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THE FUTURE OF IRAQ: SECURITY, STABILISATION AND REGIONAL VOCATION

Draft Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last two decades, Iraq has undergone civil war, occupation, a rise in sectarianism and a deep crisis of confidence in the state and its institutions. Some observers claim that Iraq itself is an artificial construct, an amalgam of ethnically and religiously varied populations too diverse to unite under one flag. But this belies the long historical experience of the country and the powerful and enduring appeal of Iraqi identity.

Since 2019, the security situation in Iraq has improved, but the state must nevertheless contend with significant internal threats and external meddling. Internal divisions are mirrored in rival militias and reinforced by non-Iraqi actors, each pursuing their own ambitions. Regional actors including Iran, the Gulf monarchies, and Turkey play a role in the country as are the United States, NATO member countries and – to a lesser degree – NATO itself. Regional rivalries and a greater competition between the NATO Allies on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, also shape Iraq's security landscape.

The United States has long been the most powerful external player in the region. US strategic thinkers are increasingly concerned that the Middle East is distracting US attention and resources from more fundamental challenges elsewhere. The recent withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan was partly driven by this logic. The US military has also reduced troop levels in Iraq, although its forces continue to conduct operations against terrorist fighters. NATO itself is involved in an important training mission that has recently been upgraded.

Iraq's relations with the Gulf countries have grown more complex in recent years, ebbing to their lowest point after the 2011 Arab uprisings when Iraq's political and religious elite backed Shia protesters in the Gulf. Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has since sought to improve relations with the region's monarchies while attracting new investment from that wealthy region. The Gulf countries, in turn, seek to ensure that Iraq does not move too far into the Iranian camp. Iran, in turn, has sought to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a military, political and ideological threat. It wants to ensure that Iraq neither collapses into civil war nor constructs an alternative democratic model appealing to disillusioned Iranians who might see it as a signpost for a non-clerical Iranian future. Iran consequently seeks to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity while encouraging a friendly, Shia-dominated government.

Several military organizations currently operate under the umbrella of the Iraqi state, including the Iraqi Army, the Counter-Terrorism Service, the Popular Mobilisation Forces and Kurdistan Regional Government security forces. There are also a range of Shia militias which claim to work for the state. While these groups are well-funded with support from backers in Baghdad and Tehran, their reliability remains a concern. Terrorist groups operating on Iraqi territory constitute a direct challenge to security and stability. With the support of pro-Iranian militias, the PKK continues to undermine Iraq's security while threatening the Iraqi state and the KRG.

Iraq's economic outlook has rapidly deteriorated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Iraqi state oversees an energy export dependent enclave economy and a bloated public sector. The fall of oil prices has hurt the economy, while insecurity, rampant corruption, and a weak state undermine the capacity of the private sector to create jobs. The corrosion of public finances and persistent sectarianism have contributed to instability. In October 2019, this dynamic triggered one of the country's most significant social and political uprisings. Elite resistance to change, a lack of government responsiveness and the repression of public dissent have eroded Iraqi confidence in their political system. But trans-sectarian political parties that could bring real and essential change to Iraq's political system have begun to emerge.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The territorial integrity and security of Iraq are essential for the lasting stability of the Middle East. What transpires in Iraq has a direct impact on the south-eastern flank of the Alliance, as well as on the cohesion and integrity of NATO, which is currently expanding its Mission in Iraq (NMI). Iraq has always been an important player in the region. It is a highly complex country with an ancient history, the signs of which are everywhere apparent. Mesopotamia was a cradle of world civilisation. Its glorious architectural and artistic heritage, the remnants of which still mark the war-scarred landscape, remains a world treasure. For centuries, this land has been the home of adherents of the three Abrahamic religions, and for most of that time, its inhabitants lived and flourished in peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

2. By the 1970s, Iraqis had established an emerging modern state on the foundations of this proud, rich, complex, and ancient culture. Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and Yazidis were constituent elements of the Iraqi mosaic. Although Sunnis did not constitute a majority in Iraq, they long ruled the country. The Ba'ath Party, dominated by Sunni members, imposed a kind of modern secularism on Iraq's political and civil society, arguing that this would facilitate modernisation and development. The exploitation of the country's immense oil reserves would help finance this great undertaking, while the security order was anchored to a limited, transactional but nonetheless important relationship with the Soviet Union, which helped Iraq develop its oil industry. In the 1970s, Iraq held the world's second largest oil reserves after Saudi Arabia and a dynamic middle class had emerged. By 1979, Iraq had achieved a notable degree of development, and the state oversaw a large military, which some saw as a first line of defence for the Sunni Gulf monarchies suddenly threatened by Revolutionary Iran.

3. The 1979 ascendance of Saddam Hussein to Iraq's Presidency marked the beginning of a long and catastrophic unravelling of this model and a tragic squandering of Iraq's accumulated wealth and power. Within roughly a decade, Hussein launched two disastrous invasions of Iran and Kuwait that would ultimately cripple the state and military, result in the deaths of millions of Iraqi soldiers and civilians, and set the stage for conflict with the United States and its coalition partners. The Iraqi army was decimated during the US-led 43-day coalition military campaign. That campaign constituted a massive shock to an already exhausted Iraqi nation. The destruction of infrastructure and services during the war and a long-term sanction regime undermined the quality of life and made life in Iraq even more precarious.

4. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, approximately 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, the majority of whom were Kurds, flooded across the borders into Turkey and Iran. Turkey welcomed these asylum-seekers and settled them in camps in Turkey. The United States, which had chosen not to prosecute the Kuwait war all the way to Baghdad, embarked first on a containment and later on a rollback strategy that focused on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, concern about WMD led Washington to occupy the country. In March 2003, when Iraqi society had not yet recovered from the devastating effects of the Gulf War and the years of international embargo, the United States and its coalition partners crushed the Iraqi military, deposed Saddam Hussein's government, and expressed an ambition to help the country's new leaders to establish a stable democratic political order in Iraq. The intervention led to great number of human casualties, tremendous material loss, massive displacement, and new forms of social and political instability emerged (Al Samaraie, 2007).

