



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

► ASIA

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Covering 168,754 square miles (437,072 square kilometers), Iraq is roughly the same size as California. The nation has three major types of terrain: sparsely inhabited deserts in western Iraq, mountains along the northern and eastern borders, and fertile valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems in central Iraq. The Tigris and the Euphrates are the nation's vital water sources; most of Iraq's farmland and urban centers depend on these rivers or their tributaries. The rivers converge in southern Iraq to form the navigable Shatt al Arab Waterway, which flows into the Persian (Arabian) Gulf at the nation's 36-mile (58-kilometer) coastline. The Iraqi government drained huge areas of marshland in southern Iraq in the 1990s to deprive political opponents among the Ma'dan, or Marsh Arabs, of their land. Only a fraction of the original marshland remains, but efforts are underway to restore it.

Most of Iraq experiences two seasons: summer (May to October) and winter (November to April). Summers are characterized by average daily high temperatures well over 100°F (38°C) and by high humidity (particularly in the south). Winter brings thunderstorms and average daily highs of 70°F (21°C). Fierce sandstorms begin in March. Mountainous northern Iraq has four distinct seasons and moderate winter snowfall.

**History.** Modern Iraq occupies much of the same territory as the ancient region of Mesopotamia (Greek for "between the rivers"). Located in the Fertile Crescent, Mesopotamia gave rise to a succession of influential civilizations, including the Sumerians (who established the area's first cities around 3000 B.C.), the Babylonians, and the Assyrians. Because the region produced humanity's first known agriculture and written language, it is often referred to as the "cradle of civilization."

The Greeks and Persians controlled the area at various times

from the sixth century B.C. until the seventh century A.D., when Muslim Arabs established Baghdad as the center of an Islamic empire (the Abbasid Dynasty) that stretched from Europe to India. The empire gradually fell into decline, allowing Mongol invaders to conquer Baghdad in 1258.

By the sixteenth century, Baghdad had become part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which ruled the region until its defeat in World War I. Iraq then passed to British control under a League of Nations mandate. In 1932, Iraq was granted independence under the leadership of the Hashemites (a ruling family from present-day Saudi Arabia) and became a constitutional monarchy.

Popular discontent with the Hashemites led to a number of attempted military coups and uprisings. Revolutionary forces successfully overthrew the monarchy in 1958. However, political instability continued, and a 1968 coup put the socialist and Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party in power. The Ba'ath Party eliminated all opposition to its policies and established one-party rule. Longtime Ba'ath leader Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq in 1979 and ordered the execution of many of his rivals. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran after a territorial dispute intensified longstanding tensions. The mutually devastating eight-year war killed hundreds of thousands and ended in a stalemate.

Although Saddam Hussein enjoyed the support of the United States in the war with Iran, he alienated the United States and most of the world when, pressing claims to Kuwaiti territory, he ordered an invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The Persian Gulf War followed, as a U.S.-led coalition forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in February 1991. A Shi'i (Shi'ite) rebellion hoped to take advantage of the Iraqi forces'

defeat in the war, but the Iraqi military crushed it. The United Nations imposed economic sanctions against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein into compliance with UN resolutions, and the coalition enforced no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq to contain the Iraqi military.

One of the conditions of the ceasefire that ended the Persian Gulf War was that Iraq should rid itself of all weapons of mass destruction, a process that was overseen by UN weapons inspectors. In 1998, when Saddam Hussein's government failed to cooperate with the inspectors, they were withdrawn. Following another round of inspections in 2002 and 2003, the United States and Britain charged Saddam Hussein with violating a UN Security Council resolution; they invaded Iraq in March 2003. The U.S.-led coalition forces encountered relatively little Iraqi resistance and, within weeks, had taken control of most of the country. The coalition began arresting senior Ba'ath Party officials, restoring basic services to war-damaged cities, and working to establish a transitional Iraqi government. Saddam Hussein, who went into hiding as coalition troops approached Baghdad early in the campaign, was captured in December 2003. However, ethnic and religious violence has plagued the country since the invasion, and clashes between coalition forces and Iraqi insurgents are widespread.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Iraq has a population of 24.7 million, growing at 2.8 percent annually. About 80 percent of the population is Arab. Kurds (17 percent) live in the north. After decades of resistance to the Arab government in Baghdad, the Kurds achieved semi-autonomous rule in 1991. Iraq is also home to small Assyrian, Chaldean, Turkoman, Bedouin, Iranian, and Armenian communities. Emigration over the past 25 years has created large populations of Iraqis outside Iraq.

