

Topical Note
Iraq: The situation in Ninewa province

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SUMMARY

ISIL took control of most of Ninewa province in the period from June to August 2014. The provincial capital of Mosul was taken first. Iraqi security forces laid down their weapons and fled, and many soldiers were captured and then killed. ISIL violence has primarily affected the minority population and the Shiites. Only Sunni Muslims are considered to have the right faith, and the majority population in Ninewa are Sunni Arabs. However, individuals who are disloyal to ISIL are also heavily targeted.

From August, the Iraqi army received air support from a US-led international coalition. This prepared the ground for Kurdish defense forces to recapture large areas from ISIL. These areas are still not safe as ISIL constantly challenge the Kurdish military there.

There are virtually no minorities left in Ninewa. About half of the minority population has sought refuge in KRI, while others have gone to Southern Iraq or other provinces in Central Iraq.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The violence in Iraq increased significantly in the course of 2014. Since the invasion in 2003, only 2006 and 2007 saw more fatalities than last year (IBC 2015). The casualty figures were highest in Baghdad, but Anbar, Salah al-Din and Ninewa were also amongst the hardest hit provinces. According to Iraq Body Count (IBC 2015), 80 percent of all conflict-related killings of civilians (including police officers) took place in these four provinces.

ISIL's takeover of power in large parts of Sunni-dominated Iraq from June and over the summer explains most of the increase in violence, but the conditions were already very poor in many parts of the country, including before summer 2014.

According to IBC (2015), 17,049 civilians lost their lives in Iraq in the course of 2014. IBC's estimate for the number of killed soldiers and people belonging to other armed groups is between 4,000 and 30,000. Another source, Antiwar.com (Griffis 2015a), specifies 16,229 civilian casualties, including police and security forces, and 30,634 armed men killed. The Iraqi government on their side specifies 15,538 civilians and members of security forces killed, while the UN has reported 12,282 civilians killed (Al Alam 2015a; UNAMI 2015).

The violence is characterised by fighting between ISIL and pro-government forces, by road and car bombs, targeted assassinations and outright executions. The number of suicide bombers in Iraq has more than double compared with 2013, from 98 to 271 in 2014 (Harel 2015).¹

This report will explain the security situation in Ninewa province, situated northwest in Iraq. Ninewa borders Syria to the west, the Kurdish autonomous provinces of Dohuk and Erbil to the north and northeast, Salah al-Din to the southeast and Anbar to the south.

This report is largely based on open web-based sources and partially on information obtained in an Iraq conference arranged by the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies in Beirut and subsequent information-gathering trip to Amman in November 2014. The information access to the area is limited due to ISIL's strong media control and it must be noted that we do not have a complete picture of the situation in the areas ISIL controls.

2. THE SECURITY SITUATION

After a four-day offensive, ISIL took control of the provincial capital of Mosul on 10 June. Columns of ISIL vehicles came in from the Syrian border, while other ISIL militants and groups who supported them were already in place in the city. The Iraqi security forces, including Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers, threw down their weapons and fled without making any appreciable resistance (Chulov 2014).

After having taken Mosul, ISIL extended its control over most of the province over the course of the summer and southwards towards Baghdad.

¹ The researchers behind the report from the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies believe this is a conservative estimate, because they only have reported on events where they could find at least two sources.

Even though the government forces did not actively fight ISIL in the days the offensive lasted, it has been reported that civilian casualties were high during these days. Dozens of people were killed and injured in the air raid in al-Rashidiya on the outskirts of Mosul on 6 July. Five men were killed in a grenade attack on 7 June in the al-Sahha district in Mosul. This is documented by Amnesty International (2014b).

It was also reported that Iraqi soldiers had killed many prisoners without trial and before they withdrew from Tal Afar and Mosul. The night of 15 June, they killed around 50 Sunni Muslim prisoners in a prison belonging to the government's anti-terrorist unit in Qala'a in Tal Afar (Amnesty International 2014b). A similar thing occurred in a prison in Hay al-Danadan district in Mosul on 9 June, according to Amnesty International (2014b). Then around 20 Sunni Muslim prisoners were killed and many others injured, either during abuse or as a result of hand grenades being thrown into the cells.

See this map from ISW for an overview of the areas ISIL has control over, where they attack and where they have local support: <http://iswiraq.blogspot.no/2015/01/isis-sanctuary-map-january-15-2015.html#!/2015/01/isis-sanctuary-map-january-15-2015.html>

ISIL managed in a relatively short time to take control over about 1/3 of Iraq and on 29 June 2014, the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself Khalif of the Islamic State, which also includes part of Syria.

The entire Ninewa province is included in ISIL's caliphate, except for the districts Akre and Sheikan, which are *de facto* under the Kurdish autonomous government's control.

Opposition to the government in Baghdad had been strong in Mosul since the change of regime in 2003. Remaining Ba'th members and Sunni militant groups, including ISIL's precursors, Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), had operated in Mosul for several years. Over the past few years, AQI and later ISI had great influence in the city.

It is believed that many within the Sunni Muslim Arabic local population wanted to welcome ISIL's takeover of power, in order to escape what they perceived as Baghdad's clammy grip of power over the province. The local population completely lacked confidence in the Shiite-dominated army and police (Mustafa Shibib, Iraqi analyst in OCHA, lecture at Iraq conference in Beirut, November 2014).

The Iraqi forces got air assistance in late August from US and other foreign forces. The coalition's bombing of ISIL's positions helped the army retake several areas. In Ninewa, it is now the Kurdish defence forces, the Peshmerga, who primarily represent the Iraqi army and who are fighting ISIL in Ninewa. The Peshmerga have also incorporated volunteer Yezidis and Assyrians in their forces in Sinjar and around Mosul.

