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# The Security Situation in Iraq: July 2016–November 2017



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## 1. Summary

This report describes a new phase in the current security situation in Iraq in comparison to previous thematic reports on the subject. The main deviating feature is the series of intensive, highly coordinated military offensives carried out by the government against the so-called Islamic State (hereafter IS) with the objective to eradicate the group from the country. All of this has resulted in bringing an end to IS territorial control in Iraq. However, pockets of resistance and sleeper cells continue to operate, mostly from remote and unwieldy terrain, making it difficult for military forces to eradicate them. This situation is likely to prevail for some time, which in turn could hamper any immediate prospects of restoring overall stability in these contested areas, as well in non-contested areas also targeted by IS. Another notable development is the visible decline in the number of security incidents taking place in areas previously identified as IS hotspots in non-contested areas. This is mainly due to the relocation of IS fighters to the contested areas, as well as the heavy losses suffered by the group on the battlefield.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, the Iraqi government now faces its biggest battle yet, that of upholding security and bringing stability to the areas now recaptured from IS. This task is entrusted to a patchwork of various official and semi-official groups, i.e. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Shia tribal militias, the Popular Mobilization Units (hereafter PMU) known as the *Hashd al-Shaabi*, as well as Sunni tribal militias and Peshmerga forces. How this will play out remains to be seen, and these are developments that Lifos continues to follow closely.

The country is also facing a string of political challenges stemming from its gruelling battle against IS over the past three years. Many stakeholders have emerged, all of which have an interest in taking part in future governance in post-IS Iraq.

One such stakeholder is the Shia militias, and many of these are committed to furthering Iran's hegemony in the region, as well as their own aspirations for power in Iraq. The PMU forces, mainly Shia, perceived as a security asset in the fight against IS, are now seen as a liability to the country's political and security status quo moving forward. Attempts to integrate these forces into the security sector have been futile.

The defeat of IS will not solve the deeper problem of Iraq's political fragmentation. Years of conflict have divided the country along ethnic lines (Arabs and Kurds), but more openly along sectarian lines (Sunni and Shia). Widespread discontent with Iraqi governance continues to prevail.

The Kurdish referendum for independence has had detrimental consequences for the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (hereafter the KRI). Deemed unconstitutional by the Iraqi government, and internationally criticised, the Kurds went ahead with the referendum anyway, only to find themselves in a

locked standoff with the central government in Baghdad. The Kurdistan Regional Government's (hereafter KRG) refusal to annul the result prompted Prime Minister Abadi to take further decisive measures. As a result, the KRG was compelled to withdraw its forces from all areas previously controlled in the disputed areas. The backlash has left the KRG landlocked, politically fragmented, and economically dependent on the central government in Baghdad.

Now that the conventional war against IS has come to an end, the government has to deal with reconstructing the areas devastated by the three-year-long conflict. Total reconstruction costs are estimated to be as high as 100 billion USD. The government, hit by soaring oil prices, is turning to the international community for help. Rehabilitation of the damaged areas is going very slowly, and community services are very limited, both in the affected areas and in areas hosting millions of internally displaced persons who are unable to return. This situation is likely to lead to new tensions.

Particular groups of interest affected by the unfolding events in the reporting period are minority groups, family members of IS affiliates, and women and children.

## **2. Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to present information on the political and security situation in Iraq between July 2016 and November 2017 and the impact of the sequence of events on the civilian population. The report further focuses on certain groups particularly affected by the unfolding developments in Iraq during the reporting period.

The report mainly relies on written information from open sources as well as additional information gathered during Lifos/Landinfo's joint fact-finding missions to Amman and Baghdad between February 25<sup>th</sup> and March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, and the Lifos fact-finding mission to Erbil between March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## **3. The political situation**

### **3.1. Winds of change from Mosul to Erbil and the disputed areas**

Following the liberation of Fallujah in June 2016, the Iraqi government devoted all of its efforts to eradicating IS from one of its strongest bastions, Mosul. After nine months of gruelling fighting, Iraqi forces were able to recapture the city. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi finally declared victory against IS in Mosul. The battle to re-capture the city was the deadliest and the most difficult in the ongoing coordinated campaign against the extremist group.<sup>1</sup> The fighting has left large parts of the city in

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post, *Iraq's prime minister announces victory against the Islamic State in Mosul*, 2017-07-10

total disarray, particularly the western side. About half the population of Mosul (845,000 persons<sup>2</sup>) was displaced as a result, and thousands were killed.<sup>3</sup>

As the battle for Mosul has come to an end, the struggle for Iraq's future has intensified. Many stakeholders have emerged from the battle of Mosul, all of which have an interest in taking part in future governance in the post-IS era.

One indication of such goals was the announcement made by the president of the KRI, Masoud Barzani, to hold a referendum for an independent Kurdish state on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The referendum included the disputed areas under Kurdish control.

The initiative for the referendum came amid growing social discontent within the KRI over the protracted political stalemate and the deteriorating economic situation. President Barzani refused to step down even though his two terms in office ended in 2013, as did the two-year parliamentary extension granted to him, which expired in August 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Widespread corruption, high unemployment, and social frustration have contributed to the growing disenchantment with the ruling powers.<sup>5</sup> The leading political parties – the KDP and PUK – therefore hoped that the referendum would drum up nationalistic sentiments that could guarantee votes in the region's upcoming elections in November 2017. By rebranding themselves as saviours of the Kurds, the KDP and PUK hoped that it would undermine their rival – the Goran Party – in the next elections.<sup>6</sup>

On September 25, 2017, people voted on the referendum on whether they wanted Kurdistan and the disputed territories to become an independent state. Voting took place in the governorates that make up the KRI, as well as in disputed areas under the control of the Kurdish forces. Voting went peacefully, with an estimated turnout of about 76 per cent, including some 5.2 million Kurds and non-Kurds.<sup>7</sup> The move was criticised by the Iraqi central government, which deemed it unconstitutional<sup>8</sup> and a threat to "peaceful co-existence among Iraqis".<sup>9</sup> Foreign powers were also critical to the referendum, describing it as unacceptable and as having a destabilising

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<sup>2</sup> IOM, Iraq Mission, *Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM*, <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/EmergencyTracking.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, *Facing defeat in Mosul, Islamic State mounts diversionary attack in south*, 2017-07-07

<sup>4</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fikra Forum, *Firing Up Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq*, 2017-04-26

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

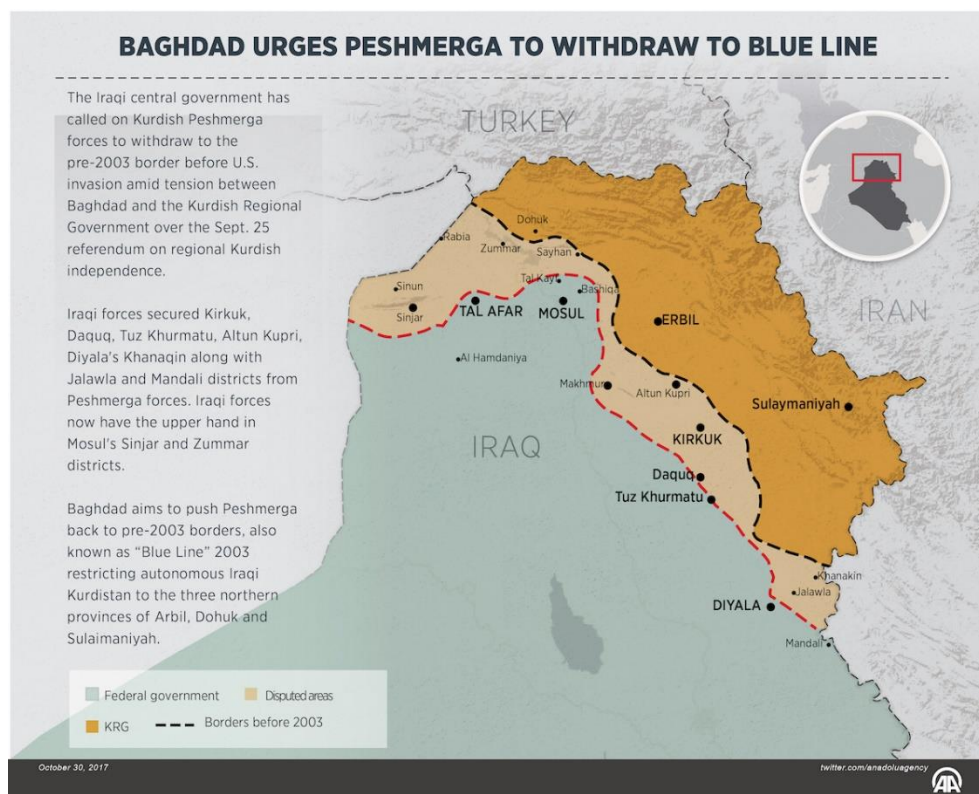
<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, *Iraqi Kurdistan votes in independence referendum*, 2017-09-25

<sup>8</sup> Aljazeera, *Iraqi government rejects Kurdish move for independence*, 2017-06-09

<sup>9</sup> BBC News, *Iraqi Kurdistan votes in independence referendum*, 2017-09-25

impact on the country and the region as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Over 92 per cent of the voters opted for independence.<sup>11</sup> Days following the referendum, Prime Minister Abadi called upon the Kurdish authorities to cancel the results of the referendum as a condition for dialogue between the parties.<sup>12</sup> However, Kurdish leaders dismissed the Iraqi government's demands, prompting Prime Minister Abadi to take decisive measures to block the Kurdish secession bid. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Iraqi forces seized the oil city of Kirkuk along with other vital strategic sites like the oils fields and military base, prompting the Kurdish forces to withdraw to the pre-2003 border, thus containing the KRG's authority within the boundaries of the governorates of the KRI, including Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya. The Iraqi government's incursion spread to other locations within the disputed areas held by Kurdish forces, including the governorates of Ninewa, Diayla, and Salah al-Din.



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On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, President Masoud Barzani, in accordance with legislation passed several days earlier, stepped down and devolved many of the powers of his office to his nephew the Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, and the Judicial Council.

<sup>10</sup> The Independent, *Iraqi Kurdish referendum: why international powers fear independence vote could derail fight against Isis*, 2017-09-19

<sup>11</sup> The Guardian, *More than 92% of voters in Iraqi Kurdistan back Independence*, 2017-09-28

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, *Iraqi PM calls on Kurds to cancel independence referendum result*, 2017-09-27

<sup>13</sup> Anadolu Agency (AA), *Baghdad urges Peshmerga to withdraw to pre-2003 borders*, 2017-10-30



The new legislation provided that “no law, or decision, would be made” until the next elections. The elections scheduled for November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, were subsequently suspended. Barzani’s resignation is seen as an attempt by the KDP to maintain its dominance over the KRG and for the PUK to uphold its power-sharing relationship with the KDP in an increasingly volatile and polarised political environment.<sup>14</sup>

The backlash following the referendum has deepened the divisions among Kurdish leaders and elites, with internal fissures and tensions as a result. This can also be seen in leaked voting results of the referendum that varied widely from governorate to governorate. The region needs to engage in internal reform and good governance that can bring stability to the region and prevent it from becoming even more vulnerable to surrounding powers that are resolute to keeping Kurdistan’s independence aspirations in check.<sup>15</sup>

### **3.2. The growing influence of the Shia militias**

Another destabilising factor that has surfaced in the offensives against IS is the growing presence of Iranian-backed Shia militias, deployed to further Iran’s ambitions to secure a corridor from Tehran to Beirut through Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup>

The future of the PMU, some of which are backed by Iran, is likely to pose considerable challenges for the Iraqi government. The PMU forces, perceived as a security asset in the fight against IS, are now seen as a liability to the country’s political and security status quo moving forward.<sup>17</sup>

In November 2016, the Iraqi government passed legislation to integrate the PMU into the security forces, subject to military law and with equal status to the army<sup>18</sup> and completely separated from political and religious affiliation.<sup>19</sup> The law also aims to turn the PMU into a national institution – a National Guard – that would include all components and sects in society.<sup>20</sup> Out of the 50,000 fighters to integrate into the new force, 15,000 fighters are to be Sunnis. Sunni parties have opposed the law, partly because they do not want to see organised fighters in Sunni provinces. Another reason behind the Sunni opposition is their feeling that the government is being selective

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<sup>14</sup> Connelly, M. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada, *Is Barzani Stepping Down or Stepping up?*, 2017-11-09

<sup>15</sup> Macfarrray Van Den Toorn, C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada Middle East Analysis, *Internal Divides Behind the Kurdistan Referendum*, 2017-10-11, The New Arab, *Iraqi Kurdistan in Disarray after the loss of Kirkuk*, 2017-10-19

<sup>16</sup> Reuters, *As Mosul battle ends, struggle over Iraq’s future intensifies*, 2017-07-07

<sup>17</sup> Mansour, R., Faleh A. Jabar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future*, 2017-04-28, s. 2-3

<sup>18</sup> The Atlantic, *The Shia Militias in Iraq, They’re essential to the fight against ISIS. But What Happens when Islamic State is gone?*, 2016-12-22

<sup>19</sup> Al-Monitor, *Why Iraq’s Sunnis fear new PMU law*, 2016-12-01

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

in their vetting of Sunni tribal factions under the new PMU, while accepting most Shia groups, hence creating a sectarian army.<sup>21</sup>

The law was also criticised by the leader of Shiite Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, who wants to see the PMU dissolved and its fighters incorporated into the Iraqi army and police instead. The law, although signed, has not yet been enacted.<sup>22</sup>

PMU forces continue to operate independently, and with impunity, and often answering only to political leaders, some of whom are rivals to the prime minister, for example, Nuri al-Maliki. PMU forces with strong ties to Iran have openly declared their loyalty to Iran and their commitment to joining the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) in Syria, which is one thing the Iraqi prime minister has strongly opposed.<sup>23</sup> The leader of the pro-Iranian League of the Righteous, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (hereafter AAH), announced in May 2017 that AAH would take part in securing the Shiite crescent in the region by joining the IRGC and Hezbollah fighters in Syria.<sup>24</sup> The PMU's ambitions to engage in an Iranian-led transnational military operation is likely to further hamper Iraqi government efforts to integrate them into the Iraqi security sector.<sup>25</sup>

Iraq is also in the midst of an internal Shia power struggle between the former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, who wants to return to power, and the current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. Another stakeholder in the equation is the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is resolved to preventing the al-Maliki faction from returning to power. Integrating the PMU into the security sector could be decisive as to who gains an advantage in this struggle.<sup>26</sup>

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, Iranian-backed militias within the PMU – including the Badr organisation, the Hezbollah Brigades, AAH, Martyrs of the Sayyid, and Jund al-Imam – reached an initial agreement to run on a unified list in Iraq's upcoming elections in 2018. This attempt further highlights the struggle over whether the Shia-dominated PMU will serve to expand Iran's regional interests or strengthen Iraqi security structures. Prime Minister Abadi has repeatedly emphasised that, as military personnel, PMU leaders are not to engage in political activities, something the militias have chosen to ignore.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Monitor, *Why Iraq's Sunnis fear new PMU law*, 2016-12-01

<sup>22</sup> Al-Monitor, *Why Iraq's law on Popular Mobilization Units isn't that popular*, 2017-03-08

<sup>23</sup> Al-Monitor, *Is Iran running Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units?*, 2017-07-11

<sup>24</sup> Niqash, *As Extremists Lose Power in Iraq, Militias Loyal to Iran Gain it*, 2017-06-14

<sup>25</sup> Al-Monitor, *Is Iran running Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units?*, 2017-07-11

<sup>26</sup> Mansour, R., Faleh A. Jabar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, 2017-04-28, s. 4

<sup>27</sup> Malik, H., Sada, *The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*, 2017-09-21

### 3.3. Political fragmentation

The defeat of IS will not resolve the deeper problem of Iraq's political fragmentation. Years of conflict have divided the country along ethnic lines (Arabs and Kurds), but more openly along sectarian lines (Sunni and Shia)<sup>28</sup>. Widespread discontent with Iraqi governance continues to prevail. The country's political system, which was brokered on a sect and ethnic-based power-sharing system, has created a dysfunctional alliance between religion and politics, thus empowering corruption and gravely undermining the rights of the civilian population.

