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## Pollution in Baghdad

### Faltering Policies and the Greed of Investment

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● **Analyses**



### **Pollution in Baghdad: Faltering Policies and the Greed of Investment**

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## Key Points

- The air of the capital, Baghdad, recently witnessed a serious pollution episode; accordingly, it was classified as the second most polluted city in the world, as the levels of some polluting elements reached nine times the rates approved by the World Health Organization as safe limits for the relationship between human beings and the environment.
- Government authorities confirm that the causes of pollution are concentrated in specific areas such as Al-Rashid Camp and the Nahrawan area. In addition to the spread of factories that do not comply with environmental standards, these parts have turned into a large dump for the waste generated by the capital, which reaches nearly 10,000 tons daily.
- So far, Iraqi governments appear incapable of finding realistic solutions to the problem of air pollution and the deterioration of the environmental system as a whole in Iraq, particularly in the capital. Here, resorting to the militarization of environmental solutions is not considered an appropriate response in an environment dominated by bribery and clientelist relations.
- People living in a large part of these areas believe

that their fate is threatened by investment projects behind which, at times, stand influential forces for whom the environment does not figure at all in their dictionary of concerns.

Despite the seriousness of the environmental situation in the capital, the government remains incapable of imposing solutions, and it is still thinking in a traditional way based on the principle of the “militarization of environmental oversight” in a situation rife with disorder, which is ultimately reflected in many manifestations, including the continued presence of the activities behind the capital’s air being unfit for safe living. This sounds the alarm regarding the effectiveness of the plans and measures that are supposed to address this problem, especially as they have begun to coincide with the expansion of investments that usually pay no attention to the fate of the environment and its problems in the Iraqi case. This paper addresses the phenomenon of air pollution recently witnessed by the capital, Baghdad, and the important repercussions it has raised at the governmental and societal levels in dealing with this dangerous event.

## The Capital Is Suffocating

On 25 November 2025, the Iraqi capital, Baghdad,<sup>1</sup> recorded one of the critical environmental phenomena; residents awoke to a city enveloped in polluted, foul-smelling air, which obliterated its urban features, a large part of which disappeared behind a cloud of smog.<sup>2</sup>

One Swiss platform concerned with monitoring air quality around the world confirmed that Baghdad had then recorded 380 points on the pollution scale and was therefore classified within the high-risk purple zones. According to the platform's data, this illustrates the severity of the environmental situation, as it stated: "The average concentration of fine particulate matter known as PM2.5 (small particles capable of penetrating the lungs and entering the bloodstream) reached 40.5 micrograms per cubic meter, which is nine times higher than the normal rate."<sup>3</sup>

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1- The Purple Zone: Air quality indicates a noticeable deterioration and a rise in pollution levels in Baghdad, at: <https://is.gd/ilmiWi>

2- "The Mist": The methods may vary, but the killing is one, at: <https://is.gd/OONFTS>

3- Iraq Watchdog Warns of "Catastrophic" Pollution as Baghdad Air Quality Plunges, <https://is.gd/IK1VaL>

This rapid deterioration in air quality left its health impact on millions of people living within this environmentally degraded zone. Although there are no precise official statistics showing this relationship, which gives the government room to evade the proposition of linking air pollution with the cases that hospitals may witness, there is other tangible, material evidence visible in the city's daily life, specifically in its center.<sup>4</sup>

Many citizens expressed their feeling<sup>5</sup> that they were experiencing cases of shortness of breath and other symptoms with which they had not been in direct contact before this event. A number of them used social media platforms<sup>6</sup> to express this health harm, especially since that episode became the focus of important conversations and discussions among a broad Iraqi spectrum of interested parties and the general public, through which information, personal experiences, and photographs were exchanged to document the event and its repercussions, which in the end constituted a major shock for those concerned with environmental affairs, especially after Baghdad was ranked the second most polluted city in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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4- Sulfur pollution in Baghdad hospitalizes hundreds: Officials, <https://is.gd/7Y2Doc>

5- Iraq Watchdog Warns of "Catastrophic" Pollution as Baghdad Air Quality Plunges, <https://is.gd/IK1VaL>

6- See: <https://is.gd/pCQC24>

7- Air quality: Baghdad ranks second most polluted city globally, <https://is.gd/iSkUaK>

