



FRAMING CREATIVITY

A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY INTO IRAQ'S
CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

REVIVING MOSUL AND BASRA OLD CITIES



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For more information on the Transition and Recovery Division programmes and current activities taking place in Iraq, please contact: iraqpublicinfo@iom.int

Main Office in Baghdad

UNAMI Compound DIWAN 2 International Zone, Baghdad, Iraq. Tel: +3908 3105 2600 ext. 5857/5928, E-mail: iraqpublicinfo@iom.int

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EDF CULTURE

This photobook presents 17 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) awarded under the Enterprise Development Fund-Culture (EDF-C). The International Organization for Migration (IOM), in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and funded by the European Union, provided financial support to enterprises in creative industries. Under the project “Reviving Mosul and Basra Old Cities”, EDF-C targeted enterprises producing goods and providing services with cultural value in Mosul, Basra, and Thi-Qar, supporting them to expand and grow their businesses, and thereby create new job opportunities in this crucial but underrepresented industry.

The histories of the grantees vary - for example, the artisans from Mosul have been directly affected by the destruction of war with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the past decade. Many workshops of the EDF-C grantees were located in West Mosul, where fighting and destruction were most intense during the Iraqi government operations to reclaim the area in 2017. However, a major cultural and economic decline had already started in 2014, when the ISIL occupation of Mosul first began, as can be seen in the testimonies captured in this book. General instability swept the country, with economic deterioration a main feature. Iraq's south was not immune, and hubs like Basra and Thi-Qar also suffered. Though each artisan featured on this book-and many others supported by the EDF-C - strives to preserve and promote a unique piece of culture, history and heritage of Iraq, and they all share a belief in and dedication to the importance of culture as a driving force for development and recovery of Iraq.



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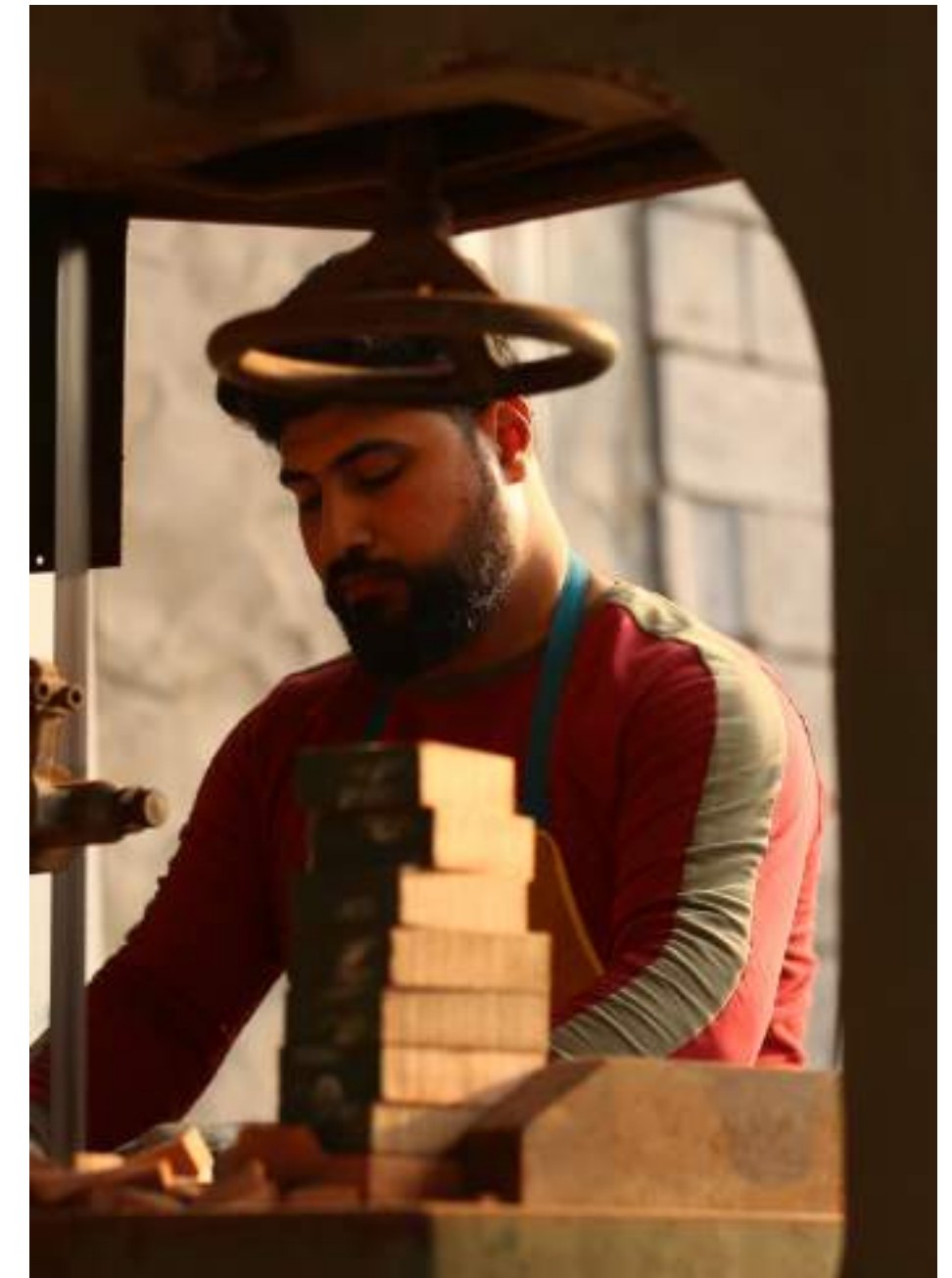
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HERITAGE SHIPBUILDING BASRA

Assad Salman, 32, started woodcarving at an early age and turned his passion – model shipwrights – into a business, driven by a significant interest from the public in acquiring the minutely crafted vessels. Through EDF-C, his passion set sail for a new horizon. He is now able to make life-sized ships, specifically the graceful *balam ashari*, a wooden boat used as an urban means of transportation, ferry and leisure in Basra, as seen in old photographs of the city once called the Venice of the East. Testimony to his resounding success is also his growing workshop, which went from having no employees to two new hires, and three seasonal hires in times of high demand.





Assad closely consults shipbuilding manuals and communicates with maritime historians in Basra and across the Middle East, paying great attention to accurate representation of the past in his work. This disappearing craft even spurred Assad to decisively pursue full-size ship-building. He also wants to open a gallery in the future where he would be able to exhibit all of his work.

