

Areas of no Return: Focus on Diyala, Khanaqin, Saadiya

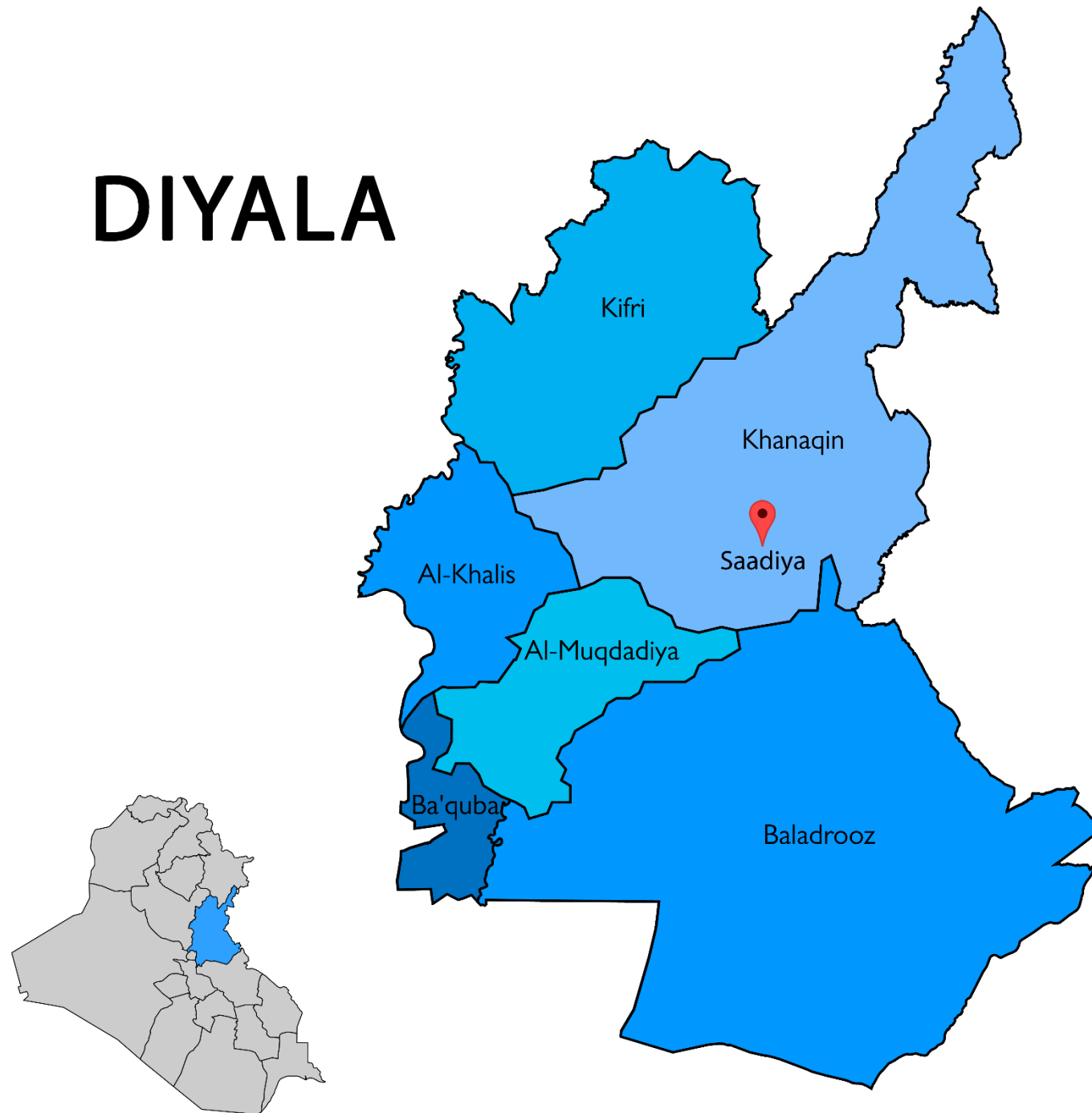
Returns Working Group Iraq

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Returns Working Group
RWG Iraq



DIYALA



Overview

- Saadiya sub- district is located in Khanaqin district in Diyala, and witnessed (insert no. of IDPs)
- Since its liberation in early 2015, there are **17 villages** in Saadiyah sub- district which have not witnessed any returns, which is the highest no. of locations which have not witnessed returns in Diyala at sub- district level.
- The other sub- districts in Khanaqin district which has not witnessed returns is Jaluala, with only one village not witnessing returns due to house destruction.
- The main reasons preventing returns include **tribal issues** and **lack of security/** blocked returns.



