



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Iraq: Opposition to the government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

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Executive summary

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a semi-autonomous region with its own president, prime minister, cabinet and parliament, although it remains subject to the Constitution of Federal Iraq. Political power has long been dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which remain the principal political actors in the region.

Available evidence indicates that political opposition continues to operate within the KRI. Opposition parties participate in elections, hold parliamentary seats and can publicly criticise the ruling parties. However, sources indicate that opposition politicians and activists can at times face harassment, detention and, in some cases physical abuse by security forces.

While freedom of assembly is formally recognised in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), protests, particularly those involving criticism of the authorities, unpaid salaries, corruption, or public services have at times been subject to restrictions, arrests and security intervention. Sources reported the use of force against demonstrators, including allegations of beatings, tear gas, arbitrary detention and, in some instances, injuries or deaths during protest-related incidents. However, available evidence indicates that these incidents occurred against the backdrop of a significantly larger number of protests that went ahead without interventions by security forces.

Journalists and media workers in the KRI, particularly those reporting on corruption, governance, human rights issues or protests, may face intimidation, threats, harassment, arbitrary detention, physical assault, prosecution and restrictions on their reporting activities. Numerous incidents reported between 2024 and 2026 involved journalists being detained while covering protests or politically sensitive events, assaulted by security personnel, threatened following critical reporting or prosecuted in connection with their work.

Supporters, members and individuals engaged in low-level political activities on behalf of political parties in the KRI are, in general, unlikely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state.

However, political opposition figures, journalists, high-profile activists and outspoken critics of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), are likely to face adverse attention from the authorities or party-affiliated security actors. However, available evidence indicates that this can take a variety of different forms and does not demonstrate that treatment is sufficiently serious, widespread or systematic to establish a generalised real risk. Accordingly, the onus remains on a person who falls within one of these profiles to show that they would be at risk of persecution or serious harm based on their specific circumstances.

Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to obtain protection. In general, a person with a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state is unlikely to be able to internally relocate to escape that risk.

Where a claim based on a fear of the state is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. All cases must be considered on their individual facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate they face persecution or serious harm.

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Assessment

Section updated: 23 September 2026

About the assessment

This section considers relevant evidence – including [country information](#), refugee and human rights law and policy, and case law – to assess **whether, in general:**

- a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution/serious harm by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) because of their actual or perceived political opinion or activities
- the state (or quasi state bodies) can provide effective protection
- internal relocation is possible to avoid persecution or serious harm
- if refused, a claim is likely or not to be certified as ‘clearly unfounded’ under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Each case must be considered on its individual facts.

For details on how CPIT makes its assessments, gathers and presents country information, its research methodology and disclaimers and explainers on coverage, source selection, maps, translations and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in developing CPIT products, see [About country policy and information notes](#).

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1. Material facts, credibility and other checks

1.1.1 Decision makers must:

- assess credibility (see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#))
- check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the Asylum Instruction on [Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- consider making an international biometric data-sharing check, when one has not already been undertaken (see [Biometric data-sharing process \(Migration 5 biometric data-sharing process\)](#)).
- consider language analysis testing, where available, in cases where there are doubts surrounding a person’s claimed place of origin (see the Asylum Instruction on [Language Analysis](#)).

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – Start of section

1.1.2 The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

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2. Exclusion

- 2.1.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons to apply one (or more) of the exclusion clauses. Each case must be considered on its individual facts.
- 2.1.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection, which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status.
- 2.1.3 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

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- 2.1.4 The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.
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3. Convention reason(s)

- 3.1.1 Actual or imputed political opinion.
- 3.1.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.
- 3.1.3 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds, see the Asylum Instruction, [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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4. Risk

- 4.1.1 Supporters, members and individuals engaged in low-level political activities on behalf or in support of political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are, in general, unlikely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise.
- 4.1.2 However, political opposition figures, journalists, high-profile activists and outspoken critics of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), are likely to face adverse attention from the authorities or party-affiliated security actors. However, available evidence indicates that this can take a variety of different forms and does not demonstrate that treatment is sufficiently serious, widespread or systematic to establish a generalised real risk. Accordingly, the onus remains on a person who falls within one of these profiles to show that they would be at risk of persecution or serious harm based on their specific circumstances.
- 4.1.3 The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a semi-autonomous region with its own president, prime minister, cabinet and parliament, although it remains

subject to the Constitution of Federal Iraq. Political power has long been dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which remain the principal political actors in the region. Political leadership within both parties remains largely concentrated within two prominent families: the Barzani family, which leads the KDP and is based in Erbil, and the Talabani family, which leads the PUK and is based in Sulaymaniyah (see [Legal context](#), [Political system](#) and [The Kurdistan Democratic Party \(KDP\) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan \(PUK\) – the ruling parties](#)).

- 4.1.4 The KDP and PUK have governed the region through a power-sharing arrangement since 2006, despite periods of tension and a history of armed conflict. Sources describe KRI politics as characterised by rivalry and competition between the two parties, which maintain distinct areas of influence and extensive patronage networks across political, economic, security, media and public institutions. The most recent parliamentary elections took place in October 2024, with the KDP remaining the largest party with 39 seats and the PUK the second largest with 23, although neither party secured a parliamentary majority. Sources indicate that relations between the KDP and PUK deteriorated following the elections, contributing to a prolonged deadlock over power-sharing arrangements and delaying the formation of a new regional government. While reporting from August 2026 suggested that negotiations had resumed and some progress had been made, no new Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) had been formed at the time of writing (see [Political system](#) and [The Kurdistan Democratic Party \(KDP\) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan \(PUK\) – the ruling parties, October 2024 Parliamentary Elections](#)).
- 4.1.5 Available evidence indicates that political opposition continues to operate within the KRI and that some level of criticism of the authorities is tolerated. Opposition parties participate in elections, hold parliamentary seats and publicly criticise the ruling parties. However, sources indicate that opposition politicians and activists have at times occasionally faced harassment, detention and, in some reported cases, physical abuse by security forces. Sources have also reported restrictions on the activities of some opposition parties and media outlets, while other sources documented arrests, short-term detentions and alleged mistreatment of activists linked to opposition parties. Several incidents were reportedly linked to criticism of the authorities, allegations of corruption, or participation in protests (see [Opposition politicians](#)).
- 4.1.6 During 2025, several prominent opposition figures were arrested or prosecuted, including Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabany of the People's Front, Shaswar Abdulwahid of the New Generation Movement and Aram Qadr of the National Coalition. Authorities maintained that these arrests and prosecutions were undertaken on criminal or security-related grounds, while supporters alleged that they were politically motivated and formed part of a broader pattern of repression. Arrests of political opposition figures continued into 2026. Sources also reported pressure on opposition campaigning, alongside concerns about due process and judiciary independence (see [The New Generation Movement \(NGM\)](#), [Other parties](#) and [Opposition politicians](#)).

- 4.1.7 Sources indicate that while freedom of assembly is formally recognised in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), protests, particularly those involving criticism of the authorities, unpaid salaries, corruption or public services, have at times been subject to restrictions, arrests and security intervention. One source suggested that there are differences between KDP and PUK controlled areas, with protests in KDP controlled areas often suppressed unless previously authorised by the party, whereas the PUK more frequently permits protests but may prevent or disperse them if they continue for an extended period of time. Reports from EUAA, Amnesty International and other organisations describe cases between 2024 and 2026 in which activists, opposition politicians, teachers, journalists and protest organisers were arrested, detained, prosecuted or dispersed by security forces. Several sources also reported the use of force against demonstrators, including allegations of beatings, tear gas, arbitrary detention and, in some instances, injuries or deaths during protest-related incidents. The authorities generally justified such actions on security or public order grounds, while critics alleged they were intended to suppress dissent (see [Protesters](#)).
- 4.1.8 However, available evidence indicates that interventions by authorities occurred in a minority of protest events. ACLED recorded 510 protests in the KRI between August 2024 and August 2026, of which 498 were classified as ‘peaceful protests’, 9 as ‘protests with intervention’ and 3 as ‘protests involving excessive force’. While sources report a number of incidents involving the arrest, detention or mistreatment of protesters, available evidence indicates that these incidents occurred against the backdrop of a significantly larger number of protests that proceeded without intervention. While critics of the authorities may face adverse treatment in some circumstances, particularly during politically sensitive protests, the evidence does not indicate that protesters are routinely subject to mistreatment (see [Protesters](#)).
- 4.1.9 Sources indicate that journalists and media workers in the KRI, particularly those reporting on issues such as corruption, governance, human rights issues or protests, may face intimidation, threats, harassment, arbitrary detention, physical assault, prosecution and restrictions on their reporting activities. Human rights organisations and media watchdogs have reported that security forces, judicial authorities and politically connected individuals have used criminal complaints, defamation laws, national security provisions and telecommunications legislation against journalists, while some media outlets have reportedly been raided or closed, and equipment confiscated (see [Journalists](#)).
- 4.1.10 Numerous incidents reported between 2024 and 2026 involved journalists being detained while covering protests or politically sensitive events, assaulted by security personnel, threatened following critical reporting, or prosecuted in connection with their work. Several sources also reported concerns regarding due process, the use of additional charges to prolong detention and pressure on journalists and their families. Cases involving journalists such as Sherwan Sherwani and Qareman Shukri have attracted criticism from international human rights organisations (see [Journalists](#)).
- 4.1.11 While estimates of the scale of violations differ between monitoring organisations, a range of sources describe a continuing pattern of arrests, intimidation, harassment and restrictions on media activity. Available

evidence indicates that journalists engaged in critical, investigative or politically sensitive reporting are more likely to attract adverse attention from authorities or politically connected actors than those reporting on less sensitive issues (see [Journalists](#)).

4.1.12 Each case must be considered on its individual facts.

4.1.13 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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5. Protection

5.1.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to obtain protection.

5.1.2 For further guidance on assessing state protection, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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6. Internal relocation

6.1.1 In general, a person with a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state is unlikely to be able to internally relocate to escape that risk.

6.1.2 For further guidance on internal relocation and factors to consider, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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7. Certification

7.1.1 Where a claim based on a fear of the state is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

7.1.2 Each case must be considered on its individual facts.

7.1.3 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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Country information

About the country information

The COI provides the basis for the assessment and the executive summary. Decision makers must use relevant COI as the evidential basis for decisions.

The cut-off date for COI included in this note is **22 September 2026**.

For details on how CPIT gathers and presents country information, its research methodology and disclaimers and explainers on coverage, source selection, maps, translations and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in developing CPIT products, see [About country policy and information notes](#).

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8. Legal context

8.1 Note on application of Constitution and Penal Code in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

- 8.1.1 According to Article 141 of the Constitution of Iraq, legislation, government decisions, court decisions and contracts are ‘considered valid unless they are amended or annulled pursuant to the laws of the region of Kurdistan by the competent entity in the region, provided that they do not contradict with the Constitution.’¹
- 8.1.2 In March 2026, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) published an article entitled ‘Overview of Iraqi laws’ which stated: ‘It should be noted that not all articles of the Penal Code apply in the Kurdistan Region. Article 121(1) of the Iraqi Constitution gives the regional parliament the right (with exceptions) to enact its own laws. On this basis, the Kurdistan parliament has already amended some articles of the Penal Code that are only valid within the region.’²
- 8.1.3 For the full text of Iraq’s Constitution, see [Constitution of the Republic of Iraq](#) (unofficial translation).

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8.2 Relevant laws

- 8.2.1 In May 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report on freedom of expression in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (the May 2021 UNAMI/OHCHR report). The report included a section on relevant laws which stated:

‘The Iraqi Penal Code (Law No 111/1969) ... prohibits “defamation” and provides that anyone found guilty of the offence is punishable “by detention plus a fine, or one of those penalties”. It is an aggravating circumstance under the law if the defamation is published in a newspaper, publication or other press medium. No offence is committed under the Penal Code if the published material is directed at a public official or is “connected with the office or employment of the aggrieved person”, if the person accused of

¹ Republic of Iraq, [Constitution of the Republic of Iraq](#), 15 October 2005

² ACCORD, [Overview of Iraqi Laws](#), March 2026

defamation “establishes the truth of all imputations made”.³

- 8.2.2 The same source summarised Article 2 of Law No. 6 of 2008 (the ‘Law to Prevent the Misuse of Telecommunications Equipment in the Kurdistan Region’) as follows:

‘Article 2 of the Law to Prevent the Misuse of Telecommunications Equipment imposes up to 5 years imprisonment for “misusing” a cell phone or any other communication equipment, email, or internet by disseminating threats, slander, insult, or misinformation, disclosing private conversations, or sharing images contrary to public morals, or taking other action that might violate integrity or honour or incite a crime or an immoral act. None of the acts which constitute a crime under Article 2 are defined in further detail.’⁴

- 8.2.3 CPIT was unable to find an English translation of this law. The full Kurdish text is available on the website of the [Kurdish Media Watchdog Organization \(CHMK\)](#).

- 8.2.4 In May 2024, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) published a COI report on Iraq (the May 2024 EUAA report). For the sections relevant to this CPIN, the report covered the period from January 2022 to March 2024. Commenting on Iraq in general (not specifically the KRI), the report stated, citing various sources:

‘Article 38 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, press, printing, advertisement, media and publication, freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration, “in a way that does not violate public order and morality”. Despite such provisions, some laws inherited from the previous era and still in force in Iraq are used by authorities to restrict these same rights. Sources noted that Article 226 of the Penal Code, in particular, has been used by Iraqi authorities to suppress dissent and critical voices in the country. Civil society organisations stated that it is unclear what can be deemed as an “insult” against authorities, as stipulated in the aforementioned article and that the “broad and vague language” used in the Penal Code allows Iraqi authorities to target activists for their opinions.’⁵

- 8.2.5 In October 2025, the EUAA published a COI report on Iraq (the October 2025 EUAA report), covering the period 1 August 2024 – 1 August 2025. Commenting on Iraq in general (not specifically the KRI), the report stated, citing various sources:

‘Iraq’s Penal Code contains several vaguely worded provisions that restrict freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, allowing authorities to prosecute and arrest individuals for expressing their views. For example, Article 403 penalises material that “violates public integrity or decency” without defining these terms, while Article 434 criminalises defamation and insult. These provisions are frequently used to deter criticism of powerful political and religious figures, particularly targeting independent journalists.’⁶

Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT was unable to find information indicating that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has annulled or amended the above Articles of the Penal Code.

³ UNAMI & OHCHR, [Freedom of Expression in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (page 8), 12 May 2021

⁴ UNAMI & OHCHR, [Freedom of Expression in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (page 8), 12 May 2021

⁵ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 13), May 2024

⁶ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 87), October 2025

8.2.6 For the full text of the Penal Code, including all amendments up to March 2010, see [Iraq: Penal Code](#) (unofficial translation).

8.2.7 Article 2 of Law No. 35 of 2007 (the 'Press Law in the Kurdistan Region') states:

'Article (2):

'First. The press is free and no censorship shall be imposed on it. Freedom of expression and publication shall be guaranteed to every citizen within the framework of respect for personal rights, liberties and the privacy of individuals in accordance with the law...

'Second. A journalist may obtain from diverse sources, in accordance with the law, information of importance to citizens and with relevance to the public interest.

'Third: In case of a legal suit, a journalist may keep secret the sources of information and news relevant to the suits brought before the courts unless the court decides otherwise.

'Fourth: Every natural or legal person shall have the right to possess and issue journals in accordance with the provisions of this Law.

'Fifth: No journal shall be closed down or confiscated.

'... Article (7):

'First: A journalist is free and there is no power over him in the performance of his work except the law.

'Second: The opinion given or information disseminated by a journalist may not be used as a reason to cause injury to his person or violate his rights.

'... Fifth: Anyone who insults or injures a journalist as a result of the performance of his work shall be punished with the punishments decided for those who injure government employees during regular working hours or as a result of the performance of his work.

'... Article (8): No crime has been committed if the journalist has published or written about the work of an official or a person entrusted with a public service or a public representative if what he has published does not go beyond the affairs of the profession or of the public or representative service on the condition that he has provided proof supporting what he has ascribed to them.'⁷

8.2.8 For the full text of this law, see [Press Law in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (translated by the Kurdistan Region Presidency).

8.2.9 Article 2 of Law No. 11 of 2013 (the 'Rights to Access Information Law in the Region of Kurdistan, Iraq') states:

"The present law aims to do the following:

'First: Enabling the citizens of the region to exercise their right in accessing information with public and private institutions, according to the provisions of the present law.

'Second: Supporting the transparency and effective participation principles

⁷ Kurdistan Region Presidency, [Press Law in the Kurdistan Region](#), September 2008

for ensuring democracy.

‘Third: Ensuring a better environment for freedom of expression and publication.’⁸

8.2.10 For the full text of this law, see [Right to Access Information Law in the Region of Kurdistan, Iraq](#), published in English by CHMK.

8.2.11 According to a report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), ‘Law no.11/2010 For the Organization of Demonstrations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq states that all protests require advance permission from the Ministry of Interior or in some cases other local authorities.’⁹

8.2.12 CPIT was unable to find an English translation of Law No. 11 of 2010. The [full Kurdish text](#) of the law is available on the Kurdistan Parliament website.

