1.4.5 Ninewa

1.4.5 Ninewa

Ninewa map

Map 6. Ninewa governorate, © UNOCHA and MapAction.298

For a general description of the governorate, please refer to section 2.6 of the EUAA COI Report Iraq – Security Situation (May 2024). Ninewa governorate's population in 2022 was estimated at 4 133 536.299

The city of Mosul and surrounding areas remained under the influence of several larger PMF factions, including the Badr Organization. Control over the Ninewa Plain continued to lie with the PMF, particularly the 30th Brigade, affiliated with the Shabak community, and the Babylon Brigade.300 Led by Rayan Al-Kildani and backed by Iran, the Babylon Brigade presents itself as a Christian militia but also comprises Shiite fighters from southern Iraq.301 It has been accused of displacing Christian and Yazidi officials, seizing land, and obstructing the return of displaced persons, thereby consolidating control on behalf of Iranian interests.302 In January 2025, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani launched a government initiative to integrate more Christians into the local police force in Ninewa, aiming to enhance stability, support reconstruction, and preserve Iraq's Christian heritage.303 In March, approximately 1 200 Yazidi officers, initially affiliated with the KDP's Peshmerga, defected to join the Babylon Brigades, reportedly due to salary and deployment grievances. This defection reportedly heightened existing tensions between Baghdad and Erbil over the governance of disputed territories and deepened the fragmentation among Iraqi security forces.304

Parallel to these developments, the district of Sinjar remained highly contested, with the Shingal Resistance Units (YBS), believed to be affiliated with the PKK, maintaining control over parts of the area since the ISIL's defeat.305 Sinjar was host to a wide array of armed actors, including forces affiliated with the PKK, the Iraqi central government, and the KRG.306 The presence of these competing groups was identified as a key factor contributing to the persistent insecurity in the area, which continued to hinder the return of thousands of displaced residents. Although Baghdad and Erbil signed a normalisation agreement in 2020, implementation has stalled.307 Since August 2024, the situation remained fragile due to ongoing Turkish drone strikes targeting PKK-linked elements.308 Despite the PKK's announcement to disarm, the group maintained bases in Sinjar.309 The same month saw armed clashes between the YBS and Iraqi forces in Sinjar, resulting in injuries on both sides.310

In the broader context of regional security, Iraq took measures to strengthen its border control in response to escalating tensions in northwest Syria. Starting in November 2024, the federal government intensified border security efforts in Ninewa governorate. According to the Border Guard Forces, over 210 kilometres of concrete barriers were installed, with an additional 100 kilometres planned.311 The PMF and Iraqi army units, including the 30th Brigade, launched coordinated operations along the Iraqi-Syrian border, taking control of posts previously held by the Syrian Democratic Forces,312 and expanded their deployment to enhance stability and prevent cross-border infiltration.313

Moreover, security operations continued throughout the reference period. In February 2025, Iraqi security forces launched coordinated operations across Ninewa, Salah Al-Din, and Anbar governorates targeting ISIL hideouts.314 In May, joint Iraqi army and Peshmerga units conducted operations in the Qarachogh mountains in Makhmour district,315 while the PMF launched an extensive campaign in July to clear the desert region linking Ninewa and Salah Al-Din governorates.316 In June, the PMF and other Iraqi forces carried out a large-scale operation in southeastern Mosul, involving multiple brigades and intelligence units.317 In July, operations of the Joint Operations Command, Counter-Terrorism Service, and the PMF were also initiated in western Ninewa to investigate a series of drone attacks targeting oil fields and infrastructure in the KRI.318

Security incidents (number and type of security incidents)

During the reference period (1 August 2024 – 1 August 2025), ACLED recorded 265 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Ninewa governorate, of which 9 were coded as battles, 246 as explosions/remote violence, and 10 as incidents of violence against civilians. Security incidents were reported across all districts of the governorate, with the vast majority (225 out of 265) documented in Akre District, of which 219 constituted attacks by the Turkish army against the PKK.319

Figure 11 Iraq

Figure 11: Security events coded ‘battles’, ‘explosions/remote violence’ and ‘violence against civilians’ in Ninewa between August 2024 and 1 August 2025 on district level, based on ACLED data.320

According to ACLED data, Turkish military forces were involved as main actor (coded as either ‘Actor 1’ or ‘Actor 2’) in 233 security incidents, 225 of which also involved the PKK as an actor. 321 For the period between 1 August 2024 and 1 August 2025, the UCDP recorded 5 security events in Ninewa governorate, leading to 9 casualties.322

Civilian casualties

During the reference period, UNAMI recorded 12 civilian casualties in Ninewa governorate,323 including 8 civilian deaths.324 For the same reference period, UCDP recorded 1 civilian fatality. 325

Conflict-related infrastructure damage and ERW

Comprehensive information on recent conflict-related damage to civilian infrastructure in Iraq during the reference period of this report was scarce across all consulted sources.

Ninewa governorate remained heavily contaminated with ERWs resulting from the 2014–2018 conflict with ISIL. These include landmines, IEDs and unexploded ordnance (UXO), particularly affecting agricultural areas and posing ongoing risks to civilians. Mosul was cited as an example of a city where unexploded ordnance and explosives are found within buildings.326 The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNAMS), between 1 January and 30 June 2025, cleared a total of 7 401 ERWs and 399 IEDs in the governorate.327

Throughout the reference period, multiple incidents involving IEDs and ERWs were reported in the governorate. On 1 September 2024, the detonation of a legacy IED in Baaj district killed three children and injured two relatives.328 On 16 September, four PMF media personnel were injured by an IED in western Ninewa.329 In January 2025, a legacy device killed a boy near Sheik Younis.330 In April, a farmer was seriously injured by an ERW in Muhalabiyah, west of Mosul,331 and in May, three civilians were wounded by an ERW near Wana subdistrict.332

Conflict-induced displacement and return

IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)333 unit stated in its Iraq Master List Report 134 (covering the period September – December 2024) that, as of 31 December 2024, Ninewa governorate was hosting 221 911 displaced people, the majority of which in Mosul and Sinjar district, with 85 074 and 40 794 IDPs respectively. This represented a decrease of 17 213 people compared to 2023. 99 % of these IDPs were displaced within the governorate and 1 % from other governorates.334

Alongside this decline in displacement, Ninewa experienced one of the highest rates of return in the country, a total of 78 %. The most substantial increases in returnees were observed in the districts Sinjar (18 246 individuals) and Al-Baaj (13 722) districts).335 As of December 2024, Ninewa had recorded nearly two million returnees, with the principal districts of return being Mosul (1 080 426), Telafar (365 700) and Al-Hamdaniya (177 750). The majority had previously been displaced within Ninewa itself (67 %), followed by displacement in Dohuk (11 %), Erbil (9 %), and other regions (13 %).336 However, Ninewa, along with Salah Al-Din, also accounted for the highest number of failed returns. In Ninewa, most failed returns were reported in Sinjar District, primarily due to insufficient public services and lack of employment opportunities in areas of origin, according to IOM.337

In addition to the absence of essential services, the security situation in Sinjar District remained a major impediment to returns. The continued presence of multiple armed actors, including groups affiliated with the PKK, the Iraqi government, and the KRG contributed to ongoing insecurity.338 These factors in turn contributed to the protracted displacement of over 40 % of Sinjar's population, many of whom continue to reside in camps in Dohuk and other locations.339 See section 3.3.

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