



MAY 2022

A stubborn threat: Islamic State in Iraq in early 2022

In the four years since its territorial defeat, Islamic State (IS) has proved to be resilient as it continues to mount attacks across Iraq. Analysis of IS activity from September 2021 to February 2022 (six months) shows that the geography, type and targets of IS attacks remained broadly similar to the year preceding this period. The volume of IS attacks increased but this mostly took the form of small-scale and local incidents. By and large, the group seems to be stable and shows neither decline nor growth. It operates nimbly and is mostly active in the arc between Sinjar and Baghdad. Counter-terrorism (CT) operations decreased in volume over the same period but are nevertheless keeping IS in check. However, as CT operations are mostly tactical affairs that remain inadequately coordinated and low on intelligence in some aspects, they have not been able to eliminate IS capacity to mount major operations, or to remove it from entire areas. Broadly speaking, IS attacks and CT operations are in a state of equilibrium. As Iraqi CT efforts emphasise security interventions over socio-political remedies, conditions for IS survival, as well as future revival, remain relatively favourable.

Introduction

Iraq and its citizens have faced substantial levels of violent conflict between 2003 and early 2022. While periods of lower-intensity violence (e.g. 2003–2005, 2010–2014, 2017–2021) have alternated with periods of higher-intensity violence (e.g. 2005–2010, 2014–2017), the reality is that dozens of incidents of organised armed violence occur nearly every day, even though they are of different intensity depending on the region. Structural factors that enable organised violence have become deeply entrenched in Iraq's socio-political life. These include the proliferation of arms and armed groups; a climate of lawlessness and lack of accountability; glorification of violence and the absence of the state; and the spread of psychological disorder, trauma and aggressive masculinity.

Against this background, IS-inspired violence recurs across some areas of Iraq despite continuing efforts to limit it. Counter-terrorism (CT) operations have so far proved to be an insufficient response. They need to be complemented by a far broader and multilayered programme that also addresses nationwide reconciliation, civic education, trauma counselling, improved political representation, security sector and legal reform.

With this in mind, the brief examines the volume and nature of IS attacks and CT operations between September 2021 and February 2022 (six months) and compares these with March to August 2021 and September 2020 to February 2021 (both also six months in

Table 1 Level of IS attacks and fatalities from September 2020 to February 2022

	IS attacks		Recorded fatalities from attacks	
	Absolute number	% change	Absolute number	% change
Sept 20–Feb 21	210	-	251	-
March 21–Aug 21	285	+36	252	~0
Sept 21–Feb 22	371	+30	305	+21

Source: ACLED, see also the note on methodology at the end of the brief.

duration).¹ We aim to understand whether IS is 'up' or 'out', and conclude that it is neither. We note that this analysis covers only part of a broader landscape of violence, which also includes attacks on US and Coalition forces by armed groups linked with Iran, violent clashes between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), tribal and drugs-related violence and incidents of domestic violence.

Islamic State attacks

A steady increase in the total frequency of IS attacks between September 2021 and February 2022 compared with the previous six-months was accompanied by a slower increase in fatalities (see Table 1). IS attacks occurred broadly in the same geographical areas – chiefly the Diyala and Kirkuk regions (see Figure 1). Most attacks stopped well short of entering into major confrontations with Iraqi security forces. IS capability seemed limited to one major operation per month and, where it could, it adroitly stoked sectarian tension, sometimes to devastating effect.

Frequency and casualties of Islamic State attacks

The rate of IS attacks between September 2021 and February 2022 shows an increase of 86 incidents compared with the previous six months. The number was heavily influenced by the 106 attacks IS carried out in September 2021, which

resulted in a death toll of 107 in the month leading up to the October 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections. IS also took advantage of worsening CT coordination and lower CT activity after the elections, while Iraq's political elites focused on forming a government, to launch a number of lethal attacks on Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in November/December 2021. IS used the disputed territories as a staging zone for these attacks, demonstrating both opportunism and an ability to act fast.

