

## Iraq History & Culture

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### Overview

Iraq was once home to not one but many successive civilizations that thrived then faded with time leaving behind their indelible imprints in terms of culture, heritage, music, learning and so much more.

### Population:

37,517,223. (2016 estimate)

Iraq is the most populous country in the Middle East.

### Area:

437,072 square kilometers.

### Capital:

Baghdad, population 7,216,000, is the capital and the largest city. The city was built, as the “Round City”, in 762 to be the capital of the ‘Abbāsid dynasty of caliphs, and for the next 500 years it was the most significant cultural center of Arab and Islamic civilization and one of the greatest cities of the world.

### Location & Geography

The geography of Iraq is varied and consists of four main areas: the desert (west of the Euphrates), Upper Mesopotamia (between the upper Tigris and Euphrates rivers), the northern highlands of Iraqi Kurdistan, and Lower Mesopotamia, the alluvial plain extending from the area around Tikrit to the Persian Gulf.

Other large cities, each with populations over 1,000,000, include Basra and Mosul.

### Iraq History Timeline - the Abridged Version

**4800 BC-** The Sumerians

**2340BC-** The Akkadians

**1894-1595 BC-** The Babylonians

**9<sup>th</sup> Century BC-** The Assyrians

**2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC- 635 AD-** The Persian Empire

**634-1258 AD –** Arab/Islamic Empire

**1258 AD-** The Mongol Invasion

**14<sup>th</sup>- 15<sup>th</sup> centuries-** The Turkmen rule

**1534 - 1918 -** Region is part of the Ottoman Empire.

**1917 -** the British took control in 1918 under the Treaty of Sevres. State of Iraq is created

**1919 -** At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Iraq was formally made a Class A mandate entrusted to Britain.

**1920 -** League of Nations approves British mandate in Iraq, prompting nationwide revolt.

**1921 -** Britain appoints Faisal, son of Hussein Bin Ali, the Sherif of Mecca, as king. This Hashemite monarchy reigned until 1958.

**1932 -** Mandate ends, Iraq becomes independent. Britain retains military base in the region.

**1930's -** During the 1930s the British, French, Dutch and American conglomerate retained rights to the Iraqi oil fields and Britain maintained a military presence to protect the oil interests.

**1941 -** Anglo-Iraqi War

- Britain re-occupies Iraq after a pro-Axis coup during Second World War.

**1958 -** The monarchy is overthrown, & the king and his family are killed in a military coup led by Abd-al-Karim Qasim and Abd-al-Salam Muhammad Arif. Iraq leaves the pro-British Baghdad Pact.

**1963** - The Qasim government is overthrown by Arif and a group of military officers.  
**1968** - A Ba'athist led-coup seizes power, puts Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr in power.  
**1972** - Iraq nationalizes the Iraq Petroleum Company.  
**1979** - Saddam Hussein succeeds al Bakr as president  
**1980 - 1988** - Iran - Iraq War  
**1990** - Iraq invades Kuwait, prompting what becomes known as the first Gulf War and putting it on a collision course with the international community.  
**1991** - Iraq subjected to sanctions, weapons inspections and no-fly zones.  
**2003** - US-led coalition invades. This becomes known as the second Gulf War. Years of guerrilla warfare and instability start.  
**2011** - US troops cease combat missions  
**2011 - 2014** - The Iraqi insurgency escalated after the withdrawal of US Troops in 2011. The level of violence rose as Sunni militant groups stepped up attacks targeting the country's majority Shia population that no longer had the protection of US troops.  
**2014** - June-September - Sunni rebels led by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) surge out of Anbar Province to seize Iraq's second city of Mosul and other key towns. Tens of thousands flee amid atrocities. Kurdish forces, US and Iran assist government in repelling attacks.  
**2015 - present** - Iraq Army & Shia militias launch offensive to retake cities occupied by ISIL. Government forces retake Ramadi & more recently (June 2016) Fallujah. The battle for Mosul is currently in progress.

