

MID-EAST e-NEWS

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This month

Sept.	
1	M Irq Iraq Cabinet named
2	T Irq Ayatollah Hakim buried
3	W
4	T Afg Fierce fight with Taleban
5	F Isr Nablus house destroyed as Israeli soldier killed in raid
6	S Isr Abbas quits
	Isr Yassin injured in Gaza raid
7	S Isr US opposes exiling Arafat
8	M
9	T Isr Bombs-Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
	Pal Arafat names Qurei as interim Palestine PM
10	W
11	T
12	F Irq Troops kill 8 police in error
13	S
14	S
15	M Isr Israel threat to kill Arafat
16	T Pal Islamic Jihad leader killed
17	W Pal Arafat offers ceasefire
18	T
19	F
20	S
21	S Irq Mortar – kills 2 soldiers
	Irq Attempted assassination of Aqila al-Hashimi
22	M Irq Bomb at UN HQ kills two
	Pal Arafat makes truce offer
23	T
24	W Irq Bush: Saddam not linked to Sept. 11 th
25	T Irq UN reduces staff in Iraq
	Irq Aqila al-Hashemi dies
26	F Jor Jordan arrests Abu Sayyaf
	Irq 9 civilians killed by shell aimed at US base
27	S
28	S
29	M Irq 6-hour battle in Habbaniya
	Irq Assassination attempt on Shiite constitutional official
30	T
Oct	W Isr Israeli extends barrier
1	Irq Iraqis battle police in demonstration for jobs

Welcome

In **e-NEWS** we have the opportunity to provide a background to the regional issues of the day. Without the pressure of deadlines, and the need to search for 'hot button' items that might increase readership, we can be as thorough as is necessary to present the material fully. Concomitant with that, we do also have the opportunity to be up to date, addressing the latest news appropriately.

In this issue you see both approaches. We continue our series on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attempting to explain the circumstances that have contributed to the position the two groups are in at the present time. Also, a consideration of the Shi'ite branch of Islam - originally intended to be a single article - has been extended to conclude in issue 3. This in the same week that Akila al Hashemi died of wounds suffered in an assassination attempt a week earlier. Akila was one of three women on the Iraqi Governing Council, the US-appointed body that is the first step in returning the government to Iraqis. Even though Akila's background was Shi'a she had, under Saddam Hussein's government, been a diplomat who worked with the United Nations through the Iraqi foreign ministry. She renounced her Baath party membership on April 9th of this year, the day that US troops occupied Baghdad. (In the next issue you can expect to see a more thorough listing of the members of the Iraqi Council, with brief descriptions of their backgrounds).

Another recent assassination was that of Ayatollah Baqir Al-Hakim, a popular leader of moderate Shi'ites. He had not supported the US invasion (an article on p2 discusses Shia attitudes to secular government) but had supported cooperation with the US authorities. There had been an unsuccessful attempt on his life a few days earlier, but the second attempt used a large car bomb and killed around 100 other Shi'ite worshippers as well as Al-Hakim, also damaging one of the holiest Shi'ite mosques in the country. Baqir Al-Hakim's brother, Abdel Aziz, is also a member of the Iraqi Governing Council.

There obviously are those in Iraq who want to destabilize the country at this time. At the same time, however, there is much progress to be observed if one looks. Perhaps you read of the recent poll taken in Iraq by Zogby International (an Arab-American polling association). According to this poll, 70% of Iraqis believe that their country will be better in 5 years time. I would like to quote some comments from a journalist for a Lebanese newspaper. When it was being reported that the US forces were widely perceived as occupiers, **Julie Flint** writes that "*it simply wasn't true*". A university lecturer who lived above a bakery where victims of Saddam were burned alive was not regretting the invasion, saying "*I feel like I've been born again*". I would like to quote this reporter further, since she does not try to whitewash a difficult situation. Unemployment, as she says, "*remains a huge problem*", but food prices are down since Saddam's last years, shops are full of imported goods, Baghdad City Council is meeting regularly, all cities and 85% of smaller towns have functioning municipal governments, Iraq has no executions, no political prisoners, no torture, and the roofs of apartments are sprouting satellite dishes that could have meant a death sentence six months earlier.

