

## International

# Mosul's ruined Old City up for sale, but few buyers

## Pungent stench from still unrecovered bodies blankets entire neighborhood

**MOSUL:** Mosul's Old City still lies in ruins three years after intense fighting drove out Islamic State jihadists. With rebuilding unlikely and Iraq's economy in tailspin, homeowners are desperate to sell. But many who lived through the horrors of IS rule there are now unable to find buyers for their properties in what still resembles a warzone.

Piles of rubble block streets and collapsed buildings mar the shattered ancient city center once famous for its mosques, churches and synagogues and maze of historic streets. Entire neighborhoods remain blanketed by a pungent stench which locals say is caused by still unrecovered bodies, broken sewage systems and illegal trash dumps. Many family homes on the banks of the Tigris river have remained largely undamaged, but are still off limits because IS booby-trapped them. "For months, I've been trying to sell my home in the Old City because it's too damaged to live in," said 62-year-old Saad Gergis. "But no one wants to buy it because it's surrounded by homes emitting horrible smells." The Islamic State group, which ran a self-declared "caliphate" across vast parts of Syria and Iraq, captured Mosul in 2014 but was driven out by the Iraqi army in mid-2017 after months of gruelling street fighting.

Many Mosul residents long waited for compensation or rebuilding-in vain, as Iraq remains mired in political and economic crisis. Gergis finally scraped together what he could and bought a plot of land outside the city to build a new home for his wife and four

children. Until the house is ready, his family is living in a rented apartment across town, on the eastern outskirts of Mosul. Returning to his old neighborhood is difficult for Gergis, who lived for three years under brutal IS rule. "When I go back, I can see all the old horrors of IS: the killings, the explosions, the executions," he told AFP.

### Waiting for state help

IS may have been defeated in Mosul, but Iraq is now struggling through its worst economic crisis in years, deepened by last year's collapse of oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic. The dinar currency has been devalued by 25 percent. "I bought my home well before the war at 60 million Iraqi dinars," around \$50,000 at the time, Gergis told AFP. "It's not even worth a quarter of that now. It's the same for all the houses of the Old City."

Mosul real estate agent Maher Al-Naqib said property prices have collapsed across a devastated city which has seen little government help. "The state has not paid for the damage, public services have not been restored, government buildings haven't reopened and bridges have not been rebuilt," he said. According to local authorities, Mosul has sent 90,000 requests for compensation to the central government, including 40,000 for the loss of a loved one and 50,000 for destroyed property.

But with dwindling state resources, Baghdad has compensated just 2,500 families. As a result, Naqib



A picture shows heavily damaged buildings in Iraq's northern city of Mosul. —AFP

said, the once expensive Old City has seen property prices "drop dramatically".

### Flight to new suburbs

Many have turned their backs on Mosul's once beloved center. Naqib said its original residents have been flocking to his offices to enquire about buying land in the suburbs, which is cheaper and now fea-

tures better services.

On Mosul's outer edges, farmlands are being gradually replaced by residential complexes with neatly paved roads, reliable electricity and clean water. The new suburbs with names like Zayyuna, Fel-lah-2 and Jamiyati promise the normalcy and basic services that many Mosul residents have missed for most of the past decade. —AFP

## UN inspection of oil tanker off Yemen delayed until March

**UNITED NATIONS:** A UN mission to inspect a long-abandoned fuel tanker off the coast of Yemen, which threatens to rupture and cause a massive oil spill, has been pushed to March, the body said Wednesday. "We've hit a few delays with international shipping that were beyond our control and had some back and forth on signing documents, which has now been resolved," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters. "For now, we think we can get there by early March. From our side we are doing everything possible to stick to that timeline and deploy the mission," he said.

In November, Yemen's Huthi rebels confirmed they had given the green light for a mission to assess the FSO Safer fuel tanker, which the UN initially planned for late January or early February.

The Iran-backed Huthis—who control much of Yemen's north after a war that erupted in 2014—had previously denied access. Sticking to the new timeline "will depend on continuous facili-

tation by the Ansar Allah authorities," Dujarric said, using the official name of the Houthi movement. "We have communicated to the authorities our concern over several logistical issues that remain pending," he added. "We urgently need to resolve these issues in the next several days to avoid missing the window for timely deployment." The UN's announcement comes just two days after new US President Joe Biden's administration suspended his country's designation of the Huthis as a terrorist group until February 26.

Dujarric said the UN was reviewing the situation concerning the US terrorist designation "to ensure that non-staff contractors are not inadvertently exposed to legal risks by participating in the mission."

Humanitarian groups argue that they have no alternative but to deal with the Huthis, who amount to a government in much of Yemen, including the capital Sanaa.

The 45-year-old fuel vessel, abandoned near the western port of Hodeida since 2015, has 1.1 million barrels of crude on board, and a rupture or explosion would have disastrous environmental and humanitarian consequences. Apart from corrosion to the aging vessel, essential work to curb explosive gases in its storage tanks has been neglected. —AFP

## UN: Clashes in Hodeida putting civilians at risk

**HODEIDA, Yemen:** The United Nations warned yesterday that thousands of Yemeni civilians were at risk in the western province of Hodeida after an increase in military clashes this month.

Since 2014, Yemen has been engulfed in a war between the internationally recognized government-supported by a Saudi-led military coalition and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels that has triggered a devastating humanitarian crisis. The latest clashes in the rebel-held Red Sea port city of Hodeida—the main gateway for food, fuel and humanitarian aid to the rest of the country—are the most violent since a truce negotiated in the area by the United Nations came into force in 2018.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement that "concern is increasing" with "thousands of civilians at risk". It added that preliminary reports showed that at least 700 people has been dis-

placed by the recent fighting and that "there have already been civilian casualties". At least eight civilians, mostly women and children, were killed last week, and many houses and farms damaged, the UN said.

"Indiscriminate attacks on residential areas are a breach of international humanitarian law and must stop immediately," said Auke Lootsma, the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Yemen. Two explosions rattled Hodeida city on Wednesday night, residents said. The Houthis have attacked to the south of the city where pro-government forces maintain positions, pro-government military sources said earlier this month. On January 18, military sources said that some 150 Yemeni pro-government soldiers and Houthi rebels had been killed in a week of fighting.

A Yemeni military source said yesterday that fighting between the warring sides has subsided slightly since then but that "intermittent clashes" were ongoing. "The parties must remember that they have a duty to take all necessary measures to protect civilians at all times and allow humanitarians to respond to the injured and displaced," the UN said. —AFP