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Map illustrates Iraq's location relative to bordering countries.



Iraq shares its border with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the south, Jordan in the west, Syria in the northwest, Turkey in the north, and Iran in the east. The two ancient rivers called Tigris and Euphrates that meander through the country have nurtured its people for millennia.

## Symbolism

## Coat of Arms

Iraq's coat of arms is a black and golden eagle bearing a shield depicting the Iraqi flag. The scroll below the eagle reads, "*al-Jumhuriya al-'Iraqiya*" ("The Iraqi Republic").



## Flag of Iraq 2015

The **flag of Iraq 2015** ((Arabic: علم العراق) includes the three equal horizontal red, white, and black stripes of the Arab Liberation Flag. During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the phrase *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) was added to the flag.



## **Resources**

Favorable geology has given Iraq some of the world's most prolific oil wells. It has not only the potential to become the world's largest oil producer, it also can produce the oil more economically than most oil producing countries in the world. Besides oil, Iraq has the 7<sup>th</sup> largest reserve of natural gas in the world, yet to be developed and produced

## **Ethnic Group(s)**

There are 2 main ethnic groups, Arabs & Kurds. The Kurds are the largest minority group, constituting about 15–20%, Arabs constitute about 75–80% of the total population. Turkmen, Assyrian and other much smaller minorities such as Mandeans, Armenian, Circassians, Iranians, Shabakis, Yazidis and Kawliya make up the remainder of (5-10) % of the population. Marsh Arabs are around 20 thousand and live in the marsh areas of southern Iraq.

## **Language**

Iraq has two official languages: Arabic and Kurdish. Arabic is the majority language, while Kurdish is spoken by about 10-15% of the population. Turkmen/Turkoman, the Neo-Aramaic language of the Assyrians and other smaller minority languages include Aramaic, Mandaic, Shabaki, Armenian, Circassian and Persian are spoken by around 5% of the population. Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkmen/Turkoman are written with versions of the Arabic script, the Neo-Aramaic languages in the Syriac script and Armenian is written in the Armenian script. Prior to the US invasion in 2003, Arabic was the sole official language. When the new Constitution of Iraq was approved in June 2004, both Arabic and Kurdish became the official languages.

## **Religion**

Muslim - 97% (Shi'a 60%-65%, Sunni 32%-37%) , Christian and others - 3%). Christians are the largest religious minority in Iraq. They are mostly descended from those who did not convert to Islam after the 7th century, and are subdivided between Chaldeans (linked to Catholicism), Nestorians (called Assyrians, Jacobites and Eastern Orthodox).

What was the origin of the Sunni-Shiite split?

When the Islamic Prophet Muhammad died in 653 AD a debate emerged about who should be his successor. Both sides agreed that Allah is the one true God and that Muhammad was his messenger, but one group (which eventually became the Shiites) felt Muhammad's successor should be someone in his bloodline, i.e Ali, his cousin & son-in-law while another group (which became the Sunnis) felt a pious individual who would follow the Prophet's customs was acceptable and they chose to follow Abu Bakr as their leader.

The Shia and Sunnis are similar in over 95% of ways. Both believe Prophet Muhammad was the messenger of Allah. And both follow the five tenets of Islam: They fast during Ramadan, pledge to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, practice ritual prayer (which includes five prayers each day), give charity to the poor, and pledge themselves to their faith. All Muslims agree that Allah is One, Muhammad is His last Prophet, and the Qur'an is His last Book for mankind. Regardless of position, Islam frames a way of life and governs political, legal, and

social behaviour. It orders one's daily life and provides moral guidance for both society and the individual. The rules of Islam come from the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (known as "hadith").

Major differences between the two occur in jurisprudence (i.e. how to pray, how to marry, inheritance) and minor elements of faith

## Culture

Iraq has a rich and layered culture, mix of traditions and cultural diversity. The dominating culture within Iraq is Arab. Sunnis are a minority in Iraq, and the Shias, a minority in the Arab world, are the majority in Iraq. Baghdad is mixed Sunni and Shia. The Kurds, a non-Arab people, are the largest minority group, constituting about 15–20%, and are concentrated in northern Iraq, eastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iran and southern Georgia. d Shia.

