

# Iraq's First Minister Of Tourism Talks To Islamic Tourism

## "Religious tourism is the backbone of tourism in Iraq"

Baghdad - Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan

It doesn't really matter what he does: the fact that Iraq even has a Minister of Tourism at one of the most violent and troubled times in its history is a victory of hope over experience.

We tried unsuccessfully on several occasions to interview Iraq's first Minister of Tourism in his office in Baghdad. The office is located in the Green Zone, and the minister has a busy schedule. But, paradoxically, when we participated in an exhibition concerned with the rebuilding of Iraq held in Kurdistan, we met Mr. Hashim Al-Hashimi, Minister for Tourism and Heritage, and he agreed to give us an interview.

**There is a lot of talk about the problems of the tourist sector in Iraq. Can you give us your perception of the current situation and your evaluation?**

Certainly, the tourism sector suffered, for more than three decades. It was grossly neglected because of the hegemony of the intelligence apparatus and secret police. The situation worsened, after the fall of the previous regime and the subsequent looting. Consequently, the tourism sector, especially the infrastructure, was devastated and proved to be a financial burden, rather than a source of income. Reform was neglected under the pretext of the country's critical situation. Thus, tourism did not get the attention it deserves. I am not revealing a secret if I say that one cannot wave a magic wand. Tourism is currently in a state of neglect and decline, but the opportunities for its reform and development still exist. This is why we called for a conference to examine the situation of the tourism sector and its revival.

**The professionals emphasize: "No tourism without hotels and no hotels without tourism"; What condition**



وزير السياحة يتحدث لندوب المجلة

The minister of tourism talks to our representative

**are Iraq's hotels in?**

The level of hotels in Iraq is certainly deplorable. One cannot even compare them quantitatively and qualitatively with those of neighbouring countries. However, the development of a hotel industry in Iraq is not difficult. It simply requires significant foreign investments. Therefore, it is necessary to work out laws and grant facilities to investors in order to facilitate the flow of capital. One should not forget the private sector which was marginalised for a long time. Its activation is one of our priorities, because it will contribute effectively to the activation of the hotel industry. Our aim in this exhibition is to meet foreign and national investors, to encourage them to invest in this vital sector.

**It is said that the best investment in Iraq relates to religious tourism, which shows a return after two years. What is happening with regard to religious tourism?**

I believe that religious tourism is the

backbone of tourism in Iraq. We focused our attention on this sector. If the security situation allowed, one could have carried out very positive results during this short period. Despite that, we concluded an agreement with Iran, in order to reactivate the return of Iranian visitors to the holy places of Najaf, Kerbala, Al-Kadhimiah and Samara. In the same way, we reached agreements with neighbouring countries for organizing the entry of visitors in a regular and ordered way so our employees could concentrate on providing the best service.

**The condition of archaeological sites and the plundered antiquities still arouses the interest of the international organizations. What progress has been made to recover these objects?**

You are fully aware that requires the coordination of local and international efforts. We asked for the assistance of some countries in this respect and they made it possible for us to recover some of the looted items. We also established an Iraqi heritage data base on the internet. Interpol can consult it to see if our archaeological treasures have been looted. We also contacted international associations, interested in heritage and culture, in order to obtain their support in this field.

**What is your vision for the future of Iraqi tourism?**

I would not exaggerate by saying that, if safety is restored, Iraq would be a centre of attraction for international tourism: the country has an unparalleled historical legacy, it is the cradle of civilisation and its holy places have a special significance for the three monotheistic religions. ■