Baghdad is Iraq's capital and largest city, with about 5 million people. Other major cities are Basra (Al Baṣrah), a historic port city on the Shatt al Arab Waterway in the south, and Mosul (Al Mawṣil) in the upper Tigris river basin. Three-fourths of Iraq's population lives in cities, most of which are located in the fertile area between Baghdad and Basra.

**Language.** Arabic is Iraq's official language and is used for education, written communication, formal speeches, and radio and television broadcasts. For informal communication, several regional Arabic dialects are spoken. Although Iraqi Kurds use an Arabic-based alphabet, Kurdish is an Indo-European language, not a Semitic language, like Arabic. Assyrian and Chaldean Christians use Aramaic in their religious rites. Turkomans speak Turkish, and Armenians speak Armenian.

**Religion.** Islam is the official religion of Iraq. Although Iraqi governments have promoted secularization, religious traditions remain strong. Iraq is home to both *Shi'i* and Sunni Muslims; the groups differ on the question of Islam's leadership after the prophet Muhammad died. *Shi'i* Muslims constitute roughly 60 percent of the population and predominate in southern and eastern Iraq. Karbalā and An Najaf are revered as holy cities by Muslim *Shi'i* worldwide. Sunni Muslims make up 35 percent of the population and live primarily in the area around Baghdad and to the north, as well as in some southern areas such as Basra. Ba'ath Party posts under Saddam Hussein were held primarily by Sunni Arabs, who constitute about 15 percent of the population. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims. Iraq also contains small minorities of Orthodox Christians (Assyrians and Armenians), Catholic Christians (Chaldeans), Mandaean, and Yazidis.

**General Attitudes.** Though differences between Iraq's ethnic and religious groups have often threatened national cohesion, Iraqis place great importance on national honor—a patriotism that stems in part from their proud heritage in the Arab-Islamic and Mesopotamian civilizations. Many Iraqis silently opposed the brutal nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, but many have also believed that recent policies of the United States and other nations were motivated by self-interest in the region. Mistrust also resulted from the international community's enforcement of economic sanctions against Iraq. As a result, many Iraqis have been skeptical of U.S. intentions in their nation.

Tribal loyalty plays an important role in Iraqi society. Most of the population belongs to one of more than 150 tribes, and tribal leaders still maintain great influence, especially in rural areas. Iraqis are friendly and hospitable, despite the hardships brought about by years of war and sanctions. They are devoted to family, value a good education, and respect those who achieve material success through hard work.

**Personal Appearance.** Although Western clothing styles have been widely adopted in urban areas, many rural women continue to wear traditional dress, consisting of long flowing gowns and scarves or veils (*hijab*). According to religious and personal preference, women may wear a scarf or veil over their hair, the entire head except the eyes, or no veil at all. Some women cover their clothes with a black cloak (*'abayah*) whenever they leave the house or find themselves in the presence of men (other than close relatives). Makeup and gold jewelry are very popular for women; silver rings are common among men.

Urban men wear Western clothing. Laborers and village men wear a long cotton garment (*dishdasha*), a jacket, a light wool cloak (*'aba*), and a checkered headscarf (*kaffiyah* or *yashmagh*) held in place with a cord (*aqal*). Virtually all men have moustaches, and members of the older generation may grow a light beard in keeping with both Sunni and *Shi'i* religious tradition.

