



Ancient tradition revived to turn honey into money

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By Mona Mahmoud and Michael Hartigan, USA TODAY



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Beekeeper Adil Hashim checks his bee cells at the Union of the Agricultural Engineers in Baghdad.

BAGHDAD — When Adil Hashim was a youngster, he planned to become an engineer. However, all that changed when he was 17 years old.

Then he "saw a group of bees gathering like a bunch of grapes on the lemon tree in our garden," Hashim recalls.

Transfixed, Hashim sought help from his neighbor, who knew about beekeeping. As they spoke, Hashim became fascinated. So instead of engineering, he went to study beekeeping at Baghdad University's College of Agriculture.

Today, Hashim, 35, has a computer shop, but he still maintains beehives at his house. And he's hardly unique. Beekeeping is an Iraqi tradition dating to ancient times and one of the country's favorite hobbies. Many Iraqis have hives in their gardens.

Honey factors into many traditional Arabic meals, especially at holiday time. The holy Quran talks about the health benefits of honey.

"Beekeeping has been there for 5,000 years," says Malcolm Sanford, professor emeritus at the University of Florida who went to Iraq this year to study the country's beekeeping industry.

It's "where it kind of started," Sanford says.

Iraq's honey industry fell on hard times during the reign of Saddam Hussein.

One of Baghdad's largest beekeeping centers, just south of Baghdad in Rashidiya, was closed and converted to a military base in 1992 by Saddam's Republican Guards. By 2002, government support for the industry had nearly vanished, and exports were virtually zero.

Now, Iraqi beekeepers are trying to revive their decrepit industry. With money from the U.S. Agency for International Development, carpenters are being trained to build efficient apiaries.

Abdul Razaq, who works at a beekeeping center in the Baghdad suburb of Abu Ghraib, says Iraq's honey production has the potential to become one of the country's largest industries.

Iraqi beekeepers got together and created a trade association last year. It now has 50 members. A small laboratory has been re-established at Rashidiya to supply queen bees.

Not surprisingly, Iraqis are honey gourmets.

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"I like to have honey on my table," says Laith Faris, 40, a customer at the beekeepers association's retail shop.

"It's so difficult to know the quality of the honey ... whether it is pure or fake. And it is very expensive. So I prefer to buy it (directly) from the society," he says.

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