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9. Brief history of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

9.1.1 In December 2025, the House of Commons Library published a report entitled ‘Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Introductory profile’ (the December 2025 House of Commons Library report) which stated, citing various sources:

‘The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is an autonomous region situated in northern Iraq. Under the country’s 2005 constitution, it is the country’s only regional government and has its own regional presidency, ministers and parliament. Its politics are dominated by two Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), both of whom maintain their own separate security forces, the Peshmerga.

‘While the KRI’s status is recognised in Iraq’s constitution, there has been tension with the federal government over internal borders, oil exports, and the federal budget. In 2017, the KRI voted in favour of independence in a referendum, though this was rejected by the federal government and opposed by foreign governments, including the United States, the UK, Turkey and Iran.

‘While the KRI has been relatively stable compared to the rest of Iraq in the past two decades, the rise of Islamic State/Daesh from 2014 resulted in extensive violence across the region. Turkey and Iran have also conducted military action in the KRI, targeting Kurdish groups they say have been linked to instability in their respective countries (both having Kurdish minorities).

‘... Since the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, there have been intermittent attempts and revolts by Kurdish communities seeking to establish a separate state.

‘In Iraq, some limited self-rule for the Kurdish northeast was first announced in 1970. However, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has its immediate origins in the 1990s. This came after a period of instability and repression under Saddam Hussein.

‘In the 1980s, attacks coordinated by the Hussein regime against Kurdish and other groups killed and displaced thousands of civilians. This included the Anfal campaign of 1987-88, in which chemical weapons were deployed

⁸ CHMK, [Right to Access Information Law in the Region of Kurdistan](#), May 2013

⁹ HRW, [Kurdistan Region of Iraq: 32 Arrested at Peaceful Protest](#), 16 March 2017

against Kurds. In 2013, the UK House of Commons resolved that this constituted genocide. No vote was taken. The government does not recognise the atrocities as genocide.

'In the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Iraq's defeat in the First Gulf War of 1990 to 1991, UN Security Council resolution 688 (1991) demanded an end to Iraqi state repression of the Kurds and other groups. The international coalition later established a no-fly zone across northern Iraq.

'This allowed the creation of a de-facto area of Kurdish autonomy. In 1992, legislative elections were organised by leading Kurdish figures and a regional assembly and government were established.

'... Following the US-invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein, a new constitution was declared in 2005. Article 117 formally established the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Iraq's only federal region. Article 140 provides for laws passed by regional authorities since 1992 to remain in force and sets out a roadmap to establish Iraq's internal borders. One particularly sensitive area under dispute has been Kirkuk, where there are large oil fields. The determination of the region's border remains unresolved.'¹⁰

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10. Political context

10.1 Political system

10.1.1 Citing various sources, the December 2025 House of Commons Library report stated:

'The Kurdistan Region of Iraq does not have its own constitution. A series of laws establish its judicial, legislative and executive branches. Under the federal constitution, the KRI has substantial autonomy over many areas, though the management and sharing of oil revenue is intended to be shared.

'Regional President

'The regional President is elected by the parliament and is the head of government and the executive. They can serve for two, four-year terms. The presidents must ratify laws before they came [sic] into force, though the parliament can overrule any revisions.

'The current President is Nechirvan Barzani, who had previously served as Prime Minister, and who took office in 2019. He is a member of the KDP ...

'Cabinet

'The region's Prime Minister and cabinet are voted for by the parliament. Some seats are reserved for women and minority faith and belief groups. The Prime Minister is Masrour Barzani, from the KDP. He took office in 2019. He is the son of the former president, Masoud Barzani. Cabinet seats have previously been shared 50:50 between the PUK and KDP, but the KDP opposes continuation of the ratio due to a greater gap in parliamentary seats.

¹⁰ House of Commons Library, [Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#) (page 1-4), 5 December 2025

‘Regional parliament

‘The KRI parliament has 100 members, a minimum of 30% of which must be women. It is elected for four-year terms. However, elections in 2024 had been delayed for two years. Factors for the delay included opposition to a ruling of the Iraqi federal supreme court that, among other measures, reduced the number of seats from 111 to 100, and PUK-KDP tensions.

‘The Parliament is responsible for legislation, appointing the president, giving and withdrawing confidence from ministers, and approving the budget.’¹¹

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10.2 The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – the ruling parties

10.2.1 In January 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published a report entitled ‘International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Republic of Iraq, Update I’ (the January 2024 UNHCR report) which stated, citing various sources: ‘Despite the unified administration under the KRG, politics in the KR-I are characterized by the historic rivalry between two political parties with distinct geographic regions of influence: the KDP, controlled by the Barzani family, and the PUK, controlled by the Talabani family. The parties are frequently at odds over the distribution of political power and resources.’¹²

10.2.2 In June 2024, US-based think tank¹³ the Middle East Institute (MEI) published an article by Winthrop Rodgers, an associate fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House¹⁴, entitled ‘No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region’ (the June 2024 MEI article). The article stated:

‘Politics in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region is centered on the ruling duopoly of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both parties wield significant influence over the administration of state institutions, the economy, and the media. Tens of thousands of Peshmerga, security forces, and Asayish are at their disposal and hundreds of thousands of public servants are part of their patronage networks. Despite these advantages, they are deeply unpopular with wide swathes of the population, who view them as corrupt, incompetent, and oppressive. An Arab Barometer survey released in 2022 found that 63% of respondents in the Kurdistan Region had “no trust at all” in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

‘... The KDP and the PUK control the security forces — and are not shy about using violence and intimidation to enforce their political will — and oversee pervasive patronage networks that shape political behavior in insidious ways. The ruling parties largely control the media, with notable exceptions like New Generation-owned NRT, and are deeply embedded in state institutions like the judiciary.’¹⁵

10.2.3 The December 2025 House of Commons Library report stated, citing various

¹¹ House of Commons Library, [Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#) (page 6-7), 5 December 2025

¹² UNHCR, [International Protection Considerations with Regard ...](#) (page 20), 30 January 2024

¹³ MEI, [About Us](#), no date

¹⁴ Chatham House, [Winthrop M. Rodgers](#), no date

¹⁵ MEI, [No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region](#), 20 June 2024

sources:

'At first, the two [the KDP and the PUK] governed in coalition, with equal representation in the assembly and government. However, tensions between them increased and they fought a civil war from 1994 to 1997. Their areas of control remain the same as today: the KDP control Erbil and Dohuk and the PUK hold Suleimaniyya and Kirkuk ... The PUK and KDP maintain separate militaries (known as the Peshmerga ...). They resumed sitting in the same regional parliament from 2002.

'... Kurdish politics continues to be dominated by the KDP and PUK, who split in 1975. Each maintain their own armed wings and areas of influence in the KRI. The KDP leadership has been continually held by the Barzani family. The group has been led by Mustafa Barzani from 1946 to 1979, who was succeeded by his son Masoud Barzani (the KRI president until 2017). Masoud's son is prime minister while his nephew is president. While coming from the same family, there are tensions in how power is shared within it.

'The PUK has been dominated by the Talabani family, with Jalal Talabani, Iraqi President from 2005 to 2014, leading the group from its foundation in 1975 to his death in 2017. Co-leadership was later established between Talabani's son and nephew, Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabani. However, in 2021 Lahur left and formed a new party. In 2025, he was arrested on charges of criminal conspiracy. Some violence accompanied the arrest. [For further information on the arrest of Lahur Talabani, see [Politicians from opposition parties](#).]

'While the KDP and PUK govern in cooperation, there have been tensions and past armed conflict. Differences include over approaches to achieving independence, relations with the federal government, control over revenue and local political office, and how to continue power sharing, given the relative PUK decline in elections. Analysts also note that the parties' patronage networks are found across KRI politics, media, business, security and public services, often funded by oil revenue. They suggest that the region remains far from united as a result, being divided between these two patronage networks.'¹⁶

10.2.4 In April 2026, Erbil-based media outlet¹⁷ Rudaw published an article on relations between the KDP and the PUK, which stated:

'Political relations between Kurdistan Region's two ruling parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) - have effectively collapsed, a senior PUK official said Sunday. This comes amid a continuing impasse over forming the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) next cabinet.

"Currently, there is no political relationship between the PUK and the KDP," Luqman Wardi, a member of the PUK leadership, told Rudaw's Sangar Abdu Irahman on Sunday, adding that: "There is no dialogue, except when an international or regional power intervenes between us."

'The political deadlock between the two parties comes as they have failed to form the Region's tenth cabinet, even 18 months after the elections were

¹⁶ House of Commons Library, [Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#) (page 5-6), 5 December 2025

¹⁷ Rudaw, [About us](#), no date

held.

‘The Kurdistan Region held its parliamentary elections in October 2024, in which the KDP won 39 of the 100 seats and the PUK secured 23. With no party achieving a majority, negotiations to form a new cabinet have stalled for months, largely due to disagreements over key political posts and governing arrangements.’¹⁸

- 10.2.5 The KDP and PUK historically maintained separate party-aligned Peshmerga forces, known respectively as Unit 80 and Unit 70. In September 2026, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced that these forces had been formally unified under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and reorganised into two Regional Commands. However, reporting indicates that the new commands continue to reflect the former KDP-PUK division in their leadership, geographical areas of operation and aspects of their administration^{19 20 21}.
- 10.2.6 For more information see [October 2024 Parliamentary Elections](#).
- 10.2.7 For further information on the KDP and PUK and their security forces, see the CPIN [Iraq: Actors of protection](#).

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10.3 The Gorran (Change) Movement

10.3.1 The June 2024 MEI article stated:

‘The most consequential opposition party in the Kurdistan Region during the post-2003 era is the Change Movement, usually known by its Kurdish name Gorran. It was founded in 2009 by Nawshirwan Mustafa, who had been a major figure in the PUK for decades. The new party declared that its explicit goal was to dismantle the KDP-PUK duopoly and bring about constitutional changes that would establish the KRG as a parliamentary democracy, in contrast to the presidential system favored by the KDP. It also promised to combat corruption and unify and depoliticize the Peshmerga and the security forces.

‘The new party sparked hope for many people that reform was possible. It quickly drew interest from across the population, with its support concentrated in Sulaymaniyah city. Several months after its establishment, it contested an election for the regional assembly in July 2009. While the KDP and the PUK — running on a joint list — won 30 and 29 seats respectively, out of the total of 111, Gorran managed a remarkable campaign and won 25 seats. This gave it a major platform to pursue its agenda, even if it could be overruled in the Kurdistan Parliament by the duopoly parties’ majority.

‘Later, Gorran earned some criticism for not standing more closely with anti-corruption protesters during the months-long demonstrations in 2011, but maintained its upstart reputation ahead of the 2013 elections. In those polls, the movement became the second-largest party in parliament: The KDP won 38 seats, Gorran took 24, and the PUK was shunted into third with 18 seats.

‘Somewhat paradoxically, this posed a major problem for Gorran and one

¹⁸ Rudaw, [No political ties remain between KDP, PUK amid government ...](#), 26 April 2026

¹⁹ Shafaq News, [KRI unifies Peshmerga Units 70, 80](#), 10 September 2026

²⁰ Shafaq News, [Kurdistan Region unifies Peshmerga ...](#), 22 September 2026

²¹ The National Context, [Peshmerga Unification Codifies the KDP-PUK ...](#), 22 September 2026

that has haunted it ever since. It decided to abandon its opposition stance and go into government with the KDP and the PUK. It took over the speakership of the Kurdistan Parliament and supplied ministers to the eighth cabinet. In part, this decision was made in order to take the reins at the Peshmerga ministry and work on one of its major policy goals. Ultimately, Gorran proved ineffective at achieving anything substantive and crashed out of the cabinet amid a major dispute with the KDP in 2015 over the extension of Masoud Barzani's term as president.

'At this point, the party began to lose steam, winning just 12 seats in the 2018 elections for the Kurdistan Parliament and re-entering government with the KDP and the PUK. Its supporters began to feel that it had been co-opted into the system it proposed to dismantle. The party was subsequently wiped out at the federal level in the 2021 elections for the Iraqi parliament. Currently, the party is wracked with internal disagreements and disputes over its leadership structure. Its elected officials have largely left the party and joined new opposition groups. Heading into the next elections, it looks like an utterly spent force.

'It is hard to overstate how disappointing this has been for opposition politics in the Kurdistan Region. Gorran's trajectory dashed the hopes of many voters and produced deep wounds that have hurt not just the party itself, but all other opposition groups. If Gorran, with its unique leader and widespread support, could not achieve its goals, then it seems to most people that the other groups have little hope of succeeding where it failed.'²²

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10.4 The New Generation Movement (NGM)

10.4.1 The June 2024 MEI article stated:

'The New Generation Movement, known in Kurdish as Naway Nwe, was founded in early 2018 by Shaswar Abdulwahid, a real estate developer and owner of prominent Kurdish satellite TV channel NRT ... Abdulwahid was already well-known as a result of NRT's outspoken coverage that frequently criticized the KDP and the PUK. During the 2017 independence referendum, he again played the role of foil by backing the "No For Now" campaign, which argued that Kurdish independence is the ultimate goal but the timing of the vote was ill-judged. While the campaign failed to make much headway — 92% of voters supported "yes" — the experience encouraged Abdulwahid to jump into electoral politics.

'New Generation participated in both the May 2018 federal elections and the September 2018 Kurdistan Parliament elections, winning four and eight seats respectively. However, disagreements between Abdulwahid and the party's newly elected MPs in Baghdad and Erbil quickly arose. Eventually, none of the MPs elected to the federal Council of Representatives and just three of the MPs in the Kurdistan Parliament would remain a part of the party. In the October 2021 federal elections, the party rallied and won nine seats, mostly by taking advantage of the collapse in support for Gorran.

'Seven years after its establishment, it is unclear what New Generation has accomplished. Its policy program is vague at best and, historically, it has relied on petty stunts to attract media attention. For the most part, the party's

²² MEI, [No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq's Kurdistan Region](#), 20 June 2024

stance is reactive, following whatever story is angering the public at a given moment (public sector salaries, gasoline prices, migration, water shortages, etc.), rather than driving the conversation, which seems odd for an organization with a prominent TV station. Strategically, its leadership is cognizant that voters roundly punished Gorran for working with the KDP and the PUK. As a result, Abdulwahid almost obsessively turns down opportunities to engage pragmatically with other parties — both ruling or opposition — who then respond in kind by ignoring New Generation.

‘Despite this poor track record, New Generation will likely end up as the largest opposition party in the next elections. The deficiencies of the other parties are enough to make it the most attractive option in an underwhelming field. Few of its supporters believe that it will make a substantial impact both because it has not articulated a coherent vision for the Kurdistan Region and its leadership is deeply mistrustful. There are decent, principled figures within the party, but it is evident to most voters and observers that New Generation is not the real deal.’²³

10.4.2 In June 2026, Rudaw reported:

‘The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) will sign a “strategic” agreement with the New Generation Movement in the coming days and is seeking half of the cabinet positions in the next Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), PUK leader Bafel Talabani announced on Monday.

‘... Talabani said the agreement with New Generation is part of broader efforts to strengthen cooperation among Kurdish political parties.

‘The remarks come as Kurdish parties continue negotiations over the formation of the next KRG ...

“We are ready to negotiate based on numbers. We are 39 to 39, and we are demanding half of the government,” he said.

‘The PUK won 23 seats in the Kurdistan parliamentary election. Together with the New Generation Movement’s 15 seats, the bloc controls 38 seats. Both parties have yet to identify a 39th seat, though it is believed to be the Christian quota seat in Sulaimani province. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) also secured 39 seats.

‘... The New Generation Movement emerged as the largest opposition party in the Kurdistan Region following the latest elections.’²⁴

10.4.3 For more information see [October 2024 Parliamentary Elections](#).

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10.5 Islamist parties

10.5.1 The June 2024 MEI article stated:

‘The Kurdistan Region has always had a significant Islamist movement, which stands in contrast to the relative secularism of the KDP and the PUK. The movement largely operates at a social and grassroots level, but is also active in electoral politics. There have been several Islamist parties, which have splintered, merged, and reorganized themselves over time. At present, there are two main Islamist parties: the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and

²³ MEI, [No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region](#), 20 June 2024

²⁴ Rudaw, [PUK says to sign 'strategic' deal with NGM, demand half of KRG cabinet](#), 1 June 2026

the Kurdistan Justice Group (KJG).

'The KIU, which is known in Kurdish as Yekgirtu, was founded in 1994 and is led by Salahaddin Bahaaddin. It is particularly strong in Duhok governorate. In the 2021 elections for the Iraqi parliament, Jamal Kocher, a KIU member running as an independent, won 56,702 votes. This was the most of any individual candidate across the whole country that cycle. The party currently has four seats in Baghdad and had five seats in the last Kurdistan Parliament. Some observers have linked the KIU with the Muslim Brotherhood.

'The KJG was formed in 2001 by Ali Bapir. It used to be known as the Kurdistan Islamic Group before a rebranding in 2021 and is referred to in Kurdish as Komal. It currently has one seat in Baghdad and had seven in the last Kurdistan Parliament. The KJG tends to be more socially conservative and outspoken than the KIU.