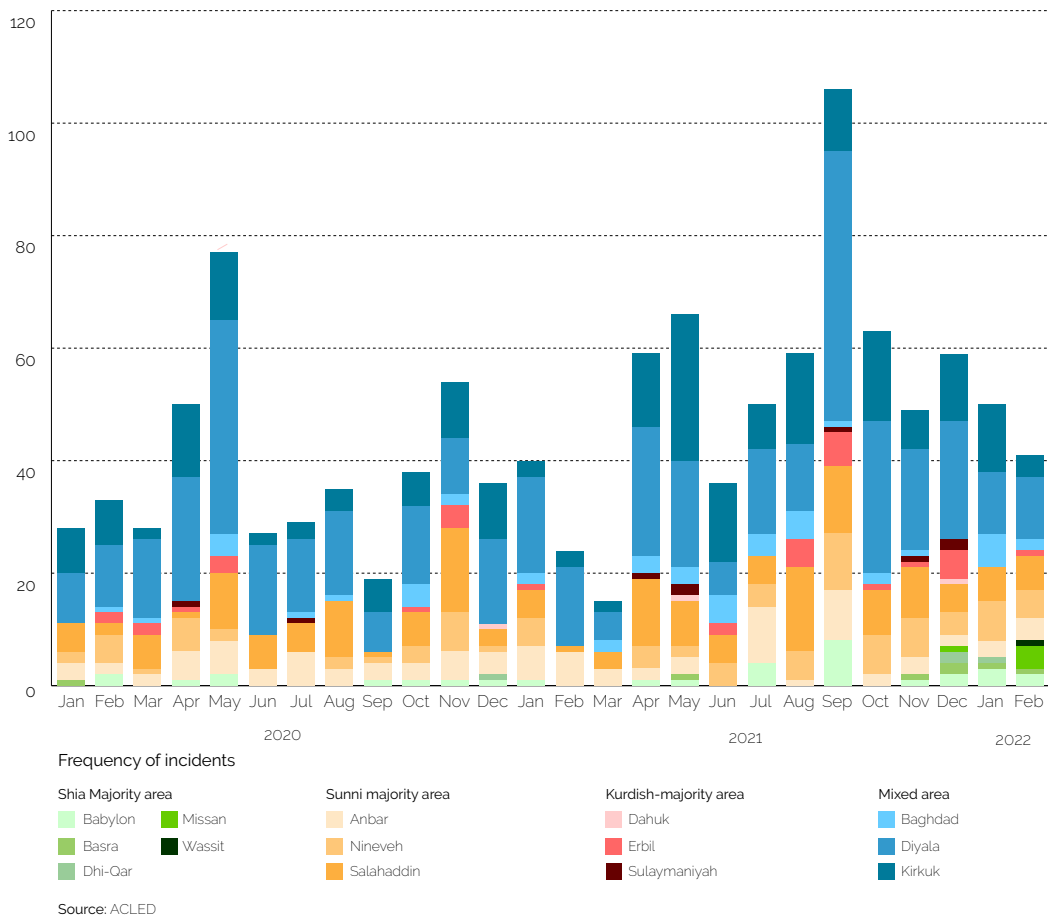
An improvement in the Iraqi CT response in December 2021/January 2022 restored order, and this peak in IS attacks is likely to be a one-off. A more recent dampening factor on IS attacks was the death of its leader Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi in early February in Syria. Only 41 IS attacks took place in that month.

Geography of Islamic State attacks

Between September 2021 and February 2022, major IS attacks were limited to one per month but varied in terms of their targets, indicating limited capability but flexibility and opportunism. In October 2021, IS targeted Diyala to trigger Sunni/Shia strife. In November 2021, it struck Sulimaniyah/ Erbil. In December 2021, it targeted the disputed territories. In January 2022, it struck an army base in Diyala. The fact that major attacks lasted only a short while and then shifted to another province might also indicate that IS was putting security arrangements in different governorates to the test. It should be added that until February, IS activity was offensive and more concentrated, while during February its attacks were more defensive and fragmented. One explanation could be the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi in early February. Operation Inherent Resolve adds another possible explanation, namely that IS

¹ We base our analysis on ACLED data (see note on methodology at the end of the brief) and, based on fresh data, echo many of Al-Hamid's conclusions regarding the 'state of Islamic State' in early 2021. See: Al-Hamid, R., *ISIS in Iraq: Weakened, but Agile*, May 2021, Newlines Institute, [online](#).

