

Erbil Governorate Profile



Source map: [Joint Analysis and Policy Unit](#)

Erbil at a Glance

Fast Facts

- Area: 15,074 km²
- Average High Temperatures: 12,2°C (January) to 42°C (July)
- Population: 1,530,722
- Capital City: Erbil
- Average Low Temperatures: 2,4°C (January) to 24,9°C (July)
- Population Distribution Rural-Urban: 24%-76%

Geography and Climate

The governorate of Erbil (or Hewler in Kurdish) is located in the northern Kurdistan region of Iraq, an area with a semi-arid continental climate. The summer season (June-September) is hot and dry, while the winters are colder and wet. Rainfall is limited to the period between October and November, averaging 543 mm annually. The governorate is bordered by the converging Tigris and Little Zab rivers in the south, while the Zagros Mountain range forms the northeastern part of the area.

Population and Administrative Division

The population of Erbil governorate is predominantly Kurdish, but the governorate is also a home to Assyrian, Arab and Turkmen minorities. The majority of Erbil's inhabitants are Sunni Muslims, but a number of Christian (Chaldeans, Assyrians and Armenians), Yezidi and Kaka'i communities are also living across the area.

Erbil is one of the three governorates governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The governorate is divided in the following seven districts: Erbil, Shaqlawa, Koisinjaq, Soran, Choman, Mergasur and Makhmur. More than half of the governorate's population lives in the district of Erbil, the location of the city of Erbil which is also the governorate's and the KRG's capital city.

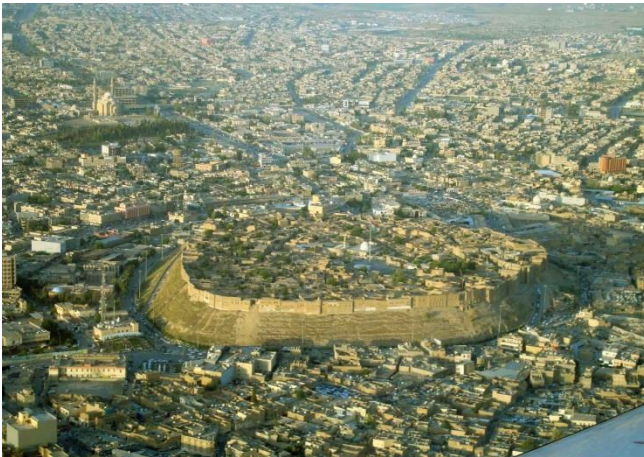
Economy

Erbil is the commercial and administrative center of Iraq's Kurdistan Region. The Kurdistan region escaped the widespread sectarian violence that broke out in other parts of Iraq following the US invasion of 2003, and Erbil benefitted greatly from this relatively calm and stable security environment. Due to a number of reasons, the Kurdish region was less affected by the UN sanctions, which were imposed on Iraq after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and were only lifted after the 2003 invasion. One of the main reasons was that the UN, instead of the Iraqi central government, managed the humanitarian relief and development efforts in the Kurdish region after the war. A large share of the UN Food for Oil program was allotted to the Kurdish region, and the higher presence of international aid organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan also dampened the effect of the sanctions. Finally, cross border smuggling made it easier to circumvent sanction imposed import restrictions.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a semi-autonomous region consisting of the governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah. The KRI was granted autonomy in the 2005 constitution of Iraq and is ruled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its parliament, the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA). Under the 2005 constitution, the KRG is allowed to have its own security forces, which operate independently from the Baghdad controlled Iraqi military and security hierarchy. The KRG's budget and oil export remains dependent of Baghdad, which in the past years regularly lead to tensions between the KRG and the central government. Unresolved territorial disputes about Kirkuk and other areas in the governorates of Diyala and Ninewa with a significant Kurdish presence also continue to poison the relations between the KRG and the central government.

The stable security situation and laws supporting foreign investment attracted a lot of foreign capital to the governorate and encouraged cross border trade with Turkey. In December 2003, an international airport was opened in Erbil. Tourism flourished in the years before the IS conquest of large parts of northwestern Iraq. This economic prosperity set in motion a construction boom. The governorate hosts three universities and a number of colleges and other education facilities. Despite these economic successes, the governorate is still plagued by unemployment, inflation and a deficient public sector. Agriculture is hampered by a lack of modern farming methods and equipment, while the infrastructure remains poor in many areas of the governorate. The massive influx of IDPs and refugees fleeing the IS takeover of large parts of northwestern Iraq is also burdening the local economy.

Historical Introduction



The historic citadel of Erbil. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The city of Erbil is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and traces of a past stretching back millennia can be found throughout the governorate. The region's modern history is deeply intertwined with Kurdish nationalism and the desire to found a Kurdish state independent from Baghdad

Since the 1920's, Iraq's Kurdish region witnessed many revolts against the central authorities in Baghdad – be them the British, the Hashemite monarchy or the Baathist regime – all of which were violently put down.

The relations between the Kurdish region and the central government started off relatively well after the Ba'athist takeover in 1968. The promising Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 11 March 1970 however was cancelled and replaced by a unilaterally declared autonomy statute in 1974 following disagreements over the borders of the Kurdish region and the disputed territories around Sinjar, Kirkuk and Khanaqin, issues which still linger on today. The following Kurdish revolt led by Mustafa Barzani was crushed by the regime, which then embarked on an 'Arabization' campaign aiming to alter the demographical balance of the Kurdish region. The Iran Iraq war, which started in 1980, diverted Baghdad's efforts and resources and the central government gradually lost control over the Kurdish region.

