



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## Iraq

Iraq – IRQ38932 – Sunnis working for  
foreign companies – Mahdi Army – Basra  
– Sectarian violence – Iraqi education  
system

22 June 2011

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**1. Are Sunni Muslims working for foreign companies in Basra (particularly United States' and Turkish companies) targeted for harm by the Mahdi Army?**

Limited information was located regarding the Mahdi Army targeting Sunni Muslims working for foreign companies in Basra. Limited information was located suggesting that those employed by foreign companies, including Sunni, Shi'a and foreign workers, have been targeted by militia groups. In March 2010, a weapons cache found in Basra province was reportedly intended to be used by an armed group targeting foreign oil companies. The weapons were accompanied by a note threatening foreign oil companies, and anyone working for them. The note – signed by The Sons of the Wide Lands of Basra – promised to “strike with an iron hand” anyone who helped or protected foreign oil companies.<sup>1</sup>

In 2009, there were reports of increased political killings in Basra, coinciding with the gradual return from self-imposed exile of former Mahdi Army members. Although less active than they had been during the height of the insurgency, militants were reportedly targeting Iraqi citizens who co-operated with British forces, as well as Iraqis working for foreign companies. In November 2009, a hearse driver in Basra reportedly claimed he had just driven “the bodies of two Iraqis back to their home in Baghdad...[t]hey were working here for a foreign company with a foreign engineer...[h]e was kidnapped and the two Iraqis were killed”.<sup>2</sup>

As suggested above, militia groups have also been known to target those assisting foreign forces in Iraq, including in Basra. In 2007, a man said to have been an interpreter for the British Army in Basra was reportedly killed by militia gunmen. The interpreter, who had also worked as an English teacher at Basra College, was beaten and abducted by up to ten suspected Mahdi Army members. His body was found in a street later that evening. According to Colonel Saleem Agaa al-Zabon, the head of Basra's Special Forces, militias had stepped up their hunt for collaborators since the British withdrawal from Basra. Colonel al-Zabon was quoted as saying that “[a]ll the people who worked for the British forces are not safe now...[e]ven people who quit one or two years ago are in danger”.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy that in 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Mahdi Army, the largest and most organised radical Shi'ite group in Iraq, announced a ceasefire, and urged militants

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Armed group targets foreign oil companies in Basra’ 2010, US Labor Against the War website, source: Iraq Oil Report, 17 March <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=21798> – Accessed 17 June 2011 – Attachment 1

<sup>2</sup> ‘Militia return to Basra and threaten those who helped force them out’ 2009, War in Iraq website, source: *The Times*, 27 November [http://www.iraq-war.ru/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=211758](http://www.iraq-war.ru/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=211758) – Accessed 20 June 2011 – Attachment 2

<sup>3</sup> ‘Dragged to death for helping the British’ 2007, *The Times*, 17 September <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article2469549.ece> – Accessed 17 June 2011 – Attachment 3

against engaging in further acts of violence and intimidation.<sup>4 5</sup> Sadr then left for Iran, where he remained until early 2011. Prior to the ceasefire, Sadr's position was that of armed rebellion against foreign 'invaders' and the Iraqi police.<sup>6</sup> Since 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr has presented himself as a genuine political figure and power broker, with his support instrumental in Nouri al-Maliki's ability to form government, some months after the March 2010 elections.<sup>7</sup> Although the Mahdi Army has officially disbanded, al-Sadr is believed to have formed a militia known as Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud, or the Promised Day Brigades.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no evidence that this new militia targets Sunni Muslims working for foreign companies specifically. It also appears this militia limits activities largely to Sadr city, in Baghdad.

According to *Aufheben*, Muqtada al-Sadr repeatedly denied any connections with sectarian cleansing and death squads. Sadr claimed that the death squads were likely rogue elements exceeding his orders to only target those actively involved in Sunni attacks on Shi'a areas, collaborators with the occupation forces, or senior ex-Ba'athists.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Are Sunni Muslims in Basra being targeted for harm?

Limited current information was located regarding whether Sunni Muslims in Basra are being targeted for harm. Historically, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2007, individuals who are perceived to be supporters of the former regime and/or the ongoing insurgency, including Sunni Arabs, have been subjected to physical violence and other forms of intimidation and harassment. Sunni Arabs were often blamed for the human rights abuses that took place under the former government, in addition to being broadly considered to be supporters of the insurgency. As such, they have been targeted by Shi'ite death squads and elements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).<sup>10</sup>

In 2009, the UNHCR reported that sectarian violence between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities had virtually halted, despite some extremist groups seeking to reignite the violence. Shi'ite armed groups, which had previously engaged in sectarian killings, continued to largely adhere to a ceasefire, although the UNHCR acknowledges that these groups may have been weakened, or had relocated. The Sunni dominated insurgency had been weakened largely due to the formation of US-backed Sunni Awakening Councils, in addition to continuous military operations in the central governorates.<sup>11</sup> According to a 2007 report by the International Crisis Group, Basra's diversity, a source of potential tension, was largely

