

Population Census in Iraq: A Step Towards Future Development or Imminent Political Conflict?

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Nov 28, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Last week's population census in Iraq became the country's first in almost three decades.

For decades, it was customary for the Iraqi government to conduct a population census every ten years. Yet the last census took place in 1997 during the previous regime, and excluded the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk). Since then, post-2003 governments have been unable to conduct a census due to security concerns, sectarian tensions, political disputes among major powers, and disagreements over disputed territories between the central government and the KRI. Especially notable were terrorist threats with the occupation of one-third of the country by ISIS in 2014 until its full expulsion from Iraqi territory in 2017. Subsequently, further delays occurred due to financial constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing the long-awaited census from being conducted.

In lieu of accurate statistical data from a census during this period, the Iraqi government relied instead on estimated statistics provided by the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Trade, and other administrative bodies. These estimates have significant implication for the government's spending allocation. Specifically, the Iraqi government spends approximately \$1.5 billion annually to distribute food to more than 39 million Iraqis through coupons. While this distribution theoretically provides the government with an estimate of the Iraqi population, the government's failure to regularly distribute the food coupons has led millions of Iraqi to neglect this benefit, while the Iraqi government itself has begun to reduce the food items. These issues have led to inaccuracies in the information contained in the food coupon, as many individuals have died or others have been born without their information being updated. Additionally, many citizens who receive a monthly salary of about \$1,000 or more are not eligible for this food coupon, while many of them circumvent this matter.

New census data can be used to ensure that this benefit is more accurately provided, and addresses the limitations of relying on estimates based on this type of data. As such, the current census is part of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani's agenda, and he stated in an official [televised address \(https://youtu.be/a88zIH04U_c\)](https://youtu.be/a88zIH04U_c) published on the Cabinet's website: "The census is not merely an accumulation of numbers but the dividing line between estimation and facts—a decisive tool for making effective and vital decisions."

Thus, last week's population census became the first in almost three decades; carried out over two consecutive days (November 20–21, 2024), the census required preparations that included training 120,000 mobile researchers who were tasked with surveying the population and housing. Security authorities also imposed a curfew during this period, permitting movement only for medical teams, media personnel, and certain humanitarian cases.

The Ministry of Planning announced that the detailed final results of the census will be released within two months after the data is compiled, categorized, and published as general tables and indicators on Iraq's population status. The preliminary results—announced on Monday, November 25—stated that Iraq's population reached approximately 45.4 million, including foreigners and refugees. The percentage of males was 50.18%, while females accounted for 49.82%. The annual growth rate was 2.33%, in addition to other indicators related to household size, age distribution, and the rural-urban population breakdown.

The Omission of "Ethnicity" and Iraqis Abroad: A Shift in Demographics

However, one category of data that was not collected is that of Iraqis' ethnicity, and the removal of the "ethnicity" question from the census questionnaire has sparked significant debate. Some political groups had demanded its inclusion to ensure the rights of all components, criticizing the omission as compromising the completeness of the census and failing to provide accurate information about ethnic and racial diversity in specific areas. Others argued that including ethnicity could fuel political sensitivities, especially given Iraq's long history of post-2003 conflicts. Meanwhile, residents in insecure areas expressed concerns about the potential misuse of personal data—such as ethnicity—for political or security purposes.

Abdul Zahra Al-Hindawi, spokesperson for the Ministry of Planning, stated in an interview with the author: "The ethnicity question was a major reason for the failure of previous census projects. Many parties harbored concerns over its inclusion. Thus, a consensus was reached to omit this question to ensure the project's implementation. This decision does not exclude any group; it focuses on the Iraqi citizen rather than specific components." He added that the emphasis should be on providing services for all citizens: "When citizens need hospitals, schools, roads, drinking water, or electricity, the issue of ethnicity becomes irrelevant. While omitting ethnicity might result in some data gaps regarding ethnic realities in Iraq, securing 95% accuracy is better than losing everything. The data related to the ethnicity question represents only about 5% of general questions."