Figure 1 Islamic State attacks by province (January 2020–February 2022)



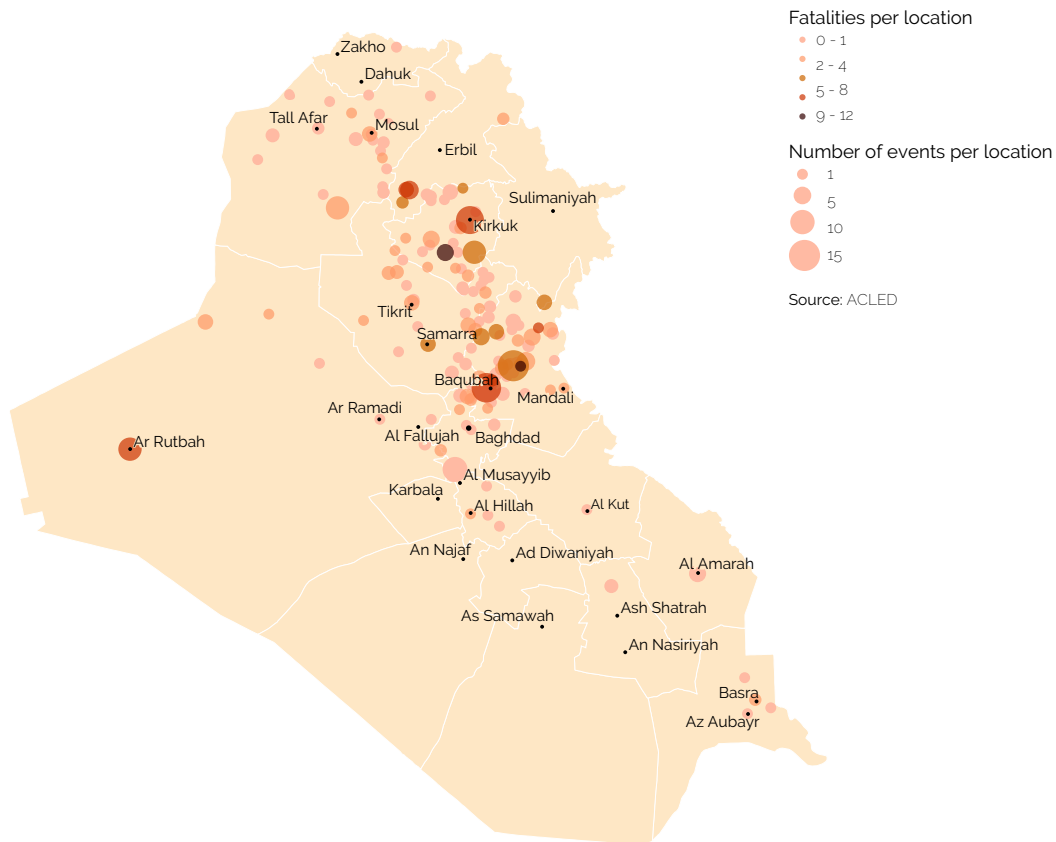
shifted its focus to ‘rebuilding’.² These factors are likely to be complementary.

Most IS attacks between September 2021 and February 2022 took place along the Sinjar-Baghdad axis: Sinjar-Nineveh-Kirkuk-Salahaddin-Diyala-Baghdad (see Figure 2). Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Nineveh were the most affected provinces (see Figure 1). The strategic explanation for this focus has

several elements. To begin with, Nineveh and Anbar are Sunni-dominated and important to IS for the movement of men and weapons between Iraq and Syria. Both provinces serve as logistics hubs. For example, the recent IS prison break in Syria translated directly into an influx of militants into Iraq via these provinces (over 30,000 Iraqi citizens believed to be affiliated with IS continue to be held in camps in Syria). In turn, Kirkuk and Diyala are mixed ethno-sectarian areas in which IS thrives by sowing division to devastating effect. For instance, IS carried out a large attack against an army base in Diyala in the third week of January 2022 to signal its ability to penetrate even facilities such as those. Its assault on this regimental headquarters left 11 soldiers dead and 10 severely wounded. Finally, Salahaddin and Diyala are key governorates for IS revenue-generating smuggling activities and constitute the IS gateway to Baghdad, where it usually aims for more high-profile attacks.

