



Iraq 2016 Crime and Safety Report: Erbil

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Religious Terrorism; Civil War; Insurgencies; Riots/Civil Unrest; Improvised Explosive Device; Religious Violence; Extreme heat/drought; Winter weather; Other Threat / Incident; Kidnapping

Near East > Iraq; Near East > Iraq > Erbil

2/23/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Low

Crime Threats

Crime statistics and/or crime reporting mechanisms in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) are unreliable. However, a worsening economic situation and fiscal crisis has resulted in a moderate increase of crime. Informally, officials have commented that non-violent property thefts and thefts from residences are on the rise. To date, most of the crime is non-violent, and Westerners and diplomats are not targeted.

The Kurdish police and security services are out in significant numbers, and visitors can move around urban areas in relative safety.

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Cyber

No specific, ongoing cyber security threat exists in the region. However, terrorist groups and criminals have used the latest technology, social media, and the Internet to recruit and further their cause. When managing personal accounts online, users should take routine precautions to prevent malware, spyware, malicious code, and phishing schemes from harming your computer or business network.

Areas of Concern

U.S. citizens who choose to visit or reside in Iraq despite the official Travel Warning are urged to take responsibility for their own personal security and belongings.

Individuals associated with the U.S. Consulate in Erbil are required to travel with a Protective Security Detail (PSD) and in armored vehicles due to terrorism threats, limiting potential criminal threats against Consulate personnel. All Consulate General movements off the compound are restricted to official business (mission essential) and require both armored vehicles and armed protective security personnel. The U.S. Consulate recommends that individuals who are required to live/travel in Iraq utilize an in-country security advisor or some type of PSD support to limit potential terrorist and criminal threats.

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Terrorists often target Iraqi civilians, Iraq security forces, Kurdistan regional security forces, the government of Iraq, and the Kurdistan regional government. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) devotes considerable resources to protect its key government buildings, vital infrastructure, soft targets (hotels, churches/mosques, shopping areas, the diplomatic community).

Travelers should avoid any areas in the vicinity of the forward line of own troops (FLOT) and stay clear of disputed boundaries, which are not easily defined. Instability and violence can erupt with little or no warning.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions are reasonably good, and roads are generally well-constructed. Urban and interstate roads are usually constructed of asphalt, while rural roads are typically hard-packed dirt and gravel. Most roads do not have an adequate shoulder for emergency stops. Most roads outside of urban centers are one lane in each direction. By U.S. or Western standards, the IKR lacks road treatment and clearing equipment sufficient to mitigate hazards associated with snow and ice. This is especially true outside major urban centers.

Expatriates and visitors who decide to drive must have a defensive mindset. Drivers do not typically exhibit U.S. standard road etiquette or adhere to traffic laws/road markings. Drivers can be aggressive and will routinely exceed posted speed limits, tailgate, and attempt

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reckless lane changes and passing. When on long trips it is wise to carry water, a medical kit, and adequate cash in the event you have an accident requiring vehicle repair or urgent medical care. Driving a serviceable vehicle reduces the possibility of a breakdown and subsequent hazards associated with being isolated on the road overnight.

Vehicle security checkpoints and dense urban populations often result in significant traffic congestion. Roads can become congested to the point of inhibiting movement due to host country checkpoints; especially along roads leading into/out of Erbil. Travelers should consider taking up-to-date maps, use a GPS navigation device, and call in-country contacts to give status checks (waypoints) while in transit. These periodic updates will assist in the event of a road mishap.

Public Transportation Conditions

Poorly maintained city transit vehicles are frequently involved in accidents or breakdowns. City buses run regularly; however, their use is not recommended because buses frequently change routes without notice. Long distance buses are in poor condition and often drive at speeds unsafe for road conditions.

Train and passenger rail infrastructure remains inadequate.

Taxis are plentiful and clearly marked, but it is best to have a reputable taxi company or private car service called ahead of time from an apartment or a hotel front desk (vice hailing a

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taxi from the street).

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Two international airports operate within the IKR: Erbil International Airport and Sulaimaniyah International Airport. Many flights operating from Europe and the Middle East fly directly to the IKR. Overall, airports in the IKR are clean, functional, secure, and well maintained. The local security force, Asayish, control the outer perimeter, gates, and access points around the airports. Airport screening of arriving vehicles, passengers, luggage, cargo, and identity documents is thorough. Modern security equipment and passenger screening protocols are in place.

The FAA prohibits U.S. civil aviation from operating in Iraq or overflying Iraqi airspace to include the IKR. Foreign airlines have postponed or canceled scheduled flights due to security factors with little notice.

