

De-Securitising and Re-Prioritising EU-Iraq Relations

by Flavia Fusco

Located at the heart of the Middle East, connecting the Levant to the Persian Gulf, Iraq has always been at the centre of regional dynamics. Yet, the country is today reduced to a quasi-failed state fundamentally damaged in its political, social and economic fabric, with long-term consequences that trace a *fil rouge* from the 2003 US-led invasion to the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and the country's current structural fragility.

While historically, geographically and politically placed at the centre of the region, Iraq has never been at the core of European policy in the Middle East.¹ From Brussels, Iraq has mostly been considered as falling under the US area of responsibilities, independently from the close economic ties between certain European states and Saddam Hussein's Iraq prior to the international

sanctions regime, or the participation of five European countries in the US-led invasion and occupation of the country.²

Indeed, a proper European Strategy for Iraq only emerged in 2018, in the aftermath of IS's territorial defeat.³ Along with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2012 but only entering into force in August 2018,⁴ these two documents provide the current normative framework for EU-Iraq relations.

¹ European Commission, *The European Union and Iraq - A Framework for Engagement* (COM/2004/417), 9 June 2004, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52004DC0417>.

² The United Kingdom and Poland were active participants in the military coalition (the latter becoming a EU member state in April 2003). Italy, the Netherlands and Spain also supported the US-led invasion.

³ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Iraq*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32406/st05285en18.pdf>.

⁴ European Union and Iraq, *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the One Part, and the Republic of Iraq, of the Other Part*, 11 May 2012, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22012A0731\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22012A0731(01)).

Flavia Fusco is Junior Research Fellow within the "Mediterranean and Middle East" and the "Italian Foreign Policy" programmes of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

Aimed at giving a coherent and strategic imprint to EU policies, the 2018 strategy suffers from important shortcomings. Problems include the security lenses through which Iraq is seen from Brussels, the lack of long-term EU commitment towards Baghdad and the fuzziness of the EU's overall regional agenda.

As a result, the EU Strategy for Iraq, even if only three years old, urgently needs to be updated, clarified and recalibrated. Iraq's current challenges not only threaten the country's internal equilibria, but also have disruptive implications for the wider region as well as for the EU itself.

Iraq is today faced with overlapping economic, social and political crises nurtured by structural fragilities and further exacerbated by the pandemic and collapse in oil prices. Recent projections signal that the oil-dependent Iraqi economy recorded the second highest real GDP contraction in the region in 2020 (-9.5 per cent), with a mild 2 per cent growth expected in 2021.⁵ Oil prices collapsed by -36 per cent in 2020 and the recovery is still threatened by the pandemic.⁶ This, in a country where over 90 per cent of the state budget relies on oil revenues, conveys the breadth of the challenges

⁵ World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects, January 2021*, Washington, World Bank, 5 January 2021, p. 94, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34710>.

⁶ Data retrieved from International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2020 Article IV Consultation with Iraq", in *IMF Press Releases*, No. 21/37 (11 February 2021), <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/02/11/pr2137-iraq-imf-executive-board-concludes-2020-article-iv-consultation>.

at hand, resulting in increased poverty, inequality and unemployment, fuelling social discontent.

Since October 2019, Iraq has experienced a new wave of popular mobilisation that has not ended with the former prime minister's resignation. Being part of a broader socio-economic and political contestation that builds on past protest cycles and a growing political consciousness, the Iraqi *thawra* has exposed the intrinsic connection between corruption, poor public services, inequality and unemployment on the one hand, and the sectarian political system on the other. Iraqi citizens are now demanding their own country.⁷

With Iraq on the brink of collapse, one of the greatest challenges facing the Al-Kadhimi government is finding an appropriate balance between immediate, targeted responses required by the urgency of the situation and long-term reforms desperately needed to tackle the structural drivers of these crises. While the Iraqi government struggles to find the political consensus and necessary resources to walk this tightrope,⁸ the EU has dedicated over a billion euro to Iraq since 2014 and continues to operate in the country in the fields of humanitarian aid, stabilisation, security and political reform. However, EU leverage in Iraq remains limited as does the tangible results of its action.

⁷ Zahra Ali, "Iraqis Demand a Country", in *Middle East Report*, No. 292/293 (Fall/Winter 2019), p. 2-5, <https://merip.org/?p=79032>.

⁸ "IMF Says Iraq Seeking Emergency Loans After Oil Price Plunge", in *Al Jazeera*, 25 January 2021, <https://aje.io/7by5n>.

