



General country of origin information report on Iraq

November 2023

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Introduction

This country of origin information report was drawn up based on the questions asked and points for attention mentioned in the Terms of Reference (ToR). This ToR was compiled on behalf of the Ministry of Justice and Security and adopted on 26 April 2023. The TOR and the country of origin information report are available on the website of the Dutch Government.

This general country of origin information report describes the situation in Iraq insofar as this is important for the assessment of asylum applications from persons originating from Iraq, and for decision-making regarding the repatriation of Iraqi asylum seekers who have been rejected. This report is an update of the general country of origin information report of October 2021.¹ It covers the period from October 2021 to September 2023. Relevant developments up to the date of publication of this report have been included as far as possible.

The country of origin information report is a factual, neutral and objective representation of the findings that were made during the period under consideration. It is not a policy document, does not reflect the government's vision or policy in relation to Iraq and does not offer any policy recommendations. It does not contain any conclusions concerning immigration policy.

This report does not pretend to be exhaustive with regard to individual security incidents and human rights violations; the incidents specifically mentioned are cited for the purpose of substantiating a more general overview. The situation in Iraq can nevertheless differ from place to place, and it can change very rapidly.

The country of origin information report has been compiled based on public and confidential sources, using information that has been carefully selected, analysed and verified. Use has been made of information from various agencies of the United Nations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), specialist literature and media reporting. Except where the facts are generally undisputed or unless stated otherwise, the content in this report is based on multiple sources. The text represents a synthesis of information from the various sources. Where qualifications are used, these can be traced back to the sources. The public sources that were consulted are listed in Section 6 of this report.

This country of origin information report also uses information from interviews conducted with relevant and expert sources. These were conducted partly in person — in particular during a fact-finding mission to Iraq — and partly online during the research for this country of origin information report. In addition, some information originates from the foreign diplomatic missions of the Netherlands, as well as from correspondence with sources. This confidential information was mainly used to support and augment passages founded on publicly available information. The sources referred to here are marked as 'confidential source' in the footnotes and are accompanied by a date. Where information from a single source is included, this is explicitly stated. This is information that is worth reporting, but could not be corroborated by other sources.

Where 'Iraq' appears in the text, it refers to the country as a whole. The term 'federal Iraq' refers to the entirety of Iraq, with the exception of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Federal Iraq is further subdivided into Southern Iraq and Central Iraq.² The KRI is referred to alternately as the KRI or the Kurdistan

¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2021/10/08/algemeen-ambtsbericht-irak-van-oktober-2021>

² This is a change with respect to the previous country of origin information report of October 2021, which subdivided federal Iraq into Southern Iraq and Northern Iraq.

region. The disputed territories are those claimed by both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

Section 1 describes political developments and the security situation.

Section 2 addresses Iraqi documents.

Section 3 describes the human rights situation in Iraq and examines the position of specific groups.

Section 4 outlines the situation of internally displaced persons.

Section 5 deals with the return of Iraqis from abroad to Iraq.

1 Political and security situation

1.1 Political developments

A turbulent year of elections and government formation preceded the entry into office of the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani in October 2022. That period — the longest without a government since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 — was marked by a long political stalemate and short-term outbreaks of violence in federal Iraq.³

Parliamentary elections

The beginning of the current reporting period coincided with the Iraqi parliamentary elections in October 2021. Al-Sudani's predecessor, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, had been leading a transitional government since May 2020, following the anti-government demonstrations (known as *Tishreen*)⁴ that occurred in late 2019 and early 2020.⁵ The elections, which had a very low turnout, were won by the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whilst Iran-backed parties suffered losses relative to the previous elections in 2018.⁶ Several of these parties had ties to the Popular Mobilisation Forces (*Quwwat al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, PMF), an umbrella organisation consisting predominantly of Shia militias in Iraq. Al-Sadr nevertheless failed to garner support to form a government. In August 2022, he recalled his 73 members of parliament and announced that he was leaving politics. This led to the fiercest violence in Baghdad in years, when al-Sadr supporters stormed and occupied government buildings, and fighting broke out with rival Shia groups (see Section 1.2.1).⁷

Government formation

In October 2022, Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani took office as prime minister. This ended a political impasse of more than a year. Al-Sudani was the candidate of the largest parliamentary bloc, known as the Shia Coordination Framework (SCF), an alliance⁸ of parties backed by Iran and affiliated with prominent PMF militias. After taking office, al-Sudani made a number of promises, including to reform the economy, to fight corruption, to improve deteriorating public services, and to fight poverty and unemployment.⁹

³ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023; The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023, p. 6; European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), *From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-Invasion Journey*, 25 May 2023.

⁴ This country of origin information report contains various references to these demonstrations and to activists involved in them. For additional information about the demonstrations, which started in October 2019, please refer to the two previous country of origin information reports (from December 2019 and October 2021): Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, December 2019, pp. 7, 11-12, 14-15, 22, 26; *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, pp. 21-23, 31, 43-45.

⁵ Reuters, *Iraqi parliament approves new government headed by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani*, 27 October 2022.

⁶ Reuters, *Cleric Sadr wins Iraq vote, former PM Maliki close behind – officials*, 12 October 2021.

⁷ Reuters, *Iraqi parliament approves new government headed by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani*, 27 October 2022; LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023.

⁸ The alliance includes prominent Shia groups, politicians and militia leaders, including the State of Law Coalition (led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki), the al-Fatah Alliance (led by Hadi al-Amiri), *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (led by Qais al-Khazali), the Alliance of National State Forces (led by Ammar al-Hakim), the Victory Alliance (led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi) and the National Contract Coalition (led by the head of the Popular Mobilisation Authority, Faleh al-Fayyadh). Sources: Al-Monitor, *Understanding Iraq's Coordination Framework*, 13 August 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Reference: Coordination Framework*, 22 July 2023.

⁹ Reuters, *Iraqi parliament approves new government headed by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani*, 27 October 2022.

1.1.1 *Influence of militias*

The PMF were established in 2014, with support from Iran, to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Although the PMF have had formal status as part of the Iraqi security forces since 2016, the militias that make up the PMF act partly outside the formal chain of command to protect their ideological and political interests.¹⁰

When Prime Minister al-Sudani's government – which was shaped by the Shia Coordination Framework – took office in October 2022, the PMF's political influence increased relative to previous years.¹¹ According to some sources, they reportedly used this to deepen their embedding within various Iraqi state institutions, including the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, anti-corruption agencies and customs posts.¹² Some critics go even further than seeing the developments merely as increased influence. According to them, with the SCF, Iran's political and armed allies in Baghdad have gained control of the Iraqi parliament, judiciary and executive, and they are using the political system to their advantage. Amongst other references, these sources point to a February 2022 decision of the Iraqi Supreme Court (which they claim was influenced by the SCF) that made al-Sadr's attempts to form a majority government impossible. The decision stated that this would require a two-thirds majority rather than a 'simple' majority, thereby effectively granting a veto to the SCF-controlled bloc in parliament. After this, al-Sadr finally withdrew, clearing the way for the SCF to form a government.¹³

The increased influence of the PMF also translated to the economic front. By further entrenching themselves in the Iraqi state, the PMF were reportedly able to increase their economic capabilities, diversify their revenue streams and expand their network of patronage. Shortly after taking office as prime minister, in November 2022 al-Sudani approved the establishment of a PMF trading company known as the al-Muhandis General Company (named after slain PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis¹⁴), a state-sanctioned body with a budget of at least USD 67 million.¹⁵ In addition, an Iraqi budget adopted in June 2023 provided for a significant increase in funding and an expansion of the PMF's workforce.¹⁶

The PMF's newfound influence is said to have reduced the perceived need for open violence against opponents relative to before the al-Sudani government took office. The PMF is said to have continued to silence critics in more subtle ways, including through intimidation, dubious lawsuits and prison sentences (see Sections 1.2.7 and

¹⁰ Confidential source, 15 December 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023; LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023.

¹¹ Brookings, *Shiite rivalries could break Iraq's deceptive calm in 2023*, 1 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

¹² Middle East Institute (MEI), *Taking stock of the first 100 days of Iraq's new government*, 31 January 2023; Foreign Affairs, *Iraq is quietly falling apart, Iran's proxies have seized power in Baghdad – and are gutting the state*, 5 June 2023.

¹³ Just Security, *Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-backed militias captured the country*, 20 March 2023; Foreign Affairs, *Iraq is quietly falling apart, Iran's proxies have seized power in Baghdad – and are gutting the state*, 5 June 2023; The Economist, *The Iraqi militias are copying their overmighty cousins in Iran*, 8 June 2023.

¹⁴ The Kata'ib Hezbollah leader and deputy commander of the PMF Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was killed in a US airstrike in Baghdad on 3 January 2020, along with the leader of the Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qassem Soleimani.

¹⁵ Brookings, *Shiite rivalries could break Iraq's deceptive calm in 2023*, 1 March 2023; The Washington Institute, *Profile: The Muhandis General Company*, 17 May 2023; confidential source, 28 June 2023.

¹⁶ MEI, *Monday Briefing: Iraq passes a massive, controversial budget bill*, 12 June 2023; Amwaj, *Granted expanded funding and personnel, Iraq's PMU highlights drone arsenal*, 20 June 2023.

3.2.1).¹⁷ According to some sources, the status quo, which was advantageous to the militias, meant that political instability and violence would not be in their interest.¹⁸

1.1.2 *Relations between the governments in Baghdad and Erbil*

Relations between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish government in Erbil (Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG) have been strained for years, due to tensions over a variety of issues. These include the sharing of oil and gas revenues, the federal budget, the status of Kirkuk city and disputed territories, and the Kurdistan region's 2017 independence referendum.¹⁹

The relationship between the federal government and the KRG remained strained during the reporting period, reflecting the same political struggle over the division of finances that had also flared up around budget negotiations during the previous reporting period and that has marked Iraqi politics for years. The division of oil (and the associated revenues) between federal Iraq and the KRI plays an important role in this relationship. During the reporting period, the issues included determining how many barrels of oil the KRI would transfer to federal Iraq and how much the federal government would pay the KRG for it.²⁰ According to one source, the implementation of al-Sudani's coalition agreement was complicated by months of negotiations over Iraq's 2023 budget, as well as negotiations over an oil and gas law between the federal government and the KRG.²¹ In addition, several developments weakened the KRG's position relative to the government in Baghdad.

For example, in March 2023, the federal government was successful in an international arbitration case that deemed unilateral exports through Türkiye of crude oil from Iraq illegal. The KRI exported oil unilaterally, without permission from the federal government in Baghdad. In April 2023, Baghdad and Erbil concluded an agreement granting the authority to market and export crude oil from KRG-controlled fields to the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO), which is managed by the Iraqi state. Exports through Türkiye had not resumed by the end of the reporting period, as far as could be ascertained.²² There was no progress in discussions on the sharing of oil revenues between the federal government and the KRG.²³

Another development in the relationship between the federal government and the KRG was the ruling of the Iraqi Supreme Court on 30 May 2023 that the extension of the term of the KRG's parliament was unconstitutional.²⁴ The KRG's caretaker status weakened its position relative to the federal government.²⁵

A multi-year budget proposal was ultimately adopted in Baghdad on 12 June 2023.²⁶ To this end, the KRG and Baghdad reached agreement on budget articles relating to matters including the structure of oil exports from Kurdish territory, with implications for financial arrangements between the federal government and the

¹⁷ MEI, *Taking stock of the first 100 days of Iraq's new government*, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 1 April 2023; confidential source, 2 June 2023.

¹⁸ Confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 1 April 2023.

¹⁹ MEI, *Bafel in Baghdad: Finding the contours of the PUK's strategy in federal Iraq*, 13 March 2023.

²⁰ Reuters, *Iraq PM risks new crisis as tensions with Kurds resurface*, 16 February 2023; confidential source, 3 March 2023.

²¹ Confidential source, 3 March 2023.

²² Reuters, *Iraq approves record \$153 billion budget including big public hiring*, 12 June 2023.

²³ Confidential source, 14 June 2023.

²⁴ Reuters, *Iraqi Kurdistan 2022 parliament extension unconstitutional, supreme court rules*, 30 May 2023; confidential source, 1 June 2023.

²⁵ Confidential source, 4 June 2023.

²⁶ Shafaq News, *Parliament approves federal budget law for 2023-2025*, 12 June 2023.

KRG.²⁷ According to one source, this gave the federal government more influence and control over the finances of the KRG, thereby affecting the autonomy of the region.²⁸ The federal government had previously held no control over the KRG's spending of oil revenues, with the latter unilaterally exporting crude oil through Türkiye. Following the aforementioned international arbitration ruling, however, Kurdish officials were forced to negotiate with the federal government.²⁹

Moreover, the Kurdistan region's position was weakened during the reporting period by continuing internal divisions between the two dominant parties: the KDP and the PUK (see Section 1.1.4). Both sides maintained separate contacts and negotiations with the federal government, and they purportedly sabotaged each other's attempts at negotiation.³⁰

1.1.3 *Disputed territories*

Another persistent issue between the federal government and the KRG is the status of the disputed territories,³¹ including Kirkuk, the Nineveh Plains and the Sinjar district. These are strategically located areas that both sides claim should be under their governance. The belt of disputed territories extends from Ninewa province in the west to Diyala province in the east. They are characterised by an ethnically and religiously diverse population, including Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, Kaka'i, Shabak and other minorities.³² During the current reporting period, as in the previous one, there were no known changes with regard to the boundaries of the disputed territories. The disputed territories run through provincial and district borders.³³

According to the 2005 Iraqi constitution, a solution to the status of the disputed territories should have been found through a referendum by 31 December 2007.³⁴ Over the past decade, however, both sides have seized opportunities to expand their territorial control over the areas. For example, the KRG maintained its presence in the disputed territories after recapturing territory from ISIS. The federal authorities then took control of large parts of the territories — including oil-rich Kirkuk — following the unilateral Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. With regard to the district of Sinjar (in Kurdish, *Shingal*), the two governments concluded the 'Sinjar Agreement' in October 2020. This agreement stipulated that governance and security in the district were the responsibility of the federal government in Baghdad.³⁵ During the reporting period, only parts of the Sinjar Agreement were in force, and disagreement persisted between the KRG and the federal government over issues including a suitable candidate for the mayoralty of Sinjar. In practice, different armed parties, including the Iraqi army and various militias, were also still competing for control of the district (or parts thereof). Attempts by federal authorities to regain administrative control over parts of the area led to a violent clash in May 2022 (see Section 1.2.1).³⁶

²⁷ The KRG's oil revenues will be deposited in an account controlled by the Iraqi central bank.

²⁸ Confidential source, 12 June 2023.

²⁹ Reuters, *Iraq approves record \$153 billion budget including big public hiring*, 12 June 2023.

³⁰ Confidential source, 1 March 2023; MEI, *Bafel in Baghdad: Finding the contours of the PUK's strategy in federal Iraq*, 13 March 2023; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), *Briefing to the UN Security Council*, SRSJ Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, 18 May 2023; confidential source, 4 June 2023.

³¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, pp. 8-10.

³² Lawfare, *Negotiating peace in Iraq's disputed territories: Modifying the Sinjar Agreement*, 17 January 2021.

³³ For a visual overview, see a 2020 map from an International Crisis Group (ICG) report: ICG, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, 15 June 2020, p. 29.

³⁴ Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), *Two decades of uneven federalism in Iraq*, April 2023.

³⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, pp. 18-19.

³⁶ ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, 31 May 2022; Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023.

Political and security situation in the disputed territories

No significant changes occurred during the reporting period with regard to administrative relations between the federal government and the KRG in the disputed territories.³⁷ There is no uniform security and administrative structure within the disputed territories. The degree of cooperation between Kurdish authorities (in practice, the KDP in some parts, the PUK in others; see Section 1.1.4), federal Iraqi authorities and locally present militias varies by area. According to one source, the KRG has not been able to influence the overall status quo since 2017.³⁸ The populations of the disputed territories, including Kirkuk, the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, have suffered from neglect by both the federal government and the KRG over the years.³⁹ For example, according to one source, there was a lack of investment by the federal government in crumbling infrastructure and agriculture in Kirkuk province in the years after the federal authorities took control of the province in 2017.⁴⁰ According to some sources, there was also a lack of representation of Yazidi stakeholders in the negotiations on the Sinjar Agreement, and local communities in Sinjar were not involved in the implementation of the agreement (or parts thereof), among other problems.⁴¹ According to one source, a feeling of resignation amongst the population within the disputed territories contributed to the relatively small amount of organised protest or opposition to the administrative situation occurring in these areas. The priority of returning displaced persons was to meet their basic needs.⁴²

A security vacuum remained in the disputed territories, between federal security forces, the KRG's *Peshmerga* and local militias. ISIS continued to take advantage of the lack of coordination between Kurdish and federal authorities with regard to anti-ISIS operations in order to operate in these areas.⁴³

According to some sources, the Iraqi army, security forces and police were particularly present in the cities within the disputed territories. Beyond that, Iranian-backed, mainly Shia PMF militias were the dominant actors, and armed groups formed by minorities (and mostly affiliated with the PMF) were active. According to these sources, citizens' freedom of movement and trade within the disputed territories were heavily controlled by such armed actors. The dominant militias would also profit from extortion through their local dominance.⁴⁴

According to one source, there had been some improvements in the security situation and reconstruction in the city of Kirkuk during the reporting period, and this had positively affected the daily lives of civilians.⁴⁵ In September 2023, however, tensions between different communities in the city ended in brief violence (see Section 3.3.1, under 'Kurds'). According to the source, issues regarding the Arab governor of Kirkuk appointed by the federal authorities remained during the reporting period. He was accused (particularly by Kurds and Turkmen) of favouritism in the areas of distribution of services, employment and reconstruction projects.⁴⁶

³⁷ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

³⁸ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

³⁹ MERIP, *Two decades of uneven federalism in Iraq*, April 2023.

⁴⁰ The New Humanitarian, *Iraq's Kirkuk: Oil deals, ethnic divides, and Kurdish grievances*, 26 September 2019.

⁴¹ Lawfare, *Negotiating peace in Iraq's disputed territories: Modifying the Sinjar Agreement*, 17 January 2021.

⁴² Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴³ Confidential source, 14 February 2023; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *Can Sudani solve long-standing disputes with the KRG?*, 17 February 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁴ Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, *'They are in Control': The Rise of Paramilitary Forces and the Security of Minorities in Iraq's Disputed Territories*, January 2022, p. 5; confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁵ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁶ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

Outside the city of Kirkuk, in the province of the same name, there was a lack of security in some districts (e.g. Hawija and Daquq). According to the source, ambiguity existed amongst locals concerning certain security incidents, with some accusing ISIS and others accusing the PMF. The PMF was also accused of attacks on villages where land disputes between different ethnic groups take place, as well as abductions and drug trafficking.⁴⁷

In Sinjar (which was badly damaged in the battle with ISIS), reconstruction was still delayed by disagreements between the KRG and the federal government over the local administration of the district. In April 2023, Prime Minister al-Sudani ordered the government to launch a reconstruction campaign for Sinjar and announced the allocation of 50 billion Iraqi dinars (USD 34.2 million). According to some sources, political disputes between the federal government and the KRG have prevented other funds that were previously allocated (under the 2020 Sinjar Agreement) from being used for reconstruction, however, whilst damaged infrastructure and poor basic services have hindered the return of more than 200,000 Yazidis displaced from the district.⁴⁸

1.1.4 *Relations between the KDP and the PUK*

Relations between the two dominant political parties in the KRI — the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) — were characterised by increasing tensions during the reporting period.⁴⁹ In early 2023, the NGO International Crisis Group wrote that the KRI was experiencing its worst political crisis since the Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s.⁵⁰ Due to instability, it was uncertain whether and when deferred regional elections could take place.⁵¹

The KDP controls the provinces of Erbil and Duhok, and the PUK is dominant in Suleymaniya and Halabja. The parties divide government posts according to a mutual agreement and maintain their own Peshmerga forces and security and intelligence services.

The KDP and PUK have several long-running disputes, including over the sharing of revenues from border crossings and taxes, the management of the oil and gas industry and relations with the federal government.⁵² Relations were placed on edge by the October 2022 assassination of the intelligence officer Hawker Abdullah Rasoul (who had defected from the PUK to the KDP) in Erbil. The KDP accused the PUK of the killing, leading to heightened tensions that strained the power-sharing agreement.⁵³ Political relations deteriorated to such an extent that PUK ministers boycotted meetings of the regional government in Erbil. After about six months, the PUK finally ended this boycott on 14 May 2023, shortly after a meeting between KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani (KDP) and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani (PUK). The parties resumed dialogue concerning a variety of issues, including potential electoral reforms.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁸ IOM, *More support needed for survivors of the Sinjar massacre*, 4 August 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023.

⁴⁹ Confidential source, 8 November 2022; Reuters, *Insight: An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan*, 5 December 2022.

⁵⁰ Confidential source, 8 November 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023.

⁵¹ Amwaj, *Parliament brawl in Iraqi Kurdistan raises questions about détente*, 23 May 2023; confidential source, 1 June 2023.

⁵² Foreign Policy, *Iraqi Kurdistan's house of cards is collapsing*, 22 March 2023.

⁵³ BBC Monitoring, *Iraq: Kurdish weekly media highlights 1-7 March*, 7 March 2023; Reuters, *Kurdish PUK party returns to cabinet meetings after boycott*, 14 May 2023.

⁵⁴ The New Arab, *Iraqi Kurdistan parliament adjourned as mass brawl breaks out*, 23 May 2023.

Meanwhile, within the PUK, a long-running leadership battle continued to play out between the party's leader, Bafel Talabani, and his former co-president, Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabani. Lahur Sheikh Jangi was removed from his position in summer 2021 and tried to challenge it legally. Since then, the unrest within the party — which flared up partly in response to conflicting court rulings on the legitimacy of Jangi's deposition — has served to weaken the position of the PUK relative to the KDP.⁵⁵

It remained uncertain when regional elections could actually take place.⁵⁶ After being postponed several times, the elections were scheduled for 25 February 2024 at the time of writing.⁵⁷ The KRI last held general elections on 30 September 2018. A new vote was scheduled for 1 October 2022, but the regional parliament at the time voted to extend the term by another year, due to disagreements between the KDP and the PUK. On 30 May 2023, the Iraqi Supreme Court ruled that the extension of the KRG's parliamentary session was unconstitutional, meaning that all decisions since October 2022 had to be annulled.⁵⁸

1.1.5 *Impact of political conditions on citizens*

In both federal Iraq and the KRI, citizens face corruption, patronage and mismanagement by the authorities.⁵⁹ The political system that was introduced in federal Iraq after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has had a major impact on the stability (or lack thereof), governance and violence in the country.⁶⁰ Unlike the political system organised along ethnic sectarian lines (*muhāsasa*) and the associated structural problems, political conditions in federal Iraq changed significantly during the reporting period. The October 2021 elections were followed by a year of political stalemate, protests and violence before a new government was formed. In the meantime, the Iraqi government under the former prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (who stayed on until a new government was formed) struggled to meet the demands of the late 2019 protests. This led to what the UN Development Programme (UNDP) described as a further breakdown in the social contract between the government and its citizens.⁶¹

The entry of the al-Sudani government into office in late 2022 ended the political paralysis in federal Iraq and began a period of relative stability.⁶² Upon taking office, Prime Minister al-Sudani presented an ambitious plan. Amongst other things, he wanted to work on fighting corruption, implementing economic reforms and improving public services for the Iraqi people.⁶³ To international partners, the government projected the image that Iraq, after decades of turmoil and violence, was once again enjoying security and stability, making it a promising environment for investment. During a visit to Iraq in early March 2023, UN Secretary-General

⁵⁵ Al Sharq Strategic Research, *Intra-PUK rivalry and its implications for the Iraqi Kurdish political landscape*, 27 December 2021; Amwaj, *Party leadership battle reignites in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 27 February 2023; The New Arab, *Boycotts, factional tensions overshadow Iraqi Kurdistan ruling party's conference*, 29 September 2023.

⁵⁶ Amwaj, *Parliament brawl in Iraqi Kurdistan raises questions about détente*, 23 May 2023; confidential source, 1 June 2023.

⁵⁷ Rudaw, *President Barzani sets February 25 as the date of Kurdistan election*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁸ Reuters, *Iraqi Kurdistan 2022 parliament extension unconstitutional, supreme court rules*, 30 May 2023.

⁵⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security*, 17 March 2023.

⁶⁰ SAIS Review of International Affairs, *Why Iraq's consociation has become a driver for chronic instability*, 23 December 2022.

⁶¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Reimagining the Social Contract in Iraq*, May 2022, p. 26.

⁶² Reuters, *Analysis: Iraq enjoys respite from turmoil but risks remain*, 19 June 2023.

⁶³ Confidential source, 23 February 2023.

Guterres praised the country's progress towards stability under the new government.⁶⁴

During the reporting period, however, little changed in the challenges faced by the population, including the heavy influence of militias, large-scale corruption, difficult economic circumstances for average citizens and the impact of climate change.⁶⁵ The influence of the militias increased even further under the new government (see Section 1.1.1). The extent to which Iraq is facing systemic, politically sanctioned corruption was once again revealed in summer 2022 with the 'Robbery of the Century', in which USD 2.5 billion was embezzled from the Iraqi tax authorities.⁶⁶

No major reforms took place in these areas during the reporting period. According to several sources, instead of focusing on major challenges, the al-Sudani government has prioritised short-term, mainly public-friendly measures in the areas of social security, employment (almost exclusively in the public sector), infrastructure and services for now.⁶⁷

Although human rights were also mentioned in al-Sudani's 'Ministerial Statement', increased pressure on freedoms could be observed under the new government (see Section 3.2).⁶⁸ In addition, there was little progress during the reporting period on accountability for human rights violations committed by security forces and militias against peaceful protesters in late 2019 and early 2020.⁶⁹

Impact of political conditions on citizens in the KRI

For years after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdistan region of Iraq was hailed in the West as the 'other' Iraq, given the relative peace and prosperity there. Characterised by the division of power and rivalry between the KDP and the PUK, however, the political status quo in the KRI has caused widespread discontent amongst the region's population over the years. The decision to postpone elections in the KRI led to a lack of legitimacy for the regional government and parliament.⁷⁰ The de-facto two-party system in the region encouraged corruption.⁷¹ The patronage-based economy of the KDP and the PUK would no longer be able to provide jobs to the parties' supporters, partly due to strong population growth.⁷² According to various sources, the predominantly young population had little hope for political and economic reforms.⁷³ This is because citizens are limited in how they can respond to the dysfunctional duopoly of the two dominant parties. The opposition parties were divided, and their position was weak.⁷⁴ The political atmosphere in the

⁶⁴ France 24, *UN chief praises Iraqi progress towards stability in rare visit*, 2 March 2023; AP, *Iraq, Qatar agree to boost economic, energy cooperation during emir's visit to Baghdad*, 15 June 2023.

⁶⁵ ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023; SIPRI, *Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security*, 17 March 2023; Reuters, *Analysis: Iraq enjoys respite from turmoil but risks remain*, 19 June 2023.

⁶⁶ TCF, *Corruption is strangling Iraq*, 14 December 2022; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

⁶⁷ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; Clingendael, *Al-Sudani's First 100 Days*, 28 February 2023; ECFR, *From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-Invasion Journey*, 25 May 2023.

⁶⁸ MEI, *Taking stock of the first 100 days of Iraq's new government*, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 23 February 2023.

⁶⁹ Confidential source, 9 May 2022; HRW, *To Sleep the Law, Violence Against Protesters and Unaccountable Perpetrators in Iraq*, 29 November 2022.

⁷⁰ Foreign Policy, *Iraqi Kurdistan's house of cards is collapsing*, 22 March 2023.

⁷¹ ICG, *Iraqi Kurdistan twenty years after*, 6 April 2023.

⁷² Confidential source, 1 April 2023; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), *Escaping from Duopoly Rule, How a Two-Party System Drives Iraqi Kurdish Migration En Masse*, 26 May 2022, p. 4.

⁷³ Arab Reform Initiative, *Understanding the Roots of the Younger Generations' Despair in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 4 April 2023; ICG, *Iraqi Kurdistan twenty years after*, 6 April 2023; Reuters, *Kurdish PUK party returns to cabinet meetings after boycott*, 14 May 2023; KAS, *Escaping from Duopoly Rule, How a Two-Party System Drives Iraqi Kurdish Migration En Masse*, 26 May 2022.

⁷⁴ Foreign Policy, *Iraqi Kurdistan's house of cards is collapsing*, 22 March 2023.

previous and current reporting periods was further characterised by restrictions on freedom of expression (see Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2).⁷⁵

According to some sources, the power competition and increased tensions between the KDP and PUK contributed to a lack of attention to such issues as public services and high unemployment.⁷⁶ The lack of unity weakened the KRG's influence relative to the federal government, and it therefore complicated discussions with the federal government on the sharing of oil revenues, as well as allocations in the federal budget. The impact was felt by the many citizens in the Kurdistan region who are dependent on this system. Two of every three households in the Kurdistan region are said to be dependent on a government salary or pension, but payments were chronically late, which according to regional authorities was due to tensions with the federal government.⁷⁷

Finally, according to some sources, the internal Kurdish feud between the KDP and PUK made the KRI more vulnerable to external (military) interference (see Section 1.2.4). Attacks by neighbouring Türkiye and Iran on Turkish- and Iranian-Kurdish (armed) groups, respectively, in Iraqi-Kurdish territory underscored the KRI's limited control over its own borders.⁷⁸

Increased discontentment amongst the KRI population became more widely visible during the EU-Belarus border crisis of late 2021, when thousands of Iraqi Kurds tried to reach the EU.⁷⁹ Even after that, political and socio-economic conditions continued to push Kurds (especially young ones) to leave the KRI.⁸⁰ A May 2022 report by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) identified the lack of meaningful political and economic reforms and the fact that a growing share of the population did not benefit from KDP and PUK patronage networks as factors contributing to the continuing migration of Iraqi Kurds to Europe.⁸¹

1.2 Security situation

1.2.1 *Relations and confrontations between actors*

During the reporting period, there were no developments regarding the border between federal Iraq and the KRI, and no protracted confrontations took place between key Iraqi actors. Although relations between the federal government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil remained difficult, the ongoing disputes⁸² did not lead to military confrontations. There were also no significant developments regarding ISIS, which has not exercised control over Iraqi territory since 2017. The group's presence and activities reportedly did not change perceptibly.⁸³ ISIS had limited capabilities in cities, but continued to launch attacks in rural areas on occasion,

⁷⁵ UNAMI, *Freedom of Expression in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, May 2021; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

⁷⁶ AFP, *Baggage of despair: Iraqi Kurd plans new escape to Europe*, 12 July 2022; Reuters, *Kurdish PUK party returns to cabinet meetings after boycott*, 14 May 2023.

⁷⁷ Rudaw, *KRG to allocate cash to resolve salary issue in Sulaimani, Halabja: official*, 17 May 2022; AFP, *Baggage of despair: Iraqi Kurd plans new escape to Europe*, 12 July 2022; Reuters, *An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan*, 5 December 2022.

⁷⁸ Reuters, *An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan*, 5 December 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023.

⁷⁹ Amwaj, *Why Iraqi Kurds are seeking refuge in Europe*, 23 November 2021.

⁸⁰ AFP, *Baggage of despair: Iraqi Kurd plans new escape to Europe*, 12 July 2022; ICG, *Iraqi Kurdistan twenty years after*, 6 April 2023.

⁸¹ KAS, *Escaping from Duopoly Rule, How a Two-Party System Drives Iraqi Kurdish Migration En Masse*, 26 May 2022.

⁸² See Section 1.1.2.

⁸³ Confidential source, 13 August 2023.

particularly in and around disputed territories in parts of Diyala, Kirkuk and Salaheddin, as well as north of Baghdad (in Tarmiyah; see also Section 1.2.2, under 'Baghdad').⁸⁴ In doing so, the group took advantage of the security vacuum in the disputed territories between federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region.⁸⁵

The security situation remained fragmented and volatile, however, especially in the year between elections in October 2021 and the assumption of the al-Sudani government.⁸⁶ Confrontations between rival Shia militias in federal Iraq, along with Turkish and Iranian operations against Kurdish groups in the KRI underscored the limited control of federal and Kurdish authorities over their own territories, as well as the lack of a monopoly on violence.⁸⁷ According to some sources, although the PMF are part of the state on paper, in practice, the state has only limited control over the militias belonging to the PMF.⁸⁸ Within the territory under the administration of the Baghdad government, there are strategic locations — including areas bordering Syria and Iran — where PMF militias exert considerable influence.⁸⁹ PMF militias also continued to block the return of displaced persons to some places they controlled (see also Section 3.3.2, under 'Sunni Arabs').⁹⁰

Organised crime is widespread in Iraq. According to some sources, most political and armed actors were involved in some way. Militias and illegal activities were closely linked. Such activities included drug and arms smuggling and abductions.⁹¹ According to one source, Iraq was transforming from a transit country for drugs to one for their production and consumption.⁹² Drug crime and related violence were a particularly visible problem in the southern provinces of Maysan, Dhi Qar and Basra.⁹³

Tensions between the dominant Shia camps — that of Muqtada al-Sadr and that of Iran-aligned Shia political parties and militias — increased after al-Sadr's election win and erupted into brief, intense and large-scale violence around the formation of the government. This occurred after al-Sadr announced his withdrawal from politics in August 2022, in the midst of the protracted stalemate over the formation. Heavy fighting broke out in the International Zone (the high-security part of Baghdad where government institutions, embassies and UN organisations are located) between al-Sadr supporters and rival Iranian-backed groups.⁹⁴ Al-Sadr's supporters include Iraqis from the poorest sections of the population and his militia, *Saraya al-Salam*.⁹⁵ Amongst those fighting on the other side was the prominent pro-Iranian

⁸⁴ Confidential source, 15 December 2022; The Arab Weekly, *Five years after its defeat, periodic ISIS attacks still claim lives in Iraq*, 20 January 2023; UNSC, *Seventeenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat*, 12 August 2023, p. 7.

⁸⁵ ECFR, *From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-Invasion Journey*, 25 May 2023; UNSC, *Seventeenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat*, 12 August 2023, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Confidential source, 15 December 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁸⁷ The Guardian, *'Who will protect us?': Baghdad residents wait out fighting as city grinds to halt*, 30 August 2022; confidential source, 15 December 2022.

⁸⁸ Confidential source, 15 December 2022; MERIP, *The political logic behind Iraq's fragmented armed forces*, 2023.

⁸⁹ The Century Foundation, *Order from Ashes podcast: A tale of two border towns*, 4 April 2023; Carnegie Middle East Center, *Border crossings: The unholy alliance between Iran and Iraqi militias*, 28 April 2023.

⁹⁰ Confidential source, 20 July 2022.

⁹¹ Global Organized Crime Index, *Criminality in Iraq, 2021*, <https://ocindex.net/country/iraq>; confidential source, 15 December 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁹² Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁹³ AFP, *Drugs, tribes, politics a deadly mix in Iraq border province*, 23 February 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁹⁴ LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023.

⁹⁵ Chatham House, *Understanding Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Inside Baghdad's Sadr City*, 8 August 2022.

militia *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*.⁹⁶ Security forces did not seem to intervene in the two-day confrontation between the two camps, which had taken up positions on either side of the International Zone.⁹⁷ According to one source, there were at least 63 fatalities, the vast majority of whom were supporters of al-Sadr.⁹⁸ During the outbreak of violence, normal daily life came to a halt in parts of Baghdad.⁹⁹ Violent clashes between the rival Shia camps also took place in the southern city of Basra, killing at least 4 people.¹⁰⁰ Fears amongst some Iraqis of an intra-Shiite civil war peaked during this period.¹⁰¹ According to one source, despite the severe tensions and feuds between the Shia factions, there was no conflict at the level of the Shia population that was intense enough to justify fears of civil war.¹⁰² Although tensions eased when Prime Minister al-Sudani's government, backed by pro-Iranian factions, took office in October 2022, it remained unclear whether al-Sadr would come to terms with the new situation.¹⁰³

During the reporting period, the KRI witnessed the worst political crisis since the Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s (see Section 1.1.4). According to some sources, although a return to the violence of that period was considered unlikely, increased hostility between the KDP and the PUK posed a serious threat to stability in the region.¹⁰⁴

In May 2022, a confrontation took place in the Sinjar district in Ninewa province, with significant humanitarian consequences for the local population. Clashes between the Iraqi army and the armed group Sinjar Resistance Units (*Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*, YBS) resulted in casualties on both sides.¹⁰⁵ The YBS reportedly has links to the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Workers' Party) and consists mainly of local Yazidi fighters.¹⁰⁶ Tension between the two sides had risen as a combination of Turkish airstrikes against PKK and YBS targets (the Turkish operation 'Claw Lock'; see also Section 1.2.4), and attempts by the Iraqi army to consolidate the authority of the federal authorities over Sinjar placed considerable pressure on the YBS.¹⁰⁷ According to humanitarian organisations, more than ten thousand civilians from the area were displaced (or re-displaced). Most ended up in displacement camps in Duhok province.¹⁰⁸ The International Crisis Group reported that the situation in Sinjar remained tense after the brief confrontation and that residents feared further escalation.¹⁰⁹ The fighting was one of the factors that prevented Yazidis residing in the KRI as displaced persons from returning to their original places of residence in the Sinjar district (see Section 3.3.2).¹¹⁰

⁹⁶ LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023.

