

## **Coalition Cast-offs Big Business in Baghdad**

**Author:** [Zeynab Naji](#)

Selling goods thrown away by the US army is a lucrative new industry in the Iraqi capital.

From his pavement perch at the Bab al-Sharki peddlers' market in Baghdad, Sabir Hassan is among a growing group of Iraqis who spend their days selling cast-off items from the United States-led Coalition military.

Well-leafed fashion and sports magazines thrown out by Coalition soldiers make up most of his inventory, which he buys from people working in US army camps. At around 1,500 dinars, one US dollar, each, they aren't cheap, but business is booming.

"There is a big demand for these magazines. Even although they are long out of date, Iraqis have been so deprived of this kind of thing that they are happy with whatever they can get," Hassan said.

High school student Omar Adnan is one of his customers. Though Omar doesn't understand English, he buys the magazines to look at life in the US. "It makes me laugh to see the kind of luxuries they have," he said.

But not everyone welcomes the new types of literature hitting the streets. Unemployed Muhammad Abdulkarim sees it as just another tactic to corrupt Iraqi youth. "These magazines are useless. The subjects they cover are totally alien to Arab society, to our reality and to our mentality," he said

Further along the street, Abu Rakan has covered part of the pavement with out-of-date tins of food, medicines, broken electrical equipment and empty videocassette covers.

He has been selling left-overs for three months and despite their obvious drawbacks, the items are popular, particularly among young people who like the foreign labels and the low prices. Shampoo, face cream and shaving paste go for 300 dinars, while consumable items like Nescafe, potato chips and Gatorade cost 250 dinars.

Most of Abu Rakan's stock comes from the rubbish tip near Camp Taji.

"We source it from the contractors who are responsible for moving the rubbish from the US army camps to the dump. A group of us pay around half a million dinars per truck and then everyone gets a share of the contents," he said.

Hassan Muhanad and his friend Mustafa were out of work for years before they began selling rubbish two months ago. "We heard about this from our friends who sell food and medicines that the Americans throw out," explained Muhanad.

"So we decided to buy one box to see how we got on, and then discovered that there is a lot of demand – and a lot of profit to be made. Some of the tins of food are even selling in upscale districts of Baghdad like al-Mansoor, although people there are normally too snobbish to buy other people's cast offs."

Amar Ahmed is one of the many peddlers working in al-Mansoor. “My goods are different to those sold elsewhere,” he said. “I sell the meals which are distributed to the American army, not just any rubbish. You get dry and fresh meat, desserts, a piece of cake and a piece of toast..”

In the al-Shula, al-Byaa, and al-Sadir districts of the capital, old medicines are the most popular items. Doctor’s assistant Abu Muhammad gets discarded drugs that have been scavenged from the American bases, or from friends who work with the Coalition forces.

“My training helps me recognise what to recommend to people,” he said. “If I don’t know, I leave it up to them.”

For many people, the product is less important than its point of origin. “I don’t understand English but I buy big quantities of medicine, even if I don’t need it, because... it’s American and that makes it good quality,” said Sadik Ibrahim, a blacksmith.

A spokesman for Iraq’s ministry of health said an investigation into the selling on of superfluous American medicines began a year ago, but has stalled, in part because of the security situation.

Many Iraqis have condemned the trade, expressing concern not only about the health implications but also the blind acceptance of US leftovers.

Civil servant Aseel Adnan, sees the medicines as nothing more than rubbish, “They could be a source of disease in themselves. They should be burnt or disposed of properly, not sold on to other people,” he said.

“Imagine people buying old medicines from peddlers on the street to treat their illnesses. If there were adequate health controls, this sort of thing wouldn’t have to happen.”

Zeynab Naji and Hussein Ali are IWPR trainees.

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