

Iraq: Security Forces Open Fire on Kirkuk Protesters

Mounting Ethnic Tensions in Disputed Territory



Iraqi security forces near the Kirkuk castle in Kirkuk, Iraq, September 7, 2023. © 2023 Ali Makram Ghareeb/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

(Beirut) – Iraqi security forces appear to have opened fire on demonstrators without prior warning in Kirkuk on September 2, 2023, killing at least 4 people and injuring 16, Human Rights Watch said today.

The violence comes amid months of increasing tensions between Kirkuk’s Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen populations. An inquiry into the incident opened by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia

al-Sudani should be independent and impartial in its investigation of allegations of excessive use of deadly force by Iraqi security forces.

“Time and again, the Iraqi government has responded to protests with lethal force and arrests of journalists,” said Sarah Sanbar, Iraq researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The government needs to take concrete steps that result in accountability for these actions.”

The ethnic tensions center around a building in Kirkuk that once served as the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the largest party in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The building has been occupied by Federal Iraqi security forces since 2017, when federal forces seized Kirkuk in response to the Kurdish independence referendum. The tensions flared after Prime Minister al-Sudani ordered the return of the building to the KDP on September 1 under an agreement made with the Kurdistan Regional Government when al-Sudani formed his government in October 2022.

On August 28, Arab and Turkmen protesters staged a sit-in in front of the former Kurdistan Democratic Party headquarters, calling for a halt to the handover of the building and to prevent the party from resuming its operations in Kirkuk. Protesters reportedly erected a tent and blocked the main road connecting Kirkuk and Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, hampering movement between Kirkuk and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Tensions escalated with the arrival of Kurdish counter-protesters, culminating in the deployment of Iraqi security forces and possible use of excessive and deadly force to dispel protesters.

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the security forces opened fire suddenly and without warning, possibly in response to protesters throwing rocks at their vehicles.

All four of those killed were Kurds, and two Iraqi officers were injured in clashes with protesters, said Lathif Fatih Farij, an independent Kurdish writer who met with families of the victims. One of those killed was an off-duty fighter for the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, Farij told Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch received reports of the arrest of journalists covering the protests but was unable to verify the number.

Prime Minister Sudani issued a statement after the violence on September 2 calling for all parties to prevent further strife and ensure stability in Kirkuk and imposed a 48-hour curfew. He also directed the formation of an investigative committee to uncover the circumstances surrounding the killings and injuries of protesters.

Hazhar Ramadan, a Kurdish resident of Kirkuk, told Human Rights Watch that his brother was shot and killed during the incident. “My brother Hawkar Abdullah Ramadan, age 38 and a father of four children, tragically lost his life during a demonstration in Kirkuk,” he said. “He was fatally shot twice in the heart. His only ‘crime’ was proudly displaying the Kurdistan flag.”

Rokan Mahmoud Jaf, a journalist from Ava Media, told Human Rights Watch that Iraqi counter terrorism forces shot him in the arm while he was covering the protests. He was filming live with his cameraman when the counter-terrorism forces began shooting without warning. A video he shared with Human Rights Watch shows him sprinting toward a car while an individual in a moving black Humvee vehicle displaying the Iraqi flag fires shots at him.

“I attempted to seek shelter behind a car, but a bullet struck my arm, and another hit the car. Just moments before my injury, I witnessed a young man fatally shot in the chest by the counter-terrorism forces,” Jaf said. “I could tell they were counter-terrorism forces from their vehicles. We were speaking with them a few minutes before the escalation.” He said he saw more than 50 marked counter terrorism vehicles in the area.

He said that protesters rushed him to a hospital. He said he intends to lodge a formal complaint against the counterterrorism forces and has already provided his testimony to the prime minister’s inquiry committee.

Hemin Dalo, a reporter for Kurdistan24, told Human Rights Watch that his team received a summons from the Iraqi National Security Service to appear at their office in Kirkuk following the violence. “We chose not to comply,” Dalo said. “Our staff has faced numerous instances of harassment from security forces and local authorities in Kirkuk since 2017.”

In response to the violence, Iraq’s highest court halted al-Sudani’s order to hand over the building to the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani of the Kurdistan region called the ruling a “farce.”

On September 3, al-Sudani reiterated that the security forces in Kirkuk are firmly committed to safeguarding Kirkuk residents’ rights to a dignified life, freedom of expression, and enjoying a secure environment.

Kirkuk, a multiethnic and multireligious city, is one of the disputed territories between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government. It has been the site of some of the country’s worst post-ISIS violence. The governorate is also home to Iraq’s oldest continually producing oilfields. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution calls for resolving the status of Iraq’s disputed territories, including Kirkuk, through a referendum. No conclusive steps to implement Article 140 have taken place since 2005.

The Iraqi government should make the preliminary findings of the investigation public as soon as possible, and where evidence of wrongdoing has been found, bring those responsible to justice in fair trials, Human Rights Watch said.

The Iraqi government has yet to provide justice for the deaths of over 600 protestors and the wounding of 20,000 more during the October 2019 protests over corruption and lack of services, known as the Tishreen movement.

“The Iraqi government’s standard response to instances of violence against protestors is to open an investigation, but they rarely amount to anything,” Sanbar said. “This latest investigation should instead set a new and better standard, ensuring that justice is served for victims and their families.”

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/08/iraq-security-forces-open-fire-kirkuk-protesters>