Khanaqin District Background



- **Location:** Khanaqin, located in the Garmaser region, was previously part of Kirkuk province. But it was annexed to Diyala province after the Arabization process began by ousted dictator Saddam Hussein. It was the only place that recovered quickly from this process after Saddam fall in 2003.
- **Population:** Khanaqin district has a mixed population between **Kurds, Arab, Turkmen**. The population of this district was estimated in 2017 at more than **300,000**.
- Agriculture has traditionally been one of the main economic activities in Diyala. The governorate is famous for its production of dates and citrus, and livestock and poultry farms are also to be found in the governorate. **The Khanaqin area is the location of an oilfield and an oil refinery.**

Pre- ISIL context and ISIL chronology:

- Saadiyah was taken by ISIL in **June 2014**. As in Jalawla, ISIL was then pressed out by Peshmerga and Shiite militias in November. According to Rudaw, the Shiite Muslim Badr militia made clear that they had no intentions of handing over control of the city to Kurdish forces and it had now to remain under the army's control.
- The security situation in the province has generally been in turmoil since **2003**, when the Kurdish Peshmerga forces took over control of the Khanaqin district and parts of Kifri district. From then, these parts of Diyala have been de facto controlled by the Kurdish autonomous government (KRG), while the central government in Baghdad has also made claims for them.
- The area was retaken by pro-government armed groups in **November 2014**, however, it was reported by the returned community that they were not allowed to return to this area until September 2016.



Current situation

- In general Khanaqin district, including Saadiyah city, used to be controlled by the Peshmerga, however now it seemed to be controlled by Shia militia. Since 2008, the Iraqi armed forces have had a presence in the area and have occasionally come very close to open confrontation between them and the Peshmerga forces.
- Particularly, Saadiyah and Jalawla are of strategic importance due to their location near KRI and Iran (al-Akhbar 2014). Many months of fighting hit the two cities hard. The relationship between Peshmerga forces on the one hand and the forces on the other side now seems tense.
- ISF and allied militias have been accused of harassing, arresting, abducting and murdering Sunni inhabitants and returnees in liberated areas. The violence against Sunni civilians seems to have been sectarian inspired, with Sunni civilians automatically assumed to be collaborators with ISIS.
- Furthermore the destruction of houses and other civilian buildings in Sunni areas seemed to aim at preventing Sunni IDPs from returning and pushing the ones that stayed to other areas, thereby altering the sectarian makeup of the governorate



Return of IDPs

Return:

- The return areas have not been secured. The people who have returned so far went to Khanaqin.
- Furthermore, the families are not returning due to safety reasons. The families can return to Jalaula as it is a city and they can find jobs.
- It is reported that some security forces are trying to recruit some of the returnee men to support in securing the villages. The families who have security clearance will be returned to Saadiya and not the 17 villages.
- It is also reported that some politicians went to the camps prior to the elections in May 2018, and promised IDPs to support their return as part of the election propaganda. However, no support was provided after the elections. It is reported that the Diyala Operations Command interfered with the return procedure and administrative process.
- **Condition to return:** The IDPs went to Saadiyah to get stamp for the security clearance, but the mayor refused until they pack their things and move from the camps. The mayor put the condition that if families have to **get exit camp clearance** so as to be able to get stamp return card.
- **Intention to return:** The IDPs do intend to return, but maybe 6 months later. Approx. 80% want to return, and 20% prefer to stay displaced. 484 families from the 17 villages have requested to return.

