Cultural Overview:
Iraq

Information compiled by DEOMI
Public Affairs
Overview

- Objective
- Background
- Ethnic/Religious Groups
- Gestures and Cultural Taboos
- Significant Cities/Sites
- Impact on the Warfighter
- Summary
Objective

- To further develop cultural/religious sensitivity and awareness
- To provide a balanced and historical perspective of the Iraqi culture
- To dispel stereotypes and promote commonalities in different peoples
- To address cultural/religious dimensions of operations
- To increase warfighter knowledge, confidence and competence
Background

Ancient Past

- Mesopotamia
- Al-Qadisiyah
- Abbasid Dynasty
Background

Ancient Warriors

• Assyrians have a strong passion for war (1450)
• “We are Husayn’s men... we are the slave of the Imam; our name is zealot and our tribe is martyr” (Safavid Shah Ismail, 1501)
• Profession of Death...the proud, sacred military professional
Ancient Religions
• Religion was/is an individual, family, clan and national commitment
• Each religion has its own history, laws, traditions and prejudices
• The Qur’an says an “eye for an eye”
Background

Culture Today

• 75% of the population is Arab, Kurds make up 15-20% of the remainder
  – Smaller groups include Turkmens, Jews, Armenians and Assyrians (5%)

• Arabic is the official language

• Muslims make up 96% of population
  – About 60 to 65% of the Muslims are Shia, and the rest are Sunni

• Christian sects make up 3%
  – Nestorians, Jacobites, Chaldean and Syrian Catholics, Yazidis, and Mandaeans Baptists

• Jews 1%
Background

Culture Today

- The family, clan and tribe are the basic units of society
- 150 major tribes and 2,000 smaller clans in Iraq
- 30-35 tribes control the country
Background

Culture Today

- Part rather than whole
- Fatalism
- Wish versus reality
- Extremism
- Paranoia
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Shia Arabs (55-60%)

- **Sedentary**: City dwelling population located around Basra and in Baghdad
- **Tribal**: Covets the close clan bonds of other groups
- **Culture**: Historically oppressed, piety not politics is important
- **Religion**: Islam - Shia
- **Leader**: Looked to Iran for leadership and help
- **Values**: Religion first, self-rule and major stake in “new Iraq”
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Sunni Arabs (15-20%)

- **Sedentary**: Urban population, recently controlled all of Iraq from a few provinces in north west part of country
- **Tribal**: Independent power brokers, professional class, family unit strength/identity
- **Culture**: Secular “ownership” of government (army, administration, security, intelligence)
- **Religion**: Islam - Sunni
- **Leader**: Chosen by community as a whole
- **Values**: Civil religion, devotion to Islamic law
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Iraqi Kurds (15-20%)

- **Semi-nomadic**: Originally nomadic herders, now semi nomadic
- **Tribal**: Live in tribes near Dahuk, Mosul, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah
- **Culture**: Ethnically close to Iran, Kurdish once a dialect of Iranian
- **Religion**: Majority Islam - Sunni
- **Leader**: Clan chieftains resist subjugation by other nations, strong political unity of tribe
- **Values**: Individuals are loyal, fearless and dedicated to independent Kurdish state
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Christian (3%)

- **Sedentary**: Highly urbanized, particularly dense population around Baghdad
- **Tribal**: No tribal or clan unity all ethnic groups represented
- **Culture**: Based on all Christian beliefs
- **Religion**: Chaldean Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Jacobite, Baptist, etc.
- **Leader**: Pope seen as leader for majority
- **Values**: Educated group with disproportionate influence on government
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Bedouin (2%)

- **Nomadic**: ‘Sons of the desert’
- **Tribal**: Pride of genealogy and sense of who are by identification with a tribe
- **Culture**: Based on tight cohesive bond...moral code of group ethics
- **Religion**: Some tribes include Sunni, Shia and Christians
- **Leader**: Sheikh chosen by consensus of group
- **Values**: Freedom, kinship, courage, loyalty, generosity, truthfulness
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Turkmen (2%), Armenians (1%), Assyrians (1%), Jews (1%)

These groups represent the descendants of ancient empires, groups oppressed by other cultures, refugees from neighboring countries and pilgrims emigrating to a perceived holy place.
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Marsh Arabs Ma’dan (0%)

- **Sedentary**: Subsistence, aquatic lifestyle
- **Tribal**: Close-knit clan/family
- **Culture**: More than 5,000 years old based on fishing, farming and reed gathering
- **Religion**: Islam - Shia
- **Leader**: Family head primary decision maker
- **Values**: Self-sufficient, mysticism, evil spirits dominate thinking/actions

*Marshlands were drained creating an environmental disaster*
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Baath Political Party

- Originated with Syrians Michel Aflaq (Christian) and Salah Bitar (Sunni Muslim) in 1940s
- Party embraced the principles of unity, freedom, and socialism
- 1960s new beliefs based on patriotism, national loyalty, collectivism, participation, selflessness and civic responsibility
Ethnic/Religious Groups

Baath Party (continued)

• The Iraqi Baath Regional Command Council (RCC) was supposed to make decisions regarding policy.
• All decisions were made by the party Secretary General and Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein.
• Following the coalition liberation of Iraq, the Baath party was dissolved along with its affiliate organizations.
Cultural Attitudes
• Recognize long-standing traditions
• Practice civility and respect
• Show kindness
• Practice humility
• Seek moderation
• Sincerity
• Remember honor and status
Greetings
- Small talk and ritual greetings
- Hospitality
- Body language
Gestures/Cultural Taboos

Body Language

- Right hand leads
- Sitting
- Posture
- Outward displays of affection
- Thumbs up
- ‘No’
- Pets
- Beads
Gestures/Cultural Taboos

Cultural Taboos
- Competition
- Dietary restrictions
- Communication
- Photographs
- Planning
- Cemeteries
Gestures/Cultural Taboos

Qur’an Requirements

- Cleanliness
- Locations
- Covering
- Height on shelves
- Holders
Significant Cities/Sites

Religious Cities

- Baghdad
- An Nasiriya
- Basra
- Tikrit
- Dohuk
- Halabjah
- Dirkuk
- Ar Ramadi
Significant Cities/Sites

Holy Sites

- Samarra
- Al-Kufa
- An Najaf
- Karbala
- Al Kazimiyah
Significant Cities/Sites

Archeological Sites

- Ninevah
- Ur
- Babylon
- Ctesiphon
- Al-Hadr
- Nimrud
- Nippur
Impact on Warfighter

Operational

• Justice
• Educate personnel
• Warfighting
• Enemy
• Leadership with Arab counterparts
• Professional ‘expertise’
Impact on Warfighter

Operational - Validation

“One need not embrace Islam to validate it. Validation does not say, ‘I believe what you believe.’ Rather it says, ‘I understand your religion is significant to you, and I respect the part it plays in your life. Because your faith is meaningful to you, I will regard it as important.’ Validation does not mean we concur with another on all points, but it does mean we treat kindly what that person holds dear even though we differ or disagree.”

CH (COL) Pete Christy
Impact on Warfighter

Strategic

- Respect Islam
- Leverage moderate religious views
- Long term
Impact on Warfighter

Tactical

• Educate Soldiers
• Awareness of ‘watching world’
• Enemy propaganda
• Brutality of regime
• Sites and shrines
• Courtyards
Summary

• Objective
• Background
• Ethnic/Religious Groups
• Gestures and Cultural Taboos
• Significant Cities/Sites
• Impact on the Warfighter
• Summary
Questions?