

Conflict and drought ravage Iraq's prized date palms

28 September 2018, by Sarah Benhaida



Iraq's date palms are under threat from conflict and drought

Sweet Iraqi dates adorn tables in homes across the country, but the fruit tree and national symbol has come under threat from conflict and crippling drought.

Shopping in the southern city of Basra, Leila only buys "the queen of dates"—those produced in the surrounding province.

Her husband Mehdi, 68, said the couple have the sweet fruit "every lunchtime, and also for snacks between meals".

The pair devours a kilo (two pounds) over two to three days, at a cost of 5,000 dinars, or just over \$4 (3.40 euros).

But high unemployment and price hikes mean not all families can afford such luxury.

For trader Salem Hussein, who has been selling dates for 40 years, the decline set in long ago—before the drought and even this century's

series of deadly conflicts.

Imports fill the gap

The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war decimated the groves of [date](#) palms on Iraqi soil, he said, dressed in a sky blue robe and white skullcap.

The majority of [trees](#) lining the Shatt al-Arab waterway, marking the border between the two countries, were incinerated by shells and rockets.

Hussein once dreamt of expanding [palm](#) groves and introducing even more varieties than the 450 already boasted by Iraq, which used to be known as the land of 30 million palm trees.



Basra dates grower Raed al-Jubayli says those producers that have survived have been hit by the double "tragedy" of severe drought and pollution from oil installations

The country's dates were long exported "to the United States, Japan and India", recalled the 66-year-old.

"We thought of developing and doubling the

number of palms, but the figure only falls."

Official estimates put the decline at 50 percent of pre-1980 numbers.

"We hoped for a better future—and it got even worse," Hussein lamented.

Iraqi agriculture has been especially hard hit by drought this year, resulting in an official ban on the growing of rice and cereals which require a lot of water and the deaths of thousands of animals.

With Iraqi farmers hiking their prices due to the drought, seller Aqil Antuch has adapted to keep his cash-strapped customers happy.

He now sells dates imported from Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait at his central Basra shop, which he has run for 25 years.

"The Saudis, who produce a high quantity, want to sell their merchandise and lower the price to 1,500 dinars per kilo," said Antuch, 52.



Iraq used to be known as the land of 30 million palm trees. But official estimates put the decline at 50 percent of pre-1980 numbers

It's a far cry from decades past.

Saddam Hussein "never let a foreign date enter Iraq", he said of the former dictator, who presided over the Iran-Iraq war and was deposed by the US-

led military invasion in 2003.

Sick palms once 'like patients'

Shopper Mehdi remembers palm trees in his garden during the dictatorship, when Iraq was under an international trade embargo.

"We would go to the agriculture office with a sick palm tree and they would examine it like a patient at the doctor's," he said.

But, in recent years, farming has also been hit by an exodus from rural areas, as Iraqis flock to cities and informal neighbourhoods.

Irrigation channels have become open sewers and the rows of trees which once provided shade have disappeared.

Palm groves have also been ripped up to make way for oil installations, the country's biggest source of revenue.



The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war decimated the groves of date palms on Iraqi soil, a trader lamented

Other groves have been snapped up for construction of new buildings.

In a cruel irony, the majority of dates now sold in Iraq come from trees which first took root in the country, before being replanted in other Gulf states

decades ago.

One Basra grower, Raed al-Jubayli, said surviving producers have been hit by a double "tragedy"—drought and pollution from oil installations.

"Buying a palm tree costs around \$250. The maintenance then costs about \$12 per season, while its four kilos of dates don't sell for more than \$3.50," he said.

But Jubayli remains proud of the date palm's "ancestral heritage" and its diverse uses.

"With the palm, nothing is wasted," he said.

"Dates bring people sugar and energy; the palms, which provide shade, once woven, make brooms; the wood is used to make furniture."

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