

# Rapid Overview of Areas of Return (ROAR): Ba'aj and Surrounding Areas

Ninewa Governorate, Iraq - April 2018

Returns Working Group  
RWG Iraq



**REACH** Informing  
more effective  
humanitarian action

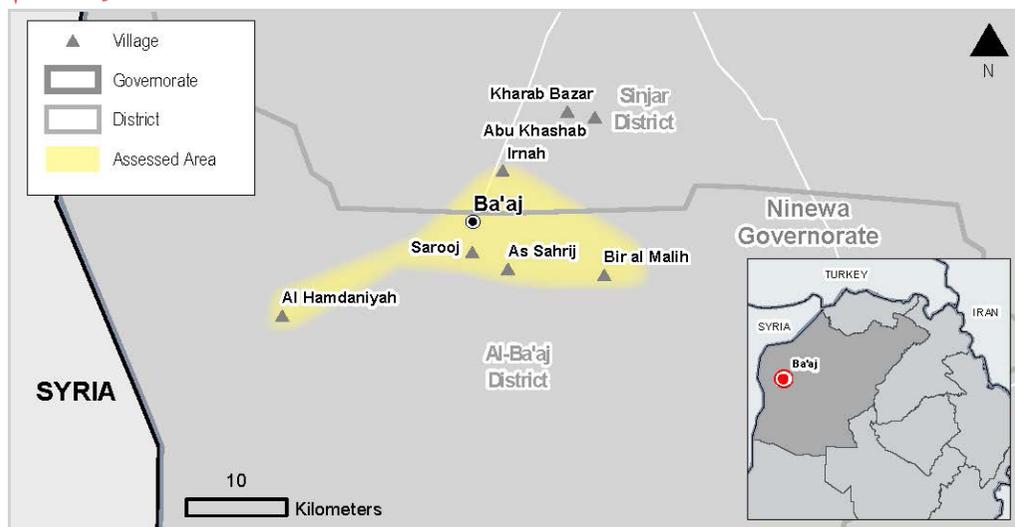
## Overview

The town of Ba'aj is located in the far west of Ninewa governorate, approximately 40 kilometres (km) from the border with Syria. The surrounding area is sparsely populated and largely agrarian, with the closest urban centres in Sinjar (just over 30 km northeast of the town), Telafar (85 km) and the governorate capital, Mosul (160 km). Before 2014, the population of Ba'aj town was reportedly around 13,000 people,<sup>1</sup> while the entirety of Ba'aj district had 133,291 people.<sup>2</sup>

The Government of Iraq (GoI) re-established control of Ba'aj in June 2017,<sup>3</sup> after the town had been held by the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) since mid-2014. At the time the GoI re-established control, the area had mostly emptied of people.<sup>4</sup> In January 2018, it was announced that returns to Ba'aj had started,<sup>5</sup> and by the end of February 2018 a total of 3,660 families had come back to the area, including 1,100 families to Ba'aj town centre.<sup>6</sup>

In the period before 2014, the area performed poorly on several development indicators, including low connectivity to water and electricity networks, along with low literacy rates.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in 2014, the recent crisis caused mass displacement from the area as well as damage to infrastructure and property. After partner international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) expressed an interest in Ba'aj and surrounding areas, REACH, in partnership with the Returns Working Group (RWG), launched a Rapid Overview of Areas of Return (ROAR) assessment to help inform the recovery process and support durable returns. The ROAR assessment looks at the motivations behind return, along with the current situation related to protection issues, livelihoods and the provision of services to identify priority areas based on resident's needs.

## 📍 Ba'aj, Ninewa Governorate



## Key Findings

### Displacement and Return, Protection Concerns

- **The main reason given by returnee KIs for coming back to the area was perceived improvements to safety.** For KIs who remain in displacement, their main reasons for not returning included a lack of sufficient services and limited livelihood opportunities in Ba'aj.
- **The town is perceived by KIs to be largely cleared of explosive hazards (mines/bombs/improvised explosive devices). However, some surrounding villages and agricultural land are reportedly still not cleared.** In terms of freedom of movement, KIs reported that there is a nightly curfew in Ba'aj town. Although they reported feeling generally safe in the area, KIs expressed that they felt vulnerable, due to their isolated location close to the Syrian border, and are fearful about the future.
- **There is no functioning office to obtain or renew identity and other civil documentation. For this, residents must travel to Mosul.** There is reportedly no functioning public court in the area. The most common legal issue among the returnee population included looted property and the loss of civil documentation.

