
II

IRAQ FOR BEGINNERS

I wrote this first chapter last, shortly after watching a segment of “Jaywalking” on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. During his “Jaywalking” clips, Jay asks questions of random people on the streets of various US cities. His questions posed to the general public focus upon politics, history, and current governmental events. After viewing a clip in which the respondent was struggling to name Jesus’ father, I realized that some people may require more basic information about Iraq before they can enjoy any subsequent discussion about Iraqi politics and events.

State department information about Iraq

This segment is derived from the state department information about Iraq. No information was added, though the document was shortened to focus on the elements germane to our discussion and to eliminate several statements designed to defend US policy, but not necessarily to provide useful information about Iraq. Source material in its entirety may be found at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6804.htm>.

Geography

Area: 437,072 sq. km.; about the size of **California**.

Cities: *Capital*—Baghdad (5.7 million, 2004 estimate)

Terrain: Alluvial plains, mountains, and desert.

Climate: Mostly hot and dry.

People

Population (2006 estimate): 26,800,000.

Ethnic groups: Arab 75%–80%, Kurd 15%–20%,
Turcoman, Chaldean, Assyrian, or others less than 5%.

Religions: Muslim 97%, Christian 3%, others less than 1%.



Languages: Arabic (Official), Kurdish (Official), Assyrian, Armenian.

Education: *Years compulsory*—primary school (age 6 through grade 6). *Literacy* (2006 UNESCO est.)—74.1%.

Health: *Infant mortality rate*—48.64 deaths/1,000 live births. *Life expectancy*—69 yrs. (2006 est.)

Economy

GDP (2006 proj.): **\$47 billion** (official exchange rate).

GDP per capita (2006 proj.): \$1635.

GDP real growth rate (2006 proj.): 4.0%.

Rate of inflation (12 months ending August 2006): **76.6%**.

Unemployment rate (2005 estimate): **27%**.

Budget (2006 est.): **\$48.0 billion revenues** and **\$64.5 billion expenditures**.

Public debt: Approximately **\$125 billion**.

Natural resources: Oil, natural gas, phosphates, sulfur.

Agriculture: *Products*—wheat, barley, rice, vegetables, cotton, dates, cattle, sheep.

Industry: *Types*—petroleum, chemicals, textiles, construction materials, food processing.

Trade: *Exports* (2006 est.)—**\$30 billion**. *Export commodities* (2006 est.)—crude oil (97%), other exports (3%). *Export partners* (2005 est.)—U.S. 49%, Jordan 20%, Canada 13%, Italy 12%. *Imports* (2006 est.)—\$29.7 billion. *Import commodities*—food, medicine, manufactured goods, refined petroleum products. *Import partners* (2005 est.)—Turkey 22%, U.S. 21%, Jordan 12%, Vietnam 5%.

End of State Department information

Geography

Iraq is bordered by **Kuwait, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia**. The country slopes from mountains over 3,000 meters (10,000 ft.) above sea level along the border with Iran and Turkey to the remnants of sea-level marshes in the southeast. Much of the land is desert or wasteland. The mountains in the northeast are an extension of the alpine system that runs eastward from the Balkans into southern Turkey, northern Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, terminating in the Himalayas.

Average temperatures range from higher than 48°C (120°F) in July and August to below freezing in January. Most of the rainfall occurs from December through April and averages between 10 and 18 centimeters (4–7 in.) annually. The mountainous region of northern Iraq receives appreciably more precipitation than the central or southern desert region.

People

Almost 75% of Iraq's population live in the flat, alluvial plain stretching southeast from Baghdad and Basrah to the Persian Gulf. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers carry about 70 million cubic meters of silt annually to the delta. Known in ancient times as **Mesopotamia**, the region is the legendary locale of the Garden of Eden. The ruins of Ur, Babylon, and other ancient cities are in Iraq.

Iraq's two largest ethnic groups are Arabs and Kurds. Other distinct groups are Turcoman, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Persians, and Armenians. Arabic is the most commonly spoken language. Kurdish is spoken in the north. English is the most commonly spoken Western language.

The majority (**60–65%**) of Iraqi Muslims are members of the **Shi'a** sect, but there is a large (**32–37%**) **Sunni** population as well, made up of both Arabs and Kurds. Small communities of Christians, Jews, Bahais, Mandaeans, and Yezidis also exist. **Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim**, but differ from their Arab neighbors in language, dress, and customs.

