



Iraq: Violence and extremism from both sides threaten activists and civilians alike

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Sectarian exclusion in Iraq has erupted in a violent uprising of extremist groups across the country. The current developments were foreshadowed by the rise of ISIS groups in Anbar province that gained more support from local civilians in their fight against government troops at the beginning of 2014. Currently the country is deeply divided and civilians live in deep fear of what the future may hold. PAX is currently in the Kurdish Autonomous Region, meeting with its partners and counterparts to assess the situation.

It is difficult to get facts on what is happening in areas currently occupied by the ISIS groups such as Mosul, as both sides of the divide use media as a weapon to terrorize, demonise and mobilise the population. However, it is clear that army and police personnel have been targeted and killed. In addition, rumours abound that ISIS is in possession of the names of key activists and civil society leaders in addition to having a database of military and police personnel and are actively checking people leaving these areas to see if they are on the list. Most civil society activists have left the cities of Fallujah and Mosul, fearing reprisals by ISIS and affiliated groups. Moderate Sunni imams in Mosul are reportedly also killed by ISIS fighters as they refuse to spread ISIS messages during prayers.

At the same time, activists from Baghdad report fear of Shiite militias as Sunni's in the city are murdered, such as a Sunni sheikh two days ago. Human rights and peace activists have been facing threats from radical Shiite groups on and off for years, and fear that the current lawlessness will result in direct targeted killings, while these Shiite groups are mobilising their militias.

PAX calls upon the international community to support Iraqi civil society in their humanitarian relief efforts and their work to mediate sectarian tensions. In addition, the international community should continue to call for the protection of civilians and human rights defenders by all fighting parties.

BACKGROUND:

Anbar uprising

Demonstrations against the Maliki government, calling for equal treatment, the end of discrimination and arrests of Sunnis, was met by the Iraqi government with deadly violence in April 2013. This resulted in further escalation and support of armed resistance. Residents of Fallujah told PAX that they are afraid to transfer the control of the city back to the Iraqi government, stating that the local population had collaborated with US forces before to defeat Al-Qaida in 2008, and they could defeat ISIS now, but they have lost trust in the Iraqi government. This trust was further undermined by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, resulting over 300 civilians killed, 80 of them women and children, according to the commissioner of the Independent Committee of Human Rights, which put further fuel to the fire.

Footage of ISIS parading through Fallujah and Abu Ghraib with heavy weaponry and armored vehicles appeared online in March, already demonstrating its military capacity and was an indicator of their rise to power.

Mosul and beyond

After the swift takeover of Mosul, coordinated with local former Baath members and Iraqi army generals that switched sides, ISIS was able to move fast down south without significant resistance from the Iraqi army. Refugees from Tikrit told PAX that foreign fighters dominated ISIS presence, many of them from Syria, Sudan, Saudi-Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Local Sunni tribesmen reportedly supported ISIS in their take-over, casting new light on their success. The violence used by both the Iraqi army and ISIS in response to the take-over, as well as lack of water and electricity lead to an exodus of civilians from Tikrit to Baghdad and the Kurdish region, with reports of children and elderly dying of dehydration on their way. UN agencies and international aid organisations are



struggling to organize an adequate response to this humanitarian crisis, leaving many internally displaced persons stranded and waiting shelter, food and water.

Any possible US intervention would push Sunni civilians into the direction of support for extremist groups currently fighting the government, stated some of PAX contacts in Anbar and Diyala, as the US has always supported prime-minister Maliki's government, both on a political and military level.

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ADDED ON 02-07-2014

Minorities at risk of being crushed between fighting parties

As many as 40 000 Christians have left their villages since last week, as ISIS moved north within the Ninewa plain and fighting erupted with the Kurdish Peshmerga forces around the villages of Qaraqosh (also known as Hamdaniyya) and Karemlesh. The Bishop of Qaraqosh remained in the city, with 4 priests and around a 100 people, and continued efforts to negotiate with ISIS. The BBC reported from Qaraqosh on 29 June stating that although ISIS is only 5KM away, the city is still in Christian hands. Meanwhile, the Shabak community in Ninewa is at severe risk. Although most minority community villages receive some protection from the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Shabak villages are left virtually unprotected. The Shabak are a predominately Shiite ethnic group. In the last few days, villages like Amrkan, Krmelc and Kokjla, as well as other neighborhoods within the city of Mosul itself, have seen frequent attacks by armed groups — some Shabaks have been kidnapped and killed because of their faith. Large numbers of Shabak families have moved to the Kurdistan region or to the Nineveh Plain, where other minorities are enjoying the protection of Peshmerga forces, but many other Shabak have chosen to stay in their areas so as not to face the poor living conditions of IDPs. Others are stuck at security checkpoints waiting for approval by the authorities to enter the Kurdistan region.

Since 2003, there has been an ongoing political dispute about the affiliation of the Shabak. The official position of the Kurds is that the Shabak are Kurdish, but many Shabak deny this. They never considered their areas to be disputed territories between Ninawa governorate and KRG, and rejected the idea of joining the Kurdistan Regional Government. As a result, since the fall of Mosul to insurgents, and after the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army from Mosul, the Shabak minority has become one of the most vulnerable groups in the north of Iraq.

For years, identity politics have been used to manipulate the small minorities living on the Ninewa plain- disputed territory between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Central Government. Not only Shabak are pressured to affiliate with one side or another, PAX received similar reports from Yezidi's (who are asked to identify as either Arabs or Kurds) and Christians, who are pressured to become members of Kurdish political parties in exchange for protection. The current crisis increases the pressure on minorities to choose sides and attempts to manipulate their identities increase. The international community should be aware of these local politics that are part of larger power plays for land and influence, and call on all sides, including the KRG, to protect all citizens in the areas they control, regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation.

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