Beat: Local

After Years as a Battleground, Investment Boom Lifts Iraqi City

Middle East

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USPA NEWS - Ramadi was the site of some of the fiercest fighting against U.S. troops during the Iraq war, then came a devastating fight with ISIS. Now, it's emerging as one of Iraq's most stable cities.

RAMADI, Iraq — On the banks of the Euphrates River, the iron beams and bricks are going up for a 20-story luxury hotel with swimming pools, a spa, and restaurants jutting out into the blue-green waters at the edge of the Iraqi city of Ramadi.
While a five-star hotel is nothing unusual in many places, this is the first one being built in decades in battle-scarred Anbar Province — part of a post-ISIS investment boom in an area that is now, surprisingly, one of the most stable in the country.
"In 2016 when we entered this city, it was a ghost town," said Mahdi al-Noman, the chairman of the Anbar Investment Commission, surveying the city on a drive down new highways flanked by well-tended grass and iron plant stands filled with purple and white petunias. "You wouldn't even see stray cats and dogs," he added.

Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar, has seen waves of warfare since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. American forces suffered their worst losses in the province after the invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein turned into an American military occupation. The final wave of battles in Anbar followed the Islamic State takeover of a third of Iraq that began in 2014.

While other parts of the country have struggled to recover from those conflicts, Ramadi has begun to flourish. Along with the $70 million hotel, construction has begun on one of the country's biggest shopping malls and companies are submitting bids for an international airport.

Anbar's population is almost exclusively Sunni Muslim, a minority group that held disproportionate power in Shiite-majority Iraq when Saddam ruled. But after he was ousted, the Sunnis were marginalized and their rage helped the Sunni-dominated terrorist group Al Qaeda gain a foothold in Iraq. It later fueled an offshoot of the extremist movement, the Islamic State, as well.
It took three years for U.S.-backed Iraqi forces to drive the ISIS militants out of the country, and it was primarily those battles that left Ramadi heavily damaged and largely empty of civilians.

Now, Iraqi investors who had focused on projects outside the country over the past 18 years are bringing some of their profits back to Anbar, while foreign companies are taking a new look at a city largely rebuilt after the fight against the Islamic State.
While some residential areas still lie in ruins, government-funded building has transformed the city. Instead of traffic-choked, potholed streets and nests of hanging electrical wires ubiquitous in other Iraqi cities, Ramadi now boasts a reorganized road system, underground electricity cables, and centralized government offices.
"We came back to destruction and decided that any new construction must be done in a new way to keep up with modern urban planning," said Anbar's provincial governor, Ali Farhan. He said that having experienced so much destruction, Anbar residents are no longer willing to tolerate the extremist rhetoric that allowed ISIS to gain a foothold here.

When ISIS captured Ramadi in 2015, the poor in this city of half a million people fled to the desert to a squalid makeshift camp for displaced Iraqis. Government authorities, worried about ISIS infiltration — a suspicion that lingered from the past — barred most of the displaced from Ramadi from entering the capital, Baghdad, just a few miles away.
But many of the Ramadi residents who could afford to do so moved to Iraq's Kurdistan Region in the north, or left the country for Jordan or Turkey. When they returned, younger people in particular wanted the malls and coffee shops and hotels they had become accustomed to. In the gleaming new supermarkets of Ramadi, Starbucks coffee and gluten-free flour line the shelves.
"This will be a recreation hub, not just a hotel," said Maher Othman, the Iraqi contractor for the new Ramadi hotel, which does not yet have a name. He said his company, Jazirat al-Atta, planned to spend at least $20 million of the total construction cost on swimming pools, restaurants, shops and a Moroccan-style spa.

On the hotel complex, workers are building 30 three-story chalets meant for families and honeymooning couples. Each will have a private garden and private rooftop pool with a barbecue area and sweeping views of the Euphrates.
Anbar, which borders Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, is known for businesspeople who made fortunes in transportation, construction and other fields. They include the owners of Al Qasas, a family firm that is building a $70 million shopping mall in downtown Ramadi.

“When they had to flee, Anbaris did business in the places they went to whether it was Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Baghdad or Kurdistan,” said Moath Alayan, the Qasas project director who lives between the Jordanian capital Amman and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. “When they came back, they came back with money.”
He said his family decided on the $70 million mall because they believed there was a market for it and because they wanted Anbar residents to see they were investing money in their home province.
In downtown Ramadi, a huge crane rises over the framework of what will be the skylight-topped three-story mall. The hundreds of shops will potentially employ more than 1,200 people.

At the new private Al Safwa Specialized Hospital, the director, Mohammed Mosleh, runs his phone over the bar code on a door for the patient information. The hospital has equipment, such as microscopes for neurosurgery, that is unavailable even in the more developed Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

In his office in a new government building, Mr. Noman opens a gray folder containing more than 200 investment licenses he has issued, potentially worth more than $5 billion in investment. They include solar power plants, fertilizer factories, residential complexes and schools.
Iraqi investors account for 70 percent of the licenses and the rest are from Germany, India, Turkey and the U.A.E., among other countries.
Mr. Noman’s big dream is an international airport and the government has already allocated $70 million to an initial planning phase.
A few miles from the edge of Ramadi near the railway station, a Jordanian-American entrepreneur, Muhannad Haimour looks out over land cleared of hundreds of explosives where he is planning to build a school that will be part of the International Baccalaureate system, a worldwide network of schools adhering to international standards.

Mr. Haimour plans to build a complex including a hotel, housing, shops and recreational facilities.
In a country notorious for corruption, he and Mr. Noman said they believed the demand for bribes was declining while investment has been helped by stability in Ramadi.

ISIS now is largely confined in Anbar to desert hide-outs in the far west of the province near the border with Syria. American troops inside Anbar’s Ain al-Assad military base, frequently rocketed by Iran-backed militias enraged at the American military presence, are instead a source of reassurance in Ramadi.
But Mr. Haimour, who organizes investment conferences for the Anbar government, still faces an uphill battle in persuading foreign investors, particularly Americans, that they would be welcomed here.
“I think there were a lot of horrible things that happened that made Anbar look like it was just a monstrous place and people were always ready to fight,” he said of the years during the U.S. occupation. “In fact, if you are a guest, Anbaris are incredibly welcoming.”

Jane Arraf is the Baghdad bureau chief. She has covered the defining events of Iraq’s history for three decades, as well as many equally important stories that never made it into the history books. @janearraf

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483 Green Lanes
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