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Country Report on Terrorism 2021 - Chapter 1 - Iraq

Overview: Iraq's primary terrorist threats included ISIS remnants and various Iran-aligned militia groups (IAMGs), including U.S.-designated Kata'ib Hizballah, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, as well as smaller militias claiming to be a part of Iraq's "Islamic Resistance." The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group primarily located in the mountains of northern Iraq and in southeastern Türkiye, conducted multiple attacks in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) resulting in the deaths of several Kurdish security forces (Peshmerga) personnel.

ISIS, though severely diminished in capacity, continued to conduct operations, particularly in northern and western rural areas with limited Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) presence. ISIS sought to reestablish footholds in Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din provinces, especially in the gaps between those areas frequently patrolled by the Peshmerga and ISF. Although ISIS conducted deadly terrorist attacks in Iraq, those attacks resulted in fewer casualties nationwide in 2021 than in previous years. Methods included bombings, indirect fire, IEDs, sniper fire, and ambushes. Iraq remained a pivotal member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and a participant in all Coalition Working Groups (Foreign Terrorist Fighter, Counter-ISIS Finance Group, Stabilization, and Communications). Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) conducted about 170 counterterrorist operations against ISIS during 2021, often with Defeat-ISIS Coalition support.

Iraqi counterterrorism functions were principally executed by the CTS, a cabinet-level entity reporting directly to the prime minister, as well as by various security forces under the Ministries of Defense and Interior, and the Peshmerga. In limited instances, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) augmented Iraqi Army and CTS-led operations. All PMF were required by law to operate under the command and control of the prime minister. However, Iran-aligned militia groups, including many within the PMF, defied central government command and control and engaged in violent and destabilizing activities in Iraq and in neighboring Syria, including killing and abducting people protesting militia corruption. The number of attacks by IAMGs against U.S. interests resulting in the killing and wounding of Iraqi service members and locals remained about the same in 2021 as in 2020. Media reported Turkish airstrikes against the PKK in northern Iraq resulted in civilian casualties, including children.

2021 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorists conducted more than 100 IED attacks on Defeat-ISIS-contracted convoys and launched at least 40 indirect fire attacks against U.S. interests in Iraq. Major terrorist incidents included the following:

- On January 21, two suicide bombers attacked an open-air market in central Baghdad, killing 32 and injuring 110. ISIS claimed responsibility, saying it had targeted Shiites.
- Iran-aligned militias launched several drone and rocket attacks against Erbil Airbase; one such rocket attack on February 15 led to the death of a U.S. contractor.
- On April 18, Balad Air Base was struck by four 107mm rockets. On July 5, Ayn al-Asad Air Base was targeted with seven 122mm rockets. On July 7, Ayn al-Asad was targeted with 14 122mm rockets, impacting on-compound from a suspected multiple rocket launcher. On July 19 an ISIS suicide bomber killed at least 35 and wounded dozens more in a crowded market in the Sadr City district of Baghdad.
- On October 26, ISIS attacked Al-Hawasha village in the Muqadadiya district of Diyala province, killing 13 civilians and wounding seven others.
- On November 7, an IAMG drone attack targeted the Iraqi prime minister's residence.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: The Iraqi government improved the security of the International Zone before the October national election. Iraq did not significantly change its counterterrorism legal and law enforcement framework. Human rights groups reported

that authorities arrested suspects in security sweeps without warrants, particularly under the antiterrorism law, and frequently held such detainees for prolonged periods without charge. The groups also allege courts routinely accepted forced confessions as evidence, and in some ISIS-related cases this was the only evidence.

Border security and corruption remained a critical vulnerability, as the Border Guard Security Force (BGSF) had limited capability to fully secure Iraq's borders with Syria and Iran. Border security was administered by the BGSF, with ISF or Peshmerga deployed behind them. The border with Syria near Türkiye remained especially porous, and border areas with Iran were generally controlled by IAMGs. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the Export Control and Related Border Security began a two-year train-the-trainer program for several hundred Iraqi border guards.

While the Ministry of Interior shared biometric information upon request on suspected terrorists with the United States, INTERPOL, and other partners, a biometric information-sharing program was not finalized by the government.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Iraq was a member of MENAFATF, as well as the Counter-ISIS Finance Group. The Government of Iraq — including the Central Bank, law enforcement, security forces, and judiciary in Baghdad and the IKR — continued to target ISIS financial networks and safeguard Iraq's financial institutions.

Iraq worked to strengthen its AML/CFT regime. Iraq's FIU was not a member of the Egmont Group, which limited Iraq's ability to exchange information with other FIUs on illicit finance issues; but Iraq worked toward membership. To compensate, the FIU signed six MOUs with peer FIUs, including one signed with Türkiye in November.

In November, Iraq advised the public about the risks of virtual assets, although the government had not implemented any regulations governing cryptocurrency use.

Countering Violent Extremism: Iraq continued strategic messaging to discredit ISIS, in part by providing significant content to the Coalition Communications Cell. Many Iraqi ISIS fighters remained in Iraqi custody, while many Iraqi civilians, including some family members of ISIS members, remained in displaced persons camps. Iraq acknowledged that the return and social reintegration of family members of suspected ISIS supporters, as well as the provision of fair and equal justice, is important to prevent future terrorism and violent radicalization. However, almost 1.2 million Iraqis remained displaced within Iraq and an estimated 30,000 Iraqis — almost entirely women and children — resided in Al-Hol refugee camp in Syria. The Government of Iraq repatriated 300 suspected ISIS fighters from northeastern Syria detention facilities as well as 1,779 Iraqi nationals, mostly women and children from Al-Hol. IAMGs routinely used threatening messaging to promote violent extremism and protect their power throughout Iraq.

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 League of Arab States — to support counterterrorism efforts.