### Livelihoods

- **There are reportedly very few livelihood opportunities in the area, with limited work available in Ba'aj town and almost no work available in surrounding villages.** In the period before ISIL, the area was heavily reliant on agriculture, but due to the fear of contamination, low rainfall and a lack of machinery, the land is largely not being used.

### Access to Basic Services

- **In Ba'aj town, schools have reportedly reopened, and children are attending classes.** However, there is a shortage of teachers, resulting in oversized classes, and a shortage of educational materials. **In surrounding villages, children are generally not receiving education due to the distances and costs involved in travelling to school.**
- **There is a clinic located in Ba'aj town and a military-run clinic located outside of the town. These only provide basic medical services.** For more complex medical cases, residents must travel to Mosul. Due to the distance and cost of this journey, many residents cannot access appropriate healthcare.
- **Electricity from the public grid and piped water from the public network are not available in the area.** KIs reported that residents are relying on generators or having to cope without power. Drinking water is reportedly being delivered on trucks from springs located north of the town. **Waste disposal services are said to have resumed in Ba'aj town, but surrounding villages do not have these services.**

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Local Forces Banish ISIS Suspects' Families," April 2018.

<sup>2</sup> IAU and OCHA, "Ninewa Governorate Profile", 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iraq's pro-government forces retake Al-Baaj from ISIL," 4 June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Local Forces Banish ISIS Suspects' Families" April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Iraq Protection Cluster, "Ninewa Returnees Profile," January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Iraq Protection Cluster, "Ninewa Returnees Profile," February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ba'aj scored low on these indicators when compared to the national average. IAU and OCHA, "Ninewa Governorate Profile", 2009.

## Methodology

REACH collected data from 28 male key informants (KIs), including 6 returnee residents, 13 residents who remain in displacement in Salamiyah camp to the south of Mosul, and 9 expert KIs, who had specialist knowledge in one of the areas covered by the assessment (see Table 1). In some cases, the same respondent was classed as an expert KI in multiple subject areas. Given their broad community knowledge, mukhtars were classed as experts in all subject areas. KIs were identified through existing REACH networks and the networks of other INGOs. Data collection took place between 16 and 23 April 2018, through remote telephone interviews conducted by REACH enumerators.

## Limitations

Findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically generalisable to the assessed area. Furthermore, KIs often provided estimates rather than exact figures, which should also be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings.

**Table 1: Number and profession of expert KIs**

SME type	Number	Profession
Protection	5	Mukhtars and one INGO worker
Livelihoods	4	Mukhtars
Water	5	Mukhtars and one technician
Electricity	5	Mukhtars and one local government worker
Solid waste disposal	4	Mukhtars
Education	5	Mukhtars and one local school manager
Healthcare	5	Mukhtars and one local medical worker

## Movement Intentions

### Historical Overview and Current Trends

The most recent displacement from the area began in mid-2014, at the time that ISIL established control. Many of the residents that displaced during this time crossed the border into Syria, including to camps such as al Hol in al Hasakeh governorate.<sup>8</sup> Two internally displaced person (IDP) KIs and one returnee KI reported that they displaced first to Syria, before re-entering Iraq and moving to camps in the Mosul area. At this time, some residents from the Ba'aj area also displaced elsewhere within Iraq.

Displacement from Ba'aj increased in 2017, due to an ongoing operation by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to establish control in areas of northern Iraq held by ISIL. Between April and August of that year almost 30,000 residents displaced from the district,<sup>9</sup> mostly heading to camps to the south of Mosul via screening sites at Hammam Al Alil.<sup>10</sup>

