

# Transcript: Tourism in Iraq - Interview with Ali al-Makhzomy

Mehiyar 0:00

Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. The Nahrein Network works to build research capacity for the sustainable development of cultural heritage in Iraq and its neighbors. The Nahrein Network is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Global Challenges Research Fund. My name is Mehiyar Kathem, and today we'll be speaking with Ali al-Makhzomy, one of the four successful candidates in the Nahrein Networks Visiting Iraqi scholarship scheme. Thank you for coming to our office here today at UCL. What do you do in Iraq?

Ali 0:31

Cultural tourism in Iraq, through the project Bilweekend project that I started two years ago as a movement or as activity to encourage Iraqis, the young Iraqis to visit the heritage sites in Iraq. But then within weeks, I saw the demand on the impact of Bilweekend, Iraqi people that they want to visit even more and more to other sites. More people would like to join the trips. So we thought to start of building Bilweekend.

Mehiyar 1:11

So the weekend is a cultural tourism agency or company?

Ali 1:16

we could call it as a small company that operates tourism in Iraq for Iraqis mainly take them to heritage sites, to museums to the attractions in Iraq. And we call it Bilweekend, because the only free time of the young Iraqis and the Iraqis in general is during the weekend time.

Mehiyar 1:44

So these are short trips. How long are your trips to, to these sites?

Ali 1:49

Some of the trips are one day or two days over the weekend.

Mehiyar 1:55

What kind of sites are we speaking about?

Ali 1:57

We are speaking about Babylon, UR and the marshes. While we have four marshes in Iraq, but mainly we take people to two, the one in Meesan and the one in Nasiriyah Hor Chibayish. Nearby Baghdad and the old Abbasid palace and Mustansiriyah Schools in

the middle of old Baghdad also to the museum's Iraqi Museum, Baghdad museum. And then, during the weekends, we started to develop not only like to take Iraqis there, but we do it with activities with the musical performance, classic musical performance, traditional dance like chobe and also a lot of activities fun and educational activities. We also have a team of professional photographers that documents the trips, also with video draft, you can say that through Bilweekend we created or we build the bridge between the neglected heritage sites for the last decade and revive the Iraqis to visit that places. Now we see the impact in Nasiriyah for example, and UR, every weekend, you can see 500 people that visiting as a local destination for locals. But if you compare before 2016, before Bilweekend start, no one would go to Ur because they don't know about it, but the way that we marketed the sites, the destinations in Iraq, through the social media platforms, the people start to know about it just would like to go when they saw the photos that we have taken the videos and the activities. So they got motivated, also motivated the other companies, the operator companies, the local ones to compare with us. But the the main goal is the to revive the cultural tourism in Iraq go to the south, especially because we already have to the north to see the nature of a beautiful Iraqi Kurdistan. But now we can find the Iraqis during the winter go to the south and during the summer they visited the north. So I say so I think contributed in reviving the tourism in Iraq. Bilweekend also like advocacy, because in the beginning all the heritage sites where they have the holiday they have during Friday and Saturday which is the weekend in Iraq, but then when we start to operate Friday and Saturday, and the government realized that there are there is a lot of demand from people to visit the sites, they change the policy. And they make the sites open during and they sold a lot of tickets, a lot of entry tickets. So they found it like a good resource of revenue. Now you can see all the sites are open during the week

Mehiyar 5:31

What kind of infrastructure exists in on these sites?

Ali 5:35

In the beginning, we faced this problem in Babylon because there are no guide now you can see like 10 tour guides and all the employees in the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. So I think we are facing the problem of tour guides, public toilets, he can't find a trash cans, there is no signs to teach you the way was the temple is with the start gate sites needs like audio guides, as well. There is no souvineer shop, there's no like, it's not the infrastructure that you would think of a few compared to any heritage sites worldwide. But I think we started one step forward. So I'm still looking for contributing in the other steps and cooperating with the stakeholders with the with the other companies and NGOs to cooperate.

Mehiyar 6:38

What can be done from the Iraqi government to improve tourism in Iraq?

Ali 6:45

Practical experience. We need facilitating the procedures of Iraqi visa tourist Iraqi visa we need more infrastructure like the roads to get maintained also we need more facilitating the investment for private sector to start like to build hotels, even small hotels, it could be okay. Public coordination we need more education in the society that cities where the heritage sites and like Nasiriyah, Babylon, again I mean, changing cultural policy of the sites, I mean, the way of selling entry tickets, the way of preparing the groups before entering sites, also in other places like Uruk, you still need roads, at least made with wood, if you compare with UR, you can see Ur is now more prepared to welcome visitors than Uruk, and the two major Sumerian cities and two of them are world heritage sites. So the government should change more about the cultural policy as well. I mean, the site policy, changing laws as well and legislations about how people can make use of the heritage sites and that places in Nasirya, for example, 90% of people of Nasiriyah they don't know where UR is and how important it is. 90% they didn't visit it because of lack of education, like lack of awareness. Also, in the way of leading you to you will find many checkpoints, one for the oil field nearby, one for the prison one of the biggest prisons in Iraq, other ones for the airport of Nasiriyah. So I think if they change the routes, the roads to that places to the oil field or to the and they just keep this road to Ur site, it would be amazing and more like shops, restaurants nearby, new hotels, more hotels, I mean just to change the city to more touristic more attractive. I think this not only the government problem also the private sector, but again the private sector needs more facilitates more exceptions from the government to more support more support is more support and more trust and and I think this will be amazing solution will create a lot of job opportunities. will it create it like trust between the people on the private sector and the government at the same time also will reduce the corruption.

Mehiyar 10:27

Well, on that note, thank you for coming into the Nahrein Network today at UCL. I wish you luck your project and we look forward to seeing you again here in London. Thank you. Thank you very much.