Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada   Commission de l'immigration et du statut de réfugié du 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.

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19 October 2016

IRQ105643.E

Iraq: Threats made by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) [Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh] to persons who have worked for the US in the Kurdistan region, including methods by which threats are made; information on whether ISIS is recruiting Kurdish men, including the profile of such recruits (2014-October 2016)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Threats Made by ISIS to Persons Who Have Worked for the US in Kurdistan

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a lecturer at the Department of Political Science of the University of Vienna, who is a member of the Austrian Association for Kurdish Studies and has conducted field trips to the Kurdistan region on a yearly basis for the past ten years, stated that he "know[s] cases" of persons who have worked for the US in Iraqi Kurdistan and have received threats by ISIS while they were there (Lecturer 26 Sept. 2016). According to the same source, "such threats are often made by telephone in Iraq" (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research associate affiliated with the Centre for Peace and Human Security based at the American University of Kurdistan, who has previously worked as a security analyst for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and whose current research focuses partly on the KRG, stated that according to information that he received from a senior security official of Asayish, the Kurdistan security forces, there is no clear indication that ISIS is targeting individuals who work for the US or have worked for the US in Kurdistan (Research Associate 3 Oct. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the US Department of State who specializes in security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq indicated that he was not aware of any instances in which persons working for the US in Kurdistan received threats made by ISIS (US 5 Oct. 2016). However, according to information that the Research Associate obtained from the Asayish senior security official, some people in the Kurdistan region have received phone threats by individuals pretending to belong to ISIS attempting to extort money (Research Associate 3 Oct. 2016). Asayish has investigated these kinds of issues and found out that the phone calls came from criminals impersonating ISIS affiliates (ibid.).

The Lecturer at the University of Vienna indicated that threats by phone are a method used to "get protection money" in Iraq (Lecturer 26 Sept. 2016). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an independent political analyst based in Washington, DC, who has written articles for *The Guardian* and Al Jazeera and whose research focuses on Kurdish affairs, stated that ISIS has publicly threatened Iraqi Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani "several times" by video messages (Independent political analyst 4 Oct. 2016). An article by Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "a political analyst specializing in issues concerning Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey with a particular focus on

Kurdish politics" (Jamestown Foundation 7 Feb. 2014), published by the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*, states that

[ISIS] threatened the two ruling Iraqi Kurdish parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – and rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operating in Syria in a video released in November 2013. (ibid.)

According to the independent political analyst,

ISIS threats are usually directed to prominent politicians, anti-ISIS fighters, outspoken journalists, women and minority rights defenders and anti-ISIS activists, and such threats are usually made publicly via social media or video messages shared by this group. However, it is not unlikely that some individuals may also have been threatened by ISIS [for] different reasons. (4 Oct. 2016)

2. Recruitment of Kurdish Men by ISIS

The Research Associate indicated that, according to interviews conducted in the Kurdistan region for his research, ISIS has recruited around 500 fighters in total in the Kurdistan region (Research Associate 3 Oct. 2016). In an article published in February 2015, the Kurdish online news service Rudaw also notes that "nearly 500 Kurds joined ISIS [in 2014], but the number has declined dramatically since ISIS attacked areas in the Kurdistan region" (Rudaw 27 Feb. 2015). A March 2015 article also written by Wladimir van Wilgenburg and published by the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor* states that,

[a]ccording to Hemin Hawrami, a senior official in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), around 300 to 350 young Iraqi Kurds have so far joined the Islamic State. (Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2015)

The Research Associate stated that many of the Kurdish ISIS militants have been killed in the battlefields or by coalition airstrikes and that there are slightly more than 100 Kurdish fighters within ISIS today (3 Oct. 2016). According to a Rudaw article published in June 2016, the spokesperson for the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs reported that approximately 50 Kurds remain members of ISIS (Rudaw 25 June 2016).

Sources indicate that some Kurds have been arrested for having ISIS affiliations (US 5 Oct. 2016; Independent political analyst 4 Oct. 2016). According to the article written by Wladimir van Wilgenburg and published by the Jamestown Foundation in 2015, the Asayish "has stepped up their monitoring of potential militants, and has arrested several Islamic State supporters and sleeper cells" (Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2015).