If it is true that the primary responsibility for the needs of Iraqi citizens pertains to the government, it is also true that international cooperation plays an important supporting role. Yet, the context in which the 2018 strategy was adopted profoundly affected its configuration. This has put the EU strategy document in clear continuity with the regional approach for Syria, Iraq and the IS threat adopted in March 2015 and reviewed in May 2016,⁹ giving it an overarching securitised imprint.

The main drivers of the strategy remain counter-terrorism and migration control,¹⁰ with security-related sectors receiving over 23 per cent of the overall funds disbursed by the EU Commission since 2018.¹¹ Much of the same applies to the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Iraq, the civilian mission at the core of EU strategy in the country. This is dedicated to capacity building for the Iraqi security forces, and was launched in 2017 and extended twice, most recently until April 2022. Aimed at “counter terrorism (including [...] violent extremism) and organised crime, with specific reference to border management [and] financial crime”,¹² the mission has had marginal impact. Among its weaknesses is the “fragmentation of effort”, shortages in personnel – with peak personnel of 95 women and men – and the

political sensitivities related to Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and the Ministry of Interior’s linkages to Iran.¹³

Dealing with security apparatuses in Iraq is indeed a delicate issue, not only for the fragmentation and plurality of branches, but also due to recurrent abuses and human rights concerns. From October 2019 to June 2020, security forces have been accused of 730 deaths among protesters and 25,000 injured, while 53,000 are missing and 2,800 have been detained.¹⁴ Despite Mustafa Al-Kadhimi’s promise to address these violations, a recent Human Rights Watch report underlines that “no senior commanders have been prosecuted”¹⁵ with violence continuing to target protesters, activists, intellectuals and journalists alike, more recently in Iraqi Kurdistan¹⁶ and the southern city of Nasiriya.¹⁷ Human rights advocates and civil society groups have repeatedly called for investigations, also bringing the EU into play.

⁹ Delegation of the European Union to Iraq website: *Iraq and the EU*, <https://europa.eu/!DW36vN>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Author’s calculation from EU Aid Explorer Database available at https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients_en.

¹² EUAM Iraq, *Introduction to EUAM Iraq*, 9 April 2020, <https://europa.eu/!Gw34Bu>.

¹³ Erwin van Veen et al., “Band-aids, Not Bullets. Eu Policies and Interventions in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars”, in *Clingendael CRU Reports*, February 2021, p. 45, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/eu-relevance-in-the-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars>.

¹⁴ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, *Iraq: Violations Without Deterrent*, October 2020, p. 5, <https://euromedmonitor.org/uploads/reports/iraqreven.pdf>.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Iraq. Events of 2020”, in *World Report 2021*, January 2021, p. 345, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/iraq>.

¹⁶ Shelly Kittleson, “Dozens Killed, Injured in Iraq’s Kurdistan Protests as Some Consider Leaving”, in *Al-Monitor*, 11 December 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/28645>.

¹⁷ “At Least Three Protesters Killed in Southern Iraq: Rights Monitor”, in *Al Jazeera*, 26 February 2021, <https://aje.io/u84ed>.

For example, during the early stages of the 2019 protests, the NGO Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor called for the suspension of the EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Iraq in light of widespread abuses.¹⁸ This has again highlighted the problematic nature of channelling development funds through public authorities involved in human rights violations or lacking legitimacy from below.

While obviously the EU has a vested interest in a secure Iraq, it is less obvious to assume that a securitised approach is the most effective strategy. Stronger engagement with Iraqi civil society is needed to strengthen the EU's people-centred approach and add coherence to Europe's commitments to uphold the rule of law and human rights. While these objectives clearly emerge from the 2018 strategy formulation, only a meagre percentage of funds has been dedicated to projects in this domain.¹⁹

By co-chairing the Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq in February 2018, the EU had allocated 300 million for the country's reconstruction and development plans. Nevertheless, as suggested by a large number of observers, the Union has focussed its efforts on technical, and therefore perceived as less sensitive assistance, with also the additional 20

¹⁸ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, *Euro-Med Calls for Suspending the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation*, 29 October 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3368839>.

¹⁹ Author calculation from EU Aid Explorer Database. A cursory overview shows that projects purely related to human rights and the rule of law only received 2.2 per cent of total funds disbursed since 2018.

million euro announced in February 2019 for development programmes mostly dedicated to technical and vocation trainings.²⁰

While presented as a way to "support programmes to help people rebuild their lives and communities",²¹ EU engagement in Iraq *de facto* bypasses any reflection on the *political* role the Union plays and also tends to disregard the *political* impact such assistance inevitably implies, independently from its avowedly neutral or technical objectives.

