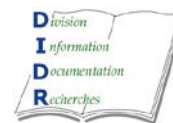


# IRAQ



14 november 2017



## The Security Situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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### Abstract

Over the past year, KRI governorates have been among the safest in Iraq. Most of the casualties recorded in the Region are a result of Turkish bombings against the PKK, ahead of shootings and IS attacks. For their part, Arab Sunnis have been facing a series of discriminations in KRI, that range from security constraints to unlawful arrests and forced displacement, because of being perceived as potential terrorist supporters since the beginning of the security crisis in Iraq.

### Résumé

Sur l'année écoulée, les gouvernorats de la Région du Kurdistan irakien ont été parmi les plus sûrs en Irak. La majorité des victimes enregistrées dans la région était due à des bombardements turcs contre le PKK, des meurtres, suivis des attaques de l'Etat islamique. Pour leur part, les Arabes sunnites, qui ont été perçus depuis le début de la crise sécuritaire en Irak comme des soutiens potentiels de l'Etat islamique, ont fait face à des discriminations qui vont de l'imposition de contraintes sécuritaires spécifiques à des arrestations illégales et des déplacements forcés.

**Nota:** The translation of sources in foreign languages is provided by the Information, Documentation and Research Division.

## 1. Background information

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is an autonomous region which in practice includes three governorates: Erbil, Suleymaniah, and Dohuk<sup>1</sup>. Although Halabja was symbolically designated as a governorate by the Iraqi government in December 2013, in order to honour the memory of the victims of the chemical attack, many ministries and institutions, including the electoral body, have not implemented measures to deal with Halabja as a separated province yet and keep considering it as part of Suleymaniah. According to the Kurdish media network *Rudaw*, only the planning, oil and finance ministries have been treating Halabja as a province up to date<sup>2</sup>.

The security of KRI is controlled both by the Peshmerga forces, which are the regional guards, and the Asayish, which is the police force of the Region. Whereas the Peshmerga are fighting on the frontline, outside of KRI, the Asayish are responsible for internal security, holding checkpoints in all parts of the Region and security facilities<sup>3</sup>. According to the International Crisis Group, the efficiency of the Peshmerga is seriously impeded by the fact that the forces are divided between KRI's two historical political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which both have their own units<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Types of threats

Over the past year, KRI governorates have been among the safest in Iraq<sup>5</sup>. Most of the casualties recorded in the Region are a result of Turkish bombings against the PKK, ahead of shootings and IS attacks<sup>6</sup>.

### 2.1. Turkish bombings

The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) has been controlling certain areas of the KRI since the 1990s, notably the Qandil mountains<sup>7</sup>. Local inhabitants come under the threat of Turkish bombings, which target the PKK every week. Although Ankara rarely gives reports on these airstrikes, the casualty figures occasionally released add up to a total of 251 PKK fighters and 5 civilians killed between July 2016 and June 2017<sup>8</sup>.

### 2.2. Criminality

The level of crime has escalated as a result of the ongoing security crises, as weapons have been more accessible in KRI. Not only can civilians acquire weapons from the Iraqi military if they volunteer to fight IS<sup>9</sup>, but the number of guns sold on the black market

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<sup>1</sup> Website of the Kurdistan Region Presidency

<sup>2</sup> REBIN YAR Ahmed, "Years on, Halabja still waiting for full province status", *Rudaw*, 26/06/2017

<sup>3</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict", 12/05/2015, 39 p.

<sup>5</sup> See Iraq Body Count's data base and WING Joel, *Musings on Iraq* monthly reports

<sup>6</sup> See monthly reports of *Musings on Iraq*

<sup>7</sup> SAMAN Omer, "Running Qandil: The Controversial Kurdish Region, Inside The Kurdish Region", *Niqash*, 12/04/2017

<sup>8</sup> See monthly reports of *Musings on Iraq*

<sup>9</sup> HONAR Rasheed, "Daily death: As number of guns in Iraqi Kurdistan increases, so does murder rate", *Niqash*, 19/07/2017

has also increased as Peshmerga members have been selling the weapons supplied by Germany to make up for their unpaid salaries<sup>10</sup>.

As a consequence, gun related violence has considerably increased in KRI<sup>11</sup>. According to a Suleymaniah Police spokesperson quoted by *Ekurd*, crime and kidnappings have been on the rise in this city in particular, even though kidnappings for ransom often go unreported, since locals try to handle matters outside of the formal criminal system<sup>12</sup>. The news website *Niqash* specifically mentions the neighbourhood of Chamchamal, in Suleymaniah, as an area "infamous for murder, suicide and kidnapping"<sup>13</sup>.

### 2.3. Terrorist attacks

The activities of IS in KRI are limited<sup>14</sup>. Over the past year, most of the attacks have targeted Makhmur district, which was closest to the front line. Two attacks were reported in this district by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in March and April 2016, one of them involving a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device<sup>15</sup>. Several sources also reported the use of chemical weapons by IS against several locations in Makhmur district<sup>16</sup>. In April and May 2016, UNAMI recorded four IS rocket attacks that caused serious breathing difficulties and swelling to 26 Peshmerga soldiers, one of whom died from the attack<sup>17</sup>. Apart from Makhmur district, very few IS attacks have been recorded in the last year. In August 2016, suicide bombers, whose links are unknown, were intercepted in two separate occasions in Suleymaniah<sup>18</sup> and in October 2016, an IS drone armed with an IED killed two Peshmerga soldiers in Erbil<sup>19</sup>.

