



# Iraq: From Crisis Hotspot to Promoter of Inter-Regional Dialogue and Reconciliation



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**Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
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### **Cover photos**

- Stone reliefs from Sennacherib’s “Palace without Rival” at Nineveh, 2002 (Angelo Rubino / Centro Scavi Torino)
- Family photo at the start of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in Sweimeh by the Dead Sea shore in central-west Jordan on 20 December 2022 (Khalil Mazraawi / AFP)
- A fishing boat gliding through the yellowish reeds in the Mesopotamian Marshes, also known as the Iraqi Marshes, which is a wetland area located in Southern Iraq and Southwestern Iran, in Nasiriyah, Iraq on 24 December 2020 (Murtadha Al-Sudani / Anadolu Agency)

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# Introduction

The Middle East continues to face overlapping challenges spanning both the domestic, regional, and international layers. Located at the centre of geopolitical clashes between conflicting regional axes, but also suffering from internal socio-economic and political fragilities and repeated instances of foreign meddling, Iraq is particularly exposed to many of these internal and external challenges. Yet, Iraqi actors have more recently pushed back against the depiction of Iraq as a weak and fragmented state unable to play constructive roles in the region, demonstrating their ability and willingness to promote intra-regional dialogue and de-escalation initiatives to dampen tensions and counter divisive sectarian trends.

The European Union and its member states maintain a strategic interest in the continuation of such regional dialogues and a more general stabilisation of the country and its neighbouring states. At a time of heightened tensions with Russia over Ukraine and concern over the risk of a regional spillover of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the EU cannot lose sight of Iraq and should redouble its engagements beyond the security domain to also include development and reconstruction, capacity building and technical assistance as well as political support for those actors engaged in nascent efforts to promote inclusivity and coexistence, both within Iraq and further afield.

Against this backdrop, this volume assesses how the European Union and Italy can support Baghdad's efforts to promote itself as a regional hub of cooperation, mediation and integration in the Gulf region and broader Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Conceptually, it addresses this question by employing the concept of Iraq's emerging role identity which finds expression in both its internal,

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<sup>1</sup> The denomination of this basin – and the corresponding sub-region – is still disputed, e.g., between Persian Gulf, Arab Gulf, Arab Persian Gulf, Muslim Gulf. For simplicity, the term Gulf will be used in this work.

as well as its external practices towards inclusivity and coexistence. Iraq has meaningful antecedents for such a role identity, notably its legacy as the “cradle of civilisation”. In recent history, and particularly since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iraq’s role in the region was constructed as a “buffer” against Iran, a role which disintegrated with the US-led military invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the sectarianized civil war which followed, leading Iraq to be increasingly framed as a cradle of violence in the region rather than a cradle of civilisation.

More recently, Iraq has sought to resist this role construction as a major crisis hotspot in the region, seeking independent development of its own role identity and promoting itself as a mediator in facilitating dialogue among regional rivals. At the same time, we have witnessed first (albeit timid) steps towards transitional justice within Iraq, to heal the wounds of the civil conflict and ISIS-perpetrated massacres of civilians and minorities and promote national reconciliation. This identity and related practices on both planes – the regional and the domestic – are indeed key to move away from divisive sectarianism towards inclusive Iraqi and regional futures and are thereby worthy of active support from the EU and its member states.

The volume looks into practices on the (sub)national, transnational and regional level which are sustaining and giving concrete expression to Iraq’s emerging role identity, but also where gaps remain, major hurdles appear and outside support could be needed. In particular, this is observed by addressing key issue areas where Iraq has potential resources and capacities to (re)build its inclusive identity and where the EU and Italy can support and promote Iraqi efforts to foster inter-regional dialogue and reconciliation, again both internally and externally within the region.

By focussing on transitional justice (chapter 1) and cultural heritage (chapter 2), the first part of the volume examines the interlinkages between internal processes of inclusive identity (re)formation and their external reverberations in terms of helping Iraqi efforts to promote inter-regional dialogue and reconciliation beyond Iraqi borders. The second part focuses on connectivity (chapter 3), climate change (chapter 4), and transboundary water resources (chapter 5), by examining how Iraq’s geographic location can help promote processes of intra-regional dialogue and reconciliation while also helping to re-

enforce internal efforts to consolidate an inclusive national identity in Iraq. In conclusion, building on the individual research papers on each identified issue area, a final policy brief takes stock of the key policy implications advanced and draws up a set of targeted policy recommendations for Italy and the EU to support Iraq's transition from a crisis hotspot to a promoter of intra-regional dialogue and reconciliation on the basis of inclusivity, regional integration and peaceful coexistence.

# Part 1

## **Social and cultural resources for an inclusive Iraqi identity**

# 1. Transitional Justice in Iraq: The Challenges of National Healing and Recovery

by Rend Al-Rahim

The United Nations Human Rights Commission provides a working description of transitional justice as covering “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past conflict, repression, violations and abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation”. It further elaborates by outlining processes that

may include both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, including truth-seeking, prosecution initiatives, reparations, and various measures to prevent the recurrence of new violations, including: constitutional, legal and institutional reform, the strengthening of civil society, memorialization efforts, cultural initiatives, the preservation of archives, and the reform of history education.<sup>1</sup>

At the core of transitional justice is the protection of human rights. As the phrase indicates, there are two crucial components: *justice*, understood as a form of accountability for perpetrators and restitution for victims and survivors who can witness justice being done; and *transition*, or a process that can lead to a more peaceful and democratic political and social culture. The various mechanisms of these components are meant to be complementary, working in tandem to achieve the aim of national healing, leading to peaceful coexistence, national reconciliation and protection of human rights. It is necessary for these mechanisms to be transparent, equitable and unbiased in order to be credible and effective.

It is within this framework that efforts to determine whether Iraq has implemented transitional justice processes and mechanisms since 2003 should

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<sup>1</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) website: *Transitional Justice and Human Rights*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/3451>.



commence. This can lead to assessments on the key limits and challenges affecting these efforts, while reflecting on how successful they have been in establishing reconciliation and peaceful co-existence within Iraqi society today, two decades after the US-led invasion.

## 1.1 A dual perspective

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During the past five decades, Iraq suffered repeated waves of violence and human rights abuses, with tragic consequences for individuals and communities, and for the social cohesion and stability of the nation. From 1968 to 2003, the former Ba'ath regime committed gross human rights violations, including use of chemical weapons, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and torture, against large segments of the civilian population. These have been well documented by the international community, including by the United Nations in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, human rights abuses have been rooted in politico-sectarian violence. Iraqis have endured foreign invasion, insurgencies, sectarian conflicts, organised terrorism and human rights violations allegedly committed by agencies of the state. These successive episodes of violence, affecting multiple localities and layers of society, have left deep scars. A discussion of transitional justice must take the history and evolution of violence in Iraq into account and evaluate efforts at promoting justice and reconciliation from a historical perspective.

Transitional justice in Iraq should therefore be examined both chronologically and thematically. Three specific periods in which Iraq attempted, yet failed, to deal with the legacy of gross human rights violations by embarking on processes of transitional justice will be addressed. These include the period immediately following the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, when transitional justice meant dealing with the human rights legacy of former ruler Saddam Hussein (in power between 1979 and 2003). The insurgency that followed the fall of the regime, aided by the terrorist network Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), culminated in

<sup>2</sup> OHCHR, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iraq, Submitted by Max van der Stoep, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, in Accordance with Commission Resolution 1993/74 (E/CN.4/1994/58)*, 25 February 1994, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/226418>; OHCHR, *Situation of Human Rights in Iraq. Report Submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Max van der Stoep, in Accordance with Commission Resolution 1998/65 (E/CN.4/1999/37)*, 26 February 1999, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1487632>.

a sectarian Sunni-Shi'a conflict (some have called it a civil war) in 2006–2008, leaving behind social stigmas and divisions that are still visible today. The third period begins in 2016, when the Iraqi state began to wrest territory from the control of the self-styled Islamic State (also known as Daesh or ISIS). We can examine whether mechanisms of accountability and justice, restitution and compensation for victims, truth-telling and reconciliation were applied in each phase, and with what level of success. A final question will be whether the application of such mechanisms has led to the desired end of national healing and a peaceful democratic society that upholds the human rights of its citizens.

## 1.2 De-Ba'athification and insurgency, 2003–2006

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The concept of transitional justice was first discussed among Iraqi expatriates prior to 2003. The question was how to deal with the crimes perpetrated by the Ba'athist regime of Saddam. These ranged from the war and use of chemical weapons against its Kurdish citizens, the torture, execution and exile of thousands of Shi'a citizens and more general practices of extreme repression against Sunni dissidents. De-Ba'athification, inspired by post-war German de-Nazification, was put forward as a necessary first step. Consequently, an order on de-Ba'athification was the first law promulgated in 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority (the US-led authority that governed Iraq following the invasion) and was later enshrined in the constitution of 2005 and embodied in a De-Ba'athification Commission as the implementing authority. The law was revised in 2008 and led to the establishment of the High National Commission for Accountability and Justice, as a more encompassing reflection of efforts at transitional justice. The aim of the new commission, as the previous one, was to extirpate Ba'athism and Ba'athists of senior rank from the body politic and uproot Ba'athist ideology from Iraqi culture.

The law contained intrinsic defects. It criminalised membership of the Ba'ath party and was applied as an act of collective punishment and denial of civil rights against a large segment of citizens who were not charged with committing specific criminal acts designated under existing Iraqi law. Because the law was not linked to any criminal acts, it penalised people who had not committed crimes while it ignored individuals and groups who, while not being officially members of the Ba'ath party, had nevertheless committed grievous violations

of human rights under the former regime. There is no record of any lawsuit brought before the courts by a victim or survivor against a Ba'athist perpetrator who had committed crimes and human rights abuses. Accountability was limited and selective, falling short of the standards of justice.

In addition to defects in the law, its application was seriously flawed. The De-Ba'athification Commission, and later the Accountability and Justice Commission, implemented the law arbitrarily and opaquely, without recourse to judicial due process. Hundreds of thousands of civil servants were dismissed from office, even though they had committed no crimes and were not senior members of the Ba'ath party. The consequent paralysis of the state and the shortage of experience forced post-2003 governments to selectively reinstate many civil servants who had previously been fired. For example, as early as the summer of 2003, some 20,000 employees of the Ministry of Education, including teachers, were dismissed for alleged Ba'athist affiliation even though they had been only minor members. The ministry was obliged to call back several thousand in order to operate.<sup>3</sup> As recently as December 2022, the head of the Accountability and Justice Commission disclosed that one million Iraqis were included in the de-Ba'athification programme, and that tens of thousands of cases are still pending review.<sup>4</sup>

To put this in quantitative perspective, the population of Iraq in 2003 was 27 million, of whom some 30 per cent were under the age of 25.<sup>5</sup> This meant that nearly 7 per cent of the adult population was de-Ba'athified. Although the law was not aimed at a particular religious group in Iraq, its impact fell largely on the Sunni community, who were deprived of jobs and civil rights. Its implementation was open to abuse: many were denounced as Ba'athists for the purpose of settling scores or getting rid of rivals. Because of politicisation, absence of due process and arbitrary implementation, de-Ba'athification was perceived, certainly by the Sunnis of Iraq, as a tool for vengeance by the post 2003 ruling Shi'a parties rather than justice, leading to widespread Sunni discontent and the beginnings of a Sunni/Ba'athist insurgency in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with a senior official in the Ministry of Education, December 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Safaa Al-Kubaisi, *قارعة رارصا: قارعة رارصا* [Iraq: Insisting on the Continuation of the work of the "de-Ba'athification" body, which stands in the way of agreements to disband it], in *Al Araby*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/node/5849745>.

<sup>5</sup> PopulationPyramid website: *Population of Iraq 2003*, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/iraq/2003>.

To provide compensation to victims of the Ba'athist era, the new government established a Political Prisoners' Foundation in 2005 and a Martyrs' Foundation in 2006 to "materially and morally" compensate the victims and survivors of the old regime (the Martyrs' Foundation was later expanded to cover those killed in the fight against ISIS).<sup>6</sup> Yet the operation of the two foundations was open to abuse and corruption, and was exploited by political parties. Other institutions, such as one for the restitution of property seized by the former regime, were also established at the same time, and was equally prone to corruption. Often the benefits provided by these institutions were used as a tool for patronage and illegal confiscation of property.

The flaws in the application of the de-Ba'athification instruments were compounded by the Anti-Terrorism Law passed in 2005. The law was not part of the de-Ba'athification process but rather designed to deal with an insurgency that began in 2003 and soon crystallised as the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Iraqi government, along with the international forces that still controlled security in Iraq, saw AQI as another face of Ba'athism, or at least in collusion with Ba'athists, and the line between the two was blurred. The Anti-Terrorism Law was criticised by the international community on several counts: the designation of terrorist acts is broad and some of the law's articles are loosely defined,<sup>7</sup> permitting the criminalisation of legitimate dissent. It allowed secret informants to accuse suspects and accepted confessions as evidence even where torture was suspected. In the fight against terrorism, the state and its foreign allies incarcerated thousands without formal charge or due process. Though this was not the intention of the law, its practical application again fell most heavily on the Sunni population, resulting in an unspoken conflation of Sunnis with Ba'athists and terrorists. In time, the law would be applied to individuals accused of membership in ISIS.

These measures, ostensibly aiming at justice, focused on punishment, paying little heed to the parallel aim of transitioning to social peace and reconciliation. For example, the trials of Saddam and a handful of senior Ba'ath officials were

<sup>6</sup> The law was revised in 2016 to include those killed in the fight against ISIS.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Article 2 considers the knowledge of violence or threats against public or private institutions and venues a terrorist act. See *Anti-Terrorism Law No. 13 of 2005*, 7 November 2005, <https://moj.gov.iq/view.6698/>.

a missed opportunity for telling the history of human rights abuses against all segments of society across the country, and thus providing a mechanism to overcome the trauma and seek national healing. Instead, the trials were conducted hastily in a polarised political climate, and only one charge, the execution in 1985 of Shi'a citizens from the town of Dujail, was heard in court. In the rush to punish, other crimes committed by the Ba'ath regime, such as the notorious 1988 Anfal campaign in which over 5,000 Kurds died from chemical attacks, were given short shrift. The trial and execution of Saddam drew particular international criticism, described by some as "shambolic".<sup>8</sup> Others went further: "The trial and execution of Saddam Hussein were tragically missed opportunities to demonstrate that justice can be done, even in the case of one of the greatest crooks of our time", stated the UN Human Rights Council's expert on extrajudicial executions. The statement continues: "The process to date has given the clear sense of a pre-determined rush to execute rather than of a commitment to achieve justice."<sup>9</sup> Far from being a prelude to reconciliation, the trial and execution of a dictator who had committed crimes against all social groups became a cause for deeper rifts and grievances.

Outside the proceedings of these trials, there were no truth commissions to document and understand the past and give voice to the suffering of survivors. Only modest efforts by private groups recognised the importance of giving survivors an opportunity to speak out.<sup>10</sup> There was much official talk about reconciliation but little political will, as groups who seized power after 2003 were reluctant to make concessions and cede any of their authority. Numerous "reconciliation conferences" were held among selected political elites, but they were rhetorical displays of slogans that yielded no actionable outcomes or state policies.

The broad sweep and uneven implementation of the de-Ba'athification law, the weakness of due process in bringing perpetrators of crimes to justice, and the absence of any parallel reconciliation measures to promote peace, were seen

<sup>8</sup> See, Ewen MacAskill and Michael Howard, "How Saddam Died on the Gallows", in *The Guardian*, 1 January 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/qm6f>.

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR, *Tragic Mistakes Made in the Trial and Execution of Saddam Hussein Must Not Be Repeated*, 3 January 2007, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/88618>.

<sup>10</sup> Notably, the Memory Foundation, an NGO working in Iraq in 2004–2005, collected and exhibited documents and produced television programmes with narratives from survivors.

as “victor’s justice”, and fuelled dissent and insurrection among Sunnis. Sunni discontent was exploited by AQI and later ISIS, both of which found fertile ground for recruitment, further polarising the country along sectarian lines.

### 1.3 The sectarian conflict of 2006–2008

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Between 2006 and 2008, the war against Al-Qaeda in Iraq morphed into a sectarian conflict between Shi’a and Sunni militias, with death squads on both sides engaging in reciprocal acts of violence. The conflict resulted in gross human rights abuses on both sides, with reports of torture, extra-judicial killings, mass incarceration, disappearances and ethnic cleansing.<sup>11</sup> Millions of families were displaced due to abductions, assassination or intimidation in ethnic cleansing reprisals. A weak state was unable to control the violence, and indeed government agencies or rogue elements within the Iraqi security services were complicit in some of the abuses.<sup>12</sup> The sectarian war resulted in social fragmentation and severe damage to Iraqi social cohesion and national identity. The conflict generated rival victimhood narratives. By the time it ended in 2008, it had become difficult to separate victim from victimiser or to hold anyone accountable since so many of Iraq’s political actors and social forces were implicated either directly or by providing political protection to perpetrators. The UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI), painstakingly compiled and published reports of the crimes committed during this internecine warfare. The government, for its part, refused to disclose data, provide information on crimes, account for victims or culprits, or hold perpetrators accountable. The only records are those compiled by international organisations and the memories of survivors.

The Iraqi state and the political class refused to disclose or acknowledge the full extent of human damage caused by the conflict, and in private citizens were usually fearful of recalling its atrocities. As a consequence, unlike the

<sup>11</sup> “Iraq Death Squad Caught in Act”, in *BBC News*, 16 February 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4719252.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4719252.stm).

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Iraq”, in *World Report 2007. Events of 2006*, 2007, p. 469-475, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2007/country-chapters-6>. For a full report, see UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), *Human Rights Report, 1 April–30 June 2007*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/71642>. On arbitrary detention, secret informants and suspected torture in prisons, see for instance Amnesty International, *Iraq: A Decade of Abuses*, 11 March 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=42481>.

measures taken against senior Ba'ath regime officials, no perpetrators of crimes were brought to justice, no restitution was provided to victims and no truth commission was established to provide a measure of atonement and reconciliation. The sectarian conflict left deep and unhealed scars in the collective national psyche. Consequently, grievances were allowed to fester, and the silence that still surrounds this most corrosive period of human rights abuses only deepened the sectarian rift between the Shi'a and Sunni communities, arguably facilitating the rise of the so-called Islamic State in 2014.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.4 Post-ISIS transitional justice, 2017–2022

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The most recent wave of widespread conflict began in 2014, when ISIS occupied one third of Iraqi territory, inflicting unprecedented destruction, enslavement, human trafficking and wholesale murder. ISIS cruelty was most severely felt by religious minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians, with minority women suffering most. Because its deadly impact affected principally Sunni areas and mixed Kurdish and Christian areas of Iraq, it caused more complicated social divisions and grey areas of both resistance and co-optation than those created by AQI or the Sunni-Shi'a conflict of 2006–2008, in which religious divisions were more pronounced. While ISIS found some support among discontented Sunni communities, there was also a local Sunni backlash against its murderous practices, raising intra-sectarian hostilities. Thousands of families fled their homes. According to the International Organization for Migration, at the height of ISIS control, 3.3 million Iraqis were displaced from their homes, principally in provinces occupied by the terrorist organisation. At the end of December 2022, there were still some 1.17 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

During the war on ISIS and following the liberation of territory from ISIS control, tens of thousands of fighters were captured and hundreds received summary trials in federal criminal courts under Iraq's Anti-Terrorism Law.<sup>15</sup> Under the

<sup>13</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Emma Davies, "Iraq's Sectarian and Ethnic Violence and the Evolving Insurgency. Developments through late-January 2007", in *CSIS Analysis*, 26 January 2007, <https://www.csis.org/node/19181>.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance, International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Iraq Master List Report*, No. 128 (October-December 2022), in *IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix*, February 2023, <https://dtm.iom.int/node/24626>.

