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# BACKGROUND BRIEF

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## *Iraq:* *Cultural Appreciation* *Booklet*

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(S.40)

*January 2007*

# **IRAQ: CULTURAL APPRECIATION BOOKLET**

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This booklet provides some basic facts about Iraq and describes the principal cultural and social mores of Iraqi society. It is intended to act as a guide to social interaction, and aid in the interpretation of social behaviour between Iraqis themselves. Many of the points covered here apply equally to both Iraqi and Arab societies more generally, but an emphasis has been placed upon cultural traits which are peculiar to Iraq.

For enquiries regarding this paper, please telephone +XX XXX XXXX (S.40)

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## **IRAQI HISTORY**

- Ancient Mesopotamia, the area corresponding to modern-day Iraq, was variously part of the Babylonian, Assyrian, Parthian, Persian and Sassanid Empires from the eighteenth century BC to the Arab conquests of the seventh century AD. During this period, there were many cultural innovations in the region, including the invention of writing, music and cartography. As such, Iraq is often described as the “Cradle of Civilisation”, as term which still has resonance with the population today.
- Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries AD, Iraq represented one province in a vast Arab empire, which, at its height, stretched from Spain in the west to Central Asia in the east. Following the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, which destroyed much of the region’s infrastructure and agriculture, Iraq became part of Mongolian or Turkoman empires.
- From the mid-sixteenth century, Iraq was incorporated into the Turkic Ottoman Empire, as three provinces centred on the cities of Baghdad, Mosul and Basrah.
- The Ottomans supported the Sunnis as the dominant political sect in Iraq, as a counterweight to the influence of Shi’a Persia (Iran). This set a pattern that was to prevail for the next four centuries.
- During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much of the population of southern Iraq converted to Shi’ism. This was due in part to the influence of Persian traders and missionaries.
- Following the First World War and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq became a League of Nations Mandate under British protection. A rebellion in 1920 convinced Britain that direct rule could not work, and a Hashemite Monarchy was established in 1921 under King Faysal I.

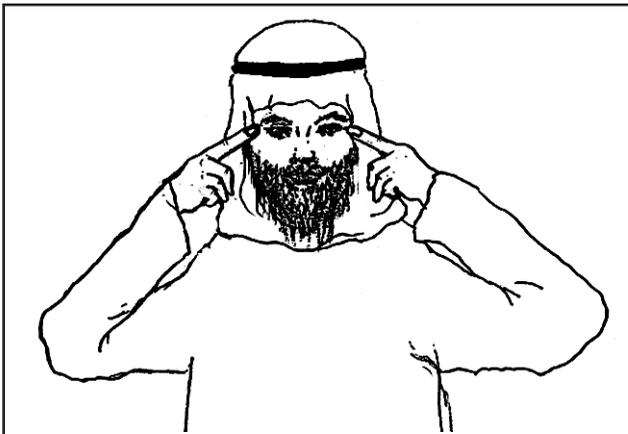
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- Iraq gained its independence in 1932, and was led by a succession of largely pro-British governments until 1958, when a coup by the ‘Free Officers’ movement resulted in the end of the monarchy and the declaration of a Republic.
- In 1968, the Ba’ath Party took power. Saddam Husayn gained control of the Party and the country in 1979, heralding a period of uncertainty and oppression for much of the population.

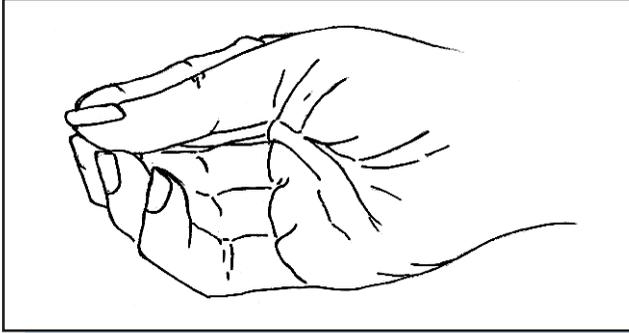
## SOCIAL INTERACTION

- Body language is a highly developed form of communication in Iraq, and a multitude of gestures are commonly used in everyday interaction. Men tend to use gestures more than women, and the following list applies largely to men.
  - A single, downward nod is the most common expression for “yes”.
  - Extending both open palms towards someone connotes enthusiasm or “excellent”.
  - Touching the outer edges of the eyes with the fingertips indicates assent.

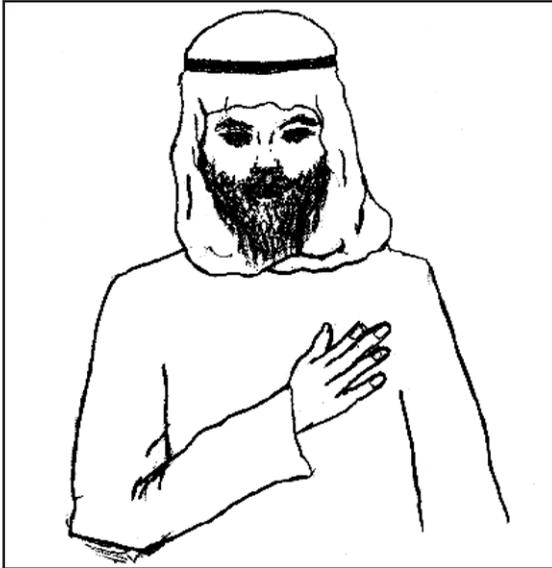


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- Holding the right palm out with the palm upward, with the tips of the thumb and fingers touching and the palm moving up and down signifies “calm down”, “more slowly” or “be patient”.



- Patting the heart repeatedly means “I’ve had enough” (usually used at mealtimes).