⁹⁷ The Guardian, 'Who will protect us?': Baghdad residents wait out fighting as city grinds to halt, 30 August 2022.

⁹⁸ LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023, p. 18.

⁹⁹ The Guardian, 'Who will protect us?': Baghdad residents wait out fighting as city grinds to halt, 30 August 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Reuters, *Clashes in Iraq's Basra kill four as crisis flares in oil-rich south*, 1 September 2022.

¹⁰¹ PBS News Hour, *Why there was an attempt to assassinate Iraq's PM*, 9 November 2021; The Guardian, 'Who will protect us?': Baghdad residents wait out fighting as city grinds to halt, 30 August 2022; LSE Middle East Centre, *Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces during the 2022 Post-Election Crisis*, April 2023, p. 6.

¹⁰² Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

¹⁰³ Confidential source, 15 December 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Reuters, *Insight: An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan*, 5 December 2022; ICG, *Iraq: Staving off instability in the near and distant futures*, 31 January 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Al Jazeera, *Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq*, 2 May 2022.

¹⁰⁶ ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, 31 May 2022, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, 31 May 2022, p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ Al Jazeera, *Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq*, 2 May 2022; Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), *Iraq: Conflict, destruction stopping displaced families from returning to Sinjar*, 18 May 2022.

¹⁰⁹ ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, 31 May 2022, p. 18.

¹¹⁰ NRC, *Iraq: Conflict, destruction stopping displaced families from returning to Sinjar*, 18 May 2022.

1.2.2 General security situation for civilians

Some analysts considered the security situation during the reporting period to have been the most stable in years, especially after a government was formed in October 2022.¹¹¹ In the period since October 2022, air strikes attributed to Türkiye in the Kurdistan region were the most notable incidents of violence at the national level. Furthermore, although armed violence continued to occur in various forms, it was more sporadic, fragmented and localised.¹¹² As part of expanded media coverage of the country twenty years after the start of the 2003 US-led invasion, international media reported the arrival of a few Western tour operators and tourists, as well as the possibility of taking long trips across the country.¹¹³ Construction and reconstruction efforts took place in several places in the country, including Baghdad and cities in Anbar province.¹¹⁴

No significant terrorist attacks took place during the reporting period. In addition, there were no sustained anti-government demonstrations on the scale of the *Tishreen* protests of 2019-2020. Peripheral areas in federal Iraq and the KRI experienced regular violent confrontations and casualties (including civilians) as a result of various conflicts involving various non-state and (external) state actors (see Section 1.2.4), as well as due to tribal violence (see Section 3.2.4).

Baghdad

The security incidents with the most impact on daily life were related to mounting tensions within the context of elections and government formation (see Section 1.2.1).¹¹⁵ During this reporting period, the International Zone (IZ) was also the target of rocket attacks, widely assumed to have been carried out by Shia militias. In October 2022, missiles were fired at the IZ shortly before the parliament began a session to elect a new president.¹¹⁶ One month earlier, a similar incident had occurred when the parliament voted on its Speaker.¹¹⁷ In January 2023, certain checkpoints and concrete barriers around the heavily fortified IZ were removed, and entrances and roads were opened as part of measures to reduce traffic congestion in the city.¹¹⁸

Some sources regarded the security situation in the capital as volatile.¹¹⁹ In July 2023, incidents involving the Quran in Sweden and Denmark led to security incidents in Baghdad, disrupting the relative calm of the previous months. After a Quran burning in Stockholm was announced — for the second time within weeks — al-Sadr mobilised his supporters to protest. Several hundred of al-Sadr's supporters stormed the Swedish embassy, during which fires were also ignited. Two days later, following the burning of a Quran in Copenhagen, supporters of al-Sadr attempted to reach the Danish embassy. Because the IZ was completely closed, however, they

¹¹¹ SIPRI, *Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security*, 17 March 2023; ECFR, *From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-Invasion Journey*, 25 May 2023; Foreign Affairs, *Iraq is quietly falling apart*, 5 June 2023.

¹¹² SIPRI, *Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security*, 17 March 2023.

¹¹³ Al Jazeera, *Iraq tourism making comeback after years of war*, 17 April 2022; FT, *Iraq, 20 years on*, 6 March 2023; Reuters, *Iraq's ancient sites, fragile stability spur new trickle of tourists*, 11 July 2023; BBC, *The Tigris: The river that birthed civilization*, 1 August 2023.

¹¹⁴ Confidential source, 20 July 2022; NY Times, *Baghdad loses green space to real estate boom*, 31 January 2023; Reuters, *Baghdad gets make-over as repairs kindle guarded optimism*, 16 May 2023.

¹¹⁵ Al Jazeera, *Uneasy calm in Baghdad after assassination attempt on Iraq PM*, 10 November 2021.

¹¹⁶ Reuters, *Rockets strike Iraq's Green Zone as deadlocked parliament meets*, 13 October 2022.

¹¹⁷ Reuters, *Rockets land in Baghdad Green Zone as parliament votes on speaker*, 28 September 2022.

¹¹⁸ The New Arab, *Barriers around Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone lifted to ease Baghdad traffic*, 8 January 2023.

¹¹⁹ Stimson Center, *Five days in Baghdad: Reassessing security in Iraq*, 28 June 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

were unable reach their target. According to some sources, these incidents should also be regarded within the Iraqi political context, as part of the power struggle between the two dominant Shia camps. The incidents were seen by many as a signal from al-Sadr that he was still enjoying great influence, almost a year after he had declared he was leaving Iraqi politics.¹²⁰

ISIS remained active in the Tarmiyah district, just north of the capital, where ISIS fighters regularly carried out attacks on security personnel (army and militia).¹²¹

Mosul

According to some sources, the security situation in Mosul has improved in recent years, and it remained stable during the reporting period.¹²² As in the previous reporting period, no significant security incidents were known to have taken place in the city.¹²³

Although reconstruction has taken place in some parts of Mosul, such efforts have lagged behind in other parts. In the western half of the city, public roads and facilities (such as hospitals and schools) remained heavily damaged.¹²⁴ The presence of unexploded ordnance continued to affect the safety of civilians. It also made reconstruction more difficult, thereby restricting civilian access to healthcare, education and other services.¹²⁵

In Mosul, PMF militias have maintained a strong presence since the city was recaptured from ISIS in 2017.¹²⁶ Although the frequency of security incidents has decreased since that time, one source noted that Mosul continued to face an undercurrent of intimidation and fear, due to the presence and activities of militias.¹²⁷ According to another source, in the months after the October 2021 elections, PMF militias in Mosul and other parts of Ninewa province cracked down on the local population in their extortion and repressive practices.¹²⁸

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that the Turkish consulate in Mosul was shelled with mortars in July 2022. There were no casualties. The incident occurred a week after at least eight civilians were killed in an attack attributed to the Turkish military in Duhok province.¹²⁹

Basra

In the southern city of Basra, the security situation was characterised by militia violence, tribal violence and drug-related crime.¹³⁰ In December 2022, an

¹²⁰ Reuters, *Analysis: Iraqi cleric Sadr flexes muscle with torching of Swedish embassy*, 21 July 2023; confidential source, 23 July 2023.

¹²¹ AFP, *Four Iraqi soldiers killed in raid on suspected ISIS fighters*, 16 February 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; BBC Monitoring, *IS boasts about recent attack north of Baghdad*, 25 May 2023.

¹²² Confidential source, 3 July 2022; MSF, *Iraq: Five years after the battle of Mosul, people still need support*, 8 July 2022.

¹²³ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 18.

¹²⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Iraq: Life in Mosul through a child's eyes*, 13 December 2021; NRC, *5 years since Mosul retaking, young people face education, employment crisis*, 6 July 2022; LandInfo, *Iraq: Situasjonen i Mosul*, 23 December 2022, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Handicap International, *No Safe Recovery: The Impact of Explosive Ordnance Contamination on Affected Populations in Iraq*, October 2021, p. 7; ICRC, *Iraq: Life in Mosul through a child's eyes*, 13 December 2021.

¹²⁶ Reuters, *Special report: Inside the proxy battle that keeps an Iraqi city on its knees*, 11 June 2020; Al-Monitor, *How Mosul's liberators became occupiers*, 1 December 2021; Foreign Policy, *Five years after liberation, there is new hope among Mosul's ruins*, 9 July 2022.

¹²⁷ Foreign Policy, *Five years after liberation, there is new hope among Mosul's ruins*, 9 July 2022.

¹²⁸ Brookings, *New vulnerabilities for Iraq's resilient Popular Mobilization Forces*, 3 February 2022.

¹²⁹ Reuters, *Turkey says its consulate in Iraq's Mosul attacked*, 27 July 2022.

¹³⁰ Emirates Policy Center, *Tribes of Basra: The Political, Social, and Security Issues*, 29 March 2022; Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), *"If I Leave... I Cannot Breathe": Climate Change and Civilian Protection in Iraq*, July

explosives-laden motorbike exploded in the city centre, killing four people and injuring several others. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.¹³¹

The province of Basra is Iraq's main oil-producing hub, but it is disadvantaged by the authorities.¹³² Shia militias have substantial influence there.¹³³ According to some sources, they were intertwined with the city's administration and population, due to a combination of tribal structures and the recruitment strategies of the militias.¹³⁴ In August 2022, tensions and armed confrontation between al-Sadr supporters and rival PMF militias in Baghdad also spread to Basra (and other cities in Iraq's predominantly Shia south). In late August 2022, clashes between the two camps in Basra left four dead, including some supporters of al-Sadr.¹³⁵

In Basra, as in other cities in southern Iraq, tensions also played out between recently-arrived climate migrants¹³⁶ and the city's original inhabitants, at a time when there was a lack of housing, basic services and economic opportunities. In recent years, there has been an increase in migrants from nearby agricultural areas, who were forced to leave their original habitats due to a scarcity of water, and who have been looking for better opportunities for securing a livelihood. These migrants faced discrimination and hostile rhetoric from locals and authorities in Basra and other cities in the south. Amongst other things, they were accused of bringing a primitive mentality and tribal violence to the city, and the authorities have used them as scapegoats for various problems (for instance, drug-related violence). According to analysts, it is precisely the difficult conditions in informal settlements in Basra (including discrimination and lack of basic services and employment) that are likely to push migrants into crime.¹³⁷

Erbil

Between March and July 2022, a series of attacks took place on targets in Erbil (the capital of the KRI), as well as in the province of the same name. In March 2022, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) carried out an attack on the city with more than ten ballistic missiles (see also Section 1.2.4, under 'Iranian military operations'). These missiles landed near a new US consulate building. One person was reportedly injured in this attack.¹³⁸ At least three missile attacks also took place during this period, targeting oil refineries in Erbil province. As far as is known, no

2022, p. 15; United Nations University, *Managing Exits from Conflict in Iraq: A Case Study of Basra and Tal Afar*, August 2022, p. 23; IOM, *Toward a safer Basra: Rebuilding trust through community engagement and policing*, 27 October 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

¹³¹ AP, *Motorcycle bombing in southern Iraqi city of Basra kills 4*, 7 December 2021.

¹³² International Peacekeeping, *The Collective Neglect of Southern Iraq: Missed Opportunities for Development and Good Governance*, 1 July 2022; confidential source, 22 January 2023; IOM and Social Inquiry, *Drivers of Marginalization and Neglect among Citizens in the South of Iraq*, 2023.

¹³³ Nieuwsuur, *IS verjaagd en Iraq vergeten: zo gaat het daar nu* (video), 1 October 2022; confidential source, 22 January 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023, Princeton University, *A Vicious Circle: State-Building, Climate Change Vulnerability and the Monopoly of Violence in Basra, Iraq*, 26 May 2023.

¹³⁴ Chatham House, *The Basra blueprint and the future of protest in Iraq*, 8 October 2019, confidential source, 27 March 2023.

¹³⁵ Reuters, *Clashes in Iraq's Basra kill four as crisis flares in oil-rich south*, 1 September 2022; Nieuwsuur, *IS verjaagd en Iraq vergeten: zo gaat het daar nu* (video), 1 October 2022.

¹³⁶ According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), at least 83,000 people had been displaced in southern and central Iraq between June 2018 and June 2023, due to climate change and environmental degradation: DW, *How climate change causes culture clashes in Iraq's cities*, 24 July 2023.

¹³⁷ Anwaj, *New arrivals spark nativist backlash in Iraq's Karbala*, 17 September 2021; IOM and Social Inquiry, *Migration into a Fragile Setting: Responding to Climate-Induced Informal Urbanization and Inequality in Basra, Iraq*, October 2021; CIVIC, *"If I Leave... I Cannot Breathe": Climate Change and Civilian Protection in Iraq*, July 2022, p. 15; The Washington Post, *Climate migration in Iraq's south brings crisis to cities*, 7 September 2022; Nieuwsuur, *IS verjaagd en Iraq vergeten: zo gaat het daar nu* (video), 1 October 2022; IOM, *Toward a safer Basra: Rebuilding trust through community engagement and policing*, 27 October 2022; confidential source, 9 March 2023; DW, *How climate change causes culture clashes in Iraq's cities*, 24 July 2023.

¹³⁸ Al-Monitor, *Iran missile attack on Erbil goes beyond retaliation for IRGC deaths*, 13 March 2023; Reuters, *Iran attacks Iraq's Erbil with missiles in warning to U.S., allies*, 13 March 2022.

one has claimed responsibility for these attacks.¹³⁹ In June 2022, an explosives-laden drone exploded in a suburb of Erbil, injuring civilians and causing material damage. According to a statement from the KRG counter-terrorism department, the drone had been shot down. No one claimed responsibility for the drone.¹⁴⁰

In Erbil and throughout the KRI, firearm violence with fatalities occurred regularly throughout the reporting period.¹⁴¹ According to police in Erbil, 62 killings and 60 shooting incidents were recorded in the city in 2022. After a student in Erbil killed two academics in June 2022, the KRG prime minister, Masrour Barzani, ordered a ban on the sale of firearms to civilians and the confiscation of unlicensed weapons. According to the Kurdish news source Rudaw, some seventy percent of the population of the KRI possess firearms.¹⁴² The measure and an accompanying KRG campaign to restrict access to weapons were unlikely to have had much effect.¹⁴³

Diyala

The security situation in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad and bordering the KRI and Iran, remained relatively unstable throughout the reporting period. One source referred to Diyala as one of the most complex and unsafe places in Iraq.¹⁴⁴ In this province, among other things there was violence against civilians and displacement during the reporting period.¹⁴⁵ As also described in the previous country of origin information report, it was not always possible to determine who was behind a specific attack.¹⁴⁶

Diyala was one of the areas where ISIS still claimed attacks.¹⁴⁷ ISIS was particularly active in the north of the province, where fighters from the group reportedly used the rugged terrain in the Hamrin Mountains as their base of operations.¹⁴⁸ Due to tensions remaining from the fight against ISIS between Shiites and Sunnis (including those returning from displacement) in the province, alleged ISIS attacks on civilians there regularly led to retaliatory attacks.¹⁴⁹

The security situation was also affected by rivalry between militias and their tribal and political allies, who were competing for influence and networks of smuggling and extortion. A strategic route for smuggling weapons, drugs and other goods runs through Diyala from the Iranian border towards Syria and Lebanon.¹⁵⁰ Since the fight against ISIS, Diyala has been dominated by the Badr organisation, a militia that was established in Iran in the 1980s (and that has been affiliated with the PMF

¹³⁹ Reuters, *Missile attack causes tank fire in oil refinery in Iraq*, 2 May 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Reuters, *Explosive drone detonates in Iraq's northern city of Erbil*, 9 June 2022.

¹⁴¹ Rudaw, *70 percent of people in Kurdistan Region own weapons, says official*, 27 April 2021; The National, *Kurdish region of Iraq bans gun sales after deadly shootings*, 30 June 2022.

¹⁴² Rudaw, *Erbil court sentences student to death for killing lecturers*, 22 June 2023.

¹⁴³ Kurdistan Regional Government, *KRG to tighten gun laws in Kurdistan*, 1 May 2023; Rudaw, *Suspect arrested for killing three in Erbil*, 7 June 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

¹⁴⁵ The Washington Post, *An ISIS attack in Iraq provokes conflict between neighbors, stirring sectarian violence*, 12 November 2021; Amnesty International, *Report 2021/22, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2022, p. 204.

¹⁴⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 16; AP, *Spiking violence strains sectarian ties in Iraqi province*, 25 March 2023.

¹⁴⁷ The Washington Post, *An ISIS attack in Iraq provokes conflict between neighbors, stirring sectarian violence*, 12 November 2021; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Monitor, *Islamic State wipes out entire army outpost in Iraq's Diyala*, 21 January 2022.

¹⁴⁹ The Washington Post, *An ISIS attack in Iraq provokes conflict between neighbors, stirring sectarian violence*, 12 November 2021; AP, *Spiking violence strains sectarian ties in Iraqi province*, 25 March 2023.

¹⁵⁰ LSE, *Searching for ghosts: Fighting corruption at Iraq's border crossings*, 24 February 2021; AP, *Spiking violence strains sectarian ties in Iraqi province*, 25 March 2023; confidential source, 1 April 2023.

since 2014), which has its own political branch.¹⁵¹ According to one source, during the reporting period, this militia managed to maintain its hold on Diyala relative to rival groups.¹⁵²

According to Iraqi authorities, at least 300 families were driven out of their villages in Diyala in October and November 2021. This is said to have occurred after individuals in cars marked with the PMF insignia attacked the village and set fire to buildings in retaliation for an attack by ISIS earlier that month, in which at least 11 people were killed.¹⁵³

A series of attacks occurred in the districts of al-Muqdadiyah and al-Khalis in February and March 2023, reportedly killing at least 19 civilians. The identity of the perpetrators was not disclosed. At least one of the deadly incidents of violence allegedly involved a sectarian reprisal by Shiites against Sunnis in a neighbouring village, due to an attack attributed to ISIS with Shiite civilian casualties in December 2022. Such incidents of violence led to protests by tribal groups, who accused armed militias of committing the killings.¹⁵⁴ According to one source, killings were also committed by Shiites on Shiites, in the fight for influence between rival Shia militias.¹⁵⁵

In March 2023, Prime Minister al-Sudani visited the province and ordered military reinforcements to control the security situation.¹⁵⁶ In early 2023, Diyala ranked as the area with the least government and NGO support for displaced persons returning home. The unstable security situation complicated the ability of NGOs to access return areas.¹⁵⁷

1.2.3 *Politically motivated attacks*

Baghdad experienced several politically motivated attacks targeting governmental and foreign targets, attributed to PMF militias. On 7 November 2021, unknown actors using drones laden with explosives carried out an attack on the residence of then-Prime Minister al-Kadhimi in the International Zone, reportedly injuring some of his bodyguards. No one claimed responsibility. The attack occurred in the aftermath of the October 2021 parliamentary elections — in which pro-Iranian factions lost — and at the beginning of a lengthy formation process. Supporters of Iranian-backed Shia parties and militias claimed — without providing evidence — that electoral fraud had been committed, and they protested for weeks near Iraqi government buildings.¹⁵⁸ The attack took place shortly after at least one protestor was killed in clashes between these supporters and security forces.¹⁵⁹

In January 2022, a multiple missile attack was carried out on the US embassy complex in the International Zone. In this incident, a woman and a child were injured and a school was damaged when a missile hit a nearby residential

¹⁵¹ Carnegie, *Badr at the forefront of Iraq's Shia militias*, 13 August 2015; LSE, *Searching for ghosts: Fighting corruption at Iraq's border crossings*, 24 February 2021; AP, *Spiking violence strains sectarian ties in Iraqi province*, 25 March 2023.

¹⁵² Confidential source, 1 April 2023.

¹⁵³ Amnesty International, *Report 2021/22, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2022, p. 204.

¹⁵⁴ BBC Monitoring, *Iraqi doctors call for nationwide strike over attacks on medical staff*, 27 February 2023.

¹⁵⁵ AP, *Spiking violence strains sectarian ties in Iraqi province*, 25 March 2023.

¹⁵⁶ BBC Monitoring, *Iraqi PM gives commanders ultimatum to maintain security in Diyala*, 9 March 2023.

¹⁵⁷ REACH, *Rapid Assessment on Returns and Durable Solutions (ReDS): Governorate Profiles – Diyala – Iraq (February 2023)*, 29 March 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Reuters, *Iran-backed militia staged drone attack on Iraqi PM – officials*, 8 November 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Reuters, *Iraqi PM decries 'cowardly' attack on his home by drones carrying explosives*, 8 November 2021.

complex.¹⁶⁰ The attack followed a series of attacks earlier that month — which the US attributed to pro-Iranian militias — on US targets in Iraq and north-east Syria, in which there were no US casualties.¹⁶¹

In the KRI, politically motivated attacks were carried out within the context of the internal Iraqi-Kurdish power competition between the KDP and the PUK, as well as within the context of Turkish and Iranian operations against members of non-Iraqi Kurdish groups (see Section 1.2.4).¹⁶²

Several attacks within the former context targeted senior security officials. A car bomb attack on 7 October 2022 in Erbil killed intelligence officer Hawker Abdullah, who had defected from the PUK to the KDP. The KDP accused the PUK of the killing, and a court in Erbil convicted PUK members *in absentia*. The PUK denied responsibility for the attack.¹⁶³ In July 2023, a former intelligence officer of the KDP-affiliated *Parastin* security service, Mohammed Mirza Sindi, was killed in an attack in Duhok. The KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani ordered an investigation into this killing.¹⁶⁴ The Kurdistan Region Security Council accused the PKK of the killing.¹⁶⁵

1.2.4 Foreign actors

During the reporting period, Türkiye and Iran continued military operations in northern Iraq against the PKK and (in most cases, armed) Iranian-Kurdish political parties, respectively, with direct consequences for members of these groups, as well as for Iraqi civilians.¹⁶⁶ The EU has officially designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation. For additional information on the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK in Türkiye, see the August 2023 general country of origin information report on Türkiye.¹⁶⁷

Turkish military operations

The Turkish army continued operations against the PKK and affiliated fighters around Sinjar, as well as in the remote and mountainous border areas with Türkiye in the KRI. Türkiye invoked the right of self-defence¹⁶⁸ and claimed that the operations were aimed at countering attacks by the PKK on Turkish territory.¹⁶⁹ According to the International Crisis Group, nearly 1,200 PKK fighters were killed in Iraq between 2015 and 2023. According to the NGO Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT) and an international civil society coalition known as the End Cross Border Bombing Campaign, at least 98 civilians were killed in Turkish attacks between 2015 and 2021. According to Iraqi-Kurdish sources, Türkiye is said to have established about fifty new military posts on Iraqi territory in the past three years, as it stepped up its offensive against the PKK.¹⁷⁰ By 2022, civilian deaths were said to have

¹⁶⁰ Al Jazeera, *Two civilians wounded in rocket attack on Baghdad's Green Zone*, 13 January 2022; UNICEF, *Statement – One child injured and a school damaged in Baghdad rocket attack*, 14 January 2022.

¹⁶¹ Al Jazeera, *Two civilians wounded in rocket attack on Baghdad's Green Zone*, 13 January 2022; Reuters, *Rockets fired at U.S. embassy in Baghdad hurt Iraqi woman, child – military*, 13 January 2022.

¹⁶² Confidential source, 14 February 2023; The National, *Assassinations spark fears for Iraqi Kurdistan's stability before elections*, 24 July 2023.

¹⁶³ Reuters, *Insight: An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan*, 5 December 2022; Asharq al-Awsat, *Erbil court sentences six to death for killing colonel in anti-terrorism service*, 5 June 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Reuters, *Former Iraqi Kurdish intelligence official killed in car explosion – source*, 23 July; The National, *Assassinations spark fears for Iraqi Kurdistan's stability before elections*, 24 July 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Rudaw, *Kurdish security council blames PKK for general's death*, 29 July 2023.

¹⁶⁶ HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, pp. 322-323; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 201.

¹⁶⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Türkiye*, August 2023, p. 15.

¹⁶⁸ As stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter.

¹⁶⁹ Republic of Türkiye – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations between Türkiye and Iraq*, date unknown; Reuters, *Insight: Turkey's push into Iraq risks deeper conflict*, 31 January 2023; Anadolu Agency, *Turkish military 'neutralizes' 4 PKK terrorists in northern Iraq*, 26 June 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Reuters, *Insight: Turkey's push into Iraq risks deeper conflict*, 31 January 2023.

increased compared to previous years. The CPT and the End Cross Border Bombing Campaign reported that at least 18 civilians were killed and 57 were injured in Turkish military operations in Iraq in 2022.¹⁷¹

In July 2022, artillery shelling killed nine people (including three children) and wounded at least twenty at a water park in Duhok province. The Iraqi prime minister at that time, al-Kadhimi, blamed Turkish troops for the attack.¹⁷² In border areas where fighting took place between the Turkish army and the PKK, there were also reportedly civilian casualties and Turkish shelling caused material damage in villages.¹⁷³

During the reporting period, Türkiye carried out attacks on targets in various locations in northern Iraq, from Sinjar in the west to Suleymaniya in the east. Turkish airstrikes against the PKK and the YBS in Sinjar were one of the factors preventing Yazidi displaced persons from returning to their original area of residence (see 3.3.2).¹⁷⁴ According to ACLED, between April and December 2022, there was a significant increase in Turkish airstrikes against PKK targets under the Turkish Operation Claw-Lock.¹⁷⁵

In April 2023, the Iraqi government blamed Türkiye for a drone attack on Suleymaniya airport, in which there were reportedly no casualties. According to Kurdish and US sources, Mazloum Abdi — the leader of the Kurdish-led militia from northeastern Syria known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — was part of a convoy targeted in the attack, along with US military personnel. The attack took place shortly after Türkiye closed its airspace to planes to and from Suleymaniya.¹⁷⁶ This flight ban was still being upheld by Türkiye at the end of the reporting period.¹⁷⁷

In June 2023, shortly after the re-election of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 28 May 2023, the PKK ended a unilateral ceasefire that had begun in February 2023. According to ACLED, Türkiye expanded the geographical scope of its drone attacks in Iraq. Whereas Turkish attacks had previously concentrated primarily in border areas in Duhok, regular attacks occurred in Erbil and Suleymaniya provinces from June onwards. As also reported by ACLED, the number of PKK attacks on Turkish troops increased in the provinces of Erbil and Duhok as well.¹⁷⁸

According to some sources, the Turkish army further increased the frequency of its drone attacks in August 2023, with attacks taking place deep within the territory of

¹⁷¹ Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT), *Civilian Casualties of Turkish Bombardments in Northern Iraq in 2022*, 31 July 2023.

¹⁷² UNICEF, *The use of explosive weapons in populated areas must STOP – UNICEF strongly condemns the killing of three children in Iraq*, 20 July 2022; AFP, *Iraq PM condemns Turkey after Kurdistan strike kills 9 civilians*, 20 July 2022; Peregraf, *'I lost two flowers': Parents mourn children killed in Turkish artillery strike in Zakho*, 22 July 2022.

¹⁷³ Reuters, *Insight: Turkey's push into Iraq risks deeper conflict*, 31 January 2023; CPT, *Teenage farmers targeted by Turkish base*, 18 July 2023; Rudaw, *Turkish bombardment worries residents in Duhok district*, 18 August 2023.

¹⁷⁴ The New Statesman, *Massacred by Islamic State, Yazidis now face Turkish airstrikes*, 6 October 2021; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq's Sinjar, Yazidi returns crawl to a halt amid fears of Turkish airstrikes*, 10 February 2022; Al-Monitor, *Turkish attacks stop displaced Iraqi Yazidis from returning home*, 12 February 2022.

¹⁷⁵ ACLED, *The Muqawama and its Enemies. Shifting Patterns in Iran-Backed Shiite Militia Activity in Iraq*, 23 May 2023.

¹⁷⁶ Reuters, *Iraq calls on Turkey to apologize for attack on Sulaymaniya airport*, 9 April 2023.

¹⁷⁷ Rudaw, *Unidentified drone injures two people in Sulaimani province*, 9 August 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Iraq: Kurdish weekly media highlights 23-29 August*, 29 August 2023.

¹⁷⁸ ACLED, *Regional overview, Middle East, June 2023*, 6 July 2023.

the KRI.¹⁷⁹ According to local reports, these actions sometimes involved civilian casualties.¹⁸⁰ It was notable that several attacks took place on busy main roads in the Kurdistan region, thereby increasing the likelihood of civilian casualties.¹⁸¹

In September 2023, the Iraqi government accused Türkiye of carrying out a drone attack on the small Arbat military airport, east of the city of Sulaymaniyah. The attack reportedly killed three members of the PUK-affiliated Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG) and injured three others.¹⁸² Without explicitly claiming responsibility for the attack, a Turkish foreign ministry statement argued that members of the PUK's 'anti-terrorism service' were conducting a joint exercise with 'PKK/YPG¹⁸³ terrorists' at the time of the incident¹⁸⁴

PMF groups (and splinter groups) carried out regular attacks on Turkish bases in Iraq. Between April 2021 and March 2023, ACLED registered more than 25 rocket and drone attacks on Turkish bases. Most of the incidents took place in 2022 and, in most cases, the target was a Turkish base in Ninewa province.¹⁸⁵

Iranian military operations

In March 2022, the IRGC attacked the KRI capital, Erbil, with more than ten ballistic missiles. These missiles landed near a new US consulate building. One person was reportedly injured in this attack. According to Iranian state media, the attack was aimed at Israeli targets in the city. Iran has claimed that Israeli spy agency Mossad is present in the KRI. Some analysts have argued that the attack was not aimed at the US, but that it was meant as a 'warning' to Israel, after an Israeli airstrike in Syria a few days earlier killed some IRGC members, according to Iran. In addition, analysts said the attack should also be seen within the context of stalled negotiations to revive the Iran nuclear deal, which the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany had struck with Iran in 2015 and which was terminated by Trump in 2018. The KRG said that the attack had targeted civilian homes, and not facilities of other countries, and it called upon the international community to launch an investigation.¹⁸⁶

From September 2022, pressure increased on Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups (and their members) that were present in the KRI and largely armed, influenced by unrest in Iran. Following the Iranian authorities' quashing of widespread protests after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, an unknown number of Iranian protesters fled to the KRI.¹⁸⁷ Most were reportedly from Iran's Kurdish provinces, and many were thought to seek refuge with relatives or travel on to or through

¹⁷⁹ Reuters, *Two killed in Turkish drone attacks against PKK members in Iraq*, 9 August 2023; confidential source, 13 August 2023; Iraq Oil Report, *Drone strikes highlight perils of Turkey-PKK war for Iraqi Kurdistan*, 15 August 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Rudaw, *Family says three civilians killed in Friday drone strike*, 12 August 2023.

¹⁸¹ Reporters Online, *Deadly drone attacks in exchange for life-saving water*, 16 August 2023; Reuters, *Three killed in Turkish drone attack on PKK members in northern Iraq – Statement*, 11 August 2023; Rudaw, *Family says three civilians killed in Friday drone strike*, 12 August 2023.

¹⁸² AFP, *Iraq condemns 'repeated Turkish attacks' after Kurdish officers killed*, 19 September 2023; Reuters, *Three killed in attack on small airport in Iraq's Kurdistan – statement*, 19 September 2023; confidential source, 24 September 2023.

¹⁸³ The YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units) are a Syrian-Kurdish militia active in north-east Syria. The Turkish authorities regard the YPG as the Syrian branch of the PKK. Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria*, August 2023, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸⁴ Republic of Türkiye – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *No: 230, 19 September 2023, Press Release Regarding the Drone Attack on Arbat Airport in Sulaymaniyah*, 19 September 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Reuters, *Eight rockets fired at Turkish base in Iraq – Kurdish security group*, 1 February 2023; ACLED, *The Muqawama and its Enemies. Shifting Patterns in Iran-Backed Shiite Militia Activity in Iraq*, 23 May 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Al-Monitor, *Iran missile attack on Erbil goes beyond retaliation for IRGC deaths*, 13 March 2023; Reuters, *Iran attacks Iraq's Erbil with missiles in warning to U.S., allies*, 13 March 2022.

¹⁸⁷ NY Times, *In Iraq's mountains, Iranian opposition fighters feel the squeeze*, 20 November 2022; Al-Monitor, *Fleeing repression, Iran's Kurdish activists struggle to find refuge in Iraq*, 21 January 2023.

Türkiye.¹⁸⁸ A minority joined the Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups that had been established for decades in the KRI, including the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Freedom Party (known as the PAK), the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI/PDKI) and the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK).¹⁸⁹ These groups were present in areas bordering Iran in the provinces of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, including near the city of Koya.¹⁹⁰

In the KRI, former Iranian protesters are said to fear the reach of the Iranian government.¹⁹¹ Iranian-Kurdish opposition members, Iranian human-rights activists and journalists in the KRI reportedly face threats from Iran. As in previous years, assassinations of members of Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups occurred in the KRI during the reporting period. For example, three members of the KDPI were assassinated within the span of ten days in early July 2023. Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups and human rights organisations attributed the attacks to the IRGC.¹⁹²

Iran accused the Iranian-Kurdish groups of fuelling protests in the north-west of the country and, as in previous reporting periods, carried out attacks on them. In September and November 2022, both fighters and civilians were killed in several Iranian operations with missiles and drones on alleged bases or party offices of opposition groups.¹⁹³

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), a series of attacks by the IRGC on targets in the KRI in September 2022 also hit towns and villages where opposition groups were not conducting military activities.¹⁹⁴ At least sixteen people were reportedly killed in these attacks, and hundreds of families were driven from their homes.¹⁹⁵ UNICEF confirmed that one of the attacks had hit a school in a refugee camp near the city of Koya, injuring two children and killing a pregnant woman.¹⁹⁶ Sources described the situation as disruptive to local communities where the attacks took place, and as a challenge to the stability of the KRI.¹⁹⁷

During the reporting period, Iran pressured the KRG, including through the federal government in Baghdad, to stop what Iran saw as providing sanctuaries to armed

¹⁸⁸ According to the KRG, more than 8,000 Iranian refugees (mostly Kurdish) were residing in the KRI in April 2023. This included individuals who had been staying there for years, as well as those who had recently fled. Kurdistan Regional Government – Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (via Twitter, now X), 19 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/JccKrg/status/1659633382005850122>

¹⁸⁹ NY Times, *In Iraq's mountains, Iranian opposition fighters feel the squeeze*, 20 November 2022; NY Times, *Iranian mothers choose exile for sake of their daughters*, 24 July 2023.

¹⁹⁰ United States Institute of Peace, *Iran attacks Kurdish groups in Iraq*, 21 November 2022.

¹⁹¹ Al-Monitor, *Fleeing repression, Iran's Kurdish activists struggle to find refuge in Iraq*, 21 January 2023. A February 2020 report by the Danish Immigration Service mentioned that Iranian authorities were monitoring Iranian Kurds in the KRI and that there had been attacks on Iranian-Kurdish opposition members there in the past: The Danish Immigration Service, *Iranian Kurds, Consequences of political activities in Iran and KRI*, February 2020.

¹⁹² Middle East Eye, *Iraq: Iranian Kurdish refugees alarmed by 'assassination' of activist*, 4 August 2021; Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, *The assassination attempt on a Kurdish political activist in Erbil*, 6 June 2022; Hengaw, *Hengaw's investigation into the assassination of two members of the KDPI in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 7 July 2023; The New Arab, *3 Iranian Kurds killed in Iraqi Kurdistan, opposition parties and rights groups point to IRGC*, 14 July 2023; Rudaw, *KDPI calls on UN to condemn recent killing of its members in Kurdistan Region*, 15 July 2023.

¹⁹³ UNHCR, *UNHCR press statement*, 28 September 2022; UNICEF, *UNICEF condemns attack on school in Koya, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and calls on all parties to respect the Safe Schools Declaration*, 28 September 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Iran attacks kill civilians in Kurdistan region*, 19 October 2022; Hengaw, *Hengaw statistical report on the killing of at least 134 Kurdish citizens during the Jina revolution*, 11 March 2023.

¹⁹⁴ HRW, *Iraq: Iran attacks kill civilians in Kurdistan region*, 19 October 2022.

¹⁹⁵ Rudaw, *Iranian attacks displaced about 700 families in Koya town: Mayor*, 30 September 2022; Rudaw, *Six villages abandoned in Sidakan due to recent bombardments: Mayor*, 5 October 2022.

¹⁹⁶ UNICEF, *UNICEF condemns attack on school in Koya, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and calls on all parties to respect the Safe Schools Declaration*, 28 September 2022.

¹⁹⁷ ECFR, *From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-Invasion Journey*, 25 May 2023; Iraq Oil Report, *Fractious Iranian Kurdish dissidents pose challenge for KRG stability*, 9 August 2023.

Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups.¹⁹⁸ Beginning in late 2022, Iran threatened to resume bombing and to carry out a ground offensive if the groups were not disarmed and the border strengthened.¹⁹⁹ In March 2023, the governments in Tehran and Baghdad concluded a border security agreement aimed at strengthening the border with the Kurdistan region.²⁰⁰ The KRG reportedly initially refused to cooperate with the Iranian demands. According to some sources, this was due to a sense of Kurdish solidarity and the desire to maintain some influence vis-à-vis Tehran.²⁰¹ At the same time, the KRG was said to tolerate the presence of the groups, although it did reportedly monitor their activities.²⁰²

Tensions flared up again in the summer of 2023.²⁰³ In June, there were reports of a build-up of Iranian troops on the KRI border.²⁰⁴ In August, Iran announced an agreement with Iraq to disarm members of the Iranian-Kurdish groups, to close their bases and to transfer them to other locations. Iran set 19 September 2023 as a new ultimatum.²⁰⁵ According to the Iraqi federal government, prior to the ultimatum, Iraq took steps to move the groups to locations deeper in the KRI, away from the Iranian border. Uncertainty nevertheless remained concerning the extent to which Iranian-Iraqi agreements were actually implemented, especially with regard to disarming the groups.²⁰⁶ As far as is known, Iran did not undertake any new military operations against Iranian-Kurdish groups in the KRI during the reporting period.