Historical timeline for Iraq

- Iraq or Mesopotamia (“land between the two rivers”) was the birth place of the first human civilizations in recorded history starting with city states. Iraq is often referred to by historians as “the cradle of civilization.”
- Sumerians 4000 BC
Sumerians developed the first written language in human history.
- Babylonians 1900 BC
Hammurabi established the first-ever code of laws.
- In subsequent centuries Hittites, Hurrians, Assyrians, Aramaeans, Chaldeans, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, and Parthians all took turns ruling Mesopotamia until the Muslim Arabs came to power.
- Iraq was conquered by the Arabs Muslims in the 7th century.
- Iraq was initially ruled by the Sunni Ummayyads.
- The Shiite Abbasids dynasty took over and ruled Iraq from 750–1250 AD.
- Baghdad was the capital of the Abbassids dynasty; it was at the forefront of scientific and literary advancements during that time.
- The 13th century invasion by the Mongols ended the golden era in Iraq.
- In the 16th century, Baghdad fell to the (Sunni) Ottoman Turks, the new rulers of the Muslim world at the time.
- **1920–1921** The British ruled Iraq under a League of Nations mandate after the Ottoman defeat during WWI.

- **1921** The British created the Sunni Hashemite monarchy to rule the predominantly Shiite Iraq. That royal family was related to the current royal family of Jordan and traced its roots to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. King Faisal was the first Iraqi King.
- **1932** Iraq was given independence by the British, but the monarchy of the Hashemites was preserved.
- **1936** The first military coup in the Arab world was led by General Bakr Sidqi; he would be assassinated by the military a year later. The government changed briefly, but the monarchy survived.
- July 14, **1958** A military coup led by Colonel Abdol Karim Qasem (Sunni) toppled the Iraqi monarchy; the last Iraqi king, King Faisal II, was killed. Qasem was one of the first leaders to refer to the “Persian Gulf” as the “Arabian Gulf,” inflaming Iranian/Persian sensitivities. He also laid claim to Mohamarah (Khoramshaher), a predominantly Arab Iranian city. He was considered a Nationalist with socialist ideology. He was unpopular with the West for advocating for the naturalization of the Iraqi oil industry.
- February 9, **1963** Another military coup assassinated Qasim and overthrew his regime.
- After a brief Ba’ath party (socialist Pan-Arab nationalist) rule, a military man, Col. Abd Al-Salem Aref and, subsequently, his brother, General Abd Al-Rahman Aref ruled until yet another military coup brought the Ba’ath party back to power in **1968**.
- **1968–1979** General Al-Baker from Tekrit (birthplace of Saddam Hussein) ruled Iraq with Saddam serving as the “Vice Chairman of the Revolution Command Council.” Some believed that Saddam was the real power broker behind the scenes in the later years of Al-Baker’s presidency.
- **1978** The Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini was deported from Najaf, Iraq to France at the behest of the Shah of Iran. Khomeini, who later led the Iranian revolution, was exiled by the Shah fifteen years prior and spent his time in Najaf, Iraq as a preeminent Shiite spiritual leader.
- **1979** Saddam became president of Iraq.
- **1979** The Iranian revolution under Khomeini’s leadership overthrew the Shah. American diplomats were taken hostage shortly thereafter.
- **1980** Saddam launched a surprise attack on Iran (I was in Iran at the time). For eight years, Saddam’s regime accused the Iranians of attacking Iraq. Throughout the war, Iraq supplemented its military with advanced tanks and missiles (SCUDs) from Russia and Mirage planes from France, all the while enjoying political and intelligence support from the US. When Iraq was on the verge of defeat against Iran, it acquired Western



(AP Photo)

“17-year-old King Faisal II of Iraq shakes hands with U.S. President Harry Truman, during a visit to the White House, Washington, August 16, 1952. The King is on a five week tour of the United States.”

technical assistance to develop chemical weapons. Iraq would later employ these weapons with overwhelming effect against the Iranians (forcing Khomeini to accept a ceasefire) and the Iraqi Kurds. The oil-rich countries in the region, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, helped finance that war.

- **1981** The American hostages in Tehran, Iran were released.