Some may argue that these data, and the perceptions related to the damage, merely express a temporary situation surrounded by exaggeration for political purposes aimed at distorting both the status of the capital and governmental performance alike. Theoretically, the temporary weather condition contributed to revealing the problem in its real form, especially since periods that witness the rise of the still-air phenomenon, "thermal inversion," prevent pollutants from spreading and dispersing with wind movement to other places.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, this absolutely does not mean that the problem does not exist, or that relying on the weather's return to its normal state can provide a solution graciously offered by nature for this crisis. On the other hand, the indicators that place the capital, Baghdad, "temporarily" in an advanced position<sup>9</sup> on the pollution scale compared with other high-density capitals such as New Delhi are in fact classifications subject to continuous change, since they follow developments monitored by the stations designated for this purpose. This does not negate the reality of the classification that places Baghdad, at best, among the twenty most polluted cities on the

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8- Environment: Thermal inversion behind the deterioration of air quality in Baghdad, at: <https://is.gd/n28Ak1>

9- Smoky clouds hang over Baghdad... and an environmental observatory warns: "More dangerous waves" are coming, at: <https://is.gd/NM57tN>

world map.<sup>10</sup> The gases responsible for pollution in the capital have recorded a clear increase in recent years.<sup>11</sup>

## The Map of Pollution in Baghdad

Maps show<sup>12</sup> that there are four main regions in which the multiple causes of pollution are concentrated. Therefore, one Swiss platform specializing in measuring air quality relies on the distribution of its stations to measure harmful gas emissions in key areas-namely,<sup>13</sup> the Al-Rashid Hotel, the banks of the Tigris River, Al-Khadraa / Al-Shorta Al-Thaniya neighborhood, the Green Zone, and Zayouna-thus enabling it to determine the degree of air pollution within a range<sup>14</sup> that, through these stations, covers all the administrative boundaries of Baghdad Governorate. Despite the multiplicity of factors that contribute to shaping the phenomenon of air pollution-transport density, electric generators, the Dora refinery, and the

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10- Iraq: Officials vow action as Baghdad ranked among most polluted cities on Earth, <https://is.gd/2GfcKa>

11- Assessment of Some Air Pollutants in Baghdad City Based on Sentinel 5 TROPMI in Three Different Periods, <https://is.gd/ZslGgt>

12- Air Pollution in Baghdad: Alarming Data Threatening Our Future, <https://is.gd/MC7Gy7>

13- Air quality in Baghdad, <https://is.gd/CLatYi>

14- Air quality near Snono Systems, Baghdad, <https://is.gd/LBzwpl>

decline of green cover<sup>15</sup>-the government and many Iraqi circles identify only two areas within the scope of responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

The Nahrawan<sup>17</sup> area is one of the most important zones producing pollution<sup>18</sup> in the capital. It alone contains more than 200 brick factories and 22 asphalt plants, most of which operate without complying with environmental regulations; therefore, its contribution to producing pollution<sup>19</sup> reaches 55 percent. There are other important indications of the presence

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15- See: Marwa Salem Mohammed, Cartographic Representation of Air Pollutants in Baghdad City Using Geographic Information Systems, at: <https://is.gd/INGy2h> ; and 11,700 generators are suffocating Baghdad... and the government moves to shut down metal-smelting sites, at: <https://is.gd/tOwNDI> ; and Despite government reassurances... what are the reasons for the continued pollution in the sky of the capital, Baghdad?, at: <https://is.gd/WcXsQAh>

16- Al-Rashid dump and Nahrawan landfill are among the main causes... an "emergency" meeting on Baghdad's air pollution, at: <https://is.gd/YjLFkS>

17- Environment: Nahrawan brick factories are among the most prominent pollution hotspots in Baghdad, at: <https://is.gd/GXeOJu>

18- Environmental note: Air pollution from brick factories in Baghdad, at: <https://is.gd/Q4iZlb>

19- Air pollution in Baghdad: Alarming data threatening our future, at: <https://is.gd/DEJfep>

of unlicensed brick factories,<sup>20</sup> and more than 9,000 workers<sup>21</sup> are employed daily across all these sites, among them large numbers from vulnerable groups<sup>22</sup>-women and young children. This is a phenomenon that has drawn the attention of concerned observers<sup>23</sup> to highlight the reality of pollution and the harsh working conditions there. Given market need and the increasing demand for the bricks produced in these factories, the Ministry of Environment attempted<sup>24</sup>-without success-to persuade stakeholders there not to use heavy fuel oil and to replace it with gas, but there was no real response because of the high cost, which comes at the expense of the profits made by factory owners. All of this occurs amid the inability of the Ministries of Oil and Industry to provide the requirements for this important transition.