Under increased pressure, the divided Iranian opposition groups in the KRI were reportedly in unification talks, but they apparently did not yield any results during the reporting period.²⁰⁷ In fact, there was even greater fragmentation. One of the main opposition groups, the Komala Party, became divided across several factions. According to one source, this had to do with a variety of disagreements, including whether to settle in refugee camps or maintain border bases, and how to structure alliances with other opposition groups.²⁰⁸ In June 2023, at least two Iranian-Kurdish fighters were reportedly killed in Suleymaniyah province during a clash between two rival factions of the Komala Party.²⁰⁹

Foreign troops

The US-led international counter-ISIS coalition continued to support federal and Kurdish forces in their fight against ISIS. The US still had 2,500 troops in Iraq.²¹⁰ As in previous reporting periods, foreign bases and convoys in Iraq were targeted

¹⁹⁸ BBC Monitoring, *Growing concern as Iran Kurds see IRGC 'build-up' on Iraq border*, 4 June 2023.

¹⁹⁹ FT, *Iran targets Kurds sheltering in Iraq: 'We're being used as a scapegoat'*, 27 November 2022.

²⁰⁰ Reuters, *Iraq and Iran sign deal to tighten border security*, 19 March 2023.

²⁰¹ Clingendael, *Big Brother is Watching, Evolving Relations between Iran and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, March 2022; Carnegie, *Iran's security anxiety in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 8 November 2022; NY Times, *In Iraq's mountains, Iranian opposition fighters feel the squeeze*, 20 November 2022; FT, *Iran targets Kurds sheltering in Iraq: 'We're being used as a scapegoat'*, 27 November 2022.

²⁰² NY Times, *In Iraq's mountains, Iranian opposition fighters feel the squeeze*, 20 November 2022; Al-Monitor, *Iran renews ultimatum for Iraq to disarm Kurdish opposition groups*, 28 August 2023.

²⁰³ Confidential source, 13 August 2023.

²⁰⁴ BBC Monitoring, *Growing concern as Iran Kurds see IRGC 'build-up' on Iraq border*, 4 June 2023.

²⁰⁵ Al-Monitor, *Iran renews ultimatum for Iraq to disarm Kurdish opposition groups*, 28 August 2023; AP, *Tehran and Baghdad reach a deal to disarm and relocate Iranian dissident groups based in north Iraq*, 28 August 2023.

²⁰⁶ Reuters, *Iraq starts relocating Iranian Kurdish fighters from Iran border*, 12 September 2023; confidential source, 17 September 2023.

²⁰⁷ Amwaj, *Inside story: Iran's Kurdish opposition struggles to achieve unity*, 4 May 2022.

²⁰⁸ Iraq Oil Report, *Fractious Iranian Kurdish dissidents pose challenge for KRG stability*, 9 August 2023.

²⁰⁹ The New Arab, *Two fighters killed during infighting between rival Iranian Kurdish parties in N. Iraq*, 23 June 2023.

²¹⁰ Reuters, *Pentagon chief, in unannounced visit to Iraq, pledges continued U.S. troop presence*, 7 March 2023; US Department of Defense (USDoD), *Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve – Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2023 – June 30, 2023*, 3 August 2023.

several times by pro-Iranian militias. These groups demand full withdrawal of US and other foreign military forces from Iraq.²¹¹

1.2.5 *Violent incidents by region*

In this section, graphs are used to depict the level of violent incidents and casualties in three different regions (for a map of Iraq, see Appendix 6.3). For purposes of comparison, the graphs display data from both the current reporting period (1 October 2021 to 1 October 2023), and from the previous one (1 January 2020 to 1 October 2021). Based on the available data, the graphs provide an indication of the scale of violent incidents in the following three regions:

- Central Iraq: the provinces of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salaheddin
- Southern Iraq: Babil, Basra, Dhi Qar, Karbala, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiya and Wasit
- Autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): the provinces of Erbil, Duhok and Suleymaniyah

Information from the data export tool of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) was used for these graphs. Most of the data collected by ACLED are from public, secondary reporting. According to ACLED, data on casualty numbers can be subjective, and they are the least accurate component of conflict data. The organisation states that it uses the most conservative estimates available. In addition, the ACLED records only fatalities.

²¹¹ ACLED, *The Muqawama and its Enemies. Shifting Patterns in Iran-Backed Shiite Militia Activity in Iraq*, 23 May 2023.

Central Iraq

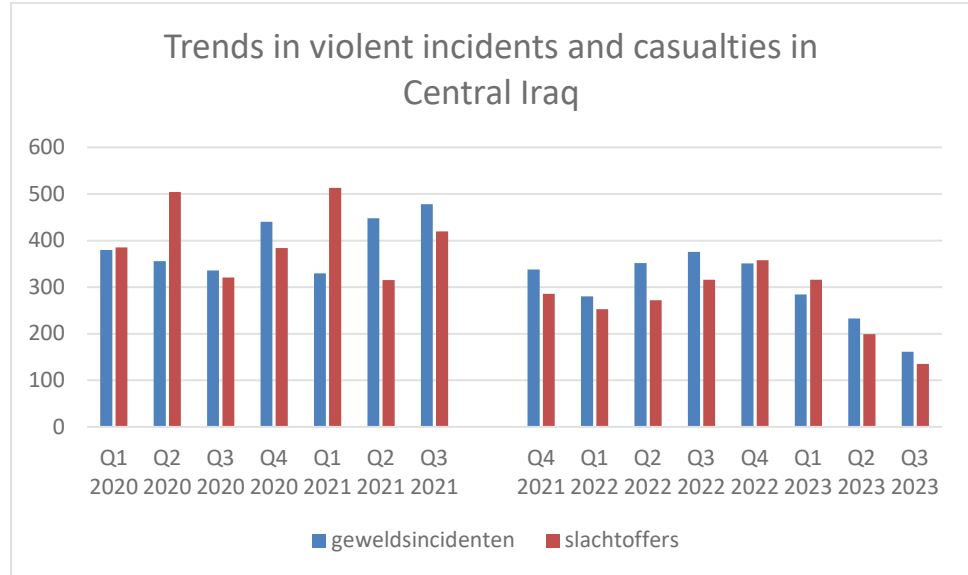


Figure 1: Quarterly trends in numbers of violent incidents (blue) and casualties (red) in Central Iraq for the previous reporting period (left) and the current reporting period (right). Source: ACLED.²¹²

Southern Iraq

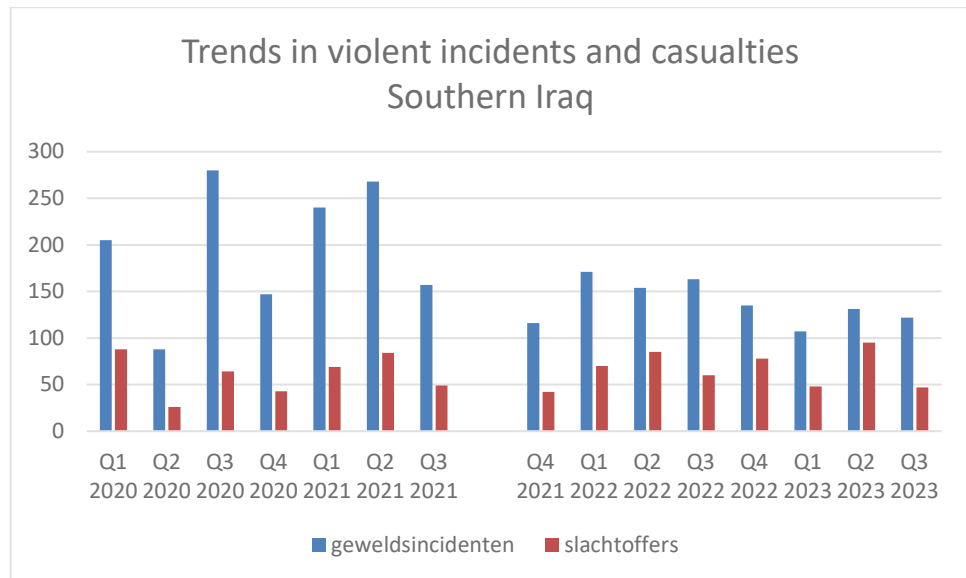


Figure 2: Quarterly trends in numbers of violent incidents (blue) and casualties (red) in Southern Iraq for the previous reporting period (left) and the current reporting period (right). Source: ACLED.²¹³

²¹² ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/>, consulted on 27 October 2023.

²¹³ ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/>, consulted on 27 October 2023.

Autonomous Kurdistan Region

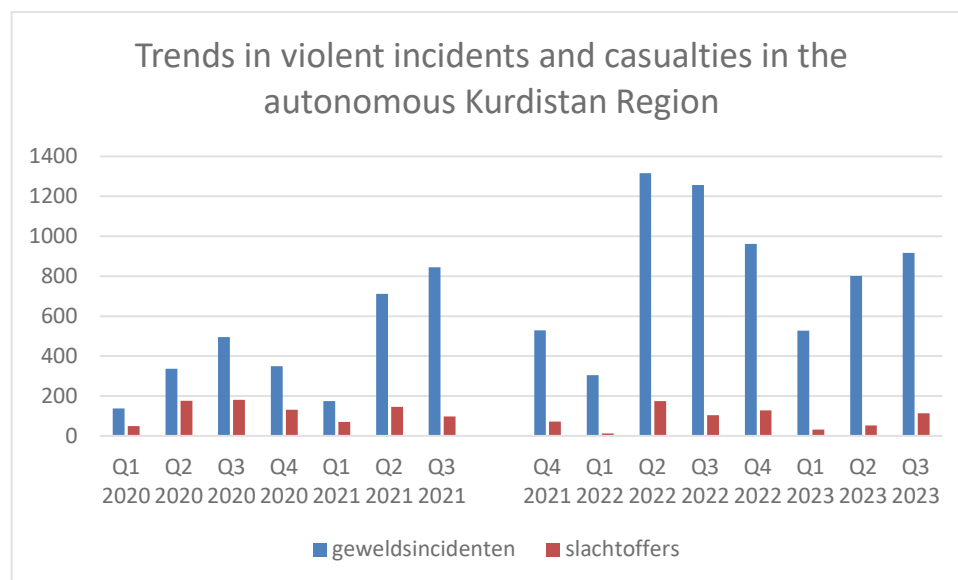


Figure 3: Quarterly trends in numbers of violent incidents (blue) and casualties (red) in the KRI for the previous reporting period (left) and the current reporting period (right). Source: ACLED.²¹⁴

1.2.6 Specific violations

This section addresses arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances and abductions, extrajudicial killings and torture. The scale at which these violations occurred during the reporting period was unclear, due to a lack of reliable figures.

Arrests and detentions of civilians

Arbitrary arrests and detentions are prohibited under the constitution and laws of Iraq. Nevertheless, security forces in federal Iraq, including the PMF, and in the Kurdistan region continued to make arbitrary arrests of individuals with alleged links to ISIS (mainly Sunni Arabs, including displaced persons), as well as journalists and activists.²¹⁵

According to Freedom House, arbitrary arrests and detentions were common.²¹⁶ No reliable figures were available concerning the total number of arbitrary arrests during the reporting period.²¹⁷ According to Iraq Body Count, the number of arrests on suspicion of terrorism increased significantly in 2022. The total of more than 1,300 arrests of alleged ISIS members was more than four times the average of the two previous years. No reasons were given for this increase.²¹⁸

In its annual report for 2022, the United States Department of State (hereinafter, USDoS) wrote that, according to local media and human rights organisations, Iraqi authorities in security operations were arresting suspects — alleged members or

²¹⁴ ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/>, consulted on 27 October 2023.

²¹⁵ HRW, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Arrests to deter protest. Protesters, journalists, parliament members targeted*, 28 August 2022; The New Arab, *32 Islamic State group suspects arrested in Iraqi military ambushes*, 14 January 2023; Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 25, 36; US Department of State (USDoS), *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, pp. 11–12.

²¹⁶ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F2.

²¹⁷ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 11.

²¹⁸ Iraq Body Count, *Iraq's residual war*, 1 January 2023.

supporters of ISIS and their family members — without warrants (particularly under the antiterrorism law) and frequently held them in detention for prolonged periods without charging them.²¹⁹ In its annual report for 2022, Amnesty International (hereinafter, Amnesty) mentioned that more than 200 Iraqi boys had been detained in Baghdad after being repatriated from north-east Syria. According to Amnesty, they had been detained without charges or trial, on suspicion of belonging to ISIS.²²⁰

In September 2022, dozens of activists and social media personalities were reportedly arrested by the PMF in several southern provinces on charges of having links to the Ba'ath Party. According to the USDoS annual report, the individuals in question had openly criticised Iranian influence in Iraq and the corruption of political parties.²²¹

According to human rights organisations, in the KRI, the authorities used arbitrary arrests as a means of suppressing critics. In August 2022, security forces arrested dozens of journalists, activists and opposition members ahead of planned protests in Suleymaniyah, Erbil and Duhok.²²² In the Kurdistan region, journalists were more often arrested while reporting on protests.²²³

In federal Iraq, authorities often would not inform detainees of the reasons for their detention or charges, nor would they notify family members of the arrest or place of detention.²²⁴ According to one source, in the Kurdish region, detainees are said to be regularly held on remand for long periods.²²⁵

In some instances, Iraqi civilians were forced to pay bribes in case of arrest and detention or ransoms in case of abduction. According to one source, Iraqi prisons were a major source of income for corrupt officers and lower-level staff.²²⁶ According to several sources, authorities in prisons and detention centres sometimes extort the families of prisoners prior to release after they have served their sentences.²²⁷ In many cases, the families of prisoners have had to pay bribes to visit their relatives in prison or detention centres, to provide them with food, medicine or clothing, to ensure that they were not subjected to torture and ill treatment, or to have them moved to better cells.²²⁸ According to one source, the amount demanded for visiting a family member in detention could reach thousands of euros.²²⁹

²¹⁹ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, pp. 11–12.

²²⁰ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203.

²²¹ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 12.

²²² HRW, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Arrests to deter protest. Protesters, journalists, parliament members targeted*, 28 August 2022.

²²³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 27.

²²⁴ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p36; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 12.

²²⁵ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36.

²²⁶ Daraj, *Behind bars: The terrible state of Iraqi prisons*, 9 December 2021.

²²⁷ Daraj, *Behind bars: The terrible state of Iraqi prisons*, 9 December 2021; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 10.

²²⁸ Daraj, *Behind bars: The terrible state of Iraqi prisons*, 9 December 2021; Fanack, *Iraqi prisons: horrors behind bars*, 14 July 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023; Gulf International Forum, *Systemic failures in Iraqi prisons create breeding grounds for extremism*, 14 July 2023.

²²⁹ Gulf International Forum, *Systemic failures in Iraqi prisons create breeding grounds for extremism*, 14 July 2023.

Disappearances and abductions

Enforced disappearance²³⁰ is not criminalised under Iraqi law, and perpetrators can therefore not be prosecuted for disappearance as a separate crime.²³¹ According to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, between 250,000 and 1 million individuals in Iraq have 'disappeared' in the past five decades.²³² The NGO Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights reported that, between 2017 and 2022, more than 11,000 families had filed reports of the 'disappearance' of a family member after 2014.²³³

Enforced disappearances also occurred during the current reporting period, although the scale on which they occurred is not clear. According to the USDoS annual report, there were regular reports of disappearances, which were allegedly the work of actors belonging to the government, including the federal police and PMF militias.²³⁴ In its April 2023 report, following a visit to Iraq in November 2022, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances wrote about an ongoing pattern of enforced disappearances in the country. The committee had also received many reports of enforced disappearances during the period since the latest wave of disappearances, which occurred in connection with the repression of the *Tishreen* protests of 2019 and 2020. The disappearances followed unlawful arrests or detentions, or detention in undisclosed locations. According to the Committee, testimonies pointed to the direct involvement of federal authorities or KRG security forces (such as the Peshmerga, Asayish and local police). The committee also noted the existence of other patterns of enforced disappearances in several provinces, involving PMF militias, non-state actors (e.g. tribal groups) and, in some cases, collaboration by members of government agencies. This included disappearances within the context of human trafficking, in the form of labour exploitation or forced prostitution, or with drug trafficking as a goal. The victims — especially women, children and migrants — disappeared into the hands of human traffickers, without the possibility of contacting their families. The committee wrote that 'the extremely limited' actions of the authorities in such cases almost never led to the recovery of the disappeared persons.²³⁵

Although abductions did not make the headlines in many cases,²³⁶ several high-profile, politically motivated abductions of both Iraqis and foreigners took place during the reporting period. The two examples described below pointed to the Iranian-backed, Shia PMF militia known as Kata'ib Hezbollah.

On 1 February 2023, the well-known Iraqi climate activist Jassim al-Assadi was abducted and tortured by an armed group and held for more than two weeks. Al-

²³⁰ The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (Part 1, Article 2) defines 'enforced disappearance' as follows: "'enforced disappearance" is considered to be the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law'. OHCHR, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced>

²³¹ Amnesty International, *Iraq: Authorities must act to reveal fate of 643 men and boys abducted by government-linked militias*, 5 June 2023.

²³² Reuters, *Up to 1 mln people 'disappeared' in Iraq in last half century – UN*, 4 April 2023.

²³³ Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, *More than 11,000 families reported missing civilians between 2017 and 2022*, 10 December 2022.

²³⁴ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 6.

²³⁵ Committee on Enforced Disappearances, *Report of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances on its Visit to Iraq under Article 33 of the Convention – Information on the Visit and Findings*, 19 April 2023, pp. 7-8.

²³⁶ Control Risk, *Kidnap for ransom in 2022*, 19 April 2022; confidential source, 28 March 2023.

Assadi was reportedly released following intervention from the Iraqi government.²³⁷ Although the reason for his abduction and the identity of his captors have not been disclosed, al-Assadi is said to have enemies in politics due to his environmental activism.²³⁸ According to some sources, Kata'ib Hezbollah was behind the abduction, and it was not the government but pressure from the victim's tribal group that had been the deciding factor in his release.²³⁹

In March 2023, the Russian-Israeli researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov was abducted in the middle of Baghdad, allegedly by a pro-Iranian Shiite militia. This was reported in the media in July 2023.²⁴⁰ A statement from the Israeli government accused Kata'ib Hezbollah of holding Tsurkov.²⁴¹ Iraqi authorities stated that they were investigating the case.²⁴² As far as is known, Tsurkov was still in detention at the end of the current reporting period, even despite international media and political attention to the case.²⁴³

Several actors allegedly engaged in abductions for ransom. Such cases are often not publicised, making the scale on which they occurred unclear.²⁴⁴ In this regard, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (hereinafter, DFAT) wrote that Christians were disproportionately targeted in abductions for ransom and other crimes by PMF militias and tribal groups. According to DFAT sources, this was because Christians were regarded as both prosperous and vulnerable.²⁴⁵ In addition, ISIS continued to abduct civilians for ransom in areas where cells of the organisation were active, according to reports.²⁴⁶

Extrajudicial executions and killings

According to the USDoS annual report for 2022, there were credible reports of unlawful executions, including extrajudicial killings by the Iraqi government.²⁴⁷ PMF militias were also allegedly responsible for killings. Killings were committed throughout the country by unidentified armed persons.²⁴⁸ Extrajudicial killings occurred in conjunction with enforced disappearances.²⁴⁹ In a report on the human rights situation in Iraq from January to April 2022, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) wrote about the continued occurrence of executions and killings targeting lawyers, activists and journalists. One of the victims named by GCHR, the activist Haider Sabri, was a prominent member of the *Tishreen* protest movement in Basra. Another victim, Judge Ahmed Faisal al-Saadi from Maysan province, was known for his crackdown on organised crime gangs and drug traffickers, according to GCHR.²⁵⁰

Torture

Torture is prohibited under the Iraqi constitution and Penal Code. The Iraqi parliament has yet to pass a specific anti-torture law. The bill would require judges

²³⁷ HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation. Prominent activist released following two-week abduction*, 23 February 2023.

²³⁸ HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation. Prominent activist released following two-week abduction*, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 9 March 2023.

²³⁹ Confidential source, 9 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

²⁴⁰ NY Times, *Israeli woman held for months in Iraq by Shiite militia linked to Iran*, 5 July 2023.

²⁴¹ Israeli Prime Minister's Office, *Statement on Elizabeth Tsurkov*, 5 July 2023.

²⁴² Al Jazeera, *Iraq investigates militia kidnapping of Israeli-Russian academic*, 7 July 2023.

²⁴³ HRW, *Iraq: Release kidnapped scholar*, 8 September 2023.

²⁴⁴ Control Risk, *Kidnap for ransom in 2022*, 19 April 2022; confidential source, 28 March 2023.

²⁴⁵ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 19.

²⁴⁶ Kurdistan24, *ISIS releases Kurdish shepherd after receiving \$25,000 ransom*, 24 April 2022; Rudaw, *ISIS releases Kurdish shepherd in Diyala province for \$50,000 in ransom*, 5 November 2022; USDoS, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq*, 15 May 2023, p. 26.

²⁴⁷ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 3.

²⁴⁸ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 5.

²⁴⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 35.

²⁵⁰ Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), *GCHR's 22nd Periodic Report on Human Rights Violations in Iraq*, 13 May 2022.

to order a medical examination for any detainee alleging torture within 24 hours of learning of the allegation.²⁵¹

In August 2023, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, stated that the use of torture and other cruel and degrading treatment continues to occur in Iraq.²⁵² Torture or severe ill treatment are used by individuals affiliated to security units to extract confessions. In August 2021, the UN mission in Iraq (UNAMI) reported that Iraqi authorities tolerated and approved the use of torture to extract confessions.²⁵³ In June 2022, the UN Committee Against Torture raised concerns about the widespread use of torture — particularly during phases of interrogation — in official and unofficial detention centres throughout Iraq, as well as about the lack of impartiality on the part of judicial authorities with the mandate to investigate allegations of torture.²⁵⁴ Courts generally accepted coerced confessions as evidence and ignored allegations of torture.²⁵⁵ According to Amnesty, forced confessions had also been used in death penalty cases.²⁵⁶ Victims of torture were said to include mostly Sunni men who had been arrested and were on trial for alleged ties to ISIS.²⁵⁷

According to various sources, both federal (including PMF militias) and Kurdish security units committed torture.²⁵⁸ The sources consulted do not mention specific security services. According to DFAT, torture occurred in detention centres of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MoI) and Ministry of Defence and of the KRG, as well as in detention locations of PMF militias.²⁵⁹ According to some sources, torture was used during arrests, pre-trial detention and after individuals were convicted.²⁶⁰ The perpetrators subjected detainees to beatings, stress positions, electric shocks and sexual humiliation, amongst other things.²⁶¹ The climate activist Jassim al-Assadi, who was abducted in February 2023, stated after his release that, during his detention, he had been subjected to 'the most severe forms of torture', involving the use of electricity and sticks.²⁶²

According to Amnesty's 2022 annual report, conditions (including overcrowded cells and lack of adequate healthcare and food) in Nasiriyah prison in Dhi Qar province were so bad that they amounted to ill treatment.²⁶³ According to the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, there were about 60,000 prisoners in federal prisons at the beginning of 2023, while there was capacity for 25,000.²⁶⁴

²⁵¹ HRW, *Submission to the Committee Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Punishment ahead of the Review of the Republic of Iraq*, 7 April 2022.

²⁵² UN OHCHR, *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes his official visit to Iraq*, 9 August 2023.

²⁵³ UNAMI, *Iraq: Ending torture through accountability, compliance and prevention – UN*, 3 August 2021.

²⁵⁴ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F3.

²⁵⁵ HRW, *Submission to the Committee Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Punishment ahead of the Review of the Republic of Iraq*, 7 April 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36.

²⁵⁶ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203.

²⁵⁷ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36; USDoS, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq*, 15 May 2023, p. 1.

²⁵⁸ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F3.

²⁵⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36.

²⁶⁰ Amwaj, *Torture in Iraq's prisons reaches epidemic proportions*, 20 October 2021; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36; USDoS, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq*, 15 May 2023, p. 1.

²⁶¹ Amwaj, *Torture in Iraq's prisons reaches epidemic proportions*, 20 October 2021; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 36.

²⁶² HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation. Prominent activist released following two-week abduction*, 23 February 2023.

²⁶³ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203.

²⁶⁴ Rudaw, *Iraqi prisons overcrowded up to 300 percent capacity: Justice ministry*, 14 April 2023.

Forced recruitment

As far as is known, there were no reports of forced recruitment of adults by the Iraqi army or militias during the reporting period.

On 30 March 2023, the Iraqi government signed an action plan to prevent the (forced) recruitment and deployment of children by the PMF. According to the action plan, the government must take the necessary legislative and administrative measures to improve the protection of children against serious violations.²⁶⁵

The UN annual report on 'children and armed conflict' for 2022 states that 32 cases were documented of children (18 boys and 14 girls, from 11 years old) having been recruited and deployed by the PKK (28 cases) and by ISIS (4). According to the report, the children were used in fighting and to staff checkpoints.²⁶⁶ In 2021, the UN had not documented any cases of child recruitment by militias.²⁶⁷

One source referred to the recruitment of Yazidi children in Sinjar in 2022. The PKK-affiliated YBS,²⁶⁸ an armed group composed primarily of Yazidi fighters, was allegedly responsible for the recruitment of children (especially boys) from around eight years of age onwards. Boys and girls were said to play equal roles within the armed group. According to the source, although the scale on which child recruitment took place was unclear, the fact that recruitment occurred was known locally amongst active members of the Yazidi community (teachers, community leaders).²⁶⁹

1.2.7 *Resettlement inside Iraq*

In some instances, Iraqis settled in other parts of the country to evade a threat. As in previous years, there were individuals who fled from federal Iraq to Erbil or Suleymaniya during the reporting period.²⁷⁰ The ability of individuals to move to other cities or regions within Iraq (for instance, to the Kurdistan region from Baghdad) depends on several circumstances, including the documents and financial resources available to them, their gender and the presence of family or tribal connections in their intended places of residence.²⁷¹ In general, it was more difficult for non-Kurdish Iraqis (especially single men) to settle in the Kurdistan region. Additional information on the conditions for different groups of Iraqis to settle in the KRI is provided in Section 4.1.3.

According to some sources, it was not possible for those seeking to flee targeted violence or threats to remain in federal Iraq, as PMF militias would be able to find people anywhere through their contacts. Resettlement in the KRI was a better option for individuals threatened by militias, provided they were able to meet the conditions for residency.²⁷²

According to several sources, the Kurdish authorities sometimes extradited individuals to the federal authorities, in line with Iraqi law.²⁷³ One source claimed

²⁶⁵ UNICEF, *The Government of Iraq, supported by the United Nations, strengthens its commitment to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces*, 30 March 2023.

²⁶⁶ UN Security Council, *Children and armed conflict. Report of the Secretary-General, A/77/895-S/2023/363*, 5 June 2023, p. 11.

²⁶⁷ UN Security Council, *Children and armed conflict. Report of the Secretary-General, A/76/871-S/2022/493*, 23 June 2022, p. 12.

²⁶⁸ Additional information on the YBS is provided in Section 1.2.1.

²⁶⁹ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

²⁷⁰ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

²⁷¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40; confidential source, 23 March 2023; UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note. Iraq: Humanitarian situation*, 23 May 2023, p. 7.

²⁷² Confidential source, 9 March 2023; confidential source, 23 March 2023.

²⁷³ Confidential source, 9 March 2023; confidential source, 23 March 2023.

that activists who had fled to the KRI did not dare criticise the Kurdish authorities, for fear of extradition.²⁷⁴ According to another source, PMF militias could influence the judiciary in federal Iraq to issue an arrest warrant for an individual.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Confidential source, 9 March 2023.

²⁷⁵ Confidential source, 23 March 2023.

2 Documents

Unified national ID card

The October 2021 country of origin information report wrote about the introduction of the unified national ID card, which has been ongoing since late 2015.²⁷⁶ This electronic and biometric identity card is intended to replace a number of other forms of documentation, including the Iraqi Nationality Certificate, the Civil Status ID and, eventually, the Housing Card (also known as Residence Card).²⁷⁷ As in the previous reporting period, implementation was delayed. A report published by the UNDP in June 2023 mentions that about 16 million Iraqis out of a population of 40 million (i.e. 40%) hold the new ID card. According to the report, there was active resistance to the widespread introduction of the advanced ID card from some groups in Iraqi society, as the system would enable verifiable identification and transparent transactions.²⁷⁸ The process of issuing of the identity document was said to be more advanced in the KRI. A Danish report from March 2023 cited a source stating that, in the KRI, 85-90% of the population held the unified national ID card. According to that source, the old version of the ID card could still be used.²⁷⁹

Iraq began issuing electronic passports in early 2023. Like the new ID card, the e-passport is equipped with a chip containing biometric data. A unified national ID is a requirement for applying for this passport.²⁸⁰

Application for identity documents

Additional information on Iraqi identity documents (such as the nationality certificate and the earlier version of the identity card (the variant without a chip), as well as on other documents that are important to the daily lives of Iraqi citizens is available in the December 2019 general country of origin information report on Iraq.²⁸¹ The procedures for applying for various identity (and other) documents from abroad are listed on the website of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under Consular Services.²⁸² It was nevertheless unclear whether old versions of ID cards and passports were still being issued during the reporting period. It was still not possible to apply for a unified national ID card from abroad.²⁸³ It was also not possible to apply for the e-passport from abroad.²⁸⁴

Lack of identity documents

Amongst displaced persons and individuals who have returned from displacement to their former areas of residence, lack of identity and other civilian documents has remained a widespread problem. According to the 2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview, an estimated 1.1 million displaced persons and returnees (including 51,000 displaced persons in camps, 244,000 outside camps and 792,000 returnees)

²⁷⁶ The Iraqi National Identity Card (INID) is also mentioned in several sources. Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 36.

²⁷⁷ EASO, *Iraq – Key Socio-Economic Indicators for Baghdad, Basrah and Sulaymaniyah*, November 2021, p. 50.

²⁷⁸ UNDP, *Digital Landscape Assessment of Iraq*, 7 June 2023, p. 79.

²⁷⁹ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 29.

²⁸⁰ INA, *Iraq: E-passport is a great leap and will make progress in global ranking*, 8 March 2023; Simaet Bhattha, *Electronic passport: What is it and how can I get one?*, April 2023.

²⁸¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, December 2019, pp. 29-33.

²⁸² Republic of Iraq – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://mofa.gov.iq/en/> consulted on 26 July 2023.

²⁸³ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 41; LandInfo, *Iraq: Sivilregister, ID-dokumenter og pass*, 14 August 2023, pp. 4, 27.

²⁸⁴ INA, *Iraq: E-passport is a great leap and will make progress in global ranking*, 8 March 2023.

still lacked one or more essential documents, and about 249,000 lacked three or more.²⁸⁵ The ability to obtain documents remained particularly challenging for individuals with alleged ties to ISIS, primarily because of obstacles in obtaining the necessary security clearance from the authorities (see also Section 3.3.3).²⁸⁶ As reported in a study conducted by REACH, households headed by a woman encountered the obstacle of needing a male relative to apply for documents, and they were more likely than households headed by a man to be unable to afford the cost of doing so.²⁸⁷

The lack of identity and civilian documents affects all aspects of an Iraqi citizen's life. Those who cannot obtain documents have limited freedom of movement and limited access to basic services. Iraqi citizens travelling within Iraq must be able to prove their identity with an official document at checkpoints. According to humanitarian organisations, people who do not have such documents are at greater risk of arbitrary arrest and detention at checkpoints.²⁸⁸ The sources consulted did not explicitly indicate which documents could be used to prove identity at checkpoints. One source indicated that, in most cases, ID cards were not specifically asked for at checkpoints. According to this source, although the ability to show a driving licence, copy of an ID card or similar document would be sufficient in most situations, it ultimately depends on the people staffing the checkpoint at the relevant time.²⁸⁹

Every Iraqi citizen must be able to produce the required identity documents in order to access healthcare, education, the state legal system, social security and other facilities. This also applies to matters like birth registration, housing rental, residential registration and entering into an employment contract. Moreover, having a legal identity gives displaced persons access to essential humanitarian assistance, including monthly food donations.²⁹⁰ Lack of documents may also lead to exclusion from reconstruction programmes.²⁹¹

²⁸⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022 – Iraq*, March 2022, p. 28.

²⁸⁶ Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) et al., *Life in the Margins, Re-Examining the Needs of Paperless People in Post-Conflict Iraq*, September 2022, p. 43; HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 320; OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, February 2023, p. 9; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 204.

²⁸⁷ REACH, *Factsheet – Missing Civil Documentation in Iraq: Who, Why & How Important is it?*, February 2023.

²⁸⁸ Protection Cluster Iraq (via OCHA), *Protection Analysis Report – Right to identity and civil documentation*, October 2021, p. 11; OCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022 – Iraq*, March 2022, p. 28; OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, February 2023, p. 9; UNHCR, *Access to civil documentation by IDPs and returnees in Iraq 2022-2023*, 2 February 2023.

²⁸⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

²⁹⁰ EASO, *Iraq – Key Socio-Economic Indicators for Baghdad, Basrah and Sulaymaniyah*, November 2021, p. 56; HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 320; WFP, *The EU and WFP provide cash assistance to internally displaced and crisis affected Iraqis missing civil documentation*, 25 July 2023.

²⁹¹ OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, February 2023, p. 9.

3 Human rights

3.1 Legal protection

Reporting and prosecution

Iraqi citizens can go to the police to report crime or threatening situations. Following a report, the police theoretically complete the file and deliver it to the court of enquiry. The court of enquiry determines whether the case will be referred for substantive consideration (for instance, by a criminal or family court).²⁹² In practice, citizens encounter several obstacles when filing reports.

The Iraqi police are generally underfunded, poorly equipped and corrupt.²⁹³ The ongoing cycles of violence in Iraq since 2003 have resulted in a highly militarised police force that is tied to networks of patronage. In the post-ISIS (post-2017) period, international organisations have facilitated attempts to transform the police from a 'fighting force' against ISIS to a more civilian-friendly and service-oriented service.²⁹⁴ According to one source, however, citizens had little confidence that the police would protect them, and willingness to file reports is low.²⁹⁵ According to another source, the extent to which the police pay attention to a given report is determined, in practice, by whether a bribe is or is not paid. The source further noted that people with influential connections (in Arabic, *wasta*) attempt to use these connections to intervene and force police action.²⁹⁶

Certain groups of people filing reports face additional barriers in certain cases. According to one source, in some cases, minors (and especially unaccompanied minors) are said to be turned away when they seek help at a police station unaccompanied. The source further noted that special juvenile police stations — in theory, one in each province and two in Baghdad — were not very active in practice.²⁹⁷

Women generally avoid police stations because of the risk of exposure to sexual (or other forms of) harassment, bullying or extortion. Other reasons include fear of stigmatisation in relation to the treatment of women at police stations (whether perceived or actual) and the possibility of retaliation by their own family members or those of the perpetrator(s).²⁹⁸ Survivors of domestic or honour-based violence are also said to be reluctant to report crimes to the officers of special family protection units (who are predominantly male and inadequately trained for their tasks) across

²⁹² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 39; *Iraqi Criminal Procedure Code 23 of 1971* – unofficial English translation available at: https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/document/irq/1971/criminal_procedure_code_23_of_1971.html

²⁹³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 37; Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *Justice and Political Stability in Iraq*, March 2023, p. 25.

²⁹⁴ LSE et al., *Local Policing in Iraq Post-ISIS, Carving Out an Arena for Community Service?*, July 2021; Third World Quarterly, *Locating the Local Police in Iraq's Security Arena: Community Policing, the 'Three Ps' and Trust in Ninawa Province*, September 2021; UNDP, *Service-oriented Iraqi police*, 9 August 2022.

²⁹⁵ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

²⁹⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 39; confidential source, 28 March 2023.