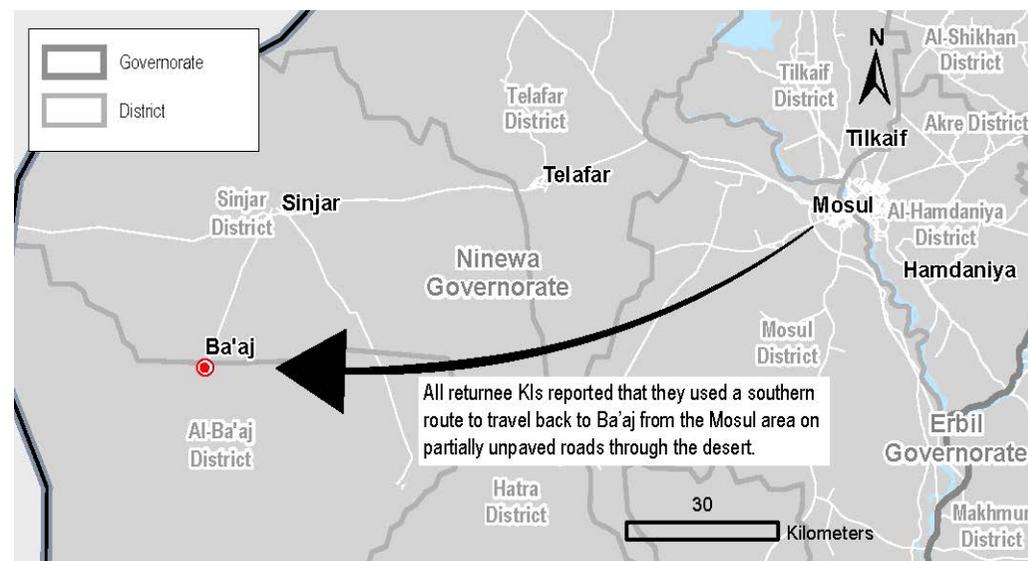
At the time that the GoI re-established control over the town, the area was reportedly heavily contaminated by explosive hazards.<sup>11</sup> Initially, it was reported that authorities were not allowing returns to the area.<sup>12</sup> However, by January 2018, it was announced by the Mayor's office that returns to the district had begun.

In order to return to the district, residents need to contact the local authorities and obtain the necessary clearance.<sup>13</sup> However, it was reported that since late February 2018, families with a male member with perceived links to extremist groups were not being allowed to come back to the area by the local authorities.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that certain groups are facing legal barriers to return.

For those who have returned, KIs reported limited livelihood opportunities, and poor access to basic services in the area. As a result, two IDP KIs indicated that some residents who returned to Ba'aj, later displaced again due to the state of living conditions and services.

All returnee KIs who had made the journey from the Mosul area to Ba'aj indicated that they had used a southern route on partially unpaved roads through the desert, in a region colloquially known as al Jazira (see Map 2). The journey was said to take 4-6 hours and cost between 100,000 and 250,000 Iraqi Dinar (IQD) (84.39-210.97 USD)<sup>15</sup> to rent vehicles, depending on the size of the family. Returnee KIs reported that they took this route due to safety concerns in Sinjar town, which the main road from Mosul to the Syria border, Iraqi Route 47, passes through. This is the road that would usually be taken to Ba'aj town. These concerns about the Sinjar route were reported as a general barrier to return for the population by 11 of 13 IDP KIs and 3 of 6 returnee KIs.

**Map 2: Reported route taken by returnee KIs to Ba'aj from the Mosul area**



<sup>8</sup> In March 2017, 97% of this camp's residents were Iraqi refugees, mostly from Ninewa: REACH, "Camp Profile Al Hol: Al Hassaka Governorate Syria", April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> OCHA Iraq, "Mosul Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 41" (27 July to 8 August 2017).

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, "Iraq Situation Flash Update", 13 June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> The Guardian, "Booby-traps ... but no Baghdadi: the men cleaning up after Isis in northern Iraq", 12 June 2017.

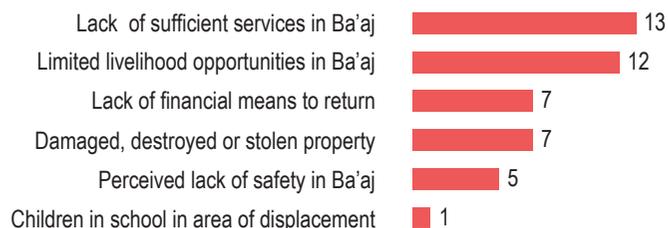
<sup>12</sup> Rudaw, "Hashd forces bar mayor, residents from return to town west of Mosul", July 2017. <sup>13</sup> UNHCR IRAQ, "Bi-Weekly Protection Update, 19 February - 4 March 2018".

