

# Scaling Up the EU's Involvement for a Secure and Stable Iraq

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# I. Assessing Iraq's Needs Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic



The COVID-19 health crisis has forced many governments around the world to operate on the basis of damage control and prevention. However, in the Middle East, many countries are struggling to contend with the pandemic on top of ongoing civil conflicts, the cycle of poverty, weak public infrastructure, mass displacement, and humanitarian disasters. These layered challenges are especially prevalent in Iraq. The European Commission's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations unit (ECHO) estimates that around 1.5 million Iraqis remain displaced as a result of proxy conflict and terrorism, and a total of 4 million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance. (1) The large presence of Syrian refugees (about 250,000) sheltering in Iraq places an extra strain on Iraqi civil authorities and the already limited provision of essential services, such as water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the preexistent lack of public health infrastructure across the country. (2) This is also reflected in the rate of COVID-19 fatalities in Iraq. As of 4 September, 2020 Iraq has counted 242,284 cases of COVID-19 and 7,201 fatalities, which may have increased since the time of publication.

Iraq's tenuous security situation continues to aggravate these humanitarian challenges. In addition to the resurgence of IS activity in the north, Iraq is caught in the middle of an ongoing proxy conflict between Iran and the United States, which endangers the civilian population and threatens to destabilize national security. The Iraqi public is incredibly pessimistic about the presence of American troops and the activities of Iran-backed militias, and does not want to be ensnared in a larger conflict between the U.S. and Iran. (3)

However, as the United States begins to disengage with Iraq, its growing national security crisis presents an opportunity for the EU to take advantage of its status as a privileged partner of Baghdad. The EU, along with individual member states such as Germany, has secured a precious commodity from Iraqi officials: trust. (4) Capitalizing on mutual trust, the EU could enlarge its role in the future of Iraq by increasing monetary and humanitarian aid and incorporating the values of human security into new regional security dialogues. Such actions would align with the EU's security and economic interests, as well as its geopolitical ambitions to extend its role as a regional security partner and mature global leader (5).

1) (ECHO), *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Iraq Factsheet. (2020).*

2) *Ibid.*

3) MDPD KAS in Brussels. *Navigating Stormy Weather: Dissecting the European and U.S. Contribution to Security & Stability in Iraq. Podcast Audio. 2020.*

4) *Ibid.*

5) *Ibid.*



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# II. The Extent of EU Involvement in Iraq – Programs & Funding



The EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2012 and formally enacted in 2018, upholds the EU's assumed responsibility to assist the "Iraqi population and supporting efforts to achieve peace and stability in the country."<sup>(6)</sup> To contribute to the necessary security sector reforms, the Council of the European Union established a Common Security and Defense Policy Mission (CSDP Mission) in Iraq in October 2017. Within this EU Advisory Mission (EUAM), European policy experts were embedded in the Iraqi Ministry of Interior to provide technical guidance to local officials. <sup>(7)</sup> The EUAM mandate in Iraq has since been extended twice, and international experts will continue to be deployed to the mission until April 30, 2022, or until a new extension is agreed upon. Since the partnership began, experts have implemented various thematic reform programs, including a five-year development plan (2019-2023) for the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, the Human Rights and Gender Strategy, the National Counter Violent Extremism Strategy, the Civil Society Strategy, Organized Crime Strategy, and Counter Terrorism Strategy. <sup>(8)</sup>

Since 2014, numerous EU aid instruments have contributed billions of euros to crisis response and humanitarian aid in Iraq. This includes "€435.27 million in humanitarian aid; €320 million in development funding; €150.9 million from the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis (EUTF); € 42.6 million in crisis response assistance from the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and €6.5 million from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and [partner] civil society organizations." <sup>(9)</sup> Portions of this aid were used to promote good governance, create jobs, support rural livelihoods, and improve basic public services such as healthcare, clean water, sanitation, and education. Amongst the displaced population, special legal and crisis counseling services were offered to survivors of abuse and wrongful detention. Recent estimates by ECHO suggest that 200,000 people have been reached by the EU's humanitarian aid missions to Iraq. However, the stress of the pandemic, regional security crisis, and depleted public infrastructure have since increased the number of people in need of assistance. <sup>(10)</sup>



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<sup>6)</sup> European Parliament. "EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (Resolution)." Strasbourg, 2018.

<sup>7)</sup> European Union External Action Service. *The EU and Iraq*. EEAS (Brussels: 2019).

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

<sup>9)</sup> European Union External Action Service. *The EU and Iraq*. EEAS (Brussels: 2019).

<sup>10)</sup> (ECHO), *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*. Iraq Factsheet. (2020).