<sup>15</sup> The UNAMI report of 2020 criticises the brevity of the court hearings and sentencing. In comparison, the trial of an ISIS member in Frankfurt, Germany, on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity

provisions of the law, most convictions carried the death penalty. The judicial system has been overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Victims have not been called to provide testimony. The trials have been shrouded in anonymity: there are no official reports of the names or numbers of those executed or the charges against them, and few witnesses came forward. As a result, if justice was done, it was not *seen* to be done, and therefore there was no comfort for victims. In a January 2020 report, UNAMI found the system flawed because of the broad and vague parameters of the Anti-Terrorism Law, reliance on secret informants and acceptance of confessions as evidence even when there were allegations of torture.<sup>16</sup> The UNAMI report concludes that “betrayals of justice, following flawed trials [...] can only serve a narrative of grievance and revenge”.<sup>17</sup>

In 2018, the United Nations, in coordination with the government of Iraq, formed the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). UNITAD's task is to collect evidence of crimes committed by ISIS. Unlike the trials by Iraqi courts that rely exclusively on the Anti-Terrorism Law, UNITAD documentation is based on international humanitarian law and can be used to prosecute specific crimes, such as genocide or human trafficking, either in Iraqi or international courts. Indeed, in November 2021, a court in Frankfurt, Germany, sentenced a former ISIS fighter on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.<sup>18</sup>

In the aftermath of liberation from ISIS control, Iraqi communities were torn apart by distrust and recrimination. Families became outcasts on the flimsiest suspicion of cooperation with ISIS. IDP families wishing to return to their homes have been subjected to security scrutiny and require documentation attesting to their innocence. Returning IDPs often face rejection from their original communities, based on the allegations of being ISIS fighters or collaborators if they fled from their homes after the government's takeover.<sup>19</sup>

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and genocide, lasted 19 months.

<sup>16</sup> UNAMI, *Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Trials under the Anti-terrorism Laws and Implications for Justice, Accountability and Social Cohesion in the Aftermath of ISIL*, January 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/71621>. See specifically the Conclusions section of the report.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> “German Court Finds Former ‘IS’ Member Guilty of Genocide”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-59976226>.

<sup>19</sup> Ouafae Sandi, *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, Baghdad, UNDP Iraq, October 2022, <https://www.undp.org/node/360736>.



Paradoxically, those who remained in their homes under ISIS control are also suspected of sympathising with ISIS. These problems are compounded by the recent repatriation of families, mostly women and children, from camps in Syria against strong objections from the host communities. In the absence of serious conflict-mitigation measures by the government and with weak rule of law, personal vengeance and deadly tribal feuds become standard methods of settling hostilities. There is thus pervasive social instability at the heart of communities impacted by ISIS that is more complex than former patterns of Sunni-Shi'a divides.

No Iraqis suffered more abuse at the hands of ISIS than did the Yezidis of the Sinjar district in the governorate of Ninawa, who were summarily murdered and whose women were enslaved and trafficked. The Iraqi government has recognised the crimes of ISIS against the community as genocide, as did more recently several European countries such as Germany. Faced with this human disaster, in October 2020 the federal government and the Kurdish Regional Government signed the Sinjar Agreement to stabilise and reconstruct the district and rehabilitate its Yezidi population. On 8 March 2021 (International Women's Day) the Iraqi state adopted the Law on Yezidi Women Survivors, which provides recognition and compensation to Yezidi women survivors as well as women from the Christian, Turkoman and Shabak minorities. The law recognises the crimes of ISIS against these communities as crimes against humanity and as genocide, and adopts measures for compensation and rehabilitation, including psycho-social support. Both the Sinjar Agreement and the law remain long on aspiration but short on implementation, as they have not resulted in any court cases and convictions yet.<sup>20</sup> Yezidi women, and the Yezidi community as a whole, are still alienated, disenfranchised and exploited by armed factions. The recent German recognition of ISIS crimes against Yezidis as genocide, resulting in the first conviction issued by a court on 30 November 2021, while it does not guarantee justice or restitution, at least provides comfort and vindication to the Yezidi victims and survivors, and acknowledges their suffering.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For the failures of the Sinjar Agreement, see International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar", in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 235 (31 May 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19099>.

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, *Germany/Iraq: World's First Judgment on Crime of Genocide Against the Yazidis*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=144081>.

Confronted with a societal crisis of this magnitude, and fearful of a resurgence of terrorism, the Iraqi state and international actors, including governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), recognised the necessity of achieving social reconciliation and peace as a means of preventing the re-emergence of extremist violence. In January 2016, the state formed the High Presidential Committee for National Reconciliation, and governments after 2017 held reconciliation conferences, established local dialogue and reconciliation commissions and sponsored the return of IDPs to their original homes.

The Iraqi government received material and technical support from foreign governments and international NGOs, who also invested funds and efforts in what the United Nations Development Programme calls “sustainable peace and social cohesion” programmes, especially in areas recently recovered from ISIS control. However, it is important to note that national reconciliation was approached as a mechanism to combat terrorism, and not necessarily as an end in itself for the health of society. For example, Iraq’s national Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism of 2019, subtitled “For an Iraqi Society That Is Safe, Renounces Extremism, and Trusts in Peace and Coexistence”, includes among its goals

[g]rooming the citizen for a position of being one who believes in middle-grounds and moderation; believes in principles of democracy, human rights, and common human values; honors diversity of cultures; and forges positive constructive ties and rapport with their family, community, and the world.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the National Strategy is principally security-driven, clearly stating its linkage to Iraq’s National Security Strategy of 2015.

Despite these good intentions, there are serious obstacles to a transition to reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. In the five years since the liberation of territory from ISIS, there has been no published investigation of the

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<sup>22</sup> Website of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism: *Violent Extremism Strategy*, [https://nccve.gov.iq/page/5/Violent+Extremism+Strategy+\(PDF\)](https://nccve.gov.iq/page/5/Violent+Extremism+Strategy+(PDF)) [Access is restricted].

circumstances that led to the rapid subjugation of territory;<sup>23</sup> the state has failed to give an account of the devastation inflicted by ISIS on one third of Iraqi territory and millions of Iraqis; there is no official documentation of the history of violence perpetrated by ISIS; and there is no systematic collection of testimonies from the thousands of victims of the terrorist group.

Local reconciliation initiatives by the state are limited and inconsistent. On a practical level, many survivors of ISIS violence lack documentation and therefore cannot access government services, and programmes to compensate them have been slow. The Kurdistan Regional Government has done a better job of documenting crimes perpetrated by ISIS and sharing data with the international community, and Yezidi non-governmental organisations have established databases to document atrocities committed against the Yezidi community and other minority groups in the Ninawa province.<sup>24</sup>

The unremitting waves of wars, sectarian conflict and extremist violence that have battered Iraq before and since 2003 have resulted in numbers of missing and forcibly disappeared persons that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) calls one of the highest in the world.<sup>25</sup> There are no confirmed figures because there is no national register or centrally compiled data, and indeed successive governments have avoided serious investigation: the topic is regarded as politically sensitive because in many cases enforced disappearances result from the activities of politically powerful entities. Even when families know the perpetrators of enforced disappearances, they are powerless to pursue the full truth and hold anyone accountable. Estimates of the disappeared and missing vary widely, but, in an exhaustive report, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances puts the number between 250,000 to one million.<sup>26</sup> Mass disappearances were reported during and following the war against ISIS, either abducted by ISIS or rounded up by Iraq security forces and armed militias. The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, and NGO, reports

<sup>23</sup> A parliamentary commission conducted an investigation but its report has been suppressed.

<sup>24</sup> The most active of Yazidi organisations is Yazda. See the official website: <https://www.yazda.org>.

<sup>25</sup> "Iraq Among Countries with Most Missing Persons: ICRC", in *Kurdistan24*, 31 August 2022, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/29378>; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Iraq: Families of the Missing, between Hope and Despair, the Search Continues*, 31 August 2022, <https://www.icrc.org/en/node/106255>.

<sup>26</sup> OHCHR, *Iraq: UN Committee Urges Urgent Investigation and Legislation to Eradicate Enforced Disappearances*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/105273>.

that by December 2022 it had received 11,000 requests for assistance from families of the missing.<sup>27</sup>

While these reports provide a useful starting point, the scope of the problem and its social impact are beyond quantification. The families of the missing and disappeared are the “collateral damage” of conflict who suffer for years in both practical and psychological ways. On the practical level, for example, women whose husbands are missing are unable to collect pensions or re-marry unless they get a death certificate, which in most cases is impossible. Even more socially injurious are the anguish and bitterness felt by the families left behind, who are unable to obtain information or pursue suspected culprits, attain closure and peace, and move forward with their lives.

## 1.5 Conclusion: How the international community can help

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Evidence indicates that mechanisms and processes of transitional justice in Iraq have been either deficient or non-existent owing to defects in the administration of justice, neglect of the requirements of national reconciliation, and lack of political will to hold perpetrators accountable for gross abuse of human rights. Punitive measures have been arbitrary and have not observed due process and transparency. Restitution for victims and survivors has been selective and haphazard. Reconciliation is elusive, with communities still suffering grievances, suspicion and animosities. Particularly in areas that suffered ISIS-inflicted violence, divisions run deep between sects and within local communities. These are aggravated by disparities in services and allocation of resources, as well as vested interests that exploit the inability of the state to impose law and order. Persistent perceptions of injustice encourage personal vendettas and provide fertile ground for renewed violence and foreign interference.

The largest obstacle to successful transitional justice is political. Competing interests make compromises and mutual accommodation among rival groups difficult to achieve. The absence of political will means that government agencies that work on reconciliation efforts are underfunded and lack capacity.

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<sup>27</sup> Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights (IOHR), *More than 11,000 Families Reported Missing Civilians between 2017 and 2022*, 10 December 2022, <https://iohriq.org/82-.html>.

In many liberated areas, such as Sinjar, Nenawa and Anbar, Shi'a militia groups who are not native to the district have settled in, and exploit resources or interfere in security arrangements. Services and resources are heavily tied to patronage systems, creating inequities and reinforcing grievances.

Key for the transition to a healthy society is a state that is seen as just, equitable and respectful of the rights of its citizens. This will be a long process for Iraq, but steps can be taken towards recovery. Amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Law to provide narrower and more precise definitions will reduce the arbitrariness of its application. Twenty years after the fall of the Ba'ath regime, the High Commission on De-Ba'athification has outlived its usefulness and has become an obstacle to transition towards a society of equal citizenship. There are demands to disband the Commission and refer cases to the judiciary, but these are met with virulent opposition, since the Commission continues to serve as a political tool to exclude or blackmail opponents. Ending corruption in the several agencies that provide compensation for survivors will inspire confidence in restitution efforts. A commitment to rule of law, accountability and transparency in the justice system should go beyond punishment (which in any case is often selective): it should also provide national acknowledgment and disclosure of the toll on society of human rights abuses both before and after 2003. And while governments have recently been engaged in facilitating the return of IDPs, return or resettlement has to be supported by efforts at communitarian healing and acceptance.

The international community has been instrumental in urging the Iraqi government to step up its efforts at peace-building and reconciliation. Diagnosing the problems that stand in the way of national healing can point the path to the areas in which Iraq's international well-wishers might provide technical assistance and political support.

The international community can play an important role in at least three areas. First, international actors should expect higher standards of due process in the trials of the accused and continue to call out defects in the administration of justice, both in the prison system and in the courts. Strengthening the rule of law and the protection of human rights are prerequisites to transitional justice and sustainable peace.

Second, the Iraqi government must be held accountable for the welfare and rights of all its citizens: the Iraqi state should be urged to enforce equity in the access to goods, services, justice and security and in the protection of civil rights. Disparities and discrimination will only renew the cycle of grievances leading to violence.

Finally, international organisations must continue to work with relevant state agencies and local civil society to build their skills and operational expertise, and help design or fund programmes that aim at social reconciliation and reinforce a common national purpose.

## 2. Rethinking Cultural Heritage in Iraq's Future

by Maysoun Al-Damluji and Maria Luisa Fantappiè

### 2.1 From heritage predation to heritage destruction

During the past twenty years, Iraq has suffered the highest loss to its cultural heritage in recent times. Archaeologists report that more damage has been inflicted to Iraq's heritage over the past two decades than in over two millennia of history.<sup>1</sup> While war and conflict plaguing Iraq are often mentioned as immediate reasons for such loss, other phenomena have also played a role. The mismanagement, destruction and damage to cultural heritage sites in Iraq can indeed be traced to recurrent practices of political exploitation by state-elites that undermine the ability of institutions to protect such sites, while preventing the local population from socially and emotionally becoming attached to these.<sup>2</sup>

Since the early beginning of the Iraqi state, governing elites have resorted to historical memory to enhance their legitimacy and control over society.<sup>3</sup> Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party was particularly focused on the Abbasid and Mesopotamian eras to legitimise his rule and ethicise elements of Iraqi history that could serve his agenda. In his book *Memories of State*, Eric Davis reports that in the wake of Iraq-Iran war, Saddam's state propaganda tried to stigmatise Persians as enemies of the state by blaming Shiite public servants of Persian origin for the weakening and fall of the Abbasid Empire.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Author phone interview with Nicolò Marchetti, Full Professor at the University of Bologna, March 2023. See also Federico Zaina, "New Perspectives on Iraqi Archaeology and Cultural Heritage", in *Rome 2018 Mediterranean Dialogues*, 2018, p. 44-47, <https://site.unibo.it/waladu/en/results/wp8-project-exploitation-and-sustainability/22-cultural-heritage.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Mehiyar Kathem, Eleanor Robson and Lina G. Tahan, "Cultural Heritage Predation in Iraq. The Sectarian Appropriation of Iraq's Past", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, March 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/28378>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Davis, *Memories of State. Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Yet, the predation of Iraqi heritage sites has reached whole new proportions following 2003, as the country has been ruled by post-invasion elites. Since the conflict, heritage has become a form of “capital” that various actors have mobilised to legitimise their rule over people and territory, entrench communal divisions and extract profit.<sup>5</sup> The damage and destruction caused to Iraqi cultural heritage sites reveals the contest over state resources in the aftermath of Saddam’s fall. Turned into a political and economic asset, heritage has been left vulnerable to mismanagement, predation and corruption. In the post-invasion phase, several attempts were for instance made by the de-Ba’athification commission to destroy monuments associated with Ba’ath party rule and reinterpret the capital’s sites through the prism of communal identities.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many statues were removed, not necessarily having any connection the Ba’ath party. A loose legal framework for heritage protection has enabled several political and religious endowments as well as local entities to replace Baghdad’s central authority in heritage management, thereby sanctioning their actions of manipulation and predation.<sup>7</sup>

Shiite and Sunni religious endowments as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have appropriated the management of local national heritage sites, using them to promote their narrow religious and ethno-nationalist identities, a practice that often comes at the expense of the sites’ preservation. The paper by Kadhem, Robson and Tahan offers important empirical evidence for this argument. The Shiite Endowment has been in charge of the rebuilding of Samarra’s al-Askari Mosque after an al-Qaeda attack destroyed it in 2006. Under the supervision of the Shiite Endowment, pre-Ottoman era heritage has been damaged or destroyed to make space for the enlargement of the mosque and associated increases in religious tourism. The renovation also displaced Sunni families. To this day, a Shiite armed militia, Seraya al-Salam, manages

<sup>5</sup> See Mehiyar Kathem, Eleanor Robson and Lina G. Tahan, “Cultural Heritage Predation in Iraq”, cit., p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> See Maysoon Al-Damluji, *Reviving Iraq’s National Identity*, unpublished paper, 2013; also Maysoon Al-Damluji, *Baghdad Sculptures between Art and Politics* [in Arabic], Baghdad, Dar Daraj, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Iraqi Constitution Art. 113. While the Constitution acknowledges that antiquities and archaeological sites (among others) constitute “national treasures”, it envisions cooperation among the federal authorities and governorates and regions of Iraq on heritage protection “to be regulated by [the] law”. In 2021, the Kurdistan Regional Parliament passed its own legislation on the “management and protection of heritage” and to this day operates in near complete autonomy from the central authorities in the management of cultural heritage sites in the areas it controls.



access to Samarra Archaeological City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In a similar fashion, the Erbil Citadel, another World Heritage Site, has been turned into a symbol of nationhood by the KRG, with the local population evicted from the site.<sup>8</sup> While the damage inflicted on Iraq's sites by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as Daesh) has been unprecedented, one could argue that jihadi militants have dealt with heritage along a similar pattern as other ethno-sectarian leaders of the post-invasion. Militants used the destruction of heritage sites (as well as the spectacularisation of such destruction which included Sunni mosques and shrines) as an asset to project terror vis-à-vis the local population and the world, entrenching leadership and sectarian divisions. Looting and illegal trafficking of assets has been yet another means to transform heritage into an asset for commercial profit.<sup>9</sup> The international community holds its share of responsibility in the degradation of Iraqi heritage, making such sites vulnerable to pillage (see the infamous pillages of Iraq's Museum)<sup>10</sup> or even directly participating in damaging them (see for instance US and Polish troops on the site of Babylon).<sup>11</sup>

Decades of state/leadership appropriation have dispossessed and alienated the Iraqi population from its heritage which sadly often makes the population complicit in illegal excavation, trafficking and damage of sites.<sup>12</sup> Even an Iraqi scholar and author, interviewed for this chapter, admits that he is not familiar with most archaeological sites in Iraq, while pointing to the difficulties that most ordinary Iraqis would have in accessing them, as well as the ethno-sectarian boundaries that conflict has erected since 2003 and more generally the poor managements of these sites.<sup>13</sup> Yet, perhaps because heritage has been so often abused, it is here that the youth-led civic movements have tried to reconnect,

<sup>8</sup> See Mehiyar Kathem, Eleanor Robson and Lina G. Tahan, "Cultural Heritage Predation in Iraq", cit., p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> See David McDonald (ed.), *Culture under Fire: Armed Non-state Actors and Cultural Heritage in Wartime*, Geneva Call, October 2018, Ch. 2, [https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Cultural\\_Heritage\\_Study\\_Final\\_HIGHRES.pdf](https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Cultural_Heritage_Study_Final_HIGHRES.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Bailey, "International Outrage as Iraq's Museum Is Looted by Civilians", in *The Art Newspaper*, 1 May 2003, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2003/05/01/international-outrage-as-iraqs-national-museum-is-sacked-by-civilians>.

<sup>11</sup> See Associated Press, "U.S. Admits Military Damaged Babylon Ruins", in *NBC News*, 14 April 2006, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna12316998>.

<sup>12</sup> Author phone-interview with Carlo Lippolis, President of the Centro Scavi Torino, February 2022. See also Federico Zaina, "New Perspectives on Iraqi Archaeology and Cultural Heritage", cit.

<sup>13</sup> Author phone-interview with Fanar Haddad, Assistant Professor at the University of Copenhagen, March 2023.

to formulate an alternative to the ethno-sectarian governing system and a bridge for social cohesion.

## 2.2 The human dimension of cultural heritage

Heritage is often approached as a luxury that societies in or recovering from conflict have little means to appreciate or preserve, given the compounding threats they face, from displacement to poor access to healthcare and education. Yet, heritage sites are not “just stones”, as a development agency officer interviewed for this chapter told us.<sup>14</sup> While the International Cultural Heritage legal framework (ICHL) largely focuses on protection of heritage alone, recent post-conflict literature acknowledges the importance of the “human” dimension of cultural heritage and its connection to human rights, post-conflict recovery and social cohesion.<sup>15</sup>

Iraq’s modern history provides excellent examples of all three of these dimensions.

