

Europe Needs to Take a Lead on Iraq

Why Stability in the Country is Critical for All of the Middle East

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As it is beginning, the Biden administration has an opportunity to refocus US attention in the Middle East, and in one key country in particular—Iraq. But this region is not the only critical policy focus for the United States. The new administration must divide its attention to deal with an onslaught of urgent issues. Beyond pressing domestic agenda items, US foreign policy priorities are as diverse as rising threats posed by China, Russia’s actions in Ukraine and with regard to government critics like Alexei Navalny, and getting the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), back on track.¹ While the Biden team understands the importance of Iraq, it nonetheless must compete with a litany of other priorities and will not necessarily rank high in comparison.

Over the past year, the United States has initiated cuts to force deployments in Iraq and withdrew from a number of Iraqi facilities, in part to prevent US troops from becoming targets of Iranian-sponsored militias in Iraq as US-Iran tensions persist.² Training and assist programs run by the US government have been curtailed or subject to greater scrutiny. All this creates the distinct impression that Washington wishes to wind down its involvement in Iraq, despite criticism that continued neglect will leave Iraq on “the edge of lasting failure.”³ While the United States and Iraq managed to hold a strategic dialogue session in the first 100 days of the Biden administration, this does not guarantee that the United States will not take further steps to draw down its involvement.⁴ The decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan is another indicator that all aspects of US engagement in the

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- 1 “Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Andrea Mitchell of MSNBC Andrea Mitchell Reports,” US Department of State, February 1, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-andrea-mitchell-of-msnbc-andrea-mitchell-reports/>. See also: “Secretary of State Confirmation Hearing,” C-SPAN, January 19, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?507953-1/secretary-state-nominee-antony-blinken-testifies-confirmation-hearing>.
- 2 “U.S. to reduce troop levels in Iraq to 3,000,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/politics/iraq-troops-trump.html>; “U.S. troops hand over military base to Iraqi army,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-troops-hand-over-military-base-to-iraqi-army/a-54664394>.
- 3 Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Biden Administration’s Security Challenges in the Gulf,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), January 27, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/biden-administrations-security-challenges-gulf>.
- 4 “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue,” US Department of State, April 7, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/>.

Middle East are subject to continued scrutiny from the new administration.⁵

Given the critical role that Iraq's stability plays in the security of the wider Middle East, it is essential that Europe proactively takes a lead in maintaining long-term political, economic, and security involvement in Iraq. Iraq's situation is dire—it is a fragile state dangerously close to becoming a failed state, a move which would have both internal and regional consequences. A weaker Iraq mired in conflict and without a structured government would not be able to contribute to regional security and would become a battleground for wider regional forces.

To prevent this downward spiral, Europe must take initiative and engage the Biden administration in comprehensive dialogue about Iraq. Europe has already invested in Iraq's stability and, going forward, should take the international lead in policy areas demanding immediate and continued attention. Deliberate policy coordination and a European willingness to significantly increase its burden-sharing would be a tangible contribution to the Biden administration's stated goal of rebuilding alliances and partnerships. It would also give the Europeans an opportunity to demonstrate their geopolitical capabilities and much-touted strategic autonomy.⁶ But, most importantly, a stated commitment to the future stability of security in Iraq would greatly benefit the Middle East.

Repercussions of Iraq's current outlook

Iraq faces a litany of fundamental challenges and its current outlook is bleak. First and foremost, corruption and dysfunction plague the Iraqi government, which is now considered a kleptocracy.⁷ Debilitating political rivalries

and poor governmental performance in Iraq are even starting to mirror that in Lebanon. The 2003 US invasion dismantled Iraqi state institutions to such a degree that the country has never recovered—militias and non-state actors continue to undermine government control and stability. Many groups continue to push a sectarian agenda that corrodes the political and social fabric of the country in an effort to consolidate their control over Iraq's illicit economy, leaving the Iraqi state weak and largely dysfunctional.

