IRAQ: IMPLEMENTING A WAY FORWARD

by C. Anthony Pfaff, Ben Connable, and Masoud Mostajabi

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Cover: A demonstrator holds an Iraqi flag as he sits on a building during an anti-government protests in Baghdad, Iraq October 30, 2019. REUTERS/Thaier Al-Sudani

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The Atlantic Council's Iraq Initiative provides transatlantic and regional policy makers with unique perspectives and analysis on the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing Iraq as the country tries to build an inclusive political system, attract economic investment, and encourage a vibrant civil society.

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The **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung** and the **Atlantic Council**, with support from **DT Institute**, have convened a US-Europe-Iraq Track II Dialogue.

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ABOUT THE DIALOGUE

Work on the US-Europe-Iraq Track II Dialogue began in Berlin in March 2020 and continued in remote venues through December 2020. The dialogue brought together experts from the United States, Europe, and Iraq for a series of workshops to identify policies to help address Iraq's political, socioeconomic, and security challenges. The attendees included a mix of former and current high-level officials and experts, all of whom are committed to a better future for Iraq.

Previous sessions identified specific interventions by Iraqi government, nongovernmental, and external actors that could improve the delivery of public services, reduce corruption, and improve security in Iraq. These prospective interventions focused on addressing an entrenched civil service, widespread corruption, and destabilizing militia activity, all of which combined to impose critical barriers to Iraq's recovery. Based on their long-standing expertise, dialogue participants recommended pursuing measures to improve civil-service competence, mobilize youth, decentralize government services, implement e-governance capabilities, and facilitate militia integration in a manner that strengthens and legitimizes state institutions.

Building upon these early sessions, the Track II Dialogue's experts took up ways to design these proposed interventions in a second round of meetings. The first of these four meetings centered on identifying and prioritizing measures to address Iraq's major challenges. The second and third meetings focused on refining recommendations into actionable policies and identifying the actors, acts, and conditions necessary for their implementation. The fourth meeting refined the implementation plan and developed a roadmap that accounts for how the measures and other interventions, in combination, will help take Iraq from its current state to one of relative stability and prosperity.

This report represents the variety of opinions expressed by participants over the course of the five months during which this round of the dialogue took place. Participants represent different nationalities, backgrounds, experiences, and professional opinions. While they have reached a great deal of agreement on the best path forward for Iraq, individual participants may or may not agree with all of this report's concepts and recommendations. Moreover, the views of individual participants do not necessarily represent those of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings and recommendations intended to assist the government of Iraq and its international partners in improving political, social, economic, and security conditions in order to enhance national stability, stabilize Iraq's democratic processes, and promote broad-based, Iraqi-generated economic growth. These findings and recommendations are drawn from two years of engagement with the dialogue's community of experts on Iraq, and responses from more than two dozen Iraqi political, economic, and security leaders to surveys conducted in mid-2021.

The overarching theme that came out of these recent discussions is that Iraqis—individually, as groups, and, perhaps more importantly, as members of social networks—are locked in a situation where there is no obvious way to facilitate the collective Iraqi interest without sacrificing their interests. Put another way, progress in Iraq generally means someone loses, and those who lose have interest in undermining the progress that comes at their expense. Sometimes they resort to violence. For this reason, efforts to directly confront corruption and instability, and to promote economic development, typically fail. The best way forward is to gain a better understanding of those interests and how they interact, and then set conditions so that individual and group interests are preserved while advancing larger, national interests.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION.

Iraqis have made extraordinary progress toward legitimate democracy since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. As of early 2022, Iraq stands out as one of the few countries in the Middle East to hold internationally recognized free and fair elections. Iraqi political leaders are held accountable by the Iraqi people at the polls, and post-Hussein transitions of power have, thus far, been peaceful and orderly. Extraordinary international investments in Iraq's government, economy, and security forces have accelerated Iraq's progress away from dictatorship and toward democracy.

Despite this progress, efforts toward full recovery have stagnated. Much-needed political, economic, social, and security reforms in Iraq have stalled due, in great part, to political impasses and endemic corruption in both the public and private sectors. These conditions have strengthened political parties, many of them militia backed, that seek to impose an alternate political order in competition with the Iraqi government institutions and, arguably, external to the Iraqi constitution. Moving forward will require a broad consensus among Iraqis regarding how to address these issues.

Today, many Iraqis suffer from high unemployment, low pay, and poor education and training. Shaky security, erratic oil prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, and continuing dependence on international support exacerbate these conditions, and continue to limit both domestic and foreign investment. Climate change has exacerbated these economic concerns by reducing annual rainfall, leading to drought and population displacement. Many Iraqis find they cannot effectively participate in the formal economy and their exclusion often creates space for criminal activity. Improving this situation will not be easy.