- Rubbing the palms of the hands against each other and then opening out the palms usually indicates “I’m finished” or “I’m not able to do that”.

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- It is often considered impolite to wave with the left hand. Pointing with the index finger can also cause offence - one should use the whole hand.

- **Greetings.** Hand-shaking (with the right hand) is the most usual form of greeting, and is often accompanied by embracing and kissing on both cheeks. A failure to shake someone's hand when meeting them or bidding them goodbye may cause offence. These rules apply only to people of the same sex; it is considered disrespectful for a man to offer his hand to a woman unless she extends it first - and obviously women should never be kissed. Touching the right hand to the heart as a form of greeting indicates respect or sincerity.
- **Food and drink.** Food and drinks should always be accepted and held in the right hand. It is especially important to observe this rule when taking food from communal dishes. When eating in a group, it is polite to wait until the host or the most senior male present has started his own meal before beginning to eat.

The consumption of pork or any item of food that may have come into contact with swine products is strictly taboo for all Muslims. There are also taboos surrounding other animals - dogs, for example, are considered unclean and defiling.

Alcohol is expressly forbidden by Islamic (Shari'a) law. Consumption in Iraq is legal, but strongly discouraged, and it is illegal for Muslims to drink alcohol during the holy month of Ramadan. Whilst alcohol was previously available in large Baghdadi hotels and from a small number of shops, most alcohol sellers have been forced to cease trading since 2003 under pressure from militant Islamic groups.

- **Hospitality.** Iraqis place great emphasis on the values of hospitality and generosity. When offered second helpings at mealtimes, one should always accept. Tea and (especially) coffee are also symbols of hospitality, and it is important not to refuse a second cup when offered.

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- **Photography.** It is considered extremely rude to photograph someone without first asking permission. Photographing women is, in any case, strictly taboo in Iraq. Photographing people at prayer is also considered offensive.
- **Smoking.** Many Iraqi men and women smoke, although the latter rarely do so in public. It is good manners, when lighting-up at a public gathering, to pass around cigarettes to all those present.
- **Conversation.** Conversation between Iraqis is usually initiated by small talk, and there are certain rules surrounding what subjects are acceptable for everyday conversation. Men should avoid questioning other men about women in their family. When communicating with people, it is considered disrespectful not to sit upright, and hands must always be removed from pockets. Crossing one's legs is also inappropriate, as it is an insult to display the soles of one's shoes or feet to another person. Similarly, shoes should always be removed when entering any holy place, as they are objects of defilement.
- **Meetings.** When attending a meeting, it is accepted practice to allow the host to initiate and direct the discussion. When a senior man enters or leaves a room, all those present are expected to stand. Men should also stand when a woman enters or leaves a room, and should also offer their seat to a woman if there are no other places to sit. Women should always be allowed to leave a room first.

## RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

### Islam

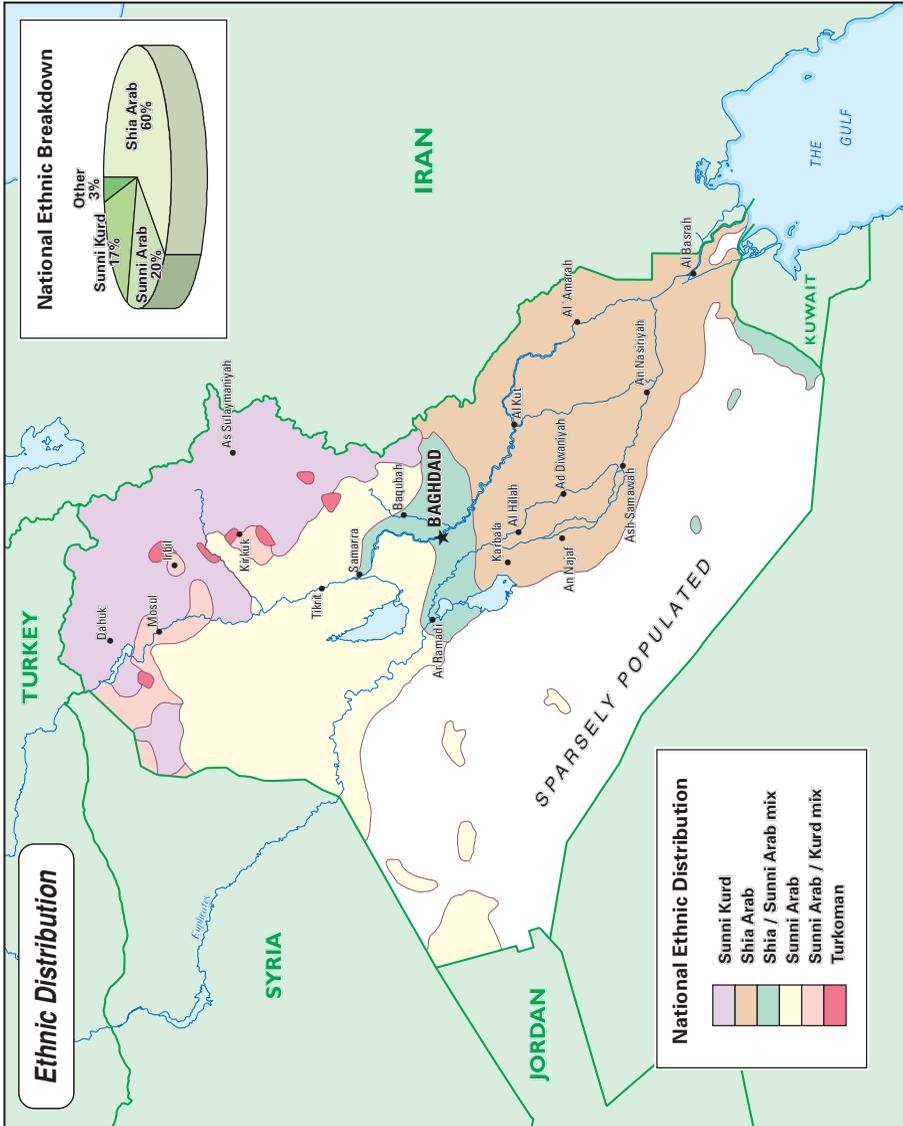
- The overwhelming majority of Iraqis are Muslims.
- Muslims follow the *Qur'an* (the proclamations of God dictated to the Prophet Mohammad) and the *Hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet).

