

Al-Jumhuriyah al-'Iraqiyah

Did You Know?

- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon in ancient Iraq were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.
- The name *Iraq* means “country with deep roots.”
- The world’s first known civilization existed in Iraq about 5,500 years ago!
- Archaeologists have found evidence of *cuneiform* (the oldest known written language) in the ruins of the ancient region of Sumer.
- In the countryside, Iraqi teenagers rarely date and marriages are arranged early on, around age 17 or 18, by the couple’s parents.
- Sumerians, Iraq’s earliest inhabitants, invented the wheel to help them move heavy objects.
- The area of land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is known as the cradle of civilization because so many early civilizations developed in that region.

Flag

The flag of Iraq, most recently adopted in 2008, features three horizontal bands of red, white, and black. Written in green on the white band is the Arabic phrase *Allahu Akbar*, which translates as “God is Great.”



National Image

The *minaret* (the tower of a mosque) in the town of Samarra is one of Iraq’s most important Islamic monuments. Built more than a thousand years ago by Caliph al-Mutawakil near the site of ancient Babylon, the *minaret* was part of the Great Mosque of Samarra. In 2005, the top part of the *minaret* was damaged during fighting between U.S. and rebel forces.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 169,235
Area (sq. km.): 438,317



Iraq is about the same size as Morocco or the state of California. It is divided into three separate regions. Northern Iraq features the high peaks of the Zagros Mountains. The central region (known as the Fertile Crescent) consists of green valleys and agricultural plains. The southeast portion of Iraq is mostly deserts, with a 36-mile (58 km) stretch of Persian Gulf coastline. The two main rivers in Iraq, the Tigris and the Euphrates, provide important water to the farmland in the center of the country.

The climate in Iraq is similar to that of the southwestern United States. A dry season,

when temperatures can exceed 120°F (49°C), lasts from May to October. This season brings two kinds of winds: the *sharqi* (eastern) and the *shamal* (northern). The *sharqi* is a dry, fast-moving wind from the southeast, frequently accompanied by dust storms. The *shamal* is a steadier, cooler northern wind that blows in off the sea. The wet season runs from November to April. During this period, rain can accumulate up to 40 inches (102 cm). The average daily temperature during the wet season is around 70°F (21°C). Some snow falls in the northern mountains.

Population

Population: 31,858,481

Iraq has a population of more than 31 million. Arabs make up 75 to 80 percent of the population. The second largest group, the Kurds, account for around 17 percent. There are other smaller groups as well, including the Turkomans. The majority of the population lives in large cities like Baghdad and Basra. Most Kurds live in the northeastern mountainous region. They are very different from Arabs socially and culturally and have long wanted to establish their own country, Kurdistan, independent of Iraq.

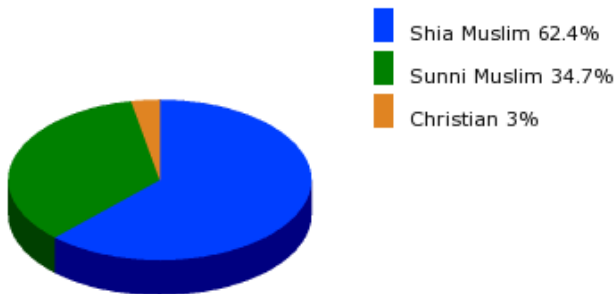
Language

The official language of Iraq is Arabic, though Kurdish also has official status in Kurdish areas. A minority of Iraqi Christians speak a *dialect* (way of pronouncing or speaking) of Aramaic or Armenian. Different forms of Arabic *dialects* are spoken in Iraq, which sometimes makes it hard for people from different regions to understand each other. Modern standard Arabic is the traditional written form. Several common English words have come from Arabic, including *sofa*, *giraffe*, *algebra*, and *magazine*.

Can You Say It in Arabic?

Hello	<i>Assalaam 'alaikum</i>	(ah-sa-LAAM all-AY-koom)
Good-bye	<i>Ma'a salama</i>	(MA-ah sa-LAA-ma)
Please	<i>Min fadlak</i>	(min FAD-lak)
Thank you	<i>Shukran</i>	(SHUK-ron)
Yes	<i>Aywa</i>	(eye-wuh)
No	<i>La'</i>	(lah)


Religion




Ninety-seven percent of Iraqis are Muslims, or followers of Islam. Around two-thirds of these are Shi'is and a third are Sunnis. The small non-Muslim population consists mainly of Christians (mostly Roman Catholic), Mandaeans, Yazidis, and Jews. Islam is a *monotheistic* religion, meaning Muslims believe in only one God (*Allah*). Muslims study their scripture, the *Qur'an*, which they believe God revealed to the prophet Mohammad through the angel Gabriel. Muslims pray five times a day and *fast* (don't eat or drink) during the month of *Ramadan* between sunrise and sunset. If they have the means to do so, Muslims are expected to make the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to the holy city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia, at least once in their lives.

