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Iraq

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Introduction

Iraq, often known as the heart of the ancient world, is a land where the rivers Tigris and Euphrates have shaped both the terrain and the destinies of its people for millennia. Frequently referred to as the "Cradle of Civilization," this region was the stage for humanity's earliest experiments with urban life, writing, mathematics, and organized religion. What emerged here not only influenced neighboring cultures but also laid foundational stones for the development of civilization across continents.

Today, Iraq's identity is richly layered—a tapestry woven from ancient glory, medieval power, turbulent modern politics, and the enduring resilience of its people. From the mighty ziggurats of Babylon and the legends of Gilgamesh to the remarkable scholarship of the Abbasid Caliphate, Iraq's history illustrates a persistent dialogue between creativity and adversity. The modern nation that inhabits this storied land bears scars of conflict but also a vivid cultural and social heritage that remains vital and dynamic.

Geographically, Iraq is a land of striking contrasts, from arid deserts to fertile plains, and from bustling cities to remote mountain enclaves. The diversity in climate and topography has contributed to equally profound variations in lifestyles, traditions, and livelihoods across the country. The rivers that nurtured early civilization still support millions today, their waters inseparable from Iraq's economic, cultural, and spiritual life.

Culturally, Iraq is one of the Middle East's most diverse societies. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Yazidis, and many other groups coexist, each contributing unique languages, beliefs, and practices. This diversity, while a source of strength, has often intersected with political challenges, shaping both conflict and coexistence across Iraq's long history. Major cities like Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil stand as living museums, fusing Islamic, Christian, and ancient Mesopotamian traditions in their architecture, cuisine, and daily life.

The Iraq of today continues to confront profound challenges: rebuilding after decades of war, establishing genuine democratic governance, protecting human rights, and ensuring opportunities for future generations. At the same time, new possibilities are emerging. Initiatives in education and civil society, efforts to revive the arts, and a renewed interest in the country's archaeological treasures all signal avenues for hope and renewal.

This book, "Iraq: Portrait of a Country," endeavors to provide a comprehensive exploration of Iraq—past and present. Through its chapters, readers will journey from

the Sumerian clay tablets to the bustling souks of Baghdad, from the indomitable mountains of Kurdistan to the heritage sites of the south. In doing so, it aims to shed light on a civilization and a people whose story continues to unfold at the crossroads of history, culture, and modernity.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Natural Environment

Iraq, a nation situated in Western Asia, holds a significant place in human history as much of its territory aligns with ancient Mesopotamia, often referred to as the "Cradle of Civilization." This land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers witnessed the emergence of the earliest cities, the invention of writing, and sophisticated developments in agriculture, mathematics, and astronomy.

Iraq spans 437,072 square kilometers (168,754 sq mi) and has a short coastline on the northern Persian Gulf. It shares borders with Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the south, and Jordan and Syria to the west. The country's topography is diverse, encompassing five main regions: the desert (west of the Euphrates), Upper Mesopotamia (the rolling upland between the upper Tigris and Euphrates), the northern highlands, Lower Mesopotamia, and the alluvial plain extending from Tikrit to the Persian Gulf.

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