Obviously, at the current time, Iraq and Palestine will dominate **e-NEWS** coverage, but we will do our best to ensure that the necessary space is also given to providing background to the other issues in the region - Afghanistan's continued trouble with the Taleban, Saudi Arabia's tussles with Al Qaeda, and the Lebanese desire to be free from Syrian control.



Dr. Akila Al-Hashemi, who died of wounds suffered in assassination attempt. One of 3 women on the Iraqi Governing Council

Who are the Shi'ites? (Part 1)

Muhammed, the founder of Islam, was born in 570 AD, was camel-driver for a merchant's widow until he married her at 25 years old, and at 40 began having the visions that led him to found the new religion.

In 622 AD he fled to Medina from Mecca (the Muslim calendar dates from this event, the *Hegira*) but he was welcomed when he returned with an army of 10,000 followers eight years later. Two years later he died.

His successors (*Khalifa* means 'successor') conquered Palestine by 637, and by 732 they had occupied all of North Africa and Spain, to be repulsed in France by Charles Martel (the 'Hammer') at the Battle of Poitiers.

Abu Bakr was the first Caliph, but died and was succeeded by Caliph Omar in 634. It was Omar who led the conquest of Jerusalem. In 644 Othman became Caliph. Under his rule the official version of the Koran was established, but he was assassinated in 656 and succeeded by Ali, Muhammed's son-in-law. Ali's sons were the only male descendants of Muhammed.

Ali's succession was hotly disputed, and in 661 he in turn was assassinated by followers of Mu'awiya. His tomb in **Najaf** is their most holy city, and a center of pilgrimage for Shi'ites. The tomb of his son, Hussein, also attracts numerous pilgrims to the city of **Karbala** which has grown up around it.

To exert control over the emergent empire Mu'awiya had transferred the capital from Medina to Damascus, and persuaded believers to pray towards Jerusalem, a city he revered.

The Ummayyad dynasty traced its line from Mu'awiya, as do today's Sunni Muslims. Ali's followers became the Shi'ites, who are primarily based in the region where he was killed. They recognize twelve Imams (teachers) beginning with Ali, and live in anticipation of the return of the last, who died in 880.

Sunni Muslims are people of the 'traditions', whereas the term *Shi'ite* means 'partisan'.

Shi'ites place a greater emphasis on esoteric meanings that may be present (but known only to the Imam) beneath the surface of the literal text of the Koran. They pay taxes to the religious leaders, rather than state authorities, which results in some very wealthy Shi'ite religious leaders.

Two other sects have originated in Shia Islam. The Isma'ili sect is found mainly in India and Pakistan. A branch of the Isma'ilis, the Druze, traces its roots to the Egyptian Caliph Hakim who disappeared in 1018, having declared himself to be God. The Druze are prominent in Lebanon.

Iran is primarily Shi'ite, with 60% of Iraq's population being of this sect and located in the south, around their holy cities of Najaf and Nasariyeh. It was in Najaf in 1057 AD that Tusi, a Shi'ite scholar, established the first of the *madrasas* (schools of learning) that are significant in the city today.

Next issue: Shi'ites today

Word Of Mouth...

Computer programmer Uri Zachem leads groups of Israelis and Palestinians around the village ruins. His organization, Zochrot, tries to raise awareness of the *Nakba* amongst the Israeli public. Amongst the visitors is Abdullah Zakout. He has a job to complete. Bringing with him a sign that reads "Boys Elementary School" he hangs it on the remaining wall of the school that they had just completed in 1948, before they had to flee.

