

5 November 2015

## **Review of ‘Responses to Iraq Country of Origin Information Requests’**

**Prepared for the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) by  
Dr Alan George (King’s College, University of London)**

### **(A) Introduction**

1. This review assesses ten recent Home Office ‘Responses to Country of Origin Information (COI) Requests’ relating to Iraq prepared by the Home Office, on the basis of instructions from the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI).

2. The invitation to tender for this work stipulates that it will entail:

*(i) Assessing the extent to which information from source documents has been appropriately and accurately reflected.*

*(ii) Identifying additional sources;*

*(iii) Noting and correcting any specific errors or omissions of fact.*

*(iv) Making recommendations for general improvements;*

3. In undertaking this Review, I have been conscious that ‘Responses to Country of Origin Information (COI) Requests’ are intended to function as reference works for Home Office officials deciding asylum and humanitarian protection claims.

### **(B) About the Author**

4. Alan George gained his first degree, in geography, from Oxford University in 1970. He obtained his Master’s degree (on Middle East geography) at Durham University in 1972, and his PhD, on Syria, also at Durham in 1978. Since 1984 he has worked as a freelance journalist, researcher and expert witness in political asylum cases involving the Middle East. As a journalist, he contributed to a wide range of UK and international publications including the *Observer*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, and he frequently commentates on Middle Eastern affairs for radio and television. He is a former Head of Research at the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce and a former Assistant Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU). His publications include *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (Zed Books, London, 2003); *Jordan: Living in the Crossfire* (Zed Books, London, 2005); *Fortschritt oder Lahmung: Baschar al-Assads Syrien*, a chapter in Hartmut Fahndrich (Ed.) *Verebte Macht: Monarchien und Dynastien in der arabischen Welt*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 2005; and *Patronage and Clientelism in Bashar’s Social Market Economy*, a chapter in *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, published by Hurst & Co this year. In 2003-2013 he was a Senior Associate Member of St Antony’s

College, Oxford University. In November 2013 he was appointed Senior Visiting Research Fellow in the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at London University's King's College.

### (C) Organisation and summary

5. I comment on the ten Iraq-related 'Responses to Country of Origin Information (COI) Requests' in date order, under separate sub-headings comprising the key identifying information for the Responses.

6. These ten 'Responses to Information Requests' offer generally accurate and up-to-date information on their respective topics, to the extent that such information exists in publicly available sources, although in some cases there was a need for updating and/or amendment. There is also a general need to standardise the styles of references.

### (D) Comments

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Non-state armed groups
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Badr brigades
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Baghdad, Sunni, Shia
<b>Date of response</b>	23/03/2015
<b>Reference number</b>	03/15-135

7. There is a problem with paragraph numbering. '6' should be where '7' now is, at the top of the third page; '7' should come before: 'An Amnesty International report of 27 June 2014...' In fact, I am uncertain that a paragraph number is needed for the 27 June 2014 Amnesty report. It could just be a continuation of paragraph 6. In any event, the paragraphs need renumbering.

8. I would replace paragraph 4 with an extract from the Institute for the Study of War's *Beyond The Islamic State: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, October 2014 (see <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni%20Insurgency%20in%20Iraq.pdf>). Perhaps the following:

'It is important to clarify the distinction between the GMCIR, JRTN [General Military Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries, Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia], and the Ba'ath Party. The Ba'ath Party, the party of deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, continued to exist after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled his government. Although officially banned, it continued to operate as a government-in-waiting, producing regular statements about ongoing events. It is interesting to note that many statements by the group reflect anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric very similar to that of the former Hussein regime. The party is comprised of three factions as a result of internal disputes. The most prominent faction is the command of Izzat al-Duri, who served as vice president under Saddam Hussein and also serves as the head of JRTN. Given his leadership role in JRTN, the largest component of the Council, it is likely that that Duri plays a major role in the GMCIR as well'.

9. I would suggest adding the following as a new paragraph, at the end of the Response:

‘ On 14 October 2014 an article in the *Independent* stated:

Iraq is descending into savage sectarian warfare as government-backed Shia militias kill, torture and hold for ransom any Sunni whom they detain. Isis is notorious for its mass killings of Shia, but retaliation by Shia militiamen means that Iraq is returning to the levels of sectarian slaughter last seen in the Sunni-Shia civil war of 2006-07 when tens of thousands were murdered.