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- Islam has five 'pillars' (central tenets):
  - Reciting the Declaration of Faith
  - Praying five times per day: at dawn, midday, in the afternoon, at dusk and at night
  - Giving alms to the needy
  - Fasting during the month of Ramadan
  - Performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in one's lifetime, if means and health permit
- The *Shari'a* is the system of Islamic law, an all-encompassing set of legal injunctions, regulations and prohibitions which govern almost every type of human activity.
- The two principal Muslim sects are Sunnism and Shi'ism. Sunnis and Shi'as have differing beliefs regarding who was the true heir to the Prophet Mohammad. The Shi'a believe that the Prophet's rightful heir was his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and (along with the Prophet) the most significant figures for the Shi'a are Ali, his two sons and his descendants (collectively known as the Twelve Imams). The Sunni believe that divine revelation stopped with the Prophet, and they therefore do not recognise Ali's descendants as Imams. The two groups have different religious leaders, attend different mosques and have different calls to prayer. There is no overall religious leader for the Iraqi Sunni, whereas most Shi'a recognise Grand Ayatollah Sistani, based in Najaf, as their supreme religious authority.
- The majority of Muslims globally are Sunni. Shi'ism is the dominant sect in Iran, Bahrain, Azerbaijan and Lebanon, as well as in Iraq.

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### **Arabs**

- Arab Sunni Muslims constitute an estimated 17% to 20% of the population and are concentrated in the central belt of Iraq. There are also Sunni enclaves in southern Iraq. Traditionally, the Iraqi government has been led by Arab Sunnis.
- Arab Shi'a Muslims constitute an estimated 60% to 65% of the population. The majority live in southern Iraq and Baghdad. Many Shi'a were brutally oppressed under the Ba'ath regime.
- The main Shi'a holy places are:
  - Najaf (Iraq) - burial place of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law.
  - Kerbala (Iraq) - location of Hussayn's (Ali's son; Prophet's grandson) martyrdom.
  - Samarra (Iraq) - tombs of the tenth and eleventh Imams.
  - Kadhimiya (Baghdad, Iraq) - tombs of the seventh and ninth Imams.
  - Masad (Iran) - tomb of eighth Imam.
  - Qom (Iran) - tombs of numerous Shi'a saints, including Fatima, the sister of the eighth Imam.
  - Medina (Saudi Arabia) - tombs of the second, fourth, fifth and sixth Imams.

### **Kurds**

- Concentrated in northern Iraq, and constituting an estimated 18% to 20% of the population. There is also a significant Kurdish population in Baghdad.
- Whilst desirous for a degree of political and cultural autonomy, the

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Kurdish population of Iraq consider themselves to be Iraqi as well as Kurdish. The majority are Sunnis, although there is a small minority of Shi'a Kurds.

- During the 1980s, Kurds were subject to severe repression at the hands of the regime.
- There are significant tensions between Kurdish and Arab communities in some areas, most notably in the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk.

### **Turkoman**

- Concentrated in urban areas in northern Iraq, and constituting an estimated 1.5% to 4% of the population.
- Two-thirds of the community are Sunni Muslim, the remaining being Shi'a.
- The community has close cultural ties to Turkey, and has had a history of conflict with the Iraqi Kurdish population.

### **Christians**

- The Christian communities of Iraq, comprising between 1.5% and 3.5% of the population, are well-established, many pre-dating the Islamic conquest.
- Christians have traditionally enjoyed religious freedom in Iraq and have maintained a harmonious relationship with other religious groups. There have been some attacks directed against the community since the fall of the former regime, however, and anecdotal reports suggest that many may have emigrated.
- The main Christian communities are Assyrian (or Nestorian), Chaldean, Mandaean (or Sabaeen) and Armenian.
- Most Christians live in urban areas of Iraq. The largest Mandaean community is reportedly located in the town of al-Amarah in Maysan province.

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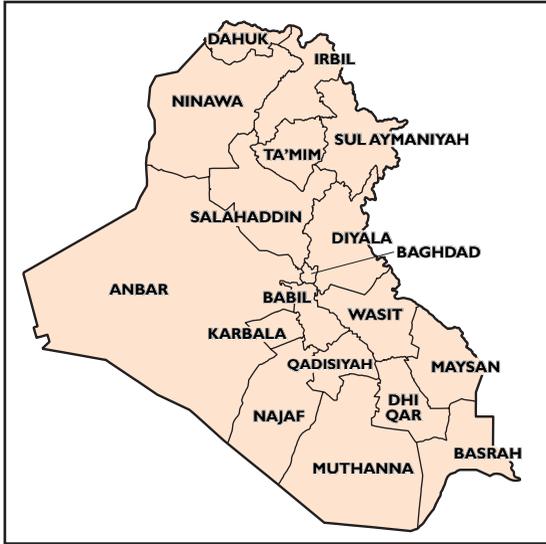
**DEMOGRAPHICS**

- Population data are of questionable accuracy, due to the scarcity of reliable demographic information about Iraq. All figures provided are therefore estimates compiled from the best available sources.