1) *The human rights dimension of cultural heritage.* The Islamic State-led destruction and annihilation of cultural sites in Nineveh and Mosul has been recognised as a campaign of cultural cleansing and a gross violation of human rights, because it attempts to erase the traces of a community’s past and therefore challenges the rights of communities to continue to exist over this land. Fleeing the Islamic State, members of the Yazidi community taking shelter in their 4,000-year-old Lalish Temple came to symbolise the struggle of this community to hold on to their right to exist – and therefore their heritage – during the ISIS-led genocidal campaign.<sup>16</sup> Assyrian and Chaldeans minorities’ concerns over the KRG appropriating their heritage provides further evidence of the human dimension of heritage, and the nexus between rights discourse and heritage preservation.

<sup>14</sup> Author informal conversation with a Western development agency, Amman, September 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Matthews et al., “Heritage and Cultural Healing: Iraq in a Post-Daesh Era”, in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2020), p. 120-141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1608585>.

<sup>16</sup> Dominique Soguel, “A Sanctuary for Iraqi Yazidis – and a Plea for Obama’s Intervention”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12 August 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0812/A-sanctuary-for-Iraqi-Yazidis-and-a-plea-for-Obama-s-intervention>.

2) *The social cohesion dimension of cultural heritage.* Several rounds of destruction and heritage manipulation have deepened intra-communal mistrust. Al Qaeda's 2006 bombing of al-Askari's mosque in Samarra is commonly referred as a turning point inaugurating the darkest period of sectarian violence. Till this day, the event has repercussions on inter-communal relations in the city where the Shiite Endowment appropriated Sunni sites and forced Sunni residents of the city centre into displacement. Conversely, heritage holds an enormous potential for social cohesion. Since 2013, youth-led civic activists have defied government repression and gathered in Liberation Square around the Freedom Monument by modernist artist Jawad Selim, inspired by Assyrian murals. In gathering around the monument (a symbol of justice and struggle against oppression) protesters have de facto re-appropriated heritage as a way to challenge the divisive nature of the post-2003 communal system.<sup>17</sup>

3) *The role of cultural heritage in post-conflict recovery.* Heritage has a role in post-conflict healing and recovery. Acknowledging this role can also serve to enhance protection. In the following section we highlight trends and recommendations, arguing that the best form of heritage protection comprises 1) ending its exploitation as a political asset and 2) unleashing its potential as an instrument for societal reconciliation.

## 2.3 Multiple heritages in Iraq's future

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As long as heritage remains a political and economic asset in the ongoing power competition prevalent in the post-invasion phase, protection and preservation will be at risk as efforts to expand and improve upon the effectiveness of existing initiatives are likely to be undermined by political competition and cronyism.

*Ending predation to enhance protection.* Ending the predation of heritage involves above all acknowledging the relevance of heritage in either deepening divisions or enhancing cohesion (depending on how it is used). It also involves acknowledging its relevance as an integral part of a reformist policy agenda

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<sup>17</sup> Maysoon Al-Damluji, *Reviving Iraq's National Identity*, unpublished paper, cit.

aimed at establishing a new social pact with the population based on citizenship. The first step in this direction is preventing manipulation of specific heritage for divisive purposes and valuing the multiplicity of heritages along several millennia of history, from the Neolithic to the post-Ottoman period.

*Policy-makers embracing Iraq's multiple heritages.* Iraq is a rather unique case of a land with heritage tracing a continuous period from the Neolithic to this day. Artists have already embraced the concept of the multiplicity of heritages. The 2017 Iraq pavilion of the Venice Biennale featured Iraqi artists engaging with ancient artefacts of the Iraqi National Museum spanning from the Neolithic to the Neo-Babylonian period over the themes of human civilization: water, earth, the hunt, writing, music, conflict and exodus.<sup>18</sup> Religious leaders have also begun to engage amicable references to all Abrahamic religions. During his visit to Iraq in the spring of 2021, Pope Francis gathered alongside other religious leaders in Ur, believed to be the birthplace of Abraham, patriarch of many religions, Christianity and Islam included. In his speech, he delivered an important message of inter-religious coexistence, referring to the need for “leav[ing] behind [...] attachments that, by keeping us enclosed in our own groups, prevent us from welcoming [the others]”.<sup>19</sup> Politicians acknowledging and valuing the “multiple heritages” of Iraq is the starting point to prevent predation, enable protection and improve the management of heritage preservation.

*Reforms in heritage management.* Acknowledging Iraq's multiple heritages is the base for a number of administrative and legal reforms aimed at improving cooperation among heritage professionals in documentation, conservation and communication of heritage. Kadhem, Robson and Tahan have already identified some of the much-needed reforms. Among others, these include 1) clarifying competences among the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and the State Board of Antiquities (SBAH); 2) improving cooperation between the SBAH and the Ministry of Higher Education, relevant universities, and provincial

<sup>18</sup> Colin Randall, “Ancient Artefacts Leave Iraq for the 57th Venice Biennale”, in *The National*, 20 February 2017, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/1.88940>; see also Ruya Foundation, ‘Archaic’ the Iraq Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, 10 March 2017, <https://ruyafoundation.org/?p=4210>.

<sup>19</sup> Vatican, *Address of His Holiness, Interreligious Meeting, Plain of Ur*, 6 March 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210306\\_iraq-incontro-interreligioso.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/march/documents/papa-francesco_20210306_iraq-incontro-interreligioso.html).

and religious endowments in the management of heritage, documentation of endangered sites, and conservation, working to develop a shared vision of the past; and 3) strengthening the domestic legal framework on heritage protection and working to harmonise it with that of the KRG.<sup>20</sup>

*The role of heritage in strengthening social cohesion.* Training a new generation of archaeologists to support documentation, conservation and communication of heritage helps enhance protection, and enables societies to rebuild social and emotional ties with heritage(s).<sup>21</sup> Domestic tourism and school exchanges among different geographical areas would be an important exercise to embrace the “multiplicity of heritages” across the country and prevent ethicised or localised manipulation of heritage.<sup>22</sup>

*Heritage's role in healing society-leadership relations.* Pre-Islamic heritage is a constant source of inspiration for civic movements. The youth-led civic movement increasingly finds in pre-Islamic heritage a rich source of symbols to promote a citizen-based rule alternative to the ethno-sectarian system governing the country. The protest movement unfolded in parallel to a social appropriation of Baghdad and its iconic landmarks, and in particular the Liberation Square occupied by a permanent sit-in.<sup>23</sup> Iconic is a mural of the tuk-tuk (the vehicle used during the uprising to transport injured protesters and goods) painted as an Assyrian protective deity, the Lamassu, a human-headed winged bull with the heading “between the present and the past”.<sup>24</sup> Along similar lines, civil society activists have engaged in initiatives on heritage protection adopting pre-Islamic references such as “Mesopotamian youth”, often linking heritage protection and environmental activism. Overall, the search for symbols in the pre-Islamic past points to opposition against chapters of Islamic history that have been often manipulated by the ruling elite to legitimise their leadership and deepen communal divisions. It is a call for a new

<sup>20</sup> Mehiyar Kathem, Eleanor Robson and Lina G. Tahan, “Cultural Heritage Predation in Iraq”, cit., p. 37-39.

<sup>21</sup> See Federico Zaina, “New Perspectives on Iraqi Archaeology and Cultural Heritage”, cit., p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Author phone-interview with Carlo Lippolis, President of the Centro Scavi Torino, February 2023.

<sup>23</sup> See “Murals: The Guest House”, in *Baghdad Tahrir Art*, <https://baghdadtahrirart.net/?p=123>. Baghdad Tahrir Art is a project showing street art, photos, videos and murals during the 2019 uprising and documenting the “social appropriation” of public spaces.

<sup>24</sup> For the picture of “Tuk-Tuk Lamassu” see “Murals: The Tunnel Left Side”, in *Baghdad Tahrir Art*, <https://baghdadtahrirart.net/?p=106>.

social pact with the country's political leaders.

*Finally, heritage can have role in a balanced and peaceful regional policy.* Over the past two years, Baghdad has helped organise two regional summits with top officials of the Middle East to discuss and advance an agenda on regional cooperation. The current and previous prime ministers have acknowledged the importance of Iraq's maintaining balanced relations with all Arab and non-Arab neighbours to keep the country insulated from regional competition. Iraq's multiple heritage could help sustain and provide historical depth to such nascent policy. During the last summit, hosted in Amman in December 2022, most senior officials began their speeches by acknowledging the importance of Iraqi heritage for the history of the region – a sign that heritage is still alive and an important reference for cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

## **Part 2**

# **Energy, trade and connectivity integration as a bridge for intra-regional reconciliation**

### 3. Iraqi Pipeline Diplomacy: Cooperation, Connectivity and Regional Interdependence

by Ruba Husari

When approached from a regional perspective, Iraq's weight in terms of energy resources and location makes it a prime candidate to serve as a hub for interconnectivity across the Middle East. It could serve as a conduit from Turkey and Europe to the Gulf region and even harness interconnectivity within the Middle East itself. Yet, when it comes to pipeline politics, the outcome of previous efforts has not always been positive, and the current connections with Turkey or Iran are not commensurate with Iraq's potential. Conflicts and wars aside, shifting alliances and interests on the one hand, and a weak political system on the other, make Iraq a fragile link in regional pipeline politics.

Since the early days of the first oil discoveries in Iraq in the 1920s, pipelines have played an important role in regional geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> During the second half of the 20th century, Iraq's pipeline diplomacy saw ebbs and flows as regional politics shifted constantly, and old alliances fell as new ones emerged to the drums of wars and conflicts. The first cross-border pipelines to be built in Iraq served several states at the same time, branching out to supply refineries in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine (before the establishment of Israel in 1948). As crises and conflicts emerged, some of those pipelines were closed and became obsolete, replaced by others as Iraq constantly searched for new routes to ship its crude oil to international markets. In a bid to diversify its export routes away from its only sea access to the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and mitigate the risks associated with that geopolitical hotspot, Iraq looked for access to the Mediterranean through various cross-border pipelines especially via Syria and Turkey. These efforts have not been without controversy, however. Even its attempt to build access to the Red Sea by laying its own pipeline through Saudi Arabia eventually fell victim to the shifting politics of the region. While pipeline politics in various parts of the world have at times strengthened

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<sup>1</sup> Oil was first discovered in Kirkuk in 1927.



alliances and helped provide stability, they have not done so in the case of Iraq. Here, pipeline diplomacy fell victim to geopolitics, preventing OPEC's second largest oil producer and the fifth largest in the world in terms of oil reserves from achieving its potential as a stable and secure oil supplier to international markets or even as a regional hub on a north-south or east-west axis.

### 3.1 Regional connectivity

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Generally speaking, oil and gas pipelines can act as a catalyst for better relations between states. There are various examples around the globe where this has been the case.<sup>2</sup> However, in a region characterised by multiple conflicts and crises, various projects that aimed at regional integration through energy or pipeline connectivity have failed. The most ambitious of these projects is the Arab Gas Pipeline project. Launched in 2001 by Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and later incorporating agreements with Iraq, Turkey and Israel, the project was promoted as the backbone of an Arab gas network that could link the region to Europe and provide the continent with a secure supply of natural gas sourced in Egypt and Iraq.<sup>3</sup> By 2011, several sections of the 1,200 km trans-regional gas export pipeline were completed all the way from Al Arish in Egypt to Kilis in Turkey via Jordan and Syria with spurs to Israel and Lebanon. The Iraq connection, which was supposed to integrate Iraq into the project as an exporter of natural gas to Europe via Turkey, never materialised. The project collapsed initially due to shortage of gas from Egypt in 2009 and later due to sabotage attacks on the pipeline in the Egyptian Sinai and to Syria's internal conflict following the Arab uprisings of 2011. In later years, certain sections were revived while others witnessed reverse flows of gas, but the project as an integral regional gas export network from the Middle East to Europe proved to be an illusion. Furthermore, despite signing various memoranda with the EU to export natural gas, especially following the return of international oil companies to Iraq in 2009, the country is today no closer to developing its gas reserves for export, let alone building pipelines that would channel those

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Keystone Pipeline System between Canada and the United States or the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline transporting Algerian natural gas to Southern Europe.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Jennifer Gnana, "Explainer: What Is the Arab Gas Pipeline and Why It Matters", in *The National*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/energy/2021/09/08/explainer-what-is-the-arab-gas-pipeline-and-why-it-matters>.

supplies to European markets.<sup>4</sup>

Iraq could have potentially played a major role in the Arab Gas Pipeline as a gas exporter. After all, Iraq is ranked 12th in the world for proven gas reserves at 131 trillion cubic feet as of the end of 2021.<sup>5</sup> However the country has never succeeded in developing those resources to sufficiently satisfy domestic needs. As demand for power generation increases, the country continues to suffer from chronic domestic gas shortages. Widespread corruption, lack of competence, inefficient domestic networks, combined with security problems and internal political crises, all collude to prevent Iraq from developing its gas reserves to their potential and push it instead to become an importer of natural gas.

## 3.2 Pipelines as political tools

The history of pipeline diplomacy between Iraq and its neighbours has always been tormented as a result of the fluid state of alliances that have underpinned Middle Eastern politics over the past several decades. While they could have served as a tool to strengthen ties between states, oil pipelines have often fallen victim to the evolving politics in the region. This was the case with Iraq's export pipelines via Syria, a network which was built in the early days of oil production in Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s and expanded after nationalisation of the oil sector in the mid-1970s, only to be closed in 1982. When war erupted between Iraq and Iran in 1980, Damascus chose to switch sides and ally itself with Iran in the conflict that opposed the two neighbours for eight years. While Iranian forces to the east bombed the oil export infrastructure in southern Iraq including the main export terminals in Basra and Faw on the coastlines of the Gulf, Syria stepped in to try to tilt the balance towards its new ally, Iran, by closing the export pipelines running to the west of Iraq through Syrian territories all the way to export terminals on the Mediterranean.

By the time the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, and despite the geopolitical and commercial risks that cross-border pipelines have proven to pose, Iraq had not

<sup>4</sup> EU and Iraq, *Joint Declaration*, Brussels, 26 May 2011, [https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2014-10/20110527\\_iraq\\_joint\\_declaration\\_1.pdf](https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2014-10/20110527_iraq_joint_declaration_1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iraq*, last updated on 28 September 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/irq>.

given up on alternative but similar projects in search of new export routes for its crude. As a result of the Iran-Iraq war and the absence of export routes, Iraq turned to Saudi Arabia, an anti-Iran ally, and Turkey, a commercial partner and crude oil customer, as alternative export routes. The Iraq pipeline through Saudi Arabia – known by its acronym IPSA – linking the oil fields in southern Iraq to an export terminal on the Red Sea was completed in two phases in 1985 and 1990. Fully built and financed by Baghdad, the pipeline and the associated Red Sea terminal at Al Muajjiz in Western Saudi Arabia did not survive the next Middle Eastern war and was again closed and confiscated by the Saudis in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Iraq's pipeline politics – whether seen through the prism of the Near East or Levant by examining the experience of bilateral (Syria) or multilateral (the Arab Gas Pipeline) pipeline diplomacy, or in a Gulf context through the Saudi cross-border experience and other pipeline projects situating Iraq within a Gulf-to-Europe pipeline network that never materialised – lend to the argument that regional pipeline diplomacy has been a failure. Pipeline diplomacy in those two areas has not been a catalyst for better relations in a region mostly characterised by ruptures and shifting alliances over its history. In contrast, the two currently functioning cross-border pipelines linking Iraq to its neighbours Turkey and Iran are based on bilateral relations underpinned by a political or commercially clientelist system.

### 3.3 Turkey

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The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, a twin pipeline system linking Iraq's northern oil fields to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean, was built in two phases in 1976 and 1987 to export Iraqi crude oil mainly to European consumers. The second line, completed in 1987, was one of the two projects Baghdad launched in response to losing its access to the Gulf and to the Mediterranean via Syria during the Iran-Iraq war, the other being the IPSA. The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline came to a halt in 1990 when the UN Security Council imposed an embargo on oil exports following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, one of the two lines was damaged during the war (1990–1991). The UN sanctions on Iraq's oil exports continued after the war until the UN oil-for-food programme was launched in 1996 and even then, volumes were restricted.

The second Gulf War in 2003 again brought Iraqi oil exports to a halt, and the pipeline sat idle until the new regime that was installed by the US managed to restart oil production and exports, albeit at a much lower rate than in the pre-war period. In the period following the 2003 war, the pipeline section in Iraqi territory was heavily damaged by continuous sabotage attacks. Then in 2014 the ISIS invasion of western Iraq gave the militia group total control over the area's oilfields and large sections of the pipeline, and its attacks on oil infrastructure once again interrupted the flow of crude oil from Kirkuk to Ceyhan.

The Kirkuk-Ceyhan export pipeline – which like most cross-border pipelines provided revenues in the form of transit fees to the host country Turkey – had an additional dimension that was not present in the case of the export pipelines through Syria or Saudi Arabia. Under the original agreement signed between the two states in the 1970s, a portion of the Iraqi crude oil exports would be allocated to satisfy the needs of the Turkish domestic market, adding a trading dimension to the relationship between the two countries. As Filippos Proedrou argues based on examples from other countries, the pipeline trade “creates ground for, facilitates, and reinforces patterns of cooperation and alliances, and interdependence”.<sup>6</sup> That interdependence, facilitated by Turkey's need to import oil from Iraq through the same pipeline, created a situation where pipeline diplomacy worked for the benefit of both parties and ensured the long-term survival of that system. However, by the time ISIS was driven out of Iraq in 2017, new players in the Iraq-Turkey pipeline politics had entered the scene. Facts on the ground had changed since part of the old infrastructure had become obsolete, and with the new players came politics that proved disruptive to the Iraqi-Turkish relationship.

When the portion of the pipeline that crossed Iraqi territory fell into disarray as a result of sabotage attacks from local Iraqi insurgents and ISIS militias, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, which had been at odds with the federal government over its independent oil policy, decided to make use of

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<sup>6</sup> Filippos Proedrou, “Revisiting Pipeline Politics and Diplomacy. From Energy Security to Domestic Politics Explanations”, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 65, No. 6 (2018), p. 409-418 at p. 411, DOI 10.1080/10758216.2017.1303616.

the existing connection from the border to the Mediterranean export terminal. The Turkish government gave its consent and became a partner of the KRG in the new setup, while Baghdad was not consulted.<sup>7</sup> The first oil from the Kurdistan region was exported through the new pipeline connection to the Ceyhan export terminal in 2014. Most of that oil initially was imported by Israel as big oil companies stayed away from the controversial barrels when Baghdad threatened legal action. That led to a partial breakdown in pipeline diplomacy between the governments of Baghdad and Ankara, as the only successful cross-border export pipeline between Iraq and its neighbours also fell victim to political squabbles from within.

This is not only a case of pipeline politics being exploited by political agents to shape political contours or enhance their own positioning – in this case the KRG – as described by Proedrou. It also saw pipeline politics being exploited by corporate interests driven by state geopolitical positioning.<sup>8</sup> Lacking the capabilities to finance the construction and operation of the new section of the pipeline that now runs through the Kurdistan region of Iraq and connects to the old Turkish section at the Iraqi-Turkish border, the KRG signed an agreement with Russian oil company Rosneft, giving the state-controlled company a 60 per cent share in operating the crude oil pipeline on a 20-year contract, and by extension giving Russia a foothold in the trade of crude via Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

The breakdown of pipeline politics between the two neighbouring states culminated in an arbitration case at the International Court of Arbitration in Paris. After almost nine years, in March 2023 the court ruled in favour of Iraq bringing KRG oil exports to a halt as Turkey shut down export facilities and banned KRG oil exports in line with the court ruling. The Iraqi government had filed the case against Turkey in 2014, alleging that the latter violated the bilateral treaty first signed in 1973 and renewed in 2010, and in particular the clauses governing the Iraq–Turkey pipeline that give Baghdad authority over oil transported through the pipeline system. The state-to-state agreements stipulate that Turkey shall adhere to the instructions of the Iraqi side in relation

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<sup>7</sup> “Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan Agree on ‘50-Year Energy Accord’”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 5 June 2014, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-iraqi-kurdistan-agree-on-50-year-energy-accord-67428>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Rosneft, *Operating Results for 4Q and 12M 2019*, 19 February 2020, <https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/199853>.

to the movement of crude oil coming from Iraq in all storage and disposal centres, and at the terminal. Allowing the KRG to export oil through the pipeline without Baghdad's consent constituted a breach of the treaty.