According to different sources however, IS continues to harbour sleeper cells inside KRI which it could use to launch attacks<sup>20</sup>. The official spokesman of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Mariwan Naqshbandi, declared that approximately 500 persons identified as Kurds had joined IS, of whom 300 were killed and 150 had returned to KRI, although he noted in September 2016 that no new recruitment had happened over the past year<sup>21</sup>. According to the interviews conducted by the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Immigration Service with field actors, Halabja is infamous for hosting IS sympathisers<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ekurd*, "Investigation continues into Iraqi Kurdistan Peshmerga who sold their weapons", 13/06/2016

<sup>11</sup> HONAR Rasheed, "Daily death: As number of guns in Iraqi Kurdistan increases, so does murder rate", *Niqash*, 19/07/2017

<sup>12</sup> *Ekurd*, "Crime on the rise in Iraqi Kurdistan due to financial crisis: police", 26/01/2016

<sup>13</sup> HONAR Rasheed, "Daily death: As number of guns in Iraqi Kurdistan increases, so does murder rate", *Niqash*, 19/07/2017

<sup>14</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016

<sup>15</sup> UNAMI, "Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 November 2015 – 30 September 2016", 30/12/2016, p. 9 and 31

<sup>16</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016; UNAMI, "Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 November 2015 – 30 September 2016", 30/12/2016, p. 9-10

<sup>17</sup> UNAMI, "Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 November 2015 – 30 September 2016", 30/12/2016, p. 9-10

<sup>18</sup> *Musings on Iraq*, "Violence in Iraq, August 2016", 05/09/2016

<sup>19</sup> *Musings on Iraq*, "5,198 dead and wounded in Iraq in Oct 2016", 02/11/2016

<sup>20</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016; *Ekurd*, "85% of Islamic State-recruited Kurds attended Islamic schools in Kurdistan", 25/09/2016

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<sup>22</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016; *Ekurd*, "85% of Islamic State-recruited Kurds attended Islamic schools in Kurdistan", 25/09/2016, p. 35

## 2.4. Threats faced by Arab Sunnis

Since the beginning of the security crisis in Iraq, Arab Sunnis have been facing a series of discriminations in KRI, that range from security constraints, to unlawful arrests and forced displacements, because of being perceived as terrorist supporters.

First of all, several sources reported that specific security constraints have been imposed on Arab Sunni IDPs. Human Rights Watch documented that the Peshmerga forces have been stopping Arab Sunni IDPs fleeing IS territories for up to three months at checkpoints, in order to screen civilians for IS affiliation before they are permitted entry to the camps.<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International also reported that IDPs have not been allowed to leave the camps without a sponsor. In Garmawa camp, in Dohuk governorate, IDPs' identity documents and telephones have been seized by the administration. A number of Arab Sunni IDPs in Garmawa camp have also been prevented from returning home to surrounding villages<sup>24</sup>. According to a lawyer interviewed by the Danish Refugee Council and the Danish Immigration Service, these security constraints tend to fluctuate depending on the security situation<sup>25</sup>.

Arab Sunnis have also been unlawfully arrested on suspicion of links to IS, based on arbitrary intelligence information<sup>26</sup>. The Asayish stated in October 2016 that 9,089 people have been arrested since 2014<sup>27</sup>. According to the Independent Commission for Human Rights, this number includes 215 children, from the ages of 8 to 17 years old<sup>28</sup>. In many cases, detainees were not presented with an arrest warrant, nor were they allowed access to a lawyer. Reportedly, detainees are also not allowed to appear before a court during their period of detention, which sometimes amounts to several years<sup>29</sup>. Amnesty International also reported that a number of detainees were tortured during their interrogation by the Asayish, which aimed, according to the organization, at "[punishing] them for crimes committed by IS or [extracting] information from them"<sup>30</sup>. Detainees testified being beaten with cables, given electric shocks, and being sexually abused in Asayish facilities in Makhmur, Dohuk and Erbil (where Asayish headquarters are known as "Gishti")<sup>31</sup>.

Finally, forced displacement of Arab Sunnis has been recorded, in "what appears to be a campaign to reverse the Arabization policies implemented under Saddam Hussein and to consolidate control over disputed territory the KRG has long claimed", according to Amnesty International<sup>32</sup>. A case in point is the mixed Kurdish-Arab town of Makhmur,

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<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Thousands fleeing kept waiting near front line", 21/06/2017

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016

<sup>25</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016; Human Rights Watch, "Victimized first by ISIS, then by the liberators", 03/02/2017

<sup>27</sup> Danish Refugee Council, Danish Immigration Service, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Access, possibility of protection, security and humanitarian situation", April 2016

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016, p. 38

<sup>29</sup> *Ekurd*, "215 minors held in Iraqi Kurdistan jails on alleged IS membership: commission", 26/07/2017

<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016

<sup>31</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016; Human Rights Watch, "Victimized first by ISIS, then by the liberators", 03/02/2017

<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016, p. 18

which was briefly seized by IS in the summer of 2014. The town's Kurdish inhabitants were allowed to return to their homes shortly after Makhmur's liberation, whereas Arab inhabitants are still prevented from going back<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International, "Punished for Daesh's crimes: Displaced Iraqis abused by militias and government forces", 18/10/2016, p. 61; Amnesty International, "Banished and dispossessed: Forced displacement and deliberate destruction in Northern Iraq", 15/01/2016, p. 36;

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