

Kerbala Governorate Profile



Source map: [IAU](#)

Kerbala at a Glance

Fast Facts

- Area: 5034 km²
- Average High Temperatures: 14°C (January) to 43°C (August)
- Population: 1,012,356
- Capital City: Kerbala
- Average Low Temperatures: 6°C (January) to 30°C (July)
- Population Distribution Rural-Urban: 33,5%-66,5%

Geography and Climate

The governorate of Kerbala is one of Iraq's smallest governorates and is located in the south west of the country. Irrigated farmland stretches along the Euphrates River in the east of Kerbala, while the western parts of the governorate are made up of desert plains. The saline Razazah Lake is located a few kilometers to the west of the city of Kerbala, the governorate's capital. Kerbala shares internal boundaries with the governorates of Anbar, Babil and Najaf.

Kerbala has a typical dry, desert climate. The temperatures easily reach 40°C or more in summer, while rainfall is very limited and concentrated in the winter months.

Population and Administrative Division

Shia Arabs are the dominant ethnic-religious group in Kerbala. A small Sunni community is also residing in the governorate.

Kerbala is divided in three districts: Kerbala, Ain Al-Tamur and Al-Hindiya.

Economy

The economy of Kerbala is based around two main sectors: agriculture and (religious) tourism. Kerbala's agricultural businesses grow a variety of fruits, vegetables and orchard produce. The shrine of Imam Hussain in Kerbala is one of the holiest sites for Shia Muslims worldwide, and every year millions of pilgrims from inside and outside Iraq visit the governorate. Other religious and archeological sites, as well as natural attractions like the Razazah Lake, also attract tourists.

Sand quarries in Kerbala have the potential to be developed into important suppliers of resources for the construction industry. The governorate's capital hosts the University of Kerbala.

Insecurity and attacks on pilgrims have had a negative impact on the number of pilgrims visiting Kerbala. The IS conquests in 2014 and the ongoing confrontation between militants and the Iraqi security forces are also scaring away many visitors, especially those coming from countries outside Iraq, like Iran. The dwindling numbers of visitors are leading to a loss of jobs in the tourism sector.

Outdated machinery and the wide availability of cheap imported products are also slowly pushing Kerbala's once famous food canning factories out of business.

Historical Introduction

In the battle of Kerbala in 680, forces loyal to caliph Yazid attacked and killed Hussain bin Ali and his followers, including his half-brother Abbas and his son Ali Akbar. Hussain was the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and is considered as the third Imam by Shiite Muslims. The tombs of Hussain, Abbas and Ali Akbar at Kerbala have been holy sites for Shia Muslims ever since, and attract millions of pilgrims every year. Kerbala has also been an important center of Shiite religious scholarship.



The Imam Hussain shrine in Kerbala. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Shiite clergy in the holy cities of Kerbala and Najaf long posed a challenge for the central authority in Baghdad. Not unsurprisingly Kerbala became one of the centers of the Shiite uprising that swept southern Iraq in 1991. Following the Iraqi defeat at the hands of the International Coalition, mass revolts broke out in March 1991 in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Shiite southern governorates. The uprisings were inspired by the Ba'ath regime's apparent weakness and encouraged by former president George H. Bush's call on the Iraqi people to take down

Saddam Hussein themselves. The expected American support for the revolts however did not materialize, and after initial victories the uncoordinated rebels were quickly crushed by the Iraqi army. Unlike the Kurdish region, the Shiite south could not count on a no-fly zone imposed by the International Coalition. Thousands were killed in the fighting, including civilians who died when the Iraqi army indiscriminately targeted rebel held areas using heavy weaponry and helicopters. Many others were detained or executed, only to be found in mass graves after the 2003 invasion. The city of Kerbala and its holy shrines suffered considerable combat damage. For the remainder of the Ba'ath regime's rule, restrictions were imposed on both the Shiite clergy as well as on pilgrims visiting the shrines.