The consequences of oppression by the Shia-dominated central government, particularly under the leadership of Nuri al-Maliki, as well as the Sunni Arab disengagement from the political process following the fall of the Saddam regime, created a crisis of representation within the Sunni community. This in turn, coupled with the absence of strong institutions for representation and intra-Sunni conflict, facilitated the emergence of IS.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq face a problem of political trust. They do not believe that the central government represents their welfare or interest nor are there reliable political forces to mobilise their interests in the political process.<sup>30</sup>

An attempt to break this deadlock took place in July of this year when a number of Sunni leaders formed an alliance – Sunni Forces Alliance (SFA) – and called for a conference, initiated by Iraq's Sunni parliamentary speaker, Salim al-Jabouri. The aim of the alliance was to create a unified Sunni stance in the post-IS era that will reach out to the Sunni population.<sup>31</sup> The conference was postponed due to internal fragmentation amongst the participating parties. Another reason was the central government's protests against some of the participants, including those who had earlier been indicted for criminal offenses (for example, Tareq al-Hashemi and Rafi al-Issawi). Subsequently, a new conference, dubbed the Baghdad National Conference (BNC), took place on July 13<sup>th</sup> attended by al-Anbar tribal leaders and 25 lawmakers from the SFA. The alliance chose to remove the word "Sunni" from its opening statements in order to tone down any sectarian provocations.<sup>32</sup> Reportedly, controversy over reliance on foreign sides (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE) resulted in further divisions amongst the participating leaders.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Small Wars Journal, *Iraq's Path to State Failure*, 2017-04-21

<sup>29</sup> Mansour, R., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Sunni Predicament in Iraq*, 2016-03-03, p. 3

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>31</sup> Rudaw, *Iraqi Sunnis form new alliance for a different future*, 2017-07-15

<sup>32</sup> Alwaght News & Analysis, *what's behind postponing Iraq's Expected Sunni Conference?*, 2017-07-18

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

The intra-Shia rivalries now play out openly in Iraqi politics. Former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki is looking to come back to power. His major rival, Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who enjoys broad support from within the poorer segment of Shia society, is calling for political reforms to reduce corruption and end the control of the larger parties.<sup>34</sup> However, these rivalries are not contained to al-Maliki and al-Sadr, but now stretch across the whole Shia political spectrum, involving high-profile figures like Prime Minister Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI).<sup>35</sup>

Abadi, although attached to the al-Maliki-led Dawa Party, is expected to emerge as an independent force. Abadi is also likely to gain popularity on the military victories against IS and his handling of the Kurdish referendum in the upcoming elections in 2018. The ISCI is also fragmented. Prominent leaders have left the party due to controversy over party leader Ammar al-Hakim's new vision to pump young blood into the party, subsequently sidelining veterans and founding leaders.<sup>36</sup>

The intra-Shia contestations, and the growing political ambitions of the Iranian-backed PMU factions, could alter the political arena in the upcoming elections in 2018 compared to previous elections. Such developments could morph into new demonstrations, as well as the empowerment of PMU's influences.

## **4. The security situation**

### **4.1. An overview**

The highly coordinated and successive military offensives, backed by air support from the US-led coalition, launched against the remaining IS bastions is probably the most discernible feature when describing the security situation in this reporting period.

The offensives carried out in Mosul, Tal Afar, Hawija, and finally western Anbar have all succeeded in pushing back IS militants and subsequently bringing an end to the extremist group's territorial control in Iraq. However, this is not likely to prevent future attacks and assaults from being carried out by IS in the country. Pockets of resistance and sleeper cells continue to operate, mostly from remote and unwieldy terrain making it difficult for military forces to eradicate them. This situation is likely to prevail for some time, which in turn could hamper any immediate prospects of restoring overall stability in these contested areas.

Another distinguishing feature in the security developments unfolding during the reporting period is the visible decline in the number of security incidents taking place in the country. This is particularly the case in, for

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<sup>34</sup> Real Clear World, *Intra-Shiite Tensions Heat Up Ahead of Iraqi Elections*, March 2017

<sup>35</sup> Mansour, R., Chatham House, *Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State*, July 2017, p. 10-11

<sup>36</sup> Al-Monitor, *Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq at risk of fragmentation*, 2017-07-09

example, Baghdad. This is mainly attributed to the intensity of the military offensives carried out by the government, which drove many IS fighters out of the contested areas, and also forced IS to redeploy its sleeper cells to the battleground. IS can no longer sustain its attacks across the country as it once had.

Despite successive victories on the battlefield, the Iraqi government now faces its biggest battle, that of maintaining security and bringing stability to the areas now recaptured from IS. This task is entrusted to a patchwork of various official and semi-official groups such as the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), PMU, Sunni tribal militias, and Peshmerga forces, and this is a development that Lifos continues to follow closely.

Finally, the political and military ramifications of the Kurdish referendum are likely to have an impact on the security situation in the future, and particularly in the so called “disputed area” where a large segment of the Kurdish population, living outside the KRI, reside. Lifos is following up on the situation, with particular emphasis on the ethnically mixed areas within the disputed areas.

Below is a breakdown on the security situation in the most affected governorates, as well as the southern and northern governorates not directly targeted by the military offensives.

#### **4.2. Anbar**

Anbar governorate, a renowned IS stronghold, remains volatile, although violence has plunged dramatically since the Fallujah offensive in June 2017. Following the liberation of Fallujah, Iraqi forces and Sunni tribal fighters continued to clear towns of IS and to secure territories in the northwest part of the governorate, such as in Haditha.<sup>37</sup> Despite these efforts and the final mopping up of remnants of the militants along the Iraqi-Syrian border, security analysts and military commanders warn it’s not the end of the IS threat.<sup>38</sup> This is partly attributed to the difficulty for Iraqi troops to hold the large and sparsely populated desert region.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, insurgent groups use the isolated villages located in the midst of the vast desert terrain as a launch pad to regroup and conduct attacks elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

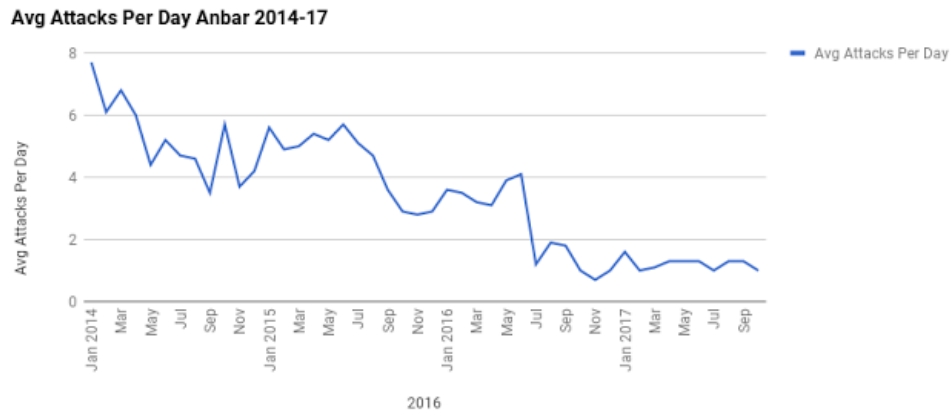
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<sup>37</sup>Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Iraq Situation Report: January 6-11, 2017*, May 6-20, 2017

<sup>38</sup> The New York Times, *Iraq Prime Minister Declares Victory Over ISIS*, 2017-12-09, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-haider-al-abadi.html>

<sup>39</sup> Humanitarian and Development Programme, *IRAQ 2018 SCENARIOS: Planning After Mosul, July 2017*, p. 13

<sup>40</sup>Ibid p. 16



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The situation gradually began to change amid the Hawija offensive in September 2017 (see 4.3.3), when the Iraqi government opted to step up military operations in a decisive attempt to break IS's grip over western Anbar, with the aim of completely expelling IS forces from Iraq and restoring the Iraqi-Syrian border.<sup>42</sup> Moving northward from Rutba, the Iraqi army, police, and PMU forces retook the town of Akashat on September 16<sup>th</sup>. A few days later, Iraqi forces, backed by groups of local tribal fighters, continued westward toward Anah, Rawa, and al-Qaim.<sup>43</sup> The campaign first targeted the town of Anah, liberating it on September 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>44</sup>

Operations in the western towns came to a halt thereafter to allow the Iraqi forces to push on to Hawija. At the end of October, Iraqi forces renewed their efforts to expelling IS from Rawa and al-Qaim. The towns, which were identified by IS as the "Euphrates Province", were strategically important IS routes for the transfer of fighters, weapons, and goods.<sup>45</sup> Thousands of civilians fleeing the towns, with the help of smugglers, have reported on food and water shortages, as well as forced recruitment of young boys as young as 11 years and other human rights violations by IS.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Musings on Iraq, How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017, 2017-11-07

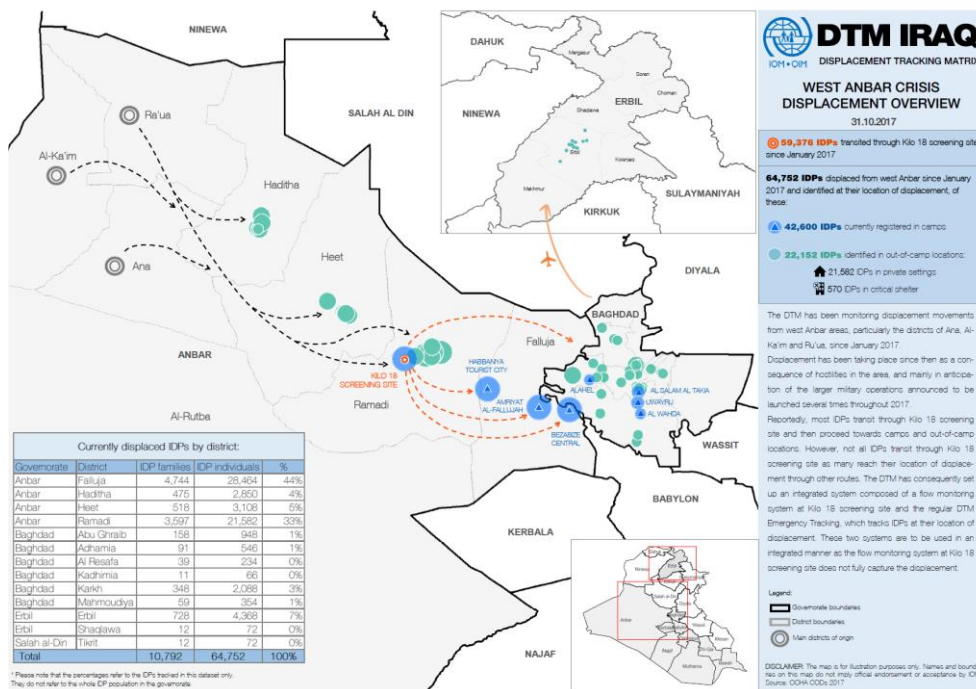
<sup>42</sup> Al-Monitor, *Anbar op aims to restore Iraqi-Syrian border*, 2017-09-26

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> The Washington Post, *Iraqi forces launch battle against Islamic State footholds in vast Anbar province*, 2017-09-19

<sup>45</sup> BBC News, *Iraqi forces launch on last IS bastion of al-Qaim*, 2017-10-26

<sup>46</sup> Ibid



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Iraqi security forces were able to retake al-Qaim on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, backed by Sunni tribal forces and Iranian-backed PMU forces.<sup>48</sup> Military advances continued thereafter to the neighbouring town of Rawa, capturing Iraq's last remaining area under IS control on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and liberating 10,000 civilians believed to be held hostage by the organisation.<sup>49</sup>

Operations in western Anbar have displaced over 60,000 persons since January 2017. The most severely affected are the districts of Ana, al-Qaim, and Rawa, and over 40,000 people are currently residing in camps. The majority of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) transit through a screening site (Kilo 18), from where they are further transferred to camps or to out-of-camp locations.<sup>50</sup>

Rebuilding and restoration of the areas earlier besieged by IS is moving slowly. Over 5,000 homes were destroyed and 15,000 damaged in Ramadi. Schools lie in ruins. Electricity, water, and sewerage systems were destroyed during the fighting. Months after the liberation, electricity and water supplies are scarce, and mines and booby-traps laid by IS remain to be cleared.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM): West Anbar Crisis Displacement Overview*, 2017-10-31

<sup>48</sup> Reuters, *Iraqi forces enter al-Qaim in final offensive on Islamic State-held territory*, 2017-11-03

<sup>49</sup> Aljazeera, *Iraqi forces advance on ISIL-held Rawa in Anbar*, 2017-11-11