'On their own and collectively, the Islamist parties do not represent a significant threat to the ruling duopoly. Instead, their approach emphasizes building support within society for Islamist attitudes. For example, both parties have proposed and supported measures that attack the LGBTQ+ community. However, they seem largely uninterested in seeking higher-level positions within the government beyond a few seats in parliament. By doing so, they maintain a seat at the broad table of governance in the Kurdistan Region and the ability to influence the ruling parties, while avoiding the responsibilities of actual governing. This pragmatic approach starkly contrasts with New Generation.'²⁵

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10.6 Other parties

10.6.1 The June 2024 MEI article stated:

'With election season approaching, two disaffected figures from established parties have sensed an opportunity and formed their own political vehicles. These new parties are largely defined by their leaders, rather than being driven by a specific ideology or set of policies. They are viewed by voters as bids for continued relevance, rather than the kind of broad-based movements that could pose a real challenge to the ruling parties, at least for now.

'The most authentically opposition of the two is Ali Hama Salih's National Stance Movement [Halwest Movement in Kurdish²⁶]. Hama Salih is a former Gorran MP with a reputation for exposing alleged instances of corruption on the part of KDP and PUK officials. As his former party crumbled, Salih was able to keep his political reputation intact by distancing himself from the Gorran leadership and resigning from parliament in February 2023. Out of office, he attempted to bring together other Gorran dissidents to form a new party that could recapture the old energy. This was largely unsuccessful because of the personal differences between the ex-Gorran factions, but he went ahead and established a new party anyway in March 2024. Hama Salih's rhetoric often skews conservative. Recently, he has decried the "new,

²⁵ MEI, [No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq's Kurdistan Region](#), 20 June 2024

²⁶ Peregraf, [Kurdistan Region in Iraq's 2025 Parliamentary Elections ...](#), 13 November 2025

strange norms” being introduced into Kurdish society from outside.

‘The other personality-driven party is led by former PUK co-leader Lahur Sheikh Jangi. He had been popular with the party’s grassroots, particularly for his strong criticism of the KDP and the Barzanis. In July 2021, however, he was ousted by his estranged cousin (and now uncontested PUK leader) Bafel Talabani. For several years afterwards, it was unclear whether Sheikh Jangi would form a new party or seek accommodation and reconciliation within the PUK. Eventually, he chose the former and announced the establishment of the People’s Front in January 2024.

‘Both of these parties are defined by their leaders. This is not unusual in the patriarchal, top-down party structures common in the Kurdistan Region, but it exposes a deep flaw in their strategies. Their success is dependent on the personal appeal of their leaders, which is necessarily limiting. In Hama Salih’s case, his inability to convince the other Gorran dissidents, who are his natural political allies, to join him suggests that he does not have the leadership skills to manage a party organization. Meanwhile, Sheikh Jangi carries the baggage of his split with the PUK and will have difficulty bringing his former comrades with him into the new party or attracting authentic opposition supporters. Moreover, he is perceived as having grown close with Masrour Barzani of the KDP as part of his struggle with Bafel Talabani. The mere appearance of working with such a hated figure undercuts his personal and political reputation, whatever the truth may actually be about their relationship. As a result, it seems unlikely that either new party will have much of an impact at the ballot box or in sparking policy change.’²⁷

- 10.6.2 For a list of all the parties currently represented in the KRI’s parliament, see the parliament’s official [website](#).

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10.7 October 2024 Parliamentary Elections

- 10.7.1 The December 2025 House of Commons Library report stated, citing various sources:

‘The most recent regional elections were held in October 2024. Elections were managed by Iraq’s independent High Electoral Commission, instead of the regional commission. Turnout was 72% of 2.9 million registered votes, though an estimated 3.7 million people were reportedly eligible. A reported 10% of ballots were spoiled.

‘The KDP retained its lead, winning 39 of the 100 seats (down 6 from 2018 but in the 111-seat parliament), followed by the PUK with 23 (up from 21 in 2018). The largest opposition party, New Generation Movement (NGM), won 15 seats. Five other parties also won representation.

‘As of December 2025, a government between the PUK and KDP has not been formed. Debates include over the sharing of ministerial posts. The NGM has said it will not participate in government. Analysis for Chatham House notes that if a government is not formed, the PUK may seek to develop their own ties with the federal government, and both parties may increasingly focus on their respective regions of KRI.

‘After the 2018 elections, negotiations to form a government lasted ten

²⁷ MEI, [No real alternative: The failure of opposition parties in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region](#), 20 June 2024

months.’²⁸

10.7.2 In March 2026, the Atlantic Council, a ‘nonpartisan organization that galvanizes US leadership and engagement in the world’²⁹ published an article entitled ‘The real roadblock to government in Iraq isn’t Maliki – it’s Kurdish power politics’ which stated: ‘The Kurdistan region held parliamentary elections in October 2024, yet it still has not formed a new government. Almost eighteen months later, the region continues to operate under a caretaker cabinet, and its parliament has struggled to convene.’³⁰

10.7.3 In April 2026, Chatham House published an article by Winthrop Rodgers entitled ‘Political deadlock has left Iraq’s Kurdistan Region dangerously exposed amid Iran war’, which stated:

‘More than 18 months have passed since voters in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq went to the polls in the region’s parliamentary election, but no new regional government has been formed.

‘... At the heart of this impasse is disunity between the two main parties; the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

‘... Historically, relations between the KDP and the PUK have been characterized by extreme tension, but there have been periods of cooperation too. One such period in the mid-2000s allowed for Kurdish autonomy to be formally established into Iraq’s constitutional framework. This often-messy arrangement between the two parties – sealed by a [strategic agreement](#) in 2006 – now appears to be breaking down.

‘This is because the KDP and the PUK have fundamentally different assessments of their relative political status – and a new generation of leaders in both parties are not willing to compromise.

‘The KDP believes that it is the ascendent and primary force in Kurdistan, as reflected in its vote and seat totals in both federal and regional elections. It wants to abandon power sharing with the PUK – a view explicitly endorsed by its leader Masoud Barzani – and is also highly suspicious of PUK president Bafel Talabani’s leadership.

‘The PUK, meanwhile, wants to re-establish itself as the KDP’s relative equal after more than a decade of political aimlessness, factional infighting and challenges from opposition parties. Any government formation deal without substantive power sharing would be viewed as unacceptable. The PUK is also frustrated by the centralization of power around Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani of the KDP and is seeking assurances this will be addressed.

‘After months of deadlock over government formation, no political ties remain between the two parties. Meanwhile, this discord is undermining their ability to respond effectively to the serious domestic challenges and geopolitical crises currently facing the Kurdistan Region.’³¹

10.7.4 In July 2026, the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC), an independent

²⁸ House of Commons Library, [Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#) (page 7), 5 December 2025

²⁹ Atlantic Council, [About the Atlantic Council](#), no date

³⁰ Atlantic Council, [The real roadblock to government formation in Iraq ...](#), 24 March 2026

³¹ Chatham House, [Political deadlock has left Iraq’s Kurdistan Region ...](#), 29 April 2026

organisation dedicated to supporting Iraqi efforts to improve governance and human rights³², published a situation report covering 2 – 9 July 2026, which stated:

‘On July 2 [2026], the leaders of the New Generation (NG) party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) signed an agreement formalizing their political alliance, which aims to break the deadlock with the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that has delayed government formation since the October 2024 regional elections. The new alliance, called the Coalition for Balance and Revival, creates a bloc of 38 lawmakers, just one seat short of the KDP’s 39 in the 100-member regional legislature. PUK leader Bafel Talabani and NG leader Shaswar Abdulwahid said the alliance aims to restore political balance by negotiating as a unified front and securing 50% of senior positions in the new cabinet.’³³

10.7.5 On 16 August 2026, Kurdistan24, a Kurdish media network providing television, radio, and online news in multiple languages³⁴, published an article which stated:

‘A senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) official said Sunday that relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have improved significantly, with the two parties moving closer to forming the next Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) cabinet and reactivating parliament.

‘Ali Hussein, head of the KDP Organization Bureau in Sulaimani and Halabja, said recent discussions between the two major Kurdish parties had produced "solid progress," signaling a possible breakthrough after months of political delay.

‘... Hussein said KDP and PUK representatives had held several meetings in recent days away from the media spotlight, with additional discussions expected this week.

‘He described the talks as part of efforts to overcome remaining political differences and establish the institutional basis for the next government.

“There is solid progress, and I believe these discussions will produce positive results,” Hussein said.

‘He said the two parties were working simultaneously on reactivating parliament and forming the new cabinet, suggesting that the processes were closely linked.

‘The comments come as the KDP and PUK, the Kurdistan Region’s two largest political forces, face pressure to resolve differences following the most recent parliamentary elections.

‘... The latest statements indicate that negotiations between the KDP and PUK may be entering a more constructive phase.

‘The two parties have shared government responsibilities in the Kurdistan Region for decades, although their relationship has periodically been strained by disagreements over power-sharing, administration, security and political authority.

³² Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC), [Who we are](#), no date

³³ EPIC, [ISHM: July 2 – 9, 2026](#), 9 July 2026

³⁴ Kurdistan24, [About us](#), no date

‘The formation of a new cabinet has consequently remained one of the central political challenges facing the Region.’³⁵

- 10.7.6 Using the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)), CPIT was unable to find information indicating that a government had been formed as of August 2026.

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10.8 Fairness of elections

- 10.8.1 In September 2024, The Washington Institute (TWI), a think tank focusing on US interests in the Middle East³⁶, published an article about the October 2024 election which stated:

‘The internal factors affecting the electoral process are uniformly concerning. First, the two ruling parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—exert an outsized influence over the media, the security forces, and the KRI’s finances. Second, public servants and ordinary citizens are pressured and incentivized to vote for the ruling duopoly, with high costs imposed on dissenters. Third, the public’s engagement with the electoral process is in decline due to a pervasive belief that change is impossible at the ballot box. Combined, these factors create an uneven playing field and limit the possibility of any real change. These are highly predictable and have been observed across several electoral cycles.

‘... In a strictly legal sense, free and fair elections require an official framework where all adult citizens are able to cast ballots and express their political opinions without coercion or retaliation, candidates are able to participate on an equal basis, and the state actively protects these rights and prevents interference into the process.

‘On paper, the KRI has (or is close to having) this kind of legal framework, but in practice this framework is subject to numerous informalities, traditions, and contextual factors that create power imbalances between parties and influence voter behavior.

‘... Although their power is divided into two exclusive geographic zones, collectively the KDP and PUK hold the top offices in the cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan parliament, distribute jobs and patronage in the ministries and local government departments, and influence the appointment of judges. Around two-thirds of Peshmerga soldiers serve in units funded by the parties and commanded by partisan officers. The internal security forces are entirely beholden to the two parties. They have access to state resources, control over the oil and gas industry, and strong ties to the business community. All in all, this provides the KDP and the PUK with immense power and resources and gives them a massive institutional advantage over opposition parties, which are weak and divided.

‘Both parties spend considerable resources ensuring that their bases turn out and support them on election day. Ordinarily, there is nothing underhanded about this, but in the KRI that extends to the massive

³⁵ Kurdistan24, [KDP, PUK Near Deal on New Kurdistan Government, Official Says](#), 16 August 2026

³⁶ TWI, [About the Institute](#), no date

patronage networks that the KDP and PUK run through control of the KRG and other state institutions, the Peshmerga, the internal security forces, and private enterprises. Public servants and others know they owe their employment to the parties and are expected to vote accordingly. Pressure not to deviate from this often comes in non-public, non-visible ways, making it difficult to counter. Indeed, the KDP and PUK strenuously deny this is the case.³⁷

- 10.8.2 In October 2024, the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), a think tank 'dedicated to strengthening US national security and improving American foreign policy'³⁸, published an article analysing the elections which stated:

'... [D]espite some heated and at times inflammatory rhetoric—particularly from the PUK—the election process unfolded in a mostly peaceful, civic, and well-organized manner. Although the political playing field was uneven, and some smaller opposition groups alleged vote-rigging without presenting concrete evidence, the elections were, by most accounts, largely fair and transparent, setting a new standard for Kurdish elections since 1992. This was further confirmed by congratulatory statements from US and EU diplomatic missions in Iraq, which commended the success of the electoral process.'³⁹

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11. Media environment

11.1 Political affiliation of media outlets

- 11.1.1 In January 2024, MEI published an article entitled 'Partisan press: The dominance of party-backed media in Iraq's Kurdistan Region' which stated:

'... [M]edia coverage in the Kurdistan Region largely promotes the interests of politically motivated patrons, rather than performing a public service mission of providing impartial and high-quality information to all audiences.

'There are some independent outlets, but they have limited reach due to lack of funding and harassment by the authorities. Their work ends up drowned out by the party-funded enterprises. For both the Kurdish public and foreign observers, this skews the playing field and creates a biased perception of events and what issues are important.

'Moreover, the resulting system produces reporting that is centered on the daily activities of the political elite, rather than stories that tackle systemic problems like corruption, the economy, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses. When these issues are covered by partisan outlets, they are framed to highlight the most positive possible interpretation or used to score points against political opponents.'⁴⁰

- 11.1.2 BBC Monitoring's media guide for Iraq, updated in March 2026, stated:

'The media in the northern Kurdistan Region reflect the political divisions in the semi-autonomous area, where most of the main outlets are affiliated with the rival political parties of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its

³⁷ TWI, [Free and Fair? Setting Expectations for the KRI's October Elections](#), 18 September 2024

³⁸ FPRI, [About](#), no date

³⁹ FPRI, [Iraqi Kurdistan's Parliamentary Elections: Resilience, Challenges ...](#), 30 October 2024

⁴⁰ MEI, [Partisan press: The dominance of party-backed media in Iraq's Kurdistan ...](#), 26 January 2024

opposition.

‘... TV is the main medium in the Kurdistan Region, and social media are popular for Kurdish-related news, Facebook in particular. Kurdish media have separate social media accounts for their various language sections.

‘Irbil [Erbil] is home to the main pro-Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) outlets, while Sulaymaniyah is the base for pro-Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and other non-KDP media.

‘Pro-KDP outlets belonging to the Rudaw Media Network and those of the Kurdistan24 (K24) for Media and Research dominate the Kurdish broadcast and digital media. They are considered to be separately affiliated with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and his cousin, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.

‘... In Kurdistan Region, prominent outlets say they are "independent" and owned by private companies. However, their political affiliations and support for specific politicians are known to audiences, and their political bias is clear from their coverage.

‘Political affiliation in the Kurdish media is more obvious during times of heightened political tension, notably before and during nationwide and regional parliamentary elections. The partiality can be blatant in the post-election phase as Kurdish groupings attempt to form government cabinets.

‘... Non-partisan and opposition journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan ... accuse the ruling KDP and PUK of controlling the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate, the journalists' union in the region, by fielding their members as union officials and agreeing beforehand on dividing up posts.

‘... Key pro-KDP Kurdish outlets include Rudaw TV and its multilingual digital platforms. Rudaw's main competitor is another pro-KDP private channel, Kurdistan24 (K24) TV and its digital platforms. They serve regional and international audiences in Arabic, English and Turkish, in addition to the main Kurdish languages. K24 has pages in Farsi and other languages. Ava News is the third largest pro-KDP outlet in the region based on social media followers.

‘Other key Kurdish outlets include opposition pro-New Generation Movement (NGM) NRT TV, pro-PUK Khandan (Xendan) website, and the PUK's Kurdsat News TV. Channel8 TV is an emerging pro-PUK channel, but has a smaller social media following than established outlets.

‘... Nechirvan Barzani was elected as president of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region in 2019, having been prime minister for several years. He is the KDP's first deputy leader.

‘Nechirvan is the ultimate owner of the Rudaw Media Network, which runs TV and radio stations, a multilingual website, and social media. When Rudaw TV was launched in 2013, it carried extensive coverage of news about him.

‘... Before becoming the KRG prime minister in 2019, Masrour Barzani was the chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council (KRSC), and before that, the chief of the Parastin intelligence agency of the KDP.

‘... Masrour Barzani is seen as the ultimate owner of K24 TV, although the

station does not link its ownership to him. K24 is Rudaw's main competitor. Its co-founder and director until 2019, Noreldin Waisy, is the prime minister's media secretary.

'K24 promotes Masrour Barzani and covers his domestic activities, foreign trips and news conferences. His social media posts are promoted via the TV and its website.

'... Shaswar Abdulwahid, a construction and media businessman turned politician and head of the opposition party New Generation Movement (NGM), is considered the ultimate owner of Nalia Radio and TV (NRT) and affiliated outlets.

'NRT news channel broadcasts his news conferences and Q&As. It airs anti-government criticisms and reports on rivalries between the ruling Kurdish parties.

'... Ahead of the October 2024 parliamentary election in the Kurdistan Region, the Kurdish media's TikTok outlets were flooded with election propaganda from the parties they are affiliated with.

'... Rudaw was considered to be pro-Turkey in its early years, in line with KDP party's policies. It continues to relay Turkish official news and live news conferences of the Turkish president and his party's rallies, especially when they touch on Kurdish affairs.

'But in recent years, Rudaw has toned down its advocacy of partisan KDP politics, now presenting a more impartial line in its general coverage. However, it continues to describe KDP leader Massoud Barzani as "Serok Barzani" (President/Leader), an honorific title.