Economic and political researcher Omar Al-Halbousi disagreed with the decision in an interview with the author, explaining: "The exclusion of ethnicity from the census is deliberate and aimed at altering the demographic composition of certain areas, especially Kirkuk and Nineveh. It also enables political parties to register naturalized foreigners, as the ethnicity question would expose these individuals. The omission of this field will negatively impact the country by favoring the settlement of imported populations loyal to Iran."

Al-Halbousi referenced a theory reported on several [television programs \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpjxbnagW0\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpjxbnagW0) claiming that while parties aligned with Iran had previously opposed the census, they removed their opposition after naturalizing thousands of Iranians, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Lebanese and granted them Iraqi citizenship, allowing the ruling coalition to include these individuals in the census, using them for political and security purposes.

He further argued that the census has little to do with improving citizens' living conditions or ensuring equitable wealth distribution. Instead, he claimed it has political, security, and economic objectives: politically, to increase parliamentary seats for Iran-aligned parties; security-wise, to incorporate naturalized individuals into security agencies; and economically, to redistribute provincial budget shares in a way that allows these parties to embezzle funds to support naturalized individuals.

If the census results are indeed utilized in elections, parliamentary seats may increase from 329 to 450. This prospect raises fears of impending conflicts over the distribution of power among dominant political factions ahead of the next parliamentary elections. Observers predict that the census may play a significant role in shaping the country's future elections, enabling certain parties to gain additional parliamentary seats due to demographic shifts. According to Iraq's 2005 constitution

(<https://iq.parliament.iq/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A/>), each 100,000 citizens corresponds to one parliamentary seat, and new parliamentary seats would shift the current political structure of the parliament.

Another notable omission in the current census was the exclusion of Iraqis living abroad. No official plans were announced to include expatriates, leading to widespread frustration among the diaspora. **Many overseas citizens expressed disappointment at the lack of government coordination to conduct the census through Iraqi embassies, online portals, or other mechanisms. ()** Some expatriates instructed their families in Iraq to register them as temporarily absent, claiming they were on a short trip outside the country to ensure they were included in the census.

Omar Al-Halbousi criticized this exclusion, describing it as unjust: "Denying millions of expatriate Iraqis the right to be included in the census is a grave injustice. This demonstrates how the government, dominated by Iran-aligned factions, exploits its control to alter Iraq's demographic composition to serve its own interests."

Regarding the potential for a census of Iraqis abroad, Abdul Zahra Al-Hindawi remarked: "There is an idea to conduct a separate census for Iraqis abroad, as far as possible, by utilizing the available electronic tablets and distributing them to Iraqi embassies worldwide. These embassies could then coordinate with expatriates to gather the necessary data." However, several obstacles will likely hinder such efforts, including the limited number of Iraqi embassies globally and their distance from major expatriate communities. These challenges necessitate exploring alternative solutions.

Technical Issues and Exclusion from Registration

Citizens have likewise complained about aspects of how the census was conducted, especially in cases where census officials failed to visit their homes during the census period. **Many reported being unable to reach an official the designated hotline, which was often found inactive, as evidenced by videos circulating on social media. ()** In response, the Statistics Authority announced the launch of the third and final phase of the census originally scheduled for Sunday, November 24, stating that field teams would reach all households that had not been visited in previous phases. However, continuing technical issues have delayed the implementation of this last phase.

Field researchers responsible for the census have reported technical issues with their electronic tablets, including difficulties updating devices to proceed with the final phase. Researchers have also called on the government to pay their overdue wages. ()

Still others have questioned the process that was used to conduct a census versus other methods of obtaining accurate population data. The census process has cost the state millions of dollars, but other countries have found much more cost-effective methods of obtaining this information. For instance, using national ID numbers linked to

Iraq's unified identification system could have streamlined the process, which other countries have used to avoid the cumbersome process of manual enumeration and door-to-door surveys. Yet in Iraq, many citizens lack these ID cards due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and cumbersome procedures, which can frequently push applicants to resort to paying bribes to complete their applications.

Despite the many obstacles facing Iraq, the census represents a significant opportunity to shape a better future for its people, depending on how the data is utilized. By understanding the country's demographic composition and addressing citizens' needs, Iraq can work toward ensuring a dignified life, job opportunities, and fair wealth distribution for its population, who have long been deprived of such basic rights in a resource-rich nation. ❖

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