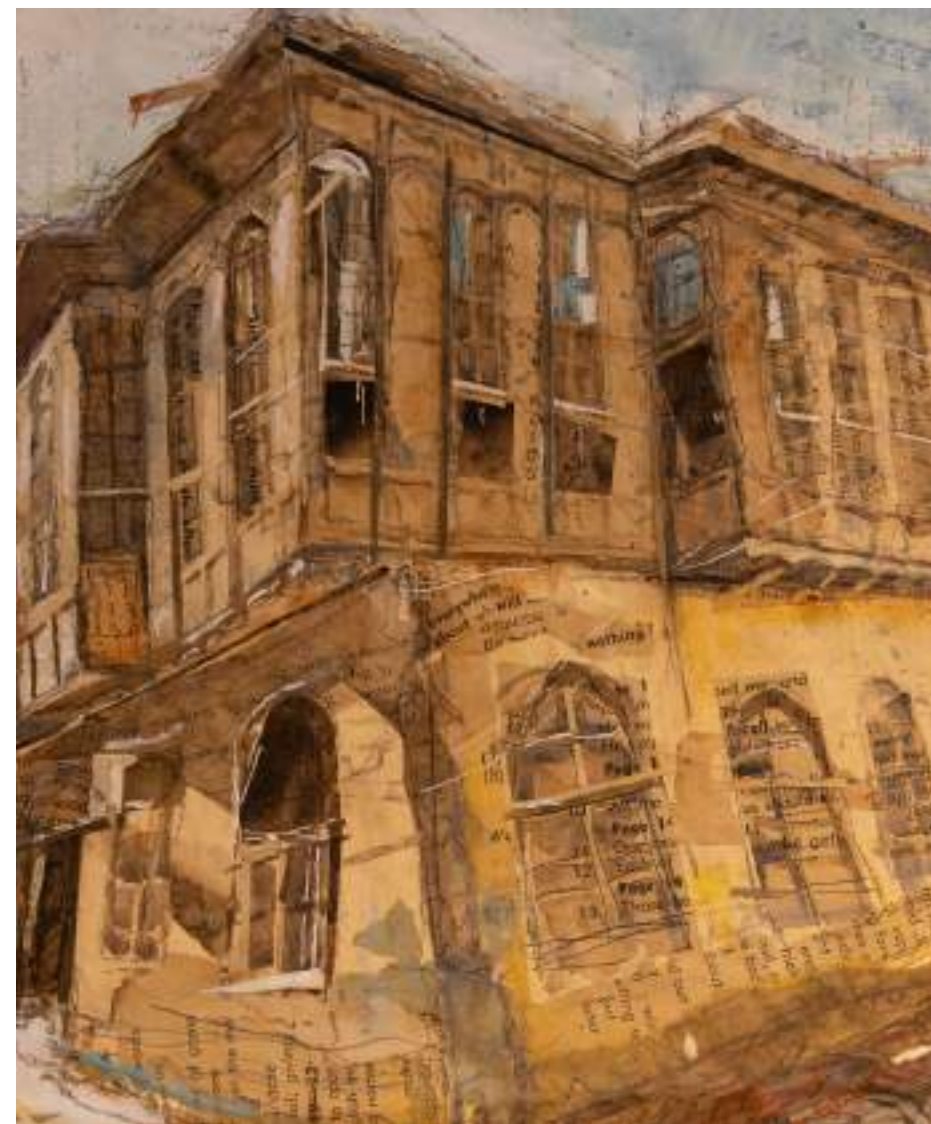
Heritage Shipbuilding was awarded USD 9,171 by IOM and, with the newly-bought tools and equipment, generated two new jobs.



HAMID SAEED GALLERY BASRA

Hamid Saeed made art into his life mission and his workspace into more than a gallery. The academic artist hosts vernissages promoting fellow Iraqi artists, organizes music and poetry events and teaches drawing, calligraphy, painting and – as of recently – photography. Hamid is also a skilled musician, providing music courses in guitar. The multi-talented artist, who graduated the College of Fine Arts in Basra and continued his post-graduate studies in Alexandria, Egypt, strongly believes in the educative power of art, especially for future generations, who “*can see things differently as long as they are given the right tools,*” he said.





Hamid lamented the secondary role of art in education, because “art makes other subjects more receptive,” the educator explained. Recreational activities are very limited in Basra. This, together with the scorching summer heat now extending well into spring and autumn, and social norms imposing restraints on women, many are isolated to their homes. But Hamid is seeing changes: interest in art and art courses is growing, especially among women, and people attend art exhibitions in higher numbers. He hopes to open a comprehensive teaching institution in the future, where he would be able to teach music, theatre and indeed, offer courses in fine arts.

Hamid Saeed Gallery was awarded USD 14,240 by IOM and added three new employees to the existing two.



IRAQI OUD CENTER BASRA

Omar Abdulkarim Hameed is a famous oud player who started his path with the celebrated pear-shaped instrument in 1996 when he enrolled at the Department of Music at the College of Fine Arts in Basra. Aside from managing his academic duties, and two musical bands, Omar runs an oud retail business – specializing in ouds made by local craftsman, and also teaches how to play the instrument. His pupils come from all walks of life, male and female, younger and older. They all share the same passion for this instrument that for centuries accompanied the lives of Iraqi, and which now “occupies the centre stage on social media, too,” Omar told us “Oud is also gaining in popularity, people take great interest in learning it,” he explained about the stringed instrument.





The *virtuoso* explains how his success in teaching comes from a simplification of teaching methods, which makes learning enjoyable and shortens the often arduous path to mastering the lute-like instrument. Omar also has grandiose plans for the future, hoping to establish a private music academy in Basra.

The Iraqi Oud Center was awarded USD 5,000 by IOM and created one new job.



DAR SHAHRYAR BASRA

Safa Thiab is a famous writer, author, and publisher from Iraq. His publishing path started in the heart and soul of Baghdad's intellectual community, Al-Mutanabbi Street, where in the early 1990s, as a student in literature, he worked at a bookshop. Due to war and instability in the early 2000s, he emigrated to Europe and later returned to Iraq to establish a bookshop of his home and publishing house in Basra. He has published more than 250 books in literature, poetry, history, philosophy, and sociology by Iraqi authors, with some Arabic translations of works by foreign authors. "I was among the first to translate and publish ecocriticism into Arabic, along a number of post-modernist texts," Safa mentioned.





