

## **Harvest Faces Renewed Threat**

**Author:** [Naser Kadhim](#)

Farmers lack the money to buy the pesticides and equipment needed for healthy crops.

For the residents of Diala, a rural governorate 60 kilometres north of Baghdad, the past year has brought more than just war, military occupation and insurgency.

It also brought a disastrous harvest to a farming community famed as the heart of the Iraqi citrus industry.

Diala is home to some 25,000 dunums (in Iraq one dunum equals 2,500 square metres) of citrus groves producing oranges, grapefruits and lemons.

But last spring's war also disrupted the government's annual pesticide spraying, and led to a harvest of citrus fruit plagued by disease and parasites.

"It's depressing. My only product is oranges," said farmer Muhammed Abbas, who tends ten dunums of orange groves.

Some of the trees in Abbas' farm have died, while the rest are producing far less fruit than they would under normal conditions.

"A tree that in the past would produce ten boxes of oranges, today produces just two," said Abbas.

Two main factors contributed to last year's poor harvest: the pest known as dubas - a relative of the aphid, which sucks the sweet sap out of trees - and the white jasmine fly.

In fact, the citrus blight follows hard on the heels of a similar crisis brought on by dubas in the date industry - Iraq's second largest export industry after petroleum, according to the agriculture ministry.

Since orange trees are thought to grow better with a bit of shade, most Iraqi farmers plant palm trees among their orange groves to provide cover.

If untreated, however, the pest typically strikes the date palms first, and later spreads to the orange trees.

Last year, it devastated Diala's palm crop, reducing it by as much as two-thirds, according to farmers.

The date blight then spread to the citrus trees.

In normal times, the agriculture ministry would use crop-dusting planes to spray chemicals designed to limit the spread of dubas.

The spraying season begins in April, said Hatem Hamoud, a Diala-based agricultural engineer. But last year's annual campaign was cancelled due to the looming war.

As a result, dubas has raged unchecked through the Diala groves, and has contributed to the weak citrus harvest.

Ahmed Jabar, an orange seller in the city of Baquba, said the price of one kilogramme of oranges has more than tripled, from 250 dinars to between 750-1000 dinars.

Those oranges that have survived are generally smaller and of lesser quality, he said.

While dubas is a perennial issue, the white jasmine fly is a relatively new problem.

A Southeast Asian parasite, which first appeared in Iraq in late 2000, the flies appear twice a year, in the spring and autumn.

Last year, the agriculture ministry organised a campaign to fight the spread of the fly, soliciting advice from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation, and had sent a sample to the British Museum for further study.

But those efforts also ended as the war approached.

Hamoud told IWPR that the agricultural ministry is now trying to work with farmers to protect future crops.

However, it has very few resources.

The warehouse holding the ministry's pesticides was looted in the chaos that followed the fall of Baghdad last spring. And Iraq's small fleet of crop-dusters was destroyed during the violence.

For now, the best the ministry can do is work with farmers on educational programmes, leaving them to buy their own pesticides and spraying equipment, Hamoud said.

For those who can afford the equipment, orange trees can be sprayed from the ground. But palm trees, which must be sprayed from the air, represent a more expensive option and are unlikely to see such preventative measures this year.

As a result, Diala's farmers may be looking at another disease-ridden year in 2004, for both dates and citrus fruits.

Naser Kadhim is an IWPR trainee journalist.

**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/harvest-faces-renewed-threat>