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Local Forces Banish ISIS Suspects' Families". <sup>15</sup> Price converted using www.xe.com on 8 May 2018.

## Why are residents not returning?

IDP KIs were asked what factors have caused them to remain in displacement. The most frequently reported factors were a lack of sufficient services (reported by all IDP KIs) and limited livelihood opportunities in Ba'aj (12 of 13 IDP KIs). Regarding services, IDP KIs specifically highlighted the lack of sufficient healthcare, water, electricity and education facilities. The other factors reported by IDP KIs for not returning were: a lack of financial means to do so (7 of 13); damaged, destroyed or stolen property (7 of 13); a perceived lack of safety in Ba'aj (5 of 13); and, finally, not wanting to remove their children from school in their area of displacement (1 of 13).

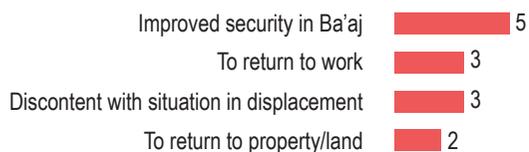
**Figure 1: Reasons reported by IDP KIs (13 in total) for not returning to their area of origin<sup>16</sup>**



## Why are residents returning?

Almost all returnee KIs indicated that perceived improvements to security in Ba'aj motivated them to return (5 of 6). Two KIs elaborated on this point, with one noting the presence of the ISF as making them feel safe, and another mentioning that their village had been cleared – in the KI's perception – of explosive hazards. Other frequently mentioned factors were to return to work (3 of 6), discontent with their circumstances in the area of displacement (3 of 6) and wanting to return to property (2 of 6). For the former, two returnee KIs elaborated on this point to say that the camp was hot and uncomfortable during the summer months, and that they wanted to leave before temperatures increased again.

**Figure 2: Reasons reported by returnee KIs (6 in total) for coming back to their area of origin<sup>16</sup>**



## How are residents getting information?

In terms of what information influenced the decision to either remain in displacement or return to Ba'aj, the most common source cited among IDPs and returnees was telephone calls with friends,

family or colleagues already living in Ba'aj, followed by visits to the area of origin and receiving information through the news or social media.

**Table 2: Reported sources of information on their area of origin among IDP and returnee KIs<sup>16</sup>**

Information Source	IDP (13 total)	Returnee (6 total)	All (19 total)
Family/Friends/Colleagues in AoO	8	4	12
Visits to AoO by KI or relatives	6	1	7
Other IDPs in camps	1	1	2
News or social media	1	1	2

## Protection Concerns: Safety, Freedom of Movement and Legal Issues

### Perceptions of Safety

- KIs perceived Ba'aj town to have been largely cleared of explosive hazards. This clearance was reportedly carried out by an ISF explosive disposal team. However, surrounding agricultural areas and some villages – such as Sarooj – had reportedly not been fully cleared, and this was said to be preventing people from re-cultivating the land. No KIs reported being aware of recent deaths caused by explosive hazards.
- Although returnee KIs generally reported feeling safe and secure in the area, they also stated that they felt vulnerable. The area is close to the Syrian border and exposed to attacks from ISIL or other armed groups, which makes it still dangerous – especially at night. Returnee KIs also expressed fear about the future, due to the possibility that ISIL or other armed groups could return and establish control of the area again.

### Freedom of Movement

- Providing that individuals are carrying the correct identification documentation and security clearance, they are reportedly able to move freely around the area.
- Several KIs noted that they avoid Sinjar town and the area around it, due to safety concerns.
- In Ba'aj town there was said to be a nighttime curfew imposed by the ISF. If residents wish to move during this period, they reportedly have to obtain permission from the ISF. The villages of Surooj, Kharab Arna and al Hamdaniyah were said to not have a curfew.

### Legal Issues

- There is currently no office in Ba'aj to obtain or replace identity documents or other civil documentation such as birth, marriage or death certificates, though there was such an office in the pre-ISIL period. As a result of this, residents have not been able to obtain new

<sup>16</sup> KIs could provide more than one answer.

identity or civil documentation. Two returnee KIs reported that newborn babies are not being registered.