While the EU strategy for Iraq frames EU engagements as following the humanitarian-stabilisation-development nexus, this has not been followed by a clear prioritisation of the areas of involvement. Relief co-ordination and support together with material relief assistance and services, immediate post-emergency reconstruction and rehabilitation as well as emergency food assistance cover more than 47 per cent of EU disbursements since 2018.²²

This demonstrates how an emergency logic is still prevalent in EU approach vis-à-vis Iraq. This aspect, together with the lack of robust coordination among member states, has often

²⁰ European Commission, *Iraq: EU Announces Additional €50 Million in Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation*, 20 February 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1289.

²¹ European Commission website: *International Partnerships: Iraq*, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/iraq_en.

²² Author's calculation from EU Aid Explorer Database.

undermined the EU role in supporting Iraqi development.

Human rights and respect for the rule of law should be concretely prioritised in EU development programmes with measures aimed to address socio-economic grievances by integrating social, environmental and gender justice considerations in cooperation with Iraqis' themselves. In this regard, recent attacks in Baghdad,²³ the first since January 2018, show that the IS threat is still present. Unaddressed socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation create a conducive environment for sleeper cells and radicalisation, and this should lead the EU to prioritise these dimensions, with particular attention given to the peripheries and basic services.

This could be done by engaging local associations and NGOs in project design and implementation as part of a broader coordinated effort jointly pursued by the EU with the Iraqi government and civil society. Out of the 670 million disbursed by the EU Commission for projects in Iraq in the period 2018–2020, less than 46 million are channelled through local NGOs, with international organisations managing almost the entirety of the funds and Iraqi public entities and government receiving almost 100 million.²⁴ This raises serious concerns regarding – the by no means technical – issue of local ownership, legitimacy and the specific development model

promoted through EU's policies.

Finally, by zooming out from the national level, the EU should also acknowledge the importance Iraq plays in regional dynamics. The EU agenda in Iraq should be carefully framed within a broader, well defined regional strategy, trying to use the EU's reputational leverage by building on Iraqi perceptions of the EU's neutrality in regional geopolitics.²⁵

To this end, the EU would be well advised to consider Iraq as an integral part of its southern enlarged neighbourhood, rather than something to deal with only in times of crises, in an effort to contain or mitigate spillovers. The recent visit of Pope Francis serves as an example of the kind of concrete, courageous and visible action required in Iraq and the region. EU should thus expand efforts to promote the principles of coexistence and respect for diversity both within Iraq and at the regional level,²⁶ through targeted people-to-people cultural initiatives and cross-religious and ethnic exchanges, as well as cultural diplomacy, building on past dialogue efforts sponsored by some EU member states together with regional actors.²⁷

²⁵ Renad Mansour, "Views from the Region: Iraq", in European Council on Foreign Relations, *Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region*, December 2019, https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/iraq.

²⁶ For further insights into how EU can play a positive role in fostering good relations between Iraq and neighbouring countries, see the EU-funded project "Iraq and Its Neighbours – Enhancing Dialogue and Regional Integration in West Asia" jointly coordinated by Carpo and EastWest Institute, <https://carpo-bonn.org/?p=5480>.

²⁷ The UN Alliance of Civilizations provides an

²³ "ISIL Takes Responsibility for Deadly Baghdad Suicide Bombings", in *Al Jazeera*, 22 January 2021, <https://aje.io/sdjak>.

²⁴ Author's calculation from EU Aid Explorer Database.

Overall, what the EU truly needs in Iraq and the region is an acknowledgement of its present and past responsibilities concerning the *political* role it is actually playing, even behind the façade of technical assistance. A return to the EU's core values as the guiding principles for a new, progressive foreign policy²⁸ in the Middle East and North Africa is therefore needed.

This *return*, in contrast with both a revival of the normative agenda of the past and the current realist turn in European foreign policy, should rather result in a middle-way based on a better filtering of EU policies through its founding principles. This would at the very least add more coherence to EU policies at home and abroad, contributing to fill the gap between EU rhetoric and action and providing an avenue to re-frame and overcome the old dichotomy between trying to export EU values in a neo-colonial fashion or overshadowing them completely for the pursuit of its strategic and material interests.

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example of such efforts and the positive role José Zapatero's Spain played in following up and bringing cultural debates to the UN. This effort also provided an important counter-narrative to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* discourse, by juxtaposing dialogue and mutual respect to divisions and prejudice.

²⁸ Daniela Huber, "The EU in the World: The Progressive Potential", in *Constellations*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 2020), p. 621-630.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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