Mahzam and Al-Alam Area (IQ047)

Salah Ad-Din - 34.715208°N 43.678417°E

KBA Criteria: **V and Ia**
IBA Criteria: **A2**
IPA Criteria: **B1**

Area: **2145 ha** - Altitude: **85-109 m**
Ecoregion: **Mesopotamian Shrub Desert (PA1320)**
Status: **Unprotected**

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Site Description: Evans (1994) listed Mahzam and Tharthar as an important bird area (IBA007), but the recent surveys have split this into two independent sites due to their location and logistics. The site consists of homogeneous riparian habitats on both banks of the Tigris River as well as desert shrublands. There are also dense fruit and date palm orchards scattered amongst bush and thickets. The geology of the area is alluvial sediments and the land is arid and hemmed in along the western bank of the Tigris by elevated rocky cliffs that extend to Tikrit. The cliffs represent typical breeding habitat for many resident species of raptor, such as Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*.

Many vegetable and fruit (largely grape) farms are distributed throughout the site. Bushes and shrubs thin out as the riverbanks turn to stone and gravel with thick poplar trees lining both sides. The eastern arm of the Tigris River is similar in habitat to Mahzam, although the Al-Alam region is characterized by date palms and orchards planted above wheat and barley fields. A few stony islands in the Tigris with scattered Tamarix plants provide nesting and roosting habitat for herons and waders. A number of gravel mines are also located on the Tigris riverbank near Al-Mahzam.

Key Biodiversity Area Criteria	**Notes**	
V. Vulnerability Criteria: *Presence of Critically Endangered and Endangered species – presence of a single individual or Vulnerable species– 30 individuals or 10 pairs.*		
Rafetus euphraticus	One adult was observed in spring 2011 in the Tigris River near Al-Alam.	
Ia. Irreplaceability Sub-criterion: Restricted-range species based on global range		
Rafetus euphraticus	See above	
Important Bird Area Criteria	**Observations made 2009-2011**	
A2. Restricted-range species	**Breeding**	**Wintering/ Passage**
Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* (Resident)	10 pairs (2009)	7 (count, 2011)
Important Plant Area Criteria		
B1. The site is a particularly species-rich example of a defined habitat type		
Inland running water-Riparian vegetation and Desert-shrub vegetation.		

Additional Important Bird Observations: In total, 120 bird species were seen. Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* and European Roller *Coracias garrulus* (both Near Threatened) were observed on passage. The site also held seven breeding Sahara-Sindian Desert biome-restricted species but did not trigger inclusion under criterion A3.

Other Important Fauna: Indian Gray Mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii* was observed and considerd the first record for Iraq (Al-Sheikhly and Mallon 2013). Also photographed at the site was the Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indica*, which face heavy hunting pressure as they are a preferred food for locals in Salah Ad-Din. No fish survey was conducted.

Conservation Issues: Illegal hunting and fishing, primarily poisoning and occasionally electro-fishing, were considered the highest threat. Gravel mining is largely unregulated and has a high impact on the diversity of fish and invertebrates though disruption of spawning beds and rearing areas and may also impact overall water quality. Water pumping stations and electricity generators located on both sides of the river cause noise, oil and fuel spills and air pollution. In addition, oil spills upstream on the Tigris from the Baiji Oil and Gas Field have a very high impact on this site. The riverbank between Tikrit and Mahzam is a popular picnic spot in spring and summer causing pollution from garbage.

Recommendations: An environmental protection scheme, better regulation and enforcement of fishing and hunting, but also addressing gravel mining, water pumping, development, and waste management are recommended. Increased capacity for emergency oil spill response if also a critical need. Although the security situation in this region has dramatically improved, coordination with police or local councils should be pursued to reduce any danger faced by future survey teams.