<sup>50</sup> IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM): West Anbar Crisis Displacement Overview*, 2017-10-31

<sup>51</sup> BuzzFeed News, *After the Caliphate*, 2017-02-11

The battle for the liberation of Fallujah was both intense and bloody. The city was virtually unpopulated when the Iraqi forces quelled the last of the IS resistance in June 2016. IS fighters had left behind booby traps and rigged explosives in order to deter people from returning.<sup>52</sup> Tight checkpoints controlled the main roads in and out of Fallujah to screen suspects with ties to IS. The city lacks rehabilitation resources, and local sources have stated that most of the aid, such as electricity and water pumps, comes from international organisations.<sup>53</sup>

Security forces patrol neighbourhoods and set checkpoints along roadsides inside and outside the cities in the governorate. The proliferation of competing armed groups adds to the instability of the area. The local population within Anbar is divided between those who fought against IS and those who accommodated them. Distrust and suspicion run deep, and many worry about tribal retribution, and there is fear of new cycles of violence.<sup>54</sup> In addition, widespread corruption, weak institutions, and the lack of rule of law allows IS collaborators to move freely and with impunity.<sup>55</sup>

The impact of the post-IS power struggle is felt as households from IS-held territories face forcible displacement to other Sunni sub-districts prompted by informal local councils fearing IS intrusion and destabilising retributive violence. The Tribal Council is advocating for a return to tribal justice, sanctioning retributive violence, collective punishment, destruction of property, and eviction notices to families accused of being associated with extremist groups. Tribal leaders have banned IS supporters from returning until their charges are reviewed. In addition, individuals who do not renounce relatives who supported IS are also banned from returning home.<sup>56</sup> An Iraqi parliamentarian whom Lifos/Landinfo spoke to in Baghdad stated that IDPs held in Amariyah camp were banned from returning by tribal leaders in fear of retribution from locals who have been victimised by IS.<sup>57</sup>

#### **4.3. Baghdad**

The pattern of violence was particularly intense in the beginning of the reporting period but progressively declined thereafter, although with periodic bouts of intensified attacks. On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, the capital witnessed the deadliest attack since 2003 when IS detonated a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) a shopping centre in the majority Shia district of Karada, in central Baghdad, killing over 300 persons.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> The New Arab, *After liberation from IS, Fallujah Struggles to rebuild*, 2017-06-05

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> BuzzFeed News, *After the Caliphate*, 2017-02-11

<sup>55</sup> The Washington Post, *Away from Iraq's front lines, the Islamic State is creeping back in*, 2017-02-22

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The Plight of Those Related to ISIS Fighters*, 2017-01-11

<sup>57</sup> Meeting with Iraqi parliamentarian in Baghdad, 2017-03-02

<sup>58</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *Iraq Situation Report: June 29-July 6, 2016*, Reuters, *Death toll in Baghdad bombing rises to 324: ministry*, 2016-07-31



attack was followed by spikes of violence between August and November 2016, mostly attributed to IS attacks. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, IS launched a spectacular attack in central Baghdad killing 15 persons.<sup>59</sup> A series of suicide attacks with explosive suicide vests were carried out in September and October in various neighbourhoods, predominately Shia.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, the security situation gradually improved at the start of the Mosul offensive, only for the violence to escalate at the beginning of 2017. On New Year's Eve, IS launched a suicide attack in central Baghdad resulting in over 20 deaths,<sup>61</sup> and this was shortly followed by a series of deadly attacks on January 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, killing 35 and 14 persons, respectively.<sup>62</sup> The attacks targeted various Shia neighbourhoods and police checkpoints.<sup>63</sup>

The violence began to gradually dip again as the offensive on Mosul intensified, and it continued to decline following the defeat of IS in July 2017. Sporadic suicide attacks continued nonetheless, mainly targeting Shia neighbourhoods (for example, Sadr City, Shula, and Hay al-Amel), as well as military targets such as checkpoints. Musings on Iraq recorded the lowest levels of attacks and killings in June 2017. Baghdad, which used to lead Iraq in attacks, went from an average of 11.6 per day in January 2016 down to 2.6 in June 2017.<sup>64</sup>

**Avg Attacks Per Day Baghdad 2014-17**



65

Despite the improvement in security, IS continues to launch its attacks from the rural towns to the south and north of the city, which is also referred to as

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, *Iraq Situation Report: September 7-19*

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, *Iraq Situation Report: September 20-October 3, 2016*

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, *Iraq situation Report: December 21, 2016-January 5 2017*, The Telegraph, *Double suicide bombing in Baghdad market kills 27*, 2016-12-31

<sup>62</sup> Institute for the Study of War Institute for the Study of War, *Iraq situation Report: December 21, 2016-January 5 2017*, BBC News, *IS conflict: Baghdad suicide car bomb blast kills 35*, 2017-01-02, Al-Arabiya, *ISIS car bombs kills 14 in Iraq's capital Baghdad*, 2017-01-05

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Musings on Iraq, *How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017*, 2017-11-07

the Baghdad belt, where IS sleeper cells retain a presence. There are still occasional attacks, but few are successful.<sup>66</sup> Part of the reason for the notable decrease in insurgent activity in the province is a new Baghdad operations commander who has focused on the Baghdad belt,<sup>67</sup> coupled with IS's withdrawal of some of its sleeper cells from the area in conjunction with the Mosul offensive in October 2017.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.4. Diyala

Diyala incorporates a unique and diversified ethnic and religious population. Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen that make up the majority of the population each include the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam.<sup>69</sup>

The governorate is historically the first hub for extremist insurgents in Iraq,<sup>70</sup> starting with al-Qaeda affiliates, including al-Qaeda Iraq, which later became IS. The governorate was amongst the first areas liberated from IS, in January 2015, leaving thousands of displaced inhabitants.<sup>71</sup>

The governorate's diversified composition, coupled with the entrenched presence of Sunni extremist groups, has since been a hotbed for ethnic and sectarian conflict. Even though the security forces succeeded in pushing out IS fighters from the governorate, there is still a considerable presence of sleeper cells. There are further indications of IS fighters returning to Diyala subsequent to the fall of Mosul. Iraqi intelligence officials believe that senior members of the organisation might have made contact with former allies.<sup>72</sup>

The security situation has gone up and down during the reporting period. Attacks carried out by IS are often on a smaller scale and are mostly against Shia armed groups, for example, checkpoints, which often prompt counterattacks by armed Shia groups against Sunni areas.<sup>73</sup> Confrontations often involve extensive gun battles and mortar attacks on Iraqi Security forces.<sup>74</sup> Kidnappings and murders with sectarian motives continue to

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<sup>66</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 8-14, 2017*, 2017-08-20, *Security In Iraq Sep 15-21, 2017*, 2017-09-27

<sup>67</sup> Ibid (The Baghdad belts are residential, agricultural, and industrial areas that encircle the city, and networks of roadways, rivers, and other lines of communication that lie within a twenty or thirty mile radius of [Baghdad](#) and connect the capital to the rest of Iraq. Beginning in the north, the belts include the cities of Taji, clockwise to Tarmiyah, Baqubah, Buhriz, Besmayah and Nahrwan, Salman Pak, Mahmudiyah, Sadr al-Yusufiyah, Fallujah, and Karmah. This "clock" can be divided into quadrants: [Northeast](#), [Southeast](#), [Southwest](#), and [Northwest](#). Källa ISW)

<sup>68</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Oct 1-7, 2017*, 2017-10-10, *Security In Iraq Oct 15-21, 2017*, 2017-10-24

<sup>69</sup> NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq, *Diyala Governorate Profile*, January 2016

<sup>70</sup> Niqash, *Extremists Return To Diyala, To Reunite With Old Allies, Al Qaeda*, 2017-04-27

<sup>71</sup> NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq, *Diyala Governorate Profile*, January 2016

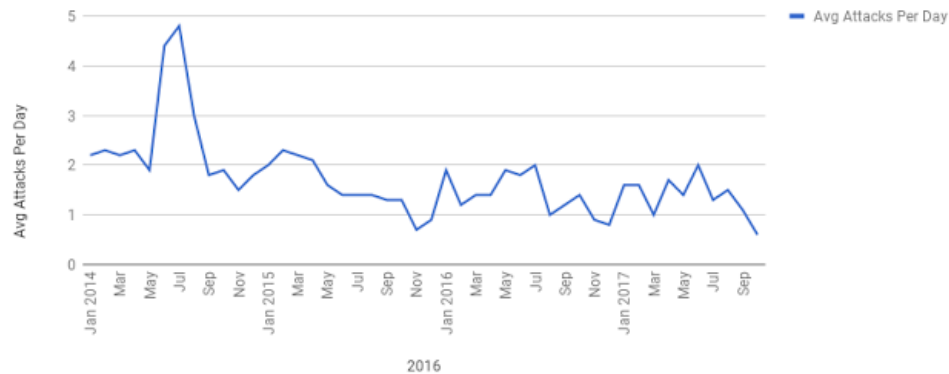
<sup>72</sup> Niqash, *Extremists Return To Diyala, To Reunite With Old Allies, Al Qaeda*, 2017-04-27

<sup>73</sup> The Institute for the Study War (ISW), *Iraq Situation Report: July 19-25, 2016*

<sup>74</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Sep 15-21, 2017*, 2017-09-27

prevail.<sup>75</sup> Attacks tend to focus on the centre and northern sections of the governorate such as the 'Avu Aida, Muqtadiya, and Khanaqin districts.<sup>76</sup> Officials fear that the situation is likely to continue.<sup>77</sup>

Avg Attacks Per Day Diyala 2014-17



78

Iraqi forces continue to strike back against IS hideouts<sup>79</sup> and pockets of resistance, particularly around Baquba<sup>80</sup> and in the Hamrin mountains bordering the governorate of Salah al-Din.<sup>81</sup> Despite constant sweeps, security forces are not able to contain insurgent activities in the governorate.<sup>82</sup>

Diyala, which also borders Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Bagdad, is a pivotal link to previous IS-infiltrated areas.<sup>83</sup> The continuing turbulence in Diyala is likely to pose a threat to the liberated areas in the neighbouring governorates.<sup>84</sup> Suicide attacks continue to prevail, often targeting Shia-controlled checkpoints.<sup>85</sup>

Forced displacement and arbitrary detentions have been reported, affecting hundreds of families. Alleged IS families were sent to “Rehabilitation Camps”.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>75</sup> The Institute for the Study War (ISW), *Iraq Situation Report: July 19-25, 2016*

<sup>76</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 1-7, 2017*, 2017-01-18

<sup>77</sup> The Institute for the Study War (ISW), *Iraq Situation Report: July 19-25, 2016*

<sup>78</sup> Musings on Iraq, *How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017*, 2017-11-07

<sup>79</sup> Iraqi News, *police arrests terrorist, destroys IS hideout in Diyala*, 2017-04-25

<sup>80</sup> Humanitarian and Development Programme, *IRAQ 2018 SCENARIOS: Planning After Mosul, July 2017*, p. 12

<sup>81</sup> Pars Today, *60 terrorists killed in clashes with Iraqi forces in Diyala Province*, 2017-02-11

<sup>82</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 8-14, 2017*, 2017-08-20

<sup>83</sup> Current Terror-Alert Status, *Hash Al-Shaabu Repels ISIS' Attacks on Key Mountains in Diyala Province*, 2016-12-25

<sup>84</sup> Iraqi News, *Twenty IS militants killed in heavy shelling on Diyala-Salahuddin*, 2017-06-13

<sup>85</sup> Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Iraq Situation Report: July 19-25, 2016, October 4-11, 2016, January 12-24, 2017, February 17-28, 2017*

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Alleged ISIS Families Sent to 'Rehabilitation Camp'*, 2017-07-13,

Years of conflict have left different ethnic groups competing over control of parts of the governorate. Shia militias and Kurdish Peshmerga forces were up until recently (October 2017) the predominant forces controlling the governorate. The Kurds have paved the way for many displaced Kurds to return. The KRG's pre-referendum ambitions of annexing parts of the disputed areas caused tensions to run high between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad.<sup>87</sup> How this is likely to develop following the withdrawal of the Kurdish troops is still too soon to tell.

The city of Khanaqin, mainly Kurdish populated, is one of the disputed territories that were affected by the standoff between the central government and the KRG in October 2017 following the Kurdish referendum for independence. Iraqi and PMU forces were deployed to the city after the withdrawal of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces from the governorate. Demonstrators waving the Kurdish flag took to the streets on October 20<sup>th</sup> to protest the takeover of the city, resulting in the killing of one demonstrator and the injuring of several others by Iraqi forces.<sup>88</sup> The situation is presently calm in Khanaqin.<sup>89</sup>

#### **4.5. Kirkuk**

Kirkuk is one of the most ethnically diverse governorates in Iraq, and it is divided along ethnic lines between Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs. The province accounts for 40% of Iraq's oil production<sup>90</sup>, which makes the question of "ownership" of Kirkuk both strategically important and highly contentious.

The security situation in the governorate maintained a considerable degree of stability for most of the reporting period, with the exception of the Hawija district, which was under IS control since June 2014 and was highly volatile.<sup>91</sup> However, the situation deteriorated in September/October of this year, particularly following the Kurdish referendum for independence.