The Shia militias have become the main fighting force of the Baghdad government since the Iraqi army was defeated by Isis when it took northern Iraq in June. According to a detailed Amnesty International report published today, the militias enjoy total immunity in committing war crimes against the Sunni community, often demanding large ransoms but killing their victims even when the money is paid.

The re-emergence of the Shia militias and the failure to rebuild the Iraqi army is torpedoing the US and British policy of supporting a more inclusive and less sectarian government in Baghdad. The aim was to create a government that could reach out to Iraq’s five or six million-strong Sunni community and seek to turn it against Isis. But, since the militias treat all Sunni men as Isis fighters or supporters, the Sunni are left with no choice but to stick with the jihadi militants.

The report cites a member of the Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, one of the largest militias, on duty at a checkpoint north of Baghdad, saying: “If we catch ‘those dogs’ [Sunni] coming down from the Tikrit we execute them; in those areas they are all working with Daesh [Isis]. They come to Baghdad to commit terrorist crimes. So we have to stop them.”

In addition to sectarian motives, militias such as Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Brigades, Kata’ib Hezbollah and Saraya al-Salam are thoroughly criminalised. One mother said: “I begged friends and acquaintances to lend me the ransom money to save my son, but after I paid they killed him and now I have no way to pay back the money I borrowed, as my son was the only one working in the family.”

Moving on the roads has become lethally dangerous for Sunni even before Isis launched its summer offensive...

...American and British ministers have lauded the new government in Baghdad under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as being less sectarian than that of his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, whom he replaced in August.

But in practice, Mr Abadi’s administration is much like the old. “For now nothing is different,” says Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s senior crisis response adviser. “Shia militias are way more important than the army and are running the show.” Even if it wanted to the government would have difficulty in bringing them under control. Ms Rovera says: “In terms of sectarian violence we are back to the levels of 2006-07.”

10. In addition - or alternatively to my suggestion in my previous paragraph - there might be a separate paragraph with extracts from the Amnesty International report cited by the *Independent - Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq* (see <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/8000/mde140152014en.pdf>).

11. I would suggest also a new paragraph with the following extract from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's *Fourth report of the Secretary-General pursuant to paragraph 6 of resolution 2169 (2014)*, dated 13 July 2015 (see [http://www.uniraq.org/images/SGReports/N1521149%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/images/SGReports/N1521149%20(2).pdf)):

“52. UNAMI also continued to receive reports alleging that pro-Government armed groups and militias are perpetrating violations and abuses of human rights. Since the beginning of May, Shi’ite militias have been establishing checkpoints in the area, harassing and assaulting Kurdish drivers and passengers. On 5 May, three Kurdish lorry drivers were killed at a checkpoint manned by Shi’ite militias in Khanaqin district, Diyala governorate. In early June, a video was posted on social media purporting to show members of a Shi’ite militia (Imam Ali Brigades) in Garma, north-east of Fallujah, burning the body of a man hanging by his feet, who had been accused by the perpetrators of being a member of ISIL.

53. Diyala governorate has seen a steady increase in attacks targeting members of the Sunni Arab community. May marked the height of such attacks, with at least 22 separate verified incidents, including at least 28 killings and 13 abductions. In the majority of incidents, perpetrators remain unidentified and no arrests have been made. On 11 May, at least 20 Sunni Arab residents of Baladruz subdistrict, Diyala, were detained by armed men, some of whom are believed to be members of the Iraqi security forces and militia groups. The vehicles used by the perpetrators appeared to be the same as those previously used by pro-Government forces in the area, mounted with loudspeakers through which Sunni residents were warned to leave. At least 10 bodies were later found in Muqdadiya, Diyala, reportedly including some of those who had been taken from their homes. During May, a well-known Sunni businessman was abducted by unidentified gunmen in the city of Baquba and an adviser to the Minister of Defence was killed after unidentified gunmen attacked his car.”

12. Like the CPIT, however, I have no evidence specifically of Badr Organisation targeting of Ba’athists, as such.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Religion, ethnicity
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Kaka’i religion in Iraq
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Kakaiya, Ale-Haqq, minority
<b>Date of response</b>	09/03/2015
<b>Reference number</b>	03/15-065

13. Re-phrase opening words of Paragraph 1 thus: ‘The *World Directory of Minorities*, edited by Minority Rights Group International and published in 1997, lists the ‘Sarliya-Kakaiya’ as a religious minority of Iraq, stating: ‘....