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20- Baghdad Operations closes 7 violating brick factories in Nahrawan, at: <https://is.gd/ricZhO>

21- Nahrawan brick factories... 9,000 people work 12 hours a day, at: <https://is.gd/yw85D8>

22- "A Slow Death"... the grueling days of women in Nahrawan brick factories, at: <https://is.gd/WaoAgg>

23- An Iraqi director documents the suffering of women working in brick factories, at: <https://is.gd/jlhPhR>

24- The Environment announces requiring brick factories in Nahrawan to use gas instead of heavy fuel oil, at: <https://is.gd/rdY7DR>

The environment<sup>25</sup> visits its curse upon the poor in ways difficult to imagine in a rich country like Iraq. Drought conditions forced many destitute families in southern cities to migrate toward the capital, but this time they were also victims of another kind of environmental harshness: because they lacked educational qualifications and professional skills, they were compelled to live in informal settlements, especially those located in Al-Rashid Camp. The number of families<sup>26</sup> there exceeds 800 families living in an area estimated at more than 5,000 square meters, and, in addition to Nahrawan, most of the sanitary landfill centers and waste-burning sites are concentrated there.

In the capital alone, nearly 10,000 tons<sup>27</sup> of waste are produced daily, and most of it finds its way to those areas through the vehicles of the Baghdad Municipality. This figure is liable to rise in an alarming way amid the escalating rates of population growth in the capital. These facts have prompted the Iraqi government to seek partnerships<sup>28</sup> through which

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25- Al-Rashid Camp... living in a garbage dump, at: <https://is.gd/uSeumr>

26- In Baghdad there are more than 213 sanitary landfill sites, at: <https://is.gd/jSKueK>

27- Al-Sudani: The volume of waste in Baghdad reaches 10,000 tons daily, at: <https://is.gd/B7h7M3>

28- Turning Iraq's waste into electricity has become a reality... the Chinese company will begin in Baghdad, at: <https://>

waste would be invested in generating electrical energy. Although this is considered a promising project, its launch, which was supposed to take place in August of this year, has not yet resulted in real work on the ground, raising doubts about the credibility of the effort and the speed of response to the challenge that air pollution imposes on the capital's residents.

### **The Faltering of Environmental Policies**

There is a state of contradiction between the environmental policies and legislation that were approved in 2009. The outputs of the "Council for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment" were suspended for many years, especially after the Ministry of Environment was turned into a marginal ministry<sup>29</sup> within the sectarian power-sharing system that does not recognize environmental challenges as a real priority on its ladder of concerns.

Governmental and broader societal practices<sup>30</sup> also failed to take into account the provisions concerning the protection of city air from pollution. This is another added condition proving that many of the provisions approved in parlia-

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964media.com/496644/

29- Mobilizing for the Environment in Iraq, at: <https://is.gd/LnhFSe>

30- Pollution is gnawing at Iraq... laws without teeth and fines without effect, at: <https://is.gd/UcSrU7>

ment remain mere ink on paper, and that ministries and public activities have not been prepared to accept their content, let alone the absence of real awareness-raising regarding these clauses. Therefore, there are indications that the Iraqi government will be forced to work, under the pressure of environmental transformations, to change many of the provisions related to environmental decisions,<sup>31</sup> especially since this hint came after confirmation of the existence of legal gaps that prevent the achievement of the goal of limiting polluting activities.

Iraqi governments always operate in the mode of reactions that themselves take on a temporary character. For example, the recent environmental crisis led to the activation of the media presence<sup>32</sup> of the forces in power and the bodies concerned with the environmental file, without our later observing any real implementation of the provisions of these meetings and the recommendations they produced. Added to this is the absence of real transparency with society regarding the nature of the weekly reports that these bodies are supposed to submit to the Prime Minister to follow up on the

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31- Amending the Environment Law as an entry point to climate justice, at: <https://is.gd/jrdbka>

32- A meeting chaired by Al-Sudani identifies 10 causes of pollution in Baghdad and the governorates and stresses the development of short- and long-term solutions to address it, at: <https://is.gd/q8QSBI>

general environmental situation, and air pollution in the capital in particular. These indicators lead to a loss of confidence in the seriousness of these parties in reaching real, sustainable strategies based on an accurate information base to diagnose the dysfunction and the damages resulting from it, and then to determine the mechanisms for dealing with it.

