



# THE YEAR IN REVIEW

## IRAQ 2017

*The Year in Review of Iraq is based on the periodical factsheets for Iraq that are produced by the IFK-MENA Team at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, National Defence Academy Vienna. The Annual Review compiles and analyzes all significant events pertaining to the Iraqi conflict while providing an outlook for the year 2018.*

### International Conflict and Crisis Management

At first glance, Iraq appears to have gained considerable successes in 2017: the victory over the terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS), a self-assured Iraqi army, powerful pro-Iranian militias, and a central government in Baghdad, which demonstrated its power over Kurdistan in Iraq, and further boosted following the independence referendum. In fact, the disappearance of the common enemy ISIS brings to the foreground other conflicts that have been suppressed so far, which may resurface in the 2018 election year. 2017 is also a comeback year of the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, to Iraq, which has been influenced politically and militarily by Saudi Arabia's rival Iran for 14 years.



*Since the ISIS Caliphate proclaimed itself 3 years ago, the terrorist organization has lost further territorial ground.*

Source: Mahmud Saleh/AFP/picturedesk.com

### Domestic Politics

Domestically, the year was marked by a further strengthening of Shiite militias, which were particularly encouraged by the victory in Mosul. In addition, the controversial discussion surrounding the integration of Shiite militias into the regular Iraqi army was at the center of debates.

### Military Developments

The year 2017 brought Iraq numerous military successes in key locations. In general, despite the internal fragmentation of forces, there is talk of renewed public confidence in the Iraqi security forces.

### Humanitarian situation

Following three years of ISIS presence, economic stagnation and intense fighting shaped Iraqi society. In 2017, around 8% of Iraqis were internally displaced (IDPs). Almost a quarter of the Iraqi population has been affected by the war and around 40% of Iraqis live in conflict-affected regions. Kurdistan is the area most affected by humanitarian challenges, due to its proximity to ISIS and the reception of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees.

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**COMPILED BY:** IFK MENA-Team (Jasmina RUPP, David FUSSI, Nasser EL-HAJ, Maya HADAR);

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### ISIS in Iraq is defeated and pro-Iranian militias were strengthened

The victory over ISIS in 2017 meant a massive increase in prestige of the pro-Iranian Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which position themselves as efficient anti-terror units and guarantor of security in Iraq.

The PMF can be broadly described as a fragmented sub-state structure which is comprised of over 50 militias and some 60,000 militants, from which the most powerful groups represent Iran's strategic interests (although some Sunni and Shia groups do not profess Iran and its spiritual leader Khomeini). In post-ISIS Iraq, the PMF strive to establish itself as a political and social movement, and first steps in this direction were already set.

The border area with Syria, around al-Qaim which was successfully conquered in 2017, is of great strategic importance to the pro-Iranian forces, as it allows them to establish the desired land corridor between Iran and Lebanon. Iran-loyal forces can thus quickly and cost-effectively shift fighters and weapons via land for future military confrontations.

Through its allies, Iran exerts influence over numerous political factions in Iraq, such as on the ministry of interior, the ministry of defense as well as the newly established anti-terror bureau. However, western politicians like France's President Macron and CIA leader Mike Pompeo, on the other hand, publicly called for the dissolution of the PMF following the eradication of ISIS. According to the Pentagon 5,200 American troops will remain in Iraq in order to cleanse areas in which an estimated 1,000 IS fighters are still present. In addition, the American soldiers are expected to carry out stabilising and demining measures.

### Ankara's aspirations to protect its interests and reorganise Iraq

Turkish influence is particularly evident in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq, in which Ankara supports the Turkmen and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP),



Shia militias, with the backing of Iran, have played a decisive role in helping liberate Iraqi cities that were held under the control of ISIS.

Source: <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/hashd-al-shaabi-recruiting-people-halabja/>

which governs the Kurdish autonomous region. The Turkish focus lies on economic cooperation with Kurdistan and the fight against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Iraq.

