

## **Basra's Neglected Waterfront**

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Once attractive area along the Shatt al-Arab has turned into a deserted, polluted mess.

Groups of teenagers sit in the doorway of a deserted government building overlooking the broad Shatt al-Arab waterway, sipping from cans of beer bought in a backroom store.

Along the waterfront, small boats are moored amid floating garbage and sludge formed from leaking fuel and oil.

Today, residents complain, the former pearl of this southern city – the al-Ashaar area alongside the Shatt al-Arab waterway – has become an eyesore.

Residents of Basra can point to many examples of the neglect that their city has suffered under Saddam Hussein and Iraq's post-war governments. Complaints run from streets strewn with rubbish to a water system that pumps out water too salty to drink, forcing many families to spend their scarce cash on bottled water.

However, Basrans see the ruin of the waterfront as a particularly hard blow. This stretch of the river was formerly lined by trees strung with coloured lights, and was frequented by families dressed up for an evening stroll and couples whispering and holding hands.

But like most of Iraq's recreational space, the al-Ashaar waterfront has suffered from war damage, post-war looting, and further neglect during the past year.

The main attraction of the area – its water – is now a polluted mess, while its two main landmarks – the natural history museum and the Sheraton hotel – have lain empty since they were ransacked in the aftermath of the war.

Basrans who used to make a living in al-Ashaar – merchants, taxi drivers, photographers, and pleasure boat operators – complain that the place has sunk from being a tourist attraction to an industrial site.

"Al-Ashaar is no longer a place that people visit," said Ahmed al-Ali, 48 who owns a cigarette shop along the corniche. "The place has become a workshop to fix up fishing boats and paint them."

"Previously, I used to make a lot of profit out of photographing tourists, but now I shoot only a few photos for a small number of people," said Mahmoud al-Lami, 41.

Residents say the waterfront used to be out of bounds for fishing boats, but Saddam's relative Ali Hassan al-Majeed, appointed military governor of Basra before the war, inexplicably moved fishing boats from Fao island at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab to the Basra waterfront. As the area is far more accessible than Fao, which is 85 kilometres along unpaved roads away from the nearest places where they could buy spare parts and sell their wares, the sailors stayed.

Basra municipal officials, meanwhile, say they are waiting for the word from higher authorities to designate funds to spruce up the waterfront.

"We are aware of the problem, but until now we have had no instructions from the governorate to rehabilitate it," said Ali Fayadh, head of Basra's municipal council.

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