Iraqis celebrate preliminary results of Iraq's parliamentary election in Baghdad, Iraq October 11, 2021. REUTERS/ Thaier Al-Sudani

These conditions are further exacerbated by a shared sense of inequitable distribution of resources between political parties, between Iraqi social groups, and even between government institutions. Perceptions of inequity reinforce general dissatisfaction with the government, encouraging large-scale antigovernment protests and weakening conditions for political compromise and economic investment. Informal service provision has emerged in the absence of government capacity, further weakening perceptions of state legitimacy. While there is a genuine interest among international partners in providing assistance, security concerns continue to limit their ability to effectively engage Iraqis where they live and operate. This failure creates space that malign actors and opportunists often fill, at the expense of democratic legitimacy.

Escaping this impasse requires incentivizing key civic actors to accept a number of short-term risks to their immediate interests in exchange for longer-term stability and efforts toward democratization. However, efforts that view Iraq's situation simply through a sectarian lens and discrete political, economic, and security "solutions" often miss the connectivity between problems, solutions, and the actors who have the power to change things.

This paper's proposed recommendations for the government of Iraq are organized along lines of effort that support the conditions necessary to set Iraq's development away from Saddam Hussein's tyranny and toward national recovery. These lines of effort are: fostering legitimacy; equitably distributing reconstruction and recovery assistance; strengthening a shared national identity; mobilizing youth; establishing a monopoly on the use of force; and optimizing international assistance.

It may appear that this analysis and subsequent recommendations deemphasize what are generally recognized as key pillars of Iraq's recovery, such as anticorruption measures and constitutional reform. Progress toward these stalled objectives should still be pursued. However, after almost twenty years with little progress and no clear way forward, it is time to consider what other measures are required.

Brief descriptions of these lines of effort and specific recommendations for the Iraqi government and its partners follow. These recommendations are intended to be applied in concert to help resolve the current dislocation and build the political will necessary to build a prosperous, inclusive, and democratic Iraq.

FOSTERING LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy depends on intercommunal belief and faith in fair and effective governmental and civic systems. This includes the government's ability to provide services, proportional access to shared funds, available jobs, and other resources fundamental to quality of life. However, in Iraq, governance is too often practiced as a zero-sum, winner-take-all competition that undermines its legitimacy. Self-serving competition permeates nearly every aspect of civil society to the detriment of all Iraqis, including those represented by the most dominant political groups. It is too simple, of course, to attribute these conditions to a failure of leadership. Rather, current conditions in Iraq make this zero-sum game the most rational course of action for Iraqi leaders and the people they represent. Changing those conditions is the most promising way forward.

The successful October 2021 elections illustrate both the opportunities and challenges associated with fostering belief in Iraq's systems and achieving real political reform. These elections were held ahead of schedule to appease protestors demanding improved governance. Yet, many protestors who called for the elections doubted their legitimacy and abstained from voting. Despite this low turnout, reform candidates significantly increased their representation, suggesting that an opportunity for a broader national consensus may exist.

Election reform continues to be a common refrain. Too often, however, reactive reform and change risk doing more harm than good. For example, the current single non-transferable vote (SNTV) election law that allowed voters to select individuals rather than party lists reduces the number of seats that each party can win, making coalition building more difficult. While the SNTV system helped break the grip that larger parties have on the parliament, it may have no appreciable, positive effect on government formation and processes that distribute positions along party lines, and in a manner that is less than transparent.[1] Many Iraqis who lost representation due to confusion over the new system viewed this change as a trick, not a reform. Moreover, changing the election laws every four years undermines already weakened public trust, as it can make these changes appear to be an effort to manipulate the elections.

Building legitimacy also depends on Iraqis believing the government is effectively functioning and providing citizens with basic needs. Because the Iraqi government has too often failed to provide basic services, like consistent electricity and access to fresh water, many have called for the decentralization of federal authorities and funds to regions or provinces. However, decentralization of federal authority and service delivery is not a panacea for faltering legitimacy. Provincial governments are arguably no more capable of managing budgets or delivering services than the central government, and they are at least equally vulnerable to divisive politics and corruption.

Previous small steps toward decentralization, such as the 2008 Provincial Powers Act, have not noticeably improved legitimacy because even modest decentralization has relocated, rather than lessened, inefficiency and corruption. As long as decentralization is enacted gradually through an experimental learning process—special economic zones are useful experiments—it can help to empower local governments to improve countrywide service delivery. There are Iraqi communities in which adequate trust and cohesion moderate corrupt influences. It makes sense to identify those communities and find ways to support their development.

