

GLOBAL PEOPLE PROFILE: The Iraqi Arabs of Iraq

—Don Tolliver, Research Specialist

Although recent events have focused much attention on Saddam Hussein and Iraq's actions as a nation, the media tell little of the average Iraqi citizen—his country, history, and personal status.

Location

The majority of Iraqi Arabs live in the Republic of Iraq, which includes the eastern end of the ancient Fertile Crescent. The country can be roughly divided into three segments: the northern mountainous region ("iraq" means "cliff"), where it shares frontiers with Turkey and Iran; the Tigris-Euphrates River valleys, including their flood plains and reaching to a narrow coastline on the Persian Gulf; and the western desert which borders Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The actual borders were drawn by the British and French, following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks in World War I. The "lines in the sand" virtually ignored the nomadic, tribal nature of the populace of these areas. One concession to the tribes was the "neutral zone" at the juncture of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, where pastoral tribes used to come and go without government interference. A classic example of boundary inequities is the lack of a homeland for the 15 million Kurdish people living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

History

The area comprising present day Iraq has a long and varied history. The ancient Assyrian and Babylonian empires originated in Iraq. After the rise of Islam in the 7th century AD, Baghdad became the glittering center of both culture and commerce.

In 1958, the Republic of Iraq was formed when a military coup evolved into a national revolution against the British-installed monarchy. Since that time, power has changed hands at least six times (not including many unsuccessful coup attempts), resulting in tremendous social upheaval.

The 1970s were years of great change due to the nationalization of oil companies and the sudden increase in profits from that sector. Although he had wielded considerable influence behind-the-scenes, Saddam Hussein came to visible power in 1979 as President of the Republic and leader of the ruling Baath

political party. He immediately embarked on several programs that seemed to have as their goal a pan-Arab nation with himself as ultimate ruler. Hussein decisively consolidated power in the Revolutionary Command Council, which he and a small group of relatives and associates controlled, and the Baath party.

Using the increasing oil revenues, he began to modernize the infrastructure of Iraq. Important projects involved improving the railroad and highway system, oil pipelines and refineries, irrigation and flood control systems, port facilities, telecommunications, and, in Baghdad, housing and hotel facilities. Baghdad was the planned site for a meeting of the non-aligned nations in 1982, and Hussein wanted to show the world a city of renewed splendor. (The Iran/Iraq War forced a change of location).

The political rhetoric also emphasized progress in education, medicine, and women's rights, but in actuality, vast resources poured into the creation of a police state where about half of the urban work force was employed by the burgeoning military, security, and intelligence forces.

In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, beginning an extremely costly war, financially as well as in lives lost, which ended in stalemate in 1988. Hussein portrayed the war as a struggle between his pan-Arab nationalism and the radical Islamic fundamentalism of Iran that "threatened" the status quo of the Persian Gulf region. More recently, Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and is currently at war with allied forces of the Western and Arab world. Although the news media is full of reports about the war, little has addressed the question, "What is the status of the Iraqi people?"

Physical/Social

The years of war have deeply scarred both the Iraqi people and the land they inhabit. Although Iraq has the potential to produce most of its own food, the agricultural system appears to have suffered a severe breakdown in most areas. During the early Eighties, a tremendous migration from the rural areas to the cities occurred. At first, many of the adult males took advantage of jobs available in the modernization projects; later, as

more men left for military duty, their families remained in urban areas, and the women began to enter the workforce—by necessity. Economic inflation increased, human rights abuses abounded, and the quality of life deteriorated rapidly. Then came the economic boycott and the mass exodus of expatriate workers in response to the invasion of Kuwait. Realistic assessments of the effect of the present conflict leave little doubt that the majority of Iraqi people exist today in extreme physical and psychological need—lacking sufficient food, water, and housing, and struggling to survive under a totalitarian regime at war.

Religion

Religious expression in Iraq has a unique flavor with its mixture of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish groups. The majority of Iraqi Arabs are Shiite Muslims, but the influential urban upper classes are Sunni Muslims (along with the Kurds, giving Sunnis a slight majority of total Iraqi population). Hussein succeeded in casting the war with Iran along Arab vs. Persian lines instead of Sunni vs. Shiite. He also has encouraged a more secular lifestyle in reaction to the militant Islamic fundamentalism of Iran. Religious expression seems to be one tool used for the government's purposes—useful in encouraging sacrifice for war, yet repressed when seen as a political threat.

Family

Of all segments of Iraqi society, the family seems to have suffered most. Estimates for the Iran/Iraq War were 120,000 dead and 300,000 wounded, with many disabled. In addition to the wars, thousands of men, women, and children have suffered human rights abuses including detention, deportation, torture, and execution. The destruction of the extended family structure, mainstay of Islamic society for centuries, has been particularly hard for the older generation to cope with. The government encouraged women to bear large numbers of children as a sign of patriotism, but the medical and educational facilities actually declined instead of increasing to meet the need. Without strong families, the state will become even less stable.

RESPONSE TO OVERWHELMING NEED —*Abu Amal, People Group Resource Coordinator.*

"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain." Psalm 127:1.

An article in *The Economist* last September was titled "The House Saddam Built". It described the complete control Saddam Hussein exerts over all the national and political party entities in Iraq. As I read the article, the above verse kept echoing through my mind. By human assessments, the plight of the Iraqi Arabs seems overwhelming because it combines tremendous needs in all areas—physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. To those of us who are Great Commission Christians, the spiritual dimension is by far the most important. Because of our eternal perspective, we know that through God we can offer these people hope that goes beyond food in their stomachs and relief from the stress of human oppression.