- Many residents have reportedly lost documentation during the recent crisis. KIs indicated that ISIL confiscated or destroyed documents to prevent people from leaving the area. In addition, many of the residents who displaced across the border to Syria were also said to have had documents confiscated by the authorities.
- To replace or collect documents, residents reportedly have to travel to Mosul or Hammam al Alil, south of Mosul. The round trip takes several days and is costly. As a result, many residents were said to not be replacing or obtaining their documents.
- One returnee KI reported that, in order to replace ID cards, residents must first get clearance from the local police to prove that they are not linked to extremist groups. Some residents are said to be afraid to do so for fear of being arrested due to this perceived affiliation.
- There are reportedly no functioning courts and no working judges in Ba'aj. In the past, expert KIs reported that the town had a court, whereas at present there is only a police station and the mayor's office operating in the town.
- The most widely reported legal issue was looted property. KIs reported that generators, pumps, household appliances, furniture, farming equipment and vehicles had been stolen during the recent crisis. No KI reported receiving any compensation for these losses.

#### Improvements Suggested by KIs

KIs suggested that legal services – such as a court and an office for document renewal – should return to Ba'aj so that residents are able to renew their documents and register legal complaints.

## Livelihoods

- There are reportedly very few livelihood opportunities in the area. KIs indicated that in the pre-ISIL period the work available in the area included public sector employment, small businesses (mainly shops), daily labour and agricultural work (including growing crops and sheep farming).
- In Ba'aj town there was reported to be some public sector employment available, as well as some small businesses that have re-opened; in the surrounding villages, however, there was said to be no work available.
- In the pre-ISIL period, the area was heavily reliant on agriculture, especially in the villages. Residents are reportedly hesitant to re-cultivate the land or use it for grazing due to fear that land is still contaminated with explosive hazards. Both expert and returnee KIs mentioned

that it had been a very poor year for rain, meaning that sufficient water is not available. In addition, pumps, generators and other irrigation infrastructure was reportedly damaged or stolen. The recent crisis has also reduced the amount of sheep residents own. In the pre-ISIL period, the government reportedly distributed feed to support sheep farmers, but this was said to no longer be the case.

- As many returnees are not working or receiving an income, reported coping mechanisms included selling possessions, spending savings and borrowing from relatives or friends. An expert KI reported that a small minority of residents are begging.
- KIs indicated that only those with the financial ability to do so are likely to have returned, while those without savings or other means of coping without an income are likely to have remained in camps.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the lack of livelihood opportunities was cited as a reason why displaced residents are not returning.

#### Improvements Suggested by KIs

In terms of agriculture, returnee and expert KIs suggested that the land needs to be de-contaminated of explosive hazards and that financial support is needed to buy seeds and feed for sheep, along with new pumps and generators to help irrigate the land. KIs also felt that more government offices and public institutions could re-open in the town, creating more work and providing more services.

## Basic Services: Healthcare and Education

### Healthcare

- Before ISIL, there was a functioning hospital, with a range of specialists and medical services available, but this has not re-opened, reportedly due to damage, looted equipment and a lack of medical staff. There also used to be two functioning health clinics, KIs reported.
- Currently, there is one functioning public clinic in Ba'aj town. There is also a military-operated clinic located around 3 km outside of the town that is used by residents. A consultation at the public clinic costs 1,000 IQD (0.84 USD),<sup>18</sup> while visiting the military clinic was said to be free.
- At the public clinic there are reportedly no doctors available, only medics. Therefore, the staff are only able to handle simple medical cases. There are reportedly long queues due to the volume of patients and the lack of staff who are able to see them.
- If the clinic in the town is not able to handle cases, residents are going to the military-run clinic, which has qualified doctors that are able to provide basic medical services, including handling emergency cases.

<sup>17</sup> This is supported by a recent REACH Intentions Survey which found that among IDPs displaced from Ninewa, the third most common reason given for not returning was “no financial means to return or restart”. See REACH, “[Camp Intentions Survey Round Two: Governorate of Origin, Ninewa](#)”, January 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Price converted using [www.xe.com](#) on 8 May 2018.