* * *

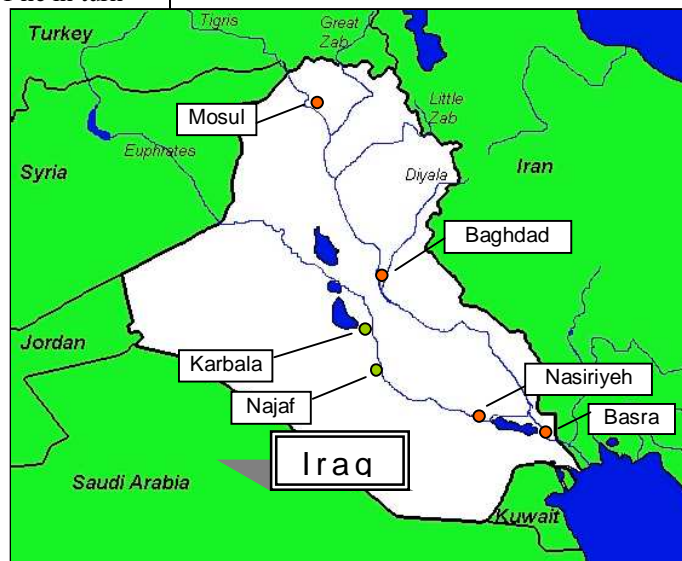
*There are two Iraq currencies these days. Distinguished by the low quality of manufacture, the **print dinar** is of poor quality, and easy to forge. Its exchange rate has fluctuated around 1,000 to the dollar since the war. The **Swiss dinar** is of a higher quality, and is worth about 200 print dinars. Its exchange rate has fluctuated between 5.8 and 14 dollars. It has circulated primarily in the northern, Kurdish region. Both types of note carry the image of Saddam Hussein.*

*In October the US administration plan to introduce a new dinar – replacing both **print** and **Swiss** dinars. the rate is*

*initially set at parity with the **print dinar**, and at 150 Swiss dinars to the new dinar.*

* * *

A recent visitor to Baghdad reports that things seem much more settled than in August during his last visit. People then were making sure to be home



soon after 7pm, but now are staying up well after nightfall (as is normal in the Arab world) to enjoy the coolest hours of the day. Girls can be seen in the street, whereas previously they would have stayed home for their own safety with the increase in violence and lawlessness.

* * *

In most Muslim countries the Christians are not expected to adhere to Islamic dress codes. However, there is concern amongst Christians in Basra at the growing dominance of the religious Shi'ites. Christian girls are being harassed in the street for not conforming to traditional Muslim practice for scarves or the ankle-length robes. Stones have been thrown in the street at those considered to be loosely dressed.

How far back does it go? (Part 2)

King Hussein was fortunate to survive the 1951 attempt on his life. It is hard to imagine what the modern history of Jordan would be if the young Hussein had lost his life then. Within two years (due to his father's mental instability) he had succeeded his grandfather on the throne, at the age of 18, and was learning the skills that would make him as effective on the world stage as amongst his closest allies, the Bedouin.

In 1956 he watched as Britain and France went to war against Egypt over the Suez Canal (Israel's involvement in this debacle made this the 2nd Arab-Israeli war). In 1957 he fired Glubb Pasha, freeing Jordan's army from British control. He survived various attempts on his life during the turbulent politics of the late 1950s. In a 1958 coup his cousin, the King of Iraq, was assassinated, with almost the entire royal family.

At this time resistance to Israeli occupation of Arab Palestine continued, with the PLO and Al-Fateh both being formed during the early 1960s. In 1966 tension increased and in 1967 Egypt blockaded the Straits of Tirana, at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. The loss of access to its southern port provoked Israel to attack the Egyptians in a pre-dawn raid on June 5th, 1967. Jordan was deceived by Egypt into the belief that the Egyptians had wiped out the Israeli air force (when in fact the reverse was true) and King Hussein took the fateful step of becoming an active participant in the war. The undamaged Israeli air force then turned on Jordan, destroyed its planes on the runway in Marqa, east Amman, and outmaneuvered its forces on the ground. The consequent loss of the West Bank, in turn, provoked another wave of refugees to pour into Jordan.

In November 1967 UN Resolution 242 called for Israel to withdraw from areas occupied in the war.

So, looking back from 2003, we can see, in the near distance, an exodus of Arabs from Palestine in 1967. They hastily left their homes in the West Bank (though many had chosen to stay) and became stateless refugees in Jordan.