'... Rudaw was the first pro-KDP private broadcaster to have regional and international live coverage via reporters in the West, Russia, the Arab world, Turkey and Iran. This was unprecedented in the Iraqi Kurdish media and attracted large audiences. Locally, it employed well-known non-KDP presenters, attracting them with competitive salaries and not requiring their direct adherence to the KDP's official line.

'K24 TV tried the same approach, but has had less success in recruiting prominent non-KDP journalists. K24's pro-KDP political advocacy tends to be overt and its criticism of KDP rivals is much stronger than that of Rudaw.

'... NRT pioneered vox pops and phone-in programmes for viewers to express criticism of the Kurdish authorities, boosting its audiences. It continues to report on hyper-local issues and airing wider political criticism.⁴¹

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12. Treatment of opponents and critics

12.1 Overview

12.1.1 The January 2024 UNHCR report stated, citing various sources:

'Individuals who criticize or are perceived to criticize the KRG authorities, the dominant ruling parties, or others with political influence in the KR-I, or who allege government abuse or corruption in the KR-I, are reported to be targeted by the authorities, influential government and party officials and

⁴¹ BBC Monitoring, [Media Guide – Iraq](#) (pages 3 – 81), 7 March 2026

party-affiliated security forces. Those falling under this profile are reported to include in particular journalists and other media professionals, members of rival or opposition political parties, civil society activists, religious figures and protestors, the profiles of whom may overlap. Forms of targeting include intimidation, harassment, physical assault, arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention, as well as politically motivated criminal prosecution (e.g., on charges of espionage and undermining national security). The authorities have also targeted for harassment, arrest and prosecution individuals who have posted criticism of the local or regional authorities on social media. Such repressive measures have reportedly created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Attacks on persons of this profile are rarely investigated and are largely committed with impunity.

‘According to reports, family members of real or perceived KRG critics as well as their lawyers have, at times, also been subjected to harassment, intimidation and arrest by KRG authorities or unknown actors.’⁴²

For details of the specific examples that informed this section of the report, see the footnotes within the report itself.

- 12.1.2 Commenting on both Federal Iraq and the KRI, the May 2024 EUAA report stated, citing various sources:

‘Vaguely worded laws have been used to target and silence journalists, activists, and rival politicians, including in the KRI.

‘... Self-censorship is said to be widely spread in Iraq and in the KRI due to the risk of criminal penalties, retaliation by government authorities, political parties, and armed groups. Freedom House observed that in the period between June 2022 and May 2023, authorities launched “a crackdown on social media users”, restricting internet freedom in both Federal Iraq and the KRI. Security forces arrested some internet users for their online content, including journalists, activists, and social media users who were targeted and physically assaulted. These violations, which have created an environment of fear, have forced many Iraqi citizens to self-censor ... Female journalists are particularly subject to discrimination, harassment and extortion, especially those working on controversial issues for independent media.’⁴³

- 12.1.3 In August 2024, the EUAA published a COI Query response on Iraq, covering the period 1 April – 31 July 2024 (the August 2024 EUAA COI Query response). Citing various sources, the report stated: ‘In the city of Zakho, in the KRI, 15 people were arrested over the course of two months for “misuse of technology, social media and means of communication”. Allegations were related to threatening to publish private videos and pictures, insulting and disrespecting people and social and religious values.’⁴⁴

- 12.1.4 The October 2025 EUAA report stated, citing various sources: ‘According to Winthrop Rodgers, legal protections for freedom of speech and political activity exist in principle in the KRI but are not upheld in practice. He reported the existence of informal, unwritten restrictions, with punishments

⁴² UNHCR, [International Protection Considerations with Regard ...](#) (page 119-120), 30 January 2024

⁴³ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 19-20), May 2024

⁴⁴ EUAA, [Major political, security, human rights, socio-economic developments](#), 22 August 2024

for violations. In February 2025, at least 12 social media users in the KRI were arrested under the Prevention of Misuse of Telecommunications Equipment Act for content deemed contrary to public morals.⁴⁵

- 12.1.5 Commenting on Iraq in general (not specifically the KRI), the same source stated:

‘... [A]uthorities continued to suppress freedom of expression during the reporting period, often under the pretext of maintaining stability or public morality. As such, according to Reporters Without Borders, Iraq ranked 155th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index for 2025. Civil society organisations, human rights defenders and journalists faced prosecution, intimidation, and harassment for criticising public officials, including by targeting their social media accounts. Between May 2024 and May 2025, UNAMI documented 26 cases in which activists and journalists were charged with defamation for criticising government officials or policies. Security forces, both in federal Iraq and in the KRI, used violence against journalists for covering protests.’⁴⁶

- 12.1.6 In November 2025, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), a US-based non-profit that describes itself as an ‘independent, impartial global monitor that collects, analyses and maps data on conflict and protest’⁴⁷, published an article entitled ‘Leaders tighten control as repression shapes Iraq’s 2025 elections’ (the November 2025 ACLED article). Citing various sources, the article stated:

‘Alongside the targeting of small opposition parties, both [of the KRI’s] dominant parties have systematically conducted assaults on the media and civil society. Kurdish and international monitors have recorded repeated arrests of journalists, unfair trials, intimidation of activists, and even prolonged detentions of vocal critics, which has created a chilling effect that discourages protest mobilization and investigative reporting. In Erbil, authorities have prosecuted and extended prison sentences for critics such as journalist Sherwan Sherwani, while security forces recently beat and detained reporters covering protests.

‘... In Kurdish governorates, especially Sulaymaniyah, coercive arrests and targeted violence against opposition parties and journalists have produced repeated but highly localized demonstrations.’⁴⁸

- 12.1.7 In November 2025, Freedom House, published its annual ‘Freedom on the Net’ report, covering the period June 2024 – May 2025. The report stated: ‘Security forces in the country, including in the autonomous Kurdistan region, routinely arrested internet users, and violent reprisals for online speech often affected journalists, activists, and ordinary social media users.’⁴⁹

The source did not define ‘routinely’ or ‘often’, nor did it specify how many cases of arrest and violence occurred during the reporting period.

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⁴⁵ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 86), October 2025

⁴⁶ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 88), October 2025

⁴⁷ ACLED, [About ACLED](#), no date

⁴⁸ ACLED, [Leaders tighten control as repression shapes Iraq’s 2025 elections](#), 5 November 2025

⁴⁹ Freedom House, [Iraq: Freedom on the Net 2025](#), 13 November 2025

12.2 Opposition politicians

12.2.1 Citing various sources, the May 2024 EUAA report stated: 'In the KRI, some rival politicians were targeted and silenced. For instance, activities of the New Generation Party and its affiliated media outlet, Nalia Radio and Television (NRT), were reportedly repressed in the KRI.'⁵⁰

12.2.2 In March 2025, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), an 'independent, non-profit NGO ... that provides support and protection to human rights defenders'⁵¹, published a report on human rights violations in the KRI (the March 2025 GCHR report) which stated: 'On 22 July 2024, security forces in Erbil arrested political activist Serias Awni, a member of the Change Movement (Gorran) in the Kurdistan Region, and took him to an unknown location. After several hours of detention, he was released, covered in blood, after being subjected to beatings and various forms of torture.'⁵²

12.2.3 In August 2025, GCHR published another report on human rights violations in the KRI (the August 2025 GCHR report) which stated:

'On the morning of 29 June 2025, political activist and member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament for the New Movement bloc (Gorran) [usually referred to as the 'Change Movement'], Sipan Salim Hassan Amidi, 34 years old, was assaulted and kidnapped after leaving a meeting in the city of Duhok by security forces affiliated with the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The kidnapping occurred following his recent statements criticising the deteriorating living conditions and rampant corruption in the Kurdistan Regional Government. [Note: another source indicated that security forces detained and beat him after he publicly criticised KDP leader Masoud Barzani⁵³]

'Amidi is a journalist and member of the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate with 13 years of experience. He is known for his harsh criticism of local authorities. He was found at the evening of the same day after being abandoned on the street between Duhok and Zakho and was taken to the hospital for treatment for wounds and bruises.

'... On 06 April 2025, security forces in Duhok arrested political activist and member of the Kurdistan National Stance Movement, Islam Iskandar Ahmed (Islam Zebari), after he made statements regarding widespread corruption in the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

'Zebari, a Peshmerga colonel with a university degree in international relations and politics, has written for nearly a year warning of violations within the Peshmerga. He was released on 22 April 2025, after being detained for 17 days.

'... The Erbil Governorate Internal Security Directorate (Asayish) announced in a statement that on 09 February 2025, political activist and member of the Kurdistan National Stance Movement, Adam Othman Suleiman, was arrested while driving the vehicle of political activist and head of the Kurdistan National Stance Movement and member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, Ali Hama Salih. Salih was filming and recording footage of

⁵⁰ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 15), May 2024

⁵¹ Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), [Our Purpose](#), no date

⁵² GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 18 March 2025

⁵³ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 86), October 2025

several locations in the city to document security forces' preparations to confront popular demonstrations. He later published the footage. The statement claimed that the purpose of publishing it was to "incite and motivate people to destabilise the region." Reliable local sources confirmed that local and Arab media outlets had published a large number of similar reports about these preparations, all of which fall within the scope of journalistic work. He was released on 13 March 2025.⁵⁴

- 12.2.4 In a section about protests in Sulaymaniyah in late June 2025, the same source stated:

'Four political activists were arrested on this day [26 June 2025]: Ali Hama Salih, head of the Kurdistan National Stance Movement and member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, Dr. Ghaleb Mohammed, a leader in the Kurdistan National Stance Movement and former member of the Iraqi Parliament, Rebwar Karam, a leader in the Coalition for Democracy and Justice, and Omar Kulbi, a leader in the Islamic Group Party and member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament. They were detained at the Internal Security Directorate (Asayish) in Sulaymaniyah and were all released at 1:00 PM the same day.'⁵⁵

- 12.2.5 In August 2025, Amwaj, a UK-based news site covering the Middle East⁵⁶, published an article which summarised media coverage of the arrest of Lahur Talabani (also known as Lahur Sheikh Jangi). The article stated:

'In a stunning turn of events in Iraqi Kurdistan, the head of the opposition People's Front, Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabany, has been arrested following a deadly raid. The flaring up of a major political feud is pitting Talabany against former partner Bafel Talabani, the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). As the dust settles, observers are taking stock of the ramifications for the Sulaimaniyah-based PUK and the semi-autonomous region's broader politics.

'... Following reports of an arrest warrant being issued for Talabany on Aug. 21 [2025], media accounts of a build-up of Kurdish security forces circulated widely, with a brother of Talabany telling journalists that "blood would be shed that night."

'A source close to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) indicated in a statement to Amwaj.media that Talabany had allegedly hired a "hit squad" to assassinate Talabani, charging that this led to the warrant and security services "preventively" arresting Talabany. However, the claim has been disputed amidst contradictory reports and accusations of a "misinformation campaign."

'Reports of significant clashes at the headquarters of Talabany's political party, the People's Front - located in the Lalezar Hotel - emerged around 3 am local time on Aug. 22 [2025].

'The violence reportedly lasted nearly four hours until Talabany's arrest alongside his brothers Polad and Aso Sheikh Jangi. Later reports claimed that hundreds of their armed supporters were also detained. [Note: other

⁵⁴ GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

⁵⁵ GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

⁵⁶ Amwaj, [About](#), no date

sources reported that “dozens” were arrested⁵⁷].

‘... According to court sources cited by Shafaq News, Talabany is now facing a litany of charges including premeditated murder in connection with the deaths of security personnel during the clashes.

‘... The charges against Talabany by a Sulaimaniyah court were reportedly issued for “conspiracy aimed at destabilizing security and stability” along with alleged fraud.

‘However, Talabany claimed through audio messages—later reaffirmed by his supporters—that he was not given “formal notification” of any charges, potentially suggesting limited due process.’⁵⁸

The article also outlined the conflicting narratives surrounding these events. Some media outlets, politicians and commentators alleged that Lahur Talabani was plotting criminal action against PUK leader Bafel Talabani, while others believed his arrest was an act of political repression by the PUK.

12.2.6 In September 2025, Rudaw reported:

‘A court in Sulaimani on Tuesday [2 September 2025] sentenced Shaswar Abdulwahid, leader of the Kurdistan Region’s largest opposition party, the New Generation Movement (NGM), to five months in jail on charges of threatening a former member of his movement, Rudaw has learned.

‘... The Tuesday sentence “followed the third hearing in Abdulwahid’s case, after two previous sessions had been postponed,” [Rudaw journalist Peshawa] Bakhtiyarr said.

‘Speaking to reporters outside the courthouse, NGM lawmaker Goran Dibagayi accused the ruling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaimani of meddling in the case.

“The case was not a legal matter; it was political,” Dibagayi claimed.

‘... Sulaimani security forces arrested Abdulwahid in mid-August [2025], following a judicial decree dated August 3 [2025] that revealed the NGM leader had been sentenced in absentia to six months in prison under Article 431 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which pertains to making serious threats against others, their property or their reputation. However, the court on Tuesday reduced the term to five months.

‘The original complaint dates back to 2021 and was filed by Shadi Nawzad, a former member of the Kurdistan Region’s parliament and of Abdulwahid’s own party, the NGM.

‘On Monday [1 September 2025], the Kurdistan Region’s finance ministry also noted that properties owned by Abdulwahid will be put up for public auction due to accumulated debts amounting to 92 billion Iraqi dinars (around \$70 million [51 million GBP⁵⁹]).

‘... Rahman Gharib, director of the Sulaimani-based Metro Center for Journalists Rights and Advocacy, commented on Abdulwahid’s case stating, “We would have hoped for a fairer trial,” but “the conditions for a just court

⁵⁷ Kurdistan24, [Lahur Sheikh Jangi Case Referred to Sulaimani Criminal Court](#), 23 April 2026

⁵⁸ Amwaj, [Deep Dive: Shock raid highlights factional feuding in Iraqi Kurdistan](#), 26 August 2025

⁵⁹ Xe.com, [70,000,000 USD to GBP - US Dollars to British Pounds Exchange Rate](#), 14 August 2026

are not always available in such a political situation.”

‘Gharib noted that many previous cases tried under the same article as Abdulwahid’s had resulted in financial penalties or “lesser sentences.” However, he claimed that “because Shaswar [Abdulwahid] is in opposition to the PUK and a vocal [critic] of the PUK and [the Kurdistan Democratic Party] KDP, his trial was expected to be different.”

‘... NGM on Tuesday described the court’s sentence against its leader as “anticipated,” citing the timing and manner of his arrest, which followed what it said was a “midnight raid on his house by masked forces,” and highlighting “the absence of any evidence or witnesses in the case.”

‘Of note, the Sulaimani court had previously rejected claims that “masked” personnel were involved in Shaswar’s arrest, stating that the individuals were police officers affiliated with the Kurdistan Region’s interior ministry.

‘In the wake of Abdulwahid’s mid-August arrest, the NGM had censured the move as an “abduction” carried out without prior notice.

‘The party alleged that security forces affiliated with the ruling PUK in Sulaimani were behind the arrest. NGM directly accused PUK leader Bafel Talabani and his brother Qubad Talabani - the Kurdistan Region’s deputy prime minister and senior PUK figure - of standing behind the operation.’⁶⁰

12.2.7 According to an article published in August 2025 by Saudi state-owned news outlet Al Arabiya English⁶¹, the New Generation Movement accused the authorities of arresting Abdulwahid in order to sabotage ‘a major action’ planned for the following week regarding delayed salary payments to civil servants⁶².

12.2.8 Shaswar Abdulwahid was released on bail in January 2026 after six months of detention, according to an article published by Kurdistan24. The article noted that the legal cases involving Abdulwahid ‘remain open pending upcoming court hearings.’⁶³

12.2.9 In October 2025, Rudaw reported:

‘The People’s Front (Baray Gal), whose leader Lahur Talabany is currently imprisoned, said on Saturday [11 October 2025] that it cannot afford a physical campaign for Iraq’s parliamentary elections. The majority of its campaign is being conducted online.

‘Baray Gal “has no money for election campaigning,” Shadman Mala Hassan, a senior party member, told Rudaw on Saturday.

““We haven’t hung posters in any city and it’s still not clear whether we can conduct public activities or not,” he said. The party’s candidates are running their campaigns on social media.

‘Hassan also claimed that security forces in Sulaimani, Halabja and Kirkuk, where the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is dominant, is putting pressure on those campaigning for Baray Gal.

⁶⁰ Rudaw, [Opposition leader Shaswar Abdulwahid sentenced to 5 months in jail](#), 2 September 2025

⁶¹ Britannica, [Al Arabiya](#), 12 August 2026

⁶² Al Arabiya, [Iraqi Kurdish police arrest opposition leader](#), 13 August 2025

⁶³ Kurdistan24, [New Generation Leader Shaswar Abdulwahid Released on Bail ...](#), 1 January 2026

‘The police have denied the charge.

