

Country profile: Iraq

Iraq, in an area once home to some of the earliest civilisations, is now the battleground of several forces competing for control.

The deadly power struggle was triggered when foreign forces, led by the United States, invaded to topple the government of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

A new government is now in place, supported by thousands of American troops. But it faces a host of crises, the chief among them security and civil order.

Insurgents regularly target civilians as well as security forces. Tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims have spilled over into brutal sectarian violence.

AT-A-GLANCE

Politics: Iraq has been the battleground for forces vying for power since the US-led invasion of 2003

Security: Unity government and US-led coalition forces are struggling to establish control; thousands of civilians have been killed and security forces are under constant threat from well-organised rebels

Economy: Violence and sabotage hinder efforts to revive an economy shattered by decades of conflict and sanctions; Iraq has the world's third largest reserves of crude oil but attacks, corruption and smuggling have crippled exports

In 2007 US troop levels were increased by 30,000, as commanders tried a military "surge" to stamp out resistance. The number of attacks had declined by year's end.

By the end of 2007, almost 4,000 coalition troops, and many thousands more Iraqi civilians, had been killed since the start of the military action.

American missiles hit targets in Baghdad in the early hours of 20 March 2003, marking the start of the campaign to remove the Iraqi leader.

US and British ground forces entered from the south, with the leadership in Baghdad remaining defiant. By 9 April US forces had advanced into central Baghdad and Saddam Hussein's grip on power had withered.

Sovereignty was transferred to an interim government in June 2004 and six months later Iraqis voted in the first multi-party elections in 50 years.

Cradle of civilisation

Straddling the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and stretching from the Gulf to the Anti-Taurus Mountains, modern Iraq occupies roughly what was once ancient Mesopotamia, one of the cradles of human civilisation.

In the Middle Ages Iraq was the centre of the Islamic Empire, with Baghdad the cultural and political capital of an area extending from Morocco to the Indian subcontinent.

Mongol invasions in the 13th century saw its influence wane, and it played a minor role in the region until independence from British control in 1932.

Following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and a coup in 1968, Iraq became one of the centres of Arab nationalism under the control of the ruling Baath (Renaissance) party. Oil made the country rich, and when Saddam Hussein became president in 1979 petroleum made up 95% of its foreign exchange earnings.

But the war with Iran from 1980 to 1988 and the Gulf War in 1991 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, together with the subsequent imposition of international sanctions, had a devastating effect on its economy and society. In 1991 the UN said Iraq had been reduced to a pre-industrial state; later reports described living standards as being at subsistence level.

In the post-Saddam years, attacks by insurgents on Iraq's oil infrastructure have cost the country billions of dollars in lost revenues.

In the north, the Kurdish community has broken away to create a semi-autonomous region of its own.

- **Full name:** Republic of Iraq
- **Population:** 29 million (UN, 2007)
- **Area:** 438,317 sq km (169,235 sq miles)
- **Capital:** Baghdad
- **Major languages:** Arabic, Kurdish
- **Major religion:** Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 58 years (men), 61 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** 1 Iraqi dinar = 1,000 fils
- **Main exports:** Crude oil
- **GNI per capita:** n/a
- **Internet domain:** .iq
- **International dialling code:** 964

President: Jalal Talabani

The parliament that emerged from elections in December 2005 re-elected Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani to a second term in the largely-ceremonial post in April 2006.

He heads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two main Kurdish parties in northern Iraq. The first non-Arab to head an Arab state, he promised to work with all ethnic and religious factions to rebuild Iraq.

Prime minister: Nouri al-Maliki

Within minutes of being re-elected, President Talabani asked Shia politician Nouri al-Maliki to form Iraq's first full-term government since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Mr Maliki was the compromise candidate of the Shia-led United Iraqi Alliance, the winners of parliamentary polls in December 2005. Kurdish and Sunni parties opposed the alliance's first nominee, interim Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, who withdrew his candidature after four months of political deadlock.

Mr Maliki is the deputy leader of the Dawaa Party, a Shia Islamist grouping. He spent years in exile after leading an anti-Saddam resistance movement in the 1970s.

He advised Mr Jaafari, also from the Dawaa Party, who was chosen as interim premier in April 2005 and went on to form Iraq's first democratically-elected government in more than 50 years.

Mr Maliki helped to draft Iraq's new constitution, approved by voters in October 2005.

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 there has been a profound transformation in the Iraqi media scene. Instead of a few, tightly-controlled media outlets, Iraqis now have a choice of hundreds of publications and dozens of radio and TV stations.

But political and religious divisions are making themselves evident in the media. Moreover, scores of journalists and other media workers have fallen victim to insurgents and coalition military action. The financial viability of media companies is seriously affected by the security situation.

There are more than 100 newspapers and magazines on offer in Baghdad and other cities and private radio and television stations have mushroomed.

The TV and radio stations set up by the now-defunct US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) are now part of a publicly-funded broadcaster, the Iraqi Public Broadcasting Service.

Private media outlets are often linked to the political, ethnic or religious groups which are jostling for a say in Iraq's future. But they face a lack of resources, in particular a constant power supply.

Foreign broadcasters targeting Iraq include the BBC, Paris-based Radio Monte Carlo and the US-backed Al-Hurra TV, Radio Sawa and Radio Free Iraq. Many of them are available via local relays. The BBC is relayed in Baghdad and Basra.

Satellite TV is watched by around 70% of Iraqi viewers; the pan-Arab news stations Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera are popular. Iran's Al-Alam TV, which broadcasts in Arabic, can be received in Baghdad without a dish.

In the northern autonomous Kurdish enclaves, rival factions operate their own media.

The press

- [Al-Sabah](#) - sponsored by state-run Iraqi Media Network
- [Al-Zaman](#) - London-based daily, printed in Baghdad and Basra; English-language pages
- [Al-Mada](#) - Baghdad, private daily
- [Al-Mashriq](#) - Baghdad, private daily
- Al-Dustur - Baghdad, private daily
- Al-Manarah - Basra, private daily

Television

- [Al-Iraqiya](#) - state-run public TV
- [Al-Sharqiya](#) - private, based in Dubai, broadcasts terrestrially and via satellite
- [Kurdistan Satellite Channel](#) - operated by Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) from autonomous northern enclave
- [KurdSat](#) - operated by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) from autonomous northern enclave

Radio

- [Republic of Iraq Radio](#) - national, public
- [Radio Basra](#) - public
- [Voice of Iraq](#) - private, Baghdad mediumwave (AM) station
- Hot FM - private, Baghdad FM music station
- [Radio Dijla](#) - private, Baghdad FM talk and music station

News agency/internet

- [Voices of Iraq](#) - pooled news service launched by Reuters Foundation and UN Development Programme, English-language pages
- [National Iraqi News Agency \(Nina\)](#) - private