5. Building a more stable political order in Iraq has proven extraordinarily difficult. The sectarian balancing act that Hussein managed for nearly three decades, largely through brutal repression, proved impossible to maintain once he exited from Iraqi politics. Where once a hyper-securitised state had asserted absolute control over Iraqi society, "de-Ba'athification" purged the state of thousands of civil servants and soldiers from the ranks of the new Iraqi state. This generated both

mass unemployment and intense discontent. Many of the disaffected ultimately joined insurgent groups fighting the new state and the coalition supporting it – with some eventually enlisting in terrorist groups like Daesh.

6. Divisions in Iraqi society ultimately hardened and became institutionalised. Public offices are now allocated based upon religion and ethnicity. Suddenly, the Shia majority – which had suffered heavily under the yoke of the Sunni-led Ba’ath Party – was positioned to impose its political will on other groups in Iraq. It engaged in a direct confrontation with both the Sunni and Kurdish minorities. This, in turn, paved the way for terrorist organisations to exploit the fragile situation in the country. It also fomented a Kurdish drive for autonomy in the northern reaches of the country, which further eroded the security situation in Iraq. Meanwhile, Shia domination of the government opened the door for direct diplomatic and security cooperation between the government and Iran, Iraq’s erstwhile nemesis. After decades of rivalry and a vicious war with its neighbour, Iran suddenly found itself holding at least some of the keys to the country. This was a shocking turn of events.

7. From the signing of the Constitution in 2005 until 2011, the United States fought a war to defeat Sunni insurgents in Iraq aiming to help secure the Iraqi state, while reinforcing the capacity of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to defend the country. While the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011 under pressure from the Iraqi Parliament, the strongly pro-Shia impulses of Iraq’s Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki alienated the Sunni minority. This combined with the ongoing conflict in Syria fomented a renewed insurgency, conducted, at least in part, under the banner of Daesh.

8. From 2014 Daesh carried out a sustained assault on its enemies in Iraq. It committed mass atrocities, including a genocidal massacre on the Yazidi, and returned Iraq to a state of civil war. Several times over the course of 2014, Daesh routed Iraqi security forces on the battlefield and captured the largely Sunni city of Mosul in Iraq’s north. Daesh also seized the Turkish consulate and held 49 people hostage for 101 days. Having previously withdrawn most of its forces from the country, US and coalition partners decided to bolster their force presence in Iraq to help the government in Bagdad drive back and ultimately defeat Daesh, a campaign that culminated in the siege of Mosul in 2017. Daesh, which briefly claimed to have established a so-called Caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria, lost the territories it had once controlled. Although deprived of the territory it once controlled, Daesh continues to threaten the security of Iraq and several other countries tragically compelled to contend with those fighting under its extremist banner. That Daesh managed to so devastate this large and strategically consequential country with relative ease demonstrated the persistent weakness of the Iraqi state, which continues to struggle with debilitating sectarian and ethnic rifts.

II. A TENUOUS SECURITY SITUATION

9. Since 2019, the security situation in Iraq has somewhat stabilised, but the state contends with significant internal threats and external meddling. Internal divisions are mirrored in rival militias and reinforced by non-Iraqi actors with a stake in particular outcomes.

10. Several armed forces currently operate under the umbrella of the Iraqi state, including the Iraqi Army, the Counter-Terrorism Service, the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and KRG security forces. Each of these operates nominally at the behest of the Iraqi state, but the CTS and the PMFs answer directly to the Prime Minister. These services vary in size and capabilities, with some operating at a reasonably high level of professionalism while others are beset with corruption, nepotism, and low morale (Aziz and van Veen, 2019).

11. With 300,000 soldiers under arms, the Iraqi Army is by far the largest of these forces. It has the most significant budget at USD 17.3 billion in 2019, but at the same time, it is the least effective

of the Iraqi security forces due to low professionalism, poor linkages to the government in Baghdad, and its general politicisation. It has managed to exacerbate sectarian tensions in disaffected Sunni and Kurdish regions of the country. Observers have lauded the courage of individual Iraqi soldiers, but have been critical of the officer corps, which is beset by competing sectarian and political loyalties, patronage, and corruption (Pfaff, 2020).

12. The comparatively small Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) answers directly to the Prime Minister. It played a central role in the campaign against Daesh beginning in 2015 and has cooperated closely with US forces (Aziz and van Veen, 2019). The CTS proved so effective in the field that it was deployed on the frontline throughout the campaign against Daesh – with the Iraqi Army and the PMFs conducting only supporting tasks (Pfaff, 2020). Overreliance on these forces, however, took a toll, and analysts suggest that the CTS suffered a staggering casualty rate of between 50% and 75% across the entire division during the battle for Mosul in 2017 alone (Amnesty International, 2017).

13. Finally, there are the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs), which are essentially Shia militias which began operating on behalf of the state after the rise of Daesh in 2014. While the PMFs are increasingly well-funded – having access to funds from the Iraqi state and their Shia backers in Tehran – there are concerns about their reliability and loyalty. Their links to the state are tenuous and therefore deeply concerning. The PMFs have overstepped orders on myriad occasions and acted either in contradiction to or without the express approval of Baghdad. They have attacked non-Shia sectarian groups, openly denounced the presence of coalition forces in Iraq and are generally seen as operating outside the control of state institutions. While the PMFs are a relatively capable fighting force that played an important role in defeating Daesh, significant questions remain regarding their ultimate purpose in the Iraqi security apparatus. Incorporating these forces into the Iraqi armed forces would be very difficult (Knights et al., 2020).

14. The PKK, with the support of pro-Iranian militias, continues to defy the security and sovereignty of Iraq and poses a threat both to Baghdad and to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Iraqi officials, including the KRG, have recently recognised the grave threat the PKK poses. The PKK's resistance to the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement remains a cause of concern. Since the signing of the Sinjar Agreement, the PKK began directly targeting Peshmerga and on certain occasions, Iraqi Security Forces. The PKK continues to reinforce its presence in Sinjar through Syria. Neither normalisation in the region nor the safe return of Yazidis to Sinjar is possible if the PKK actively opposes the Agreement. The ongoing alignment of pro-Iranian militia groups with the PKK and the expansion of the NMI in Iraq underlines the threat the PKK poses to the Alliance and its partners.

