Country Profile: Iraq

In 2013 and 2014, the Explosive Violence Monitoring Programme recorded more civilian deaths and injuries of explosive weapons and more incidents of explosive weapons use in Iraq than in any other country in the world. In both years, more than 10,000 deaths and injuries and more than 600 incidents were recorded. Alongside use of more conventional weaponry such as artillery and aerial bombings, Iraq has seen unprecedented rates of IED (Improvised Explosive Device) usage. In 2014, almost half the IED deaths and injuries recorded globally (48%) were in Iraq. Many of these were suicide bombings: Iraq had the highest number of recorded deaths and injuries from suicide bombings globally in 2014, as well as the highest number of incidents. In addition to current explosive violence, Iraq has a long-established unexploded ordnance problem, with significant areas, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan, containing active minefields from previous conflicts.
The Conflict

- April 2013: Creation of ISIS announced
- December 2013: ISIS launches an offensive in Anbar Province, Iraq
- January 2014: ISIS seizes Fallujah city
- June-December 2014: Massive ISIS offensive takes Mosul, Tikrit, Tal Afar, Zumar, Sinjar, Kabisa, Hit and many villages and towns.
  - 29th of June: Global caliphate announced; ISIS becomes simply ‘Islamic State’
  - 8th of August: US begins air strikes to protect the Yazidis besieged on Mount Sinjar
- December: Kurds retake Sinjar
- March 2015: Iraqi forces retake Tikrit
- May 2015: ISIS takes Ramadi
- May-September 2015: slow advance by Iraqi and Kurdish forces against ISIS in Ramadi and Anbar

In 2001, following the events of 9/11, the government of George W. Bush began planning the invasion of Iraq, whose ruler Saddam Husayn was alleged to be stockpiling weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and to have connections to al Qaeda. In 2003 – on the basis of controversial intelligence claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction – a US-led coalition invaded Iraq and removed Husayn’s Ba’th Party from power. Iraq was then governed by the transitional Coalition Provisional Authority. The CPA, which would later be criticised for its financial mismanagement, attempted to dismantle Saddam-era institutions and establish a democratic Iraq with an entirely market-based economy. Its initiatives included the selling-off of national companies and the ‘de-Ba’thification’ of Iraq, based on the denazification policies put into place in post-WW2 Germany. Both of these policies produced considerable resentment within the Iraqi population.

Slightly more than a year after its establishment, the CPA was dissolved, handing over authority to an Iraqi provisional government. The period from 2004-2011, when the US withdrew its last combat troops, saw the emergence of both Shi’i and Sunni militant opposition to the US presence and the new Iraqi government. By 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had established a very significant presence in the western Sunni regions of the country. In 2007, however, the US extended and expanded their military presence in the country through what was termed the ‘troop surge’ policy, succeeding in crushing AQI and putting a temporary end to the flood of insurgency.

After the US withdrawal in 2011, Iraq continued to suffer political instability. The Arab Spring saw popular protests break out against the government, and, perhaps more importantly, the collapse of neighbouring Syria into civil war. The situation in Syria was exploited by a number of armed groups with connections in Iraq, and in 2014 the newly-rebranded Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), previously Al Qaeda in Iraq, seized control of large portions of the Iraqi north as well as the Syrian east. ISIS managed to advance almost to Baghdad itself at the height of their initial campaign, although they have since been repelled and driven back into the northeast with the help of American and French airstrikes. ISIS also advanced eastwards towards Kurdistan, threatening members of the Yazidi minority who had taken refuge on Mount Sinjar with genocide. Providing the Yazidis with humanitarian and military assistance became the prime justification for the first airstrikes of the ongoing American intervention.

The situation in Iraq is bleak. As of October 2015, there are over two million displaced people within Iraq’s borders, including over 500,000 Syrian refugees. Over 8.2 million people are categorised by UNOCHA as requiring immediate humanitarian support.
Key players

Iraqi Government and Army

- **Head of Government**: Haider al-Ibadi
- **Military strength**: 250,000 ground troops (on paper), 90,000 Popular Mobilisation militiamen, 400 tanks, 2,500 armoured fighting vehicles
- **Allies**: US-led coalition, Kurdish Regional Government
- **Enemies**: ISIS

The internationally-recognised government of Iraq is headed by Haider al-Ibadi, who became prime minister in 2014 after Nouri al-Maliki’s resignation over ISIS’s 2014 advances. Since the devastating defeat suffered by the national army at the hands of ISIS in 2014, Ibadi has come to depend more and more on private Shi’i militias known as the Popular Mobilisation units (Hashd Sha’bi). Some of these militias are backed financially by Iran. Both the Iraqi Army and these Shi’i militias have been accused of sectarian looting, abduction, killing of civilians and other abuses on several occasions, particularly after the reoccupation of the Sunni areas of Amerli and Tikrit which had been under ISIS control. The Iraqi government have also been accused of indiscriminate shelling and bombing of civilian areas, including attacks on at least one hospital. Ibadi has ordered an end to shelling of civilian areas, but it continues apace as of October 2015.

