A closer look: A comprehensive history of Iraq

By Laura Sass, Executive Editor and Dave Maccar, Opinion Editor

Iraq was part of the so-called cradle of civilization where the fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers made it the ideal place to begin. The civilization of Sumer was the earliest recorded occupier of the territory of modern Iraq. Sumer arose in the fourth millennium B.C.E. and peaked under the third dynast of Ur at the close of the third millennium B.C.E.

After Sumerian control the area was occupied by the Babylonian empire, the Assyrian empire, and in 539 B.C.E. by the Persian empire under Cyrus the Great. Iraq remained under Persian control until 331 B.C.E. when it was taken by Alexander the Great. After Alexander’s death, the Greek Seleucid dynasty reigned for 200 years.

Until the year 602 A.C.E., Iraq had been ruled by the Lakhmid kings of Al-Hira who were themselves Arabs. In that year Khosrow Il Parviz abolished the Lakhmid kingdom. Iraq was fragmented, partly under Parviz control and partly under the rule of the Byzantines and the Sassanians.

In 1258 Baghdad was conquered by Hulagu, grandson of the Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan. During the invasion, the scholars of Baghdad were killed and a pyramid was built with their skulls. The elaborate irrigation system that the Abbasids had established was destroyed and Iraq became a neglected frontier area ruled from the Mongol capital of Tabriz in Iran. In 1335 the last great Mongol ruler of this region died, and anarchy prevailed. The Turkic conquerors, Tamerlane then sacked Baghdad in 1401, again massacring man inhabitants and building another skull pyramid.

Government/Politics

Iraq was a monarchy from 1921 to 1958, when military officers overthrew the monarch and installed a loose republic that was then established.

Since 1968, Iraq has been a dictatorship dominated by a single political party, the Ba’ath Party. The people of Iraq have had little to do with their government. Occasionally there have been pseudo-elections to the legislature held and the president was once chosen by a two-thirds majority of the Revolutionary Command Council.

The legislative branch includes a unicameral National Assembly or Majlis al-Watani (250 seats; 30 appointed by the president to represent the three religious communities. Ethnic groups in Iraq include a 97 percent Muslim population with the remaining three percent Christian or other religions. Languages spoken in Iraq include Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian and Armenian.

The terrain is mostly composed of broad plains, but there are also reedy marshes along Iranian border and the southern no-fly zone. Mountains can be found along borders with dry, hot, cloudless summers. The northern mountainous regions along the Iranian and Turkish borders experience colder winters with occasionally heavy snows that melt in early spring, sometimes causing extensive flooding in central and southern Iraq.

The capital of Iraq as of 2002 is 23,331,985. The estimated density is 53 people per square km., or 138 people per square mile. The population is 76 percent urban. Some of those who live in rural areas live in tribal communities. Ethnic groups in Iraq are Arab, which include 75 percent to 80 percent of the population, Kurdish, which are 15 percent to 20 percent, and Turkmen, Assyrian and others, which make up five percent. Religions in Iraq include a 97 percent Muslim population with the remaining three percent Christian or other religions. Languages spoken in Iraq include Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian and Armenian.

Culture

Iraq is comprised of a variety of people, including nomadic tribes of the north and west, peasant farmers of the south, dryland cultivators of the northeast and the mountain herders of Kurdistan. There are religious differences between the Kurds and Arabs, as well as between the Shi’ites and Sunnis within the Islamic religion. Iraqi singers are very popular in the Arab world. The four most popular types of music are Maqam, a kind of high pitched Arab blues accompanied by violins and drums, Monologat, non-classical, humorous songs, Pestat, popular poetry sung to music and Bidhuiat, a hymn-like music.

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In rural areas, traditional social relationships and values still exist, but the cities have been Westernized. Alcohol and “Western” entertainment are available. More women are participating in the labor force, although the government encourages them to stay at home.