Kurdish clothing styles differ from those of Iraqi Arabs. Kurdish women wear pants under their dresses, while men wear baggy trousers tied with sashes. Among Kurds, Arab villagers, and Bedouins, sleeveless embroidered jackets and *khanjars* (ornamental curved daggers) are common.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** In some (especially urban) segments of Iraqi society, men and women may shake hands, kiss on the cheeks, or hug when greeting. However, in conservative sectors, men do not touch women unless they are first-degree relatives (wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters), in which case they greet with a handshake. Family members of the same sex greet with a handshake and hug. In rural areas, greetings between men include handshaking and kissing three times on the cheeks (right, left, and right again). A son may kiss his mother's head as a sign of respect. Children show respect by kissing the hand of an elder.

It is customary that people in public places greet one another even if they are not acquainted. A typical greeting is *Al-salamu 'alaykum* (May peace be upon you). Young Iraqis greet with a less-formal wave and the word *Marhaba* (Hi). When meeting a friend or relative, people usually begin their conversation by asking about the welfare of family members.

It is considered impolite to address a person by first name unless the individual is a close friend and from the same generation and social class. A man is commonly addressed as *Abu* (Father of) followed by his oldest son's first name. A woman

likewise might be addressed by her oldest son's name, as in *Um Abbas* (Mother of Abbas). Even a husband and wife refer to each other in this way, both in public and in private. An individual with no sons is addressed by his or her oldest daughter's first name, and an individual with no children is called *Abu ghayib* or *Um ghayib* (Awaiting father or Awaiting mother). In an uncertain situation, one may address an older person as '*Am* (Uncle) or *Khalah* (Aunt). The structure of an individual's name is formed by the first name, followed by the father's name, and then the family name, which could reflect a person's tribe or city of origin. Women do not change their name after marriage.

**Gestures.** When engaged in conversation, Iraqis tend to stand a short distance from one another and use a good deal of physical contact. Body language is an important method of expression. In keeping with Islamic custom, Iraqis use the right hand to pass items to another person; they use the right hand or both hands to receive items. To express respect, especially to an elder, a person will avoid eye contact during conversation. Likewise, men and women will not maintain eye contact with each other. Traditions like these are observed less and less in modern Iraq, as behavior is increasingly influenced by Western culture.

**Visiting.** Visiting among Iraqi relatives and friends is a common social occurrence. Extended family members typically visit each other at least once a week, usually unannounced. Visits tend to be arranged only for formal matters, such as business transactions. A visit may last anywhere from 30 minutes to four hours, depending on the closeness of the relationship between the guest and host. Relatives and close friends usually bring sweets, food, fruit, or other gifts with them. During the two major Muslim holidays, *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, guests may bring money for adults and sweets and money for children.

If only women are at home at the time of a visit, a male visitor is expected to leave and return later when a male is present. When families visit each other, men and women usually congregate on separate sides of the room or home. Visitors are expected to accept refreshments such as tea, coffee, or juice. If visitors arrive during mealtime, the host is required by custom to provide them with a meal. Therefore, unless a meal has been prearranged, visiting is usually done after lunch or, most commonly, after dinner, when the visit involves lengthy socializing, watching television, and sharing refreshments.

**Eating.** Iraqis eat three meals every day: *riyuq* or *futur* (breakfast) in the early morning, *ghidaa'* (lunch) at around 2 p.m., and '*isha*' (dinner) at around 7 or 8 p.m. Lunch is considered the most important meal of the day. All meals end with dark, sweet tea. Family members usually eat together for all three meals. Traditionally, all members of the family gathered on the matted floor of the living room to eat from a main dish with their hands, but this practice is less frequent today. Most people now use utensils and individual plates and gather at a dining table. The presence of guests may change seating arrangements in traditional segments of society, in which men and their male guests eat before women and children.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Family members are expected to take care of each other. Households often include extended family members of several generations. Although young couples are increasingly inclined to live apart, maintenance of family ties remains important. Men have control over family finances and act as

the outward head of the family. Women wield substantial influence within the family by mediating family disputes and making marriage arrangements. In urban areas, both single and married women may work, pursue higher education, and hold government posts. Women of poorer families, especially those with a large number of children, generally work only in the home. Rural women tend subsistence crops and sell produce.