2 Meaning that IS primarily seeks to free its members from various prisons, smuggle its militants and their families out of camps and recruit new members. The US Treasury believes IS retains tens of millions of US dollars in accounts across the region and significant illegal business activity such as oil smuggling, kidnapping for ransom and extortion. See: US Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve October–December 2021, 2022* [online](#); Cordesman, A., *The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues*, CSIS, 2020, [online](#) (both accessed 31 March 2022).

Figure 2 Islamic State attacks: frequency and fatalities (September 2021–February 2022)



Targets of Islamic State attacks

Many IS attacks between September 2021 and February 2022 featured a lower level of confrontation than its higher-profile ‘campaigns’, consisting of hit-and-run attacks on security checkpoints and other security infrastructure (such as police stations) and gunfights with security forces, but also attacks on civilian infrastructure (houses, farms) and kidnappings. Remote explosives and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are mostly deployed in areas where IS has less presence and where its mobility is reduced – such as in Basra and Missan – in addition to Diyala, Kirkuk and Nineveh.

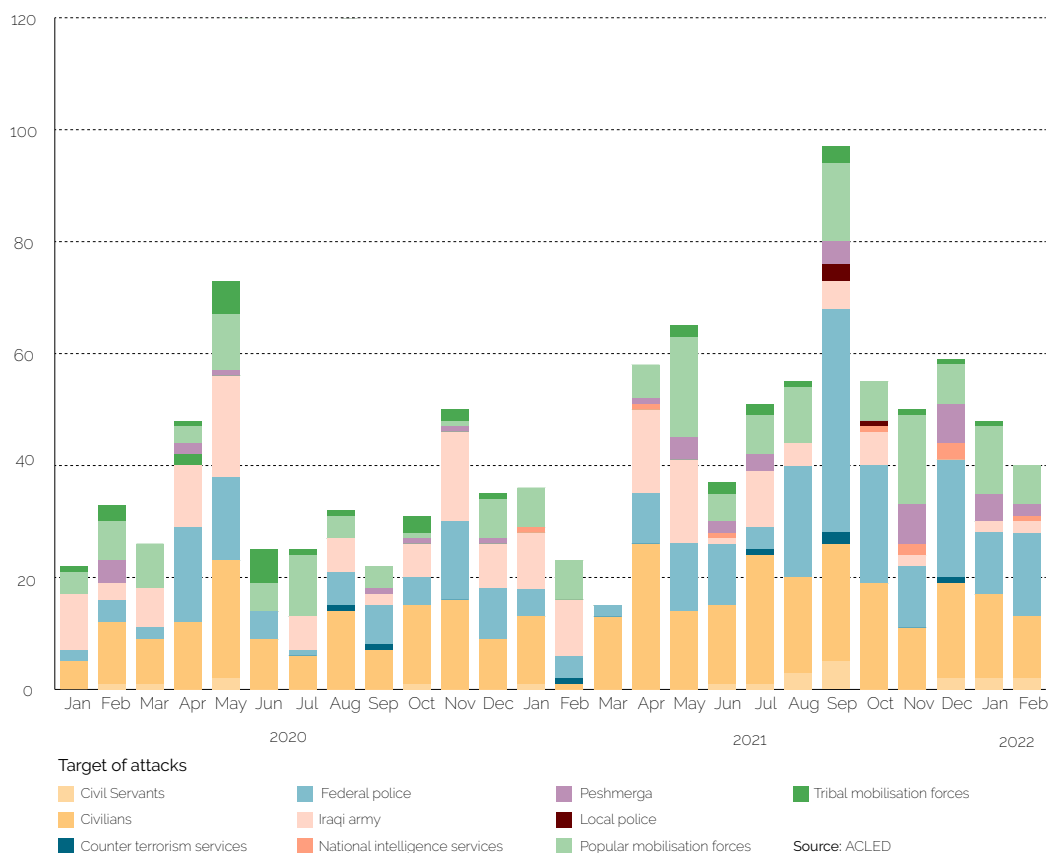
The top three targets of IS attacks were the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), civilians and the Iraqi Federal Police. IS does not often confront the Iraqi Army. Targets of IS attacks are largely a function of where Iraqi forces are deployed. For example, there are substantial Federal Police forces deployed in Kirkuk that coordinate the provincial security

response and border crossings. This explains why they are regularly targeted, as the area already features substantial IS activity. As IS targets checkpoints to maintain mobility, security organisations that run them can expect to be targeted more regularly.³

On 26 October 2021, IS militants attacked the Shi’a village of Al Rashad near the town of Muqdadiya in Diyala, killing at least 15 civilians and wounding dozens. Muqdadiya is located in the Hamrin mountains, which are strategically important for IS as they provide access to the Iraqi central desert region that connects with Syria. After the attack, some 3,000 fighters from the victims’ tribes, supported by Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) units,

3 Diyala seems to be a partial exception since IS singled out PMF forces as targets, probably in order to play on the divided nature of the area and to feed sectarian frames.

