1.4.6 Salah Al-Din

1.4.6 Salah Al-Din

Salah Al-Din map

Map 7. Salah Al-Din governorate, © UNOCHA and MapAction.340

For a general description of the governorate, please refer to section 2.7 of the EUAA COI Report Iraq – Security Situation (May 2024). The governorate's population in 2022 was estimated at 1 767 837.341

Throughout the reference period, Salah Al-Din governorate has been a focal area for counter-terrorism operations by Iraqi forces, targeting remaining ISIL elements. These operations were part of broader security efforts that spanned several governorates, including Kirkuk, Diyala, and Al-Anbar.342 In Salah Al-Din, airstrikes and ground offensives were conducted in multiple regions, notably in Tuz Khurmatu343 in the Balkana mountain range,344 in Baiji345 and in the Al-Zarka region.346 These actions led to the destruction of ISIL hideouts, the capture of group members, and the killing of high-ranking operatives,347 including the so-called 'Wali of Kirkuk', Daham Mohammed Alawi.348

Turkmen-populated areas, notably Tuz Khurmatu and its surroundings, were identified as among the last areas of regular ISIL activity in Iraq.349 As reported by Shafaq News in November 2024, the city of Tuz Khurmatu was repeatedly targeted by ISIL. The group carried out attacks against civilians and Iraqi forces, including kidnappings and the planting of IEDs.350 Notable incidents during the reference period included IED attacks in September351 and November 2024,352 both of which targeted joint patrols of Iraqi and Peshmerga forces and resulted in casualties.353 The Balkana mountains – in the district of Tuz Khurmatu – are a known retreat for local ISIL cells,354 and witnessed operations against the militants throughout the reference period.355 In February 2025, an increase in ISIL movement was reported between Kirkuk and Salah Al-Din.356

Joint security operations involving the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga were implemented under the umbrella of the Iraqi Joint Operations Command, particularly in areas between Tuz Khurmatu and Kifri.357 The United States Central Command also supported operations, contributing to the killing and capture of ISIL operatives.358

In addition to official security forces, several factions of the PMF and other major armed factions maintained a presence in Salah Al-Din. These included the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq coalition and Saraya Al-Salam.359 PMF infrastructure in the governorate included the Martyrs Camp near Amerli and the Al-Imamain Al-

Askariyain Training Center in Balad.[360] As of March 2025, the PMF's 35th Brigade maintained control over Al-Awja, birthplace of Saddam Hussein.[361] Saraya Al-Salam, operating within the PMF framework (brigades 313, 314 and 315), was deployed primarily around Samarra with an estimated force exceeding 10 000 fighters.[362]

Security incidents (number and type of security incidents)

During the reference period (1 August 2024 – 1 August 2025), ACLED recorded 57 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Salah Al-Din governorate, of which 15 were coded as battles, 35 as explosions/remote violence, and 7 as incidents of violence against civilians. Security incidents were recorded in most governorate districts, with the majority being documented in Tuz Khurmatu (19) and Samarra (11) districts.[363]