²⁹⁷ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

²⁹⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 39; LSE et al., *Challenging Narratives of 'Fate and Divine Will', Access to Justice for Gender-Based Violence in Iraq*, November 2021, p. 17; CIVIC, *Missing in Action: Women in Iraq's Security Forces*, March 2022, p. 21; Raseef 22, *Incest in Iraq... A husband asks his wife to put up with his brothers' desire*, 13 March 2022; DW, *YouTube star's murder: How to end domestic violence in Iraq?*, 7 February 2023; The Danish Immigration Service, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 61; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

federal Iraq. With regard to victim protection, these units prioritise family reconciliation, and they lack the capacity to support women in need.²⁹⁹ According to one source, in the KRI — where there is a special police unit for domestic violence cases — it was common for women experiencing domestic violence to encounter a lack of will to pay attention to their cases and to be actively discouraged from filing reports at regular police stations.³⁰⁰

Individuals who are perceived as belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community due to their appearance or dress are exposed to severe harassment, intimidation and extortion, especially in police stations.³⁰¹ According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), LGBTIQ+ individuals in Iraq lived in constant fear of arrest and violence by the police.³⁰²

According to one source, activists who have been threatened by influential militias were unlikely to seek protection from the police, for fear that such a move would reach members of the militias, giving them even more to fear from the armed groups.³⁰³

If the police fail to address a report, the person filing the report can lodge a complaint to higher authorities. In most cases, however, people are unlikely to make use of this option. In practice, this would most likely make sense only for those having influential connections or the financial means to influence criminal prosecutions.³⁰⁴ Due to distrust of the police and the legal system, or lack of access to the courts, many citizens turn first to tribal groups instead of the authorities to seek protection or settle disputes, including those involving serious crimes.³⁰⁵ One source claimed that only those individuals with no tribal connections seek protection from the formal authorities.³⁰⁶ Other sources indicated that the police and judges in federal Iraq — out of concern for their own safety, fear of retaliation on the part of perpetrators or clans — also shy away from socially sensitive cases, instead referring individuals involved to the informal mechanism of tribal practices.³⁰⁷ For example, problems of domestic and honour-based violence within or between families are quite commonly not resolved through legal channels, but often according to tribal rules and customs.³⁰⁸

The extent to which NGOs or international organisations in general can be helpful in seeking legal protection is not known. One source indicated that there were cases in which a representative of an organisation tried to mediate at a police station for the fair treatment of a minor filing a report.³⁰⁹

²⁹⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; US DoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 51.

³⁰⁰ Confidential source, 23 March 2023.

³⁰¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 39; HRW and IraQueer, "Everyone Wants Me Dead", *Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, March 2022.

³⁰² HRW, *Iraq: Impunity for violence against LGBT people*, 23 March 2023.

³⁰³ Confidential source, 9 March 2023.

³⁰⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 39; confidential source, 28 March 2023.

³⁰⁵ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F1; confidential source, 27 March 2023; EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, p. 18; Peregraf, *Turning to tribal arbitration and away from the courts*, 15 August 2023.

³⁰⁶ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

³⁰⁷ Assafir Al-Arabi, *Iraqi women: Resisting oppression in an afflicted country*, 16 January 2022; Amwaj, 'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq, 7 February 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

³⁰⁸ BBC Monitoring, *Explainer: Iraqi women caught between domestic violence and tribal law*, 8 March 2021; France 24, *The struggle for women's rights in Iraq* (video), 5 November 2021.

³⁰⁹ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

Due process and criminal prosecution

In general — and in addition to the lack of specific legislation in areas such as domestic violence — there was a lack of effective implementation and enforcement of existing legislation, both in federal Iraq and in the KRI.³¹⁰ According to one source, the main causes were a lack of political will amongst those in power, a conservative undercurrent in society and politics, and corruption.³¹¹ Corruption is one of the factors that limit due process in Iraq.³¹² As in 2021, Iraq shared 157th place in the rankings of 180 countries on the 2022 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 23 (where a score of 100 means free of corruption and a score of 0 means very corrupt).³¹³ According to Freedom House, in addition to corruption, the judiciary in federal Iraq and the KRI is influenced by political pressure, violent intimidation and occasional killings, as well as by tribal and religious interests. Executive interference in the judiciary is said to be widespread.³¹⁴

Due process is also under pressure in the KRI. Commonly mentioned obstacles include limited access to lawyers and documents for detainees, political interference in court cases and the alignment of national legislation with international standards.³¹⁵

With regard to accountability, there was also little progress during the current reporting period.³¹⁶ In June 2022, the UN mission in Iraq (UNAMI) wrote about the ongoing impunity in Iraq for killings, disappearances, abductions and torturing of activists. Limited results were achieved in terms of holding perpetrators accountable for the violent crackdown on large-scale anti-government demonstrations in 2019 and 2020.³¹⁷ The UN has documented that, between 1 October 2019 and 30 April 2020, at least 487 protesters were killed and 7,715 were injured as a result of the use of force by Iraqi security forces and 'unidentified armed elements'³¹⁸ against protesters.³¹⁹ Four cases related to violence committed by armed elements were ongoing. A fact-finding committee set up by the al-Kadhimi government had not produced any investigation results or provided any public information.³²⁰ As indicated in the October 2021 country of origin information report, both victims and their relatives and lawyers taking legal action against violent crimes related to the demonstrations could face threats, especially if the crimes were attributed to 'unidentified armed elements'.³²¹ This pattern continued during the current reporting period. According to UNAMI, several individuals (family members, judges, investigators and activists) seeking accountability had faced threats and

³¹⁰ OHCHR, *Iraq: Implementation of laws key to ending torture and building public trust in justice system – UN*, 3 August 2021; confidential source, 23 February 2023.

³¹¹ Confidential source, 23 February 2023.

³¹² The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, *The Iraqi judiciary: Undermined by violent intimidation, corruption, and politicization*, 30 January 2023; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F1.

³¹³ Transparency International – *Corruption Perceptions Index 2022*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>

³¹⁴ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, F1.

³¹⁵ UNAMI and OHCHR, *Human Rights and Freedom of Expression: Trials in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 15 December 2021; confidential source, 23 February 2023.

³¹⁶ Confidential source, 9 May 2022; UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq, Limited Progress towards Justice for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022; HRW, *To Sleep the Law. Violence against Protesters and Unaccountable Perpetrators in Iraq*, 29 November 2022; confidential source, 23 February 2023.

³¹⁷ UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq, Limited Progress towards Justice for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022, p. 3.

³¹⁸ The actors in question, which the UN refers to as 'unidentified armed elements', were often labelled by witnesses and human rights organisations as (PMF) militias. See also: Amnesty, *Iraq: Four years after Tishreen protests, no justice for state and militia violence*, 27 September 2023.

³¹⁹ OHCHR, *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes his official visit to Iraq*, 9 August 2023.

³²⁰ UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq, Limited Progress towards Justice for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022, p. 3.

³²¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 40.

intimidation, or violence.³²² According to various sources, no significant progress on accountability was made even under the al-Sudani government, despite commitments in this area in the ministerial programme that was drawn up when it took office.³²³

Specific grave violations

Torture by a public servant is punishable under Section 333 of the Penal Code. At the same time, however, the use of torture in detention to extract confessions is a common practice in prisons in federal Iraq and the KRI, and it usually goes unpunished (see Section 1.2.6). In May 2022, the UN Committee Against Torture reported that perpetrators are not effectively held accountable based on existing mechanisms in Iraq to investigate cases of torture and ill treatment by officials.³²⁴ According to HRW, judges in court rarely respond to allegations of torture.³²⁵

Rape is punishable under Section 393 of the Penal Code. Criminal prosecution depends partly on the victim's willingness to file a report. Stigma is a major barrier that keeps women in Iraq from reporting sexual violence (see Section 3.3.5). In addition, some women are said to be unaware of their rights and the laws that exist to protect them from violence.³²⁶

3.2 Compliance and violations

3.2.1 Freedom of expression

As in the previous reporting period,³²⁷ freedom of expression was under severe pressure in both federal Iraq and the KRI during the current reporting period.³²⁸ Both the federal authorities and the KRG used vaguely worded laws to criminally prosecute journalists, activists and others as a means of silencing critical or dissenting voices.³²⁹ In federal Iraq, during the time of the al-Kadhimi government and, later, the al-Sudani government, the authorities increasingly used legal and legislative strategies to suppress peaceful criticism.³³⁰ Despite pledges³³¹ made upon taking office to guarantee freedoms, the al-Sudani government took additional steps towards further curtailing freedom of expression and space for civil society beginning in late 2022.³³² The government prepared legislation that would further

³²² UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq, Limited Progress towards Justice for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022, p. 5.

³²³ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023, p. 2.

³²⁴ OHCHR, *UN Committee against Torture publishes findings on Cuba, Iceland, Iraq, Kenya, Montenegro and Uruguay*, 13 May 2022.

³²⁵ HRW, *Submission to the Committee Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Punishment ahead of the review of the Republic of Iraq*, 7 April 2022.

³²⁶ UNDP, *Rising rates of rape and sexual violence in conflict should be an alarm bell*, 15 June 2022.

³²⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 41.

³²⁸ UNAMI, *Iraq - International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists*, 2 November, 2 November 2022; OHCHR, *Global update: High Commissioner outlines concerns in over 40 countries*, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³²⁹ HRW, *Human Rights Watch Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee in Advance of its Review of Iraq*, 25 January 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Activist imprisoned for peaceful criticism of security forces, Alarming escalation of legal threats against civil society*, 6 December 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report - Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 27; HRW, *20 years after deadly attack, free press still threatened in Iraq*, 8 April 2023.

³³⁰ HRW, *Iraq: Activist imprisoned for peaceful criticism of security forces, Alarming escalation of legal threats against civil society*, 6 December 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023; Al Jazeera, *The long shadow of Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq*, 16 April 2023.

³³¹ Amnesty International, *Open Letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023.

³³² Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; Al Jazeera, *The long shadow of Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq*, 16 April 2023.

limit space for critical voices and opportunities to protest.³³³ In addition, the authorities launched a campaign aimed at countering 'indecent' or 'immoral' online expressions, which was followed by arrests and convictions.³³⁴

According to some sources, in contrast to previous years, there was a relatively low level of physical violence against journalists or other target groups in federal Iraq during the reporting period, although the aforementioned means did lead to more widespread self-censorship on the part of civil society, and even amongst non-activist youth wishing to avoid trouble with the authorities or powerful parties.³³⁵

Measures against critical voices

In federal Iraq, during the two different political timeframes within the reporting period — the period from the elections (October 2021) to the formation (October 2022), and the period since the al-Sudani government took office — different strategies were employed to further restrict space for critical voices, for journalists and activists, as well as for the wider Iraqi population.³³⁶

Throughout the reporting period, but — according to one source — particularly in the months leading up to the formation of the government, the political elite used certain laws to file baseless lawsuits (mostly criminal defamation cases) against individuals who had expressed criticism online or through other channels (such as TV programmes).³³⁷ Various legal provisions were used (e.g. articles 225–227 of the Iraqi Penal Code) to prosecute individuals who had allegedly insulted government agencies.³³⁸ For example, Article 226 prohibits 'publicly insulting' the parliament, the armed forces or other state institutions, under penalty of imprisonment for up to seven years.³³⁹

Many cases of such lawsuits did not enter the public domain because of the victims' fear of retaliation or further damage.³⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there were several high-profile cases during the reporting period. A noteworthy example of legal action to intimidate a critical person was the case involving the activist Haidar al-Zaidi. Some activists regarded the case as a signal to notify activists that criticism of the authorities and the PMF would be punished.³⁴¹ On 5 December 2022, a criminal court in Baghdad sentenced al-Zaidi (who was 20 years old at the time) to three years in prison for having posted a Tweet criticising the deputy PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed by the US in 2020.³⁴² In response to the Tweet, al-Zaidi was arrested in June 2022 and released on bail after sixteen days. His arrest in December led to demonstrations in Nasiriya, in Dhi Qar province, in which at least

³³³ Since 2011, when a new parliament was formed, the two bills in question have been reintroduced in their original form — without amendments that would bring them more in line with international standards. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *Draconian bills resubmitted to Iraqi parliament*, 20 December 2022; confidential source, 12 March 2023.

³³⁴ NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³³⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report: Iraq*, October 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023, confidential source, 26 March 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³³⁶ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³³⁷ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³³⁸ Al Jazeera, *The long shadow of Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq*, 16 April 2023.

³³⁹ Shafaq News, *Metro: the "specter" of Article 226 haunts Iraq's journalists*, 2 June 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Activist imprisoned for peaceful criticism of security forces, Alarming escalation of legal threats against civil society*, 6 December 2022.

³⁴⁰ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 24.

³⁴¹ HRW, *Iraq: Activist imprisoned for peaceful criticism of security forces, Alarming escalation of legal threats against civil society*, 6 December 2022.

³⁴² BBC, *Iraqi activist jailed over tweet 'insulting' Iran-backed militia force*, 7 December 2022.

two protesters were killed by riot police.³⁴³ Al-Zaidi was released and the charges against him were reportedly dropped after a meeting between a senior PMF official and al-Zaidi's family.³⁴⁴

Another well-known case was that of political analyst and writer Mohammad Na'naa'. During the last election campaign, Na'naa' had said both in essays and on television that the future prime minister lacked strategic vision and was a hostage of pro-Iranian factions. He was charged with defamation by Prime Minister al-Sudani and arrested in March 2023. He was released on bail and, as far as is known, was still awaiting trial at the end of the reporting period.³⁴⁵ Another well-known example was the case against the TV presenter Ahmed Mulla Talal, who was arrested under Article 226 in April 2022 for impersonating on TV a senior general engaged in corruption.³⁴⁶ These are only a few examples of people who were forced into silence in response to actual or perceived criticism of the political or military elite.

The al-Sudani government reintroduced two bills in parliament that, according to international and Iraqi human rights organisations, if passed, would severely restrict the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The proposed draft law on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly would allow Iraqi authorities to arbitrarily prosecute anyone who makes public utterances that violate 'public morals' or 'public order'. According to the second proposed bill, on cybercrime, anyone posting online content that would undermine the country's unclearly defined 'supreme economic, political, military or security interests' could be sentenced to life imprisonment and a fine of up to 50 million Iraqi dinars (about USD 38,000).³⁴⁷ Although neither bill had yet been passed by parliament, their reintroduction raised major concerns within civil society.

In January 2023, the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior launched a large-scale campaign against online content that 'violates public morals, contains negative and indecent messages and undermines social stability' (Article 403 of the Iraqi Penal Code). The ministry set up a platform that allowed Iraqis to report social media content published by other citizens.³⁴⁸ A committee was also set up to punish individuals under Article 403 of the Penal Code, which criminalises published material that 'violates public integrity or decency'. According to human rights organisations, the vagueness of these terms opened the door to rampant abuse, including the suppression of peaceful dissent.³⁴⁹ Six months later, the ministry said it had received more than 150,000 complaints between January and July 2023, eventually leading to charges against fourteen people for publishing 'indecent' or 'immoral' content on social media. Those charged included well-known social media influencers in Iraq who had posted videos of themselves online that might come across as provocative to conservative Iraqis. Examples include an interview with a

³⁴³ AP, *2 killed in protest over Iraqi activist's prison sentence*, 7 December 2022; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, *GCHR's 25th Periodic Report on Human Rights Violations in Iraq*, 16 December 2022.

³⁴⁴ AP, *2 killed in protest over Iraqi activist's prison sentence*, 7 December 2022; Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023.

³⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, *The long shadow of Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq*, 16 April 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³⁴⁶ Ahmed Mulla Talal (via Facebook), 7 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=528209198867380&set=a.313914056963563>; The National, *Iraqi TV presenter and actor face trial over parody of military corruption*, 10 April 2022; confidential source, 20 July 2022.

³⁴⁷ Access Now, *Stop the assault on free speech, drop the draft digital content regulation in Iraq*, 16 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; Social Media Exchange (SMEX), *Iraq: New draft law threatens freedoms and violates constitution*, 31 March 2023; Amnesty International, *Iraq: Draft laws threaten rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly*, 18 July 2023.

³⁴⁸ NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³⁴⁹ Access Now, Amnesty International and ARTICLE19 et al., *Joint Statement: Iraqi authorities must cease chilling crackdown on free speech*, 3 March 2023.

young woman dressed in tight-fitting clothes about her private life; a fashionista dressed in an outfit based on the Iraqi army uniform; and a woman dancing at her son's birthday party. Eight of them were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six months to two years. In many cases, sentences were shortened on appeal. Many complaints are said to still be under investigation.³⁵⁰

Several sources perceived the aforementioned steps of the al-Sudani government as a disturbing, deliberate strategy of part of the political elite to consolidate its newfound power through the suppression of freedoms.³⁵¹ One source likened the more-or-less parallel, technically legal steps to wires that together formed one large dragnet to fish out critics.³⁵² A group of international and Iraqi human rights organisations also warned that the new government's actions would have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.³⁵³

In federal Iraq, large-scale, organised protests against the increased pressure failed to materialise. Sources pointed to the success of the crackdown that was deployed, which is said to have led journalists and the wider public to practise more self-censorship.³⁵⁴

In the KRI, freedom of expression — and especially freedom of the press (see Section 3.2.2) — and freedom of assembly were under unrelenting pressure during the reporting period.³⁵⁵ Kurdish authorities also used vaguely worded laws to suppress criticism and unwanted opinions.³⁵⁶ They arrested, prosecuted (criminally) and convicted journalists, activists and critics on arbitrary grounds.³⁵⁷

Red lines

In general, independent media and journalists experienced difficulties in reporting on sensitive issues, including political conflicts, corruption and smuggling, the security forces, demonstrations and gender-based issues.³⁵⁸ According to one source, normal citizens could estimate to some extent what the 'red lines' were for them, although these shifted unpredictably within the complex political situation. For example, in federal Iraq, criticism of certain political figures, including the leaders of the most prominent pro-Iranian militias, was a red line.³⁵⁹ In the KRI, criticism of members of the families at the head of the KDP (Barzani) and the PUK (Talabani) constituted a red line.³⁶⁰ It was not always clear where the red lines began and where they ended: political views that were safe in one part of the country could be dangerous in another. Even within the KRI, there were differences between the KDP and PUK territories in this regard. Throughout Iraq, multiple actors compete for power, territory, resources and control over legal and illegal markets. As a result, according to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT),

³⁵⁰ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³⁵¹ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; Confidential source, 26 March 2023; Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁵² Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁵³ Access Now, Amnesty International and ARTICLE19 et al., *Joint statement: Iraqi authorities must cease chilling crackdown on free speech*, 3 March 2023.

³⁵⁴ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³⁵⁵ Nesar Records, *Data dive: Tracking press freedom violations across the Kurdistan Region*, 11 April 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

³⁵⁶ HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 317.

³⁵⁷ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 27; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

³⁵⁸ UNAMI, *Iraq - International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists*, 2 November, 2 November 2022; Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, *A "silencer" arrest warrant has been issued against Haider Al-Hamdani: a legal trap that violates court orders*, 18 November 2022; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

³⁵⁹ Confidential source, 1 April 2023.

³⁶⁰ DFAT, *Country Information Report: Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 29; confidential source, 1 April 2023.

individuals with undesirable political views could find themselves at odds with a wide range of groups, including the authorities, security forces, state-sponsored militias or other armed groups, tribal groups and conservative religious authorities.³⁶¹ Several sources described the complexity of the space for criticism by contrasting it with the situation under Saddam Hussein, when, according to one of these sources, 'at least it was clear who the dictator was about whom people could not talk'.³⁶² Information on the situation of individuals who are critical of Islam is provided in Section 3.2.3.

In federal Iraq, fear of possible legal or non-legal consequences of perceived or actual criticism or 'indecent' self-expression led to an increase in self-censorship, according to some sources.³⁶³ The increase in criminal defamation cases in 2022 led to self-censorship among a large group of journalists, according to one source. In addition, this source noted that the campaign against 'indecent' expressions had a chilling effect on a broader public.³⁶⁴ Partly due to the lack of transparent information about the actual content underlying the convictions relating to the campaign, many young people in particular are said to have drastically changed their internet activities, for fear that they could be convicted of something.³⁶⁵

Critical online (and other) publications

Based on available sources, it was not clear on what scale and how actively the authorities monitored critical or otherwise sensitive online (or other) expressions by Iraqis, both inside and outside Iraq. Whereas, according to Freedom House, federal Iraqi and Kurdish authorities would constantly monitor online platforms, another source noted that the Iraqi government did not have the institutional capacity to do so.³⁶⁶ 'Electronic armies' affiliated with the political elite and pro-Iranian militias were deployed to monitor social media, spread fake news and targeted threats (to individuals), and troll or hack dissenters.³⁶⁷

The campaign against 'indecent expression' was also a mechanism for monitoring social media.³⁶⁸ Monitoring was essentially outsourced to the public: anyone could report 'indecent' or 'immoral' content. According to the MoI, this happened on a large scale. Between January and July, more than 150,000 complaints were reportedly received through the dedicated platform *Balleg* (Arabic for 'report').³⁶⁹

It was clear that there were risks involved in expressing political opinions or frustrations about social issues. In some cases, individuals (including non-activists) were subjected to threats and intimidation after posting online on controversial topics, including alleged corruption, LGBTIQ+ issues, foreign interference in Iraqi politics and the power of certain militias.³⁷⁰ In other cases, statements made on

³⁶¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 23.

³⁶² Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

³⁶³ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; Confidential source, 26 March 2023; Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁶⁴ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁶⁵ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁶⁶ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁶⁷ The Telegraph, *Exclusive: Inside Hizbollah's fake news training camps sowing instability across the Middle East*, 2 August 2020; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023; The Guardian, 'My questions are turned into a weapon to kill me': the deadly war against Iraq's journalists, 22 March 2023; confidential source, 2 June 2023.

³⁶⁸ Peregraf, *Iraq cracks down on social media authorities deem 'inappropriate'; Does the campaign cover Kurdistan?*, 14 March 2023; Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023.

³⁶⁹ NY Times, *As Iraq tries to chill critics, its newest target is social media*, 16 July 2023.

³⁷⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report: Iraq*, October 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 28.

social media led to criminal prosecution and conviction, as in the case of Haidar al-Zaidi.³⁷¹

3.2.2 *Position of journalists, human rights (and other) activists, opposition members*

In both federal Iraq and the KRI, pressure from the authorities, politicians and religious groups on civil society increased during the reporting period. NGOs — both local and international, and especially those focusing on gender — faced hardships including extra-statutory imposed administrative obligations (such as stricter requirements for registration and financial records), as well as harassment and threats (both in-person and online). Journalists and human rights activists (including climate activists) operated under difficult conditions. Women — independent journalists, but also those running shelters for victims of gender-based violence — experienced additional challenges and threats.³⁷²

Freedom of the press and the position of journalists

In the 2023 Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Iraq at position 167 out of 180 countries, down from positions 156, 162, 163 and 172 in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, respectively.³⁷³ In both federal Iraq and the KRI, journalists were obstructed in the performance of their work, arbitrarily arrested and detained, harassed and threatened during the reporting period.³⁷⁴ As far as is known, no journalists were killed in the course of (or because of) their work.³⁷⁵

According to Amnesty, the prevailing climate of impunity for armed actors who targeted protesters, activists and journalists during the repression of the *Tishreen* demonstrations in 2019 and 2020³⁷⁶ undermined the right to freedom of expression in federal Iraq.³⁷⁷ One incident during the reporting period that was regarded by several sources as exemplifying this was the storming of the offices of TV channel Al-Rabaa in Baghdad by armed supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr in October 2022. The incident took place after a media presenter was said to have reported the destruction of state buildings by followers of al-Sadr and to have criticised al-Sadr's former militia, the Mahdi Army. According to Amnesty, although Iraqi authorities condemned the attack and announced an investigation, no further measures were announced to protect media workers or hold perpetrators accountable.³⁷⁸

³⁷¹ BBC, *Iraqi activist jailed over tweet 'insulting' Iran-backed militia force*, 7 December 2022; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023.

³⁷² Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 12 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; GCHR, *Challenges facing journalists in the MENA region*, 3 May 2023; NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, *UN Security Council briefing on Iraq by Khanim Latif*, 18 May 2023; confidential source, 21 August 2023.

³⁷³ Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/index> consulted 26 June 2023.

³⁷⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *Iraqi security forces assault, detain journalists covering Baghdad protests*, 31 August 2022; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202; confidential source, 26 March 2023; Nesar Records, *Data dive: Tracking press freedom violations across the Kurdistan Region*, 11 April 2023.

³⁷⁵ UNESCO, *Observatory of Killed Journalists*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory>, consulted on 9 July 2023; Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/data/>, consulted on 9 July 2023.

³⁷⁶ During the *Tishreen* demonstrations, Iraqi security forces and armed groups acted with deadly force against protesters, activists, journalists, human rights defenders and others who supported the protest. According to the UN, at least 487 people were killed in the first seven months (October 2019–April 2020) of the demonstrations. See: UNAMI, *Update on Demonstrations in Iraq: Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements*, May 2021, p. 4.

³⁷⁷ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

³⁷⁸ JFO, *Attacking "Al-Rabeea" channel: A new chapter of governmental tolerance for violence against the press*, 5 October 2022; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

Several sources described a general decline in physical violence against journalists and media offices in federal Iraq.³⁷⁹ Most incidents of violence occurred during periods of political unrest. For example, at least ten journalists were reportedly injured during protests in August 2022 by al-Sadr supporters, and a rocket was reportedly fired at Dijlah TV headquarters during the same period.³⁸⁰ The political elite and PMF militias had other means to suppress criticism (see also Section 3.2.1).³⁸¹ Militias that had previously mainly used physical violence would now use the legal system as a tool and put pressure on the judiciary — like other parties. For example, in many cases, journalists were falsely accused of criminal offences (for instance, endangering national security, defamation) and arrested.³⁸² Journalists also continued to face threats.³⁸³ According to one source, in about six months (between October 2022 and the end of March 2023), more than forty cases were documented in which journalists had faced direct threats because of their work. In about half of these cases, journalists stopped working. Some fled to Erbil, a larger number went to Türkiye and yet others went into hiding.³⁸⁴ There were also instances of TV programmes being taken off the air and journalists being fired after discussing sensitive issues.³⁸⁵ Due to the context outlined above, journalists took security measures and avoided sensitive topics in order to stave off problems with a variety of powerful groups and individuals.³⁸⁶

Following increased repression during the previous reporting period,³⁸⁷ pressure on journalists continued unabated in the KRI.³⁸⁸ Female journalists faced additional problems, including gender-based harassment (both online and offline) and violence.³⁸⁹ The authorities continued to use broadly worded laws to attack critics for expressing criticism and opinions they objected to.³⁹⁰ This reportedly included pressuring journalists to sign documents in which they promised to stop reporting on specific topics. To ensure their own safety, many journalists had no choice but to practice self-censorship.³⁹¹ According to one source, it was difficult for independent media still present in the KRI to report on the functioning (or dysfunction) of the regional government. The source further noted that independent media had experienced increasing difficulties in reporting on sensitive topics (such as political conflicts, corruption and smuggling, the security forces, demonstrations and gender-based issues).³⁹² In the disputed territories, media organisations also faced challenges, including security risks and ethno-religious divisions.³⁹³

³⁷⁹ Kurdistan24, *Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights report outlines declining freedom of press in Iraq*, 3 May 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸⁰ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 27.

³⁸¹ Kurdistan24, *Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights report outlines declining freedom of press in Iraq*, 3 May 2022; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸² Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸³ The Guardian, *'My questions are turned into a weapon to kill me': the deadly war against Iraq's journalists*, 22 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸⁴ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸⁵ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸⁶ Kurdistan24, *Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights report outlines declining freedom of press in Iraq*, 3 May 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 27; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

³⁸⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 42.

³⁸⁸ Columbia Journalism Review, *'A kind of hell for journalists'*, 6 April 2022; Kurdistan24, *431 violations were recorded against journalists in the Kurdistan region last year: the Metro Center*, 16 January 2023; RSF, *Surge in harassment of journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 27 July 2023.

³⁸⁹ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

³⁹⁰ Columbia Journalism Review, *'A kind of hell for journalists'*, 6 April 2022; HRW, *World Report 2023: Events of 2022*, 12 January 2023, p. 317; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

³⁹¹ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

³⁹² Confidential source, 8 June 2023.

³⁹³ DW, *Can there be dialogue in Iraq's disputed territories?*, 12 December 2022; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

In relation to the KRI, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) spoke in September 2022 about an alarming increase in the number of brief arrests of journalists (especially those working for media critical of the government) in the preceding weeks.³⁹⁴ The Metro Center for Journalist Rights and Advocacy, which monitors violations against journalists, confirmed the perception that the number of arbitrary arrests was increasing.³⁹⁵ According to the Metro Center, 431 incidents against 301 journalists and media organisations took place in the KRI in 2022. These incidents included 195 cases of preventing or obstructing reporting, 64 arbitrary detentions 'without a court order' (a sharp increase from previous periods) and at least 26 incidents of violence.³⁹⁶ In 2021, Metro reported a total of 353 violations, after reporting 385 in 2020 and 231 in 2019.³⁹⁷

As in the previous reporting period, firm action was taken against journalists covering demonstrations in the KRI. One incident that generated attention during the reporting period was the arrest of dozens of journalists, activists and opposition members on 6 August 2022, ahead of planned protests in several cities (called for by the opposition New Generation Party). According to Amnesty, the *Asayish* security service briefly detained at least twenty journalists in connection with coverage of the protests, which were aimed at the delayed payment of government wages and lack of employment.³⁹⁸

Human rights (and other) activists

In federal Iraq, human rights (and other) activists faced criminal prosecution, intimidation and, in some cases, violence, including abduction and torture.³⁹⁹ Several human rights (and other) activists were also reportedly targeted in attacks.⁴⁰⁰ However, compared to the previous reporting period (January 2020 to October 2021), which coincided in part with the violent suppression of the *Tishreen* demonstrations, physical violence against activists was less widespread. Following the crackdown on the protest movement, many protesters had discontinued their political activities (at least overtly), gone into hiding or fled to the KRI. Others had joined political parties.⁴⁰¹ A report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) states that many of the human rights activists and other demonstrators who were active in the protest movement were still experiencing severe psychological strain due to the violence, prosecution and impunity they had faced. These pressures were exacerbated by social pressure from family and society, as well as by a general lack of social and psychological support. Some current and former activists tried to

³⁹⁴ RSF, *RSF calls on authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan to release Qahraman Shukri and three other detained journalists*, 27 September 2022.

³⁹⁵ Kirkuk Now, *New record of violations against journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan Region*, 16 January 2023.

³⁹⁶ Metro Center, *Report on situation of freedom of journalism in Kurdistan Region in 2022*, 17 January 2023.

³⁹⁷ Ekurd Daily, *231 violations against journalists recorded in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2019: watchdog*, 11 January 2020; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 42; Ekurd Daily, *353 violations against journalists and media recorded in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2021: watchdog*, 16 January 2022.

³⁹⁸ Draw Media, *Violations against journalists in one day was higher than the past six months*, 8 August 2022; HRW, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Arrests to deter protest*, 28 August 2022; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

³⁹⁹ HRW, *Drop complaint against Iraq human rights commission member*, 10 March 2022; UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq. Limited progress towards justice for human rights violations and abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022; pp. 10–11; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 26; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, E1-E2; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 48.

⁴⁰⁰ CIVICUS, *Reports and monitoring missions document extreme repression and violence against activists*, 18 August 2022; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 48; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁴⁰¹ UNAMI, *Update on Accountability in Iraq. Limited progress towards justice for human rights violations and abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'*, June 2022; p. 10; The Century Foundation, *Under Pressure, Iraqi Activists Plot "Third Way"*, 28 September 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 26.

protect themselves through self-censorship, and it was reported that others were still regularly changing their places of residence.⁴⁰²

Like other critics, prominent activists faced prolonged judicial harassment to force them to silence. For example, authorities would sometimes start a case and not complete it — thereby opening the possibility of issuing an arrest warrant at any time — or brought one case after another.⁴⁰³ According to one source, judicial harassment sometimes gave cause for human rights defenders to flee Iraq.⁴⁰⁴

In September 2022, members of PMF militias in several cities in the south arrested dozens of people whom they accused of being part of a 'Ba'ath conspiracy' to disrupt a Shia religious ceremony (the Arba'een pilgrimage). Those arrested included four prominent *Tishreen* activists from Diwaniyah.⁴⁰⁵ The DFAT reported that the activists had been tortured and that two of them had died shortly after their release.⁴⁰⁶

On 1 February 2023, a well-known climate activist, Jasim al-Assadi, was abducted and tortured for a fortnight by unknown armed individuals (see also Section 1.2.6). The identity of the perpetrators remained unknown, although there were strong indications that pro-Iranian militias were behind the incident.⁴⁰⁷ Climate and environmental activists faced threats, judicial (and other) intimidation and arbitrary arrest or abduction by government officials and armed groups.⁴⁰⁸ According to HRW, many of these threats involved key figures in the environmental movement who had been critical of environmental issues, and who were targeted in attempts to stop their work and deter other activists.⁴⁰⁹ According to one source, the security risks to these individuals had led Iraqi activists and environmental NGOs to proceed with great caution and a high level of self-censorship.⁴¹⁰

Although in earlier years, as well as during the reporting period, some at-risk activists in federal Iraq sought safe haven in the KRI, human rights (and other) activists in the Kurdish region also faced intimidation and arbitrary arrests by the authorities.⁴¹¹

In both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region, activists standing up for women's rights or LGBTIQ+ people were also at risk of intimidation and threats from the

⁴⁰² GCHR, *They Will Not Shoot Down Our Dream: Challenges Faced by Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Following the "October Popular Movement"* 5 May 2022, p. 7.

⁴⁰³ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), *Iraq: Judicial harassment of Dr Ali Akram al-Bayati*, 1 March 2022; confidential source, 22 July 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation*, 23 February 2023; Arab Reform Initiative, *Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change*, 25 May 2023; Front Line Defenders, *Human rights defender and journalist Yasser al-Hamdani acquitted*, 9 June 2023.

⁴⁰⁴ Confidential source, 22 July 2022.

⁴⁰⁵ Shafaq News, *Independent MP calls for dismissing PMF chief following "illegal" mass arrest campaign in al-Diwaniyah*, 15 September 2022; Al-Monitor, *Iran-linked militias claim arrest linked to threats to disrupt religious holiday*, 16 September 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 24.

⁴⁰⁶ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 24.

⁴⁰⁷ HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation*, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 9 March 2023.

⁴⁰⁸ HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation*, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 9 March 2023; Arab Reform Initiative, *Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change*, 25 May 2023; New Lines Magazine, *Ashura rituals in Iraq highlight environmental crisis*, 15 August 2023.

⁴⁰⁹ HRW, *Iraq: Environmentalists face retaliation*, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 9 March 2023; Arab Reform Initiative, *Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change*, 25 May 2023; New Lines Magazine, *Ashura rituals in Iraq highlight environmental crisis*, 15 August 2023.

⁴¹⁰ Arab Reform Initiative, *Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change*, 25 May 2023, p. 13.

⁴¹¹ Confidential source, 22 July 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 26; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 13; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

authorities and socially or religiously conservative groups and individuals.⁴¹² For example, in Basra in June 2022, a workshop on gender-based violence was stormed by three men who demanded that the organisers stop their activities.⁴¹³ Well-known women's rights activists and NGOs were targeted by online harassment, sometimes in the form of coordinated hate campaigns accusing them of various offences, including the promotion and spread of homosexuality.⁴¹⁴

According to one source, the increasing pressure on women's rights activists and opposition to gender-focused organisations should be regarded primarily within the domestic-political context in the run-up to the upcoming provincial elections (in December 2023). Politicians were said to use and monopolise the debate on the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people to brand themselves as protectors of traditional Islamic values.⁴¹⁵ In this regard, other sources also pointed to the increased influence of Islamist parties in the Kurdistan region in recent years, along with its negative impact on the space for both women's rights and LGBTIQ+ activists.⁴¹⁶ For example, women's rights activists drew attention to the situation of the activist Shilan Noury, against whom a conservative Islamic organisation had filed a lawsuit after she compared polygamy to prostitution on a Kurdish TV channel.⁴¹⁷

Opposition members

In federal Iraq, citizens can form political parties even if they explicitly oppose the political system that is organised along ethnic sectarian lines (known as *muhasasa*).⁴¹⁸ During the reporting period, MPs and parties (mostly from the *Tishreen* movement) faced attempts by the established and dominant political elite to antagonise them, influence their voting behaviour or rein them in (for instance by banning them from certain parliamentary committees).⁴¹⁹ According to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights (IOHR), they also faced attempts to restrict their political activities, including actions targeting their political offices and attempts to prevent them from participating in future elections.⁴²⁰ According to Freedom House, prominent members of reformist parties faced militia intimidation.⁴²¹ Women politicians faced threats from conservative elements in society, especially around the elections.⁴²² Independent MPs and members of new parties, without political backing from an established party or armed group, were vulnerable in the face of the dominant blocs in parliament that turned against them. They would not always dare to disclose actions directed against them, for fear of repercussions. After an MP from

⁴¹² UNSC, *Letter dated 26 October 2022 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General*, 1 November 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 29.

⁴¹³ Middle East Eye, *Iraqi NGO demands answers from authorities after attack on human rights workshop*, 28 June 2022; GCHR, *Iraq: Gender-based violence workshop in Basra stormed by National Security Service forces*, 29 June 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 28.

⁴¹⁴ Confidential source, 30 March 2023; Chatham House, *The backlash against women's rights in Iraq's Kurdistan region*, 14 April 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023; confidential source, 21 August 2023.

⁴¹⁵ Confidential source, 21 August 2023.

⁴¹⁶ LSE, *Pockets of feminism, art and activism in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 30 July 2022; confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴¹⁷ Confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 21 August 2023.

⁴¹⁸ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, B1.

⁴¹⁹ LSE Middle East Centre, *The fragmentation of Iraq's 'protest parties' attests to the muhasasa system's resilience*, 7 June 2022; confidential source, 23 February 2023; Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, *Threats and attacks against members of parliament (MPs) who do not belong to the influential forces*, 2 August 2023.

⁴²⁰ Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, *Threats and attacks against members of parliament (MPs) who do not belong to the influential forces*, 2 August 2023.

⁴²¹ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, B1.

⁴²² Reuters, *Braving intimidation, hundreds of Iraqi women run for parliament*, 16 September 2021; LSE Middle East Centre, *Changing the System from Within? The Role of Opposition Parties in Consolidating Democracy in Iraq Post-2019*, March 2023, p. 15; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, B1.

