

March 31, 2021

Statement by KRG Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy (OCIA)

Preliminary Clarifications on the US Department of State's Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Iraq

On March 30, the U.S Department of State released its annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices for Iraq. The report considerably addresses the human rights status in the Kurdistan Region.

As far as the human rights assessments are concerned, the KRG Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy (OCIA) has a coordinative modality with the international counterparts including U.S. Consulate General in Erbil. The latter submitted a list of questions to OCIA on September 2020, framed within a time-limit for verifications of requested data and information, in the perspective of balancing judgmental statements that might appear in the report and with the aim of clarifying facts and situations with all available versions and elements necessary to get the full, truthful stories.

Below is a precursory clarification on certain highlights raised in the report. Further amplifications on this statement will be prepared by OCIA and will be circulated accordingly in the near future.

As far as the intelligence services structure in Kurdistan Region is concerned, the Security Council (KRSC) is a well-established governmental institution, and, while it distributes particular obligations to provinces on the basis of decentralization, it consolidates unified security policies.

Regarding terrorism hostilities in the disputed areas, there is not a clear split of jurisdictions between the Federal authorities and KRG subsequent to the October 2017 events. The Federal authorities militarily proceeded to seize further territories, following October 2017, causing security vacuums to arise in some spots in the disputed areas. This, by and large, allowed ISIL militants to operate actively and launch strikes on Peshmerga forces. The Sinjar Agreement is expected to resolve the frictions and restore order, but it has not been executed yet.

The US report verifies figures obtained from local authorities that PKK has run secret prisons in Sinjar, imprisoning about 70 Yezidi citizens; in addition to kidnapping more than 400 Yezidi women whose fate still remains unclear. KRG security forces have no access to the enclave territories to confirm the numbers.

In terms of the return of IDPs to their places of origin, the overwhelming majority of the return families are still concerned about the security situation there, and the destruction of their properties in the liberation process. These concerns have been addressed in the meeting between KRG and Mosul Governorate in February 2020, in which they agreed that the returnees should be registered and documented, the security situation in the area

should be assessed, and the process should be coordinated by KRG, Federal and the local authorities.

Concerning the public disturbance that took place in Zaxo 19 August 2020, KRG reiterates that it is fully committed to preserve and promote freedom of speech within civic demonstrations and vigils aimed to enhance social welfare and public good. Nonetheless, the protest in Zaxo soon transformed to a vicious riot. The protest was supposedly managed and led by truck drivers who felt that the opening of Ibrahim Khalil crossing point with Turkey will allow the drivers from Turkey to deliver passengers to stations inside the Kurdistan Region, a step that would expectedly damage their labor.

However, it has been confirmed that 61 persons from security forces and 4 civilians have been injured. Moreover, 26 police and civilian cars have been damaged, in addition to other public and private properties.

The report also raised concerns about the discretion of the judicial authorities. In the Kurdistan Region, there is an independent and impartial Public Prosecution Office, whose mission is to apply the law and monitor the legality of all state agencies in ultimate transparency and independence, in accordance with the provisions of the laws in force. KRG guarantees a fair execution of domestic laws, and the consolidation of international standards as far as the judiciary is concerned.

As far as the press in the Kurdistan region is concerned, Journalism Law No. 35 of 2007 regulates freedom of journalism and expression. Meanwhile, the journalists are responsible for protecting national security and, simultaneously avoiding the defamation of particular institutions without necessary evidence. No journalist has been arrested arbitrarily.

There are hundreds of TV channels, journals, newspapers, radios, etc. that operate freely and independently in the KR. In relation to the highlights of the report regarding the temporary closure of NRT offices in the previous year, it is worthy to note that NRT consistently aimed to exploit the freedom that media agencies enjoy in KR for political agendas.

The Ministry of Youth and Culture sent several warnings to NRT, urging them to soften their rhetoric that incentivized hundreds of people to not abide by the protective regulations issued by the government. The last warning was delivered on June 3, 2020. It alluded to the fact that KR-I goes through a critical period, which demands implementing social-distancing and protective measures to be surpassed.

Hence, the warning letter contended, NRT has violated regulations issued by the Ministry of Youth and Culture. NRT's license was not terminated. Only their offices were temporarily suspended. Furthermore, no reporter or correspondent of NRT was detained.

The Kurdistan Regional Government is fully committed to the rule of law, to a fair and impartial legal process, and to the freedom of the media. The Government is currently working with international partners to ensure that Kurdistan Region is fully meeting its international human rights responsibilities and is following international human rights best practice, in particular in respect of media freedom.

KRG remains dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights in the Region. It has strived to establish a safe haven for IDPs and refugees during and after the war against terrorism, despite the severe economic crisis and the imminent threat of ISIL to proceed into KRG territories. KRG endorses and exemplifies the democratic principles of good governance, transparency, freedom of speech, gender equality and humanitarianism, in Iraq and in the Middle East.

KRG perceives itself as an integral part of the international community. It is therefore part of the well-connected system through which the essential values of democracy are enhanced and reciprocated. The significant presence of diplomats and international agencies in the Region remarkably contributed to the enhancement of these values. KRG has recognized these values to be crucial for good governance.