

# 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](#).

11 March 2016

### IRQ105461.E

Iraq: Security situation in Dohuk [Dahuk], including ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) [Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Daesh] activities and targeting of Christians; treatment of Christians by Kurdish authorities in Dohuk, including state protection (2014-March 2016)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Overview

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Dohuk is "the northernmost governorate of Iraq with a total population of 505,491" and, "[a]long with Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, it composes the area administrated by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)" (IOM 30 Apr. 2015). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an official at the Representation of the KRG in the US stated that the city of Dohuk is approximately 35 km away from the closest ISIS-occupied territory (KRG 4 Mar. 2016). Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research fellow at the French Institute of the Near East (Institut français du Proche-Orient, IFPO [1]) in Erbil, who has published several articles on the history of the Kurdish people, stated that the city of Dohuk is approximately 30 km away from the ISIS front line and 40 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 written articles on the situation of Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, stated that the ISIS front lines are approximately "within ... a one hour drive" of Dohuk (22 Feb. 2016).

According to data published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there were 405,846 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Dohuk governorate as of 6 February 2016 (UN 6 Feb. 2016).

#### 1.1 Security Situation

In a February 2016 update of its website, Global Affairs Canada advises "against non-essential travel" to Dohuk (Canada 16 Feb. 2016). The governments of both Canada and the UK warn that the security situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq could "deteriorate quickly" (ibid.; UK 21 Dec. 2015). On its Iraq travel advice webpage, the UK government states that "[w]hile the Kurdistan [r]egion has a different security environment to the rest of Iraq, Daesh controls territory nearby" (ibid.). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative at the UNHCR office of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Director in Amman stated that

[t]he current frontlines of conflict in northern Iraq ... remain very close to the major strategic communication and administrative centers of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah. A breach of the frontline by ISIS would pose a very serious threat to the civilian population in the [Kurdistan region]. (UN 9 Mar. 2016)

In contrast, when asked to comment on the security situation in the Dohuk governorate, sources contacted by the Research Directorate 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 front lines with ISIS "does not affect the city of Dohuk" (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 ... Dohuk governorate is relatively stable" (Independent journalist 23 Feb. 2016). According to the same source, the front line "has not changed much over the past year" (ibid.).

Sources stated that, apart from ISIS, no other Muslim fundamentalist groups are active in the Dohuk governorate (ibid.; KRG 4 Mar. 2016; 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 [3], today, "most" Kurdish members of ISIS have been killed (22 Feb. 2016). According to the English-language online newspaper *Iraqi News*, in late September 2015, a KRG official announced the killing of "more than 250 Kurdish militants within the ranks of ISIS" and claimed that "only 100 armed Kurds remain within the ranks of the organization" (*Iraqi News* 30 Sept. 2015).

Sources report that, in July 2015, Turkey began to launch airstrikes against alleged positions of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq (*The New York Times* 25 July 2015; AI 11 Aug. 2015). Further sources indicate that airstrikes also occurred in the province of Dohuk (Rudaw 18 Sept. 2015; *Iraqi News* 13 Dec. 2015; PressTV 4 Feb. 2016). Amnesty International (AI) reports that, on 1 August 2015, Turkish airstrikes on the village of Zergele [in Erbil governorate] "killed eight residents and injured at least eight others" (AI 11 Aug. 2015).

## 1.2 Threat Posed by ISIS

According to the freelance journalist, "[ISIS's] threat was very big in August 2014, when [it] attacked [the Kurdistan region]. But now there are frequent US coalition airstrikes, and the region is safe" (22 Feb. 2016). Similarly, 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 "Dohuk is safe from ISIS" thanks to the presence "in the area" of Kurdish fighters from both Iraq and Syria and of the international coalition (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016). The official at the KRG Representation in the US stated that "ISIS does not represent a danger for Dohuk governorate" because of the control exerted by Kurdish security forces, specifying that, in the whole Kurdistan region, "130,000 Peshmerga forces ... are stationed along a [240 km] border with ISIS territory" (KRG 4 Mar. 2016).

However, according to the ISHR President, "[t]here is always the risk of a terrorist attack inside the territory" (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" and that "[i]n Dohuk, there seems to be little control against people coming into the city with weapons" (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.).