Other Travel Conditions

Roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are not common in the IKR; however, law enforcement have found smaller handheld explosives.

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Travelers should know where the FLOT and disputed internal boundaries are located. Border areas between neighboring countries can be dangerous and often not clearly defined. If transit across borders is required, only use established border crossing points.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Critical

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Northern Iraq and northern Syria remain centers of gravity for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and they control Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. In 2014, ISIL was able to take advantage of the porous border between Iraq and Syria and seize lands that became the nucleus of a self-proclaimed Caliphate. Kurdish Peshmerga forces maintain approximately a 700-mile border against ISIL commonly referred to by the U.S. military term FLOT.

Since the departure of the U.S. military in December 2011, terrorist and insurgent groups have continued to attract foreign fighters. Numbers have grown, and these groups move around the country with relative ease, increasing in lethality and in their ability to conduct complex attacks and ground assaults.

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During the summer of 2014 the rapid advance of ISIL into north/west Iraq resulted in an elevated threat for terrorism in Erbil and the neighboring northern provinces. Although ISIL's advance has been stopped, the front line remains approximately 23 miles from Erbil. As ISIL suffers battlefield setbacks, the threat of asymmetric attacks on soft targets and IKR facilities remains high.

The security situation in the IKR remains fluid and can deteriorate rapidly. Insurgents continue to carry out effective small- and large-scale attacks throughout Iraq that cause casualties, hinder the freedom of movement for citizens, and influence public opinion.

On August 23, 2014, a car bomb exploded in Erbil and wounded several individuals.

On November 19, 2014, a suicide car bomber attacked the Provincial Governor's building in Erbil, killing five people and injuring 29 others.

On March 15, 2015, three 122mm rockets impacted an area 7.5km southwest of the Erbil airport, causing the suspension of flights by European and Gulf carriers for weeks.

On April 17, 2015, a car bomb detonated on the street outside of the U.S. Consulate General, killing two, injuring scores, and damaging local shops and businesses.

In November 2015, Russia fired several sorties of cruise missiles across the IKR en route to Syria, shutting down the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports. Flights were cancelled for several weeks until overflight protocols could be negotiated.

ISIL lost both territory and facilitation routes in northern Iraq in the latter part of 2015, to include Mount Sinjar and the surrounding area. Although on the defensive, ISIL still remains capable and dangerous. On December 16, 2015, ISIL broke Peshmerga lines on four axes before being halted. Further complicating the security environment, internal ethnic, religious,

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and political rifts remain along disputed boundaries that form the IKR.

The increase in attacks throughout 2015 indicates the willingness of radical groups to use terrorism for political and economic gain. These groups hold areas under their control, destabilize the governments, and disrupt life for Iraqi citizens. In 2015, Turkish air strikes began against Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) elements on Kurdish soil. This step generated concern about retaliatory attacks against Turkish interests in/around Erbil, although retaliatory attacks have not occurred. In 2016, Turkey continues to maintain a military presence in the IKR.

Mosul and other areas remain under ISIL's control. As Mosul becomes the center of attention in the fight against ISIL, the IKR will experience additional activity from the Kurdish Peshmerga, Kurdish police, and security services. Kirkuk, while under Kurdish control, remains a highly unstable location with frequent attacks and security incidents. Activity in/around Kirkuk has included vehicle bombs, Katusha rockets, and roadside IEDs. The Kirkuk police and security services routinely arrest and interdict ISIL affiliates. The security environment in Kirkuk deteriorated significantly in the later part of 2015. Discord between Sunni and Shia Turkmen, Kurds and Turkmen and Shia militias continue to escalate along the Iraqi-Kurdish disputed area, including the restive Tuz Khurmatu.

In January 2016, Kurdish authorities interrupted an active ISIL plot to detonate an explosive device in Suayamaniyah.

In February 2016, Kurdish security agencies arrested members of a ISIL terrorist cell who were planning attacks in Erbil.

The heavy presence of Kurdish Peshmerga on the FLOT has been a stabilizing force, especially when working in tandem with Coalition air power and advise/assist missions. This

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combination has undoubtedly prevented significant acts of terrorism in Erbil and other major urban areas in the IKR.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

While anti-American sentiment may exist in southern Iraq, the Kurds have a favorable view of Americans and Westerners in general. It is a priority for the Kurds to keep Americans and Westerners safe. The threat of attacks in the IKR remains a concern. There have been no serious attacks against Americans or Westerners in the IKR. In spite of political divisions and the threat from ISIL, the Kurdish region enjoys a strong relationship with the U.S. and the region remains relatively secure.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Politically, Kurdistan is divided mostly between the KDP, PUK, and Goran political parties. The KDP primarily has political influence in the urban areas of Erbil and Dahouk, and the PUK has control of Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk.