History

Time Line

3500 BC	
3500 BC	The Sumerians start the world's earliest recorded civilization along the banks of the Euphrates River
1900	
1900	Babylonians conquer Mesopotamia
600	
605	King Nebuchadnezzar II builds the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Ishtar Gate
	
300	
331	Alexander the Great conquers Mesopotamia
	
AD 600	
AD 637	Arabs conquer Mesopotamia, bringing Islam to the land
762	Baghdad is founded as the capital of the Abbasid Empire
1200	
1258	Mongols invade and capture Baghdad
1500	
1534	The Ottoman Turks invade, making Mesopotamia part of the Ottoman Empire
1900	

1917	The British capture Baghdad from the Turks during World War I	
1921	Britain unites the provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra to form the nation of Iraq	
1927	Oil is discovered in Kirkuk	
1932	Iraq becomes independent	
1958	The military overthrows the government, killing the king	
1968	The Ba'ath party comes to power	
1979	Saddam Hussein becomes president	
1980	Iraq invades Iran, starting the Iraq-Iran war	
1988	Both sides declare a cease-fire in the Iraq-Iran war	
1990	Iraq invades Kuwait, triggering the Persian Gulf War	
1991	Iraq is forced out of Kuwait by international troops	
1995	The UN allows Iraq to sell oil in exchange for food and medicine	
2000		
2003	U.S. and British forces invade Iraq; Saddam Hussein is captured a few months later	
2004	A temporary Iraqi government takes over	

2005	Iraqis elect a permanent government and adopt a new constitution	
2006	Saddam Hussein is executed	
2007	According to United Nations estimates, more than 34,000 Iraqis were killed during violence in 2006	
2007	To reduce violence and improve security in Iraq, the United States dramatically increases the number of troops as part of a "surge" strategy	
2009	United States troops begin to withdraw from Iraqi cities, handing security duties over to Iraqi forces	
2011	The last United States troops leave Iraq	
2013	Iraq holds its first local elections since the last American forces left	
PRESENT		

Sumer

The ancient civilization known as Sumer is the first known civilization in the world. Around 3500 BC, Sumerians lived in organized cities along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Sumerians were responsible for developing a number of things that are still used today, including the first known systems of writing and counting, an irrigation system, the calendar, and the wheel. The form of writing used in Sumer was *cuneiform*, a Latin term meaning "wedge-shaped." *Cuneiform* consisted of six hundred wedge-shaped characters written from left to right. The Sumerians worshipped several different gods, to whom they built tall monuments. These pyramid-shaped temples, or *ziggurats*, consisted of layers of terraced brick leading up to a *shrine* (a place dedicated to a particular god or saint). Faithful people climbed to the top of the *ziggurats* to worship their gods. The Sumerian civilization lasted about a thousand years until a series of conquerors swept through the land.



Invasions

The first invaders were the Akkadians in 2340 BC. They were followed by the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Chaldeans. In 331 BC, Alexander the Great led the Greeks into the land and conquered it. He named the area Mesopotamia, which means "the land between two rivers." The Greeks promised order and peace, but their rule was cut short by Alexander's unexpected death at the age of 33. In the 7th century, a group of Arabs called the Abbasids invaded Mesopotamia. The Abbasids were faithful Muslims who introduced Islam and the concept of *monotheism* (the belief in one god) to a land that had worshiped multiple gods for thousands of years. Under the Abbasids, Basra and Baghdad became important cities for business and trade. The Abbasid dynasty lasted for around six hundred years and ended with the arrival of the Mongols and, later, the Ottoman Turks.



