

# Enacting Security Sector Reform in Iraq: The Naivety of International Actors

An analysis of the international actors working to enact security sector reform in Iraq, and the challenges they face operating in the multi-faceted security apparatus.

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**RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES** – POLICY BRIEF

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country has fallen victim to foreign influence on multiple fronts, as competing actors vie for power and work towards creating an Iraq suitable to their strategic and geopolitical positions. International involvement, on behalf of the United States, Iran, Turkey and the International Coalition<sup>1</sup>, which includes NATO and the European Union (EU), is vital to the future of Iraq. Many of these actors are present in order to enact security

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<sup>1</sup> The international coalition is a group of 83 partners, countries and international organizations working in Iraq to enact security sector reform, and to assist in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. The Global Coalition was originally founded to defeat the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, but still exists in the country in a capacity building and support mechanism for the Iraqi government and military forces. <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>

sector reform and to bolster the recently formed government, under the direction of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

The international actors that operate in Iraq face many challenges. In recent months there have been profound requests to end international involvement in the country (mainly referring to the United States) which have been seen through demands of the protesters as well as recurring attacks on military bases hosting international troops and the US embassy in Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> Further, the desire to end international involvement from within Iraq has also come from various militia groups, some aligned with different factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), seen through multiple attacks on international bases hosting US and international troops and staff.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the challenges of operating in Iraq, the need for security sector reform in the country is clear. However, this reform may come in ways that are not aligned with the desires and goals of international actors, who operate in official capacities, under largely democratic values. The largely Westfalian, state-centric, principles that international institutions operate under, and intend to implement security sector reform through, may inhibit fruitful and lasting reform in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> By failing to recognize the complex system that does not head way to one, monopolized state actor operating in the security environment in Iraq, security sector reform in Iraq must be formulated through the engagement of multiple stakeholders working in the security environment.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. POWER COMPETITION AND A NEW ERA FOR THE UNITED STATES**

### **2.1 Failures, Misunderstandings and Geopolitical Action**

It is no secret that the United States has taken on a major role in Iraq over the past nearly 20 years. However, since the rise and fall of IS, the United States has taken a keen interest in enacting security sector reform in Iraq, largely in part to counter regional adversary, Iran.<sup>6</sup> The role of the United States in Iraq, since the beginning

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/iraq-thousands-rally-calling-for-us-troop-withdrawal/a-52134547>;  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/12/30/us-iran-military-tensions/>

<sup>3</sup> For further information, please see the BIC publication from December 2020, which outlines the paramilitary groups in Iraq.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/master-iraq-edited-volume-.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/master-iraq-edited-volume-.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/using-smart-power-counter-iran-iraq>

of the Trump administration has been tumultuous at best, as Trump acted erratically throughout his presidency, withdrawing troops and leaving large gaps in the security sector that the US has sustained for nearly two decades. Most significantly, on 3 January 2020 the Trump administration cleared an airstrike targeting Iranian Major General, Qassem Soleimani, along with the leader of the PMF Abu Muhandi al-Muhandis.

The death of Muhandis and Soleimani drastically shifted geopolitical alliances within Iraq and exposed the underlying allegiances that PMF groups had. The entirety of 2020 challenged the US in Iraq, as the largest US embassy in the world was repeatedly targeted by PMF forces.<sup>7</sup> Further, these attacks brought into question the efficacy of a US political and diplomatic presence in the country, and in September 2020, the Trump administration threatened to withdraw the US Ambassador to Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the Trump administration took a clear stance on the PMF forces in Iraq, noting that the “pro-Iranian PMFs pose a threat to the US.”<sup>9</sup> This immensely oversimplifies the alliances that these groups have, and labelling many of the groups as Iranian proxies.<sup>10</sup> Not all PMF forces are aligned with Iran, and many operate independently, born from the fragments in the Iraqi security sector and the need to protect communities.<sup>11</sup> While some PMF groups have pledged their allegiance, or denote their support towards Iran, this is not the case for many of the Sunni or Shia PMF groups. The failure to understand the complexities of these groups, as well as their position in the Iraqi security sector, significantly inhibited the ability to create lasting reform.

