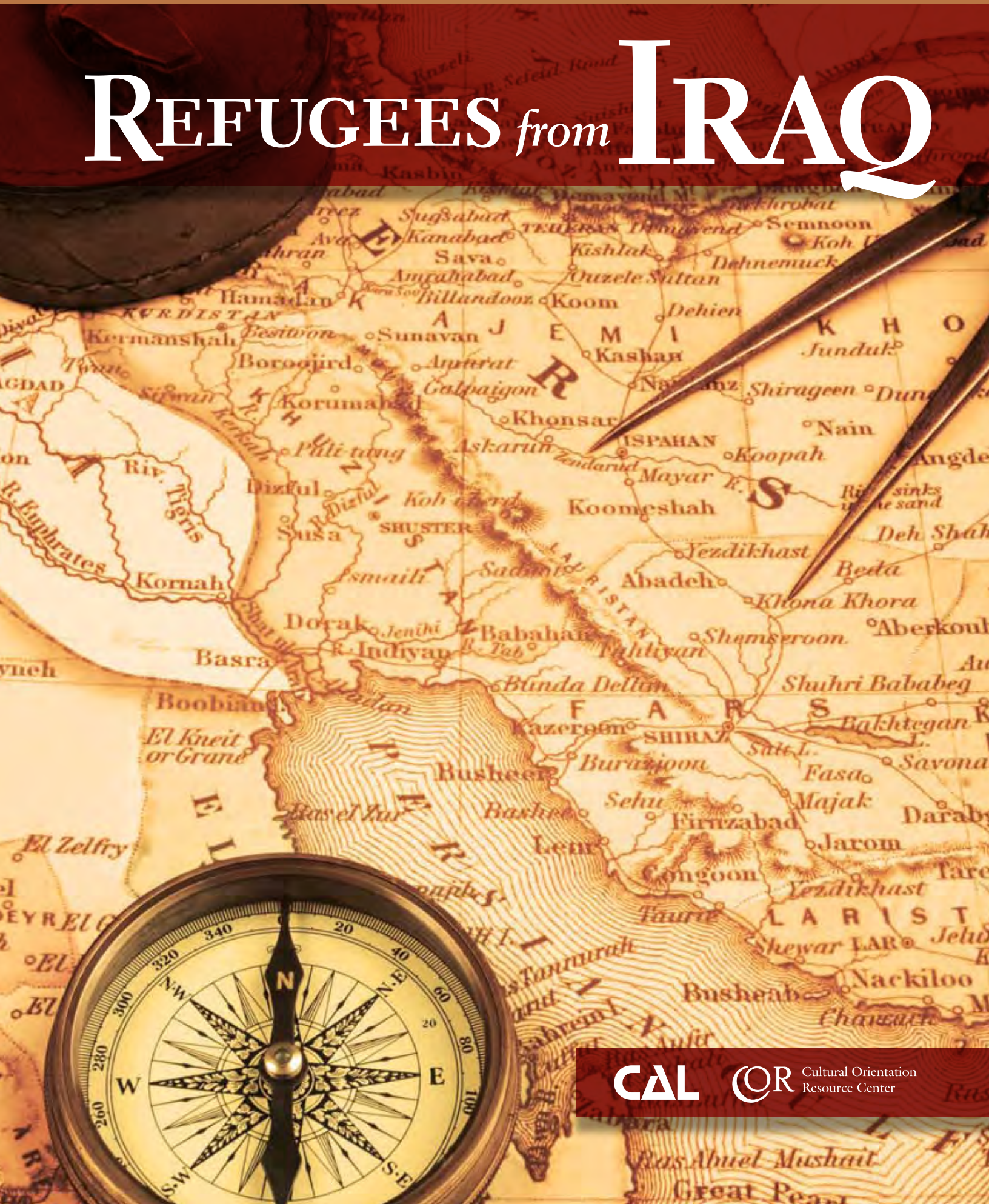


# REFUGEES *from* IRAQ





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# Refugees from Iraq

Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences

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# The Iraqis: Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences

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# Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than four million Iraqis have been displaced by the war in Iraq and its aftermath. Of these, about two million people have found asylum in neighboring countries, where many eke out a marginal living in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, often by working illegally for low wages as laborers, drivers, and restaurant workers. Most Iraqi asylees are living in Syria and Jordan, but Iraqis have also sought asylum in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Because most Iraqis are unable to return to Iraq safely or to settle permanently in the countries to which they have fled, Western nations, including the United States, have begun to resettle those refugees who are considered by the UNHCR to be at greatest risk. The new Iraqi arrivals will be joining previous groups of Iraqi refugees resettled in the United States. After the 1991 Gulf War, an estimated 12,000 Iraqis were admitted to the United States, and in 1996, about 6,500 Iraqis who had links to a U.S.-sponsored coup attempt against the regime in Iraq were granted asylum.

Before Iraqis came to the United States as refugees, thousands entered the country as immigrants, and today there are thriving Iraqi-American communities in many American cities, with Detroit, Chicago, and San Diego hosting the largest populations. In the 2000 U.S. Census, 90,000 people claimed Iraq as their birthplace. Many of the 120,000 Christians who have fled Iraq since 2003 are believed to have relatives in the United States.

This Enhanced Refugee Backgrounder provides basic information about the history, cultures, and background experiences of the new Iraqi arrivals. It also looks at the experiences of refugees in the countries of first asylum and potential resettlement issues. For readers who wish to learn more about Iraq and its peoples, we provide a list of books, articles, reports, and Web site resources at the end of the Backgrounder.

This publication is intended primarily for refugee resettlement agency staff who will be assisting the refugees in their new communities in the United States. But others may find the Backgrounder useful, too. Local government agencies—the housing and health departments, the courts, and the police—may use the Backgrounder to provide the new arrivals with the services they need, while teachers may use it to help their students better understand events that are shaping their future world.

## People

Iraq includes a number of diverse ethnic groups, religions, and languages. According to the CIA's online World Factbook, Iraq's population is currently about 28 million, of whom 75% to 80% are Arabs and 15% to 20% are Kurds, with smaller numbers of Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkomen. Islam is the predominant religion, practiced by 97% of the population. Of Iraqi Muslims, 60% to 65% are Shi'i Arabs and 32% to 37% are Sunni Arabs or Kurds. A small number of Iraqis, including Ali-Ilahis and Yazidis, are syncretic Muslims. Christians make up 3% of the population: Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans are all Christians, and there are also some Arab Christians. Arabic, the national language, is spoken with some level of proficiency by all Iraqis.

## Land and Climate

### *Land*

The origin of the term *Iraq* is a subject of debate among scholars. References to it are made in pre-Islamic Arab poetry and by early Muslim historians. Some say it is derived from the country's ancient name, *Araqi*, meaning "on the land of the sun." Others believe that the term is the Arabized version of *Irah*, which in ancient Asiatic languages meant "sea coast" or "riverside." Still others say it derives from the Persian word *erag*, meaning "lowland."

With an area of about 172,960 square miles, Iraq is slightly larger than the U.S. state of Texas. Located in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq is bounded on the north by Turkey, on the east by Iran, on the southeast by Kuwait, on the south and southwest by Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and on the west by Syria. Its shallow coastline on the Gulf extends only about 37 miles from Ras Bisha to Um Qasr. As part of the shortest land route between Europe and Southeast Asia, Iraq has served as a bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe, and between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

Iraq's flat desert lands to the southwest and its numerous passes through the northern and eastern mountains have made the country vulnerable to foreign invasions and migrations since the dawn of history. Its population, comprising a diverse mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, reflects this history.

### *Climate*

Iraq is located in the warmer part of the Northern Temperate Zone. Hot and dry summers usually last from May to October, when temperatures range from 97°F to 110°F in the central and southern regions and may reach a daytime high of 120°F. Temperatures in the hilly and mountainous northern areas are usually cooler. Humidity is generally low except in areas close to rivers, lakes, marshes, or the sea.

Winter usually lasts from November to early March. Winter nights are very cold whereas days are mild. The northern areas have longer autumn and spring seasons. Rains fall in winter and spring and are heavier in the mountainous areas. The desert, central, and southern areas receive an average of 6 inches of rain annually, but in the northeast, heavier rains, ranging from 16 to 23 inches annually, make it possible to grow crops without irrigation. The mountains of Kurdistan receive about 39 inches of rain annually. Heavy snows fall in the high mountains during the winter.

## Economy

Iraq's economy shrank by more than 14% in 2002 and by 35% in 2003, the year of the U.S. occupation. The economy rebounded in 2004, then settled down to a more normal rate in 2005, although there is considerable inflation, reaching about 30% for most consumer items in 2006. Per capita income is about \$1,190. According to a recent poll, more than 60% of Iraqis complain that basic household goods are unavailable.

Iraq's economy is dominated by oil production, and in recent years oil resources have accounted for more than half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Oil output peaked at 3.6 million barrels per day in the early 1980s but fell as a result of the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war and the 1991 Gulf War. The economic sanctions from 1991 to 2003 prevented reconstruction.

Since 2003, Iraq's oil production has settled to about 2 million barrels per day. As a result of the insurgency and sabotage, efforts to increase production have largely failed. Lack of security has hindered reconstruction efforts and scared off foreign investors.

Iraq is believed to have the world's third largest petroleum reserves, amounting to about 116 billion barrels. One recent estimate gives Iraq another 100 billion barrels of reserves in the largely unexplored Sunni-inhabited region west of Baghdad. If accurate, this estimate would dramatically alter the calculations of politicians, because Iraq's main oil wealth currently comes from the Shi'i-dominated south.

The second largest developed oil fields in Iraq, after the Shi'i areas in the south, are in Kurdish areas. The Iraqi cabinet is currently considering a law that would place all oil fields under the control of the central government. The Kurdistan Regional Government is resisting this and has been concluding separate oil deals on its own. Recent months have also seen tensions between the Kurds and Iraqi Arabs over the future of oil-rich Kirkuk, which is claimed by both groups.

## History

### *Early History*

Iraq has played a long and unique role in human history. The area witnessed the birth and evolution of the world's oldest human civilization. Its peoples developed a sophisticated irrigation system; invented the wheel; began the study of astronomy, mathematics, law, literature, music, and art; and developed a writing system that is the source of the roman alphabet.

### *The Islamic Empire*

Before its conquest by Muslim Arabs, the Arab kingdom of Hira, a vassal of the Sasanian (Persian) Empire, was established as a center of trade and culture in Iraq in the 3rd century C.E. In 637 C.E., soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim Arabs invaded Iraq and defeated the Sasanian forces. By 750 C.E., Iraq had become the center of a new empire that would eventually extend from Spain across central Asia to parts of India.

The ruling Abbasid caliphs—that is, caliphs claiming descent from Abbas, uncle of the Prophet Muhammad—established Baghdad as their capital. It became one of the largest cities in the world, a center of arts and sciences and the birthplace of religious and revolutionary movements that shaped Islamic history.

Over the next few centuries, however, the centralized power of the caliphate gradually waned, and the empire fragmented into autonomous regions called emirates. In 1258, the Mongols invaded Iraq, demolishing the Abbasid caliphate and destroying what had taken five centuries to build. Iraq became a neglected frontier province where power rested in the hands of tribal sheikhs.