# III. Scaling Up the EU-Iraq Partnership



The mounting public health crisis caused by the coronavirus should prompt the EU to bring the Team Europe Approach to all of its partner countries in MENA, including Iraq. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has stated previously that the virus will remain a global hazard until everyone is guaranteed to be safe from infection. The European Commission and European External Action Service have already allotted €20 billion to support partner countries, €240 million of which will be allocated to Jordan and Lebanon, where vast populations of refugees and IDPs (mainly from Syria) currently reside. (11) Given this emphasis on assisting refugees and the countries hosting them, the EU should direct a similar aid package to Iraq. Currently, Iraqi IDPs and Syrian refugees are coping with the instability caused by the US-Iran proxy conflict, the danger of increased IS activity, the conflict still raging in Syria, the state's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its violent response to peaceful protests.

While these emergency funds may address the immediate concerns plaguing Iraq, the EU should also invest in long-term solutions to incorporate human security into its broader security dialogue. Doing so would not only allow the EU to embrace a mature leadership role in the Middle East, but also bring a sense of security to the surrounding region and its own borders. Given the past success of EUAM collaborations between Iraqi officials and European advisors, the EU could easily transition from bilateral security dialogues and assume a mediating role to improve regional security negotiations. Although the EU may never scale up enough hard power to replace the US as a stabilizing power in the Middle East, it may instead be preferable for the EU to embrace its soft power role and provide more support for peaceful dialogue, human rights, human security, and environmental conservation efforts throughout the region. (12) Additionally, the EU should scale-up its contribution to Iraqi security sector reform in order to enable the state to provide security and stability to its own population. While the EUAM's extension indicates the EU's commitment to facilitating the autonomy and safety of Iraqi security structures, this mandate should be widened both geographically and in principle. Overall, the goal of the renewed EUAM mandate should be to maximize the human security of the entire MENA region through the EU's partnership with Iraq.

Since the EU is regarded by many as an impartial and neutral actor, it is well-positioned to expand its soft power through an improved partnership in Iraq. (13) In particular, the guiding principle of human security should be more thoroughly incorporated into the language and guidelines of security dialogue in order to align solutions with the needs of the most vulnerable communities. As such, aid should be made conditional on the acceptance and implementation of these guiding principles, as well as on the elimination of corruption. These principles should also drive the "diplomatic and developmental efforts that help address the region's many deeper ecological, economic and social problems." (14) In particular, the EU has a unique opportunity to expand its advisory role in Iraq in order to support the civil society groups that are already on the ground. Through the EUAM, the EU will continue to support the national government, subnational authorities, and civil society groups in achieving the multiyear strategies, ensuring local ownership of the goals, and monitoring their implementation. However, such efforts should remain cognizant of the safety of civil society actors; too often, the outward appearance of working with an international partner can put activists at risk. (15) Therefore, the EU and its non-governmental partners should collaborate to amplify the voices of civil society actors and pressure the Iraqi government to recognize the public's concerns, while maintaining awareness about the potential risks. In addition to facilitating a stronger civil society environment, the EU should form multilateral relationships with the parliament, political parties, and the media to contribute to stronger government oversight and accountability. A peaceful democracy is a functional democracy. Therefore, the EUAM approach should be combined with more comprehensive EU external action instruments to help peaceful, pro-democracy protesters oppose the corruption of the political elite and advocate for tangible solutions. As a mostly peaceful soft power, the EU offers better partnership prospects for stability and peace in Iraq, unlike hard powers such as the U.S., China, or Russia. Further, the EU should recognize how its own interests may be served by contributing to stability and safety in Iraq and the surrounding region.

11) European Union External Action Service. "Team Europe" - Global EU Response to Covid-19 Supporting Partner Countries and Fragile Populations." news release, April 11, 2020

12) Erwin van Veen. "A Covid-19 Upgrade of EU Engagement in the Middle East." Clingendael Institute, May 2020.

13) (ECHO), European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Iraq Factsheet. (2020).

14) Erwin van Veen. "A Covid-19 Upgrade of EU Engagement in the Middle East." Clingendael Institute, May 2020.

15) MDPD KAS in Brussels. Navigating Stormy Weather: Dissecting the European and U.S. Contribution to Security & Stability in Iraq. Podcast Audio. 2020.



Firstly, what happens in Iraq usually does not stay in Iraq. When instability and violence drive displacement, the surrounding region has to bear the impact of migration and the needs of refugees. This process has already played out in Europe, and the same can be said of violence and terrorism, which also tend to spill-over. Therefore, the EU can maximize its own security and make good on its humanitarian promises by investing in human security in Iraq.

Secondly, from the perspective of the international political order, the EU is now presented with a unique opportunity to become a stronger security partner not just in Iraq, but in the surrounding MENA region. Years of proxy conflicts between the U.S., Iran, and Iraqi militias have left a sour taste, and the public perception of the EU in Iraq is considerably more favorable. <sup>(16)</sup> Rather than mimic the hard power of the U.S., the EU should use this unique moment to change the tides of international involvement in Iraq and set a course towards peace.



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<sup>16)</sup> *Ibid.*

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