One important piece of evidence proving this lies in the failure to follow up on and implement a governmental decision<sup>33</sup> that recommended relocating brick factories to new areas. It should be noted that talking about the geographical redistribution<sup>34</sup> of these factories does not necessarily mean ending the crisis at its roots so much as it means thinking about a mechanism for distributing the harm and moving it away from residential complexes in the capital. Some of these areas, such as Bismayah,<sup>35</sup> close to Nahrawan, have begun to lose their ability to attract buyers because of the ongoing complaints that residents are exposed to the harms of air pollution. In this context as well, some reports indicate that waste-burning operations in Al-Rashid Camp resumed again

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33- Al-Sudani directs the identification of alternative areas for brick factories outside the cities, at: <https://is.gd/TRMrOL>

34- The Ministry of Industry announces the areas to which brick factories are to be relocated, at: <https://is.gd/A1i6sj>

35- Warning of a humanitarian catastrophe... the air of the "Bismayah" complex is the most polluted among Iraq's regions, at: <https://is.gd/n9ch9Q>

only three days after the Prime Minister announced the cessation of those operations.

The force in control of the ground there faces field complications greater than its actual ability to ensure that this camp is not exploited for the collection and burning of waste in a random manner. There are accusations directed<sup>36</sup> at some individuals affiliated with this force of taking bribes, which leads to the creation of a kind of clientelist relationship among the benefiting parties, who care nothing whatsoever about the environment or its safety. There is also a strange overlap of responsibility regarding the management of the environmental file with other parties,<sup>37</sup> especially the Integrity Commission and the Environmental Protection Police. This complexity contributes to creating important gaps that other parties know how to exploit in order to sustain their work there. Disposal by these cheap methods plays a role in reinforcing the zero cost they are supposed to bear on the one hand, while also contributing to strengthening the economy of illegal activities harmful to the environment on the other. In the end, this entrenches the accusations directed at government bodies that their se-

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36- The closure of dozens of pollution sources in Baghdad... has the crisis ended?, at: <https://is.gd/ZL78dy>

37- Closing the entrances to Al-Rashid Camp, and the Integrity Commission investigates the causes of the smoky haze, at: <https://is.gd/P30I46>

curity measures do not constitute a sustainable solution to the pollution crisis and its basic inputs in the capital.

## Investment Threatens the Capital's Environment

Most of the residents in the areas classified as centers of pollution production in Baghdad believe that there are carefully planned policies aimed at intensifying the process of forcibly dispersing them for investment purposes that have absolutely nothing to do with protecting the environment. Therefore, in many of their protest marches they resort to raising banners and pictures of<sup>38</sup> "Mr. Muqtada al-Sadr," seeing in him a possible supporter in confronting the government's projects and its allies.

The recent closures of activities causing air pollution were concentrated in areas<sup>39</sup> east and southeast of Baghdad, which are characterized by high population density, high unemployment rates, and the expansion of tribal power<sup>40</sup> at the expense of the state. People there escalated the tone of their rhetoric,<sup>41</sup> which on one occasion threatened to cut the road

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38- With pictures of Al-Sadr and clubs... tribal demonstrations renewed in Baghdad (video), at: <https://is.gd/uyy3tT>

39- Closing metal factories... a campaign to control environmental violations, at: <https://is.gd/2mz5Hb>

40- With pictures of Al-Sadr, source previously cited.

41- Residents of Hayy al-Nasr and al-Maamil in Baghdad organize a sit-in in protest against deteriorating services, at:

linking the capital to the rest of the southern governorates. These were events that recurred on various occasions<sup>42</sup> and in different areas and caused clear embarrassment for the authorities, which usually found themselves facing the choice either of confronting the citizens or listening to their demands, demands that came outside the framework of agreed understandings regarding the environment and its protection.

In such situations, it is not surprising that the citizens of those areas direct accusations<sup>43</sup> at certain influential actors operating under the umbrella of the Iraqi factions, indicating that the latter do not respect the state's decisions regarding the prohibition on burning waste, especially in Al-Rashid Camp. Citizens there believe that this behavior constitutes a systematic effort to force them to leave the areas surrounding the camp because of these actors' desire to turn them into investment centers.