## Education

Iraq once had a good education system. However, the ravages of the Gulf Wars and subsequent UN sanctions followed by the US invasion, and ongoing sectarian violence has led to the deterioration of quality education which in turn has lowered the literacy rate dramatically.

**Literacy: (UNESCO 2000)**

Adult Male	74%	Female	64%
Youth Male	84%	Youth Female	81%

There is currently an insufficient supply of schools, and most schools suffer from poor conditions. Based on UN data, 2751 severely damaged schools require rehabilitation.

Some of the factors that have weakened the education system in Iraq:

- schools in dangerous areas were forced to close for extended periods,
- personnel were targeted,
- teacher and staff absenteeism and that of girls (due to security reasons)
- poor quality of inputs

## Islamic Calendar

The Hijri calendar is a lunar calendar, consisting of 12 months, a total of 354 or 355 days, about 11 days shorter than the year in the Gregorian calendar. It is used by Muslims everywhere to determine the designated days on which to observe the annual fasting, to attend Hajj, (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and to celebrate other Islamic holidays and festivals.

The first year was the Islamic year beginning in AD 622 during which the emigration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, known as the Hijra, occurred. Each numbered year is designated either "H" for *Hijra* or "AH" for the Latin Anno Hegirae ("in the year of the Hijra) therefore, Muslims typically call their calendar the Hijri calendar.

The current Islamic year is 1437 AH. In the Gregorian calendar, 1437 AH runs from approximately 14 October 2015 to 2 October 2016.

The year begins with the month of Muharram (1st Muharram being October 2nd, 2016).

## Islamic Holidays

Iraq is a Muslim nation with Arabic and Kurdish as its official languages. As such, Islamic holidays are celebrated.

### Islamic Holidays

*Al-Hijra/Muharram* is the Muslim New Year, the beginning of the first lunar month.

*Mawlid al-Nabi* is a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam in 570 CE. Sunni Muslim dates are shown. Shi'a Muslims celebrate Mawlid five days later, on the 17th of the lunar month of Rabi'-ul-Awwal in the Islamic calendar.

For Sunni Muslims, *Ashura* is a day of fasting that was originally observed by Jews to recall when God saved the Children of Israel from the Pharaoh in Egypt.

For Shiite Muslims, *Ashura* recalls an event circa 680-OCT-20 [CE](#) in Iraq when an army of the Umayyad regime martyred a group of 70 individuals who refused to submit to the Caliph.

*Ramadan* is the holiest period in the Islamic year; it is held during the entire 9th lunar month of the year. This was the month in which the Qura'n was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is a time at which almost all Muslims over the age of 12 are expected to fast from sunup to sundown, unless they suffer from health problems which would make fasting dangerous

*Id al-Fitr* (a.k.a. "*Id*" and "*Eid*") is the first day of the 10th month -- i.e. the day after the end of Ramadan. It is a time of rejoicing. Houses are decorated; Muslims buy gifts for relatives. The words "*Id*" and "*Eid*" mean festival.

*Id al-Adha* (the *Feast of Sacrifice* or *Day of Sacrifice*) occurs during the 12th month of the Islamic year. This immediately follows the Hajj. It recalls the day when Abraham intended to follow the instructions of God, and sacrifice his son Ishmael. (Muslims believe that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his elder son Ishmael; Judeo-Christians believe that it was Isaac who was involved in the near sacrifice).

## The Arts

The country has an art heritage, proof of which is the renowned Arab painters, poets and sculptors that call Iraq home. Iraqi artisans are well known for their work in both handicrafts and carpets and rugs. Iraqi architecture is also among the best in the Arab world, as seen in the cityscape of Baghdad.