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<sup>4</sup> 'Gunmen try to shoot Iraqi cleric Sadr's spokesman' 2009, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 May <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a1d3e09c.html> – Accessed 1 April 2011 – Attachment 4

<sup>5</sup> Jamestown Foundation 2011, 'Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran Use 'Soft Power' to Pursue Objectives in Iraq', *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 9 Issue: 5, 7 February <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d4f99c92.html> – Accessed 1 April 2011 – Attachment 5

<sup>6</sup> 'Profile: Muqtada Sadr' 2008, 'Profile: Muqtada Sadr', *BBC News*, 22 February [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3131330.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3131330.stm) – Accessed 29 February 2008 – Attachment 6

<sup>7</sup> 'Iraq Elections' 2010, *The New York Times*, 21 December <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iraq/elections/index.html> – Accessed 23 March 2011 – Attachment 7

<sup>8</sup> Al Juburi, S. 2010, 'Can Iraq's Sadrists prove their nationalist credentials?', Open Democracy website, 4 January <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/shatha-al-juburi/can-iraqs-sadrists-prove-their-nationalist-credentials#> – Accessed 4 April 2011 – Attachment 8

<sup>9</sup> 'Al-Sadr and the Mahdi army: Sectarianism and resistance in Iraq' 2009, *Aufheben* #17, Libcom.org website <http://libcom.org/library/aufheben-17> – Accessed 20 June 2011 – Attachment 9

<sup>10</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2007, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers*, August, Section B.2 – Attachment 10

<sup>11</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2009, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs for Iraqi Asylum-Seekers*, April, Section II – Attachment 11

mitigated by the rise of armed Islamist parties. Many Sunni families relocated to Baghdad and Mosul, thus reducing the potential for sectarian violence.<sup>12</sup>

Please refer to the responses for [Question 1](#) and [Question 3](#) for further information on Shi'a/Sunni sectarian violence.

### 3. What is the current situation regarding Shi'a / Sunni sectarian violence in Basra?

Limited current information was located regarding Shi'a/Sunni sectarian violence in Basra. Despite claims of a drastic reduction in sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that in 2009, there continued to be reports of attacks on Sunnis living in Shi'ite-dominated areas and on Shi'ites in Sunni-dominated areas. The small Sunni community in Basra reportedly continued to be targeted with intimidation and property damage in attempts to forcibly evict them, as well as with killings and assassinations. Despite this, there were reports that displaced Sunnis were increasingly returning to Basra.<sup>13</sup>

In Iraq more generally, Sunnis are reportedly concerned about the return of Shi'ite militias and the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr, who has threatened to recommence his campaign against US forces should they remain in Iraq past the planned 31 December 2011 withdrawal deadline. Shi'ites, conversely, are reportedly worried about former Ba'ath party loyalists who fled to Yemen and Syria following the US-led invasion in 2003, who now may seek to return to Iraq in light of the current instability in these countries.<sup>14</sup>

While limited examples of recent sectarian violence in Basra were located, there were reports of more general violence in the region, likely aimed at destabilising the government, as well as at foreign forces. According to *Al-Jazeera*, in June 2011, at least five people were killed and 15 injured in a suicide car bomb attack at the entrance to a special police unit. The article noted that Basra had been subject to less attacks than other cities in Iraq, with an overall decline in levels of violence since 2007. Despite this, earlier in June 2011, a bomb attack against an oil storage facility in Basra set one storage tank on fire, while in March 2011, a roadside bomb targeting a US military convoy exploded near a civilian bus, killing six people and wounding 12 others.<sup>15</sup> According to *Aswat al-Iraq*, seven people were killed and 18 civilians were injured in a March 2011 improvised explosive device (IED) blast close to Maaqal railway station in Basra.<sup>16 17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group 2007, *Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 67, 25 June, p.10

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/67\\_iraq\\_lessons\\_from\\_basra.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/67_iraq_lessons_from_basra.ashx) – Accessed 17 June 2011 – Attachment 12

<sup>13</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2009, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers*, April, Section VIII.H – Attachment 11

<sup>14</sup> 'Nervous Iraqis buying more assault rifles, pistols' 2011, *The Hindu*, source: *Associated Press*, 14 June <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2103615.ece> – Accessed 20 June 2011 – Attachment 13

<sup>15</sup> 'Suicide blast kills five in Iraq's Basra city' 2011, *Al-Jazeera*, 13 June <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/06/20116136255241619.html> – Accessed 21 June 2011 – Attachment 14

<sup>16</sup> 'Number of persons injured in IED blast in Basra' 2011, *Aswat al-Iraq*, 6 March [http://en.aswataliraq.info/Default1.aspx?page=article\\_page&id=141330&l=1](http://en.aswataliraq.info/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=141330&l=1) – Accessed 21 June 2011 – Attachment 15

<sup>17</sup> 'Seven persons killed, 18 injured in Basra blast' 2011, *Aswat al-Iraq*, 6 March [http://en.aswataliraq.info/Default1.aspx?page=article\\_page&id=141334&l=1](http://en.aswataliraq.info/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=141334&l=1) – Accessed 21 June 2011 – Attachment 16

