



Iraq Fact Sheet

Government

The Iraqi government was created by a constitution in 2005, after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The government is led by a Kurdish President, Barham Salih, a Shia Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, and a Sunni Arab Speaker, Mohammed al-Halbousi. The Prime Minister is the dominant leader. The population of Iraq is [estimated](#) to be 38 million, with two official languages, Arabic and Kurdish. Currently, the once powerful Islamic State (IS) Caliphate (both in Iraq and Syria) is in decline. The Kurdish areas in the north desire to secede from Iraq, although their referendum failed.



Ethnic and Religious Groups

- **Sunni Arabs:** Iraqi Sunni Arabs number about 20% of the population, or around 5-7 million people. Under Saddam Hussein, who was a Sunni Arab, they had a privileged place in Iraq. During the de-Ba'athification process post-2005, Sunni Arabs were largely excluded by the Shia elites, particularly under former Prime Minister Nouri Maliki. Sunnis, including those from the "[Awakening Councils](#)," were also mostly excluded from joining the Iraqi Army, as it was feared that they could retake control.
- **Shia Arabs:** Shia Arabs are roughly 60% of the total population. Under Saddam, the Shiites were largely oppressed, shut off from their Shia neighbor Iran, and generally excluded from power in the country. In post-Saddam Iraq, the constitution gave Shias the most powerful position, that of Prime Minister. Nouri Maliki, the former Prime Minister, favored Shias. Maliki also took advantage of U.S. aid; it is reported that Iraq's security forces received nearly [\\$100 billion](#) from 2006 to 2014. Maliki [became](#) increasingly authoritarian during his eight years as premier, and eventually was pushed out. The current Prime

Minister, Haider al-Abadi, is also a Shia Arab from the same party – Dawa – as Maliki, but has been generally [less biased](#), [less corrupt](#), [more pro-American](#), and less pro-Iranian.

- **Kurds:** In Iraq, there are [5.5 million Kurds](#), about 15% of the population, who reside in the four northern provinces that make up the [KRG](#). Kurds have had de facto autonomy since 1991, post-the first Gulf War. The KRG was originally founded by two Kurdish political parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Masoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Barzani is the current President. Both the KDP and the PUK are [essentially](#) autocratic family run organizations. Some Iraqi Kurds live outside of the KRG, however, and the Kurds have laid claims to those areas, including the Kirkuk region, which produces over 600,000 barrels per day of crude oil. [Kirkuk was originally Arabized during the Baathist control of Iraq](#). Although the KRG [overall](#) has a better record of respecting the rights of its own people and minorities in its region, [including refugees](#), both Iraqi Christians and Yazidis were angered after many Peshmerga forces [fled](#) when ISIS conquered Sinjar and other areas in 2014. The KRG has an excellent relationship with the U.S., and until its independence referendum, [with Turkey](#), to whom it sells oil. The KDP is a [rival](#) of the PKK, a Kurdish group from Turkey. The PUK [is](#) an ally of the PKK and the YPG, a Kurdish group from Syria. It [is also](#) an ally of Iran. In 2017, the KRG [held a non-binding referendum](#) on independence, which independence won with 93% of the vote. The [central government](#), led by the Shia Arab majority, as well as [Iran and Turkey](#), have all vociferously opposed Kurdish independence, and have threatened [economic pressure](#), [troop movements](#). The Iraqi army [engaged with the Kurds over Kirkuk](#), with Iran and the PMF’s [supportive](#) of Iraqi forces. The Kurdish authorities [have retreated](#) and are now [only in](#) the official Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) areas. [Public officials](#) in the U.S. have also opposed independence and threatened aid.
- **Turkmen:** The Turkmen are estimated to number [between 500,000 to 3 million](#), making them Iraq’s third-largest ethnic group, comprising 1.3% - 7.8% of the population. They are [concentrated](#) mostly in Kirkuk and surrounding regions. The Turkmen are diverse: Roughly [six in 10 are Sunni and the rest Shia](#). [Most](#) Iraqi Turkmen consider themselves part of Iraq. Turkmen feel [mistreated](#) by the Kurds, a reality that they say Ankara [has done little to alleviate](#) despite its influence on KRG President Barzani.
- **Yazidis:** The [500,000 to 700,000](#) member Yazidi religious minority in Iraq and Syria [is also](#) ethnically Kurdish. The Yazidis are mostly grouped in Iraq of which 400,000 lived in Sinjar (Shingal). When ISIS attacked their land in 2014, [around 300,000](#) fled, primarily to the KRG. ISIS has murdered more than 5,000 Yazidis, raped thousands of Yazidi women and children, and sold at least 7000 Yazidis, mostly women and children, as sexual slaves. The Yazidis are allied with their fellow Kurds, although they split between the different Kurdish groups.
- **Christians:** Most Christians in Iraq [are Assyrians](#), and still speak Aramaic, although they also speak Arabic. The Christian community also includes Chaldeans, Armenians and Syriacs. Many Christians do not consider themselves Arabs. In 2013 they were officially numbered at 1.5 million, although today they are estimated to be no more than 500,000. Most of them have fled the country, although a sizable number have been killed. They are constant targets of both Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq. Many Christians have fled to Kurdish areas, where they are safer.