**Basic data (2000 unless stated)**

Population (2004, est.):	25,375,000
Births per 1,000 population	35
Deaths per 1,000 population	6
Rate of natural increase (%)	2.9
Annual rate of growth (%)	2.9
Life expectancy at birth (yrs)	66.5
Infant deaths per 1,000 live births	62
Total fertility rate (per woman)	4.9

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Ethnic Group	Population
Arab Sunni	4.25-5m
Shi'a	14-15m
Kurd	5 million
Turkoman	500,000-1.5m
Assyrian	600,000-800,000
Chaldean	150,000-300,000
Yazidi	30,000-120,000
Mandaean/Sabeaan	20,000

Province	Population, 2002 (est.)	Persons per square km, 2002 (est.)
Anbar	922,574	7
Babil	1,148,020	177
Baghdad	7,767,848	10,583
Basrah	1,957,066	103
Dhi Qar	1,124,222	87
Diyala	938,222	49
Dohuk	820,000	U/K
Irbil	1,294,125	U/K
Karbala	494,456	98
Maysan	602,527	37
Muthanna	392,893	8

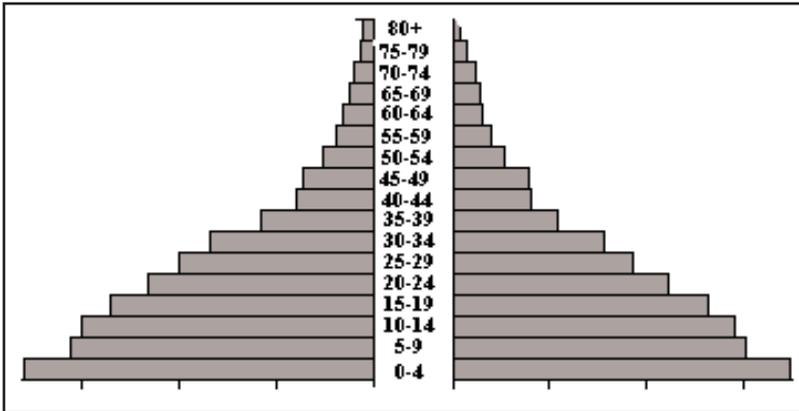
Province	Population, 2002 (est.)	Persons per square km, 2002 (est.)
Najaf	717,659	25
Ninawah	2,025,602	54
Qadisiya	785,252	96
Salahaddin	673,297	27
Sulaymaniyah	1,598,625	U/K
Tamim	940,730	91
Wasit	726,492	42

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City	Population, 2002 (est.)
Baghdad	5,605,000
Mosul	1,739,800
Basra	1,337,600
Irbil	839,600
Kirkuk	728,800
Sulaymaniyah	643,200
Najaf	563,000
Karbala	549,700
Nasiriyah	535,100

City	Population, 2002 (est.)
Hillah	524,500
Diwaniyah	421,000
Al-Kut	381,500
Al-Amarah	340,100
Dohuk	300,000
Al-Zubayr	168,000
Suq ash Shuyukh	155,600
Ash Samawah	124,400

- Iraq has a very youthful population. Almost two-thirds of the population are under 25, and over 40% are under 15.



Population pyramid in 2000

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### TRIBES OF IRAQ

- Tribalism is an important aspect of Iraqi society. It has been estimated that up to 75% of the population identifies themselves as belonging to a specific tribe.
- Tribes (*ashira or qabila*) tend to be more powerful in the rural areas of the country, although they are also significant in the poorer areas of towns and cities. Many people in the wealthier districts of urban Iraq consider tribes to be “backward” and “anti-modern”.
- Tribes are made up of constituent clans (*fukhudh*), which themselves consist of groups of extended families (*bayt or ahl or 'aila*).
- Tribes vary significantly in size, ranging from a few hundred individuals to tens and even hundreds of thousands. Large tribes tend to be confederations (*sillif*) of several smaller tribes.
- Many Arab tribes cross the sectarian divide, having both Sunni and Shi'a branches.
- Saddam manipulated the tribal structure, using tribal networks to distribute patronage and employing shaykhs loyal to the regime to oppress disloyal tribes around them.
- Among the most important majority-Sunni tribal confederations are the Dulaym, the Ubayd, the Jibur and the Shammar. They are dominant in the 'Sunni Triangle' region, and some also have branches in different countries.
- Majority-Shi'a tribal confederations include the Bani Malik, the Bani Lam, the Bani Hujaym and the Albu Muhammad. These tribes are located in the south and south east of Iraq.
- Important Kurdish tribes include the Surchi, the Baradost, the Barzani, the Zibari and the Jaf.

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- It should be noted that membership of a tribe does not necessarily mean that people will utilise this allegiance for social action, or indeed that the association has any salience for them at all.

## LANGUAGE

### Arabic

- For Muslims, Arabic is first and foremost the language of God, the Prophet and the Qur'an, and thus a vehicle for religious expression and enlightenment. Unlike the Bible, which represents a *translation* of divine communication, the Qur'an is regarded as a verbatim transcription of the word of God and is therefore considered by many scholars to be inherently untranslatable. Printed Qur'ans are regarded as sacred objects by all Muslims.
- Classical Arabic - the language of the Qur'an - is always accorded the highest status in the linguistic hierarchy.