Kurdistan Regional Government

- **Head of Government**: Massoud Barzani
- **Military strength**: As many as 190,000 Peshmerga soldiers, unknown number of tanks and armoured vehicles
- **Allies**: US-led coalition, Iraqi Government
- **Enemies**: ISIS
The Kurdistan regional government is headed by Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party. The Kurds have had theoretical political autonomy since 1970, but anti-Kurdish policies continued in Kurdish-majority regions, including attempts at forcible Arabisation. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Saddam Husayn regime – which considered the Kurds a serious threat – launched a series of attacks on Kurdistan known as the Anfal Campaign. These attacks involved the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons. The Anfal Campaign has been recognised by the UK, Swedish and Norwegian governments as a genocide.

After the Gulf War, however, the imposition of no-fly zones by the USAF allowed the existing political and military forces to run their own affairs. During the US invasion of Iraq, Kurdish forces sided with the Coalition. The new Iraqi constitution granted the Kurdistan Regional Government effective political autonomy, and the Regional Government has its own customs authority and armed forces, the Peshmerga, independent from the central government. The KRG are currently one of the main forces fighting ISIS, whose rapid advance into Kurdish territory was one of the triggers for the ongoing American intervention. In the course of the war on ISIS, they have seized significant portions of northern Iraq that Kurdistan had previously contested control of with the national government. Barzani has promised to hold an independence referendum in the near future, which would presumably involve secession from Iraq along with the contested areas.

**Islamic State of Iraq and Sham**

- **Caliph**: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
- **Military strength**: Unclear. A 2014 CIA estimate suggests 20,000-31,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria. Large numbers of tanks and armoured vehicles.
- **Allies**: None
- **Enemies**: Iraqi Government, US-led coalition, Kurdish Regional Government

ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) began its existence as Al Qaeda in Iraq, one of a number of anti-Coalition militias that won significant popularity among disaffected Sunnis in western Iraq during the occupation. In 2006, its leaders proclaimed the foundation of the Islamic State of Iraq after absorbing several other Sunni groups and militias. ISI was briefly a major force in Iraq from 2006-2007, but a major US campaign against the organisation brought it to its knees and killed off many of the original leadership. The new generation included many disenfranchised supporters of the old Ba’thist regime, who became prominent in the resurgent ISI forces after the American withdrawal. When the Syrian civil war broke out, ISI sent troops to join the opposition, and this group quickly developed into the independent Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra). In 2013, the leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the reabsorption of the Nusra Front and the establishment of an Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (the Levant), and ISI’s operations expanded into Syria, although most of the Nusra Front’s fighters and leadership rejected the merger. In June 2014, al-Baghdadi declared a global caliphate. Shortly thereafter, ISIS launched a major offensive in Iraq, capturing
several major cities and advancing to within a short distance of Baghdad. Although the offensive was repulsed and ISIS have now been driven back to their heartland in western Iraq, the fight is still ongoing and ISIS has emerged as the foremost priority of foreign involvement in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS is accused of a wide number of human rights abuses\(^1\). Its actions have led directly to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Those living within territories under its control are subject to killings and abductions regardless of sect.\(^2\) Minority groups in Iraq have faced mass killings, abductions and rape.\(^3\) ISIS are known to use child soldiers.\(^4\) ISIS have also become well-known for their usage of IEDs in suicide and non-suicide attacks against civilians and against armed combatants. Roads and infrastructure are often planted with IEDs which act like a mine field preventing or slowing passage by armed forces, as well as threatening unsuspecting civilians.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper
**Weapons**

**Air strikes**

Both the Iraqi air force and the US-led coalition forces have conducted air strikes in Iraq. These air strikes are typically described as targeting ISIS, but the presence of large numbers of civilians in areas under ISIS control means that it is often difficult to avoid non-combatant deaths and injuries. Despite considerable evidence of the Iraqi army’s indiscriminate attacks on areas with high concentrations of civilians, the US has provided large amounts of expensive high-tech military aid to Iraq. From January to August 2014 780 Hellfire air-to-surface missiles were delivered to Iraq, and in August the US government made a new agreement promising 5,000 more. The US have also sold Iraq a number of F16 jets.