In 1948 the previous generation had fled their homes in fear, spurred on by the reports of the massacre of 245 unarmed villagers in Deir Yassin, near Jerusalem. Until this time, the *Nakba* ("Catastrophe") of 1948, Arabs in Palestine had been resisting the British administration and the increasing numbers of Jews that were pouring into their country.

Next issue: World War 1 documents.

People Groups - Iraq

Since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq the country has been frequently described as comprising of three groups in particular – Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds. This is basically correct, but when looking more closely, these groups do not appear quite so homogenous.

The Shi'ites have already been discussed in these pages.

They are not so unified that they can be expected to agree politically, but from a religious/cultural point of view they can essentially be treated as one block.

Sunni Moslems form the second major block in Iraq. They profess the same religion, but the cultural differences are significant. They are more likely to be *secular*, with their religion playing a less significant role in daily life. In consequence they are more likely to dress in a western manner, and be involved in party politics. The Baath party is almost entirely comprised of Sunni Muslims, though only a minority of the Sunni population are either party members or activists.

In Iraq, as in any other region, language is a major determinant of cultural identity. (See Genesis 10:5, 20, 31, as it describes the racial divisions that formed after the Tower of Babel – which is described in the chapter that follows.) For Shias and Sunnis alike, Arabic is the language of daily communication as well as of religion.

The third group in Iraq is the Kurds, a racially distinct people. Arabic may be the religious language of the Muslims among them, but the "street language" is Kurdish. This alone would distinguish them from the rest of the population of Iraq, even without the racial distinction.

Their language does not exactly unite them, since within Iraq there are two distinct Kurdish dialects, geographically separated into north and south. The larger group, located in the region of Erbil, Kirkuk and vicinity, speak the *Sourani* dialect. The *Behdini* Kurds are found particularly in the triangle located south of the Turkish border, between the Euphrates and the *Zab* river (see map on p4). Additional to these dialects, Kurds across the border in Turkey speak a third dialect, Kurmanji, and a fourth is known – but written in Cyrillic rather than the Kurdish alphabet – amongst the Kurdish residents of southern Russian-speaking republics.

A smaller, but not insignificant group, is the Sabeans. They are a religious sect, proto-Christian, who trace their faith to John the Baptist. They are found particularly in the south of Iraq. Look for more on the Sabeans in a future issue.



Refugees crossing the King Hussein Bridge

Old Testament Lands

(Part 1, Abraham)

Abraham's birthplace, **Ur**, was on the east bank of the Euphrates (which has since changed its route somewhat). His father, Terah, took Abram and the rest of the family to the town of **Haran**, apparently on their way to Canaan as a group. As can be seen from the map, their journey would have followed the route of the river quite closely. Haran is now in southern Turkey, east of the south-flowing Euphrates.

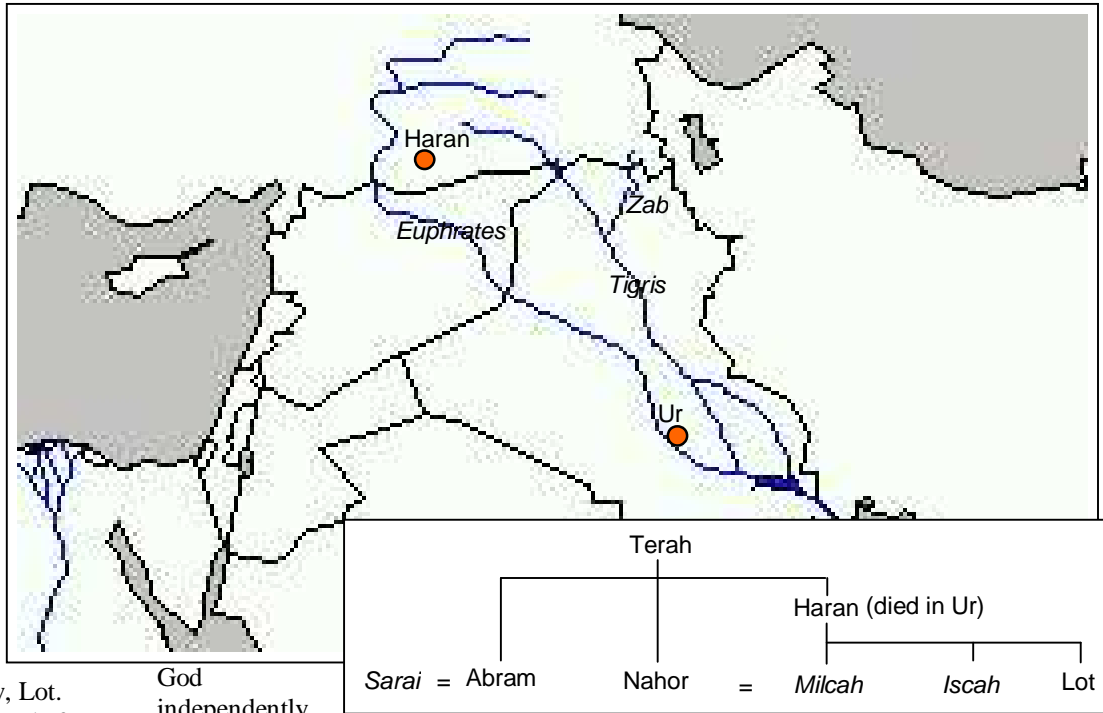
It may have been after his father died that God called Abram to complete the journey to Canaan. He did so along with Sarai and his nephew, Lot.