Disappointed by the Kurdish ally President Barzani over the independence referendum held in September, a new rapprochement was reached between Turkey and the central government in Baghdad, according to which Prime Minister Abadi gave Erdogan a green light to clean the entire border area from "PKK terrorists". The Iraqi-Syrian border region may be dominated by new tensions as Iran does not hesitate to support the PKK in order to consolidate its power.

### A comeback of Saudi Arabia

Numerous high-profile visits in 2017 suggest a revival in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, with the support of the US. The opening of Saudi embassies and consulates, new air links, the establishment of a trade commission, and the opening of the Arar border crossing since 1990 are designed to give Saudi Arabia a leading role in reconstruction and limit Iranian dominance. Saudi Arabia seeks alliances with anti-Iranian Shiite political leaders such as Prime Minister Abadi to foster its presence in Iraq on a political, economic and social level. Whether Saudi Arabia can influence the 14-year-old Shiite elite in Baghdad and its powerful militias remains to be seen.



Numerous high-level visitor exchanges in 2017 suggest a comeback of Saudi Arabia in Iraq with the aim of containing Iran's growing influence in Iraq. Iraqi Prime minister Abadi met with Saudi king Salman in October 2017.

Source: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/what-is-saudi-arabias-end-game-in-iraq/234963/>

### The year of oil business

The end of fight against ISIS and the capture of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk by the central government in Baghdad made establishing new oil production contracts possible. The agreement between Tehran and the Iraqi leadership to export Petroleum from Kirkuk is set to replace Turkey's existing export route. Turkey will benefit from the construction of a new pipeline from Baiji to the Turkish-Iraqi border region of Fish-Khabur by replacing parts of the old Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline which is severely damaged. Meanwhile, Russia expanded its military and economic cooperation and concluded an oil subsidy agreement between Rosneft (Russian oil company) and the Kurdish regional government.

## Forecast

The defeat of ISIS in 2017 brought the internal fragmentation of religious and ethnic groups to the fore again. However, the war against ISIS allowed these actors to arm, organize and further develop their claims to power. In 2018, Iraq will have to face the crucial decisive question of whether PMF militias will be integrated into the army or following the example of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which evolves into a kind of parallel army in Iraq.

Much will depend on the extent in which Sunni groups feel represented by Baghdad, how far political power is granted to militia leaders, how the Kurdish reconciliation course looks like and how quickly and successful reconstruction and economic stability can be achieved. Whether the external powers Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, USA and Russia will play a constructive role here is doubtful.

The compromise candidate, Prime Minister Abadi, faces a difficult spell as he stands between the US and Iran, which is declared by President Trump as the arch-enemy, and between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

However, in a post-ISIS Iraq and a safer environment, the Iraqi economy could recover somewhat. Iraq relies on stable commodity prices, international financiers and investors who rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by ISIS in particular. The Iraqi Foreign Minister called for a "Post-ISIS Marshall Plan" for 2018 in this context.

Meanwhile, the long-term stability of Iraq will depend heavily on terrorist attacks and the resurgence of ISIS. The capture of the Caliphate provinces symbolizes the territorial end of ISIS, yet, at the same time, it means the transformation of the group into a terrorist guerrilla organization, which will no longer be vulnerable to its territory and still has personnel with years of experience in state administration, economic activity, terrorist funding as well as artillery and guerrilla tactics.

In the short term, as compensation for the losses of the Caliphate provinces in Syria and Iraq, ISIS will continue to rely on its global terrorist strategy and will launch new series of attacks in Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia but also Western countries.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

### Referendum on the independence of Kurdistan

The referendum on the independence of Kurdistan, held at the end of September, caused great upheaval, both between Baghdad and Erbil, and between the Kurdish factions themselves. After the Kurdish parliamentary elections were cancelled, it finally led to the resignation of the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Masud Barzani and extension of the term of office of the parliament. Already at the beginning of the year Barzani threatened that he would proclaim the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, if Nuri al-Maliki returns to office as Prime Minister of Iraq (Maliki was a long-term Prime Minister and currently serves as Deputy Prime Minister - he was accused of sectarian politics and the rise of ISIS).