In 2003 American forces on their way to Baghdad pushed through the so called 'Kerbala Gap', the stretch of land between the city of Kerbala and the Razazah Lake. In April 2003 the city of Kerbala itself was taken following an airborne assault and days of heavy fighting. In December 2003 a string of bomb attacks hit multinational forces in Kerbala, killing 13 people and wounding 172 others, many of them civilians. In January 2007 American forces were again targeted when five soldiers were abducted from their base and executed in a raid which was allegedly supported by Iran.

In the years of sectarian strife following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the symbolically important city of Kerbala was targeted multiple times by Sunni insurgents. In March 2004 six bombs exploded near the Hussain shrine, targeting crowds of Shia Muslims taking part in the Ashoura festival, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. 85 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded. The shrine was again targeted in January 2006, when a bomb attack killed at least 60 civilians and wounded many others. In April 2007 again dozens of civilians were killed when a suicide car bomber detonated near the Imam Hussain shrine. In January and February 2009 and again in February 2010 and January 2011 pilgrims were once more targeted by bomb attacks. During the December 2014 Arba'een festival a mortar attack struck Kerbala, killing one and wounding four others. Despite these attacks the

number of pilgrims visiting Kerbala steadily increased since the restrictions on the pilgrimage were lifted in 2003 following the overthrow of Saddam Hussain.

The governorate of Kerbala escaped the onslaught of IS which swept large parts of northwestern Iraq in 2014.

Humanitarian Issues

Despite the string of bomb attacks on pilgrims, Kerbala is one of the safer governorates of Iraq with a relatively low number of security incidents.

	Population under the poverty line	Unemployment	Enrollment primary education	Enrollment secondary education	Literacy
Kerbala Governorate	11,4%	9,6%	88,7%	43,3%	79,4%
National Averages	11,5%	11,3%	90,4%	48,6%	79% ¹

The number of people living under the poverty line of \$2,5 a day in the governorate of Kerbala is almost equal to the national average. It should however be noted that both poverty and food insecurity drastically decreased over the past few years. Despite a significant increase in the enrollment rate for secondary education recently, Kerbala still scores below the Iraqi average enrollment rates for both primary and secondary schooling. Even though unemployment is somewhat lower than in most other governorates of the country, the employment rate for women (10,8%) is among the lowest of all Iraq.

92,7% of Kerbala's inhabitants are connected to the public water network. Less than 60% of the governorate's households however rely on the public network as their first source of drinking water, with the others using bottled water or water tankers to satisfy their water needs. For waste water disposal only 27% of Kerbala's population relies on the public sewer network, with the remainder using septic tanks or covered canals outside their houses.

The public electricity network is the first source of power for 91% percent of Kerbala's households, but as almost 95% of the population reports daily power cuts of twelve hours or more it is no surprise that the majority of people also use private or shared generators to provide electricity.

Following the IS conquest of large swaths of northwestern Iraq in 2014, the country witnessed a wave of internal displacement.

¹As by UNICEF, *State of The World's Children 2015 Country Statistics Table*, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq_statistics.html , 25/02/2015. All other data are from JAU, *Kerbala Governorate Profile* (2013), <http://www.iau-iraq.org/documents/466/GP-Kerbala%202013.pdf> , 02/06/2015.

A large number of IDPs are staying in so called vulnerable settlements, which include religious buildings, schools and unfinished buildings which often lack crucial amenities like water and electricity, and IDPs staying there often lack access to food and health services. IDPs staying in these forms of settlement are also at risk of eviction, while others renting housing face difficulties coming up with the rent. For an up to date overview of the numbers and locations of IDPs, refugees and camps in the governorate please consult [IOM's displacement tracking matrix](#) or [REACH Iraq's resource center](#).

Presence of NGOs

Please see the [members' area](#) on NCCI's website for full access to our weekly field reports, including an NGO activity mapping and an up to date humanitarian situation overview. This map gives an oversight of local and international NGO presence on a district and camp level.

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