##### **4.5.1. Security situation prior to the Kurdish referendum for independence on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

Kirkuk city, the provincial capital, previously controlled by the Kurdish Peshmerga alongside PMU militia forces, witnessed few reported security incidents. However, in October 2016, IS launched a major attack in Kirkuk's central and southern neighbourhoods when 40 IS fighters, supported by sleeper cells, targeted governorate facilities and police

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<sup>87</sup> Niqash, *Locals want Kurdish Annexation in Disputed areas, officials say*, 2016-09-15

<sup>88</sup> Kurdistan 24, *Watch: Iraqi forces in Khanaqin open fire on demonstrators kill and injure seven*, 2017-10-20

<sup>89</sup> Rudaw, *Not safe for Kurds to return to 'out of control' Khurmatu, Iraq minister*, 2017-10-21

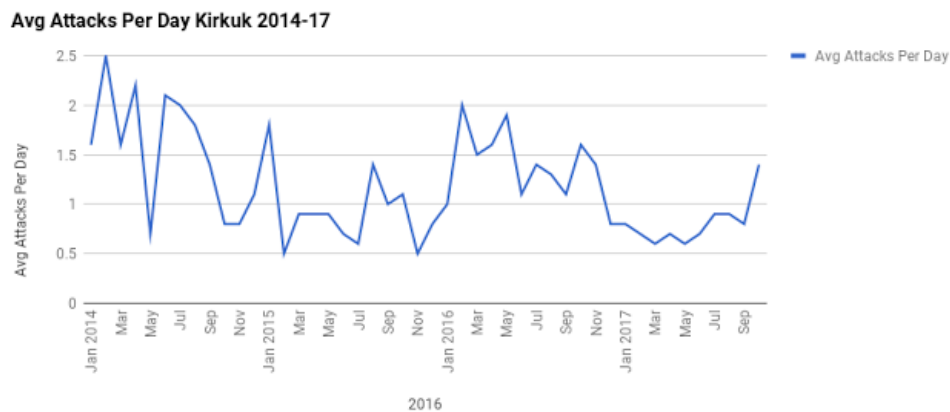
<sup>90</sup> PressTV, *Kurdistan independence to lead to breakup of Iraq: Analyst*, 2017-09-14

<sup>91</sup> BBC News, *Iraqi forces launch offensive to retake Hawija*, 2017-09-21

stations<sup>92</sup>, killing 99 and wounding 263 persons.<sup>93</sup> IS fighters also attacked Kirkuk's power station in Dibis, executing 18 persons, five of whom were Iranian contractors.<sup>94</sup> The following day the governor of Kirkuk issued an order instructing all IDPs within Kirkuk city, not those residing in camps, to vacate their residences. As result, at least 250 displaced families were forced to leave the city. Kurdish security – *Asaysih* – and Peshmerga forces reportedly demolished 100 homes belonging to Arab residents. KRG officials did not give any justifications for the evictions or the demolitions other than that the demolitions targeted illegally constructed buildings.<sup>95</sup>

Prior forced ejections by the Kurdish Forces are also reported to have taken place in September 2016, predominantly targeting Arab IDP families from Diyala and Salah al-Din.<sup>96</sup>

In May, 2016, unidentified gunmen shot and injured a member of the Peshmerga forces and later a policeman.<sup>97</sup>



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#### 4.5.2. The security situation subsequent to the Kurdish referendum for independence

The standoff between the central government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil amid the Kurdish referendum in September 2017 intensified tensions amongst the governorate's ethnically diversified population. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, clashes erupted between Kurds and Turkmen when gunmen opened fire on the offices of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, resulting in the death of one of the assailants and wounding two others. The incident triggered further

<sup>92</sup> The Institute for the Study of War, *Iraq Situation Report: October 18-25 2016*

<sup>93</sup> Musings on Iraq, *5,198 Dead And Wounded In Iraq In Oct 2016*, 2016-11-02

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Human Rights Watch, *KRG: Kurdish Forces Ejecting Arabs In Kirkuk*, 2017-11-03

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> The Institute for the Study of War, *Iraq Situation Report: October 18-25 2016*

<sup>98</sup> Musings on Iraq, *How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017*, 2017-11-07

clashes, compelling the authorities to impose an overnight curfew.<sup>99</sup> In an effort to avoid further confrontation, the governor declared another overnight curfew immediately after the voting ended on September 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>100</sup>

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Iraqi forces took control of major government buildings in Kirkuk city<sup>101</sup> and other key infrastructure sites, amongst them the K1 military base, the Baba Gurgur oil field, and the airport<sup>102</sup>, compelling Peshmerga forces to withdraw from all formerly controlled positions within the governorate. The incursion prompted thousands of Kurds to flee, fearing reprisals from the Iraqi forces and the PMU.<sup>103</sup> Approximately 79,000 persons fled from Kirkuk, but thousands of those who fled reportedly opted to return within days after Iraqi troops regained control of the governorate.<sup>104</sup>

Clashes are reported to have occurred between the special commando forces, belonging to Division 70 of the Kurdish forces, and the East Tigris troops of the Iraqi army when Iraqi troops headed towards the airport. Fighting quickly subsided as Peshmerga forces received orders to withdraw. Kurdish locals also reported mistreatment by PMU militias, while others received verbal abuses from Turkmen locals.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> The New Arab, *Kurdish referendum: Iraqi police deploy after Kirkuk ethnic clashes*, 2017-09-19

<sup>100</sup> Center for Security Policy, *Iraqi Kurds Face Tensions from Iraq, Iran and Turkey after Independence Referendum*, 2017-09-26

<sup>101</sup> Reuters, *Iraqi forces seize oil city Kirkuk from Kurds in bold advance*, 2017-10-16

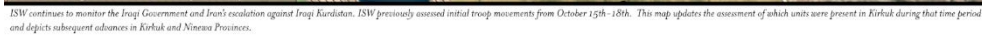
<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Deutsche Welle (DW), *Iraqi forces enter Kurdish-controlled Kirkuk*, 2017-10-16

<sup>104</sup> CBS, *Civilians return to Kirkuk as Iraq's Kurds lose more ground*, 2017-10-17, OCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Iraq, October 2017*, 2017-11-02,

<sup>105</sup> Niqash, *The View From Kirkuk: Secret Deals, Sacred Neighbours + Grieving Mothers*, 2017-10-19





Iraq and Iran rejected a Kurdish ceasefire offer and launched a new phase of their military campaign against Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi forces and Iran's proxies are prepared for new military operations to seize Iraqi Kurdistan's border crossings if Kurdish forces do not relinquish them. Iranian proxy leaders are coordinating with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) commanders and may even direct the military operation, if it occurs. It will begin at the Fiskhakar border crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria, where Iran's proxies including the Badr Organization and Asa'i Ahl al Haq are based. Negotiations are underway after Prime Minister Abadi set a deadline for the handover of the crossings by October 23rd. However, since there has been no sign of a Kurdish withdrawal, Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani announced he will not seek an extension of this term set in a letter to the Kurdistan Parliament on October 23rd.

Violent clashes broke out in Altin Kupri, 40 km south of Erbil, when Peshmerga forces anticipated an advance on Erbil, resulting in over 100 PMU fighters and a number of Peshmerga dead and several hundreds wounded.<sup>107</sup>

Sporadic confrontations were reported days after government troops seized control of the governorate, but these now appear to have subsided. Reports of alleged revenge killings in Kirkuk and Dibil emerged, however, following the discovery of bodies in various areas.<sup>108</sup> On November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, militants launched two suicide attacks in Kirkuk city, targeting government buildings, as well as members of Moqtada al-Sadr's "Peace Brigades" and Iraqi forces, killing five and injuring more than 20 persons.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Aljazeera, *Iraq: Twin suicide attacks kill at least five in Kirkuk*, 2017-11-05, Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq* Oct 1-7, 2017, 2017-11-09

#### 4.5.3. The Hawija Offensive

On September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Iraqi forces launched an offensive to recapture the city of Hawija from IS. Hawija, a key juncture between Mosul and Kirkuk, located 50 kilometres southwest of Kirkuk, was a longstanding bastion for Sunni insurgents following the fall of the Saddam regime 2003. The security situation was exacerbated in 2013 following a wave of demonstrations, leading to many deaths, against Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, accusing his government of marginalising the country's Sunni community. In a move to counter al-Maliki's sectarian policies, insurgents chose to side with IS when militants seized the city in June 2014.<sup>110</sup> Hawija is also located close to the mountain areas of Hamrin and Makhoul where IS militants reportedly launched attacks into the neighbouring governorate of Salah al-Din<sup>111</sup> as well as against armed forces and civilians in the regions west and south of Kirkuk, particularly Tuz Khurmatu and Daquq.<sup>112</sup>

The offensive on Hawija was delayed several times due to disagreements between Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga, often stemming from the disunity amongst the Peshmerga forces. The Peshmerga forces are initially backed by the KDP and PUK respectively.<sup>113</sup>

Once launched, the operation to recapture Hawija was considerably swift. Within two weeks, the Iraqi forces were able to liberate over 90 villages located north and west of the city, killing hundreds of IS militants.<sup>114</sup> On October 5<sup>th</sup>, Iraqi troops and PMU forces liberated the city of Hawija, with little resistance from local IS militants.<sup>115</sup> Approximately 1,000 IS militants, with 7,000 accompanying family members, surrendered when the armed forces recaptured the city.<sup>116</sup> This offensive is reported to be the largest mass-surrender of IS fighters,<sup>117</sup> whereby IS militants, upon receiving orders from their commanders, opted to surrender to the Peshmerga forces, knowing they would be better treated, instead of surrendering to the PMU.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>110</sup> BBC News, *Iraqi Sunni protest clashes in Hawija leave many dead*, 2013-04-23

<sup>111</sup> Al-Monitor, *Liberation of Iraq's Hawija delayed yet again*, 2017-04-30

<sup>112</sup> Rudaw, *Abadi blames Peshmerga fragmentation for delay in Hawija op*, 2017-09-06.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> The Independent, *Iraqi military recaptures vital Isis stronghold of Hawija*, 2017-10-05, Iraqi News, *200 IS members killed on first day of Hawija offensive second phase*, 2017-09-29, Musings on Iraq, *Two-Thirds Of Hawija Area Freed By Iraqi Forces*, 2017-10-03

<sup>115</sup> The Independent, *Iraqi military recaptures vital Isis stronghold of Hawija*, 2017-10-05,

<sup>116</sup> The New York Times, *Iraq Claims Victory in ISIS' Last Urban Stronghold*, 2017-10-05

<sup>117</sup> Business Insider, *ISIS fighters, once bent on martyrdom, surrender en masse from last Iraqi stronghold*, 2017-10-09

<sup>118</sup> The New York Times, *ISIS Fighters, Having Pledged to Fight or Die, Surrender en Masse*, 2017-10-08



A number of mass graves were reportedly uncovered by Iraqi and PMU forces following the liberation of Hawija, most of them containing the remains of army and police personnel, allegedly executed by IS.<sup>119</sup>

#### **4.5.4. The situation in the governorate following the Kurdish retreat: an assessment**

Armed confrontation appears to have subsided following the Peshmerga forces' withdrawal from the governorate. However, prevailing military tensions, and the current political deadlock between the central government in Baghdad and the KRG, are likely to continue to strain the security situation within the governorate if opposing parties do not come to an agreement. The political uncertainty over the governance of Kirkuk might trigger new bouts of ethnic tensions amongst segments of the population, mainly between Kurds and Turkmens, causing further infringements on civilian lives, especially in ethnically mixed areas.

The volatile situation in Hawija following the fall of IS's last territorial bastion in Iraq also raises concerns about attacks from IS sleeper cells and other pockets of resistance, each looking to take advantage of prevailing local grievances and shifting military alliances to further their own objectives of destabilising the security situation.

### **4.6. Ninewa**

#### **4.6.1. The Mosul Offensive**

The battle to liberate Mosul actually began on the Ninewa plains, a belt of multi-ethnic and multi-religious Kurdish and Christian towns mixed with old Arab and Yezidi settlements in addition to micro-minorities such as the Kakai and Shabak groups.<sup>120</sup> Christian and Yezidi-populated towns such as Qaraqosh, Tal Kayf, Bashiqa, and Bartalla under IS control for over two years were liberated in the end of 2016<sup>121</sup> and the beginning of 2017.<sup>122</sup> Large areas have remained depopulated as many of the former inhabitants fear that the area might turn into a proxy battlefield between external and internal security forces policing many of the abandoned towns in the plains.<sup>123</sup> In places like Qaraqosh, many Christians opted to migrate to other countries, while others remain doubtful about returning.<sup>124</sup> Other places, such as Tel Kayf, show indications of inhabitants gradually returning to

<sup>119</sup> Iraqi News: *Mass grave of security personnel found south of Hawija*, 2017-10-02, *Forces run into a third mass grave of security members near Hawija*, 2017-10-03, *Mass grave of 50 police, army personnel's relics found in Hawija*, 2017-10-27,

<sup>120</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Confidence-and Security- Building Measures in the Nineveh Plains*, 2017-07-14

<sup>121</sup> Rudaw, *Yezidis mark their return to Bashiqa with ritual ceremonies*, 2016-11-11

<sup>122</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Confidence-and Security- Building Measures in the Nineveh Plains*, 2017-07-14

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup> The Independent, *The Iraqi Christians who are struggling to survive amid wreckage left by Isis*, 2016-11-06

rebuild their communities after the destruction left by IS.<sup>125</sup> Around 40 per cent of Bashisqa's displaced population have returned, but basic services remain unavailable.<sup>126</sup>

The Mosul offensive began in October 2016 and ended in the beginning of July 2017. Following the liberation of the eastern side of the city in January 2017, Iraqi forces and other coalition forces engaged in the more densely populated western side of the city. Residential neighbourhoods, characterised by narrow streets and alleys, hampered Iraqi forces from using armoured vehicles, and the high population density thwarted the use of long-range artillery. The small geographical areas also complicated the reliance on international coalition airstrikes, which previously were the main success factor in the recovery of cities by Iraqi forces.<sup>127</sup>

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on hundreds of civilians killed in US airstrikes. According to HRW, 200 people were killed in March 2017 when US forces targeted two IS fighters on a roof.<sup>128</sup> Airwars, a UK-based NGO that monitors airstrikes, estimated that the US-led coalition attacks may have killed over 5,800 civilians.<sup>129</sup>

It is difficult to get an exact estimate of the total number of civilians killed and injured as a result of the offensive. According to Kurdish intelligence reports made available to *The Independent*, death tolls from the battle may have reached 40,000. These figures were later denied by the Iraqi military command.<sup>130</sup> Musings on Iraq estimated the number of casualties for the entire campaign of Mosul to over 20,500 dead and close to 30,500 injured. The source further estimated the number of dead and wounded in the city of Mosul alone to be around 17,000 and 24,100, respectively.<sup>131</sup> During the campaign, IS is reported to have executed almost 5,000 persons, of which approximately 2,700 were inside Mosul city.<sup>132</sup>

IS snipers killed large numbers of civilians trying to escape, and the militant group is reported to have taken thousands of civilians as "human shields" against the Iraqi forces' advance on Mosul.<sup>133</sup> Civilians who managed to escape were hungry and severely shell-shocked after months of virtual

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<sup>125</sup> Alshahid, *Volunteers come together to clean up church in Tel Kayf*, 2017-11-09

<sup>126</sup> Kurdistan24, *Official: Nearly half of IDP:s return to Bashisqa, face scarcity of services*, 2017-05-22

<sup>127</sup> Aljazeera Centre for Studies, *The Battle of Western Mosul Stakes and prospects*, 2017-03-14

<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Civilian Casualties Mount in West Mosul*, 2017-06-06