In spring 2017, Barzani took the lead in the independence movement in Kurdistan and announced that the result of the referendum was not binding, but merely a 'sign' for Baghdad. The main point of contention was that the referendum was carried out not only in the auto-

nomous region of Kurdistan, but in areas that were occupied by the Peshmerga forces in the course of the war against ISIS, such as parts of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk and around the city Sinjar, in the Syrian-Iraqi border region. Prime minister Abadi visited both the President of the KRG and Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), at the beginning of the year. This unusual visit illustrated that already at that time inner-Kurdish differences about the referendum were pre-

vailing to a large extent. The Kurdish-Iraqi tensions posed a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq as a whole. On 25 September, a majority of just under 93% of the approximately 2.3 million voters voted in favour of Kurdish independence.

Barzani's hope that the tensions within the Iraqi Kurds would be resolved by the referendum did not materialize. The opposite was the case. As early as summer 2017, Iran, Turkey and Germany also announced that they would not support

### Controlled territories by the Kurds in Iraq



The Kurds in Northern Iraq have expanded their territorial control since 2014 in which previously held ISIS territory has been seized.

Layout: IMG  
Source: IFK

Kurdistan's independence. Only Israel sided with the Iraqi Kurds.

In response to the referendum, Baghdad's funds and financial transfers to Kurdistan were frozen, a no-fly zone was established over Kurdistan, the mobile communication was restricted and the border crossings were announced to be put under the control of the central government. In addition, Baghdad planned the reopening of old oil pipelines bypassing the Kurdish Autonomous Region. In fact, the KRG was disenfranchised by Baghdad and turned into a provincial government without international support again. The Kurdish parliament suspended its work for two weeks in protest of Baghdad's actions. The date for the parliamentary and presidential elections in Kurdistan, which were scheduled for November 1, were postponed indefinitely. Germany also ceased its support for the Kurds on the ground ending the training program for the Peshmerga. Iran and Iraq held together a provocative military exercise in close proximity to the autonomous region of Kurdistan.

**Power struggles in Baghdad**

The grave struggles within the political elite in Baghdad intensified during the course of 2017, in particular due to external influences. Saudi Arabia for example sought to build a unified Sunni party in Iraq to install a loyal Sunni ruler in Baghdad following the parliamentary elections in spring 2018. The numerous attacks by ISIS in Baghdad, especially in the first half of 2017, damaged the image of Prime minister Abadi, who always positioned himself as an "anti-terror prime minister". Although there were regular protests in Baghdad, particularly in the first half of the year, their extent was lower than the year before. Abadi approached the influential Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in a wise foresight in order to prevail against his counterpart and rival Maliki in the planned parliamentary elections in 2018. The Yazidis formed their own party for the first time to compete in the upcoming national elections.

The numerous victories of the Popular Mobilization Forces against ISIS and the partly withdrawal of the Kurds from occupied territory outside the autonomous region strengthened the government in Baghdad. However, internal fragmentation may continue following the defeat of ISIS, and the upcoming 2018 parliamentary elections due to the ban on militia leaders to be part of the political sphere.



The Kurdish Parliament in Northern Iraq meetings ahead of the historical referendum.

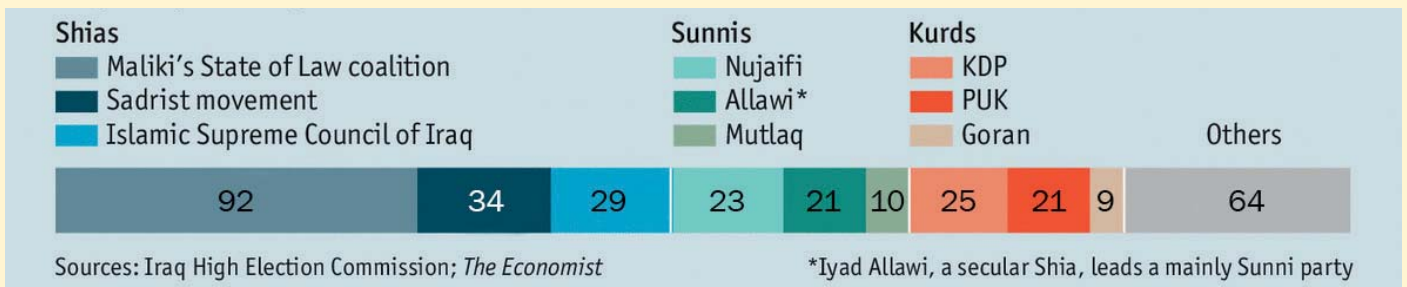
Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraqs-kurdish-parliament-backs-sept-25-independence-referendum-idUSKCN1BQ2AV>