15. By 2019, many felt that, after years of bitter fighting, Iraqi forces with coalition support had finally defeated Daesh. Its self-declared Caliphate no longer exercised significant territorial control in Iraq. In October of that year, U.S. forces killed its self-declared Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. But while the organisation lost its leader and territory, its ideology has a degree of resonance among disaffected groups in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Indeed, while Daesh is now significantly more fragmented because of the defeats it has suffered on the battlefield, the organisation has since gone underground and continues to conduct terrorist operations in regions where it is difficult for the US-led Coalition to operate, including in Afghanistan. U.S. officials estimate that between 8,000 and 16,000 Daesh fighters remain in Iraq and Syria, with the group conducting a “low-level” insurgency in rural areas (Everstine, 2021). The release of Daesh members from camps and make-shift detention centres by PKK affiliated terrorist groups in Syria undermines the security of the countries in the region, including Iraq. Moreover, even if Daesh now finds itself on the defensive, many of the underlying political, economic, sectarian, and demographic conditions that drove Iraqis into its arms remain unaddressed. This remains a long-term concern both for the Iraqi state and for the international community at large. Undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant economic

consequences have exacerbated these persistent social, economic, and political tensions and challenges (Cordesman, 2020).

16. Kataeb Hezbollah plays a particularly important role on behalf of the Iranian state in Iraq. Founded in 2005, its fighters have actively taken on US forces in Iraq. It now conducts Iran's outreach to Shiite militia groups. In December 2019, US forces struck Kataeb Hezbollah after it threatened the US Embassy and US personnel (Smythe, 2021). One of its founders, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, was killed along with Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in a Jan. 3, 2020 U.S. airstrike near Baghdad International Airport. Another Iranian controlled group, Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, has recruited thousands of fighters for operations in both Iraq and Syria. It is thought to have played a part in the Saraya Awliyah al-Dam attack in Erbil (Smythe, 2021). The killing of Qassem Suleimani brought the entire region to the brink of armed conflict and put new pressures on the government to push U.S. forces out of the country.

17. Beginning in 2012, pro-Iranian militia groups operating in Iraq also fought in Syria, and thousands of Iraqi fighters engaged to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad. By 2016, over 20 organisations had deployed 10,000 to 15,000 Iraqi Shiite fighters in a civil war that, in many respects, had turned into a proxy war. Although the number of Iraqi fighters in Syria has since fallen considerably, many are still operating in Damascus or in parts of eastern Syria near Deir ez-Zor.

III. INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN IRAQ AND THE FUTURE ROLE OF IRAQ IN THE REGION

A. UNITED STATES' RELATIONS WITH IRAQ IN THE WAKE OF WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

18. The United States military has reduced current troops levels in Iraq to under 2,500 and since 2019 has withdrawn from several bases. The Trump Administration had argued that Iraq was positioned to take on Daesh fighters without a significant U.S. presence in the country. But fighting continued and attacks on U.S. forces prompted American military leaders to redeploy their forces to only the best defended bases (Cooper and Schmitt, 2021). In March 2021, U.S.-led coalition aircraft carried out 133 airstrikes over 10 days on Daesh assets in northern Iraq, 50 kilometres southwest of Erbil. The strikes targeted a cave complex that served as a haven for terrorists. This was the most significant monthly airstrike total in Iraq and Syria since 2019. The attacks supported CTS-led Iraqi ground forces engaging terrorist fighters (Abdul-Zahra, 2021). Again, on 27 June, US forces targeted operational and weapons storage facilities at two locations in Syria and one location in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, however, condemned the attack as a "blatant and unacceptable violation of Iraqi sovereignty and Iraqi national security". In a rare admonishment of US action by the Kadhimi administration, the Iraqi government said it was studying "all legal options" to prevent such action from being repeated (France 24, 28/06/2021).

19. In July 2021, the United States announced that it would withdraw all deployed combat forces in Iraq by the end of the year, with American non-combatant personnel remaining in the country as part of a training and advisory mission. Overall, the number of American soldiers deployed in Iraq is likely to remain the same, at 2,500 soldiers. The US government is clearly seeking to shore up political support for Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is under pressure to remove the American presence following the June 27 strikes. Nonetheless, Iraq's leadership insists that Iraq's armed forces are strong enough to defend Iraqi territory from Daesh and other threats on their own, with only limited advisory support from the United States (BBC, 2021).

20. Many observers have pointed to the parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly following the US and Allied decision to withdraw the last remaining troops in Kabul. Although the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are very different, the two have been inextricably linked largely

because the U.S. decision to intervene in both conflicts followed on the heels of the September 11 attacks. Both interventions were cast as components of the global “war on terrorism”. The initial U.S. ambition in Afghanistan was to strike at both al-Qaeda and the Taliban government that offered them sanctuary to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for groups posing a direct threat to U.S. security. Allied countries engaged directly in the war in Afghanistan after the North Atlantic Council, for the first time, invoked Article 5 to provide a framework for their support. By contrast, not all Allied governments initially supported the U.S. intervention in Iraq although several countries participated in the coalition effort to overthrow Saddam Hussein and later to fight ISIS. Eventually, however, NATO engaged by focusing on training the Iraqi military. The experience in Afghanistan helped NATO member governments to recognise the terrorist dangers that could arise if the Iraqi state were unable to exercise control over its territory.

21. Some analysts are using the withdrawal from Afghanistan to pose questions about the degree of international commitment to support the Iraqi state in its struggle to gain full control over its territory, take on ISIS and other extremist groups, and resist Iranian interference in domestic affairs. How long the international commitment will remain in place is now under question because of what has transpired in Afghanistan. But there are compelling reasons why sustained support could be justified given Iraq’s pivotal position in a region of global strategic importance. The US decision to withdraw all of its forces from Afghanistan following negotiations between the Trump Administration and the Taliban that concluded in February 2020, the Biden Administration’s acceptance of the terms of that agreement, the collapse of the Afghan state and military, the surprisingly sudden fall of Kabul to Taliban fighters in August 2021, and the chaos that ensued could have implications for Iraq and for the countries that are supporting it. It is, however, clear that neither the United States nor its allies are currently prepared to pull out of Iraq. The 2,500 U.S troops will now be reclassified as engaged in an advice-and-training rather than a combat mission. US forces in Iraq also provide support to 900 U.S troops operating against DAESH in Syria. The U.S. presence in Iraq provides a degree of deterrence for Iran, which is precisely why Iranian supported militia have consistently targeted coalition forces operating in Iraq (Karni, 8/8/2021).