British Occupation

During World War I, the Ottoman Turks fought with Germany against the *Allies* (Britain, France, Russia, and later Italy and the United States). Great Britain sent troops to capture Baghdad from the Turks. Many Arabs fought alongside the British, having been promised independence after the war. To the Arabs' frustration, the major European powers, particularly Britain and France, were given control of most of the Ottoman Empire after the war. Britain was put in charge of all of Mesopotamia. From three Mesopotamian provinces—Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul—Britain established a new country, Iraq, in 1921. The former king of Syria, Faisal Hussein, was installed as Iraq's king, and members of the minority Sunni community were given the most important positions in the government. Iraq was formally granted independence in 1932. After World War II broke out in 1939, a highly anti-British politician named Rashid 'Ali came to power in Iraq. He requested support from the Nazis, which prompted the British to invade Iraq. After the war, a pro-British government was put in place in Iraq.

The Iraq-Iran War

The Iraqi government following World War II was very unstable. Several political parties, backed by various military groups, tried to seize power. In 1968, the Ba'ath Party managed to take and keep control of the government. The *secular* (non-religious) Ba'athists outlawed all other political parties and executed many people who disagreed with their policies. In 1979, Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq. That same year, Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran after a revolution by Iran's Shi'is. Partly to keep Iraq's Shi'is in check, Saddam started a war with Iran by sending Iraqi troops over the border and claiming the strategically important Shatt al-Arab waterway. The war lasted for eight years and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Iranians. When both countries agreed to a ceasefire in 1988, neither side had gained anything.



Gulf Wars

In 1990, Iraqi forces under the command of Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Iraq's neighbor to the south. Hussein was desperate to take over Kuwaiti oil fields in an attempt to help the Iraqi economy recover from its long war with Iran. In response, the United Nations (UN) stopped Iraq from trading its goods with other countries or selling its oil, and the United States sent military forces to the region to protect Saudi Arabia. Hussein refused to withdraw his troops from Kuwait, so early in 1991, war planes bombed strategic sites in Iraq and ground troops entered Kuwait. In February, Iraqi troops withdrew from Kuwait, and a cease-fire was signed.



During the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein used poisonous gases on Iranian soldiers as well as Iraqi Kurds he accused of supporting them. After the war, many nations feared that Saddam Hussein was developing more chemical weapons and perhaps other kinds of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The UN sent inspectors into Iraq to check on the status of Iraq's WMD programs. However, the Iraqi government refused to work with the inspectors, who eventually left before they could make sure that Saddam had stopped all his WMD programs.

After the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the United States argued that Iraq must be disarmed before Saddam Hussein could share WMD with terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. In March 2003, the United States, along with troops from other nations around the world, invaded Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein from power. He was captured the following December. No WMD were found.

A New Nation

Many Iraqis celebrated the fall of Hussein and a chance to run their own government without foreign occupation, but *insurgent* (rebel) groups throughout the country fought the international troops and any Iraqis willing to work with them. Despite the violence, millions of Iraqis voted in *democratic* (government by the people) elections in 2005. After the elections, fighting between Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'is grew so bad that, late in 2006, several U.S. media outlets started calling it a civil war. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost in the ongoing conflict.



Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Football (soccer) is by far the most popular sport in Iraq. From a very young age, Iraqi children start playing and joining local teams. Almost every town has its own team. For many years, Iraq's national soccer team had to play their games outside the country because of the wars. In 1986, Iraq became the first team to qualify for the World Cup without having played one game at home during that year. Many Iraqi women participate in the Muslim Women's Games. Female athletes from Islamic nations come to compete in a variety of sports such as gymnastics, cycling, swimming, and kayaking. No men are allowed at the games, even as spectators.



Holidays

There are two major Muslim holidays celebrated by both Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq, as well as throughout the Muslim world. *Eid al-Fitr* is a three-day celebration that marks the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*. *Eid al-Adha* commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. It is a four-day holiday at the end of the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. People do not work on either holiday (except for necessary services). They spend the time visiting, picnicking, and relaxing. Kids enjoy both *Eids* because they receive gifts and money. Also, they get to go to small amusement parks, where there are play areas, rides, and treats. Iraqis also celebrate national holidays such as Independence Day and *secular* (non-religious) holidays such as New Year's Day.

Food

Iraqis eat three meals a day, together as a family when possible. *Ghidaa'* (lunch) is the largest meal of the day. It often includes rice and vegetable stew and sides of salad and yoghurt. Popular dishes include *kebab* (beef and vegetables cooked on a skewer) and *masgouf* (a whole fish grilled over an outdoor barbecue). For dessert, Iraqis enjoy *baklava*, a flaky pastry filled with honey and nuts. Kids enjoy fruit and snacks such as cookies and chocolate. Breakfast is usually just tea and eggs or cheese and bread. All meals include *khubuz* (a traditional, round flatbread) and end with a serving of dark, sweet tea.



