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Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 1 - Iraq

Overview: Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) remained in nominal control of territory liberated from ISIS. ISIS continued to present a serious threat to Iraqi stability, undertaking targeted assassinations of police and local political leaders and using IEDs and shooting attacks directed at both government and government-associated civilian targets, in support of a violent campaign to reestablish a caliphate. ISIS sought to reestablish support among populations in Ninewa, Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah ad Din, and Anbar provinces, especially in the areas of disputed control between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government, where the division of responsibility for local security is unclear. Although ISIS maintained the capability to conduct deadly terrorist attacks in Iraq, these attacks resulted in fewer casualties in 2019 than in previous years. Attacks by Iran-backed Shia militia groups on Iraqi bases hosting U.S. and Defeat-ISIS Coalition forces increased in 2019, killing and wounding American and Iraqi servicemembers. The Iran-backed, U.S.-designated KH continued to operate in Iraq and in some cases sought to enter local politics by backing provincial candidates. The Government of Iraq issued Executive Order 237 which required all Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), including those backed by Iran, to operate as an indivisible part of the armed forces and be subject to the same regulations; however, many of these groups continued to defy central government command and control and engaged in violent and destabilizing activities in Iraq and neighboring Syria, including attacks on and abductions of civilian protesters. The Kurdistan Workers Party (commonly known as the PKK), a terrorist group headquartered in the mountains of northern Iraq, continued to conduct attacks in Turkey.

Iraq is a pivotal member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and a participant in all Coalition Working Groups (Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Counter-ISIS Finance Group, Stabilization, and Communications).

2019 Terrorist Incidents: According to the Federal Intelligence and Investigation Agency within Iraq’s Ministry of Interior, acts of terrorism, violence, and armed conflict with ISIS killed more than 534 civilians and injured more than 1,121 in 2019 as of December 1. This was a decrease from 2018, when roughly 900 civilians died and 1,600 were injured. ISIS continued to carry out suicide and hit-and-run attacks throughout the country with 844 attacks during the year. The most significant of these was a bus bombing in September that killed 12 Iraqis near the major pilgrimage site of Karbala. In addition, Iran-backed Shia militia groups are believed to be responsible for more than a dozen rocket or indirect fire attacks targeting U.S. or Coalition targets in Iraq in 2019, including the December 27 attack in which KH launched more than 30 rockets at an Iraqi base hosting U.S. forces in Kirkuk, killing one American contractor and wounding several American and Iraqi service members. Other prominent terrorist attacks included:

- On January 11, a VBIED detonated in a market in al-Qa’im, on the Syrian border in western Anbar, killing two civilians and injuring 25 others.
- ISIS targeted truffle hunters mostly in Anbar province, kidnapping more than 44. On June 1, nine bodies were found west of the town of Rutba, some 300 kilometers west of Anbar’s provincial capital Ramadi.
- On November 8, a car bomb exploded near a restaurant in Mosul, Ninewa governorate, killing 13 people and wounding 23 others.

- On November 16, an IED exploded in Baghdad's Tahrir Square where anti-government protesters gathered. There were no reported casualties.
- On November 29, ISIS attacked Kurdish security force (Kulajo Asayish) headquarters in Kifri district, Diyala governorate, killing three Asayish members, including the unit's director.
- On December 4, an ISIS tactical element comprising 10 to 15 members conducted an attack against the Ministry of Peshmerga's 3rd Regional Guard Brigade, killing three and wounding two others.
- On December 31, Iran-backed Shia militia groups, including KH, participated in an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, which resulted in significant damage to embassy property. There were no embassy casualties and security personnel used less-than-lethal countermeasures to repulse intruders.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Iraq made no significant changes to its counterterrorism legal and law enforcement framework in 2019.

Border security remained a critical capability gap, as the ISF has limited capability to fully secure Iraq's borders with Syria and Iran. While border security along the periphery of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) is robust and administered by various security units under the Kurdish Minister of Interior, the border with Syria south of the IKR remained porous and vulnerable to ISIS and other terrorist networks, as well as to smuggling and other criminal enterprises. Iran-backed PMF units continued to maintain a presence at Iraq's major border crossings. The Iraqi government re-opened the Iraq-Syria border crossing in al-Qa'im under Border Police control, though various PMF units positioned themselves to the north and south of the main checkpoint.

Iraq and the United States partnered to close a gap in border security through broader deployment of and upgrades to the U.S.-provided PISCES. The Ministry of Interior shared biometric information upon request on known and suspected terrorists and shared exemplars of its identity documents with the United States, INTERPOL, and other international partners, though there remained no agreement or arrangement in place that would support the implementation of an intended U.S. program to facilitate biometric information-sharing on both terrorist and criminal suspects. In the Disputed Internal Boundaries, ISIS continues to exploit the security vacuum between Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga Forces. Recent attacks in the northern Diyala and activities along Qarachogh Mountain indicate ISIS presence. Counterterrorism efforts in the Disputed Internal Boundaries areas have been hampered by the lack of coordination between Peshmerga and ISF, mainly due to the relationship between the KRG and the Government of Iraq. Additionally, Iraq has taken preliminary steps to partner with UNITAD in the collection of digital, documentary, testimonial, and forensic evidence to support the prosecution of ISIS members for their atrocity crimes committed in Iraq.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Iraq is a member of MENAFATF. Iraq is also a member of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition's CIFG. In 2019, the IKR began setting up its own AML/CFT Committee that will coordinate across relevant KRG ministries and work with the IKR's Terrorism Finance Unit.

The Government of Iraq – including the Central Bank of Iraq, law enforcement, security forces, and the judiciary – continued to dismantle ISIS's financial networks and safeguard Iraq's financial institutions from exploitation by ISIS. Efforts include:

- Iraq cooperates closely with the U.S. government on multiple U.S. designations under U.S. CT authorities.
- Iraqi and Kurdish agencies coordinating actions with the U.S. Departments of Defense and the Treasury against Afaq Dubai to disrupt and curtail ISIS's logistical infrastructure and its ability to generate, store, and use funds for recruiting and paying its fighters and for its operations.
- Iraq shared a list of banned exchange houses and money transfer companies with regional regulators and tasking judicial action against more than a dozen individuals and companies suspected of illicit financial activity. These actions ranged from business closures to arrests of suspects.

Countering Violent Extremism: Iraq remained active in its strategic messaging to discredit ISIS, including through its membership in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Communications Working Group, and engaged with U.S. military and civilian counterparts to develop a wide range of capabilities to build national cohesion and combat terrorist ideology. The Government of Iraq and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS also implemented stabilization, reconciliation, and accountability programs to strengthen locals’ ability to counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.

Many Iraqi ISIS fighters remained in Iraqi custody, along with ISIS-affiliated foreign women and children. Iraq acknowledged that the return and reintegration of family members of suspected ISIS supporters, as well as the provision of fair and equal justice, are important to prevent future terrorist radicalization and violence. However, more than 1.4 million Iraqis remain displaced within Iraq, and more than 30,000 – mainly women and children – reside in the al-Hawl IDP camp in Syria. Iraq publicly stated it has no intention of housing Iraqi ISIS fighters with the general prison populations in Iraqi prisons. The lack of separate, secure detention facilities within Iraq delayed Iraqi efforts to repatriate additional Iraqi fighters detained abroad.

International and Regional Cooperation: Iraq continued to work with multilateral and regional organizations – including the UN, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, NATO, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, INTERPOL, and the Arab League – to support CT efforts.

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