

## Iraqi Quick Fact Sheet

### Background

- Can be divided geographically into 4 zones: Syrian Desert area in west & southwest, upland between upper Tigris & Euphrates rivers, mountainous areas in north & northeast, and river valleys of central & southeast areas.
- For centuries, population consisted almost entirely of settled farmers in river areas.
- Traditional ways of life altered in last century by several factors, including gradual filtering into society of Western thought & politics, influx of foreigners w/ discovery & processing of oil, and migration of segments of population from rural to urban centers.
- Changes in government & society brought about by: Ba'ath Party & Saddam Hussein, effects of long Iran–Iraq war & invasion of Kuwait, Desert Storm, associated embargoes, and most recently US invasion in 2003.

### Culture and Religion

- 2011 population 31 million, about 77% Arabs, 19% Kurds, rest a variety of different groups, including Turkmens, Assyrians, and Armenians.
- 3 classes: higher class-- well-known, influential families; middle class-- government employees, prosperous merchants, military, etc.; lower class-- peasants & laborers.
- 95% are Muslim, and Islam is a very powerful social force
- Marriage expected of everyone. Many marriages arranged. Children belong to their father's family, and he's automatically awarded custody in divorce cases.
- Extended family important socially & politically, controls one's social status; virtually impossible to rise socially as status of one's family's unchangeable.
- Individual behavior very much constrained by desire not to bring shame on family.
- Traditional Arab homes very private, usually consist of a man, his wife & children, mother (if still living) & any unmarried sisters.
- Polygamy is allowed in Islam, though possibility available only to wealthier members of society.
- From western view, Arab women appear dominated & repressed; status of women controversial in Muslim society today.
- Women able to pursue careers & maintain a family. Public dress less restricting.
- Education has always been available to women of the upper classes.
- Financial power is in hands of men, though women exercise great power over home & children.

### Adjusting to Life in America

- Most familiar w/ Western dress, have no trouble adapting, though might be scandalized at amount of flesh we bare in summer.
- Educated often have at least limited ability to speak English, though it might turn out they read more than they can say or understand.
- Cross-gender platonic friendships almost never occur in society: any friendly overture from American woman to Iraqi man may be interpreted as sexual or romantic advance. Situation further confusing as young men observe American couples expressing affection in public, never done in Arab society.
- Refugees might be puzzled at American customs involving necessity of invitations & giving notice before visit. Iraqi family might issue a general invitation, not realizing they must pin down a specific time & place, then sit at home socially isolated & lonely, wondering why Americans are so unsociable.
- Hospitality cherished tradition; Iraqis may insist on paying, even when more than they can afford.
- Some refugees, particularly from rural areas, confused by # of Americans who don't follow a religion & are vocal about not believing in God, yet well-behaved, accepted members of society.