22. The defeat of the so-called Islamic State’s caliphate after the Obama Administration deployed thousands of troops to push Daesh out of territory it occupied had already resulted in many terrorist fighters previously operating in Iraq and Syria moving into ungoverned space in Afghanistan and the Sahel. This now becomes a particular concern as the Taliban gains control of the Afghan state. The Taliban’s highly problematic past does not exactly square with its current claims that it will not open the door to terrorist movements or that it will be fully capable of preventing these movements even if it wants to. These claims should therefore not be accepted at face value and the Alliance will need to closely monitor the situation.

23. In July the Biden Administration agreed with the al-Kadhimi government to end the combat mission of its troops in Iraq by the end of 2021, 18 years after U.S. troops initially deployed there. This will mark the end of formal U.S. participation in a second war that has endured since the Administration of George W. Bush. At the July meeting with al-Kadhimi in Washington, however, President Biden vowed that “our counter-terrorism cooperation will continue even as we shift to this new phase” (BBC, 27/7/2021). In early August, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee notably voted to repeal the 1991 law that originally authorised the Persian Gulf War and the 2002 law authorising President George W. Bush to attack Iraqi forces and overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein (Savage, 4/8/2021). This points to a growing Congressional effort to shape U.S. policy in the region and determine when and how forces are deployed there.

24. The government of Iraq called for the end of the U.S. combat mission after U.S. forces killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and the leader of an Iranian backed militia in Baghdad last year. Enraged pro-Iranian parties in the Parliament, encouraged by Tehran, used the moment to push for an early US departure from Iraq. The decision to convert remaining U.S. forces to a train and advise

mission was partly aimed at assuaging those concerns while nonetheless retaining an important U.S. link to the country. It should be noted that Shia militia have carried out a range of mortar, rocket, and drone attacks on Iraqi military bases hosting coalition forces to pressure the United States and its allies to leave the country. The United States, along with its NATO allies, have vowed to continue to train and support Iraqi government troops, which will play the leading role in combatting terrorist groups operating in the country. The U.S. mission, which also includes an intelligence sharing dimension, reflects the strategic importance it and its allies attach to stability in Iraq and that country's pivotal role in countering dangerous terrorist movements. It also demonstrates the international community's determination that Iraq never again becomes an ungoverned strategic vacuum where terrorists are able to operate with impunity (Ranj, 30/7/2021).

25. Like Afghanistan, Iraq confronts internal division, open resistance to state authority and external pressure from neighbours. Corruption has undermined the state's legitimacy in both countries and proved enormously frustrating to supporting countries which inadvertently fed that corruption with large infusions of aid and support (Solomou, 23/8/2021). The collapse of the Afghan state demonstrates how corruption insidiously erodes state authority, effectiveness and military order. It undermines the public will to defend the state and the commitment of external actors to provide support. Iraq's state has more capacity than did Afghanistan's, but its inherent weakness remains a clear concern and a strategic as well as a domestic political challenge. But it is also evident that there is greater Sunni support for the state in Iraq today than there was when ISIS seized a large chunk of the country during the government of the Shia Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki. His anti-Sunni agenda had been an important catalyst for the rise of ISIS in the country. Today there is greater support for the state among different ethnic and religious groups, which makes it less likely that ISIS or any other terrorist group will be positioned to seize a significant portion of the country's territory. This is a primary reason that ISIS is now more focused on operating in Afghanistan and Africa where state authority is significantly weaker. The greater challenge now for Iraq, at least from the U.S. perspective, is Iranian interference and its support for pro-Iranian militia, proxies and parties that, in turn, willingly advance its interest in Iraq (Gardner, BBC, 26/7/ 2021).

26. Indeed, Iraq must now contend with a powerful neighbour dedicated to exercising influence and using proxies to do so. Pakistan played a decisive role in the victory of the Taliban as it provided strategic depth, equipment, and political cover to the Taliban over many years of the conflict. Iran has played a somewhat similar role in Iraq through its support of Shia political parties and militia groups, which are dedicated to ousting coalition forces from the country and advancing the broad interests of Iran. These groups have escalated their attacks in recent months and in so doing have weakened the state and undermined the capacity of government forces to contain ISIS. These militia have also attacked those Iraqi protestors demanding greater democracy and less corruption, and in so doing, have undermined public trust, polarised national politics, and opened the door for Iranian influence. Yet there has been a reluctance to treat these militia as terrorist operators (Alaaldin, 2021). There are hopes that regional talks could settle differences while preserving Iraqi autonomy and sovereignty. But this would require a significant change in Iranian behaviour. The Afghan experience makes it very clear that the successful defence of Iraq against terrorist groups demands a coherent and relatively compact state capable of defending its interests both domestically and regionally. The onus ultimately lies with Iraq itself, but its international supporters need to be mindful of this compelling reality.

27. Developments in Afghanistan clearly have relevance for U.S.-Iranian relations and particularly relative to matters pertaining both to Iran's nuclear weapons program and its proclivity for interfering politically and militarily in the domestic matters of neighbouring states. Iran has certainly noted that the Taliban has outwaited the international community and seized power in Afghanistan. Its geographic position along the borders with Iraq suggest that it is not going anywhere, and its aspiration is to wait out the United States and its allies and to do what it can to hasten their departure.

It is thus not likely that Iranian leaders and their militia will see matters differently simply because the U.S. has rebranded its mission as an advice and training endeavour (Hannah, 2/8/2021).

B. TURKEY

28. Turkey, a NATO member state, also has strong interests in the region and its relationship with Iraq is particularly important. Despite a range of disagreements and challenges to the relationship, Turkey and Iraq continue to conduct a close dialogue to jointly confront the PKK. In full respect of Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Turkey has endorsed the recent NATO Summit communique which states: NATO and Allies support Iraq in its fight against ISIS/Da'esh and terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. We commend the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces for their continued efforts to combat ISIS/Da'esh. Based on a request from the Iraqi Government, we will strengthen our support to Iraq through our NATO Mission Iraq. We will broaden our non-combat advisory, training, and capacity building mission to support Iraq in building more effective, sustainable, accountable, and inclusive security institutions and forces. This expansion of NATO Mission Iraq, including additional support to the Iraqi security institutions, will be demand-driven, incremental, scalable, and based on conditions on the ground. It will be carried out with the full consent of the Iraqi authorities, in full respect of Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in close coordination with relevant partners and international actors, including the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS/Da'esh, the United Nations, and the European Union.

