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The State of the World's Human Rights; Iraq 2024

Impunity prevailed for violations committed in the context of military operations against the armed group Islamic State. The fate of thousands forcibly disappeared since 2014 remained undisclosed. Justice and adequate reparations were slow for enforced disappearances and unlawful killings committed by security forces and militias during and in the aftermath of the October 2019 protests. Authorities arrested and prosecuted people over “indecent content” and stifled civil society. Journalists were harassed, prosecuted and arrested for their media work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Protests in central and southern Iraq were met with excessive and unnecessary force. A draft bill to amend the Personal Status Law threatened to further undermine women’s rights and allow child marriage for girls as young as nine. Violence against women and girls often went unpunished, including in the Kurdistan Region. Internally displaced people struggled to access housing, water and medical care and remained at risk of arbitrary detention. The death penalty was imposed, often after unfair trials, and mass executions were carried out. Rampant overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in prisons continued. Iraqi authorities failed to address the country’s worsening environmental crisis.

Background

Throughout the year, Türkiye carried out air and drone strikes on what it said were positions held by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) and carried out drone attacks to assassinate individuals it claimed were PKK members.

In January, missiles which Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) claimed were targeting Israeli operations struck homes in Erbil in the KR-I, killing at least four civilians including one infant girl, and injuring at least six others, according to the Kurdistan Region Security Council. Throughout the year, other attacks were launched by the IRGC targeting anti-Iran Kurdish opposition groups inside the KR-I.

In March and May, Iraq and the KR-I experienced significant flooding across several governorates, primarily due to heavy rainfall, displacing hundreds of people. At least eight deaths and 11 injuries were reported across the KR-I.

On 20 October, parliamentary elections initially scheduled for 2022 were held in the KR-I.

Throughout the year the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of armed factions under the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), intensified its operations against Israel in a response to Israeli military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, firing missiles they said were targeted at military objectives in Israel and the occupied Golan Heights.

In August an unclaimed rocket attack on a US base in western Iraq injured at least five US personnel and two contractors. A similar attack was launched in October on another US base in the capital, Baghdad, with no casualties reported.

Throughout the year the armed group Islamic State carried out attacks targeting and killing members of the Iraqi Security Forces as well as civilians, primarily in the governorates of Anbar, Diyala and Salah Al-Din.

Impunity

Authorities failed to take steps to reveal the fate of thousands of men and boys forcibly disappeared during and after military operations to retake control of territory from Islamic State, or to hold perpetrators accountable for these and other crimes committed during operations against Islamic State.

Five years after the lethal crackdown on the October 2019 ("Tishreen") protests, the authorities failed to deliver meaningful justice commensurate with the scale of serious human rights violations committed in the context of the protests, including crimes under international law. These included enforced disappearances and the excessive and unlawful use of lethal force by anti-riot police, counterterrorism forces and members of the PMU.[1]

Of the 2,700 criminal investigations opened into the crackdown, by August only 10 arrest warrants had been issued against suspected perpetrators, and only seven convictions handed down, according to Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council. Six high-profile cases examined by Amnesty International revealed serious flaws in the judicial system, political interference in the work of the judiciary, a lack of will to hold powerful members of the security forces and affiliated militias accountable, and a complete lack of transparency surrounding judicial proceedings.

People injured or disabled during the protests continued to face significant hurdles in accessing financial compensation and other forms of reparation.

Freedom of expression

The authorities continued to crack down on freedom of expression, particularly speech that criticized the authorities, in the name of stability and "public morality".

The authorities continued to conduct arrests for what they called "indecent content", without defining the term and prosecuted individuals on the basis of an overly broad and vague Penal Code provision that criminalized publishing material that "violates public integrity or decency".

Criminal defamation provisions were also used to deter criticism of powerful political and religious figures. Women's rights workers and other NGO workers faced judicial harassment for their work, while some were instructed in a meeting with government officials not to contribute to the work of UN reporting mechanisms.

In the KR-I, security forces and individuals affiliated with powerful political parties continued to intimidate, harass and threaten journalists and activists for their work. Several journalists were arrested or summoned by security forces and at least one journalist in the KR-I was prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to a prison term for their media work.[2]

In February, Iraq's parliament held a first reading of a draft Right to Information Law which would impose excessive restrictions undermining access to information.

The Department of Non-Governmental Organizations (DNGO) – a government body – continuously interfered with local NGOs' programming and activities, as well as the naming of new NGOs. The DNGO imposed background checks on directors and dictated their participation in UN review mechanisms.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Security forces frequently used water cannon, tear gas and live ammunition to disperse largely peaceful protests or sit-ins in central and southern Iraq, which were driven by widespread frustration over lack of accountability, government corruption, economic hardship and poor public services.

In August and September, security forces in Baghdad dispersed peaceful demonstrators, primarily medical graduates, using water cannon, and in some instances violently dragged demonstrators away from government buildings.