“The police have not prevented any party or candidate and we are not aware that any other security force has done this,” a senior security official told Rudaw on the condition of anonymity.⁶⁴

12.2.10 Citing various sources, the November 2025 ACLED article stated:

‘While competition between the KDP and PUK has remained largely nonviolent, smaller parties have been the target of violent crackdowns and repression ... Since June 2025, Kurdish authorities have arrested three opposition leaders in Sulaymaniyah: Shaswar Abdulwahid, president of the largest opposition party, the New Generation movement (NGM); Aram Qadr, leader of the National Coalition; and Lahur Sheikh Jangi, head of the People's Front party. Jangi's August 2025 arrest sparked heavy fighting that left several people dead and dozens of Jangi's loyalists wounded. Amid this climate of intimidation, other groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, announced they would boycott the [November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary] elections.’⁶⁵

12.2.11 In June 2026, GCHR published a periodic report on human rights violations in the KRI (the June 2026 GCHR report) which stated:

‘On 13 May 2026, security forces in Erbil arrested political activist and leader in the Kurdish National Stance Movement, Islam Iskandar Ahmed Al-Zebari, upon his return from Sulaimaniyah. He was arrested at the Dikla checkpoint, located between Erbil and Koya. His colleagues confirmed that the arrest was purely politically motivated and part of a campaign to intimidate and silence courageous voices in the region. They called on the relevant authorities to reveal his whereabouts and end the policy of targeting activists and opposition political leaders.

‘... On 05 May 2026, security forces arrested political activist and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) member Islam Biberkhy in the town of Dereluk, Duhok Governorate. His arrest stemmed from his criticism of the local government on his Facebook page, in which he held it responsible for the deteriorating living and political conditions and its restrictions on citizens' public freedoms. Following pressure from his party on local authorities, he was released two days later, after his arrest, which was carried out without a warrant.

‘On 22 February 2026, authorities in Sulaimaniyah released political activist and head of the Alliance for Democracy and Justice Party, Aram Mohammed Qadir, after seven months of detention. He had been arrested on 14 July 2025.

‘His trial was postponed twice, first on 13 January 2026, and then again on 08 February 2026. He faced numerous charges, including organising political activities without official permits and espionage under Article 1 of Law No. 21 of 2003.’⁶⁶

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12.3 Protesters

⁶⁴ Rudaw, [Lack of funds cripple electoral campaign of Lahur Talabany's party](#), 11 October 2025

⁶⁵ ACLED, [Leaders tighten control as repression shapes Iraq's 2025 elections](#), 5 November 2025

⁶⁶ GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 19 June 2026

12.3.1 Citing various sources, the May 2024 EUAA report stated:

‘In the KRI, mosque preachers have been arrested by Kurdish authorities for criticising the ruling regime over lack of provision of basic services. KRG-security forces arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted activists and perceived critics. Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and PUK, each one with its security apparatus, repressed dissidents, and peaceful protesters. A climate of fear is reported by activists, both in Federal Iraq and in the KRI, resulting in self-censorship. Cases of ordinary citizens, unfamiliar with activism, being arrested for posting online content critical of authorities, were reported in 2022. According to Freedom House, these cases supposedly indicate authorities’ capacity to monitor social media.

‘... Arrests of activists and politicians by security forces took place in August 2022, on occasion of a pre-announced protest in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk ... In the KRI, authorities linked both to the KDP and the PUK, continued to restrict the possibility of protesters to gather, arbitrarily arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning activists, journalists and individuals perceived as critics. Security forces, including ... some units of Kurdistan Regional Government Asayish internal security services, reportedly acted with impunity, arresting suspects without any guarantees.’⁶⁷

12.3.2 The March 2025 GCHR report stated: ‘On 19 March 2024, security forces arrested political activist and New Generation Movement leader Omar Mama Kurda after he announced that his movement would file a complaint against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for not paying employees’ salaries. He was released on bail on 02 April 2024.’⁶⁸

12.3.3 The same source also stated:

‘On 09 February 2025, Asayish forces (Internal Security) in Erbil Governorate prevented dozens of protesting teachers from Sulaymaniyah Governorate from entering Erbil to demonstrate in the regional capital. Protesters faced a series of tight security measures, with Kurdish Asayish forces, affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, closing the Degala checkpoint at the entrance to Erbil, preventing them from entering the city. Excessive violence and tear gas were used to disperse them, forcing most of them to return to Sulaymaniyah.

‘... On 24 February 2025, dozens of teachers in Sulaymaniyah organised a peaceful demonstration in the Arbat sub-district, on the road between Sulaymaniyah and the Iranian border, to pressure the authorities to accept the exclusive settlement of salaries through federal banks.

‘Protesters were attacked by security forces, who were behind the targeting of their tents, according to reliable local sources ... Several protesters were also detained for brief hours to prevent them from protesting.’⁶⁹ For information on the treatment of journalists at these protests, see [Journalists](#).

12.3.4 In an article about the same protest, London-based ‘progressive, non-partisan news outlet’⁷⁰ The New Arab reported:

‘Security forces in Sulaimaniyah, within Iraq’s semi-autonomous Kurdistan

⁶⁷ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 15-17), May 2024

⁶⁸ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 18 March 2025

⁶⁹ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 18 March 2025

⁷⁰ The New Arab, [About Us](#), no date

region, dispersed a protest on Monday night [24 February 2025] as teachers demanding unpaid salaries clashed with truck drivers accused of smuggling fuel to Iran, a nation under stringent US sanctions.

‘The protesters had blocked the Sulaimaniyah-Arbat Road, a vital route for oil transport, since Sunday, accusing Kurdish authorities of exporting fuel illegally to Iran and other countries.

‘They alleged that revenues from the smuggled oil were being siphoned off by the ruling Kurdish parties instead of benefiting the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) treasury or the federal budget in Baghdad.

‘... “The security forces used all kinds of violence against us, including kicking. The incident escalated when some unknown people started throwing stones at us and the truck drivers. After that, the security forces joined the stone-throwers and started cracking down on teachers and KRG employees,” Othman Gulpi, a teacher participating in the protest, told The New Arab.

‘... Ten protesters were reportedly arrested but later released.

‘... Dilshad Baban, another teacher from Sulaimaniyah, said he managed to evade arrest but confirmed what he described as “heavy-handed tactics” used by security forces against protesters and journalists.

‘However, the General Directorate of Sulaimaniyah Security (Asayish) denied these allegations [that they had used “heavy-handed tactics”], stating that their forces were deployed “to ease tensions between the civil servants and truck drivers” and that they had only “distanced some people from the area for the safety of all.”

‘Colonel Salam Abdulkhaliq, spokesman for the Kurdistan Regional Security Agency, stated to TNA [The New Arab], “No one was arrested. Asayish distanced some people from the area as a measure to ease tensions.”⁷¹

- 12.3.5 In an March 2025 article about the same protest, Community Peacemaker Teams – Iraqi Kurdistan (CPT-IK), an organisation which aims to build ‘partnerships with Iraqi Kurdistan’s civil society to transform violence and oppression’⁷², stated:

‘On the 23rd and 24th of February [2025], a group of teachers and government employees gathered to block the road between Arbat and Sulaimani. The blockade was part of an ongoing campaign about unpaid wages. This protest started as a small group, but by the second day had grown to a crowd of hundreds. The blockade was targeted directly at oil tankers - symbolic of the feuds over oil revenue between the Iraqi Central Government and the local Kurdish government, which have led to government employees repeatedly not being paid their wages over the last decade. For two days the protesters maintained a peaceful blockade; even stopping to talk and drink tea with the truck drivers at times.

‘... As evening fell on the second day, the atmosphere abruptly changed. A number of young people, some covering their faces with masks, appeared and began to throw stones at the trucks – and even at the protest tent. Truck drivers were upset and started driving their trucks through the blockade.

⁷¹ The New Arab, [KRG security disperses teachers blocking Iran-bound oil tankers](#), 27 February 2025

⁷² CPT-IK, [About](#), no date

Security forces began to physically break up the blockade, arresting and beating protesters.⁷³

12.3.6 According to an article about the same protest published by KirkukNow, an online news outlet which ‘publishes stories and events taking place within or relevant to Iraq’s disputed territories’⁷⁴, some of the protesters alleged that the security forces planted the stone throwers in order to create a pretext for their intervention⁷⁵. These allegations were also reported in the March 2025 CPT-IK article⁷⁶.

12.3.7 In June 2025, Rudaw reported:

‘Ali Hama Saleh, leader of the National Stance Movement (Halwest), several lawmakers from rival opposition blocs, and journalists from multiple news outlets were arrested Thursday [26 June 2025] by security forces in Sulaimani, ahead of a planned protest over unpaid public sector salaries.

‘An informed source told Rudaw that Halwest leader Saleh and two other senior party officials were detained Thursday morning, before later announcing on Facebook that they were released.

‘In a Facebook statement the previous day, Halwest accused plainclothes security forces affiliated with the ruling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of surrounding its main office in civilian clothes and arresting “friends of Halwest” shortly after the group visited Lahur Talabany, head of the opposition Baray Gal [People’s Front] party. Talabany was previously co-leader of the PUK before being ousted by his cousin Bafel Talabani.

‘On early Thursday morning, Halwest announced that “all the leaders of the Halwest Movement... will be at the front of the protestors [ranks].”

““This is [setting] a new precedent in Sulaimani,” Rahman Gharib, director of the Metro Center for Journalists’ Rights and Advocacy, told Rudaw on Thursday. He described the arrests as a sweeping crackdown not seen before.

““There is illegal mass arrest,” he said, adding that journalists were blocked from accessing protest locations and that individuals had been arrested for merely expressing intent to protest.

‘Gharib said that he has asked Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, a senior PUK figure and brother to its leader Bafel Talabani, to intervene and allow protests to proceed.

‘Among those arrested earlier in the week were Dilshad Mirani and Osman Gulpi, two organizers of the protest. Alliance 19, a civil society watchdog affiliated with Metro, said both were separately summoned by Sulaimani’s local security (Asayish) on Tuesday night and have been unreachable since.

‘The watchdog said Adil Hassan, a member of a local teachers’ committee, told them that the families of the two men were informed Wednesday that they would be released the following day.

‘Omar Gulpi, Osman’s brother and a member of the Kurdistan Justice Group

⁷³ CPT-IK, [Journalists beaten and arrested while reporting protest](#), 9 March 2025

⁷⁴ KirkukNow, [About us](#), no date

⁷⁵ KirkukNow, [Influx of Violations against Journalists ...](#), 26 February 2025

⁷⁶ CPT-IK, [Journalists beaten and arrested while reporting protest](#), 9 March 2025

(Komal), who won a seat in the Region's parliamentary elections held in October [2024], told Rudaw on Thursday that 11 people had been held in detention for two nights. Omar previously filed a lawsuit with Iraq's top court against the Kurdistan parliament, calling for the annulment of the regional election results over its failure to convene.

'Hours after being arrested, Omar was also released.

'Alliance 19 also said a group of teachers were arrested at a press conference on Tuesday, [sic]

'Sulaimani's security committee issued a statement Monday backing the "legitimate rights and demands of teachers, employees, and salary earners," but said protests were "not appropriate" given the region's current circumstances - referring to the sharp escalation of regional tensions following missile exchanges between Iran and Israel. That conflict drew in the United States, which carried out airstrikes on Iran's nuclear sites before brokering a ceasefire Tuesday.

'... Sulaimani-based Asayish said in a statement on Thursday that they had been "intensively aware of a plan by some troublemakers who intended to exploit the demonstrations of beloved teachers and employees in Sulaimani to disrupt peace and stability." It added that the alleged plan sought to "sow discord among demonstrators and rightful protestors in order to achieve political goals."

'Asayish claimed that "To thwart this plot, we were unfortunately compelled over the past two days to arrest some of the demonstration organizers, despite their lack of awareness of the scheme... Our intention in detaining them was solely to protect their lives, as well as those of other protestors and dissatisfied citizens, and to prevent any harm."

'Asayish also said its members treated the detainees "with respect" and issued an apology, stating, "We assure them that our actions were taken only to ensure their safety and maintain the peace of the city."'⁷⁷

12.3.8 In July 2025, The New Arab reported:

'A man was killed in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region late Sunday during protests against power cuts, residents and a medical source told AFP.

'Residents in the Rawandz region, north east of Kurdistan's capital Erbil [Erbil], said that protesters took to the streets and blocked a main highway leading to a border crossing with Iran.

'Security forces intervened to open the road, leading to clashes with protesters, they said.

'A medical source in the area's Ashti hospital said that "the body of a man who was killed by gunshot arrived at the hospital," with locals saying he was involved in the protests.

'It was not immediately clear how the victim sustained the gunshot, but a protester told AFP that "security forces shot" his relative, a 45-year-old father of ten.

⁷⁷ Rudaw, [Opposition figures, journalists arrested ahead of Sulaimani protest ...](#), 26 June 2025

‘Regional authorities did not comment on the protests.’⁷⁸

12.3.9 The August 2025 GCHR report stated: ‘On 18 March 2025, the Erbil Court of Appeals decided to drop all charges against teacher and civil society activist Luqman Najm and release him. The Erbil Criminal Court sentenced him to one and a half years in prison on 25 August 2024, after he participated in demonstrations organised by teachers demanding their financial rights and criticising the Kurdistan Regional Government. He was arrested on 23 November 2024.’⁷⁹

12.3.10 The same source also stated:

‘On 21 June 2025, a group of teachers and employees in Sulaymaniyah announced at a press conference their intention to organise a peaceful demonstration on 26 June 2025, to demand the payment of overdue salaries and to oppose corruption, mismanagement, and the lack of social justice ...

‘Several organisers of the demonstration were arrested in advance by security forces deployed throughout the city’s streets and public gathering places, including the West Sulaymaniyah Education Directorate, which was surrounded by large security forces to prevent the demonstration from taking place.

‘On 24 June 2025, two civil society activists and protesting members of the Teachers’ and Employees’ Association, Othman Kulbi and Dilshad Mirani, were arrested after being summoned by the Internal Security Directorate (Asayish). They were detained for two days and released on the afternoon of 26 June 2025.

‘The Kurdistan National Stance Movement (Helwesti) also announced that, on 25 June 2025, security forces in civilian clothes arrested a number of civil society activists, teachers, and employees protesting outside its office in Sulaymaniyah. The individuals were: Shahla Ali, Munira Abdullah, Nour Farqi, Dilawar Ali, Zrian Ali, Najmuddin Mohammed, and Mohammed Rasool.

‘On 26 June 2025, shortly before the demonstration began in Sulaymaniyah, security forces in the city launched a widespread arrest campaign that included civil society activists, political activists, journalists, and media teams covering the events.

‘The Metro Center for Defending Journalists’ Rights issued a statement on the same day confirming the arrests in Sulaymaniyah, stating, “53 protesters and 14 journalists were arrested and released.”

‘... On 25 June 2025, security forces physically and verbally assaulted engineer and woman human rights defender Delsoz Shafiq Zangana while she and a group of protesting teachers were holding a press conference in front of a public park in Sulaymaniyah to demand the release of their detained colleagues. She sustained injuries as a result of the beating and was taken with her colleagues to a security center in the governorate, where they were detained for one day. After her release, she received treatment at the hospital.

‘Zangana is the head of the Dabin Organisation for Democratic Development

⁷⁸ The New Arab, [Iraqi Kurds protest power cuts, one killed ...](#), 14 July 2025

⁷⁹ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

and Human Rights, founded in 2017, which works to empower women and defend human rights and democracy in the Kurdistan Region.⁸⁰

12.3.11 The August 2025 GCHR report stated:

‘... On 16 July 2025, unidentified armed men in three vehicles attacked human rights lawyer Shwan Saber Kurdi on Route 120 in Erbil. The attackers initially attempted to kidnap him, but when they failed, they severely beat him and threatened him to stop publicly criticising the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or face even worse consequences. The attack resulted in severe injuries that required hospitalisation. Local sources confirmed that despite his complaint and the ability of the relevant authorities to easily identify the perpetrators, no serious action was taken.’⁸¹

According to CPT-IK, two days before he was attacked, he had posted on his Facebook page calling for Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to resign. This source also described him as a ‘legal investigator for the KRG Public Prosecution Presidency.’⁸²

12.3.12 In August 2025, CPT-IK also published an article about the trial of imprisoned journalist Sherwan Sherwani (see paragraphs 12.4.22 to 12.2.24 for more information) which stated:

‘Given the high public interest in the case, a significant number of journalists, parliamentarians, activists, and family members of Sherwan Sherwani gathered outside the courthouse and engaged in peaceful protest following the announcement of the trial outcome [on 19 August 2025]. An undetermined number of plainclothes security personnel were observed mingling within the crowd. These individuals instigated and physically assaulted protesters and parliamentarians, provoking a response that allowed armed security forces to intervene with considerable force to disperse the demonstrators.’⁸³

12.3.13 The October 2025 EUAA report stated, citing various sources: ‘In the KRI, Winthrop Rodgers stated that protests are legally permitted but, in practice, subject to numerous restrictions. In KDP-controlled areas, protests are almost always suppressed unless directly authorised by the party, while the PUK more often allows protests but may prevent or disperse them if they continue for too long. In February 2025, security forces reportedly attacked teachers protesting in Sulaymaniyah.’⁸⁴

12.3.14 In January 2026, ‘independent Iraqi news agency’⁸⁵ Shafaq News reported: ‘The Article 19 Alliance Network, coordinating with the [Metro] Center [for Journalists’ Rights], reported 356 protest-related incidents during the year, saying security forces used force against peaceful demonstrators, resulting in deaths, injuries, and dozens of detentions.’⁸⁶

12.3.15 In April 2026, Amnesty International published its annual ‘State of the World’s Human Rights’ report, covering events in 2025 (the April 2026

⁸⁰ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

⁸¹ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

⁸² CPT-IK, [Updates on violations against journalists and activists in Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 15 August 2025

⁸³ CPT-IK, [Unjust Treatment by the Kurdistan Regional Government Continues ...](#), 20 August 2025

⁸⁴ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 87), October 2025

⁸⁵ Shafaq News, [About Shafaq News Agency](#), no date

⁸⁶ Shafaq News, [300+ Press freedom violations in Kurdistan in 2025 ...](#), 17 January 2026

Amnesty International report). The section on Iraq stated:

‘Security forces dispersed peaceful gatherings across the KR-I, particularly those protesting about unpaid salaries and corruption, using tear gas and arbitrary arrests and detention.

