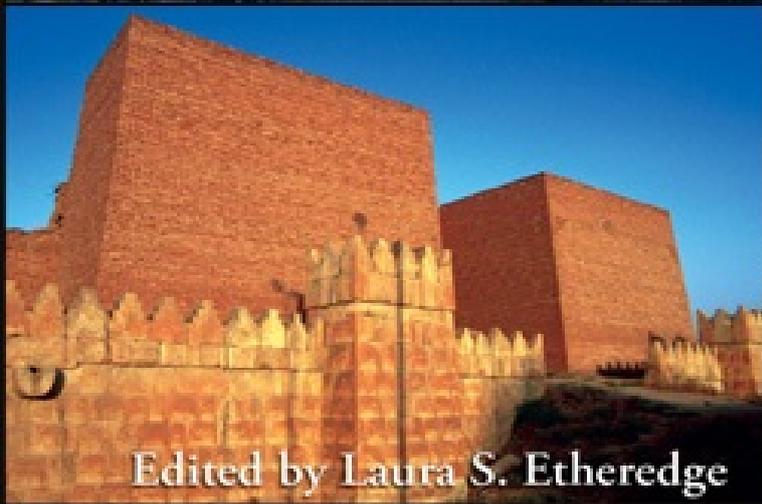


# MIDDLE EAST

# EAST

REGION IN TRANSITION

# IRAQ



Edited by Laura S. Etheredge

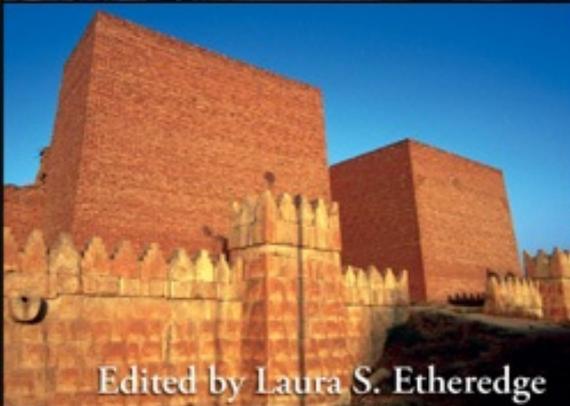


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**MIDDLE EAST  
REGION IN TRANSITION  
IRAQ**

**EDITED BY LAURA ETHEREDGE, ASSOCIATE EDITOR, MIDDLE EAST GEOGRAPHY**



Published in 2011 by Britannica Educational Publishing  
(a trademark of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.)  
in association with Rosen Educational Services, LLC  
29 East 21st Street, New York, NY 10010.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Iraq / edited by Laura S. Etheredge.

p. cm.—(Middle East: region in transition)

“In association with Britannica Educational Publishing, Rosen Educational Services.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61530-402-8 (eBook)

1. Iraq. 2. Iraq—History. I. Etheredge, Laura.

DS70.62.I73 2011

956.7—dc22

2010016104

**On the cover:** Aside from the war-heavy headlines, Iraq pulsates with vibrant culture, people, and history (clockwise from top left): a copper craftsman in Baghdad, Muslim Shī'ites observing Āshūrā in Karbalā', the modern Baghdad Palace, and the ancient city of Nineveh (opposite modern Mosul, Iraq). (*clockwise from top left*) Akram Saleh/Getty Images, Mohammed Sawaf/AFP/Getty Images, Shutterstock.com, Jane Sweeney/Lonely Planet Images/Getty Images

**On pages 1, 14, 32, 50, 62, 71, 182, 184, 187:** Some Iraqi desert and mountain dwellers still depend on animals such as camels for transportation. *Francoise De Mulder/Roger Viollet/Getty Images*