## 2. Incidents and Attacks by ISIS in Dohuk (2015-March 2016)

The official at the Representation of the KRG in the US stated that no terrorist attack has occurred in Dohuk since the beginning of 2015 (KRG 4 Mar. 2016). Similarly, three sources contacted by the Research Directorate said that they were not aware of any terrorist attacks occurring in the Dohuk 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 "[t]here have not been major 'terrorist' attacks" in Dohuk 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).

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 [2015] bombing in the public area outside U.S. Consulate General Erbil. (US 4 Dec. 2015)

### 3. Economic and Political Crisis

When asked to comment on the security situation in the Dohuk 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). The ISHR President said that "[s]hootings related to the political situation happen ... sometimes in Dohuk" (24 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 "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).

### 4. Treatment of Christians in Dohuk (2014-March 2016)

#### 4.1 Overview

The official at the KRG Representation in the US stated that "[a]ll Christians remaining in Iraq are in the [Kurdistan region], with the exception of a few Christians who live in Baghdad" (KRG 4 Mar. 2016). Sources stated that Christians live safely in the Kurdistan region (CNEWA 4 Mar. 2016; ISHR 24 Feb. 2016; Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). The ISHR President said that, to his knowledge, no major incidents targeting Christians have occurred in Dohuk since 2014 (24 Feb. 2016). The official at the KRG Representation in the US said that there are no "systematic incidents" targeting Christians in Dohuk (KRG 4 Mar. 2016).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a humanitarian and advocacy NGO based in the US that aims to "support and protect persecuted Assyria[n] Christians" in Iraq and in other countries of the Middle East (Iraqi Christian Relief Council n.d.), stated that "Christians can practice their faith freely" in Dohuk, adding that "Kurds allowed a lot of missionaries to [work] in the Kurdistan region" (ibid. 4 Mar. 2016). The IFPO research fellow similarly stated that churches are [translation] "well established" in Dohuk (24 Feb. 2016). The ISHR President said that Christians in Dohuk "enjoy good relations with Kurds" (24 Feb. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The IFPO research fellow noted that the Christian population in Dohuk has significantly increased as a result of ISIS's invasion in other regions of Iraq (24 Feb. 2016). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) [4] specified that, over a year-and-a-half, 120,000 persons, including 100,000 Christians, arrived in the Kurdistan region, the majority of whom arrived over the course of a few days in August 2014 (4 Mar. 2016). The ISHR President explained that Christians in Dohuk governorate who fled ISIS reside in refugee camps or in houses provided by the church (2 Mar. 2016).

According to the independent journalist, Christians "tend to be quite well received" (23 Feb. 2016). However, oral sources stated that the arrival of a large number of IDPs in a short period of time created some social unrest and triggered some incidents, such as thefts (KRG 4 Mar. 2016; CNEWA 4 Mar. 2016). Without providing details, the CNEWA representative stated that some attacks took place in 2014-2015, though he specified that when a Christian is victim of an attack by a non-Christian, this does not necessarily mean that the attack is due to their religious or cultural identity, but rather that it may be related to their status as a [translation] "vulnerable person" (ibid.). The same source highlighted that, in his opinion, Christians arriving from other regions of Iraq are vulnerable and thus more likely to be [translation] "exploited" [than the average inhabitants of Kurdistan] (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources highlighted that, for IDPs in general, a lack of Kurdish language skills can represent a barrier for integration (Scholar 23 Feb. 2016; CNEWA 4 Mar. 2016), including access to employment, education and housing (ibid.).

## 4.2 Treatment by the State

The Carnegie Middle East Center scholar affirmed that

[t]he KRG's policy has been to accommodate for minorities in an attempt to show its international (namely Western) allies that it can be a beacon of hope and a safe haven for minorities. (Scholar 23 Feb. 2016)

Similarly, the IFPO research fellow stated that, [translation] "in general, authorities try to mitigate tensions [between certain local Muslims and Christians] and avoid any discrimination" (Research fellow 24 Feb. 2016). However, without providing further details, the CNEWA representative stated that the KRG claims that Christians are welcome in order to make a good impression on the international community, but that, [translation] "in fact, the situation is different" (CNEWA 4 Mar. 2016). The Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative, who recently met representatives from all Christian communities in Dohuk, except for the Catholic bishop, affirmed that "Christians are discriminated against, not because of their religion, but because they are a separate ethnic group" [5] (Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). The US Department of State's *2014 Report on International Religious Freedom* states that, compared to the rest of the country, "[t]here were relatively fewer reports of official abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation in the [Kurdistan region], but similar reports based on ethnic affiliation" (US 14 Oct. 2015, Sec. II).