‘In February [2025], security forces in Erbil blocked teachers from entering the city to demonstrate, using violent tactics and tear gas to disperse them. Later that month, various security forces attacked peaceful protesters in the Arbat sub-district of Sulaymaniyah and detained journalists to prevent coverage of their actions. Asayish forces (the Kurdistan Regional Government’s primary security and intelligence forces) fired tear gas and assaulted journalists covering the Arbat demonstration, arrested several reporters and raided a local TV station.

‘In June [2025], security units cracked down on multiple demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, leading to further arrests and harassment of activists and demonstrators.’⁸⁷

- 12.3.16 The data below has been obtained using the ACLED [Data Export Tool](#). Between 1 August 2024 and 1 August 2026, ACLED recorded 510 protest events within the KRI (dataset available upon request). Of those recorded protest events, 498 were ‘peaceful protests’, 9 were recorded as ‘protests with intervention’ and 3 were recorded as ‘excessive force against protesters’⁸⁸. See the table below for ACLED’s definitions of these events and sub-events:

Term	Definition
Protests	A Protests event is defined as an in-person public demonstration of three or more participants in which the participants do not engage in violence, though violence may be used against them.
Excessive force against protesters	This sub-event type is used when individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest and are targeted with lethal violence or violence resulting in serious injuries (e.g., requiring hospitalization).
Protest with intervention	This sub-event type is used when individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest during which there is a physical attempt to disperse or suppress the protest without serious/lethal injuries or the targeting of protesters with lethal weapons reported. This sub-event type also covers any instance where armed groups or rioters interact with peaceful protesters without resulting in serious/lethal injuries, as well as cases where protesters are arrested.

⁸⁷ Amnesty International, [Human rights in Iraq](#), April 2026

⁸⁸ ACLED, [Data Export Tool – Iraq: 1 August 2024 – 1 August 2026](#), 24 August 2026

Peaceful protest	This sub-event type is used when demonstrators gather for a protest and do not engage in violence or other forms of rioting activity, such as property destruction, and are not met with any sort of force or intervention.
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12.3.17 It should be noted that the protests were about a variety of issues, not all of which involved criticism of the authorities. For example, a significant proportion of the protests were in support of Syrian Kurds.

12.3.18 In total, there were 12 protests that were subject to intervention or excessive force. Nearly all of these protests involved some form of criticism of the authorities. Overall, however, ACLED's data indicates that the vast majority (97.65%) of protests involving criticism of the authorities took place without intervention. The 3 events that were coded as 'excessive force against protesters' all took place in Erbil, one in July 2025, one in November 2025 and one in December 2025. The notes for each event are as follows:

'On 13 July 2025, residents held a protest, blocking the Khafiz Bridge, in Warte town (Rawanduz, Erbil) against power cuts and demanding better services. Asayish forces intervened and opened fire at the protesters, killing 1 protester and injuring 4 others.

'On 29 November 2025, around 400 protesters (mostly from the Harki tribe) gathered in front of the Lanaz refinery in Lacan village (Erbil) to demand employment there. Unknown forces opened fire at the protesters, killing 1 and injuring 11 others. Sources reported that Asayish forces opened fire at the protesters, but the KRG Ministry of Interior denied their involvement and claimed that the demonstrators opened fire on pedestrians and travellers. An injured protester, who was also a Peshmerga soldier, succumbed to his wounds and died on 4 December. 2 fatalities. Some sources claimed that a relative of KDP leader Masoud Barzani owned the refinery. The Kurdistan Regional Security Council claimed that they thwarted a plot to "paralyze the energy sector and create a 'river of blood'." The council released the alleged confessions of a suspect linked to the incident, stating that he was part of a plot to escalate the situation by carrying out shootings during the demonstration to force the Asayish forces to respond.

'On 5 December 2025, residents, mostly from the Harki tribe, protested in Chamah village (Erbil) against the arrest of two youths from the Harki tribe. Asayish forces opened live fire into the air to disperse the protesters. One source claimed that the forces targeted civilian homes with live fire. There were no casualties. The protest came amidst tensions between Harki tribesmen and security forces in the Khabat area, including deadly clashes during demonstrations.'⁹⁰

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12.4 Journalists/activists

12.4.1 Citing various sources, the January 2024 UNHCR report stated:

'According to RSF [Reporters Without Borders], "[P]ress freedom in the

⁸⁹ ACLED, [ACLED Codebook](#), no date

⁹⁰ ACLED, [Data Export Tool – Iraq: 1 August 2024 – 1 August 2026](#), 24 August 2026

Kurdistan Region is getting worse and worse.” Journalists and other media professionals who engage in critical reporting on political or other sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights violations, and poor government services face a wide range of human rights violations and abuses. Forms of targeting include intimidation and harassment; physical assault; confiscation or destruction of equipment; arbitrary arrest, detention, and politically motivated prosecutions. Both State and non-State actors are reported to be behind such violations and abuses, mainly the KRG authorities, including the judiciary and the security forces, as well as influential political and business figures.

‘Journalists are reported to have been arbitrarily arrested and held in pre-trial detention for long periods without being charged with a crime, while being denied access to their lawyers. Other journalists have been charged with a range of crimes, including defamation, “misuse of communications equipment”, “undermining national security”, and espionage. Trials against journalists and other media professionals were reported to have fallen short of international fair trial standards, at times resulting in long prison sentences. According to Amnesty International, these repressive measures have “instilled an atmosphere of fear amongst journalists and activists in the KR-I, specifically in Duhok.”

‘Although no recent abductions and killings have been reported, the cases of several journalist killings recorded between 2008 and 2016 remain unresolved, as they were reportedly not promptly and transparently investigated by the authorities.

‘Raids and closures of media offices have also been reported, and authorities have interfered with and shut down broadcasts and social media accounts of journalists and media organizations seen as critical. Incidents of interference in journalistic activities and attacks against journalists, media professionals and media outlets perceived as critical of the KRG are most frequently reported during political events (e.g., protests, elections) or security crises.

‘... In some instances, family members and lawyers representing journalists and other media professionals in legal proceedings have also been singled out for threats, including threats of arrest.’⁹¹

For details of the specific examples that informed this section of the report, see the footnotes within the report itself.

12.4.2 Citing three sources published in 2022, the same source stated:

‘Influential figures in the KR-I regularly use criminal complaints to harass journalists and to punish them for their critical reporting. Reported cases related to the Iraqi President, regional and local government officials, and other politically connected personalities such as members of the ruling families. For example, one journalist recounted that “pressure on him rapidly skyrocketed after he filed a report about a politically well-connected doctor in Erbil who allegedly raped two patients who were sisters. (...) after publishing, the government-funded Syndicate of Journalists announced that a complaint had been filed against him.” He was arrested and charged with

⁹¹ UNHCR, [International Protection Considerations with Regard ...](#) (page 146-148), 30 January 2024

defamation.⁹²

- 12.4.3 In April 2024, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an ‘independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide’⁹³, published an interview with journalist Guhdar Zebari, who was detained in October 2020 and released in February 2024⁹⁴. In the interview, Zebari stated:

‘Every night since my release, my family has been receiving threatening calls from known and unknown individuals. These individuals assert that I am “outspoken and critical” in my public speeches. They urge my family to persuade me to refrain from speaking against the government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

‘On the first day of my release ... I had held a press conference during which I strongly criticized Masrour Barzani, labeled the government’s behavior as “extreme authoritarianism,” and asserted that [my town] Akre is under the control of KDP [Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party]. A friend informed me that the security agency conducted a meeting to address my statements. The agency head instructed his team to draw a clear “red line” for Guhdar.

‘I didn’t take the threat seriously, but later my cousins informed me that the head of Asayish [the Kurdish government security force] in Akre said that my speech was too harsh and I would have to pay a price. I am living now in one of the villages around Akre city. My father received phone calls from the village’s mukhtar [local chief] who relayed a message from Reza Zebari, head of the Zebari tribe, saying “Don’t speak like this, don’t go out, don’t talk to any other channels, just be quiet.”’⁹⁵

- 12.4.4 Citing various sources, the May 2024 EUAA report stated:

‘Human Rights Watch researcher Sarah Sanbar said that journalists or those with large social media followers perceived to “insult” Iraqi or Kurdish authorities continue to face “serious repercussions, including arrest, harassment, kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and death threats, from both state and non-state actors.” Journalists and online media outlets writing on corruption were particularly targeted, including with cyberattacks.

‘... In the KRI it included arbitrary arrests, prosecution and imprisonment of journalists, especially local and independent reporters. In August 2022, dozens of journalists and activists were arrested prior to a planned protest aimed at expressing grievances towards the KRG, against corruption, poverty and unemployment. In some cases, journalists in the KRI were detained with accusations of espionage.’⁹⁶

- 12.4.5 In May 2024, Amnesty International published an article urging the KRI authorities to ‘immediately end their assault on press freedom’ (the May 2024 Amnesty International report) which stated:

‘While a number of journalists have been prosecuted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, in the majority of cases, the authorities have subjected journalists to harassment and intimidation, silencing critical voices. Amnesty International is aware of at least eight journalists who have fled the KR-I in

⁹² UNHCR, [International Protection Considerations with Regard ...](#) (page 147), 30 January 2024

⁹³ CPJ, [What We Do](#), no date

⁹⁴ Amnesty International, [Iraq/KRI: Further Information: Journalist Released ...](#), 26 February 2024

⁹⁵ CPJ, [Iraqi Kurdish journalist Guhdar Zebari is free from prison, but not from threats](#), 30 April 2024

⁹⁶ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 19), May 2024

the past four years fearing for their safety. Many of them worked in outlets that were perceived to be critical of the authorities and covered issues of alleged corruption in the KRG.

‘... One journalist who had collaborated with Sherwan Sherwani on corruption and social issues told Amnesty International that the Asayish and the intelligence agency of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Parastin, arrested him 11 times before he fled in 2020. The Kurdistan Democratic Party is the ruling party of the KRG. The journalist said he was never presented with an arrest warrant.’⁹⁷

12.4.6 In June 2024, Rudaw reported:

‘A young man has been detained by security forces in Halabja for the past five days, allegedly for leaving a social media comment criticizing the district mayor’s office, a local watchdog reported.

‘Metro Center for Journalists Right and Advocacy on Saturday condemned the detention of 25-year-old Halabja local Bryar Kamal Mohammed, who has been in custody since Wednesday [26 June 2024] and his family’s request for release on bail has been denied by the court.

‘The watchdog said that Mohammed’s apprehension sets a “dangerous precedent” and poses a threat to freedom of expression, calling for his immediate release.

‘Activists and locals were quick to condemn Halabja mayor Nuxsha Nasih, blaming her for the arrest. Nasih denied the allegations.

“‘I did not file a complaint against him [Mohammed]. The complaint was filed by the joint committees of the mayoral office, because he had made inappropriate comments about them on social media,” the mayor told Rudaw’s Hidayat Jan.

‘The young man has been allegedly arrested for a Facebook comment in which he criticized authorities in Halabja for slapping a fine on a bakery.

‘They cannot speak against anyone, except bakers. If bakeries close for two days, the mayor and her committee will need to go buy bread in another city because they have never baked bread in their lives. We should bring them and make them bake bread to see their situation and mock them,” wrote Mohammed in one comment.

‘In another comment, he referred to those who made complaints about the bakery in a jargon loosely translated to “scum” adding “they only make committees for bakeries. They are supposed to control the bazaar, but in Halabja they are only there to take pictures.”

‘The committees claimed that they had fined two bakeries, in accordance with the regulations, for charging high prices during the third day of Eid al-Adha. They accused Mohammed of writing “defamatory” and “disrespectful” comments, and said that they have filed a complaint against him accordingly.’⁹⁸

According to an article published by 964media, he was released on Sunday

⁹⁷ Amnesty International, [Iraq: Authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#), 2 May 2024

⁹⁸ Rudaw, [Man allegedly detained for social media comment in Halabja](#), 30 June 2024

30 June 2024⁹⁹.

12.4.7 Citing various sources, the August 2024 EUAA COI Query response stated:

‘In May [2024], Amnesty International denounced the continued attacks against journalists by KRI authorities, including “arbitrary detention, beating and grossly unfair trials.” During the same month, Shakar Star, a journalist and presenter at local media agency Tiwar News was arrested by Asayish security forces. Star was accused of presenting “false and misleading news reports”. According to the head Tiwar News agency, Star’s arrest was linked to his reporting disclosing a smuggling network of gold, money, weapons, drugs, as well as human trafficking, with involvement of Sulaymaniyah security forces. In July [2024], Hejin Fetah, a journalist at Zoom News and some of her colleagues were reportedly detained by security forces of the KRG while they were reporting on Turkish military operations in the Amedi district.’¹⁰⁰

12.4.8 In August 2024, CPJ reported:

‘On August 18 [2024], in Halabja, Sulaymaniyah province, Iraqi Kurdistan Asayish security forces attacked Zoom News TV reporter Avin Atta and cameraman Zhyar Kamli while they were reporting on a demonstration against the killing of a porter, known as a kolbar, by Iraqi border forces in the Hawraman area.

‘Atta told CPJ that an Asayish official twisted her arm behind her back, dislocating her shoulder and wrist, after she refused to hand over their camera and microphone. The security forces released Atta and Kamli after reviewing their footage for more than an hour.

‘CPJ did not receive a response to its request for comment sent via messaging app to Salam Abdulkhaliq, spokesperson for the Kurdistan Region Security Agency.

‘Zoom News TV supports the newly formed People’s Front [the party of Lahur Talabani – see paragraph 10.6.1], a political party participating in Kurdistan’s October 20 [2024] parliamentary elections.’¹⁰¹

12.4.9 In November 2024, CPJ reported:

‘The attack [on journalist Wrya Abdulkhaliq] took place on November 4 [2024], hours after Abdulkhaliq, a reporter for the online outlet Bwar Media, published a report on allegations that an official had blocked the implementation of a local electricity and water project, according to multiple news outlets and the journalist, who spoke with CPJ. The report said the unnamed official was part of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, which is the defense ministry in Iraq’s semi-autonomous northern region of Kurdistan.

‘Abdulkhaliq told CPJ and a news conference that he was in his orchard when the official’s nephew and bodyguard approached, and the bodyguard aimed a gun at him.

“I quickly grabbed his hand and pushed him back to prevent him from shooting. The nephew tried to shoot but misfired,” Abdulkhaliq told CPJ.

“The nephew stabbed me deeply in the abdomen with a combat knife. Then

⁹⁹ 964media, [Man released after arrest for Facebook comments](#), 30 June 2024

¹⁰⁰ EUAA, [Major political, security, human rights, socio-economic developments](#), 22 August 2024

¹⁰¹ CPJ, [Iraqi security forces assault 2 news crews covering protests](#), 20 August 2024

the bodyguard prepared to shoot again but he [the nephew] stopped him, saying, 'Let's not shoot him; he's already wounded and will die.'"

'Bwar Media's editor-in-chief Ibrahim Ali told CPJ that the assailants also punctured Abdulkhaliq's tires. He said doctors told him that the journalist was stable after receiving 21 stitches in the hospital.

"Two assailants along with a military official have been arrested. We are committed to ensuring that justice is served," Ramak Ramazan, mayor of Chamchamal District where the incident took place, told CPJ via phone, without providing further details.'¹⁰²

12.4.10 In February 2025, CPJ published an article entitled 'Dozens of Iraqi Kurdistan journalists teargassed, arrested, raided over protest' which stated: 'The Committee to Protect Journalists is alarmed by Kurdistan security forces' assault on 12 news crews covering a February 9 [2025] protest by teachers and other public employees over unpaid salaries, which resulted in at least 22 journalists teargassed, two arrested, and a television station raided.'¹⁰³ See the full [article](#) for further details, including personal accounts from several of the 22 journalists.

12.4.11 In March 2025, CPT-IK published an article entitled 'Journalists beaten and arrested while reporting protest' which was about the teachers' protests in Sulaymaniyah in late February 2025 (see paragraphs 12.3.3 - 12.3.5 for details about these protests). The article indicated that journalists were able to report on the protests until the violence began, at which point the atmosphere changed. The article stated:

'A group of ten journalists met with CPT and told us about the violent repression they endured last week.