Figure 3 Islamic State attacks by targeted actor (January 2020–February 2022)



attacked the nearby Sunni village of Nahr Al Imam, accusing its residents of harbouring IS militants. This retaliation resulted in the death of 11 civilians, destruction of the village mosque and medical facility, the razing of agricultural lands and the displacement of dozens of families. The incident exemplified the capability of IS to manipulate and trigger sectarian revenge reflexes, as well as underlining the inability of Iraqi security forces to intervene in a decisive and timely manner.⁴

Counter-terrorism operations

Broadly speaking, counter-terrorism (CT) operations seem to be keeping IS in check, even though their number has decreased and their geography is somewhat mismatched with that of IS attacks (i.e. a large number of operations took place in provinces other than Diyala and Kirkuk where most IS attacks took place). The role of the PMF in CT operations has decreased appreciably over the past six months. CT efforts remain, however, limited to security interventions.

Frequency and location of counter-terrorism operations

For most months between September 2021 and February 2022, the number of CT operations was equivalent to, or exceeded, the number of IS attacks (the total number of CT operations only ended up being lower due to the high volume of IS attacks in September 2021). However, these numbers look different on a province-by-province

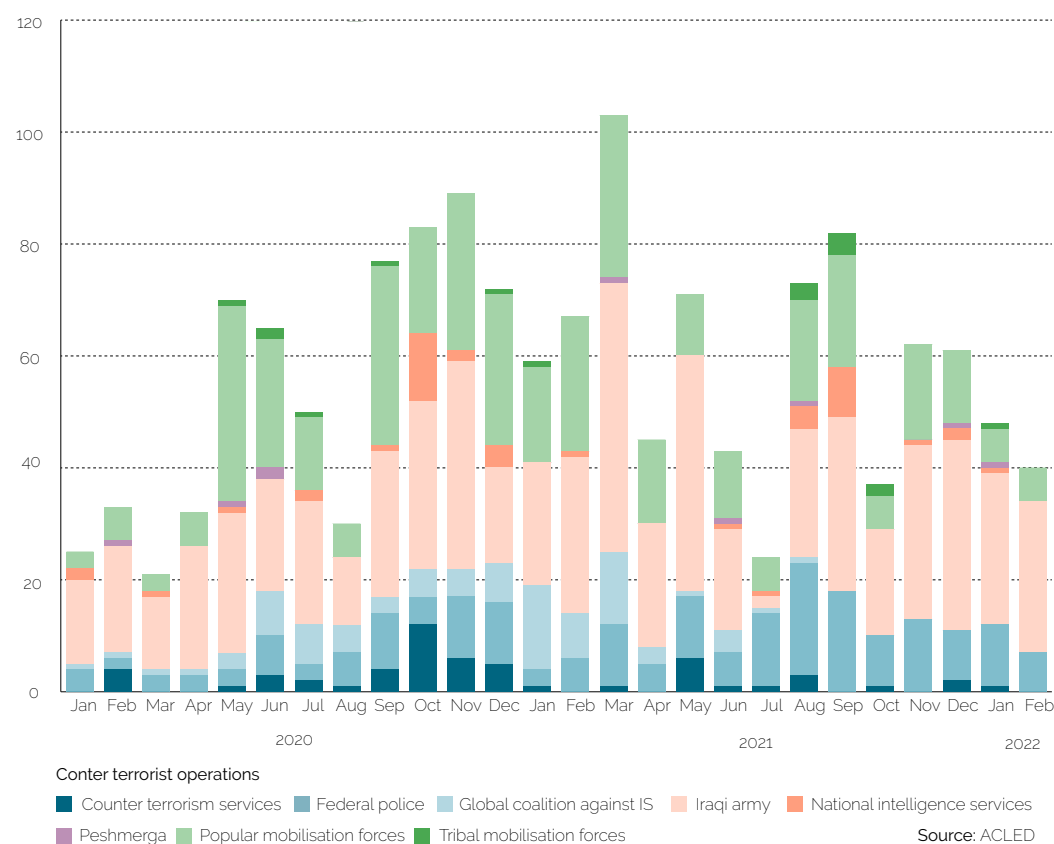
⁴ Diyala province is religiously and ethnically mixed and saw heavy fighting in 2006–2007, with revenge killings between Sunni and Shi'a villages continuing for many years. It also features a lively smuggling trade with neighbouring Salahaddin, rough terrain and little government presence.