Mode of Arabic	Context
Classical	Qur'anic text and verse
Modern standard	Print and broadcast media, literature, formal conversation (e.g. at a conference).
Colloquial	Everyday speech, some poetry, cartoons, plays
Slang	Varies with dialect

- The principal Arabic language dialects in Iraq are Mesopotamian Arabic, North Mesopotamian Arabic and Nadji Arabic.
- The Arabic alphabet contains 28 letters. Text is read from right to left, numbers from left to right.

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### **Kurdish**

- The two main Kurdish languages are Surani (or Kurdi), which is spoken mainly in the southern Kurdish region, and Kurmanji, spoken by people in the northern part of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the two languages are mutually-comprehensible and share much of the same vocabulary, there are significant grammatical differences between them.
- Both Kurdish languages are generally written in Arabic script. However, Latin alphabets are also widely used and understood, and are increasingly employed in the Kurdish-language media.

### **Other Languages**

- The main Turkoman language is Turkish, but most of the population are also fluent Arabic speakers.
- Assyrians speak Aramaic (also known as Syriac), an ancient language related to Hebrew and Arabic.
- English is widely understood among the well-educated sectors of society, and many people have at least a basic knowledge of the language.

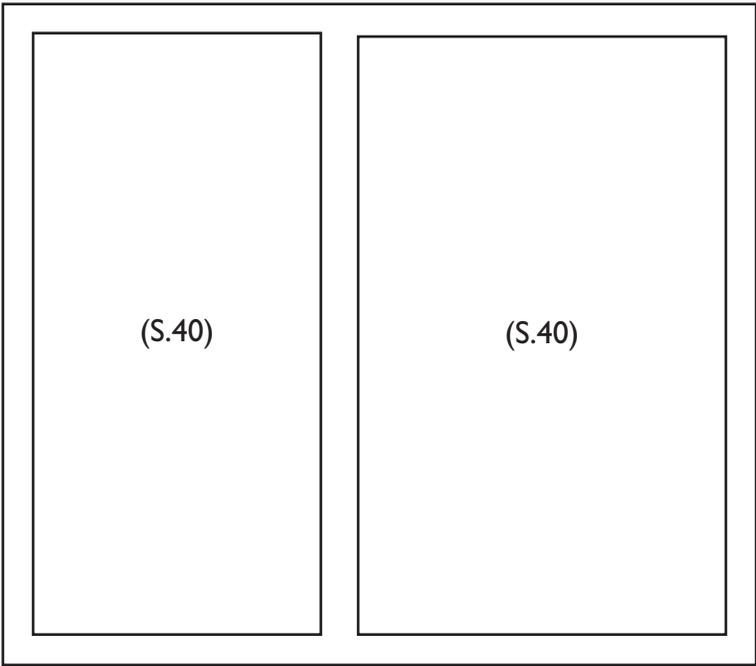
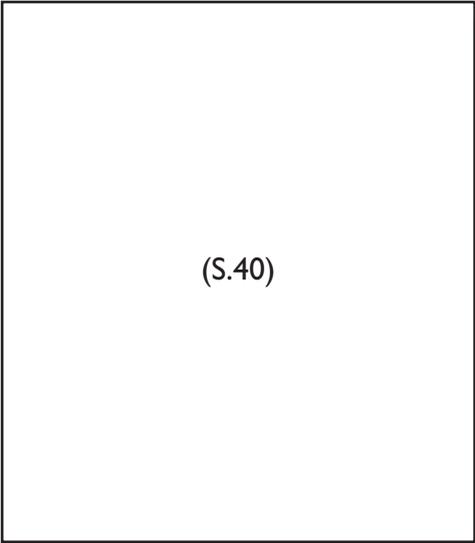
### **DRESS**

- Although western-style clothes are commonly worn in Iraq, Arab men often wear a long cotton or woollen shirt, known as a *dishdash(a)*, over loose trousers. Sometimes - particularly on special occasions - men will also wear a large, rectangular cloak, (*abaya* or *bisht*) over the dishdash. Headdresses (*keffiyeh*) are usually either black and white checked (most common), red and white or plain white. They are secured to the head with a piece of thick cord known as an *igal* or *agal*.

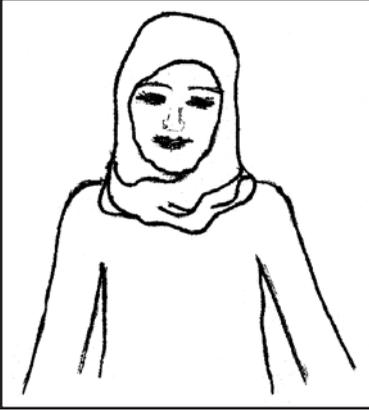
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- In the Kurdish areas, men commonly wear loose trousers with a shirt and jacket, and a skullcap over which is worn a turban folded from a large square of material. The colours of clothing often symbolise tribal or political allegiance: green is associated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), yellow with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), for example.



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*Even if wearing western clothes, women will usually wear headscarves (hijab) in public.*



*More conservative women wear shawls or full body coverings in the form of a long-sleeved one-piece coat or dress (jilbab or abaya).*

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**ANNEX A**  
**USEFUL TERMS AND PHRASES**

**Numbers**

0	Sifr
1	Wahid
2	Ithnayn (Itneen)
3	Thalaatha (Talaata)
4	Arba'a
5	Khamsa
6	Sita'a
7	Saba'a
8	Thamaaniya (Tamaaniya)
9	Tissa'a
10	'Ashara
11	Ahad-ashar
12	Itha-ashar (Itnashr)
13	Thalaathat ashar (Talaatashr)
14	Arba'at ashar
20	Ashreen
30	Thalaatheen (Talaateen)
40	Arba'een
50	Khamseen
60	Sitteen
70	Saba'een
80	Thamaaneen (Tamaaneen)
90	Tissa'een
100	Miyya
200	Meetayn
1000	Alf
2000	Alfayn
3000	Thalaathat alaaf (Talaat alaaf)
1,000,000	Milyoon