<sup>129</sup> The Independent, *The massacre of Mosul: 40,000 feared dead in battle to take back city from Isis as scale of civilian casualties revealed*, 2017-07-19

<sup>130</sup> Iraqi News, *Iraqi command dismisses Independent's Mosul Civilian death count*, 2017-07-20

<sup>131</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Human Cost Of The Mosul Campaign*, 2017-11-13

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> CNN, *ISIS 'executes' 232 near Mosul, takes thousands as human shields, UN says*, 2016-10-29

siege.<sup>134</sup> Around 845,000 persons were displaced due to the fighting.<sup>135</sup> The United Nations and aid organisations are in dire need of funds, and the Iraqi minister of planning estimated that Iraq is in need of 100 billion USD to rebuild the cities destroyed by IS.<sup>136</sup>

In an effort to demonstrate its grip over the western side in Mosul, IS launched a wave of bomb attacks in June 2017.<sup>137</sup> The most spectacular was the bombing of the Grand Mosque, *al-Nuri*, from which leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the so-called Islamic caliphate IS in June 2014.<sup>138</sup>

Trapped IS fighters in the city set off suicide bombs or threw themselves into the Tigris river. Others were shot trying to cross the river. The majority were foreign fighters with no place to go. Some insurgents surrendered.<sup>139</sup>

IDPs fleeing the fighting relocated to camps on the border areas of the KRI. Men and women were initially separated in the camps, and the authorities security-screened the men before they were re-united with their families. Those who were the subject of interest to the authorities were located elsewhere for further investigation.<sup>140</sup>

Iraqi forces forcibly transferred family members of alleged IS affiliates to detention camps to receive “psychological and ideological rehabilitation”. According to an HRW [report](#) from July 2017, 170 families were relocated to a “rehabilitation camp” in Bartalla, east of Mosul. Local authorities are also demanding the eviction of families thought to have ties to IS, many of whom have received threats and abuse.<sup>141</sup> A committee screens the families (only women and children). Those who do not have family links with IS are subsequently released. Some families were reportedly released.<sup>142</sup>

Shabak fighters belonging to PMU forces are guarding the camp. Officials in Ninewa told HRW that the camp in Bartalla is accommodated to receive

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<sup>134</sup> The Telegraph, *Retreating Isil fighters flee across River Tigris as Iraqi forces advance in final battle for Mosul*, 2017-07-08

<sup>135</sup> IOM, Iraq Mission, *Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM*, <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/EmergencyTracking.aspx>

<sup>136</sup> Al-Monitor, *Planning minister: Iraq needs \$100 billion for post-IS reconstruction*, 2017-07-07

<sup>137</sup> The Independent, *Mosul: Wave of Isis suicide bomb attacks fail to stop Iraqi army's final assault onto the Old City*, 2017-06-26, Aljazeera, *Deadly suicide bombings hit shopping district in Mosul*, 2017-06-24

<sup>138</sup> The Independent, *Isis blows up Grand al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul where caliphate was declared, Iraqi army says*, 2017-06-21

<sup>139</sup> The Telegraph, *Retreating Isil fighters flee across River Tigris as Iraqi forces advance in final battle for Mosul*, 2017-07-08

<sup>140</sup> Meeting UNHCR Baghdad 2017-02-28, Meeting with UNHCR Erbil, 2017-03-06

<sup>141</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Alleged ISIS Families Sent to 'Rehabilitation Camp'*, 2017-07-13

<sup>142</sup> Ibid

2,800 families and that the authorities plan to receive other IS families from other camps and areas.<sup>143</sup>

Many of the IS fighters who remained in Mosul were foreign fighters who were easily recognisable and unable to flee. The majority died on the battlefield. Iraqi IS fighters were able to get out by mingling with the civilian population fleeing the fighting.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, widespread corruption, rife within segments of the Iraqi forces, has allowed many fighters to slip through the checkpoints undetected. Others have paid bribes for their release from detention. This could create new sleeper cells and lead to revenge against persons who informed against them.<sup>145</sup>

The situation in Mosul remains volatile, and restoring security and reconciling a society riddled by three years of atrocities will mean new challenges in addressing grievances and working together to rebuild the community. Extra-judicial revenge killings by Iraqi forces against suspected IS members were reportedly carried out in the wake of the military victory of the recapture of Mosul.<sup>146</sup> Hundreds of IS members are being held incarcerated in dire conditions, some of whom have died because of the difficult conditions.<sup>147</sup>

Some 3,000 suspected IS members or collaborators are awaiting trial in Iraqi courts, and an average of 50 hearings are being held every day. HRW has raised concerns about the quality of the defence for the accused,<sup>148</sup> and according to HRW Iraqi authorities issued arrest warrants for 15 private lawyers on charges of working in IS courts. The targeted lawyers were representing suspected IS members at the time of their arrest. The arrests have now deterred private lawyers from taking on cases defending suspected IS affiliates, and as a result only state-appointed lawyers are on the cases.<sup>149</sup>

Revenge killings carried out by vigilante groups have also surfaced as a result of the recapture of the city. In October 2017, over 20 bodies, bound and blindfolded, of suspected IS members were retrieved from the river Euphrates near Mosul.<sup>150</sup>

Although violence has decreased, insurgents have continued to operate after the fall of Mosul. Sporadic suicide attacks, targeting Iraqi forces<sup>151</sup> and

<sup>143</sup> Ibid

<sup>144</sup> Al-Monitor, *Mosul becomes 'graveyard' for foreign jihadists*, 2017-07-08

<sup>145</sup> The Independent, *The massacre of Mosul: 40,000 feared dead in battle to take back city from Isis as scale of civilian casualties revealed*, 2017-07-19

<sup>146</sup> Rudaw, *Iraqi Officer seeks vengeance in Mosul, where killings mount*, 2017-07-19

<sup>147</sup> The Independent, *Shocking photos emerge of suspected Isis fighters held like battery chickens in overcrowded prison*, 2017-07-19

<sup>148</sup> BBC News, *Inside the Iraqi courts sentencing IS suspects to death*, 2017-09-02

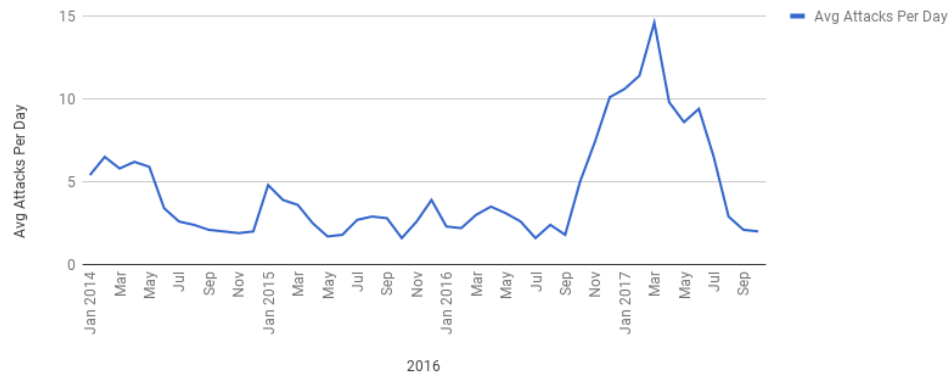
<sup>149</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Lawyers Arrested for work in ISIS courts*, 2017-08-10

<sup>150</sup> AlMada Newspaper, *فرق محلية تلاحق مؤيدي داعش في مناطق الموصل*, 2017-10-04

<sup>151</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 1-7, 2017*, 2017-08-18, *Security In Iraq Sep 1-7, 2017*, 2017-09-09

members of the PMU,<sup>152</sup> continue throughout the governorate. IEDs left behind in houses are another threat,<sup>153</sup> and these continue to kill and wound civilians returning to their homes.<sup>154</sup>

**Avg Attacks Per Day Ninewa 2014-17**



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#### 4.6.2. The Tal Afar offensive

The Mosul offensive was one objective in the broader strategy of eradicating IS territorial control. After the Mosul offensive, attention turned towards the remaining IS pockets in Ninewa and Tal Afar.<sup>156</sup>

The offensive was announced on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, by Prime Minister Abadi to liberate the district of Tal Afar. A long-time stronghold of hard-line Sunni Muslim insurgents, Tal Afar, 80 km west of Mosul<sup>157</sup>, is mostly ethnic Turkmen and is divided along sectarian lines, i.e. Sunni and Shia.<sup>158</sup> The area witnessed cycles of sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias after the fall of the Saddam regime. Tal Afar is further renowned to have produced some of IS's most senior commanders.<sup>159</sup>

The city of Tal Afar, captured by IS militants in June 2014, was strategically important due to its location along IS's supply route between Mosul and Syria.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Sep 15-21, 2017, 2017-09-27, Security In Iraq Oct 1-7, 2017, 2017-10-10*

<sup>153</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 8-14, 2017, 2017-08-20*

<sup>154</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Nov 1-7, 2017, 2017-11-09*

<sup>155</sup> Musings on Iraq, *How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017, 2017-11-07*

<sup>156</sup> Humanitarian and Development Programme, *IRAQ 2018 SCENARIOS: Planning After Mosul*, July 2017, p. 4

<sup>157</sup> Reuters, *Iraq starts offensive to take back Tal Afar from Islamic State*, 2017-08-20

<sup>158</sup> The New York Times, *Iraqi Forces Start Offensive to Retake Tal Afar From ISIS*, 2017-08-20

<sup>159</sup> Reuters, *Iraq starts offensive to take back Tal Afar from Islamic State*, 2017-08-20

<sup>160</sup> The New York Times, *Iraqi Forces Start Offensive to Retake Tal Afar from ISIS*, 2017-08-20

The battle to recapture the district was swift. On August 27<sup>th</sup>, Iraqi forces entered the city centre, retaking all neighbourhoods and forcing IS militants to flee to ‘Ayadiya, 11 km northwest of the city.<sup>161</sup> On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, Prime Minister Abadi declared victory over IS militants in Tal Afar, marking the end of IS territorial control in Ninewa province.<sup>162</sup>

#### **4.6.3. Kurdish Peshmerga forces pull out of Ninewa in the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum for independence**

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Iraqi forces took control of Kurdish-held areas of Ninewa governorate, including the Mosul hydroelectric dam. As a result, the districts of Bashiqa, Makhmour, and Gwarm Rabia and Snune in Sinjar district were all handed over to the federal forces.<sup>163</sup> No confrontations were reported, with the exception of the areas surrounding the Mosul dam, where clashes erupted between the PMU and Kurdish forces, killing nine people.<sup>164</sup>

An estimated 20,000 people fled hostilities in Zumar, Rabea, and Sinjar, mostly seeking shelter in Dohuk.<sup>165</sup> Approximately 2,000 Arab families returned to Zumar. Another 22,000 persons fled from Makhmour to Erbil. Reportedly, 1,200 Yezidi returnees from Sinjar opted to return to their place of displacement due to lack of services in Sinjar and out of fear of further security escalations.<sup>166</sup>

### **4.7. Salah al-Din**

Similar to Diyala, the governorate of Salah al-Din was liberated in the earlier stages of the Iraqi forces’ offensive against IS. Tikrit, Saddam Hussein’s place of birth, is a potent symbol of Sunni dominion in central Iraq. The governorate also houses the Shiite *al-Askari* shrine in Samarra, one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam. The attack on the shrine in 2006 ignited a sectarian spiral of violence between Sunni and Shia factions that spread to other parts of the country.<sup>167</sup>

Shia PMU militias led the charge to evict the IS militants from the city in April 2015.<sup>168</sup> The PMU militias continue to make up the primary military force in the governorate, whereby the ISF holds joint control with Shia militias in strategic areas like Tikrit and Samarra.<sup>169</sup> The road between

<sup>161</sup> The Independent, *Iraqi forces on the verge of retaking Tal Afar from Isis*, 2017-08-27

<sup>162</sup> The New York Times, *ISIS Loses Another City to U.S.-Backed Iraqi Forces*, 2017-08-31

<sup>163</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Kurds Fall Back to 2014 Borders*, 2017-10-18

<sup>164</sup> Anadolu Agency (AA), *Iraq: 9 killed in clashes near Mosul Dam*, 2017-10-18

<sup>165</sup> OCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Iraq, October 2017*, 2017-11-02

<sup>166</sup> Ibid

<sup>167</sup> The New York Times, *Blast Destroy Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Secterian Fury*, 2006-02-22

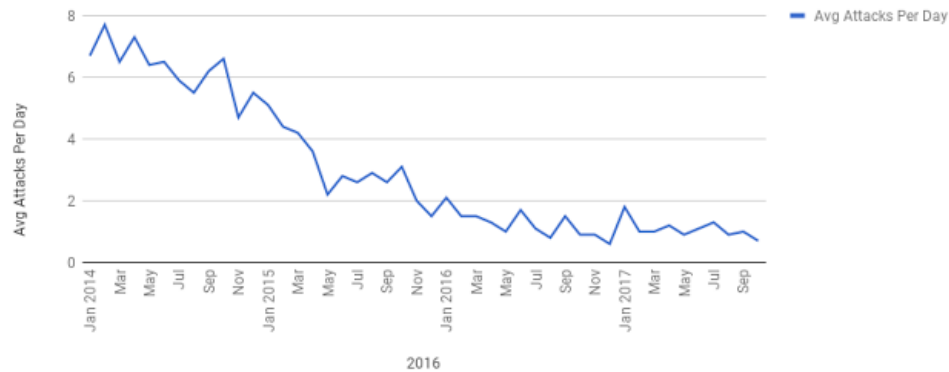
<sup>168</sup> The New York Times, *Iran Gains Influence in Iraq as Shiite Forces Fight ISIS*, 2015-03-05

<sup>169</sup> Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Iraq Control of Terrain Map: June 16, 2017*

Tikrit and Baghdad is permeated by checkpoints, predominantly controlled by PMU forces.<sup>170</sup>

Security remains comparatively stable, with attacks ranging, on average, between one to two incidents per day for most of the reporting period.