Meanwhile, the regional elections scheduled for September this year have been postponed by Parliament and will be held in spring 2018 together with the parliamentary elections. The reason for this was, on the one hand, a dispute over the vote-counting process, and on the other hand the status of the Kirkuk and Niniveh provinces, which at that time were partly occupied by Kurds. The election of pro-Kurdish candidates in Kirkuk would have meant another loss of control of the oil-rich province for Baghdad. In the course of the protests against corruption, which have been recurrent since 2015 and are mostly organized by the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, there are repeated arrests of protesters.

**Dealing with the Popular Mobilization Forces**

Integrating the Shiite PMF into the Army in 2017 was one of the key issues. While the implementation of the PMF's full integration law into the regular Army is a thorn in the side of most Sunni, Kurdish and some Shiite personalities like Muqtada al-Sadr, most Shiite politicians are pushing for electoral votes next year in the parliamentary elections. In addition to the military issue, the integration of the PMF also has a political dimension, as per current provisions, an entry in the 2018 elections for militia leaders, who are usually also deputies, is not allowed. However, the current regulations can be circumvented if the leaders formally renounce their militias.

**Parliamentary election results and Allocation of Seats, 2014**



The election results of 2014 demonstrate a clear majority for Maliki's Shiite "State of Law Coalition".

Source: [https://cdn.static-economist.com/sites/default/files/images/2014/05/blogs/pomegranate/20140524\\_mac037.png](https://cdn.static-economist.com/sites/default/files/images/2014/05/blogs/pomegranate/20140524_mac037.png)

## Forecast

The central questions in the upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2018 will be the role of the Kurds, the admission of militia leaders to the elections and the reconciliation with Sunni forces. A prognosis for the election result is difficult to make. The fight against remaining ISIS cells, the ongoing corruption, the reintegration of former ISIS supporters and intra-ethnic tensions will determine the 2018 election year. Prime minister Abadi, who was considered a compromise candidate of the US and Iran, has to fight hard not to be replaced by his party colleague and ex-prime minister Nouri al-Maliki at the helm of Iraq in the spring 2018 elections.

The defeat of ISIS will make some PMF militias look for

other activities and Nouri al-Maliki's strong relations to Iran and to most of the militia leaders will strengthen his position in Baghdad. It is also clear that through the formal resignation of militia leaders for the purpose of a political career their influence on the respective militias will not disappear.

The end of the territorial existence of ISIS in Iraq raises new questions that have been postponed to date. At this point, the remaining ISIS cells could play a decisive role as, if they finally lose their territory, they will resort to guerrilla tactics and therefore have the potential to stir up internal Iraqi conflicts militarily, and, through propaganda. The handling of the reintegration of former ISIS sympathizers will be a sticking point in the future of Iraq.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