29. Turkey, as a frontline state bordering two destabilised countries like Iraq and Syria which provide fertile ground for terrorist organisations and trigger irregular migration flows, regards the territorial integrity of Iraq as a prerequisite for stability in the region and sees Northern Iraq as a safe haven for terrorist organisations. Terrorist organisations also straddle the border between Iraq and Syria. They use this area for the transfer of terrorist fighters and military equipment, thus threatening the territorial unity of Iraq and Syria. Ankara has also actively worked to upgrade the capacity of Iraqi security institutions in its fight against extremist violence and terrorism and has contributed to NATO's mission in Iraq since its inception.

C. IRAQI RELATIONS WITH IRAN

30. Iraq and Iran have a long history of complex and sometimes difficult relations. The two countries have, at different times, been strategic partners, rivals, and dire enemies. Prior to 1979, few considered Iraq a serious threat to Iran. This changed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, at which point Iran cut its ties with its Western partners and found itself surrounded by Arab states that saw the Revolution as a direct threat to their own rule. Iraq holds an important place in Iran's revolutionary religious narrative and strategy, with the two most important Shia religious sites, Karbala and Najaf, located in Iraq.

31. The 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq was the Islamic Republic's first major military test, one that came at a huge human and financial cost. In the decades since, Iran has developed a marked capacity to mobilise Shia communities across the region and pro-Iranian proxy militia now operate in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's most important warfighting force, oversees this vast network (Associated Press, 2021). Iran's security agencies know Iraq's physical and political terrain and sustain an active intelligence presence there. Its network of political, religious, and armed groups in Iraq affords it enormous leverage in the domestic affairs of its neighbour. Iran emerged as a major power broker in Iraq after US intervention in 2003, and, from that point, began to support openly Shia parties and militias there. Iran's priority has been to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a military, political and ideological threat. The security and integrity of Iraq constitutes a core foreign policy concern for Iran. It wants to ensure that Iraq neither collapses into civil war nor constructs an alternative democratic or religious model

appealing to disillusioned Iranians who might see it as providing a signpost for a non-clerical Iranian future.

32. Iran consequently seeks to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity while encouraging a friendly, Shia-dominated government in that country. Religious, economic, and political interdependence between the two countries has deepened since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011. In recognition of Iraq's potential role as a link in a strategic bridge to the Mediterranean, official visits and cooperation agreements have increased significantly. Iran and Iraq have actively worked to deepen economic ties, especially in the light of sanctions imposed on Iran. Today, Iraq is one of Iran's top five trading partners. Iran now sees Iraq as an outlet for its economy which has suffered from sanctions. US sanctions hit Iran's crude oil revenues and are pushing Iran to create alternatives, in the Iraqi market and beyond (namely, Syria). Iraq is the second leading importer of Iran's non-oil commodities. To further project economic influence in Iraq, Iran taps into its network of proxies in the country which are active across different sectors of Iraqi society.

33. With the rise of Daesh in 2014, Iran suddenly faced a new and dangerous enemy along its borders, one vowing to annihilate Shia communities and establish a so-called caliphate in the region. So grave was the threat that the United States and Iranian interests aligned in the fight against Daesh. Iran actively supported many of the Shia militias and helped mobilise them to fight Daesh. These groups include, among others, Kataeb Hezbollah, the Imam Ali Brigades, Sayed al-Shuhada and the Badr Organization (also known as the Badr Brigades). The latter is one of the largest groups within the PMF and its chief, Hadi al-Amiri, leads the Fatah Bloc in the Iraqi parliament.

34. Iraq not only has a problem with disaffected Sunnis, but it must also contend with disaffected Shia communities enjoying strong religious, political, and military links to Iranian clerical, military, and intelligence establishments. These ties are reinforced by the powerful Iranian-supported militia groups operating in the country. These groups, by definition, challenge the coherence of the Iraqi state and often propagate the interest of leading factions within it. They attack US and coalition forces and undermine Iraq's unity and security. A powerful pro-Iranian social media, radio, and television presence offers up anti-Western narratives that resonate in the society, help recruit adherents and fighters, and complicate efforts to stabilise the country.

35. The defeat of the so-called caliphate, reanimated U.S. and Iranian competition for influence in Iraq. Tensions escalated dramatically in January 2020 with the US strike in Baghdad that killed the IRGC's revered commander, Qassem Soleimani, as well as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of Kataeb Hezbollah. That strike proved a turning point, as both Soleimani and al-Muhandis controlled an array of militia groups operating in Iraq. Their deaths outraged Iraqi parliamentarians, who then voted to expel US-led coalition forces from Iraq. Since then, militias have grown more aggressive (Associated Press, 2021). There have been several attacks on the US Embassy in Baghdad, military bases hosting US troops, and facilities supporting US companies working in Iraq.

36. Iran's attitude towards the PKK terrorist organisation and its offshoots across the region is essentially designed to satisfy its short- and medium-term interests in its neighbourhood. While directly confronting PJAK – the PKK's Iran branch – the Iranian-backed Shia militias seek to undermine “the Sinjar agreement” in tandem with the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), which is one of the PKK affiliated groups in Iraq.

37. Despite Iran's influence among some Iraqi elites, many Iraqi Shias shun this influence while supporting their spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, promoter of a “national Shiism”. This reflects mounting public distrust of Iran and the armed militias loyal to it as well as a resurgent nationalist movement (ICSSI, March 2021). “Iran Out of Iraq” was one of the more frequently heard slogans at the 2019 Thawrat Tishreen rallies attracting primarily young Shia protestors. The rallies, which are often referred to as the October Revolution, have significantly challenged the pro-Iranian

dynamic of the political class, which has dominated Iraq politics since the fall of Saddam Hussein (Davis, 2021). It is worth noting that during a press conference after his election, Ebrahim Raisi, the new ultra-conservative President of Iran declared that Iran's support for regional militias would not be subject to negotiation.

