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Amid continuing political instability and sporadic clashes between armed actors, dozens of people were killed and thousands more joined the 1.2 million people already internally displaced. Kurdistan Regional Government security forces repressed freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Impunity continued to prevail for past unlawful killings as well as for torture and other ill-treatment. Reports of gender-based violence increased while state-provided paths to protection remained minimal in both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and central Iraq. Proposed legislation further threatened LGBTI people's rights. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people continued to face obstacles in accessing vital services and dignified, safe return to their areas of origin. Courts continued to hand down death sentences following unfair trials. The authorities failed to provide adequate support to marginalized communities most affected by droughts, heatwaves and prolonged sandstorms.

Background

A new government was formed in October more than a year after parliamentary elections. The delay was caused by disputes between political parties allied to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which are affiliated to Iraq's central authorities and were designated as part of the Iraqi armed forces in 2016, and the "Sadr Bloc" of parliamentarians supporting popular cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, which won the majority of seats. The political impasse occasionally spilled over into armed clashes between rivals. After Muqtada Al-Sadr called on "Sadr Bloc" parliamentarians to resign in August, his supporters and members of the affiliated Saraya al-Salam militia stormed parliament in the Green Zone and clashed with PMU fighters using rockets, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, leading to tens of deaths and hundreds of injuries. Clashes between Muqtada Al-Sadr's followers and PMU factions perceived as aligned with Iran spread to Basra city between late August and early September and led to at least four deaths.

Türkiye continued to carry out air strikes and shelling as part of its ongoing military operation targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) based in northern areas of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I). The Iranian Revolutionary Guards claimed responsibility for attacks targeting locations of Kurdish Iranian opposition parties in Erbil governorate. Such attacks led to deaths and displacement.

Sporadic attacks by the armed group Islamic State, which targeted security forces' barracks and checkpoints, continued in Anbar, Kirkuk and other governorates previously controlled by Islamic State. Media reported Islamic State abductions of at least 10 residents of Kirkuk and Diyala governorates, who were freed after their families paid ransoms.

Freedom of expression and assembly

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) security forces continued to repress the right to freedom of expression and assembly.

KRG security forces arbitrarily arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned journalists, activists and perceived critics. Two journalists and three political activists, detained since August 2020 and convicted in February 2021 on national security-related charges, went on three hunger strikes during 2022 in protest at their continued detention, despite a decree issued in February by the KRG president Nechirvan Barzani to reduce their sentence from five to two years.

On 6 August, KRG security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse peaceful protests in the cities of Erbil and Sulaimaniya in the KR-I against delayed payment of government wages and lack of employment opportunities, resulting in several injuries. Asayish forces, the KRG's primary security and intelligence agency, briefly detained at least 20 journalists in connection with protest coverage. The New Generation Party, an opposition party that called for protests, reported that Asayish forces arrested dozens of its members at their homes or during the protests in Erbil and Sulaimaniya. After several days in detention, they were released on bail without being informed of any charges.

In September, Asayish forces arrested a journalist working for a media outlet aligned with the opposition during his coverage of a Turkish drone attack targeting PKK fighters in Erbil governorate. He was released the next day without charge after signing a pledge to no longer cover similar incidents. In October, Asayish forces arrested two journalists near Erbil under the vaguely worded 2008 Law to Combat the Misuse of Electronic Devices, used in the past to prosecute individuals for posting content deemed critical of officials. They were released by the end of the month.

The prevailing climate of impunity for armed actors targeting protesters, activists and journalists undermined the right to freedom of expression in central Iraq. In October, armed supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr stormed and destroyed al-Rabaa TV channel offices in the capital Baghdad after a media host reported the destruction of state buildings by Muqtada Al-Sadr's followers and criticized his former militia known as the Mahdi Army. Iraqi authorities condemned the attack and announced an investigation, but no further measures to protect media workers or hold perpetrators accountable were announced.

On 5 December, a court in Baghdad sentenced activist Hayder Hamid al-Zaidi to three years in prison under article 226 of the Penal Code for a tweet deemed to mock a deceased PMU leader. Hayder Hamid al-Zaidi had been arrested in June and released two weeks later on bail. On 7 December, security forces opened fire on protests in the southern city of Nasiriyah to denounce the sentence, killing at least two and injuring at least 17.

Impunity

Impunity prevailed for hundreds of unlawful killings during the October 2019 protests with little progress in investigating suspected perpetrators. The Iraqi authorities failed to announce the results of investigations by committees established in the aftermath of protests to investigate protest violence as well as the targeted killings and attempted killings of tens of activists between 2019 and 2021. Armed actors continued to threaten to kill or disappear activists as well as relatives of dead or disappeared protesters and activists, prompting them to go into hiding or flee abroad.

In February, an investigative court in Nasiriyah city, Thi Qar governorate, launched an investigation into the role of a senior military officer in the crackdown against October 2019 protesters in the governorate; no further information was made available.

Also in February, Ali Al-Bayati, a former member of the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights – a national institution – was questioned in a Baghdad investigative court on charges of defamation because he raised torture concerns in a media interview in 2020 and officials lodged a complaint against him.

In September, Iraqi authorities announced an investigation into the fatal shooting of Zainab Essam Majed al-Khazali, a 15-year-old girl, during live-fire drills at a US military base near Baghdad International Airport. US authorities stationed in Iraq did not acknowledge the incident. No further developments were made public.

