, secularists, Sunnis, Christians, clerics, artists and traders. Once renowned as a centre for trade and culture in the Arab world, the oil-rich province has recently been a battleground for Shia militias that attempted to control its economy and social mores.

Basra's cultural infrastructure began crumbling in the 1990s, when Islamists gained power locally and Iraq reeled under international sanctions. It further deteriorated after 2003, as armed groups took over the streets.

Known as morality militias, Shia fundamentalists were blamed for killing at least 40 women, forcing others to veil and banning many types of music from public.

They also drove out artists, including a composer who was allegedly threatened and forced to create an anthem for a militia group. He complied, and then swiftly fled to Baghdad.

Militias were contained or forced to the outskirts of the province after last year's Iraqi and British military operations targeting armed groups, most notably the Mehdi Army.

Improved security has enabled Basra's culture to blossom. But it is far from flourishing, and the new

liberalism is not welcomed by all.

Some clerics attending the dance performance to inaugurate Basra as Iraq's cultural capital in April walked out of the performance. Others followed suit later in the evening.

Sheikh Zakaria al-Salihi, a Sadr loyalist and religion teacher, calls the unveiled dancers "symbols of a corrupted society".

Alcohol and nightlife have also returned to Basra, a centre of vice and parties under Saddam Hussein's regime. The nightlife is unacceptable for many Islamic leaders.

"Clerics must act as guides," said Salihi. "If they one day assume power, they will be allowed to change this kind of culture by force to get the community on the right path."

He embraces the idea of Basra as Iraq's cultural capital "if that culture is based on Islamic education, not dancing and singing performances that pass on a twisted culture to new generations".

While militias no longer control the streets, their presence is still felt. The faces of unveiled women on posters have been scratched out in some areas. "Traitor" has been spray painted on some homes.

Even as they dance unveiled on stage, dancers frequently travel home in cloaks and veils so as not to be identified.

"Freedom exists now, but the government has not given us any real assurances that people won't be assaulted," said one female dancer.

"We are only free on stage. We're afraid to go to the market. People point at us because we're female dancers. The extremists and fundamentalists won't let us be, and their beliefs could cost us our lives."

Basra is also having difficulty rebuilding itself as a cultural centre.

The city is expected to hold a fine arts exhibition and concerts as part of its "cultural capital" events this year, but the vast majority of its cinemas, arts centres, theatres and music shops no longer exist.

Basra's drum market is now a home supply store, and its once-renowned poetry competitions and festivals rarely take place.

The artists' union offices have been taken over by a political party, while squatters inhabit the writers' union.

Once an outpost of the feared Badr Brigade militia, a massive cultural hall is now occupied by the Iraqi military and a media institute. Cows graze in the backyard.

The Iraqi government is trying to fix the problem and has reportedly approved a plan for a vast new cultural centre that will cost 10 million US dollars to build.

Talib Abdulaziz, who serves on the committee overseeing Basra's cultural capital festivities, admits that the lack of cultural infrastructure such as theatres, halls and cinemas makes it difficult to host events.

None will be held over the summer when some buildings are expected to be repaired and advertising campaigns developed for events later in the year.

He says that Basra's designation as Iraq's cultural capital "may just be a media campaign to show that security is stable for political and economic reasons and to drum up investments".

But despite the problems, there is hope. Many say life in Basra has vastly improved, even while security remains tenuous.

Major-General Mohammed al-Huwaidi, Basra security operations chief, says no acts of terrorism have occurred recently and that "some murders that happened are the kind of criminal incidents occur everywhere".

Abdulaziz says he remains optimistic that in the future, "Basra will once again host creativity and openness, and will embrace the culture of diversity that existed before".

Abduladhim Karim is an IWPR-trained reporter in Basra.

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