Additionally, long-term mismanagement, lower oil prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic caused a dismal economic situation. The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reports that 4.1 million Iraqis remain in need of critical humanitarian assistance while the World Bank asserts that up to 12.4 million are vulnerable to poverty.⁸ Iraq's macroeconomic indicators also reveal a dramatically worsening situation. The economy contracted by nearly 10 percent in 2020 and state debt reached an unprecedented 30 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).⁹ Sixty percent of the population is under the age of twenty-five and the current youth unemployment rate stands at over 25 percent, leaving the 700,000 Iraqis who enter the job market annually with little hope of finding jobs.¹⁰ As a result of the collapsed education system, illiteracy has also emerged as a major problem—one-third of Iraqis between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine are said to be either illiterate or semi-illiterate.¹¹

Iraq is teetering on the verge of an economic collapse and it has not been able to engage in any real reconstruction since either the US-led invasion in 2003 or the more recent campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Infrastructure lies in ruin and power outages remain widespread. Economic decline exacerbates Iraq's

5 "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," White House, April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

6 Due to the shifts in the international environment and the policies pursued by the Trump administration, the concept of both Europe's geopolitical relevance and strategic autonomy have dominated the EU's policy discourse in Europe in recent years. See: Steven Blockmans, "Why the EU's needs a geopolitical Commission," Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), September 15, 2020, <https://www.ceps.eu/why-the-eu-needs-a-geopolitical-commission/>; Josep Borrell, "Why European Strategic Autonomy matters," European External Action Service, December 3, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en.

7 Robert F. Worth, "Inside the Iraqi Kleptocracy," *New York Times*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/iraq-corruption.html>.

8 "Iraq," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed April 2021, <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>; Iraq Economic Monitor, World Bank, Fall 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34749>.

9 *Impact of COVID-19 on Iraqi economy*, United Nations Development Programme in Iraq, October 2020, <https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/crisis-response0/impact-of-covid-19-on-the-iraqi-economy.html>.

10 "Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate) - Iraq," World Bank, accessed April 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=IQ>.

11 *Iraq: Key socio-economic indicators for Baghdad, Basra and Erbil*, European Asylum Support Office, September 2020, https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020_09_EASO_COI_Report_Iraq_Key_socio-economic_indicators_Baghdad_Basra_Erbil_0.pdf.



Despite being the third largest oil exporter in the world, Iraq is mired in an acute economic crisis, which has been further exacerbated by the spread of the pandemic, which decreased global demand and caused crude prices to collapse. *Source: ILO/Handout / Latin America News Agency via Reuters Connect.*

devastating social dislocation, which continues to erode the fabric of Iraqi society. More than 1.4 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, according to UNOCHA.

A combination of political nepotism, economic decay, failing social systems, and little reconstruction and recovery progress in much of the country has had serious ramifications for Iraq and the international community.

First, the country is witnessing a resurgence of ISIS activity, another destabilizing factor for the state. The day after US President Joe Biden was inaugurated, a twin suicide bombing in Baghdad killed at least thirty-two people and wounded more than 100, reflecting the continued and growing violence. Daily attacks have once again become the norm.¹² Beyond the impact on Iraq's own stability, a strengthened ISIS has the potential to once again turn Iraq into a battleground, a prospect with

severe implications for neighboring Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, a wider region already reckoning with the long-term effects of extremist activity.

Second, under present conditions, there is little hope that the power of non-state actors and militias within the state can be sufficiently curtailed, meaning that Iraqi institutions will remain weak and fragmented. The current economic insecurity allows militias to strengthen their power, reinforcing patronage networks and swelling their ranks with the impoverished and underprivileged.¹³ The overall objective of building competent and centrally controlled Iraqi security institutions is at risk of failing and the resulting power vacuum would allow militias to keep their strangle hold on the development of the Iraqi state.

Third, Iraq risks becoming a permanent battlefield in confrontations of external forces vying to exert influence

¹² Ranj Alaaldin, "To save Iraq from economic collapse and fight ISIS, contain Iran's proxies," Brookings Doha, February 17, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/17/to-save-iraq-from-economic-collapse-and-fight-isis-contain-irans-proxies/>.

¹³ Ibid.

in the region—primarily that between the United States and Iran. This was apparent following the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by a US drone at Baghdad airport in January 2020, as well as in the subsequent reprisal attacks on US forces stationed in Iraq by Iranian-backed militias.¹⁴ Throughout 2020 and into 2021, US bases in Iraq have been subject to repeated attacks by Iranian-backed militias, the most recent coming on March 3, 2021, when one US contractor was killed in an attack on the Ain al-Asad base.¹⁵ As the United States and Iran avoid a direct confrontation, Iraq is a tempting alternative staging ground.

The temptation for additional external involvement also remains high. Iraq is a center of conflict between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran, with Saudi Arabia in particular vying to pull Iraq away from Iranian influence. This is the key reason why Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has been determined to play a mediating role between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as seen in the successful meeting that took place between the two sides in Baghdad in April.¹⁶ To the north, Turkey continues to flex its power and regularly encroaches on Iraqi territory under the guise of pursuing Kurdish militants. Eager to underline its strengthened role in the Middle East, Russia could also be ready to capitalize on a potential power vacuum by exerting its influence in the region.