- **1988** The Iraq-Iran war ends after the Iranians agreed to a ceasefire, having suffered tremendous casualties in part due to the chemical weapons used by Iraq.
- August 2, **1990** Iraq invades Kuwait. The Kuwaiti royal family is forewarned by US intelligence; they are flown to Saudi Arabia during the early hours of the invasion (I was in Kuwait at the time).
- **1991** The Iraqi occupation army is expelled from Kuwait by US-led allied forces in what came to be known as the first Gulf War (I was in England at the time watching the war on Sky News).
- **1991–2003** Saddam retained power in Iraq despite US-backed efforts to overthrow him by Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south. The UN supervised the destruction of declared chemical weapons and warheads after the first Gulf War, but Saddam succeeded in maintaining the illusion that he still possessed undeclared Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Perhaps he sought to maintain this illusion as a deterrent against future attacks by Western powers. If so, it was a strategy that backfired.
- September 11, **2001** Terrorists attack New York and Washington. ***No direct or indirect link to Iraq or Saddam was ever established.***



(AP Photo by [ANJA NIEDRINGHAUS](#))

*“Looters push carts with furniture through the streets of Iraq’s capital Baghdad, Sunday **April 13, 2003**. Baghdad has been engulfed in a frenzy of looting ever since U.S. troops took control of the city on Wednesday.”*



(AP Photo by **DUSAN VRANIC**)

*“Plumes of thick smoke mark Baghdad’s skyline Thursday, **April 17, 2003**. U.S. forces have begun to crack down on lawlessness in the Iraqi capital amid criticism that they have not done enough to protect the city.”*

- **March 2003** During the second Gulf war, a US-led coalition invades Iraq and overthrows the Saddam Ba’athist regime.
- Looting commenced in Baghdad and other cities after the fall of Baghdad on **April 9th, 2003**. Many ordinary Iraqi citizens as well as the old police tried to patrol the streets of Baghdad to stop the looting. The US military watched idly during the first week of looting, appearing unprepared or incapable of managing the post-war phase.
- **April 2003**, The CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority), led by Gay Garber and shortly thereafter by the new American Ambassador Paul Bremer, becomes the temporary governing body of Iraq.
- **2004** A year later, the US appointed an interim Iraqi government to help administer Iraq until a provisional Iraqi government was finally elected in **2005**.
- **May 2006** More than three years after the invasion, the first constitutional Iraqi government took office in Baghdad. The US military remained in charge of overall security operations and decisions in Iraq.

Present day

- Iraq is now divided into 3 spheres of influence:
 - Kurds in the north (~20%),
 - Shiites (Protestant Muslims) in central and southern Iraq (50–60%), and
 - Sunni (Orthodox Muslims) Arabs in Western and central Iraq (~30%).
- The Shiites outnumber the Sunnis 2 to 1, but many Sunnis contest that statistic.
- Most Iraqis, including those in government, now consider the US-led presence in Iraq to be a foreign occupation.
- The Iraqi insurgency in Iraq is often referred to by Sunnis as the “resistance movement.”
- The distance from Baghdad to Washington, DC is 6200 miles (9977 km).
- The distance from Baghdad to Tehran, Iran is 431 miles (694 km).
- The distance from Baghdad to Jerusalem is 544 miles (876 km).
- The distance from Baghdad to Damascus is 467 miles (751 km).
- The distance between Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurdish provincial capital city of Arbil is less than 200 miles (< 322 km).

Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Major Tribes



Ethnic Group	Estimated Population	Also Found in	Religion	Language
Arabs	16 to 20 million	Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, Iran	65-60 percent Shia, 20-30 percent Sunni, less than 5 percent Christian	Arabic (Iraq dialect)
Kurds	3.6 to 4.8 million	Turkey, Iran, Syria, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan	Mostly Sunni, Shia, and Yazidi minority	Kurdish
Turkomans	300,000 to 800,000	Related to other Turkic peoples in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan	Primarily Sunni	South Azeri Turkish
Others	As many as 1 million	Mostly Christians, Iranians, and other groups found in the Middle East	At least 50 percent Christian; Shias, Sunnis, and members of other religions account for the balance	Mostly Arabic, some Persian and other languages

CIA 2003 map posted on the web site of the University of Texas library. Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_ethno_2003.jpg.