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An Iraq man sells nuts in the old bazaar in Arbil, the capital of the northern Iraqi Kurdish autonomous region. — AFP photos



An Iraq man folds a scarf at his shop in the old bazaar in Arbil.



An Iraq man sells nuts in the old bazaar in Arbil.

In Iraq, generous Mideast tradition of 'istiftah' lives on

As the sun rises over Arbil's historic bazaar, shopkeepers sweep their stoops and eagerly await the "istiftah"—the first customer of the day, believed to be a good omen. For a country as famously hospitable as Iraq, where lunch tables are often overflowing with platters of meat as big as truck tyres, the custom of "istiftah", which means "opener", is subtle but sweet. The first customer of the day gets to name his or her price for the goods or service being purchased, without the usual process of haggling and compromise that is quintessential to street markets.

"The first customer is exceptional," said Hidayet Sheikhani, 39. "He's carrying wealth and well-being straight from God to the businessperson in the early morning." Sheikhani sells traditional black-and-white embroidered scarves and hats in the bazaar in the bustling center of Arbil, the Kurdistan region's capital. Shopkeepers arrive in the bazaar's brick alleyways around dawn, roll up the metal shutters of their shops and pour an obligatory glass of sweet tea to start their day. It's a tradition as old as time—not only in Iraq, but all across the Middle East.

Sheikhani inherited it from his grandfather, who had a shop in the same marketplace a century ago. At the time, he said, the "istiftah" tradition set the tone for the rest of the day. Shopkeepers who

had not yet sold anything would put a chair outside their shop, as a signal to their colleagues. Those who had made their first sale would direct any incoming shoppers to the other shops, until everyone had had their "istiftah". Only then would they accept a second customer. That went for both Muslim and Jewish shopkeepers, said Sheikhani, as Arbil was home to a thriving Jewish community until the mid-20th century.

'God will make it up to me'

The origin of the "istiftah" tradition remains disputed. Some say it hails from the Hadith, a record of the words and actions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), in which he pleads to God, "Oh Allah, bless my people in their early mornings". But Abbas Ali, a lecturer at the College of Islamic Studies in Iraq's Salahaddin University, said the custom's prevalence among other faiths indicates it may not be related to Islam at all. "It's possible it was merely an ancient custom that was practiced for a long time—and good traditions often become religious rituals," Ali told AFP.

Either way, it lives on, even among young businessmen. Jamaluddin Abdelhamid, a 24-year-old with a wispy goatee, sells roasted nuts, sweets and spices in the bazaar. "Often, a customer requests honey because they're sick. It usually costs 14,000 Iraqi dinars (less than \$10) per jar, but they ask for it at

10,000 and I agree because it's the 'istiftah'," he said. "I know God will make it up to me somewhere else in my day," said Abdelhamid. Rejecting a first customer's request—no matter how steep the

said Maher Salim, a 46-year-old car mechanic in Arbil. But an "istiftah" never goes for free. First customers often offer a very discounted price for their early-morning purchase, but it's frowned upon

still buys his groceries—bread, yogurt, cheese and vegetables—every morning from small shops near his home, showering the shopkeepers with prayers for blessings and good health as he walks



An Iraq man sits in his shop in the old bazaar.

discount is—leaves him guilt-ridden. "I spend the whole day feeling sad, asking myself how I could have rejected God's blessing," Abdelhamid said.

Tradition under threat?

It goes beyond the old bazaar: even taxi drivers, plumbers and mechanics have adopted it. "Whatever cash I earn first in a day, I kiss it and raise it to my forehead as a sign of gratitude to God,"

to request something at no cost at all. "Even if it's my brother, I'll take something symbolic from him—even just 1,000 Iraqi dinars," Salim told AFP.

There's one creeping threat to the beautiful balance of the "istiftah": shopping malls. As Arbil has developed over the last decade, large malls have cropped up across the city, offering convenient and speedy shopping experiences to its residents. Mohammad Khalil



An Iraq man opens his shop in the old bazaar in Arbil.

out. Interactions at malls, he complained, are comparatively cold. "There's no sense of istiftah there—everything is about the computer system," Khalil told AFP. "Most of the time, the people who work in the mall shops aren't the actual owners, so they don't even care about the tradition." — AFP



South African DJ Master KG

Warner Music demands German police pay up for 'Jeruselema' videos

German state said Monday it was forced to fork out for license fees to Warner Music after several police forces took part in the "Jeruselema" viral dance challenge. The song by South African DJ Master KG became a global hit last year after it was used as the soundtrack to a video by a group of dancers in Angola. Groups of staff at businesses, hospitals, police forces and other workplaces around the world have since filmed themselves dancing to "Jeruselema" as a way of spreading good cheer during the pandemic. But Warner Music has now written to many of these organizations in Germany demanding license fees amounting to several thousand euros in some cases, according to a recent report in the Focus weekly news magazine.

The interior ministry for Germany's most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia told AFP on Monday that it had "settled claims from Warner Music on behalf of several police forces" in the region. A spokesman for Duesseldorf University Hospital told national news agency DPA it had also received mail from Warner Music and had since taken down its video. The North Rhine-Westphalia Fire Brigades Association warned its members about the license fees in early January after learning about one such letter, a spokesman told DPA. Some local fire services have since deleted their videos or cancelled plans to make one, he said. Warner's move sparked sharp criticism on their Facebook page on Monday, with many users accusing the label of "shabby behavior". — AFP

SPANISH POLICE ARREST RAPPER HOLED UP IN UNIVERSITY

Spanish police yesterday arrested a rapper who barricaded himself inside a university after he was controversially sentenced to nine months in jail over a string of tweets, television images showed. Pablo Hasel, 32, had been given until last Friday night to turn himself in to begin serving his sentence after being convicted for glorifying terrorism, slander and libel against the crown and state institutions. At issue was a series of tweets attacking the monarchy and accusing police of torturing and killing demonstrators and migrants, with his case sparking protests in Madrid and Barcelona.