The danger of diverting attention from Iraq

Iraq's own stability is at risk and this continued volatility has repercussions for the region as a whole, as well as for the United States and Europe. With Iraq exporting instability, it is difficult to see how the Syrian crisis can be resolved, Iran-GCC relations can fundamentally shift, or extremism can be effectively tackled, not to mention how US and European positions in the region can improve. Iraq occupies the center of gravity in the region and the developments that unfold in Iraq will undoubtedly both mirror and shape many similar processes in the wider Middle East.

A commitment to ensuring the future stability of Iraq would send a powerful message of hope to the Iraqi

population, as well as to the rest of the region, and would put forces of destabilization on notice. With its abundance of energy resources and an educated populace, Iraq could be central for region-wide economic development. For instance, reconstruction work within Iraq would necessarily involve Iraq's neighbors. Building a functioning and well-structured federal political model could also further serve as inspiration for resolving other conflicts in the Middle East, such as Yemen and Libya.

A renewed emphasis of the importance of Iraq's stability must therefore be given the proper attention by European states, to avoid allowing the issue to fall down the list of foreign policy priorities. It is imperative that Iraq's downward spiral is reversed, given the potential visions of the state of the Middle East in five years that arise from its current trajectory. Critical to this process is abandoning the zero-sum thinking that stubbornly prevails among those with a role to play in the future of Iraq. This includes rejecting the lens that frames all potential future cooperation among regional actors within the context of seeing all Iranian interference in Iraq eliminated. Instead, efforts need to be made to ensure that Iraq can contribute to the stability of its neighbors. An approach that frames Iraq in this way would also allow advances in the broader regional strategic picture, including putting relations between Iran and the West on more solid footing.

Iraq is unlikely to pull itself out of the current quagmire, given the multitude of issues it faces, and its neighbors lack the willingness or capacity to provide and support appropriate medium- to long-term stabilization strategies. Thus, the burden falls on external powers to take the lead.

While the United States would normally be the primary actor in this situation, it is unfortunately not a given that Washington will provide the attention that Iraq requires. While the Biden administration has announced special envoys to address the situations in Yemen and Iran, no such assignment was extended to Iraq. Washington views Iraq almost exclusively through a securitized lens of counterterrorism and countering Iranian-backed proxies, and has therefore been focused on reducing its vulnerabilities to those threats. This has led to a significant drawdown on personnel and a turnover of bases to Iraqi

14 "U.S. Strike in Iraq kills Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Iranian Forces," *New York Times*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>; "Iran attack: US troops targeted with ballistic missiles," BBC News, January 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51028954#:~:text=Iran%20has%20carried%20out%20a,there%20have%20been%20any%20casualties>.

15 Caroline Rose, "In the Wake of Drawdown: Addressing Blindspots in Iraq," Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, March 8, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iraq/in-the-wake-of-drawdown-addressing-blindspots-in-iraq/>.

16 "Saudi and Iran officials holds talks to patch up relations," *Financial Times*, April 17, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/852e94b8-ca97-4917-9cc4-e2faef4a69c8>.



Then-German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen with the speaker of Iraq's parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi in Berlin, Germany, in February 2019. *Source:* Reuters/Fabrizio Bensch.

security forces, which by their own power are unable to fill the vacuum left by the United States' departure.¹⁷ Deep and sustained involvement by the United States to ensure that Iraq is able to escape its current quagmire is simply not in the cards. As Steven Cook noted in a recent piece in *Foreign Policy*, "no one in Washington wants to invest in trying to fix Iraqi politics."¹⁸

Even though many argue that the United States broke Iraq and has the responsibility to fix it, the combination of urgent US domestic priorities, reluctance to deepen involvement in the Middle East, and its other pressing foreign policy considerations means the notion of an expanded and revitalized US role in the stabilization of Iraq is a non-starter. This is an opportunity for Europe to make Iraq a key focal point in its overall approach to the Middle East and take the appropriate lead.