### *Ottoman Rule*

In 1508, the Safavids of Iran seized control of Iraq but a few years later were forced out by the Sunni Ottoman Turks. Ottoman rule encountered continual difficulties in Iraq, including tribal uprisings, confrontations with Persia, and—after the conversions of many of Iraq's Sunni tribesmen to Shi'ism in the 19th century—hostility from Iraqi Shi'is, who resented the rule of a Sunni government imposed from afar. Gradually the Ottomans gave up power to local leaders.

The final days of the Ottoman Empire drew Iraq into international politics. Britain grew increasingly interested in the country because of growing international imperial rivalries. The growing need for oil in the West and its discovery in Iran immediately before World War I also had important repercussions.

During World War I, the Ottoman Turks sided with Germany against Britain, France, the United States, and their allies. After Germany's defeat, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled. As a result of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the creation of the League of Nations, the former Arab provinces of the Empire were divided between France and Britain in the form of mandates of the League. Britain was given the mandate over the area that is now roughly Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while France was given the mandate over the area that is now Lebanon and Syria.

### ***Creation of the Modern State of Iraq and the Monarchy***

In 1920, Iraqi national and religious agitation triggered a major revolt against British rule in Iraq. After putting down the rebellion, Britain marginalized the Shi'i clerics and some Sunni tribal leaders, and appointed mostly Sunnis to the bureaucracy and army while buying the loyalty of Shi'i and other tribal leaders by granting them large estates. King Faysal, who had fought with Britain in the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, was made king of Iraq in 1921.

Britain's mandate gave it control over Iraq's foreign and defense policies and the rights to several military bases. In 1925, the Iraqi government granted a concession to a British-dominated oil company. Two years later, the first major oil discoveries were made near Kirkuk.

In 1932, Iraq earned nominal independence, becoming a full member of the League of Nations. Skirmishes between a group of Assyrians and the Iraqi army triggered a brutal government crackdown. In 1935, Shi'i clerics and tribal leaders led a rebellion against the government, demanding greater representation. In the mid-1940s, the government crushed a Kurdish uprising led by the newly formed Kurdish Democratic Party.

The mid-1950s saw the formation of the Baghdad Pact, an alliance by Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey to strengthen regional defense and contain the Soviet Union. After the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956, riots broke out in Iraq in support of Egypt and against the Baghdad Pact, Britain, and the Iraqi regime.

### ***Two Brief Republics***

In mid-1958, General Abd al-Karim Qasim and a group of officers overthrew the Iraqi monarchy and the pro-British regime that supported it. The new government formed a republic and withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact. In 1963, Qasim was himself overthrown by a coup led by the Ba'th party and the army. After the coup, Ba'thists were excluded from power, army influence in Iraqi politics greatly increased, and the new regime espoused an Arab nationalist ideology. In 1966, the Kurds accepted a plan giving them greater political and cultural rights, but this soon fell by the wayside.

### ***The Ba'th Regime***

In 1968, a second Ba'th coup established the regime that would stay in power until 2003. Initially, the Ba'th regime launched an intensive development effort to improve Iraq's standards of living and technical capabilities. In 1972, Iraq nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company.

A Kurdish rebellion, with Iranian support, broke out in the Kurdish areas in 1974. After border clashes, Iran and Iraq settled their differences in Algiers in March 1975, and the Kurdish uprising collapsed.

In 1979, Saddam Hussein, who was then vice president, appointed himself president of Iraq. That year, the Ayatollah Khomeini established an Islamic Republic in Iran, setting the stage for a confrontation between

Baghdad's secular Arab nationalist regime and Tehran's Islamic regime. Tehran encouraged sabotage operations in Iraq and provoked clashes along the border. Probably calculating that war was unavoidable, Saddam Hussein took the offensive and initiated a war that lasted eight years. Iraq scored some initial successes, but Iran turned the tide and occupied the Fao Peninsula and devastated Basra, damaging Iraq's oil installations.

The Kurds took advantage of the war to carve out a largely independent area in the north, aiding Iranian forces in the process. As the war with Iran ended, Saddam launched an assault on the Kurdish guerrillas, destroying Kurdish towns and border villages. According to some estimates, as many as 200,000 Kurds were killed.

Because the war seriously damaged Iraq's capacity to produce and export oil, Saddam obtained financing for the war through loans and grants from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. When the war ended, Kuwait demanded repayment of the loans. Unable to reach agreement with Kuwait or to get new loans from foreign banks, and perhaps misreading signals from Washington, Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait in late 1990.

### ***The First Gulf War***

The United States demanded that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait unconditionally, while the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed an arms embargo and economic sanctions on Iraq. Early in 1991, the United States and its allies launched Operation Desert Storm, liberating Kuwait and devastating Iraq's civilian and military infrastructure.

A UNSC mandate called for the destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and imposed a UN arms inspection regime. Encouraged by messages of support from U.S. President George H. W. Bush, Shi'is in southern Iraq led an uprising against the hated Ba'thist regime. Supported by deserters from the defeated Iraqi army, the rebels launched a rampage against Ba'th officials and their families. The government retaliated brutally, killing thousands.

In the north, a Kurdish rebellion was defeated, causing nearly two million Kurds to flee toward the Turkish and Iranian borders. The UNSC created a UN safe haven for the Kurds in the north, and in 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government, made up of two parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, was created. Fighting between the Kurdish parties soon broke out and continued sporadically until 1998.

When the Gulf War ended, the UNSC maintained the arms embargo and economic sanctions against Iraq. U.S. aircraft enforced no-fly zones over the Kurdish area in the north and Shi'i areas in the south, while UN inspections continued. A 1999 survey by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that half a million children under the age of five had died in the south since the war, due to the destruction of public health facilities and to malnutrition and shortages of medicines related to the sanctions.

In 1998, Iraq ended its cooperation with the UN inspectors. In retaliation, the U.S. Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, providing funding for pro-democracy groups in or outside Iraq opposed to the Baghdad regime. Meanwhile, the Clinton Administration's Iraq policy was evolving from containment to regime change, and in December 1998, U.S. and U.K. forces launched Operation Desert Fox, an aerial bombardment campaign to degrade Iraq's air defenses further and weaken Saddam Hussein's regime.

### ***The 2003 Invasion of Iraq and the New Iraq***

The evolution of U.S. policy toward regime change in Iraq accelerated after George W. Bush became president. The Republican Party platform in the 2000 elections had advocated the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, but it took the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to galvanize the White House into action. On September 20, President Bush announced the start of the War on Terrorism, and in his State of the Union address in January 2002 he declared Iraq to be part of an "axis of evil." The Bush administration appeared convinced that a regime change in Baghdad was necessary.

On September 12, 2002, President Bush presented the UNSC with the U.S. case for invading Iraq, but after bitter debate, the Council merely authorized the resumption of inspections, threatening “serious consequences” for Iraq’s recalcitrance. President Bush met with better luck at home, as the U.S. Congress passed the Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq. The invasion of Iraq began on March 20, 2003, with the United States and Britain in the lead and with the participation of a “Coalition of the Willing” that included Australia, Denmark, Poland, and Spain. The United States supplied most of the forces. Unlike the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion did not enjoy the support of the UN or of major European allies such as France and Germany.

After Baghdad fell on April 12, 2003, a wave of looting and vandalism led to the plunder of the National Library and National Museum. Coalition forces in Iraq found neither weapons of mass destruction nor any evidence linking Saddam to the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Shortly after the invasion, the coalition created the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) as a transitional government. Informal power structures parallel to those of the CPA emerged in the cities in southern Iraq and in the impoverished Sadr City in East Baghdad. Clashes occurred between these indigenous leaders and CPA-appointed Iraqi officials. In the north, the coalition left intact the structure of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Seeing an opportunity to maximize their gains, the Kurds tried to extend their control and authority.

Under presidential envoy and CPA administrator Paul Bremer, the CPA formed a Governing Council to prepare for parliamentary elections and the drafting of a new constitution. The Shi’i leadership (and the Americans) sought to ensure that the majority Shi’is would rule Iraq, ending the era of Sunni domination. Bremer dissolved the Iraqi army, banned the Ba’th Party from participating in Iraq’s government, and moved to privatize the economy. Alienated Sunnis mounted an insurgency led by former Ba’th leaders and disgruntled former Iraqi army and intelligence officers. The international terrorist network al-Qa’ida, which did not exist in Iraq before 2003, emerged to launch a brutal terrorist campaign against its U.S. and Iraqi opponents. Shi’i and Sunni political leaders sought to manipulate the anxieties of the population into support for one side or the other.

In mid-2003, after the Governing Council agreed to an interim constitution, a UNSC resolution transferred sovereignty to an Iraqi government. An interim National Assembly was formed, and National Assembly elections, largely boycotted by the Sunnis, were held in January 2004.

In May 2005, the Iraqi Transitional Government was formed in line with the results of the January elections, with a Shi’i prime minister, a Kurdish president, and one Shi’i and one Sunni vice president. A constitution was approved by referendum the following October.

December 2005 saw a second round of elections. Turnout was high, even among Sunnis. The main winners were the Shi’i-dominated United Iraqi Alliance and the two main Kurdish parties, although the Iraqi Accord Front, which is the main Sunni Arab Islamist party, also won a substantial number of seats. In May 2006, a new cabinet headed by Nuri al-Maliki, a Shi’i leader, was formed.

Iraq has been plagued by the absence of law and order since the U.S. invasion in 2003. Al-Qa’ida was joined in its fight by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, a terrorist leader from Jordan. Whose campaign included suicide bombings and attacks on civilians. Shi’i militias infiltrated the newly created police and security forces and formed death squads that assassinated leaders of the Sunni insurgency as well as many innocent civilians. The insurgents’ sabotage of oil exports kept oil production to between half a million and one million barrels a day below the pre-war average.

Initially Sunni and Shi’i leaders preached national cohesion and played down ethnic and sectarian differences, but the cycle of sectarian killings and revenge took its toll. In 2006, the bombing of the Imam al-‘Askari Shrine, a historic Shi’i mosque, opened the floodgates to sectarian killing. Both Sunni and Shi’i

militias engaged in widespread ethnic cleansing in Baghdad and elsewhere. Neighborhoods that had always had a mixed population became homogeneous.

In an effort to establish security, the United States increased its troops in Iraq to clear areas of Baghdad from insurgents and Shi'i militias. This strategy became known as "the surge." The effort restored stability to certain areas of the capital. U.S. forces also formed alliances with Sunni Bedouin chiefs in what seemed an effective alliance against al-Qa'ida, although critics questioned the wisdom of a policy of arming Sunni tribesmen.

Politically, the situation remains uncertain. In early February 2008, after weeks of bitter debate, the Iraqi parliament took an important step toward political reconciliation when it passed three sensitive measures: the 2008 budget, a law outlining the scope of provincial powers, and an amnesty that would apply to thousands of the detainees held in Iraqi jails. While praising the passage of the laws—something that could not have happened a year before when sectarian violence raged—analysts noted potential hurdles in their implementation. Other thorny political issues facing the country include Sunni demands to share more power and government efforts to convince armed groups to maintain their ceasefires. As this publication goes to press in October 2008, the major question facing the leaders of Iraq is whether they will be able to work together to pave the way to sectarian reconciliation.