L1: Ensure successful future elections. Building from the relative success of the October 2021 elections, take firm steps to guarantee free and fair elections going forward.

- **L1.a: Build public trust in elections.** To the greatest extent possible, stick to the present election model until comprehensive government reforms are undertaken. Make improvements only when necessary to alleviate effects of the muhasasa system that promote sectarianism. Ensure any modifications are clearly and effectively communicated to the Iraqi public well before the date of elections. Ensure post-election certification and government formation are transparent. Otherwise, government formation in Iraq will continue to be detached from the public vote, promoting party insiders rather than competent technocrats.

- **L1.b: Finalize the structure of the Independent High Elections Committee (IHEC).** The structure of the committee, which selects board commissioners according to a quota, is currently apportioned along party lines. This facilitates ethnosectarian influence. One option considered is for a neutral party like the United Nations to nominate committee members, who would then be approved by an Iraqi process.

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1   Victoria Stewart-Jolley, "Iraq's Electoral System," Chatham House, October 6, 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/iraqs-electoral-system.

● **L1.c: Continue election monitoring.** International election monitoring performed well in the October 2021 elections. For the time being, international entities, especially the European Union and the United Nations, should plan to participate in this important role.

● **L1.d: Improve federal oversight.** Improve federal oversight of all aspects of elections, including the IHEC and local election authorities, as well as security for polling stations. Employ both digital and manual counting systems to improve efficiency and resiliency against cyber or other electronic manipulation. The international community can offer capacity-building measures, such as training local election observers.

● **L1.e: Extend effective electoral monitoring to local elections.** Improve checks and balances at the local level by allowing for the direct election of local authorities, including governors, mayors, and provincial council members.

L2: Improve checks and balances. Iraqi leaders have a number of opportunities to improve the government's system of checks and balances, including the balance of authorities between the central and provincial governments.

● **L2.a: Establish fiscal-accountability procedures, so both national and local governments can identify and mitigate corrupt practices.** Assess, test, and apply information technology to better track central, provincial, and municipal spending and hold government agencies publicly accountable.

● **L2.b: Push service delivery down, along with funding.** Given central-government struggles with service delivery, empower provincial and municipal authorities to improve infrastructure, healthcare, and housing. Social-welfare programs should remain with the national and local governments. Both national and local governments should consider increasing reliance on (primarily Iraqi) nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations to provide services, where appropriate.

● **L2.c: Empower provincial tax assessment and collection.** Empower provincial governors and line-ministry representatives to propose and collect taxes that could be used to address specific provincial needs.

Fiscal-accountability technology (L2.a, above) can be used to monitor provincial tax activities. Ministry of Finance line officers should then be empowered to monitor and enforce tax laws.

● **L2.d: Rethink "local" by conducting focused empowerment experiments in selected municipalities.** Rather than define "local" in provincial terms, identify communities where adequate trust and cohesion exists, and empower them to exercise limited, but practical, control over distributed government resources to promote reconstruction and recovery.

● **L2.e: Give the public more voice in national issues.** There is little incentive in parliament to carry out reform that would redistribute power outside key parties. Iraq's anemic constitutional checks-and-balances system seems destined to ensure the status quo. One way around present limitations is to mobilize popular activism and implement a polling or referendum system in which Iraqis get to voice opinions, or even vote, on key reforms as well as other measures of national interest. Doing so could lower the risk of cooperation with rival parties as—ideally, at least—approved measures would reflect the will of these parties' constituents. Moreover, it could give the public an outlet for frustrations other than resorting to violent protests. While implementing such a measure will be complicated, and will require broad support from the government, it is worth undertaking a study to assess its feasibility.

● **L2.f. Reform Iraq's constitution.** Establish a process and timeline to conduct internationally supported constitutional reform. Comprehensive reform activities should include external assessments and advice, but center on Iraqi interpretations of democracy and legitimacy. While the current constitution is intended to recognize Iraq's diversity, its provisions have proven divisive in practice. Revising the constitution, however, has proven equally divisive because of entrenched interests that benefit from the constitution as written, as well as fears that a new constitution could result in an unequal distribution of political power. The way forward is to find a compromise formula that would allow for an effective central government, while giving provincial governments, as well as minority populations, adequate protections and authorities to secure their interests.

# ECONOMIC REFORM AND EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

As noted above, political legitimacy depends on the equitable distribution of resources and services, which requires political consensus, political will, and effective and accessible public- and private-sector institutions. The Iraqi government's October 2020 white paper on economic reform provides a comprehensive roadmap for reform, stabilization, and recovery across all sectors of Iraq's economy.[2] It is remarkable in its breadth and transparency, though it has been criticized by some experts as overly technocratic. Implementation efforts have been slow to emerge, and have been further delayed by the elections and government formation.