**Avg Attacks Per Day Salahaddin 2014-17**



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Although two years have passed since the eviction of IS from the area, the governorate continues to be a base for pockets of IS resistance to regroup and launch attacks on local security forces and tribal groups who oppose them.<sup>172</sup> The difficult terrain and the long stretches of unpopulated land and the surrounding mountains of Hamrin serve as good hideouts for IS fighters, and their numbers appear to be increasing following IS losses of other territories.<sup>173</sup>

Attacks carried out by IS are predominately hit and run raids on military and local tribal forces.<sup>174</sup> Several suicide attacks took place, often targeting members of the security forces as well as strategic sites such as electricity towers.<sup>175</sup> Most of the attacks have taken place in the Makhoul Mountains, as well as in and around Tikrit<sup>176</sup>, Samarra, and areas south and east of Samarra, where IS groups are believed to have taken control of small

<sup>170</sup> Ibid

<sup>171</sup> Musings on Iraq, How Violence Declined in Iraq, 2014-2017, 2017-11-07

<sup>172</sup> Niqash, *Hide and Seek: Extremist's Hit-and-Run Attacks Increase in Southern Iraq*, 2017-04-11

<sup>173</sup> Ibid

<sup>174</sup> Niqash, *Hide and Seek: Extremist's Hit-and-Run Attacks Increase in Southern Iraq*, 2017-04-11

<sup>175</sup> Reliefweb, *Iraq: Deadly suicide attacks claim civilian lives*, 2016-11-15, Institute for the Study of war (ISW), *Iraq Security Report: June 29-July 6, 2016, July 7-13, 2016, September 20-October 3, 2016, October 18-15, 2016, November 2-8, 2016, November 18-30, 2016, December 21, 2016-January 5, 2017, February 11-16, 2017, March 1-20, 2017, March 20-April 20, 2017, April 21-May 5, 2017*,

<sup>176</sup> Musings on Iraq, *3,230 Dead, 1,128 Wounded In Iraq June 2017* 3,230 Dead, 1,128 Wounded In Iraq June 2017, 2017-08-03

villages.<sup>177</sup> More than 600 families fled their villages for the cities in fear of becoming victims of IS. IS is reported to have confiscated farms and burned property.<sup>178</sup>

The modus operandi of the attacks became more daring as of August 2017, with suicide bombings and the downing of an ISF helicopter, as well as cutting the Baghdad–Mosul highway.<sup>179</sup> The uptick in planned attacks continued throughout the month of September, mostly in the form of mass suicide attacks, shoot-outs, and the blowing up of several power towers, as well as mixed local attacks on various party locations and a politician.<sup>180</sup> October of 2017 saw 23 security incidents, which was only 0.7 incidents per day.<sup>181</sup>

Another targeted area has been the holy Shia shrine in Samarra. In November 2016, a suicide bomber killed 11 pilgrims and injured around 100. The suicide bomber was believed to be an IS jihadist from Mosul.<sup>182</sup>

Iraqi forces have displaced hundreds of families alleged to have family ties to IS affiliates. Sunni tribal militias – known as *Hashd al-Asha'ri* – and PMU and Iraqi forces have forced family members out of their homes following a decree issued by the local authorities. The families are reportedly held against their will in a detention centre.<sup>183</sup> In August 2016, the authorities passed a decree banning persons complicit or affiliated with IS from returning to the governorate.<sup>184</sup> The decree also includes the expulsion of immediate family members for a period of 10 years or up to life. Most of those affected by the collective punishment policy have been transferred to the al-Shahama camp outside Tikrit or to Rubaidha. Many families had their homes demolished following their eviction.<sup>185</sup> Local Sunni militiamen, along with Iraqi security forces, have carried out some of the evictions – all targeting Sunnis.<sup>186</sup>

There are also fears that growing Shia influences, nurtured by the extended PMU presence, might lead to changes in the demographic balance of the

<sup>177</sup> Niqash, *Hide and Seek: Extremist's Hit-and-Run Attacks Increase in Southern Iraq*, 2017-04-11

<sup>178</sup> Niqash, *Hide and Seek: Extremist's Hit-and-Run Attacks Increase in Southern Iraq*, 2017-04-11

<sup>179</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq, Aug 8-14, 2017*, 2017-08-20

<sup>180</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq, Sep 1-7, 2017*, 2017-09-09, *Sep 8-14, 2017*, 2017-09-19, *Sep 15-21, 2017*, 2017-09-27, , *Oct 8-14, 2017*, 2017-10-20, *Month of October, 2017*, 11-03

<sup>181</sup> Ibid

<sup>182</sup> The Independent, *Iraq ambulance bombings: At least 25 people killed in twin suicide attack as Isis are forced from Mosul*, 2016-11-06

<sup>183</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Displacement, Detention of Suspected "ISIS Families"*, 2017-03-05

<sup>184</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Displacement, Detention of Suspected "ISIS Families"*, 2017-03-05

<sup>185</sup> The New York Times, *Iraqi Region Is Evicting Families of ISIS Members*, 2017-01-29

<sup>186</sup> Ibid



governorate, particularly in Tikrit. Shia militias have occupied former presidential palaces (belonging to Saddam Hussein) and government compounds. The militias also set up several offices in Tikrit following the liberation of the city in 2015. There are about 13 offices in Tikrit city today, and the militias are becoming a semi-official force. Traditional Shia practices are performed openly, and the ceremonies are often festooned with pro-Shia slogans and flags (green and black) as well as pictures of contemporary Shiite religious leaders.<sup>187</sup>

Tensions escalated in the ethnic-mixed (Kurds and Turkmen) town of Tuz Khurmatu in the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum. Clashes broke out on October 16 between Peshmerga and PMU forces, leaving dead and wounded on both sides, as well as civilians. Several homes were burnt down, forcing many to flee the town.<sup>188</sup> Local tensions were exacerbated between the town's predominantly Kurdish and Turkmen population. Kurdish families received threats from other locals, and over 250 homes (53 of which belonged to senior Kurdish members within the security sector) and 150 shops and businesses were looted and then destroyed. Some of the damage has been attributed to revenge for earlier evictions of Turkmen by Peshmerga forces when they controlled the town. Kurdish locals further accused the PMU of looting and destroying homes and of other crimes. A spokesperson for the PMU denied the allegations, maintaining that the destruction was a result of the military clashes.<sup>189</sup> Around 30,000 Kurds were displaced as a result.<sup>190</sup> Many have since returned, but they remain vigilant to new hostilities that could prompt them to flee again.<sup>191</sup>

#### **4.8. The Southern Governorates**

The governorates of the south, although not directly affected by the conflicts in the northern and central provinces, are subject to IS attacks, but on a relatively small scale (3–10 on average per month).<sup>192</sup> The governorates of Basra and Babil are those primarily affected, and the incidents are usually IEDs and car bomb attacks or shootings.<sup>193</sup>

The town of Jurf al-Sakhr, located in the northwest of Babil and the only majority Sunni town in the governorate, is one of the areas that witnessed an increase in IS infiltration in recent months.<sup>194</sup> The town was liberated from IS in 2014. Unlike other liberated cities, Jurf al-Sakhr remains depopulated

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<sup>187</sup> Niqash, *Shiite Muslims Are Taking over Our Sunni Muslim City, Tikrit Locals Say*, 2017-07-06

<sup>188</sup> Human Right Watch, *Iraq: Fighting in Disputed Territories Kills Civilians*, 2017-10-20, Rudaw, *Peshmerga, Iraqi Shiite militia resume clashes in Khurmatu as residents flee town*, 2017-10-26

<sup>189</sup> Niqash, 'Nothing But Destruction', *Tuz Khurmatu, Town Of Broken Hearts*, 2017-11-08

<sup>190</sup> Reuters, *Nearly 30,000 Kurds displaced from city near Kirkuk*, 2017-10-25

<sup>191</sup> Rudaw, *Not safe for Kurds to return to 'out of control Khurmatu: Iraq minister*, 2017-10-21

<sup>192</sup> See Musings on Iraq: 2016-2017, <http://Musingsoniraq.blogspot.se/>

<sup>193</sup> Ibid

<sup>194</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security in Iraq Oct 1-7, 2017*, 2017-10-10

because of its strategic and delicate location. Not only is it connected to the major cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, it is also situated along the road leading to the holy Shiite cities of the south – Najaf and Karbala. Only members of the Iranian-backed militias – the Badr organisation and the AHH – have access to the town.<sup>195</sup> Banning the population of Jurf al-Sakhr from returning has raised controversy and resentment among Sunni politicians and the affected families who see the ban as a threat to the demographic composition of area. The upsurge in recent IS attacks has led to renewed interest in the problem because these might lead to new tensions, as well as exacerbate the grievances to those already affected by the situation.<sup>196</sup>

Another sign of IS attempting to regroup in the region was a rare bombing in Dhi Qar in September of this year. Similar attacks took place in the governorates of Nasiriya and Karabla, and such attacks demonstrate the insurgents' capacity to infiltrate the Shiite heartland. Although sporadic, these attacks serve as an indicator that IS is determined to maintain a presence in Iraq.<sup>197</sup>

The security void following the deployment of security forces to the fighting in the north has left the southern region open to reoccurring tribal clashes, criminal activity, and political violence.<sup>198</sup> The oil-rich Basra governorate is particularly susceptible, where fighting between rival tribes over farmland, state construction contracts, and land ownership continues to escalate in intensity. The surge in violence could undermine stability in Basra, which could deter future foreign investments in one of the county's vital oil and gas sectors. Basra accounts for over 95 per cent of Iraq's oil export.<sup>199</sup>

Ongoing political rivalries and widespread corruption further add to the tension in the region. The head of the provincial council was arrested on bribery charges in July of this year. This was followed by the resignation of Basra's governor in August, who left for Iran after allegations of graft were brought against him.<sup>200</sup>

The southern governorates are likely to experience high levels of intra-Shia tensions in the upcoming elections, compounded by various influential militia groups backing different political agendas. Following IS territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, the group is mostly likely to shift focus towards

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<sup>195</sup> Niqash, *Security or Demographics? Why Babel Province Has A Ghost Town*, 2017-08-30

<sup>196</sup> Ibid

<sup>197</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security in Iraq Sep 8-14*, 2017-09-19

<sup>198</sup> Musings on Iraq, *Security In Iraq Aug 1-7, 2017*, 2017-08-18, Iraqi News, *Armed Tribal clash north of Basra leaves 5 casualties*, 2017-04-12

<sup>199</sup> Reuters, *Tribal clashes, political void threaten oil installations in Iraq's south*, 2017-09-11

<sup>200</sup> Ibid

high-propaganda soft targets within segments of the Shia community, as well as religious sites, consequently inciting further sectarian tensions.<sup>201</sup>

Interlocutors whom Lifos/Landinfo spoke to in Iraq and Amman further raised concerns over growing risks of a power-struggle between rival militia groups returning from the north. This is a situation that might ignite new bouts of violence in the region.<sup>202</sup>

#### **4.9. The northern governorates of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – KRI**

The Kurdish authorities continue to have a strong grip on the security situation in the KRI. According to representatives from UNAMI whom Lifos spoke to in Erbil in March 2017, the situation remains contained in the region, but local authorities remain vigilant to insurgency activities. Home-grown sleeper cells have been identified, particularly in the Kalar area.<sup>203</sup>

The deteriorating economic situation due to falling oil prices and the costly campaign against IS continues to strain the local population. As a result, the region has witnessed an increase in the level of crime, mainly in organised crime such as drug and gold smuggling, as well as robberies.<sup>204</sup>

The security situation appears generally unchanged after the withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces from Kirkuk and other previously controlled territory in the disputed areas. Peshmerga forces continue to maintain control over KRI territory. However, the standoff with the central government following the referendum vote in favour of independence has brought about considerable infringement on the KRG's territorial authority in the region, a disposition the region has enjoyed since it regained autonomy in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017, Kurdish authorities handed over the main border crossing with Turkey, Ibrahim Khalil, to the central government forces.<sup>205</sup> Subsequently, vehicles crossing the border are now subject to three checks carried out by Turkish, Iraqi, and Kurdish forces. Similar arrangements were undertaken at the Fish Khabur border crossing to Syria.<sup>206</sup>

Iran re-opened the border crossing with the KRI on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, after having closed it on October 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>207</sup> Lifos has not been able to obtain any information confirming whether Iraqi forces have retained control of the Kurdish–Iranian border areas. Statements made by the Iraqi government in

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<sup>201</sup>Humanitarian and Development Programme, *IRAQ 2018 SCENARIOS: Planning After Mosul, July 2017*, p. 17

<sup>202</sup>Meeting with Iraq expert in Amman, 2017-02-27, Meeting with William Warda Baghdad, 2017-03-02

<sup>203</sup> Meeting UNAMI, Erbil, 2017-03-07

<sup>204</sup> Ibid

<sup>205</sup> The New Arab, *Iraq 'takes over' Turkey border crossing from Kurds*, 2017-10-31

<sup>206</sup> Reuters, *Iraqi authorities gain first foothold at Kurdish frontier with Turkey*, 2017-10-31

<sup>207</sup> Rudaw, *Updated: Iran shuts borders with Kurdistan Region*, 2017-10-15

late September confirmed plans to take over the border areas between the KRI and Iran.<sup>208</sup>

The central government further suspended all international flights from the KRI in an effort to pressure the KRG to annul the result of the referendum. Humanitarian, military, and diplomatic flights are reportedly exempted from the ban.<sup>209</sup> Domestic flights between the KRI and Baghdad are still running.<sup>210</sup>

The loss of control over the oil fields in Kirkuk, and a number of smaller fields in Ninewa, that were previously under Kurdish control is likely to deepen the KRG's already ailing economy. These losses have reduced the Kurdish region's oil exports by approximately 55 per cent, ending all hope for creating a self-sustaining economy separate from Baghdad.<sup>211</sup> This will further put a strain on the KRG to pay salaries to its civil servants – most of whom have not received full pay in more than two years. The KRG also has more than 20 billion USD in debt in energy deals with both Turkey and Russia.<sup>212</sup>

Local opposition to the various political parties and the KRG was also visible during the referendum.<sup>213</sup> These divisions are likely to deepen in the coming months as grievances continue to unfold. Many Kurds feel cheated by their own leaders within the KDP and PUK. This could trigger tensions among various groups, which could well generate sporadic bouts of violence. This was the case when angry protestors stormed the parliament amid Masoud Barzani's declaration to step down earlier in November this year.<sup>214</sup>

In light of the prevailing circumstances, the KRG – landlocked, politically fragmented, and economically dependent on Baghdad – has little choice but to pursue a dialog with the central government. Prime Minister Abadi has agreed to pay the salaries of government employees, which in turn is likely to increase the central government's political leverage within the region.<sup>215</sup>

## 5. The Humanitarian situation

### 5.1. Background

The humanitarian situation in Iraq continues to be on one of the largest and most volatile in the world.<sup>216</sup> Over 3 million persons are currently displaced,