Since the end of August, the coalition has conducted hundreds of air raids against ISIL. This has weakened ISIL's ability to keep what they have taken and in October, it was reported that several of the group's leaders had left Mosul.

As a result of this, Kurdish forces have managed to liberate several villages and small cities, but the situation is still unresolved since ISIL has continued to attack the Kurdish positions in these areas. The fighting is happening on several fronts, both in the Mahmour district, located near Erbil, and in areas west of Mosul, which are strategically important for ISIL's supply lines into Syria. The front moves back and forth here.

By the end of January 2015, ISIL still has control over the important cities of Mosul and Tal Afar, while the Kurdish forces have recaptured several villages in the Ninewa plains. However, the recaptured areas are still vulnerable to attacks from ISIL and are therefore referred to as disputed by ISW (see map from ISW from January 2013: <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2015-01-13%20Control%20Zone%20Map.pdf>).

According to the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, the Iraqi forces have recaptured an area of 700 square kilometres from ISIL after the coalition started bombing ISIL's positions (BBC 2014a).

According to Iraq Body Count (2015), 2,367 civilians were killed in Ninewa in 2014. This is more than double from 2013.

Below is an account of the situation as it appeared in the beginning of February 2015 in the most important cities and areas which either are, or have been, under ISIL's control.

2.1 MOSUL

ISIL took control of Mosul, including important institutions such as the governor's office, prisons and TV stations, on 10 June 2014. The governor fled to Erbil in the Kurdish autonomous region (KRI). ISIL also took over Badoush prison with around 3,000 inmates. About half managed to escape, while ISIL took control of about 1,500 of them. Of these, about 600 were killed, most were Shiites, but there were also Kurds and Yezidis amongst them (HRW 2014c). Sunni Muslim Arabs and Christians were abducted and most were later released.

Because the government in Baghdad generally enjoys little confidence amongst Sunni Muslims, there were many Mosul residents who welcomed the change in power (participants at the Iraq conference in Beirut, conversations November 2014). From the first period, there are reports from Mosul where many were out in the streets and apparently hailed the new rulers. However, there were quickly just as many reports which witnessed fear and fleeing.

See Landinfo's report from September (Landinfo 2014a) on the immediate security consequences in Mosul after the takeover of power.

ISIL immediately got going conforming the community. In Mosul, they rule with an iron fist based on their self-defined Sharia-based laws. Women are forced to wear full veils over their hair and face (niqab or burqa) and the sale of cigarettes, alcohol, movies and music are prohibited (Shamdeen 2014; Lefler 2014). In December last year, when ISIL had come under heavy military pressure, the people's mobility and communication abilities were further weakened by shutting down most of the mobile network and Internet (Morris 2015; BBC 2014b). Measures have also been introduced to control the inhabitants' freedom of movement. All entry and exit to and from the province is controlled by checkpoints. In order to be allowed to leave the city, one must reportedly place a guarantee that they will return (Khodr 2015).

Critical pressure was quickly cracked down on by ISIL and much of the information from Mosul has been disseminated via blogs and other testimony by phone or e-mail to journalists outside ISIL's areas. As the brutality spread, dissatisfaction with the new rulers increased, including amongst Sunni Muslims, who in the first phase had a positive response to the new regime. The restrictions on the mobile network and people's access to the Internet has led to few critical voices being heard.

Amongst the first affected by the unification were non-Muslim minorities such as Christians and Yazidis. These fled from Mosul after threats that they would be killed if they did not convert to Islam. Shiite Muslim Turkmen and Shabak were also subjected to ISIL's brutal violence on the basis of their religion. Police and soldiers risked being executed unless they signed that they no longer supported the government in Baghdad. Shiite Muslims within the security forces in Mosul were executed immediately.

The population's freedom of movement has been restricted. Until November, it was possible for the local population to move in and out of ISIL's area and many went to the Kurdish region (KRI) or Kirkuk to buy provisions. However, in November the group sent out information that people who did not return to their homes within ten days would lose their homes (Rudaw 2014a).

At the same time, there were reports of increased crime in Mosul, particularly at night, such as burglary in shops and other establishments. This is reportedly due to ISIL's police not patrolling at night.

The Iraqi army has not yet attempted to retake Mosul, but the US-led coalition has conducted a number of bombings against ISIL's positions in the outskirts of the city. In January this year, the coalition released fliers where the population was asked to stay away from ISIL's installations and positions in the city. This could be a sign that the bombing of ISIL's locations in Mosul is being stepped up. A counteroffensive against ISIL is thus expected, but it is uncertain when Iraqi forces will be ready for this mission. According to Prime Minister Abadi, an offensive will be begun before the summer (Al Alam 2015d).

Mosul is thus, for the time being, still in ISIL's hands. The air bombing affects both the civilian population and ISIL, because ISIL uses civilian buildings such as schools, hospitals, religious buildings and other public buildings.

There is also fighting between ISIL and tribal militias. By 20 January, there must of been fighting between ISIL and the Al-Gehaish clan in the Shura area south of Mosul, according to a security source Landinfo receives daily updates from, but who will not be quoted.

On 23 January, the Kurdish forces must have shot missiles at ISIL targets in the centre of the city for the first time (Coles 2015). Many ISIL fighters must have lost their lives. Unconfirmed reports also say that three civilians were killed in the attack.

2.2 TAL AFAR

Tal Afar is a city with a Turkmen majority population, located 50 kilometres west of Mosul. Most Turkmen in this city are Shiite Muslims. After ISIL took control of the city on 16 June 2014, around 90 percent of the Turkmen population fled from the city, while others were abducted or killed (HRW 2014a; HRW 2014b).