Table 2 Number of counter-terrorism operations from September 2020 to February 2022

	Number of CT operations	% change	Number of IS fatalities	% change
Sept 20–Feb 21	452	-	464	-
March 21–Aug 21	360	-20	310	-33
Sept 21–Feb 22	332	-8	285	-8

Source: ACLED, see also the note on methodology at the end of the brief.

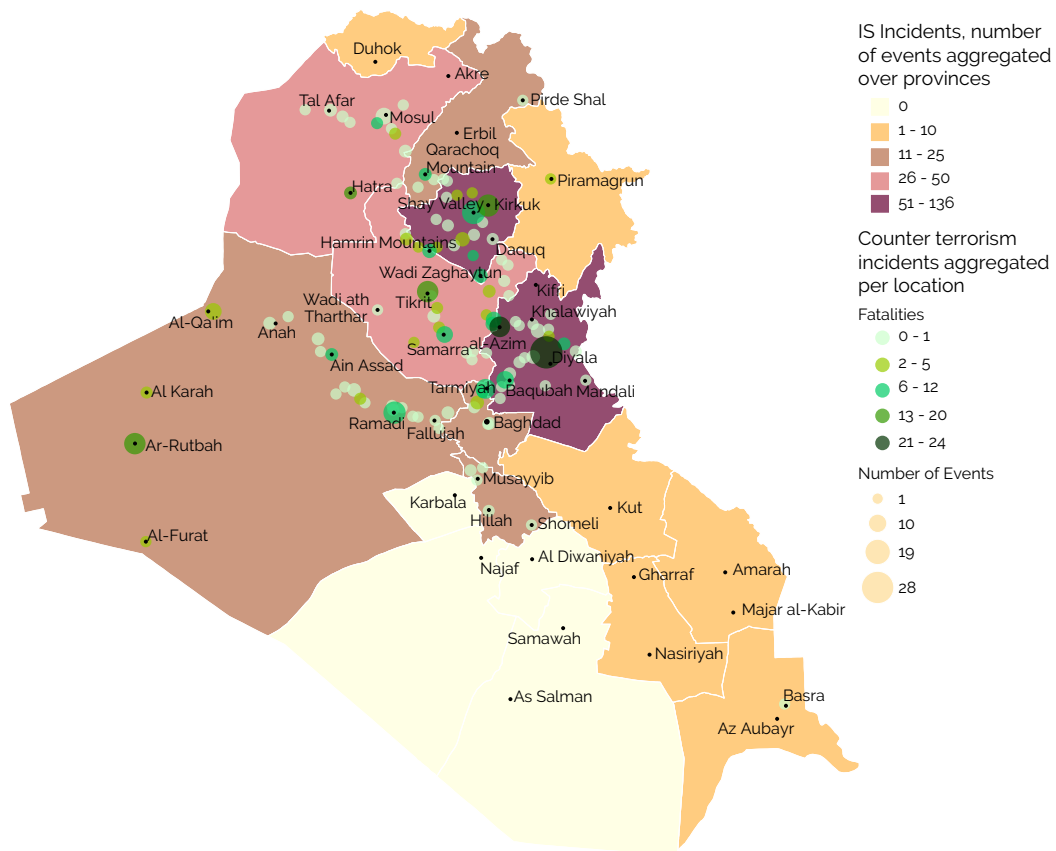
Figure 4 Counter-terrorism operations by actor (January 2020–February 2022)



basis. Some CT operations were launched in the Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar, Salahaddin and Nineveh, which saw limited IS activity. Fewer CT operations took place in Kirkuk and Diyala, where IS attacks were concentrated. In other words, the geography of IS attacks and the geography of CT operations overlapped in Salahaddin but otherwise appeared somewhat of a mismatch (see Figure 5). The decrease in CT operations compared with previous periods was accompanied by a corresponding drop in IS-fatalities (see Table 2).