# CONTENTS

Introduction

## Chapter 1: Land

Relief

*Fertile Crescent*

Alluvial Plains

Al-Jazīrah

Deserts

The Northeast

Drainage

*Diyālā River*

Soils

Climate

*Shamāl*

Plant and Animal Life



## Chapter 2: People

Arabs

Kurds

Languages

Religion

Shī'ites

*Karbalā'*

Sunnis

*Ḥanafīyyah*

Religious Minorities

Settlement Patterns  
Rural Settlement  
Urban Settlement  
*Al-Başrah*  
Demographic Trends



### **Chapter 3: Economy**

Economic Development  
State Control  
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing  
Resources and Power  
Petroleum  
Oil Pipelines  
Other Minerals and Energy  
Manufacturing  
Finance  
Trade  
Services  
Labour and Taxation  
Transportation and Telecommunications



## **Chapter 4: Government and Society**

*Ba‘th Party*

Local Government

Justice

Political Process

Security

Health and Welfare

Housing

Education



## **Chapter 5: Cultural Life**

Daily Life and Social Customs

The Arts

*‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayafī*

Cultural Institutions

*National Museum of Iraq*

Sports and Recreation

Media and Publishing



## Chapter 6: History

Iraq from c. 600 to 1055

The Arab Conquest and the Early Islamic Period

*Battle of Karbalā'*

The 'Abbāsid Caliphate

The Būyid Period (932–1062)

Iraq from 1055 to 1534

The Seljuqs (1055–1152)

The Later 'Abbāsids (1152–1258)

The Mongol Il-Khans (1258–1335)

Il-Khanid Successors (1335–1410)

The Turkmen (1410–1508)

*Kara Koyunlu*

The Şafavids (1508–34)

Ottoman Iraq (1534–1918)

The 16th-Century Conquest of Iraq and the Regime Imposed by Süleyman I

The Local Despotisms in the 17th Century

The 18th-Century Mamlūk Regime

*British East India Company*

The Fall of the Mamlūks and the Consolidation of British Interests

Mid-19th-Century Ottoman Reforms

The Governorship of Midhat Paşa

The End of Ottoman Rule

*Armistice of Mudros*

Iraq Until the 1958 Revolution

British Occupation and the Mandatory Regime

Independence, 1932–39

World War II and British Intervention, 1939–45

*Nūrī al-Saʿīd*

Postwar Reconstruction and Social Upheavals, 1945–58

The Republic of Iraq

The 1958 Revolution and Its Aftermath

*ʿAbd al-Karīm Qāsim*

The Revolution of 1968

Iraq Under Ṣaddām Ḥussein

*Nūrī al-Mālikī*





Conclusion

Glossary  
Bibliography  
Index

## INTRODUCTION



*Iraq's diverse population reflects the historical influences of invaders and immigrants. AFP/Getty Images*

It may seem peculiar to associate the Arabic term Al-Jazīrah (“the Island”) with the nearly landlocked country of Iraq. Yet the term, which actually denotes one of Iraq’s major regions, in many ways represents the country as well for the exceptional place it has occupied in history. Treasured for its fertility—it makes up much of what is known as the Fertile Crescent—Iraq has been the seat of empires and the object of desire for numerous conquerors over the centuries. This volume journeys past today’s turbulent headlines to explore the history, culture, and people of a unique region that is both captivating and complex.

The topography of Iraq has largely shaped its settlement patterns and the industries

that sustain the country. Perhaps among the most storied features of Iraq's landscape are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, whose waters nourished some of the world's earliest civilizations and remain crucial to sustaining neighbouring villages and cities and local wildlife and vegetation, as well as supporting the country's agricultural productivity. Some one-third of the country is covered by alluvial plains, which are characterized by low elevation marked by marshlands and flooding. North of the alluvial plains, the Tigris and Euphrates bound the area known as the Al-Jazīrah plateau. Like the deserts in western and southern Iraq, the plateau is largely hot and arid, but it contains some fertile soil.