He lamented the lack of financial support in Iraq for publishing and reiterated the importance of having received IOM's grant.

Active on many fronts, Safa also regularly participates in book fairs across the Middle East. The writer is currently working on publishing works about the cultural and political history of Basra from the 19th to the early 20th century and is determined to further expand in the future by opening a branch in Baghdad, Mosul or Erbil.

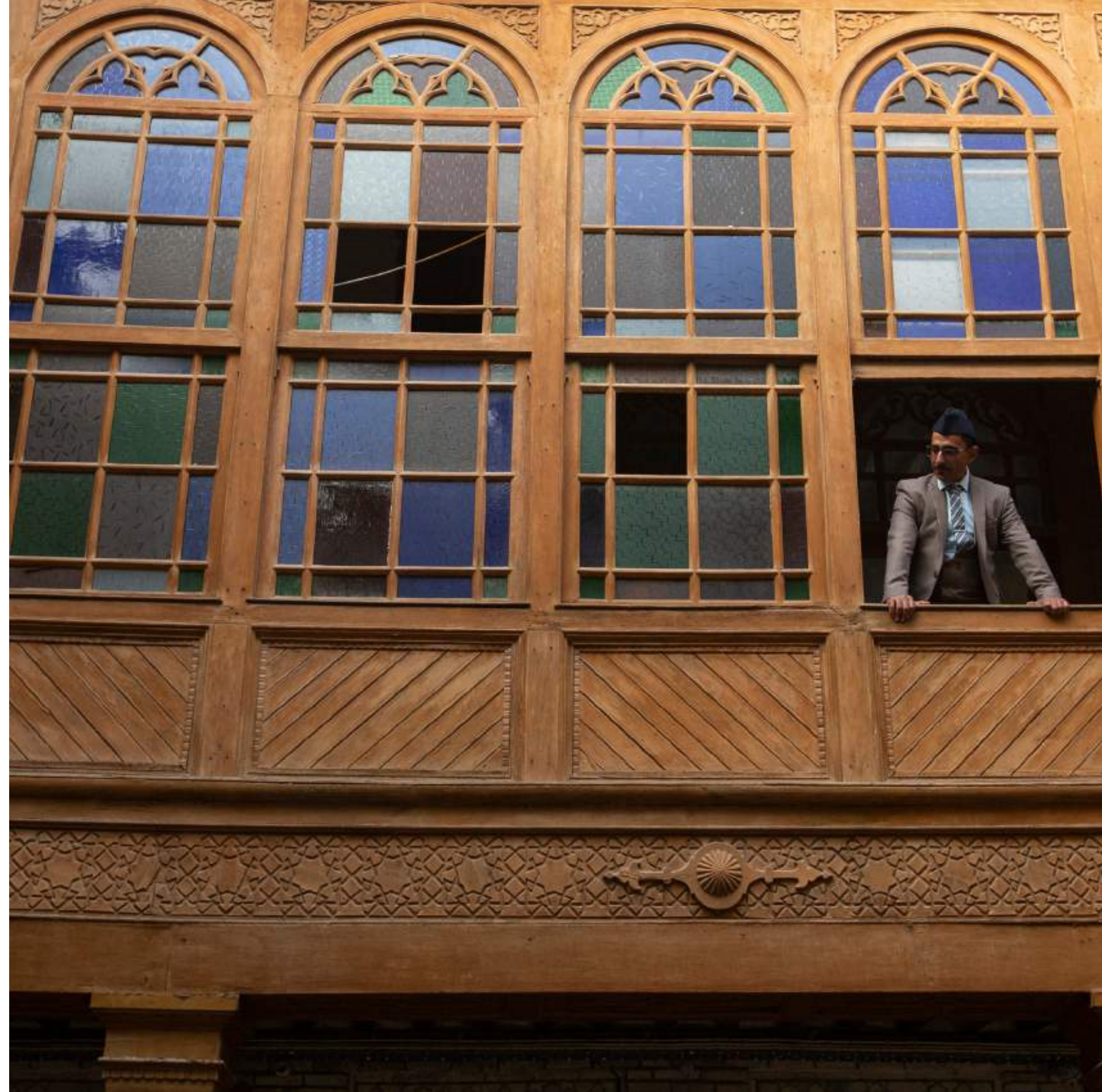
Dar Shahryar was awarded USD 25,000 by IOM and through the grant added two new workers to the two employees.



ARAJEEN BAND BASRA

The Arajeen Band was formed in 2017, said the founder **Aqil Mohammed Khuthair**. It's comprised of seven musicians, including an oud player, a violinist, a flutist, three tabla players and a singer, Aqil himself. The Arajeen Band focuses on the Iraqi *maqam*, which is a genre of Arabic *maqam*. *"Technique of improvisation that defines the pitches, patterns, and development of a piece of music and is unique to Arabian art music."* (Habib Touma, 1996)

"The Arajeen Band saved the Iraqi maqam from disappearance," Aqil Mohammed stated and with time it has caught great attention from the public.





Aside from celebrating local and regional traditions, the Arajeen Band also innovates by mixing different types of maqams or introducing new lyrics also closely collaborating with contemporary Iraqi poets and writers. The energetic and confident performances of the Arajeen Band bring to life songs about love, life and country. They play at different events such as book fairs, bazaars and various other types of cultural events, festivals and conferences as well as privately, in family settings.

Aqil Mohammed has great plans for the future, with to also establish an institute for researching, preserving, and teaching traditional Iraqi music.