In 1987 the Iraqi regime decided to end the 'Kurdish problem' once and for all. Under the command of Ali Hassan Al-Majid, a cousin and close friend of Saddam Hussain, the Iraqi army launched the Spring 1987 campaign, which started with chemical strikes on villages in the Balisan valley. Then ground forces moved in and demolished hundreds of villages throughout Kurdistan, forcing their residents to resettle or move to government-built camps. The Spring campaign however was only the prelude for the even bloodier Anfal campaign. Between February and September 1988, eight Anfal campaigns were launched, sweeping the entire Kurdish region of Iraq. The Anfal campaigns all followed a similar two-staged battle

plan. First a wave of chemical attacks, airstrikes and artillery shelling was launched against both Peshmerga positions and villages. After the first phase Iraqi ground forces moved in, demolishing entire villages and detaining and deporting the civilian population. Captured battle age men were then split from the other detainees and executed. Other civilians of all ages were also targeted by mass executions and disappearances. By the end of the Anfal campaign, at least 2000 villages had been razed and varying sources estimate that between 50,000 and 187,000 civilians were killed during gas attacks, executed by the Iraqi army or had perished from hardships endured when they fled the violence. Many others had been 'disappeared', their fate unknown to their relatives up to today.

After the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War, revolts broke out in Iraqi Kurdistan and the mainly Shiite southern governorates. The revolts were violently crushed by the government, but the stream of refugees fleeing Kurdistan triggered an international response: a safe haven was declared in the Kurdish region, guaranteed by the international coalition that fought Iraq in 1991. A massive relief operation was also set in motion in the Kurdish governorates. Clashes between Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi army however continued on a limited scale after the Kurds seized Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in July 1991.

In 1994, open hostilities broke out between the rival KDP and PUK factions, at one time involving Iran on the side of the PUK and the central government supporting the KDP. In 1998 the two factions finally signed a US brokered peace agreement. When the US-led coalition force invaded Iraq in 2003, Kurdish forces joined the fight against Saddam's regime. After the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime, the Kurdish region, including the governorate of Erbil, remained relatively calm and untouched by the sectarian strife that engulfed other parts of Iraq. Tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government in Baghdad however remained. The disputed oil-rich areas around Kirkuk, the partition of the oil-revenue and the presence of Baghdad-controlled security forces in or near Kurdish areas are all points of contention between the Kurds and Baghdad. The IS-conquest of large parts of northwestern Iraq in 2014 and the following retreat of the Iraqi army left many of these contested areas de facto under control of Kurdish Peshmerga forces, thus adding another layer of complexity to the ongoing territorial conflict.

Humanitarian Issues

Compared with most other parts of Iraq the security situation in Erbil is relatively stable. This however does not mean that the governorate has been entirely incident free. Crime and cross-border smuggling are affecting the security situation in the area, and occasionally attacks do manage to get through. Erbil and the two other Kurdish governorates are also littered with landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Since the IS incursion into Iraq it has been getting increasingly difficult to employ Arab staff in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Arab Iraqi's working for NGOs in the KRI have been questioned, delayed or even blocked at security checkpoints. These checkpoint issues not only hinder NGO operations in the region, but also make the life of thousands of IDPs residing in the region more difficult. Arab Iraqis and Arab nationals from other countries are also facing problems in obtaining visa to enter the KRI.

Development Parameters 2013:

	Population under the poverty line	Unemployment	Enrollment primary education	Enrollment secondary education	Literacy
Erbil Governorate	2%	7,3%	94,7%	69%	73,3%
National Averages	11,5%	11,3%	91%	50%	79% ¹

Erbil governorate ranks above the national average on a number of development parameters. Despite the relatively low number of people living under the \$2,5 a day poverty line and limited unemployment, malnutrition is still a serious problem in some parts of the governorate. The percentage of underweight children under the age of five reached 9,7% in 2011, a considerable deterioration from the 6,5% of underweight children in 2000. Illiteracy also remains a problem throughout the governorate, especially for women. Infrastructure in general remains poor, with most areas suffering from prolonged power cuts. Access to the water network is also not available or reliable for all households in Erbil, with significant variation between the different districts of the governorate.

The governorate of Erbil has witnessed a massive influx of internally displaced persons following the militant takeover of large parts of northwestern Iraq in 2014. Refugees fleeing the war in neighboring Syria also flocked to Erbil. 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](#).

The costs of renting housing is a major problem for IDPs staying in rented accommodation, while IDPs residing in camps or religious buildings are often lacking access to water, sanitation, health facilities and food. Shelter, water, sanitation and heating are problematic in unfinished buildings or other informal housing IDPs reside in. The high costs of living in Erbil in general are a concern for the displaced population. The large number of IDPs is also putting huge pressures on the host communities and economy of the governorate.

Presence of NGOs

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

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, *Erbil Governorate Profile 2013*, <http://www.jauiraq.org/documents/380/GP-Erbil%202013.pdf> , 24/02/2015.

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