Post Political Violence Rating: Critical

Civil Unrest

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Civil unrest occasionally takes place in the IKR. Religious and political rallies attract hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of participants; protests are typically peaceful, require a permit, and are heavily monitored by Kurdish police and security services. Demonstrations have been a consequence of political strife and internal economic factors. In October 2015, violent demonstrations over the non-payment of government salaries quickly escalated into a major clash between the KDP and Goran supporters that took place primarily in Sulaymaniyah, which resulted in the Goran party losing seats in the KRG Parliament and ministries to include the speaker of Parliament. Demonstrations over the lapse of civil servant pay and worsening economic conditions continue in 2016.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

The rise of ISIL has led to violations of religious freedom and the outright persecution of minority groups in parts of Iraq. The IKR has sought to prevent inter-religious tensions and control clashes between ethnic groups. However, some violence and internal inter-ethnic conflict frequently takes place in Kirkuk and other KRG-controlled areas that have significant non-Kurdish populations. In general, the provinces of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah have not experienced serious religious or ethnic strife. The Kurdish government and their people have taken in almost two million exiled Syrian, Yazidi, and Christian groups. In general, the Kurds are widely viewed as tolerant and very generous to groups persecuted and displaced by ISIL.

Post-specific Concerns

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Environmental Hazards

Iraq and the Kurdish environment can be harsh. Temperatures fall below 32 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and often exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Snow typically falls in areas of higher elevation; this closes roads until warmer temperatures return. Heavy fog, often lasting for hours, is common during the winter. Dust storms, which can reduce visibility and impede aircraft, occur frequently during the spring.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

The battle between ISIL, the Iraqi national government forces, and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces has taken a toll on Iraq's critical infrastructure, including the nation's oil reserves and industrial infrastructure, power plants, and, most recently, the country's hydraulic power system. Power failures occur frequently throughout the day, and almost all homes and businesses rely on back-up generators to maintain consistent power. Power outages increase during the summer months.

There has been considerable attention given to the status of the Mosul Dam and if it will fail. There are international efforts to improve the structural integrity of the dam and reinforce the porous ground beneath it. If the Mosul Dam fails, it is estimated flood waters will reach as far south as Baghdad. All essential/life support services will be impacted. It is strongly recommended all U.S. citizens, commercial businesses, and private organizations develop contingency plans to relocate their personnel quickly in the event of a dam failure.

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Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Economic espionage and intellectual property thefts are on the rise worldwide. Because these events are often not reported publically, it is difficult to identify victims, business sectors impacted, or offenders. In general, the threat of economic espionage and intellectual property thefts is not endemic to the IKR.

Privacy Concerns

The growth of Internet usage has raised concerns about privacy. Individuals visiting/working in Iraq are reminded to be careful with the information they share online, including posting strongly-worded or divisive comments against any political party in the IKR.

Drug-related Crimes

Crime statistics and/or crime reporting mechanisms in the IKR are unreliable. Informally, Kurdish authorities opine that drug use and cross border drug trafficking are not a serious concern, and any drug possession that may exist is for personal use (vice large-scale sales and distribution).

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Kidnapping Threat

U.S. citizens remain at high risk for kidnapping and terrorist violence. In 2015, the threat of violence in the IKR increased considerably with the presence of ISIL near Kurdish areas.

Police Response

IKR police and military units have the ability to quickly respond to security incidents, terrorist attacks, and criminal activities. IKR police and security services have sufficient command and control to direct their officers quickly where required and are equipped with basic weapons and security equipment. Specialized units (explosive ordinance disposal teams) have enhanced training and equipment. IKR police and security services are professional and highly responsive to Americans and Westerners. Americans should cooperate and follow instructions if approached by IKR security personnel.

The Kurds do not apply U.S. laws and jurisprudence standards, and all personnel operating in Iraq are subject to Iraqi law. Visitors and expatriates should avoid unauthorized photography, especially of IKR security forces and checkpoints, which is strictly prohibited. IKR military personnel may confiscate equipment and temporarily detain individuals taking unauthorized photographs or asking probing questions to IKR police and security officials. For more information, please review OSAC's Report "Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography." American personnel should carry proper identification at all times to avoid undue questioning and delays at checkpoints.