Between September 2021 and February 2022, most CT operations were carried out by the Iraqi Army (176 out of 332, or 53%), the PMF (74 out of 332, or 22%) and the Iraqi Federal Police (69 out of 332, or 21%). The role of the PMF in CT operations declined after September 2021. The PMF generally engages only within the boundaries of the province in which its units are stationed because of their limited operational capability, while the Iraqi Army usually conducts CT operations encompassing several provincial borders. Other actors – such as the national intelligence and Counter Terrorism Services

Figure 5 Counter-terrorism operations versus IS attack targets (September 2021–February 2022)



(CTS) – support operations with strategic planning and intelligence, while the Peshmerga and tribal forces tend to facilitate terrain/area access. The CTS, especially, has moved away from frontline participation in CT operations and become more of an enabler.

In this context, Iraqi security forces sought to reduce IS recruitment and mobility in four main ways by: a) launching an operation to collect intelligence about Sunni tribal insurgents by embedding officers in local communities; b) strengthening border controls by posting more army units to the frontier, installing heat cameras and building mud walls in a bid to curtail the smuggling of fighters and weapons from Syria; c) strengthening control over prison facilities in the wake of the IS outbreak at al-Hol (Syria); and d) launching their first joint Iraqi Army-Peshmerga CT operation in disputed border towns in a bid to better secure the area.

Geography of counter terrorism

A significant number of larger-scale CT operations took place in areas where IS is suspected to be deeply rooted rather than in areas where it was most active. Such operations – between one-third to half of all CT operations – were mostly clearing operations (e.g. destroying hideouts and weapon seizures). Smaller-scale CT operations appear to be tactical level responses by provincial commands that target locally known IS facilities and cells, mostly located in the areas where IS attacks occur. Armed clashes with IS elements constitute around 20–30 per cent of CT operations in most provinces. There does not seem to be a coordinated national CT strategy that is centrally implemented.⁵

⁵ Based on Clingendael monitoring of press statements on CT operations between September 2021 and February 2022 by the Joint Operations Command in Baghdad.

Air/drone strikes are also used frequently, usually after heavy clashes have occurred in places such as Diyala and Kirkuk, or to target mountainous hideouts.

Performance of counter-terrorism operations

While CT operations have become more professional, issues that require further attention include:⁶

- The majority of CT operations take place in areas where Iraqi security forces already have a permanent presence via patrols and checkpoints.
- Despite recent efforts to improve CT intelligence, CT coordination and strategy remain suboptimal. For example, CT operations remain largely decentralised, with provincial brigades/commands having substantial autonomy to undertake 'their own' CT activities.
- Most CT operations are publicised before they are concluded, reducing the element of surprise.

Finally, CT efforts in Iraq remain largely limited to security operations. Reconstruction efforts proceed slowly, while reconciliation efforts remain few and far between, despite rhetorical agreement on their necessity and some government initiatives. The result is that many Sunni families – and even communities – remain stigmatised because they are suspected of links with IS. Meanwhile, Iraq's remaining million-plus internally displaced persons (IDPs) struggle to return due to poor economic prospects and/or social marginalisation in their places of origin. Incremental climate-induced displacement (largely in the south) is adding to the quasi-permanent displacement that resulted from the fight against IS (largely in the north and west).

6 Clingendael monitoring of press statements on CT operations between September 2021 and February 2022 by the Joint Operations Command in Baghdad; recent reporting on Operation Inherent Resolve by the US Inspector-General, accessible here: <https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/>.

Looking ahead

Between September 2021 and February 2022, IS focused on executing more but smaller-scale attacks by mobile groups of fighters in familiar territory but further away from IS bases and shelters in Diyala and Kirkuk. In all likelihood, these attacks were intended to maintain territorial control, spread fear and showcase the group's abiding relevance. Such a strategy does not require large numbers of fighters and is scalable. It is likely that the outflow of IS militants from Syria into Iraq played a role in enabling its execution.