14. Re-phrase the opening words of Paragraph 2 thus: ‘Another Minority Rights Group International report, Still Targeted: *Continued Persecution of Iraq’s Minorities*, published in 2010, reported the following, with a very different population estimate:’

15. Paragraph 6 should be transferred to the end of the Response because the paragraphs on either side of it are both about the ‘Between the Millstones’ report, while the BBC report at Paragraph 6 is unrelated.

16. I would suggest a final paragraph with the following extract from *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 11 December 2014 to 30 April 2015*, published jointly by UNAMI and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and issued in June 2015 (see [http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&task=download&id=1396\\_5fcd404d37485e029a9429a71d783df5&Itemid=650&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&task=download&id=1396_5fcd404d37485e029a9429a71d783df5&Itemid=650&lang=en)):

‘Members of Iraq’s diverse ethnic and religious communities continued to suffer from a range of violations at ISIL hands. These groups, including Christians, Faili Kurds, Kaka’e, Sabaeans, Shabak, Shi’a Arabs, Turkmen, Yezidi and others, have been systematically persecuted. These acts appear to form part of an on-going policy that aims to suppress, permanently expel, or destroy many of these communities within ISIL areas of control.’

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Nationality
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Nationality laws
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Nationality laws
<b>Date of response</b>	3 October 2014
<b>Reference number</b>	09/14-200

17. I have no comments on this Response.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Media, internet freedom
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Al-Fardous newspaper
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Al-Fardous newspaper
<b>Date of response</b>	27 October 2014
<b>Reference number</b>	10/14-118

18. I would insert the following, prior to the final sentence: ‘The media list on the [www.al-bab.com](http://www.al-bab.com) website notes that ‘after this initial burst of activity [in mid-2003] many of them [the publications listed] closed as the security situation deteriorated’.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	LGBTI persons
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	LGBTI persons.
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Law. Societal harassment. Governmental position. Internal relocation. Support. NGOs.
<b>Date of response</b>	15 January 2015
<b>Reference number</b>	01/15 - 131

19. Paragraphs 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10: The State Department’s latest report, for 2014, should be cited - although the information is much the same.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Religion, ethnicity
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	The treatment of Yazidis in Iraq
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Yezidi, ISIL, KRI
<b>Date of response</b>	24 February 2015
<b>Reference number</b>	02/15-097

20. I would re-phrase Paragraph 2 slightly, as follows: ‘(their divine being, Malak Taus, also being known as Shaytan - the name for Satan, or the devil, in the Islamic holy book, the Qu’ran)’.

21. At Paragraph 3 I would re-phrase very slightly, as follows: ‘with a smaller community in the Shaikhan region, north east of Mosul, where their most holy shrine, the tomb of Shaikh Adi at Lalish, is located’.

22. I would suggest inserting a new paragraph 12 (in the section on the treatment of Yazidis in ISIL controlled areas) with the following extract from *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 11 December 2014 to 30 April 2015*, published jointly by UNAMI and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and issued in June 2015 (see [http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&task=download&id=1396\\_5fcd404d37485e029a9429a71d783df5&Itemid=650&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&task=download&id=1396_5fcd404d37485e029a9429a71d783df5&Itemid=650&lang=en)):

‘Members of Iraq’s diverse ethnic and religious communities continued to suffer from a range of violations at ISIL hands. These groups, including Christians, Faili Kurds, Kaka’e, Sabaeans, Shabak, Shi’a Arabs, Turkmen, Yezidi and others, have been systematically persecuted. These acts appear to form part of an on-going policy that aims to suppress, permanently expel, or destroy many of these communities within ISIL areas of control.’

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<b>Date of response</b>	23/03/2015
<b>Reference number</b>	03/15-135

23. It might be worth inserting a new Paragraph 2 with an extract from the Congressional Research Service report *Iraq: Politics, Security, and US Policy*, dated 16 September 2015 (see <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf>). This information is essentially the same as that in Paragraph 1, from the 27 February 2015 Congressional Research Service report - which in fact provides slightly more detail.

