

IRAQ

The return to Sinjar

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

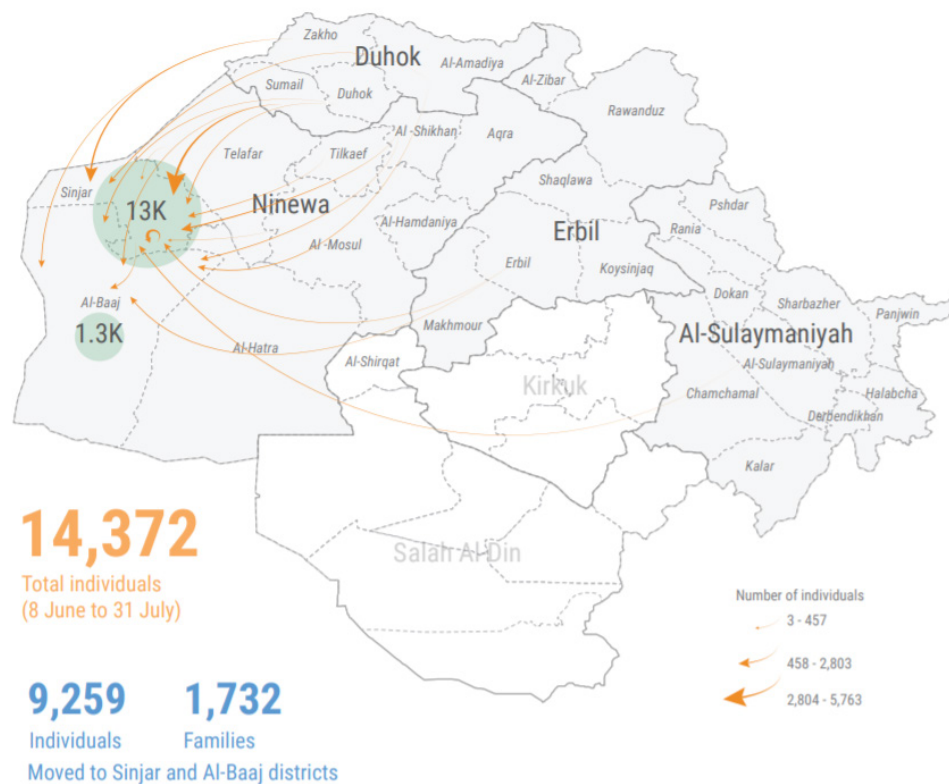
In October 2020, the federal Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) signed an agreement on the status of Sinjar district, in Ninewa governorate. The agreement details and organises aspects of administration, security, and reconstruction in Sinjar, and aims to restore security and stability in preparation for the return of the displaced populations originating from the district. As there is an upward trend in the number of returnees to Sinjar district, this analysis aims to help inform the humanitarian community about the current and expected living conditions and humanitarian needs of both residents and returnees. The intention is to support evidence-based decision-making around the safe return of – and response efforts for – the Yazidis and other communities from Sinjar. Main needs identified include social reconciliation, education, health, WASH, protection, and livelihoods.

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

Sinjar district falls within the disputed territories of northern Iraq. Although the October 2020 agreement is meant to resolve tensions between the GoI and KRG in relation to Sinjar, organisations are likely to continue to face administrative and bureaucratic constraints, as access will be coordinated between the two bodies.

Ongoing insecurity in the governorate is also likely to limit their response capacity of some organisations.

POPULATION MOVEMENTS TO SINJAR AND AL-BAAJ DISTRICTS (8 JUNE - 31 JULY 2020)¹



Source: OCHA 17/08/2020

Education

SHORTAGE OF SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS; AND A LACK OF WASH INFRASTRUCTURE

Health

ONLY TWO HOSPITAL IN THE DISTRICT, AND A LIMITED NUMBER OF HEALTH CENTRES IN SOME VILLAGES

WASH

OUTDATED AND/OR DESTROYED INFRASTRUCTURE

OVERVIEW

On 3 August 2014, the Islamic State (IS) launched an attack on the Yazidi community in Sinjar district in the north-western area of Ninewa governorate, 50 kilometres from Iraq's border with Syria. This district had an estimated population of 400,000 people prior to 2014, inhabited primarily by the Yazidi community, with a minority of Muslim and Christian communities (UNDP 02/08/2020; ICG 20/02/2018).

