

Hawiga District, Iraq - Rapid Humanitarian Overview

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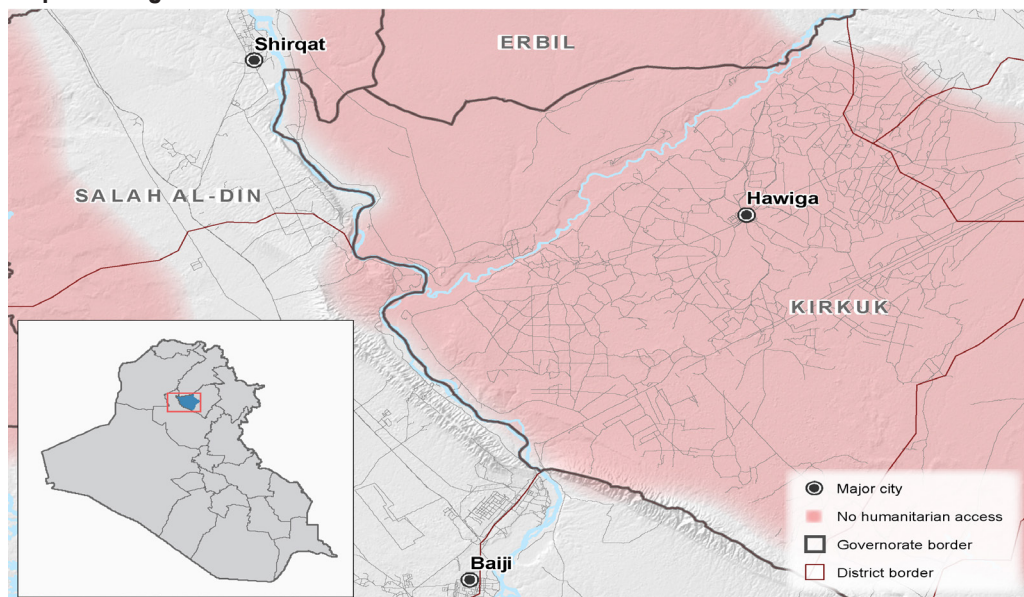
Overview

Hawiga district is one of the last areas of Iraq still occupied by the armed group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The offensive by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to retake the city is due to begin imminently. With the beginning of the operation, the United Nations (UN) estimates that 65,000 civilians, still residing in ISIL-held territory, will be affected.¹ The fighting is likely to trigger mass displacement, with probable continued influx of civilians towards areas controlled by Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

Located in Kirkuk Governorate in northern Iraq, Hawiga district has been under ISIL control since June 2014. Following the takeover, the area became inaccessible to humanitarian actors. As of July 2016, military operations in nearby Shirqat cut the remaining trade routes between Hawiga and ISIL-controlled areas west of the Tigris River, after which Hawiga district has remained cut off from the rest of Iraq. With the upcoming offensive by the ISF, the number of individuals displacing from Hawiga district on a monthly basis doubled in August, to almost 1,000 individuals in that month alone.²

According to assessed individuals who left ISIL-controlled areas of Hawiga district over the past month, those remaining in the area are in severe humanitarian need. There is no access to healthcare, livelihood opportunities, education or sufficiently clean drinking water, along with limited food security. As a result, due to the lack of security and anticipation of the upcoming offensive, individuals are moving out of the district in increasing numbers, at high risk to their lives.

Map 1: Hawiga District



Methodology

In order to inform the humanitarian response in Hawiga district, REACH collected in-depth information from 15 recently displaced male respondents between the ages of 24 and 60 from ISIL-controlled areas of Hawiga district, including Hawiga city and 9 surrounding villages. Data was collected remotely, through telephone interviews from 6-13 September 2017. All except one respondent left Hawiga district after 26 August, and therefore had relatively up-to-date information on the humanitarian situation in their areas of origin. Due to the inherent limitations of qualitative data collection, presented findings should be understood as indicative only, rather than statistically representative of the target population or the wider geographical area.

Key Findings

- The majority of IDPs leaving Hawiga district are traveling on two routes: either northwest toward the vicinity of Shirqat city, or north toward the vicinity of Makhmur city.
- **Healthcare is not accessible for civilians** due to the high price of medicine and lack of functional medical facilities. Some medicines are available, however they are extremely expensive and often out of date. There are reports of people dying due to the lack of healthcare – particularly those with chronic diseases.
- **Malnutrition is reportedly widespread**, with respondents indicating that most civilians are eating one to two meals per day. Available food is either being grown by residents or from the limited number of shops still open. Food and non-food items (NFIs) being sold in the aforementioned shops are largely smuggled in from outside of ISIL-controlled territory, and are very expensive and of a bad quality. There are reports of people becoming ill from out of date food.
- **Clean drinking water is reportedly not accessible.** Water is being collected directly from rivers and is not treated. There are widespread reports of illness from unclean water, including diarrhoea and skin diseases.
- **There are no functional schools** and no children are studying, and have reportedly not studied for at least three years. Some respondents reported that ISIL had established schools with an adapted curriculum, but that these schools were no longer functional.
- Respondents reported that **there are little to no livelihood opportunities**, with civilians relying on pensions, savings and subsistence farming.
- **Shelter is not a major area of concern**, as most villages have seen their populations decrease, and respondents generally reported low levels of damage - with the exception of Hawiga city.