**Dating and Marriage.** Unmarried daughters and sisters are carefully protected, and marriages constitute a contract not only between individuals, but also families. Early marriage is encouraged, especially in rural segments of Iraqi society, where dating is rare and boys and girls are usually segregated in schools and elsewhere. Although fully arranged marriages are becoming less common, parents continue to suggest and approve marriage partners for their children. Marriage between first cousins is regarded favorably. Even in urban areas, dating in the Western sense is relatively rare. Couples might meet through family acquaintances or at work. Urban men marry in their late twenties and women generally a few years earlier. In all circumstances, the groom is required to pay a large dowry to the bride's family, but this money is often used to buy furniture for the new couple.

After a wedding ceremony, relatives, friends, and guests of the bride and groom celebrate with a large wedding party involving singing, dancing, and plenty of food. At the conclusion of the party, guests escort the couple to their home or a hotel in a trail of cars, honking their horns. In rural areas, friends and relatives may fire bullets in the air during the party.

Under Islamic law, men are allowed to have up to four wives, but few Iraqi men have more than one wife. Divorce is rare and considered a last resort. Discord between husband and wife is often mediated by extended family members.

**Diet.** Breads such as *khubz* (flat bread) and *samoon* (an oval-shaped bread loaf) are staples at every meal. Breakfast typically includes tea and a light item such as cheese, eggs, or *khubz* soaked in soup. Lunch is a sizeable meal that consists of rice and a vegetable stew made of dried beans, eggplant, okra, zucchini, or green beans. Barbecued lamb, beef, kidney, heart, or liver are favorite dishes, but their expense is prohibitive for many Iraqis today. Side dishes may include salad, pickles, and liquid yogurt. Dinner is usually light and consists of rice and *kibba* (a fried cracked wheat dough stuffed with meat or vegetables). Dinner and lunch sometimes include seasonal fruits; the most common are oranges in the winter and watermelon, cantaloupe, and fresh dates in the summer.

**Recreation.** *Football* (soccer) is extremely popular. Iraqis of all ages play at schools, parks, and any other open space in the community. Young people often form their own teams, collect money to buy a ball, wear distinct uniforms, and practice and compete with other local teams. Men spend time together playing backgammon, chess, or dominoes in cafés and coffee shops. Watching nightly television programming is a common family pastime.

**The Arts.** Traditional Arab-Islamic art, modern visual art, music, theater, and crafts are common among Iraqis. Specialized schools teach traditional crafts, such as woodwork, copperware, metalwork, carpet weaving, jewelry, mosaics, ceramics, and calligraphy. The Iraqi Museum in Baghdad contains masterpieces from Mesopotamian and early Islamic periods. People often visited cultural centers in major cities to attend musical and theatrical performances prior to 1990, but performances are less common today. Popular music includes Arabic rock and *maqamat*, a blues-like style of classical Arabic music.

## Iraq

At weddings, a traditional group dance called the *debka* is performed; men hold hands in a circle and dance to the beat of a drummer (*tabbal*) and flute player (*zummar*). The *debka* is common in different versions among Bedouins, southern rural populations, Kurds, and Assyrians.

**Holidays.** Islamic religious holidays are observed according to the lunar calendar. *Ramadan* is a holy month of fasting during which Muslims abstain from food, drink, and tobacco from sunrise to sunset. During *Ramadan*, most government offices and businesses work shorter hours. In the evenings, family and friends gather to celebrate and eat. A three-day feast called *Eid al-Fitr* ends *Ramadan*. Also important are *Moulid al-Nabi* (the prophet Muhammad's birthday) and *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of Sacrifice), a four-day holiday celebrating the end of the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. *Ashura* is observed by *Shi'i* Muslims, who reenact the suffering of the martyr Husain, the grandson of Muhammad.