**Mortars and artillery**

AOAV recorded 74 mortar, artillery and shelling incidents in Iraq in 2014, resulting in a total of 1148 civilian deaths and injuries and 138 combatant deaths and injuries. Of the 56 incidents for which there is clear location data, 54 took place in populated areas, and these attacks accounted for almost 94% of the civilian deaths and injuries, whilst only accounting for five confirmed combatant deaths. This raises obvious questions of distinction and proportionality. Both the Iraqi government and ISIS have been criticised for indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas. There is some evidence, though it is not decisive, that ISIS have used chemical weapons in mortar attacks, particularly mustard gas.

The Iraqi army, as of 2013, was equipped with M252 and M120 mortars and several 155mm M109 self-propelled howitzers and a number of 152mm Type 83 self-propelled howitzers. They also had a number of 130mm M-46 and 155mm M198 towed field guns. It was reported in July 2014 that ISIS had seized upwards of 52 M198 howitzers – almost half Iraq’s 2013 arsenal – during their offensive. ISIS are also known to be equipped with Type 59-1, a Chinese copy of the M-46, which they may have acquired from the Syrian or Iraqi militaries.
IEDs

IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) are home-made bombs generally made from industrial or domestic chemicals which can be combined with other components to produce explosives. They are sometimes made from recycled landmines or other unexploded ordinance, such as artillery shells. IEDs can have many kinds of improvised detonation mechanisms. Some are activated by mobile phone. Others are deployed with timers, tripwires or a trigger attached to a suicide belt. Although IEDs which are activated by the bomber allow for more deliberate targeting, this does not provide as much protection to civilians as might be expected. AOAV’s data for 2014 shows that 77% of civilian deaths recorded came as a result of IED attacks, particularly those on populated areas, which even if they are targeting armed actors typically result in civilian deaths and injuries because of the area-effect nature of an IED.34 Of the incidents recorded in Iraq for which we have clear indication of location, 96% took place in populated areas. Most IED attacks do not have a clear claim of responsibility. Of those reported, ISIS claimed 25 and the Mosul Brigades 1, with 407 incidents with unknown perpetrators. However, the targeting of Sunni areas, sometimes in apparent response to bombings of Shi’i gatherings, suggests that these attacks are not solely attributable to ISIS and ISIS sympathisers.

Although IEDs of various kinds have been staples of violent insurgency for a very long time, Iraq has seen unprecedented levels of IED usage. ISIS in particular have developed a defence strategy centred around the use of IEDs.35 Members of the Peshmerga and Iraqi army attempting to advance on ISIS-held areas have been confronted by pervasive seeding of improvised anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines in roads and agricultural areas, and IEDs of this kind have accounted for the majority of military deaths and injuries.36 These IEDs may be produced from a variety of different substances, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that ISIS is manufacturing them on a significant scale from recovered artillery shells.37 These weapons, aside from the current threat to civilians attempting to make use of roads and other public infrastructure, are likely to contribute to Iraq’s existing serious unexploded ordinance problem.
Car bombs

‘Car bomb’ is a catch-all term for vehicles packed with explosives. They have a long history stretching back to the 1920 Wall Street Bombing when a horse-drawn cart packed with explosives detonated at the financial heart of New York City. Car bombs provide a bomber with greater carrying capacity and cover, and may be detonated by the suicide of the driver or by any other IED activation method. Although car bomb usage is not limited to ISIS, car bombing schools, probably an ISIS innovation, have been set up by the organisation, and ISIS’ car bombs, like their IEDs, have proven to be surprisingly sophisticated.

Hand grenades

ISIS are known to possess, at the very least, modern German-manufactured grenades intended for the Kurdish defenders of Kobane in Syria. They may also have other equipment captured from the Iraqi army or other forces.

Grenade launchers

The Iraqi army and Shi’i militiamen are known to possess rocket propelled grenades. In December 2008 they requested 2,550 M203 grenade launchers from the US, although it cannot be confirmed that the sale took place. There is evidence that ISIS has acquired Croatian RG-6 grenade launchers, which were provided to Syrian rebel groups by Saudi Arabia. There have been a number of controversies caused by ISIS’ acquisition of weapons supposedly intended for moderate groups such as the Free Syrian Army, although whether they acquired them directly or through theft or purchase from other groups remains unclear.
Rocket launchers

Reports suggest that ISIS have a range of rocket launchers available, including self-propelled Katyusha multiple rocket launchers\(^44\) and Croatian RPG-22 and M79 Osa portable rocket launchers.\(^45\) The Iraqi army, meanwhile, has the Russian TOS-1A multiple rocket launcher,\(^46\) which it is confirmed to have used in combat, and the BM-21 Grad rocket launcher.\(^47\)