The minority population in the villages around Tal Afar suffered the same fate as the city's inhabitants. Shiite Muslim, Christian and Yezidis religious shrines have been destroyed by ISIL.

There are few reports on what is happening to the Sunni Muslim local population, but there is reason to assume that they are treated the same way as Sunni Muslims in other places under ISIL's control. I.e. people who show resistance to ISIL are punished severely, while others must submit.

There is constant fighting between ISIL and Kurdish forces in the areas around the city of Tal Afar, both in Khara'ej, 6 km northwest of Tal Afar, and in al-Aiyadhiya, 12 km northwest of the city (Security source Landinfo receives daily updates from, 7 January 2015). The Iraqi air force has also conducted air raids against ISIL's positions in al-Aiyadhiya in January (18 January).

Kurdish forces have captured several of the villages around Tal Afar, while ISIL still controls the city itself (ISW blog, 13 January 2015).

Kurdish forces conducted a major offensive on 21 January which led to ISIL becoming more isolated in Tal Afar (ISW blog, 21 January 2015). Therefore, it is an open question how long the group will manage to keep hold of the city.

2.3 SINJAR

ISIL took Sinjar and the surrounding villages in August. The city, which at this time had a population of about 80,000 inhabitants, had a majority of Yezidis (65 percent), but also Kurds (about 20 percent) and Sunni Muslim Arabs (12-15 percent) living there (Kurds from Sinjar, participant at the Iraq conference in Beirut, conversation November 2014).

Thousands of Yezidis fled to the Sinjar mountain, others were abducted and/or killed by ISIL (Amnesty International 2014a & b; HRW 2014b). During autumn, Kurdish and other Iraqi forces, with the coalition's assistance, managed to recapture parts of the city, but there is still ongoing fighting between Kurdish forces and ISIL, both inside the city and in the district in general. According to a security firm which Landinfo receives daily updates from, Kurdish forces as of January 2015 have taken control of about 25 percent of the city in the eastern part.

It is assumed that the vast majority of Yezidis have fled the city. During the fleeing, hundreds (the exact number is unknown) were arrested and abducted by ISIL.² Many were killed, but some found their way to safer areas in KRI. Hundreds of Yezidis sought refuge in the Sinjar mountain and were stranded there for many months before Kurdish forces in mid-December managed to secure the roads north of the Kurdish-controlled areas.

Since late August, the international coalition has conducted several bombings against ISIL's positions from the air, while Kurdish forces fight on the ground. ISIL has lost ground in this district, but has not been driven out completely. As of the end of January 2015, there was still fighting between ISIL and Kurdish forces (ISW blog, 2015). The situation in Sinjar is thus unclear.

Yezidis in the Sinjar district feel betrayed by their Arab neighbours, who they had previously lived in peaceful co-existence with. They claim that their Arab neighbours participated in the attacks against the Yezidis. In the village of Haran, near the Syrian border (which previously had a mixed local population), many houses owned by Arab residents were set ablaze in January this year. This is reportedly not due to ongoing fighting in the area, but rather is due to retaliation (Abdulla 2015).

² For a report on the Yezidis's flight from Sinjar, see Barber 2014.

2.4 ZUMMAR

Zummar is all the way north in Ninewa province, near the border of Dohuk province, southwest of the Mosul dam and north of Tal Afar. The city is strategically important in the sense that it is located near the main road between Mosul and Syria. ISIL took control of this city in early August, but since then, the power has shifted between Kurdish forces and ISIL. The Kurds managed to recapture the area on 1 September, but in mid-October ISIL took back control after the Kurds withdrew.

In late-October, the US-led coalition conducted bombings on Zummar, which laid the ground for a new Kurdish offensive against ISIL. After first having regained control in the villages outside the city (Jaziri, Sinana Jadid, Boti, Grikafir, Girber, Kani Shirin, and Girbakir), they managed to drive ISIL out of Zummar (Live Leak 2014).

Control of Zummar gives the Kurdish forces a better ability to attack ISIL in Sinjar and Tal Afar, which is located along ISIL's other supply lines to Syria.

However, ISIL still threatens the Kurdish forces in Zummar. In January, ISIL conducted several attacks against Kurdish forces in villages in the outskirts of the city, first in Sahlj, and then in Hugna on 9 January and in the Salihiya area on 20 January (Security source Landinfo receives daily security updates from, 10 and 21 January 2015). The Kurdish forces, with the help of the coalition's air forces, reportedly managed to resist the attacks.

2.5 RABIA

ISIL tried early on to take control of the border city of Rabia, but met resistance from the Iraqi army. The situation was unclear for a long time, but in early October, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, in cooperation with Syrian Kurdish forces, managed to take back control of the city. According to ISW (blog 2015), it is currently Iraqi Kurdish forces and local tribal militias who have control of the Iraqi border city.

2.6 THE MOSUL DAM

The Mosul dam is the most important power and water source in northwestern Iraq and is therefore strategically important for both parties (Milner 2014). For the same reason, this has been one of the most important battlegrounds. On 7 August, ISIL took control of the dam, but over the month, Kurdish and Iraqi forces, with the help of US air strikes, managed to recapture it (BBC 2014a). However, ISIL is still conducting attacks against the Iraqi army (ISF) and Kurdish forces in areas near the dam, most recently on 14 January (Security source Landinfo receives daily security updates from, 15 January 2015). So far the state forces have managed to keep control of the dam (ISW blog, 2015).