The attack by IS caused significant displacement and destruction. Six years on, up to 200,000 Yazidis remain displaced. Thousands were killed or abducted, taken to Mosul in Iraq and Syria. The attack targeted mainly women and girls living in the area of Mount Sinjar, many of whom were kidnapped, forced into sexual slavery, or killed. The survivors of these attacks who fled into the mountains remain displaced in harsh conditions. Others who fled towards the neighbouring Kurdistan region are mostly living in camps in Duhok governorate, and in smaller numbers in Ninewa governorate (ICG 20/02/2018; Nadia's Initiative 2018; IOM 29/10/2020; KAS 2017). However, since June 2020, Sinjar has seen an upward trend in the number of returnees (IOM 29/10/2020). This trend is likely to continue as the Iraqi government becomes more determined to end the protracted displacement in Iraq.

On 9 October 2020, the GoI and KRG announced an agreement on the status of Sinjar district. The agreement details and organises aspects of administration, security, and reconstruction, and aims to restore security and stability in Sinjar, in preparation for the return of IDPs originating from the district. The majority of those displaced from Sinjar district are Yazidi. As at October 2020, 47% of the Yazidis who had been displaced by IS six years ago had not yet returned, primarily due to lack of livelihoods and services, but also due to insecurity. Despite ongoing opposition to the plan by some Yazidis, the number of returnees is expected to keep increasing. Displaced families have been slowly starting to return to Sinjar since June 2020, driven by the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown in other areas of the country (IOM 16/10/2020; KirkukNow 10/10/2020).

Given the upward trend in the number of returnees, this report highlights the current and expected living conditions and humanitarian needs of both residents and returnees in the district. Sectoral needs include protection, education, health, WASH, livelihoods, and social reconciliation. Basic services and living conditions were both significantly affected by the conflict inflicted by IS, as 80% of public infrastructure and 70% of civilian homes in Sinjar City and surrounding areas were damaged or destroyed (World Bank 01/2018).

SECTORAL NEEDS

Education

- There is shortage of schools in most villages and towns, especially for families living in IDP camps on Mount Sinjar. This is causing overcrowded classes and is reducing the quality of education. Overcrowding also increases the risk of the spread of COVID-19 (Kurdistan 24 10/11/2019; NED 04/2020; OCHA 07/2020).
- Long distances between students' houses and schools remain an access constraint to education, as many cannot afford the cost of transportation – a phenomenon that has led to an increase in dropout rates in other areas (although data on the number of children out of school in Sinjar is lacking) (Kurdistan 24 10/11/2019; NED 04/2020).
- The shortage of teaching staff remains an issue. There are around 500 teachers for around 19,000 students in Sinjar city and its surrounding towns and villages, who are employed by the KRG Ministry of Education. However, only 100 of those teachers are paid – the rest are volunteers. The ratio of 38 students per teacher is high – the average for the Middle East and North Africa region is 15 students per teacher (World Bank 2018; Yazda 05/03/2019). In addition, local reports indicate that teachers across KRI are being paid only once every few months and had their salaries cut by more than 20% in June 2020. This is due to a significant budget deficit faced by the GoI and KRG, which has meant that the governments have struggled to pay public sector employees – including teachers – since the fall of oil prices in 2016. The delay in payments is pushing more public school teachers to quit their jobs (Kirkuk Now 21/05/2020; Al-Monitor 22/05/2020; LSE 10/2019; Rudaw 27/09/2020; Kirkuk Now 13/09/2020; Rudaw 21/06/2020).
- Schools in Sinjar are in need of rehabilitation following conflict, and lack both gas for heating and WASH infrastructure. The majority of the IQD1 billion earmarked for the Sinjar's education budget is allocated for teachers' wages. That means that little is left for the development and maintenance of school infrastructure (Kirkuk Now 21/05/2020; Al-Monitor 22/05/2020; LSE 10/2019; Rudaw 27/09/2020; Kirkuk Now 13/09/2020; NED 04/2020; Nadia's Initiative 04/2019).
- Access to higher education is limited for residents of Sinjar, especially for Yazidis – even before 2014 there were no colleges or universities in the district. Residents wishing to obtain higher education degrees often had to travel to Mosul University, Dohuk University or Salaheddin University-Erbil. However, many Yazidis have reservations about going to Mosul not only because of the 2014 events but also because even before IS took hold of the city, Yazidis would face discrimination and were often subjected to threats, intimidations.

tion, and targeted violence. Also, many Yazidis do not speak Arabic, and communication with other students and teachers is therefore difficult (MSF 09/08/2020; MERI 2017; PAX 06/2016; MEI 08/2008). An additional constraint is financial – as highlighted in a survey conducted in March 2020. The average monthly living and study-related costs of attending Duhok and Mosul universities are estimated at USD150, and USD320 respectively. As a result, Yazidis are often underrepresented in Iraqi universities. Despite Yazidis making up between a quarter and a third of the overall population in Duhok governorate; they make up only 10% of the Duhok University population (DhK 03/2020).