Sectoral Overviews

Healthcare

- There are shortages of medicines, and what medicine is available is very expensive and often out of date.
- There is a small hospital reportedly operated by ISIL in Hawiga city, but healthcare there is largely reserved for ISIL fighters.
- Medical facilities throughout the district are generally closed, and those that remain open do not have sufficient staff, medicine or materials. Overall, there were reported to be few doctors or other medical professionals available to the population.
- Some people are reportedly dying as a result of the lack of healthcare, particularly those with chronic diseases such as cancer or diabetes. Some households with members suffering from chronic diseases stockpiled medicine, but these stores are running low, and medicine is often out of date.
- Respondents also widely reported illnesses caused by poor quality food and unclean water, including diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal disorders, as well as skin diseases. Some respondents also reported anemia linked to malnourishment.³
- Respondents reported that children have not been vaccinated since 2014.

Food Security

- Overall, food is scarce, and individuals are reportedly coping with food shortages by eating one to two meals per day, with widespread cases of malnourishment reported.
- Between 10-20% of shops and markets are reportedly open – but most goods are very expensive. Food and NFIs are smuggled in from outside of ISIL territory, particularly from Shirqat. Trade routes within ISIL-controlled territory have been severely affected since the start of the 2016 ISF offensive on Mosul and the surrounding areas, which has caused shortages of many items and driven up prices.
- A majority of those living in villages are at least partly relying on subsistence farming; however, agricultural capacity has been severely affected, with many fields left fallow due to a lack of resources – mainly seeds and water.
- People had stockpiled stores of food from when trade routes remained open in 2016, but many of those stores are either exhausted or running extremely low.
- Respondents reported that people are becoming ill from expired food.

Water

- Drinking water is reportedly entirely sourced from the Great Zab and Tigris Rivers.
- The vast majority reported that the water they drink is untreated and unclean. Several respondents from Hawiga city reported that a water pumping station is operating on generator power. However they indicated this water is not filtered, and is only available for several hours per day.
- As water is coming from the river, there is a constant supply – though it has to be brought from the river either by hand or in tanks.
- A minority of respondents reported that some individuals are boiling water to treat it, though the vast majority reported that no one was treating their water in any way.
- Most respondents reported that the water (for both drinking and general use) is causing health problems, including diarrhoea and skin conditions.

Education

- There are no open schools and no children are attending school. Most reported that this has been the situation for at least three years.
- However, there were some reports of special schools run by ISIL that used an adapted curriculum. Some respondents reported that the curriculum taught children to be violent and due to this many Hawiga residents felt uncomfortable sending their children to these schools. Those respondents largely indicated that even these schools are no longer functional.
- There are reports of conflict-related trauma and mental health problems among children.

Livelihoods

- Livelihood opportunities are reportedly very limited - farmers and shepherds generally do not sell their goods, but rather subsist on these items, or potentially trade them for other goods, and therefore are generally not able to draw salary from these assets.
- The only people receiving salaries are those receiving pensions – which are still paid by the government, with funds brought into ISIL-controlled areas by smugglers.
- There is very little cash available, and no functional hawallas. However, wealthier individuals, or those with means of income, reportedly provide informal hawalla services to small numbers of individuals through contact with their households outside of Hawiga.
- To cope, others are reportedly borrowing funds and/or food from friends and family located both inside and outside of Hawiga – but only small numbers of individuals (reportedly less than 5%).

Some households were reported to have cash savings, but respondents indicated that these savings were largely depleted.

Shelter

- Overall, the situation of shelter in Hawiga district was not reported to be severe.
- Hawiga residents are generally not paying rent due to either owning the property or residing in vacant houses. Overall, there were very low numbers of IDPs reported by all respondents.
- Most damage to structures occurred during the initial takeover by ISIL forces in 2014. Although respondents generally reported less than 25% of structures as damaged, respondents from Hawiga city reported higher levels of damage than those from villages.

Displacement

Overview

Prior to July 2016, very little displacement from Hawiga district was reported. However, from July to November 2016, following the closure of a vital trade route between Mosul and Hawiga city, 46,000 IDPs left the district.⁴ By January 2017, the UN reported that 80,646 had displaced, mainly to the areas of Daquq, Tikrit, Baiji and Erbil districts.⁵ This number increased to 101,862 by September 2017.⁶ Although these figures suggest that displacement rates slowed down over 2017, in more recent months the numbers displacing are reported to be increasing, with the number displacing doubling in August compared to July.⁷ Currently, the UN estimates that 65,000 civilians remain within ISIL-controlled areas of Hawiga district.⁸

Regarding respondents' decisions to leave their areas of origin, most reported the lack of access to healthcare, livelihoods, sufficient food and clean drinking water and the general lack of security as the primary push factors. In addition, respondents mentioned that much of the recent displacement has been triggered by the anticipation of the upcoming ISF offensive to retake the area – which they reported being informed of through leaflets air dropped by the Iraqi government.