The diversity of the various peoples who have settled in each of Iraq's four major regions reflects the sundry influences of past invaders and immigrants. The Arab conquests of the 7th century marked the Arabization of central and southern Iraq, and of the approximately 30 million people in Iraq today, about two-thirds are Arabs and more than three-fourths of the population speaks one of several Arabic dialects. Another one-fourth of the population consists of Kurds, and the remainder is made up of smaller groups of Turks, Turkmen, the Lur, and Armenians.

The dominance of the Arab majority and its influence on Iraqi governance is often contrasted with the plight of the Kurdish minority. Like a significant proportion of Arab Iraqis (and like the ruling elite of much of the 20th century), Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims. They are culturally and linguistically distinct, however, and as such, they have long struggled against Arabs for autonomy. Unable to transcend factional differences, however, Kurds have repeatedly failed to achieve statehood and have suffered intense violence against them, especially at the hands of the Ba'ath regime.

Although the Iraqi population is predominantly Shī'ite, it also has a large proportion of Sunnis, thus representing both major sects of Islam more equally than any other country. Still, divisions along religious lines continue to threaten unity. Large cities like Baghdad attract diverse residents, but elsewhere in the country, settlement is generally along traditional lines: Sunni Arabs prevail in central Iraq, Kurds are concentrated in the northeast, and Shī'ites dominate the southern areas. A small number of Christians continue to reside in Iraq, but the once sizeable community of Jews has all but disappeared.

With more than two-thirds of Iraq's population settled in one of its urban centres, the country's rural communities have dwindled. Revenues from oil production have accounted for much of the shift away from agriculture toward industrialization and manufacturing. Oil is Iraq's most valuable export, and the fate of the Iraqi economy is closely tied to its capacity to produce and distribute oil. Although Iraq at one point had the third largest economy in the Middle East, its involvement in various international conflicts produced severe economic setbacks. The devastation to oil production and distribution facilities during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s was compounded by the United Nations embargo on Iraq following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Only after the implementation of the oil-for-food program, which allowed Iraq to sell a certain amount of oil so that it could obtain basic necessities, was the Iraqi economy able to recover to some extent.

Iraq's agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors, as well as its trade and infrastructure, have likewise been affected by struggles with other countries. Despite

widespread damage, however, Iraq remains a country still rich in many agricultural and mineral resources.

Political instability pervaded Iraq in the first half of the 20th century, first under the monarchy and then in the years following its overthrow. The socialist Ba‘th Party, which came to power in 1968, brought a measure of stability, although it did not adhere to Iraq’s provisional constitution. Ṣaddām Ḥussein, who ruled from 1979 until 2003, effectively turned Iraq into a dictatorship and single-party state: political parties opposing the Ba‘th regime were eventually outlawed. With the toppling of the Ba‘th Party at the start of the Iraq War in 2003, the legacy of unchecked power was finally abandoned. The United States and its allies subsequently helped oversee the restructuring of the Iraqi government, and a permanent constitution was approved in October 2005. The new constitution established a parliamentary democracy, with a president, a prime minister, and an independent judiciary.

Although the country remains grounded in traditional Arab and Islamic cultural values, it has also welcomed more secular trends in dress, entertainment, and women’s rights, especially in its urban areas. In contrast to the elevation of ancient and traditional styles espoused by the Ba‘th regime, the arts in Iraq today embrace Western styles of dance and theatre even as customary forms of Middle Eastern expression continue to be exhibited.

Evidence of Iraq’s lengthy history is still visible at the country’s archaeological sites, museums, and holy cities and provides insight into the country’s bygone eras. Although civilization flourished in the Fertile Crescent for centuries prior to the advent of Islam, it bore little resemblance—culturally, ethnically, or socially—to current-day Iraq. The story here picks up around 600 CE, when the ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and religious pluralism of the region at the time were challenged by new political and religious forces. In the centuries that followed, Iraq was characterized by constant transformation and reinvention.

