

IRAQ 2021: Grave Violations

Chronicling the rising tide of child deaths in Iraq

by Lily Hamourtziadou, Hamit Dardagan

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The principles of distinction and proportionality require all fighters to distinguish between combatants and civilians. However, because of the changing nature of conflict, these principles are eroding among fighting parties, both states and non-state actors. Children are injured and killed during conflict, victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance, as well as bombings and shootings, abductions and executions.¹

¹Parties to conflict must protect children from being killed, maimed or injured, UN Security Council.

²The Six Grave Violations, UN Security Council.

The 1999 resolution on children and armed conflict adopted by the United Nations Security Council placed the issue of children affected by war on the Council's agenda. The resolution identified and condemned² six grave violations affecting children the most in times of war, which serve as the basis to gather information and report on violations affecting children:

- Killing and maiming of children
- Recruitment or use of children as soldiers
- Sexual violence against children
- Abduction of children
- Attacks against schools or hospitals
- Denial of humanitarian access for children

Iraq Body Count documented 668 civilians killed in Iraq during 2021, of whom at least 60 were reported to be children. This is more children than were killed last year, in number as well as proportionally.

Year	Civilians killed	Children	Percent
2021	668	60	8.9%
2020	908	32	3.5%
2019	2393	92	3.8%

Childhood endings

January

The first child killing in Iraq in 2021 was reported on January 1st, when [the body of a boy aged 13-14 was found](#) in Salah al-Din. Iraq News reported that the unidentified corpse was discovered on the southern bank of the Aqsa River by security staff.

[An explosive device killed and wounded two girls](#), in Anbar, on January 18th. Captain Suleiman Al-Joghaifi, deputy director of police in Haditha, reported that the device exploded while children were playing in the Albu Hayat area in the district of Haditha, resulting in the death of an 11-year-old girl and the injury of another 10-year-old girl.

The next day, [a 15-year-old boy was killed](#) in an explosion in Muthanna. Another child was killed in Najaf on the 27th: Najaf Police spokesperson Lt. Col. Miqdad Al-Mousawi said, "while a group of citizens were digging near a garbage dump, a foreign object, which was of old war remnants, exploded and injured three people, [including a 10-year-old girl who died](#)".

[A child was killed in an explosion](#) of a military projectile in Jalawla, in Diyala, on January 29th. Acting Director of Jalawla district Ahmed Al-Zarkoush told the National Iraqi News Agency (NINA) that a child was killed and four others were wounded in an explosion that occurred when they tampered with the head of a mortar in Al-Wehda neighborhood, in the centre of Jalawla.

February

On February 16th, the [body of a 10-year-old boy was found](#) in Al-Salamiyah village, south of Mosul. On the 21st [three brothers were killed](#) in a landmine explosion in Nasiriyah. A stray bullet [killed a 14-year-old boy](#) in Basra on the 26th, during an armed clan conflict.

March

On March 8th [a child was killed in an explosion](#) in Kirkuk. On the 19th [another child was killed](#) when a missile fell on a house in Dhi Qar.

April

Security forces [found the body of a child](#) wearing sports clothes near a stadium in the Al-Failaq area near Kirkuk on April 10th. It was the body of 10-year-old Zubair Sami Khalaf.

A child tampering with a bomb reported to have been planted by ISIS [was killed](#) in the village of Qarah Dara on April 21st. [A 4-year-old boy was killed](#) in an armed attack on the 25th in Khalis as he walked to a relative's house with his father

On April 27th [two children were killed](#) and a third wounded, when a bomb exploded in Hammam Al-Alil. The children were grazing sheep. In Basra, [two children were killed in another explosion](#) as they played.

May

[The body of a 16-year-old shepherd was found](#) in Sheikh Hamdan village on May 3rd. [A 17-year-old was shot dead](#) in an ISIS-attributed attack near a security point in Muqdadiya, on the 12th

On May 16th a left-over projectile attributed to ISIS [killed three children in](#) Al-Malha village, near Tikrit, as they played. [The body of a 16-year-old boy was found](#), after he was kidnapped, in the suburbs of Al-Abara district, northeast of Baquba, on May 26th.