In November 2010, a car bomb in Basra reportedly killed five people and injured 15 when it exploded near a restaurant in the south-west of the city. On the same day, two additional car bombs targeted Karbala and Najaf, two of Iraq's holiest cities for Shi'ite Muslims, killing another 16 people. The attacks appear to have been timed to coincide with talks held by political leaders aimed at breaking an eight-month deadlock over forming a new government.<sup>18</sup> In October 2010, two explosions killed at least 10 people and injured 35 at the al-Ashaar market in Basra. Police speaking anonymously said a roadside bomb and a car loaded with explosives caused the blasts, although the Police Chief said the explosions were caused by a malfunctioning power generator.<sup>19</sup>

Please refer to the responses for [Question 1](#) and [Question 2](#) for further information on Shi'a/Sunni sectarian violence.

#### **4. Does the Basra school system work on a staggered roster?**

A number of sources confirmed that some schools in Iraq – including those in Basra – share common infrastructure, and educate students in shifts. In January 2009, UNICEF reported that in a number of governorates, including Basra, less than 60 per cent of children aged 6-11 regularly attended school in the previous two months. In many governorates, over 30 per cent of primary schools were operating two or more shifts per day.<sup>20</sup> According to a 2004 UNICEF report, increases in enrolments in the 2003/2004 school year were undermined by inadequate school facilities, with insufficient desks, chairs and classrooms to accommodate demand. UNICEF estimated that a quarter of all primary schools in Iraq run two or three shifts per day, resulting in reduced classroom time for each shift of students. A survey released by the Iraqi Ministry of Education reportedly revealed that primary schools were most overcrowded in Basra, where over 600 primary schools were sharing buildings.<sup>21</sup>

In April 2011, *Radio Free Europe* reported that Basra Province was experiencing a shortage of an estimated 700 schools, and as a result, some schoolhouses are used by two or three schools with students learning in shifts. According to *Radio Free Europe*, an estimated 700,000 pupils in Basra attend 1,430 schools, which in turn make use of 900 school buildings in the province.<sup>22</sup> In March 2011, the Iraqi Education Ministry reportedly said that the country would need 5,800 schools in order to overcome the crisis developing over a lack of school buildings. As a result of the shortage, the Ministry of Education had implemented double shifts in many schools, particularly in rural areas away from urban centres.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that such practices are not limited to Basra. According to Save the Children, 15 schools host operations for 43 separate institutions in northern Iraq. Most of these schools

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<sup>18</sup> 'Car bomb kills 5 in southern Iraqi city of Basra' 2010, Sign On San Diego website, source: *Associated Press*, 8 November <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/nov/08/car-bomb-kills-5-in-southern-iraqi-city-of-basra/> – Accessed 20 November – Attachment 17

<sup>19</sup> 'Blasts in Iraqi city of Basra kill 10, wound 35' 2010, *APA*, 8 August <http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=127473> – Accessed 21 June 2011 – Attachment 18

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF 2009, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action Update – Iraq*, UNICEF website, 19 January [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/HAU\\_Iraq\\_19\\_Jan09.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/HAU_Iraq_19_Jan09.pdf) – Accessed 17 June 2011 – Attachment 19

<sup>21</sup> 'Iraq's Schools Suffering From Neglect and War' 2004, UNICEF website, 15 October [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_23630.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_23630.html) – Accessed 16 June 2011 – Attachment 20

<sup>22</sup> 'Iraq's Basra Province Struggles To Meet Demand For Schools' 2011, *Radio Free Europe*, 13 April [http://www.rferl.org/content/iraq\\_basra\\_province\\_struggles\\_to\\_meet\\_demand\\_for\\_schools/3556493.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/iraq_basra_province_struggles_to_meet_demand_for_schools/3556493.html) – Accessed 16 June 2011 – Attachment 21

<sup>23</sup> 'Iraq needs 5,800 New Schools' 2011, *Iraq Business News*, source: *AKnews*, 9 March <http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2011/03/09/iraq-needs-5800-new-schools/> – Accessed 17 June 2011 – Attachment 22

serve three to four shifts of students per day for a few hours at a time.<sup>24</sup>In October 2009, the *American Forces Press Service* reported that a newly renovated school would host an estimated 950 students, who would attend school in two shifts. The first shift would service approximately 700 primary students, while the second shift would accommodate 250 secondary school students.<sup>25</sup>

**5. Deleted.**

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<sup>24</sup> 'Iraq – Save the Children' 2009, Save the Children website, July  
<http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIp14E/b.6153129/> – Accessed 16 June 2011 – Attachment 23

<sup>25</sup> 'School Opening Brings New Hope in Iraq' 2009, *American Forces Press Service*, 27 October  
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## Attachments

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11. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2009, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers*, April.
12. International Crisis Group 2007, *Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 67, 25 June [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/67\\_iraq\\_lessons\\_from\\_basra.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/67_iraq_lessons_from_basra.ashx) – Accessed 17 June 2011
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