The Persian Sāsānian empire that had overseen the stability of the region into the early 7th century finally fell to Arab Muslim conquerors in 651. Iraq subsequently became a province under the Muslim caliphate, and ‘Alī, the fourth caliph, made Iraq his centre until the Umayyad dynasty captured power and moved the seat of the caliphate to Damascus. The wealthiest part of the empire, Iraq, now subordinated, became a seat of unrest. Opposition to the Umayyads grew, and after the ‘Abbāsids succeeded in overthrowing the Umayyads in 750 the caliphate was returned to Iraq with its capital at Baghdad. Notwithstanding periods of instability, the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate supervised advances in science and philosophy that travelled far beyond Baghdad and secured Iraq’s place as a hub of cultural and intellectual activity.

After the decline of the ‘Abbāsids and the period of chaos that followed, an initial measure of stability was achieved when the Būyids—who allowed the ‘Abbāsīd caliph to remain as a captive figurehead—assumed control of Iraq. With the subsequent descent into political turbulence, however, the region became vulnerable for capture by the Turkish Seljuqs, led by Toghrīl Beg, in 1055. In the 12th century, ‘Abbāsīds rallied against the Seljuqs and confronted them militarily, and under the caliph al-Nāṣir the ‘Abbāsīds were able to shake off Seljuq domination and revive

independent caliphal authority. Not long after al-Nāṣir's death in 1225, Mongol invaders entered the area, and by 1258 Baghdad had fallen to them.

The destruction wrought in Iraq by the Mongols was exacerbated by the tumultuous rule of the Mongols' Timurid and Turkmen successors. Even as arts reached new heights in the 15th century, by the decline of the Turkmen Kara Koyunlu and Ak Koyunlu tribal federations, Iraq had experienced one of the darkest periods in its history.

After a period under Shī'ite Ṣafavid rule, the next phase of Iraqi history witnessed the integration of Iraq into the Ottoman Empire. Iraq was thereafter oriented westward and aligned more closely with Ottoman dominions in Syria and Anatolia than with its own neighbouring Persian lands. The Sunnism of the Ottomans prevailed in Iraq, but Shī'ites retained influence and prestige.

Ottoman rule was often unsteady and did not go unchallenged: local dynasties around Iraq as well as the Ṣafavids vied for control when the central Ottoman government weakened in the 17th century, while the Iranian leader, Nādir Shah, tried to advance on Iraq in the 18th century. Still, the Ottomans revolutionized Iraq in many respects. The governorship of Midhat Paşa, for instance, oversaw the improvement of Iraq's infrastructure and educational facilities and the introduction of the Ottoman Land Law of 1858, which systematized the process of land ownership and the collection of taxes.

The interest of Great Britain in the area had been growing since the end of the 18th century, and it was the British who ultimately led to the end of Ottoman control. The British feared the increase of German influence in Iraq, and during World War I they strove to capture Baghdad, succeeding in 1917. At the end of World War I, the League of Nations granted Great Britain a mandate to govern Iraq, which it did until 1932. During this period the British established a constitutional monarchy with the emir Fayṣal I as the king of Iraq. After Iraqis voiced concern over foreign influence, Iraq was granted independence. British influence continued thereafter, however, notable especially in such issues as Iraq's role in World War II.

Troubled by continued British involvement and their exclusion from the country's politics, younger Iraqis revolted in 1958 and deposed the monarchy. The material progress Iraq made in the 1950s thanks to the increased oil revenues it earned only marginally offset the tension in the region. The 1958 revolution was followed by more unstable regimes, first under 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim and then under 'Abd al-Salām 'Ārif, who was overthrown by the army in 1968. The Ba'th Party, which had briefly taken power in 1963, reclaimed power in 1968 and would retain it, chiefly under Pres. Ṣaddām Ḥussein, until 2003.