The question remains, though, "How can that hope be effectively communicated to the Iraqi Arabs?" We know that there is a relatively new translation of the Scripture in Arabic, BUT the illiteracy rate is fairly high and distribution is very difficult. We know that there are some radio broadcasts in Arabic into Iraq, BUT we cannot gauge their reception during wartime. We know that traditionally there has been a Christian presence through ancient churches in Iraq, BUT we're unsure of their present status. Given these constraints, we're pursuing a flexible, interlocking three point plan in our efforts to initiate a mobilization of world-wide resources for service to this people group.

PRAYER

Throughout history, the Middle East has been notorious as an area of spiritual warfare. Recently, much attention has rightfully been given to the unseen battle we wage with principalities, powers, and spiritual forces of darkness. Unless prayer precedes, undergirds, and follows every attempt to evangelize the Iraqis, we risk "laboring in vain". There is a constant temptation to neglect the labor of prayer in order to focus on the "urgency" of organizing an effective strategy of action. By God's grace, the first priority MUST be the establishment of prayer support—the creation of a network of individuals, groups, and churches who will wage the spiritual battle for Iraqi people. This network must be supplied with accurate updates to enable the intercessors to pray specifically and with spiritual discernment.

PROMOTION

People who dedicate themselves to pray

for a people group often become its advocates to the world, as well as to God. As more people become involved in intercessory prayer, we believe God will lead some to serve. We were excited to learn that a retired missionary from the Arab world is praying that God will capture the hearts of 5000 of the people serving in the Allied armed services, calling them back to ministry in the Middle East. Great needs call for the mobilization of great resources—yet God deals with us individually, as we pray and seek His will for our response.

PREPARATION

What effect will the war have on Christian service in the Middle East? We've heard opinions ranging from "a setback of fifty years" to "it will create an incredible openness to the Gospel." Only God knows if there will be there that "window of opportunity", how long it will be open, and for whom.

To that end, some Christians are attempting to learn everything possible about post-war reconstruction. Just recently, Secretary of State Baker said that the Americans had no quarrel with the Iraqis themselves, and that plans were already begun to aid in reconstruction, for the betterment of the Iraqis.

Questions are many:

What skills will be needed? Medical personnel, such as physical therapists and rehabilitation experts? Agriculturalists? Engineers?

What nationalities will be most acceptable to the Iraqis? Germans? Indians? Egyptians? Brazilians?

We believe that we must begin now to develop that network of skilled Christians who will begin to pray, promote, prepare, and plan to go in God's time and for His purposes.

Prayer Profile—T. Key, *Prayer Mobilizer.*

The Iraqi Arabs are a prime example of an unreached people group "hidden" in plain view. Despite all the attention focused on Iraq, the average Iraqi is hidden behind high walls—of Islamic culture, a restrictive government, and negative perception by most of the rest of the world. These walls serve to seriously hinder evangelization. Most Iraqis have not had even one opportunity to hear the Gospel and respond to it.

Sadly, most people view the Iraqi people as political adversaries instead of spiritual prisoners. It is our hope that, as Christians around the world unite in intercessory prayer, our eyes will be opened to the tremendous need, and to the challenge of finding creative, Spirit-empowered strategies to break down these walls.

The Iraqis have suffered much during their long history. Most still live in or near the sites of early civilizations

such as Assyria and Babylon.

President Saddam Hussein presently rules Iraq with an iron hand; he has created a secular police state in which over half of the adult population works for the government or the military. Virtually every family suffered greatly in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) which ended in stalemate. Over 120,000 Iraqis died in that conflict and about 300,000 were wounded, with many of those left permanently disabled. The casualties increase daily in the present conflict over Kuwait.

In the face of such overwhelming physical and spiritual need, the Gospel of Jesus Christ can provide the Iraqis with desperately needed hope. Prayer and resources need to be focused on this group. You can play a vital role in this effort by committing to pray for these people.

Prayer is THE KEY to open the walls of Iraq.

1. PRAY specifically for Saddam Hussein to seek God. In Daniel 4 we read of how God humbled Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the great Babylonian empire, causing him to recognize God's sovereignty and give Him glory. Babylon is located about 50 miles from present day Baghdad. God has not changed—let's petition Him to glorify Himself by Hussein's conversion!!

2. Proverbs 21:1 "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." PRAY for President Bush, Saddam Hussein, and all of the leaders involved in the present crisis, that they would acknowledge God's power and seek His wisdom for their decisions.

3. Psalm 68:5,6 says "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, only the rebellious dwell in a parched land." PRAY for the families of Iraq. Approximately one out of every three adult Iraqi males presently serve in the military. Add to this the thousands that died in the Iran-Iraq war and you have most of the families missing a husband, a father, a brother, a son—many of them permanently. Only God can heal these terrible emotional wounds—pray that events would prepare the Iraqis to seek the Lord with all their hearts.

4. I Thess. 5:17 says "PRAY without ceasing." If everyone who reads this would PRAY each time the media drew our attention to the crisis in the Gulf, our hearts will be changed and the power of the Holy Spirit will be focused on the unreached people of Iraq.

PRAYER is THE KEY.

T. Key, P.O. Box 2072, Andalusia AL 36420