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<sup>208</sup> Aljazeera, *Iraqi forces plan takeover of Kurdish region's borders*, 2017-09-29

<sup>209</sup> BBC News, *Iraq halts international flights to Kurdistan Region*, 2017-09-29

<sup>210</sup> The Telegraph, *Foreigners rush to leave Iraq's Kurdish territory ahead of flight ban imposed after independence referendum*, 2017-09-29

<sup>211</sup> Foreign Policy, *Iraqi Kurdistan Was Never Ready for Statehood*, 2017-10-31

<sup>212</sup> Ibid

<sup>213</sup> Ibid

<sup>214</sup> PressTV, *Protestors storm Iraqi Kurdistan parl. as Barzani resigns*, 2017-10-29

<sup>215</sup> Al-Monitor, *Why is Baghdad paying salaries of Kurdistan employees*, 2017-10-27

<sup>216</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2017*, 2016-12-16, p. 4

dispersed across 99 districts and over 3,700 locations.<sup>217</sup> Around 15 million of Iraq's 36 million inhabitants live in conflict-affected areas, and an estimated 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>218</sup> Humanitarian funding for the country is progressing at a slow pace, and the funding needed in accordance to the Humanitarian Response Plan for Iraq for 2017 is estimated to be 985 million USD. Only 48 per cent was raised as of August 31<sup>st</sup> of this year.<sup>219</sup>

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) report – [Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2017](#), published in late December 2016 – predicts that the humanitarian situation is likely to worsen before families are able to re-establish their livelihoods and consolidate their households. The report further predicts that no measurable improvements can be expected until well into 2018.<sup>220</sup>

Three years of continuous fighting and economic stagnation have disrupted all aspects of Iraqi society. Poverty rates continue to fluctuate at around 22 to 23 per cent – as estimated in 2014<sup>221</sup> – compared to 19 per cent in 2013. Poverty rates in areas earlier controlled by IS are reportedly higher, where poverty rates in the governorates of Salah al-Din, Ninewa, Anbar, and Diyala ranged from 20 to 45 per cent in the past two years.<sup>222</sup> In the KRI, poverty rates reportedly quadrupled, from 3 per cent to 15 per cent,<sup>223</sup> and unemployment remains relatively high at 16 per cent in 2016.<sup>224</sup>

Over 5 million persons are in need of livelihood assistance across Iraq. Conflict and displacement are the main causes preventing access to sustainable livelihood. The majority of IDPs rely on savings and family support, which in many cases prove unsustainable in the long run. The governorates of Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din have experienced the greatest limitations on livelihood opportunities.<sup>225</sup>

## 5.2. Community services

The lack of adequate access to community services, and the slow progress in rebuilding the damage and devastation to the infrastructure in the post IS-era, are probably the most compelling challenges awaiting the Iraqi

<sup>217</sup> IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM Round 82*, October 2017

<sup>218</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2017*, 2016-12-16, p. 6

<sup>219</sup> OCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Iraq, August 2017*, 2017-09-01

<sup>220</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2017*, 2016-12-16, p. 4

<sup>221</sup> UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Iraq*, January 2017, p. 11, UNDP, *About Iraq*, 2017, World Bank in Iraq, *Overview*, 2017-04-01

<sup>222</sup> Middle East Monitor, *Poverty rates exceed 45% in Iraq*, 2017-08-10

<sup>223</sup> Rudaw, *Poverty Rate in Kurdistan Region quadrupled to 15 percent, official*, 2016-12-28

<sup>224</sup> Trading Economics, *Iraq Unemployment Rate*

<sup>225</sup> UN Office for the the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 27

government now that the military campaign against IS has come to an end. Lack of services is likely to prolong the displacement of civilians affected by the conflict. This in turn could trigger rising frustration and tensions within the IDP populations and host communities, who are growing weary of the strains it is posing on their own resources and the social tensions that follow as a result.

The health system in Iraq is faltering at all levels due to ongoing conflicts, displacement, and disease outbreaks. Lack of funding and human resources have caused significant disruptions to the health sector in the country. Almost 10 million persons are reportedly in need of medical assistance. The most severely affected areas are Mosul, Anbar, and Salah al-Din, where approximately 23 hospitals and over 230 health facilities are either completely or partially non-functional.<sup>226</sup> The World Health Organisation (WHO) and health cluster partners continue to work closely with the government to deliver assistance in needy areas. According to the WHO's latest [Situation report](#) from September 2017, the organisation is now dedicating special efforts in the former conflict areas of Kirkuk, Anbar, and West Mosul where populations are suffering from limited accessibility to health services due to damaged health infrastructure and a shortage of health care workers.<sup>227</sup>

The ongoing crisis is also having a detrimental effect on the education sector. Over 3.7 million children are reportedly affected, including 1.4 million IDP children and 1 million children in host communities directly affected by the IDP influx. This also includes the almost 600,000 children returning to newly liberated areas.<sup>228</sup>

Fewer than half of the IDP children living in camps, and only around 30 per cent of out-of-camp IDP children, attend schools. Many schools are overcrowded and operate on two or three shifts per day. Teacher shortages are another challenge facing the education sector. Moreover, over 45 per cent of children in the conflict areas are unable to attend school because their parents are unable to pay for school materials or school transport. Explosive hazards further hamper accessibility to schools in conflict-ridden areas. Over 3,000 IDPs are sheltering in schools throughout Iraq, most in the Ninewa and Salah al-Din governorates.<sup>229</sup>

The United Nations Children and Emergency Fund, UNICEF, continues to address educational needs in Iraq. Despite faltering funds, and through increased community engagement and local ownership, the organisation was

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<sup>226</sup> UN Office for the the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 27

<sup>227</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO), *Situation report issue number 7 01 September -30 September 2017*, October 2017

<sup>228</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 26

<sup>229</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 26

able open temporary (pre-fab) learning spaces for over 38,000 children, thereby realising 76 per cent of the annual target. The organisation has further facilitated the delivery of educational material to nearly 600,000 children. However, school dropout and non-enrolment continue to be major challenges.<sup>230</sup>

Vulnerable residents and IDP households are at risk of becoming food insecure due to dwindling livelihoods and protracted displacement. Crop production is seriously affected by reduced access to agricultural land, partly due to the presence of explosive remnants of the conflict, but also due to previous IS occupation. For example, around 40 per cent of wheat production was previously under IS control. According to OCHA estimates, over 3 million people are likely to suffer from food insecurity as a result of the conflict, and liberated areas in Mosul, Hawija, and Anbar will be in need of food assistance in the near future.<sup>231</sup>

The need for shelter and other non-food item assistance is estimated to reach almost 4 million people. This is largely due to new displacements generated by recent military offensives over the course of this year and the continued need for repairs to existing IDP shelters, as well as the deteriorating living standards for other groups in need. Around 1 million IDPs living in camps will need continued shelter and non-food assistance in 2017, and many returnees will need shelter assistance to re-establish their lives. Homes previously destroyed, looted, and burnt stand abandoned during years of absence. Property rights and ownership need to be addressed, particularly because many property owners lost their documentation when IS took over their areas of residence. In addition, returning residents will need assistance to remove rubble and unsafe structures in order to rebuild their homes.<sup>232</sup>

### **5.3. The situation for returnees**

The number of returnees increased over the reporting period. The majority of returnees stem from Anbar (45 per cent) followed by Ninewa (8 per cent) and Salah al-Din (7 per cent).<sup>233</sup>

Concerns have been raised over the severity of practices and policies aimed at forcing people to leave their area of displacement. These practices include forced evictions, forcible transfers of displaced persons, mass arrests, and demolition of homes. Other coercive measures include confiscating documents, restricting movement, and applying discriminatory practices with regard to access to services.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> UNICEF, *Iraq Humanitarian Situation Report*, September 2017

<sup>231</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 20

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p. 22-23

<sup>233</sup> IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM Round 82*, October 2017

<sup>234</sup> UN Office for the the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 14

Refugees International published a report *Too Much Too Soon* that raises concerns about forced and coerced returns, as well as a lack of humanitarian response from the government of Iraq to those affected by the campaign against IS, whereby the government has come to rely heavily on international assistance to IDPs.<sup>235</sup>

The circumstances of return for IDPs differ depending on the person's place of origin. One of the most pressing concerns raised by people contemplating returning is security, most notably the fear of retribution and revenge by people taking the law into their own hands.<sup>236</sup> Another issue of concern is the prospect of making a livelihood. A lack of documentation makes it difficult for returnees to gain access to services. A related issue is proof of ownership of property and land, which is difficult because much of the documentation was destroyed by IS. Lack of community services is another compelling reason deterring IDPs from returning.<sup>237</sup>

Reportedly, civil servants who were allowed to continue their work in their area of displacement were later told that they either had to return or forfeit their salaries. Other IDPs received notifications of eviction. There have also been cases of persons who had their travel permissions rejected and therefore were prevented from returning.<sup>238</sup>

Despite the challenges facing returnees, many are still opting to return. Of the almost 1 million civilians who fled Mosul, over 300,000<sup>239</sup> have returned. The majority of these are residents of East Mosul. Conditions in western Mosul remain difficult because large parts were completely destroyed. The remainder are still displaced either living in camps or with relatives.<sup>240</sup>

The flow of returnees to Hawija was swift after the area was retaken from IS. Of the 47,000 persons displaced, only 11,000 remained displaced as of the end of October of this year despite a lack return procedures, a shortage of basic services, and explosives hazards.<sup>241</sup>

#### **5.4. Earthquake hits Iran–Iraq border areas**

A 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck the Iran–Iraq border on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The quake hit close to the areas of Halabja and southeast Sulaimaniya. Most of the death toll and casualties were recorded on the Iranian side of the border<sup>242</sup>, with over 400 killed.<sup>243</sup> The quake killed seven

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<sup>235</sup> Grisgraber, D, Refugee International, *Too Much Too Soon*. September 2017, p. 5

<sup>236</sup> Ibid p. 6

<sup>237</sup> Ibid p. 9

<sup>238</sup> Ibid p. 12

<sup>239</sup> IOM, Iraq Mission, *Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM*, <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/EmergencyTracking.aspx>

<sup>240</sup> abcNews, *Iraqis rebuild in Mosul after the defeat of ISIS*, 2017-11-08

<sup>241</sup> OCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Iraq, October 2017*, 2017-11-02,

<sup>242</sup> Aljazeera, *Iran-Iraq earthquake: More than 300 die in heavy tremor*, 2017-11-13

<sup>243</sup> The Guardian, *Iran-Iraq earthquake death toll climbs to more than 400*, 2017-11-13



and injured over 500 on the Iraqi side. The most extensive damage was reported in Darbandikhan, east of Sulaimaniya. Homes and buildings suffered extensive structural damage.<sup>244</sup>

## 6. Groups of particular interest

### 6.1. Minorities

The future of Iraq's minority population remains to some extent uncertain, despite the removal of IS from previously held territory. Fears appear to have shifted from responding to the immediate humanitarian crises to larger apprehensions about the future after IS.

There are no direct armed confrontations taking place today in the areas that host Iraq's ethnic and religious minority groups. The liberation of areas retaken by IS, and the geopolitical ramifications following the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces from the disputed areas, have had an impact on the demographic balances in the home communities that make up Iraq's ethno-religious minorities, which are primarily located in the disputed areas. This in turn has renewed former tensions and led to new power struggles, supported by external actors, over the hegemony of the area.

Rivalries between the various minority groups on the Ninewa plains intensified following the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, and these rivalries have continued in the area. Emboldened by the ascendancy of the Shia powers in Baghdad, groups of Shia Shabak embarked on expansive land encroachment, allegedly financially backed by Iran<sup>245</sup> and Baghdad-based Shia groups.<sup>246</sup> This was mainly the case in in Bartalla and Qaraqosh, both towns that Christians identify as purely Christian areas.<sup>247</sup> Reportedly, the majority of the returnees to Bartella are Shabaks, as well as Arab IDPs. The majority of Christians have not returned.<sup>248</sup> The same is reported for Qaraqosh<sup>249</sup>. The new demographics are illustrative of the significant changes in the political and security dynamics in the Ninewa plains.<sup>250</sup>

Local security and defence forces, consisting of multiple Christian, Shabak, and Turkmen forces, have proliferated as the result of the post-IS dynamics that have emerged in the Ninewa plains. Each pursues a different political agenda. Subsequently, this has triggered further concerns in the Christian community, both within their own community and toward the communities of their perceived rivals in Ninewa Plain. Given their strained relations, and

<sup>244</sup> Ibid

<sup>245</sup> Wirya, K., Fawaz, L., Middle East Research Institute (MERI), *The Christians Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, September 2017, p. p. 8

<sup>246</sup> Global Public Policy Institute, *Report: Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District*, 2017-08-05

<sup>247</sup> Wirya, K., Fawaz, L., Middle East Research Institute (MERI), *The Christians Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, September 2017, p. 8

<sup>248</sup> Global Public Policy Institute, *Report: Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District*, 2017-08-05

<sup>249</sup> Reuters, *Iraqi Christians return to ransacked town with fear and hope*, 2017-04-18

<sup>250</sup> Global Public Policy Institute, *Report: Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District*, 2017-08-05

rivalry for power and domination, their relations are likely to suffer more as a result.<sup>251</sup> Christian militia groups received funding and weapons from the KDP and various Assyrian political parties, whilst Shabak militia forces operate under the 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which in practice falls under the leadership of the Badr Brigade. Additionally, the 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade also incorporates a Christian sub-force known as the Babylon Brigade.<sup>252</sup>

The Shabak forces' integration in the PMU has helped promote them as potential stakeholders in the region. Shabak forces are also known to have been involved in both frontline fighting and in holding areas and have gained a reputation for harsh treatment and retaliation against Arabs. The forces continue to control checkpoints in Bartella and on the outskirts of Mosul.<sup>253</sup>

However, divided views over who is best suited to protect the Christian community has driven a wedge between the different groups, resulting in Baghdad and the KRG having their own Christian affiliates.<sup>254</sup> The competition between the different Christian groups is an additional source of tension that could have a negative impact on the stability of the Christian population in the region as a whole. How this is likely to play out in the aftermath of the Kurdish forces' withdrawal from the disputed areas has brought further uncertainty to the Christian community's future in Iraq.<sup>255</sup>