Iraqi history under Ṣaddām Ḥussein was dominated by international conflict. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) resulted from the clash of the Islamic government of Iran and the secular one of Iraq. The influence upon the Shī'ites of Iraq by Shī'ite Iran—whose policy of exporting its Islamic revolution included the desire to overthrow the Iraqi government—was of special concern. To the detriment of both countries, Iraq and Iran fought for much of the 1980s, and a formal peace agreement was not achieved until

1990. An array of Iraqi grievances against Kuwait—including territorial disputes, Kuwaiti violation of OPEC quotas, and accusations that its neighbour had stolen Iraqi oil—led to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. After suffering defeat at the hands of the United States and coalition forces, Iraq withdrew from Kuwait and ended the Persian Gulf War.

The Iraq War, begun in 2003, was launched by the United States and United Kingdom based on the notion that Iraq supported terrorist groups and planned to obtain weapons of mass destruction. The Iraq War entailed the dismantling of Šaddām’s regime and the launch of a Western initiative to implement democracy in Iraq. Indeed, Iraq was able to hold democratic elections in the years following the war’s start, but the war itself continued through the first decade of the 21st century.

Although Iraq has withstood immense hardship throughout periods of its history, its cultural bequests have continued to influence the world. Inheriting a wide range of challenges from its predecessors and confronting new questions as it moves forward, today’s Iraqi government must navigate unfamiliar territory as it pioneers new solutions to each.

# CHAPTER 1

## LAND

Iraq is the easternmost country of the Arab world, located at about the same latitude as the southern United States. It is bordered to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iran, to the west by Syria and Jordan, and to the south by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Iraq has 12 miles (19 kilometre) of coastline along the northern end of the Persian Gulf, giving it a tiny sliver of territorial sea. Followed by Jordan, it is thus the Middle Eastern state with the least access to the sea and offshore sovereignty.



*Iraq.* Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

### RELIEF

Iraq's topography can be divided into four physiographic regions: the alluvial plains of the central and southeastern parts of the country; Al-Jazīrah (Arabic: "the Island"), an upland region in the north between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; deserts in the west

and south; and the highlands in the northeast. Each region extends into neighbouring countries, but the alluvial plains lie largely within Iraq.

### *Fertile Crescent*

The Fertile Crescent is the region in the Middle East where the civilizations of the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin began. The term was popularized by the American Orientalist James Henry Breasted.

The Fertile Crescent includes a roughly crescent-shaped area of relatively fertile land that probably had a more moderate, agriculturally productive climate in the past than today, especially in Mesopotamia and the Nile valley. Situated between the Arabian Desert to the south and the mountains of Armenia to the north, it extends from Babylonia and adjacent Susiana (the southwestern province of Persia) up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to Assyria. From the Zagros Mountains east of Assyria, it continues westward over Syria to the Mediterranean and extends southward to southern Palestine. The Nile valley of Egypt is often included as a further extension, especially because the short interruption in Sinai is no greater than similar desert breaks that disturb its continuity in Mesopotamia and Syria. Throughout the region irrigation is necessary for the best agricultural results and, indeed, is often essential to any farming at all.

