

Iraq

A Country with "Deep Roots"

How "Iraq" Came to Be

- *Before 1919, there was no "Iraq," nor "Iraqi" people. History, religion, and geography all pulled the people apart, not together.*
- *In creating the new nation of "Iraq," Britain cobbled together the Ottoman provinces of Basra (mostly Shiite Arabs), Baghdad (mostly Sunni Arabs), and Mosul (mostly Kurdish and Sunni but not Arab!) with Baghdad as its capital.*
- *Under the Ottoman Empire, Kuwait was a district of Basra until gaining independence in 1961. In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, citing its historical connection to Iraq, touching off the first U.S. involved Gulf War.*
- *Iraq was held together for more than 80 years by the autocratic rule of kings and dictators. The British established a monarchy in 1921 (see "Iraq's Unruly Century") that was overthrown by a military coup in 1958. Following several more coups, the socialist Ba'ath Party seized control in 1968. Saddam Hussein declared himself President in 1979 and held autocratic rule until toppled by the United States-led coalition in 2003.*
- *The population of Iraq is around 26 million people, of which about 75% are Arabs; 20% are Kurdish; and the rest made up of Assyrians, Armenians, Turkoman, and others. The country of Iraq is currently divided into 18 provinces, three of which are Kurdish.*
- *Iraq is made up of 168,750 square miles, which is a little larger than the state of California. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers join together just north of Basra, resulting in the Shatt al-Arab ("River of the Arabs") waterway. There is, however, only about 12 miles of shoreline, making Iraq virtually landlocked.*
- *Backed by the United States, Iraq engaged in an 8-year war with Iran from 1980-1988; fighting was finally brought to an end by the United Nations Resolution #598 in 1988.*
- *In March, 2003 the United States invaded Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling "weapons of mass destruction" which might be used against the West or its allies. No such weapons were ever found, though more than 100,000 Iraqis died as a result of the invasion. U.S. troops officially withdrew from Iraq in December, 2011 but the country is suffering from civil strife, disputes in government, and since 2003, the presence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

Iraqi Culture and Traditions

- *Iraqis are a very strong people ... proud of their ancient origins and long histories of early kingdoms, advanced civilizations, and Biblical homelands. One of the most important social traditions throughout Iraq is the coffee shops where people (usually men) gather to talk about their great histories, cultures, literature, and arts. "Baghdad" (meaning "gift from God") is known to many because of its "Arabian Nights" fame.*
- *Another social tradition found among the cities of Iraq (especially Baghdad) is that of the booksellers. They are the guardians of a literary tradition that has survived empires and colonialism, as well as monarchies and dictatorships. Iraq's love affair with books is generally known throughout the Middle East where it is said: "Books are written in Cairo, published in Beirut, and read in Baghdad."*
- *The archaeological sites and museums of Iraq are also valued and long-held traditions. More than 10,000 archaeologically significant sites are recognized in Iraq, with more than 600 in Baghdad alone. Tragically, thousands of priceless artifacts, dating back to the first Sumerian civilizations, disappeared from museums during the looting and lawlessness following the United States invasion in 2003. Only a small fraction of those pieces have been recovered.*
- *Culturally, Iraqis hold to a mostly Arab tradition which includes strong family and tribal loyalties and a high priority for "honor," which is sometimes translated into "coming from a good tent." Also, hospitality is second to none and guests are treated with pomp and generosity. Gift giving, therefore, is lavish and often serves to repay hospitality.*
- *Central to Iraqi (and Arab) culture in general:*
 - *The focus is on the family. The honor and public image of the family is central. Extended family and/or tribal loyalties may take precedence over everything else.*
 - *Elders are cared for by family members. Almost all homes have elderly family members living there. For many, it is a "family shame" if elders are not present in the home.*
 - *Marriage is expected and generally arranged by parents or older family members. First or second cousins are considered choice marriage partners.*
 - *A "traditional household" may consist of:*

