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ALI AL-MAWLAWI

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Iraq at a Crossroads: Reconfiguring the Role of the United Nations

Iraq's relationship with the United Nations has endured much turbulence over the past 40 years. Since 2003, the UN has invested heavily in helping to bring about peace and security in the country. For 13 years during the sanctions period, Iraq was considered a pariah state that threatened international peace and security. Today, having emerged from a costly 4-years war with ISIS, Iraq stands at a crossroads and the international community - including the United Nations - needs to reconfigure its commitments to the country in order to consolidate recent gains. A critical evaluation of the UN's interventions in Iraq needs to be undertaken to determine the best course of action moving forward.¹ In doing so, it is important to look back at how the UN's role in Iraq has evolved, and to take heed of the hurdles and shortfalls.



Turbulent relations

A founding member of the United Nations, Iraq was admitted as a member state on 21 December 1945 and twice held a seat as a non-permanent member of the Security Council. The first UN programs in Iraq began in 1955. The most fundamental change to Iraq's relationship with the UN came in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, a move reserved only for the most flagrant abuses to the international order, the Security Council issued several resolutions including 687 (1990), which authorized military force against Iraq and held it "liable under international law for any direct loss [and] damage" resulting from its invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Crippling economic sanctions were subsequently imposed on Iraq in addition to an arms embargo.

¹ Elizabeth Sellwood. The Role of the United Nations in Middle East Conflict Prevention: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AB1CF70D4A5E74A4492575EC0005FECA-Full_Report.pdf

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For the next 13 years, the UN's involvement in Iraq focused on three core functions: imposing sanctions to limit Iraq's ability to develop weapons of mass destruction; deploying IAEA teams to monitor and inspect the country's weapons programs; and administering the Oil-for-Food Programme.²

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the UN's role was initially defined by Resolution 1483 of 22 May 2003, which outlined a framework for establishing a political mission that would play a key role in supporting the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council to help pave the way for a transition to a fully-fledged and elected Iraqi government. On 14 August 2003, the Security Council voted under Resolution 1500³ to formally establish the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). Led by the Secretary-General's Special Representative in Iraq, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the mission was composed of nearly 650 international personnel, 300 of which were based in the Canal Hotel in Baghdad. But a major turning point in the UN's engagement came just days later when a suicide truck bomb struck the Canal Hotel, killing 22 people including de Mello. A month later, the building was targeted again by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, leading to the evacuation of most of the UN staff. For the next 4 years, the UN severely restricted its presence in Iraq and programs were largely managed from neighboring countries. UNAMI's mandate was renewed each year at the request of the Iraqi government but remained unchanged until August 2007, when a major decision was taken to greatly expand the mandate with the adoption of Resolution 1770 (2007)⁴.

The resolution came to define the future trajectory of the mission, affirming the UN's role in "supporting the efforts of the Iraqi people and government to strengthen institutions for representative government, promote political dialogue and national reconciliation, engage neighboring countries, assist vulnerable groups, including refugees and internally displaced persons, and promote the protection of human rights and judicial and legal reform".⁵ Two key aspects of their work involved supporting the implementation of a 2007 joint initiative known as the International Compact with Iraq; and providing "active donor coordination of critical reconstruction and assistance programs through the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI)".⁶

Lessons learned from a decade of UN involvement

Ten years on, Iraq's priorities today appear to be distinctly similar. The devastation caused by the war with ISIS, combined with the fiscal shortfall means that the country will need to mobilize the collective efforts of the international community if it is to rebuild the liberated provinces and provide for the millions of Iraqis who have been affected by the conflict. There are important lessons to be gained from the experiences of the previous decade, especially in relation to failures and shortfalls in achieving stated development targets.

The 2007 Compact was supposed to be a five-year national plan⁷, led by the Iraqi government and co-chaired by the UN with the support of the World Bank and IMF, to set the country on a path to peace, sound governance and economic sustainability. As part of the agreement, the government would commit to a comprehensive set of benchmarks, and in return, the United Nations would channel the support of international donors and

² All measures related to the Oil-for-Food Programme were concluded in December 2017. See UNSC Resolution 2390 (2017): <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13109.doc.htm>

³ UNSC Resolution 1500 (2003): <http://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7843.doc.htm>

⁴ UNSC Resolution 1770 (2007): <http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/sc9095.doc.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fact sheet on the International Compact with Iraq: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/note6078.doc.htm>

⁷ "International Compact with Iraq: mid-year progress report": http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/iraq/mid_year_progress_rpt.pdf