Schools

Adult Literacy: 78.2%

Schooling in Iraq is free, and, where circumstances allow, children attend from age six until they finish *secondary* (high) school. Partly because of the wars in Iraq, few new schools have been built, and books and supplies are hard to come by. The government has little money to pay teachers' salaries. Many families live in poverty and have been forced to keep their children at home to help out. Today, only half of Iraqi children go on to *secondary* school, which lasts for six years and prepares students to go on to a university or trade school. Unlike some Arab countries, Iraq has traditionally actively encouraged the education of women and girls.



Life as a Kid

There aren't many organized after-school programs in Iraq, so some kids help their parents with work, especially if they run a small business or family restaurant. Other kids spend their time playing different games and sports. *Football* (soccer) is the most popular sport in Iraq, as it is throughout the Middle East. Children usually practice their *football* skills after they get home from school and on weekends. If no fields are available, they play in narrow alleys or courtyards. Since the weather is mild in the winter, kids can play outside all year round. A growing number of kids play video games, Nintendo, and other computer games. After dinner they usually do their homework, watch TV with the family, and go to bed.



Society

Government

Capital: Baghdad

Head of State: Pres. Jalal Talabani

Head of Government: PM Nouri al-Maliki

Iraq is a *republic* (government in which the leader is elected by the people) and is led by officials who are elected to represent the people. The prime minister is the head of the government and makes all the important decisions as he consults with the *al-Mejlis al-Watani* (Council of Representatives). The office of president is mainly a ceremonial position. The 325 members of the *al-Mejlis al-Watani* are elected to represent the people in their home *provinces* (similar to states). Iraq adopted a new constitution in October 2005. The voting age is 18.

Money and Economy

Currency: New Iraqi dinar



The fertile land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has been farmed for thousands of years. Oil was discovered in Iraq in 1927, and it quickly became Iraq's biggest *export* (goods sold to another country) and the driving force behind the Iraqi economy. However, a series of wars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has severely reduced oil production and slowed development. Trade restrictions set after the invasion of Kuwait made it difficult for Iraq to recover from the destruction of those wars. The restrictions were lifted in 2003 after the fall of Saddam Hussein, but Iraq's economy still hasn't recovered, partly because of the ongoing violence. Iraq's current farm production still cannot meet the needs of Iraq's own people, who continue to rely on foreign aid. Iraq's currency is the Iraqi *dinar*.

Getting Around

In the cities, most people travel by bus and many drive their own cars. Iraq had a large system of paved roadways, but the nation's history of war and violence has damaged much of this system. The railways in Iraq have begun working again recently, and repairs are slowly beginning on the roads. In *rural* (countryside) areas people still travel mostly by foot.



Culture Facts & Contacts

Visit to Kerbala

Most Shi'i families visit the city of Kerbala regularly throughout the year. Kerbala, located some 62 miles (100 km) southwest of Baghdad, is a sacred city for Shi'is all over the world because it contains the shrine of Imam Hussein, who was *martyred* (killed for what he believed in) in 680 AD while he was trying to claim leadership of the Muslim community. Families travel from all over Iraq to spend a weekend in Kerbala. The shrine is a great *mosque* (church) decorated with Islamic art. Lights and mirrors increase the beauty of the designs. The visit to the shrine is usually followed by dinner at a restaurant, where fresh barbequed *kebab* (beef cooked on a skewer) is served, along with other traditional foods. A visit to Kerbala usually includes some shopping before the family returns home.



Learn More

Contact the Embassy of Iraq, 3421 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 742-1600; web site www.iraqiembassy.us.

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ProQuest
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
Fax: 1.800.864.0019
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Iraq



The Tigris and the Euphrates are the nation's vital water sources; most of Iraq's farmland and cities depend on these rivers or their tributaries.

Baghdad is Iraq's capital and largest city.

Iraq occupies much of the same area as the ancient region of Mesopotamia (Greek for "between the rivers"). Mesopotamia gave rise to a number of important civilizations, including the Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians. The region is often referred to as the "cradle of civilization."

In the 1990s, the Iraqi government drained huge areas of marshland in southern Iraq in order to ruin the land occupied by their political opponents. Only a fraction of the original marshland remains.