In October, police used live bullets and tear gas to disperse largely peaceful protests in Nasiriyah, Thi Qar governorate, resulting in protesters blocking roads and throwing stones. The protests were prompted by arrests of local activists and the broader crackdown on dissent. Demonstrators gathered in Al-Haboubi Square to demand the release of detained activists and the resignation of the city's police chief. Authorities in Nasiriyah continued to conduct sporadic arrests and detention of activists in November, releasing them on bail after several days.

Women's and girls' rights

In August, parliamentarians introduced a draft bill to amend the Personal Status Law. The amendments, if adopted, would grant Sunni and Shia religious councils in Iraq the authority to develop a "code of Sharia rulings on personal status matters", effectively threatening women's and girls' rights and their equality before the law. It would also potentially allow girls as young as nine to be married, legalize unregistered marriages, and remove penalties for men who enter into child marriages and clerics who conduct them. It would also remove divorced women's rights to remain in the marital home or receive financial support. Demonstrations to oppose the draft bill led by Coalition 188, a network of NGOs and activists, took place in Baghdad, Basra, Thi Qar, Babil, Kirkuk, Diwaniyah and Najaf.

On 2 December an amended version of the draft bill was made public. It included several improvements from the earlier draft, including retaining the current legal age of consent of 18 years, or 15 with a judge's permission, for marriage and directing the personal status courts to only register marriages that fall within the legal requirements; however, it retained provisions to develop sectarian codes. The vote on the bill was postponed to 2025.

Gender-based violence

Under Iraqi law, "honour" remained a mitigating factor in cases of murder and other serious crimes perpetrated against women, while corporal punishment of wives by their husbands and children by their parents remained permissible. In central Iraq, no steps were taken to criminalize marital rape or other forms of domestic violence nor to establish shelters for survivors or for women and girls at risk of gender-based violence.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

In the KR-I, despite some positive steps, authorities failed to ensure that perpetrators of domestic violence, including in cases of murder, rape, beatings and burning, were held to account. They also imposed arbitrary restrictions on the freedoms of survivors who sought protection in the underfunded and deprioritized shelter system.[3]

Laws criminalizing violent acts against women and girls in the KR-I remained wholly inadequate or were not implemented. In courts, slow processes, lack of judicial capacity and judges' discretionary powers led at best to punishments that were incommensurate with the gravity of the crimes.

The Kurdistan Regional Government failed to properly fund and support state-run reporting mechanisms established and recognized by the Domestic Violence Law of the KR-I, thus undermining their ability to effectively deliver protection services, including reporting, legal advice, family advice centres, counselling and psycho-social care, as well as safe spaces that enable survivors to make informed decisions about their safety and well-being.

LGBTI people's rights

In April, Iraq's parliament passed a law criminalizing same-sex sexual relations between consenting adults, punishable with prison sentences of between 10 and 15 years. The law also penalized "promoting" same-sex relations, transgender expression or acting "effeminate". The law was a further blow to LGBTI people, who have also faced persecution from militias operating with impunity.[4]

Internally displaced people's rights

Approximately 1.1 million Iraqis remained internally displaced and struggling to access their rights to housing, water and medical care. Among these, about 134,369 individuals were still living in formal camps, primarily in the KR-I. In January, Iraqi authorities set a deadline of 30 July for the KR-I to close the remaining camps for internally displaced people and to stop providing aid. However, the camps remained open at the end of the year.

Internally displaced people continued to face serious obstacles to obtaining civil status documentation, hindering their access to public services including health and education.

Iraqi security forces subjected internally displaced people in Al-Jed'ah Centre for Rehabilitation – the last operating camp outside the KR-I – to arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances. Security forces subjected those that were detained to beatings, electric shocks and waterboarding, and concealed their whereabouts from their families for periods lasting from days to months. Security forces frequently arrested individuals based on family connections or personal disputes, and detainees were denied fair trials, with many coerced into making "confessions" under duress.[5]

Death penalty

Iraq continued to sentence people to death and carry out executions of people convicted of terrorism, murder and drug offences. Courts frequently issued death sentences, particularly for those accused of "terrorism", following trials that did not meet fair trial standards.

The authorities carried out several mass executions, which were shrouded in secrecy.

Prison authorities failed to notify lawyers and relatives prior to carrying out executions and verbally demeaned families who came to collect their loved ones' bodies. On at least one occasion, militias prevented a family from holding a funeral, due to the executed person's perceived affiliation with Islamic State.

Inhumane detention conditions

Conditions in prisons remained dire, and prisoners were denied adequate healthcare. Prisoners were detained in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions amid reports of dirty drinking water and food infested with worms. No effective investigations were carried out into deaths in custody.

Right to a healthy environment

Iraqi authorities failed to address a worsening environmental crisis marked by severe water shortages, air and water pollution, and the destructive effects of climate change.

Poor governance and inadequate policies enabled mismanagement of water resources, exacerbated by unresolved disputes with neighbouring countries over water rights. Urban and industrial pollution, largely unchecked due to weak regulations – combined with environmental degradation from years of conflict – further endangered public health. Ineffective waste management and deforestation intensified dust storms and waterborne diseases, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, particularly displaced people.