Foreign Influences: Iran & Turkey

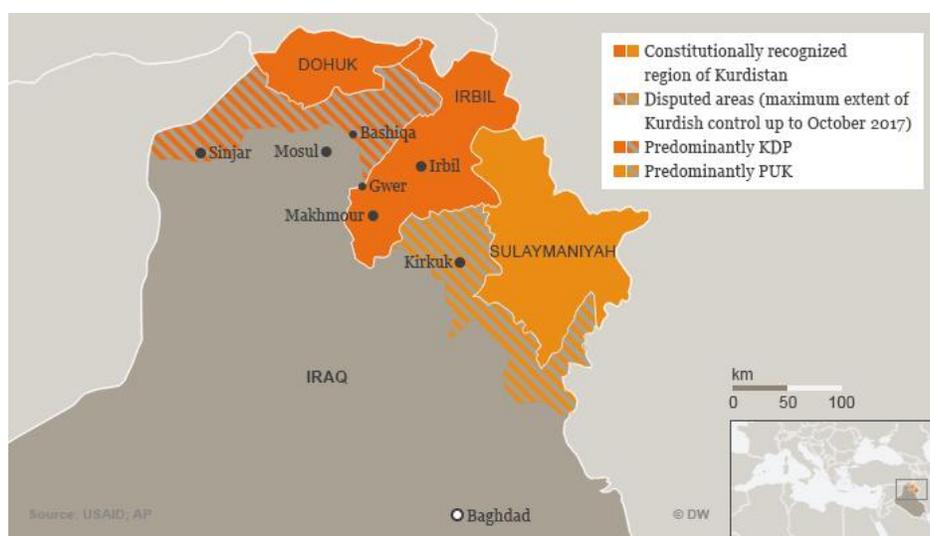
Since 2011, Iran [has exercised](#) increasing control over the central government in Baghdad, and now [dominates](#) it. Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the Quds Force, Iran’s special operations branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has met with numerous Iraqi leaders and visited the Kurdistan region, and the IRGC has brought in thousands of troops from Iran or from other allied Shia populations in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. [More than 2000 IRGC and allies](#) have been killed in Iraq. The Iranians also [control](#), train and support the [100,000 – 120,000 man](#) PMF in Iraq. After the KRG was pushed out of Kirkuk, Iraq [rewarded](#) Iran with the oil.

Turkey has stationed [2000 troops](#) in northern Iraq, along with [several thousand](#) mostly Sunni Arabs from Mosul, where they have helped to train Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga and Sunni fighters. The central government of Iraq [has objected](#) to their presence. The Turks have also threatened Kurds from the PKK that [are](#)

[currently stationed](#) in Iraq, and they have [attacked](#) them. The Turks until recently got along with the KRG, until the September 2017 independence referendum antagonized Turkish President, who fears Kurdish nationalism. The Turks [seek to block](#) Christians or Shia Muslims from living in the areas they are controlling.

ISIS

ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria began as only ISI, Islamic State of Iraq, a splinter group of Al Qaeda. Its main goal is to create a caliphate, an Islamic state consisting of only Sunni Arabs spanning all of the Middle East. ISIS was founded by Abu Musab Zarqawi, who operated under Osama Bin Laden in Iraq. Zarqawi was later killed by US airstrikes in 2006. Today, Abu Omar al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi is the leader of ISIS. ISIS targets Kurds, Shiites, Christians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Westerners and anyone else who is not a Sunni Arab. As of late 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi [declared final victory](#) over the Islamic State after Iraqi forces drove the last remnants of the group from the country. In 2018, top U.S. military leaders marked the “end of major combat operations against [ISIS in Iraq](#)” and a change to the U.S.-led [coalition’s](#) mission in the country. However, while ISIS has largely lost the territory it controlled, it is [still very active](#) in conducting terror attacks.