38. The Biden Administration must also factor in this formidable Iranian presence as it explores the possibility of returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It is now communicating to its Iraqi partners that its ambition is to lower the temperature with Iran. This could make it easier to work out an arrangement for the coming months. But these Iranian supported militia groups pose a genuine conundrum. The talks between United States and Iraq take place under the guise of a Strategic Dialogue, which began during the Trump Administration, and which seeks to reinforce bilateral ties. The April discussions will be the first round of formal talks with Iraq's leaders conducted with the Biden Administration. These talks will take place just as the United States returns to discussions in Vienna about Iran's nuclear programme and its own possible return to the JCPOA.

D. IRAQI RELATIONS WITH ARAB COUNTRIES AND IRAQ'S GROWING REGIONAL ROLE

39. Throughout the 1970s, the Iraqi government worked steadily to improve relations with its Arab neighbours beyond the Persian Gulf. In the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Iraq launched a diplomatic campaign to corral the Arab world under its leadership in opposition of Israel. It hoped to present a unified Arab front to represent the Palestinian cause, a diplomatic strategy that enjoyed greater salience once Egypt, the traditional leader of the Middle East, signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Although Iraq's efforts were notable at the time, they ultimately produced mixed results due primarily to the strident radicalism of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party. Still, some of the structural factors that once allowed Iraq to emerge as a leading country of the Arab Middle East, including its central geographic location, its vast reserves of hydrocarbons, and its relatively large population remain to this day despite the damage the country has suffered. Iraq today has re-established a role for itself in the region's multilateral diplomatic processes.

40. The Gulf countries have a complex relationship with Iraq. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iraq accepted Gulf financial support in exchange for the military containment of the new Islamic Republic's revolutionary ambitions. Iraq stands in the middle of the regional rivalry between Iran and the Gulf states. In 1990, its relations with the Gulf countries entered a new chapter after it invaded Kuwait. The Gulf states were overwhelmingly critical of Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of an Arab gulf country, and several took up arms against him (Belbagi, 2021). Hussein's overthrow opened the door to revitalise these ties. But this has not been an easy process. Improving ties became all but impossible during the government of Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), particularly after the 2011 Arab uprisings when Iraq's political and religious figures backed Shia protesters in the Gulf – most notably in Bahrain. Maliki alienated much of the Arab world with his sectarian policies and the deliberate marginalisation of Iraqi Sunnis. Maliki's departure has once again created diplomatic openings, but the Gulf countries have not worked out a long-term strategic approach to Iraq (Alaaldin, 2020). The current Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, however, has actively sought to engage the region's monarchies and to attract Gulf investment. Given ongoing uncertainties about Iran, the Gulf countries are likely to deepen their ties to Iraq to encourage it not to move too far into the Iranian camp.

41. Kuwait has enjoyed particularly positive relations with Iraq. In February 2018, several months after the liberation of Mosul from Daesh, Kuwait organised an international conference with the objective of raising USD 100 billion dollars for the reconstruction of the city and kickstarting private investment there. Less than a third of that sum was finally raised (Mercadier, 2021). Many Gulf financiers expressed worries about ongoing political and security risks of doing business in Iraq. No business deal was signed. Although Kuwait and Iraq have a respectful relationship, some

issues linked to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Iraq's historical if nonetheless disputed claims on Kuwaiti territory remain – including specific border questions and the repatriation of the remains of those killed in battle. In March 2021, in the presence of the UN Resident Coordinator, Kuwait received from Iraq some of the property and archives that had been seized during Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.

42. By contrast, challenges to Iraq-Qatar relations have persisted due to accusations of Qatari involvement in Iraq's internal affairs. In 2019, however, Iraq and Qatar agreed to reactivate economic and trade relations and to restore communication channels. Their cooperation includes reconstruction funding, investment, as well as a project to transport goods from several countries to Qatar through Iraqi territory. On 24 March 2021, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani met Iraqi leaders in Baghdad marking a further step in an ongoing reconciliation process.

43. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has carefully cultivated strong, personalised relationships with key Iraqi leaders. Since 2009, UAE-based Crescent Petroleum has invested over USD 3 billion in Iraq and in 2019, signed a 20-year gas deal with the Kurdistan Regional Government (Reuters, 2019). During a March 2021 state visit to that country, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi agreed to deepen trade and investment ties.

44. Iraqi relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia constitute a delicate balancing act. In January 2021, for example, explosive-laden drones crashed into the royal palace in Riyadh. US media suggested that a militia group had launched those attacks from Iraq while the Iraqi Prime Minister denied the allegations (AFP, 2021). Pro-Iranian elements operating within or in the orbit of some state actors create difficulties that can be challenging to surmount. Al-Kadhimi is compelled to walk a diplomatic tightrope between Tehran and Riyadh and is seeking to cultivate good relations with both neighbours in order to carve out a degree of space for Iraqi diplomacy. In November 2020, Iraq and Saudi Arabia reopened their Arar land border crossing for the first time since 1990 and in March 2021, al-Kadhimi finally visited Riyadh (AFP, 2021). Both countries subsequently agreed to boost trade and economic cooperation and work for greater stability in global oil markets.

45. Since the beginning of 2021, the al-Kadhimi government has noticeably re-engaged diplomatically with other Arab nations within and beyond the Gulf region (Cook, 2021). In April 2021 Iraq hosted military and intelligence officials from Tehran and Riyadh in the hopes of reducing tensions between the two sides. It marked the first meeting between Iranian and Saudi representatives since 2016, when the two countries broke off diplomatic relations. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi leveraged his relations with both countries to bring the two sides together (Nasr and Fantappie, 3/8/2021). On 27 June 2021, al-Kadhimi hosted a summit in Baghdad attended by Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah II. The heads of state exchanged their views on regional security, energy, and trade issues while exploring possible political solutions to Syria's ongoing civil war and on-going political dialogue in Libya and Yemen (France 24, 2021; Associated Press, 2021). Establishing a mechanism for systematic cooperation among Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt could foster closer regional economic and more stable diplomatic ties

46. On 28 August 2021, Iraq hosted a summit in Baghdad engaging heads of state and foreign ministers from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Several allied leaders participated including French President Emmanuel Macron and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. Iran's newly confirmed foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian also attended. During the Summit, leaders discussed a range of issues including the region's water crisis, ongoing political and economic turmoil in Lebanon and the war in Yemen (Vohra, 2021). In their closing statement, participants "welcome the tireless Iraqi diplomatic efforts to reach a common ground at the regional and international level" to help bolster economic, political and security

cooperation (Al-Ansary, 28 August 2021). At the meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to keep troops in Iraq (France 24, 29 August 2021) for as long as the Iraqi government sought that support. Although no major diplomatic breakthroughs occurred, the meeting demonstrated that Iraq is well positioned to act as a consequential regional mediator – a position that marks an important return to the international stage as a protagonist and not simply an object of international concern. The government’s willingness to play a broker’s role in the region could add a critical degree of stability to a region that needs more diplomacy and less hostility (Cook, 2021).