Strengthening Iraqi institutions will require considerable transfer of expertise from international organizations and partners. These organizations include the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which can develop Iraq's ministries and encourage investment by foreign corporations to accelerate job creation and the development of Iraq's private sector. Transfer of expertise cannot happen at a distance; experts need to be physically located where Iraqis live and work. Presently, international organizations have limited their presence in Iraq due to security concerns. Until these international organizations are better able to accept the risks associated with operating in Iraq, progress will be limited. While improving the security situation (see below) will help improve conditions for greater international involvement, enduring security requires parallel economic improvement.

D1: Support Economic Reform. Increasing the availability of resources is an important first step in their equitable distribution. Ready local availability can help reduce competition. The following recommendations are intended to set conditions for reforms that promote economic growth, many of which are reflected in the 2020 white paper.

● **D1.a: Develop central planning, purchasing, and reconstruction boards.** As is already called for in the white paper, the international community could assist the Iraqi government in developing the right expertise for those who would participate on these boards.

● **D1.b: Pursue customs duties and other revenue sources.** The Iraqi government should better collect customs and other duties at ports of entry. Federal tax collection would be enhanced by the application of a national revenue-technology platform (L2.a, above).

● **D1.c: Improve upon reconstruction and increase support for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.** Given the limits of available funding and the already generous support provided by the international community for reconstruction, IDP support, and resettlement, the Iraqi government should leverage the white paper and associated reforms to lobby for increased funding specifically to help Iraq recover from the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). A portion of new funding should be set aside for provincial and municipal use.

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2   "Final Report," Emergency Cell for Financial Reforms, October 2020, https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Iraq-White-Paper-English-version-Oct.-2020.pdf.

A man works at Umm Qasr port near Basra, southeast of Baghdad. REUTERS/Essam Al-Sudani

● **D1.d: Reform banking institutions.** With international advice, set a clear process and timeline for comprehensive banking reform. Improved banking will need to provide better access to loans and cash, and solidify presently inadequate oversight and auditing procedures. A framework of foreign investment and banking reform, one that is transparent and subject to audits, will likely enable the banking sector to finance startups.

● **D1.e: Leverage international expertise to help implement the white paper.** Create an international working group of business experts to advise and assist on implementation of the white paper's recommendations.

D2: Diversify sources of revenue. Oil revenue is unreliable, and is insufficient to sustain the government and the Iraqi economy. The government of Iraq must diversify its sources of revenue.

● **D2.a: Increase focus on private-sector investment and growth.** Establish both central-government and local-government (provincial, municipal) funds for targeted private-sector investments. At least at the outset, projects should be small and local, to avoid corruption. Play to Iraq's existing strengths by emphasizing agricultural and service industries. With support from the international community, establish a federal low-interest loan program, particularly for young Iraqi entrepreneurs. Leverage international support to provide expertise, assistance, and accountability to ensure funds are applied to their intended purposes and used effectively.

● **D2.b: Protect private-sector development.** Restrict harmful imports, such as products from Iran that have flooded Iraqi markets, to create more space for private-sector development. Restrictions do not need to be severe—simply enough that both Iraqi and Iranian needs are met.

● **D2.c: Streamline procedures for establishing small businesses.** Make it easy and straightforward to start small businesses. In addition to providing targeted loans (D2.a), the government can improve small-business success rates by creating business- and financial-literacy programs. Bureaucratic hurdles to small-business growth should be investigated and, wherever possible, reduced.

● **D2.d: Leverage international climate-change funds to reduce dependence on oil and improve renewable-energy capacity.** Poor oil infrastructure and gas flaring are limiting Iraq's ability to effectively exploit its oil and natural-gas resources. In late October 2021, the government pledged to stop gas flaring by 2025 and to increase reliance on solar power over the next ten years. It also signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia to develop solar-energy infrastructure that could generate one thousand megawatts in Najaf. Significant international resources—both public and private—exist, and should be more aggressively pursued. International advisors can help Iraq's government identify and pursue these funds.

● **D.2.e: Develop agricultural industries.** The Iraqi government should emphasize development of the agricultural industry to rapidly create more jobs, as well as exports. In particular, it should consider infrastructure investments in subsectors such as wheat, barley, poultry, tomatoes, and dates, which can give it a comparative advantage for exports. A full examination of regional agricultural markets and distribution networks (building on previous studies) would benefit this effort.