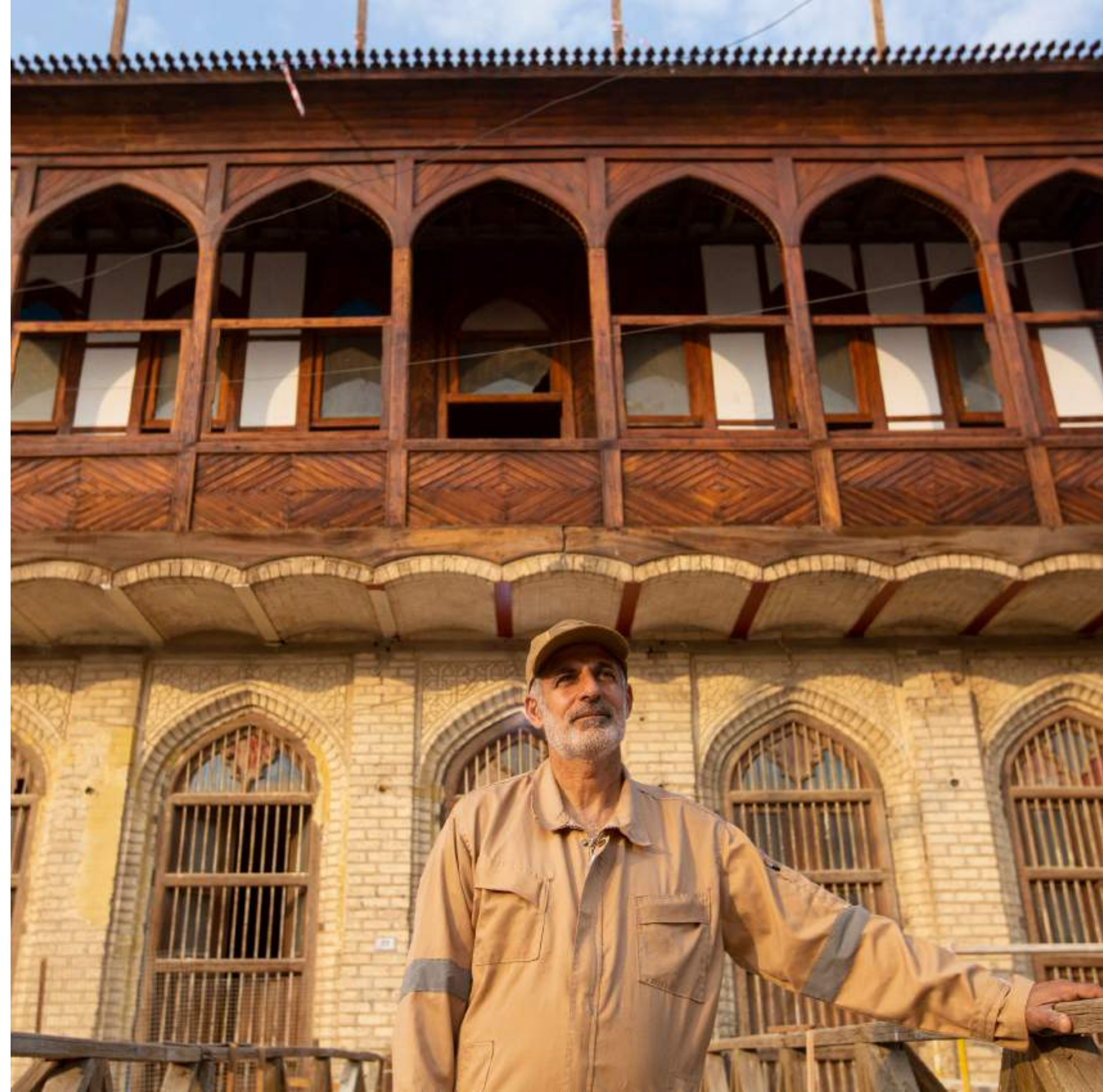
The Arajeen Band was awarded USD 21,789 by IOM. Through the grant the band added one new player employee and contributed to maintaining seven current members.





SHANASHEEL CARPENTRY BASRA

Abd Ali Qadoori grew up in Old Basra and, since his childhood, has been captivated by the beauty of the shanasheel, an extruded wooden structure on the frontal façades of buildings along the streets and hanging over the canals of the ancient city. During his summer breaks in high school he learned the craft of *shanasheel* at the workshop of a skilled local carpenter. In the 1980s, the interest in Iraqi heritage and especially *shanasheel* was high, Abd Ali recalled, which also eventually led him to work in some of the major palaces across the country. Dark times soon descended over Iraq, with sanctions and wars leaving many palaces in Basra crumbling. There was no more demand for Abd Ali's craft.





After the war with the ISIL, shanasheel is again gaining popularity. “We add iron to reinforce the structure of the shansheel, which also makes it easier to maintain and repair,” Abd Ali explained. The skilled craftsman also conducted several workshops on the history of shanasheel and its possible introductions into contemporary architecture. Demand is high again, Abd Ali explains, not only for rebuilding and preserving the historical palaces, but also from the hospitality sector, particularly restaurants, and private owners, who are keen to embellish their premises with the intricate geometric patterns of *shanasheel*.

Shanasheel Carpentry was awarded USD 11,350 by IOM, which helped it to create new job and maintain the jobs of the two employees already working at the carpentry workshop.





AL-HASSOUN MUSEUM AND KITCHEN BASRA

A visit to Basra is now considered incomplete without a stop for a lavish breakfast at Al-Hassoun Museum and Kitchen, located in Old Basra. One could spend hours getting lost in the sequence of *Wunderkammer* carefully fitted by **Abdallah Abboud Hassoun** through 40 years of relentless travel across Iraq hunting down old photographs, everyday objects, carpets, containers and all sorts of *memorabilia*, all reminding the visitor of the richness of the Iraqi past. The tranquil space with a water fountain at its centre and singing birds attracts men and women customers alike.





Abdallah organizes concerts and poetry nights, slowly becoming a cultural focal point in Basra. Al-Hassoun's popularity exploded during the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup, which was held in Basra in 2023. The museum and restaurant was packed with visitors for days, a mirror of the victories recorded by the Iraqi national football team on the other side of the awakening city.

Abdallah feels that he has only just started his journey with the expansion supported by IOM. He has already rented additional spaces next door to expand his restaurant and is planning to open a cafeteria on the other side of the canal, next to the palaces rehabilitated by UNESCO. He believes the museum has a profound impact on the people of Basra, as it *"inspires people to love their city, to care for it, and to look at it differently."*

Al-Hassoun Museum and Kitchen was awarded USD 30,000 by IOM to expand its restaurant and cafeteria, which contributed to maintaining two jobs and opening three new positions with five subsequent new hires.





MOSUL HERITAGE MOSUL

Mosul Heritage, a house run by **Ayoub Thanoon Younis** located in Mosul's Old City, is built in a traditional Moslawi style and proudly flaunts precious alabaster carvings from nearby workshops, which Mosul is known for across Iraq. Mosul Heritage is a bit of everything: it's a coffeeshop, an events venue, a tourist office and even a museum exhibiting local artifacts donated by Moslawi families and a virtual museum of historical sites in Iraq. The new landmark in Mosul is now visited by Iraqi school children and university students, and it increasingly attracts foreign visitors, too.