In October, a court in Diwaniya, al-Qadisiya governorate sentenced Kifah al-Kuraiti, a former member of Muqtada Al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam, to death for the murder of prominent activist Thaeir

Torture and other ill-treatment

In its concluding observations published on 15 June, the UN Committee Against Torture expressed concerns about the widespread use of torture, especially during investigative stages, in official and unofficial places of detention throughout Iraq, and the lack of impartiality of judicial authorities mandated to investigate torture complaints.

Conditions of detention for prisoners on death row in Nasiriyah prison, Thi Qar governorate, violated the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment. Sources reported that prisoners were subjected to frequent beatings; kept in overcrowded and filthy cells; and denied adequate healthcare, sufficient food and drinking water unless they paid for it, and regular family visits.

Unfair trials

Proceedings against hundreds of suspected Islamic State members and supporters, among them boys, continued in Iraq, including in the KR-I, amid serious concerns over their fair trial rights, including the right to adequate defence. Long prison terms and death sentences were imposed following convictions based primarily on torture-tainted “confessions”.

Over 200 Iraqi boys were detained in Baghdad after their transfer from northern Syria. They remained held without charge or trial on suspicion of belonging to Islamic State.

Violence against women and girls

The Iraqi parliament continued to fail to criminalize domestic violence despite an increase in “honour killings” and other forms of gender-based violence documented by national NGOs.

Effective state-provided paths to protection from gender-based violence remained severely limited in the KR-I and central Iraq. A limited number of shelters overseen by the KRG’s Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs operated in KR-I cities, but national NGOs noted the inadequacy of rehabilitation services for survivors. Only one shelter, able to accommodate some 100 survivors, operated in central Iraq with the backing of the UN Population Fund. NGOs in Baghdad continued to be harassed for running unofficial women’s shelters, including by being summoned for questioning following complaints by parliamentarians from conservative parties.

The KR-I witnessed an increase in reports of women and girls killed by male relatives, including for converting to a different religion and for identifying as transgender women. A coalition of women’s organizations documented the killings of at least 16 women and one girl, aged 15, by male relatives between January and March alone; the actual number is believed to be much higher. Authorities failed to carry out independent and impartial investigations into most of these killings amid a social climate of victim-blaming, including on social media, and apathy of legislators.

In September, Iraq’s Ministry of Interior announced that the “community police” – a force established in 2016 under the Ministry of Interior with a broad mandate to support local police in a range of tasks – received over 1,100 calls from survivors of domestic violence. According to women’s rights NGOs, this force merely operated as a “hotline” and took no effective action to protect survivors or investigate reports of domestic violence.

LGBTI people’s rights

In July, a number of parliamentarians in central Iraq announced an initiative for a draft bill to criminalize homosexuality. In September, a bill was introduced in the KR-I parliament to criminalize overt support for LGBTI rights.

Internally displaced people's rights

At least 1.2 million people remained internally displaced, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). After the central Iraqi authorities' closure of camps in 2021, some 75% of internally displaced people were left to fend for themselves. Around 15% were housed in 14 camps that remained open in the KR-I and parts of Ninewa governorate controlled by the KRG. The remaining 10% were able to return to their areas of origin.

Thousands of internally displaced people faced obstacles to their dignified and safe return to their areas of origin in Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa and Salah Al-Din governorates due to risks of arbitrary arrest and other harassment by armed actors and security forces, as well as lack of livelihood opportunities and access to services. Previously displaced children across Anbar, Diyala, Dohuk, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah Al-Din governorates faced major obstacles to accessing formal education due to the lack of identity documents for children born in territories under Islamic State control. Since 2016, Iraqi civil and security apparatuses have subjected thousands to collective punishment for their perceived affiliation to Islamic State, denying them civil status documents necessary to access essential services and move about freely.

Hundreds of families returned to Iraq from Syria after they fled there in the context of the conflict involving Islamic State. Most remained in limbo in poorly equipped "reception centres" in Ninewa governorate. The government failed to devise any plans for their safe and dignified return to their areas of origin and reintegration.

In May, clashes between Iraqi forces and a Yezidi faction of the PMU displaced at least 3,000 individuals from Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate, to private settings in Duhok governorate and camps in the KR-I.

Failure to tackle climate crisis and environmental degradation

The effect of climate change, including droughts, heatwaves and sandstorms, impacted the lives of millions of people across Iraq. The IOM reported that by September over 10,000 families remained displaced because of drought, land degradation and increased salinity in rivers across 10 governorates.

Iraq's healthcare infrastructure, already on the brink of collapse due to the Covid-19 pandemic and years of neglect and corruption, failed to meet the needs of people impacted by heavy and protracted sandstorms.

Day labourers were disproportionately affected by the closure of public institutions during particularly heavy sandstorms between April and June due to their loss of livelihoods in the absence of any social security system.

Right to water

In October, Iraq's Water Sources Ministry said that 2022 was the driest year since 1930. Water shortages resulting from drought, failure of desalination plants blamed on corruption, and the drying out of river beds and marshlands had devastating human rights impacts, particularly on the rights to health, work, water and sanitation of millions of Iraqis. Iraqi authorities failed to provide adequate support to those most affected and to marginalized rural communities, including inhabitants of marshlands whose threatened livelihoods led thousands to relocate to urban areas.

NDC

Iraq committed to voluntarily cut 1-2% of overall emissions by 2030 from their 2021 level, when it became a party to the Paris Agreement, and indicated its aim to raise its commitment to 15% conditional on international financial and technical support.

Death penalty

Courts in Iraq imposed death sentences for murder, rape of children and “terrorism”-related acts, frequently following trials that failed to meet international fair trial standards. There was a notable decrease in the number of executions, but thousands remained on death row.