## Music

Iraqi music, also known as the music of Mesopotamia, encompasses the music of a number of ethnic groups and musical forms. Ethnically, it includes Arabic music, Assyrian, Kurdish and the music of

Turkmen, among others. As well as the time honored music of these peoples, Iraqi music includes contemporary music styles such as pop, rock, soul and and urban contemporary. Iraq is known mainly for three musical instruments, the Oud, Iraqi Santur and Joza.

## **Sport**

In July 2007, roars were heard and tears were shed all around Iraq. The high emotions celebrated, for the first time in Iraq's history, an Asian Cup victory by the Iraq national football team. It was a uniting factor - Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians joyously celebrated together the accomplishments of the Iraqi football squad. Football is the most popular sport in Iraq. At the 2004 Olympics in Athens the Iraqi football team placed 4th, losing the bronze medal to Italy by a single goal.

Basketball, swimming, weightlifting bodybuilding, taekwondo, boxing, kickboxing and tennis are also popular sports.

The correct reading of the Quran is considered a rite of passage for children. Elders are highly respected because Iraqi Arabs believe that wisdom comes as one grows older. Generosity is also valued in the culture, a quality that is particularly apparent during Ramadan when it is considered important to give to the needy. Births and marriages are major milestones in Iraq and in many instances hundreds of guests will attend weddings. While marriages are mostly arranged, they are rarely forced.

Iraq also has a strong tradition of afternoon tea, which is why it's common to find tea houses in all the major towns and cities, a time for people to retreat to their homes or a nearby shop to enjoy a cup over conversations with friend

## **Role of Gender**

Iraq's new Constitution states that all Iraqis are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on gender. However, the Constitution also cites Islam as the basic source of legislation and forbids the passing of laws contradictory to its "established rulings" and allows each religious group in Iraq to govern its own personal status matters. As a result, the situation of women in Iraq very much depends on the implementation of Islamic law and on the priorities of male religious authorities.

## **The Family**

It is common for large extended families to live in the same house, compound, or village. In urban areas, families do not necessarily live in the same house, although they generally live in the same street or suburb at least.

## **Family and Honour**

Iraqis consider family and honour to be of foremost importance. The extended family or tribe is both a political and social force. Families hold their members responsible for their conduct, since any wrongdoing brings shame to the entire family. Loyalty to the family comes before other social relationships, even business.



## **Meeting People**

The most common greeting is the handshake accompanied by eye contact and a smile. Good friends of the same sex may greet each other with a handshake and a kiss on each cheek, starting with the right. Expect to be introduced to each person individually at a small social function. At a large function, you may introduce yourself.

## **Hospitality**

Hospitality is an Arab and Muslim tradition deeply engrained in the culture. Visitors are treated as kings and must always be fed and looked after. A tradition within Islam actually stipulates someone is allowed to stay in your home for 3 days before you can question why they are staying and when they will leave. Invitations to a home must be seen as a great honour and never turned down.

## **Food Customs at Ceremonial Occasions**

It has been traditional to sacrifice a lamb or a goat to celebrate holidays. However, today few Iraqis have the means to do this, and celebrations are now minimal.

## **Gift Giving Etiquette**

If you are invited to an Iraqi's home a gift is appropriate & appreciated. A box of cookies, pastries or a box of chocolate is acceptable. A fruit basket is also appreciated.

- Flowers are being given more and more but only to a hostess.
- If a man must give a gift to a woman, he should say that it is from his wife, mother, sister, or some other female relation.
- A small gift for the children is always a good touch.
- Gifts are given with two hands.
- Gifts are generally not opened when received.

## **Dining Etiquette**

- Check to see if you should remove shoes.
- Dress conservatively and smartly.
- Do not discuss business.
- Iraqi table manners are relatively formal.
- If the meal is on the floor, sit cross-legged or kneel on one knee. Never let your feet touch the food mat.
- Use the right hand for eating and drinking.
- It is considered polite to leave some food on your plate when you have finished eating.

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