Image

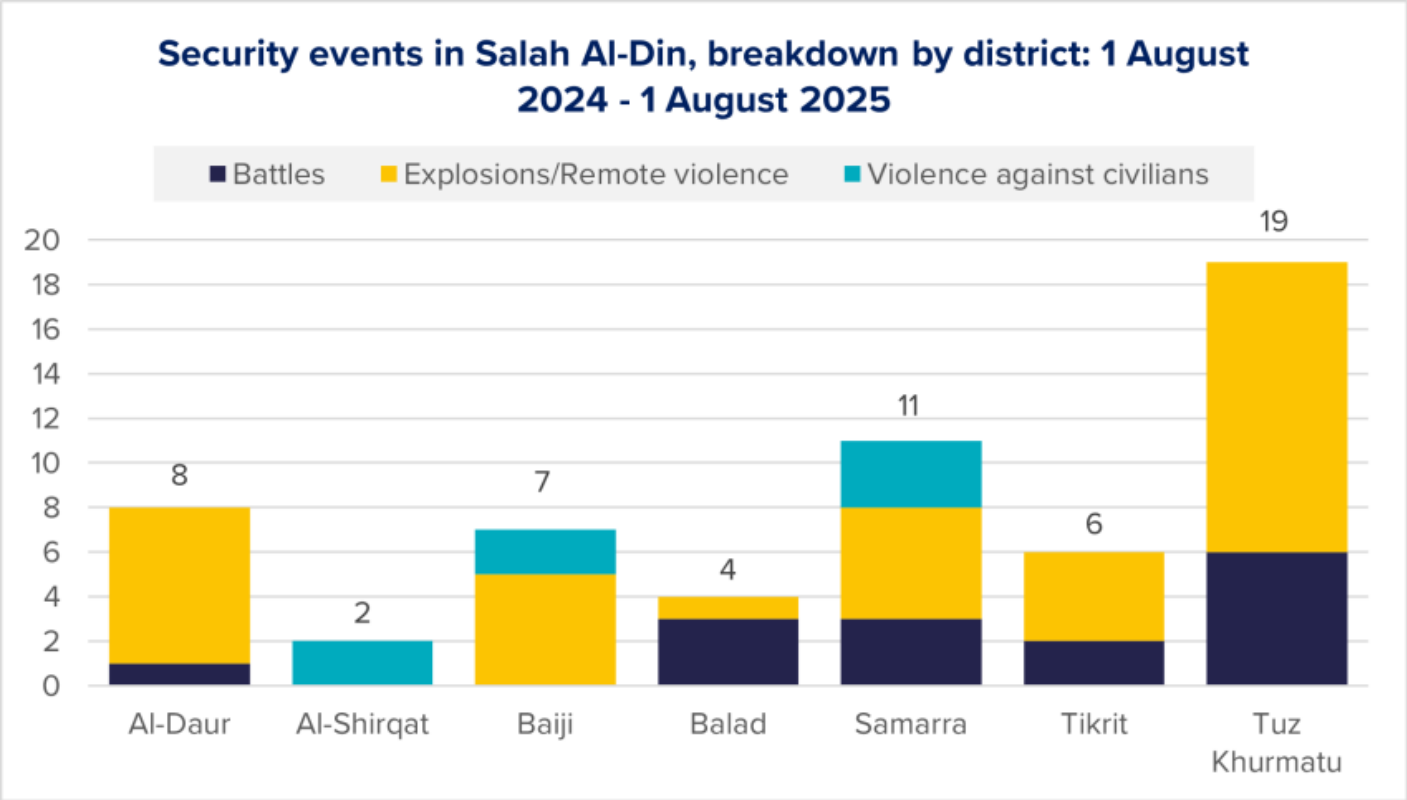


Figure 12: Security events coded 'battles', 'explosions/remote violence' and 'violence against civilians' in Salah Al-Din between August 2024 and 1 August 2025 on district level, based on ACLED data.[364]

According to ACLED data, ISIL was involved as main actor (coded as either 'Actor 1' or 'Actor 2') in 39 security incidents, 27 of which also involved Iraqi military forces as an actor. Unidentified armed groups were involved in 12 security incidents.[365] For the period between 1 August 2024 and 1 August 2025, the UCDP recorded 15 security events in Salah Al-Din governorate, leading to 48 casualties.[366]

Civilian casualties

During the reference period, UNAMI recorded 12 civilian casualties in Salah Al-Din governorate (including 8 deaths), [367] while UCDP recorded 10 civilian deaths.[368]

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.

Salah Al-Din governorate remained heavily contaminated with ERWs resulting from the 2014–2018 conflict with ISIL. These include landmines, IEDs, and unexploded ordnance (UXOs), particularly affecting agricultural areas and posing ongoing risks to civilians. Since May 2023, clearance efforts by Humanity & Inclusion (HI) in the governorate resulted in the decontamination of over 2.1 million square kilometres of land, and in the destruction of 1 730 IEDs and 1 044 UXOs.369 Despite these efforts, incidents continued: ERW explosions in Baiji370 and Al-Alam371 districts in late 2024 and early 2025 injured civilians.

Conflict-induced displacement and return

IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)372 unit stated in its Iraq Master List Report 134 (covering the period September – December 2024) that, as of 31 December 2024, Salah Al-Din governorate was hosting 42 078 displaced people, the majority of which in Samarra and Tuz Khurmatu district, with 15 186 and 14 724 people respectively. This represented a decrease of 6 150 people compared to 2023. 97 % of these IDPs were displaced within the governorate, 2 % were from Kirkuk and 1% from other places.373

In parallel with this decline in displacement, Salah Al-Din also recorded one of the highest increases in returnees nationwide, next to Ninewa governorate. The largest numbers of returnees were reported in the districts of Balad (7 542), Fares (5 346), and Baiji (5 040).374 As of December 2024, the total number of returnees in Salah Al-Din stood at 779 742, with Tikrit (189 762), Al-Shirqat (166 002), and Baiji (141 606) being the primary districts of return. Most returnees had previously been displaced within Salah Al-Din (45 %), followed by Kirkuk (25 %), Erbil (13 %), and other areas of Iraq (15 %).375

In Salah Al-Din governorate, return of IDPs remained limited to specific areas due to security-related restrictions. According to IOM, Tuz Khurmatu district records the lowest return rate in the governorate at 65 %, with 33 856 individuals still displaced. Of 45 locations with returns, 19 regained less than half their pre-conflict populations,376 while 18 locations - ten in Al-Amerli, six in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, and two in Suleiman Beg - saw no returns due to blocks by security actors.377 In other parts of the governorate, such as Al-Awja – the birthplace of Saddam Hussein – and Al-Awisat, return remained prohibited,378 despite the some displaced residents having concluded all legal and security obligations.379 IOM further reported that Salah Al-Din, along with Ninewa, accounted for the majority of failed returns. In Salah Al-Din, all such cases were reported in Balad District, where the lack of employment opportunities and insufficient financial resources in areas of origin were cited as key obstacles.380

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