Meanwhile, war and general lawlessness in Iraq continue to cause Iraqis to flee their homes. Today, an estimated two million Iraqis have taken refuge in neighboring countries, mostly in Syria and Jordan. For a discussion of life in the asylum countries, see page 29 of this publication.

## **Ethnic and Religious Communities in Iraq**

After the creation of the Iraqi state, Iraqis began to develop a common identity. Over the last two decades, as the result of recent events—the Iran–Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the 2003 war and its aftermath—sectarian, tribal, and ethnic identities have become increasingly central to a person's social identity. As a result, ties to a broader social unit are becoming harder to forge. In the recent past, many Iraqis intermarried across sects and ethnicities. Today, intermarriage is less common.

In this section, we look at Iraq's different ethnic and religious communities. We devote more attention to Iraqi Christians than their relatively small numbers in Iraq would seem to justify because they represent a substantial proportion of the refugees currently being resettled in the United States.

### ***Iraqi Arabs***

Everyday behavior among Iraqi Arabs often reflects Islamic belief and custom. While one finds great differences in individual behavior depending on educational background and exposure to the West, some generalizations are valid for most Iraqi Arabs, if not for most Arabs.

### ***Religion***

Most Iraqi Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomen are Muslims, making Islam the religion of about 95% of the country's population. Although an individual Iraqi might not adhere strictly to all of its beliefs and practices, Islam is and has always been a very powerful social force in the country. Iraqis are torn between tradition and modernity, and in response to political events, more and more have been turning to religion, although Iraq's urban society used to be highly secular.

Islam is the most recent of the world religions to have arisen in the Middle East. It was founded by the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in Mecca in the 6th century C.E. and is believed to have received his

first revelations from God in about 610. His flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 to escape persecution marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. This calendar is a lunar calendar rather than a solar one; as a result, the Islamic year is eleven days shorter than the Western year.

Muhammad's divine revelations have been collected in the Koran, and this, along with his sayings and records of his personal conduct—the *Hadith*—form the basis for a code of behavior that is relatively standard across the Muslim world, despite local variations. In addition to the Koran and Hadith, Islam recognizes the Pentateuch and Psalms from the Old Testament and the Christian Gospels from the New Testament, although they are considered to have been altered by man and not to represent exactly the words of God.

Traditional Islamic belief considers religion to be inseparable from law, commerce, and social policies. Today, however, almost all Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia and Iran are notable exceptions) have adapted Western legal codes, although matters of family law are usually still handled in Islamic courts of law. Under Saddam Hussein, the Ba'th government of Iraq was a resolutely secular one, and as such was at odds with traditional Islamic tenets. Since the outbreak of violence between Sunnis and Shi'is, adherents of the two sects have tended to become more outwardly religious.

The everyday behavior of Muslims reflects the five basic teachings of Islam, commonly referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam. These teachings are observed throughout the Muslim world.

The **first pillar** is the declaration of faith, encapsulated in the phrase, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God." This is the basic affirmation of Islamic belief: Saying and firmly believing it qualifies one as a Muslim.

The **second pillar** is prayer. Several times a day (five times a day for Sunnis and three times for Shi'is), Muslims are required to pray, facing Mecca, in a series of prayers said first from a standing and then from a kneeling position. People are encouraged to pray in the mosque, and the bigger mosques have special areas for women. In Islam, Friday is somewhat parallel to the Christian Sunday: On this day, Arabs are expected to go to the mosque to pray and hear a sermon. Prayer times are announced by *muezzins* who chant from the minarets of mosques at the appropriate times each day (although today most of the calls to prayer are recorded). The common sight of a simple laborer praying by himself in the middle of a city, oblivious to the traffic and bustle around him, is a reminder that one is in an Islamic country. Another reminder is the closing of shops at prayer times.

The **third pillar** is fasting. The 9th month of the Islamic year is Ramadan, and Muslims are expected throughout the month to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and "other worldly pleasures" all day long. Certain exceptions—soldiers, travelers, children, the sick, the elderly, pregnant and menstruating women—are allowed. Traditionally, the day is carefully measured: It begins when there is enough light to distinguish a black thread from a white thread, and ends when the last light has left the sky. The main meal of the day is after sunset, and special care is taken that poor people are adequately fed.

Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, Ramadan rotates through the year, occurring eleven days earlier each year. Work slows down considerably during Ramadan. Westerners who work in Islamic countries learn not to expect to get much done during the month.

The extent to which Ramadan is observed varies from individual to individual and from society to society. In recent years, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, more Muslims are fasting. There have always been many Muslim individuals and communities in the United States who observe Ramadan.

The **fourth pillar** is the giving of alms. Traditionally, Muslims were expected to give one fortieth of their income to those in need. Today, the exact contribution is left up to the individual conscience. Many people contribute 2.5% (i.e., one fortieth) of their net income after basic family expenses are met.



The **fifth pillar** is the pilgrimage to Mecca, called the *Hajj*, the high point of a devout Muslim's religious experience. The trip is not required of people too poor to pay their own way, but many villagers will scrimp and save their whole lives to make the journey. There are restrictions on one's behavior while on the pilgrimage, including what one wears and what one does on reaching Mecca.

In addition to satisfying the requirements of the five pillars, a Muslim is expected to live a virtuous life and do good deeds. Central to this is the concept of *jihad*. Jihad has been classified either as *al-jihād al-akbar* ("greater jihad") or *al-jihād al-asghar* ("lesser jihad"). The greater jihad is the struggle to do good works and avoid evil thoughts, words, and deeds and to live every day in the way that God has prescribed, while the lesser jihad is the effort to protect Islamic lands, beliefs, and institutions. In recent years, the term *jihad* has become politicized and is frequently used now to refer to war in the name of Islam.

It should be emphasized that, just as religious customs and fashions vary and come and go in the Western world, so they do in the Islamic world as well. In recent years, Islamic fundamentalism has been on the rise throughout the Islamic world, even in such secular countries as Turkey. Many young Muslims are more devout than their parents. Female university students in many Islamic countries have returned to the practice of covering their hair in public, and many areas that had liberalized Islamic strictures that are at odds with Western practice—for example the availability of alcohol—have tightened up again.

### **Family Life**

Among Iraqi Arabs, the family is the center of life, and an individual's social status tends to be determined by his or her family. Personal preferences normally take a secondary place to family loyalty and duty, and individual behavior is constrained by the desire not to bring shame on one's family. However, with modernization, individual achievement has gradually acquired a more important role.

Iraq, like other Arab societies, is patriarchal. The father has ultimate responsibility and authority and is rarely questioned. Male siblings tend to have more say in the life of the family than females, and they enjoy a bigger share of and greater control over family resources.

Traditional Arab homes are very private by Western standards. Older individual houses are behind high walls, totally sheltered from the street and from passers-by. Even in urban apartment buildings, family privacy is maintained. Inside a traditional home, there is usually a room, a kind of formal parlor, where the men of the family can receive male visitors without them seeing or having contact with the women of the family.

The traditional household of a typical man in his forties consists of himself, his wife, their unmarried sons and daughters, their married sons with their wives and children, the man's mother if she is still alive, and frequently his unmarried sisters. The most powerful force in the household is often the man's mother, revered by her sons and obeyed by her daughter-in-law. In recent decades, however, the trend among less traditional Iraqis has been to live in nuclear rather than extended families.

In Iraqi families, young children are adored and indulged. Older boys are allowed to attend the gatherings of the men, and by listening absorb many of the cultural values and attitudes that will shape their public behavior. Older girls are very carefully protected, sometimes to their own chagrin. They learn the domestic skills through participation.

### **Treatment of Women**

Much has been written in the Western press about Arab women, who from a Western point of view often appear dominated and repressed. The status of women is a controversial issue in Arab society today—in part because it has gotten so much negative press in the West—and there are movements among educated Arab women for equal rights. In the more progressive countries, including Iraq since the days of the monarchy, women from upper-class families have always had access to education and have been able to

combine career and family. Under the various governments that followed the 1958 downfall of the monarchy, women gained important rights, including the right to vote in 1980. In recent years, Iraqi women have attempted to extend their rights to all Arab women.

At the heart of the treatment of women is the belief in a man's honor and the honor of his family. Protection of women is a central tenet of Islamic society, and both men and women believe it to be necessary. Behavior that looks like repression to Westerners is often viewed by Arab women as evidence that they are loved and valued. Western female freedom is often interpreted by Arab women as evidence of neglect and immorality. Furthermore, men and women are believed to be different in their very natures, with women's role properly centered around the home and family.

That said, women in many Arab countries play a more central role in public life than is immediately apparent. Before the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion and occupation, Iraqi women were generally among the most liberated in the Arab world and were better integrated into the workforce than in most other Arab countries. In 1959, the Code of Legal Status granted women political and economic rights. That year, Iraq became the first country in the Arab world to have a woman cabinet member, and many women in Iraq are scientists, doctors, judges, and teachers. Interaction between men and women in the workplace is expected, although there are extensive controls over social interaction between the sexes.

Iraq's recent wars and economic sanctions have taken a heavy toll on the status of women. More restrictive behavior and more conservative clothes, including the covering of the hair and the body, have reappeared on a wide scale, largely due to the emergence of fundamentalist groups in society. Recent years have also seen an increase in honor killings, the killing by a family of a female relative believed to have shamed the family in some way.

### ***Marriage***

Among Iraqi Arabs, everyone is expected to marry. Many marriages are still arranged, although young men and women can often find opportunities to meet one another. A girl and boy might be attracted to each other at one of these meetings, and after a clandestine telephone courtship, they might confide their attachment to their respective families, which then follow up with the traditional arrangements—if the families approve of the match. In less indulgent families, marriage arrangements are entirely in the hands of the parents—often just the mothers—who match eligible boys and girls after thoroughly checking the potential mate and family. Many people believe that since marriage has social and economic dimensions, these concerns are more important than emotions.

Women do not join their husband's family—unless they are already in it (in the past, marriage among first cousins was quite common). Children belong to their father's family, and in the case of divorce the father is automatically awarded custody of older children.

In the West, much is made of the right of an Arab man to divorce his wife simply by saying "I divorce you" three times. Mention, however, is rarely made of the fact that in doing so he must then contend with his wife's family and sometimes his own family as well. Divorce is, in fact, a last resort and a source of sadness and regret for both families involved.

Polygamy is allowed in Islam (up to four wives are permitted), but it has long been dying out in the Arab world, to the point that these days most educated middle- and upper-class Arabs find the subject somewhat embarrassing, and most of the Arab countries have laws outlawing polygamy from a secular perspective. In any event, it has always been an option available only to the wealthier members of society. There are advantages to having more than one wife: It expands the numbers of families one can count on for support, and provides a man with many children. But there are hardships as well, the greatest of which is economic: Islamic law is clear that each wife must be treated absolutely equally.