### Mossul

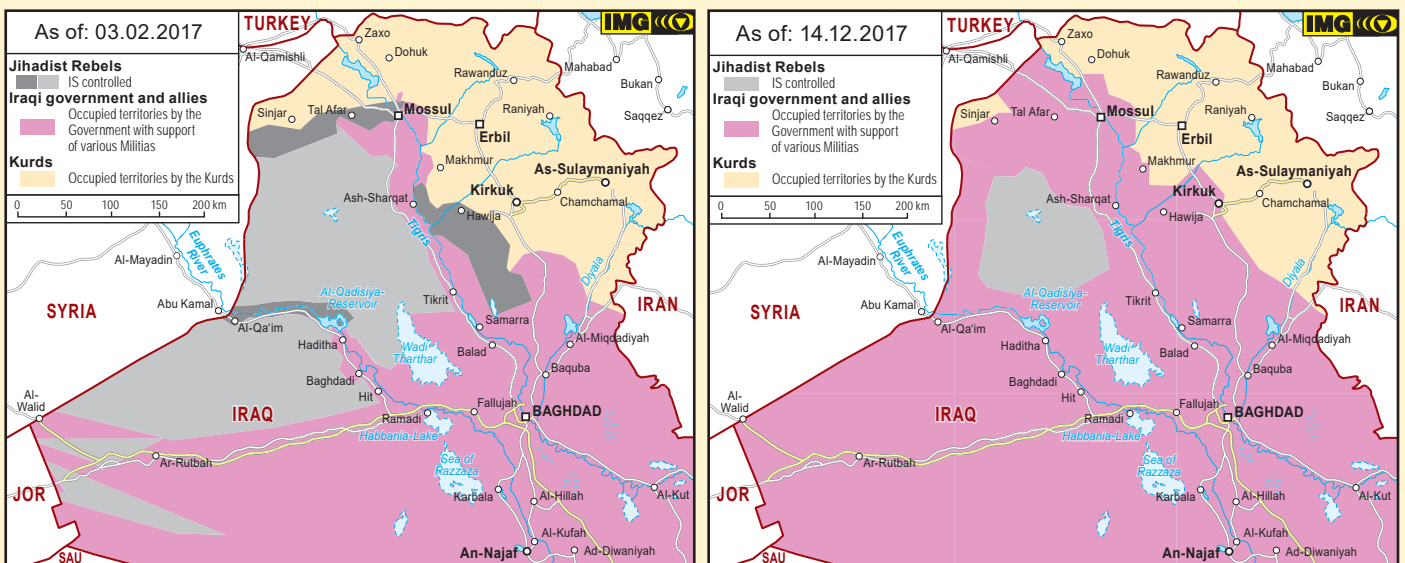
Mossul's major military campaign was propelled by strategic motives: Mosul is Iraq's second largest city, was the last major stronghold of ISIS in Iraq and the place where its leader al-Baghdadi proclaimed the caliphate in 2014. The significance of Mosul also conveys the effectiveness in which the military operation against the terrorist group encompassed the cooperation of a number of forces including the Iraqi Army; the Iraqi police; the Popular Mobilisations Forces; the Peshmerga forces and the US-led coalition. Turkey had troops in northern Iraq and Iran had sent special military advisers, and special forces though denying the latter. The victory in Mosul presented an important step of the United States in fighting terrorism in the Middle East. The PMF underscored several times their own role in the fight against ISIS. Symbolically, the offensive conveyed the strength of Shia fighters as a force to be reckoned with among Sunni-sympathetic fighters and which might pose further challenges if the Shia groups will not be resolved and integrated into the Iraqi security sector.

### Tal Afar and Hawija

The Iraqi Security Forces gained a decisive victory over ISIS in Tal Afar in northern Nineveh province. Tal Afar is particularly important as the city represents a history of major sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias, and has produced some of ISIS' senior leaders. Furthermore, Tal Afar's strategic importance is underlined by the fact that it constitutes a supply route between Mosul and Syria. The role of the Peshmerga forces in the the battle for Tal Afar was passive, however, they were able to capture a large number of ISIS fighters.

The battle in Tal Afar set the scene for the Iraqi Security Forces' offensive in Hawija, one of the last strongholds of ISIS. Given the proximity of the Peshmerga forces to Hawija, a close coordination with the Iraqi Army was necessary according to Prime Minister Abadi. However, this cooperation did not take place as in the face of the Kurdish independence referendum tensions between Erbil and Baghdad already existed. The disagreement concerned the direction

### Comparison of territorial control of all actors from February and December 2017



Military and Iraqi Security Forces have been able to reclaim major cities in Iraq and seriously deter the threat of ISIS to the point where Prime minister Abadi has declared victory over the terrorist group. The Mosul offensive came to a successful conclusion. Kirkuk, which has long been intended by the Kurds to be part of an autonomous area, is also under Iraqi government control with the Peshmenga retreating.