● **D2.f: Resolve issues with the Kurdish Regional Government regarding oil exporting.** Iraq will likely not meet its stated goal of exporting eight million barrels of oil per day as long as Erbil and Baghdad continue their dispute over how oil revenues are apportioned. Set a process and timeline to resolve this long-standing dispute.

● **D2.g: Prepare to respond to effects of climate change.** Climate change has already led to reduced rainfalls and increased drought, both of which affect Iraqi agriculture, riparian forecasting, hydroelectric-power generation, food availability, and employment. In concert with D2.d, above, the government should fully engage with international efforts to help mitigate and adapt to climate change. Assign senior diplomatic representatives to international climate boards, panels, and committees, to cement Iraq's role in the effort to combat climate change. In parallel, conduct a transparent, internationally supported, comprehensive study to assess the best ways to both mitigate and adapt to climate change within Iraq.

D3: Integrate investment to support economic reform. Iraq should implement reforms to better incentivize international and Iraqi investment in the private sector, with particular focus on infrastructure and reconstruction development.

● **D3.a: Systematically reduce barriers to foreign investment.** Establish a commission to draft new regulations to facilitate foreign investment. This commission should conduct a comprehensive review of barriers to foreign investment and Iraqi capital investment, report findings to the federal government, and be empowered to help enact changes. The commission should consider measures including streamlining the visa process, simplifying tax requirements, and establishing federally backed foreign-investment banks.

● **D3.b: Continue and consider expanding on experimental special economic zones.** Building on existing efforts, the central government should continue to support the creation and monitoring of economic zones with reduced regulation. In addition to providing real, near-term economic benefit, these zones provide the government with opportunities to test and observe moderated steps toward economic decentralization in a generally safe environment.

STRENGTHENING NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Iraqi public appears receptive to messages of national unity, as well as those that counter sectarian messages, educate on human rights, offer solutions, and shame those who promote disruptive sectarian causes. Protests through early 2022 center, to a great extent, on Iraqi national identity. But, the nationwide connective tissue necessary to foster broader civic belief and cooperation needs development. While the Iraqi public does not generally see its problems through a sectarian lens, there has been limited cross-sectarian cooperation to address Iraq's political and economic concerns.

Strengthening national identity—and thereby supporting government legitimacy, stability, and economic resilience—requires building institutions that embody an Iraqi national identity and offer the kind of service opportunities that promote that identity. In Iraq's formative years in the 1930s, the Iraqi Army played this role. The hope now is not only that the security services will play a similar role, but that civil institutions, including nonprofits, will do so as well.

U1: Develop senses of national identity and national service. As noted above, the Iraqi military has long been a source of national pride and unity, and it can be so again, especially in light of its success against ISIS. However, the military is not the only way Iraqis can serve their country and build a shared national identity. Thus, the Iraqi government should look for ways to encourage other civil-service and nonprofit organizations to play such a role as well.

- **U1.a: Recruit nonprofit and civil organizations to facilitate social integration and recovery.** The Iraqi government should identify organizations that address critical needs associated with recovery, reconstruction, and security, and promote recruitment, especially of youth.

- **U1.b: Encourage service throughout the country.** While police should be recruited locally, national security forces such as the Iraqi Army and Federal Police should rotate individuals and units throughout the country, and encourage service away from their place of origin.

Pope Francis arrives to hold a mass at Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil, Iraq, March 7, 2021. REUTERS/Yara Nardi

● **U1.c: Build on momentum toward increasing national unity.** The Iraqi government should conduct a widespread media campaign to message positive models supporting service and national unity. Messaging should build upon the success and identity of the Iraqi Army—an organization that has been called the spinal column of the nation—and on protestors' use of the national flag. Military successes against ISIS should be memorialized, using both information technology and monuments.

● **U1d: Establish a presidential commission.** Establish a commission that coordinates the efforts of government, civil, and international organizations to promote national unity, including sponsoring cross-sectarian conferences that include tribal and religious leaders from Iraq's diverse population to find ways to establish a common national identity and fight corruption and discrimination. These conferences should also promote communication between local leaders and the national government, as well as mobilize the population to promote unity.

U2: Reduce disenfranchisement. Promoting a collective belief in national unity and purpose is critical to political stability.

● **U2.a: Bolster programs and messaging to build Iraqi unity and public trust.** Empower nonsectarian organizations like the Iraqi Lawyers and Jurists Union to hold government, parties, and other public institutions accountable. Rather than reflect the ethnosectarian divisions in Iraq, personnel in government should reflect the skills and competencies needed to provide services. Additionally, the government—as well as civil organizations—should not only promote and promulgate national unity messages, but also counter sectarian ones.