2.1 Methods Used by ISIS to Recruit Kurdish Militants

According to a 2014 article published by the Jamestown Foundation, in August 2014, the KRG decided to temporarily shut down Twitter and Facebook access in the Kurdish region, after the Islamic State had sent messages through social media aimed at recruiting members of the Kurdish population (Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2015). Sources indicate that ISIS tries to influence Iraqi Kurds through video messages made by Kurdish members from Iraq (Independent political analyst 4 Oct. 2016) or through the media (Rudaw 25 June 2016). An article published by Rudaw in June 2016 notes that two Islamic radio stations based in Mosul were transmitting messages deemed to be "a threat" to the Kurdish districts of Barda Rash and Akre at the time the article was published (ibid.).

The Research Associate stated that some individuals have been recruited in Kurdistan's mosques and Islamic schools (3 Oct. 2016). According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, in 2014, Kurdish security forces carried out "several raids" on Sulaymaniyah mosques to stop the recruitment of Kurdish jihadists (Jamestown Foundation 7 Feb. 2014). However, the same source indicates that following the August 2014 attacks by ISIS within the Kurdistan region,

[i]t is difficult today for Kurdish radicals to even express sympathy with the Islamic State, since most locals would immediately report such suspicious behavior to the Asayish. (ibid. 20 Mar. 2015)

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

2.2 Profile of Kurdish Recruits

According to sources, Kurdish recruits are usually young men (Lecturer 26 Sept. 2016; Independent political analyst 4 Oct. 2016; Senior Policy Advisor 3 Oct. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior policy advisor for the Middle East at the Open Society Foundations in Washington, DC, who has previously worked for the Washington Kurdish Institute, a non-profit organization that engages in

research programs in Iraqi Kurdistan, stated that ISIS recruits are usually unemployed or students, and that "rural, more conservative regions in Kurdistan have produced extremists in past" (ibid.). According to the independent political analyst, Kurdish recruits usually have "little or no education," are "mainly under or unemployed" and come from "conservative famil[ies]" (4 Oct. 2016). The Research Associate also stated that Kurdish ISIS militants originate from both Kurdish Islamist political parties operational within the KRG, as well as Ansar al-Islam, the former Kurdish Islamist insurgents' group (3 Oct. 2016).

Sources indicated that the majority of Iraqi Kurds recruited by ISIS come from the Halabja Governorate (Lecturer 26 Sept. 2016; Research Associate 3 Oct. 2016). The Research Associate further noted that Ansar al-Islam used to be active in the Halabja Governorate, which is part of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (3 Oct. 2016). According to the same source, the US and the KRG bombarded all Ansar al-Islam bases in 2003, but many supporters are still present in the region (ibid.) The Research Associate also indicated that some Kurdish recruits come from Erbil or Dohuk (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.

References

Independent political analyst. 4 October 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Jamestown Foundation. 20 March 2015. Wladimir van Wilgenburg. "Islamic State Develops New Strategies to Destabilize the KRG." *Terrorism Monitor*. Volume 13. Issue 6. [Accessed 30 Sept. 2016]

Jamestown Foundation. 7 February 2014. Wladimir van Wilgenburg. "'With These Guns We Will Return to Kurdistan': The Resurgence of Kurdish Jihadism." *Terrorism Monitor*. Volume 12. Issue 3. [Accessed 30 Sept. 2016]

Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna. 26 September 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Research Associate, Centre for Peace and Human Security, American University of Kurdistan. 3 October 2016. Telephone interview.

Rudaw. 25 June 2016. "Kurdish ISIS Leader Killed in Airstrike." [Accessed 4 Oct. 2016]

Rudaw. 27 February 2015. "Kurdistan Arrests Six Suspected Pro-ISIS clerics." [Accessed 6 Oct. 2016]

Senior Policy Advisor, Open Society Foundations in Washington, DC. 3 October 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

United States (US). 5 October 2016. Department of State. Correspondence from an official to the Research Directorate.

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Nonresident Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center; Research Fellow, Carnegie Middle East Center; Research Fellow, Middlesex University.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; BBC; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; ecoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; *The National*; National Iraqi News Agency; *The Times*; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the High Commissionner for Human Rights, Refworld; US – Department of State.

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