At **Shechem** he built an altar before traveling south and making camp between Bethel and Ai.

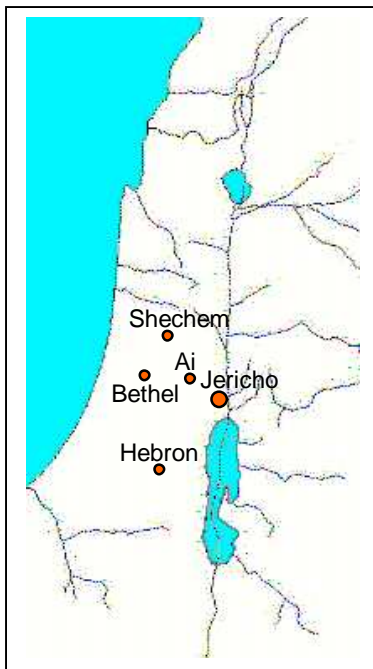
Because of a famine they traveled to Egypt, but Pharaoh asked them to leave after Abram's deceit over his wife. They then returned to the site, between Bethel and Ai.

Lot's choice of Sodom as a place to live was quickly to prove dangerous to him. He and his family were caught up in a war, taken captive, and finally rescued by Abram. It is interesting to note that the place where the battle occurred was called *the valley of Siddim* and additionally *the Salt Sea*. Perhaps this is a reminder of how the depth of the **Dead Sea** has fluctuated in the past, where a valley that hosted a battle later became inundated by the sea.

Melchizedek's presence in the region is perhaps an example of individuals maintaining the worship of



God independently of the influence of the Covenant introduced by Abraham, Jacob and Moses.



and Gomorrah.

When Isaac was weaned, Sarah had Ishmael and Hagar sent away. God had promised Abraham that Ishmael's descendants would form a nation also.

When God tested Abraham by instructing him to sacrifice Isaac, He

sent him to **Moriah**, which is probably **Jerusalem**. (Islamic tradition claims that the son he was about to sacrifice was Ishmael, though the Koran does not name him there).

At Sarah's death Abraham bought a piece of land from the Hittites in **Hebron**, where they were living at the time. This became Sarah's tomb, and later that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as some of their wives. Hebron (known as *al Khalil*) is today a Palestinian town, though an enclave of Jews who moved in to the town in 1980 in have been protected by the Israeli security forces. (It was in Hebron in 1929 that one of the first serious riots took place in reaction to the increased Jewish immigration into Palestine. It resulted in the deaths of 67 Jews, though a large number were saved by being sheltered in the homes of Arabs who risked their own lives to protect them.)

Abraham took another wife, Keturah, after Sarah's death, living for almost another 50 years. Keturah bore him six children, but these were sent away to the east – joining Ishmael's descendants – while Abraham was still alive. Isaac and Ishmael together buried him alongside Sarah.