But Hasel, who is known for his radical leftist views and whose real name is Pablo Rivadulla, on Monday barricaded himself inside the University of Lleida, in the northeastern Catalonia region, with dozens of supporters to avoid arrest.



Catalan rapper Pablo Hasel is arrested by police at the University of Lleida, 150 kms west of Barcelona, yesterday where he had barricaded himself. — AFP

Spanish television showed images of police escorting him out of the university yesterday.

"They will never make us give in, despite the repression," Hasel said, his fist raised as he descended a staircase, wearing track pants and a sweatshirt and carrying a duffel bag. A Catalan police spokesman told AFP that officers entered the university early yesterday "to enforce the judicial ruling" on his arrest. Police in protective gear removed

chairs, garbage bins and other objects that had been set up as barricades to reach the spot where the singer was barricaded with his supporters. Hundreds of artists have signed a petition demanding Hasel's release, including film director Pedro Almodovar, Hollywood actor Javier Bardem and folk singer Joan Manuel Serrat.

Hasel said on Twitter Monday: "I'm locked inside the University of Lleida with quite a few supporters so they'll

have to break in if they want to arrest me and put me in prison." Last week, Spain's government pledged to reduce the penalty for "crimes of expression" such as the glorification of terrorism, hate speech, insults to the crown and offences against religious sensibilities in the context of artistic, cultural or intellectual activities. But in an interview with AFP last week, Hasel said he had no intention of turning himself in, accusing the government of making empty pledges. "I refuse to go of my own accord and knock on the prison door," he said.

"So they'll just have to come and kidnap me, which will show up the state for what it really is: a phoney democracy." Far-left party Podemos, the junior partners in Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's minority coalition government, criticized Hasel's arrest, saying all those who "consider themselves progressives should feel shame". Are their eyes covered? There is no progress if we refuse to recognize our existing democratic shortcomings," the party added in a tweet. The case echoes that of another rapper called Valtonyc who fled to Belgium in 2018 after being convicted of similar crimes. Spain is trying to have him extradited but Belgium has refused on the grounds that his offences are not a crime under Belgian law. — AFP

Canadian singer Raymond Levesque dies at 92 after contracting COVID-19

Canadian singer-songwriter Raymond Levesque, whose 1956 classic "Quand les hommes vivront d'amour" was an international hit, has died at the age of 92 after contracting COVID-19, Canadian media reported Monday. Poet, novelist, playwright and actor, Levesque composed hundreds of songs that became part of the fabric of Quebec's cultural life. His best-known work remains the pacifist hymn "Quand les hommes vivront d'amour" ("When Men Live by Love"), which was written partly in reaction to the Algerian war that France was waging at the time, and which has been covered by a variety of Canadian and French singers including Celine Dion and Eddie Constantine.

"All my condolences to the family and loved ones of the great Quebecer Raymond Levesque, author of one of the most beautiful songs of all time," Quebec Prime Minister Francois Legault



Canadian singer-songwriter Raymond Levesque

said on Twitter. Levesque had been committed to the idea of independence for Quebec and refused the Governor General's Award when it was offered to him in 2005 because it represented the British monarchy in Canada. After going deaf in the mid-1980s, he devoted himself to writing, particularly poetry and theater. He was hospitalized in Montreal after contracting COVID-19 and died Monday, according to his family, quoted by the media. Steven Guilbeault, the federal heritage minister, praised a "giant of the Quebec artistic scene." "Raymond Levesque is leaving us, but his hymn to peace will continue to awaken what is most beautiful in everyone's heart," he said on Twitter. — AFP

Father of salsa music Johnny Pacheco dies aged 85

Johnny Pacheco, the Dominican-born musician considered one of the fathers of salsa, died Monday at the age of 85 in New Jersey, his family said. A musician, composer and producer, Pacheco founded the Fania Records label, as well as the historic Fania All Stars band, which included salsa icons Celia Cruz, Hector Lavoe and Willie Colon. "With great pain in my soul and an emptiness in my heart I inform you that maestro Johnny Pacheco passed away this afternoon with great peace," his wife, Cuqui Pacheco, said in a statement published on the musician's official Facebook page.

"A thousand thanks for all your prayers and all the love you always gave him." Pacheco had been urgently hospitalized a few days ago for pneumonia. Born Juan Azarias Pacheco in Santiago de los Caballeros, in the northern Dominican Republic, on March 25, 1935, he emigrated to New York as a child with his family. There, he studied at the Juilliard arts school and began his



Dominican-born musician Johnny Pacheco.

musical career in the 1950s. He rose to fame with his band Pacheco y Su Charanga. He founded Fania Records in 1964 with attorney Gerald Masucci.

He recorded or composed more than 100 songs during his career, including "El Faisan" and "Quitate tu." "DEP (Rest In Peace) my dear friend and teacher," Colon tweeted after Pacheco's death was announced, calling his former bandmate "unique." — AFP