**Days of the week**

Monday	(yawm) al-ithnayn (al-itneen)
Tuesday	(yawm) ath-thalaatha (at-talaata)
Wednesday	(yawm) al-arba'a
Thursday	(yawm) al-khamees
Friday	(yawm) al-juma'a
Saturday	(yawm) as-sabt
Sunday	(yawm) al-ahad

**Food and drink**

Food	akil
Bread	khubz
Breakfast	ftuur
Cheese	jibin
Chicken	djaaja/dijaj
Fish	samak
Fruit	faakiha
Lamb	(lahm) ghanam/kharuf/quzi
Salad	salata
Soup	shorba
Coffee	gahwa
Tea	chai
Vegetarian	nabati
Vegetable	khadrawat (greens)
Water	my

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**Conversation**

*(Modern Standard Iraqi Arabic with colloquial alternatives in brackets)*

Hello	as-salaamu alay-kum (response: wa alay-kum as-salaam)
Hello/welcome	marhaban
Welcome	Ahlan (wa-sahlan) (response: ahlan bik(i))
Goodbye	Ma' as-salaama
Yes	Na'am (ay na'am)
No	La'
Please	Min fadlak/Min fadlik
I'm sorry	Afwan/mutaasif(a)/Aasif(asfa)
Thank you	Shukran (response: You're welcome: Afwan)
What's your name?	Ma ismak(ik)? (shu ismak?/shismak/ismak ay?)
I would like...	Orid....min fadlak
How long? (time)	al-muda kam?(shgad?)

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**ANNEX B**  
**KEY DATES IN 2007 AND 2008**

All religious festivals in Iraq are reckoned on the basis of the Islamic (or Hijra) calendar, which is based on the phases of the moon. Like the solar (Gregorian) calendar used in the west, it consists of 12 months, but it is 11 days shorter. The calendar started in AD 622, the year of the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina. AD 2007 is equivalent to AH 1428 in the Islamic calendar. (AH - Anno Hegirae - year of the Hijra.)

Because the beginning of the month is determined by the sighting of the new moon in the Islamic calendar, all dates marked \* below are subject to change by (plus or minus) one day.

Some Iraqis also commemorate key political and historical events, such as the Revolutions of 1958 and 1968. These dates are fixed to the western calendar and do not vary each year.

**2007:**

- 20 January (1 Muharram) Islamic New Year\*
- 30 January (10 Muharram) Ashura Festival (Shi'a)\*
- 10 March (20 Safar) Arbare'en Festival (Shi'a)\*
- 31 March (12 Rabi al-Alwwal) Milad al-Nabi (Birth of the Prophet Mohammad - Sunni)\*
- 04 April (16 Rabi al-Alwwal) Milad al-nabi (Birth of the Prophet Mohammad - Shia)\*

Month	Name
1	Muharram
2	Safar
3	Rabi-al-Awwal
4	Rabi-al-Saani
5	Jamadi-al-Awwal
6	Jamadi-al-Saani
7	Rajab
8	Sha'ban
9	Ramadan
10	Shawwal
11	Dhu-al-Qi'dah
12	Dhu-al-Hijjah

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- 30 June (15 Jamadi al-Saani) Anniversary of Iraqi revolt against the British (1920)
- 14 July (29 Janadi al-Saani) Anniversary of 1958 Revolution
- 17 July (2 Rajab) Anniversary of 1968 Revolution
- 28 July (13 Rajab) Death of the 10<sup>th</sup> Imam\*
- 04 August (20 Rajab) Anniversary of the founding of the Ba'ath party in Syria 1947
- 10 August (26 Rajab) Isra al-Mi'raj (commemorating Prophet's ascension to heaven)\*
- 29 August (16 Sha'ban) Occulation of 12<sup>th</sup> Imam (Shi'a)\*
- 13 September (1 Ramadan) - 12 October (30 Ramadan) Ramadan (Holy Month)\*
- 08 October (26 Ramadan) Laylat UI-Qadr (Night of Power)\*
- 13 October (1 Shawwal) Eid al-Fitr (Celebrating the end of Ramadan)\*
- 02 December (22 Dul al-Qi'dah) Birth of the Eighth Imam\*
- 19 December (9 Dul al-Qi'dah) Hajj (Mecca)\*
- 20 December (10 Dul al-Qi'dah) Eid al-Auda\*

**2008:**

- 09 January (1 Muharram) Islamic New Year\*
- 19 January (10 Muharram) Ashura Festival (Shi'a)\*
- 28 February (20 Safar) Arbare'en Festival (Shi'a)\*
- 20 March (12 Rabi al-Awaal) Milad al-Nabi (Birth of the Prophet Mohammad - Sunni)\*