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While the IKR may issue “Kurdish visas,” the government of Iraq strictly enforces requirements regarding visas and stamps for entry and exit, vehicle registration, authorizations for weapons, and movements through checkpoints.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Police harassment of Americans is rare in the IKR, but if detained, Americans should follow the instructions of host nation security and be respectful. The ability of the Consulate General to assist U.S. citizens facing difficulty, including arrest, is extremely limited.

Crime Victim Assistance

The ability of the Consulate General to assist U.S. citizens facing difficulty, including arrest, is extremely limited. Many services that existed in the past (U.S. military-provided medical evacuations, transportation, convoy support, lodging, quick reaction forces, PSDs) are not available through the Consulate. Victims of crime should notify the U.S. Consulate by contacting the American Citizen Services via e-mail at ErbilACS@state.gov or at 066-211-4554 (from Iraq) or 240-264-3467 ext. 4554 (from the U.S.) during regular business hours. For after-hours emergencies (including weekends and holidays), please call 066-211-4000 from Iraq) or 1-240-264-3467 (from the U.S.).

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Police/Security Agencies

Armored vehicles and local security teams are available for hire on short- and long-term contracts.

Medical Emergencies

Many IKR hospitals and emergency medical services do not meet U.S. standards. Although a few hospitals and dental clinics subscribe to a Western standard of care, local hospitals typically have substandard staffing, equipment, and may not carry specialized medicines. IKR hospitals should be utilized only as a contingency for urgent life or death emergencies. Individuals associated with private businesses are responsible for arranging their own medical care.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

A list of doctors and hospitals can be obtained from the Consulate's American Citizen Services office by e-mailing ErbilACS@state.gov. For security reasons, the names of organizations and individuals are not posted on the Consulate's American Citizen Services website.

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Recommended Insurance Posture

Americans should secure private medical evacuation insurance and also have enough cash on hand to pay for urgent medical treatment.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

For vaccination and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/iraq>.

OSAC Country Council Information

For additional information on the Erbil Country Council, please visit <https://www.osac.gov>. To reach OSAC's Near East team, please email OSACNEA@state.gov.

U.S. Consulate Location and Contact Information

Consulate Address and Hours of Operation

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U.S. Consulate General in Erbil

413 Ishtar, Ankawa, Erbil, Iraq

The U.S. Consulate is located in the Ankawa neighborhood of Erbil City, within the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The Consulate is situated in close proximity to the Erbil International Airport.

Hours of Operation: 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Sun-Thurs

Consulate Contact Numbers

For all non-emergency inquiries, please email us at ErbilACS@state.gov.

For American citizen emergencies:

During business hours from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Sun-Thurs (local Erbil time is eight hours ahead of the East coast time for the U.S.): from Iraq: 066-211-4554 and from the U.S.: 240-264-3467 extension 4554.

After-hours emergencies and on weekends (Fri, Sat, and holidays): from Iraq: 066-211-4000 and ask for the Duty Officer and from the U.S.: 240-264-3467 and ask for the Duty Officer

Website: <http://erbil.usconsulate.gov/>

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Nearby Posts

Embassy Baghdad: <http://iraq.usembassy.gov/>

Consulate Basrah: <http://basrah.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Kirkuk: <http://kirkuk.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Guidance

The U.S. Consulate remains at emergency staffing levels. For visa information or questions, you must email the visa unit at ErbilNIV@state.gov.

American citizen travelers should enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) in order to receive messages from the Embassy about safety and security. Travelers can enroll by visiting <https://step.state.gov/step/>. It is also recommended that travelers consult the Country Specific Information for Iraq and the Travel Warning for Iraq, located on the same website.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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Situational Awareness Best Practices

Visitors should always remain aware of their surroundings, secure their valuables, and be on guard against petty street crime or crimes of opportunity.

Individuals are reminded to travel in groups, when possible, and to maintain situational awareness. Visitors should be mindful to be on-guard against strangers who ask excessive questions about your business, where you are residing, or other questions/actions to get you to divulge details about yourself, your companions, actions in country, or your business.

Travelers should consider using all available security assets to minimize any potential terrorist or criminal risks, to include protective security or a local driver who knows routes, speaks the local language, and knows which areas may present a higher degree of risk. Interpreters can also negotiate with Kurdish security at check points. Individuals should avoid predictability by varying routes/ times of travel and locations/arrival times. Visitors are strongly discouraged from traveling alone. PSD personnel can also be used to render assistance in the event of an emergency and call for additional police and security support. All travelers should carry a cell phone that has both calling and texting capability. All phones should have contact numbers preloaded into the phone in the event they are needed quickly.

Americans should make several copies of passports and other vital identity documents.

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