## ***Beliefs and Values***

Hospitality is a cherished Islamic tradition, and anyone who has lived in a Muslim country has a store of personal experiences of hospitality extended freely without any expectation of return. The belief in fate or predetermination also has considerable influence in Iraqi life. There is an almost universal belief that everything depends on the will of God, a belief that contrasts sharply with the American notion that people are masters of their own destiny. Dignity, honor, and reputation are also values highly esteemed by Iraqis.

In Muslim society, there is a much greater difference between public and private behavior than in Western societies. In traditional families, it is an invasion of privacy, for example, for a man to ask another man how his wife is; one asks instead how his family in general is, or how his children are. Arab men and women do not express affection of any sort in public, including holding hands, although affection is often publicly expressed among friends of the same sex, including hugs and repeated kisses. Arab women are usually deferential to their fathers, brothers, or husbands in public. The friendships that commonly exist between men and women in the West are rare in the Arab world.

## ***Festivals***

Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic year, is an occasion for fasting from daybreak to sunset, prayer, and meditation. *'Id al-Fitr* is a three-day holiday at the end of Ramadan that is celebrated by visits to family elders, notables, and friends. Children get new clothes, and an air of festivity marks the feast. In many cities, a Ferris wheel and games offer entertainment to children in a carnival-like atmosphere.

The *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is a duty all Muslims must perform at least once. *'Id al-Adha* is celebrated after the *hajj*, and lambs or other animals are sacrificed in commemoration of Abraham. The feast lasts for 3 days.

Shi'is celebrates *Muharram*, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Mourning lasts 40 days, and some Shi'is flagellate themselves as a form of atonement. The occasion is also used to highlight social injustices and grievances. Ceremonies culminate in a pilgrimage to the mosque where Hussein is buried in Karbala. Sunnis do not participate in this ritual.

## ***Food and Alcohol***

With a preponderance of lamb and a heavy use of oil and spices, Arab food is pleasantly spicy without being hot, and has much in common with Greek, Persian, and Turkish food. Rice combined with vegetables and meat is common. Muslims, like their fellow Semites the Jews, do not eat pork. Resettled refugees should be warned that hot dogs might contain pork and that some of the options available at fast food places might contain bacon.

Many Arabs prefer to buy meat from *halal* butchers—that is, butchers who sell meat only from animals that have been slaughtered according to Koranic ritual. Any area with a Muslim community is likely to have at least one *halal* butcher. Kosher meat is also acceptable to some Muslims, as it is slaughtered in approximately the same way.

Alcohol is forbidden by Islam, although a good many Arabs drink. In some Arab countries, the possession of alcohol is strictly forbidden to everyone. In other countries, like Iraq, it is legal and available to foreigners. Devout Muslims shun alcohol.

## ***Dress***

The Arab concept of honor explains, in part, a woman's covering up in public, which can be seen as a means of shielding her from the view and attentions of strange men. Iraqi women have always been somewhat

freer than women in the Arabian peninsula, but there are still many Iraqi women who cover their hair in public. The hair covering can range from a gauzy veil draped around the head and neck to a thick kerchief folded so that the front lies low on the forehead and the rest of the head is securely swathed. There are also women who wear the *'abaya* (a long-sleeved, long cloak or coat-like overgarment that covers the body from neck to ankles) whenever they go out. This is most common in rural areas and among older, less educated women, although more women are now covering up as a result of the fundamentalist movement. Underneath the *'abaya* and veil, Arab women in general dress more conservatively than Western women, although under the Ba'th governments middle-class women wore Western-style clothes, and many upper-class women were very aware and appreciative of Western fashions.

Iraqi men generally wear Western clothes. Rural and tribal peoples, however, wear the *kaffiya*, or *ghutra*, a square piece of cloth kept in place by the *agal*, a rope that is used to keep the ghutra on the head.

### **Names**

Arabs traditionally do not have last names parallel to Western family names. Each extended family has a name, of course, and in recent times that name has come to be used as a last name, especially in Western circles where last names are a requirement.

An Arab woman does not take her husband's family name, but in formal situations gives her own and her father's names. Nawal, married to Hussein, is formally Nawal Ali Nasser ("Nawal, the daughter of Ali of the Nasser family"). For Western purposes, Hussein uses the name Hussein al-Jamil ("Hussein of the al-Jamil family"). Their son Nizar is Nizar Hussein al-Jamil, and their daughter Amira is Amira Hussein al-Jamil.

Many Arab names are taken from the Old Testament and have parallels to Old Testament names in English. For example, Ibrahim is Abraham in English, Yahya is John, Dawud is David, and Yusuf is Joseph. Issa or Eisa is parallel to Jesus, and is a very common name among Muslim men. Miriam, or Maryam, is parallel to Mary.

A common way to name a boy is to call him "servant of" followed by one of the many hundred names for God. The Arabic word for servant is *'abd*. That word plus *al* or *el*—meaning "the"—plus whatever word for God is chosen constitutes the full name. (Our rendition of an Arab name as Abdul or Abdel is actually the word for servant plus the definite article, but minus the rest of the phrase.)

Here are some examples:

[ˈabdil-ˈaziiz] عبد العزيز  
Abdel-Aziz ('Servant of the Almighty')

[ˈabdil-Hakiim] عبد الحكيم  
Abdel-Hakim ('Servant of the Wise')

[ˈabdil-kariim] عبد الكريم  
Abdel-Karim ('Servant of the Generous')

[ˈabdil-raHmaan] عبد الرحمن  
Abdel-Rahman ('Servant of the Merciful')

[ˈabdullaah] عبد الله  
Abdullah ('Servant of God')

## **Arts**

Iraqis are noted for their achievement in the arts, having produced many of the most acclaimed poets, musicians, painters, and sculptors in the Arab world. Arabic calligraphy is an art form that is particularly developed in Iraq. Iraqis have contributed significantly to the cultural life of the countries in which they have sought refuge, such as Jordan.

## ***Iraqi Christians***

There are three main Christian groups in Iraq: the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, and the Jacobites. Before the 2003 war in Iraq, Assyrians and other Christians numbered a little more than 1 million, comprising between 4% to 5% of the Iraqi population. Of the 450,000-500,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, between 100,000 and 150,000 are Christians. In Syria, Christians are believed to make up 200,000 to 300,000 of the 1.2 million Iraqi refugees.

The three Iraqi Christian communities are culturally similar, sharing many of the same traditions and beliefs. All three see themselves as the original people of Iraq with linguistic and geographic roots that go back thousands of years. In ancient times, they spoke Aramaic, the language that once dominated the region. After the coming of Islam, Aramaic was spoken largely in rural areas, and today it exists in Iraq mostly as the liturgical language of the Christian communities, although some Iraqi Christians speak modern Syriac, an Aramaic language. The communities usually speak Arabic and Kurdish along with their own languages. For the urbanized groups, Arabic is the daily spoken language.

While the Chaldean and Jacobite Christian communities have stayed out of the struggles between the Arabs, the Kurds, and the British, the Assyrians have a long history of clashes, first with the Ottoman Turks and then with the Iraqi government. In recent years, some Assyrians have supported the Kurdish nationalist movement.

As with other Middle Eastern communities, Iraqi Christian life revolves around the family and extended family. Families are headed by men and are generally patriarchal. Women are in charge of the household and are expected to be nurturing and understanding, while children are taught to respect and revere their elders. The extended family plays a significant role in family affairs, with members often visiting and helping one another. Strong extended family ties remain a valued ideal, even among immigrant communities in the West. Traditionally arranged by parents, marriage is an important event that usually takes place between individuals from the same region or the same villages. Dating does not occur, divorce is mostly unknown, and widows usually do not remarry.

Historically, Iraqi Christians have worked as farmers, builders, artisans, craftsmen, businessmen, and social service providers. Christian women enjoy more freedom than many of their Arab neighbors, and before the war they entered professions such as teaching, education, and architecture. Men have tended to enter professions and business, especially in recent years. Iraq's Christian communities are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and strong work ethic and the high value they place on education.

Like others in the Middle East, Iraqi Christians value hospitality and believe that if guests come to visit they should be invited to eat. Their food is generally similar to that of their neighbors; a typical meal consists of vegetables, lamb, beef, and grain. Although some older women in the rural areas wear darker, more traditional clothing, most Iraqi Christians today wear Western clothes.

Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, although Eastern Christians, such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Jacobites, celebrate at different times than Christians in the West. Chaldean Christians, who practice a form of Catholicism, celebrate their holidays at the same time as Catholics in the West.

## *Assyrians*

The Assyrians, also known as Nestorians, are a Christian community in the mountainous region of the Mesopotamian plain between Lake Van and Lake Urmia, a region shared by Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. They are indigenous to the region, having lived there since 5,000 B.C.E.

Assyrians first converted to Christianity in the 1st century C.E. when the Apostle Thomas is said to have preached in Mesopotamia. With the coming of Islam in the 7th century, the Assyrians found that they were generally tolerated by the early caliphs and thrived in the new empire. They supported the Muslim Arab armies against the Persians, who had previously persecuted them, and contributed to Islamic intellectual, scientific, and administrative life, producing great scientists, translators, and physicians.

The Assyrians were soon subjected to periods of religious persecution, however, first under the caliphs and later under the Mongols, Ottomans, Kurds, British, and others. The Assyrians were nearly eradicated by the Mongol massacres and invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries, and attacks by Kurds and Ottoman soldiers led them to become fierce and courageous fighters. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the increased activity of British and American Protestant missionaries contributed to the belief among many Assyrians that they were a separate nation. Most of the Assyrians now in Iraq are the descendants of those who fled southward from the Ottomans and the Kurds during the First World War. Attempts to establish a homeland triggered reprisals, first by Kurdish and Turkish forces and later by the Iraqi army. Clashes with the Iraqi army in 1933 led to a huge Assyrian exodus that dispersed many of them into Lebanon, Syria, Sweden, and the United States.

Under Saddam Hussein, the Assyrians were fairly well integrated into Iraqi life, and today many are educated professionals who have migrated from smaller towns to larger cities in search of better opportunities. Their relations with the Turkomen, Yazidis, and other minorities have been good. The Gulf War and the sanctions that followed, however, had devastating effects on Assyrian life in Iraq. Many suffered from discrimination; some were attacked and killed or forced to leave their homes. Today, the Assyrian population in Iraq is estimated at 200,000. In the United States, Assyrian communities are found principally in Chicago, where an estimated 100,000 live, and in southern and northern California.

## *Chaldeans*

Originally part of the Nestorian and Assyrian communities, the Chaldeans became a distinct group when they began to identify with the Roman Catholic Church in the 17th century. Today they are the largest Christian sect in Iraq. Although they suffered persecution from their governments and neighbors in the early part of the 19th century, in the aftermath of World War I the Chaldeans did not suffer as much as other minority groups that sought to establish autonomous states. Unlike the Assyrians, they had a "live and let live" approach to the central government. With few exceptions, such as Tariq Aziz, Saddam Hussein's foreign minister, the Chaldeans have generally not been involved in politics.

Today nearly 800,000 Chaldeans are believed to live in Iraq. While the Chaldean community was well integrated into Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime, politically charged conditions today have led to their persecution along with many other Christian groups. Nevertheless, the Chaldeans, like the Assyrians, have been constitutionally recognized by Iraq's new government and continue to take part in it.