## **2.2 The Biden Presidency: Understanding and Engaging as a way Forward**

Moving forward, the US, as well as other international actors that operate in Iraq, should identify the threats within the security sector that they anticipate, and engage in a deeper understanding of how these groups are situated within the

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<sup>7</sup> <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-hybrid-armed-actors-paradox-a-necessary-compromise/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraq-baghdad-embassy-tensions-iran/2020/12/02/79141136-34c3-11eb-9699-00d311f13d2d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraq-baghdad-embassy-tensions-iran/2020/12/02/79141136-34c3-11eb-9699-00d311f13d2d_story.html)

<sup>9</sup> [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713\\_Strategic\\_Dialogue\\_FIN.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200713_Strategic_Dialogue_FIN.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>

<sup>11</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/57a346b17d6da07ae732ba1437520fd2>

security sector. The complexities of the Iraqi security sector, with the integration of PMF groups as formally recognized non-state militias operating under state control, has thus far proven difficult to navigate as the security sector is vastly different, with various security actors operating in different areas of the country. For example, the formal Iraqi military forces operate, by-and-large, well within the capital region of Baghdad, but in the periphery there is a disconnect in the ability of state-sponsored security forces to ensure the safety of civilians, which is largely how non-state militias emerge.<sup>12</sup>

Now, under the Biden administration, the United States will need to clearly identify their stance towards Iraq, which has yet to be seen. The US stance seems to be more promising under the Biden administration, as the US plans to prioritize regional peace and easing geopolitical tensions.<sup>13</sup> Engaging Iraq and identifying measures for a sustainable security sector reform should be one of the top priorities of the Biden administration. Iraq continues to experience attacks that threaten the already fragile security apparatus in country. The Biden administration will have to address these attacks, that threaten the lives of both Iraqis and international forces. Ultimately, the stability of any country relies on the permanence of a security sector and also military forces.<sup>14</sup> Other international actors have faced similar challenges in operating in Iraq and have questioned their future in being able to facilitate security sector reform.

### 3. A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: THE ROLE OF THE EU AND NATO

#### 3.1 Beyond Baghdad: Is anybody out there?

The European Union constitutes one of Iraq's greatest partners. The EU specifically is Iraq's second biggest trade partner<sup>15</sup>, and has engaged in an ongoing Advisory Mission (EUAM Iraq) since 2017.<sup>16</sup> EUAM Iraq is a civilian-led operation that supports the coherent implementation of Iraqi National Security Strategy. Unfortunately, the capabilities of the EUAM remain rather limited in nature, due to

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<sup>12</sup>[https://ecfr.eu/publication/torn\\_between\\_two\\_allies\\_europeans\\_can\\_reduce\\_iraqi\\_dependence\\_on\\_iran\\_us/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/torn_between_two_allies_europeans_can_reduce_iraqi_dependence_on_iran_us/)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55752102>

<sup>14</sup> <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/01/23/the-leading-causes-behind-todays-unstable-iraq/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://bit.ly/39jzc8M>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/07/iraq-eu-extends-advisory-mission-on-security-sector-reform/>

many restrictions in operating in such a hostile environment<sup>17</sup>, as well as the restrictions of their mission only to Baghdad.<sup>18</sup> As previously noted, the security situation within Iraq varies significantly within each region, noting that the Iraqi Security Forces operate mostly in the regions near and around Baghdad. In trying to advise on security sector reform as well as assess the needs of Iraqis, the EUAM is failing to access a large majority of the population which experience a completely different reality beyond Baghdad.

The purpose of the mission is to engage in focused projects to maximize the impact of these initiatives, while also avoiding intersection between the other missions and actors that are involved in security sector reform, such as NATO, the US, and the international coalition.<sup>19</sup> Further, the engagement from the EUAM that exists only within Baghdad is additionally constricted to a small group of officials that the mission engages with. There is little interaction with civilians or members of informal groups, such as those that comprise the PMF.<sup>20</sup> There are multiple reasons for this, but ultimately the lack of engagement in local initiatives, and the disengagement with non-state actors further reiterates the lack of understanding of the significance of the PMF as a structure within the formal security sector in Iraq. The initiatives and projects that the EU has undertaken in Iraq are carried out through bilateral collaboration with the relevant Iraqi officials, however none of their missions are done through grassroots or civilian-led initiatives, but solely through cooperation with the Iraqi government, demonstrating a high-level to high-level dialogue and cooperation, but nothing at the societal level.<sup>21</sup> By choosing not to engage with these non-state actors, for whichever reasons, the likelihood of enacting serious, lasting security sector reform with international assistance, is unlikely.

