

Violence against returned asylum seekers in Iraq

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Overview

Since the second Gulf War, the Iraqi population have been destabilised by a massive death toll and a regime shift which has significantly exacerbated sectarian violence. Anti-Western sentiment has become a major source of violence in the country so that Shi'a Muslims, Christians and anyone seen as "too Western" have been subjected to shootings, car bombings and other forms of violence. Some groups seen as particularly western have been eight times more likely to be driven from the country compared to other groups.

Returned asylum seekers are seen as having been westernised and are consequently targeted by extremist groups and quite likely in domestic violence. In response to this threat, the Iraqi Parliament has banned the forced return of asylum seekers.

Scale and drivers

Scale

Due to the paucity of records it is impossible to quantify the exact scale of risk posed to returned asylum seekers in Iraq; however a number of factors must be taken into account. Mortality rates in the country more than doubled from 5.5 per thousand people per year before the second Gulf War to 13.3 per thousand per year in the 40 months post-invasion². Of the 654,965 deaths attributable to the effects of the war up until July 2006, 601,027 were attributed to violence. At the time of this study, mortality rates were increasing annually³. The causes of violence are particularly relevant to returned asylum seekers, and these will be discussed below.

Sectarian violence

Iraq's leadership has come from the minority Sunni Muslims since 1932, but since the regime change brought in by the second Gulf war there has been a revival of the dominant (approximately 60-67% of the Muslim population) Shi'a group⁴. This has proven to be a major driver of sectarian violence as anti-Shi'a sentiment is central to the more militant components of Sunni belief⁵, which include Al Qaeda, the Taliban,

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² **Burnham G, Lafta R, Doocy S, Roberts L. 2006.** Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey. *Lancet* **368**: 1421–8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ **Nasr V. 2004.** Regional implications of Shi'a revival in Iraq. *The Washington Quarterly* **27**: 5–24.

⁵ Ibid.

the Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the day of the 2011 Ashura bombings in Afghanistan for example, a Kuwaiti Wahhabi cleric stated on his web site that the Shi'a were "the biggest display of idolatry" and accused them of collaboration with the US and Israel⁶. The Syrian conflict has added to these tensions even further and the death toll from car bombings and other forms of domestic terrorism continues to climb⁷.

Anti-Western Sentiment

The accusation of Western collaboration cited above is central to the current context, as anti-Western sentiment has thrived since the invasion. This is exemplified by the fact that despite making up less than 5% of the population, Christians – who are associated with a "Crusade" by the West made up 40% of the refugees living in nearby countries by 2007⁸. Put another way, an individual with a perceived connection with the West was eight times more likely to be forced to seek refuge.

This reality is also evident in domestic violence across the Muslim world, where a 2010 study⁹ found that 43% of honour killings were due to the perception that an individual was "too Western".

Other Stressors

The UNHCR estimated in 2007 that approximately 7% of the Iraqi population had fled the country since the war, with an additional 1.7 million internally displaced persons¹⁰. Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria however, many that had sought refuge in that country have returned. In July and August of 2012 alone, 32,000 that had fled the country were forced to return¹¹. In addition to these, Syrians fleeing their own violence are seeking refuge in Iraq in massive numbers¹²; last year Iraq received a total of 64,265 asylum applications. To put this in perspective, this is more than twice the number of applicants to Australia in the same year and more than 13 times the burden based on the respective GDP of our countries.

Analysis

Risk to Returned Asylum Seekers

The primary risk to asylum seekers returning from Australia is the perception that they have been westernised.

National Response

Iraq has determined that it is unsafe for asylum seekers to be returned to the country against their will. In response to the violence directed at returnees, the Kurdish Regional Government banned the entry of asylum seekers forced to return in 2010¹³; this ban was extended across the country by the Iraqi Parliament in 2012¹⁴.

Conclusion

Forcible return of asylum seekers to Iraq will put their lives at serious risk. It will increase the tension in a country that Australia has played a part in destabilising and which is carrying a significantly greater refugee load than Australia. Forcible return of asylum seekers has been banned by the Iraqi Parliament as they have deemed that the risk to these individuals is too great.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-09-16/at-least-48-people-killed-in--iraq-car-bombings/4959358>

⁸ **USA Today, 2007.** Christians, targeted and suffering, flee Iraq. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-03-22-christians-iraq_N.htm

⁹ **Chesler P. 2010.** Worldwide trends in honor killings. *The Middle East Quarterly* 17(2): 3-11

¹⁰ **UNHCR. 2007.** <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7466089>

¹¹ **UNHCR. 2013.** Country Operations Profile. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486426.html>

¹² <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/where-we-work/middle-east/iraq>

¹³ **The Guardian. 2010.** Kurdish officials ban flights returning failed asylum seekers from UK. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/31/kurdish-uk-asylum-seekers-iraq>

¹⁴ **The Guardian. 2012.** Iraqi parliament refuses to accept nationals deported from Europe. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/iraq-parliament-deported-nationals-europe>