Displacement Trends

The current displacement trend from ISIL-controlled areas of Hawiga district is divided into two main routes to the north and the northwest. The majority of individuals were reported to be moving northwest towards ISF-controlled areas in the vicinity of Shirqat city, with the remainder moving north towards Kurdish-controlled areas in the vicinity of Makhmur city. The route to Shirqat was reported to take between 2-3 hours by car – depending on area of origin – or 10-12 hours on foot. Once crossing into ISF-controlled territory on the west bank of the Tigris, all IDPs are transported by the ISF to Shirqat for security screening.

Those traveling north to Kurdish-controlled areas reportedly travel on foot, with IDPs either swimming or wading across the Great Zab, or walking across partially damaged bridges. The journey takes between 10-12 hours. This route was reported by IDPs to be more dangerous due to mines and a heavy ISIL presence near the frontline with Kurdish forces. Once they reach Kurdish forces to the north of Hawiga, IDPs are brought to Debaga, where their names are registered before being transported through Makhmour to Iraqi forces in Qayarra/Jedaa, and then by the ISF to Shirqat for security screening.

Respondents reported that the route to Kirkuk, which was already seeing declining numbers of IDPs as of October 2016,⁹ is no longer being used. The route was described as being too dangerous, both because of mines and because of heavy ISIL presence. The south-western route through the Hamreen Mountains to the al-Alam/Baiji area was also reported to no longer be in use, as, like the Kirkuk route, it is considered too dangerous. In addition, respondents indicated that smugglers are no longer using either route, which makes the passage more treacherous for those households attempting to leave on their own, and particularly through the mountainous terrain of the south-western route to the al-Alam/Baiji area.

For all movement out of ISIL-controlled areas of Hawiga district, the vast majority of respondents reported paying smugglers to direct them to safe displacement routes and, in some cases, to provide transport vehicles. In all cases, the cost of hiring a smuggler was reportedly between 100-250 US dollars (USD) per person, depending on the distance and the means of travel. A significant minority reported completing the journey without the aid of smugglers, but these individuals indicated that they had prior knowledge of the safe routes out of the district.

Respondents also reported that no one is able to cross from the southern to the northern banks of the Great Zab River in vehicles, as all bridges have been destroyed – though there is reportedly one bridge that is only half destroyed, and can be crossed by foot. The majority of respondents either swam or waded across the river. A minority used personal vehicles, either reporting that they drove to the southern bank of the river, crossed, and hired smugglers, or that they walked to the river and had friends or family pick them up in vehicles on the other side.

According to respondents, IDPs remain in a converted school in Shirqat for three to seven days while awaiting clearance. Cleared individuals from Hawiga are escorted by the ISF in convoys south to Tikrit, or north to Qayarra/Jedaa. All respondents indicated that they were transported by hired vehicles – not by government transportation – with ISF vehicles providing clearance through checkpoints, as the IDPs do not have documentation.

Upon reaching either Tikrit or Qayarra/Jedaa, IDPs from Hawiga were reportedly registered by local authorities, and either sent to IDP camps in the area, or allowed to reside outside of the camps if they had sponsorship from members of the host community. Additional respondents

reported the ability to continue on to other cities, or camps, if they were able to provide proof of host community sponsorship. In traveling to these further destinations, IDPs are also escorted – again using hired vehicles – by the ISF in order to pass checkpoints along the route.

Intentions

In terms of intentions for those who remain in ISIL territory, respondents reported that those individuals intend to leave if they have the opportunity to do so. Alternatively, if they cannot, they intend to stay in their homes until the ISF clears their areas, provided that ISIL does not force them to leave beforehand. Respondents also indicated that small numbers intend to remain in order to protect their property. For others, they cannot afford the smugglers fees to be able to get out of territory controlled by ISIL.

For those people who have already displaced, respondents indicated that they intend to remain in their place of displacement until the fighting is over. The main factor that would encourage them to return would be increased security, with the resumption of services being a secondary – although still important – concern. If Hawiga IDPs find opportunities and services in their place of displacement they are more likely to wait until services and livelihood opportunities have been restored in their area of origin. Given this, people in camps are potentially more likely to return sooner than those who displaced to towns and cities.

Endnotes

1. UNHCR, Iraq: Center & South Bi-Weekly Protection Update (21-31 August 2017).
2. Ibid.
3. Respondents were not medical professionals – this designation was based on reports of loss of weight, change in physical appearance and mental changes.
4. IOM, DMT ET, (29 November 2017)
5. OCHA, People Currently Displaced From al Hawiga District (January 2017).
6. IOM, DTM Data (September 2017).
7. UNHCR, Iraq: Center & South Bi-Weekly Protection Update (21-31 August 2017).
8. Ibid.
9. REACH Iraq, Humanitarian Overview: Hawiga and Surrounding Areas (November 2016).

Map 2: Displacement Routes - Hawiga District

