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a) Security situation in Iraq: recent events

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: November 2024

○ Situation in Iraq

From February to October 2023, Iraq experienced a phase of relative calm and stability - the most stable since the years prior to the 2003 US-led invasion - with a functioning government and a decline in the level of terrorist violence. However, as highlighted by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in March 2023, armed violence still continued in a ‘sporadic, fragmented and localised’ form in the country, which ‘remained fragile and deeply divided’. As of April 2023, Iraq’s security situation was described as complex and challenging, characterised by foreign as well as domestic violent threats.

The situation of the disputed territories contested by the KRG and the federal government of Iraq, remained unsolved. Prime Minister Sudani envisaged to withdraw national forces from the security headquarters in Kirkuk and hand over control to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, but ethnic tensions within the city sparked violent protests in September 2023, leading to the suspension of the decision.

The situation in Iraq had become increasingly volatile amid the resumption of the Israel-Hamas’ conflict in October 2023. Iraq was already experiencing rising US-Iran tensions, with Iran-backed militias targeting US personnel and local political adversaries on Iraqi territory, and US forces responding in reprisals. In October 2023, self-proclaimed armed groups known as ‘Islamic Resistance in Iraq’ targeted facilities hosting US military personnel, as well as members of the international coalition against ISIL, mainly in Anbar and Erbil governorates. In July 2024, US also struck a PMF base in

Babil governorate.

Relations between the KRI and Iran have also been strained, as Iran has consistently accused the KRI of providing refuge to Iran Kurdish opposition groups and has in the past launched strikes on their camps. On 15 January 2024, Iranian ballistic missiles targeted a site in Erbil, killing at least four civilians; IRGC alleged that the attack was aimed at an Israeli 'spy' site. An agreement of cooperation between the Iranian and the Iraqi governments was signed in March 2023 with Iraq pledging to prevent armed groups in the KRI from launching cross-border attacks against Iran.

[COI reference: Security 2024, 1.1, 1.3; COI Update 2024, 2.1, 2.3]

○ Presence, methods and tactics of actors

For a general overview of presence, methods and tactics of the ISF, PMF, KRG and ISIL involved in armed conflicts in Iraq, see 2. Actors of persecution or serious harm.

Türkiye established several military bases in northern Iraq, notably in Dohuk governorate and has regularly carried out airstrikes mostly in the shared border area but also deeper within the KRI, targeting PKK positions. In Sinjar district in Ninewa governorate, Türkiye repeatedly targeted the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), an affiliate of the PKK, as well as PKK fighters with drone strikes. Türkiye's military operations in the Kurdish region have been criticised for often affecting civilian lives and property, including by means of displacement. Since the start of a new military operation against the PKK in mid-June 2024, Turkish forces reportedly conducted 238 bombardments in the KRI, primarily in Duhok governorate.

The PKK, as of January 2022, had a presence in the north of Dohuk and Erbil governorates along the border with Türkiye, in the Qandil mountains along the border between the KRI and Iran, in the Asos mountains in Sulaymaniyah governorate, in Makhmur district and the Sinjar mountain range in Ninewa. In June 2023, the PKK declared an end to a ceasefire which had been implemented with Türkiye following the earthquake of February 2023. From August 2023 onwards, attacks carried out by the PKK on Turkish military positions or clashes between the PKK and Turkish troops were recorded on almost a monthly basis in northern Iraq.

US troops were stationed in Iraq, at the Ain Al-Asad Base in Anbar governorate, the Victory Base near Baghdad, the Hareer Base in Erbil governorate, and a base near Erbil International Airport. US military launched airstrikes targeted at leading members of the Shiite militias. Some US strikes caused casualties among PMF units leading to tensions between the Iraqi and US governments.

The surge in Iranian-backed groups' attacks on US targets in Iraq often involved drones and missiles, targeting the same locations in a single day. Drones have reportedly been the primary tool in these recent attacks, with their use more than doubling in 2023 compared to 2021 and 2022 combined. Meanwhile, the use of IEDs has fallen significantly, with only one reported IED attack against US targets in 2023.

Furthermore, in July 2023, ACAPS reported that, although security conditions had improved in the first half of 2023, the continued presence of landmines and ERW still posed challenges to movement and recovery efforts in some areas of the country. From February 2023 to 28 March 2024, Enabling Peace in Iraq Centre (EPIC), documented 76 IED and ERW incidents with civilian and non-civilian casualties. These 76 incidents resulted in 103 people injured, and 58 others killed.

[COI references: Security 2024, 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, COI Update 2024, 2.1]

○ Security incidents

Data concerning this indicator are primarily based on ACLED reporting from 1 February 2023 to 31 July 2024. Relevant reporting from other sources, including the UNAMI and UCDP, is also noted. Please note that different sources use different methodologies for the recording of incidents, therefore some discrepancies on data are to be expected. For more information on the methodologies of data collection see Security 2024, Sources.

According to the **ACLED** dataset, between 1 February 2023 and 31 July 2024 there were 8 366 security incidents recorded in Iraq: 1 670 were recorded as battles, 6 123 as explosions/remote violence and 573 as violence against civilians. Most security incidents were recorded in Dohuk (4 839), Erbil (1 436) and Baghdad (440) governorates.