E. IRAQI RELATIONS WITH NATO

47. From 2004 to 2011, NATO conducted limited training, mentoring and assistance programmes with the Iraqi security forces. The NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) was part of a broader international effort to help Iraq establish more effective and accountable security forces. This effort should not duplicate other international efforts. All NATO member countries contributed to that effort either in or outside of Iraq, through financial contributions or donations of equipment. NATO also worked with the Iraqi government on a structured cooperation framework which established an enduring relationship with the country.

48. In response to a request by the Iraqi government, NATO agreed to provide defence and related security capacity building support in July 2015. By April 2016, it was conducting “train-the-trainer” courses in Jordan for Iraqis (more than 350 Iraqi security and military personnel were trained). Then, following a request from the Iraqi Prime Minister, at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO leaders agreed to provide NATO training and capacity-building activities to Iraqi security and military forces within Iraq. In January 2017, NATO deployed a modest but scalable Core Team to Baghdad consisting of eight civilian and military personnel, thus establishing a permanent NATO presence in Iraq. The Core Team coordinated all NATO assistance provided to Iraq in 2017-2018 and laid the foundation for the establishment of NMI in 2018 (NATO, 2021)

49. In October 2018, NATO established an official advisory, training, and capacity-building mission in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government. The NMI aims to strengthen Iraqi security forces and Iraqi military education institutions so that Iraqi forces are better able to fight all terrorist organisations. In response to an Iraqi government request, at the February 2021 Defence Ministerial meeting, NATO Ministers agreed to expand NMI. Allied governments agreed to increase the size of NMI from 500 personnel to as many as 4,000 (Knights et al.) and to broaden its work with the Interior and Justice ministries. The NMI is a non-combat advisory, training, and capacity-building mission, which is conducted in full respect of Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Due to Iraq’s complex security situation, potential trainees within the NMI framework are vetted diligently to prevent the infiltration of terrorists. This practice should continue.

50. The mission engages civil and military personnel and coordinates its work with other international actors operating in the country. NATO does not deploy its personnel alongside Iraqi forces during combat operations and only trains Iraqi security forces under direct and effective control of the government of Iraq. Training, advisory and capacity-building activities were initially conducted in the greater Baghdad area, but after the decision taken in February 2021 to expand the mission, the goal now is to work further afield. Iraqi authorities must consent to any troops increases and these would only occur incrementally.

51. NATO’s primary goal is to help Iraq strengthen its security forces to fight all terrorist organisations and prevent the re-emergence of Daesh. It does this by advising Iraqi military education institutions and employs a train-the-trainers approach. It also advises the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, the Office of the National Security Advisor, and other national security institutions on how the country might create more sustainable, transparent, inclusive, and effective security institutions

and structures. It also focuses on the rule of law, the law of armed conflict, countering corruption, the protection of civilians including children in armed conflicts, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Since November 2020 Lieutenant-General Per Olsen (Denmark) has led the NATO Mission Iraq. The mission will next be led by Italy, which has reinforced its presence and 20-yearlong commitment in the country. The authority for the effort falls under Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples, one of NATO's two operational-level commands.

F. RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

52. From a broader geo-strategic perspective, Iraq also finds itself in the middle of a greater rivalry between the Western community of nations on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. Russia's central role in shaping the Syrian conflict and its growing presence in Libya demonstrate its continuing interest in the region – in part conditioned by its quest to exercise more control over global energy flows. Similarly, China is a rising power that depends heavily on imported oil and gas and is a global economic power with a growing interest in asserting a presence in the sea lanes of communication. It too is slowly building a presence in the region, which could eventually be of military consequence. The United States has long been the most powerful external player in the region – with NATO partners, the United Kingdom and France playing a role as well – but US strategic thinkers increasingly worry that the Middle East is distracting its attention and resources from greater challenges elsewhere – namely in the Pacific.

IV. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

53. Iraq confronts a range of structural economic problems that have accumulated over decades. High unemployment and poor infrastructure create a fertile environment for extremism. The challenges mounted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a related collapse in oil prices which helped trigger mass demonstrations and delays in nominating a new government. The oil price crash and the coronavirus pandemic have taken a serious toll on the country. State income has fallen significantly, and the capacity of the state to pay salaries and pensions, which constitute 45% of total government spending, has been significantly diminished as a result. Falling oil revenues have undermined the government's capacity to cover essential spending.

54. Iraq is the world's third most important oil exporter, so falling oil prices had a profoundly negative impact on an economy that had shown some signs of revitalisation once the civil war had ended and as oil prices recovered. Indeed, Iraq registered a GDP growth rate of 4.4% in 2019 (World Bank, 2020), a development that helped generate a budget surplus and a decline in public debt (UNDP, 2020). Unfortunately, the pandemic-induced recession swiftly reversed these trends. The public debt stood at 44.6% of GDP in 2019 but rose substantially in 2020 due to falling oil revenues and increasing spending obligations that aimed to counter the worst impacts of the crisis (World Bank, 2020). The World Bank and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) expected poverty to increase by over 50% in the aftermath of the pandemic (UNDP, 2020).

55. The Iraqi state oversees an export dependent enclave economy and a bloated public sector. Insecurity, rampant corruption (Iraq ranked 160 out of 180 in Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Index) and weak state capacity make it difficult for the private sector to create jobs. This only increases public reliance on an enfeebled state. As is the case in much of the Middle East, the state remains the country's most important employer, and salary costs have tripled since 2004. Economists estimate that more than 40 percent of the work force depends on government salaries and contracts. Youth unemployment in Iraq is among the highest in the Middle East.