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) International Court of Arbitration ruled indeed that Turkey was in breach of that agreement.<sup>10</sup> It issued a net award for damages of 1.471 billion US dollars to Iraq. The ruling put an end to the KRG's independent oil exports forcing it to negotiate a new modus operandi with Baghdad to enable exports from the Kurdistan region to continue under Iraqi control or at least under the latter's umbrella. Ankara, on the other hand, refused to reopen the pipeline for Baghdad-controlled oil exports despite formal requests from Iraq, citing technical issues. Using the closed pipeline as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with the Iraqi government to settle the award, although not explicitly stated, cannot be excluded while Turkey awaits a second phase of arbitration over breaches to the ITP treaty pertaining to the post-2018 period.

## 3.4 Iran

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Pipeline diplomacy between Iraq and Iran is quite recent, only becoming possible following the change in the political regime in Iraq in 2003 and the ascent of the ascent of Shia political actors with strong relations with Iran. The first gas import agreement was signed between the two governments in 2013, and the pipeline carrying natural gas from Iran to power plants in several cities in eastern Iraq was inaugurated in 2017. Despite having vast gas reserves and signing multiple agreements with international companies to process and distribute the associated natural gas produced with oil, paradoxically, Iraq has been suffering from chronic shortages of gas for power generation. Almost half of the associated gas produced continues to be flared resulting in wastage worth several billion dollars and an environmental catastrophe. Iraq ranks second globally in gas flaring after Russia. Gas imports from Iran in principle amount to 50–70 million cubic meters per day or around 40 per cent of Iraq's

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<sup>10</sup> Cleary Gottlieb, *Iraq Secures Major Victory in Long-Standing ICC Arbitration Against Turkey*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.clearygottlieb.com/news-and-insights/news-listing/iraq-secures-major-victory-in-long-standing-icc-arbitration-against-turkey>.

needs in the summer season. In practice, the volumes vary depending on Iran's domestic needs and the availability of excess gas.<sup>11</sup> Tehran also restricts exports to Iraq to pressure it to settle its debts in hard currency, though such payments require a special US government waiver that is occasionally awarded.<sup>12</sup>

The pipeline and gas import agreement are underpinned by the clientelist relationship between Iran and certain political elites in Iraq. Since 2003, Tehran has exercised the biggest influence on Iraqi internal politics and has been instrumental in pushing political allies to power. Delivering natural gas from Iran at above market price, even as large volumes of Iraqi gas are being wasted through gas flaring, can only be seen as politically motivated. It allows Iran to export whatever excess gas becomes available. Also, Iran benefits from the agreement as it ensures the country hard currency while it remains under US sanctions. The US awards Iraq regular sanction waivers to import gas from Iran while sanctions are maintained.

The asymmetric interdependency created by the commercial pipeline agreement, unlike the case of Turkey, puts Iran in a dominant position in this bilateral relationship as the gas import pipeline is used as a bargaining tool for political purposes. Iran can therefore exercise leverage on Iraqi domestic politics through the increase or decrease of gas supplies to Iraq.

### 3.5 Future prospects

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How can pipeline diplomacy help Iraq achieve its potential as a hub and possible transit route towards Europe? The first step is by deconflicting the relationship, politically and commercially, between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in order to maximise the benefits of the Iraq-Turkey pipeline to both sides. Iraq can benefit from increasing its access to the Mediterranean to channel some of its crude oil from the south to the north and export it via Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> "Iraq Says Iran Blames Reduced Gas Exports on 'Technical' Matter", in *Reuters*, 26 May 2023, <http://reut.rs/43vX426>.

<sup>12</sup> AFP, "Iraq Must Settle Gas Import Dues for Tehran: Pro-Iran Parties", in *VOA News*, 9 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7173576.html>.

The March 2023 arbitration ruling by the ICC has opened the way for interim agreements between Baghdad and the KRG whereby the KRG acquiesced to the state marketer selling oil produced in its region while proceeds from the sales would be deposited in a bank account accessible to the KRG but with full visibility awarded to the Baghdad government, once Turkey agrees to re-open the pipeline. Turning those interim agreements into a permanent settlement is more challenging. Baghdad and the KRG can share the current pipeline infrastructure including the modifications introduced by the Turkey–KRG agreement. This would allow Baghdad full access again to the Ceyhan terminal in Turkey to export oil produced in the south. However, the arbitration ruling has created an odd situation. The KRG now controls the section of the pipeline it built through northern Iraq while Baghdad controls the access from the Turkish border to the export terminal as its power over that section has been re-instituted by the ruling.

This is further complicated by the financial dealings between the Turkish government and the KRG as well as the commercial and financial agreements between the KRG and Russia's Rosneft. Permanently deconflicting the relationship is a politically complex process given the vague articles of the Iraqi Constitution which blurred the responsibilities of each side when it comes to developing and exploiting oil resources in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The current political system is not conducive either. Consensus among the main Kurdish parties' is required in any government formation and they trade this consensus for interim benefits including ministerial portfolios making a permanent settlement of disputes impossible. Deconflicting the relationship commercially would instead entail disentangling the complex commercial and financial setup the KRG has created which conflates the roles and responsibility of a federal versus a confederal system, despite the Constitution stating that Iraq is a federal state made up of several regions.

The second step lies in creating symmetry in the pipeline politics between Iraq and Iran, an issue that is also loaded with political, economic and personal entanglements that prevent Iraq from pursuing an independent course of action. As far as Iran's pipeline politics are concerned, Iraq's importance goes beyond being a market for Iranian natural gas and extends to potentially becoming a transit route for Iranian gas to Europe in the future, using Iraq and Syria to get to the Mediterranean. However, any future pipeline extension plans



will depend on the nature of the political system in post-war Syria.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

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Among Middle East oil and gas producers, the history of pipeline politics in Iraq is the most loaded with conflicts and controversies. That is not surprising given Iraq's size and location, the size of its hydrocarbon reserves and its oil production capacity which ranks second among OPEC producers. Almost land-locked except for its limited access to the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz and sharing land borders with six neighbouring countries – four of which were or still are involved in cross border pipelines – Iraq has been desperately chasing safe export routes for its oil since the latter part of the 20th century. Furthermore, armed conflicts, shifting alliances and interests, and an unstable or weak political system deprived the country from monetising on its potential to act as a hub for interconnectivity in the region. Its cross-border pipelines with Syria and Saudi Arabia that gave it access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea fell victim to wars. Its control of the Iraq-Turkey pipeline fell victim to a post-war changing political landscape which saw newcomers, such as the Kurdistan Regional Government, defy that control by enacting changes to the infrastructure owned by Baghdad. The only cross-border import pipeline which brings natural gas from Iran to plants in Iraq, is governed by the intrinsically close political relationship between the Shiite elites and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Unlike the Iraq-Turkey oil export pipeline which is underpinned by commercial and transactional benefits, the Iran-Iraq gas import pipeline lacks in commercial logic and is loaded with political benefits, especially for Iran. As long as Iraq continues to be a subservient state vis-à-vis Iran, and as long as Iran needs the Iraqi gas markets for hard currency and as a tool to exercise its influence on political elites in Baghdad, Iraq is unlikely to become self-sufficient in natural gas despite its big but undeveloped reserves.

Wars and political crises have been the main characteristics of the Middle East since the middle of the last century. While some regional cross-border pipelines have survived such crises (for example the oil export pipeline from

<sup>13</sup> Ruba Husari, "Syria and the Changing Middle East Energy Map", in *Carnegie Articles*, 2 January 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/50474>.

Egypt to Israel or the gas export pipeline from Qatar to the UAE), in the case of Iraq the impact of such wars and crises was costly. Yet, the potential for the country to play a role as an interconnectivity hub in the future is not excluded. As the energy landscape changes in Europe as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, old plans to send natural gas from the Gulf – in particular from Qatar – to Europe by pipeline via Iraq could be revived, as gas is expected to continue to play a major role in a reduced hydrocarbon energy environment in the future. That would require a high level of cooperation among regional powers. Such cooperation has been lacking in the past though it is possible that a common enemy brought about by climate change impact on the region creates the ground for such cooperation.

## **4. From Threat to Opportunity: Harnessing Climate Change to Build a Prosperous Future for Iraq and the Region**

by Azzam Alwash

Modern Iraq is the inheritor of the Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Abbasid empires. The strength of these empires was built on irrigated agriculture and taxing trade caravans that crossed its territories. Since the discovery of oil in Iraq, the economy began shifting away from trade and agricultural income to a rentier state based on the extraction of mineral resources. The presence of oil made Iraq a target for modern empires as they competed for hegemony over the past century. In the late fifties, nationalist military leaders ended the pro-western monarchy when the latter was engaged in a widespread modernisation programme which used oil income to build infrastructure and agricultural output according to a free market approach. In the sixties, new military leaders moved to nationalise oil production as well as other small-scale private sector industries. When the Ba'ath party took over Iraq in 1968, it embarked on a campaign to industrialise the country with public owned industries being subsidised by oil income. As a result, the government essentially became the only employer of graduates from what at the time was considered one of the most advanced higher education systems in the region. The Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s interrupted this process, as the Iraqi economy suffered significantly and Iraq's subsequent debt ended the development drive of the 1970s. Finally, Saddam Hussein's fateful decision to invade Kuwait in the 1990s, and the international sanctions regime that followed in its wake, led to growing outmigration as a once thriving economy and growing middle class became impoverished and conditions worsened considerably across the country.

The feelings of hope and trepidation that followed the removal of Saddam Hussein by the US-led coalition in 2003 were soon crushed as Iraq went into a tailspin. An undeclared insurgency and civil war ensued, later leading to a new phase of instability with the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

While oil income again helped the state economy, following the lifting of the international embargo, little was done to modernise and repair Iraq's economy through the development of a functioning private sector. Spending on the military and security forces increased and much of the newly gained wealth was lost to corruption and inefficient use of the funds in state owned industries and patronage networks. Amidst this increased fragility, the deleterious effects of climate change pose a further and potentially existential challenge to Iraqi sustainability, acting as a threat multiplier on a whole number of interlinked political, institutional and socio-economic domains.

## 4.1 Climate threats and disruptions

The deleterious effects of climate change are being felt in many ways across the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Iraq is particularly exposed to these threats and is indeed recognised as a country facing significant exposure to climate-related risks. The United Nations Environment Programme has noted that Iraq is the fifth most vulnerable country in the world to decreased water and food availability as well as extreme temperatures.<sup>1</sup> These factors pose a significant threat to the living conditions of millions of Iraqis, as well as the long-term sustainability of the country's governance structures. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by Iraq's declining farming and trade outputs, as the country has increasingly grown addicted to hydrocarbon revenues to service the state budget. This funding stream is destined to be reduced as the world shifts from fossil fuels to sustainable energy resources. Oil demand worldwide is expected to drop from the current 100 million barrels per day (mbd) to 25 mbd by 2050, adding further strain to Iraqi finances.

One by-product of climate change is the growing frequency and severity of dust storms in Iraq and the region. Such events carry significant costs, estimated at 13 billion US dollars a year to address clean-up health problems as well as productivity losses, according to a 2019 World Bank report.<sup>2</sup> Temperatures are increasing in the region (+3-5 degrees Celsius compared to the 1960s, though

<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq, *Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq*, Baghdad, IOM Iraq, August 2022, <https://iraq.un.org/en/node/194355>.

<sup>2</sup> See World Bank, *Sand and Dust Storms in the Middle East and North Africa Region. Sources, Costs, and Solutions*, Washington, World Bank, Fall 2019, p. 16, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33036>.

Iraqi scientists have measured even higher temperature increases in the country).<sup>3</sup> Snowfall and precipitation patterns are also changing and no longer predictable and this is being exacerbated by dam building, the rerouting of rivers and the uncoordinated management of limited water resources inside Iraq but more importantly between Turkey and Iraq. Meanwhile, water flow from Iran has dropped from 15 billion cubic metres annually to practically zero as of 2018, as Tehran struggles to provide sustenance to its own population while dealing with sanctions.

## 4.2 Water scarcity

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Dam building on the headwaters of Iraq's twin rivers – the Tigris and Euphrates – has reduced the amount of water, adversely affecting agricultural production. Moreover, given the reduced flow in Shatt Al Arab, the salt wedge at the northern tip of the Gulf is migrating upwards towards the southern portion of Iraq, causing salinisation of the lands in both Iraq and Iran and leading to a lack of drinking water in Iraq's major southern city of Basra.<sup>4</sup> The rivers feeding the tributaries of Lower Zab, Diyala, Karon and Karkha have also been dammed and rerouted in Iran, and a river has now been excavated by Tehran parallel to Shat Al Arab along the path of an ancient dry riverbed. Water flows from the Tigris and Euphrates have declined as a result and the flood pulse has been muted with flows dropping from an annual average of 70 billion cubic metres to less than 40 billion between 1925 and 2010, with expectations of further declines as more dams are built in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

According to a restricted 2014 draft report by Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources entitled "Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq", the country could face a shortfall of as much as 10.8 billion cubic metres of water annually by 2035 if

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Saleem A. Salman et al., "Long-Term Trends in Daily Temperature Extremes in Iraq", in *Atmospheric Research*, Vol. 198 (December 2017), p. 97-107, DOI 10.1016/j.atmosres.2017.08.011.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Basra is Thirsty. Iraq's Failure to Manage the Water Crisis*, July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/node/331987>.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Tobias von Lossow et al., "Water Governance in Iraq. Enabling a Gamechanger", in *Water, Peace and Security Reports*, September 2022, <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/files/245>; Azzam Alwash et al., *Towards Sustainable Water Resources Management in Iraq*, Iraq Energy Institute, August 2018, <https://wp.me/pai56B-jq>.

no action is taken to modernise irrigation and water resource management.<sup>6</sup> The plan lists a series of projects that must be implemented before 2035 to avoid water bankruptcy and limit the need for water rationing. As of 2022, however, few if any of these projects have been initiated.

Irrigated agriculture was sustainable in Mesopotamia for thousands of years due to cyclical flooding. This flooding would wash away the salts resulting from evaporation from the year before, providing a new layer of silt and clay which annually renewed the vitality of farmlands. Due to dam building upstream, there are no longer any floods, while precipitation is also declining significantly. The result is that 54 per cent of Iraq faces the serious threat of land degradation, while desertification is affecting 39 per cent of the land area.<sup>7</sup>

The area to the north of Baghdad was traditionally developed through rain-fed agriculture. Over the past forty years, however, much of the land is being irrigated by using pivot wells. The use of groundwater has caused some farms to lose productivity over time because of salt being left behind when groundwater used for irrigation evaporates. The biggest impact, however, occurred following the advent of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS, also known as Daesh), which took over large areas in central and northern Iraq beginning in 2014. Daesh fighters destroyed irrigation equipment while terrorising farmers. The result was that these farmlands have been abandoned, becoming a source of dust that is then picked up and carried across Iraq and the region by more severe wind storms linked to climate change.

### 4.3 Demography: An added challenge

Such challenges are further complicated by Iraq's rapid population growth, almost doubling from 25 million people in 2003 to 42 million today and expected to reach 53 million by 2030.<sup>8</sup> Iraq's significant youth bulge – with approximately

<sup>6</sup> The report was completed in 2015 but is not available because Iraqi authorities treat such issues with a high degree of secrecy due to the national security implications of Iraq's declining water resources. Also see, Azzam Alwash et al., *Towards Sustainable Water Resources Management in Iraq*, cit.

<sup>7</sup> Rana Alfardan, "Iraq's Growing Desertification Problem", in *Planetary Security Initiative News*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/node/3025>.

<sup>8</sup> PopulationPyramid website: *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100: Iraq*, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/iraq/2030>.

60 per cent of the population below the age of 30 – adds significant strain to an already weak social contract as authorities struggle to provide sustenance and basic infrastructure for its growing population. Iraq is home to one of the biggest percentages of youth across the region.<sup>9</sup> This demographic wave is a time bomb because of the dependence of Iraqis on government jobs that produce little in the form of added value to the economy. Employment has essentially become a means to disguise widespread unemployment and is largely a way for the government to redistribute oil income through patronage. There is practically no output from government-owned enterprises and what little remains, or any surplus that is generated, is wasted through corruption and useless white elephant projects.

The post-Saddam youth – i.e., children born in the mid-1990s and thereafter – will soon become a majority of the population, demanding jobs and income. Yet, there are no opportunities for them in government and there is no real private sector in Iraq. This youth can be attracted to radical ideologies and extremism as poverty and a lack of opportunities eat away at their future prospects. Those who do not fall into extremism are likely to engage in other forms of criminal activities, thus remaining a security risk for the state.

Faced with these prospects, most of the middle class is seeking to migrate to safer lands abroad where their children can grow in a safe and secure environment.<sup>10</sup> This is not only Iraq's problem but a regional and even global issue. Similar situations have occurred during the 1990s in Russia and over the past decade in Syria and other localities of the MENA. Furthermore, the youth-led public demonstrations that began in Iraq in 2019 are a reminder of the widespread socio-economic challenges facing large portions of Iraq's population. Despite the severe methods used to suppress the demonstrations (over 800 killed), protests did not end until the resignation of former Prime Minister Adil Abd Al Mahdi and the appointment of a caretaker cabinet led by Mustafa Al Kadhimi to prepare for early elections.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, "Iraq", in *MENA Generation 2030 Country Fact Sheets*, February 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/4191/file>.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Munqith Dagher, "Iraqi Stability and Its Free-Falling Middle Class", in *CSIS Analyses*, 21 October 2020, <https://www.csis.org/node/58563>.

<sup>11</sup> On the youth-led protests in Iraq see, International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box", in *Middle East & North Africa Reports*, No. 223 (26 July 2021), <https://www.>

## 4.4 Instability and insecurity

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The challenges facing Iraq are further compounded by the prolonged period of instability and foreign interventionism witnessed by the country over recent decades. The devastating eight-year war with Iran (1980–1988), the Iraqi invasion and retreat from Kuwait during the first Gulf War (1990–1991), the era of international sanctions (1990–2003) and finally the US-led invasion and occupation that began in 2003 have all had serious repercussions on Iraqi infrastructure and coping capacities. The US invasion was followed by almost two decades of severe conflict and instability across Iraq, as a local insurgency against occupying forces overlapped with broader trends of regional meddling and interventionism. Iraq thus became a battleground among competing regional actors and political-religious strands of thought. These included Iran’s promotion of Wilayat al-Faqih among Iraq’s large Shi’a population, Turkish (and Qatari) support for Sunni and Muslim Brotherhood–linked actors and Saudi Arabia’s promotion of the more conservative strand of Sunni Islam linked to Wahhabism and Salafi thought.

Faced with these multiple and overlapping challenges, there is an urgent need to shift dynamics internally within Iraq and in the broader region, overcoming zero-sum relations to promote new mutual benefits based on economic reform and regional integration. The status quo is unsustainable and will only lead to progressive worsening of internal and external dynamics. Iraq and the broader region are currently facing three perfect storms: a demographic timebomb; decreasing income from oil as the world prepares for a post-oil future; and climate change impacts such as increasing temperatures and reduced water flows, compounded by waste and corruption.

These interlinked challenges are likely to coincide over the next ten to twenty years, causing widespread hardship and potentially catastrophic impacts on states and societies across the MENA. Yet, any urgency on the side of Iraqi (and regional) policymakers appears to be lacking, as reflected by the continuation

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crisisgroup.org/node/17109. Also see, Hafsa Halawa, “Iraq’s Tishreen Movement: A Decade of Protests and Mobilisation”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|26 (June 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13601>.



of corrupt and wasteful practices affecting the economy as well as the mismanagement of water, energy and resource conservation across Iraq and the region.