June

[A boy was killed](#) on June 15th, along with two members of his family, when a landmine exploded in the Samawa desert. Another [boy was killed](#) in the village of Aziz on the 28th. He was tending sheep belonging to his family and died instantly when he came upon an explosive device, near Mosul.

July

A stray [bullet killed a child](#) in Basra on July 8th. At least [2 children were killed](#) when a roadside bomb exploded in Baghdad's Sadr City on July 19th, killing 35 people. [Two siblings died](#) with their father on July 31st in Heet, when fighters reported as ISIS attacked a house.

August

[A teenaged boy was killed](#) on the 13th in Al-Qaim. He was a shepherd. According to a security source, an explosive device left behind by ISIS led to the death of the 14-year-old and the wounding of two others aged 12 and 13, all shepherds, noting that "the two wounded are in critical condition and were admitted to Al-Qaim Hospital, west of Anbar."

A UNICEF statement released on August 26th noted that on August 24th [a 10-year-old was killed in an explosion](#). UNICEF reported an alarming increase in the number of child casualties compared to 2020 resulting from the explosive remnants of war and landmines. 'While landmines and explosive remnants of war often result in civilian casualties, children are most at risk. Because children are smaller than adults, they are more likely to be exposed to the full impact of an explosion and are therefore more likely to die or be seriously injured.' While IBC documented 25 child deaths from explosives from January to August, Sheema Sen Gupta,

the UNICEF representative in Iraq, revealed that 35 Iraqi children had been killed in explosive violence since the start of the year, adding another 10 to the total recorded. (It is possible, but unlikely, that victims of unspecified age recorded by IBC included children in UNICEF's total. However as UNICEF did not publish their disaggregated data this cannot be entirely ruled out.)

An 11-year-old shepherd was killed by an IED in Bani Saad on August 25th. Two children were killed on the 31st in an explosion in Qadia camp for the displaced in Iraqi Kurdistan.

September

The burnt body of a 16-year-old girl was found in Bani Saad on September 1st. A girl from the village of Ain Tamr was killed in a landmine explosion as she was playing on September 23rd. A security source reported that a mortar shell fell near a house in the Hamrin residential complex (60 km northeast of Baquba), causing the death of a girl and the injury of another child who happened to be on the street, on the 24th.

October

The tortured body of a 5-year-old girl was found in Baghdad on October 7th. On the same day Shafaq News reported that unknown persons targeted an electoral conference for the candidate Abdul Rahman Al-Bardi in Baiji with a sound bomb that was thrown from behind a wall. The bomb targeted Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Bardi while he was giving his speech, but it fell on the roof of a house under construction. The explosion killed a child and wounded 5 other children, who were on the roof of the house when the bomb fell near them.

Two children were reported killed in Kasr Mihrab, in Tal Afar, on October 22nd, when an explosive attributed to ISIS went off.

December

A 16-year-old was killed during clashes in Aldoah in Dhi Qar, on December 2nd. Another 16-year-old, a shepherd, was killed by a landmine in the village of Al-Bayda on December 6th. Another boy was killed by an explosive attributed to ISIS in Sultan Abdullah village, near Mosul, on December 11th. A 5-year-old girl was killed in an exchange of fire between security forces and gunmen in New Baghdad, on December 19th.

On December 30th at least two children were among up to 19 of his own family members shot dead by a suspect, according to security forces, when a SWAT team surrounded the house he was in and attempted his arrest on terrorism charges.

Of the 60 Iraqi children killed in 2021, only one was directly named in the reports: 10-year-old Zubair Sami Khalaf, killed on April 10th. Let his death and those of the other 59 nameless children not be forgotten. Iraq Body Count has documented the violent deaths of around 7,500 children and babies since March 2003, only some of whose names are known to the public record. Those deaths remain the gravest violation, saddest outcome of the invasion and the devastation it brought to this small Middle Eastern country.