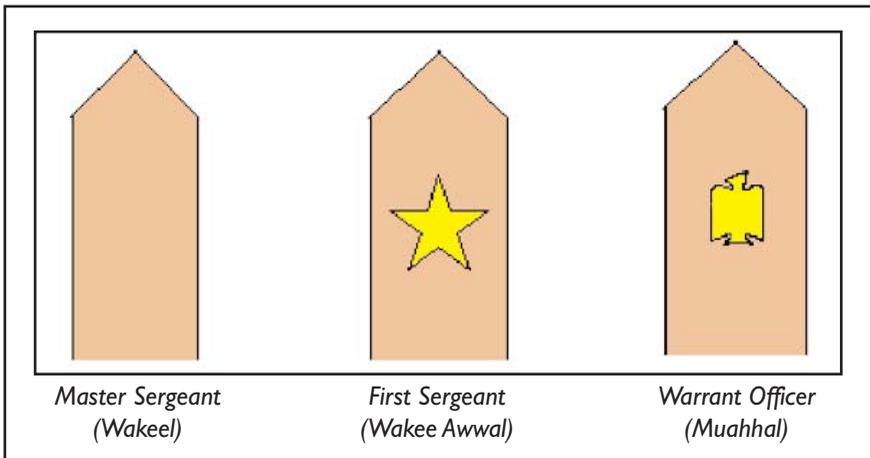
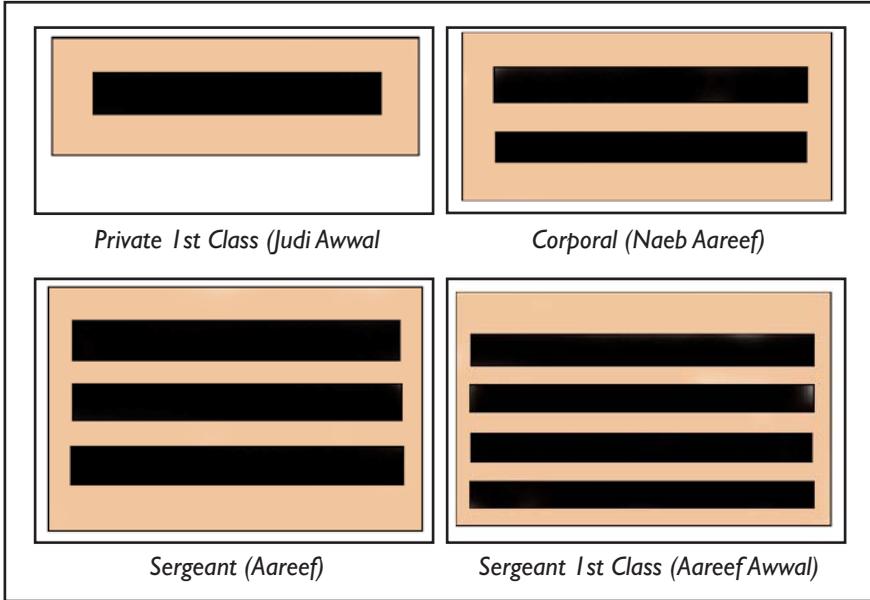
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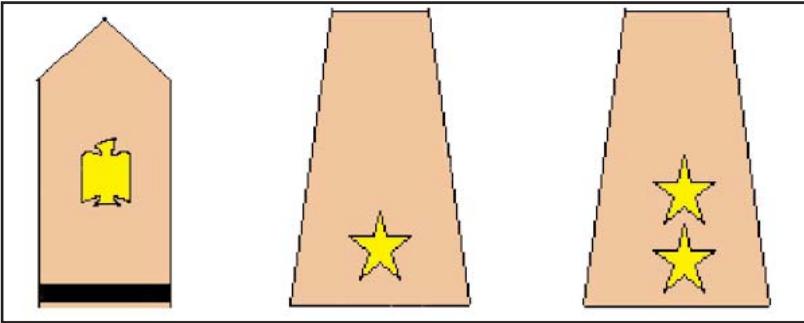
- 25 March (17 Rabi al-Awaal) Milad al-Nabi (Birth of the Prophet Mohammad - Shi'a)\*
- 30 June (26 Jamadi al-Saani) Anniversary of Iraqi Revolt against the British (1920)
- 14 July (11 Rajab) Anniversary of 1958 Revolution
- 17 July (14 Rajab) Anniversary of 1968 Revolution
- 17 July (14 Rajab) Death of the 10th Imam\*
- 31 July (28 Rajab) Isra al-Mi'raj (Commemorating Prophet's ascension to Heaven, also known as Lailat al-Mi'raj)\*
- 04 August (2 Sha'ban) Anniversary of the Founding of the Ba'ath Party in Syria in 1947
- 18 August (16 Sha'ban) Occultation of the 12th Imam (Imam Mahdi) - Shia\*
- 02 September (1 Ramadan) - 01 October (30 Ramadan) Ramadan (Holy Month)\*
- 27 September (26 Ramadan) Laylat Ul-Qadr (Night of Power)\*
- 02 October (1 Shawwal) Eid al-Fitr (Celebrating the end of Ramadan)\*
- 21 November (22 Dhu al-Qi'dah) Birth of the Eight Imam\*
- 08 December (9 Dul al-Qidah) Hajj (Mecca)\*
- 09 December (10 Dul al-Qidah) Eid al-Auda\*
- 30 December (1 Muharram) Islamic New Year\*

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**ANNEX C**  
**IRAQI NATIONAL GUARD AND IRAQI POLICE SERVICE**  
**INSIGNIA**



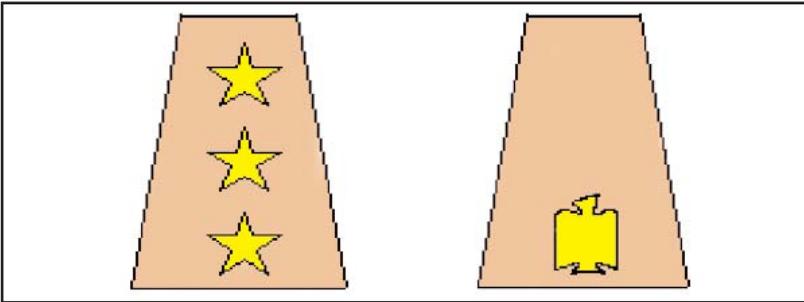
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Chief Warrant Officer  
(Muahhal Awwal)