**Commerce.** Offices and banks are open Saturday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday is a day off work and the day Muslims are required to attend the mosque. Iraqis employed in offices prefer the shorter workday so they can avoid working during the afternoon heat. However, most people work six days a week from morning until sunset, breaking only for lunch.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority began working to form a transitional government with representation from Iraq's various ethnic and religious groups. This body, a 25-member Interim Governing Council, held its first meeting in July 2003. One of the council's primary roles is to prepare for democratic elections at the local and national levels. The United States and other nations plan to maintain their presence in Iraq until the elected government can successfully take power.

**Economy.** Iraq has the world's second largest known reserves of oil. Oil wealth allowed the government to invest heavily in the country's infrastructure and education in the 1970s and 1980s. However, military spending, devastation of the country during the Iran-Iraq and Persian Gulf wars, and international sanctions damaged the oil industry, which now requires extensive maintenance. Iraq also produces barley, wheat, rice, cotton, textiles, and natural gas.

Prior to the 2003 invasion, about 60 percent of the population depended on food provided through a UN "oil-for-food" program, initiated in 1996 to allow Iraq to bypass sanctions and sell oil in exchange for food, medicine, and other basic supplies. Aid agencies began administering humanitarian relief in 2003. Iraqis will rely heavily on aid until their economy, particularly the oil industry, is allowed to recover. However, even when Iraq's economy is functioning successfully, agricultural production does not meet local needs, and large amounts of food are imported.

**Transportation and Communications.** Iraq has an extensive system of paved roads and highways, although much of the infrastructure is in need of repair. Railways connect Baghdad with other major cities. The majority of urban Iraqis rely on buses; few people own cars.

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	.....NA
Adjusted for women	.....NA
Real GDP per capita	.....\$2,400
Adult literacy rate	.....71 percent (male); 45 (female)
Infant mortality rate	.....55 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	.....67 (male); 69 (female)

Most Iraqis have telephones, and post offices and telecommunication centers provide telephone and fax services to those who lack either. Almost everyone in major cities has access to television and radio broadcasts. In addition to Iraqi-produced shows, Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese shows are popular. U.S. and European shows are subtitled in Arabic. The internet is not easily accessible, although Baghdad has a number of internet cafés. Postal service is fairly reliable.

**Education.** Prior to 1990, the government's large investments in education dramatically increased literacy rates and the accessibility of higher education. After Iraq invaded Kuwait, however, resources for education were transferred elsewhere. Schools fell into disrepair. Many teachers were forced to abandon their jobs when salaries decreased to just a few dollars a month. Where schools continued to operate, students had to attend overcrowded classrooms and share the few available books. Impoverished parents often compelled their children to find work rather than attend school. In 1996, the United Nations began using a small percentage of "oil-for-food" revenue to improve education facilities, but Iraq's education system is still far from recovering to pre-1990 standards.

**Health.** Iraq's healthcare system is in disarray, especially in rural areas. Hospitals are understaffed and lack needed medicine and supplies. Diseases such as typhoid and cholera are common, in large part due to contaminated drinking water. These problems, combined with widespread poverty, malnutrition, and pollution, have contributed to a significant rise in infant mortality in recent years.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In April 2004, the killing of four U.S. contractors in the city of Falluja, 30 miles (50 kilometers) west of Baghdad, sparked a prolonged U.S. siege of the city and intense fighting between U.S. forces and Iraqi insurgents.
- Iraq's Interim Governing Council approved a temporary constitution in March 2004. It is to remain in force until an elected government can approve a permanent constitution.
- In March 2004, more than 180 *Shi'i* Muslims were killed in coordinated bombings in Baghdad and Karbalā during the *Shi'i* holy period of *Ashura*. It was Iraq's deadliest day since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

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