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multilateral organizations to facilitate the implementation of the Compact. Ultimately, the goal was to “restore the Iraqi people’s trust in the state and its ability to protect them and meet their basic needs”. Likewise, the IRFFI sought to establish a vehicle whereby international donors could pledge funds that were earmarked for programs in line with the Compact’s aims and objectives. Within the IRFFI, two funds were established – one administered by the UN, and the other by the World Bank – that had accumulated over \$1.84 billion in donations by 2008. These ambitious endeavors started strongly, but within 18 months they had fizzled out. It is no coincidence that the resurgence of the UN in Iraq came soon after the “surge” of US troops was launched in January 2007. Together with their Iraqi partners, a major counterterrorism offensive paved the way for a markedly enhanced security environment by the summer of 2008. But by this point, it had become clear that the United States was intending a major drawdown of US troops - beginning in 2009 and culminating in the withdrawal of all combat troops by 2011. As the number of US personnel gradually dissipated, so did the international community’s interest in the country.

Today, following the liberation of all Iraqi territory from ISIS and the formal end of military operations, the country stands at a critical juncture. Both the government and the international community now need to reconfigure their priorities to ensure that the next set of challenges can be confronted head on. Much like the 2007 Compact, the UN’s existing approach seeks to mobilize the efforts of the international community to support Iraq’s post-war needs. UNDP is administering a donors fund called the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) to accelerate the return of displaced persons by restoring basic services to liberated areas, while the World Bank along with other international partners organized the conference in Kuwait in February this year to attract major international firms to invest in reconstruction. But as the drawdown of military personnel from the Global Coalition commences, there is a worry that the international community may again lose focus.

The way ahead – an important juncture

United Nations Iraq (UN Iraq) is composed of two distinct entities: UNAMI, which reports to the Department of Political Affairs in New York; and the United Nations Country Team, which incorporates some 20 agencies, funds and programs that operate in the country.

When the Security Council renewed UNAMI’s mandate in July 2017, it included an important new requirement for the Secretary-General to conduct an **independent external assessment** of the UN’s work in Iraq by 15 October 2017.⁸ The assessment would look at “structure and staffing, related resources, priorities, and areas in which it enjoyed comparative advantages, in order to ensure the most appropriate configuration of the mission and the United Nations country team”. Not since 2007 has there been such a thorough undertaking to evaluate the UN’s mission in Iraq. The report was presented to the Security Council on 15 November in a letter by the Secretary-General. It recommends significant changes to how the mission formulates strategy and measures results; it proposes a restructuring of resources and staffing; and the report sets out guidelines for where UNAMI should set its priorities. The report acknowledges that operational ineffectiveness is endemic within the structure of the mission. The dichotomy between UNAMI and the country team creates tensions and duplicates work efforts, notwithstanding the confusion it causes to Iraqi stakeholders. A mechanism that integrates the work of all UN actors needs to be adopted to ensure unity of purpose.

⁸ Letter dated 15 November 2017 by the UN Secretary-General on the independent external assessment of UNAMI: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1739111.pdf>

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A breakdown of **UNAMI's 2017 budget** shows that only 20% of the total budget is allocated for staff directly involved in the implementation of its mandate, while a shocking 50% of the budget is spent on security and support staff costs. There are at least three steps that could be taken to reduce these costs so that that a greater share of budgetary spending can be channeled to Iraqi beneficiaries. **Firstly**, the mission needs to reduce its reliance on private security contractors and the UN Guard Unit, and incorporate Iraqi Security Forces into their security architecture. These adjustments can be made in light of the significantly reduced threat levels across the country. Often such moves are faced with strong resistance from existing security personnel with vested interests, but the mission needs to account for the missed opportunities that arise from immobile staff. Restricted access to Iraqi stakeholders has a direct bearing on the delivery and impact of UN programs and interventions, in addition to its overall public perception. **Secondly**, the mission needs to incorporate more local Iraqi specialists, interns and volunteers into their ranks while reducing reliance on costly international civil servants and consultants. And **finally**, as the report rightly recommends, UN Iraq should change the rest and recuperation cycle for UN staff from four weeks to six weeks. Not only would this cut costs, but it would enhance continuity of work and reduce duplication of efforts.