Europe's role and tools

In her inaugural speech to the European Parliament, European Union (EU) Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated, "My Commission will be a geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies. And I want the European Union to be the guardian of multilateralism."¹⁹ Given the equal weight afforded to concerns about continued volatility in Europe's southern neighborhood, elevating Iraq's importance within the EU's policy approach would help Europe play a more central role in wider international geopolitics, contribute to the stability of its own extended neighborhood, and extend a hand to the United States as it seeks to reengage multilaterally and with its allies.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Steven A. Cook, "Who is hot and who is not in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, February 26, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/26/who-is-hot-and-who-is-not-in-the-middle-east/>.

¹⁹ "The von der Leyen Commission: for a Union that strives for more," European Commission, September 10, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5542.

EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell is one official that has commented publicly on Europe's "vital interest in a stable, prosperous and democratic Iraq."²⁰ So far, Europe has backed its commitment with more than 1.2 billion Euros in assistance since 2014. The reality of closer geographic proximity and the direct impact that continued volatility in Iraq has on European states, from migration flows to stability in states part of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), requires a higher level of engagement from Europe than can be expected from Washington. Ensuring European interests are protected in Iraq and the Middle East requires a proactive, forward-looking agenda with a medium- to long-term approach. Waiting for the United States to take the lead is not a tenable position and would only increase future costs and ensure that current investment has little real impact.²¹

There are several main advantages of European leadership in Iraq. First, the EU already has frameworks in place to support reform and development processes in the country. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Iraq has been in force since 2018, alongside a comprehensive EU Strategy on Iraq from the same year. Both documents highlight the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, establish a balanced and accountable system of government, promote economic growth and job creation, cultivate an effective justice system, and promote good neighborly relations. These frameworks have also already seen some level of implementation—related initiatives span multiple Iraqi sectors, including an advisory mission for security sector reform and projects to reduce violence at the community level, enhance local governance, repatriate displaced persons, and restore historic urban landscapes.²²

Second, Europe has a wide variety of useful mechanisms and tools at its disposal. It can operate at the multilateral EU level; in flexible EU3, EU4, or other formats; or at the individual level of different EU-member states. This can ensure coordination of and communication with a variety of consequential actors and promote the integration of local actors into processes. The EU also promotes a comprehensive approach to security, allowing discussions to take place on a range of related issues, including

climate change and environmental challenges, health security, migration, technical and economic cooperation, people-to-people networks, and capacity-building programs. With this toolbox, Europe operates with precisely the holistic approach that Iraq requires. It would also move thinking beyond the current security-focused approach. Furthermore, Europe has the ability to craft policy with medium- to long-term dimensions. Instead of focusing on producing grand bargains, Europe can provide a more subtle and measured approach based on step-by-step deliverables.

Third, Europe does not come to the table with the same heavy baggage of other actors with more direct and recent involvement in Iraq. And from an Iraqi perspective, European engagement is not as sensitive as that of the United States. It will be important to build on Europe's strengths and avoid falling into the same international realpolitik framing as the United States, China, and Russia, where national interests rank supreme, and most issues associated with Iraq are securitized and approached primarily from a military angle. Europe can instead carve out a unique role based on a twenty-first century vision of geopolitics, leaving the nineteenth century balance-of-power model behind. Given the tools at its disposal, its outlook, and its proven ability to deal with historical animosities, Europe offers much of what Iraq desperately needs.

Finally, taking a leadership role in the region is also important for Europe. Europe has long grappled with projecting a more coherent and effective foreign policy front, including in its own neighborhood, and direct impact that instability in the Middle East has on Europe's security underscores this importance. This is evident in the waves of migration to Europe, as well as in the continued crises in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Given Iraq's central importance to the stability of the Middle East as a whole, Iraq can thus provide an opportunity for Europe to demonstrate its commitment to contributing to overall security while also protecting its own interests. Europe needs a version of *Ostpolitik* for the Middle East based on the core components of deterrence, de-escalation, and dialogue. In this context, a close partnership with the United States remains imperative. However, Europe

20 "Iraq: High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell speaks to newly appointed Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi," European Union Newsroom, June 16, 2020, https://europa.eu/newsroom/content/iraq-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-speaks_en.

21 Charles Thepaut and Pierre Morcos, "Enough Theory, European Strategic Autonomy needs practice in the Middle East," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 6, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/80985/iraq-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-speaks-newly-appointed-prime-minister_en.

22 "Iraq and the EU," Delegation of the European Union to Iraq, accessed February 11, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iraq/690/iraq-and-eu_en.

should construct the overall vision and ensure that Washington's policy is in alignment.