Babil province spoke out about threats against his family in June 2023, his political office was reportedly besieged by armed individuals the same week.⁴²³

In March 2023, controversial changes were made to the electoral law, which were seen as disadvantageous to independent candidates and the smaller, reformist parties in future elections. The federal government approved amendments increasing the size of constituencies. The changes were pushed through by the Iran-backed Shia Coordination Framework, the alliance of Shia parties that controls a majority in parliament and supports the al-Sudani government. In effect, this reversed changes made after the 2019/2020 anti-government demonstrations, in response to the protesters' demand for a fairer electoral law. Both prior to and after the planned changes, demonstrations took place in several cities.⁴²⁴

In the KRI, repressive actions have taken place in recent years against the opposition New Generation Party and its affiliated media channel Nalia Radio and Television (NRT), which is owned by New Generation Party leader Shaswar Abdulwahid.⁴²⁵ In August 2022, KRG security forces detained members of the party in connection with the protests in Suleymaniyah, Erbil and Duhok mentioned earlier in this section (under 'Freedom of the press and the position of journalists'). According to the party, which had called for the protests, the Asayish security service had arrested 86 of its members in their homes and during the protests in Erbil and Suleymaniyah. After a few hours or days in detention, they were released on bail without being informed of the charges against them. Three of those arrested from the New Generation Party were members of the Iraqi parliament.⁴²⁶

3.2.3 *Freedom of religion and belief*

Legal framework

The Iraqi constitution guarantees freedom of religion for every Iraqi citizen, specifically naming Muslims, Yazidis, Christians and Mandaeans. Freedom of religion and belief for followers of other religions or beliefs is not explicitly mentioned.⁴²⁷ For additional information on the legal framework regarding religious freedom in federal Iraq and the KRI, see the country of origin information report dated October 2021. Amongst other items, this report stated that Judaism was included in the Personal Status Law as a recognised religion. The Law on Protection of the Right of Components (Law No. 5), which was adopted in 2015 in the KRI, recognises religious minorities, including some not recognised in federal Iraq, namely Zoroastrians, Kaka'i and Baha'i. The law recognises the right to equal treatment and prohibits any form of discrimination.⁴²⁸

As also mentioned in the previous country of origin information report, the electronic and biometric national ID card (the unified national ID card) does not print information on the holder's religion, but this information must be mentioned when

⁴²³ Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, *Threats and attacks against members of parliament (MPs) who do not belong to the influential forces*, 2 August 2023.

⁴²⁴ AP, *Hundreds protest new proposed election law in Baghdad*, 27 February 2023; The New Arab, *Fresh protests in Iraq over new election bill*, 6 March 2023; Reuters, *Iraqi parliament approves unpopular election law amendments*, 27 March 2023.

⁴²⁵ Rudaw, *Erbil police seek arrest of Shaswar Abdulwahid: NRT*, 16 May 2021; Amwaj, *New Generation Movement: A new alternative in Iraqi Kurdistan?*, 18 January 2022; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, B2.

⁴²⁶ HRW, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Arrests to deter protest*, 28 August 2022; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 202.

⁴²⁷ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, D2; US DoS, *Iraq 2022 International Religious Freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 1.

⁴²⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 48.

applying for the card, and it is stored on the chip in the ID card. The card holder can specify only one of the following five religious identities: Muslim, Christian, Yazidi, Mandaean or Jewish.⁴²⁹

Freedom of religion in practice

The country of origin information report of October 2021 mentioned that recognised religious minorities were officially and governmentally able to live and practice their faith freely (e.g. having specific buildings and performing services and rituals). In practice, however, the ability to practise freely depended on where religious minorities were living, as well as on the security and other situations there.⁴³⁰ No evidence has been found that significant changes have occurred during the current reporting period with regard to the extent to which Iraqis are able to live out their religion or beliefs in their daily lives.

On the one hand, some sources indicated that, as far as is known, religious minorities were not restricted in terms of practising their faith during the most recent period.⁴³¹ One source referred by way of example to the way in which Mandaean, a small ethno-religious community, openly performed the baptismal rites sacred to them in the river Tigris in Baghdad.⁴³² Christians were able to practice their faith freely in cities on the Nineveh Plains, where many Christians (returned from displacement) were living, as was the case in the district of Hamdaniya.⁴³³ Other sources mentioned that members of various groups in certain areas avoided appearing visibly religious to the social environment.⁴³⁴ For example, this was said to be the case amongst Sunnis in areas recaptured from ISIS, due to the perception that their religiosity is associated with ISIS sympathisers.⁴³⁵ In general, the Kaka'i community is said to hide its beliefs and religious rituals from the outside world.⁴³⁶ According to a recent small-scale survey of various population groups in Iraq, many Christians and Yazidis reportedly experience discrimination. The research report cites as an example that Christian and Yazidi students from Mosul and Sinjar studying at the University of Mosul indicated that they did not live on campus for fear of facing violence or harassment because of their religious identity.⁴³⁷

One source described the situation of minorities in northern federal Iraq (in areas like Ninewa) as living on the fringes of society and its power structures, with purely token political representation, a lack of social mobility and constant stigmatisation due to widespread and persistent stereotypes.⁴³⁸ In the KRI, which is outwardly known for the peaceful coexistence of different religions,⁴³⁹ sources noted that there was only token political representation of Christians.⁴⁴⁰

⁴²⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 49.

⁴³⁰ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 49.

⁴³¹ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴³² Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴³³ Aid to the Church in Need, *Iraqi Christians eye new year with hope and trepidation*, 24 January 2022; Catholic News Agency (CAN), *Joyful Iraqi Christians return to Nineveh Plains to celebrate Holy Week*, 11 April 2022; New Lines Magazine, *It's still a merry Christmas in Nineveh*, 23 December 2022.

⁴³⁴ MEI, *Addressing challenges to tolerance and religious diversity in Iraq*, 5 July 2023.

⁴³⁵ IOM, *The Role of Religious Institutions in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Iraq*, 24 May 2023, p. 17.

⁴³⁶ Nirij, *The plight of minorities in Iraq: violence, discrimination, and the threat of extinction amidst ongoing migration*, January 2023.

⁴³⁷ Search for Common Ground et al., *JISRA in Iraq*, 11 August 2022, pp. 2–3.

⁴³⁸ MEI, *Addressing challenges to tolerance and religious diversity in Iraq*, 5 July 2023.

⁴³⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 49; MEI, *Addressing challenges to tolerance and religious diversity in Iraq*, 5 July 2023.

⁴⁴⁰ Al Sharq Strategic Research, *Political representation of Iraq's minorities: Tool for dominant parties?*, 18 March 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023; The Kurdish Center for Studies, *Brawling over power sharing in the KRG*, 27 May 2023.

In its annual report for 2022, Freedom House reported that the Baha'i community was still suffering legal discrimination, given that its religious activities were officially prohibited and that members of the Baha'i community were not recognised as belonging to a minority religion, thus preventing them from registering as such.⁴⁴¹

According to some sources, after the end of the large-scale battle with ISIS in 2017, members of the Iraqi political elite wanted to give the impression that they supported and protected religious minorities.⁴⁴² As observed by some sources, however, federal and Kurdish authorities had not protected minorities in conflicts over land, as was the case in clashes between Christians and (Shia) Shabak in Bartella and al-Hamdaniya (also known as Qaraqosh) on the Nineveh Plains, and between Christians and Kurds in certain villages in Duhok.⁴⁴³ As mentioned in the previous country of origin information report, the lack of protection on the part of the authorities left room for the Shiite Muqtada al-Sadr to set up a committee in January 2021 to investigate the illegal expropriation of land from Christian landowners.⁴⁴⁴ In late 2022, this committee claimed to have helped Christians and Mandaeans recover two hundred occupied properties, including houses and real estate in several cities.⁴⁴⁵

Secularism, atheism and apostasy in Iraq

The question of what is meant by the complex concepts of secularism, atheism and apostasy in Iraq cannot be answered unequivocally. When asked, several sources indicated that the first two concepts often blended into each other in everyday use and that their interpretation could apparently differ (for instance, from one generation to the next).⁴⁴⁶

The most common Arabic translation for 'secularism' (*'ilmaaniyah*) has negative connotations for some. According to various sources, in Iraq, the word 'secular' (*'ilmaani*) is regarded as synonymous with 'atheist' (*mulhid*).⁴⁴⁷ One source stated that, within a political context, activists and protesters in Iraq preferred the term *madani* (literally meaning 'civil', as in civil society), as popularised by the Arab Spring, to evoke an ideal state that promotes justice and equality whilst separating religion and politics, but without using the Arabic word for 'secular'.⁴⁴⁸

'Atheism' (in Arabic, *ilhaad*) had even more negative connotations and, according to one source, it is equated with blasphemy.⁴⁴⁹ A recent study on freedom of religion and belief in Iraq pointed out that religion is often strongly intertwined with ethnic identity, and is not merely a matter of faith. As such, according to this source, atheism would be interpreted as denial of ethnic identity, which would make any discussion of atheism difficult.⁴⁵⁰ According to another source, the term was used in a flexible manner. The source noted that some students in Baghdad now call themselves atheists as a sign of modernity and as a way of opposing the establishment. Families were also said to call family members who did not

⁴⁴¹ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, D2.

⁴⁴² Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁴³ Christianity Today, *Word or deeds: Shiite firebrand pledges to restore Iraqi Christian property*, 21 January 2021; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁴⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 66.

⁴⁴⁵ Agenzia Fides, *The Muqtada al Sadr Movement returns 120 illegally stolen real estate from Christian citizens and Mandaeans*, 24 February 2022; Rudaw, *Sadr-led committee returns at least 200 occupied properties to their Christian owners*, 17 December 2022.

⁴⁴⁶ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁴⁷ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *In search of a madani state in Iraq*, 7 May 2023.

⁴⁴⁸ 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *In search of a madani state in Iraq*, 7 May 2023.

⁴⁴⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁵⁰ Search for Common Ground et al., *JISRA in Iraq*, 11 August 2022, p. 3.

participate in Ramadan (or other practice) atheists.⁴⁵¹ Actual atheists reportedly did not openly express their views, largely due to social stigma and to avoid trouble. They reportedly expressed themselves and congregated primarily online, hiding their identities.⁴⁵² According to the DFAT, although some activists publicly stand up for their views, intimidation and violence against atheists sometimes emerge from the side of their own families, religious groups and militias.⁴⁵³

According to one source, the Arabic word for 'apostasy' (*ridda* or *irtidaad*) was a religious term, said to be used only in religious circles (referring to atheists and converts).⁴⁵⁴ It is further said to be more common for individuals renouncing the Islamic faith to become non-religious than to convert to another religion (such as Christianity or Zoroastrianism).⁴⁵⁵

Conversion

Although conversion from Islam to another faith is not defined as a criminal offence in the Iraqi Penal Code, it is not recognised by personal status laws in Iraq.⁴⁵⁶ The lack of legal recognition means that a convert remains registered as a Muslim in government registers, and this therefore cannot be changed on ID cards.⁴⁵⁷

During the reporting period, there were no known cases in which individuals who had converted from Islam to another religion were criminally prosecuted by the authorities, nor were there any known cases in which converts had in practice sought and received adequate protection from the authorities. Conversion from Islam to another religion (such as Christianity or Zoroastrianism) would generally be regarded negatively within the individual's family. In addition, according to one source, converts are said to be viewed with suspicion by the communities that they join. According to this source, encouraging conversion from Islam to another religion would be more likely to cause problems with militias than conversion itself.⁴⁵⁸ According to various sources, individuals who have converted from Islam to another religion do not usually disclose this. From a social and community perspective, conversion to a different faith places an individual in a different community, particularly because the family and social network will not easily accept conversion.⁴⁵⁹

Critical remarks on Islam

According to the Freedom House annual report for 2022, Iraq's laws on blasphemy were rarely enforced.⁴⁶⁰ Several sources believed it was possible for Iraqis to express critical views on Islam without consequences. Being critical of religion was reportedly 'popular' amongst students as a means of standing up to the establishment. Many young people were highly critical within their own environments (online or offline). Some went so far as to ridicule Islamic traditions, respected clerics and their sermons online. The risk of social problems increased significantly when critical online expressions reached a large audience.⁴⁶¹ For the

⁴⁵¹ Confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁵² Wired, *How an Iraqi Instagram influencer became a people smuggler*, 5 January 2023; Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, D2; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁵³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 23.

⁴⁵⁴ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁵⁵ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁵⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, December 2019, p. 43; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 International Religious Freedom Report*, May 2023, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁷ EUAA, *Country Guidance: Iraq*, June 2022, p. 114.

⁴⁵⁸ Confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁵⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁶⁰ Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, D2.

⁴⁶¹ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 28 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

same reason, the risk of consequences is higher for public figures who speak critically.⁴⁶²

In February 2023, a Protestant cleric in Duhok got into trouble over an expression on his Facebook page about the Prophet Muhammad that was perceived as critical. He reportedly faced legal action from Islamic organisations and the provincial office of the Directorate of Endowment and Religious Affairs. In addition, threats against him allegedly forced his family to leave the country.⁴⁶³ According to the international Christian organisation Open Doors, Christians in Iraq were usually careful in how they expressed themselves when mentioning Islam.⁴⁶⁴

Non-practising Muslims

In Iraq, secularisation (or reduced religiosity) is being increasingly observed amongst the sizeable current generation of young people.⁴⁶⁵ According to one source, Muslims not practising Islam did not face any security risk.⁴⁶⁶ Another source indicated that only eating in public places during Ramadan could bring people into contact with the police. The source did not mention any specific problems that could be expected on the part of the police.⁴⁶⁷

According to one source, there were more checks on religious observance in rural areas, especially in the southern provinces. In these areas, potential problems could be expected from the side of tribal groups, although the source did not specifically mention which problems might arise due to not practising the Islamic faith. According to the same source, in Mosul, after it was recaptured from ISIS, Islamic identity became less dominant, and secularism became increasingly prevalent.⁴⁶⁸

In some cases, religious minorities (such as Christians and Mandaeans) have reportedly adopted certain Islamic practices (e.g. wearing a headscarf or fasting during Ramadan) to avoid intimidation.⁴⁶⁹ According to the USDoS annual report for 2022, members of non-Muslim minority groups had reported abductions, threats and intimidation by pro-Iranian Shia militias to force them to comply with Islamic practices.⁴⁷⁰

Non-conformist lifestyle

According to some sources, having a lifestyle or style of dress divergent from the local common norm could lead to social (or other) problems, but this would depend on various factors, including the region in which a person lives.⁴⁷¹ Freedom House wrote in its annual report, without providing further details, that both men and women in Iraq faced pressure to conform to conservative norms relating to personal appearance, and they faced harassment, detention and abuse by state actors and family members for deviating from the traditional appearance or behaviour that would suit their biological sex.⁴⁷² Women in particular continued to be confronted with socially conservative views permeating society about how women should dress

⁴⁶² Confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁶³ Rudaw, *Duhok bishop faces legal complaint over Facebook post on Islam*, 18 February 2023; Open Doors, *Iraq: Bishop faces legal action for comments on social media*, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁶⁴ Open Doors, *Iraq: Bishop faces legal action for comments on social media*, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁶⁵ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; IOM, *The Role of Religious Institutions in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Iraq*, 24 May 2023, p. 18; confidential source, 4 July 2023; New Lines Magazine, *Iraq goes dry despite opposition*, 24 August 2023.

⁴⁶⁶ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁶⁷ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁴⁶⁸ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁴⁶⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 17–18.

⁴⁷⁰ US DoS, *Iraq 2022 International Religious Freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 30.

⁴⁷¹ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁷² Freedom House, *Iraq: Freedom in the World Report 2023*, March 2023, G3.

and behave.⁴⁷³ Although young people in Baghdad at present are particularly less likely to conform to common styles of dress, women who did not wear headscarves and had a Western style of dress sometimes faced harassment.⁴⁷⁴ One source referred to the growing culture clash between rural and urban Iraq, due to the migration of climate migrants from rural areas to the city, amongst other factors. According to this source, rural newcomers to the city were not accustomed to seeing women in a more Western style of dress, which could cause social problems.⁴⁷⁵

Several sources indicated that young Iraqis sometimes change residence within the country (for instance, from southern Iraq to Baghdad, or from federal Iraq to the KRI), in order to be able to have a certain lifestyle and live within a freer environment of like-minded people.⁴⁷⁶ According to one source, tattoos were currently more visible in public life in Baghdad.⁴⁷⁷

3.2.4 *Blood feuds and honour killings*

There are no reliable figures on the number of honour killings in Iraq, partly because honour-based and domestic violence cannot always be distinguished, and not all cases are reported and investigated (at least not properly). Honour killings usually take place within the domestic or family circle.⁴⁷⁸ Many victims of domestic violence and women threatened with honour killings do not file criminal complaints because of the obstacles that impede women from reporting, including the associated stigma (see Section 3.1).⁴⁷⁹ According to some sources, the violent death of women is often dismissed as suicide, even if the exact circumstances have not been established.⁴⁸⁰ Legally, a husband has the right to punish his wife. An honour motive can also bring a milder sentence in cases of murder.⁴⁸¹ The actual number of incidents and victims of violence against women is expected to be significantly higher than reported by authorities and organisations.⁴⁸²

Domestic violence remained widespread. During the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence increased.⁴⁸³ According to UN figures, an estimated 1.32 million people in Iraq are at risk of various forms of gender-based violence, with 77% of incidents involving domestic violence.⁴⁸⁴ In September 2022, the Supreme Judicial Council in federal Iraq declared that the number of registered cases of domestic violence between January 2021 and June 2022 had exceeded 18,600.⁴⁸⁵

Honour killings remained a serious problem across Iraq.⁴⁸⁶ According to local sources, there has been an increase in the number of femicides in the KRI,

⁴⁷³ Wilson Center, *Violence against women permeates all aspects of life in Iraq*, 29 November 2022; Oxfam, *The Tyranny of Dress Codes. Women's Narratives of Violence and Resistance in the Middle East and North Africa*, December 2022, p. 4.

⁴⁷⁴ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; DW, *How climate change causes culture clashes in Iraq's cities*, 24 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁵ DW, *How climate change causes culture clashes in Iraq's cities*, 24 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁶ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁷ Confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 55.

⁴⁷⁹ Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023.

⁴⁸⁰ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 53; confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁸¹ For an overview of the legal framework concerning domestic violence and honour-based violence, see: UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note. Iraq: 'Honour' Crimes*, March 2021, pp. 9–11.

⁴⁸² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 55; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁸³ UNAMI, *First Gender-Based Violence Strategic Plan launched in Iraq*, 2 February 2022.

⁴⁸⁴ UNAMI, *First Gender-Based Violence Strategic Plan launched in Iraq*, 2 February 2022.

⁴⁸⁵ Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023.

⁴⁸⁶ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 53; confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

especially from honour killings.⁴⁸⁷ In its 2022 annual report, Amnesty wrote that the KRI had seen an increase in reports of killings of women and girls — including transgender women — by male relatives. According to Amnesty, women’s rights organisations had documented seventeen killings of women — including a fifteen-year-old girl — by male relatives between January and March 2022 alone, and the actual number was said to be higher. Amidst a social climate of victim-blaming and lack of political will, the authorities did not conduct independent and impartial investigations into most of these killings.⁴⁸⁸ According to another source, Kurdish authorities reportedly recorded 44 cases of femicide throughout all of 2022. The same source stressed that this did not reflect the true number, which was said to be two to three times higher.⁴⁸⁹ Women’s rights activists and organisations said there were reports of violence against women (including fatalities) every day.⁴⁹⁰

Tribal violence

As stated in the country of origin information report of October 2021, tribal violence had reportedly increased in previous years, noting that the complex confluence of clan structures and other political and social ties makes it difficult to determine the causes of violent incidents from the outside.⁴⁹¹ Tribal violence also occurred in the current reporting period, particularly in the southern provinces of Basra, Dhi Qar and Maysan,⁴⁹² as well as in Baghdad, amongst other places.⁴⁹³ In 2022, Iraq Body Count recorded 125 deaths as a result of violent clashes between tribal groups to settle disputes. According to the organisation, there was an alarming increase in such incidents, related to a lack of trust in the government to uphold the rule of law and provide legal remedies.⁴⁹⁴

Incidents of violence involving tribal groups included violence against medical personnel. A 2021 study of Iraqi doctors found that 87 percent of them had experienced violence in the previous six months, during the coronavirus pandemic.⁴⁹⁵ Violence against doctors had also been a problem before the pandemic.⁴⁹⁶ According to the DFAT, this was still a serious problem in Iraq: many doctors had left the country or changed jobs.⁴⁹⁷ During the current reporting period, there were regular reports confirming this image. Doctors and nurses were targeted for revenge by relatives of deceased patients. Doctors and, in some cases, their families, were threatened for mistakes (actual or alleged), with relatives of patients forcing them to pay tribal fines that could reach tens of thousands of euros.⁴⁹⁸ According to one source, medical staff were not the only ones experiencing such

⁴⁸⁷ SEED Foundation, *SEED Foundation’s 6th June 2022 statement on the revisions to the act of combating domestic violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Law No. 8 of 2011)*, 7 June 2022; Peregraf, *Death under the pretext of honor; femicides increase in Kurdistan Region by 400 percent*, 8 March 2023.

⁴⁸⁸ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World’s Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203.

⁴⁸⁹ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁹⁰ PAX, *Strijden tegen gendergerelateerd geweld in Iraq*, 8 December 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁴⁹¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 56.

⁴⁹² AFP, *Drugs, tribes, politics a deadly mix in Iraq border province*, 23 February 2022; Carnegie, *The growing tribal role in Iraq’s post-election Shia politics*, 17 May 2022.

⁴⁹³ Amwaj, *Are new housing projects curbing tribal violence in Iraq?*, 7 July 2022; Iraq Body Count, *Iraq’s residual war*, 1 January 2023.

⁴⁹⁴ Iraq Body Count, *Iraq’s residual war*, 1 January 2023.

⁴⁹⁵ Lafta R., Qusay N. et al., *Violence against doctors in Iraq during the time of COVID-19*, 6 August 2021, p. 1.

⁴⁹⁶ The Lancet, *Iraq’s health system yet to heal from ravages of war*, 3 September 2011; AP, *Doctors still working in Iraq face violence, tribal justice*, 14 December 2015; The Arab Weekly, *Medical doctors, a disappearing profession in Iraq*, 31 March 2019; Reuters, *Violence mounts against Iraqi doctors as COVID cases spike*, 23 September 2020.

⁴⁹⁷ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 8–9.

⁴⁹⁸ The Guardian, *‘The family will kill you if the patient dies’: the doctors facing attack in Iraq’s hospitals*, 9 August 2022; Raseef22, *Exposed to “revenge attacks”: Iraqi doctors left to fend for themselves*, 25 November 2022; DW, *Is violence driving doctors in Middle East to emigrate?*, 25 January 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Iraqi doctors call for nationwide strike over attacks on medical staff*, 27 February 2023; Context (Thomson Reuters Foundation), *Iraq War 20 years on: Doctor’s dreams shattered by tribal clan*, 13 March 2023.

circumstances. Teachers also faced threats and violence from relatives of their students (for instance, as revenge for giving them poor exam marks).⁴⁹⁹

The payment of blood money is still used as a means of breaking the cycle of blood vengeance.⁵⁰⁰ Mediation or arbitration processes can also be used to resolve tribal conflicts.⁵⁰¹ On honour-based issues, a report by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) states that, within tribal groups, the following alternative (non-violent) solutions are prevalent: arranged or forced marriage, *fasliya* marriage (in which family members — including women and children — are trafficked), forced divorce, restriction of freedom of movement or detention, deprivation of fundamental rights and denial of the personal autonomy of the person concerned, forced abortion, forced virginity testing and abandonment.⁵⁰² The purpose of these measures is to restore the honour of the family or clan. According to the DFAT, *fasliya* practices for settling disputes between tribal groups remained particularly prevalent in the southern provinces of Iraq.⁵⁰³

According to some sources, the influence of the state was too limited, and police officers (or other actors) could face threats or violence from tribal groups if they meddled with tribal practices.⁵⁰⁴

It is still common for families or tribal groups to expel or outcast individual members. This could be for several reasons. It could be due to honour-based issues (such as homosexual relations), or if an individual does not conform to tribal traditions or expectations in other ways. Links to ISIS (actual or alleged) could be another reason.⁵⁰⁵ According to various sources, expulsion or outcasting was usually formalised with a document.⁵⁰⁶ A 2018 UNCHR report mentioned that such documents 'do not follow a standard format', and that the person in question receives a copy of them or is verbally informed of their status through family members or members of the tribal group.⁵⁰⁷ The document formally announces the tribal expulsion of the person concerned and announces that the tribal group will not accept any liability for that person's actions in the future.⁵⁰⁸ No such outcasting rule is enshrined in Iraqi law. The document is thus of no legal value.⁵⁰⁹ When individuals are expelled by a tribal group, this has serious implications for their social status and daily life, as they lose any claim to protection by the tribal group.⁵¹⁰

⁴⁹⁹ Raseef22, "I will shut the school and break your skull", *tribal violence facing Iraq's teachers*, 31 January 2023.

⁵⁰⁰ Shafaq News, *Iraq's Interior Minister: I am the adversary of tribes threatening security officers*, 12 November 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023; Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), *Stammesfehden / Blutrache*, May 2023, p. 6.

⁵⁰¹ The Century Foundation, *Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq*, 7 November 2019, p. 2; EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, p. 36.

⁵⁰² EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, p. 52.

⁵⁰³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 31.

⁵⁰⁴ AFP, *Drugs, tribes, politics a deadly mix in Iraq border province*, 23 February 2022; Shafaq News, *Iraq's Interior Minister: I am the adversary of tribes threatening security officers*, 12 November 2022; Context (Thomson Reuters Foundation), *Iraq War 20 years on: Doctor's dreams shattered by tribal clan*, 13 March 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁵⁰⁵ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, p. 35; BAMF, *Stammesfehden / Blutrache*, May 2023, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁶ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; BAMF, *Stammesfehden / Blutrache*, May 2023, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁷ UNHCR, *Tribal Conflict Resolution in Iraq*, 15 January 2018, p. 3.

⁵⁰⁸ UNHCR, *Tribal Conflict Resolution in Iraq*, 15 January 2018, pp. 2–3; BAMF, *Stammesfehden / Blutrache*, May 2023, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 57.

⁵¹⁰ UNHCR, *Tribal Conflict Resolution in Iraq*, 15 January 2018, pp. 2–3; BAMF, *Stammesfehden / Blutrache*, May 2023, p. 9.

According to the EUAA, information on domestic resettlement to avoid tribal threats was scarce.⁵¹¹ Reference is made to the January 2023 DFAT country report, which states that when a person moves elsewhere to escape violence or the threat of (for instance honour-based) violence on the part of family, tribal group or community, such actors will pursue the person into the new place of residence, through tribal or other connections. According to the DFAT, successful resettlement within Iraq in such cases was hampered by the fact that traditional norms and practices are adopted by large sections of society, as well as by the limited ability of the state to provide protection against such practices.⁵¹² See also Section 1.2.7 on domestic resettlement.

3.3 Position of specific groups

3.3.1 Ethnic groups

Kurds

In the KRI, the majority of the population is of Kurdish origin. Kurdish communities also live in various places outside the Kurdistan region. This section describes the situation of Kurds outside the KRI.

According to some sources, the size of the Kurdish population in Mosul is very limited. Like many other minorities, many Kurdish residents had left the city between 2007 and 2009, due to the presence of and threats from extremist groups (such as al-Qa'ida). The Kurdish community in Mosul was therefore relatively small, even before the arrival of ISIS in 2014. As far as is known, hardly any Kurds have returned to the city since Mosul was recaptured from ISIS.⁵¹³ According to one source, the returning Kurds consisted primarily of individuals working for the federal government.⁵¹⁴ Little was known about the position of Mosul's current Kurdish residents.

During the reporting period, as far as could be ascertained, no significant changes have taken place in the situation of Kurds in the disputed territories. The overall balance of power has not changed since federal troops and PMF militias took control of these areas from the Kurdish Peshmerga in late 2017 (see Section 1.1.3).

As mentioned in the previous country of origin information report, according to Kurdish sources, the proportion of Kurds in the disputed part of Diyala province had decreased significantly in recent years.⁵¹⁵ The Kurdish news source Rudaw stated in September 2022 that demographic changes continued to take place in the Khanaqin district in Diyala, where more and more Arab families were reportedly registering. The poor security situation and lack of Kurdish-language education were also cited as reasons for Kurds to leave Khanaqin.⁵¹⁶ This information could not be independently verified during the period of investigation. As in the KRI, Kurds in the disputed territories were politically divided, particularly between the dominant Kurdish political parties KDP and PUK. For example, the small Kurdish community in the multi-ethnic town of Tuz Khurmatu in Salaheddin province appeared unable to

⁵¹¹ EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, p. 81. In this report, the EUAA refers to an EASO publication from February 2019, entitled *Iraq: Internal Mobility*: https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Iraq-Internal_Mobility.pdf

⁵¹² DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40.

⁵¹³ Kirkuk Now, *Kurds of Mosul nostalgic for home*, 30 March 2021; confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵¹⁴ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵¹⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 58.

⁵¹⁶ Rudaw, *Demographic change threatens Khanaqin, officials warn*, 4 September 2022.

unite in the run-up to Iraq's provincial elections, which are scheduled for December 2023.⁵¹⁷

In April 2023, Kurdish sources accused Arabs of attacking a village in Kirkuk province. The KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani condemned the incident and described it as part of changing the demography of the area through threat.⁵¹⁸ In January 2022, one source wrote that the Kurdish language was increasingly disappearing from the streets and from local education in Kirkuk and other disputed territories.⁵¹⁹

In September 2023, rival protests in the city of Kirkuk — between Kurds on one side and Arabs and Turkmen on the other — ended in violence, killing four Kurdish civilians in a single day. Police had been deployed to act as a buffer and keep the rival groups apart. Tensions had risen in the week before these events, as some of the residents vehemently opposed the KDP's return to Kirkuk. Arab and Turkmen protesters had organised a sit-in near the headquarters of Iraqi security forces in Kirkuk province, following reports that Prime Minister al-Sudani had ordered the site to be handed over to the Kurdish KDP, which had maintained a headquarters there until 2017. In doing so, they blocked the road between Kirkuk and Erbil. The situation reportedly escalated when Kurdish protesters tried to reach the sit-in. After the escalation, al-Sudani ordered a curfew in Kirkuk.⁵²⁰ In a statement, the chairman of the KDP and former president of the KRI, Masoud Barzani, denounced the violence against Kurdish protesters and expressed his disappointment with the action of federal security forces.⁵²¹ The Iraqi Supreme Court issued a ruling requiring the federal government to delay the transfer of the facility in Kirkuk to the KDP.⁵²² According to Kurdish sources, the anti-KDP demonstrators were members and supporters of the PMF.⁵²³ Several (Kurdish) analysts saw the events as indicative of the federal government's limited authority in Kirkuk, in contrast to the dominance of the PMF.⁵²⁴ The initial decision by the federal authorities to hand over the facility to the KDP is said to have been part of a political deal that paved the way for the formation of the al-Sudani government.⁵²⁵ The KDP wanted to participate in the December 2023 provincial elections in Kirkuk, where they will be held for the first time since 2005.⁵²⁶

⁵¹⁷ Reuters, *Iraqi government sets Dec. 18 as date to hold provincial elections*, 20 June 2023; Kirkuk Now, *Salahaddin: Kurds struggle for one provincial seat within Arab blocs*, 27 August 2023.

⁵¹⁸ Kurdistan24, *Clashes take place between resettled Arabs, Kurdish villagers in Kirkuk*, 21 April 2023; Rudaw, *Peshmerga forces deployed near Kirkuk village following attack on Kurds*, 22 April 2023.

⁵¹⁹ Kamaran Palani (via Twitter, now X), 2 January 2022, <https://twitter.com/KamaranMPalani/status/1477613326762917888>

⁵²⁰ Kirkuk Now, *It's PM's decision to take back all our headquarters in Kirkuk, KDP*, 28 August 2023; The New Arab, *Protests break out in Iraq's Kirkuk against KDP's return*, 31 August 2023; AFP, *One killed in ethnic protests in Iraq's Kirkuk*, 2 September 2023; AP, *Clashes in Iraq's Kirkuk over handover of police HQ to Kurds leave 1 dead, several injured*, 2 September 2023; Reuters, *Iraqi security forces deploy in Kirkuk after four protesters killed in ethnic clashes*, 3 September 2023.

⁵²¹ AP, *Clashes in Iraq's Kirkuk over handover of police HQ to Kurds leave 1 dead, several injured*, 2 September 2023.

⁵²² Reuters, *Iraqi security forces deploy in Kirkuk after four protesters killed in ethnic clashes*, 3 September 2023.

⁵²³ Kurdistan24, *Shiite militias protest KDP return to Kirkuk for second day*, 29 August 2023; Rudaw, *Kirkuk in chaos as KDP return draws protests*, 2 September 2023.

⁵²⁴ Lawk Ghafuri (via Twitter, now X), 2 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/LawkGhafuri/status/1698041393250287802>; Kamaran Palani (via Twitter, now X), 2 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/KamaranMPalani/status/1698014852466299092>

⁵²⁵ The New Arab, *Protests break out in Iraq's Kirkuk against KDP's return*, 31 August 2023; AP, *Clashes in Iraq's Kirkuk over handover of police HQ to Kurds leave 1 dead, several injured*, 2 September 2023.

⁵²⁶ Rudaw, *PUK, Communist Party join forces for Kirkuk election*, 5 August 2023; Kirkuk Now, *It's PM's decision to take back all our headquarters in Kirkuk, KDP*, 28 August 2023; The New Arab, *Protests break out in Iraq's Kirkuk against KDP's return*, 31 August 2023.

Faili Kurds

Most of the estimated 1.5 million Faili Kurds in Iraq live in Baghdad, as well as in the KRI and the eastern parts of the provinces of Diyala, Wasit, Maysan and Basra on the border with Iran.⁵²⁷ Faili Kurds have historically faced stigmatisation and persecution because of their dual identity: Shiite and Kurdish. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, they faced mass deportations, enforced disappearances and confiscation of property.⁵²⁸ Faili Kurds are still trying to reclaim their property.⁵²⁹

In the 1980s, the Ba'ath regime stripped about 300,000 Faili Kurds of Iraqi citizenship.⁵³⁰ Today, the vast majority of Faili Kurds in Iraq are said to have citizenship.⁵³¹ A 2021 UNHCR survey found that 3–5% of community members remain stateless, mainly due to bureaucratic obstacles or lack of documents.⁵³² Faili Kurds who do not have nationality documents do not have access to public services such as education and healthcare.⁵³³

According to some sources, community members may still face discrimination based on their ethnic and/or religious identity. For example, they are considered Shia by many within Kurdish society, and they are regarded as Kurdish in Baghdad. Against this background, community members in Erbil reportedly emphasise their Kurdish side, in contrast to those in Baghdad, who emphasise their Shiism.⁵³⁴ It has been reported that, in the capital, a majority of the younger generation of Faili Kurds no longer have a mastery of Kurdish (or a dialect thereof).⁵³⁵ According to one source, Faili Kurds in the KRI were said to experience discrimination, for example when passing through checkpoints and when trying to buy property.⁵³⁶

Turkmen

Turkmen are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq in terms of size, after Arabs and Kurds. Part of the population is Sunni, and part is Shia. Turkmen populate the area in northern Iraq from Tel Afar (Ninewa province) in the west to Khanaqin (Diyala province) in the southeast. Except for cities like Mosul and Erbil, much of their home area falls in the disputed territories. In the city of Tel Afar, in the district of the same name (which was controlled by ISIS until 2017), Turkmen make up the majority of the population.⁵³⁷ Since the district was recaptured from ISIS, PMF militias have remained the dominant actors there.⁵³⁸ According to a January 2023 report by Action Against Hunger, the situation in the district of Tel Afar was further characterised by political divisions, remaining unexploded ordnance around the city of Tel Afar, tribal tensions and limited public services. Divisions between Sunni and Shia Turkmen — particularly as a result of violence under ISIS and revenge attacks following the recapture of the district — continued to play a major role within the population. The same source reported that Sunni members of the community felt discriminated against, and would not protest about this for fear of being seen as ISIS supporters. Some felt that Shiites had excessive representation in leadership

⁵²⁷ Minority Rights Group International, *Faili Kurds*, November 2017; confidential source, 30 March 2023; BAMF, *Ethnische und Religiöse Gruppen in Iraq*, May 2023, p. 7.

⁵²⁸ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 13.

⁵²⁹ Minority Rights Group International, *Faili Kurds*, November 2017; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵³⁰ BAMF, *Ethnische und Religiöse Gruppen in Iraq*, May 2023, p. 7.

⁵³¹ Minority Rights Group International, *Faili Kurds*, November 2017; BAMF, *Ethnische und Religiöse Gruppen in Iraq*, May 2023, p. 7.

⁵³² UNHCR, *Statelessness and Risks of Statelessness in Iraq: Faili Kurd and Bidoon Communities*, September 2022, pp. 23–26.

⁵³³ Minority Rights Group International, *Faili Kurds*, November 2017.

⁵³⁴ Confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵³⁵ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵³⁶ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵³⁷ EUAA, *Country of Origin Information Report. Iraq – Targeting of Individuals*, January 2022, p. 48.