## 4.5 Climate change: A national priority for Iraq

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During 2021, several activists concerned about the threat of climate change, including this author, were brought together by Iraq's former President Barham Salih to discuss climate related disruptions and their impact. The results of the deliberations were published in September 2021, under the heading of the Mesopotamian Revitalization Initiative (MRI). The initiative was submitted to the ministerial council and was reviewed and approved in principle as a basis for compiling a Green Paper that would guide governmental action to prepare Iraq for the coming economic and energy transition and the urgent need to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change, not only in Iraq but across the wider region as well.

The history of Mesopotamia is rooted in its role as the breadbasket of the region as irrigated agriculture was first developed in these lands. Iraq was also a vital stop in the north–south and east–west trade routes. Mesopotamia lived on income from agriculture and trade for over seven thousand years but since the discovery of oil in Kirkuk in 1927, the Iraqi economy has become addicted to the rentier value of extracting oil and other natural resources. As a result, food production has been withering and trade has become limited to importing what Iraq needs, while transit dues have declined due to instability in the country as well as extensive bureaucratic red tape that generally prevents the passage of goods across Iraqi territory.

Building on this historical past, the Mesopotamian Revitalization Initiative seeks to revive Iraq's role as a major food producer and trade hub in the region, linking this to Iraq's extensive potential to become an exporter in renewable energy. The initiative seeks to gradually strengthen Iraq's renewable energy and agricultural output as a means to support the state budget while diminishing the country's reliance on hydrocarbon revenue and reviving its role as a major transit country for trade.

For this, the MRI advances a number of proposals and projects that can be made sustainable through a mixture of government and private financing. The four interlinked dimensions of the MRI are outlined below, underscoring how each can work together to provide for a prosperous and sustainable future that is rooted in the history of Mesopotamia.

## 4.6 Afforestation and food production: The drive to modernise irrigation

Any effort to revitalise food production starts by taking advantage of carbon credit markets to raise resources needed to jump-start a reforestation programme in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> This should focus on native species, via the replanting of abandoned farms and orchards, that will reduce land degradation and the creation of dust that is picked up by increasing wind storms. Such efforts also provide added value in terms of increasing shaded areas and thereby decreasing the effect of rising temperatures. The shaded areas between planted palm trees are a traditional protection for vegetable production from extreme heat and extreme cold. The planting and maintenance of these forests can be supported and subsidised by carbon credits that are sold on the voluntary carbon market.

Replanted palm tree forests will also produce added income from dates in the south and west of Iraq, while other fruits and vegetables (as well as honey) can be produced in northern Iraq. This will help secure carbon credits from sequestered carbon where each tree can be exchanged for no less than two tons of carbon credits (currently about 70 US dollars per ton). In this, the programme also takes advantage of existing Iraqi regulations that give land to graduates from agricultural and engineering institutes, who become owners of the land once it is planted. Youth who take advantage of this opportunity can generate income through carbon credits as well as the sale of goods, thereby reducing reliance on government jobs. Revitalised farmlands are expected to be worth about 20,000 US dollars per hectare, a valuable asset for those who

<sup>12</sup> Iraqi youth can sell the carbon sequestered in planted trees through the voluntary carbon market to pay for the costs of afforestation. For more details, see Christopher Blaufelder et al., "A Blueprint for Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets to Meet the Climate Challenge", in *McKinsey Sustainability Reports*, 29 January 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/a-blueprint-for-scaling-voluntary-carbon-markets-to-meet-the-climate-challenge>.

take advantage of this programme.

Moving to the dimension of water security, efforts to reduce water waste are also integrated within the MRI. Newly planted trees will use cocoon planters, ensuring that newly planted saplings will extend their rootlets into the vadose zone above the shallow groundwater, eliminating the need for irrigation.<sup>13</sup> This programme will help jump-start a new industry to recycle paper for the production of cocoon planters, while also increasing demand for native species of saplings that require a shorter time (approximately two years) to reach mature growth. More details on how to produce cocoon planters and saplings in Iraq are outlined on a dedicated website, Nature Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

To further increase output, while maximising resources, the MRI also includes initiatives to increase citrus and vegetable production, with such goods traditionally planted in the shaded spaces between palm plantations. In this domain, efforts are being directed at introducing smart growing beds that utilise fish ponds to not only raise fish but also produce water that is full of natural nutrients. This pond water is then used to irrigate vegetable plantations grown in porous media that have no capillary action, helping to diminish evaporation from the soil surface. The pond water is recycled to eliminate losses from drainage. These beds will eliminate the growth of weeds and thereby substantially diminish the need for herbicides. The beds can be built with recycled materials and can be produced economically at a large scale. Finally, should the Iraqi government choose to support such initiatives, a process can be implemented that switches from the current practice of the government purchasing farmers' produce at double or triple the market price, to new and more sustainable forms of support in the form of providing farmers with kits to produce food using hypo-technology.

In addition to the reforestation programme, the MRI also identifies areas for the establishment or expansion of protected green parks across Iraq, a means to protect such areas for future generations while also limiting desertification and temperature increases. This effort capitalises on the strategies identified in

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on the vadose zone see, ScienceDirect topics: *Vadose Zone*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/vadose-zone>.

<sup>14</sup> See the Nature Iraq website: <http://www.natureiraq.org>.

the Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq and promotes the treating of sewage and other recyclable water resources to be used for irrigation, while simultaneously modernising Iraq's irrigation system to reduce leakage and land loss to salinisation.

Looking to the future, these initiatives can also be linked up in a regional framework. Agricultural companies can be formed including Turkish, Iranian, Saudi and Iraqi companies, taking advantage of Iraq's long growing season. Such initiatives would rely on increased efforts by Iraq to properly manage its water resources in conjunction with Iran and Turkey, where much of this water originates, while merging know-how from Turkey and funding support from Saudi Arabia to make such initiatives sustainable. The ultimate objective is not simply to produce food for the region (and possible even the world) but also to establish a dynamic that helps promote stability across Iraq and the region, thereby indirectly strengthening efforts to relaunch intra-regional dialogue and cooperation as opposed to the current state of zero-sum competition that has long dominated this area of the Middle East.

Other dimensions of this Mesopotamia Revitalisation Initiative are outlined below. In keeping with the overall objective of creating avenues for internal and well as intra-regional cooperation, these initiatives also rely on an effort to foster co-dependency and co-existence in the region, thereby countering the last half century of competition and rivalry played out in Iraq and the region.

## 4.7 Solar power and green hydrogen: Freeing Iraq from the hydrocarbon curse

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Iraq's economy is highly reliant on hydrocarbon resources. Currently, between 92–94 per cent of Iraq's GDP is accounted for by the extraction and export of crude oil, with minor additional income from the export of other minerals such as sulphur. As the world approaches the post-oil future, global demand will decrease, causing significant strain on Iraqi finances. Yet, Iraq has huge untapped potential in terms of solar power, where photovoltaic (PV) cells are about three times more productive compared to those installed across

Europe.<sup>15</sup> If planned appropriately, Iraqi deserts can produce ample amounts of clean electricity via the development of solar plants and photovoltaic cells, also allowing for re-export to the region. Meanwhile, electricity that is not consumed can be converted to green hydrogen using large-scale electrolysis and the energy of the sun can be stored temporally (seasonally or for night use).

Strengthening Iraqi capacity to produce green energy can also serve the broader purpose of promoting intra-regional cooperation and rapprochement. An agreement with Turkey could be reached whereby Iraq would produce electricity from PV during the day while Turkey uses hydroelectric dams to supply the network at night. Meanwhile, green hydrogen can be produced in southern Iraq to supplement this electricity production used in both countries. Such an approach would provide both Turkey and Iraq with a stable supply of clean electricity, including with a potential export capacity to Eastern Europe, while simultaneously helping to encourage broader bilateral agreements on water management, particularly in the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Such a scheme would likely require a decade or two to be fulfilled, but political and geopolitical questions will also need to be resolved. In light of this, and to contain the possibility that ongoing competition between Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia could scuttle such efforts, a broader regional lens will likely be required. In this regard, expanding the PV forests from Iraq into Saudi Arabia and Iran could provide a degree of co-ownership and complementarity of interests in promoting such an effort, while simultaneously reserving the most fertile lands in southern Iraq for reforestation and food production as outlined above.

If successful, such a co-dependency between the four countries – Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia – would strengthen the common interest for stability in Iraq, thereby increasing the space for implementation of the above initiatives

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Testing the Potential of Solar in Iraq*, 24 June 2020, <https://www.undp.org/iraq/stories/testing-potential-solar-iraq>; Mohammed T. Hussain and Emad J. Mahdi, "Assessment of Solar Photovoltaic Potential in Iraq", in *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, Vol. 1032 (2018), Article 012007, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1032/1/012007>.

needed to produce sustainable electricity generation and the associated green hydrogen, for the benefit of Iraq and its neighbours. Taking inspiration from the trajectory embraced by Europe after two devastating world wars – and which led to decades of peace on the continent – there is no reason why the Middle East should go through another set of wars and conflicts before reaching stable and peaceful co-existence.

The best way to support such objectives is by harnessing the private sector. Each of the power-producing plants developed in Iraq, Turkey and the region could become an independently operated centre that sells electricity to the highest bidder, while ensuring adequate maintenance and upgrades in the infrastructure. Initially, electricity will need to be supplied through the existing thermal and hydroelectric plants already in operation, but gradually new and more sustainable plants can be established, eventually replacing the older thermal plants. Such an electricity network can be operated by a publicly owned company that includes at first the Turkish and Iraqi governments as the largest shareholders before opening up the system to private investors through public offerings. Such a structure will ensure a fast conversion of existing plants while also accommodating the eventual entrance of third actors, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, if and when the respective political leaderships endorse such models of cooperation.

## 4.8 Water management

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Iraq loses no less than 8.5 billion cubic metres annually to evapotranspiration, according to the Strategy for Water and Land Resources in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> With higher temperatures compared to other localities in the region, this evaporation is expected to increase in the near future. Instead of storing water in Iraq where the reservoirs are shallow and elevation is such that evaporation is about 3 metres per annum, the MRI proposes that Turkish dam infrastructure be used to store water with greater efficiency. Evaporation rates in Turkish dams are much

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Shukri Al Hasan, “Drought Ignites Tribal Conflicts in Southern Iraq”, in *Planetary Security Initiatives News*, 17 August 2020, <https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/node/2952>. Other sources place the yearly amount of evaporation at 15.7 billion cubic metres, see Safaa Khalaf, “Climate Change and the Water Crisis in Iraq: Indicators of Vulnerability and the Severity of Environmental Impact”, in *Assafir Al-Arabi*, 2 October 2022, <https://assafirarabi.com/en/48880>.

less pronounced than in Iraq, given that Turkish reservoirs are mostly located in the high mountains and are therefore deeper as well as having a smaller surface area for the same volumes of water (in Iraq, reservoirs are shallow and thus have a large surface area).

Such proposals for cooperation between Turkey and Iraq are not new. Similar initiatives were first suggested in 1946, when the Turkish-Iraqi friendship treaty was signed. This gave Iraq the right to build dams on the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates in coordination with Turkey for the benefit of both peoples.<sup>17</sup> Given that the dams have already been built, there is a basis to negotiate operational rules for hydroelectric plants. This will save the water from evaporation in Iraq while buying more time to allow for the modernisation of water and irrigation infrastructure in Iraq. Such an approach would for instance allow for the draining of the Mosul dam reservoir – recently renovated by an Italian company, Trevi – but still considered one of the world’s most at-risk dams. The draining of the reservoir will allow for injection of the foundation without dealing with the hydrostatic pressure of the reservoir, thereby allowing authorities to increase safety at the dam while increasing its utility.

Those who object to such an arrangement on the basis that this would give Turkey the upper hand strategically forget that Iraq is facing water bankruptcy – but also ignore that the other parts of this plan provide Iraq with strong benefits and leverage as well, meaning that Turkey and Iraq would basically be on an equal footing should such an initiative come to full fruition.

## 4.9 Transportation and transit rights

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To increase the regional dimension of this series of interlinked initiatives outlined in the MRI and specifically to attract buy-in and support from states on the Arabian Peninsula, new gas connectivity links can be promoted. These could link the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to Iraq, Turkey and Eastern Europe, creating added incentives for all actors involved to promote

<sup>17</sup> Iraq and Turkey, “Treaty of Friendship and Neighbourly Relations between Iraq and Turkey”, signed at Ankara on 29 March 1946, in *UN Treaty Series*, Vol. 37 (1949), p. 281-331, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2037/v37.pdf>.

the stabilisation of Iraq and its emergence as a key transit and transportation hub for the region and Europe.

Connected to such energy connectivity potential, recent discussions in the region on the need to promote land transportation routes would also provide complementarity to such objectives. In this domain, one can envision new railway and highway links connecting Omani ports to the United Arab Emirates and northwards through Kuwait to Basra in southern Iraq all the way to Berlin via Turkey.

This idea is based on an old German-Ottoman proposal for a Berlin-Basra train link that was supposed to be an answer to the Suez Canal and would have provided the railway company rights to extract minerals from Iraq (e.g., sulphide, tar, gas and phosphates, among others). These rights were handed over to the British and French as compensation after WWI and became the core assets of the Iraq Petroleum Company.

Such a land link would compete with Rotterdam for faster transportation to Eastern Europe as well as giving Turkey an opening to GCC countries for its products. Trucks that come loaded with Turkish and European goods can go back loaded with freight from the east intended for destinations in Eastern Europe. Fast transit requires an agreement between countries to accept and use unified manifests and regulations, thus opening borders and standardising trade mechanisms, a process that holds important similarities to how the European Common Agricultural Market worked, leading ultimately to the establishment of the European Union.

## 4.10 Future prospects

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The initiatives and overarching vision outlined above are no doubt ambitious. They require significant political will and ample work to implement economic models capable of attracting required investments from sovereign wealth funds and institutional investors. Political and security conditions arguably represent the most significant challenges and much will depend on the choices made by the leadership in Iraq and neighbouring states. At the time of writing, the conditions that would allow for such drastic changes in the region are not



present, but considering the multidimensional challenges facing Iraq and its neighbours, from climate change to the energy transition and continued population growth, the benefits of such visions grounded in interdependence and cooperation cannot be disputed.

Looking to the past, the nations of the Arabian Peninsula faced financial bankruptcy in the 1940s when Japan developed pearl farming, depriving Kuwait and the Emirates of their main source of livelihood. These nations were subsequently saved from financial ruin by the discovery of oil, which the leaderships of the Gulf have used with caution and with an eye towards creating wealth for future generations.

While the states of the Arabian Peninsula learned their lesson from this loss of pearl revenue, Iraq and Iran have arguably yet to appreciate that they are facing financial ruin once the oil era comes to a close. The time will come when the leaders of Iraq and Iran will have to face the consequences of not preparing for the post-oil future, finding alternative means to provide opportunities and sustenance for new generations. Amidst continued population growth and rampant corruption, not much time is left for Iraqi authorities to begin implementing the required reforms. Should the authorities fail to provide new opportunities and future sustenance, Iraq will face new waves of popular demonstrations, followed by political repression and social polarisation, potentially leading to conflict and new migration waves across the region and even Europe.

In this regard, the urgent need to imagine alternative futures for Iraq and the region is not only in the interest of these states and societies, but is arguably also central to the European Union's own interests vis-à-vis Iraq and the broader Middle East. In this regard, the initiatives outlined above – which are compatible with the EU Green Deal and other climate change policies, including the recent EU Global Gateway strategy – provide openings for European states and institutions to support these processes, both politically and financially. Such support would also provide new investment opportunities for European companies and manufacturers, while helping to promote regional interdependence as an antidote to the current trends of intra-regional competition and rivalry.

Despite the tensions that permeate regional politics, the region's leaders implicitly acknowledge the need to work together for a better future for their peoples as the world moves away from its reliance on the oil that has supported the region's economy over the past century. The two iterations of the Baghdad Conference in Iraq and Jordan in 2021 and 2022 are testaments to this recognition – though as usual in the Middle East, there is a wide margin between expressed ideas and the reality on the ground.

Ultimately, there is no alternative to finding means of compromise and accommodation throughout the region, based on co-dependencies and economic cooperation. Such modalities alone can help states and societies in the region prepare for the impending climate emergency and associated energy transitions, elements that will fundamentally alter the current economic and socio-political models prevalent in Iraq and much of the region.

The proposals linked to Iraq's Mesopotamia Revitalisation Initiative are one dimension of such visions that seek to promote cooperation and interdependence between Iraq and its neighbours. Building on the legacies of the past while harnessing the new technologies of the present, this and other initiatives seek to place Iraq and the region on a new and more sustainable footing, one capable of providing answers for the needs of new generations while simultaneously strengthening national and local capacities to withstand and adapt to new global trends and challenges.

The EU's own legacy of integration via the pooling of resources in the European Coal and Steel Community is one potential inspiration for the ambitious goal of promoting regional integration and interdependence in the Middle East. This is what Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, was referring to when he said in no uncertain terms that "the new Europe will be the Middle East",<sup>18</sup> a statement repeated since 2018 and endorsed also by other leaders in the Arabian Peninsula as well.

Whether and to what extent such a vision comes to fruition will ultimately depend on the political will of leaders in the region and their ability to move

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Kane and Lojien Ben Gasseem, "MBS: Middle East Can Be the 'New Europe'", in *Arab News*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1393491>.

away from zero-sum competition to embrace the spirit of compromise and cooperation for mutual benefit and sustainability. Such a transformation is no doubt difficult and challenging, but given the existential nature of the threats facing Iraq and the region, there are no alternatives to embracing the spirit of compromise for the benefit and prosperity of all, beginning from the future generations that will inhabit the broader MENA region.

# 5. Iraq's Transboundary Water Resources as a Source of Cooperation and Conflict

by Cornelius Adebahr

## 5.1 Water challenges in the region

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The Middle East is no stranger to scorching heatwaves. Yet, 2021 was way above the norm, even for this region, with record temperatures of nearly 50° Celsius, or almost 7°C above the average. Amidst global warming, the Middle East is experiencing temperature increases that outpace those witnessed by other regions: average temperatures are expected to rise, before 2050, by 2.0 to 2.7°C, and in some places like Dubai by up to 3.3°C.<sup>1</sup> Iraq, with a projected increase of 2.6°C by 2050, is at the upper end of that spectrum.

As temperatures swell, water becomes increasingly scarce. This is especially true for a region that is home to 6.3 per cent of the world's population but holds only 1.4 per cent of global renewable fresh water reserves.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it does not come as a surprise that 14 of the world's 33 most water-stressed countries by 2040 will be found in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Iraq remains just shy of the top 20 most vulnerable countries identified by the World Resources Institute. Neighbouring Kuwait and Iran come out on top of Iraq, while Syria and Turkey follow closely behind – all with levels of absolute water scarcity.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Florence Gaub and Clémentine Lienard, "Arab Climate Futures. Of Risk and Readiness", in *Chaillot Papers*, No. 170 (October 2021), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2663>; cf. also Katharina Waha et al., "Climate Change Impacts in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) Region and Their Implications for Vulnerable Population Groups", in *Regional Environmental Change*, Vol. 17 (2017), p. 1623-1638, DOI 10.1007/s10113-017-1144-2.

<sup>2</sup> Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, Liz Creel and Roger Mark de Souza, *Finding the Balance: Population and Water Scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, Population Reference Bureau (PRB), 2002, <https://www.prb.org/resources/finding-the-balance-population-and-water-scarcity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Maddocks, Robert Samuel Young and Paul Reig, "Ranking the World's Most Water-Stressed Countries in 2040", in *WRI Insights*, 16 August 2015, <https://www.wri.org/node/43223>.

<sup>4</sup> Florence Gaub and Clémentine Lienard, "Arab Climate Futures", cit.