2.7 BASHIKA

Bashika is primarily an Assyrian city, but Yezidis, Shabak and Arabs also live there. The city is only a few kilometres east of Mosul. ISIL took control of Bashika and the surrounding region early on, but the Peshmerga, with air support from the US-led coalition, liberated the city and the villages around it in fighting with ISIL between 5-7 September (ISW blog, 5 September 2014).

On 24 November, ISIL attacked again, but the Peshmerga forces managed to resist the attacks (ISW blog, 24 November 2014).

The ongoing fighting in Bashika and the situation there is uncertain (ISW blog, 13 January 2015).

ISIL reportedly executed six of its own this year due to accusations that they had given information to the Iraqi army (ISF) (Security source Landinfo receives daily security updates from, 7 January 2015).

2.8 QAYYARA

Control in the Qayyara subdistrict, south of Mosul, has been changing hands since ISIL first took control there in August 2014. Most recently on 10 January, ISIL attacked the villages Dwizat Tahtani, Dwizat Fuqani and Tal al-Sheir (ISW blog, 11 January 2015).

Local tribes have challenged ISIL in this area, and in January 2015 ISIL executed four members of the Al-Jabour clan and threatened to execute ten more (Security source Landinfo receives daily security updates from, 13 January 2015).

In mid-January, ISIL must have imposed a curfew in Qayyara as a result of an offensive against Iraqi government forces in the area (AIN 2015).

Although the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior reopened the local police station in Tel al-Sher in Qayyara on 6 January this year, recent battles in the area have shown that the situation in Qayyara is uncertain (ISW blog, 2015).

2.9 BAKHDIDA (ASSYRIAN) / HAMDANIYA (ARABIC) / QARAKOSH (TURKISH)

This is a primarily Christian city located about 30 kilometres east of Mosul in the direction of Erbil. The situation there is uncertain at the time of this writing. Kurdish forces, in cooperation with a Christian defence force, managed to defend the city against ISIL's attacks in June 2014 (Mothlag 2014). Many of the inhabitants fled to Erbil, but returned after a short time. However, on 6 August, the Kurdish forces left the city when ISIL threatened an offensive again. The local population was then forced to flee after they were given a few hours to decide whether they would convert to Islam or flee (Christian Iraqi refugees in Amman, conversation November 2014). The city was emptied of residents within a few hours.

After the Kurdish forces received air support from the US and their allies, they managed to recapture several cities and villages in the Ninewa plains, but the situation in Bakhdida is still uncertain. Most recently on 7 January, there was fighting between ISIL and Peshmerga forces in this district. Many ISIL fighters were killed and the Peshmerga forces retook control of nearby Wardak, according to ISW (blog, 8-9 January 2015).

2.10 GWER AND MAHMOUR

Gwer is a small city southeast of Mosul, located along the Great Zab river, which divides Ninewa province from Mahmour district in Erbil province. The city of Mahmour is located a few kilometres further southeast. Gwer and Mahmour are strategically located just a few miles south of the KRI capital of Erbil and in the vicinity of several oil fields.

In an offensive in early August which caught the Peshmerga unawares, ISIL captured these cities and several of the villages around it. ISIL thus suddenly constituted a direct threat to Erbil. ISIL's conquest of Mahmour and Gwer were considered to be factors that caused the US forces to start air strikes against ISIL's positions in late August 2014. With the help of these, Kurdish forces managed to regain control of Mahmour and Gwer in August, although ISIL still held sway in some of the surrounding villages.

The fighting in this area flared up again on 10 January this year, when ISIL fighters crossed Great Zab river with boats and attacked the Kurdish forces there. The Peshmerga managed to repel the attacks. Twenty-four Kurdish soldiers were killed in the fighting, while over 100 ISIL fighters were killed in the US-led air strike in Gwer and the surrounding villages, including in Sultan Abdullah and Zawya, which ISIL attacked in the days afterwards (Rudaw 2015c; Prothero 2015; ISW blog, 11 January 2015).

There have been reports about kidnapping of civilians during the attack on Gwer in January and one person was reported killed (Griffis 2015c).

Although Kurdish forces seem to have the upper hand in Gwer and Mahmour after this, the situation in the area is still uncertain, because new fighting may flare up again.

3. MILITARY PLAYERS

The military players can be divided into two main groups, the government forces and Kurdish Peshmerga on the one side and armed insurgent groups, primarily ISIL, on the other.

The government forces include the Iraqi army (ISF), the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, most of which are included in ISF, police forces and also a special forces unit which works specifically with counterterrorism (Counterterrorism Service). Amongst other things, this special force assists the army in clearing mines and booby traps which ISIL has left in areas they have abandoned.

Kurdish forces from Syria and Turkey (PYD and PKK, respectively) have assisted ISF in some operations, including in Sinjar and Rabia.

In August, the government army got assistance from a US-led international coalition based in Erbil and Baghdad. In addition to training Iraqi soldiers, the coalition has conducted over 1,000 air strikes against ISIL in Iraq (BBC 2015). So far, they have not sent ground forces into Ninewa.

Shiite Muslim militias, which in other places fight on the government's side against the insurgents, have probably not operated in Ninewa. Rather, a Sunni Muslim anti-ISIL armed group has been created, the Revolutionaries for the Liberation of Mosul Brigade, which also participates in the fighting against ISIL on the government's side.

In August 2014, an Assyrian force was established consisting of about 200 volunteers, who will assist the government army when it is time to liberate Mosul from ISIL (Rudaw 2014c). The force is currently under retraining in the Kurdish-controlled area. Most of them is believed to have had previous experience in the army.

Yezidi militiamen have also fought alongside the Iraqi Kurdish forces in Ninewa (Vatanka & Shamsulddin 2015).