Seeing the place grow out of ruins from the war on ISIL, into a multi-purpose space hosting over 5,000 visitors between the months of November and December 2022 alone, is truly astounding and a reminder of Mosul's rise from the ashes. Ayoub Thanoon Younis is very clear that his goal is to change the narrative on Mosul, from a place of war to a place of beauty and peace.

Mosul Heritage received USD 26,900 from IOM, enabling a staff of two to become a workforce of seven. Three additional employees are expected to be hired on.







SIRAJA AL-AWWAL MOSUL

Siraja Al-Awwal's leather craft workshop can be traced back two hundred years, hence the name 'Awwal', which means 'first' in Arabic. Siraja Al-Awwal produces leather wallets, belts, bags, holsters, and wall decorations. During the ISIL occupation, **Adib Maher**, owner and leathersmith, explains, they had to halt all of their operations and give up their workshop. However, he managed to slowly bounce back in 2018 after buying some basic equipment and starting up again in a small workshop.





Adib proudly highlighted that his business contributes to the preservation and transmission of a centuries-old craft central to Mosul's rich handicraft past, comprised of coppersmithing, blacksmithing, animal harness manufacturing, traditional syrup making, rug weaving, and textile manufacturing, to list only a few. Due to the impacts of war and the competition caused by cheaper imports, these all struggle to survive today.

Adib's journey does not stop here. In the future he hopes to open two additional workshops, one in East and another in West Mosul, and he has no doubts about the demand for his products: quality, experience and good reputation will attract many customers, Adib confidently remarks.

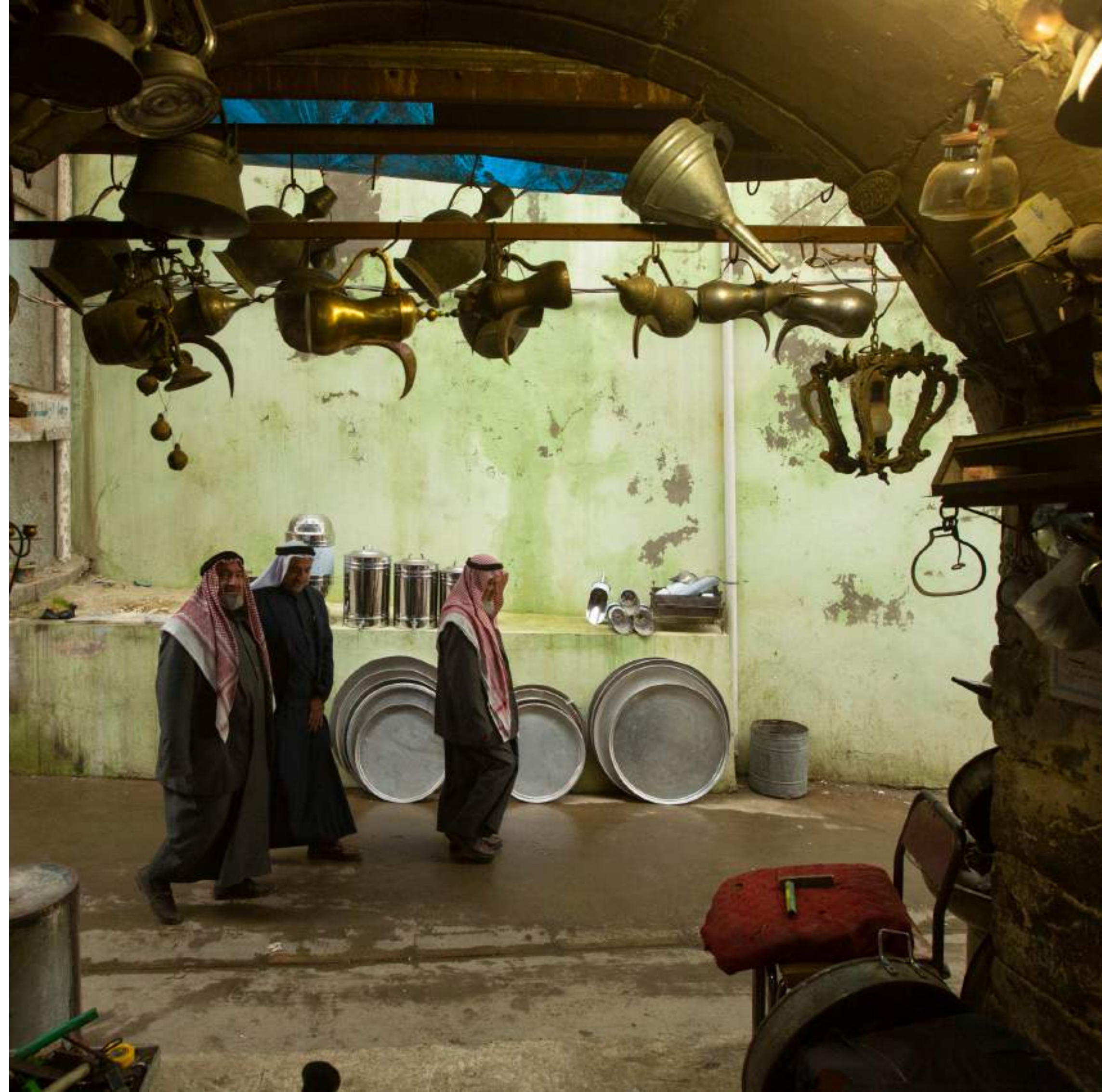
Siraja Al-Awwal was awarded USD 16,000 by IOM and added three new employees to the three already working at the enterprise.

