

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

3 March 2016

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Iraq: Security situation in Sulaymaniyah; activities of muslim fundamentalist groups, including ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) [also known as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Daesh] (2015-February 2016)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sulaymaniyah governorate is located in the northeast of Iraq, on the border with Iran; its population in May 2015 was 1,893,617 persons (IOM 1 July 2015). Together with Erbil and Dohuk governorates, it composes the Kurdistan region of Iraq (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research fellow at the French Institute of the Near East (Institut français du Proche-Orient, Ifpo) in Erbil [1], who has published several articles on the history of the Kurdish people, stated that the city of Sulaymaniyah is approximately 80 km away from the front with ISIS and 200 km away from Mosul [a city controlled by ISIS (US 4 Dec. 2015)] (research fellow 24 Feb. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a freelance journalist based in Erbil who has worked for several media organizations, including Al Jazeera, and who has authored articles on the situation of Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, stated that the frontlines with ISIS are approximately "within ... a one hour drive" from Sulaymaniyah (22 Feb. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

On its webpage updated in February 2016, Global Affairs Canada advises "against non-essential travel" to Sulaymaniyah (Canada 16 Feb. 2016). The governments of Canada and the UK warn that the security situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq could "deteriorate quickly" (ibid.; UK 21 Dec. 2015). The UK government further explains security conditions on its Iraq travel advice webpage, stating that "[w]hile the Kurdistan [r]egion has a different security environment to the rest of Iraq, Daesh controls territory nearby" (ibid.).

When asked to comment on the security situation in the Sulaymaniyah governorate, sources described it as "relatively safe" (scholar 23 Feb. 2016) or [translation] "satisfactory" (research fellow 24 Feb. 2016). The freelance journalist stated that the proximity of the frontlines with ISIS "does not affect the city of ... Sulaymaniyah" (22 Feb. 2016). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an independent journalist and scholar at Harvard University with experience reporting on the war against ISIS in Iraq's Kurdistan region, indicated that "the current security situation in the Sulaymaniyah governorate is relatively stable" (independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016). According to the same source, the frontline "has not changed much over the past year" (ibid.).

Sources stated that, to their knowledge, apart from ISIS, no other Muslim fundamentalist groups are active in the Sulaymaniyah governorate (ibid.; ISHR 2 Mar. 2016).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center [2], who is also a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge and whose research focuses on Iraq, Iran and Kurdish affairs, reported that there is

increased radicalization in the Kurdistan region (i.e., Kurds who are associating themselves with the idea of an Islamic State). Although these forces remain relatively small, [they are] increasing. (scholar 23 Feb. 2016)

However, the freelance journalist stated that while some Kurds initially joined Jihadist groups and fought against Peshmerga forces, today, "most" Kurdish members of ISIS have been killed (22 Feb. 2016).

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Incidents and Attacks by ISIS in Sulaymaniyah (2015-February 2016)

Three sources contacted by the Research Directorate said that they were not aware of any terrorist attacks occurring in the Sulaymaniyah governorate since the beginning of 2015 (freelance journalist 22 Feb. 2016; independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016; ISHR 24 Feb. 2016). The Carnegie Middle East Center scholar said that "there have not been major 'terrorist' attacks" in Sulaymaniyah since 2015 (23 Feb. 2016), while the freelance journalist stated that "[i]n general, there are not many incidents that could be considered very serious" (22 Feb. 2016). Sources indicated that terrorist incidents are more likely to occur in Erbil (scholar 23 Feb. 2016; independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016; ISHR 24 Feb. 2016), which is the centre of the Kurdistan region of Iraq's investments, parliament and government (ibid.). For information on the security situation in Erbil, refer to Response to Information Request IRQ105417.

The Government of Canada's travel advice and advisories for Iraq state that

[a]reas under [the Kurdistan Region Government, KRG] control have been less affected by violence and terrorism than other parts of Iraq, but nonetheless remain vulnerable to the impacts of both regional instability and internal tensions. Extremist insurgents led by ISIL are responsible for attacks on KRG-controlled areas, including towns southwest of Erbil. (Canada 16 Feb. 2016)

Similarly, on its "Iraq Travel Warning" webpage, the US Department of State indicates that

[t]errorist attacks within the Iraqi Kurdistan region (IKR) occur less frequently than in other parts of Iraq, although the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), U.S. Government facilities, and western interests remain possible targets, as evidenced by the April 17 bombing in the public area outside U.S. Consulate General Erbil. (US 4 Dec. 2015)

According to the freelance journalist, "[ISIS's] threat was very big in August 2014, when [they] attacked. But now there are frequent US coalition airstrikes, and the region is safe" (22 Feb. 2016).

However, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the President of the Iraqi Society of Human Rights - Canada (ISHR), a non-profit organization registered in Toronto dedicated to "helping Iraqi Displaced Persons (IDP) and raising awareness of the threat of ISIL and other extremist groups" (ISHR n.d.), stated that "[t]here is always the risk of a terrorist attack inside the territory" (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016). In a similar way, the independent journalist noted that "the attack in Erbil in April 2015 showed that ISIS are able to work within the borders" of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, adding that "[a]ttackers seemed to enjoy a certain freedom of movement within Kurdistan" (independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016). According to the same source, the existence of small ISIS groups within the Kurdistan region of Iraq is likely (ibid.).