Health

- Health facilities were already lacking in Sinjar, and were further compromised by the conflict with IS and the subsequent military offensive to retake the area. The displacement of health professionals due to insecurity and ongoing violence in parts of the Ninewa governorate also contribute to the lack of access to healthcare (MSF 08/11/2018; field information 10/11/2020; World Bank 01/2018).
- According to an assessment by the Iraq Health Access Organization (IHAO) in July 2020, 38% of those surveyed (159 of 413 families) reported the need for health services. 126 families reported having elderly people who need special care and most of them need expensive medications on a regular basis. Basic medications for chronic illnesses are provided at healthcare facilities but needs are far greater (IHAO 07/2020).
- One survey conducted in April 2020 by the local NGO “Youth Bridge Organisation”, which covered 72 towns and villages in Sinjar district, showed that about 90% of villages and towns surrounding Sinjar were suffering from lack of health centres, hindering people’s return to their place of origin. The same survey shows that there were only three qualified and functioning health centres in the 72 villages. The centres, which provide basic health services, were equipped and rehabilitated by humanitarian organisations (NED 04/2020; field information 10/11/2020).
- There are only two hospitals serving the population of Sinjar – Sinoni General Hospital and Sinjar General Hospital – and there is only one health facility providing maternal care. In addition, Sinjar General Hospital lacks specialists as well as many crucial health departments, such as maternity and surgery. Some 20 villages in Sinjar are not served by any health centres (Nadia’s Initiative 04/2019; WHO 19/09/2018; field information 10/11/2020; Rudaw 29/10/2020; NED 04/2020). Due the lack of healthcare access, Sinjar residents have to travel to facilities in Duhok, Tel Afar or Mosul (MSF 09/08/2020; MSF 08/11/2018).
- 92 families from the IHAO assessment reported the need for psychosocial support ser-

vices – and this is thought to be underreported (IHAO 07/2020). Psychosocial services and programmes are lacking. The government provides little support to children who were kidnapped and forced to fight or go to schools teaching the IS curriculum (Middle East Eye 23/10/2020). Many child survivors who have returned from IS captivity from across the country suffer from post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression. Amnesty International found that more than 50% of the former child soldiers that it interviewed had not received any form of health assistance, psychosocial or other support (Amnesty International 30/07/2020). Children who were recruited by IS from different faiths, especially Sunni children, have been treated differently by both the GoI and the KRG in the provision of services, which hinders their ability to access the assistance needed (Middle East Eye 23/10/2020; Middle East Eye 07/02/2020; HRW 06/03/2020).

WASH

- There is a critical need for WASH assistance in Sinjar. The outdated water infrastructure and lack of water purification infrastructure/implants and distribution networks has been further affected by the conflict (Kirkuk Now 28/09/2020; Arij 2013; MSF 09/08/2020; Nadia’s Initiative 04/2019).
- Ground water, extracted by boreholes, is one of the important sources of water in Sinjar (Kirkuk Now 20/08/2019). Many residents have installed shallow onsite wells that are insufficient for drinking water and could be contaminated (Nadia’s Initiative 04/2019). Ground water is also running out due to continuing drought, increased pumping of groundwater reservoirs, and mismanagement of water sources (Kirkuk Now 20/08/2019).
- The lack of quality water remains an issue. In 2019, it was reported that 40% of returnees in Sinjar were not receiving any drinking water. Residents and returnees have to resort to walking for kilometres to reach the nearest well, or to buying trucked water, which can cost up IQD70,000 (USD50–USD60) per month (Kirkuk Now 28/09/2020; Kirkuk Now 20/08/2019).
- According to statistics from the district office of Sinjar, 40 villages suffer from water shortages. It is reported that 50% of residents of Sinun town suffer from lack of access to water (Kirkuk Now 28/09/2020). The water shortage problem is likely to be further exacerbated as more families return to Sinjar, adding more pressure to an already limited infrastructure (Kirkuk Now 28/09/2020).
- The lack of WASH infrastructure in schools represents a significant challenge as it prevents children from returning to education, or exposes those who do return to the risk of communicable diseases (Nadia’s Initiative 04/2019).

- Wastewater collection coverage in Sinjar is low, with only two collection networks built by the Directorate of Sanitation prior to the conflict. Therefore, many residents use informal sewage disposal systems, which are likely to contaminate sources of water and run the risk of spread of waterborne diseases (Nadia's Initiative 04/2019).