Outside of Iraq, Chaldean communities can be found in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States. An estimated 200,000 live in the United States, with Detroit and San Diego hosting the largest communities.

## ***Jacobites***

A small Christian community in Iraq, the Jacobites derive their name from Jacob Baradai, who founded their faction in the 5th century C.E. Today, the Jacobites in Iraq number between 70,000 and 100,000.

In the 7th century, the Jacobites were liberated from Persian persecution by the Muslim Arabs. Later, they flourished under the caliphs, where they achieved high positions as scholars, physicians, and court administrators. Internal splits, the Mongol invasions, and subsequent religious fanaticism and massacres, however, greatly weakened the Jacobite church by the 17th century.

Before the 19th century, the Jacobites lived mostly in India, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. But those who fled the persecution and massacres in Anatolia in the 19th century and during World War I sought refuge in other countries as well, including Armenia, Lebanon, and Sweden. Since the 2003 war and occupation, Jacobites have joined the ranks of refugees fleeing Iraq.

In the United States, small Jacobite communities exist in California, Michigan, Rhode Island, and elsewhere. These communities have tried to help members of their families in Iraq who have fled their homes for safety elsewhere.

## ***Other Iraqi Populations***

### ***Turkomen***

The Turkomen are an ancient Turkic community in Iraq dating back to the caliphs. They are found mostly in Arbil and Diyala provinces, Kirkuk, and Baghdad. Today, the Turkomen number approximately one million, although they claim to be about two to three times that size.

Turkomen speak a dialect of Turkish that is very close to Azeri, and they are one of the few recognized minorities in Iraq allowed to use their own language. Most Turkomen also speak either Arabic or Kurdish.

Turkomen are almost all Sunni or Shi'i Muslims. They have generally identified themselves as Iraqis and have not been involved in antigovernment activities. During the Ottoman Empire, many Sunni Turkomen served in government positions.

The culture and customs of the Turkomen have been influenced by Islam as well as by Ottoman and Turkish traditions. Turkomen families are generally patriarchal. Most Turkomen, including women, wear Western clothes, although since the 2003 war more and more Turkomen women can be seen wearing their traditional long colorful dresses. Conservative clothing accompanied by the veil has also become more common. Their food, like that of most other Iraqis, includes vegetables, bread, dairy products, chicken, and lamb.

The Turkomen value education, and in modern Iraq they have prospered as businessmen and professionals. Many have held high government posts and have worked in the oil sector. In recent decades, the Turkomen have experienced some tension with the Kurds in Iraq. Both have laid claim to oil-rich Kirkuk, and politicized Turkomen have condemned what they see as the Kurdification of Kirkuk. In this dispute, the Turkomen have been supported by Turkey, which worries about the implications of an autonomous or independent Kurdish entity for its own Kurdish population, and uses the issue to interfere in the Iraqi political situation.

The Turkomen have been affected like other Iraqis by the war. Some have been displaced internally; others have fled abroad. A small number of Turkomen families live in the United States, where they have integrated into U.S.-Arab communities.

## ***Yazidis***

The Yazidis are a religious sect in northern Iraq. They are also found in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, and Turkey. Today, the Yazidis in Iraq number between 500,000 and 700,000. They are of mainly Kurdish origin and speak a Kurdish dialect, but some trace their origins to southern Iraq and the lower Euphrates.

There is great controversy about the origins of their religion. What is certain is that they have integrated elements from different religions in the region, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and ancient Mesopotamian religions. Wrongly depicted as devil worshipers, the Yazidis are angel worshippers who view the devil as a lord of power and not, as in Semitic religions, as the author of evil. The Yazidis believe they are descended from Adam but not from Eve; they also believe in the transmigration of souls. Their practices include the baptizing of children by total immersion, fasting, not eating cabbage or lettuce, and not wearing shirts open at the collar or the color blue. Because of their beliefs and practices, the Yazidis were severely persecuted and nearly eliminated by their Ottoman and Kurdish neighbors in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Most Yazidis are farmers and herdsmen, although semi-nomadic tribes do exist. Apart from their religious beliefs, their culture is similar to that of other Middle Eastern communities. Traditionally, they have enjoyed good relations with neighboring Christians; they often live in the same communities. The Yazidis have given refuge to Assyrians fleeing persecution.

Under Saddam Hussein, both the government and the Kurds applied pressure on the Yazidis to join one side against the other. As a result, the Yazidis became divided, with some joining the Iraqi government and others joining the Kurds. Since the 2003 war and the rise of fundamentalist values among some of their Arab and Kurdish neighbors, the Yazidis have been the target of attacks by religious extremists. In one of the worst attacks on civilians in Iraq, hundreds of Yazidis were killed. For reasons of religion and security, Yazidis are attached to their traditional areas, but some have been forced by recent events to flee their ancestral lands. A very small number of Yazidis live in the United States.

## ***Sabeans***

The Sabeans, also known as Mandaeans or Subba, are members of an ancient monotheistic religion living mostly in southern Iraq and in Iran, with deep roots in ancient Mesopotamia and possibly Palestine. They had protected status in Islam as "People of the Book" (i.e., those, such as Jews and Christians, who received scriptures revealed to them by God before the time of Muhammad) and became great scholars and scientists under the caliphs, further substantiating their name Manda, which means "knowledge" in Aramaic. Until the 2003 war and its aftermath, the Sabeans numbered between 150,000 and 175,000 in Iraq.

The Sabeans' beliefs incorporate elements of ancient Babylonian and Mesopotamian religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, ancient Chaldean customs, star worship, and astrology. They have 12 saviors and wear white clothes as an indication of spiritual and physical purity. They do not eat meat from pigs, dogs, pigeons, or birds of prey. In accordance with their other name, Subba, which means "immersion in water" in Aramaic, baptism is a fundamental religious tenet. The Sabeans have traditionally lived near running water and revere St. John the Baptist as their major prophet.

The Sabeans do not practice polygamy or circumcision, and divorce is forbidden except with special permission from their judges. The Sabeans are believed to have influenced Yazidi beliefs. Their religious texts are in Aramaic.

The Sabeans are known for telling fortunes and are master craftspeople and silversmiths. They value education, and the younger generations have gone into business and the professions. A few have become well-known poets and writers. In modern times, a small number joined the Iraqi Communist Party and the Ba'th Party. In recent years, as the result of the war and the rise of fundamentalism in Iraq, Sabeans



have suffered discrimination and persecution, and some have fled Iraq or moved to safer areas of the country. In the United States, a small number of Sabeans can be found in Detroit, San Diego, and other Iraqi–American communities.

### ***Kurds***

The Kurds are an Indo-European ethnic group who for centuries have inhabited an area that stretches from Syria and Turkey through Iraq and Iran. More than 4 million Kurds, about 18% of the population of Iraq, live in northeast Iraq. Arbil and Sulaymaniyah, the fourth and fifth largest cities in Iraq, are entirely Kurdish. The Kurds claim the province of Kirkuk, which contains the second-largest developed oil fields in Iraq, the largest being in the south of the country.

The culture of the Kurds is close to that of their Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish neighbors. The Kurds have their own Indo-European languages, most closely related to Pashto and Baluchi, spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and less closely related to Iranian Persian. The Kurdish languages have been influenced by Arabic and Persian, and to a lesser extent by Turkish, Armenian, and Aramaic. Today, most Iraqi Kurds also speak Arabic, although few Kurds born in Iraq in the last two decades speak Arabic fluently.

Most Kurds are Muslim. Kurdish women have faced fewer restrictions than other Muslim women in dress or work outside the home. Kurdish identity has become increasingly important to Kurds in recent decades, particularly since the Kurdish rebellions in Iraq and the subsequent repression by the central government.

In recent years, the Kurds have taken important strides toward autonomy. Under the new Iraqi constitution, the Kurds were granted a federal Kurdish region with wide executive and legislative powers. Kurdish experience in running governmental agencies has added to their influence. Iraq's president is a Kurd, as are the deputy prime minister, the foreign minister, the deputy chief of staff of the army, and several other senior officials.

Economically, the Kurds are enjoying one of the most promising developments in their recent history. Having largely escaped the sectarian violence that wracked the rest of the country, the Kurdish region has become Iraq's most stable and prosperous area. It has attracted foreign investors, and while unemployment remains high, government and foreign and domestic companies have hired large numbers of people. Many villages destroyed during the 1975 Kurdish revolt have been rebuilt, and roads, hospitals, schools, and universities have been constructed or expanded. This generally optimistic picture has been marred in recent months by rising tensions among the Kurds, the Turkomen, and the Iraqi Arabs over the future of oil-rich Kirkuk, claimed by both Kurds and other Iraqi Arabs. In addition, the Kurds' claim that they have the constitutional right to sign their own deals with foreign companies has strained their relations with the central government. The area has also witnessed increasing attacks by the Turkish military and, to a lesser extent, the Iranian military against Turkish and Iranian Kurdish rebels operating in the mountainous border regions between Turkey and Iran.

Many Kurds have fled the violence in Baghdad, Mosul, and other areas to the relatively safe Kurdish regions. Others have fled Iraq to neighboring countries, particularly Jordan and Syria. An estimated 30,000 to 35,000 Iraqi Kurds live in the United States, with Nashville, Tennessee, hosting the largest community. Most of the Iraqi Kurds in the United States were resettled here after the collapse of the 1974–1975 revolt against the Iraqi government.

### ***Ma'dan***

A distinct subgroup of Iraqi Arabs, the Ma'dan, or Marsh Arabs, inhabit 6,000 square miles of marshy area just above the point at which the Tigris and Euphrates flow together, in a rough triangle formed by Amara, Nasiriya, and Basra. At high water, much of the marshland is submerged.

## Sunnis and Shi'is

### *What is the difference between Sunnis and Shi'is, and what is the source of the conflict between them?*

Both Sunnis and Shi'is follow the fundamental precepts of Islam. The two sects differ on one central point, however. Sunnis maintain that the successors to the Prophet Muhammad (*khalifs*) should be chosen by the leaders of the Islamic community on the basis of merit, and need not be descendants of the prophet. Shi'is, in contrast, believe that only the descendants of Muhammad, through his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law and cousin Ali, can be the legitimate heirs of the prophet. In fact, the name Shi'i derives from *Sh'at Ali* ("followers or partisans of Ali"). Shi'is believe that the leadership of the Islamic community, since Ali's assassination, has been usurped. The main shrines of Shi'ism are located in Iraq.

Another important difference between Sunnis and Shi'is is the relative position of the clergy in the two sects. Since the mid-19th century, the Ottoman Empire and its successor Arab states (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, Syria) have appointed the Sunni clergy, who are thus state functionaries. Shi'is, in contrast, have traditionally been independent of the state and are supported financially by the offerings of the faithful. This clerical independence was one of the factors that enabled Ayatollah Khomeini to emerge as the leader of the Iranian revolution against the Shah in 1978-1979 and to found the Islamic Republic of Iran.