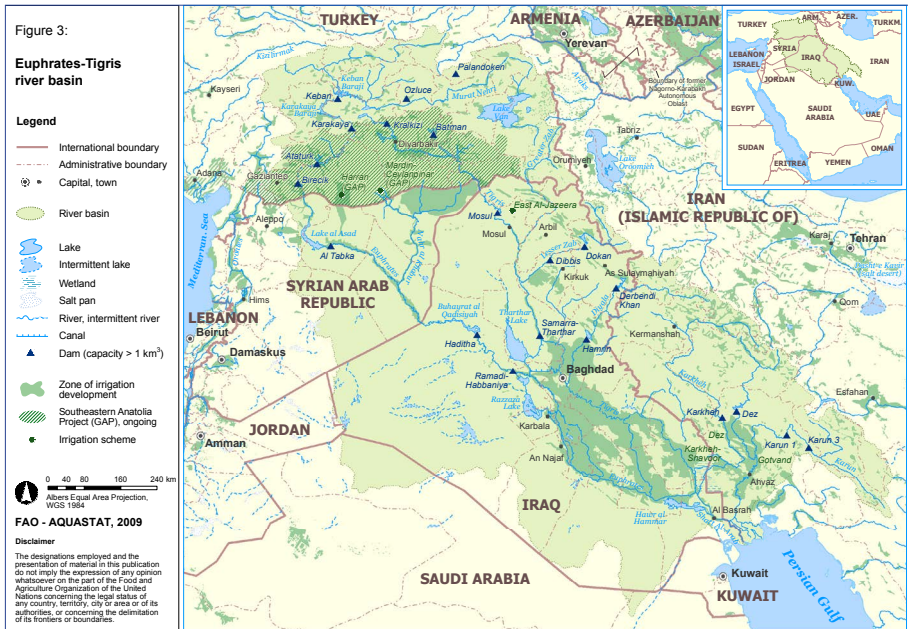
A water-stressed Iraq clearly cannot remain unaffected by the water scarcity in countries surrounding it. In fact, a number of studies have found a direct link between the inability of Arab governments to address citizen concerns about basic needs, including climate issues like droughts and desertification, and the Arab Spring revolts of 2011, even though the initially made claim of a drought in Syria preceding the protests has been questioned by more recent research.<sup>5</sup> Either way, it is not just climate change and bad neighbourly relations that are negatively affecting water availability in the region. The mismanagement and overuse of water in most countries of the region are equally important variables to consider. Huge amounts of water are wasted in agriculture through a lack of wastewater recycling: instead of treating water for irrigation or industrial processes, more than 80 per cent of the region's wastewater is lost.<sup>6</sup> Also, most countries focus on water policies that increase access, whether through exploring new aquifers or through desalinating seawater, both of which tend to exacerbate the problem by either increasing water scarcity or raising energy consumption. Instead, governments should be looking for ways to save water and make its management more efficient.

This setting provides ample room for action by Iraq's national and regional governments and for international partners, including the United Nations and the European Union. These actors can work together to strengthen the management of transboundary water resources and thereby boost Iraqi water security. This implies looking at how the water is used both upstream and downstream, including through the construction of dams. It also includes an emphasis on the most likely drivers of potential conflict, both internal and cross-border. With Baghdad embarking on a new path to become a driver of regional integration and stability, there is an opportunity for outside partners to support the Iraqi authorities.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mohamed Abdallah Youness, "How Climate Change Contributed to the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa", in *Arab Voices*, 10 December 2015, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/node/17979>; and, on Syria in particular, Jan Selby et al., "Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited", in *Political Geography*, Vol. 60 (September 2017), p. 232-244, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.05.007>.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Schaar, "A Confluence of Crises. On Water, Climate and Security in the Middle East and North Africa", in *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, No. 2019/4 (July 2019), <https://www.sipri.org/node/4879>.

Figure 1 | Euphrates-Tigris River Basin



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) AQUASTAT, *Transboundary River Basins – Euphrates-Tigris River Basin*, 2009, p. 2, <https://www.fao.org/aquastat/en/countries-and-basins/transboundary-river-basins/euphrates-tigris>.

## 5.2 Challenges specific to Iraq: Good dams make bad neighbours

Like few other countries in the Middle East, Iraq embodies potential conflict over water as much as the need – and opportunity – for intra-regional dialogue and reconciliation. Whether in antiquity, when Cyrus the Great ordered the diversion of the Tigris to conquer Babylon in 539 BC, or in modern times, with the centrality of the Shatt al-Arab waterway to the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s – the land's rivers have played a prominent role in its conflicts.

The defining feature of the sub-region around Iraq is the centrality of the Tigris-Euphrates River system. These two streams originate in Turkey and then cross through Syria (with the Tigris effectively demarcating a stretch of Syria's north-easternmost border with Turkey), and flow through Iraq into the Shatt al-Arab

and further into the Gulf. On their way, they draw from catchments mainly in Iran but also as far away as Jordan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> Nearly half (46.4 per cent) of the Euphrates-Tigris basin is on Iraqi territory, which in turn is nearly entirely (93.1 per cent) made up of that basin.<sup>8</sup> This puts Iraq, the country carrying two rivers in its historical name of Mesopotamia, at the centre of a web of cross-border relations creating water interdependence for half a dozen countries – and the transboundary water tensions that often come with such features.

Despite those two great central rivers, the Iraq of today – like much of the Middle East – is literally running out of water. Whether it is record declines in precipitation, the long-term decrease of water flows in the main rivers or declining groundwater due to higher salinisation – there is simply less water available. This scarcity is compounded by population growth inside the country, which has risen threefold since 1980 (from 13.6m to 40.2m in 2020) – with roughly one million to be added each year to reach 70m by 2050.<sup>9</sup> The amount of annual renewable freshwater per person, in turn, shrank from 4,844 m<sup>3</sup> in 1961 to 1,384 m<sup>3</sup> in 2001, and dropped further to 847 m<sup>3</sup> in 2019, the latest year for which data is available.<sup>10</sup>

### 5.2.1 Relying on its neighbours for water

Being a populous and water-thirsty country, Iraq nonetheless relies heavily on water resources originating outside its borders.<sup>11</sup> In fact, all major rivers running through its territory originate outside of Iraq. In addition to the Euphrates (2,800 km) and Tigris (1,850 km), also the Great Zab (400 km) springs, which originate in Turkey's mountainous Eastern Anatolia region, are important, together with the Karkheh (964 km), Karoun (867 km), Diyala (445 km) and Lower Zab (400 km) rivers which originate in Iran's Zagros Mountains. Within Iraq, the water

<sup>7</sup> Peter Gleick, Charles Iceland and Ayushi Trivedi, *Ending Conflicts over Water. Solutions to Water and Security Challenges*, Washington, World Resources Institute, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.46830/wriprt.19.00081>.

<sup>8</sup> FAO AQUASTAT, *Transboundary River Basins – Euphrates-Tigris River Basin*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> Worldometer, *Iraq Population (1950-2023)*, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/iraq-population>.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank Data, *Renewable Internal Freshwater Resources Per Capita (Cubic Meters) – Iraq*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ER.H2O.INTR.PC?locations=IQ>.

<sup>11</sup> David Michel et al., *Water Challenges and Cooperative Response in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, Brookings Institution, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/water-challenges-and-cooperative-response-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

discharge of the dominating Tigris-Euphrates rivers has already shrunk by 30 to 40 per cent over the past 40 years and is set to further decrease.<sup>12</sup> As the upper riparian states, both Iran and Turkey enjoy what has been termed “hydro-hegemony” over their lower riparian neighbour Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

A number of these rivers are disputed between riparian states, such as the Tigris and Euphrates which Iraq shares with Turkey and Syria, and the Karkheh and Karoun rivers shared with Iran. Bilateral treaties and international instruments have failed to resolve the situation: the Algiers Accord of 1975 between Iraq and Iran on the separation of the Shatt al-Arab, the 200 km-long river created by the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers whose waters feed into the Gulf, is no longer implemented. Meanwhile the UN Water Convention, which could provide a basic framework for any transboundary waterway, is vague and largely not enforced. While Iraq had ratified the convention in 2001 and formally acceded to it in March 2023, Iran has not yet adopted it, whereas Turkey even voted against it in the UN General Assembly.<sup>14</sup>

While the decline in water availability can partly be attributed to rising temperatures due to climate change, much of it is human-caused. The former relates to deserts or desert-like areas in Iraq suffering from considerable drought. The lack of water, including snowfall in mountainous areas, drives farmers away from desertified land and into the cities, overcrowding an already dense urban space. Also, a significant drop in water quality due to increased oxygen levels as the rivers’ flow is reduced and their water temperature rises is creating supply problems.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Tobias von Lossow and Mahmoud Shatat, “Less and Less: Water in the Middle East”, in Shira Kronich and Liel Maghen (eds), “Ensuring Water Security in the Middle East: Policy Implications”, in *EuroMeSCO Joint Policy Studies*, No. 15 (April 2020), p. 34-55, <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/ensuring-water-security-in-the-middle-east-policy-implications>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner, “Hydro-Hegemony: A Framework for Analysis of Trans-Boundary Water Conflicts”, in *Water Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (October 2006), p. 435-460, DOI 10.2166/wp.2006.054.

<sup>14</sup> See Salman M.A. Salman, “The United Nations Watercourses Convention Ten Years Later: Why Has its Entry into Force Proven Difficult?”, in *Water International*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2007), p. 1-15, DOI 10.1080/02508060708691962; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), *Iraq’s Accession to UN Water Convention Opens New Opportunities to Strengthen Transboundary Water Cooperation in the Middle East*, 24 March 2023, <https://unece.org/environment/press/iraqs-accession-un-water-convention-opens-new-opportunities-strengthen>.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Gleick, Charles Iceland and Ayushi Trivedi, *Ending Conflicts over Water*, cit.



On the human-made side, it has to be noted that the extended period of wars, civil wars and international sanctions over the past four decades has turned water management into a low political priority. A “dysfunctional decentralisation” has prevented both adequate national water governance and efficient local water management.<sup>16</sup> In turn, practices like the construction of dams, reservoirs and irrigation projects, whether inside the country or undertaken by Iraq’s upstream neighbours, have largely reduced the amount of water available in Iraq.

### 5.2.2 Dams be damned

Among the different measures taken, dam-building has proven to be a fateful strategy, both in neighbouring countries as well as inside Iraq. Water infrastructure development on the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris in Turkey, for example, has strained relations since the 1970s. With dozens of dams built as part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project, generating not just hydropower but also used for irrigation, water inflow to both Syria and Iraq has been drastically reduced.<sup>17</sup> While annual water discharge is hard to determine due to seasonal changes, the mean has declined from around 30 billion cubic metres (bcm) before damming began (1930 to 1973) to around 25 bcm thereafter (1974 to 2010).<sup>18</sup> That said, in May 2021, the Iraqi Minister of Water Resources claimed in a press conference that over just one year, flow rates in the two rivers had halved, with severe consequences for the entire country.<sup>19</sup>

Iran is also heavily investing in dam-building including on tributary rivers flowing from the Western Zagros mountains down to Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, Iran’s dams not only hold back water to release it later for electricity production, but also to divert it to other parts of the country to alleviate water scarcity there.

<sup>16</sup> Tobias von Lossow et al., “Water Governance in Iraq. Enabling a Gamechanger”, in *Water Peace and Security Reports*, September 2022, <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/files/245>.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Gleick, Charles Iceland and Ayushi Trivedi, *Ending Conflicts over Water*, cit.

<sup>18</sup> UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) and Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), *Inventory of Shared Water Resources in Western Asia*, New York, United Nations, 20 June 2013, <http://waterinventory.org>.

<sup>19</sup> Sinan Mahmoud and Robert Tollast, “Iraq Faces Harsh Summer of Water Shortages as Turkey and Iran Continue Dam Projects”, in *The National*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/1.1229371>.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Rivlin, “The Forgotten Crises in the Gulf: Electricity and Water in Iran and Iraq”, in *Iqtisadi: Middle East Economy*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (20 July 2021), <https://dayan.org/content/forgotten-crises-gulf-electricity-and-water-iran-and-iraq>.

This significantly reduces the amount of water discharged into the Tigris.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, Tehran announced no less than 109 new dams, based as much on its revolutionary rationale of self-sufficiency even in water-intensive agriculture as on the security apparatus's vested interests in infrastructure construction.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the much-hailed regeneration of Lake Urmia in north-western Iran after it had shrunk for decades was in part thanks to the diverting of the Little Zab River away from Iraq – resulting in severe water shortages across the country.

With Iran threatened by water scarcity itself, it becomes clear that “one country's adaptation strategy risks becoming another's crisis”.<sup>23</sup> However, this is not merely about neighbouring countries cutting off water supplies from Iraq, as the same selfish tactic is followed inside the country. For example, dams in Iraqi Kurdistan, on the upper course of the Tigris River, prevent water from flowing to the rest of the country.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to withholding water that then is missing downstream, dams have the tendency to increase water loss. Enormous amounts of water are stored in the new lake above the dam, creating a huge surface. Water thus exposed to the elements is prone to evaporating rather than seeping into the ground. The lake created by the Mosul Dam, for example, has seen considerable loss of surface water (and hence total capacity) since 1990, with some estimates ranging up to 60 per cent.<sup>25</sup> A 3,400-year-old city even emerged from the reservoir after months of extreme drought.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while dams may have been built for flood control, irrigation and electricity generation, they also do damage to the environment and the people depending on it for sustenance.

<sup>21</sup> Austin Corona, “How Mangled Dam Diplomacy Is Shaping Iraq's Water Crisis”, in *Fikra Forum*, 4 November 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-mangled-dam-diplomacy-shaping-iraqs-water-crisis>.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Adebahr and Olivia Lazard, “How the EU Can Help Iran Tackle Water Scarcity”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 7 July 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/87281>.

<sup>23</sup> Daniela Sala and Bart von Laffert, “Iranian Dams Cut Off Iraqi Water Supplies”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-58764729>.

<sup>24</sup> Kira Walker, “Dam Building Risks Water Stress in Iraq”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-55169989>.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Iceland, Tianyi Luo and Gennadii Donchyts, “It's Not Just Cape Town: Four Shrinking Reservoirs to Watch”, in *WRI Insights*, 11 April 2018, <https://www.wri.org/node/61441>.

<sup>26</sup> Rosie Frost, “3,400-Year-Old City Emerges from Reservoir in Iraq after Months of Extreme Drought”, in *Euronews*, 7 June 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2022/06/07/3-400-year-old-city-emerges-from-reservoir-in-iraq-after-months-of-extreme-drought>.

### 5.2.3 Water feeding conflict, both internal and external

The likelihood of further conflict arising from water shortages in Iraq is high, according to the UNESCO-funded Water Peace and Security (WPS) programme. With droughts, pollution and sheer water waste undermining public health, food security and energy security, the issue of the WPS Global Early Warning Tool of December 2022 warned of “emerging and ongoing conflict throughout much of Iraq over the next 12 months”.<sup>27</sup>

Southern Iraq, in particular, will continue to suffer from water scarcity. There, the partial collapse of water and electricity supplies during a heatwave in 2018, combined with Iran’s diverting of the Karoun and Karkheh Rivers inland, led to a spike in hospitalisations with water-borne diseases and other symptoms affecting some 118,000 people.<sup>28</sup> This acute crisis, in turn, contributed to protests directed at government failure, corruption and unemployment – as well as Iranian influence.<sup>29</sup> Three years later, another heatwave put at least seven million people in Iraq at risk of losing access to water, food and electricity, thus possibly pushing them into displacement.<sup>30</sup>

Under such circumstances, environmental work also spills into the domain of humanitarian aid,<sup>31</sup> and water management becomes political: the Tishreen activists who won 15 seats in the Iraqi Parliament in 2021 have their roots in the 2018 Basra uprising,<sup>32</sup> and “hydropolitics” is set to become a growing driver in

<sup>27</sup> Water Peace and Security, *WPS Global Early Warning Tool: December 2022 Quarterly Update*, 14 December 2022, <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/info/global-tool-update-december-2022>.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Basra Is Thirsty. Iraq’s Failure to Manage the Water Crisis*, July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>.

<sup>29</sup> Mustafa Salim and Liz Sly, “Widespread Unrest Erupts in Southern Iraq Amid Acute Shortages of Water, Electricity”, in *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/widespread-unrest-erupts-in-southern-iraq-amid-acute-shortages-of-water-electricity/2018/07/14/b9077b90-86c2-11e8-9e06-4db52ac42e05\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/widespread-unrest-erupts-in-southern-iraq-amid-acute-shortages-of-water-electricity/2018/07/14/b9077b90-86c2-11e8-9e06-4db52ac42e05_story.html).

<sup>30</sup> “Water Crisis Puts 12 million at Risk in Syria, Iraq, Aid Groups Say”, in *Al-Monitor*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/44334>; ACTED et al., *Water Crisis and Drought Threaten More than 12 million in Syria and Iraq*, 23 August 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3767342>.

<sup>31</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), “How to Cope with Iraq’s Summer Brushfire”, in *Crisis Group Middle East Briefing*, No. 61 (31 July 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5860>.

<sup>32</sup> Tobias von Lossow et al., “Action Needed: Three Priorities for Iraq’s Water Sector”, in *Water Peace and Security Reports*, June 2022, <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/files/229>.

Iraq's foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, different tribes in the Wasit Governorate bordering Iran, where the partly wiped out Mesopotamian Marshes begin, have clashed over access to and diversion of water.<sup>34</sup>

The relevance of forecasts such as the one from WPS becomes clearer when looking at the recent history of water-related conflict in Iraq. In addition to the above-mentioned links to the 2011 Arab uprisings, the most notorious case is that of the self-declared Islamic State (IS). This terrorist outfit, known for the brutality of its short-lived caliphate occupying the eastern half of Syria and a good chunk of north-western Iraq, benefited hugely from Iraq's water crisis. For one, the Jihadists' recruitment drive in northern and western Iraq built on decades-long decreases in rainfall by providing impoverished farmers with an alternative source of income.<sup>35</sup> For another, the group used water as a direct weapon: flows were routinely withheld to break local resistance, and IS fighters flooded entire areas to make them inhabitable, such as through the opening of the Falluja Dam in 2014.<sup>36</sup> The ongoing civil war in Syria, in turn, has led to decreased water use there, from which Iraq, cynically albeit perhaps involuntarily, benefited as more water ran through the Euphrates River.

In the Iraqi context, Iran is of particular relevance, and not just for the predominantly Shia population in southern Iraq, but also because the Shatt al-Arab is about 40 per cent fed by water from Iran. Whether through political influence in Baghdad, military action against Iranian Kurdish groups on the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government, or through dam-building at home – Tehran's presence affects its neighbour's water scarcity issues. Interestingly, however, there is also a reverse relation, as dust storms emerging over dried-up areas in central Iraq and even further away, in Saudi Arabia and Turkey,<sup>37</sup> can wreak havoc in Iran's western provinces, with toxic air pollution

<sup>33</sup> Pieter-Jan Dockx, "Water Scarcity in Iraq: From Inter-tribal Conflict to International Disputes", in *IPCS Special Reports*, No. 203 (May 2019), [http://www.ipcs.org/issue\\_select.php?recNo=6147](http://www.ipcs.org/issue_select.php?recNo=6147).

<sup>34</sup> Mustafa Habib, "Iraq's Lack of Water 'Is a Foreign Policy Problem'", in *Iraq Business News*, 24 February 2018, <https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/?p=131328>.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Schwartzstein, "Climate Change and Water Woes Drove ISIS Recruiting in Iraq", in *National Geographic*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/climate-change-drought-drove-isis-terrorist-recruiting-iraq>.

<sup>36</sup> Tobias von Lossow, "Water as Weapon: IS on the Euphrates and Tigris", in *SWP Comments*, No. 3/2016 (January 2016), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/water-as-weapon-is-euphrates-tigris>.

