Drone Warfare in Iraq

Civilian and conflict impact considerations in context

White Paper

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In a world of rising violence and fragile peace, the utilisation of new technologies, including the widespread use of drones, is changing the way that warfare is conducted and the risks civilians face. From Ukraine to the Middle East, drones are now central to war dynamics and linked to broader and less visible forms of civilian harm.

While existing analysis has explored the spread, cost and legal implications of drone warfare, there is a need for greater focus on how impacts manifest in specific contexts. This paper takes Iraq as its focus, highlighting how fragmented authority and overlapping security arrangements and alliances interact with drone use to create distinct risks to civilians and shape possibilities for conflict mitigation and management. Iraq is not just another theatre of drone warfare, it is a structurally distinct proxy conflict space where fragmentation, hybrid actors, competing alliances, and infrastructural fragility reshape how civilians are impacted.

Identity and social dynamics

In Iraq, civilians face heightened risks of harm from drone warfare due to the diversity of armed actors and their embeddedness within civilian populations. Identities of state and nonstate armed actors in Iraq are complex, and belie Israel/US-Iran polarities, involving a complex web of alliances. The entanglement of civilian and armed actor identities and geographic presence puts civilians at risk of drone attacks, as drone activity often seeks to target actors who have presence in populated areas.

This does not necessarily create new divisions but can reinforce existing, fragmentary narratives. Discussions around who or what is being targeted may circulate within communities, sometimes contributing to uncertainty or mistrust. At the same time, many civilians emphasise shared exposure to risk, regardless of identity. As Maryam, an NGO worker noted:

> *"In Iraq's diverse social context, it is impossible for citizens from different backgrounds not to share common concerns about the daily challenges they face, such as electricity shortages, water supply problems, and transportation issues. Discussing these matters has become a normal part of everyday life. However, the recent drone attacks shifted public conversation to a far more serious level, drawing attention to the fragility of Iraq's security, economy, and political environment. This concern became even more painful when civilians, especially children, became targets, such as the 8-year-old child who was killed in a drone attack in Baghdad. The weakness and complexity of the situation were clearly reflected in social media discourse, daily conversations, and public opinion, as these events revived memories of periods when civilians were left exposed in the streets, vulnerable and without effective state protection."*

This highlights a dual dynamic: while conflict can sharpen perceptions of difference, the experience of insecurity can also underline common ground.

The cost of drones and interception

The cost of drone warfare impacts civilians in Iraq as resources are turned from essential services to air defence systems and weapons procurement. Reports suggest that in the recent war, the cost of each drone starts from $20,000 USD and the interception of these weapons through different air defence systems is reported to cost more than $1 million USD in each instance.

This imbalance can place pressure on state resources, particularly in contexts like Iraq where public budgets are already stretched by reconstruction needs and service provision. Meanwhile, it is particularly triggering for communities who see little to no resources invested, globally, in responding to their needs to heal from earlier cycles of violence, including compensation as it relates to transitional justice in post-IS context and quality of basic services, including increasingly shrinking water supplies amid rapid climate change impact on daily life.

Drone interception also does not occur in isolation of the social fabric of the context. In environments where military and civilian spaces are closely intertwined, defensive actions carry their own risks. Intercepted drones or missiles may fall in or near populated areas, and explosions, whether from incoming or intercepted devices, can affect nearby infrastructure. This dynamic is increasingly reflected in how civilians experience safety, as highlighted through ongoing analysis and community accounts, including Reem who says:

> *"What felt most unsettling was how everything started to feel random. Drones were no longer something distant, they were falling on civilian houses without warning. In one case, a family had left their home that night almost by chance, after hearing that another house nearby had been hit a few days before. Their house was later significantly damaged. An older woman said she had a feeling something might happen, and that is why they left. It makes you realise how much safety starts to feel like a matter of chance. People begin to question whether it is safe to stay, to leave, or even to move within their own neighbourhood."*

This creates a situation in which civilians are exposed not only to intended strikes, but also to the broader cycle of attack and defence. Risk is therefore not confined to specific targets but distributed across surrounding areas.

> *While the usual drone targets are highly predictable, not knowing where debris might fall or how far the impact will reach makes it hard to feel truly safe. This uncertainty feels heavier when you are away from your family, the thought that something could happen and you might not be able to reach them stays with you.*
>
> *- NP staff from Erbil*

Compounding effects of existing vulnerabilities and previous cycles of violence

The impact of drones in Iraq extends beyond immediate physical damage. It interacts with existing psychological and socioeconomic vulnerabilities as well as polarisation shaped by decades of conflict, economic challenges, and infrastructural strain.

When drones are used in surveillance they contribute to a persistent sense of observation. Even when no strike occurs, the sound or awareness of drones can influence daily routines, sleep, and perceptions of safety. In places like Gaza for example, the constant buzzing of surveillance drones used by Israel has been reported for years as a symptom of insecurity. A similar pattern is increasingly being reported by civilians in Iraq.

Communities are already living with pre-existing fragilities and legacies of war, this only exacerbates vulnerabilities for survivors in their journey for collective recovery. When civilians in Iraq reflect on the impact on them and their country by saying "it's not the first time, we will manage", that presents a level of normalisation of violence and constant risk that deprives a sense of safety.

In some communities, repeated exposure to insecurity has led to a form of everyday contingency planning. Families may keep important documents accessible, maintain contact networks, or identify potential places to relocate if needed. This does not always result in immediate displacement, but it reflects how insecurity shapes decision-making over time. Housing choices, employment opportunities, and movement patterns may all be influenced by perceptions of risk.

Reem, who witnessed these drone attacks first hand, describes the experience:

> *"What people struggled with most was how sudden and unpredictable everything became. The sound of drones was often followed by loud explosions that started getting closer to civilian areas, which made people feel that they could be directly at risk, including from falling debris. It affected sleep significantly, as many people were afraid to sleep in case something might happen during the night. At the same time, movement became more limited, with people choosing to stay indoors or avoiding certain places, as potential targets could be located in different parts of the city, including during daytime and working hours. While some initially tried to normalise the situation, as incidents intensified and houses began to shake from nearby explosions, it became overwhelming and triggered past trauma. Over time, people became highly sensitive to sounds, with even minor noises creating a sense of alert and anticipation."*

Erbil Governorate, Iraq, 2022. Photo: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg),

Conclusion

A civilian-centred perspective on the impact of use of drones in Iraq does not resolve the complexities of attribution or intent, or address the heavy impacts of this kind of warfare on civilians. However, it is important to understand how technological shifts in warfare such as the increasing use of drones are shaped and defined by context, and how in settings like Iraq, their consequences extend into the fabric of everyday life. Prevention and response actions that meet the needs of civilians need to account for these particularities, and be led by the experiences of communities on frontline – both in Iraq or beyond.

Nonviolent Peaceforce is available to discuss programmatic responses to drone use and duty of care in the face of these harms on request.