Obstacles to return

1. Security clearance:

- The lists containing names which have been cleared have been tampered with, and the local authorities received the list with some **names which have been crossed out**. It is reported that these names are crossed out by the security forces, and this is linked to family issues within the Bani Weiss tribe.
- The IDPs report that some of the family members who they have issues with and returned earlier requested for the security forces to delete their names, and it is reported that for the IDP names to be returned to the list, they have to pay a bribe of USD 1,200. The security actors do not get arrested as there are no witnesses.
- Some families did not request for security clearance, it was just brought to them and they were told to return to Saadiyah centre and not their villages. The families who have security clearance do not want to declare having the clearance as they will be forced to leave the camps.

Obstacles to return Ctd.

2. Lack of security:

The people from the 17 villages (around 5,050 families, mostly Arab Sunni,) 4,425 have security clearance but are not allowed to return due to lack of security, only returning to surrounding villages. At the moment, there is no one currently living in the 17 villages, and are reported to be empty. It is believed that there are military operations in the 17 villages, but cannot confirm as there is no access to these villages. It is further reported that Al Qaeda still have operations in these villages and have been present since 2006, as well as a few ISIL cells and a few clashes have been reported, but the military is controlling the area (though it is unknown which security actors are present in the area).

3. Tribal issues:

Tribal issues mainly from the Bani Weiss tribe- problems exist within the same tribe and within family members. The issues with the tribe stems from family members accuse the other families of being ISIL affiliates, and some families wanting to take leadership of the tribe.

Displacement

- **Displacement:** The families have been displaced for 4 years, and were first displaced in KRG (Suli). 80% of the IDPs are in Khanaqin and 5% in Kalar, 5% in Baquba and 10% in other areas. The returnees are in Saadiya.
- **Living conditions:** The rent in Saadiya is supposedly between 150,000- 200,000 IQD (around 125- 170 USD), and most of the IDPs who returned to Saadiya centre are government employees and used their salary to fix houses.
- **Source of income/ livelihoods:** farming, public sector employees (still receiving salaries from the government), daily wages by working in agriculture, taxi drivers, markets and agriculture (selling chicken).
- **Access to services:** IDPs have access to water, electricity, schools, and there are reportedly around 6-7 schools in Saadiya which are all operating.
- **Needs and gaps:** Lack of services- especially electricity and damaged infrastructure. There is also delay in the security clearance. In addition, most of the agricultural fields were burnt during the crisis, and it will take approximately USD 20,000 to rehabilitate the lands. Need to clean irrigation channel and fix/ restore electricity, which will revitalize the irrigation channel and resumption of agricultural activities.
- **Assistance provided:** It is reported that 150 shelters have been constructed/ rehabilitated for the returnees in Saadiya, as well as hospital rehabilitation (in Jalaula), rehabilitated a bridge and rebuilding a kindergarten. There is also WASH and education activities. There are no reported assistance being provided by the government to the returnees.
- **Relationship with host community/ local integration:** The IDPs have a good relationship with the host community, and have been hosted well hence why they stayed in Khanaqin. The IDPs will also be allowed to locally integrate in Khanaqin, and some have already built houses and settled there.
- **Compensation claims:** The IDPs and returnees have filed for compensation claim, and a team from the Governor's office came to assess houses but there has been no follow up since. It is claimed that if someone's house is burnt, one goes to the governor's office with two witnesses and swear by the Quran to prove that their house was burnt and to be eligible to apply for compensation.

Proposal to return:

- All the families who have been cleared to return should return first, then the ones with no clearance will be dealt with on a case by case basis.
- The people from the 17 villages to return all at once, and not a few families only. There also needs to be presence of a security actor for them to feel safe- this being federal police and ISF, not just the military.
- The IDPs are not requesting for anything, just that if they return they will not be arrested.
- 75% of the IDPs will return if the houses are rehabilitated, (even if only one room was renovated, 1 bathroom and the kitchen), and will work as daily workers in the agriculture field to fix their houses themselves.

Any questions?