January and February 2022, however, saw the beginning of a steep drop in IS attacks to a record low (since 2003) of 26 incidents in March 2022. It is unclear whether IS is reducing its activity as a result of capacity or leadership issues, or whether it is biding its time and reconstituting itself. 'Exploratory' IS campaigns testing security arrangements in new provinces – such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah – over the preceding months suggest the latter. However, the month of Ramadan and Eid – a period of increased IS activity in previous years suggests the opposite. The Islamic State attacks nearly doubled during Ramadan at a total of 43 incidents, but their location and nature indicate limitations. Most incidents were small-scale (e.g. remote shootings or IEDs). Only three incidents were offensive in nature with the remainder largely aimed at keeping residents and government forces away from IS bases, mainly in rural areas.

Either way, IS continues to find support in marginalised Sunni communities as reconciliation efforts remain ineffectual and fragmented. The overall sentiment in Iraq remains distrustful of IDPs and communities suspected of any kind of ties with IS. Therefore, the recent drop in IS attacks can be quickly reversed if the Iraqi government does not expand its approach to counter terrorism beyond the military dimension. Several risks hover on the horizon in this regard.

First, recent clashes between Sunni and Shi'a tribes in Diyala were poorly reported and it is unclear what damages and fatalities Diyala's Sunni districts suffered. But even

so, it is clear that they did reignite sectarian tensions that can grow and spread. Second, poor treatment of Sunni IDPs creates serious grievances in the camps hosting them, which remain severely underserved and require special access permission even for humanitarian organisations. Unexplained deaths have even been reported from inside such camps. Third, discriminatory security arrangements in liberated territories pit communities against each other by arming some of them but not others. Fourth, the lack of reconciliation efforts will make itself felt

with a vengeance as more Iraqis return from camps in Syria. This problem could grow even further if the Ministry of Migration and Displacement persists with its plans to close the last remaining IDP camps in Iraq soon.

Should any of these risks materialise, it is likely that IS will capitalise on the associated grievances to enlist and abuse local communities in rural areas of Kirkuk, Diyala and Salahuddin to perpetuate its influence by recruiting fighters, sowing discord and organising attacks.

A note on methodology

We used ACLED as the primary data source for this brief. While ACLED produces a (relatively) comprehensive list of violent incidents that occur in Iraq on a monthly basis, it struggles to correctly categorise and characterise these incidents. We therefore reviewed all news items collected and reported by ACLED to (re-)categorise and (re-)characterise ACLED-reported violent incidents as necessary and to introduce additional variables, including: actor initiating the incident (IS or CT), type of attack, target of the attack and number of fatalities. The figures in this brief are based on this enhanced ACLED-origin dataset and produced by ITHACA S.R.L. We also used public statements by the Joint Operations Command (JOC) to compile a list of major CT operations by Iraqi security forces. These press statements typically cover larger CT operations at national level. They represent a subset of all CT data, which we used for strategic interpretation of ACLED's more granular reporting on CT operations.

Data problems and mitigation

- We download and review ACLED data as soon as they become available. Any changes to the initial ACLED data are not reflected in the data used in this brief.
- Media sources used by ACLED may be biased. In case of doubt about accuracy, we triangulate with other sources but some incidents are not independently verifiable.
- Fatality numbers for incidents with large numbers of casualties may not be entirely accurate. Media sources often report a minimal number of casualties when the exact number is still unknown. Also, those wounded in an attack may lose their lives after initial reporting.
- We attribute incidents classified by ACLED as initiated by 'unidentified armed groups' to known security actors based on our best assessment of the nature of the incident and its motive. On average, there are about 60–80 such incidents per month, of which c. 50–60 per cent are easily reclassified based on ACLED-included news items. This means that about 25–35 incidents per month cannot be attributed due to lack of evidence and these are excluded from the reporting. This represents between 3.5 and 7 per cent of the total number of monthly violent incidents that ranges between 500 and 700.

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www.clingendael.org/cru
cru@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

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About the authors

Nancy Ezzeddine is a research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. She contributes to its Middle East research programme by exploring identity politics in the region and the use of religion as means of political mobilization.

Matteo Colombo is a junior research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. He contributes to its Middle East research programme by analysing prospects for political renewal and reform across the region with a focus on Egypt and Libya.