● **U2.b: Reach out to build ties within vulnerable and fractured communities—especially Kurd, Sunni Arab, Yazidi, and Christian—to find ways to reestablish unity.** The Iraqi government and civil organizations should establish programs that address minority communities' concerns directly. The papal visit in March 2021, during which Pope Francis visited Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as well as Iraqi Christian leaders, may provide pathways and a window of opportunity to build on, and engage in, sincere dialogue to create compassion and solidarity among these communities.

● **U2.c: Establish a system of national conferences.** In cooperation with nongovernmental organizations, conduct national conferences to bring leaders and representatives of different regions, identities, and backgrounds together to solve mutual problems. These conferences should promote communication between Iraqi local and national leaders. Communication alone will not solve Iraq's problems, but it is a necessary condition for trust building. These conferences may also create a venue for mobilizing civil-society actors in ways that could amplify their positive effects.

MOBILIZING YOUTH

As evidenced by widespread youth participation in ongoing protests, a large segment of Iraq's youth remains marginalized from Iraqi society. Youth protestors have consistently argued that neither the government nor the society writ large serves their needs. Youth unemployment is very high, though probably difficult to measure with any degree of accuracy. Iraqi youths have recognized their own value; right now, they are a wasted resource to help stabilize and build Iraq. Iraqi youths are also a potent source of nationalist sentiment that the government should mobilize to counter sectarian influences. The government can facilitate this by improving youths' opportunities and bringing them more into the electoral process.

Y1: Mobilize youth. Improving opportunities and conditions for Iraq's youth is critical to establish and sustain political stability. Recommendations in this section are reinforced by recommendations above to provide small-business and loan support to young Iraqi entrepreneurs.

● **Y1.a: Promote youth-related issues, especially education and employment.** Establish education programs that emphasize vocational skills associated with Iraq's recovery, such as construction, medicine, and agriculture, as well as service-related industries. At the college level, offer programs to provide a basic education in leadership and management, business, computers, information technology, logistics, technology, and foreign languages to facilitate integration in the global economy. The presidential commission identified in P3, above, should develop a national-unity curriculum for Iraqi schools that includes civics.

● **Y1.b: Expand the role of youth in elections, and include youths in political decisions.** IHEC should employ youths in much-needed mid-level roles, as well as establish youth representation on the council. IHEC can also promote a "first-time-voters campaign" for the next election, explaining why it is important for the youth to take part in the election.

● **Y1.c: Increase access to paid internship programs.** The Iraqi government should encourage both public- and private-sector organizations to establish paid internships. The Iraqi government could increase scholarships and job opportunities for youths to study or work outside their regions of birth.

University of Basra students carry balloons as they take part in protests, in Basra, Iraq December 8, 2019. REUTERS/Essam al-Sudani

Volunteers who have joined the
Iraqi security forces take part
in a training session in Kerbala.
REUTERS/Mushtaq Muhammed

ESTABLISHING MONOPOLY ON USE OF FORCE

The divisive and disruptive role militias have played in stymieing Iraq's recovery has been a recurring theme throughout the Track II Dialogue. Participants and advisers to the Track II Dialogue concur that the Iraqi government does not have a monopoly on the use of force necessary for promotion and support of a well-ordered society. However, a monopoly on the use of force only promotes recovery if the government is perceived to be legitimate. Iraqi Security Forces' (ISF) role in violence against protestors undermined the boost in trust they received after driving ISIS underground in 2017. Despite this behavior—unfortunately redolent of many ugly chapters in Iraqi history—many Iraqis see their security services as an important symbol of national unity and a venue in which a national identity can be built.

Because of differing public views on government legitimacy, limited capacity of military and police forces, and the security role militias of all kinds still play, confrontational approaches to reigning in militias' malign activity are not only ineffective, but often do more harm than good. On the other hand, positive measures that decrease the need for militias, while providing the public with alternatives to participating in militias, may contribute to conditions that will give militias and the public more attractive alternatives to continuing their malign activities. Moreover, any measures—positive or negative—directed at militias should apply to all militias; otherwise, they will likely not be seen as legitimate.

In February 2021, NATO announced that, at the request

of the Iraqi government, it will expand its security-training mission from five hundred to approximately four thousand personnel, and will increase the number of units it trains. While this is a welcome development, the ISF—with some notable exceptions—have previously proven resistant to enduring reforms. Moreover, these efforts do not apply to local law-enforcement organizations. The United States has spent more than $40 billion on capability development and other support for the Iraqi military. Yet, this assistance failed to overcome the entrenched shortcomings that allowed al-Qaeda to metastasize into ISIS, and which led to the initial ISF defeat in 2014.