⁵³⁸ United Nations University, *Managing Exits from Conflict in Iraq: A Case Study of Basra and Tal Afar*, August 2022, p. 17.

positions and amongst the security forces present.⁵³⁹ This image was confirmed by another source. The source stated that there was resignation among Sunni Turkmen. They reportedly had no room to mobilise in PMF-dominated Tel Afar, where key government officials were Shia. For Shia Turkmen, therefore, the status quo was said to be more positive. Members of this part of the community were embedded within the PMF.⁵⁴⁰ An August 2022 report released by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) confirms that the PMF have different relationships with different parts of the Turkmen community. According to this report, the reintegration of families with ties to ISIS (actual or alleged) posed the greatest challenge to community recovery and social cohesion. There was still great distrust of Sunni individuals with such associations.⁵⁴¹

Like other population groups in the province, the Turkmen community in Kirkuk faced challenges including a lack of security in districts outside the city, related to conflicts over land and the presence of PMF militias and ISIS (see also Section 1.1.3).⁵⁴² Politically, Turkmen in Kirkuk were very divided.⁵⁴³ According to one source, community leaders were concerned about declining political influence of Turkmen in Kirkuk compared to the Kurds, who had a greater degree of influence over the federal government. Leaders of the Turkmen community in Kirkuk reportedly felt ignored by Prime Minister al-Sudani's government.⁵⁴⁴ In March 2023, the federal government confirmed Turkmen as the third official language in Kirkuk province, after Arabic and Kurdish.⁵⁴⁵ Prior to the decision, Türkiye, which presents itself as a protector⁵⁴⁶ of the Turkmen in Iraq, had protested against an alleged decision by the al-Sudani government to restrict the official use of Turkmen in Kirkuk.⁵⁴⁷

Palestinians

According to various sources, there were about 8,000 Palestinians in Iraq in 2022, the vast majority of whom were living in federal Iraq, and particularly in Baghdad.⁵⁴⁸ The Permanent Committee for Refugee Affairs of the Ministry of Interior (PC-MoI) issues residence permits and ID cards to Palestinians. These are the same cards as for refugees of other nationalities.⁵⁴⁹

According to one source, Palestinians holding UNHCR certificates and PC-MoI cards generally enjoyed freedom of movement within federal Iraq, although these documents were not always recognised at checkpoints. For travel to the KRI, they were required to have a Palestinian national passport.⁵⁵⁰

⁵³⁹ Action Against Hunger, *Conflict Sensitivity Assessment in Nineveh*, 27 January 2023, pp. 12–13.

⁵⁴⁰ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵⁴¹ United Nations University, *Managing Exits from Conflict in Iraq: A Case Study of Basra and Tal Afar*, August 2022, pp. 43–49.

⁵⁴² Amwaj, *Why IS continues to exert influence in Iraq's Kirkuk*, 3 February 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵⁴³ Kirkuk Now, *Turkmens of Kirkuk: Internal and ethnic rivalry*, 3 October 2021; Amwaj, *Deep Dive: Article 140 and the future of Iraq's Turkmens*, 17 February 2023; Amwaj, *Will Iraqi Turkmen quest for political power be backed up by force?*, 1 June 2023.

⁵⁴⁴ Amwaj, *Deep Dive: Article 140 and the future of Iraq's Turkmens*, 17 February 2023.

⁵⁴⁵ Shafaq News, *Iraq's cabinet to use Turkmen as an official language in Kirkuk*, 1 March 2023; The New Arab, *Turkmen now third official language in Iraq's Kirkuk governorate*, 2 March 2023.

⁵⁴⁶ According to Clingendael, one of the purposes of the Turkish support for (Sunni) Turkmen in Iraq was to balance Iran's influence (through the PMF) in Iraq's disputed territories: Clingendael Institute, *Turkish Interventions in its Near Abroad: The Case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, March 2022, pp. 1, 4–5.

⁵⁴⁷ Republic of Türkiye – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release Regarding the Decision Taken by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Iraq*, 1 March 2023; Daily Sabah, *Iraq backs out of ban on Turkmen language*, 2 March 2023.

⁵⁴⁸ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 15; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵⁴⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 59.

⁵⁵⁰ Confidential source, 28 April 2023.

Little recent information was available on the security situation for Palestinians in Iraq. As far as is known, there were no reports of arbitrary arrest and/or detention of Palestinians in 2022.⁵⁵¹ According to one source, due to violence against the community in Baghdad before the current reporting period, Palestinian refugees in Baghdad were still reluctant to move outside their neighbourhoods.⁵⁵² No information was found regarding whether Palestinians have effective recourse to protection.

The legislation, regulations and practices concerning the return of Palestinians to Iraq after a stay in a third country are unclear. The following information is from one source and concerns the situation at the end of 2022. To travel outside Iraq, Palestinians must hold a travel document that is valid for one year. For Palestinians who fled to Iraq in 1948, this is a travel document issued by the MoI Residence Affairs Directorate. For all other Palestinians, it is a Palestinian passport, issued by the Palestinian embassy in Iraq. According to the source, Palestinians who stayed abroad beyond the validity period of their travel documents were denied entry to Iraq.

To secure their return, Palestinians must obtain exit/re-entry visas from the Residence Affairs Directorate before leaving Iraq. The validity of these entry and exit visas is normally three months, but it can vary depending on the purpose of travel. Cases of Palestinians returning after the expiry of their exit/re-entry visas were reviewed by Iraqi authorities. The basis on which the authorities grant or deny access in such cases is unknown. Having a sponsor (an Iraqi national) is reportedly a prerequisite in practice. When Palestinians are admitted in such cases, they must legalise their stay with the relevant authorities (PC-MoI).⁵⁵³

3.3.2 *Religious groups*

Security situation and position of Yazidis

Yazidis live predominantly in the disputed district of Sinjar (west of Mosul) in Ninewa province, as well as in Duhok province in the KRI. Until the arrival of ISIS in 2014, Yazidis had lived in Sinjar, both in the district of the same name and in the city itself, alongside other populations (such as Sunni Arabs and Turkmen). In August 2014, ISIS began committing crimes against the Yazidis in Sinjar, including killing, abduction and the enslavement of thousands of community members.⁵⁵⁴ In 2014, the survivors sought refuge primarily in the KRI as displaced persons. According to the IOM, nine years later, about 200,000 Yazidis still remained as displaced persons in the KRI, in camps and outside.⁵⁵⁵ It was unclear how many Yazidis were living in Sinjar again during the reporting period, whether as displaced persons or not. As in the previous reporting period, return to villages around Mount Sinjar occurred on a small scale.⁵⁵⁶ In August 2022, the IOM stated that, in all, 42,000 individuals had returned to Sinjar.⁵⁵⁷

Particular obstacles to return include the destruction of infrastructure and houses in towns and villages in Sinjar, and the lack of livelihood opportunities and basic

⁵⁵¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 15; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵⁵² Confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵⁵³ Confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵⁵⁴ UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "They Came to Destroy": *ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 15 June 2016; NOS, *Kamer erkent IS-misdaden tegen jezidi's als genocide: 'Belangrijke eerste stap'*, 6 July 2021.

⁵⁵⁵ IOM, *Nine years in remembrance, the road ahead for Yazidi genocide survivors in Iraq*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁵⁶ IOM, *Nine years in remembrance, the road ahead for Yazidi genocide survivors in Iraq*, 3 August 2023; Kurdistan24, *100+ families returned to Sinjar: Iraqi Migration Ministry*, 10 August 2023.

⁵⁵⁷ IOM, *What comes after*, 3 August 2022.

services. Residents had limited access to running water, electricity, healthcare and education.⁵⁵⁸ According to IOM, eighty percent of public infrastructure and seventy percent of houses had been destroyed in Sinjar city between 2014 and 2017.⁵⁵⁹ In a May 2023 report by HRW, displaced persons also cited as an obstacle to return the lack of compensation from the government for material damages incurred in the fight with ISIS — despite the fact that funds had been earmarked for that purpose, and despite the now 5,000 applications that have been approved based on Law No. 20 from 2009. Without compensation, which required complex, lengthy and expensive application procedures, many citizens lacked the financial resources to rebuild their homes and businesses.⁵⁶⁰ As reported by HRW in June 2023, many schools and medical facilities are still damaged or destroyed, and functioning facilities face staffing shortages.⁵⁶¹ In the new budget, the al-Sudani government allocated 50 billion Iraqi dinars (USD 34.2 million) for the reconstruction of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains.⁵⁶² According to HRW, however, ongoing political disputes between the federal government and the KRG concerning the governance of Sinjar had hampered the use of previous government reconstruction funds.⁵⁶³ There was still no civil authority recognised by all parties that could provide public services to the local population.⁵⁶⁴

Several sources cited the security situation in Sinjar as the main obstacle to large-scale returns.⁵⁶⁵ Regular Turkish airstrikes on PKK and YBS targets were a major factor in this regard. According to one source, air strikes had caused secondary displacement, with Yazidis returning from displacement to Sinjar (again) moving into displacement camps in Duhok. Humanitarian organisations reported that an armed clash in May 2022 and ongoing tensions between the Iraqi army and the YBS in Sinjar additionally led to the (renewed) displacement of more than ten thousand civilians from the area towards the KRI (see also Section 1.2.1).⁵⁶⁶ In addition, mines and unexploded ordnance continued to pose a danger to residents.⁵⁶⁷ In background media articles surrounding the ninth commemoration of the crimes against the Yazidis, displaced persons and returnees spoke of the difficulty of living in an area where crimes against their community have taken place, amid places — including the many mass graves — that constantly evoke traumatic memories.⁵⁶⁸

Yazidis faced hate speech (including online) against the community. In April 2023, Yazidis were targeted in a campaign of hate speech and false accusations on social media, including rhetoric condoning the crimes committed against them by ISIS. This began after Yazidis were accused of setting fire to a mosque during a demonstration in Sinjar against the return (from the closed Jeddah 5 displacement

⁵⁵⁸ Confidential source, 14 September 2022; HRW, *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023; Minority Rights Group International, *Understanding Barriers to Health Care for Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia*, June 2023, pp. 10–11; Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Yazidi genocide nine years later*, 22 August 2023.

⁵⁵⁹ IOM, *More support needed for survivors of the Sinjar massacre*, 4 August 2022.

⁵⁶⁰ HRW, *Iraq: Compensation for ISIS victims too little, too late*, 9 May 2023.

⁵⁶¹ HRW, *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023.

⁵⁶² Al Jazeera, *Analysis: Iraq's new budget may hamper more than it helps*, 26 June 2023.

⁵⁶³ HRW, *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023.

⁵⁶⁴ Confidential source, 20 November 2022; France 24, *Returning to Sinjar: In Iraq, displaced Yazidis struggle to go home*, 22 May 2023.

⁵⁶⁵ New Lines Magazine, *Iraq's 'other' minorities still endangered*, 26 April 2022; NRC, *Iraq: Conflict, destruction stopping displaced families from returning to Sinjar*, 18 May 2022; confidential source, 14 September 2022; confidential source, 1 April 2023.

⁵⁶⁶ Al Jazeera, *Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq*, 2 May 2022; NRC, *Iraq: Conflict, destruction stopping displaced families from returning to Sinjar*, 18 May 2022.

⁵⁶⁷ UNAMI, *The Federal Republic of Germany provides additional contribution to UNMAS in support of the mine action sector in Iraq*, 17 February 2022.

⁵⁶⁸ France 24, *Returning to Sinjar: In Iraq, displaced Yazidis struggle to go home*, 22 May 2023; Al Jazeera, *Nine years after the Yazidi genocide, what's next for survivors?*, 3 August 2023; Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Yazidi genocide nine years later*, 22 August 2023.

camp) of Sunni families with alleged ties to ISIS. In the thousands of posts on social media, Yazidis were called infidels and devil-worshippers.⁵⁶⁹

Partly due to a lack of effective implementation of the October 2020 Sinjar agreement, which had been concluded by the federal government and the KRG to stabilise the situation and facilitate the return of displaced persons, the security and administrative situation in Sinjar remained chaotic.⁵⁷⁰ In effect, the district was still divided between a variety of armed actors — both state and non-state — including the Iraqi army, the YBS, pro-KDP groups and various PMF militias.⁵⁷¹ According to some sources, the Yazidi community in Sinjar was divided in terms of its links to these local and external actors.⁵⁷² Sources have reported that the feeling of insecurity amongst Yazidis included a lack of confidence in protection by the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga.⁵⁷³

In December 2022, the Iraqi council of ministers approved a legal decree to recognise the land rights of Yazidis in the district of Sinjar. The decree was intended to facilitate the registration of these rights. The decision came after decades of denial of the Yazidis' housing rights, beginning under the former Ba'ath Party regime.⁵⁷⁴ At the end of the reporting period, it was not clear whether the decision had been implemented and to what extent this step facilitated a return to Sinjar, given the obstacles already mentioned.

The situation of Yazidis residing in the KRI as displaced persons is described in Section 4.

The situation of survivors of ISIS violence

On 3 August 2023, Iraq commemorated the 2014 crimes against Yazidis.⁵⁷⁵ Even after nine years, the fate of many is still unknown. Yazidis continued to be found, including in displacement camps in northeastern Syria, and returned to Iraq.⁵⁷⁶ Mass graves also continued to be dug up in Sinjar, and new ones discovered.⁵⁷⁷ According to Yazidi organisations and the IOM, around 2,700 Yazidis had not yet been found or identified.⁵⁷⁸

No change had occurred in the difficult situation of Yazidi survivors.⁵⁷⁹ Because of the crimes inflicted on Yazidi women and children (including now adult men who had

⁵⁶⁹ Nadia's Initiative, *Nadia's Initiative condemns recent hate speech and false accusations targeting the Yazidi community in Sinjar*, 4 May 2023; Free Yazidi Foundation, *Condemnation of anti-Yezidi rhetoric*, 4 May 2023; MEI, *Addressing challenges to tolerance and religious diversity in Iraq*, 5 July 2023.

⁵⁷⁰ New Lines Magazine, *Iraq's 'other' minorities still endangered*, 26 April 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023; Al Jazeera, *Nine years after the Yazidi genocide, what's next for survivors?*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁷¹ Yazda, *We Cannot Return, Part 1: Collapsed Security Threatens the Future of Yazidis & Minorities in Sinjar*, 21 September 2022, p. 9; confidential source, 30 March 2023; HRW, *Iraq: Political infighting blocking reconstruction of Sinjar*, 6 June 2023.

⁵⁷² Notes from Kurdistan (blog), *The coming Sinjar war*, 1 April 2021; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵⁷³ Confidential source, 14 September 2022; LSE Middle East Centre, *Unrest in Sinjar: Iraq's government has yet to earn the trust of the Yazidi community*, 19 June 2023.

⁵⁷⁴ UNAMI, *Joint statement by Iraq's Prime Minister and the UN on the decision to grant Yazidis ownership of their lands in Sinjar after 47 years of denial*, 4 January 2023; Amwaj, *Will new land ownership rights be game-changer for Iraq's Yazidis?*, 7 March 2023.

⁵⁷⁵ Free Yazidi Foundation, *9th anniversary commemoration event brings together 27 Yazidi-led NGOs and CSOs*, 8 August 2023.

⁵⁷⁶ Confidential source, 14 September 2022; AFP, *'Dead or alive': Iraq's Yazidis anxiously await IS-abducted relatives*, 25 April 2023; Rudaw, *Yazidi sisters rescued from ISIS captivity*, 11 July 2023.

⁵⁷⁷ UNITAD, *Hamadan: the latest in UNITAD and Iraqi authorities joint excavation and investigation of ISIL victims' mass graves in Sinjar*, 28 March 2023; confidential source, 14 May 2023.

⁵⁷⁸ IOM, *Nadia's Initiative and IOM Iraq break ground on cemetery and memorial for Yazidi genocide victims*, 13 February 2023; AFP, *'Dead or alive': Iraq's Yazidis anxiously await IS-abducted relatives*, 25 April 2023.

⁵⁷⁹ Minority Rights Group International, *No peace without justice: Commemorating victims of violence in Iraq*, 22 August 2022; Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Yazidi genocide nine years later*, 22 August 2023.

previously been indoctrinated by ISIS and deployed as child soldiers) in captivity, many are still struggling with serious physical and/or psychological problems, including suicidality.⁵⁸⁰ Despite several initiatives by NGOs and the Iraqi authorities, adequate mental healthcare was not available in Duhok and Sinjar. For some, the stigma surrounding mental health continued to pose an obstacle to seeking help.⁵⁸¹

As in the previous reporting period, there was little specific coverage of the situation of women and children of other ethnic and religious groups (e.g. Turkmen, Shabak, Christians and other minorities, as well as Sunni Arabs) who were abducted, trafficked and raped by ISIS at the time.⁵⁸² Those still missing included Shiite Turkmen and Christian women and girls who had been abducted by ISIS.⁵⁸³ According to one source, returned non-Yazidi survivors were largely ignored and abandoned. They also struggled with physical and/or psychological problems and generally faced marginalisation. Sunni and Shia Arab women who had been abducted and raped by ISIS reported that they and their children had been rejected by their families and tribal groups, in addition to being abandoned by the government. Survivors who do not belong to an ethnic or religious minority listed in the 2021 Yazidi Survivors Law are not entitled to reparations.⁵⁸⁴

Compensation Act for survivors of ISIS violence

The previous country of origin information report mentioned the approval in the Iraqi parliament of the Yazidi Survivors Law (YSL), which is intended to compensate for the suffering of women and men — from the Yazidi, Shabak, Turkmen and Christian communities in Iraq — who have been victims of and survived sexual or other forms of violence perpetrated by ISIS.⁵⁸⁵ The YSL forms the institutional framework for providing financial support and other kinds of reparations to survivors, including in the form of monthly payments, a piece of land and access to mental or physical healthcare.⁵⁸⁶ In early March 2023, two years after the YSL was passed (and almost four years after the bill was introduced), the Iraqi government disbursed the first 24 reparation payments. In all, 21 women and three men (all Yazidi) received debit cards, which they could use to withdraw monthly payments.⁵⁸⁷ According to the IOM, by August 2023, 900 survivors had been verified since the launch of a portal for applying for reparations in September 2022. Monthly payments have since begun for 650 people. In addition, by 2023, a formal referral system had been activated that allows YSL beneficiaries to be referred to mental health and psychosocial support services in their areas of residence.⁵⁸⁸ The Iraqi budget for 2023–2025, which was adopted in June 2023, allocated 25 billion Iraqi dinars (USD 19 million) to the YSL.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁰ Amnesty International, *Iraq: New documentary highlights plight of Yazidi child soldiers who survived Islamic State*, 10 February 2022; confidential source, 14 September 2022; Save the Children, *Yazidi children still living in fear 8 years after genocide*, 22 September 2022; UNHCR, *Iraqi doctor provides care and comfort to Yazidi survivors*, 4 October 2022.

⁵⁸¹ Al Jazeera, *Psychotherapists help Yazidis heal layers of trauma in Iraq*, 10 July 2022; Save the Children, *Yazidi children still living in fear 8 years after genocide*, 22 September 2022; IOM, *Toward comprehensive rehabilitation: mental health service referral system launched for genocide survivors in Iraq*, 28 March 2023.

⁵⁸² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 62; Al Jazeera, *'No one cares': ISIL's 'invisible' victims*, 8 March 2022; Amwaj, *Almost a decade after IS blitz, Iraq's Shiite Turkmen still suffer*, 29 December 2022.

⁵⁸³ Minority Rights Group International, *No peace without justice: Commemorating victims of violence in Iraq*, 22 August 2022; Amwaj, *Almost a decade after IS blitz, Iraq's Shiite Turkmen still suffer*, 29 December 2022.

⁵⁸⁴ Al Jazeera, *'No one cares': ISIL's 'invisible' victims*, 8 March 2022.

⁵⁸⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 61.

⁵⁸⁶ IOM, *Toward comprehensive rehabilitation: mental health service referral system launched for genocide survivors in Iraq*, 28 March 2023.

⁵⁸⁷ IOM, *On 2nd anniversary of YSL: Yazidi survivors see first benefits of landmark reparation law*, 2 March 2023.

⁵⁸⁸ IOM, *Toward comprehensive rehabilitation: mental health service referral system launched for genocide survivors in Iraq*, 28 March 2023; IOM, *Nine years in remembrance, the road ahead for Yazidi genocide survivors in Iraq*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁸⁹ Al Jazeera, *Nine years after the Yazidi genocide, what's next for survivors?*, 3 August 2023.

In addition to the slow pace of the implementation of the Act, there were difficulties relating to the procedures to qualify for reparations.⁵⁹⁰ Yazidi organisations indicated that, to file an application, it was necessary (once again) to submit a testimony before a judge, a step for which there is no legal basis in the YSL. This bureaucratic process caused psychosocial stress to survivors and once again evoked traumatic experiences.⁵⁹¹ Survivors were said to face verbal harassment and stigmatisation by government officials when filing the necessary criminal complaint.⁵⁹² Human rights organisations called on the authorities to drop the requirement of filing a criminal complaint.⁵⁹³

Sunni Arabs

Most Sunni Arabs live in Baghdad, as well as in the provinces that have been under the control (for long or shorter periods) of ISIS and in parts of the disputed territories (such as Kirkuk). Baghdad has high levels of segregation. After 2003, sectarian tensions and violence in the city led to a decline in the number of mixed neighbourhoods.⁵⁹⁴ In former ISIS areas, conditions for Sunni Arabs varied depending on various factors, including the local security situation, relations with the dominant armed actors and the degree of reconstruction and access to basic services. In general, Shia PMF militias have been present in areas with (or that had previously had) a Sunni majority since the recapture from ISIS.⁵⁹⁵ This is one of the factors that effectively blocked returns to certain areas. Examples of places where militias would not allow returns for 'security reasons' include Jurf al-Sakhar (in Babil province) and al-Awja (Saddam Hussein's birthplace, near Tikrit in Salaheddin province).⁵⁹⁶ Shia PMF militias also had a dominant position in strategic border areas, such as the al-Qa'im district in the predominantly Sunni Arab province of Anbar.⁵⁹⁷ With international support, the cities of Ramadi and Falluja in Anbar have undergone relatively large-scale reconstruction since the recapture from ISIS. This has contributed to relative stability and economic progress.⁵⁹⁸ Local authorities have nevertheless left little room for participation and activism from civil society.⁵⁹⁹ According to one source, activists and citizens critical of the authorities faced threats or intimidation from the police. This is said to have led to growing discontent amongst local leaders in Anbar with regard to the grip of Iraq's Sunni parliament speaker, Mohammed al-Halbousi (who was born in the province) on local institutions.⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁰ UNAMI, *Remarks by the SRSG for Iraq and head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), Ms. Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, at the 9th Annual Commemoration of Victims of the Genocide Against Yazidis and other Iraqi Components*, 3 August 2023.

⁵⁹¹ Confidential source, 1 April 2023; Coalition for Just Reparations (C4JR), *C4JR urges committee established under Yazidi Survivors Law to drop requirement of filing criminal complaint to receive reparations*, 6 April 2023.

⁵⁹² Jiyon Foundation for Human Rights and C4JR, *More than Ink on Paper, Taking Stock of Two Years after the Adoption of the Yazidi (Female) Survivors Law*, 1 March 2023, p. 24.

⁵⁹³ C4JR, *C4JR urges committee established under Yazidi Survivors Law to drop requirement of filing criminal complaint to receive reparations*, 6 April 2023; Amnesty International, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, The Center for Victims of Torture, et al., *Joint statement on the implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law*, 14 April 2023.

⁵⁹⁴ EUAA, *Iraq – Targeting of Individuals*, January 2022, p. 25.

⁵⁹⁵ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁵⁹⁶ Shafaq News, *Jurf al-Sakhr situation is complicated by security concerns, not political veto: leading figure*, 13 December 2022; France 24, *Tikrit: 20 years since the US invasion of Iraq, what has become of Saddam Hussein's birthplace?* (video), 17 February 2023; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁵⁹⁷ Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier*, 31 March 2020; confidential source, 30 March 2023; The Century Foundation, *Order from Ashes podcast: A tale of two border towns*, 4 April 2023.

⁵⁹⁸ Al Jazeera, *Iraq: Anbar's post-ISIL reconstruction spawns autonomy debate*, 27 January 2021; confidential source, 20 July 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 27 June 2023.

⁵⁹⁹ LSE, *The trouble with Halbousi: The extraordinary rise and looming fall of Iraq's Sunni strongman*, 16 June 2023; confidential source, 27 June 2023.

⁶⁰⁰ LSE, *The trouble with Halbousi: The extraordinary rise and looming fall of Iraq's Sunni strongman*, 16 June 2023.

Sunnis in former ISIS areas continued to be subjected to arbitrary arrests, on suspicion of having had ties to ISIS (see Section 1.2.6).⁶⁰¹ According to various sources, in practice, rather than on actual suspicions of ties to ISIS, individuals were often arrested on the basis of religious identity, combined with other social characteristics (e.g. descent) and circumstances (e.g. local conflicts over land, or rivalries between tribal groups).⁶⁰²

3.3.3 *Treatment of persons with (actual or perceived) links to ISIS*

The group of displaced persons with actual or perceived links to ISIS consists of an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people. They consist mainly of Sunni Arab families and individuals from the provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, Salaheddin and Diyala.⁶⁰³ For more information on when someone is perceived to be affiliated with ISIS, see Section 3.3.3 of the country of origin information report of October 2021.⁶⁰⁴ The return of this group of displaced persons to former ISIS areas has stagnated in recent years because, in addition to other obstacles to return (as described in Section 4), they face a lack of acceptance by the local community in many places.⁶⁰⁵ In an October 2022 report, the UNDP indicated that many residents of areas heavily affected by ISIS crimes continued to oppose the return of the families and relatives of individuals (mostly men) who had joined ISIS in the years after 2014. Regardless of whether these individuals were alive, imprisoned, missing or killed, their families – in practice, mostly women and children – continued to be largely excluded by Iraqi society.⁶⁰⁶ Relatives of actual or alleged members or sympathisers of ISIS may also face problems. When one family member is accused of joining ISIS, it can affect the perception of the entire family, and even of distant relatives within the same tribal group. Several sources referred to collective punishment.⁶⁰⁷ Within this context, the UNDP referred to a *de-facto* ban on returns in many areas, as punishment for those perceived by local authorities, tribal groups, local communities or PMF militias as ISIS sympathisers or relatives of ISIS members. It remains difficult for families of victims to forgive perpetrators of crimes and their families.⁶⁰⁸ Individuals with actual or perceived links to ISIS sometimes faced threats or violence from the community.⁶⁰⁹ Several sources indicated that this was no longer happening on the same scale as was the case shortly after ISIS territories were recaptured.⁶¹⁰ Recent articles give the impression that, amongst displaced persons,

⁶⁰¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 25; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁶⁰² Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁶⁰³ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 25.

⁶⁰⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 69.

⁶⁰⁵ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

⁶⁰⁶ UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi.

⁶⁰⁷ HRW, *Iraq/Kurdistan Region: Former ISIS Suspects Stuck in Limbo*, 28 October 2021; War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; UN Women, *Zainab Qassim, an Iraqi woman mediator who helped reintegrate families accused of ISIS affiliation into their home communities*, 24 October 2022; The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023.

⁶⁰⁸ UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi.

⁶⁰⁹ World Bank Group, *Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq*, January 2022; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 25; The Economist, *Failing to reintegrate Iraq's Sunni rebels could prove costly*, 24 August 2023; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns*, 24 August 2023.

⁶¹⁰ The Washington Post, *After years in ISIS prison camp, they now face an uncertain welcome home*, 5 July 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns*, 24 August 2023.

the fear of violence from the local community nevertheless remains high, even when their tribal leaders accept return and guarantee security.⁶¹¹

If someone is perceived to be affiliated with ISIS, it may cause problems in going through security screening and obtaining a security clearance from the authorities. This clearance is necessary for a displaced person to be able to return to the original home, or to settle elsewhere.⁶¹² In practice, a security clearance is also required in order to obtain identity documents.⁶¹³ To dissolve such an association, individuals can formally distance themselves from the suspected family member by filing a report against them.⁶¹⁴ In Arabic, the associated procedures are referred to by the term *tabriya*, which stems from tribal practices and is incorporated into the formal legal system. According to one source, many men and women felt pressured, especially by local security actors, to do *tabriya*, as it was their only way to rebuild their lives. Many women are said to be reluctant to do *tabriya*, as they are vulnerable to exploitation in interactions with security forces and courts.⁶¹⁵ As described in the previous country of origin information report, *tabriya* further has both legal and social implications, including the loss of inheritance rights or exclusion by other relatives or in-laws.⁶¹⁶ Moreover, according to one source, there was no guarantee that women who went through *tabriya* would be accepted by the community in their original place of residence.⁶¹⁷

According to the UNDP, other obstacles to the return of families or individuals with actual or perceived links to ISIS included security problems, administrative procedures, tribal and sectarian tensions, and unstable living and economic conditions.⁶¹⁸ Many do not (or no longer) have the documents necessary to register in the place of residence and access basic services (such as education and legal employment). Children born under ISIS in north-east Syria cannot be registered without their parents' identity documents.⁶¹⁹ In many cases, displaced persons no longer own a home, and they have no means of renting housing.⁶²⁰

The federal government, international organisations and local authorities made efforts to return displaced families to their original areas of residence. This was done through the reconstruction of infrastructure and services, investment in employment and reconciliation mechanisms with local communities.⁶²¹ Several sources indicated

⁶¹¹ The Guardian, 'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention, 15 June 2023; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns*, 24 August 2023.

⁶¹² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 70; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi.

⁶¹³ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi.

⁶¹⁴ World Bank Group, *Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq*, January 2022, p. 25; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; EUAA, *Iraq: Arab Tribes and Customary Law*, April 2023, pp. 59–60.

⁶¹⁵ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022.

⁶¹⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 70.

⁶¹⁷ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022.

⁶¹⁸ UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi.

⁶¹⁹ Confidential source, 30 July 2023; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns*, 24 August 2023.

⁶²⁰ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; NPR, *A life in limbo for the wives and children of ISIS fighters*, 15 March 2022; The Guardian, 'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention, 15 June 2023.

⁶²¹ UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; UN Women, *Zainab Qassim, an Iraqi woman mediator who helped reintegrate families accused of ISIS affiliation into their home communities*, 24 October 2022; The Guardian, 'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention, 15 June 2023; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

that, in practice, these community investments in return sites have yet to yield the desired acceptance of returnees.⁶²²

As a result of these obstacles to return and reintegration, families with actual or perceived links to ISIS were at risk of marginalisation. In recent years, following the closure of the displaced-persons camps where they had been staying (or leaving them for other reasons), thousands of people had resettled in underdeveloped places, where they hardly participate in society at all.⁶²³

Return of Iraqis with actual or perceived links to ISIS from north-east Syria

Stigma was a common obstacle in the return to their original homes of Iraqis transferred to Iraq from the al-Hol camp in north-east Syria. In cooperation with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Iraqi authorities continued to repatriate Iraqis with actual or alleged ties to ISIS. Partly because of the stigma on this group, repatriation and reintegration pose a major challenge for the Iraqi authorities. Since May 2021, more than 5,500 people (mostly women and children) have returned from al-Hol.⁶²⁴ Although returnees were reportedly vetted by multiple security agencies for involvement in crimes, the criteria for admission to Iraq were not transparent.⁶²⁵ According to a 2021 agreement, each transfer of 150 families from al-Hol coincided with a transfer of 50 detained ISIS fighters (current or former), who were referred for prosecution by Iraqi courts.⁶²⁶ In principle, the families were transferred to the Jeddah 1 camp, south of Mosul, where they are undergoing a rehabilitation programme. More than 800 families had moved on from Jeddah 1, some of them to their original areas of residence.⁶²⁷ According to a survey conducted in December 2022, some residents of Jeddah 1 (especially families headed by women) were at risk of long-term stay within the camp, including those without valid documents or those who were unable to return due to lack of acceptance from the community.⁶²⁸

Outside the return and rehabilitation process facilitated by the Iraqi government and supported by the international community, an unknown number of Iraqi citizens from al-Hol travelled to Iraq with the help of human traffickers.⁶²⁹ According to estimates, 25,000 Iraqi civilians were still residing in al-Hol in August 2023.⁶³⁰

3.3.4 LGBTIQ+

The legal framework

The legal position of persons belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community, as described in the country of origin information report of October 2021,⁶³¹ did not change during the reporting period, although attempts were made in both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region to criminalise LGBTIQ+ people and the provision of support to this group.

⁶²² The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

⁶²³ War on the Rocks, *Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families*, 3 February 2022; NPR, *A life in limbo for the wives and children of ISIS fighters*, 15 March 2022; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS. Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, October 2022, vi; The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023; confidential source, 27 June 2023.

⁶²⁴ The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

⁶²⁵ The Washington Post, *After years in ISIS prison camp, they now face an uncertain welcome home*, 5 July 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁶²⁶ The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023.

⁶²⁷ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

⁶²⁸ UN University, *The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience*, December 2022, p. 3.

⁶²⁹ Confidential source, 27 June 2023.

⁶³⁰ The Guardian, *'The people don't want us': inside a camp for Iraqis returned from Syrian detention*, 15 June 2023; confidential source, 30 July 2023.

⁶³¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 73.

Iraq has no legislation explicitly prohibiting sexual acts by same-sex adults. Article 401 of the Iraqi Penal Code (CPC) refers to 'indecent acts in public'. Under this article, such behaviour may be punishable by detention of up to six months.⁶³² Article 394 of the Iraqi Penal Code prohibits sexual relations outside marriage, punishable by up to seven years in prison, thus effectively criminalising all sexual activity by people of the same sex.⁶³³ In theory, these provisions could be used against LGBTIQ+ people.

In practice, the authorities reportedly used a range of provisions from the Iraqi Penal Code to criminally prosecute LGBTIQ+ people. According to several sources, in some instances, the authorities used the provision in the Iraqi Penal Code prohibiting 'indecent acts' in public to arrest LGBTIQ+ people.⁶³⁴ In addition, allegations of prostitution have reportedly been used to prosecute individuals as well.⁶³⁵ According to the USDoS annual report for 2022, convictions for extramarital sex — including 'sodomy' (legally defined as anal sex between two men) — were rare, due to the high standard of proof (those involved must be caught in the act) and societal norms of keeping quiet about such matters.⁶³⁶

In Iraq, it is not possible for transgender people — regardless of what medical treatment or surgery they have undergone (outside Iraq) — to adjust their gender at the civil registry, and thus in their identity documents.⁶³⁷

During the reporting period, there were increasing attempts to explicitly criminalise LGBTIQ+ people and the provision of support to them. In July 2022, some MPs in federal Iraq announced an initiative for a bill to criminalise homosexuality.⁶³⁸ In December 2022, MPs made a proposal to criminalise LGBTIQ+ 'propaganda'.⁶³⁹ In the KRI, MPs tabled a bill in September 2022 that would criminalise standing up for LGBTIQ+ rights.⁶⁴⁰ The proposal would further limit the scope for activism. Under the bill, any individual who supports LGBTIQ+ rights could face up to a year in prison. The bill would also suspend for up to a month the licences of media companies and civil society organisations that 'promote homosexuality'.⁶⁴¹ According to HRW, such a law, if passed, would stifle public discussion on gender and sexuality.⁶⁴²

In July 2023, renewed attempts to criminalise homosexuality were launched in Baghdad by various groups in parliament.⁶⁴³ One bill that circulated was a proposal to amend the current anti-prostitution law of 1998. The proposal expanded the law to ban homosexuality and transgenderism, and it also included the criminalisation of allegedly promoting homosexuality and aiding LGBTIQ+ people. The bill went a step

⁶³² Human Dignity Trust, *Iraq*, www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/iraq consulted on 13 July 2023.

⁶³³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 31; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 63.

⁶³⁴ HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 320; Human Dignity Trust, *Iraq*, www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/iraq, consulted on 13 July 2023.

⁶³⁵ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 31.

⁶³⁶ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 63.

⁶³⁷ HRW, *World Report 2021*, January 2021; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 73; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 66.

⁶³⁸ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 204.

⁶³⁹ Al-Monitor, *Iraq's Sadr takes aim at LGBTQ community*, 6 December 2022; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 67.

⁶⁴⁰ HRW, *A push to silence LGBT rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 7 September 2022.

⁶⁴¹ HRW, *A push to silence LGBT rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 7 September 2022; Human Dignity Trust, *Iraq*, www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/iraq, consulted on 13 July 2023.

⁶⁴² HRW, *A push to silence LGBT rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 7 September 2022.

⁶⁴³ Bas News, *Homosexuality ban bill submitted to Iraq parliament for consideration*, 4 July 2023; NRT English, *Another anti-homosexuality draft bill sent to speaker's desk*, 6 July 2023; confidential source, 11 July 2023.

further than previous proposals: according to the proposal, homosexuality should be punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty. Aiding or promoting it should be punishable by a minimum of seven years in prison.⁶⁴⁴ At the end of the reporting period, none of the bills to criminalise homosexuality had passed.