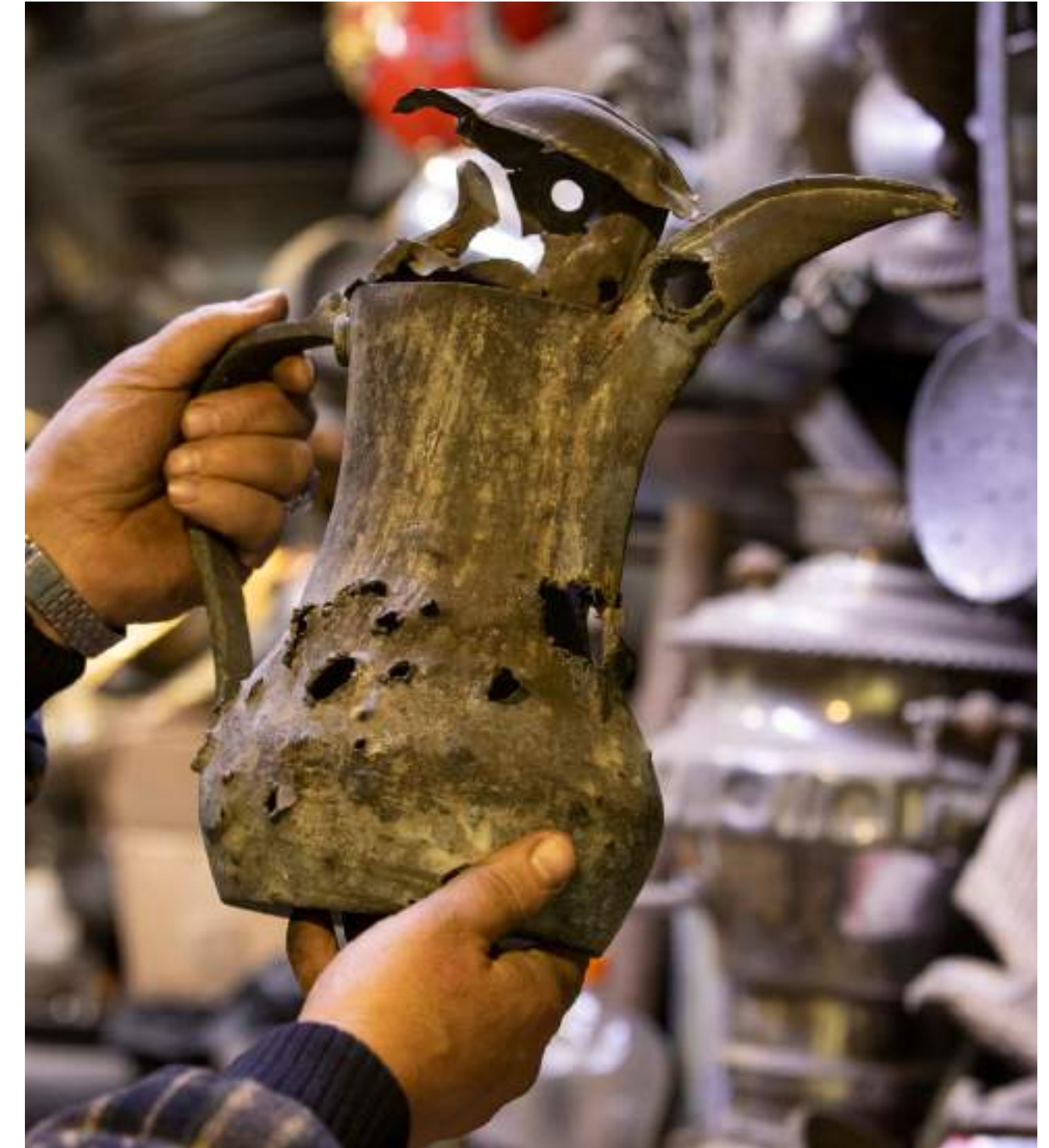




AL-SAFFAR MOSUL

Nooraddin Abbas Yassin is a famous coppersmith from the Old City in West Mosul. Coming from a family tradition tracing back over 300 years, he proudly preserves and passes down the old artistry in its original location too, the Safareen Market, which historically hosted Mosul's coppersmith workshops. Nooraddin's workshop produces copper dishes, utensils, pots, coffee set, and even custom-made objects, some of which requiring over a week to complete.





Nooraddin is reviving and preserving and reviving a centuries-old traditional craft of Mosul and believes that, through his copperwork, he contributes to preserving the very identity of the city which for centuries was also renowned among regional traders. He is also determined to continue expanding in the future by opening a new branch in another part of town, hiring more workers and introducing a variety of new products to his line.

Al-Saffar was awarded USD 18,000 by IOM and added two workers to its workforce, also maintaining the job of one employee.





MAHMOOD ARABESQUE FOR ENGRAVING MOSUL

Youssif Mahmoud is a skilled calligrapher, engraver and sculptor from Mosul, mastering work with a variety of materials, ranging from different types of stones to wood. Youssif is also completely self-made. One day, he got ahold of a burin – this is how it all started, the eminent craftsman explained. In his 55 years of activity in palaces, churches, mosques, public buildings and private dwellings, Youssif left his mark not only one Mosul but also on Iraq itself.



His workshop was looted during the war on ISIL, and he lost everything. Through IOM's grant, he was able to finally buy back the lost equipment and tools. Most importantly, Youssif believes, he can now also transmit the craft and knowledge of engraving and calligraphy to the new generation, stopping the know-how from heading into oblivion.