A backdrop of political instability

Iraq's sixth election since the 2003 US-led invasion took place in October 2021. The 36 per cent turnout, the lowest recorded in the country's post-2003 electoral history, shows that many Iraqis are disillusioned with a political system which entrenches a corrupt political elite at their expense.³

It is hardly surprising, given the promises made by previous governments, none of which were kept, in areas of political and personal security. In May of 2020, Iraq's Parliament had approved a government programme presented by PM Al-Kadhimi, which gave as government priorities⁴ the following:

³Explaining Iraq's election results, Chatham House 2021-10-22.

⁴Iraq's Parliament approves government programme, 2020-05-07.

- Restricting weapons to state and military institutions
- Launching a national dialogue with all sections of Iraqi society, listening to the demands of the protest movement, bringing to justice those involved in the spilling of Iraqi blood and looking after the families of the martyrs
- Protecting the sovereignty and security of Iraq, continuing to fight terrorism, and providing a national vision on the future of foreign forces in Iraq
- Fighting corruption and protecting the wealth of Iraq
- Promoting the values of shared Iraqi citizenship, respecting Iraq's ethnic, religious diversity, and rejecting all forms of discrimination
- Providing all the necessary requirements to support internally displaced people to return to their home, and end internal displacement in Iraq

The government pledged to develop and reform security institutions:

- The duty of the Iraqi Army is to protect Iraq's external borders, sovereignty, and democratic process. It must not operate inside civilian areas unless by exceptional orders from the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces
- The security formations of the Ministry of Interior will be responsible for internal security, maintaining civil peace, the rule of law, and protecting human rights. These formations will be reorganised, will receive further training, and be properly equipped
- The National Intelligence Service, the National Security Agency, the Counter-Terrorism Service, and Popular Mobilisation Units will continue to perform the tasks assigned to them as directed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces
- The security forces will be properly equipped and provided with the necessary arms and ammunitions to enable them to protect Iraq from terrorism and to secure its borders

Furthermore:

- Iraq will not allow any country to violate its sovereignty, and will not permit its territories to be used to launch attacks on any of its neighbours or be used as an arena to settle regional or international scores