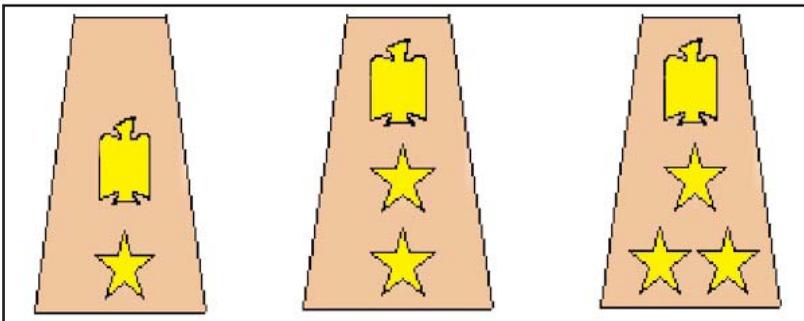
Second Lieutenant  
(Mulaazem Thani)

First Lieutenant  
(Mulaazem Awwal)



Captain  
(Naqeeb)

Major  
(Raa'id)

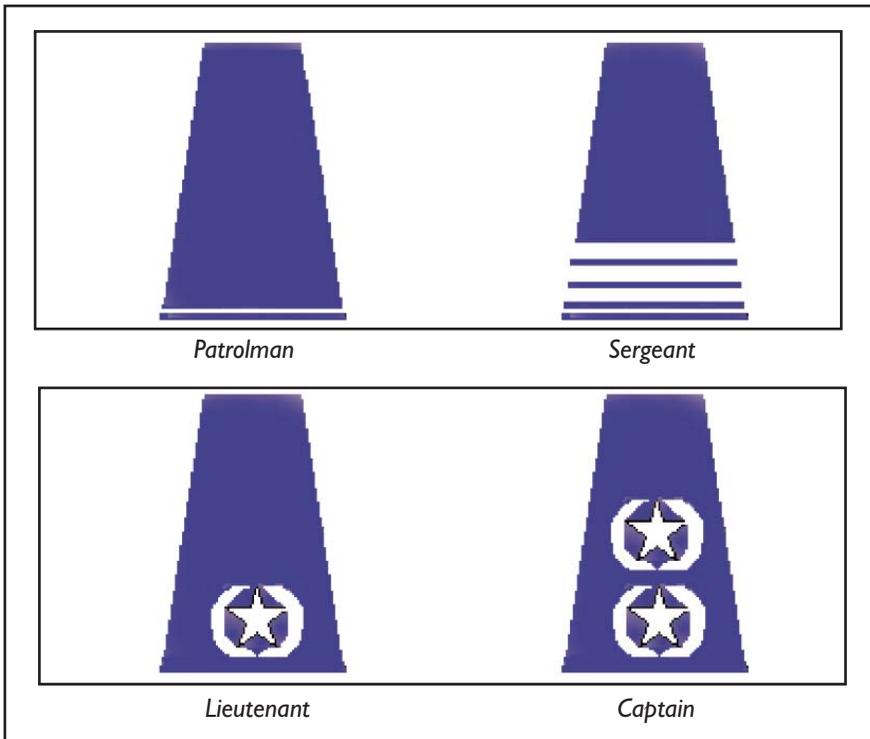
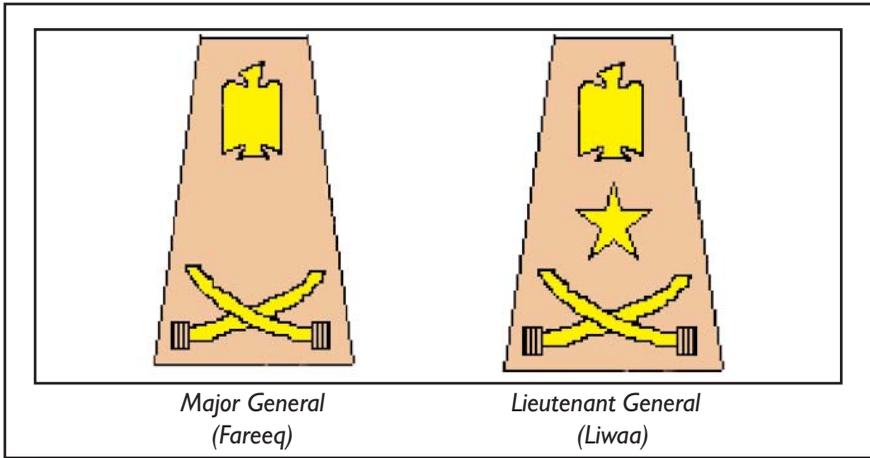


Lieutenant Colonel  
(Muqaddam)

Colonel  
(Aaqeed)

Brigadier  
(Aameed)

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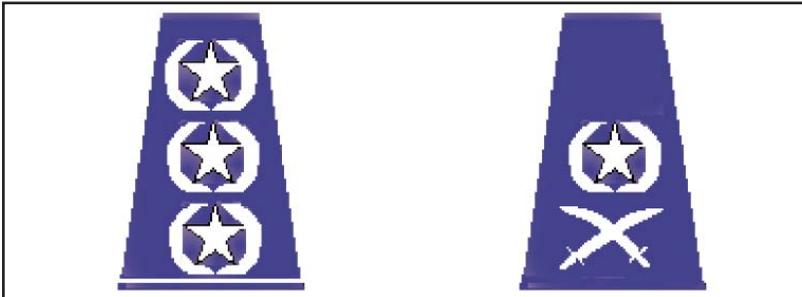


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*Inspector*

*Chief Inspector*



*Superintendent*

*Chief Superintendent*



*Chief of Police*

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