Despite frustrations with the enduring nature of the ISIS threat, as well as the limited success of previous capability efforts, international military cooperation has facilitated progress. Persistent engagement with the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) yielded a force that has consistently performed well in combat and received praise for its soldiers' concern for civilian lives.[3] However, while such counterterrorism forces have a profile, they are too small and too specialized to serve alone as a building block for national unity or an identity necessary for state building.

A number of shortcomings prevent much of the ISF from realizing success similar to that of the CTS. Unity of command is undermined by a spiderweb of official and unofficial chains of command that allow senior political and military leaders to bypass (and thereby undermine) commanders. Essential combat-support capabilities like intelligence, communications, and logistics are still lacking, with continuing dependence on international support. Despite some real improvements since 2003 and 2014, the ISF are still not able to independently and effectively maneuver against an adversary, or coordinate effective fire or close-air support. Poor administration is manifested in high rates of absenteeism and inadequate personnel and equipment accountability. Finally, corruption remains systematic, and limits efforts to resolve these other shortcomings.

These recommendations are intended to help the ISF realize the unity and independence they need to secure unstable areas of the country, strengthen government legitimacy, build national identity, and reduce dependence on international security support.

M1: Security-sector reform (SSR). To set positive political conditions, Iraq needs to strengthen "connective tissues" across all state actors who have a stake in SSR.

● **M1.a: Pursue transparency and public trust.** Identify and implement specific training, education, and accountability measures to more effectively manage protests, safeguard legal protestors, and regain public trust. Many of these proposed steps have been outlined in existing international support assessments and recommendations available to the government. Also look for ways to engage and develop local law-enforcement and security organizations.

● **M1.b: Prioritize military and police capacity building to reduce the need for Popular Mobilization Forces.** While the above measures may be useful for setting conditions for militia integration, their endurance and independence are a function, at least in part, of utility, as well as external support. Thus, those—or any other—measures are unlikely to succeed until the military and police can fill that need in a way Iraqis trust. So, rather than confronting militias directly, a long-term effort to grow capacity that focuses on local security and builds trust could, over time, reduce the utility of militias.

● **M1.c: Incentivize participation in military and police forces.** The Iraqi government should make service in military, police, and counterterrorism forces more attractive than service in the Popular Mobilization Forces. Capitalizing on efforts to build public trust, as well as past success against ISIS, the Iraqi government should provide incentives for youth to join forces that fall directly under government control.

● **M1.d: Continue to encourage integration of all militias and nongovernment security forces.** The role militias should play in Iraq's security should be addressed comprehensively and apply to all militias equally. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's direction for militias associated with Iraq's marjayia to integrate into Iraq's armed forces remains the preferred model; however, alternatives exist that the Iraqi government could consider.[4] For example, the Iraqi government could also repeal the law establishing the Popular Mobilization Forces as a separate armed force

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3   "Iraq: At Any Cost: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul, Iraq," Amnesty International, July 11, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/6610/2017/en/.

4   Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shia Leader Sistani Moves to Break Iran's Grip over Militia Movement," Middle East Eye, May 1, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-iraqi-shia-leader-sistani-moves-break-irans-grip-over-militia-movement.

with its own budget. Measures should also be taken to better integrate the Peshmerga into the ISF command structure. Doing any of this, however, is not likely to be politically viable without improvement in capability, and other political and security reforms.

● **M1.e: Intelligence reform.** Intelligence services need to build trust with the public, which currently perceives them as untrustworthy and venues for external influence. These measures may take the form of revising the security and military structure, or developing a comprehensive and effective security plan to meet current and forthcoming challenges.

M2: Professionalization and leadership reform. More effective, unified, and independent ISF need strong, effective, and ethical leaders and soldiers. Many of these Iraqis already serve. They need support, and emerging leaders and soldiers need improved development.

M2.a: Update the law on military service and retirement. Current Iraqi law does not specify the qualifications for each rank and role. This needs to be remedied as a way of improving leadership competence, as well as curbing the practice of purchasing positions or giving them to unqualified persons as acts of patronage. Specifying the conditions for each rank

and role will clarify for individuals what skills and abilities they should have and encourage merit-based promotions for those who excel.

M2.b: Conduct a media campaign illustrating positive leadership and soldier role models. Build trust with the public and provide serving ISF members with role models for effective service. Actions include the development of a Counter-Daesh Campaign History Program highlighting the courage and actions of (in particular) Iraqi army and police personnel; increasing the number of soldier profile videos on social media; and developing a monument-building program.