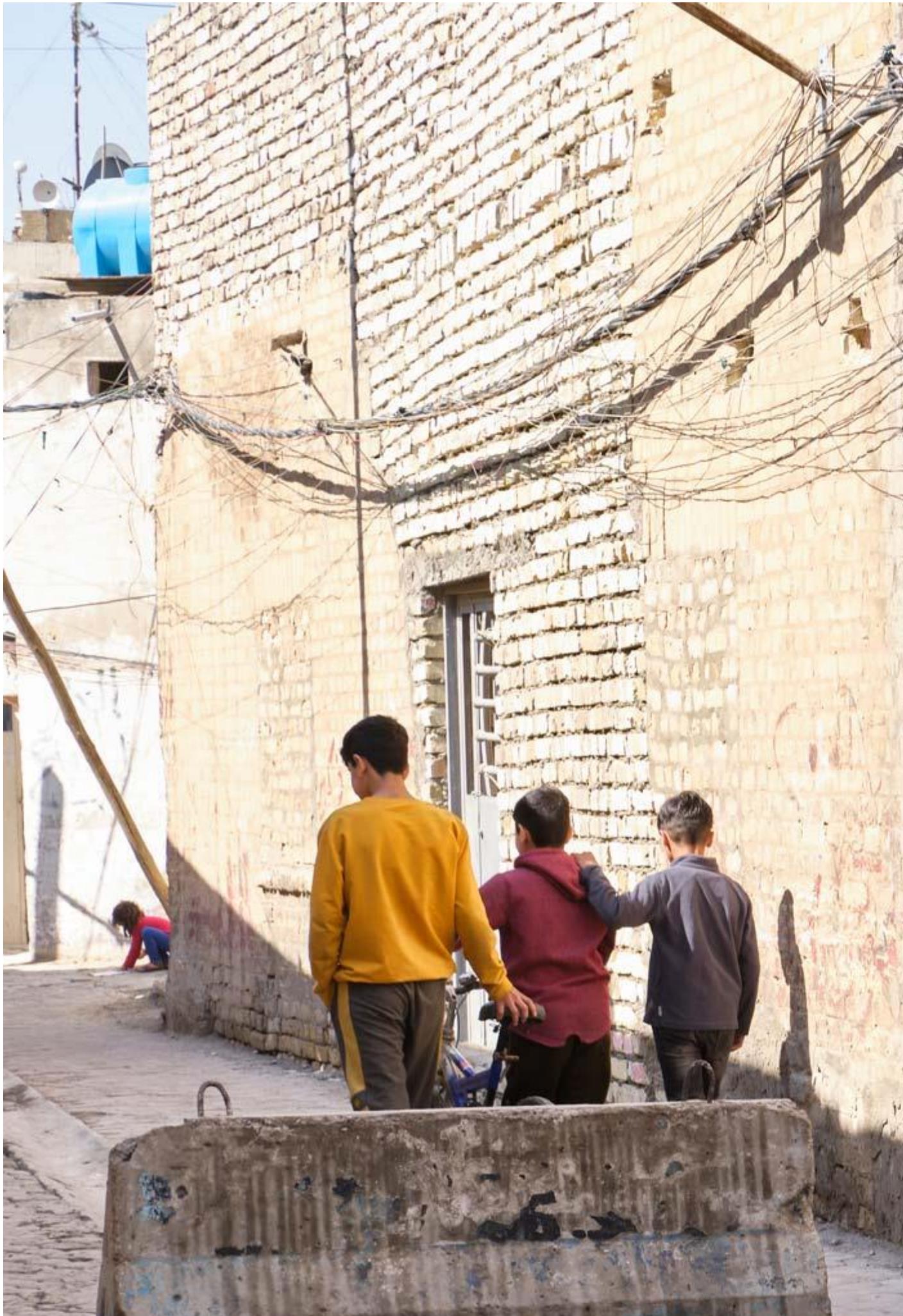
A year later, protesters were burning tyres and blocking roads in Karbala, after the killing of a prominent activist, Ihab Jawad Al-Wazni. A leading figure in protests against the government in the city, [Al-Wazni was killed by unknown gunmen](#) near his home in the early hours of May 9th. Protesters blocked a number of main roads in the city and demanded security forces find and identify al-Wazni's killers, threatening to escalate protests if the perpetrators were not exposed. Hundreds of demonstrators also took to the streets in the city of Nasiriya, capital of the southern province of Dhi Qar, closing down a number of main roads to protest the killing.

The killing of al-Wazni is seen by Iraqis as a message by militias affiliated with political parties. He was among 18 protesters and activists killed in 2021. In July, as summer temperatures reached scorching levels, hundreds of Iraqis

poured into the streets to protest widespread power outages in Baghdad and the country's southern provinces. In Basra demonstrators blocked highways and burned tyres. There have been regular waves of anti-government protests since 2015. Iraqis have been frustrated by the lack of clean water and electricity, widespread poverty, high levels of unemployment, government corruption, and dismal prospects for the largely young population.

A never-ending death toll

Iraq in 2021 remains a country with an alienated and marginalised population, a corrupt government, an economy in crisis and, tragically, an annual death toll from armed conflict and terrorist attacks in the hundreds, with over 668 civilians killed by gunmen and in explosions, including air attacks. In addition, 941 combatants were killed, a category which, in Iraq, includes PKK fighters, ISIS and other terrorists, Iraqi military and the Popular Mobilisation militia. Altogether, 1,609 killings were recorded by IBC in 2021, indicating a continuing state of war. As for 'not allowing any country to violate its sovereignty', or 'use it as an arena to settle regional scores', Turkey bombed areas of Iraqi Kurdistan repeatedly this year. Iraqi governments continue to fail to provide security to citizens, in all areas. The safety and wellbeing of the unarmed population is clearly not a priority of those in charge of Iraq, despite the continued killings, even those of children.



Children walk past a concrete barrier straddling the pavement.
(Nabil Salih - @NabilAlMafrachi)