'... In all, twelve journalists and media workers were arrested - along with dozens of protesters. A number of items of media equipment were never returned.

'... It should not be forgotten the reason why the protest was held in the first place - that Kurdish politicians siphon oil money into the pockets of their families and political parties, leaving ordinary working people as the ones to deal with the fallout when the Iraq government refuses to pay their wages. The violent repression discussed here is not a random occurrence - it is done to stop protests and media highlighting the black market oil industry and its deep political connections.'¹⁰⁴

See the full [article](#) for individual journalists' accounts of their treatment by Asayish personnel at the protest.

12.4.12 The March 2025 GCHR report stated:

'[During the teachers' protest in Sulaymaniyah on 24 February 2025], [j]ournalist Jawa Rawan Mahmoud, a reporter for Shar Press TV, was detained and removed from the protest area twice to prevent her from covering the protests.

'... On 01 February 2024, the Asayish arrested journalist and civil society activist Tikushar Hussein in the Choman district of Erbil Governorate and

¹⁰² CPJ, [Journalist stabbed in Iraqi Kurdistan after reporting on corruption](#), 8 November 2024

¹⁰³ CPJ, [Dozens of Iraqi Kurdistan journalists teargassed, arrested, raided ...](#), 13 February 2025

¹⁰⁴ CPT-IK, [Journalists beaten and arrested while reporting protest](#), 9 March 2025

transferred him to the Asayish prison in Soran District in the same governorate. He was not released until three days later.

‘Late on the night of 04 February 2024, a number of armed men attacked journalist Ahmed Mustafa after he stopped his car at a traffic light on Street 60 in Erbil, near the François Hariri Stadium. He was threatened with death and the cutting off of his tongue if he did not cease his criticism of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

‘On 05 February 2024, while covering demonstrations organised in Erbil in support of employees and teachers who had declared a sit-in three months earlier due to unpaid salaries and the regional government’s failure to pay their financial dues, security forces arrested journalist Diako Hussein, a correspondent for the Kurdish Standard Media Foundation. They confiscated his belongings and equipment, including his phone and camera, and took him to an unknown location. He was released the same evening after being detained for several hours.

‘... On 18 May 2024, security forces arrested journalist Shaker Sattar, who works for Tiwar News, while returning with his family from Sulaymaniyah. Security forces stopped him at the Ashti checkpoint in the Koya district of Sulaymaniyah Governorate.

‘He was charged with defaming the people of Sulaymaniyah by publishing reports that spread fear among citizens, pursuant to Article (226) of the Iraqi Penal Code, based on a complaint filed against him by the Public Prosecutor. Three days after his arrest, he was released on bail.

‘On 26 June 2024, security forces arrested journalist Ahmed Shamki, a correspondent for the 7 Roj Media Foundation, in the Shiladze area of Amadiya District, Duhok Governorate. His arrest is linked to his publication of a corruption case involving the sale of land on a public street in the Shiladze sub-district. He was released on bail on 30 June 2024. Following his release, he stated that he had exposed the sale of a plot of government land, prompting the mayor of the area to threaten him with legal action if he did not stop pursuing the case. He stated that his release came after increasing pressure from human rights organisations and media outlets.

‘... On 10 July 2024, Asayish security forces in Dohuk arrested the media crew of the Kurdish satellite channel Zoom, consisting of journalist and correspondent Hajin Fatah Rikani, cameraman Adel Sekeri, and the crew’s driver, for covering Turkish attacks in Dohuk Governorate. The channel’s correspondent was released several hours later, but her two colleagues were not released until a day after their detention.

‘On the evening of 13 July 2024, Asayish security forces in the Amadiya area arrested the media crew of the Kurdish satellite channel 8, consisting of journalist Nazhyar Mohammed Salim Nirooyi, cameraman Bahiz Aqravi, and the driver of the vehicle accompanying the media crew, Hawar Yousef, while they were covering the ongoing Turkish army attacks in the Amadiya area of Dohuk Governorate. They were released several days after their arrest. Nirooyi moved to Sulaymaniyah after being threatened and beaten by security forces during his detention.

‘On 22 July 2024, security forces in Sulaymaniyah assaulted a Roj News Agency crew for attending a ceremony announcing the formation of a united

front against the Turkish occupation of the Kurdistan Region. The assault included Kurdish journalist Derin Rahim, a Roj News correspondent, who was severely injured. Security forces briefly confiscated her phone, but her camera and other journalistic equipment were also confiscated.’¹⁰⁵

12.4.13 The same source also stated:

‘On 29 July 2024, the Duhok Court sentenced journalist Suleiman Ahmed, editor of the Roj News Agency, to three years in prison after convicting him of charges related to the security of the Kurdistan Region. Defense lawyers asserted that the charges were baseless, pointing out that their client had worked for the agency for five years, according to official documents issued by the Kurdistan Regional Government.

‘On 06 January 2025, the Kurdistan Regional Government Review Court issued a decision to drop all charges against him and release him immediately after finding a lack of evidence to support the accusations. He was released on 20 January 2025, pursuant to the court’s decision.

‘He was arrested by security forces at the Fishkhabour border crossing with Syria on 25 October 2023, while returning to the Kurdistan Region from Syria. He had traveled to the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo earlier that month to visit his family in Syria.

‘... On 25 August 2024, the Kalar Investigation Court in Sulaymaniyah Governorate issued a detention order against journalist Sirwan Hassan, who works for NRT TV, after he appeared before an investigative judge based on a complaint filed against him by the Gorran Movement. The complaint relates to his publication of a story about the corruption of some [Gorran] movement officials and their practice of changing their license plates and car numbers while traveling between the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk. He was charged with misuse of telecommunications equipment under Article 2 of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s Law on the Prevention of Misuse of Telecommunications Equipment. He was detained for 15 days following the complaint, after which he was released on bail.’¹⁰⁶

12.4.14 In March 2025, CPJ reported:

‘Kurdistan security forces arrested four journalists from the new digital outlet Media21 on February 28 [2025] in the eastern Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah, confiscating their phones and taking them from their homes.

‘Security forces closed the outlet’s office in Sulaymaniyah on March 1, saying it lacked a license, confiscated several computers, and ordered staff not to return to work, according to two sources who spoke to CPJ on condition of anonymity, citing fear of retaliation.

‘Three sources told CPJ that authorities released three of the journalists on bail on Sunday, March 2 [2025]. Bazyani remained in custody as of Monday [3 March 2025].

‘... Two sources told CPJ that the arrests and shutdown are linked to a Media21 interview with the sister of a Kurdistan Regional Government official regarding a family dispute. The official filed a lawsuit after Bazyani

¹⁰⁵ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 18 March 2025

¹⁰⁶ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 18 March 2025

messaging him about the interview ahead of publication.

'Karwan Anwar, head of the Sulaymaniyah branch of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate, told CPJ that the journalists were charged with defamation under Article 433 of the penal code, which provides for an unspecified prison term and/or a fine. "Harsher penalties" can be imposed on media outlets.'¹⁰⁷

12.4.15 In July 2025, CPJ reported:

'In the early hours of July 9 [2025], Kurdish security forces, known as Asayish, arrested three journalists in Rovia, a subdistrict of the northern city of Duhok's Bardarash area. The journalists - Taif Goran, a reporter for opposition-linked NRT TV; his camera operator, Rayan Sidqi; and Rizgar Kamil, a reporter for Westga News - had traveled to Erbil's Khabat district to cover clashes between security forces and tribal fighters.

'After all journalists were blocked from entering the area, they returned to Rovia to broadcast live and were detained. They were released the afternoon of July 10, after more than 25 hours in custody.

'Goran told CPJ that at around midnight, during a live broadcast, five Asayish vehicles arrived and officers beat and blindfolded the journalists.

"We were tortured and beaten as much as they could and pressured to quit journalism," he said. "Later, we were moved to Bardarash and held in solitary cells that had been used as toilets, in 35-degree (95 F) heat with no ventilation or water for hours."

'Goran said they were forced to unlock their phones, which were returned on July 15 [2025] with all their data erased.

'Kamil told CPJ that officers beat the men during the arrest and again at the Asayish office in the city of Rovia.

"They called us traitors and chaotic," he said. "My phone was reformatted, and my back still hurts from the beating."

'... CPJ contacted the Bardarash Asayish by phone, where officials confirmed the arrests but denied any assault or torture, offering no further explanation.'¹⁰⁸

12.4.16 The same source also stated: 'On July 14 [2025], three security personnel assaulted Hersh Qadir, head of NRT's Erbil office, while he was covering a protest in Erbil's Ainkawa district. He told CPJ that a man in plainclothes identifying himself as an Asayish officer ordered him not to broadcast.'¹⁰⁹ Although the source describes this incident as an 'assault', it did not specify whether it involved physical violence or simply a verbal order.

12.4.17 The August 2025 GCHR report stated:

'Journalist and civil society activist Omed Haji Fatah Baroshki from the Bahdinan area, who is the owner of Rast Media, was scheduled to be released on 30 July 2025. However, his lawyer, Revink Yassin, announced that his release was postponed by six months.

¹⁰⁷ CPJ, [Media21 outlet shuttered, 4 journalists arrested in Iraq](#), 3 March 2025

¹⁰⁸ CPJ, [Iraqi Kurdish authorities arrest, severely beat 3 journalists, assault another](#), 16 July 2025

¹⁰⁹ CPJ, [Iraqi Kurdish authorities arrest, severely beat 3 journalists, assault another](#), 16 July 2025

'The postponement is related to a previous defamation case filed against him in 2021 by former Kurdistan Regional Parliament member for the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Mullah Ihsan Rekani. He was sentenced to a suspended six months in prison, unless further cases are filed against him.

'On 30 January 2025, the Duhok Misdemeanor Court sentenced him to six months in prison. He was convicted under Article 2 of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's Law on the Prevention of Misuse of Telecommunications Equipment, which relates to the misuse of a mobile phone. His lawyer filed an appeal against the ruling.

'Local sources confirmed that this case, filed against him by the administration of Zarka General Prison in Duhok, is related to a social media post he made calling for the release of other prisoners of conscience.

'Baroshki had previously been arrested several times. On 22 February 2024, security forces raided his home and arrested him. He was not released until three days later, without any information being revealed about the reason for his arrest. He was also arrested on 19 August 2020, during the teachers' and employees' protests against the authorities responsible for their unpaid salaries. He was not released until 22 February 2022, after spending a year and seven months in prison. He faced several prison sentences totalling two years and six months, in addition to a fine of 240,000 Iraqi dinars [135.19 GBP¹¹⁰] for another case.

'On 13 August 2024, security forces arrested Baroshki as part of a security campaign to disperse participants in the annual commemoration of the death of journalist Wedat Hussein Ali who were attempting to gather at his shrine in Dohuk. He was released hours later, and the participants were forcibly dispersed.'¹¹¹

12.4.18 The same source also stated:

'On 24 June 2025, security forces in Sulaymaniyah detained a media crew from the NRT satellite channel while they were conducting a news report in the city's public market, reflecting the deteriorating conditions there and the deteriorating purchasing power of citizens due to the delay in paying salaries to employees in the region. The crew, comprised of correspondent Ali Saleh and photojournalist Mir Sarkawt, were taken to the Internal Security Directorate (Asayish), where all their equipment, including their cameras and mobile phones, was confiscated. They were released with their equipment after a six-hour detention.'¹¹²

12.4.19 The same source additionally stated:

'... On 16 July 2025, unidentified armed men in three vehicles attacked human rights lawyer Shwan Saber Kurdi on Route 120 in Erbil. The attackers initially attempted to kidnap him, but when they failed, they severely beat him and threatened him to stop publicly criticising the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or face even worse consequences. The attack resulted in severe injuries that required hospitalisation. Local sources confirmed that despite his complaint and the ability of the relevant

¹¹⁰ Xe.com, [240,000 IQD to GBP - Iraqi Dinars to British Pounds Exchange Rate](#), 14 August 2025

¹¹¹ GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

¹¹² GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

authorities to easily identify the perpetrators, no serious action was taken.’¹¹³

According to CPT-IK, two days before he was attacked, he had posted on his Facebook page calling for Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to resign. This source also described him as a ‘legal investigator for the KRG Public Prosecution Presidency.’¹¹⁴

12.4.20 In relation to the protest in Sulaymaniyah on 26 June 2025 (see paragraphs 12.3.7 and 12.3.10), the August 2025 GCHR stated:

‘A number of journalists and media professionals who wanted to cover the demonstrations were also arrested that same day [26 June 2025], including Moral Satellite TV correspondent Mehran Ramadan and her colleague, cameraman Nizar Satar, who were taken to an unknown location.

‘The media crew of Payam Satellite TV, consisting of reporter Hoshyar Mohammed and cameraman Hemin Mohammed, was also arrested.

‘This campaign also included the arrest of several members of the Speda Satellite TV media crew, including reporter Ibrahim Salih and photojournalists Ayoub Aziz and Mohammed Saadullah, along with their driver, Hassan Mohammed.

‘Zulia Ali, a correspondent for the Diplomatic Magazine Institution for Digital media, was also arrested.

‘Security forces also arrested two media crews from Zoom Satellite TV while they were attempting to cover teachers’ protests in front of the West Sulaymaniyah Education Directorate.

‘It is worth noting that all detainees were released hours after their arrest. Local sources confirmed that the purpose of their arrest was to prevent them from covering demonstrations and protests in the city.’¹¹⁵

12.4.21 In August 2025, CPT-IK published a report entitled ‘Updates on Violations Against Journalists and Activists in Iraqi Kurdistan – July 2025’ which stated:

‘July [2025] recorded one of the most repressive and aggressive periods of the year for journalists and activists by governmental authorities and entities. During the month, there were nine arrests, one attempted arrest, one killing, seven injuries, and four incidents in which at least 18 journalists were obstructed from performing their work. This escalation in repression coincided with a rise in activism and media coverage focusing on key grievances, including delays in salary payments, inadequate access to basic services, and growing tensions over land disputes between tribe leaders and allegations of preferential treatment by the government in how the disputes were resolved.

‘Further analysis and communication with local security forces indicate that security authorities are concerned about demonstrations being unsafe due to regional instability, and that such events could be vulnerable to outside interference. However, the timing of these violations and acts of aggression coincides with elections scheduled for later this year, a period during which government authorities and political parties are more sensitive to criticism,

¹¹³ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

¹¹⁴ CPT-IK, [Updates on violations against journalists and activists ...](#), 15 August 2025

¹¹⁵ GCHR, [GCHR’s periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 1 August 2025

public demonstrations, opposition activity, and independent media.’¹¹⁶

See the full [report](#) for a list of incidents. The list includes several reports of security forces beating journalists and one report of a member of the security forces accidentally shooting and killing a protestor.

The source’s claim that July 2025 witnessed a particularly high level of repression should be treated with caution. The source did not provide information about the number and/or severity of violations against journalists in previous months, and CPIT was unable to find other reports published by CPT-IK which provide this information.

12.4.22 In August 2025, Amnesty International published an article about imprisoned journalist Sherwan Sherwani which stated:

‘In response to an Erbil court sentencing journalist Sherwan Sherwani to another four years and five months in prison on 19 August [2025] for an apparent threat made to a prison officer, Amnesty International’s Iraq Researcher Razaw Salihi said:

“Sherwan Sherwani is already serving an unjust prison term after being previously convicted on spurious charges. He should have long since been released. Instead, he is being handed a new years-long prison sentence weeks before his scheduled release.

“This newest case against the journalist, long feared by his lawyer and family, is a blatant ruse by the authorities to keep him behind bars. His trial was marred by a complete lack of due process, including the refusal to provide his lawyer access to evidence and case files in due time so as to prepare an adequate defense.

“The injustice Sherwani is facing is part of a broader pattern of repression documented by Amnesty International, including the authorities’ making examples of critics in the Kurdistan Region. The authorities have repeatedly demonstrated a total disregard for press freedom, using intimidation, arbitrary detention and grossly unfair trials to punish journalists, activists and other critics who report on corruption and human rights issues.

‘... Sherwan Sherwani is a journalist whose work, up until his arrest, focused on human rights, including freedom of expression, and corruption. He was arrested in October 2020 along with four other journalists and activists and sentenced to six years in prison in a grossly unfair trial based on vague and overbroad laws. The trial was marked by serious violations of his right to a fair trial, including allegations of torture that were not investigated and the use of torture-tainted confessions.

‘His sentence was later commuted, but Sherwani faced additional spurious charges designed to prevent his release; in July 2023, months before his scheduled release, he was sentenced to a further four years. Witnesses described to Amnesty International that armed men in civilian clothing intimidated Sherwan Sherwani’s family members, activists and others who had gathered outside the court after the hearing, including waving guns.

‘This latest case follows a pattern of authorities targeting journalists and other critics who are already imprisoned with new charges as their release

¹¹⁶ CPT-IK, [Updates on violations against journalists and activists ...](#), 15 August 2025

dates approach.’¹¹⁷

12.4.23 In August 2025, CPT-IK published an article about the trial of Sherwan Sherwani which stated:

‘CPT-IK observed the trial and documented major violations, including a lack of proper evidence and procedures, the defense’s inability to challenge the validity of the evidence used to convict Sherwani, unjust sentencing, the militarization of the court, and the use of plainclothes security personnel to agitate and assault civilians waiting outside the courtroom.