Livelihoods

- According to the IHAO (July 2020) livelihoods remains a major concern for returnees. The majority of the responders (327 families, 79%) reported needing livelihoods programmes and 296 families (71%) reported the need for fixed income to secure their basic needs (IHAO 07/2020).
- After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent containment measures, including movement restrictions, many internally displaced Yazidis lost their jobs. Many of the displaced also lost access to assistance, as COVID-19 measures impacted the work of humanitarian organisations. This has forced many to return to Sinjar for the first time since 2014 (Reuters 06/07/2020).
- 70% of Sinjar's residents identify agriculture as their predominant source of income. However, irrigation systems, boreholes, and water pipes were destroyed during the conflict, and this is disrupting the livelihoods of farmers and shepherds (Welthungerhilfe 09/04/2020; Nadia's Initiative 04/2019). IS occupation has also left much agricultural land contaminated with improvised explosive devices and unexploded ordnance (Food Security Cluster 08/2017; iMMAP private communication 09/08/2020).

Protection

- Villages to the south of Sinjar are widely reported to be contaminated with explosive remnants of war. The lack of decontamination efforts in Sinjar town, especially the Old City, appears to be a concern for residents. However, this does not seem to be affecting people's decisions to return (NRC 2018; iMMAP 09/08/2020).
- Turkey has been regularly conducting cross-border operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) positions in northern Iraq, including Sinjar, to drive the group away from the area. These attacks on border villages have pushed residents to flee and are preventing many others from returning. PKK elements continue to have presence and are likely to remain a target, which could result in fighting and insecurity that risks affecting civilians (Al-Monitor 24/01/2020; France24 01/10/2020; ICG 20/02/2018).

- Residents in Sinjar are in need of a legislative framework that would ensure the protection of the diverse communities and groups, encouraging social reconciliation and cohesion. Lack of social cohesion in disputed areas or areas with diverse demographics has been a critical problem in the face of recovery post-IS conflict (OCHA 11/2019; UNDP 15/11/2020).

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Internally displaced people from Sinjar district

- Sinjar was taken back from the control of IS in 2015, and despite the official defeat of IS in 2017, until the onset of COVID-19 and the associated lockdown, return of the Yazidis to their areas of origin had been slow. This was primarily due to the lack of livelihoods and services. Many displaced people were forced to stay at home during lockdown and lost their sources of income (IOM 09/2020). However, those who had work in the city have been prompted to return, sometimes with their families, as restrictions on movement made daily travel in and out of the city difficult (Reuters 06/07/2020).
- The majority of those displaced live in camps in Duhok governorate, which hosts the most crowded camps in Iraq (REACH 23/09/2020). However, those who return to Sinjar often also return to harsh living conditions. As at August 2020, Sinjar had the second highest number of individuals living in shelters in critical condition (8,094) after Mosul (31,590) (IOM 09/2020).¹
- The GoI has been closing IDP camps across the country and facilitating the return of IDPs to their places of origin since mid-2019. There are reports that many IDPs who leave the camps prematurely become out-of-camp IDPs. This secondary displacement is often due to the fact that places of origin remain destroyed or lack basic services (TNH 11/03/2020; NRC 09/11/2020). New returnees to Sinjar district are expected and risk facing the same issues as more camps in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and Ninewa close.

Social reconciliation

Social reconciliation and cohesion is important in creating a safe environment for Sinjar's residents. Reconciliation also plays a role in the stability and security of the district, and therefore possibly also in incentivising returns (IOM 11/2019).

¹ Critical shelters or shelters in critical condition include informal settlements, religious buildings, schools, and unfinished or abandoned buildings. For returnees, critical shelters also include habitual residences that are severely damaged or destroyed and for IDPs, long-term rental accommodation that is unfit for habitation (having characteristics of unfinished or severely damaged buildings)

In March 2019, Iraqi President Barham Salih submitted the “Yazidi Female Survivors’ Law” to Parliament for review and approval – part of the government’s first steps to addressing social reconciliation. If passed, this law will likely ensure protection assistance for Yazidi women in the country, including those from Sinjar district who experienced IS attacks in 2014 (Iraqi Presidency 07/04/2019).

The draft law applies to Yazidi women who were kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS, and later escaped or were rescued from captivity. It aims to award financial and ethical compensation to help survivors rebuild their lives. It also aims to provide survivors with physical and psychological healthcare, and to facilitate local health centres and clinics (Iraqi Presidency 07/04/2019). The proposed bill has been delayed due to ongoing nationwide protests since October 2019, government changes, and the spread of COVID-19 (Middle East Eye 23/10/2020).