24. My Paragraphs 9 - 11 above are as applicable to this Response as to Response 03/15-135.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Non-state armed groups
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Penalty for desertion in Iraq
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Desertion, ISF
<b>Date of response</b>	11 May 2015
<b>Reference number</b>	05/15-045

25. I would suggest the insertion of a new paragraph 3 with an extract from a *Washington Post* article entitled ‘Iraqi soldier tells of desertion as militants attacked refinery: “Our officers sold us out”’, dated 11 July 2014 (see [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraqi-soldier-tells-of-desertion-as-militants-attacked-refinery-our-officers-sold-us-out/2014/07/10/e634c0a0-02be-11e4-8fd0-3a663dfa68ac\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-soldier-tells-of-desertion-as-militants-attacked-refinery-our-officers-sold-us-out/2014/07/10/e634c0a0-02be-11e4-8fd0-3a663dfa68ac_story.html)). The article is essentially an interview with a soldier, Ammar, who was one of hundreds who deserted in the face of an IS attack against the Baiji Refinery. The article states:

““Our officers sold us out,” said Ammar, who, fearing government reprisal, spoke on the condition that only his first name be used. “They abandoned us.” Since he fled, Ammar has evaded authorities, who are arresting deserters, by moving between the houses of friends and family in his home city of Baghdad...

‘...Ammar and his comrades said they never had any illusions about the virtue of their officer corps. Iraqi soldiers could often avoid showing up for duty by giving half their salaries to their commanders, who in turn paid off the generals. Even before Mosul fell, this cycle of bribery and absenteeism had deprived the military of almost one-third of the 1 million troops receiving paychecks’.

26. Although it’s about desertion, rather than penalties for desertion, it might also be worth adding, as a new Paragraph 4, the following extract from a *Reuters* reported entitled ‘Some Iraqis ditch fight against Islamic State for life in Europe’, dated 21

September 2015 (see <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/21/us-europe-migrants-iraq-military-insight-idUSKCN0RK0EB20150921#uFQ6s3TufirsUHzi.97>):

‘Some Iraqi soldiers are abandoning their posts and joining a wave of civilian migrants headed to Europe, raising new doubts about the cohesion of the country's Western-backed security forces in the fight against Islamic State militants.

Interviews with migrants and an analysis of social media activity show scores of fighters from the national army, police and special forces as well as Shi'ite militias and Kurdish peshmerga have left in recent months or plan to go soon.

They join more than 50,000 civilians who have left Iraq in the past three months, according to the United Nations, part of an even larger exodus from neighboring Syria and other conflict zones across the Middle East.

The inability of Iraq to retain its soldiers threatens to further erode morale in a military that has partially collapsed twice in the past year in the face of the Islamic State militant group.

It could also undermine the efforts of a U.S.-led coalition that has spent billions of dollars training and equipping Iraqi forces to take on the militants.

A spokesman for the Iraqi defense ministry said the military was not concerned about the migration of soldiers, which he put in the "tens" out of a security force estimated to number in the tens of thousands.

"The armed forces are performing their duties. There is no reason to be worried," said General Tahsin Ibrahim Sadiq.

But Saed Kakaie, adviser to the minister of peshmerga forces in northern Iraq's Kurdistan region, said while he could not provide a specific figure for how many peshmerga forces had left, the numbers were "concerning".

The soldiers' departure highlights a pervasive sense of hopelessness among many Iraqis more than a year after Islamic State seized a third of their country's territory, threatened to overrun the capital and declared a modern caliphate.

Despite driving them back in some areas, members of the security forces say they are leaving because they face daily offensives by the insurgents, sectarian violence, and economic depression.

Many in the security forces are also frustrated and disillusioned with elected officials, who they allege abandoned them on the frontlines, while failing to provide adequate resources and enriching themselves through graft.’

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Women, children
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Violence against women.
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Law. Rape. Harassment. Honour crime. Freedom of movement. Protection.
<b>Date of response</b>	26 June 2015
<b>Reference number</b>	06/15 – 131

27. I have no comments on this Response.

<b>Country</b>	Iraq
<b>Category</b>	Non-state armed groups
<b>Subject</b> (up to 6 words)	Albu Ajeel tribe
<b>Key words</b> (up to 3 words)	Hadi Al-Ameri, Speicher
<b>Date of response</b>	12 August 2015
<b>Reference number</b>	08/15-027

28. I have no comments on this Response.