While calls for greater strategic autonomy gained momentum the longer the Trump administration was in office, there is a distinct danger that Europe will now take a step back and hope that the Biden administration will fix matters and set a policy direction for Europe to follow. This would be a mistake, as it is unlikely the United States will take on that role. With its own long list of priorities, the United States cannot be everywhere and may not take the time to form new approaches to long-standing issues like Iraq. By putting forward a proactive agenda for Iraq that clearly highlights the areas critical to move Iraq out of its current crisis, Europe would be able to engage the United States and stave off the devastating consequences of Iraq falling through the cracks of Western priorities. By taking initiative, Europe can ensure that the policy agenda includes European priorities and considers European interests, rather than simply rendering payments for US services. Discussions with Washington could further divide labor in ways advantageous for both Europe and the United States.

A Europe-US partnership on Iraq: Policy recommendations

To be effective, a European agenda on Iraq put forward for US consideration should focus on four areas: political and economic reforms, a comprehensive development agenda, an expanded security role for NATO, and the promotion of regional contact groups. All four would contribute to diminishing the threat of extremism, sectarianism, and corruption, factors which are at the heart of Iraq's instability. A Europe-US partnership would also work to limit Iran's influence in Iraq, a critical interest for both parties. These action areas must be tackled in parallel, as each represents an integral part of Iraq's overall structure.

Political and economic reforms: Given the urgency of the situation, it is critical that the EU and the United States agree on a wide political reform effort, one that creates responsive and integrated Iraqi institutions, fights corruption and nepotism, and moves toward a more genuinely representative system. The EU already funds a program alongside the World Bank for the

reform of public finance management.²³ Europe could further engage on functional cooperation to encourage accountable institution building focused on the finance and justice ministries and the Prime Minister's Office.²⁴ Europe could also increase focus on constituencies that are often overlooked and sidelined, such as women and youth. Joint US-European measures and consistent high-level dialogue could increase pressure on the Iraqi government to follow through on urgent tasks of overall reform. In the meantime, economic reform efforts should play a key role in curbing the influence of militias inside Iraq. This cannot be done through focus on security sector reform alone. Instead, programs to support infrastructure, connectivity, transport, and the service industry should offer employment opportunities and allow people to rely on government services instead of those provided by militia groups.

A comprehensive development agenda: Iraq requires a comprehensive development agenda to help bridge social cleavages and assist in the vast reconstruction program the country requires. On this front, Europe is clearly the best choice for the necessary nation-building programs. Europe already provides the largest share of development and humanitarian assistance to Iraq. It also convened the 2018 Iraq Reconstruction conference in Kuwait, which resulted in pledges of \$30 billion. In addition to providing many of the technical capacities desperately needed for reconstruction and rebuilding efforts, Europe can promote education, community-level reform, reconciliation mechanisms, and capacity-building and research and development (R&D) partnerships. Numerous European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) already engage on these fronts throughout Iraq. Europe also has the mechanisms to provide assistance to micro-projects with a focus on women and youth. In addition to backing the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq, Europe already has, for example, backed programs for emergency reproductive health. European experience in strengthening and expanding the health sector would also greatly benefit the region.

An expanded security role for NATO: Economic and development programs would only have a limited impact if the security situation inside the country did not improve. In many areas, such as intelligence and reconnaissance, the US role remains critical—despite the fact that the

23 "World Bank and EU to help Iraq Strengthen Public Financial Management Oversight & Accountability," World Bank, January 24, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/01/24/world-bank-and-eu-to-help-iraq-strengthen-public-financial-management-oversight-accountability>.

24 Sajad Jiyad, "Torn between two allies: How Europeans can reduce Iraqi dependence on Iran and the US," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 28, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/torn_between_two_allies_europeans_can_reduce_iraqi_dependence_on_iran_us/.



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi visit the historical city Ad Diriyah on the outskirts of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in March 2021. *Source:* Bandar Algaloud/Courtesy of Saudi Royal Court/Handout via Reuters.

United States' role galvanizes Iraqi opposition. In the context of security, it would be worthwhile to explore an expanded role for NATO in Iraq, to avoid a front-and-center US military presence. The current NATO mission in Iraq is restricted to a non-combat advisory, training, and capacity-building role. In February 2020, NATO defense ministers agreed in principle to enhance NATO's efforts in Iraq, followed by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's announcement that the NATO contingent in the country would be increased from 500 to 4,000 personnel to expand services to Iraqi institutions outside of the Ministry of Defense.²⁵ This is in line with the Iraqi government's request for a broader NATO role as a means to lessen dependence on the United States, following former US President Donald Trump's announcement of his intention to withdraw forces from Iraq.²⁶ Denmark assumed

command of the NATO Mission in November 2020, so this could be an opportune moment for the EU, the United States, and NATO to discuss an integrated military approach, working in parallel with broader political, economic, and social efforts.²⁷ By deepening NATO's role, Europe would shoulder a greater degree of responsibility for some of the hard security requirements Iraq still needs. It could help further contain the risk of a confrontation occurring between the United States and Iran inside Iraq.