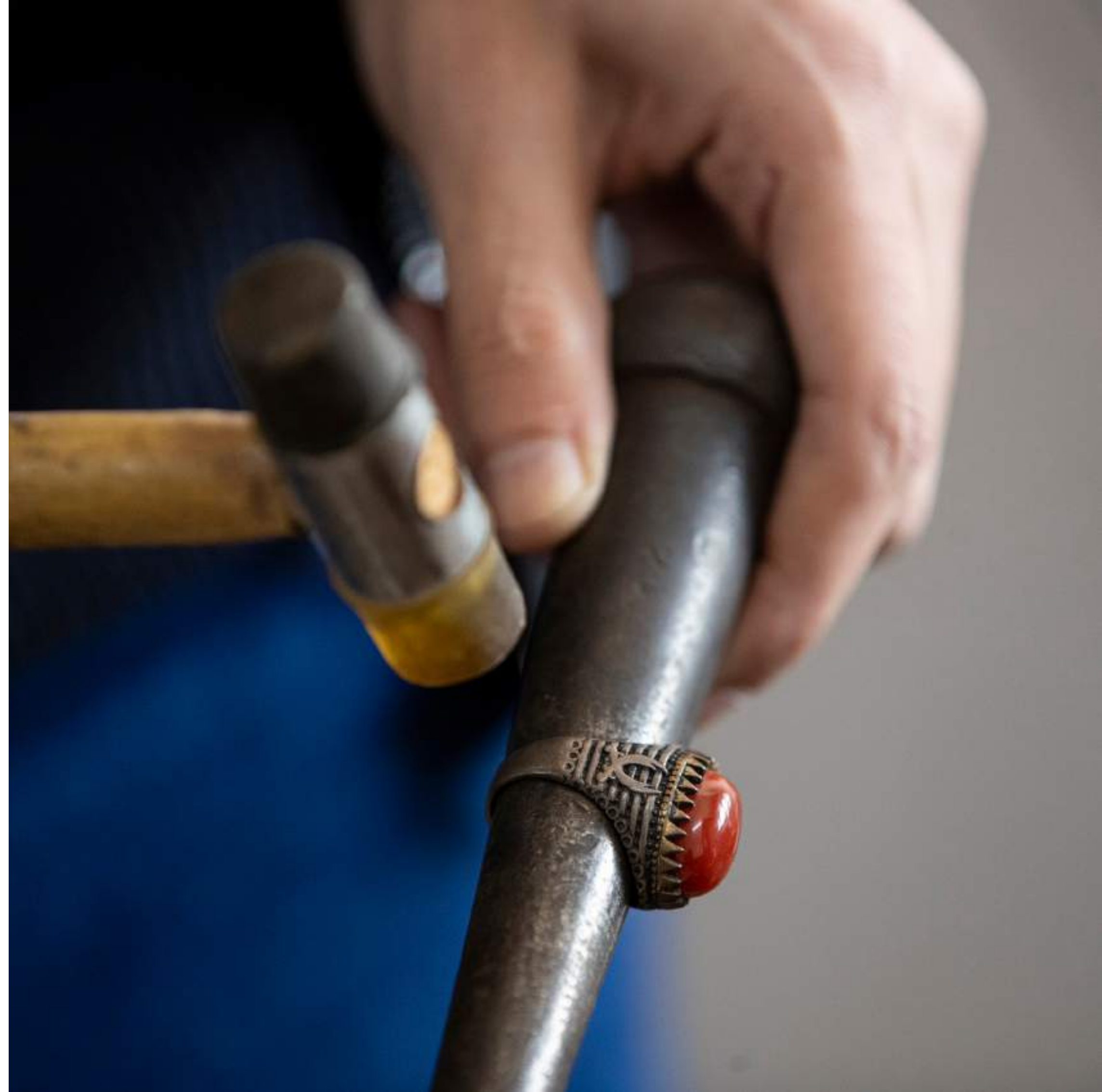
Mahmoud Arabesque was awarded USD 12,045 by IOM and added three new workers through expansion.





AL-ANDALUS MOSUL

Qasim Yarub Qasim is a jeweller from Mosul, specializing in men's and women's adornments. Among his designs, one can find not only contemporary jewellery but also 'Ottoman-style' pieces, as the skilled craftsman showed us. The craft was passed down to him by his grandfather, and as a child, Qasim was already showing promise. As an adult, he opened his own jewellery shop, but had to close it down in 2014 due to the ISIL occupation. *"People's purchasing power dropped so only few could afford to buy jewellery during those times,"* Qasim was already showing promise. As an adult, he opened his own jewellery shop, but had to close it down in 2014 due to the ISIL occupation.





ISIL also imposed restrictions on gold and *jewellery* be sent to the relevant authorities of the self-styled caliphate for marking, which “*might have likely resulted in jewellery breakage or even worse*” Qasim remembered. Also, nobody would have been later able to re-sell the jewellery bearing the ISIL logo, Qasim believes. Closing down was the only solution. When operations to retake Mosul were underway, the workshop was destroyed, and like so many artisans, he had to reopen elsewhere. His new shop is stationed in Suq Al Nabbi.



Qasim is impatiently waiting to return to Najaf Street in the Old City, cite of his original store, and counts the days until the municipality finally rehabilitates his old workshop. He feels his contribution to saving the art of jewellery making is vast, as this is also a disappearing craft, with shortages of skilled craftsmen already apparent in the late 2000s.

Al-Andalus was granted USD 11,700 by IOM and hired two new workers – the workforce now totals four.





ZIYAD AL-TORNACHI MOSUL

Ziyad Aziz Fathi is a skilled craftsman, who sculpts architectural elements – especially Moslawi and Roman arches – and other decorative objects made from limestone and alabaster. Operating in the very center of stone cutting and sculpting in Mosul, Gogjali, Ziyad's beginnings are linked to the assassination of his uncle, a tragic event that left their business without direction. Later on, the ISIL occupation also inflicted a heavy toll on his business; Ziyad entirely abandoned the craft, fearing the risk of conscription into the extremist's group ranks, which due to his skills could have forced him to manufacture weapons, the sculptor explained. People also could not afford limestone or alabaster any more.





Ziyad underscored that his contribution to Iraqi culture is immense, since few individuals with the knowledge in making arches in particular are left in the city. His mastery has also been instrumental in the rehabilitation of the Old City of Mosul, where he and his team are currently actively engaged.

Ziyad Al-Tornachi received USD 12,600 from IOM and added two new workers to his workforce of Four.





SANA BOOKSHOP AND PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSUL

Anfal Hussein Khalaf is a writer, who writes short stories about Iraqi culture and women's experiences. She started publishing in 2017 and she designs and prints books from Moslawi writers and writers from wider Iraq too, along with texts on history, philosophy, and culture – with a special focus on Moslawi culture. She has put out 40 publications in total to date. While before she had to print publications abroad, with an IOM grant she is now able to print the books herself.



While spreading knowledge about the culture of Mosul, she also hopes to increase the quantity and availability of translations of Iraqi works so that one day, she might export the books abroad to spread knowledge of her country and let the world know Iraq more intimately.