<sup>37</sup> Johan Schaar, "A Confluence of Crises", cit.

leading to shutdowns in Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan province. This peripheral part of Iran, with a majority Arab population, has its own issues with the central government in Tehran, as water is being further diverted to central Iran.<sup>38</sup>

Unsurprisingly, people are protesting water shortages in Iran as much as in Iraq. This alone would make joint initiatives to tackle related challenges of water scarcity a natural objective if it were not for political interests on either side.

### 5.3 Possible ways forward

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Despite the track record of past conflicts and the perspective of more to come given the dire situation on the ground, water scarcity in Iraq features low on the EU's radar. For example, the high-level EU–GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting in early 2022 only briefly discussed the political situation in Iraq and did not touch upon water issues.<sup>39</sup> Also, the EU's long-awaited Gulf strategy, which appeared shortly thereafter, refers to Iraq only in the context of "regional crises" and barely looks into water issues at all (i.e., just by mentioning water vapour measurements in relation to space and water management, including the water-energy nexus).<sup>40</sup>

This negligence is in stark contrast to Brussels's oft-applied broad policy framework for external relations ranging from trade and energy to climate and humanitarian aid. Moreover, the EU made an explicit pledge, in the Council Conclusions from only four years before, to engage in water diplomacy "to address the transboundary challenges of water [...] and [...] to work in partnership with others to promote collaborative and sustainable water management, encouraging and supporting regional and international cooperation".<sup>41</sup> The EU still seems to be lacking a "persistent, coordinated, and diligent effort" in

<sup>38</sup> Austin Corona, "How Mangled Dam Diplomacy Is Shaping Iraq's Water Crisis", cit.

<sup>39</sup> Council of the European Union, *Co-Chairs' Statement – 26th EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting*, 22 February 2022, <https://europa.eu/!4Ryr4m>.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission and European External Action Service, *A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf* (JOIN/2022/13), 18 May 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52022JC0013>.

<sup>41</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on EU Water Diplomacy*, Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, 19 November 2018, point 11, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/37022/st13991-en18.pdf>.

tackling the water crises emerging from its neighbouring region.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, efforts to promote cooperation on managing transboundary water resources among neighbouring states as well as to advance international adjudication continue. For example, despite the continuing internal upheaval, Iraq managed to host three editions of the newly installed international Baghdad Water Conference in 2021, 2022 and 2023, respectively.<sup>43</sup> Given the lack of progress on the question of water rights, however, Iraq has also openly called for the United Nations to mediate in its dispute with Iran<sup>44</sup> and formally lodged a complaint against Tehran at the International Court of Justice.<sup>45</sup>

International actors should build on such developments to reinvigorate talks between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran on the sharing of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates. Even if the prospects for a basin-wide agreement between a group of states are low, bilateral agreements can at least help alleviate the water shortages in Iraq. Building on existing bilateral Memoranda of Understanding, it is crucial to include references to key principles of international water law, e.g., the principle of equitable and reasonable utilisation enshrined in the Helsinki Rules of 1966 and the principle of no significant harm.<sup>46</sup> The EU, for example, should try to build some leverage over Turkey on water issues through the latter's aspired approximation to European standards through the Enlargement process.

That said, tackling concrete issues such as the effects of natural disasters or water pollution may be a more constructive entry point than trying to (re) negotiate absolute water-sharing quantities given that these are set to decline due to climate change. This can include the use of satellite imagery, provided by a neutral actor and available for all parties to use for water management and scientific purposes. Ultimately, such actions would contribute to joint research

<sup>42</sup> Farwa Aamer et al., *International Hydro-diplomacy: Building and Strengthening Regional Institutions for Water Conflict Prevention. Pre-conference study 2021*, Brussels, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung & Washington, Stimson Center, Autumn 2021, p. 8, <https://www.stimson.org/?p=46793>.

<sup>43</sup> See the official website: <https://baghdad-iwc.com>.

<sup>44</sup> "Minister: Iraq Resorts to UN to Secure Water Rights from Iran", in *Middle East Monitor*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=482697>.

<sup>45</sup> "Iraq Ministry Files Lawsuit against Iran over Water Shortages", in *The New Arab*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.newarab.com/node/1040965>.

<sup>46</sup> Tobias von Lossow et al., "Action Needed: Three Priorities for Iraq's Water Sector", cit.

towards a database on transboundary water flows and use, and broader knowledge sharing for mutual benefit. Mini-lateral or regional organisations built around such technical agreements could also work as a conduit for bringing in private investment and for political dialogue on water issues more generally, thus opening avenues for conflict resolution in the future.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to such efforts aimed at improving transboundary water flows, international actors should support the Iraqi national government and regional authorities in increasing water availability inside the country. This includes the establishing of country-wide principles for water use, especially on wastewater treatment and incentives to harvest crops with low water intensity and using modern technology. Moreover, investments in collecting rain and flood water in border areas to fill up water reserves, as well as separating sewage and rainwater drainage networks, is crucial. These activities can also include cross-border components, such as through the promotion of industrial development rather than water-intensive agricultural projects and the revival of marshlands.

Many of these endeavours involving technology and infrastructure could be supported through EU funds provided under the European Green Deal/ Just Transition policies or its Global Gateway investment initiative. Such financing can be used to ensure implementation of the international principles mentioned above as well as to encourage better coordination on national and regional dam-building efforts. As in antiquity, when Mesopotamia was not just the cradle of civilisation and a breadbasket for the region, Iraq today can play a key role in developing a Gulf/Middle East strategic water framework, in turn helping to boost interdependence, sustainability and political de-escalation in the process.

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<sup>47</sup> André Mueller et al., *Climate Change, Water and Future Cooperation and Development in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin*, Potsdam, Cascades, November 2021, <https://www.cascades.eu/?p=1723>.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

by Giulia Daga

After decades of instability and as the target of international peace initiatives, the Iraqi government has recently increasingly invested in presenting the country as a regional promoter of dialogue and reconciliation, as shown in initiatives such as the Baghdad Conference<sup>1</sup> and the facilitation of dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Both endeavours started under the leadership of Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi but were also embraced by Prime Minister Al-Sudani,<sup>3</sup> with an intensified focus on the economic dimension of regional cooperation, as was visible in the spirit of the 2nd Baghdad Conference.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these commendable efforts, Iraq's long-term identity role as a regional hub for cooperation, mediation and peace is largely reliant on the stability of the country's economic, social and political systems. Corruption, foreign interference, the lack of a strong private sector and of effective cross-border cooperation are among the most pressing unsolved questions. In addition, increasing climatic constraints, unemployment and years of conflict have hampered efforts towards the effective reconciliation between fractured components of society and the safe return of displaced people.

In this context, this volume has covered some of the issue-areas that are of vital importance for the Iraqi healing process, and that are likely to be central for the

<sup>1</sup> Bilgay Duman, "What Does the Baghdad Conference Mean for Iraq?", in *Mena Affairs*, 31 August 2021, <https://menaaffairs.com/?p=6398>.

<sup>2</sup> Nussaibah Younis, "Mediation Nation: Iraq's New Role in Iranian-Saudi Talks", in *ECFR Articles*, 14 May 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=72468>.

<sup>3</sup> Hafed Al-Ghwell, "In Iraq, a Resilient Al-Sudani Forges on", in *Arab News*, 8 April 2023, <https://arab.news/m53bq>; Mina Aldroubi, "Iraq to Retain Regional Mediator Role in 2023, Experts Say", in *The National*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/01/10/iraq-to-retain-regional-mediator-role-in-2023-experts-say>.

<sup>4</sup> Mehran Haghirian, "Regional Economic Integration Comes into Focus at Second Baghdad Conference", in *Bourse & Bazaar Foundation Articles*, 23 December 2022, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/12/23/regional-economic-integration-comes-into-focus-at-second-baghdad-conference>.



long-term stability of the country, trying to identify spheres in which Italy can more effectively contribute.

In 2007, Italy and Iraq signed a Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation (ratified in 2009),<sup>5</sup> aimed at increasing cooperation in several areas. Within this framework, Italy's approach towards Iraq has followed mainly two broad directions, one focused on security led by the armed forces, and one focused on development cooperation led by several private and public actors. Development cooperation has evolved along the following priority sectors: agriculture and food security, human development, governance and civil society, and private sector development. In addition, cross-cutting areas of Italian involvement have included gender and woman's empowerment, vulnerable groups assistance, cultural heritage protection and enhancement, environment and climate change, infrastructure development, and natural resources management with a focus on water.<sup>6</sup> As an economic partner, Italy has also an interest in Iraq for the presence of Italian private companies in the industrial sector, with particular focus on the agri-food, petrochemical and construction sectors.

The country's difficulties in solving its internal issues have however often hampered and delayed the Italian public and private investments.<sup>7</sup> The following sections look at areas of intervention in which the Italian government, local administrations and private actors can support the Iraqi federal and regional governments in joint efforts that can have positive effects for both countries.

## 6.1 Transitional justice

### a) The Iraqi context and general recommendations

Since 2003, Iraq has experienced three main waves of transitional justice efforts. The first one took place just after the demise of the Ba'ath regime and

<sup>5</sup> Italy and Iraq, *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation between the Italian Republic and the Republic of Iraq*, Rome, 23 January 2007, <https://itra.esteri.it/Search/Allegati/48982>; Law No. 27 of 20 March 2009: *Ratifica ed esecuzione del Trattato di amicizia, partenariato e cooperazione fra la Repubblica italiana e la Repubblica dell'Iraq, fatto a Roma il 23 gennaio 2007*, <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2009-03-20;27>.

<sup>6</sup> OpenAid website: *Iraq*, <http://openaid.esteri.it/it/code-lists/recipients/543>.

<sup>7</sup> infoMercatiEsteri website: *Iraq*, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id\\_paesi=105](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=105).

the so-called de-Ba'athification. The second was launched after the sectarian conflict between 2006 and 2008, and the third one followed the government's reconquest of territories from the so-called Islamic State in 2016. These three waves of efforts towards reconciliation and compensation mechanisms have largely failed, mostly due to a lack of political will and competing interests among the Iraqi political forces. According to the author, the following reforms need to be launched by the Iraqi authorities for the transitional justice efforts to succeed:

- To revise the anti-terrorism law and narrow the definition of terrorism in precise terms, so as to avoid political instrumentalisations.
- To dismantle the commission on de-Ba'athification, so as to reduce sectarian mistrust.
- To adopt anti-corruption, transparency and accountability measures, so as to increase application of the rule of law and reduce waste of resources and foreign interference.
- To tackle unprosecuted human rights abuses, so as to favour the return of displaced persons (both internally and externally).

International organisations and other external players should support these reforms by cooperating with state agencies and the local civil society to exchange best practices, transfer expertise and promote social reconciliation through the design or funding of tailored programmes.

### **b) The Italian role and specific recommendations**

The Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation between Italy and Iraq included cooperation in the legal, judicial and administrative fields (art. 13).<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the parties agreed to collaborate in civil, commercial and criminal law matters. While article 13 is predominantly intended to foster common measures against organised crime, drug-trafficking and traffic in human beings, it also provides space for a stronger partnership in the field of justice administration through the exchange of best practices.

Since 2003, Italy has cooperated with Iraq on issues of governance and justice through both military and civil instruments. Indeed, one of the tasks of the

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<sup>8</sup> Italy and Iraq, *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation*, cit.

Italian military mission in Iraq has included support to the political transition with a focus on governance. Moreover, in the summer of 2023, the NATO Mission in Iraq has expanded the scope of its role to include advisory and capacity-building activities in support of the Ministry of Interior.<sup>9</sup>

In parallel to the military presence, since 2003 (and with a temporary halt during the ISIS parenthesis) the Italian agency for development cooperation (AICS) has identified governance, civil society empowerment and assistance to vulnerable groups as priority sectors of intervention. In line with this, in November 2022, the AICS and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) committed 2 million euros in support of the UNDP “Funding Facility for Stabilisation” that aims at promoting reconstruction and return.<sup>10</sup>

Solving internal fractures while strengthening the state capacities in terms of rule of law is a long and difficult exercise, and the most important one for a successful reconciliation. In this sense, transitional justice is both the precondition and the objective of improved cooperation in the other areas considered in this volume.

If looked at from a macro-level perspective, transitional justice is indeed an essential precondition, and the greatest obstacle, for the success of any further cooperation initiatives. However, if looked at from a micro-level perspective, healing can be the long-term objective of issue-based local cooperation projects that aim at solving practical difficulties. The Italian involvement in the issue-areas considered in the following sections can thus be understood as contributions to the strengthening of the local conditions that can make macro-level transitional justice efforts more effective.

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<sup>9</sup> NATO, *NATO Mission Iraq Takes on Additional Advisory and Capacity-Building Tasks*, 17 August 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_217942.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217942.htm); “Operazione ‘Prima Parthica’: conclusi 4 corsi addestrativi con 100 frequentatori” in *Report Difesa*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.reportdifesa.it/jyjh>.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP Iraq, *Italy Renews Its Commitment to Stabilization with a New EUR 2 million Contribution*, 9 November 2022, <https://iraq.un.org/en/node/206513>.

## 6.2 Cultural heritage

### a) The Iraqi context and general recommendations

Cultural heritage has suffered from unprecedented losses in the Iraqi recent history, mostly due to the consequences of conflict but also to mismanagement, corruption and political exploitation of national sites by local ethno-sectarian actors as the result of a loose legal framework for heritage protection. In this regard, the volume identifies two main general recommendations and a few more practical ones to invest in the Iraqi cultural heritage while seeking reconciliation:

- To end the exploitation of cultural heritage as a political asset.
- To take advantage of the potential of cultural heritage as an instrument of social cohesion.

In practice, this can be achieved by several activities. First, by increasing the public interest and awareness in the multiple coexistent heritages that are visible in Iraq, from the Neolithic to the present. Second, by reforming the heritage management system, and devising clear structures of cooperation between professionals and state authorities at the local, regional and federal levels. Third, by harmonising legal frameworks and professional curricula, especially between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal ones. Fourth, by training a new generation of archaeologists, organising school exchanges in different parts of the countries and increasing domestic tourism, so as to allow the population to become fully aware of the shared heritage.

### b) The Italian role and specific recommendations

Cultural diplomacy has been an essential component of Italian foreign policy and an internationally recognised field of excellence. Archaeological cooperation between Italy and Iraq dates to the 1930s. In 1969, the two countries signed an agreement on scientific and cultural cooperation, which led to the creation of the Italian-Iraqi Centre for the Restoration of Monuments (CIIRM) and the Italian-Iraqi Institute of Archaeology (IIA). Activities were launched in Ctesiphon, Baghdad, Babylon, Anah, Hatra and Aqar Quf, but were mostly interrupted in 2003.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Monumenta Orientalia website: *Mirjanyia 2013-2017*, <https://www.monumentaorientalia.it>.

The 2007 Treaty of Friendship aimed at relaunching cooperation for the protection and enhancement of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (art. 10). The article foresaw: “a) enhancing and reorganising the Iraqi National System for the Protection of the National Heritage; b) establishing the National Iraqi System for the Catalogue of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Property; c) enhancing the national network of laboratories for the restoration of cultural property; d) designing and implementing plans for the management of museums, archaeological sites and other areas of particular historical/cultural importance, archives, libraries, theatres, cinemas and musical venues; e) designing and implementing archaeological, architectural, artistic and historical restoration projects; f) promoting theatrical, cinematographic, music and performing arts events in general”.<sup>12</sup>

In 2012, a memorandum of understanding in the field of archaeological sciences was signed to further advance the objectives of the treaty.<sup>13</sup> With this new agreement, the CIIRM and IIA were transformed into the Italian-Iraqi Cultural Centre for Archaeological Sciences and Restorations (CCIISAR), which was launched in 2016.<sup>14</sup> Iraq has recently become the first country in terms of contributions from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for archaeological, ethnological and anthropological missions, with projects involving the Universities of Udine, Bologna, Milan, Turin and Rome (La Sapienza) among others.<sup>15</sup>

Some of these projects have specifically focused on the Region of Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, the University of Udine has conducted projects in Faida in cooperation with Kurdish archaeologists, which led to the discovery of Assyrian reliefs along the Faida canal. They also have aimed at protecting the sites against vandalism, construction or illegal excavation.<sup>16</sup> The University of

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org/?p=9447; Centro Scavi Torino (CRAST) website: *The Italian-Iraq Cultural Centre*, 2021, <https://www.centroscavitorino.it/?p=1688>.

<sup>12</sup> Italy and Iraq, *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> OpenAid website: *Iraq*, <http://openaid.esteri.it/it/code-lists/recipients/543>.

<sup>14</sup> Monumenta Orientalia, “Mirjanyia 2013-2017”, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Italian Consulate General in Erbil, *Italian MFA Grants for Archaeological Missions: Iraq First in the World for Number of Projects (10 in the Federal Iraq and 8 in the Iraqi Kurdistan)*, 14 July 2022, <https://conserbil.esteri.it/en/?p=406>.

<sup>16</sup> University of Udine, “Italian and Kurdish Archaeologists on the Trail of the Assyrian Empire”, in *Qui*

Milan has also focused on the Kurdistan region, with an archaeological mission in the plain of Erbil, launched in 2022 with a focus on the Neolithic and medieval eras. For this project, the University has cooperated with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Directorate for General Antiquities in the Region of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>17</sup> Synergy between the University, Italian regional and central administrations,<sup>18</sup> private partners and Kurdish authorities has guaranteed the success of the projects.<sup>19</sup>

Most of these initiatives have combined the cultural heritage and social cohesion dimensions.<sup>20</sup> The BANUU project of the University of Bologna, co-funded by the EU, for example, has aimed at increasing the employability of Iraqi humanities students, creating synergies between universities and public enterprise sectors through internships and transfer of transversal and entrepreneurial skills. At the same time, the project has aimed at supporting the revision of learning outcomes of BA and MA degree programmes and at facilitating bureaucratic processes.<sup>21</sup> Also, the Centro Scavi Torino (CRAST) has cooperated with the Iraqi authorities in Hatra, with the objective of providing training for new staff of Iraqi restorers over a corpus of statues from the Parthian period.<sup>22</sup>

A successful preventive archaeology, combined with increased cultural heritage management, allows for further growth of adjacent sectors, such as cultural tourism, which would enrich the country's revenues, thereby contributing to

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UNIUD, 13 January 2020, <https://qui.uniud.it/ricerca-e-innovazione/italian-and-kurdish-archaeologists-on-the-trail-of-the-assyrian-empire>.

<sup>17</sup> University of Milan website: *MAIPE: Italian Archaeological Expedition in the Erbil Plain*, <https://orientea antico.unimi.it/en/maipe-2>; Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Italian Discoveries in Iraqi Kurdistan*, 24 November 2022, <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/en/?p=44321>.

<sup>18</sup> Including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, Friuli Banking Foundation, ArchaeoCrowd Ltd and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation.

<sup>19</sup> University of Udine, "Italian and Kurdish Archaeologists on the Trail of the Assyrian Empire", cit.

<sup>20</sup> EDUU website: *Archaeology and Cultural Heritage for Social Cohesion: An EU-Iraqi Partnership, Joint EDUU and WALADU Day at University of Bologna*, April 2019, <https://site.unibo.it/eduu/en/meetings/archaeology-and-cultural-heritage-for-social-cohesion-an-eu-iraqi-partnership-joint-eduu-and-waladu-day-at-university-of-bologna-april-2019>.

<sup>21</sup> University of Bologna website: *BANUU – Designing New Pathways for Employability and Entrepreneurship of Iraqi Students in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, <https://disci.unibo.it/en/research/research-projects/european-projects/banuu-designing-new-pathways-for-employability-and-entrepreneurship-of-iraqi-students-in-archaeology-and-cultural-heritage>.