- For any more complex cases, residents are travelling to Mosul. However, this is prohibitively expensive for some. KIs indicated that the trip – including travel, accommodation and medical fees – can cost more than 100,000 IQD (84.39 USD).<sup>19</sup> One KI reported hearing of cases where the inability of ill or injured patients to access appropriate healthcare led to deaths.
- Aside from traditional birth attendants, professional maternity care services are not available in the area. Two returnee KIs mentioned having to travel to Mosul in order to access these services.
- There is reportedly one pharmacy in Ba'aj town, which has medicines that are coming from Mosul. Only a limited range of medicines are available, however.
- The lack of healthcare services was frequently cited by KIs as a reason for why many residents have not returned to the area.
- There is reportedly a clinic that is badly damaged on the west side of town. The hospital, despite widespread looting, reportedly remains structurally sound.

#### Improvements Suggested by KIs

Expert KIs suggested that equipment should be replaced so that the hospital can re-open and increase the medical services available in the area. There is also a need for more doctors, medicines and equipment, such as ambulances.

## Education

- According to an education expert KI, of the eight schools in Ba'aj town that were functioning in the period before ISIL, only two have re-opened. One is reportedly serving as both a primary and secondary school, while the other is operating as just a primary school. The KI suggested that around 20% of the pre-ISIL school-age children in the town are currently attending classes.
- KIs indicated that some children in the area have not received formal education for several years as a result of the crisis.
- In many surrounding villages – such as Sarooj, Sahrij, al Hamdaniyah and Kharab al Arna – schools have reportedly not re-opened, primarily due to a lack of teachers. Many children in these villages are reportedly not receiving education due to the distance they would have to travel to attend schools, and the associated cost of transport. Although public education is free, the cost of uniforms, equipment and books were also cited as additional financial barriers.
- For the schools that have re-opened in Ba'aj town, there is reportedly an insufficient number of teachers, which is leading to oversized classes. An education expert KI reported

that their school had four times as many students now when compared to the period before ISIL. Likewise, a returnee KI living in Ba'aj reported that when they returned, their nearest school was not accepting any more students due to overcrowding, and that they had to send their children to a school located further away.

- Equipment and materials have reportedly been looted from schools. There was said to be a lack of textbooks, and the books that are available are outdated.
- The lack of education services was cited by KIs as one of the reasons why many residents have not returned to the area.

#### Improvements Suggested by KIs

Expert KIs reported that they need new educational materials, such as textbooks and notebooks, more teachers to return, damaged facilities to be repaired and for transport to be provided so that children are able to travel to school from surrounding villages.

## Basic Utility Services: Water, Electricity and Waste Disposal

### Water

- In the period before ISIL, water projects provided piped water to Ba'aj town, but not to surrounding villages. However, this water was not always available in the town and two KIs reported that it was not always clean enough to drink. Residents from surrounding villages reportedly came to Ba'aj to collect their water from the pipe network in the town.
- Currently, residents are said to be buying drinking water, which comes on trucks from springs in the villages of Abu Khashab and Kharab al Bazaar (see Map 3).
- The drinking water costs between 5,000 and 12,000 IQD (4.21-8.43 USD)<sup>20</sup> for 1,000 litres (it costs more to have water delivered to outlying villages than Ba'aj town, hence why prices vary). This usually provides sufficient drinking water for a household for over a week. This water is reportedly not being treated. If residents cannot afford water they either use other people's or borrow money to pay for it.
- Two KIs indicated that residents were getting sick from the water.
- KIs reported that all-purpose water is either pumped or pulled manually from wells. KIs indicated that there was a shortage of generators to pump the water and fuel to power the generators.