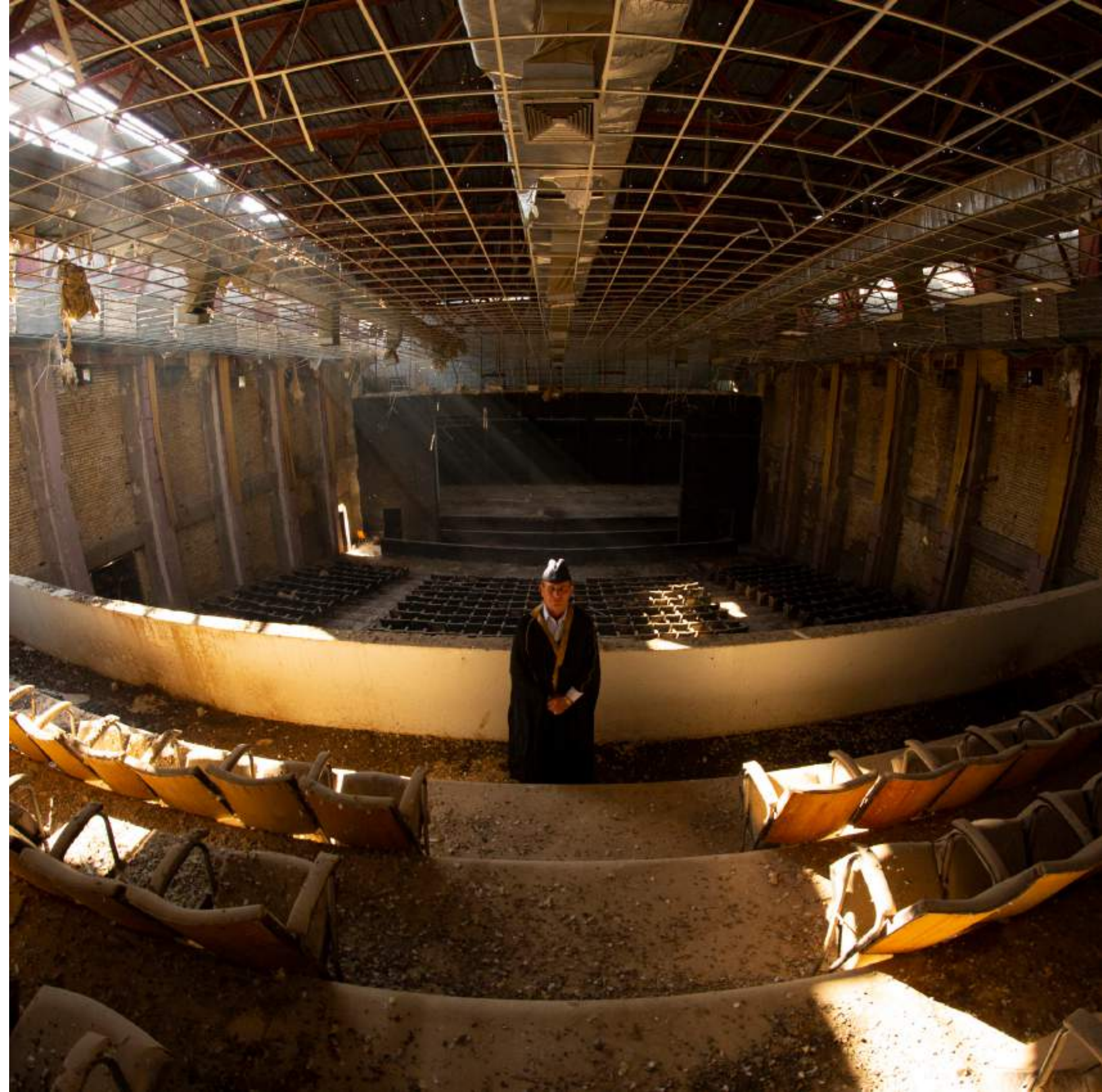
Sana Bookshop and Publishing House was granted USD 15,000 by IOM and added two new workers. by IOM and added 2 new workers to the existing employee.





OTHMAN AL-MAWSILI
OPERETTA
MOSUL

Tahsin Hussein Ali is a well-established musician and singer from Mosul. While he formed music groups of different sizes in the past, his band now counts eight musicians in total, and they focus on the famous Moslawi singer, poet, and *maqam* composer Othman Al-Mawsili (1854-1923), with an operetta celebrating the *Sufi* icon. During the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) occupation of Mosul, Tahsin stopped entirely due to the ban on music and was only able to restart after the liberation of the city.





Rehearsing in a container located in the courtyard of the famous, now severely damaged, Spring Theater, the operetta is ready for curtains-up. will be staged across Iraq, with invitations to perform quickly filling up in the already busy calendar of the music group. Othman Al-Mawsili Operetta aims to revive and spread knowledge of the famous Sufi poet, now close to forgotten in Iraq, who should instead represent the pride of Moslawis and Iraqis alike, Tahsin explained.

Othman Al-Moslawi Operetta was granted USD 14,000 and added two new workers to their workforce of six.





ABU ZAINAB FOR BUILDING AL- MUDHIF THI-QAR

Mohammad Riad Arnus is a skilled planner and builder of elegant and sturdy *mudhifs*, an architectural structure based on curved arches made of reeds found in Iraq's ancient Mesopotamian marshes, a structure style typically commissioned by local chiefs or sheikhs. Mohammad inherited the know-how from his grandfather, who started making *mudhif* more than 50 years ago.

The use of the *mudhif* evolved over time and it is now embraced by the hospitality sector, where it often decorates the courtyards of restaurants or the premises of local tourism businesses where boat trips to the marshlands usually start.





Visitors enjoy grilled fish (known as *masguf*) in the *mudhifs*, drink tea, socialize and take a break during the visit to the enchanting UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Abu Zainab for Building Al-Mudhif is preserving an ancient type of building craft, dating back to Sumerian times. Today, it is a craft only mastered by few – there are “only 4 workshops between *Chibayish* and *Suq Al-Shoyokh*”, said Mohammad. While also preserving the memory of life in the marshes, Mohammad also hopes to further expand his work and reach by establishing courses in *mudhif* building to pass down the craft characteristic of the south.

Abu Zainab for Building Al-Mudhif received USD 14,590 by IOM and created two new jobs to join the existing six.





ATELIER ADEL DAWOOD THI-QAR

Adel Dawood Hussein Aljabri is an artist whose small studio and gallery in Nassiriya, the capital of Thi-Qar Governorate brings gaiety, charm and character to the city's famous Haboobi Street. The eccentric and animated painter has mastered drawing, water colour and oil painting, tending towards reliefs based on archaeological documentation of past civilizations of Iraq. Adel studied fine arts in Baghdad and opened a studio in Karrada, but years of insecurity brought him back to Nassiriya, where he still operates today.





While selling locally, Adel also dispatches his works abroad, to Europe and the USA. His life in Nassiriya is not easy, Adel admits, as an artist and non-conformist to societal norms of the deeply conservative south, he is often mocked and derided by passers-by, who sometimes struggle to understand not only his art but also the general attitude of the free-spirited artist. *“But those few who appreciate art mean everything to me,”* declared the eternal optimist.

Atelier Adel Dawood was awarded USD 7,500 by IOM and added one worker to two existing employees.







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