<sup>22</sup> CAMNES website: *HaSSP: Hatra Statuary Salvage Project*, <https://camnes.it/hatra-statuary-salvage-project>; CRAST website: *The Italian-Iraqi Cultural Centre*, <https://www.centroscavit torino.it/?p=1688>.

the wider aim of economic stability. At the same time, Italy can increase its role, both through local private and public actors, and in coordination with the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, by sponsoring exchange programmes for archaeology students between the regions in which it is mostly present, and especially between the Region of the Iraqi Kurdistan and other areas of the country. In this way, the Italian efforts in cultural heritage will also provide the basis for a more integrated and reconciled national citizenship.

Also, Italy can support an increased awareness and appreciation of the common national heritage by supporting the Iraqi efforts to invest in the national Iraq Museum. In June 2023, for example, the Italian government gave back to Iraq an ancient cuneiform tablet that had been in Italy since the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> This kind of act could be integrated with a more active role in devising joint exhibitions.

Cultural diplomacy is a pivotal asset for the Italian foreign toolbox and should be further employed in a comprehensive way as an instrument of foreign policy in Iraq, through a continuous linkage between specific projects and wider governance objectives.

## 6.3 Energy and interconnectivity

### a) The Iraqi context and general recommendations

Enhanced regional connectivity in terms of pipeline networks would have beneficial effects not only for Iraq but also for Europe, which could benefit from a pipeline connection linking Iraq to the Mediterranean. Iraq has great capabilities as OPEC's second largest oil producer and ranking fifth in world oil reserves as well as twelfth in world gas reserves, but it has not yet fulfilled this potential. The problems that Iraq has faced in this field are both domestic and regional. Domestic difficulties are the same that weaken the development of other issue-areas: corruption, inefficient management, political instability, foreign interference and conflict. Regional problems include historical rivalries and unrest. For example, the civil war in Syria has halted plans for a pipeline connection to the Mediterranean through the two countries, while plans for

<sup>23</sup> AFP, "Iraq Unveils Ancient Stone Tablet Returned by Italy", in *France 24*, 18 June 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230618-iraq-unveils-ancient-stone-tablet-returned-by-italy>.

a pipeline connection with Saudi Arabia stopped after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The two existing cross-border pipeline systems – with Turkey and Iran – also face difficulties and unequal relations that prevent Iraq from fully exploiting its potentials. Working relations with Turkey have had ups and downs which led to direct cooperation between the KRG and the Turkish government, provoking the legal reaction of the federal Iraqi government. Similarly, cooperation with Iran has been damaged by the Iranian use of gas exports as a political leverage, aided by the fact that the country has a strong grip over Iraqi political actors.

To address these problems, three are the general recommendations identified:

- To deconflict the relations between the KRG and the Federal Government through clearer rules on the roles of both actors.
- To equalise relations between Iran and Iraq and explore cooperation for Iranian gas exports to Europe via Iraq.
- To explore the revision of the project of natural gas transportation from Qatar to Europe via Iraq and Syria.

### **b) The Italian role and specific recommendations**

Italy is strongly present in Iraq in the hydrocarbon fields, providing technical expertise, especially in the petrochemicals sector. Indeed, the hydrocarbon sector still attracts most of the Italian private presence and will likely continue to do so in the near future. In September 2023, for example, a new oil well was perforated in the Nasiriya field, and in July 2023 the Iraqi government announced the goal of reaching gas self-sufficiency by 2030, with US, Saudi and Qatari companies already expressing their interest in supporting the transition.<sup>24</sup> Italian companies can continue to look for opportunities to support the Iraqi hydrocarbon sector, especially in the field of gas exploitation, as half of the Iraqi production is reported to be wasted as result of gas flaring.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> infoMercatiEsteri, *Iraq: Governo, autosufficienza gas entro il 2030*, 25 July 2023, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights\\_dettagli.php?id\\_highlights=22100](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=22100).

<sup>25</sup> Ali al-Aqily et al., "Backup Plans Emerge for Iraqi Gas as Total Energies Faces Delays", in *Iraq Oil Report*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/?p=45179>.



Beyond the hydrocarbon extraction industry, however, trans-border interconnectivity cooperation remains central for taking full advantage of the Iraqi oil and gas potentials. The search for improved relations between the KRG and the Federal Government – and between Iraq and its neighbours – on pipeline cooperation needs to be coupled with cooperation in other sectors, so as to create interdependence and a balanced equal relation among the partners.

Recent actions taken by the Iraqi government suggest a growing interest in reinforcing the Iraqi energy and infrastructural capabilities, where the Italian private and public sector can find room for increased involvement. In September 2023, for instance, the Iraqi government announced its willingness to increase combined cycle power plants and accordingly announced the will to provide incentives to international energy sector companies.<sup>26</sup> A few months earlier, SACE and GKSD Investment Holding signed an entente protocol that opens the way for the participation of Italian companies in development projects in the infrastructure and energy fields. Among the projects supported by SACE, energy-saving technologies in hospitals and home construction have been identified as priorities.<sup>27</sup>

In the field of transportation, the Iraqi government has launched a project for the construction of a railway and road connection from Al Faw Port to the Turkish border, under the name of Development Road.<sup>28</sup> Within this project, in August 2023, it announced the intention to import high speed trains (300 km/h) by 2028, thereby creating additional opportunities for international companies interested in investing in Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Despite the economic importance of the Development Road initiative, the Iraqi Kurdistan's natural resources are not integrated in the national infrastructure projects, thus adding to the other controversy on the Turkish-KRG direct pipeline negotiations.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> infoMercatiEsteri, *Iraq: Premier, il governo vuole aumentare produzione energia*, 15 September 2023, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights\\_dettagli.php?id\\_highlights=22296](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=22296).

<sup>27</sup> Mariapia Ebrio, "L'impresa italiana sbarca in Iraq: firmato l'accordo fra Sace e Gksd", in *Fortune Italia*, 24 May 2023, <https://www.fortuneita.com/?p=307854>.

<sup>28</sup> infoMercatiEsteri, *Iraq: Si studia collegamento ferroviario con la Turchia*, 18 July 2023, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights\\_dettagli.php?id\\_highlights=22083](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=22083).

<sup>29</sup> infoMercatiEsteri, *Iraq - Governo progetta ferrovie ad alta velocità*, 8 August 2023, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights\\_dettagli.php?id\\_highlights=22129](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=22129).

<sup>30</sup> Sardar Aziz, "Iraq's Development Road: No Place for Kurdistan?", in *Sada*, 8 August 2023, <https://>

Based on these recent evolutions the following more specific recommendations can support a coherent Italian approach to energy and transportation infrastructures in Iraq:

- To deconflict relations between the Federal Government and the KRG, Italy can build on the lessons learned from its heritage protection projects in the Iraqi Kurdistan – especially with regard to facilitating administrative cooperation between the regional and federal authorities – and can apply them to energy and infrastructure cooperation projects between the two regions.
- To support egalitarian relations between Iran and Iraq, Italy (and the EU) should acknowledge and further investigate how the dynamics resulting from international sanctions to Iran concur to hamper the evolution of a sustainable economic interdependence between the two countries.<sup>31</sup>
- To support the launch of additional energy networks, Italy should take note of the political evolutions of the past few months/years and put itself at the forefront of proposals that involve Iraq, the GCC states and Syria.

## 6.4 Climate, environment and water resources

### a) The Iraqi context and general recommendations

Decades of civil wars, displacement, foreign interference, corruption, lack of a private sector and inefficiency have created a political environment that has not been able to deal with the deteriorating climate situation. Iraq is now considered as the fifth most vulnerable country in the world, and the situation is likely to further deteriorate in the next years. Hot temperatures, destruction, desertification, dust storms, abandoned farms, water scarcity and population growth are all concurring variables in exacerbating the situation. Within this context, Iraq needs to look rapidly at a post-oil and sustainable future with even more urgency than its neighbours.

Azzam Alwash's 2021 Mesopotamian Revitalisation Initiative<sup>32</sup> proposal offers practical examples on how Iraq can transform its climate change threats into

[carnegieendowment.org/sada/90345](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90345).

<sup>31</sup> See p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Nature Iraq website: *Mesopotamia Revitalization Project*, <http://www.natureiraq.org/mesopotamiarp.html>.

opportunities. The proposal includes plans for the replanting of palm tree forests and the reopening of abandoned farms to avoid dust and degradation, further leading to the increase in shaded areas, which in turn leads to lower temperatures. Also, it recommends the use of carbon credits to pump young entrepreneurship initiatives, and the use of smart technology to provide irrigation and farm management with little or no waste of water. Moreover, it highlights that Iraq should invest in solar power and green hydrogen to produce exportable green energy.

As with pipeline diplomacy, these projects would benefit from intra-regional cooperation (e.g., Iraq producing solar energy during the day in exchange for Turkish energy generated by hydroelectric dams at night). Intra-regional connectivity (through roads and railways) can also link Iraq beyond the immediate neighbours and attract GCC partners in joining these initiatives.

Among the climate change-related threats, water scarcity is probably the most pressing one, and one that could be solved through trans-border cooperation. The Tigris and Euphrates pass through Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq, before entering the Gulf. While presenting ground for cooperation, water management has until now created competition, with Turkey and Iran exploiting and diverting the upper parts of the rivers for their internal usage.

The study has highlighted the following recommendations to avoid cases of “hydro-hegemony”:

- To increase cooperation on water storage in places where evaporation rates are lower, such as the Turkish and Iranian mountains.
- To increase trans-border cooperation on dam construction.
- To include third parties’ expertise and technology to reduce the effects of natural disasters and water pollution.
- To invest on water re-use, through measures such as wastewater treatment, modern harvesting technology, and rain and flood water collection.
- To reduce water-intensive agricultural projects.

## b) The Italian role and specific recommendations

By identifying water as a priority area<sup>33</sup> of intervention for development cooperation in Iraq, Italy has understood the importance of investing in water management as one of the most urgent aspects that Iraq has been facing.

In terms of large-scale projects, the Italian company Trevi has been involved in the restoration of the Mosul dam. In parallel, the company has provided training programmes to help local technicians increase their skills in dam and barrage management.<sup>34</sup> At the governmental level, in July 2023, AICS and United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) sponsored a department for safe management of hydraulic infrastructure within the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of local projects, in 2021, AICS and UNOPS started cooperating in providing basic water services for returnees in the Sinjar district. Through this kind of project, Italy has been supporting the double objective of water safety and healing measures. In practice, the initiative aims at rehabilitating damaged water facilities through innovative technologies.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Italy has cooperated with the UNDP to provide water management and other public services to the governorate of Sulaymaniyah in technical-scientific cooperation with the Authority of Waste and Hydraulic Management (AURI) of the Umbria region.<sup>37</sup> In parallel, Eni has cooperated since 2022 with the EU and UNICEF to increase the quality of water in Basra, with particular emphasis on improving drinking water access in schools and health centres.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> OpenAid website: *Iraq*, <http://openaid.esteri.it/it/code-lists/recipients/543>.

<sup>34</sup> Trevi website: *Mosul Dam Project*, <https://www.trevispa.com/en/mastering-the-task--mosul-dam-project>.

<sup>35</sup> Italian Consulate General in Erbil, *Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources Celebrates Establishment of a Department Dedicated to Safe Management of Hydraulic Infrastructure Thanks to the Support of Italy and UNIDO*, 2 July 2023, <https://conserbil.esteri.it/it/?p=363>; UNIDO, *Iraq: Establishment of a Department Dedicated to Safe Management of Hydraulic Infrastructure*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.unido.org/node/9622456>; "Italy Says Provided Private Funding for Mosul Dam Repairs", in *Rudaw*, 27 June 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/27062023>.

<sup>36</sup> Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (AICS) Amman, *AICS and UNOPS Partner to Rehabilitate the Basic Services for Returnees in Sinjar, Iraq*, 11 March 2021, <https://amman.aics.gov.it/?p=9214>; UNOPS, *Improving Access to Water Services for Returnees in Northern Iraq*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.unops.org/news-and-stories/news/improving-access-to-water-services-for-returnees-in-northern-iraq>.

<sup>37</sup> FELCOS Umbria website: *Peer-to-Peer Cooperation to Foster Water Management in Sulaimaniyah Governorate*, <https://www.felcos.it/?p=21042>.

<sup>38</sup> Eni, *The European Union and UNICEF, in Collaboration with Eni, Launch a Project to Improve the*

Moreover, Italy has identified the fields of sewage systems, waste treatment and remediation as export opportunities.<sup>39</sup> These fields can be integrated with water supply projects to improve water waste management and reuse. In September 2023, the Iraqi government has launched around 20 residential city projects in the Baghdad governorate to tackle population growth and the housing crisis.<sup>40</sup> This provides opportunities for the construction sector – in which Italy is already strongly active in Iraq – but also in cooperation with the water management and sewage system sectors to propose sustainable projects with positive social impacts.

Indeed, the linkage between sustainability (green energy and water management in particular) and housing construction is not only in line with the goals and best practices of the Italian companies investing abroad, but also supports Iraq in areas that are vital for the long-term stability of the country.

While insisting in this direction, Italian local and public administrations and private companies should also increase their support to transboundary local projects, in line with the increasing Iraqi government interest in developing trans-border water cooperation, as it was exemplified by Iraq joining the Convention of the Protection of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes in April 2023.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusions: Local efforts with multilayered objectives

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The issue-areas taken into consideration have shown how Iraq's efforts to go beyond the image of a fragmented state and become a facilitator of regional dialogue are showing some impact. To fully achieve this identity role change, Iraq needs to solidify those areas that are the source of most social, economic and environmental grievances. In this way, the Iraqi government can engage

*Water Quality for 850,000 People in Basra*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2022/02/the-european-union-and-unicef-in-collaboration-with-eni-launch-a-project.html>.

<sup>39</sup> infoMercatiEsteri website: *Iraq*, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id\\_paesi=105](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/paese.php?id_paesi=105).

<sup>40</sup> infoMercatiEsteri, *Iraq - Governo progetta la costruzione di venti nuove città*, 18 September 2023, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights\\_dettagli.php?id\\_highlights=22300](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/highlights_dettagli.php?id_highlights=22300).

<sup>41</sup> UN Water, *Nigeria and Iraq Join UN Water Convention*, 3 April 2023, <https://www.unwater.org/node/2174>.

in its rebranding efforts with a more solid domestic environment. As shown in the previous paragraphs, Italy has both the interest and the capacity to contribute to this change by further accelerating on two parallel tracks: to promote multilayered private and public initiatives and to promote transborder cooperation projects with a local reach.

### To promote multilayered private and public initiatives

The previous paragraphs have shown how a multilayered approach that combines economic advantages and sustainability can build on the Italian public and private presence on the ground, creating synergies with existing partners from different fields (e.g., energy, cultural, high-tech) while opening the space to new innovative multidimensional projects that support local entrepreneurship and training that serve both economic, social and environmental objectives.

For example, in March 2023 the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed an agreement with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) at the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to develop the private sector through a green dimension in the southern part of Iraq. The agreement aims at providing management and financial training to young Iraqis, in addition to financial services support to develop micro, small and medium enterprises. The initiative seeks to support projects that have a climate change–adaptation dimension.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, in 2022, UNIDO, Eni and LVenture Group launched a sustainable entrepreneurship initiative with a focus on promoting innovation in the fields of water management, energy and agriculture.<sup>43</sup> Also, in July 2023, SACE signed an agreement with the High Committee for Export Credit in Iraq to support cooperation between Italian and Iraqi companies on projects of high social impact.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *Italy and the ILO Support Private Sector Development in Southern Iraq's Green Economy*, 9 March 2023, [https://www.ilo.org/rome/risorse-informative/comunicati-stampa/WCMS\\_871164/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/rome/risorse-informative/comunicati-stampa/WCMS_871164/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>43</sup> UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) website: *IPI Call for Innovative Entrepreneurship*, <https://www.unido.it/IPIraq/IPICall>.

<sup>44</sup> SACE, *SACE with Higher Committee for Export Credit of the Republic of Iraq to Support High Social Impact Projects Involving Italian Companies*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.sace.it/en/media/press-releases-and-news/press-releases-details/sace-with-higher-committee-for-export-credit-of-the-republic-of-iraq-to-support-high-social-impact-projects-involving-italian-companies>.

Support to youth sustainable entrepreneurship is an important example of a multilayered approach that addresses both unemployment and climate change issues. These kinds of initiatives should be incentivised and increased, while an expansion of the fields of intervention should be considered to include healing and reconciliation efforts. For example, sustainable entrepreneurship can be combined with heritage promotion initiatives to increase cooperation between areas of the country that have been more strongly affected by the sectarian and ethnic conflicts. Also, young entrepreneurship projects could focus more on incentivising the safe return of displaced persons.

### **To promote transborder local projects**

Some of the problems that concur with the Iraqi systemic economic, social and environmental grievances come from a zero-sum conduct of neighbouring relations. Direct state negotiations have often demonstrated themselves to be unproductive if not counterproductive. Iraq's renewed interest in presenting itself as a facilitator rather than a potential regional hegemon or geopolitical revisionist is an important precondition that can support the success of improved regional relations. In parallel, transborder cooperation and trust should be incentivised in addition to – but even in the lack of – governmental negotiations. Rather than waiting for the central governments to negotiate and ratify comprehensive agreements, local administrations, private actors and international partners can promote regional transboundary projects on several issues, including water management, pipeline cooperation and road and railway construction.

The main assumption behind the volume's findings is that economic interdependence eventually favours a conducive environment to peace and stability, building on the example of the European Community as a healing project after WWII. Interdependence is built on the awareness of shared interests, shared advantages and risks. In this sense, the successful implementation of trans-border projects between constituencies of Iraq and its neighbourhood (especially in the water management and interconnectivity fields) is likely to increase the chances of a positive and stable interdependence. For example, in the Turkish-Iraqi relation, transborder plans that create a stable complementarity between Iraqi oil and Turkish water could be a useful point of departure, and an area in which Italian private and public actors can play an active role.

Considering this, the Italian decennial experience in the Interreg Europe programme<sup>45</sup> can provide many practical inspirations for possible private and public support to Iraq's transboundary cooperation. Insisting on the local dimension (something that the Italian actors have already been doing in promoting projects in Iraq), and combining it with a transborder dimension, is something that deserves further exploration and commitment.

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<sup>45</sup> Interreg Europe website: *Italy*, <https://www.interregeurope.eu/italy>.



# Abbreviations

AICS	Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AURI	Autorità Umbra Rifiuti e Idrico
Bcm	billion cubic metres
CCIISAR	Italian-Iraqi Cultural Centre for Archaeological Sciences and Restorations
CIIRM	Italian-Iraqi Centre for the Restoration of Monuments
CRAST	Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
ICHL	International Cultural Heritage Law
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	internally displaced person
IIA	Italian-Iraqi Institute of Archaeology
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOHR	Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPSA	Iraqi Pipeline in Saudi Arabia
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ITP	Iraq-Turkey Pipeline
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
Mbd	million barrels per day
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MRI	Mesopotamian Revitalization Initiative
NGO	non-governmental organisation

OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PV	photovoltaic
SBAH	Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	UN Assistance Mission to Iraq
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIDO	UN Industrial Development Organization
UNITAD	UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes by Da'esh/ISIL
US	United States
WPS	Water Peace and Security

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# Iraq: From Crisis Hotspot to Promoter of Inter-Regional Dialogue and Reconciliation

This volume assesses how the European Union and Italy can support Baghdad's efforts to promote itself as a regional hub of cooperation, mediation and integration in the Gulf region and broader Middle East. The volume looks into practices on the (sub)national, transnational and regional level which are sustaining and giving concrete expression to Iraq's emerging role identity, but also where gaps remain, major hurdles appear and outside support could be needed. In particular, this is observed by addressing key issue areas in the cultural, social, economic, energetic, and environmental domains where Iraq has potential resources and capacities to (re)build its inclusive identity and where the EU and Italy can support and promote Iraqi efforts to foster internal and inter-regional dialogue and reconciliation.



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