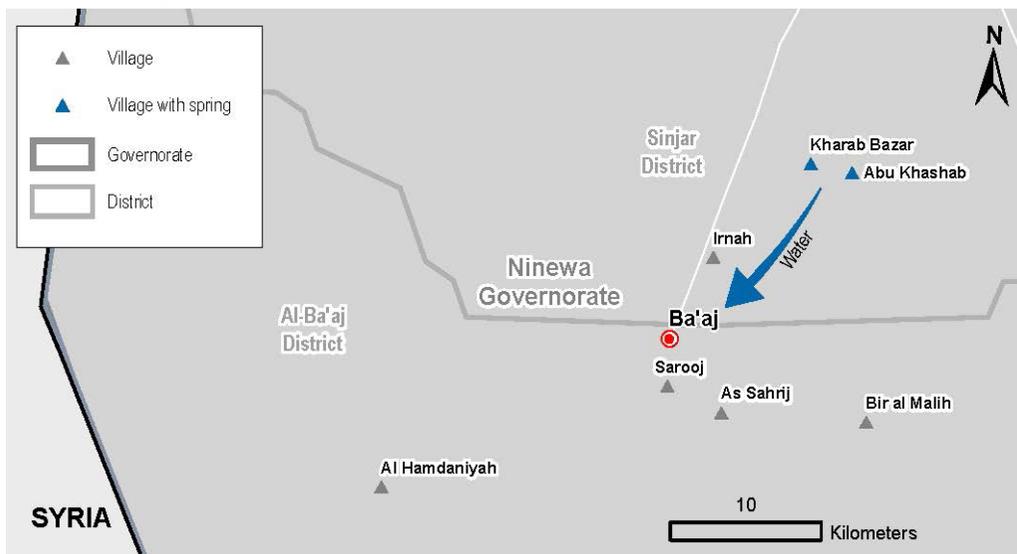
#### Improvements Suggested by KIs

Expert KIs reported that the pipe network should be restored and expanded. They also suggested that they need more generators and pumps.

<sup>19</sup> Price converted using [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com) on 8 May 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Price converted using [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com) on 8 May 2018.

Map 3: Drinking water origin point



## Solid Waste Disposal

- KIs reported that waste collection services have recently resumed in Ba'aj town. Solid waste is being collected free of charge by the municipality. The waste is collected from outside houses and from communal bins in the town, and is then taken to a landfill, located to the south of town. However, two returnee KIs from Ba'aj town reported that they did not receive this service and are disposing of waste themselves. This indicates that waste disposal services do not cover the entire town.
- In the assessed villages surrounding Ba'aj town, there are no waste disposal services. In the villages of Sarooj, Sahrij, al Hamdaniyah and Kharab al Arna, it was reported that residents dispose of waste themselves by burning or burying it in unused land in the vicinity of the villages. However, KIs reported that in those villages there were no disposal services before ISIL, meaning that this situation has not changed as a result of the recent crisis.

### Improvements Suggested by KIs

One expert KI suggested that waste disposal services should be expanded to villages surrounding Ba'aj. Large bins should also be provided for residents.

## Electricity

- In the period before ISIL, KIs reported that Ba'aj town and several surrounding villages were connected to the public grid, with electricity being provided from a power station near Sinjar town.
- Currently, residents do not have access to electricity from the public grid, which is reportedly completely dysfunctional due to electrical wires, poles and transformers having been stolen or damaged during the recent crisis. As a result, residents are using generators to access electricity. An expert KI reported that there are several functioning community generators in Ba'aj town. KIs reported that these provide 10 to 12 hours of electricity a day and cost between 7,000 IQD to 9,000 IQD (5.90-7.59 USD) per ampere. Some residents in Ba'aj town also have private generators.
- In some surrounding villages – such as Sarooj, Sahrij, Kharab Arna and al Hamdaniyah – there are no community generators and residents are relying on private generators.
- Residents who are not able to afford or access electricity are relying on alternatives, such as gas or oil lamps for lighting or solar power devices for an electricity source.

### Improvements Suggested by KIs

Expert KIs indicated that the entire electricity network needs to be repaired, including fixing or replacing the cables, the poles and generators.

### About REACH

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms.

All our reports, maps and factsheets are available on the REACH resource centre. For more information, visit our website at [www.reach-initiative.org](http://www.reach-initiative.org), follow us on Twitter: @REACH\_info and Facebook: [www.facebook.com/IMPACT.init](https://www.facebook.com/IMPACT.init) or write to [geneva@reach-initiative.org](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org)

### About the Returns Working Group (RWG) Iraq

The Returns Working Group (RWG) is an operational and multi-stakeholder platform on returns, which was established in line with Strategic Objective 3 of the 2016 Iraq HRP “to support voluntary, safe and dignified return” of IDPs; to monitor and report on conditions in return areas, and determine to what extent durable solutions have been achieved- or progress made- for returnees.

The key objective of the group is to establish coherence of information, data and analysis, strengthen coordination and advocacy, give guidance on activities related to the key areas, and enhance complementary action among its partners with the overall goal of supporting and reinforcing the national response to Iraq's coming reintegration challenge.