Those accusations did not arise from a vacuum. In 2024, the Investment Commission granted one company, Imkanat

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<https://is.gd/8jYWJP>

42- Ibid.

43 - One of the residents of Al-Rashid Camp told "Al-Oula": Influential parties are behind setting fires in Al-Rashid Camp..., at: <https://is.gd/dGiTDQ>

Company,<sup>44</sup> owned by one of the figures allied with one of the influential actors, the opportunity for an investment contract to transform Al-Rashid Camp into a multi-dimensional development space,<sup>45</sup> which prompted some members of the Council of Representatives to raise doubts about this project, describing the company as linked to “big sharks,”<sup>46</sup> which later led to the cancellation<sup>47</sup> of the residential component idea and the focus only on reviving green spaces. In the end, this did not contribute to diminishing citizens’ fears that this type of decision might in the future be circumvented, especially if the government changes and another one comes that is more responsive to the desires of investors and the bodies supporting them.

Many commentators believe that there is a kind of trade-off that could occur in this matter. Keeping Al-Rashid

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44- By document... the government grants “Imkanat” Company, affiliated with Yazan Mishaan al-Jubouri, land for investment with exemption from the conditions of competition, advertisement, and licensing, at: <https://is.gd/stbN9j>

45- The Al-Rashid Camp Development Project, at: <https://is.gd/GpvLE8>

46- Parliamentary Integrity moves against the Investment Commission after contracts with a “company linked to big fish,” at: <https://is.gd/TiQdxH>

47- Cancellation of the residential project in Al-Rashid Camp and its replacement with tourist forests, at: <https://964media.com/426336/>

Camp under the title of “Baghdad Forests” may be accompanied by abandoning Al-Zawraa Park,<sup>48</sup> which today suffers from severe neglect. Despite the Baghdad Municipality’s denial,<sup>49</sup> voices are rising to confirm that the areas near this park have turned into a space filled with residential complexes profitable for investors and the parties connected to them, and that this scene will later extend to the park itself, by virtue of its important location in the heart of the capital and its affluent neighborhoods.

It should also be noted that the absence of urban planning for the capital has contributed to the increase in informal settlements,<sup>50</sup> whose uses are classified as part of the causes of pollution. Therefore, residents there fear that decisions by some ministries will lead to their displacement from their homes. This has also coincided with government talk about the project to establish the residential “Al-Fursan”<sup>51</sup> City for Ministry of Defense personnel on the lands of Nahrawan.

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48- Al-Zawraa... the breathing space of Baghdad’s families, at: <https://is.gd/dUVtAg>

49- The Baghdad Municipality threatens those spreading the rumor of turning Al-Zawraa into residential complexes, at: <https://964media.com/485722/>

50- Another Baghdad made by the destitute, at: <https://is.gd/doHyoQ>

51- Bangen Rekani discusses the details of Al-Fursan Residential City for defense personnel, at: <https://is.gd/ZZEUNa>

## Conclusion

Although the incident of air pollution in Baghdad was described by some as a temporary condition that coincided with transient weather circumstances, it exposed many matters that cannot be kept silent about, and that can be summed up in a statement expressing a painful truth: “The capital’s air is no longer safe from a health standpoint.”

The government’s inability to produce an economic transformation accompanied by a cultural and societal concern for the idea of protecting the environment leaves us facing a bleak future scene. In such a case, the geography of pollution in the capital is expected to expand to include new areas, and all of this will coincide with the rapid increase in population numbers and their unbalanced concentration in Baghdad, which will create further social and political crises.

It is usually pointed out that the cleanliness and safety of the environment necessarily express the existence of a real democratic system<sup>52</sup> that practices politics from the standpoint of social justice, and that the absence of this will lead to the growing role of the opposition, to which a new dimension will be added through “environmental struggle” to free it-

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52- Democratic Representation, Environmental Justice and Future People, <https://is.gd/Lbb6OT>

self from the sense of injustice and exclusion practiced by the various authorities. Unless Iraqi forces begin to believe in this idea in order to create a state of alignment between the environment and governmental decision-making in all its dimensions, the escalation of complex environmental challenges will be sufficient to create further obstacles before this system, which already suffers from many problems.



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and a participating society**

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