There are more Sunnis in the Islamic world than Shi'is. In Iraq, however, the Sunnis (both Arabs and Kurds) are a minority, constituting about 40% to 42% of the population. The Sunnis are concentrated in parts of Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle to the northwest of the capital; there are also some large Sunni pockets in the south. The Shi'is form between 55% and 58% of Iraq's population and are concentrated in areas of Baghdad, the central Euphrates, and the southern provinces. They also form the overwhelming majority of the population in Iraq's eastern neighbor, Iran.

Since the foundation of Iraq in 1921, there has been a history of struggle for political power between the two sects. The Sunnis were initially favored by the British and as a result they were overrepresented in the government and military. Since the time of the Ottomans and the British, Shi'is have been underrepresented in government, and at least until the 1930s, there were Shi'i rebellions and uprisings against the Sunni-dominated government. The Coalition Provisional Authority's de-Ba'athification project effectively served to exclude large numbers of Sunnis (in addition to some Shi'i Ba'athists) from public office. Today, Shi'is dominate the Iraqi government.

Despite the tensions and conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'is, the divide between the two is by no means absolute and unbridgeable. In fact, intermarriage between the two groups is quite common among the urban middle class. Some large and influential Iraqi tribes have both Sunni and Shi'i branches. And Iraqi nationalism is very important to both groups. In two telling examples of this, Sunnis and Shi'is fought side-by-side against the British colonizers and in the war against Iran.

The Ma'dan have a very different life from other Iraqis. They do very little farming, depending instead on fishing and the raising of water buffalo. Their quonset-hut-shaped houses, built of reeds resting on piles to keep them above water, are architecturally unique. The Ma'dan get around in canoe-like boats when the water levels are high, and in other ways enjoy a unique lifestyle in the area. This lifestyle was put in grave danger under Saddam Hussein, after the government diverted the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers from the marshes for security and irrigation purposes, forcing many families to leave. In recent years, some water has been diverted back to the marshes, and some families have returned. Like other Iraqis, the Ma'dan have been affected by economic sanctions, the war, and sectarian conflicts, but more Ma'dan are believed to have returned to the region than have left it.

## Health Care

By Middle East standards, Iraq used to have very good health care facilities. During the 1970s and early 1980s, it provided some of the best medical care and produced some of the best doctors in the region.

Both the Iran–Iraq war and the Gulf War devastated Iraq's health care infrastructure, and the economic sanctions imposed by the UNSC prevented the country from rebuilding. After the 2003 war, the situation deteriorated further.

Today, despite massive development assistance, the health care situation is in crisis. Noting a shortage of doctors and nurses and the lack of a basic medical infrastructure, a 2003 report by Voices in the Wilderness, a human rights group, estimated that only 10% to 20% of Iraq's medical needs were being met. Doctors at Baghdad's Yarmouk Hospital estimate that 1,800 patients each year are dying from treatable medical problems in their hospital due to the lack of equipment and medication.

Deteriorating security in Iraq has taken its toll on health care, with some patients afraid to go to hospitals and doctors being intimidated. In an April 2007 article describing Iraq's health status as "disastrous," the Cairo-based, English-language *al-Ahram Weekly* reported that 2,000 physicians had been killed, largely by unidentified groups, since the U.S. invasion and occupation. Health professionals are also subject to kidnapping. In 2006, Medact, a British nongovernmental organization (NGO), estimated that 18,000 doctors, almost half of Iraq's physicians, had fled the country.

Increasing poverty has contributed to Iraq's health care crisis. According to a recent study by the United Nations Development Program, one third of Iraq's population lives in poverty. Iraq's ministry of health has estimated that half of Iraq's children are suffering from some form of malnutrition. The mental health of Iraq's population has also suffered: *Al-Ahram Weekly* noted that in a survey of the psychological effects of war on Iraqis conducted by the Association of Iraqi Psychologists, 60% of respondents claimed to have suffered panic attacks that prevented them from leaving their homes.

## Education and Literacy

According to UNESCO, Iraq had one of the best educational systems in the Middle East before the 1991 Gulf War, with high levels of literacy for both men and women. Institutions of higher education were of an international standard, particularly in science and technology.

The Iran–Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the economic sanctions took their toll on Iraq's educational system. Enrollment fell, and the school system began to collapse. Since the 2003 invasion, more than one third of Baghdad's schools have been damaged by bombing. Many others have been burned and looted.

There are no up-to-date studies on the status of education in Iraq today. A 2004 UN survey indicated that only 55% of young people between the ages of 6 and 24 were enrolled in school. The study found a literacy rate of 74% for youth between the ages of 15 and 24, with a higher literacy rate for the 25 to 34 age group. Female literacy appears to have dropped dramatically. In a 2004 UNICEF article about the survey, UNICEF's representative in Iraq said that the school system was "effectively denying children a decent education."

According to the United States Agency for International Development, almost 3,000 Iraqi schools have been "rehabilitated in full or part" since 2003, 20 million new textbooks have been supplied, and tens of thousands of teachers have received technical assistance. However, security concerns continue to hamper efforts to develop the country's educational system, especially in Baghdad, where the lack of security has closed down most schools. Elsewhere the situation varies greatly. In the Kurdish north, where security is relatively good, the educational system is functioning the best.

## The Arabic Language in Iraq

Approximately 77% of Iraqis speak Arabic as their first language. Most Iraqis with a different mother tongue speak Arabic with some level of proficiency. Arabic thus serves as a common language among Iraqis.

### *Basic Characteristics*

Arabic is a Semitic language that is spoken by about 200 million people in a wide geographical area from Morocco in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east. The Arabic language originated in the Arabian Peninsula (now Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states) and was spread throughout the area as a result of conquests by Islamic armies.

There are more than 15 dialects of spoken Arabic, defined by geographical areas and rural–urban differences, and they have varying degrees of mutual intelligibility. Arabic speakers can understand people in neighboring countries, and the fact that most cinema and television films are made in Egypt has ensured that Egyptian Arabic is pretty well understood by all Arabic speakers. Dialects spoken by those in the far west and the far east of the Arab world, however, are no longer mutually intelligible. In hiring interpreters, service providers should be aware that the interpreter might not always understand the particular Arabic of their Arabic-speaking clients.

For basic information on the grammar of spoken Iraqi Arabic, see *The Iraqis: Their History and Culture* by the Center for Applied Linguistics, available online at [www.cal.org/co/iraqi/index.html](http://www.cal.org/co/iraqi/index.html).

### *The Arabic Alphabet*

The Arabic alphabet is not as difficult as it looks at first. Although it might seem like an endless list of characters, in fact it has just 28 letters, with each one standing for a single sound. Once you learn these, you can sound out and begin to write words. There are no capital letters, but there is some difference between printing and handwriting, as there is in English. Short vowels are usually not written. Thus, the name Muhammad is spelled, in Arabic,

The image shows the Arabic word 'محمد' (Muhammad) written in a cursive script. To its right is an equals sign followed by four individual characters: 'م', 'ح', 'م', 'د', which are the letters of the word written in a simple, printed style to show their individual components.





or m-h-m-d reading from right to left. Otherwise, words are spelled very close to the way they are pronounced.

Here is a list of all 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, with their sounds (also called transcriptions) in square brackets and their Arabic names in italics. Ask an Iraqi to say the alphabet for you, and read along.

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>Name</i>
ا	[a]	<i>alif</i>	ض	[D]	<i>DaaD</i>
ب	[b]	<i>ba</i>	ط	[T]	<i>Ta</i>
ت	[t]	<i>ta</i>	ظ	[TH]	<i>THa</i>
ث	[th]	<i>tha</i>	ع	[ʻ]	<i>'ayn</i>
ج	[j]	<i>jiim</i>	غ	[gh]	<i>ghayn</i>
ح	[H]	<i>Ha</i>	ف	[f]	<i>fa</i>
خ	[kh]	<i>kha</i>	ق	[q]	<i>qaaf</i>
د	[d]	<i>daal</i>	ك	[k]	<i>kaaf</i>
ذ	[dh]	<i>dhaal</i>	ل	[l]	<i>laam</i>
ر	[r]	<i>ra</i>	م	[m]	<i>miim</i>
ز	[z]	<i>zaay or zayn</i>	ن	[n]	<i>nuun</i>
س	[s]	<i>siin</i>	ه	[h]	<i>haa</i>
ش	[sh]	<i>shiin</i>	و	[w]	<i>waaw</i>
ص	[S]	<i>Saad</i>	ي	[y]	<i>ya</i>

Besides the shapes of the letters, the most important difference between the Arabic alphabet and the Roman alphabet, in which English is written, is that the letters and words are written or printed from right to left.

A less noticeable feature of the alphabet is that when the letters are combined into words, their shapes change slightly when they are connected to other letters. To illustrate the last point, the letter **ب** *baa* has the following shapes:

-  when it appears independently (as in the line just above this one), or at the end of a word after a “non-connecting” letter, e.g., **باب**
-  when it appears at the beginning of a word, e.g., **باب**
-  when it appears after a “connecting” letter, e.g., **عبد**
-  when it appears at the end of a word after a “connecting” letter, e.g., **كتب**

## Some Iraqi Arabic Expressions

Here we provide a short list of useful Iraqi Arab words and expressions. But first, so that you can learn to pronounce the words with some accuracy, we provide a guide to pronunciation.

### Pronunciation Guide

The most notable feature of Arabic pronunciation is the presence of what are sometimes called *back* and *heavy* consonants. There are not many of these consonants, but they occur frequently. They have no equivalent in English.

Below we list the back and heavy consonants. If you want to know exactly how they sound, ask an Iraqi to pronounce the letters for you.

#### Back Consonants

Letter	Sound	Description
خ	[kh]	a scrape made with the back of the tongue and the soft palate; same sound as in German <i>Bach</i> or Scottish <i>loch</i>
غ	[gh]	like [Kh] but with the vocal cords vibrating; much like a French <i>r</i>
ق	[q]	like [k], but pronounced at the very back of the mouth; in Iraq, it is often pronounced like [g] as in <i>go</i>
ح	[H]	a harsh [h], pronounced by constricting the throat
ع	[ʕ]	no close equivalent in English pronounced in the pharynx like [H], but with voicing; sounds like strangling!

#### Heavy Consonants

Letter	Sound	Description
ص	[S]	like [s], but with tongue raised at the back
ض	[D]	like [d], but with tongue raised at the back
ط	[T]	like [t], but with tongue raised at the back
ظ	[TH]	like the [th] in <i>this</i> , but with tongue raised at the back

The other consonants are close enough to English to be easily recognized. Note, however, that consonants can be doubled (or lengthened), an important feature because consonant length affects meaning.

Iraqi Arabic has fewer vowels than English, but they can be short or long (i.e., held for a shorter or longer time). In our word and phrase list on page 28, we represent a long vowel in English by giving the letter twice.

## Some Words and Expressions

### Greetings and Blessings

Greetings and blessings are extremely important in Arab culture. Ask an Iraqi friend to read the following phrases for you so that you will recognize them when you hear them used. Maybe you will even learn to use them yourself.

#### Formal greeting:

'Peace be upon you.'

[is-salaamu 'aleekum] السلام عليكم .

#### Response:

'And upon you peace.'

[wa 'aleekum is-salaam] وعليكم السلام .