Figure 2. Breakdown by governorate of number of security events recorded by ACLED between 1 February 2023 and 31 July2024.

2024 CG IRQ security incidents

The **UCDP**, for the period between 1 February 2023 and 31 July 2024, recorded 351 security events leading to fatalities in Iraq. The largest number of events were recorded in Dohuk governorate (82) followed by Erbil (35) and Sulaymaniyah (24) governorates. For 108 of the events recorded by the UCDP, the exact location within a governorate was not specified. Most of these events (100 out of 108) were reported in the Northern Kurdistan areas of Iraq.

For 1 February 2023 to 31 July 2024, **UNAMI** documented a total of 115 incidents.

Based on ACLED data, further calculations on security incidents per week in each governorate for the period 1 February 2023 - 31 July 2024 are also provided in section b.

[COI references: Security 2024, 1.5; COI Update 2024, 2.5]

○ Civilian casualties

Information concerning this indicator is primarily based on UNAMI reporting the period from 1 February 2023 to 31 July 2024, unless specified otherwise.

UCDP provides also data on the number of civilian deaths and on security events leading to fatalities. Iraq Body Count (IBC), an independent data project, also documents violent civilian deaths caused by US-led coalition forces, Iraqi government forces or paramilitary or criminal attacks by others in Iraq.

Please note that different sources use different methodologies for the recording of civilian casualties or fatalities, therefore some discrepancies on data are to be expected. For more information on the methodologies of data collection, see Security 2024, Sources.

In 2023, UNAMI documented at least 153 civilian casualties resulting from armed conflict-related incidents in Iraq, 57 % less than in 2022 and 81 % less than in 2021.

For the reference period (1 February 2023 and 31 July 2024), UNAMI documented a total of 115 incidents resulting in at least 221 civilian casualties, including 96 dead and 125 wounded. The majority of civilian casualties were caused by unexploded ordnances, ERWs, air attacks, mortars and rockets, and small arms fire.

Figure 3. Breakdown by governorate of number of civilian casualties recorded by UNAMI between 1 February 2023 and 31 July 2024.



For the period between 1 February 2023 and 31 July 2024, the UCDP recorded 351 events leading to 682 casualties out of which 58 were civilian deaths. The largest number of civilian deaths was recorded in the governorates of Diyala (22) and Salah-al-din (5). There were also 13 civilian deaths recorded by UCDP in the KRI. In 2023, IBC documented at least 537 civilian deaths due to violence, 27 % less than in 2022. For the first three months of 2024, the same source documented 119 civilian deaths.

Based on UNAMI data, further calculations on civilian casualties per 100 000 inhabitants in each governorate for the period 1 February 2023 - 31 July 2024 are also provided in section b.

[COI references: Security 2024, 1.5; COI Update 2024, 2.5]

○ Conflict-related displacement

Information concerning this indicator is mostly based on IOM reporting.

In terms of various drivers of displacement, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in November 2023 described Iraq as an ‘example of how conflict-induced migration compounds with other drivers such as water scarcity, the absence of cooperation around the management of limited water resources, lack of economic opportunities and environmental degradation’.

Years after the official defeat of ISIL in Iraq, more than 1 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, primarily in the KRI. As of 31 December 2023, the governorates hosting the largest numbers of IDPs were reported to be Ninewa (239 124 IDPs), Dohuk (235 251 IDPs) and Erbil (225 565 IDPs).

Although a general decrease in the number of IDPs across the country was reported, IOM documented 6 394 newly displaced persons during the period between September and December 2023. 93% of these cases involved IDPs experiencing secondary displacement. In terms of return, IOM identified 4 863 072 individual returnees, as of 31 December 2023. The governorates with the highest number of individuals returning were Ninewa (1 960 734 returnees) and Anbar governorate (1 548 936 returnees).

At the end of July, authorities announced to have postponed the closure of the IDPs camps in the KRI, which had been set for 30 July 2024. Many IDPs have reportedly been reluctant to leave despite the financial incentive, due to continuing violence in their hometowns, damaged infrastructures and lack of basic services. On 11 July, the last remaining IDP camp in Sulaymaniyah governorate was shut down.

[COI references: Security 2024, 1.5; COI Update 2024, 3.7]

○ Further impact on civilians

Years of insecurity have resulted in significant damage to infrastructure. In the reference period, wildfires resulting from aerial bombardments were reported and local residents complained of aerial attacks causing destruction of agricultural land and farms.

Despite reconstruction efforts, the need for humanitarian assistance persisted in Iraq, particularly for those returning to remote, disputed areas with few services. In a report of August 2023 focusing on Ninewa governorate, IOM described the destruction of homes as a major obstacle for IDPs to return to their places of origin. In April 2023, Iraq's Prime Minister launched a reconstruction campaign in Sinjar, allocating 50 billion Iraqi dinars [approximately 35.3 million EUR] to the project. However, ongoing disputes between the Iraqi central government and the KRG have stalled the use of previously allocated funds. As a result, damaged infrastructure and inadequate services continued to hinder the return of IDPs.

[COI reference: Security 2024, 1.5]

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