Sources affirmed that the KRG has "confiscated" (Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016) or "tr[ie]d to take" parcels of land belonging to Christians (ISHR 24 Feb. 2016). The Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative said that "[t]he head of the Kurdistan region's parliament has acknowledged to the Iraqi Christian Relief Council that land has been grabbed illegally. A case has been filed by Christians against the KRG" (4 Mar. 2016). Further information on land confiscation could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that the KRG discriminated against, or was reported to discriminate against, certain groups of people, including Christians, in providing humanitarian assistance (US 14 Oct. 2015, Sec. II; Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). According to the Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative, "[a]ny NGO that brings aid to Kurdistan has to abide by KRG instructions as to where aid is distributed. The Assyrian Aid Society is the only one that managed to distribute aid where they decided" (ibid.). She added that "[t]he KRG favors those allied with [the ruling] KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party]. Many Christian organizations are not affiliated with" this party (ibid.). However, other sources reported on foreign organizations who have been able to send humanitarian assistance directly to the organizations in the Kurdistan region that they wish to help, without going through the KRG (CNEWA 4 Mar. 2016; Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council 7 Mar. 2016).

The Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative stated that the KRG has built new schools for Christians recently, but that, after a few months, it has moved the students out to smaller schools "that are falling apart" (Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative further stated that history taught in schools, including Christian schools, is Kurdish history only and that Christians can only teach their own history in churches or cultural centres (ibid.). In its *2014 Report on International Religious Freedom*, the US Department of State specified that "[t]he KRG [Ministry of Education] funds Syriac-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory, and the curriculum does not contain religion or Quranic studies" (US 14 Oct. 2015, Sec. II).

The Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative stated that businesses established after 2014 are not allowed to have a name in the Assyrian language (Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). In contrast, a representative of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, a political organization that currently occupies two seats in the Kurdistan Parliament (KRG n.d.) and maintains "excellent relations with the KDP," said in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate that businesses are now obliged by law to have a Kurdish "as well" (Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council 7 Mar. 2016).

Regarding access to employment, the Iraqi Christian Relief Council representative stated that Christians cannot reach a "high level" in their profession, unless they belong to the ruling KDP (Iraqi Christian Relief Council 4 Mar. 2016). She gave the example that, in practice, it is not possible for a Christian teacher to become the principal of a public school or for a Christian to become a judge (ibid.). In contrast, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council representative affirmed that "there are Christian principals, even in some Kurdish schools" and that "[t]here are a few Christian judges" in the Kurdistan region (Chaldean Syriac

Assyrian Popular Council 7 Mar. 2016). When asked whether it is possible for a Christian to become a judge in the Kurdistan region, the KRG official replied that

[j]udges need to know the Koran and Sharia law because the legislation is based on Islam. For example, the legislation regarding divorce is based on Islamic law, which makes it difficult for Christian judges. However, there are Christian judges in Kurdistan ... [who deal with] Christian matters, such as Christian divorces. (KRG 4 Mar. 2016)

The same source stated that in his opinion, Christians face no particular obstacle in "climb[ing] the social ladder," adding that "[t]here are ministers, generals, or director generals in the government who are Christian" (ibid.).

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 Peshmerga are the Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq (BBC 12 Aug. 2014).

[4] The CNEWA is a "papal agency" that provides "humanitarian and pastoral support" in various regions of the world, including in the Middle East; its website indicates that it "works for, through and with the Eastern Catholic churches to identify needs and implement solutions" (CNEWA n.d.).

[5] According to the *New York Times*, "[m]ost of Iraq's Christians call themselves Assyrians, Chaldeans or Syriac, different names for a common ethnicity" (22 July 2015).

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### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Assyrian Aid Society of America; Assyrian Society of Canada; ekurd.net; Human Rights Watch; International Committee of the Red Cross; International NGO Safety Organisation; journalists, *The Los Angeles Times*; journalists, Reuters; journalists, Rudaw; journalists, Shafaq News; journalists, *The Wall Street Journal*; Professor of Kurdish Studies, University of Exeter; United States Institute of Peace.

**Internet sites, including:** 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; Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq; Minority Rights Group International; Nalia Radio and Television; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; UN – Refworld, ReliefWeb, UN Development Programme; US – Commission on International Religious Freedom, Department of State.

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