On the insurgent side, ISIL is the primary military player. ISIL has a preponderance of Iraqi fighters, but there are also foreign fighters amongst them.

A group called The Men of the Naqshabandi Army is another insurgent group which has fought on ISIL's side in Ninewa, particularly in the initial phase of the takeover of power. This group shared ISIL's goal of liberating Mosul and Ninewa from the Iraqi army, but the cooperation has reportedly become strained later due to power struggles and differing visions for Ninewa's future governance.

There are also several smaller militant groups which have more or less allied with ISIL. It may be assumed that there have been shifting alliances between these various groups, but in the period after June 2014, it appears that ISIL has cracked down on all militant groups and individuals who do not show loyalty to ISIL.

4. POPULATION COMPOSITION

4.1 ARABS

The majority population in Ninewa is Arab Sunni Muslims. They dominate in Mosul and the southern part of the province, but also live scattered in cities and villages which have a mixed ethnic and religious population.

4.2 KURDS

The Kurds constitute the second largest population group in Ninewa. The majority of them are Sunni Muslims. Most of the Kurds live in Mosul, Sinjar and the Ninewa plains, including in cities and villages which have a heterogeneous population.

The Kurds in Ninewa speak the Kurdish dialect Badini, which corresponds to the Turkish Kurdish dialect Kurmanji.

4.3 ASSYRIANS

Assyrians are a Christian population group which has been living in Mosul and the Ninewa plains since the beginning of Christianity. The majority belong to the Chaldean Catholic Church, while others belong to the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorians) or the Syrian Orthodox Church (Jacobites).

The largest Christian settlements in the Ninewa plains are located in Bakhdida (Hamdaniya in Arabic / Qarakosh in Kurdish) and in Tel Keppe (Assyrian) / Tel Keif (Arabic). Bakhdida, Bartallah, Bashiqa and Karamlish are located in the Hamdaniya district east of Mosul, while Tel Keppe, Alqosh, Batnaya and Sharafiya are located in the Tel Keif district slightly north of Mosul, along the main road to Dohuk.

The Assyrians have their own Assyrian language, but many also speak Arabic, depending on where they live.

4.4 TURKMEN

Turkmen in Ninewa province have kept to Tal Afar and the surrounding villages. The majority of Turkmen in Tal Afar are Shiite Muslims.

Turkmen also live in villages in the vicinity of Mosul, such as Guba and Shireekhan (HRW 2014a). A majority of Turkmen in Iraq in general are Sunni Muslims.

Turkmen in Ninewa are often bilingual or trilingual and speak Kurdish and/or Arabic in addition to a Turkmen dialect, depending on where they live.

4.5 YEZIDIS

The Yezidis are a non-Muslim Kurdish³ minority who, in Ninewa, primarily live in the Sinjar district and in villages in the Ninewa plains, such as in Ain Sifne, Bashiqa and Bahzan.⁴ Like many other Muslims in Iraq, ISIL sees the Yezidis as infidels and devil worshippers, because a central figure in Yezidis belief, the peacock angel Melek Taus, is mistakenly considered by outsiders to be Satan. Because of this, ISIL has declared that Muslims can legally take Yezidis women as slaves, which they have also done (Amnesty International 2014b).

Most Yezidis speak Kurdish (Badini). The exception is the Yezidis in Bashika and Bahzan, who have Arabic as a main language.

4.6 SHABAK

The Shabak are another minority who have traditionally lived in Ninewa. Their villages are located east of Mosul. The majority of Shabak belong to a religious sect which has much in common with Shia Islam, while a minority are Sunni Muslims. The Shabak have their own language, but many also speak either Arabic or Kurdish, depending on where they live.

4.7 OTHERS

There are also some smaller minorities in Ninewa, such as Kaka'i and Bahai.

The Kaka'i are a religious group which is characterised by most as a branch of Shia Islam. In Iran, the members of this group are called Ahl-e-Haq. After 2003, it seems most of the Iraqi Kaka'i have either fled to the KRI provinces or left the country.

The Bahai constitute a small group in Iraq. Their religion is not officially recognised in Iraq. There is little information on this group in Ninewa.

Another Iraqi minority are the Sabeen-Mandaeans, but it is unlikely there are any communities of Sabeen-Mandaeans in Ninewa, because this group traditionally comes from Southern Iraq. They currently either live in the south, in Baghdad or they have sought refuge in KRI.

It must be assumed that these minorities are subjected to similar violence and pressure as other minorities under ISIL's rule.

³ The Yezidis are divided on the opinion of whether they are ethnic Kurds or constitute their own ethnic group.

⁴ A geographical overview of Yezidi settlements in Ninewa is found here:
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?dg=feature&msa=0&mid=zh9dRNDnWnfY.kCYlwYIQ9kMc>

5. VULNERABLE GROUPS

During the seven months ISIL has ruled Mosul, the regime has become stricter and stricter. Islamic laws were introduced almost immediately, but while in the beginning there was no testimony of strict enforcement of all laws, capital punishment and public executions have become common. Adultery, homosexuality, unseemly apparel and other immoral behaviour are severely punished according to strict interpretations of Sharia law (*hudud*).

5.1 POLICE AND SOLDIERS (ISF)

The Iraqi security forces are amongst the most vulnerable in ISIL's operative areas throughout Iraq. In Mosul, around 2,000 Shiite Muslim police officers and prisoners were killed by ISIL during the takeover of power (HRW 2014c).

In an early phase, Sunni Muslim police officers got an offer to sign a declaration that they repented for having worked for the Iraqi government in order to save their own life. Many signed such a declaration, but several were later executed anyway.