Missiles

In June 2014, scandal erupted over the possibility of ISIS having seized Stinger Missiles and Blackhawk helicopters sold to the Iraqi military. The Pentagon denied that it had sold Stinger Missiles to the Iraqi army in the first place,\(^48\) although it did confirm that the Iraqi military had access to an Integrated Air Defence system which made use of a variant of the Stinger which cannot be used outside the ADS.\(^49\) There is also the possibility that Saudi Arabia, which has its own large stockpile of Stingers, may have made some available to Syrian rebels. If this is the case then they might have ended up in the hands of ISIS in the same way as the Croatian rocket and grenade launchers. The Iraqi army may also have a wide range of missiles available from the Husayn-era missile program.\(^50\)

Drones

There have been armed American Predator Drones in Iraq since May 2014, although until Obama ordered the first air strikes on ISIS in August they were limited to surveillance missions protecting the American troops training Iraqi forces.\(^51\) Figures on American drone strikes are not available. In November 2014, British Reaper drones launched their first strike on Iraq, and according to MoD data, by the end of June 2015 they had flown a total of 350 missions in Iraq, 130 of which were air strikes.\(^52\) Reapers engage in strike missions at almost the same rate as manned aircraft.\(^53\) The use of drones is controversial, and it has been argued by PIL (Public Interest Lawyers) that they breech a number of principles of international humanitarian law, including distinction, proportionality and humanity.\(^54\) However, at present there are no international arms treaties dealing with drones.
Landmines

The Iraqi Kurdistan region was of considerable strategic importance during the Iran-Iraq war. The Kurds, as a non-Arab people who spoke a language related to Farsi and who had a long-established political movement for independence, were perceived by the Husayn regime as a potential fifth column. Kurdistan’s inhabitants were subject to displacement and eventually the notorious Operation Anfal. However, when the war had ended and Kurds were allowed to return to their homes, they found that the Iraqi army had seeded much of the Kurdistan countryside with landmines. More landmines were placed along the Turkish and Syrian borders during the Gulf War\textsuperscript{55}, and the problem was exacerbated by fresh mine seeding during the 2003 conflict.\textsuperscript{56}

Anti-personnel landmines are forbidden under the Ottowa Treaty, and are considered an indiscriminate weapon which cannot distinguish between civilian and military targets. Iraq is, since 2007, a signatory of the Ottawa Treaty, but may still have landmine stockpiles. Landmines can remain active for decades after the end of the conflict they were originally intended for. Although landmine injuries are now rarely reported in Iraq by the media for various reasons, making data difficult to obtain, the presence of often unmarked and unmapped minefields remains a serious problem.\textsuperscript{57} The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor for 2014 gives a figure of 124 landmine related deaths and injuries.\textsuperscript{58}
International response

- 7.9 million people are in need of protection assistance
- 6.7 million people need access to essential health services
- 4.4 million people are in need of food assistance
- 4.1 million people need access to water and sanitation
- Millions of unexploded landmines and IEDs

Many international groups already had a presence in Iraq and were monitoring and recording data about humanitarian and legal issues there before the outbreak of military conflict in 2014. Iraq's unexploded ordinance problem, for example, dates back to the Iran-Iraq war, and organisations like Human Rights Watch and the Mine Advisory Group have been engaged with it since at least 2003. AOAV, too, has been recording data on explosive weapons use in Iraq and around the world since 2011 as part of its Explosive Violence Monitoring Program.

However, ISIS's sudden 2014 campaign, which came as a surprise to many, has acted as a catalyst for international involvement in Iraq. The group's rapid advance and well-documented mistreatment of minorities has meant that its expansion has been perceived as an existential threat to religious and ethnic groups like the Yazidis, many of whom starved during the 2014 siege of Mount Sinjar after fleeing there in an attempt to escape ISIS. ISIS' campaign against the Yazidis has been described as a possible genocide by the UNHCR. Governments across the world, as well as international organisations, have publicly condemned ISIS for their activities and war conduct, and many have joined the US-led coalition against their forces in both Syria and Iraq, either in a direct military or support capacity.

However, the Iraqi military and coalition forces have not escaped criticism for their own conduct of military operations. The Iraqi army in particular has been criticised for indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas and sectarian abuses against Sunnis in areas reclaimed from ISIS control. The Shi'i militias that fight alongside the government have also been widely criticised internationally for lootings, summary executions, rape and other violations of human rights against Sunnis in particular. Human Rights Watch has recommended that Obama place pressure on Ibadi over the militias' activities. HRW has also noted that members of the Iraqi security forces have beaten and abducted anti-corruption demonstrators.


38 “Car bombing, Baghdad” by Jim Gordon - originally posted to Flickr as Car bombing, Baghdad. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 via Commons - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Car_bombing,_Baghdad.jpg#/media/File:Car_bombing,_Baghdad.jpg