#### Informal greeting:

'Hello,' 'Hi.'

[marHaba] مرحبا .

#### Morning greeting:

'Good morning'

[Sabaah il-kheer] صباح الخير .

#### Response:

'Good morning'

[Sabaah in-nuur] صباح النور .

#### How-are-you's:

'How are you' (to a man)

[shloonak?] شلونك؟

'How are you' (to a woman)

[shloonitsh?] شلونج؟ / شلونتش؟

#### Responses:

'Fine, thank God.' (from a man)

[zeen, il-Hamdillaah] زين، الحمد لله .

'Fine, thank God.' (from a woman)

[zeena, il-Hamdillaah] زينة، الحمد لله .

'Thank God.' (from either)

[il-Hamdillaah] الحمد لله .

#### Goodbye:

'With safety'

[ma'a s-salaama] مع السلامة .

#### Responses:

'God make you safe.' (to a man)

[allaah ysallmak] الله يسمت .

'God make you safe.' (to a woman)

[allaah ysallmitsh] الله يسلج / يسلمتش .

#### General phrases:

'Wonderful' (literally 'What God has willed')

[maa shaalla] ما شاء الله .

'In the name of God.'

[bismillah] بسم الله .

'God willing.'

[inshaalla] ان شاء الله .

## Everyday Words and Phrases

Thank you	[shukran] شكراً
I am sorry	[asif] (m.) أسف / [aasfa] (f.) آسفة
Do you understand?	[da-tifham] (m.) دا تفهم؟ / [da-tifhamein] (f.) دا تفهمين؟
Yes.	[na'am] نعم
No.	[laa] لا
What is your name?	[sh-ismak] (m.) شِسْمَك؟ / [sh-ismich] (f.) شِسْمِج؟ [shino-ismak] (m.) شِنُو إِسْمَك؟ / [shino-ismich] (f.) شِنُو إِسْمِج؟
I am happy to meet you	[tsharrafna] تَشْرَفْنَا
Are you hungry?	[juu'aan] (m.) / [juu'aana] (f.) جُوْعَان؟ / جُوْعَانَة؟ [juu'aaniin] (m.pl.) / [juu'aanaat] (f.pl.) جُوْعَانِيْن؟ / جُوْعَانَات؟
Do you feel well?	[Inta zein] (m.) اِنْتِ زَيْن؟ / [inti zeina] (f.) اِنْتِي زِينَة؟ [into zeiniin] (m.pl.) / [into zeinnat] (f.pl.) اِنْتُو زِينِيْن؟ / اِنْتُو زِينَات؟

## Relationship Terms

Father	[ab] أب / [walid] والد
Mother	[umm] أم / [waalda] والدة
Son	[ibin] ابن
Daughter	[ibna] ابنة
Brother	[akh] أخ
Sister	[ukhut] أخت
Grandfather	[jidd] جد
Grandmother	[jidda] جدة
Uncle	[khaal] خال
Aunt	[mma] عمّة
Friend	[sadiiq] (m.) صَدِيق / [sadiiqa] (f.) صَدِيقَة

## Numbers

1	[waahid] (m.) واحد / [whida] (f.) وحدة
2	[thnein] (m.) ثنين / [thintein] (f.) ثنتين
3	[tlatha] ثلاثة
4	[arba'a] أربعة
5	[khamsa] خمسة
6	[sitta] ستة
7	[sab'a] سبعة
8	[thmaanya] ثمانية
9	[tis'a] تسعة
10	[shra] عشرة

Abbreviations: f.=feminine; f.pl.=feminine plural; m.=masculine; m.pl.=masculine plural



## Iraqi Arabs as English Language Learners

Because of Iraq's historical connections with Britain, English has generally been the Western language of choice among Iraqis. Most educated Iraqis have at least some ability to speak English, although they might read more English than they speak.

Speakers of Iraqi Arabic will face most of the same challenges in learning English that all Arabs do. The following describes some of the common challenges.

### **Pronunciation**

Arabs tend to have difficulty with many of the English vowel sounds, largely because there are relatively few vowels in Arabic and relatively many in English. Arabs will probably have difficulty hearing and pronouncing the different vowels of *sit* and *seat*, *bet* and *bat*, *shut* and *shot*, *boat* and *boot*, and *bait* and *beet*.

Arabs typically pronounce the English *r* as they do in their own language: The Arabic *r* is made with the tip of the tongue, and the double *rr* is a strong trill, as in Spanish or Italian. The effect in English may be striking, although it probably will not impede understanding.

The confusion of *p* and *b* is a common problem for most Arabs but not for Iraqis, who have a *p* in their dialect.

### **Grammar**

Questions in English will cause problems (as they do for many English language learners), because they involve changes in word order—for example, “He is studying” versus “Is he studying?” In Arabic, the difference between a sentence and its parallel question is carried only by the tone of voice, as it is in English with “He’s studying?”

Another potential problem is the words *should* and *would*. Arabic sentences that express the ideas conveyed by *should* and *would* have very different structures.

The verb *to be* in present-tense sentences also presents challenges. In Arabic, there are no parallels to *is* and *are*, so the Arab learner of English is likely to say, “I Iraqi” or “What your name?” instead of “I am Iraqi” or “What is your name?”

### **Writing**

Legible handwriting is usually a challenge for Arabic speakers learning English. In Arabic handwriting, it is not necessary for the letters to be written on the line, as English letters are. Arab learners therefore need a lot of practice in writing so that their letters are all the same size and written more or less on the line. Arabs also have difficulty with capitalization and punctuation, a predictable result of the lack of capitalization in the Arabic alphabet and the very different punctuation conventions.

## Iraqi Refugees in Asylum Countries

Most of the two million Iraqis who have fled Iraq for neighboring countries have gone to Syria, which hosts an estimated 1.4 million Iraqis, and to Jordan, which hosts 450,000-500,000. Smaller Iraqi refugee populations are found in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey. Here we discuss the causes of the refugee problem, explain the need for third-country resettlement, and describe the living conditions and background characteristics of the refugee population.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Information in this section has been provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and by the Overseas Processing Entities in Egypt and Turkey.

## ***Reasons for Flight***

People flee Iraq for different reasons. For Muslims, Sunni–Shi'i violence is the most common reason for flight. Members of non-Muslim minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, and Yazidis, have increasingly become targeted for religious reasons or because of their ethnicity.

Still other Iraqis have suffered persecution for political reasons. They are supporters, or perceived to be supporters, of the former regime, the insurgency, the current Iraqi government, or the multinational forces. People who are accused of un-Islamic behavior, as well as members of certain professions, such as doctors, journalists, actors, and artists, have also been targeted. Women in Iraq, particularly female heads of households or single women without male protection, form a vulnerable target for militias, insurgents, Islamic extremists, and family members seeking to commit honor killings (the growing practice in Iraq of killing a woman believed to have shamed the family in some way).

While every community in Iraq is now potentially a target for another group, the Assyrian and Chaldean communities are at special risk, observers say. There are several reasons for this: Unlike other groups, the Assyrian and Chaldean communities have no militia to protect them; they are accused by widely disseminated propaganda of supporting the multinational forces; they have traditionally run businesses (such as selling alcohol) that extremist groups deem unacceptable; and they are considered a good target for kidnappers because they are believed to be wealthy.

## ***Need for Resettlement***

Iraqis are being considered for resettlement in the United States because the two other durable solutions to the refugee crisis—voluntary repatriation to Iraq and local integration in a country of asylum—are not currently available to most Iraqi refugees. According to UNHCR, the country's volatile security situation, widespread breaches of human rights, and general inability to protect its citizens rule out voluntary repatriation as a humane solution. Local integration in the countries of asylum also has little or no chance for success. None of the asylum countries is offering integration to the refugees; their own difficult economic, political, and social situations do not favor local absorption.

## ***Conditions in Asylum Countries***

### ***Living Conditions***

Unlike refugees in other parts of the world, Iraqi refugees do not live in camps isolated from the host country population. Rather, they live in local neighborhoods, typically in and around the capital city, and in conditions that are similar to those of their non-Iraqi neighbors. While some Iraqis came with considerable wealth, and others have been living and doing business in the region for many years, most recent arrivals (especially post-February 2006) have limited resources.

### ***Health Care***

The large number of people who have arrived in the asylum countries, especially since 2006, has strained the already overstretched public services in those countries and poses major challenges to the host governments and local and international humanitarian organizations. Even when the treatment needed is available, it is generally not affordable to refugees, who in many cases sold all their belongings in Iraq to finance their flight.

In Syria, hospital care is limited; the UNHCR office in Damascus is approached on a weekly basis by refugees whose children or other family members are suffering from life-threatening diseases. Lebanon's health care services are likewise very limited, even for nationals.

The situation is better in Jordan, where refugees are provided with primary health care services equivalent to those enjoyed by Jordanian citizens. In August 2007, Jordan agreed to ensure “access for displaced Iraqis to the most essential health services,” UNHCR reports.

### ***Employment***

The single biggest problem facing Iraqis in asylum countries is the lack of legal, gainful employment. Many Iraqis work, but they do so illegally, generally in low-wage, unskilled or semi-skilled jobs as laborers, cooks, waiters, and drivers. The Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Cairo estimates that among the refugees it has processed, the average monthly income is about \$100. Increasingly, refugees are unable to afford educational or medical expenses, and food shortages have become such a problem in Syria that the World Food Programme has issued an emergency appeal for food distributions.

### ***Education***

Educational opportunities for children in the three main asylum countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria have recently improved. In September 2007, the number of Iraqi children in Syrian schools increased greatly after the Syrian Ministry of Education launched an effort to raise the number of Iraqi students to 100,000. In Jordan, thousands of young Iraqis enrolled in schools after the government decided to permit all Iraqi refugee children in the country to attend public schools, regardless of whether their parents have residence permits. In Lebanon, Iraqi children have the right to a free public education, but places are limited and Lebanese children have priority. In response, UNHCR, through its implementing partners, provides children with education grants and offers vocational training for those who need it. UNHCR also provides grants to university students.

## ***Characteristics of the Population***

### ***Physical and Mental Health***

According to UNHCR, the rate of serious disease for Iraqi refugees falls mostly within the normal range. There are, however, several significant areas of exception and concern:

- The low vaccination rate for children (Measles: 65% and Polio/OPV3: 75%)
- The high rate of diarrhea for children under 5 (19% during a recent two-week period)
- The increasing number of cancer-related deaths among both adults and children, linked by specialists to the use of unsafe products in agriculture and the long-term effects of war on the population's resistance to disease
- The numerous cases of applicants with war-related injuries, such as amputated limbs

Psychological distress among Iraqi refugees is also cause for concern. Many Iraqi refugees have been subjected to traumatizing events in Iraq. These include various forms of violence (including rape and other forms of gender-based violence), torture, kidnapping, blackmail, and intimidation and harassment by militias and neighbors. In the countries of asylum, refugees have experienced threats of detention and deportation, limited work opportunities, inhumane work conditions, local hostility, economic hardship, and threats from Iraqi militias.

