

Najaf Governorate Profile



Source map: [JAPU](#)

Najaf at a Glance

Fast Facts

- Area: 28,824 km²
- Average High Temperatures: 14°C (January) to 42°C (July)
- Population: 1,220,145
- Capital City: Najaf
- Average Low Temperatures: 6°C (January) to 29°C (July)
- Population Distribution Rural-Urban: 28,9%-71,1%

Geography and Climate

The governorate of Najaf is located in southwestern Iraq and borders Saudi-Arabia. Najaf also shares internal boundaries with the governorates of Anbar, Kerbala, Babil, Qadissiya and Muthanna. Desert plains dominate the landscape of the governorate. A ribbon of irrigated farmland runs along the course of the Euphrates River, which intersects the governorate near its eastern border.

Najaf has a typical dry desert climate. The summers are hot and dry, while precipitation is very low and limited to the winter months. The governorate receives an average amount of only 99mm of rainfall a year.

Population and Administrative Division

Shia Arabs are the dominant ethnic-religious group in Najaf. Except for the area near the Euphrates River in northeastern Najaf, the governorate is sparsely populated. The governorate is divided into the following three districts: Al-Najaf, Al-Kufa and Al-Manathera.

Economy

The city of Najaf hosts the shrine of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, making it a holy place for both Shia and Sunni Muslims. The governorate is also the location of the Wadi Al-Salam (valley of peace), an important Shia burial ground and the city of Najaf is a prominent center of Shia learning. These holy sites draw a lot of pilgrims and religious tourists to the governorate, making the tourism sector one of the most important components of Najaf's economy, contributing almost 30% to the governorate's GDP.

Najaf also hosts a number of industrial activities, including the production of cement and other building materials, mineral and hydrocarbon extraction and agribusiness. The governorate's farmers mainly produce wheat, rice dates and vegetables. The University of Kufa is located in the governorate's capital of Najaf, which also hosts an international airport.

The governorate's economic development is hindered by poor infrastructure and a lack of private investment. A lot of jobs in agriculture and trade are also unwaged.

Historical Introduction

The city of Kufa, nowadays merged with the governorate's capital of Najaf, holds an important place in early Islamic history. Najaf is the location of the shrine of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, whom Shias regard as the first Imam while Sunnis consider him as the fourth and last rightly guided caliph. For centuries Najaf has also been an important center of Shia religious scholarship, and today the city still hosts important Shia centers of learning.

The holy city of Najaf and its Shia clergy had long posed a challenge for the central authority in Baghdad. Not unsurprisingly Najaf became one of the centers of the Shiite uprising that swept through southern Iraq in 1991. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, a US-led International Coalition intervened and crushed the Iraqi army, forcing it to retreat from Kuwait. After the Iraqi defeat at the hands of the Coalition, mass revolts broke out in March 1991 in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Shiite southern governorates.



The Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf. Source image: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The uprisings were inspired by the Ba'ath regime's apparent weakness following its defeat in Kuwait 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, including civilians, were killed in the fighting by indiscriminate targeting of 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 assassination of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr in Najaf in 1999 sparked another wave of protest and violence between Iraq's Shia population and the Ba'ath regime. Al-Sadr was a Shiite cleric and critic of the Ba'ath regime, and it was widely believed the regime ordered his assassination. His death incited days of violent anti-regime protests in Iraq's Shia dominated southern governorates, including Najaf, and in Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad.

The governorate of Najaf again saw heavy fighting in 2003, when American forces took the city of Najaf and its surroundings to secure their supply lines for the final push into Baghdad. In the years following the invasion the governorate witnessed a number of other security incidents. In August 2003 the Imam Ali mosque was targeted by a car bomb, which killed more than 100 people, including Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

After 2003 the governorate of Najaf, just like other governorates in Iraq's Shiite south, became a stronghold of Moqtada Al-Sadr. Al-Sadr, a popular Shiite cleric, headed the Sadrist Trend party, and also commanded the Mahdi army, a Shia militia force. In the summer of 2004 tensions between the government, the occupation force and the Mahdi army erupted into open combat. A days long battle was fought out between Mahdi army fighters, US, and Iraqi forces in and near the Wadi Al-Salam cemetery. Peace only returned after grand-ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani brokered a ceasefire.

In January 2007 fighting broke out between Iraqi security forces supported by American troops and fighters belonging to the so called 'soldiers of heaven' in the group's hideout near Najaf. The soldiers of heaven were a messianic cult, which allegedly plotted to attack Shia pilgrims on the holy day of Ashura. More than 200 people were killed in the fighting.

During the past few years the governorate of Najaf has remained relatively peaceful. The governorate of was also spared from the onslaught of the IS conquest in 2014, which swept over large parts of northwestern Iraq.

Humanitarian Issues

	Population under the poverty line	Unemployment	Enrollment primary education	Enrollment secondary education	Literacy
Najaf Governorate	8,1%	10,4%	90,3%	39,3%	76,4%
National Averages	11,5%	11,3%	90,4%	48,6%	79% ¹

The governorate of Najaf scores above average on a number of humanitarian parameters. The number of people living below the poverty line of \$2,5 a day is lower than the national average, and so are the unemployment figures. The poverty level also decreased from 15,4% in 2007 to 8,1% in 2011.

Regarding illiteracy and education enrollment rates Najaf however compares poorly to most other governorates of Iraq. Enrollment rates for female students are also below the enrollment rates of their male counterparts.

90,3% of the households in Najaf have sustainable access to an improved water source and 97,8% is connected to the public water network, figures that are higher than the national average. However, just like in other regions of Iraq, the availability of drinking water, both in quality and quantity, is deemed to be insufficient by the bigger part of the governorate's inhabitants. The greater majority of Najaf's inhabitants thus also rely on bottled water or other sources of water to fulfill its water needs. The percentage of households with access to an improved sanitation facility (92,5%) is slightly lower than the national average. The governorate scores worse than other governorates in terms of waste water management, as only 12,5% of Najaf's inhabitants use the public sewage system as their first method for disposing of waste water. 61,8% of Najaf's households use a septic tank with almost twenty percent relying on a covered canal.

As in most other governorates of Iraq, the public electricity network is unreliable, forcing more than 90% of Najaf's households to supplant or replace the network with a private or shared generator.

Following the IS conquests in 2014 the governorate of Najaf attracted a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 84,000 IDPs were residing in the governorate in June 2015. Around 80,000 of them are hailing from Ninewa, with a much smaller group coming from Anbar or other governorates. Najaf

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, *Najaf Governorate Profile* (2013), <http://www.jauiraq.org/documents/459/GP-Najaf%202013.pdf> , 05/05/2015.

recently received new IDPs who fled the violence which broke out in Anbar in April 2015. More than 65,000 IDPs in Najaf are residing in informal settlements, where access to food, water and health and sanitary services are not guaranteed. IDPs staying in religious buildings or other forms of informal or vulnerable settlement like schools or unfinished and abandoned buildings also risk eviction. Smaller groups of IDPs are staying in rented housing or with the host community (friend, relatives or unrelated families). In late April 2015 one IDP camp was under construction in Najaf.

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.

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