The Christian community of Baghdad, which once hosted about half of Iraq's Christian population<sup>256</sup>, continues to diminish. Eight churches closed in 2017 due to low attendance brought about by the large numbers leaving the capital. Many fled to the KRI, together with other Christians from other parts of the country. The KRI witnessed an increase in the numbers of newly opened churches in the region, and the latest was in June of this year. Many Christians have found refuge among Kurdistan's already robust Chaldean Community. Those who left the country opted to travel to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.<sup>257</sup>

Christian IDPs residing in the KRI with no immediate family ties often rent private houses as an alternative. However, the protracted situation is posing a financial strain on the families, particularly for those whose income stemmed from activities in their hometowns. Rents are increasing and

<sup>251</sup> Wirya, K., Fawaz, L., Middle East Research Institute (MERI), *The Christians Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, September 2017, p. 14

<sup>252</sup> Global Public Policy Institute, *Report: Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District*, 2017-08-05

<sup>253</sup> Wirya, K., Fawaz, L., Middle East Research Institute (MERI), *The Christians Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, September 2017, p. 14

<sup>254</sup> Ibid

<sup>255</sup> Aljazeera, *Iraq's Christians worry over Iraqi-Kurdish conflict*, 2017-11-07

<sup>256</sup> Wirya, K., Fawaz, L., Middle East Research Institute (MERI), *The Christians Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, September 2017, p. 5

<sup>257</sup> Kurdistan24, *8 Churches in Baghdad close in 2017 as threatened Christian population in Iraq shrinks*, 2017-08-02

overcrowding is common, with several families often sharing a single house.<sup>258</sup>

Similarly, Yazidis are also caught up between the KRG and the Iraqi central government. Like many minority groups, thousands of Yazidis were relocated from the mountain areas of Sinjar as a result of the “Arabisation” campaign initiated by the Saddam regime, who declared them as Arabs rather than Kurds. Following the fall of the Saddam regime, the KRG has emphasised the Kurdish identity of the Yazidis in an effort to reinforce Kurdish claims on the disputed areas that include the Sinjar Mountains. The question of the Yazidis’ identity has diverse political implications for external political actors who each seek to define Yazidis in accordance to their own political agenda.<sup>259</sup>

The atrocities committed against the Yazidis make them reluctant to return. Of the 550,000 Yazidis who lived in Iraq, approximately 90,000 have emigrated. Many others are trying to leave because they do not see a future in Iraq. Three years have passed since IS attacked the Yazidi community, and although the Sinjar area has long been liberated, 75 per cent of the community remains displaced. One reason has been the conflict between the KDP and the PPK in the Ninewa plains. Another reason is the growing presence of the PMU forces in the area.<sup>260</sup>

The Turkmen have long felt marginalised in Iraq, first by Saddam Hussein’s “Arabisation” campaign, and later by so-called “Kurdisation” attempts of the Kurds. This was, up until October of this year, the case in Kirkuk. The Turkmen were also strongly opposed to the Kurdish referendum because they saw it as a further consolidation of power over the country’s oil revenues.<sup>261</sup> The issue of the referendum has also contributed to splitting the Turkmen community because Turkmen in Kirkuk and Erbil differ in their stances on Kurdish independency. Some Turkmen support the territorial integrity of Iraq, while others favour cohabitation with the Kurds, a common view observed by the Turkmen in Erbil.<sup>262</sup>

However, the withdrawal of the Kurdish authority from Kirkuk might well tilt the balance in the Turkmen’s favour. Much will depend on the future governance of the governorate and how this plays out for the Turkmen community.

Thousands of Shia Turkmen from Ninewa, predominately Tal Afar, who fled IS in 2014 were relocated to the south. They settled in mosques and dormitories in various locations between Najaf and Karbala. The group is

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<sup>258</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq’s minorities after ISIS*, June 2017, p. 16

<sup>259</sup> Yahya, M., Carnegie Middle East Center, Diwan, *Unmagical Mountain*, 2017-03-2017

<sup>260</sup> Al-Monitor, *For many of Iraq’s Yazidis, going home is not an option*, 2017-06-14

<sup>261</sup> Al-Monitor, *Iraq’s Turkmen areas become battlefields in Kurdish referendum debate*, 2017-08-13

<sup>262</sup> Al-Monitor, *Kurdistan referendum leaves Iraq’s Turkmen in quandary*, 2017-09-18

hesitant to return for fear of further sectarian violence. Many appear to have settled and found work and are for that reason unwilling to return because they are uncertain of the future that awaits them upon their return.<sup>263</sup> Nonetheless, there are those who believe they can overcome these difficulties upon returning to Tal Afar.<sup>264</sup>

The situation of the Kurds in the disputed areas after the Kurdish withdrawal in October of this year appears at present to be calm. Other than the information provided in the earlier sections of the report, there is nothing to indicate any escalation in the situation. Lifos continues to follow events closely.

## **6.2. Family members of IS affiliates and supporters**

As mentioned in previous sections in the report, the situation of family members of former IS affiliates and supporters remains quite precarious. Policy measures undertaken by local authorities and tribal councils in IS-liberated areas to ban family members of IS affiliates appear to serve a number of purposes. Other than imposing local justice through collective punishment, the policies also serve as a way avoid cycles of revenge between members of the community that took opposing sides during the IS invasion.

An Iraqi parliamentarian whom Lifos/Landinfo spoke to in Baghdad maintained that authorities consider “immediate family members” of IS affiliates to include the father, son, or husband.<sup>265</sup> Family members are stripped of their property, and their ration cards are suspended. Families that kill their IS-affiliated family members or hand them over to the authorities are subsequently exempted.<sup>266</sup> The same parliamentarian further stated that accusations of IS affiliation brought against persons are often unfounded, speculative, or arbitrary.<sup>267</sup>

The future prospects of these family members remain uncertain. The measures undertaken to ban these members are likely to stigmatise these families for generations to come, as well as to limit any means of a sustainable livelihood and doom them to protracted and multiple displacements.<sup>268</sup>

Hisham al-Hashimi, a researcher on armed militias, maintains that dealing with the family members is likely to be one of the government’s biggest challenges. Al-Hashimi is of the opinion that victimising family members

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<sup>263</sup> Niqash, *Stay Or Go? Displaced In Southern Iraq Refuse To Return to Mosul*, 2017-08-03

<sup>264</sup> Ibid

<sup>265</sup> Meeting with Iraqi parliamentarian, Baghdad 2017-03-02

<sup>266</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Displacement, Detention of Suspected “ISIS Families”*, 2017-03-05

<sup>267</sup> Meeting with Iraqi parliamentarian, Baghdad 2017-03-02

<sup>268</sup> Meeting with parliamentarian, Baghdad 2017-03-02

could push these stigmatised members into becoming IS's next recruits. Reportedly, there are about 100,000 persons with family ties to IS affiliates.<sup>269</sup>

Notwithstanding the prevailing circumstances, the situation is difficult to assess. The government does not retain full control in cities liberated from IS, and so far has not been able to restore minimum services to these hard-hit areas. Security is often controlled by a patchwork of official, semi-official, and unofficial groups, which range from regular security forces to PMUs and tribal militia groups.<sup>270</sup>

Reportedly, Iraqi authorities are holding 1,400 foreign wives and children of suspected IS fighters. Most of them come from Turkey and former Soviet states such as Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The family members are held in a camp south of Mosul, where they are living under difficult conditions. Most of the women surrendered to the Kurdish forces along with their husbands. The Kurds handed the women and children over to the Iraqi forces but kept the men. Concerns have been raised of tensions arising between locals and those living in the camps.<sup>271</sup>

### 6.3. Women

During times of conflict, women and girls are at greater risk of gender-specific harm. The ongoing crises continue to target women and girls, exposing them to all kinds of violations. Displaced women are particularly vulnerable.

Women with male relatives who were formerly affiliated to IS are detained in camps, with no future prospects of leaving the camp or supporting their family members. There have been reports of prostitution and drug abuse taking place in the camps.<sup>272</sup>

The severity of sexual violence in Iraq is alarming. Violations are committed against women and girls when fleeing and while in displacement. Women and girls in displacement face partner violence, sexual exploitation, harassment, and honour killings. About 48 per cent of IDP families live in communities where domestic violence is a top protection concern.<sup>273</sup> Female-headed households, adolescent girls, and women and girls with disabilities are more susceptible to abuse and more frequently face challenges accessing humanitarian aid.<sup>274</sup>

<sup>269</sup> Niqash, *Fuelling The Fight? Never Ending Story Of Extremism in Iraq*, 2017-11-16

<sup>270</sup> Niqash, *Fuelling The Fight? Never Ending Story Of Extremism in Iraq*, 2017-11-16

<sup>271</sup> Reuters, *Exclusive: Iraq holding 1,400 foreign wives, children of suspected Islamic State fighters*, 2017-09-10

<sup>272</sup> Al-Monitor, *Islamic State families fear persecution in Iraq*, 2017-06-07

<sup>273</sup> UN Office for the the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 15

<sup>274</sup> Ibid

Women who married IS fighters, with or without consent, risk stigmatisation and collective punishment based on suspicion of affiliation to the group.<sup>275</sup> Even their children risk stigmatisation.<sup>276</sup>

Over 6,800 Yezidis were kidnapped by IS, and about 3,000 of them are still believed to be held captive.<sup>277</sup> A UN report based on interviews with survivors of sexual violence committed by IS highlights gaps in the Iraqi legal system when it comes to providing adequate protection to victims of sexual and domestic violence. The report further includes abuses committed by groups fighting against IS militants. The crimes include “revenge attacks” carried out against women thought to be affiliated with IS, sometimes sanctioned by tribal leaders.<sup>278</sup>

Marriage and birth certificates issued by IS are not recognised by Iraqi or Kurdish authorities, leaving women and children with no legal status, particularly children born as result of sexual slavery. UNHCR has identified some 800 births registered by IS in areas previously under its control.<sup>279</sup>

#### **6.4. Children**

The three years of violence following IS’s territorial takeover in 2014 have had an overwhelming impact on children’s lives in Iraq. Half of the IDP population are children, and around 5 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 4,600 have been separated from their parents, putting them at risk of being exploited and abused.<sup>280</sup>

Children who lived under IS-controlled areas often experience harsh treatment because they are perceived to be affiliated with IS. Armed groups have used children in combat, and IS is thought to have recruited around 2,000 child soldiers in Iraq and Syria.<sup>281</sup>

HRW reports on young Yezidi boys enrolling in PKK militia groups in Sinjar to fight “for revenge” for the atrocities committed against the Yezidis. Accordingly, the forces offer the boys training and weapons, encouraging the boys to join. Even if it would appear that the boys join of their own accord, the recruitment cannot be regarded as “voluntary” because it involves minors, according to HRW. HRW documented 29 cases where PKK recruited children. Conditions in the training camps are difficult, and the children are not allowed to contact their families or to leave.<sup>282</sup> However, it is not only vengeance that is the driving force behind the

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<sup>275</sup> Reuters, *Iraq must ensure Islamic State’s victims of sexual violence see justice*: UN, 2017-08-22

<sup>276</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Sunni Women Tell of ISIS Detention, Torture*, 2017-02-20

<sup>277</sup> Reuters, *Iraq must ensure Islamic State’s victims of sexual violence see justice*: UN, 2017-08-22

<sup>278</sup> Ibid

<sup>279</sup> Ibid

<sup>280</sup> UNICEF, *No Where to Go, Iraqi Children Trapped in Cycles of Violence*, June 2017

<sup>281</sup> Alshahid, *Cubs to lions: What is next for ISIL’s Child Soldiers*, November 2017

<sup>282</sup> Human Right Watch, *Stop Recruiting Child Soldiers in Iraq*, 2017-01-04

recruitment, but a way to escape desperate circumstances brought about by living in camps without prospects for a livelihood.<sup>283</sup> HRW has also reported on Iraqi government-backed Sunni tribal militias – *Hash al-Asha'ri* – recruiting child soldiers to fight in the Mosul offensive.<sup>284</sup>

The hardships have also led to an increase in child marriage and child labour.

Islamist parties in the Iraqi parliament are renewing attempts to amend the marriage law to allow men to marry girls as young as nine years old. The bill, submitted by the National Iraqi Alliance, proposes that courts should follow the rulings of the religious scholars for Sunni and Shia sects when deciding on personal status issues. The choice of religious school depends on the husband's faith, and critics of the amendment have rejected the proposal and described it a breach to the constitution.<sup>285</sup>

High rates of unemployment have forced children into the labour market, particularly in female-headed households where unemployment is significantly higher. Between 68 and 75 per cent of children under the age of 15 are working.<sup>286</sup>

Life appears to be gradually coming back in the areas liberated from IS. Local authorities are taking steps to restart schools, and projects to reconstruct and rehabilitate schools in Mosul are being implemented. Children have been particularly traumatised by IS in the three years IS held a grip on the city, and experts believe that it will take a long time for these children to overcome their traumatic experiences. Schools in other areas previously under IS control have been extensively damaged. About 70–80 per cent of schools (approximately 1,500) in Anbar are destroyed. Some education services in Fallujah have been restored with temporary schools and with the help of international aid. Basra, which did not witness any fighting, abolished makeshift temporary schools and demanded the construction of 1,000 permanent schools. However, this was not realised because local authorities were declared bankrupt. The authorities are now seeking relief in order to complete the project.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid

<sup>284</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Militias Recruiting Children*, 2016-08-30

<sup>285</sup> Al-Monitor, *Iraqi Islamists MP's proposal would allow child marriage*, 2017-11-16

<sup>286</sup> UN Office for the the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2017-03-07, p. 20

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## 7.2. Oral Sources

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## Lifos publications

**Country report** primarily aims to provide a basis for the judicial governance of the Swedish Migration Agency. It can also provide support in the examination of migration cases.

**Thematic report** aims to provide country of origin information in one or several related themes, or a theme that affects several countries.

**Situation report** aims to provide a concise status report of a situation in a country, including an analysis on possible developments.

**Scenario analysis** is primarily intended to provide support in forecasting, strategic decision making etc., by describing a number of possible scenarios and the probability and consequences of these.

**Question-Answer** is a compilation of information in response to questions from case officers of the Swedish Migration Agency.



## About Lifos

Lifos is a center for country of origin information and analysis. We collect, analyse and provide expert knowledge about countries and regions from which people come to Sweden.

**Lifos' mission:** Lifos is an expert body which acts impartially and proactively to contribute to legally secure and effective migration processes through reliable, relevant and easily accessible country of origin information and analysis.

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