Military Strength

- **Iraqi Army:** The Iraqi army fell apart after ISIS overran Mosul in 2014. In 2011, the Iraqi Army numbered 200,000 soldiers and was armed with heavy U.S. military equipment and billions of dollars in support. In 2012, the Iraqi military was equipped with [1,1000](#) new armored personnel carriers, and 140 M1 Abrams battle tanks. However, today, the Iraqi military has about [50,000 troops](#).
 - The U.S. [has trained](#) some 35,000 Iraqi soldiers over the past decade.
 - The Iraqi army [has](#) an elite 1st Special Operations Brigade, an American-trained counterterrorism unit of some 10,000 soldiers representing all of Iraq’s religious sects whose senior officers are graduates of the U.S. Army Ranger School. The elite Iraqi unit is often called “the Golden Brigade,” or, more recently, “the Golden Division”. The elite unit answers directly to the Iraqi prime minister. The division’s soldiers have proved to be tenacious fighters, having led the successful fights to oust ISIS from Ramadi and Fallujah, and now are leading the fight in Mosul. But sources inside the U.S. Central Command tell that the division has, as a result, suffered “horrific” casualties every day.
- **Shiite forces:** Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) or Hashd al-Shaabi, was formed in 2014 as a coalition of Iranian trained, largely Shiite militias composed of roughly [120,000 fighters](#). PMF works and officially reports to the Shiite government and PM Haider Abadi; it was created as a response to ISIS. The PMF is now [officially part](#) of the Iraqi security forces. In practice, the PMF [often reports](#) to Iran and the IRGC.

The PMF has been accused of roaming beyond its territory in southern Iraq and into Sunni strongholds, threatening, kidnapping and killing Sunni Muslims. In July 2016, The UN reported that the PMF abducted [640](#) Sunni men and boys west of Baghdad, while executing 50. The PMF force is made up of different groups, including the three main ones – [the Badr organization](#), [the Ktaeb Hezbollah](#), and [the Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) – and others, such as the [Nujaba group](#). They also have associated groups of non-Shia, including the [Lalesh](#), a Yazidi affiliate.

- **Kurdish Militias:** The Kurdish Peshmerga (those who face death) is composed of nearly [190,000](#) fighters from the KRG - both KDP and PUK members. They have been among the most effective forces against ISIS in Iraq. The PKK and its allies [have](#) an armed stronghold in the Qandil mountains along the Iraq-Iran border. An [estimated](#) 5,000 PKK Kurds are stationed there. There [are](#) three Yazidi militias: 1) the Sinjar Defense Units (HPS), led by Haider Shesho, which has 5,000 fighters, including 400 women, and is affiliated with the PUK; 2) the Qasim Shesho Peshmerga, which is led by Qasim Shesho, has 3000 fighters, and is allied with the KDP; and 3) the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), an offshoot of the PKK, which has almost 2,000 men and women fighters. The YBS [has clashed](#) with the Peshmerga.
- **Turkish Troops:** Turkey [has stationed](#) about 2,000 soldiers near Mosul (Bashiqa Camp, northern Iraq). Turkish President Erdogan has rejected calls from Baghdad to leave.
- **Christian Militias:** There are a number of Christian militias in Iraq (they also operate in Syria). The Nineveh Plain Protection Unit (NPU) has about [500 fighters](#), although up to [3500 more](#) have registered to be trained. It is the [only registered security force](#) on the Nineveh Plain under the authority of Iraq, and [also allied](#) with the Shia militias. The NPPU [support](#) making the Ninevah Plains a separate administrative unit under the auspices of the Iraqi central government. There is the Babylon Brigade with about [1,500 fighters](#), which is also associated with Iraq and the Shia militias. The Gozarto Protection Force is allied with the Shia militias, and has about [500 fighters](#). The Nineveh Planes Forces (NPF) have about [800 fighters](#), and [are allied](#) with the KRG. There is also [Dwekh Nawsha](#) (Self-Sacrificers in Aramaic), with about 100 fighters, although more than [2000 men](#) have expressed interest. It [is also linked](#) to the KRG.
- **Iranian Troops:** Aside from the Iranian influenced Iraqi militias (PMF), there is estimated to be about [1,000](#) Iranian forces supporting the Iraqi government.
- **ISIS fighter:** There [may be as many as 15,000](#) ISIS fighters in Iraq. ISIS is transforming from a “proto-state” to a covert “terrorist” network, “a process that is most advanced in Iraq”.
- **U.S. Troops:** Starting in March of 2003, [thousands](#) of American troops moved into Iraq. The high point, during the surge, had 170,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, during June of 2007. After the withdrawal of the U.S. troops in 2011, the U.S. began to send them in again. Right now, there [are 5200](#) based in Iraq.

Humanitarian Crisis

According to the United Nations about 3.2 million people [remain displaced](#) in Iraq. The last estimate by Abadi put the cost of post-war reconstruction at \$50 billion, a figure calculated before Iraqi forces retook Mosul. The U.S. government has provided nearly \$1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance for Iraq since the Islamic State takeover of the north in 2014. [One estimate](#) of the number of Iraqis killed since the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 is 236,546. [Since](#) the U.S. invasion (October, 2016), 3,693 American soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines in combat, and 4,541 American personnel, have been killed in Iraq.

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