Layout: IMG

from which each side should attack, as the largely Sunni population of Hawija did not favour the involvement of Shi-ite forces in the operation. In the months leading up to the Hawija offensive, ISIS had been carrying out deadly operations against both the Peshmerga forces and civilians in Kirkuk.

### Kirkuk

Following the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum held in September, the oil rich province of Kirkuk had become an even greater contentious issue between the Kurds and the Iraqi government. Shortly after ISIS was defeated in Hawija, capturing Kirkuk city within a very short period of time was due to the retreat of Kurdish militias from the city and gave the government in Baghdad greater territorial control close to the border with Kurdish territories. A major part of the province of Kirkuk, where there is a Kurdish minority, was taken by ISF with hardly any fire exchanges. Symbolically, having Kirkuk under its control had reiterated the government's view on the referendum and thus delivered a blow to the Kurds. Furthermore, the battle of Kirkuk soured the relations between the Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmergas who had, until then, proved a crucial player in battling ISIS in Iraq. Currently some territories which lie outside the Kurdish autonomous region are still in the hand of Kurdish forces, however Prime minister Abadi announced to conquer them soon.

### Sinjar

Following massacres towards Yazidis in 2014 by ISIS, and despite the latter being driven out from much of the territory in Sinjar, tensions remained high between the PKK and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which regards Sinjar as part of Iraqi Kurdistan and sees the PKK as a local political rival. In 2017 though, tensions escalated as the Rojava Peshmerga, Syrian Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdish National Council, became embroiled in a battle with PKK-affiliated militias in Khanasor, close to the Iraqi-Syrian border. A ceasefire has been reached between the PKK and the KNC, yet there is insecurity in the area as reports emerge of the Rojava Peshmerga having good relations to Turkish intelligence services which are at odds with the PKK and Yazidis.



Former Kurdish President Barzani (2005-2017) fought for an autonomous Kurdish area and regularly called for the referendum to take effect.

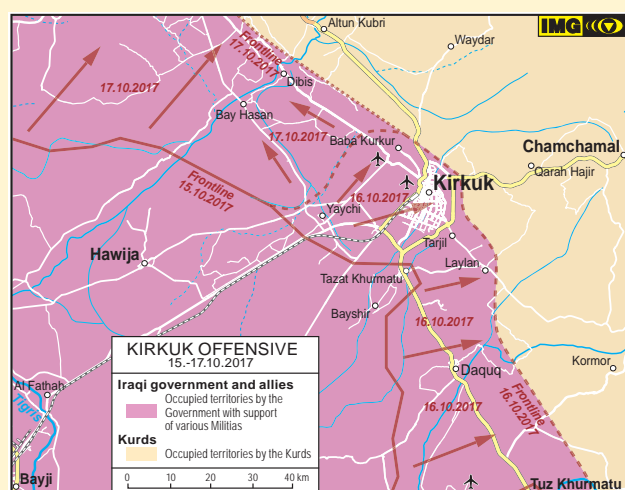
Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>



The Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul was a famous place of worship for Sunni Iraqis, but from where the Islamic State caliphate was launched and is thus symbolically important for the terrorist group. Prime minister Abadi called its destruction as ISIS' "declaration of defeat".

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

### Kirkuk Offensive



The Kirkuk Offensive was surprisingly short as the Iraqi government reclaimed oil-rich Kirkuk from the Peschmerga forces that protect Kurdish-controlled territories.

Layout: IMG  
Source: IFK

### Forecast

The ISF will look to improve the security control around areas that the government had initially lost to ISIS, while dealing with the possibility of the re-emergence of terrorism that may prolong destabilisation in the country. Tensions between the PMF, Sunni and Kurdish factions over territorial control in Iraq may continue under the incitement of external players, leading to insecurity and increased protection issues of civilians through the reconstruction period. The future of Shia militias in Iraq, supported by Iran, will play a crucial role in a 'post-IS-Iraq', yet, militias that are largely formed of Iraqi youth will continue to be one of the few sources of income, mobility and prestige in the fractured state.