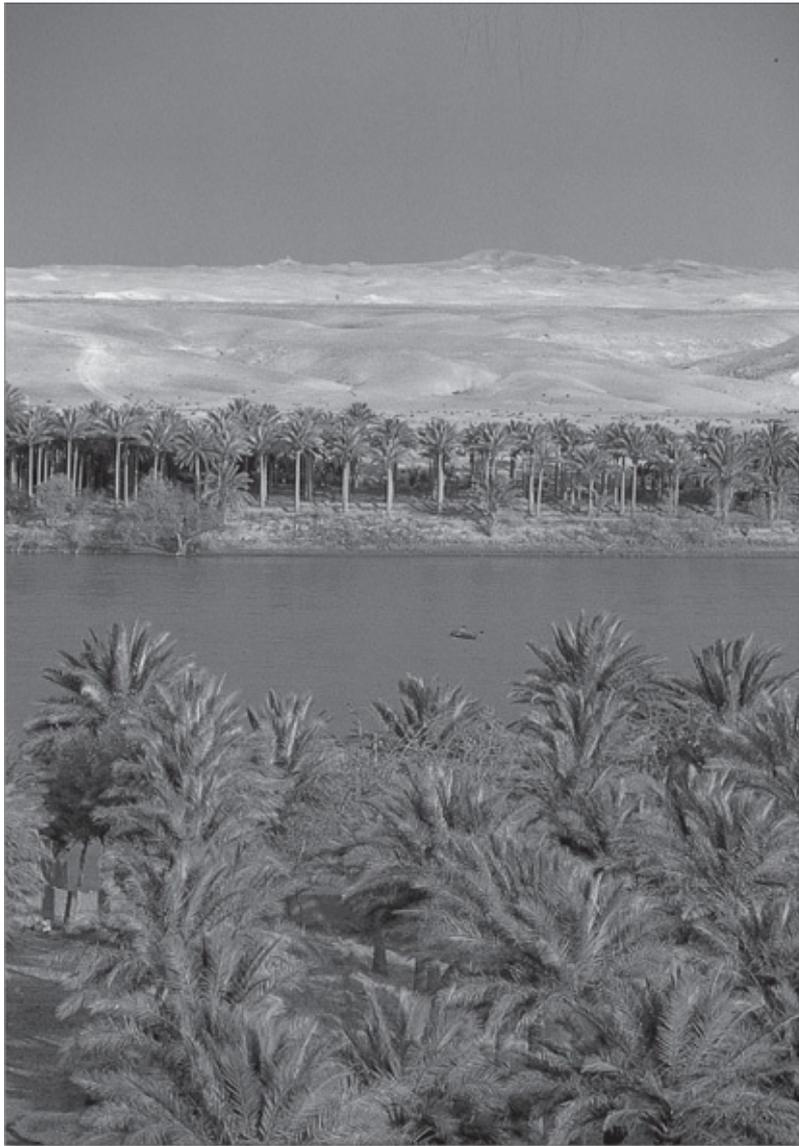
In its wider extension, the Fertile Crescent corresponds exactly to the region that plays a dominant role in the Hebrew traditions of Genesis and contains the ancient countries (Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Phoenicia) from which the Greeks and Romans derived civilization. This age-old belief that the earliest known culture originated in the Fertile Crescent has been confirmed by the development of radiocarbon dating since 1948. It is now known that incipient agriculture and village agglomerations there must be dated back to about 8000 BCE, if not earlier, and that the use of irrigation followed rapidly.

### **ALLUVIAL PLAINS**

The plains of lower Mesopotamia extend southward some 375 miles (600 km) from Balad on the Tigris and Al-Ramādī on the Euphrates to the Persian Gulf. They cover more than 51,000 square miles (132,000 square km), almost one-third of the country's area, and are characterized by low elevation, below 300 feet (100 metres), and poor natural drainage. Large areas are subject to widespread seasonal flooding, and there are extensive marshlands, some of which dry up in the summer to become salty wastelands. Near Al-Qurnah, where the Tigris and Euphrates converge to form the Shatt al-Arab, there are still some inhabited marshes. The alluvial plains contain extensive lakes. The swampy Lake Al-Ḥammār (Hawr al-Ḥammār) extends 70 miles (110 km) from Al-Baṣrah (Basra) to Sūq al-Shuyūkh; its width varies from 8 to 15 miles (13 to 25 km).

## AL-JAZĪRAH

North of the alluvial plains, between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, is the arid Al-Jazīrah plateau. Its most prominent hill range is the Sinjār Mountains, whose highest peak reaches an elevation of 4,448 feet (1,356 m). The main watercourse is the Wadi Al-Tharthār, which runs southward for 130 miles (210 km) from the Sinjār Mountains to the Tharthār (Salt) Depression. Milḥat Ashqar is the largest of several salt flats (or *sabkhahs*) in the region.



*The Euphrates River at Khān al-Baghdādī, on the edge of Al-Jazīrah plateau in north-central Iraq. © Nik Wheeler*

## DESERTS

Western and southern Iraq is a vast desert region covering some 64,900 square miles