Even if the bill becomes law, it has some shortcomings and more needs to be done to address needs. The bill only covers Yazidi women who were abducted. IS committed other violations and crimes towards men, women, and children, many of whom are suffering from mental trauma and still struggling to access the help they need, due to the limited availability of psychosocial support (OHCHR 15/06/2016; VOA 19/02/2020; HRW 08/2020).

Similarly, the draft law does not include reparations for non-Yazidi, other religious and ethnic groups, or victims of crimes and violations. Many Shia Turkmen, Christians, Shabak, and Sunni Arab women were also captured by IS, and faced exploitation and abuse. Crimes against certain vulnerable groups or minorities are often under-reported and under-prosecuted. This risks deepening the divide between different groups in Iraq and severely halting reconciliation efforts (LSE 26/04/2019; Open Global Rights 13/10/2020).

The bill includes the establishment of a General Directorate for Female Survivors Affairs under the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers – a body dedicated to reparation for female survivors. The General Directorate would be established in Ninewa – however, the majority of survivors are displaced and currently live in Duhok governorate. Financial constraints would limit access to many of those in need (LSE 26/04/2019).

There is also a significant need for reconciliation efforts between the minority Sunni-Arab

and Yazidi communities in Sinjar. Many Yazidis still feel unsafe to return, due to the lack of trust and confidence as well as to the growing strife between both groups, given the events of 2014 and their aftermath. Anecdotal evidence suggests that retaliatory action was taken against Sunni Arabs in some areas following the defeat of ISIS. Many Yazidis accuse members of the Sunni-Arab community of having supported IS. There is reportedly no trade between these two groups, nor are they able to visit each other’s villages, particularly due to restrictions on the movement of the returned Sunni Arab population (IOM 11/2019; France24 21/03/2019).

The Yazidi community is concerned to know the whereabouts of the remaining 3,000 missing Yazidi women and children and has requested the exhumation of all mass graves, and an international judicial investigation into the events of 2014. Developments on these fronts have been very slow (IOM 11/2019; UN 03/08/2020; UN 28/10/2020).

Who is responsible for reconstruction?

After IS was pushed out of Sinjar in 2015, various administrations were established – controlled by various militia groups or political parties. This has left no organisation or political party responsible for, or willing to invest in, the reconstruction and security situation. Basic public services such as water, electricity, education, and healthcare are consequently insufficient or inadequate (ECFR 30/10/2018; UNDP 02/08/2020).

Prior to the October 2020 agreement, Sinjar district had seen two different administrations governing at the same time – one appointed by Erbil and the other by Baghdad. The district remains overcrowded with different armed forces or groups competing over increased influence: the PKK, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), Yazidi Protection Force (HPE), and the PMF as well as the Iraqi army, Iraqi police, and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters (Al-monitor 14/10/2020; Middle East Eye 16/10/2020).²

The fact that Sinjar district is within Iraq’s disputed territories adds a second layer of complexity to the question around who is responsible for administering the area, including leading the reconstruction phase.³ In late 2017, the Iraqi security forces and PMF took over control of these territories from the KRG. They took control after the KRG staged an independence

²Also known as Hashd Sha’abi, the PMF are militia groups that have been transformed into a military unit in the army structure

³Territories that are disputed between the GoI and KRG and located in Erbil, Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Ninewa governorates in northern Iraq.

referendum in areas under its security control in September 2017. More than 92% of voters in KRI voted in favour of independence from federal Iraq (ICG 17/10/2017; The Guardian 28/09/2017; Reuters 08/03/2018; Kurdistan 24 10/10/2020; ECFR 30/10/2018).

The newly signed agreement between Baghdad and Erbil consolidates the strong presence of the GoI. The security aspect will remain within the scope and powers of the GoI, which will operate in coordination with the KRG. Service provision will be the responsibility of a joint committee formed of GoI, KRG, and Ninewa governorate administration representatives. Details on how these arrangements will be achieved currently remain unclear (Kurdistan 24 10/10/2020).

The deal aims to limit the presence of the various armed groups. The district's security is to be limited to three parties: the local police, the National Security Service, and the intelligence service. The Prime Minister's Office and the Interior Ministry are to appoint 1,500 residents from the district, including 1,000 people from Sinjar and 1,500 from displacement camps, to join the region's security forces (Al-Monitor 14/10/2020). At the time of writing no steps have been taken regarding the implementation of this agreement.

INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS

- Gender-related data on the needs of returnees is lacking.
- Data on the needs of non-Yazidi residents of Sinjar is often missing.
- Information on the status of reconstruction and rehabilitation of homes, WASH, and agricultural and other infrastructure in Sinjar district is lacking.
- Data on enrolment and the dropout rate of children in schools in Sinjar is missing.