**Humanitarian challenges in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The majority of Syrian refugees (over 60%) in Iraq remain outside camp settings, living in host communities in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) alongside roughly 900,000 Iraqi IDPs, many of whom have been displaced for over 2.5 years due to the ongoing conflict. Consequently, public services and infrastructure, including for health, education water supply, and sanitation in the KRG remained critically overstretched throughout the year. To make matters worse, an ongoing economic downturn in the KRG resulted in limited national resources and partial or irregular pay for civil servants (teachers, health workers etc.).

**An overstretched school system**

With tens of thousands of school-aged Syrian refugee children, hundreds of thousands internally displaced Iraqi children and the existing host community children, the formal school system continued to be overcrowded throughout 2017. The prolonged economic downturn in Iraq resulted in a shortage of teachers and ongoing non/partial-payment of teacher salaries, shortages of learning spaces and replenishment of education materials. Reasons for school non-attendance or dropout included frequent movement between different locations in the KRG, the child’s role in supporting household income (child labor) and health issues. Additional concern in this regard was limited transportation to school, necessary to ensure safe travels in areas under conflict. The parallel system whereby both Kurdish and Arabic language curricula were taught in separate schools in the KRG in the beginning of the year was revised and starting with September Syrian children became eligible for enrolment in Kurdish medium schools in host

communities, supporting a transition to more durable solutions and promoting integration of Syrian refugee children into Kurdish schools.

**Limited Refugee Camp Capacities**

The lack of livelihoods opportunities in urban areas resulted in an increased interest in non-camp to camp relocation. However, refugee camp capacities are limited, leading to extensive waiting lists. About 38% of Syrian refugees in Iraq reside in nine camps in the KRG. Routine immunization services (against measles and polio), vitamins supplementation or supplementary nutrition dose were provided in refugee camps alongside children growth monitoring services and treatment in cases of malnutrition. In order to reduce child mortality, additional neonate monitoring and parental healthcare counseling were provided as well as infant and young child feeding counseling sessions.