M2.c: Capitalize on counter-ISIS success to build identity and build momentum for fully professionalizing forces. ISF success against ISIS, while incomplete, has allowed the armed forces to establish themselves as an organization capable of meeting significant security needs. This provides the ISF with an opportunity to set an example of national unity through inclusive, merit-based recruitment and promotion. Overall, however, the ISF lack the institutional capacity to do this effectively over the long term. Thus, investment in professional military education, as well as accounting and oversight capabilities, would improve the ISF's ability to sustain their professionalization efforts.

A Japanese Self-Defence Force soldier addresses hospital staff members as they deliver supplies in Samawa. REUTER/Mohammed Ameen RCS/KI

OPTIMIZING INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

The international community has played a mixed role in assisting Iraq in its recovery. While security cooperation has been essential to eliminating ISIS control over Iraqi territory, many complain that the international community has failed to provide any other kind of meaningful assistance, despite the fact that Iraq's partners have provided considerable economic, reconstruction, and humanitarian assistance. Of course, Iraq's poor security situation, as well as its difficult investment environment, limits what the international community can do.

In general, however, the international community should seek ways to align assistance with Iraq's priorities, as well as provide direct assistance at local levels—independent of, but complementary to, Iraqi government efforts. Doing so could provide an alternate accountability structure that could avoid the corruption of the Iraqi system. Any steps that might appear to be interfering in internal Iraqi politics should be avoided.

P1: International partners. Provide expertise, support, and resources to support development and reform.

● **P1.a: Nonmilitary support.** All international partners should consider increasing nonmilitary support. Such support should be tied to programs or efforts that will be effective in supporting Iraq's development and recovery or meeting critical social needs, such as new and improvised pathways of improving a deteriorated healthcare system.

● **P1.b: Expand the role of international organizations in building trust.** As noted earlier, European Union and United Nations election monitoring was critical to the conduct of a free and fair election. The Iraqi government could consider how these roles could be expanded to observing the post-election certification process in order to promote transparency. It could also be expanded to other aspects of governance where there is little trust.

● **P1.c: Capitalize on all foreign partners' roles in Iraq.** Better focus international assistance on Iraq's internal priorities. Consider providing direct assistance at local levels, independent of, but complementary to, contributions to the central government. Doing so could provide an alternate accountability structure that could avoid the corruption of the centralized Iraqi system, and perhaps incentivize federal leaders to address corruption. The Iraqi government could consider establishing a working group of international partners to better communicate and align Iraq's needs with the assistance these partners can provide. Look for ways to engage Iran in playing a more productive role in Iraq's recovery and development.

P2: Better align partner interests and activities with Iraq's domestic and regional realities. While international partners play an important role in the counter-ISIS fight, as well as ISF capability development, they also often engage in activities that are destabilizing.

● **P2.a: Formalize the status of international coalition forces.** Iraq's security partners, including Iran and the United States, should establish a venue for coordinating security roles and activities.

● **P2.b: Transparency about coalition presence.** Coalition forces and other international organizations like the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) need to be more transparent regarding their roles and operations.

● **P2.c: Inspect in-country projects to ensure resources are used as intended.** International partners who provided funding or material assistance need to have the ability to inspect projects and account for resources, to ensure assistance goes to achieve the intended effect. Otherwise, those resources will likely be diverted to other actors and interests.

CONCLUSION

The recent elections have created a moment in which Iraqi leadership may have enough popularity and support from the Iraqi people to push through meaningful reform, regardless of the political parties' entrenched interests. To the extent those reforms include measures that impose effective checks and balances, grow and diversify the economy, and improve security, these reforms will provide more ways for Iraq's varied stakeholders to realize their interests without infringing on those of others. Iraq's new government will likely be unable to do it alone, creating opportunities for the international community to realign its assistance to meet Iraq's needs, down to the local level.

However, it was apparent from the dialogue's discussion that there is much more work to be done to understand different stakeholder interests in order to craft "win-win" solutions that better align these interests with Iraq's development and recovery needs. Getting into the details of these interests—and, perhaps more importantly, how they interact—could be the subject of the next round of discussions.

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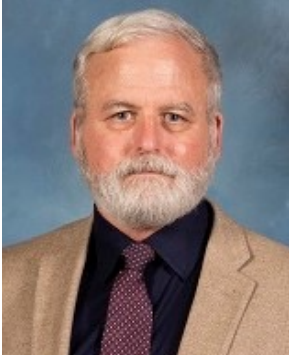
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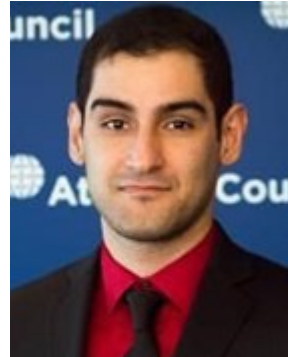
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