‘... Although Sherwan Sherwani was scheduled for release on September 9, 2025, security forces approached him in June - just months before his release - offering an early release and compensation in exchange for ceasing his criticism of the government. He denied the offer and the formal judiciary process of the complaint by prison personnel began.’¹¹⁸

12.4.24 Commenting on Sherwan Sherwani’s case, the April 2026 Amnesty International report stated: ‘An appeals court in the region’s capital, Erbil, upheld his conviction in October [2025] but reduced his sentence to three years and five months – still heavier than the two-year maximum term prescribed by law.’¹¹⁹

12.4.25 On 22 August 2025, security forces in Sulaymaniyah raided the headquarters of Zoom TV, a news outlet affiliated with Lahur Talabani¹²⁰, who was arrested on the same day. On 6 September 2025, security forces handed back the office to Zoom TV, according to the outlet’s director Hemn Mahmoud. He said that ‘everything has been destroyed and no equipment remains usable’ and added that normal broadcasting would resume after repairs had taken place. He also denied that Zoom TV is affiliated with Lahur Talabani¹²¹. Speaking to a news outlet for an article published in January 2026, Mahmoud said: ‘After more than three months since the tensions, one of our main offices remains occupied by an armed force.’¹²²

12.4.26 Citing various sources, the October 2025 EUAA report stated: ‘In the KRI, security forces and individuals affiliated with powerful political parties continued to intimidate, harass and threaten journalists and activists. Security forces arrested or summoned several journalists for covering protests or conducting investigative reporting.’¹²³

12.4.27 In January 2026, The Amargi, a ‘grassroots-funded online media outlet’ focusing on Kurdistan whose core values are ‘freedom, democracy, diversity, coexistence, equality and social justice’¹²⁴, published an article entitled ‘Press Freedom Under Strain in Iraq Amid Arrests and Intimidation’. The article stated:

‘He [Sherwan Sherwani] was imprisoned following trials, whose fairness has been questioned by a wide range of human rights organizations, including the United Nations and several diplomatic missions in Erbil. “Sherwani’s cell

¹¹⁷ Amnesty International, [KRI: New sentence for journalist is evidence of practice ...](#), 20 August 2025

¹¹⁸ CPT-IK, [Unjust Treatment by the Kurdistan Regional Government Continues ...](#), 20 August 2025

¹¹⁹ Amnesty International, [Human rights in Iraq](#), April 2026

¹²⁰ Rudaw, [Authorities to return control of Zoom TV linked to Lahur Talabany](#), 29 August 2025

¹²¹ Rudaw, [Zoom TV to relaunch after suspension tied to Lahur Talabany arrest](#), 6 September 2025

¹²² The Amargi, [Press Freedom Under Strain in Iraq Amid Arrests and Intimidation](#), 9 January 2026

¹²³ EUAA, [Iraq – Country Focus](#) (page 88), October 2025

¹²⁴ The Amargi, [About Us](#), no date

is very narrow, lacks heating, and necessary carpet and blankets. His prison conditions are bad,” his lawyer, Mohammed Abdullah, told The Amargi. “Sherwani is expected to be freed by 27 September 2026.”

‘Abdullah stated that his client now faces an additional complaint from a fellow inmate, who, after being accused of harassing Sherwani, filed a counter-complaint against him.

‘... The Kurdistan region, once claimed to be a beacon of press freedom in the Middle East, has experienced a deteriorating press landscape in recent years as the two main ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), employ increasingly harsh tactics to silence journalists, activists, and protesters.

‘Even journalists tied to Kurdish ruling parties are no longer immune from intimidation. Late on 20 December [2025], Miran Bakr Abdulrahman, a ministry employee and former media secretary to the Kurdistan Region’s Peshmerga minister, was beaten and dragged to the PUK’s headquarters in Erbil before being released after several hours of detention.

‘Abdulrahman was targeted after publicly criticising party officials. This raised fears about how independent, and therefore more vulnerable, journalists will be treated if even partisan journalists face brutal intimidation.

‘... Late in November last year [2025], security forces in Erbil, under KDP control, prevented media coverage of protests in Lajan village, where demonstrators demanded jobs at the Lanaz refinery, owned by a son of KDP leader Masoud Barzani.

‘... Saman Nuh, head of the Network of Iraqi Reporters for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ), told The Amargi that press freedom in Iraq and the Kurdistan region is worsening across all areas.

‘... He pointed out that although the KRG is intended to govern the entire Kurdistan region, it is divided: the KDP controls Erbil and Duhok, whereas the PUK controls Sulaimaniyah and Halabja. Each area enforces its own regulations for journalists. Although some media outlets report on corruption, a lack of accountability restricts investigative journalism.’¹²⁵

12.4.28 In January 2026, Shafaq News reported:

‘Violations against journalists in the Kurdistan Region nearly doubled in 2025, reaching 315 cases, according to reports released on Saturday [17 January 2026] by a media watchdog.

‘In its annual report, the Metro Center for Journalists’ Rights described the increase reflected as “entrenched impunity,” documenting 74 cases involving physical assaults, threats, or direct attacks on journalists. The center also recorded 53 incidents in which journalistic equipment was seized or destroyed, along with 120 cases involving coverage bans or discriminatory practices.

‘Security forces detained journalists without warrants, searched mobile phones and violated privacy protections, the Center added, calling the findings evidence of a “serious crisis in the rule of law.”

‘... The Kurdistan Regional Government has not yet released official data

¹²⁵ The Amargi, [Press Freedom Under Strain in Iraq Amid Arrests and Intimidation](#), 9 January 2026

regarding violations against journalists in 2026.¹²⁶

CPIT was unable to locate the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights annual report mentioned above within the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)).

12.4.29 In January 2026, KirkukNow published an article comparing Metro Center's statistics above with those of the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate. The article stated:

'The Iraqi Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS) documented only 46 violations against journalists in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq KRI in 2025, a figure that sharply contrasts with a report released two days earlier by the Metro Center for Journalists Rights and Advocacy, which recorded 315 violations.

'On Monday, the KJS published its annual report on violations committed against journalists and media organizations over the past year. According to the report, just 46 cases were registered. The report was prepared by the Board for the Protection of Journalists' Freedom and Rights.

'KJS data shows that only one incident involved the shooting and injury of a journalist, and only one case involved the closure of a media outlet in 2025.

'... In contrast, the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy (MCJR) reported that 315 violations were committed against 252 journalists in the Kurdistan Region during the same year.

'According to the Metro Center, the most frequent violations were prevention and discrimination, accounting for 120 cases. These were followed by beatings, physical assaults, threats, and verbal abuse, recorded in 74 cases.

'The Metro Center reported 182 cases of violations against journalists and media channels in 2024, including 24 cases of journalists arrested without court warrant, compared to 249 violations in 2023.

'The KJS has reported 62 cases of violations against journalists in 2024, including 25 cases of obstruction and discrimination.¹²⁷

A KJS official told KirkukNow in January 2024 that the KJS and the Metro Center differ in what they count as violations¹²⁸. This is likely to be one of the reasons for the different figures. CPIT was unable to locate the KJS report mentioned above within the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)).

12.4.30 In February 2026, The New Arab reported:

'Authorities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region have closed the offices of Nalia Radio and Television (NRT), citing a court order. Officials stated that the closure was legal, as the broadcaster and rights groups say it is politically motivated.

'The broadcaster is said to be owned by opposition leader Shaswar Abdulwahid, head of the New Generation Movement (NGM), ... The NGM has accused the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of undermining media freedom and shutting down the channel for politically motivated reasons.

¹²⁶ Shafaq News, [300+ Press freedom violations in Kurdistan in 2025 ...](#), 17 January 2026

¹²⁷ KirkukNow, [Data of Journalist's Union or Metro Center? Violence Against ...](#), 20 January 2026

¹²⁸ KirkukNow, [62 violations against IKR journalist in 2023 ...](#), 23 January 2024

‘Erbil Governor Omed Khoshnaw told local media that the closures followed complaints against NRT, including allegations of “disrespecting national symbols.”

‘The court order has been implemented in Erbil, affecting all NRT offices in the region.

‘Mariwan Hassan, NRT newsroom director, told The New Arab, “Our offices in Erbil and Duhok were closed without any legal proof or court notifications.”

“Authorities have also prohibited our teams from carrying out journalistic work, in violation of the law regulating media in the Kurdistan Region,” he added, emphasising that the channel maintains professional standards.

‘Khoshnaw reiterated that the action was legal rather than political, stating, “The force that closed the office was the police and implemented a court order; it has nothing to do with politics.”

‘The decision reportedly stems from NRT blurring a photo of the late Mustafa Barzani, a national symbol for the KDP and father of party leader Masoud Barzani. His photos are displayed in government offices and public spaces in Erbil and Duhok.

‘The closure comes amid escalating political tensions following stalled negotiations to form the Kurdistan Regional Government’s tenth cabinet. In mid-January, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Bafel Talabani and Abdulwahid, after his release from jail, agreed to form a joint parliamentary bloc and participate together in the new KRG cabinet, which provoked discontent among the KDP. [For information on the PUK-NGM bloc, see [The New Generation Movement](#).]

‘... Srwa Abdulwahid, head of the NGM bloc in the Iraqi parliament and Shaswar’s sister, accused the KDP of orchestrating the closure. In a post on X, she alleged that a KDP-affiliated security force “confiscated equipment and forcibly shut down the office,” and stated that “NRT practices professional journalism, but the KDP continues its repressive approach, recognising only media loyal to its authority.”

‘The Kurdistan Journalists’ Syndicate’s Board for Freedom and Journalists’ Rights also expressed dissatisfaction, stating that the channel was closed without prior notification to the Syndicate.¹²⁹

12.4.31 Commenting on the same events, a GCHR report published in April 2026 stated:

‘On 04 April 2026, a security force affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) raided the Erbil office of NRT satellite TV, shutting it down and confiscating all its equipment. Simultaneously, another KDP force raided the channel’s Duhok office, closing it and confiscating its equipment as well. These actions were carried out without a court order, and the Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Culture stated that it was unaware of the security forces’ actions in Erbil and had not received any official notification regarding the matter.¹³⁰

12.4.32 In March 2026, KirkukNow published an article about the continued

¹²⁹ The New Arab, [With NRT channel shut, Iraqi Kurdistan's press ...](#), 5 February 2026

¹³⁰ GCHR, [GCHR’s 37th Periodic Report on Human Rights Violations in Iraq](#), 14 April 2026

detention of journalist Qareman Shukri which stated:

‘Khawla Taha, the mother of imprisoned photojournalist Qareman Shukri, continues to live with deep worry over her son’s fate. Despite a decision by the President of the Kurdistan Region to reduce his sentence, Shukri remains behind bars.

‘Qareman Shukri, 32, who previously worked with Rojnews, Star TV, and KNN, has spent nearly five years in prison. [In 2021], [a] court in Duhok sentenced him to seven years in prison in a trial where he was reportedly not allowed to appoint a lawyer.

‘... Qareman, the eldest in a family of twelve children - five brothers and six sisters - was arrested on December 27, 2021, by security forces in the Sere area of Shiladze, in Amedi district of Duhok province. He went missing for 97 days.

‘In June of that year, his family was able to visit him in prison for the first time. During that visit, Qareman told his mother that he had been sentenced to seven years in prison and had been prevented from hiring legal representation.

‘Most of Shukri’s work involved photography for the media outlets he collaborated with. He was convicted under Law No. 21 of 2003, which concerns espionage and actions that threaten national security. Critics argue that applying this law contradicts the Kurdistan Region of Iraq KRI’s Prss [sic] Law, which states that journalists should be prosecuted according to media legislation.

‘... On July 9, 2024, Kurdistan Region of Iraq President KRIP Nechirvan Barzani ordered a 60 percent reduction in Shukri’s sentence, according to his lawyer Ramazan Artisi, under the authority granted by the Presidency Law. However, the decision has not yet been implemented.

‘... Observers say Shukri’s case reflects a broader pattern in which journalists are prosecuted under laws related to national security rather than media legislation. In some cases, they are also denied the right to legal counsel, despite laws guaranteeing that right.

‘For instance, Article 23 of the Criminal Procedure Code states that any accused person must be brought before a court within 24 hours and has the right to appoint a lawyer and receive legal advice before and during investigations. According to his family and lawyers, these rights were not respected in Shukri’s case.

‘The Duhok branch of the Kurdistan Union of Journalists (KUJ) previously stated that it did not intervene in Shukri’s case because authorities claimed his arrest was unrelated to journalism, according to branch head Vian Abbas.

‘Even five years after the sentence, the court has not clearly explained how Shukri allegedly attempted to “undermine national security.”¹³¹

12.4.33 Commenting on the same case, the May 2024 Amnesty International report stated: ‘Shukri’s brother, also a journalist, told Amnesty International he has received multiple threats telling him to “keep his mouth shut” for advocating

¹³¹ KirkukNow, [Case Lives Only in Khawla’s Heart ...](#), 6 March 2026

on behalf of his brother's release. "I left [Kurdistan] to protect my family because they lived in constant fear that I was also going to be arrested," the brother said.'¹³²

12.4.34 The April 2026 Amnesty International report stated:

'Journalists in the KR-I, particularly those covering issues relating to human rights and government corruption, faced detention, harassment, assaults and threats at the hands of the authorities and individuals who identified themselves as affiliated to political actors, with little accountability for perpetrators. Between January and July [2025], civil society organizations and media in the KR-I reported dozens of arrests of media professionals, often accompanied by assaults and raids. Authorities introduced legislation that would criminalize reporting on crime in certain circumstances, contributing to self-censorship.

'Security forces in the KR-I repeatedly detained media workers at their place of work or while covering peaceful protests or security incidents, and assaulted them.

'The KR-I judiciary often extended the detention of journalists, activists and critics through new additional cases brought against them.'¹³³

12.4.35 The June 2026 GCHR report stated:

'On 28 April 2026, security forces in Duhok Governorate arrested civil society activist Divan Ahmed for posting a video on his Facebook page. In the video, he discussed the Duhok Misdemeanor Court's refusal to accept a legal complaint filed by lawyers on behalf of the Yazidi community in the Kurdistan Region against a KDP member who had insulted their beliefs. Reliable sources confirmed that the complaints were dismissed due to partisan political control over the judiciary in the region.

'On 28 April 2026, the Baytakht Media Foundation announced that it had lost contact with its journalist, Gutbar Rasul, in the Rania district of Sulaimaniyah Governorate, under mysterious circumstances. It was later revealed that he had been detained by the Asayish (Internal Security) and released on bail after 52 hours of detention. Rasul had previously worked as a reporter and journalist for Zoom TV.

'... On 16 April 2026, security forces arrested journalist and Channel 8 Satellite TV reporter Ayoub Ali Warti while he was preparing a report on the waste left by oil refineries in Erbil. He was arrested without cause or prior order, apparently to prevent media coverage of the pollution and gas emissions and their impact on the area's residents. He was released a few hours later.

'... On 08 April 2026, security forces in Duhok Governorate assaulted the 8 Satellite Channel crew and their reporter, Imran Yousif, while they were covering a high school student protest in front of the Duhok Education Directorate building. These forces prevented them from covering the protest and forcibly removed them from the scene.

'On 04 April 2026, security forces in Duhok Governorate arrested journalist and political activist Sabah Al-Atroushi, a member of the Kurdish National

¹³² Amnesty International, [Iraq: Authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq ...](#), 2 May 2024

¹³³ Amnesty International, [Human rights in Iraq](#), April 2026

Stance Movement, and civil society activist Reber Ahmed Aymanki after they called for public protests against rising electricity bills in the region and the awarding of the electricity contract to a private company backed by the Prime Minister. They were referred to court under Article 2 of the Law on Misuse of Telecommunications Devices. They were released on bail on 08 June 2026.¹³⁴

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¹³⁴ GCHR, [GCHR's periodic report on human rights violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan ...](#), 19 June 2026

Terms of Reference

The 'Terms of Reference' are the main topics and issues relevant to the scope of this note and provide the framework for the country information. In this note, they were:

- political context
 - summary of political situation and system
 - main recent political events
- opposition groups – size, structure, aims and activities
- treatment of groups by state actors (sub-sections for each specific group as required)
 - legal status – law to exercise freedoms of association, assembly and expression, including registration, operation of political parties and participate in elections
 - political groups:
 - ability to register as a political party or organisation with the government; set up offices; hold meetings, demonstrations, campaign and publish/broadcast aims in media
 - harassment, excessive use of force in dispersing meetings/demonstrations and other forms of violence, including frequency and nature
 - facing arbitrary arrest and detention, including
 - frequency
 - number
 - length of and treatment in detention
 - prosecution and conviction
 - profile of individuals subject to discrimination or human rights violations – senior leaders, members and/or supporters, protests, journalists

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Version control and feedback

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **4.0**
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Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – End of section

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Changes from last version of this note

Updated COI and assessment.

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