The report also describes the **trust and goodwill** that exists between the people of Iraq and the United Nations. The authors are correct in pointing out the UN's unique role as an honest broker "that no other actor can come close to fulfilling". That trust is at times susceptible to erosion when the United Nations fails to communicate its work clearly to local stakeholders. Two examples come to mind: when the initial results of the 2010 parliamentary elections were contested, the UN electoral team, which worked closely with Iraq's electoral commission to administer the vote tallying process, failed to alleviate concerns about discrepancies that had been raised by observers, which created suspicions about the UN's role in the elections. Secondly, the infamous "Sunni conference" that was hosted by Qatar in September 2015 led to widespread unease in Iraq because it transpired that representatives from the outlawed Baath Party and various Iraqi insurgency groups had also participated. The UN's special envoy to Iraq himself reportedly played a key role in mediations at the conference, and the failure to publicly explain what UNAMI was doing in Doha created bad blood with Baghdad, given that any assistance that UNAMI offers should be done at the request of the Iraqi government.

Nevertheless, one sure indicator of the UN's positive image is the fact that Grand Ayatollah Sistani continues to meet with UN officials whereas he has consistently declined meetings with all foreign diplomatic missions and even Iraqi politicians in recent years. Furthermore, a recent nationwide poll by Al-Bayan Center showed that some 43% of respondents were in favor of replacing Iraq's electoral commission with a UN agency that could organize and administer the elections.⁹ Although this would run counter to constitutional provisions, the finding reflects a degree of trust for the UN among the Iraqi public.

Greater alignment between UNAMI's objectives and the needs of the Iraqi people is also an important area for improvement. There is often a mismatch between the priorities that the UN sets itself (translated into programs and funds) and those of Iraqi policymakers. A case in point is where to prioritize the issue of national reconciliation. The independent assessment commissioned by the UN recommends six strategic priorities for UNAMI: a) prevention of conflict; b) national reconciliation; c) promotion of human rights; d) protection of minorities; e) good governance; and f) support for Iraqi sovereignty and regional reintegration. Contrast these priorities with the official letter of request by the Iraqi foreign ministry for renewing UNAMI's mandate, which outlines the following areas of support: "reconstruction of liberated areas, ensuring the return of displaced persons,

⁹ Al-Bayan Center, Voter Attitudes Towards the Next Round of Elections in Iraq: <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2017/11/1290/>

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strengthening human rights, promoting the rule of law, execution of planning programs, building capacity and national reconciliation".¹⁰ To illustrate the point further, the above mentioned Bayan Center poll found that under 7% of responders nationwide felt that reconciliation or tackling sectarianism should be top priorities for candidates running in next year's elections, compared to 50% who were concerned about the economic welfare, jobs, services and corruption. One way for the UN to bridge this strategic gap is to increase engagements with stakeholders through focus groups and public opinion polling to understand where needs are most acute, and as a means to measure the UN's performance.

Indeed, a recent series of interactions between Iraqi stakeholders and UN agencies in New York, facilitated by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, provided encouraging signs of greater openness to this form of dialogue.¹¹ Identifying Iraq's root problems through an Iraqi lens not only enhances the policymaking process but it creates a symbiotic relationship whereby confidence between Iraqi actors and UN partners is strengthened.

Ultimately, as successive UN Security Council resolutions have emphasized since 2003, the goal is to steer Iraq towards a "stable, prosperous and democratic future, at peace with its neighbors". The UN took strong measures against Iraq under Saddam Hussein because it was considered a threat to international peace and security. Today, there is a greater realization that investing in peace and security inside Iraq brings positive returns for the international community at large.

About this paper:

This paper was inspired by a study visit of a high-ranking Iraqi delegation from Baghdad and Erbil to the United Nations and other institutions in New York in October 2017. This visit entitled "The future role of the United Nations in Iraq" was organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's New York office in cooperation with the foundation's Syria/Iraq Office. The author of this publication, Ali Al-Mawlawi, was part of this delegation. Ali is Head of Research at the Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies in Baghdad (www.bayancenter.org).



The Iraqi delegates with representatives of the World Bank (from the left): Hassan Hadad, Dr. Mohammedali Taha, Prof. Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, Björn Gillsäter (World Bank), Dr. Hanan Alfatlawi, Nils Wörmer (KAS Syria/Iraq), Dr. Claire Kfoury (World Bank), Ali Al-Mawlawi, Dr. Stefan Friedrich (KAS New York).

¹⁰ Letter dated 14 June 2017 from the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Secretary-General: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1290351/files/S_2017_518-EN.pdf

¹¹ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Tackle the problems at their roots – with the help of the UN: <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.50530/>