Societal situation of LGBTIQ+ people

The bills were part of a wider anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment in Iraq.⁶⁴⁵ In general, there is a perception in Iraq that LGBTIQ+ people are mentally ill, that they are at odds with human nature and religious values, and that their lifestyle is the product of Western influences.⁶⁴⁶ According to several sources, anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric and online hate speech increased during the reporting period.⁶⁴⁷ This was fuelled by politicians using the issue in bills and public utterances for their own political gain.⁶⁴⁸ It also capitalised on the conservative undercurrent in Iraqi society by presenting the concept of gender as being supportive of the LGBTIQ+ community and as having been imposed by the West.⁶⁴⁹ In December 2022, Muqtada al-Sadr — who had previously drawn links between homosexuality and the COVID-19 pandemic, monkey pox and other developments — launched an online campaign against the LGBTIQ+ community.⁶⁵⁰ Although al-Sadr called for non-violence against the LGBTIQ+ community, activists warned that such statements legitimised violence against the community, and LGBTIQ+ people faced the emergence of a new wave of homophobia.⁶⁵¹

LGBTIQ+ people experienced increasing pressure from authorities and society, while the space for community support became further restricted, and they were usually forced to lead double lives. Many were extremely cautious and hid their sexual orientation from their families and society at large to avoid arrest, harassment and violence.⁶⁵² In the KRI, many LGBTIQ+ people were reportedly able to experience their gender and sexual identity together only in the homes of others in the community.⁶⁵³ According to the DFAT, the use of online dating apps and coming out for one's sexual orientation or gender identity online could make a person a target. HRW also reported that LGBTIQ+ people were targeted with death threats by armed groups in response to their online activities.⁶⁵⁴

Members of the community reportedly fear extortion and blackmail.⁶⁵⁵ Activists faced more resistance, and the work of LGBTIQ+ organisations was also hampered

⁶⁴⁴ Confidential source, 11 July 2023; HRW, *Iraq: Scrap anti-LGBT bill. Death penalty for same-sex conduct; imprisonment for transgender expression*, 23 August 2023.

⁶⁴⁵ AP, *Influential Iraqi cleric launches anti-LGBTQ campaign*, 2 December 2022; confidential source, 11 July 2023.

⁶⁴⁶ LandInfo, *Iraq: Situasjonen for LHBTIQ-personar*, 11 October 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 11 July 2023.

⁶⁴⁷ BBC Monitoring, *Iraq: Social media highlights for 16-22 December*, 22 December 2022; confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

⁶⁴⁸ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 11 July 2023.

⁶⁴⁹ Confidential source, 8 June 2023; Jadaliyya, *In Iraq, to defend gender is to refuse violence*, 31 August 2023.

⁶⁵⁰ AP, *Influential Iraqi cleric launches anti-LGBTQ campaign*, 2 December 2022.

⁶⁵¹ Al-Monitor, *Iraq's Sadr takes aim at LGBTQ community*, 6 December 2022; Middle East Eye, *Iraq: Draft law to ban LGBTQ+ publishing as Sadr tweets more homophobia*, 12 December 2022; Jummar, *Iraq's queer women: Survival under false identities and secret lives*, 15 February 2023; L'Orient Today, *Escape to survive: The saga of two young Iraqi LGBTQ+ men*, 13 June 2023.

⁶⁵² IraQueer and Outright Action International, *"I Need to Be Free," What It Means to Be a Queer Woman in Today's Iraq*, March 2022; Raseef22, *Iraq's LGBT community's two choices: immigration or death*, 6 April 2022; Inter Press Service, *LGBTI in Iraq: Defending identity in the face of harassment, stigma and death*, 25 November 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 32; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁵³ BBC World Service (via YouTube), *Fear and Survival: Being LGBTQ in Iraq* (video), 14 May 2022; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

⁶⁵⁴ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 32; HRW, *"All This Terror Because of a Photo", Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa*, 21 February 2023, p. 5.

⁶⁵⁵ AP, *Rights group denounces violence against LGBT people in Iraq*, 23 March 2022.

by the ever-shrinking space for civil society (see Section 3.2.2).⁶⁵⁶ Several sources spoke of a major psychological impact of intolerance towards LGBTIQ+ people and the effects on their daily lives, which are said to contribute to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and suicidal tendencies.⁶⁵⁷

Consequences of actual or suspected homosexuality or gender variance

In Iraq's predominantly conservative society, anyone who does not conform to mainstream norms of gender expression can be at risk. Those who exceed the boundaries of what society defines as feminine or masculine in terms of observable characteristics (such as non-normative hairstyles⁶⁵⁸ or voice⁶⁵⁹) are at risk of becoming targets of discrimination, (sexual) abuse, violence or murder.⁶⁶⁰ According to some sources, LGBTIQ+ people fear violence from armed groups, the authorities, their own families and the community, including intimidation and violence on the streets, at school or university or at work.⁶⁶¹ Families usually regard having an LGBTIQ+ son or daughter as a disgrace and may respond to suspicions or disclosure of homosexuality or gender variation by locking up, marrying off, ostracising or killing the family member in question.⁶⁶²

Other sources confirmed the perception that, in some cases, violence was used against people who did not disclose their sexual orientation. Suspicion of belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community is reportedly enough to make a person a potential target.⁶⁶³

In March 2022, HRW published a report on violence against LGBTIQ+ people in Iraq. The report states that any suspicion of homosexuality or gender variation is grounds for potential violence. This could result in the death of LGBTIQ+ people, or make their lives unliveable. According to the report, this is due to the 'cyclical' nature of abuses against LGBTIQ+ people, stemming from the family and extending to every aspect of their public life. According to HRW, the Iraqi government had failed to hold accountable members of various armed groups who had allegedly continued to abduct, rape, torture and kill lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people with impunity in recent years.⁶⁶⁴ According to HRW, LGBTIQ+ people were also at risk of arbitrary arrest and violence by the police.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁵⁶ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; HRW, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: LGBT rights group shuttered*, 6 July 2023.

⁶⁵⁷ The Red Line, *Being LGBT in Iraq: a mental health nightmare*, 5 August 2022; Inter Press Service, *LGBTI in Iraq: Defending identity in the face of harassment, stigma and death*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023; L'Orient Today, *Escape to survive: The saga of two young Iraqi LGBTIQ+ men*, 13 June 2023.

⁶⁵⁸ The New Arab, *In Iraq, hair can set off violence*, 29 March 2022; L'Orient Today, *Escape to survive: The saga of two young Iraqi LGBTIQ+ men*, 13 June 2023.

⁶⁵⁹ Peregraf, *Duhok's LGBTIQ+ community live in increased fear following homicide of trans woman*, 22 February 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁶⁰ HRW, *"Everyone Wants Me Dead": Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, March 2022; UNHCR, *Advocacy note – Resettlement needs in Iraq*, June 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

⁶⁶¹ Inter Press Service, *LGBTI in Iraq: Defending identity in the face of harassment, stigma and death*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁶² DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 31–32; Jummar, *Iraq's queer women: Survival under false identities and secret lives*, 15 February 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; L'Orient Today, *Escape to survive: The saga of two young Iraqi LGBTIQ+ men*, 13 June 2023.

⁶⁶³ Daraj, *More stigma against transgender people in Iraq*, 4 February 2022; Raseef22, *Iraq's LGBT community's two choices: immigration or death*, 6 April 2022; BBC World Service (via YouTube), *Fear and Survival: Being LGBTIQ in Iraq* (video), 14 May 2022.

⁶⁶⁴ HRW, *"Everyone Wants Me Dead": Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, March 2022.

⁶⁶⁵ HRW, *"Everyone Wants Me Dead": Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, March 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 31–32; L'Orient Today, *Escape to survive: The saga of two young Iraqi LGBTIQ+ men*, 13 June 2023.

In February 2023, HRW released a report on the use of digital platforms by authorities in the MENA region to trap, extort and persecute LGBTIQ+ people. The organisation had also documented cases in Iraq where LGBTIQ+ people had been ambushed by security services through fake profiles, and cases of online extortion by armed groups.⁶⁶⁶

Suspicious of homosexuality or gender variance can also have an effect on socio-economic situations. Widespread intolerance and stigmatisation of the LGBTIQ+ community makes it difficult to obtain and keep a job.⁶⁶⁷ In addition, according to some sources, LGBTIQ+ people are exposed to discrimination, harassment and intimidation by classmates and fellow students, as well as by staff in the education and healthcare sectors.⁶⁶⁸ LGBTIQ+ people who had mental health problems due to their difficult situation also faced discrimination and referral for conversion therapy within the mental healthcare system.⁶⁶⁹ According to one source, in the KRI, it was difficult in practice for men – regardless of their gender expression – to obtain permission from local residents and the Asayish security service to rent housing together. In addition, if they were suspected of homosexuality, they were likely to face discrimination from brokers.⁶⁷⁰

While there were many reports of discrimination, harassment and violence against lesbians, gay men and gender-non-conforming individuals in general, several sources indicated that transgender women were particularly vulnerable because of their visibility.⁶⁷¹ The USDoS annual report stated that the inability to obtain identity documents corresponding to their gender identity and expression puts transgender people at greater risk of violence, impedes their access to crucial services and can exacerbate their mental health problems.⁶⁷²

Forms of violence and protection against them

According to the Human Dignity Trust, there have been consistent reports of discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ+ people in recent years, including frequent reports of killings.⁶⁷³ In March 2022, HRW reported having evidence of murder (and attempted murder), extrajudicial executions, abductions, torture and sexual violence (including rape), and serious threats against LGBTIQ+ people by armed (PMF) groups in Iraq. In addition, 40 of the 54 victims interviewed reported having been exposed to extreme violence by family members, due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. For example, they were locked up for long periods of time, deprived of food and water, burnt, beaten, raped, subjected to electric shocks and shot at. Some were subjected to 'conversion practices', including involuntary hormone therapy, institutionalisation, psychotherapy and forced marriage.⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁶⁶ HRW, "All This Terror Because of a Photo", *Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa*, February 2023, p. 4.

⁶⁶⁷ BBC World Service (via YouTube), *Fear and Survival: Being LGBTQ in Iraq* (video), 14 May 2022; Inter Press Service, *LGBTI in Iraq: Defending identity in the face of harassment, stigma and death*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁶⁸ Daraj, *More stigma against transgender people in Iraq*, 4 February 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 31–32; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁶⁹ The Red Line, *Being LGBT in Iraq: a mental health nightmare*, 5 August 2022; Jummar, *Iraq's queer women: Survival under false identities and secret lives*, 15 February 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁷⁰ Confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁷¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 31–32; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 8 June 2023.

⁶⁷² USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 66.

⁶⁷³ Human Dignity Trust, *Iraq*, www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/iraq, consulted on 13 July 2023.

⁶⁷⁴ HRW, "Everyone Wants Me Dead": *Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, March 2022.

It was not possible to invoke effective protection from the authorities. In practice, victims of violence or threats had no effective means of challenging this in a court of law. According to several sources, it was rare for authorities to arrest or prosecute perpetrators — whether government officials, members of armed groups or family members — of violence against LGBTIQ+ people.⁶⁷⁵ Moreover, LGBTIQ+ people were at risk of arrest and violence on the part of the Iraqi police or the Kurdish security service Asayish.⁶⁷⁶ Each of the individuals interviewed by HRW for the March 2022 report indicated that they would not report violence against them to the authorities for fear of being targeted again, or that they would be turned away or arrested by the police.⁶⁷⁷ For information on reporting violence and the obstacles individuals making a report may face in doing so, see Section 3.1.

According to one source, the LGBTIQ+ community had few or no shelter options for those in need. During the reporting period, increasing control and repression of NGOs by the federal government and the KRG also eliminated opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people to find assistance.⁶⁷⁸ Organisations working with the queer community were at risk of persecution in both federal Iraq and the KRI, and they therefore increasingly closed down their activities. In May 2023, a court in the KRI ordered the closure of Rasan — reportedly the only human rights organisation in the Kurdistan region willing to openly support the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, in addition to its work on women’s rights and domestic violence.⁶⁷⁹

One case of honour killing that received substantial attention and had an impact on the LGBTIQ+ community was the killing of Dosky Azad, one of the few openly transgender women in the KRI. A brother of the victim had come to Duhok from Europe to commit the killing, allegedly with the family’s knowledge. Azad was previously said to have been ostracised and threatened with death by both her immediate family and distant relatives.⁶⁸⁰ Reportedly, when she had previously sought protection, the police had advised her to leave the city of Duhok. Although the perpetrator was known, he managed to escape arrest and prosecution. The failure and lack of transparency of the authorities in the case highlighted the impunity afforded to perpetrators of anti-LGBTIQ+ violence. In some cases, it was said to be expedient for perpetrators of killings to cite ‘honour’ as a motive. According to the Iraqi Penal Code, this is a mitigating circumstance, which may reduce the sentence. As described by LGBTIQ+ NGOs, the killing of Dosky Azad was part of an ‘increase’ in discrimination, hate crimes and honour killings against the community in the Kurdistan region.⁶⁸¹

3.3.5 Women

Societal status of girls and women

The societal status of girls and women in Iraq has not undergone any structural changes relative to the previous reporting period. Although circumstances vary by case, women across the entire spectrum of the patriarchal and largely conservative

⁶⁷⁵ HRW, “Everyone Wants Me Dead”: Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq, March 2022, p. 59; HRW, Submission to the Committee Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Punishment ahead of the Review of the Republic of Iraq, 7 April 2022; DFAT, Country Information Report – Iraq, 16 January 2023, p. 32.

⁶⁷⁶ HRW, “Everyone Wants Me Dead”: Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq, March 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁶⁷⁷ Rudaw, Deadly violence against LGBT people in Iraq, 23 March 2023.

⁶⁷⁸ Confidential source, 23 February 2023.

⁶⁷⁹ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; HRW, Kurdistan Region of Iraq: LGBT rights group shuttered, 6 July 2023.

⁶⁸⁰ Rudaw, Trans woman killed by brother, perpetrator flees country, 2 February 2022; VOA, Death of transgender woman sparks outcry in Iraq’s Kurdistan, 3 February 2022.

⁶⁸¹ The Guardian, Kurdish transgender woman shot by brother had been hiding from family, 21 February 2022; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

Iraqi society face unequal cultural practices (including a restrictive impact on the freedom of movement), widespread domestic and gender-based violence, inadequate state protection, discriminatory laws, exclusion from political decision-making and inequality in economic participation.⁶⁸² The discussion on women's rights was further complicated during the reporting period, as gender issues were increasingly (and consciously) linked to LGBTIQ+ rights, under the influence of a conservative undercurrent in the political domain.⁶⁸³ According to one source, this exploited an existing negative attitude towards LGBTIQ+ rights to cast various projects and organisations focusing on gender equality in a bad light.⁶⁸⁴

The legal framework for addressing gender-based violence is inadequate, and patriarchal norms are embedded within the Iraqi legal system.⁶⁸⁵ For example, the 1969 Iraqi Penal Code contains legal provisions that discriminate against women. For example, the law does not consider rape (Section 393) a crime if the perpetrator marries the victim. Article 41 effectively gives men the right to beat their wives if they are disobedient, and Article 409 provides for lenient punishments for honour killings in certain circumstances, even in the case of murder.⁶⁸⁶

Since the central role⁶⁸⁷ of women in the protest movement of 2019/2020, new female members have entered parliament, and civil society organisations of young women are said to be more visible.⁶⁸⁸ The representation of women nevertheless remains low at the highest political levels and in the judiciary.⁶⁸⁹ In federal Iraq, 97 women occupy 29% of the seats in parliament, and three of the total 21 ministers in the current cabinet are women.⁶⁹⁰ Women continue to encounter male dominance in politics and flawed democracy.⁶⁹¹

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), major inequalities continued to exist in the workplace: 10% of all women were employed, as compared to 68% of all men.⁶⁹²

Freedom of movement for women

The sources consulted did not provide unequivocal information regarding legal restrictions on women's freedom of movement. According to multiple sources, a woman needs the consent of a male legal representative to apply for a passport and other identity documents. The identity card is required for access to the regular labour market, education, housing, social services and other facilities (see Section 2

⁶⁸² DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 29; confidential source, 23 February 2023; NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, *UN Security Council briefing on Iraq by Khandan Latif*, 18 May 2023.

⁶⁸³ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; UNHCR, *Advocacy note – Resettlement needs in Iraq*, June 2023; OHCHR, *Statement: UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes his official visit to Iraq*, 9 August 2023; confidential source, 21 August 2023.

⁶⁸⁴ Confidential source, 21 August 2023.

⁶⁸⁵ HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 318; France 24, *Women's rights in Iraq* (video), 14 April 2023.

⁶⁸⁶ Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Iraq*, 30 March 2022, p. 3; confidential source, 23 February 2023; Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023.

⁶⁸⁷ The Independent, *Women in Iraq defiantly take to the streets despite fears they 'could die at any moment'*, 23 November 2019; International Journal of Middle East Studies 55(2), *Post-Tishreen Online Feminism: Continuity, Rupture, Departure*, August 2023, p. 329.

⁶⁸⁸ France 24, *Women's rights in Iraq* (video), 14 April 2023; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *The struggle of young Iraqi women for political participation*, 16 April 2023.

⁶⁸⁹ Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Iraq*, 30 March 2022, p. 3.

⁶⁹⁰ Shafaq News, *Women in al-Sudani's cabinet: how culture becomes the biggest challenge*, 16 November 2022; Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Iraq*, <https://www.ipu.org/parliament/IQ>, consulted on 19 July 2023.

⁶⁹¹ 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *The struggle of young Iraqi women for political participation*, 16 April 2023.

⁶⁹² International Labour Organization, *Iraq and ILO launch first national Labour Force Survey in a decade*, 5 July 2022.

of this country of origin information report).⁶⁹³ With regard to the ability of women to apply for passports, however, Human Rights Watch wrote that the law no longer requires Iraqis (older than 18 years of age) to show the consent of a male representative.⁶⁹⁴ In federal Iraq, this has reportedly been the case officially since the Passport Law of 2015. The KRG is said to have lifted this restriction in 2009. The July 2023 report from HRW does not mention whether the showing of consent is requested in practice. Elsewhere in the report, HRW does state that individuals applying for new civil ID documents should show an identity card or nationality certificate from a father, brother or other male relative.⁶⁹⁵ According to a report by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, there are no major legal obstacles for single women in the KRI with regard to freedom of movement.⁶⁹⁶

In everyday life, women's freedom of movement is mainly subject to cultural restrictions.⁶⁹⁷ Some sources indicated that, for the majority of women in federal Iraq and the KRI, their families do not allow them to travel independently. For example, girls and women from conservative families are reportedly often not able to move around the streets alone, even within Erbil. Single, independently living women in Baghdad reportedly stay indoors in the evenings.⁶⁹⁸

A commentary on the website of the Iraqi independent-media initiative Jummar described the practice of forced isolation in which the author claims the majority of Iraqi women and girls live (even after the COVID pandemic).⁶⁹⁹ Their husbands or other male relatives effectively forbid them from leaving the house (without approval) or restrict their movement outside the home. In addition to preventing women and girls from working or pursuing education,⁷⁰⁰ the enforced isolation from society and personal contacts also has an impact on their mental health. Moreover, such practices reportedly often involve physical domestic violence.⁷⁰¹

The DFAT report from January 2023 stated, without going into detail, that it is extremely difficult, or even impossible, for a single woman to move to a new place of residence where she does not have the protection of a male relative.⁷⁰²

In general, hotels do not allow adult Iraqi women to check in if they are not accompanied by a male relative (for example a husband, father or brother) or cannot show an official letter from a governmental or non-governmental organisation linking the stay to business or a conference. This is not a legal obligation, but is said to be instructed to hotels by the tourism authority.⁷⁰³

⁶⁹³ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Iraq*, March 2023, G1; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 57.

⁶⁹⁴ HRW, *Trapped, How Male Guardianship Policies Restrict Women's Travel and Mobility in the Middle East and North Africa*, July 2023, pp. 44–45.

⁶⁹⁵ HRW, *Trapped, How Male Guardianship Policies Restrict Women's Travel and Mobility in the Middle East and North Africa*, July 2023, p. 43.

⁶⁹⁶ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 1.

⁶⁹⁷ World Vision, *Empowered Women, Empowered Children*, April 2022, p. 28; The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁸ Confidential source, 26 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁶⁹⁹ Jummar, *Home confinement in Iraq, Women imprisoned by society's ignorance*, 8 March 2023.

⁷⁰⁰ Oxfam, *The Tyranny of Dress Codes, Women's Narratives of Violence and Resistance in the Middle East and North Africa*, December 2022, p. 21.

⁷⁰¹ Jummar, *Home confinement in Iraq, Women imprisoned by society's ignorance*, 8 March 2023.

⁷⁰² DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40.

⁷⁰³ Confidential source, 9 March 2023; HRW, *Trapped, How Male Guardianship Policies Restrict Women's Travel and Mobility in the Middle East and North Africa*, July 2023, p. 42.

Protection options

Because it is not always possible to separate domestic violence from honour-based violence, sources do not always draw distinctions between them in all cases. In both federal Iraq and the KRI, violence against women is a widespread problem. According to the 2022 annual report of Amnesty, Iraqi NGOs have documented an increase in gender-based violence.⁷⁰⁴ Exact figures are lacking, partly because many incidents of violence go unreported.⁷⁰⁵ Iraq also does not have a centralised system for reporting domestic violence.⁷⁰⁶

There was no improvement from the previous reporting period in terms of the ability of obtaining protection for girls and women who are victims (or at risk) of domestic or honour-based violence. The legal framework and policies for addressing gender-based violence remained inadequate. In February 2022, the Iraqi Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization jointly launched a strategic plan aimed at reducing the impact of gender-based violence.⁷⁰⁷ Women's rights organisations were critical of this and other UN-backed strategies aimed at women, which were said to lack actual implementation.⁷⁰⁸ Protection by the authorities remained minimal, both in federal Iraq and in the KRI. In most areas, there was no form of government-provided protection: no nearby shelters or telephone emergency services, and little or no sensitivity training for local police.⁷⁰⁹ The few state-run shelters in Iraq do not provide adequate protection.⁷¹⁰ In addition, during the current reporting period, NGOs increasingly encountered difficulties in operating shelters.⁷¹¹

Although women's rights groups continued to push for the passage of an Anti-Domestic Violence Law (which had been on the parliament's agenda since 2011), their efforts led to opposition from religious leaders and conservative politicians.⁷¹² The latest bill would criminalise domestic violence and — in collaboration with local women's rights organisations — set up shelters for female survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking.⁷¹³ In the KRI, there is already a law against domestic violence (Law 8) and a referral system for gender-based violence. The law criminalises domestic violence, including both physical and psychological abuse, threats of violence and marital rape. The KRG has a special police unit to investigate cases of gender-based violence, a domestic violence helpline and a family-reconciliation commission within the judiciary. According to some sources, implementation of the law and referral mechanism is limited, partly due to a lack of capacity, and cultural (honour-based) norms that complicate the reporting of family violence. Authorities focus on reconciliation with families rather than providing protection to victims.⁷¹⁴

According to Amnesty, there was only one shelter in federal Iraq. Operated with UNFPA support, it has capacity for about 100 people.⁷¹⁵ In March 2023, the UNFPA

⁷⁰⁴ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, pp. 201, 203.

⁷⁰⁵ See Section 3.1 for more information on barriers to reporting.

⁷⁰⁶ Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023.

⁷⁰⁷ WHO, *First gender-based violence strategic plan launched in Iraq*, 2 February 2022.

⁷⁰⁸ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁰⁹ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 54.

⁷¹⁰ Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023; The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 27.

⁷¹¹ Confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷¹² HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 318; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *The invisible war: domestic violence and its impact on Iraqi women*, 14 May 2023.

⁷¹³ HRW, *Human Rights Watch submission to the UN Human Rights Committee in advance of its review of Iraq*, 25 January 2022; MERIP, *Iraqi women's activism – 20 years after the US invasion*, April 2023.

⁷¹⁴ Staatssekretariat für Migration SEM, *Iraqische Region Kurdistan – Gesetz gegen Häusliche Gewalt (Nr. 8 / 2011)*, 9 February 2023, p3; confidential source, 23 February 2023; confidential source, 23 March 2023.

⁷¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203.

stated that it was working to rehabilitate the Women's Protection Centre in Diwaniyah, in addition to building two new centres in Ramadi and Mosul.⁷¹⁶ Although private shelters are prohibited by law in federal Iraq, there were organisations that offered shelter to individuals in acute need, including women and people belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. These shelters have faced physical attacks and threats from families of female residents, as well as from the communities in which the shelters are located, which reportedly regarded them as brothels.⁷¹⁷ As in the previous reporting period, an organisation that operated several unofficial shelters in federal Iraq faced opposition from the authorities. Amongst other things, the organisation and its employees were threatened, summoned for questioning by the authorities, legally harassed with lawsuits and faced administrative obstacles.⁷¹⁸

In the KRI, there were four shelters, which were operated by the Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW, part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs), and, as far as is known, one or a few private shelters.⁷¹⁹ Due to a lack of available funds, the authorities increasingly relied on NGOs to provide a variety of services in the shelters, including legal aid and psychological assistance.⁷²⁰

Admission to a shelter can be so complicated and bureaucratic that it does not provide a timely solution to actual or imminent violence. In the KRI, a woman needs a court order to enter a state shelter, and to leave it again.⁷²¹ According to some sources, space in state-run shelters in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region is limited, and services, including psychological support, are poor.⁷²² As noted by several sources, due to lack of sufficient shelters (and capacity therein), the courts would sometimes have women reporting actual or imminent violence admitted to prison as a safer alternative to the home situation.⁷²³ There are few options for women to leave a shelter (at least safely). Returning home often resulted in further stigmatisation and violence by the family or community.⁷²⁴ According to one source, during the current reporting period too, there were several cases of women being killed after leaving a shelter, despite the family allegedly having signed a statement not to harm her.⁷²⁵

⁷¹⁶ UN-HABITAT and UNFPA, *Renovated women protection centre in Baghdad provides hope for gender-based violence survivors*, 16 March 2023.

⁷¹⁷ HRW, *Human Rights Watch submission to the UN Human Rights Committee in advance of its review of Iraq*, 25 January 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 318.

⁷¹⁸ France 24, *The struggle for women's rights in Iraq* (video), 5 November 2021; Al Jazeera, 'You are not honourable anymore', *Shamed and trafficked into Iraq's sex trade*, 22 August 2022; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203; MERIP, *Iraqi women's activism – 20 years after the US invasion*, April 2023; Manara Magazine, *Women's freedom in Iraq: A conversation with Yanar Mohammed*, 4 May 2023.

⁷¹⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 25.

⁷²⁰ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 26; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 52; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷²¹ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023; HRW, *Trapped, How Male Guardianship Policies Restrict Women's Travel and Mobility in the Middle East and North Africa*, July 2023, p. 43.

⁷²² Confidential source, 23 February 2023; Amnesty International, *Report 2022/23, The State of the World's Human Rights*, March 2023, p. 203; The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, pp. 25–26; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 52; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷²³ HRW, *Human Rights Watch submission to the UN Human Rights Committee in advance of its review of Iraq*, 25 January 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷²⁴ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 52; confidential source, 30 March.

⁷²⁵ Confidential source, 23 March 2023.

In addition to economic barriers, negative social attitudes towards reporting domestic or gender-based violence and women's shelters posed barriers to victims seeking protection. Fearing stigma and the potential consequences, and having nowhere else to go, many women reportedly choose to stay with a violent partner or relative, refrain from filing a case against the perpetrator, or leave the shelter and return to their families.⁷²⁶

Single women

According to demographic data for the current reporting period, about one in ten Iraqi households had a woman as head of household.⁷²⁷ Single women are vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, displacement, eviction and sexual harassment and abuse.⁷²⁸ The usually conservative environment stigmatises divorced women, single women and all other women and girls who are seen as deviating from traditional norms.⁷²⁹ According to a report by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, the attitude of the environment towards a single woman – and the consequences of this attitude – depends on several factors, including location, family, marital status, age and whether the woman does or does not have children.⁷³⁰ In practice, the many challenges facing single women are said to prevent many women from getting divorced or leaving home to seek protection from domestic violence.⁷³¹

In Iraq, divorce rates are reportedly increasing, despite the inequalities that women face.⁷³² Although women can initiate divorce proceedings, the community and authorities discourage divorce and emphasise reconciliation.⁷³³ Women are not entitled to alimony, and those wishing to divorce are sometimes required to return their dowries. In cases of divorce, fathers are automatically granted custody of their children, although divorced mothers can be granted care rights over their children until the age of 10 (which the court can extend to the age of 15), after which children can choose which parent to live with.⁷³⁴

It is common for divorced women and widows to live with their families.⁷³⁵ Many are not financially independent. There is no form of social security that they can claim, apart from any pension from a deceased spouse.⁷³⁶ In many cases, the family of a deceased spouse reportedly prevent the wife from claiming her share of the inheritance. Young and divorced women are said to be particularly likely to face

⁷²⁶ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 1; Cordaid, *Displaced by war, driven by peace. A story of sisterhood*, 17 April 2023; 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, *The invisible war: domestic violence and its impact on Iraqi women*, 14 May 2023.

⁷²⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 78; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 29–30.

⁷²⁸ AFP, *In Iraq, divorce rates soar even as stigma persists for women*, 19 October 2022; DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30.

⁷²⁹ LRT, *After family's decision to kill her, Iraqi woman finds love in Lithuania's migrant camp*, 30 July 2022; confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023; UNHCR, *Advocacy note – Resettlement needs in Iraq*, June 2023.

⁷³⁰ The Danish Immigration Service and Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 7.

⁷³¹ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁷³² AFP, *In Iraq, divorce rates soar even as stigma persists for women*, 19 October 2022.

⁷³³ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 78; AFP, *In Iraq, divorce rates soar even as stigma persists for women*, 19 October 2022.

⁷³⁴ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 29; USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 57.

⁷³⁵ LRT, *After family's decision to kill her, Iraqi woman finds love in Lithuania's migrant camp*, 30 July 2022; AFP, *In Iraq, divorce rates soar even as stigma persists for women*, 19 October 2022; confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷³⁶ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

restrictions from their conservative families and environments with regard to their freedom of movement and ability to work.⁷³⁷

Although it is legal for a woman to live alone, it is very unusual. This applies to women of all ages, regardless of whether they have been married or have children. According to some sources, in rural areas, it is generally even less accepted for a woman not to live with her family than it is in cities such as Baghdad and Erbil (or certain parts thereof).⁷³⁸ Single women living independently face stigma from those around them.⁷³⁹ According to one source, the eyes of the entire neighbourhood or community are on them.⁷⁴⁰ These women, especially those who are outcasts, do not enjoy the usual protection from the family or clan. In their position, they are highly vulnerable to sexual or other forms of harassment and violence (for instance from a landlord).⁷⁴¹ According to one source, the question of whether single women have been married or not and whether or not they have children has no effect on the degree of unwanted attention, but only on the type of inappropriate questions that women face (for instance, about the absence of a partner or the identity of the father of their children).⁷⁴² Another source indicated that, if a single woman were to live with a teenage son, it could potentially be more accepted in conservative circles for them to live alone.⁷⁴³

One source indicated that, even in the case of a financially independent woman living alone with the permission of her family in a relatively affluent and deemed safe environment in Baghdad, her daily life is likely to be strongly affected by stigma and insecurity (or a sense of insecurity). Even within such parts of the capital, women reportedly do not walk the streets alone in the evening, for safety reasons.⁷⁴⁴

According to the aforementioned report by the Danish Immigration Service, in the KRI, there are no significant legal barriers to single women with regard to their freedom of movement and access to housing, healthcare, education and the labour market. In practice, however, they face major challenges, including verbal and sexual harassment, the unwillingness of the authorities to allow single women to live on their own, limited job availability and difficulties in obtaining documents.⁷⁴⁵ For financial and cultural reasons, it is nearly impossible for single women to rent housing. In general, they do not obtain the necessary permission from the security service Asayish to rent a flat.⁷⁴⁶ According to one source, the Christian district of Ankawa near Erbil was an exception.⁷⁴⁷ In addition, according to some sources, it is easier for expatriates and women returning from the Iraqi diaspora to rent independent housing in at least certain parts of Erbil.⁷⁴⁸

⁷³⁷ LRT, *After family's decision to kill her, Iraqi woman finds love in Lithuania's migrant camp*, 30 July 2022; AFP, *In Iraq, divorce rates soar even as stigma persists for women*, 19 October 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷³⁸ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; Confidential source, 26 March 2023; Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷³⁹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 29–30; UNHCR, *Advocacy note – Resettlement needs in Iraq*, June 2023.

⁷⁴⁰ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁷⁴¹ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, pp. 29–30; confidential source, 23 March; confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁷⁴² Confidential source, 23 March 2023.

⁷⁴³ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁴⁴ Confidential source, 26 March 2023.

⁷⁴⁵ The Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 1.

⁷⁴⁶ The Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Issues regarding Single Women, Documents and Illegal Exit*, March 2023, p. 9; confidential source, 23 March; confidential source 30 March 2023.

⁷⁴⁷ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁴⁸ Confidential source, 23 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

During the reporting period, considerable attention was directed towards a case in which a relatively well-known single woman became a victim of violence after returning to Iraq. The 22-year-old YouTube personality Tiba al-Ali, who was unmarried and living in Türkiye, was strangled by her father whilst visiting her family in the southern province of Diwaniyah on 31 January 2023.⁷⁴⁹ Her father turned himself in and declared he had acted to protect the family's honour. Because the killing was categorised as an 'honour killing', it was considered unlikely that the father would be severely punished for it.⁷⁵⁰ He was eventually sentenced to six months in jail.⁷⁵¹ After her death, a series of unverified recordings surfaced of conversations between the victim and her father. In the recordings, the father can be heard expressing his displeasure that his daughter was living with her partner in Türkiye. In addition, the voice of a woman can be heard claiming that she had fled to Türkiye after being sexually abused by her brother. The woman accuses her parents of knowing about the abuse and covering it up.⁷⁵²

The killing led to small-scale protests by citizens and women's rights groups, who raised the alarm about violence against women in Iraq and the necessity of reforming legislation to punish perpetrators more severely.⁷⁵³ The UN and human rights organisations condemned the killing and urged the federal government to take further measures to criminalise gender-based violence and prevent impunity for perpetrators.⁷⁵⁴ Both the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and protesters specifically called on the government to repeal Articles 41 and 409 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which respectively allow men to 'punish' their wives and impose up to three years in prison for men who kill their spouse or female relative for alleged adultery.⁷⁵⁵ Amidst public reactions, the Iraqi MoI stated that local authorities had tried to mediate between the young woman and her relatives a day before the killing, in order to resolve the 'family dispute'. Al-Ali had reportedly informed the police herself that she was in danger.⁷⁵⁶ Some activists subsequently held the authorities responsible for al-Ali's death, as they were aware that she had received death threats.⁷⁵⁷

As far as is known, during the reporting period, there were no cases in which independently living single women in need received protection from the Iraqi authorities.

3.3.6 *Female Genital Mutilation*

As far as is known, no relevant developments occurred with regard to female genital mutilation (FGM) during the reporting period. Sources confirmed what had been mentioned in the country of origin information report of October 2021 about the

⁷⁴⁹ Amnesty International, *Iraq: Action must be taken on gender-based violence after murder of Tiba Ali by her father*, 3 February 2023.

⁷⁵⁰ Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023; confidential source, 23 February 2023.

⁷⁵¹ BBC, *The Iraqi YouTube star killed by her father*, 5 September 2023.

⁷⁵² AFP, *'Honour' killing of YouTube star sparks outrage in Iraq*, 3 February 2023; Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023.

⁷⁵³ Al Jazeera, *Iraqis protest over killing of YouTube star by her father*, 5 February 2023.

⁷⁵⁴ Amnesty International, *Iraq: Action must be taken on gender-based violence after murder of Tiba Ali by her father*, 3 February 2023; UNAMI, *UN in Iraq condemns the killing of Tiba al-Ali and calls on all parties to protect women and girls from violence*, 5 February 2023.

⁷⁵⁵ Al Jazeera, *Iraqis protest over killing of YouTube star by her father*, 5 February 2023; Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023.

⁷⁵⁶ Al Jazeera, *Iraqis protest over killing of YouTube star by her father*, 5 February 2023.

⁷⁵⁷ Amwaj, *'Honor killing' of YouTube star sends shockwaves across Iraq*, 7 February 2023.

concentration of FGM in the Kurdistan region.⁷⁵⁸ The practice of FGM is said to be particularly prevalent in rural areas of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces, as well as in Kirkuk, the disputed province with a large Kurdish community.⁷⁵⁹ In other parts of Iraq, the scale of FGM was unclear, but was said to be less common.⁷⁶⁰ The subject of FGM continued to be taboo in parts of federal Iraq.⁷⁶¹

The statutory framework

In the KRI,⁷⁶² legislation has criminalised performing FGM. In federal Iraq, there is no law that explicitly criminalises FGM. In 2021, some NGOs proclaimed Halabja in the Kurdistan region 'FGM-free'.⁷⁶³ Although the extent to which women and girls could effectively seek protection based on criminalisation was unclear, NGOs attributed the decline of FGM in the Kurdistan region to legislation and sustained campaigning by organisations and activists.⁷⁶⁴ The ability to reference legal punitive measures is said to have strengthened the anti-FGM campaign.⁷⁶⁵ The NGOs nevertheless criticised the weak implementation of the law. Several sources, including the head of the KRG's anti-FGM unit in 2019, indicated that the law was not applied in practice, as girls do not file complaints against their mothers or fathers.⁷⁶⁶

3.3.7 *Unaccompanied minors*

Care of minors

As far as is known, there were no relevant developments regarding the reception of minors during the reporting period. Children may end up in an orphanage or shelter if one or both parents have died and there is no family to care for the child. Children of unknown parents are also admitted to orphanages. Iraq nevertheless lacks sufficient orphanages to accommodate the large number of orphans.⁷⁶⁷ The shelter system continues to be strained by the legacy of the fight against ISIS. In March 2023, one source highlighted the challenge of accommodating and providing appropriate care to an expected caseload of about 500 unaccompanied minors returning from the al-Hol camp in north-east Syria without having to make undesirable choices when allocating places (for instance, separating siblings).⁷⁶⁸

Many children orphaned in the fight against ISIS have been taken in by relatives or acquaintances. Although adoption is not possible under Iraqi law, there is a system of foster care. Family members or individuals not related to a child by blood can be assigned foster care if they are capable of caring for the child.⁷⁶⁹ Prospective foster parents must be able to produce a court order to this effect.⁷⁷⁰ According to one source, foster care is supervised by social workers employed by the Iraqi Ministry of

⁷⁵⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 79; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁵⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 79.