### 3.2 Capacity Building for Who?

Working in tandem with the US (as a key ally) and the EUAM, the NATO Mission Iraq is a non-combat advisory, training and capacity building mission established in

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<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> Information from an interview with an anonymous EU Official operating in Iraq. Interview conducted in November 2020.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/07/iraq-eu-extends-advisory-mission-on-security-sector-reform/>

<sup>19</sup> Information from an interview with an anonymous EU Official operating in Iraq

<sup>20</sup> Information from an interview with an anonymous EU Official operating in Iraq

<sup>21</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/32427/The%20EU%20and%20Iraq](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/32427/The%20EU%20and%20Iraq)

2018.<sup>22</sup> The goal of this mission is to train Iraqi security forces to strengthen their abilities to prevent and counter threats that the country faces.<sup>23</sup> The actions and mission of NATO in Iraq are clear and designate specific terms to the limitations of their mission. As NATO forces do not engage in field operations alongside Iraqi forces, they place a greater focus on prevention and education in supporting the current security forces in Iraq. However, the NATO Mission in Iraq only focuses on the greater Baghdad area in its operations and training.<sup>24</sup> The significance that international actors place on the security of Baghdad is understandable, but further establishes the division between Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, where many regions face great security concerns, including IS resurgence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

International involvement in security sector reform is the only path forward to creating lasting peace in the country. However, the solution that many international actors may believe in, that of a single state-sponsored, Westfalian-esque, non-inclusive strategy, will only result in failure. Enacting security sector reform requires the recognition of paramilitary groups as a vital pillar of the security sector in Iraq. Not all groups within the PMF share the same beliefs or alliances, and simply thinking that all these paramilitary groups represent a significant role in the future of Iraq would be incorrect. However, the role these groups have will carry Iraq into a more secure future, as the current state-led military structure, without the PMF, is insufficient in protecting Iraqis.

Also, identifying potential avenues for the inclusion and support of paramilitary groups into the formal structure of the Iraqi security sector will likely result in certain reforms of these groups internally as well. Failing to recognize the role of PMF groups in the future of Iraq's military, and security apparatus more broadly, will likely only continue the current cycle of tension, insecurity, and a calamitous security environment.

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<sup>22</sup><https://bit.ly/3ofmAUw>

<sup>23</sup><https://bit.ly/3ofmAUw>

<sup>24</sup> <https://bit.ly/3ofmAUw>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Biden Administration:

- Prioritize peace and lasting security sector reform through strategic engagement with groups in and beyond the state structure. This could be achieved by utilizing pre-existing, on-ground institutions such as civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations who are working to promote security sector reform in Iraq. Engaging militarily, without proper dialogue will only further isolate the US and endanger international troops.
- Prioritize security sector reform in a manner that serves the best interests of Iraqis first and foremost, rather than pursuing policy changes based on geopolitical gains. Geopolitical tensions, via Iran and/or its proxies should not play out in Iraq or the US's stake in security sector reform.
- Request a strategic assessment of the current conditions on-ground, specifically relating to presence of IS terrorist cells. Should terrorist attacks continue, the United States, along with the International Coalition, will need to revamp measures to combat terrorist groups throughout Iraq.

To the EU, NATO, and International Coalition:

- Engaging with multiple stakeholders, including civilians and paramilitary actors is vital to understanding security sector reform. The EUAM must diversify the actors that they engage with, noting that the solution to peace in Iraq may not constitute one that is led solely by the formal government.
- Actors operating in Iraq must engage with stakeholders beyond Baghdad. There is no hopeful security sector reform without a full-country approach, which involves security actors beyond the capital.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

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