All these factors have affected the psychological well-being of Iraqi refugees. According to figures released in January 2008 by the UNHCR, Iraqi refugees in Syria are suffering from levels of trauma that are far higher than normal for refugee populations. The figures, based on interviews with 754 refugees and analyzed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, reveal that 89.5% are suffering from depression, 81.6% from anxiety, and 67.6% from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the survey, 77% of respondents had

experienced air bombardments, shelling, or rocket attacks; 80% had witnessed a shooting; 68% had undergone interrogation or harassment by militias; and 75% knew someone close to them who had been killed.

### ***Occupational Backgrounds***

The Iraqi refugee population includes highly trained professionals as well as shop owners, traders, and skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Most refugees with professional backgrounds have not been able to practice their professions in the asylum countries. UNHCR notes that many refugees claim to have worked with foreign professionals, such as business people, medical professionals, NGO workers, and journalists.

### ***Exposure to Western Life***

Familiarity with modern Western life differs by educational background, place of residence in Iraq, and social background. Those with the greatest exposure to Western life are Iraqis who studied in the West before the fall of Saddam Hussein or who traveled abroad as tourists. At the other extreme are Iraqis with little exposure to foreign cultures; these include people from poor rural areas. In between these two extremes are Iraqis who have gained second-hand knowledge of Western life from relatives in the West, and Iraqis who worked and mingled with Western nationals in post-Saddam Iraq.

It should be noted that Iraqi women generally enjoyed greater freedom than women elsewhere in the Middle East: They have had jobs, enjoyed unlimited educational opportunities, occupied high public office, and traveled unveiled. While there is nothing in the new Iraqi constitution that prevents women from enjoying these freedoms and opportunities today, many neighborhoods are now controlled by religious militias or *jihadi* groups who demand that women confine themselves to their homes.

### ***Educational Levels and Literacy***

Before 2003, education in Iraq was mandatory through Grade 6. As a result, most Iraqis adults have acquired at least basic reading and writing skills. The elderly, laborers, farmers, and vendors typically have fewer literacy skills.

### ***English Proficiency***

English proficiency among Iraqi refugees varies widely. A minority, usually the highly educated, speak English well. Others speak no English at all. Most have at least a basic proficiency.

## **Iraqi Resettlement: Strengths and Challenges**

Iraqi refugees, and Iraqi immigrants who enter the United States on Special Immigrant Visas and who are eligible for the same programs and services as refugees, are already arriving in communities across the United States. More than 1,600 arrived in Fiscal Year 2007; more than 8,100 will have arrived by the end of 2008. Iraqis are being resettled in every region of the the United States, with communities in Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, and Texas receiving the largest numbers of new arrivals.

How will these refugees fare in their new communities? What strengths and skills will they bring with them? What challenges will they face? Because it is too soon to give definite answers to these questions, here we offer a brief and preliminary look at Iraqi resettlement in the United States. Our comments are based on the experiences of resettlement agency staff working with both current Iraqi arrivals and with groups that arrived in the early and middle 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Information for this section was provided by U.S. resettlement agencies and by mental health professionals at the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

## ***Strengths and Resources***

Iraqi refugees bring with them considerable strengths and resources. Resettlement agency staff describe the newcomers as generally knowledgeable about Western life, open-minded in their attitudes toward cultural differences, and resourceful. As a group, they often have more formal education, professional work experience, and English language skills than other refugee groups. Those who have joined the workforce have generally proven to be diligent and well-regarded employees. And while Iraqis may find some American beliefs and behaviors confusing and even offensive, they generally respond positively to other aspects of American life. For the most part, Iraqis admire American values of achievement, scientific progress, and freedom and equality.

Many Iraqi refugees have relatives and friends in the United States who are eager and able to help them. Iraqis resettled in or near established Iraqi communities will generally find a supportive host community, culturally suitable social services, and familiar food items in grocery stores. It should be noted, however, that the cultural and religious backgrounds of new Iraqi arrivals might not always match those of the Iraqi host community. In these cases, there may be less community support for the newcomers.

## ***Resettlement Challenges***

While the presence of established Iraqi–American communities has eased adjustment for the new arrivals, there has been some concern that recent sectarian divisions in Iraq might undermine community cohesion in the United States. This appears to have happened in at least one U.S.–Iraqi community, according to an Iraqi–American with a long background in refugee and immigrant education. Resettlement agencies in other communities, however, have noticed no serious sectarian tensions and describe relations among the various groups as generally good. A resettlement agency in one Michigan community reports that Sunni and Shi’i newcomers are even sharing apartments.

## ***Early Adjustment Issues***

Resettlement agency staff identify three early adjustment challenges for newly arrived Iraqis. The challenges relate to resettlement expectations, mental health, and English language needs.

- Early evidence suggests that Iraqi refugees may be arriving with unrealistic expectations regarding housing, resettlement agency services, and employment opportunities. Refugees have expected better housing and furnishings, more support than agencies typically provide, and higher level jobs than they are usually offered. Better-educated Iraqis, in particular, are reluctant to take entry-level jobs, preferring to put off employment in hopes of landing jobs commensurate with their work experience and education. Resettlement agencies have found that Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government in Iraq can be especially disappointed by their employment prospects in the United States.
- Resettlement agency staff have observed symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among the refugees. According to one agency, these symptoms include “headaches, inability to sleep, nightmares, some depression, and high levels of concern and worry.” One resettlement agency reports that war-related physical problems “have largely overshadowed the more subtle signs of PTSD.”
- Many Iraqi refugees have a higher proficiency in English than other newcomer groups but still need or want classes to improve their skills. Classes that meet these refugees’ needs may be difficult to find because language classes for new refugee arrivals are often geared toward those with little or no English. In addition, it may be difficult to persuade refugees who want to improve their English to take a job first and study after hours, like many Americans who simultaneously work and go to school.

## ***Cross-Cultural Issues***

While resettlement agencies describe Iraqi newcomers as generally tolerant of cultural differences, refugee service providers who have worked with this population in the past note several possible areas of cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict:

- Because religion plays such an important part in the lives of Iraqi Arabs, some resettled refugees—particularly those from rural areas—might be confused by the number of Americans who do not follow a religion and are vocal about not believing in God, yet are well-behaved, accepted members of society.
- Resettled Iraqi refugees might be puzzled at the American need for invitations and advance notice before a visit. An Iraqi family might issue a general invitation, not realizing that they must pin down a specific time and place, then sit at home socially isolated and lonely, wondering why Americans are so unsociable. Iraqis might also insist on paying in restaurants and on other occasions, to the point of spending more than they can afford.
- Friendships between men and women in the West can be a source of confusion to young Iraqi men and women. Many young Iraqi Arab men need to understand that friendliness in an American woman is not necessarily a sign of romantic or sexual interest. Cross-gender friendships in American society can be frightening to young Iraqi women, who may become very shy and hesitant to go out alone, speak up in class, or make friends.

One area of cross-cultural difference that should not present much of a problem for Iraqi Arabs is clothing styles in the United States. Most Iraqi Arabs are familiar with Western dress, although they might be shocked at the amount of flesh Americans bare in the summer.

## ***Working With Iraqi Refugees***

Resettlement agencies offer the following suggestions for dealing with refugees' unrealistic expectations, mental health issues, and need for continuing education.

### ***Adjust Unrealistic Expectations Early On***

Resettlement agency staff underscore the importance of explaining resettlement realities carefully to new arrivals, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, and agency support. New arrivals need to understand that available housing may be in less desirable neighborhoods; that it will take time and effort to find professional-level jobs, particularly in areas with less robust economies; and that resettlement is a responsibility shared by the agency, the refugees, family, and friends.

"Early self-sufficiency should be emphasized from day one," suggests a Texas resettlement agency staff member. Another resettlement agency reports some success in placing refugees in professional positions: "Our staff has been able to help place refugees in their field of expertise, getting them 'in the door' at a lower position initially. This is often what it takes for them to be able to progress in their professional careers." A third agency reports success in placing medically trained refugees in childcare facilities, professionally trained refugees in Arab social service agencies, and unskilled women in the food service industry.

Agencies underscore the need to stress early on that the financial capacities and responsibilities of the resettlement agencies are limited. One resettlement agency cautioned those resettling Iraqis not to say anything that might be interpreted as a promise: "Have staff and volunteers say 'I'll try' when asked for something." Be equally careful regarding time frames that could be construed as deadlines.

### ***Provide Mental Health Support***

For refugee service providers working with survivors of torture or trauma, the Office of Refugee Resettlement and others with experience in refugee mental health suggest the following:

- Refer survivors of torture or extreme trauma to a torture treatment program, if one exists in the area.
- Strive to create a trusting relationship with clients and establish a warm and accepting environment.
- For refugees undergoing therapy, consider individual rather than group therapy, at least initially. There is some evidence that this population does not do as well in a group setting as a result of “severe trust issues that this population carries with them,” according to a refugee mental health provider.
- Provide guidance and cultural orientation services with special attention to possible fears of police, closed rooms, medical exams, and separation from family members.

Understand that survivors of torture or extreme trauma will have more needs and require more help than other refugees to rebuild their lives. They will likely require more time and encouragement to access the medical, legal, mental health, employment, educational, and social services they need. They may want to explore their spiritual needs, having strengthened or forsaken their faith due to the trauma.

### ***Explore Continuing Education Options***

Finding suitable classes for refugees with more proficiency in English than is the norm for new arrivals may also be a challenge. It will be important to canvas each community for English language study options in advance of arrivals so that timely referrals can be made. For better educated refugees, community colleges may offer higher level English classes at low cost.

Refugees with professional training who want to practice their profession in the United States will probably need to be re-credentialed, a process that can be time-consuming and expensive. For resources on the re-credentialing process, see page 37 in this publication.

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## **Recommended Reading and Web Site Resources**

### **Books**

- Alnasrawi, A. (1994). *The economy of Iraq: Oil, wars, destruction of development and prospects, 1950-2010*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Batatu, H. (1978). *The old social classes and the revolutionary movements of Iraq: A study of Iraq's old landed and commercial classes and its communists, Ba'thists, and free officers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
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- Davis, E. (2005). *Memories of state: Politics, history and collective identity in modern Iraq*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Diamond, L. (2005). *Squandered victory: The American occupation of Iraq and the bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq*. New York: Henry Holt.
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### **Articles, Reports, and Chapters in Books**

- Campbell, D. (2008, April). Exodus: Where will Iraq go next? *Harper's Magazine*, 50-56.
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### **Web Site Resources**

- <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/priority1.htm>  
Torture treatment programs are available in many states receiving Iraqi refugees. This Web site lists ORR-funded torture treatment programs.
- <http://www.cvt.org/main.php/HealingtheHurt>  
This Web site provides a free downloadable copy of *Healing the Hurt: A Guide for Developing Services for Torture Survivors*.
- <http://www.cvt.org/main.php/ResourceCenter/WebLinks/AgenciesLocatedintheU.S.>  
This Web site lists members of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs.
- <http://www.irct.org/>  
This Web site for the International Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims looks at current issues in the treatment of torture survivors and provides resources.
- [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resources/eta\\_factsheet1.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resources/eta_factsheet1.htm)  
This Office of Refugee Resettlement Web site provides important information on the re-credentialing process.







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