The police and ISF soldiers who laid down their weapons when ISIL took power in Mosul were also executed if it was suspected that they were infiltrators and still working for the Iraqi or Kurdish government. In early January this year, five former soldiers were executed for various types of offenses (Griffis 2015a).

On 17 January 2015, the Iraqi news agency NINA (2015b) reported that the houses of 11 police officers who had previously participated in a training camp used by a force which will assist the army in liberating Mosul were blown up by ISIL in Hammam al-Aleel and Qayyara, south of Mosul.

According to the Peshmerga Department of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), 727 Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers were killed and 3,564 were wounded in fighting between June and mid-December (AFP 2014). Not all of these losses occurred in Ninewa province.

5.2 MINORITIES

In addition to the police and soldiers, minorities were amongst the first who were to suffer the burden of ISIL's brutal violence. Abductions, executions, forced conversion to Islam, arrests, looting and trashing of houses, sexual violence and other violence are well documented in the media and international organisations. The UN wrote in a statement on 28 June (UN Iraq 2014) that ISIS had performed outright executions and abductions of Shiites, Shabak, Yezidis, Assyrians and Turkmen. Amnesty International has described in reports from July (2014a & b) how ISIL has targeted Iraqi minorities and Human Rights Watch has described ISIL's misdeeds against minorities in reports from 28 June and 19 July and later in their annual report for 2014, which was published in January 2015 (HRW 2014a & b; HRW 2015).

Since Mosul and Tal Afar were the first cities and districts which ISIL took control of, the minorities in these areas were the first to be struck by ISIL's violence. This mainly applied to Assyrians, Turkmen and Shabak.

However, according to an Assyrian Iraqi Landinfo met at an Iraq conference in Beirut in November 2014, many of the Assyrians were at first happy for the change in power in Mosul, because they had serious problems with the situation as it was before June 2014. But as the brutality spread, the Assyrians were forced to flee. They were given the choice to convert to Islam or be killed.

In Mosul, the houses of the Christian Assyrians were marked with N, the first letter of *nastrani*, the Arabic word for Christian. These houses were then taken over by ISIL.

According to the Christian news agency AINA (2015), about 200,000 Assyrians have fled from their homes after ISIL took over control of the Ninewa plains on 7 August. It is unknown how many have been killed.

In October, Assyrians from Bakhdida/Hamdaniya were forced to flee when the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, which had protected the city until then, had to withdraw. The Christian inhabitants were given the choice between fleeing or being killed (Christian refugees, conversation in Amman November 2014). They had three hours notice before ISIL invaded. In the course of these hours, the city was emptied of Christians. They did not bring any assets other than what they were wearing when they left. They sought refuge in Erbil and got free housing there.

Many of them later got visas to Jordan and were picked up in a Jordanian plane as a gesture from the Jordanian king (Christian refugees, conversation in Amman, November 2014; ARDD legal aid, meeting in Amman, November 2014).

Shiite Muslim Turkmen, who were primarily living in Tal Afar or in villages outside Mosul, were also forced to flee after ISIL took control of the city. The rest were killed or abducted. Many of their mosques and shrines were destroyed by ISIL (Amnesty International 2014b). According to the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry, citing a report from the Refugee and Migration Department, around 1,000 Turkmen must have been killed (Anadolu Agency 2014).

The Yezidis are the minority who have been hardest hit by ISIL's violence. In the first phase after ISIL took power in June, many Yezidis fled from Mosul and Tal Afar to Sinjar. When ISIL took over Sinjar in early August last year, the Yezidis also had to flee from there.⁵ Hundreds were reported having been killed by ISIL during flight, while other were captured and forced to convert to Islam. Many converted to save their lives.

According reports from those who have managed to escape from ISIL's captivity, girls and young women were separated from their parents and either sold, given away as gifts or forcibly married to ISIL fighters and their supporters (HRW 2014b). Many were subjected to brutal violence and mistreatment, including rape and other sexual violence.

The Yezidis have been systematically exterminated in the province. While women and children have been taken as slaves for ISIL fighters, the men have been killed, abducted or forced to convert to Islam. HRW (2014b) estimates that thousands were killed or captured. Hundreds were said to have been moved to ISIL's headquarters Raqqa in Syria (Security source Landinfo receives daily security updates from, 11 December 2014). Several mass graves of Yezidis have been discovered. There are signs that many had been buried alive, while others were shot in the head first (Al Alam 2015b).

Around 2,500 Yezidis women must have been captured by ISIL (OHCHR 2014). Some have managed to escape from ISIL's captivity, while around 200 Yezidis were released on 18 January 2015. Most of them were sick and disabled elderly and children. Hundreds are still believed to be in ISIL's custody.

⁵ An account of the Yezidis's flight can be read in Barber 2014.

According to the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry, citing a report from the Refugee and Migration Department, around 5,000 Yezidis are reported having been killed by ISIL (Anadolu Agency 2014).

The Shabak, in line with the other minorities, have also been killed, abducted or chased while fleeing their homes (Amnesty International 2014b; HRW 2014b). ISIL started targeted attacks against this minority already in autumn 2013. Shabak in Mosul fled as a result of death threats and attacks, both in Mosul and several surrounding villages. Dozens of people were killed in the attacks in autumn 2013, while around 1,200 fled from Mosul (Raphann 2013).

Residents in Shabak villages outside Mosul have told Amnesty International (2014b, p. 10) about ISIL's behaviour. It was claimed that ISIL was looking for weapons, militia members and politically active people. Weapons were confiscated and men were abducted. Many were later released, while others are still missing. Many houses were robbed and then set ablaze.