⁷⁶⁰ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 30; Kirkuk Now, *Wadi explores Female Genital Mutilation FGM in middle and south of Iraq*, 15 May 2023.

⁷⁶¹ Confidential source, 28 March 2023; Kirkuk Now, *Wadi explores Female Genital Mutilation FGM in middle and south of Iraq*, 15 May 2023.

⁷⁶² *Law on Combating Domestic Violence for the Kurdistan Region No. 8 of 2011*, Article 6.

⁷⁶³ Kirkuk Now, *Wadi explores Female Genital Mutilation FGM in middle and south of Iraq*, 15 May 2023; Wadi, *Presentation: Wadi's work to combat FGM in Iraqi-Kurdistan and other countries in the Middle East*, 4 July 2023.

⁷⁶⁴ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 53; Wadi, *Presentation: Wadi's work to combat FGM in Iraqi-Kurdistan and other countries in the Middle East*, 4 July 2023.

⁷⁶⁵ Kirkuk Now, *Wadi explores Female Genital Mutilation FGM in middle and south of Iraq*, 15 May 2023.

⁷⁶⁶ AFP, *Women strive to end genital mutilation in Kurdish Iraq*, 2 January 2019; OFPRA, *Iraq: Les Mutilations Sexuelles Féminines (MSF) au Kurdistan*, 21 September 2022, p. 2.

⁷⁶⁷ EUAA, *Country Guidance: Iraq*, June 2022, p. 151.

⁷⁶⁸ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁶⁹ EUAA, *Country Guidance Iraq*, June 2022, p. 151.

⁷⁷⁰ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). A social worker monitors a child's situation by visiting the foster family every three months. In case of inadequate care, the court may remove a child from a foster family.⁷⁷¹

Shelters for minors

According to one source, there were at least twenty state-run orphanages in Iraq. They are subdivided into three age categories: 0–6 years, 6–12 years and 12–18 years.⁷⁷² There is reportedly a shelter in the provincial capital of each of the fifteen provinces in federal Iraq. According to the source, in the province of Baghdad, there were three orphanages in al-Karkh (the western bank of Baghdad) and three in al-Rasafa (the eastern bank).⁷⁷³ In most cases, the different age groups are reportedly housed in the same location, which is divided into different sections. The source stated that, in March 2023, a total of about 1,000 to 1,200 Iraqi children were staying in state orphanages in federal Iraq, along with an unknown number of children of different or no nationality.

In addition to the state orphanages, there are a few well-known private shelters, which accommodate limited numbers of children. These shelters are dependent on donations.⁷⁷⁴ Whereas the state orphanages fall under the responsibility of the MoLSA and are supervised by social workers, there is a lack of supervision for the private shelters and the children and conditions there, according to the source. In some cases, these shelters have been said to be backed by powerful parties or militias, such that the government leaves them alone. In principle, state orphanages do not apply any distinction or admission restriction based on ethnicity or religion. According to the source, in private shelters, it is theoretically possible for the donor to stipulate that only children from a certain target group are to be taken in.⁷⁷⁵

State orphanages are funded by the government. In addition, according to the source, they sometimes received material or other types of donations from companies. State orphanages provide night shelter and, in general, they reportedly have a small room for medical care and are visited weekly by a doctor. According to the source, although the government has a budget for each orphanage, in practice, the allocated funds are reportedly not spent in their entirety on the shelter and care of the children, due to corruption. This has effects on various aspects, including the quality of the three daily meals. In some cases, clothing is provided to the orphanages by private sector companies and humanitarian initiatives. Sanitary facilities are said to be very basic and separate for boys and girls.

Children in these shelters are required to attend the six classes of primary education, in theory, starting at the age of six years. This is followed by optional secondary and, in some cases, further education. According to the source, orphanages are usually located a short distance from a primary school, reportedly have transportation to school, and children are accompanied by a social worker on the way to and from school.

According to the source, although the MoLSA had a training centre where these children could receive vocational training to prepare them for an existence outside the shelter, this centre is currently not functioning. In some cases, children who have reached the age of majority and have continued their education are employed

⁷⁷¹ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁷² Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁷³ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁷⁴ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁷⁵ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

by the ministry, and some come to work in the orphanages where they had resided as minors.⁷⁷⁶

According to one local media source, there were three official orphanages in the KRI. In April 2022, more than fifty children and young adults were staying in one of the orphanages, in Erbil. For children continuing their studies, there is reportedly room to stay at the orphanage even after they turned eighteen.⁷⁷⁷ According to an official statement by the KRG in January 2023, orphans who had turned eighteen in the past three years would be given the opportunity to join the KRG's MoLSA.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁶ Confidential source, 28 March 2023.

⁷⁷⁷ Rudaw, *19-year-old boy spent most of his life in Erbil orphanage*, 29 April 2022.

⁷⁷⁸ Kurdistan24, *Orphaned male adults will be employed in the Kurdistan Region*, 8 January 2023.

4 Displaced persons

The pace at which displaced persons return to their areas of origin remained low during the reporting period, due to lack of security, lack of housing (or repaired housing), limited opportunities for earning a livelihood, and limited availability of or access to basic services.⁷⁷⁹ Iraqis who are still displaced — years after being displaced in the conflict with ISIS — constitute a vulnerable group for whom safe and sustainable return is often complicated or impossible. They still face the risk of arbitrary arrest by security forces and militias, as well as obstacles in obtaining essential identity documents necessary for freedom of movement and access to services.⁷⁸⁰

The scale of displacement and humanitarian needs in Iraq remained largely unchanged from the previous reporting period. Since the closure of several official displacement camps in federal Iraq in 2020 and 2021, the total number of people displaced as a result of the conflict with ISIS in Iraq has barely decreased. In August 2023, Iraq still had more than 1.14 million displaced persons — a fraction less than the 1.2 million in December 2020 (as reported in the previous country of origin information report). Most of the displaced persons were in the KRI (nearly 665,000) and in Ninewa and Kirkuk (partly in disputed territory).⁷⁸¹ About 15% (180,000) of all displaced persons were dispersed across 25 camps under Kurdish rule and — until it closed in April 2023 — in the last official displacement camp in federal Iraq. Most displaced people were still residing in informal, often camp-like conditions. According to the February 2023 Humanitarian Transition Overview, about 990,000 people (displaced and formerly displaced) were still in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in 2022.⁷⁸² Funding for humanitarian services in Iraq declined, however, thereby affecting food security and other aspects. Due to a funding shortfall, the World Food Programme (WFP) was forced to halt food aid to 137,000 displaced persons in several camps in April 2023.⁷⁸³

Although the Iraqi constitution and the national policy for the return of displaced persons do address the rights of displaced persons, little has been established in legislation.⁷⁸⁴ Assistance to displaced persons is provided by the federal government, the KRG and international and local organisations, including UN agencies and NGOs. Whereas the situation in Iraq was amongst the world's greatest humanitarian crises in the years during and immediately after the large-scale fight against ISIS (2014–2017), the scale of needs in recent years has been smaller, but stable. During the reporting period, the country was in transition from a purely humanitarian response to so-called 'durable solutions'.⁷⁸⁵ According to the UN, it was time for the federal authorities and the KRG to take on a greater share of the relief effort. The impact of this transition on conditions in displacement camps was not yet fully understood during the reporting period. Due to continuing needs,

⁷⁷⁹ UNSC, *Implementation of resolution 2631 (2022)*, S/2023/340, 11 May 2023, p. 11.

⁷⁸⁰ DRC, IRC, NRC, et al., *Life in the Margins, Re-Examining the Needs of Paperless People in Post-Conflict Iraq*, September 2022, p. 14; HRW, *World Report 2023, Events of 2022*, January 2023, p. 320; Amnesty International, *Open letter to Prime Minister Al-Sudani: End Iraq's reign of impunity*, 15 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁸¹ IOM, *IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Iraq Mission*, most recent update 31 August 2023, <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/>, consulted 16 October 2023; KRG Joint Crisis Coordination Centre via Twitter, 19 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/JccKrg/status/1659633382005850122/photo/1>

⁷⁸² OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, February 2023, p. 17; UNSC, *Implementation of resolution 2631 (2022)*, S/2023/340, 11 May 2023, p. 11.

⁷⁸³ UNSC, *Implementation of resolution 2631 (2022)*, S/2023/340, 11 May 2023, p. 12.

⁷⁸⁴ USDoS, *Iraq 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023, p. 36.

⁷⁸⁵ UN Country Team in Iraq, *Annual Results Report, 2022*, April 2023.

humanitarian aid by the UN was not completely stopped, and major international NGOs and local partners continued to provide support. Humanitarian organisations were nevertheless concerned that the transition was proceeding too rapidly, thereby leaving gaps for vulnerable groups.⁷⁸⁶ Scaling down aid could lead to a rapid deterioration in living conditions for displaced persons. According to one source, this could eventually lead to the return of displaced persons (essentially forced) due to the flawed situation and, when safe and sustainable return is not possible, departure from Iraq.⁷⁸⁷

4.1.1 *Humanitarian situation in camps*

The 25 formal displacement camps managed by the KRG are spread across the provinces of Duhok (11), Ninewa (7), Erbil (3), Suleymaniyah (3) and Diyala (1). Of the camps in disputed territory in Ninewa, four fall under the authority of local authorities in Duhok, and three (located east of Mosul) camps fall under authorities in Erbil. The camp within the provincial borders of Diyala is managed by authorities in Suleymaniyah.⁷⁸⁸

As of March 2023, a total of about 135,000 displaced persons, mostly Yazidis from the Sinjar region, were staying in the 15 camps under the control of authorities in Duhok. About 11,000 people were residing in the four camps managed from Suleymaniyah. About 13,000 people were staying in the three camps in urban areas around the city of Erbil, including one in the Christian district of Ankawa. The three camps under Erbil's control in disputed territory in Ninewa, between Erbil and Mosul, housed about 14,000 displaced persons.⁷⁸⁹

In the camps, displaced persons lived in overcrowded conditions, in shelters or tents that were not suitable for long-term residence and that did not provide sufficient protection against extreme weather conditions and fire hazards.⁷⁹⁰ In this reporting period too, fires regularly broke out in camps in Duhok where Yazidis were staying, causing casualties and destroying shelters.⁷⁹¹ In June 2022, the governor of Duhok approved the independent upgrading of tents, allowing displaced persons to replace tents with shelter made of more durable materials (e.g. concrete blocks), in order to reduce the risk of fire and as a long-term solution for shelter in the camps.⁷⁹² In the camps, access to education, healthcare and other basic services was limited.⁷⁹³ For example, according to some sources, there was insufficient access to psychosocial support for traumatised individuals, both women and men. There were regular reports of Yazidis committing suicide in a displacement camp.⁷⁹⁴ Many displaced persons struggled to access employment and were vulnerable to food insecurity. Poverty was widespread.⁷⁹⁵ Dependence on humanitarian aid was high, especially in

⁷⁸⁶ The New Humanitarian, *Taking stock of the UN's shift away from emergency aid in Iraq*, 20 March 2023.

⁷⁸⁷ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁷⁸⁸ UNHCR, *Iraq CCCM Cluster*, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/iraq_cccm, consulted on 1 May 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁸⁹ UNHCR, *Overview of the 25 IDP camps in KR-I – as of December 2022*; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁹⁰ REACH, *Iraq: IDP Camp Profiling Round XVI*, 1 February 2023, p. 8; confidential source, 18 June 2023.

⁷⁹¹ Kurdistan24, *Duhok's Jezidi Bajid Kandala camp to be upgraded following third fire this year*, 1 July 2022.

⁷⁹² UNHCR, *CCCM Cluster Iraq Transition Strategy Update: August 2022*, p11; UNHCR, *UNHCR Iraq 2022 Achievements*, 30 April 2023, p. 5; confidential source, 18 June 2023.

⁷⁹³ REACH, *Iraq: IDP Camp Profiling Round XVI*, 1 February 2023, pp. 8–9; confidential source, 18 June 2023.

⁷⁹⁴ Kurdistan24, *Displaced Jezidi woman commits suicide in Zakho*, 6 May 2022; Kirkuk Now, *Government gives up in case of suicide among Ezidis*, 20 May 2022.

⁷⁹⁵ REACH, *Iraq: IDP Camp Profiling Round XVI*, 1 February 2023, pp. 7–10; confidential source, 18 June 2023.

the Duhok camps. Such aid declined during the reporting period, however, due to low funding and the gradual transfer of responsibility to the government.⁷⁹⁶

According to one source, conditions were even worse in the three camps formally under Erbil's control in Ninewa (between Mosul and Erbil). Problems included a lack of sufficient electricity, water, toilets and hygiene. This was reportedly due in part to the transfer of service provision from UN organisations to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD). According to the source, neither Kurdish nor federal authorities fulfilled their responsibility to provide basic services to these locations in disputed territory. As noted by the source, residents of these camps also had very limited ability to move outside the camps, as their identity documents were in the possession of the Kurdish security service Asayish. This meant that, whenever a person wanted to visit a doctor outside the camp (for instance in Mosul), the person had to go to the Asayish for a temporary certificate of permission with which to leave the camp. With this letter, and without proof of identity, the person in question could be stigmatised at checkpoints and by authorities as someone with links to ISIS.⁷⁹⁷

According to some sources, for displaced persons in the other formal camps, freedom of movement — between different districts and provinces within the KRI, and between the KRI and federal Iraq — varied by camp and depending on the background of the group. Displaced persons in camps in Duhok — mainly Yazidis — were able to move around relatively freely and therefore had access to services (where available) outside the camps. They were also in principle free to move between the Kurdistan region and their original homes in Sinjar. During this reporting period too, displaced Yazidis were returning to the camps and urban areas in Duhok after a brief return to Sinjar and were admitted.⁷⁹⁸

In federal Iraq, approximately 103,000 people⁷⁹⁹ were still in long-term displacement in 'informal sites' during the reporting period.⁸⁰⁰ Across Iraq, most informal sites were found in the provinces of Duhok (35%), Ninewa (18%) and Salaheddin (13%), with the greatest share of the population residing in Anbar (27%), followed by Duhok (21%) and Salaheddin (15%).⁸⁰¹ Although conditions in the more large-scale, camp-like informal sites varied, they were generally even more difficult than conditions in formal displacement camps, due to a lack of public services.⁸⁰² In general, displaced persons in informal locations lacked livelihood opportunities, in addition to a regular lack of access to adequate water, sanitation or other essential services, and they received limited or no humanitarian assistance.⁸⁰³

⁷⁹⁶ OCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview – Iraq*, March 2022, p. 99; Kurdistan24, *International aid for IDPs and refugees in Duhok decreasing*, 24 June 2022; confidential source, 1 April 2023; confidential source, 18 June 2023; confidential source, 25 June 2023.

⁷⁹⁷ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁷⁹⁸ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023; confidential source, 1 April 2023.

⁷⁹⁹ REACH, *IDPs in Iraq – Intentions and Profiling: Informal Sites (April 2022)*, 10 May 2022.

⁸⁰⁰ The UNHCR uses the following definition: 'An informal site is a site hosting a minimum of 5 displaced families – who were displaced to the location after 2014 – living together collectively in a site that is not built to accommodate people, and with sub-standard living conditions. Shelter type is sub-standard, including tents, makeshift shelters, unfinished or abandoned buildings, or buildings not meant for living in e.g. schools, mosques'. Source: CCCM Cluster, *Technical guidance on Informal Site definition*, September 2020.

⁸⁰¹ IOM Iraq, *Informal Sites Assessment 2022, DTM Integrated Location Assessment VII*, 2 October 2022.

⁸⁰² NRC, *Twice displaced: The unmet needs of Iraq's children in informal settlements*, September 2022, p. 4; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸⁰³ UN in Iraq, *Iraq Common Country Analysis 2022: Condensed Version*, 27 July 2022, p. 2; IOM, *Iraq: Informal Sites Assessment 2022*, 2 October 2022, p. 8; confidential source, 18 June 2023.

4.1.2

Closure of displacement camps

In 2019, federal authorities had started closing and merging camps, in order to accelerate the return of displaced persons.⁸⁰⁴ In April 2023, the government closed the last formal displacement camp in federal Iraq: Jeddah 5 in Ninewa.⁸⁰⁵ On 17 and 18 April — only a few days after the official announcement of the closure — the 422 families (1,566 people, two thirds of whom were under the age of 18 years) were required to leave the camp. According to one source, they were expected to leave the camp without initially accessing existing assistance and resources to facilitate return. As was the case during the closure of dozens of camps in federal Iraq in 2020/2021, this resulted in forced departure from the camps, without the opportunity for either displaced persons or aid organisations to prepare properly. According to the source, there were concerns about the safety of some of the families from Jeddah 5, partly because time constraints made it impossible to ensure that these displaced persons, who were stigmatised due to actual or perceived ties to ISIS, would be accepted in the return communities.⁸⁰⁶ The UN also expressed concerns about the rapid closure of Jeddah 5.⁸⁰⁷ The return of Sunni Muslims from Jeddah 5 to Sinjar led to protests from the local Yazidi community and heightened tensions.⁸⁰⁸

Earlier in the reporting period, on 10 November 2021, the last formal camp in Anbar province, Ameriyat al-Fallujah (AAF) was closed. Despite the reclassification of this site from a formal camp to an informal site for displaced persons, it was actually still a displacement camp, housing about 500 households. The difference was that humanitarian services became limited, leading to rapidly deteriorating conditions in the camp, especially in terms of basic facilities and hygiene. According to one source, this led to cases of forced and unsafe returns. The AAF camp is an example of declassification, where displaced persons could not safely and sustainably return to their former homes. For example, some of the families in AAF came from Jurf al-Sakhar in the province of Babil, one of the places to which returns are not allowed by the armed actors in control of the area.⁸⁰⁹

The small-scale displacement camp at Zayona in Baghdad, which housed several hundred Christians displaced from Ninewa, and which the Iraqi authorities had classified as an informal site rather than a formal camp in late 2020 (during the previous reporting period), was in danger of being evacuated in late 2022. There were reportedly plans to turn the complex, which housed about 120 families, into a shopping mall. As far as is known, the Chaldean patriarchate subsequently made preparations to provide shelter for families from the camp at the former Chaldean seminary in Dora, a suburb of Baghdad.⁸¹⁰

The authorities in federal Iraq proceeded to close the last remaining formal displacement camps during the reporting period. In contrast, in the KRI, there have been no relevant developments regarding the status of the 25 camps under Kurdish

⁸⁰⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 85.

⁸⁰⁵ Jeddah 5 should not be confused with the Jeddah 1 'rehabilitation camp', where Iraqi returnees from the al-Hol camp in north-east Syria are rehabilitated.

⁸⁰⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 85; confidential source, 23 April 2023; The New Humanitarian, *In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns*, 24 August 2023.

⁸⁰⁷ OCHA, *Statement by the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq on the closure of Jeddah 5 camp*, 19 April 2023.

⁸⁰⁸ Shafaq News, *Tensions rise in Sinjar as Sunni families accused of ISIS ties return*, 27 April 2023; Kirkuk Now, *Part of Sunni Arabs unable to return to Shingal (Sinjar)*, 4 July 2023.

⁸⁰⁹ OCHA Iraq, *Humanitarian Bulletin, November/December 2021*, 17 January 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸¹⁰ Agenzia Fides, *The former seminary will welcome Christian refugees "evicted" from the "refugee camp of the Virgin Mary"*, 12 December 2022.

control, despite the authorities' intentions to reduce the number of camps. Forced returns were not observed here. Nevertheless, the authorities' intentions to merge camps led to concerns among humanitarian organisations that displaced people would not return of their own free will, or that they would be transferred to other camps. According to several sources, the KRG had presented plans to close two of the camps around Erbil, amongst others, even as humanitarian organisations were calling for the continued reception of displaced persons there.⁸¹¹ Moreover, according to one source, the authorities are said to be looking at the camps managed from Erbil east of Mosul that have the most difficult conditions as an option for transferring displaced persons who cannot return or obtain the necessary security clearance to settle elsewhere within the Kurdistan region. The same source concluded that, in the KRI as well, humanitarian considerations — based on conditions for the displaced — did not guide the authorities' policy on the future of the camps.⁸¹²

4.1.3 *Conditions for access and residence*

Various factors (such as an individual's ethnic and religious background and place of origin, and the need to have specific documents and personal connections as conditions for entry and residence) can create barriers to the ability of individuals to access and settle permanently in an intended place of residence, and to access basic services there.⁸¹³

Like all Iraqis, internally displaced persons are registered with the local civil registry in a given locality. This locality is designated as the place of origin. This means that they can request their identity documents only there. In addition, there is the registration of the Iraqi Housing Card, which proves an individual's actual place of residence. Although this is theoretically possible for a displaced person, applying for a Housing Card in the place where one resides as a displaced person is complex in practice. Displaced persons can register with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD). This is how individuals gain access to aid intended for displaced people. For more information on the Housing Card and registration as a displaced person, see the country of origin information report dated October 2021.⁸¹⁴

When the conflict with ISIS led to large-scale displacement in Iraq between 2014 and 2017, many local authorities introduced strict entry and residency restrictions, including sponsorship requirements. Some areas implemented entry bans for almost all people fleeing conflict-affected areas, and especially for Sunni Arabs. Following the recapture of territory from ISIS, these restrictions were gradually lifted or relaxed beginning in December 2017.⁸¹⁵

With regard to access, all formal restrictions and requirements were lifted in early 2020 for access to provinces in federal Iraq for individuals coming from areas controlled by ISIS or affected by the conflict, including those returning from abroad.⁸¹⁶ During the reporting period, a few places were still known in Diyala

⁸¹¹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸¹² Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸¹³ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, p. 1.

⁸¹⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, pp. 83–84.

⁸¹⁵ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, p. 4.

⁸¹⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 83.

province where a sponsor was needed for access. No sponsor is required for entry into the Kurdistan region, regardless of the location from which a person is travelling into the KRI. A security screening is carried out, however, after which the Asayish security department usually issues a document with a validity of 30 days for entry and temporary residence in the KRI.⁸¹⁷

In practice, in order to get from A to B, displaced persons must navigate a complex and frequently changing situation. To gain access to the intended residence area, displaced persons must first pass through checkpoints. There, individuals must be able to show an identity document.

To actually settle somewhere and access public facilities, displaced persons must have the proper documents and a security clearance from the relevant local security actors. Humanitarian organisations have visited displacement camps with mobile missions in recent years to ensure that displaced persons can apply for their identity documents. According to one source, although the simple cases generally had their documents in order by now, people with more complex cases (for instance due to stigmatisation or the loss of a family member) have not (or not yet) managed to obtain their essential documents.⁸¹⁸

Registration in the new place of residence is highly complex and time-consuming. According to one source, many who try to settle in a new locality are therefore never fully registered. To complete registration, displaced persons must physically visit government offices in their area of origin, which is not safe or possible for everyone. According to the source, a person's ethnic and religious background are quite likely to be amongst the factors that determine whether a person meeting the formal requirements can actually register in a given locality. The source stated that this had to do with local sensitivities concerning the demographic balance between different populations, with the understanding that tribal relationships should also not be underestimated.⁸¹⁹

In practice, the conditions of entry and residence are determined not only by written instructions (of which one can be aware), but also by the specific local context and security and political considerations of relevant actors in a given area. This means that conditions for entry and residence that are applied at checkpoints or within a given locality may suddenly change.⁸²⁰

Residence as a displaced person in different areas is subject to conditions, which can include sponsorship. The following information on residence in specific cities and provinces is taken from a report published by the UNHCR in November 2022, after months of research.⁸²¹ This document sets out what the conditions and restrictions for entry and residence in different areas were at the time, in addition to highlighting the changeability of these measures. According to the UNHCR, the legal framework regulating conditions for entry and residence is complex and characterised by legal pluralism. Existing practices also vary by location and implementing agency. In this regard, sponsorship and other approval requirements

⁸¹⁷ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, p. 5.

⁸¹⁸ UNHCR Iraq, *Access to civil documentation by IDPs and IDP returnees in Iraq 2022-2023*, 24 August 2022; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸¹⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸²⁰ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸²¹ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/63720e304.html>

are generally neither legally defined, nor officially announced.⁸²² The report does not mention whether different conditions apply to people who have not come directly from their area of origin, but who wish to move from abroad to an area other than their original area of residence. Aside from the cases explicitly mentioned below, the source made no mention of a limited length of residence.

In Baghdad, the conditions for residence in the city were not known to have changed from the previous reporting period. Regardless of their area of origin and ethnic or religious background, individuals from outside the province of Baghdad were required to have two sponsors from the district where they wished to reside, as well as a letter of recommendation from the *mukhtar* (local district or village head), the local district council or the mayor. Together with a security clearance, this was usually enough to formalise residence, rent housing and gain access to legal work and services (such as certain public and private hospitals).

Stricter conditions applied in some areas in Diyala province,⁸²³ where a sponsor was also required to gain access. More specifically, applicants were required to obtain three letters of recommendation: in addition to one from the *mukhtar*, two from different official security services.

In Mosul city, individuals who were not from the city but who wished to settle there, regardless of their background, were required to obtain a security clearance from the relevant security services before moving to the city. This required an application to be made in the area of origin. Iraqis wishing to settle in the city from abroad were thus unable to obtain the necessary security clearances without first returning to the original area of residence where they had been registered.

In the city of Kirkuk, individuals needed only a letter of recommendation from the local *mukhtar* of the district where they wished to reside. This subsequently had to be approved by a department of the intelligence services of the MoI in the intended community.

In the southern provinces,⁸²⁴ including the city of Basra, individuals were required to have a local sponsor and a letter of recommendation from the local *mukhtar*. In addition, they were required to obtain a security clearance at the provincial level and, possibly, from locally present militias as well.⁸²⁵

As far as is known, there were no significant changes from the previous reporting period regarding the ability of individuals coming from federal Iraq to settle in the Kurdistan region. Special residency conditions applied to Arabs and Turkmens who were not originally from the KRI. In the provinces of Erbil and Suleymaniyah, individuals were required to apply to the local Asayish office to obtain a residence card. They were not required to have a sponsor. The card was usually valid for one year. Exceptions in this regard were single Arab and Turkmen men and women. They were issued cards that were valid for only a month, after which they had to be renewed. This made it difficult for this group to find work. Single Arab and Turkmen men who did have regular work and who had a letter of recommendation from their

⁸²² UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, p. 2.

⁸²³ 'Villages in northern Muqadadiyah District and Saadiyah Sub-District in Khanaqin District, as well as villages located in the north of Al-Udhim Sub-District in Khalis District'.

⁸²⁴ Babil, Basra, Dhi Qar, Karbala, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiya and Wasit.

⁸²⁵ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, p. 12.

employers could apply for a one-year card. In practice, however, it was rare for such applications to be honoured.⁸²⁶

4.1.4 *Return of displaced persons*

During the reporting period, the number of displaced persons hardly declined, and research showed that the displaced persons remaining in formal camps — amidst current conditions in their areas of origin — had no intention of returning (at least voluntarily) in the foreseeable future. In a survey conducted in July 2022 by REACH amongst residents of formal displacement camps in the KRI, 98% indicated that they did not plan to return in the following year; between 58% (residents of camps in Erbil) and 75% (in Duhok and Suleymaniyah) indicated that they did want to return to their areas of origin in the longer term.⁸²⁷

In federal Iraq, the closure of the last formal displacement camps (AAF at the end of 2021 and Jeddah 5 at the beginning of 2023) pressured large populations of displaced persons to return to their former areas of residence. In the KRI, there was no similar direct pressure on displaced persons to return to federal Iraq. According to one source, however, the Kurdish authorities did deliberately fail to ease conditions for certain camp populations, especially those in the camps east of Mosul, in order to avoid making the reception for these displaced people more permanent in any way.⁸²⁸

The stagnation in return figures was related to the fact that many of the Iraqis still in displacement faced various obstacles that prevented or complicated their return. This was particularly applicable to displaced persons of Sunni Arab origin and those (perceived to be) affiliated with ISIS. Stigmatisation from the community in areas of origin continued to play a role (see Section 3.3.3).⁸²⁹ In addition, displaced persons (particularly men) ran the risk of being arrested at checkpoints en route to their original areas of residence.⁸³⁰

There are reportedly still many locations in former ISIS territory to which return is very difficult in practice, including areas largely destroyed or dominated by PMF militias for strategic reasons, or to which return is very difficult due to actual or perceived ISIS connections, or tribal (or other) tensions between local communities. During this reporting period as well, Jurf al-Sakhr in the province of Babil emerged as a prominent example of a place where PMF militias are blocking the return of displaced Sunni Arab residents.⁸³¹

Displaced persons who returned despite the obstacles mostly found themselves in difficult economic and, in some cases, unsafe conditions. During the reporting period, some of the return sites had inadequate access to electricity and water, in addition to deteriorating social cohesion, security problems and limited livelihood opportunities for returnees, according to the IOM.⁸³²

⁸²⁶ UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq – Ability of Iraqis to Legally Access and Settle Durably in Proposed Areas of Internal Relocation*, November 2022, pp. 14, 16.

⁸²⁷ REACH, *Movement Intentions Survey IDP Households in Formal Camps – Governorate of Displacement Duhok, Erbil, Al-Sulaymaniyah, Nineveh (July 2022)*, 23 November 2022.

⁸²⁸ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸²⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸³⁰ Confidential source, 30 March 2023.

⁸³¹ Shafaq News, *Jurf al-Sakhr situation is complicated by security concerns, not political veto: leading figure*, 13 December 2022; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸³² IOM, *Iraq DTM Return Index: Findings round eighteen (June 2023)*, 30 June 2023; Norwegian People's Aid, *Finally, a return to some normalcy for Ayada and his family following the clearance of their land*, 9 July 2023.

5 Return

As far as is known, Iraqis who voluntarily returned to Iraq did not experience any problems with the authorities at the border. Returnees generally face obstacles (such as psychosocial and financial problems and lack of housing) that make sustainable return difficult.⁸³³

Between May 2018 and September 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) registered nearly 45,000 Iraqis who had returned to Iraq from abroad. About half of them had returned from Türkiye (32%) and Syria (19%). Taken together, the two provinces of Dhi Qar (49%) and Ninewa (39%) received the vast majority of registered returnees.⁸³⁴ The total number of Iraqi returnees is difficult to determine, especially given that not all returnees have made use of assisted voluntary return programmes, thereby making return movements difficult to track.⁸³⁵ No information was available on which groups of Iraqis returned from Europe and North America during the reporting period.

Iraqis returning from abroad can travel through any of the country's six international airports. They are located in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Kirkuk, Erbil and Suleymaniyah. Returns from neighbouring countries also take place overland, through official Iraqi border crossings with Türkiye, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran. Upon arrival at an international airport or an official border crossing, the identity details of all travellers are recorded, regardless of their nationality.⁸³⁶

There are also unofficial border crossings, notably between Iraq and Iran, and between Iraq and Syria. The KRI's international borders are porous, and a significant proportion of entries and exits take place there through unofficial border crossings.⁸³⁷ The scale of unregistered returns from the region through unofficial border crossings is unknown.

5.1.1 *Obstacles to returning*

Given the small amount of recent information available regarding the obstacles that Iraqis face when returning to Iraq and reintegrating into society, no comprehensive overview is possible.⁸³⁸ During the reporting period, no cases were known in which Iraqis were denied entry to the country. In addition, according to one source, there were no reports of Iraqis being subjected to examination upon returning from abroad.⁸³⁹

Seeking asylum abroad and then returning as soon as circumstances permit is said to be widely accepted in Iraq. According to the DFAT, it is not unusual for Iraqis who have received protection from Western countries to return to Iraq to reunite with families, set up businesses or take up or resume work. The DFAT also ascertained that it is highly unlikely that asylum-seekers rejected in another country would face

⁸³³ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸³⁴ IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix. Iraqi Returnees from abroad - Dashboard*, September 2022.

⁸³⁵ IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study*, 27 August 2023, p. 6.

⁸³⁶ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40.

⁸³⁷ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 40.

⁸³⁸ IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study*, 27 August 2023, p. 6.

⁸³⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

ill treatment upon returning to Iraq solely because they had sought asylum abroad.⁸⁴⁰

According to a report by the Finnish Immigration Service from August 2021 (published just before the start of the current reporting period), for many Iraqis returning from Europe, a persistent fear of stigmatisation had a major impact on behaviour and mental health after returning, in some cases, even more than actual stigmatisation and negative treatment from their social network and the rest of the community. In many cases, returnees experienced a sense of failure and of having abandoned their families by failing in their attempts to remain in Europe.⁸⁴¹

In addition to the local security situation and general economic conditions in Iraq, returnees face several practical obstacles. Major obstacles include finding jobs or income-generating activities, and lack of housing. According to one source, many returnees no longer have assets of value in Iraq. Instead, they have large debts. In many cases, returnees have reportedly had no home to return to, having sold it before departure.⁸⁴²

According to an IOM survey on the experiences, needs and vulnerabilities of (420) Iraqi returnees from EU countries,⁸⁴³ in economic terms, financial insecurity (due to insufficient income or unemployment) was the greatest problem for most returnees. Lack of connections in the community posed a major barrier to finding work.⁸⁴⁴ Almost half of the respondents reported having poor to very poor access to housing. One in five reported having poor support networks in the area of return, and one in three reported not feeling part of the community. At the same time, the majority (68%) said that they had never or rarely been treated differently within the community because they had migrated abroad.⁸⁴⁵

In addition, return was still not occurring or was complicated in some areas that had been occupied by ISIS. With regard to obstacles related to returning to former ISIS territory, which apply to both internally displaced persons and those returning from abroad, see Section 3.3.3. of this report.

Formally, there are no restrictions that impede returning Iraqis from settling in localities other than those from which they originally came.⁸⁴⁶ In practice, for many returnees, having a social network is an important factor for sustainable reintegration in the localities where they settle.⁸⁴⁷

5.1.2 *Support upon return*

Some international and national organisations, including Frontex, the IOM, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) and the Iraqi Red Crescent, are able to provide support for preparation and reintegration to individuals

⁸⁴⁰ DFAT, *Country Information Report – Iraq*, 16 January 2023, p. 41.

⁸⁴¹ Finnish Immigration Service, *Sustainable Reintegration in Iraq*, August 2021, pp. 6–8.

⁸⁴² Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸⁴³ This longitudinal study followed 323 Iraqi men and 107 Iraqi women who had returned to Iraq — primarily in connection with a rejected asylum application — after living in Germany, Greece or Finland. They were interviewed several times in 2020 and 2021.

⁸⁴⁴ IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study*, 27 August 2023, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁴⁵ IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study*, 27 August 2023, p. 10.

⁸⁴⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq*, October 2021, p. 91.

⁸⁴⁷ Finnish Immigration Service, *Sustainable Reintegration in Iraq*, August 2021, p. 8.

returning to Iraq.⁸⁴⁸ Various forms of service delivery (for instance, economic and social reintegration assistance, housing support (subsidies) and psychosocial support) from a variety of organisations have been placed under the National Referral Mechanism led by the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD). According to some sources, the Mechanism had a strong focus on psychosocial support, as there were many vulnerable cases amongst returnees.⁸⁴⁹

After returnees have reported to the Mechanism at a MoMD office in Baghdad or Erbil, their needs are assessed and they are assisted with individual counselling, referral to service organisations and follow-up on the reintegration process.⁸⁵⁰ According to one source, however, the case managers responsible for this had not received any special training. In addition, the source stated that support from the government and from national or international organisations was not always well aligned.⁸⁵¹

⁸⁴⁸ Frontex, *Reintegration assistance*, <https://frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/reintegration-assistance/> undated, consulted on 9 September 2023; GIZ, *Making a successful fresh start possible in countries of origin*, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/62318.html> undated, consulted on 20 May 2023; IOM Iraq, *Migration Management Unit*, <https://iraq.iom.int/migration-management-unit> undated, consulted on 20 May 2023; Iraqi Red Crescent Society, *The Iraqi Red Crescent hosts a workshop on voluntary return and reintegration for immigrants in order to assist their integration back into society*, 25 April 2023.

⁸⁴⁹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023; IOM, *Fast cars and slow recovery: Referrals for Iraqi returnees help restart and rebuild lives*, 29 May 2023.

⁸⁵⁰ IOM Iraq (via YouTube), *National Referral Mechanism for Returnee Reintegration in Baghdad*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxL6TKp5iDw>; IOM Iraq (via YouTube), *National Referral Mechanism Erbil*, 26 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuiB10VRf9w>; confidential source, 27 March 2023.

⁸⁵¹ Confidential source, 27 March 2023.

6 Appendices

6.1 Abbreviations used

IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KDP	Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê – Party of Free Life of Kurdistan
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers’ Party)
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
PUK	Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq
YBS	Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê – Sinjar Resistance Units
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People’s Protection Units

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6.3 Map of Iraq