The BBC reports that, on 19 January 2016, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) [3] announced on its website that

Iraqi Kurdish security forces have arrested "several members" of the Islamic State group ... who worked as part of an "underground cell" to carry out deadly "terrorist" attacks in the city of Sulaymaniyah

The arrested IS cell included both Arab and Kurdish jihadists, who had planned to bomb crowded places in central Sulaymaniyah as well as the city's only Shi'i mosque, the Husayniyah Mosque. (BBC 19 Jan. 2016)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Economic and Political Crisis

When asked to comment on the security situation in the Sulaymaniyah governorate, sources referenced the current economic and political crisis in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which they described as a security threat (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016; research fellow 24 Feb. 2016). Sources stated that the economic crisis is characterized by:

- near-bankruptcy of the region (Reuters 9 Oct. 2015);
- very low investments (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016); and
- non-payment of public sector employees' salaries for several months (research fellow 24 Feb. 2016; scholar 23 Feb. 2016), and salary cuts (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016).

According to media sources, there is unrest in the Kurdistan region due to a political crisis around the succession of the president of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, whose term ended in August 2015 (Middle East Eye 20 Nov. 2015; Al Monitor 28 Aug. 2015; Reuters 9 Oct. 2015).

Media sources report that violent demonstrations related to the consequences of the economic situation took place in Sulaymaniyah in October 2015 (Reuters 10 Oct. 2015; *Iraqi News* 11 Oct. 2015), with both demonstrators and the police resorting to violence (ibid.). According to sources, buildings of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) [which is part of the KRG (Reuters 10 Oct. 2015)] in Sulaymaniyah were attacked (*Iraqi News* 11 Oct. 2015; Reuters 9 Oct. 2015). Reuters reports that five persons were killed during the demonstrations (ibid. 10 Oct. 2015). The Ifpo research fellow similarly indicated that protests regarding the non-payment of salaries have [translation] "sometimes degenerated into riots against headquarters of the KDP" (24 Feb. 2016).

In February 2016, sources reported that protests in the Sulaymaniyah governorate continued and intensified (RFI 10 Feb. 2016; Reuters 9 Feb. 2016), after the government announced new austerity measures (ibid.). According to the ISHR president, "[s]hootings related to the political situation happen a lot in Sulaymaniyah," and violent protests against the government "could happen again anytime" (24 Feb. 2016). On its "Iraq Travel Warning" webpage, the US Department of State "strongly" urges US citizens "to avoid protests and large gatherings" in the whole country because of "the potential for political protests and demonstrations to become violent" (US 4 Dec. 2015).

In addition, sources stated that the presence of a large refugee population can be considered a potential source of tension (research fellow 24 Feb. 2016; independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016). According to figures published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there were 164,448 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Sulaymaniyah governorate on 6 February 2016 (UN 6 Feb. 2016).

4. State Protection in Sulaymaniyah

Without providing further details, sources stated that security forces in the Sulaymaniyah governorate are effective in protecting citizens against ISIS (freelance journalist 22 Feb. 2016; ISHR 24 Feb. 2016). According to the scholar affiliated with the Carnegie Middle East Center, "[i]n general, the security services, both the Peshmerga and the Asaiyish (intelligence service), are effective in combating Islamic State cells ... quickly, usually before an incident can occur" (scholar 23 Feb. 2016).

However, concerning the political unrest in Sulaymaniyah, and in reference to the October 2015 demonstrations specifically, Reuters quotes a local member of the KDP as stating that the number of police officers was "insufficient to ... control the situation" and "to protect" the party members targeted by the protesters (9 Oct. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] Ifpo is a research centre under both the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development and the French National Centre of Scientific Research (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, CNRS) (France 21 Mar. 2014).

[2] The Carnegie Middle East Center is "an independent policy research institute" located in Beirut (Carnegie Middle East Center n.d.).

[3] The PUK is part of the coalition of political parties forming the KRG (KRG n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Al Arabiya News; ARA News; Bloomberg View; British International School of Sulaymaniyah; École française de Sulaymaniyah; ekurd.net; Human Rights Watch; International Committee of the Red Cross; International NGO Safety Organisation; International School of Choueifat; journalists, *Los Angeles Times*; journalists, Reuters; journalists, *The Wall Street Journal*; Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq Representation in the US; Professor of Kurdish Studies, University of Exeter; Rudaw; Shafaq News; United States Institute of Peace.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; BBC; ecoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; Institute for the Study of War; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; IRIN; Minority Rights Group International; Nalia Radio and Television; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Rudaw; UN – Refworld, UN Development Programme; US – Congressional Research Service, Department of State’s *Crime and Safety Report*, *Religious Freedom Report*, *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

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