HRW (2014b) reports that 83 Shiite Muslim Shabak were abducted from their villages in the period between 13 June and 10 July 2014. Seven of the men were later found dead, while others are still missing. Thousands of families must have fled from their homes (HRW 2014b).

5.3 ISIL'S OPPONENTS

There have been reports of many executions in Mosul and other areas under ISIL's control in Ninewa province (UN News Service 2015). Common to those executed is that they refused to assist ISIL. Amongst the victims are youths and men who do not want to fight for ISIL. Unconfirmed reports went out that 162 youths were arrested and threatened with execution because of this in early January this year (Security source Landinfo receives daily updates from, 5 January 2015). The new agency Rudaw (2015b) reports that ISIL has started forcibly recruiting youths into their military forces. Families who oppose this must reportedly pay a fine of one million dinars, corresponding to 850 US dollars. The reason for this is supposed to be that ISIL has lost many of their own fighters and needs reinforcements.

According to a Peshmerga officer, 250 inhabitants in the village of Abu Maria, northeast of Tal Afar, were reported to have been taken captive as a result of having refused to join ISIL's military forces (Rudaw 2015d). Three inhabitants in the village were reportedly killed in the riots which occurred, and the villagers taken to a prison in Kaske.

5.4 PEOPLE WHO FAIL TO SUBMIT

Others who violate Islamic law also risk execution. The first public execution ISIL performed after the takeover of power in June took place in Mosul in late August. A man was stoned in public after having been convicted of adultery (Jumah 2014a). Previously, executions had occurred without a public spectacle. More were executed due to adultery since then (UN News Service 2015).

Amongst other examples of punishment for so-called unseemly behaviour, it can be mentioned that on 12 January 2015, ISIL executed five husbands of women who were not wearing full hijab in the Al-Muthanna area in Mosul (Al Alam 2015c). ISIL's religious police, Hisbah, reportedly man roadblocks in Mosul in order to check clothing, amongst other things.

A newlywed couple was reported killed for having decorated their car in connection with the wedding (NINA 2015).

Two men convicted of homosexuality were killed by being pushed out of a tall building (UN News Service 2015).

Thirteen young boys were detained and then executed on the open street in Mosul after having watched an international football game on TV, according to Malm (2015). ISIL publicised the punishment and the reason for it over loudspeakers in the city. The information has emerged through the activist group calling itself Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently.

ISIL also does not spare Sunni Muslim religious scholars. Amongst them, those who do not support ISIL's Islamic governance also risk execution. This occurred most recently in February 2015, after some imams criticised ISIL for having burnt to death a Jordanian pilot who was taken prisoner (Rudaw 2015e).

5.5 PROFESSIONAL GROUPS

Members of professional groups who oppose ISIL's control or fail to submit are hit hard. The punishment is arrest or execution (Griffis 2015b). Below are some examples.

Journalists and others in the media have long been subjected to murder and kidnapping in Mosul, even before ISIL's takeover of power. However, their situation has become even worse after 10 June 2014. ISIL does what it can to prevent critical news coverage in the areas they control. Out of Mosul's estimated 250 journalists, about half of them fled from the city, while others were arrested and abducted (Joumah 2014b). ISIL has tried to persuade several journalists to work for them and some have accepted the offer and now work for ISIL's media newsrooms.

Other critical voices also risk being killed, such as a professor who criticised ISIL for their treatment of the Christians. He was abducted and killed in July 2014 (Al-Shorfa 2014).

Lawyers have also been affected by ISIL's violence. Three female lawyers were killed in January 2015, reportedly because they did not quit their jobs (UN News Service 2015). ISIL forbids women from working as lawyers. On 15 January 2015, the houses of six judges in the city were destroyed by explosions caused by ISIL (ISW blog, 15 January 2015).

Doctors who refuse to treat wounded ISIL members are threatened with death (Al Monitor 2015; Mahmoud 2014). Several doctors in Mosul were executed and arrested after having refused to treat wounded ISIL fighters (UN News Service 2015; Al Monitor 2015; Rudaw 2014b). ISIL requires, amongst other things, that doctors from Mosul serve with ISIL in the field and treat their wounded fighters on site. In December, ten doctors, all specialist from Jimhuri Hospital in Mosul, were arrested and four were then executed (Mahmoud 2014).

The Director of Salam Hospital in Mosul was detained for 20 days because he and his colleagues refused to travel to Tal Afar to treat ISIL fighters there. As part of the punishment, he received 120 lashes.

6. PUBLIC SERVICES AND DAILY LIFE UNDER ISIL'S RULE

Since the takeover of power in Mosul and large parts of Ninewa province, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has increased their revenue base significantly and is now the most affluent militant organisation in the world. Income is collected from oil fields, local banks, hostage taking, donations and imposed fees.

Despite major resources, ISIL probably does not have enough income to cover all the public expenses a state usually has (Al-Shishani 2014).

The ways in which daily life changed in Mosul after ISIL's takeover of power are described in Landinfo's report from September last year (Landinfo 2014b). The situation has in many ways become even worse since that time.

In October, RFE/RL's correspondent (Paraszczyk 2014) reported that public services were virtually absent in Mosul. Garbage reportedly floats in the streets and cleaning workers work at low pace.

The Iraqi central government has continued to pay salaries to public employees, even though they work within ISIL-controlled areas. However, it has been reported that ISIL has held back salaries for people who do not cooperate with the new rulers (Mahmoud 2014).

The healthcare sector still has major challenges. There is supposed to be a major shortage of medicines and equipment in hospitals as a result of supplies not arriving (Al-Monitor 2015). There must also be a shortage of doctors and other healthcare personnel, because many have fled. Doctors have been under pressure from two sides, both from ISIL and ISIL's opponents, either they have refused to treat ISIL's fighters or the other way around.