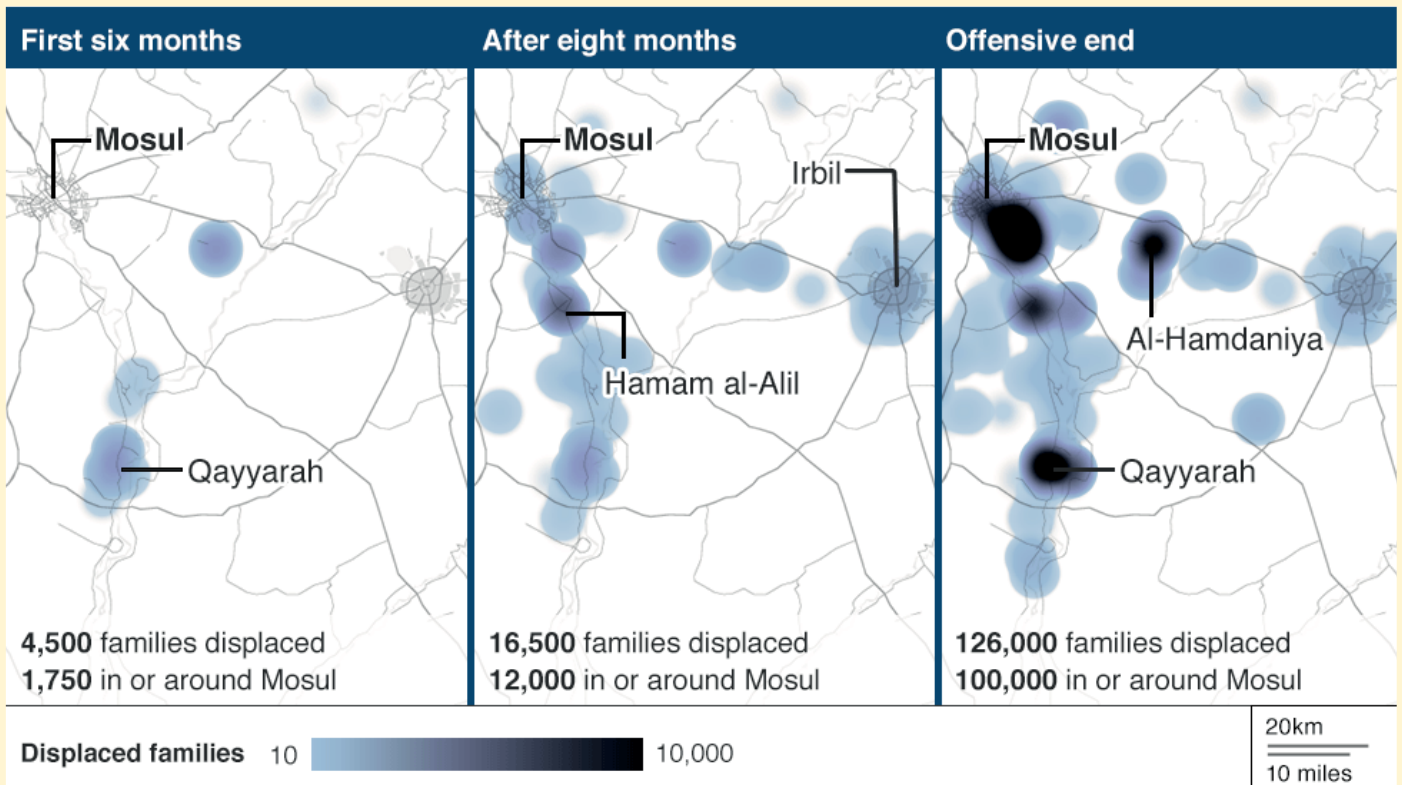
**Outbreak of diseases**

Although the last major outbreak of cholera occurred in late 2015, the disease is endemic in Iraq and several cases have been confirmed in 2017. In order to ensure the populations’ health, consistent water quality monitoring was arranged, water purification measures were taken and hygiene promotion campaigns were conducted in affected or at risk locations (such as Baghdad, Najaf, and Wassit) by UNICEF and partners.

**Military offensives aggravate the refugee situation**

The military offensive initiated by the Iraqi Government to retake Mosul city in the beginning of 2017 resulted in a further large-scale displacement of Iraqis from conflict

**The humanitarian crisis during the Mosul Offensive**



This map is showing how military developments in Mossul affected humanitarian displacement during the Mossul Offensive from 17 October 2016 until 9 July 2017.

Source: BBC News

locations into other parts of the country. The KRG independence referendum was followed by further offensives to retake parts of Kirkuk and in several restrictions on movement between the KRG territories and federal Iraq, particularly for NGO staff. Consequently, and due to uncertainty about internal border procedures, UNICEF missions between the KRG and federal areas were suspended in the last week of September.



Refugees receive non-food items at a distribution point in Dohuk, northern Iraq, from the European Commission Humanitarian Organization (ECHO).

Source: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/eu\\_echo/15329973112](https://www.flickr.com/photos/eu_echo/15329973112)



The humanitarian situation in Iraq since the war led to an extravagant amount of Iraqis of all backgrounds become refugees and consequently be forced to relocate to camps

Source: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/KawergoskCampProfile30Jan.2014.pdf>

### Forecast

While the international community provided significant monetary support throughout the year, the combined pressures of the large-scale internal displacement crisis, the ongoing conflict in some areas and the implications on the national budget, underfunding had undeniably affected the capacity of the UN and its partners to deliver the necessary humanitarian support in 2017. The humanitarian situation in Iraq in 2018 will undoubtedly be directly affected by the political and military state in the country, specifically with regard to the KRG regions. Despite internal Iraqi concerns and persistent funding gap, the foreseeable termination of the Syrian war leaves room for a cautious optimism and the planning for gradual return of Syrian refugees.



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