

## **Rubbish Plagues Baghdad Slum**

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Waste dumping is running out of control in one poor Baghdad neighbourhood, threatening to engulf homes and farmland.

Dealing with rubbish disposal hasn't been a priority in Baghdad of late, but in the Al-Hurya neighbourhood in the north of the city, out-of-control waste dumping is threatening the homes and livelihoods of local residents.

For years, an empty plot in Al-Hurya had been a dumping ground for the capital's building trade. But now, in addition to the bricks and tiles, mounds of household rubbish are being dumped on this fifty metre square patch of wasteland, which lies between Al-Hurya and the more up-market Al-Adil neighbourhood.

Fifteen-year-old Akeel Mahdi sells fruit on the main road into Al-Hurya, near the ever-expanding rubbish tip. He says the sight and smell of the rotting refuse is starting to put customers off and affect his sales.

"The garbage trucks dump loads there everyday. The municipality cleans the place up from time to time, but it's pretty pointless because they just come back again. Until the authorities find a way to stop them, it's just going to keep getting worse," he said.

Like many families in the area, the Alis moved to Al-Hurya over a decade ago, capitalising on the government's offer of free land in return for watching over the irrigation plant there. "My family agreed to live among the garbage because it was free. All we had to do was make sure the surrounding farmland was kept irrigated," explained Malik Ali.

"Then the project stopped and the machines were moved somewhere else, so we started selling watermelons to earn some money. We're still living in this rubbish dump because we don't have anywhere else to go."

Adel Abdulsada has lived in the Al-Hurya neighbourhood for four years, "We built our house from the scrap we found here, using old cement blocks and fixtures. It has two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Now we've had to start building a fence around it to try to keep the rubbish heap from invading."

Abdulsada, who sells the scrap building materials left there, relies on the mounds of refuse to make a living, like many people in the neighbourhood.

Twelve-year-old Haidar Murad and his nine-year-old brother Kadum get paid for ferrying rubbish here from other parts of the city.

"We go to neighborhoods like Al-Adil and Al-Jamiaa and pick up rubbish from there – food leftovers, building rubble, all sorts of stuff – and then we bring it to Al-Hurya," said Haidar. "I've been doing this for a year and a half."

This work nets them around 3,500 dinars a month, close to the average Iraqi wage. The money they earn, however, goes straight to their family to supplement its income.

The growing rubbish heap is now threatening to spread into nearby fields, where fruit, vegetables and rice are grown.

Haj Abu Naji owns 14 square metres of farmland near the rubbish dump. “[It’s] spreading and slowly taking over – it now covers about four square metres of my land. It’s getting into the irrigation supply as well, contaminating the water and blocking the flow channel,” he said.

The Al-Hurya municipality acknowledged the problem but said it was already doing all that it could. “We are concerned about the state of this area. The Baghdad municipal authorities have hired private companies to shift the rubbish from Al-Hurya to designated government dumps on the outskirts of the city,” said spokesman Haidar Ismail.

The supervisor of the company tasked with clearing up Al-Hurya, Ahmed Sami, claimed refuse was being moved every day to the official dump in Al-Shula. He blamed the scale of the problem for their lack of visible result, “We are working from 8am to 3pm, but still cannot tackle the problem.”

According to Abu Naji and other local residents, however, a number of different companies have sent trucks to move the rubbish – but most of them just move the refuse from one side of the road to the other.

“They get paid by the amount of cargo they carry and no one checks where they are moving it to,” said Abu Naji. “It would almost be comical if they weren’t being paid up 10,000 dinars a day to leave us living in squalor.”

Without a policy of enforcing strict anti-dumping restrictions, the municipality has no hope of controlling the situation.

“What’s the point of moving the garbage every day if people just keep bringing more and more. There are official dumps, people who don’t use them need to be punished,” said Abu Naji.

While the remaining farmland may yet end up submerged beneath the growing tide of trash, the threat of it spreading even further should bring a quick response.

Government storage facilities and the Kirkuk oil pipeline run along the boundary of the farmland, neither of which the authorities will want to see overwhelmed by refuse.

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