A doctor at Mosul General Hospital has told Al-Monitor that the hospital can no longer perform surgeries due to lack of medicines and doctors. Even births are now largely occurring at home with midwives present. Only complicated births take place at the hospital (Al-Monitor 2015).

The education sector has undergone major changes since ISIL took power. New syllabi of a religious nature have been introduced and the classes have been divided by gender.

There have been reports of the spread of disease in Mosul as a result of poor water quality. People must have been poisoned due to inadequate cleaning of drinking water. The price of bottled water has risen considerably (BBC 2014b).

Before the Internet was blocked, there was an increasing number of reports about rising dissatisfaction with ISIL's services from people in Mosul (Morris 2015; BBC 2014b).

The lack of water and power in addition to sky-high prices for food, fuel and gas canisters makes the situation very difficult for many (Kurds from Sinjar, conversation in Beirut, November 2014; Dali-Balta & Khozai 2014).

Unemployment is said to have risen as a result of many having lost their jobs and this leads to reduced purchasing power. A Mosul resident who spoke with Al Jazeera in January said that there was enough food in the city, but that people do not have money to buy it (Khodr 2015).

It is difficult to know if the conditions are the same in all areas ISIL controls, but there is no reason to believe that the conditions are any better outside Mosul.

7. HUMANITARIAN AID

According to a source in OCHA which Landinfo met at an Iraq conference in Beirut in November last year, ISIL was then trying to prevent emergency aid from reaching their areas. Everyone who assists aid organisations is reportedly seen as a traitor (Mustafa Shibib in OCHA, meeting in Beirut, November 2014).

Other Iraqi participants at the conference were of the opinion that the Iraqi government does not take responsibility for providing humanitarian aid to the internally displaced people in ISIL-controlled areas (Representatives of the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies, meeting in Beirut, November 2014). However, the need is great and the government's complacency is viewed as a collective punishment against the local population in the areas ISIL has taken over. The need for humanitarian aid is enormous, according to a representative from OCHA and a Kurdish aid organisation (Lecture at the Iraq conference in Beirut, November 2014). Aid will be given to internally displaced people in KRI, but on the condition that the aid does not go to internally displaced people in ISIL-controlled areas.

IRIN and the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) (2014) have conducted a study in ISIL-controlled areas and found out that ISIL has allowed some international aid organisations to operate there. The work of these aid organisations is admittedly difficult, but it can be done if they work in secret using local, Arab tribal networks. The organisation Iraqi Red Crescent (Iraqi Red Crescent Society, IRCS) is one of the organisations which has assisted internally displaced people in Mosul (Dali-Balta & Khozai 2014). As long as they only use local employees and do not use their logo on the goods they distribute or on their cars and uniforms, they can work in peace. Until mid-November last year, IRCS was reported to have handed out food rations to 10,000 people, heaters to 450 families, 4,500 blankets and 891 oil lamps in Mosul.

ISIL has also handed out food rations to the population on certain occasions, such as at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan (IRIN & HPG 2014). However, this was food which was stolen from people who had fled from ISIL.

8. INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Ninewa is the province in Iraq which most people fled from in 2014 and almost half of Iraq's internally displaced people come from Ninewa (IOM 2014a, p. 2). According to IOM (2014a, p. 1), around 200,000 people fled their homes in Ninewa in the period of June and July 2014, most of them from Mosul and Tal Afar. After ISIL expanded their area of control in Ninewa province in August, another 600,000 people have fled (IOM 2014b). The majority of the most recent wave of refugees come from Sinjar. It was primarily minorities and government officials who fled. Many fled to surrounding villages and some went to KRI. Some fled in several stages within Ninewa province.

Shiite Muslim Turkmen and Shabak primarily fled to Najaf and Kerbala in Southern Iraq, while Yezidis and Assyrians primarily sought refuge in KRI. The World Food Programme, which assists 50,000 internally displaced people in Southern Iraq, reports precarious humanitarian living conditions for this group (WFP 2015). Many used all of their savings on the trip south and now live in unfinished buildings or mosques. They receive monthly food rations.

Over half of the internally displaced people from Ninewa have sought refuge in Dohuk (IOM 2014b). Otherwise the refugees are displaced to all of Iraq's provinces, except for Diyala and Salah al-Din (IOM 2014b).

There are two official UN camps for internally displaced people in Ninewa, in Khazir and Garmawa, respectively (REACH 2014a and 2014b). Both camps were established in the wake of ISIL's takeover of power and act as temporary shelter for people fleeing to KRI. Khazir is located near the border of Erbil province, but Garmawa is near the border to Dohuk. Both areas are under Kurdish control.

In the autumn, the Iraqi government set up a camp for the security forces which had fled from ISIL (Morris 2015). The so-called Ninewa Liberation Camp, which houses hundreds of Iraqi police officers and soldiers, is close to the Kurdish autonomous area.

In September 2014, 29 percent of the internally displaced people lived with relatives in Ninewa. School buildings and religious buildings were then commonly used as shelters (IOM 2014a, p. 3). Most of the schools and religious buildings which were used were located in al-Shekhan and Akre. Over 2,000 families lived in abandoned or unfinished buildings.

The internally displaced people suffer as a result of several factors. One thing is the insecurity and loss of home and other assets, but there are also problems with school access for children and youth. Students from Ninewa cannot study at the universities in KRI.

In September 2014, food and medicines were reported to be the goods with the biggest shortages (IOM 2014a), while those who lived in schools were worried what they would do with themselves when the school year started in September. The school year was postponed as a result of the crisis.

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