- *A middle-aged male and his wife (or wives)*
 - *Any unmarried sons and daughters*
 - *Married sons with their wife (wives) and children*
 - *The man's mother if she is a widow*
 - *Any unmarried sisters*
 - *Any elderly family member who is without children*
- *Young children are adored and indulged in by all family members. Boys are generally allowed at gatherings of men while girls generally are protected and often remain in the home.*
 - *There are matters that are considered "public" or "private." Males are the public face of the family; females are the private. (One should, by the way, never ask a man about his wife!) The eldest woman in the home generally "rules" the home.*
 - *Public affection between males and females is generally discouraged and may lead to arrests under the current Shi'ite governance. Cultural greetings such as hugging and kissing those of the same sex are okay.*
 - *Arab women tend to be deferential to fathers, brothers, and husbands in public. However, they may well "rule the roost at home!"*
 - *Though always evolving under changing political and other current conditions, cultural values and worldviews among Iraqis, and Arabs in general, include:*
 - *"Collectivity" (We-People) rather than "Individuality" (I-People);*
 - *Personal identity based on "Who I belong to" as a group rather than "Who I am" as an individual;*
 - *Children generally raised in values for "conformity with the group" (family, religion, etc.) rather than "individual creative thinking and behavior;"*
 - *"Vertical" (hierarchical) relationships based on age, gender, and position rather than "horizontal" (egalitarian) interactions (generally showing high respect for those in authority);*
 - *A general sense of "fatalism" about life rather than "free will" of choice ("Enshah-allah!");*
 - *Individual behaviors motivated more by the "avoidance of shame" rather than by "personal guilt"; and*
 - *Thoughts focused more in "past and present orientations" rather than "future oriented" ones.*

Perhaps two of the highest values for Iraqis, as well as Arabs in general, are those of "generosity" and "hospitality to guests." They will spare no effort to

provide the very best food, comfort, and personal attention to guests in the home, even to those whose ideas and politics may differ from their own.

Communicating with Iraqis (and other Arabs)

- **Verbal communication**

- *Oral communication assumes great importance. Arabs deeply value their language and pride themselves on their “flowery” and “circular” form of speech. It often takes patience on the part of the listener before figuring out “the bottom line.” Generally, the spoken word takes priority over the written word.*
- *Great value is placed on one’s ability to memorize. Many Arabs pride themselves on being able to recite the entire Qur’an. They also learn to recite poetry and literary quotes at a very early age.*
- *Something may not be considered important unless stated 2 or 3 times.*
- *Loudness of speech, as well as excessive gesturing, may be normal. Also, there is often steady to almost piercing eye contact.*
- *Many statements may be accompanied with “Ensha-allah!” This translation means “if God wills” and may indicate a tentative nature of the statement.*
- *Belief in the “evil eye” is common. One tends to avoid talking about topics of death, illness, and other matters which might draw the attention of “the eye!”*

- **Non-verbal communication**

- *Body language is very important. One should always appear alert and engaged in a conversation. Arabs do not generally cross their legs when seated.*
- *Never expose the soles of one’s shoe to an Arab! Also, the “thumbs-up” gesture carries a very insulting meaning ... similar to the “middle finger.”*
- *Always use the right hand when gesturing, touching, or handing over something to someone. The left hand is used for cleanliness.*
- *“Saving face” is so important as it is related to the honor of one’s family. Arabs seldom say “no” to someone he or she respects. Rather, “yes” may mean “I’m listening,” or “maybe,” or even “no!” However, if stated 3 times or more, it probably means “yes!” ☺*

Religious diversity in Iraq

- *Religion in Iraq is often a key identifier of people. The main religious groups in Iraq are Shi'a Muslims (about 65%) and Sunni Muslims (about 30%). Christians make up the next largest group (mostly Chaldean and Assyrian) and a few others including the Yazidis and Baha'is. In general, more emphasis in religion is given to the "collectivist" group of members rather than to "individual" members.*
- *Iraq has been "home" at times to all three of the great Western religions.*
 - *The community of Jews in Iraq recedes back 2,500 years ago to the Babylonian captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar. Before World War II the population of Jews numbered more than 130,000. However, Jews in Iraq were targeted for persecution by the Nazis and many fled to other regions, especially Palestine. More have immigrated to Israel following the creation of the Jewish state in 1948.*
 - *The community of Christians in Iraq can be traced to the early years after Pentecost. Prior to the U.S. invasion, it is thought that between 7 and 9% of Iraqis belonged to Christian churches. Because of severe persecution by radical Muslims, however, the population is now closer to 2%.*
 - *The community of Muslims in Iraq dates back to the 7th century C.E. with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Islam, the newest of the three faiths, quickly spread throughout the region. In 762 C.E. the Abbasid dynasty founded the city of Baghdad, whose name means "The gift of God." Over the next five centuries, Baghdad would become the seat of the "Golden Age" of Islamic civilization, where scholars of virtually all fields of study would gather.*

Quote by former Ambassador Edward Peck Regarding U.S. Foreign Policy:

"Everyone in the world does not perceive life in the same way. People in the United States assume that they do! Most believe that everyone would believe and do things the way we do if only they were more intelligent, better educated, or had the tools to do it. Until we learn to perceive and understand the world as it is, not as we think it is, or how it should be, we will be unable to enjoy a peaceful coexistence."

Some ideas taken from: Understanding Arabs – A Guide for Modern Times by Margaret K. Nydell. Other information gathered from personal interviews and other resources.

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