Regional contact groups: Given the central role played by many of Iraq's neighbors in its domestic affairs, it is imperative that structured dialogues are set up through which neighboring states can engage in discussions about the future of Iraq. The core objectives would be sharing

25 "Online press conference: by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the second day of the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers," NATO February 19, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_181561.htm.

26 "Secretary-General welcomes Iraqi Foreign Minister to NATO headquarters," NATO, September 16, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177988.htm; Abisheq Bhaya, "Iraq mulls larger NATO role as Trump looks for face-saving troop pullout," CGTN, January 29, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-29/Iraq-mulls-larger-NATO-role-as-U-S-looks-for-face-saving-pullout-NEbmztqFjy/index.html>.

27 "Secretary General welcomes Iraqi Foreign Minister at NATO Headquarters," NATO, September 18, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177988.htm.

analysis and examining constructive paths forward for regional cooperation.

One partner in this effort would be the GCC. The tenor of the GCC-Iraq relationship has shifted in recent years, with the GCC launching a Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue with Iraq in 2019 that laid out a five-year, three-pronged engagement effort at the political-security, trade and investment, and people-to-people levels. Interestingly, the decision to launch such a comprehensive dialogue was made during a deep crisis within the GCC (from 2017 until early 2021, the conflict between Qatar on one side and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other), indicating a common GCC concern for the future stability of Iraq. Individual GCC states have also increased their engagement with Iraq, evidenced for instance by the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council established in October 2017. The visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates at the end of March and beginning of April 2021 similarly underscored intentions on both sides to open a new chapter in bilateral relations.²⁸

Within the context of EU-GCC cooperation, specific dialogue on the situation in Iraq should consider policy solutions and joint projects based on convergence that already exists for capacity-building, reconciliation efforts, and conflict management. Alongside the EU, GCC states are major providers of development and humanitarian aid to Iraq and should be engaged on reconstruction efforts inside Iraq as part of a wider donor coordination strategy. Closer coordination could ensure that such aid provides the concrete relief that the Iraqi population requires and fits into a wider regional context. One area of concentration could be reconstruction projects in the western part of Iraq, where many parts of the country are still recovering from devastation wrought by ISIS. As the energy sector is key in Iraq, and especially in this region, linking Iraq to larger GCC electricity grids could be further pursued.

Europe could also propose a regional contact group for multilateral dialogue, drawing in countries like Iran and Turkey that are vital for the future stability of Iraq. European NGOs are already engaged at the track 2 and track 1.5 level.²⁹ Similar efforts could also be undertaken with Jordan to ensure that Jordan does not get drawn further into complications stemming from Iraq. Multilaterally, the EU could go further and push for joint efforts within various international organizations, including the United Nations.

Conclusion

There should be no doubt that the EU faces numerous obstacles to pursuing a realistic and achievable plan for Iraq. For one, it needs to transition from a compartmentalized to a regional approach. General EU incoherence and lack of unity will also pose challenges, as European countries often pursue different agendas. However, these concerns should not overshadow the fact that the EU has a real opportunity to advance a positive agenda for Iraq. As Europe tries to define its role in the Middle East, become a geopolitical power player, and demonstrate strategic autonomy, and while the United States seeks to reduce its overall footprint in the region, Europe needs to find the courage and initiative to make Iraq a strong strategic partner, a critical security interest, and a centerpiece of the EU's policy in the Middle East. The past decade has shown that Europe cannot continue to rely on others to stabilize the region. Europe must quickly engage the Biden administration in discussions about the future policy approach toward Iraq and clearly signal that Europe is ready to take the lead.

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28 Hasan Al-Mustapha, "Kadhimi deepens cooperation with Saudi Arabia, UAE on Gulf tour," *Al-Monitor*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/kadhimi-deepens-cooperation-saudi-arabia-uae-gulf-tour>.

29 For example, see: "Iraq and its Neighbours – Enhancing Dialogue and Regional Integration in West Asia" Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO), accessed April 2021, <https://carpo-bonn.org/en/iraq-and-its-neighbours/>.



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