56. The Iraqi government has been covering a large fiscal deficit by borrowing domestically and drawing on its foreign reserves. The economic outlook remains daunting although recently rising oil

prices will certainly help. The price of Brent Crude rose from USD18.38 in April 2020 to USD75.17 in July 2021 (Sönnichsen, 16/8/ 2021). Iraq's revenues fluctuate with oil prices and when prices are low, it is not well positioned to finance public sector obligations. Rising debt levels and rampant corruption only complicate governance problems. Sectarianism and patronage systems are now deeply entrenched and even institutionalised. Iraq enjoys an oil endowment that gives it a fighting chance to begin to refill its coffers. Inherent inefficiencies in state spending and pervasive corruption, however, undermine the state's capacity to put public finances on a more durable foundation (Ezzeddine and Noun, 2020).

57. Despite efforts to diversify its economy, Iraq still overwhelmingly depends on fossil fuel exports and functions essentially as an enclave economy dominated by that industry. As one of the world's largest crude oil producers, Iraq generated USD 87 billion through oil exports in 2019 alone (EIA, 2021). The country is endowed with the world's fifth largest reserves of oil, currently estimated at 144.2 billion barrels (IEA, 2020). The sector generates 90% of the state's tax revenues, which leaves the public sector highly vulnerable to global price swings. Energy price swings also have an outsized impact on the exchange rate, and when oil prices are high, this can induce a kind of "Dutch Disease" that penalises domestically produced non-oil products in global markets. This is obviously a problem for the non-energy sector, and it impairs the capacity of the country to diversify its economy and find other sources of jobs and wealth. A large oil endowment has thus been both a gift and a curse.

58. Some analysts describe Iraq as a "rentier state" where power and wealth largely correlate with access to oil industry-generated income (UNDP, 2020). That same oil sector, however, does not create significant employment. Political allegiance is thus often secured through the distributing of subsidies, cash, or other in-kind benefits to Iraqi households. The practice distorts relative prices and leads to a range of sub-optimal economic impacts. Many Iraqis, for example, perceive electricity as an entitlement provided by the state at no or very low cost. The problem, of course, is that this price distortion leads to resource misallocation, under-investment, and waste while environmentally sound practices like energy conservation are simply not encouraged (Kadhim and Vakhshouri, 2020).

59. In this distorted economy Iraq's public sector, as is the case in much of the region, is bloated and has become the employer of last resort. The problem has only worsened since the 2003 war. Today, the government is by far the country's biggest employer, and this only starves the anaemic private sector of resources, competitive incentives, and talent. Economists warn that the system has reached its limits and that only the private sector will have the capacity to generate future job growth. The unemployment challenge is particularly dire for young people, and as suggested above, the country is sitting on a demographic and political time bomb if job prospects for young people remain dim.

60. Iraq's finance Minister Ali Allawi recently warned officials about the structural instability caused by the long-cherished practice of purchasing political allegiance and votes through public hiring schemes (Cornish, 2020). According to Mr. Allawi, that exercise has resulted in approximately 300,000 "ghost" employees. The entire superstructure of state-generated job creation is also highly vulnerable to oscillating government revenues. When public income flows diminish, the model rapidly generates instability. Delayed government pay checks in November 2020, for example, precipitated worrying public anger and street demonstrations. Indeed, since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, successive governments have constantly confronted mass protests generally linked to dysfunctional public services and unemployment.

61. Protests have often followed power outages which occur regularly, particularly throughout the summer months when temperatures in Iraq's south can climb to 50 degrees Celsius. In those hot months, electricity consumption soars, and inordinate strains are placed on the country's war

damaged power distribution system (Kadhim and Vakhshouri, 2020). Of course, because electricity use is subsidised, the industry itself suffers from chronic under investment, making it ever more prone to power outages. Iraq's former Minister of electricity, Luay al-Khatteeb, recently described a "summer ritual" in which demonstrators burn effigies of Iraqi politicians to express their frustration with the system in place (Al-Khatteeb, 2020). The problem is that reducing subsidies to generate income for investment also risks triggering public protest. The entire sector is thus caught in a kind of vicious cycle that makes positive change very difficult to achieve and crisis almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. In current crisis circumstances, more economically inspired protests seem likely. Last year, Iraq's finance Minister asserted that Bagdad recognises that structural change will be essential, adding that "if you over-milk [a cow] it might die" (Cornish, 2020). He admitted, however, that austerity of any kind is a notably "hard message" to sell in Iraqi politics. International institutions like the IMF have repeatedly implored the government to abandon jobs for votes-schemes, reverse the "unsustainable expansion of wage and pension bills", and reduce "inefficient energy subsidies" (IMF, 2020). In Iraq, short-term political calculations continue to drive decision making, and this has remained the case during an economically catastrophic pandemic.

62. At the end of last year, the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) announced a devaluation of the dinar of more than 20%, the greatest fall in its value since 2003 (Cornish, 2020). According to the World Bank, the CBI's foreign currency reserves have significantly fallen over the past year. Although the CBI is officially independent, analysts understood the decision as a concession to the government, which would otherwise be hard pressed to meet public sector salary obligations. Any substantial devaluation would likely precipitate a rise of domestic inflation (Cornish, 2020).

V. RECONCILIATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

63. As this report has suggested, over the last two decades Iraq has undergone both a rise in sectarianism and a crisis of confidence in the state and its institutions. Some observers characterise Iraq an artificial construct, an amalgam of ethnically and religiously populations too diverse to unite under one flag. But this belies the long historical experience of the country and the powerful pull of Iraqi identity. Many recent studies confirm how important this identity is in the country, even though Saddam Hussein long lay siege to this traditional identity. Iraq's modern history and the current Iraqi nationalist movement demonstrate the transcendent appeal of Iraqi identity, which extremism has never managed to eviscerate.

64. Saddam Hussein sought to appropriate selectively useful national symbols while attacking the underlying sentiments that had long held the country together (Baptiste and Benraad, 2020). His authoritarian regime simply sought to crush those groups that it identified as threats to the nation, including the Shia and Kurdish communities (Benraad, 2018). Saddam Hussein's power was essentially built on terror and clannish patronage rather than on sectarianism. Indeed, Sunni Iraqis were never genuinely privileged as such: Saddam Hussein's family and clan took pride of place in the hierarchy of the radical state he had constructed. Joining the Ba'ath party offered the best means to gain access to employment, education, and a steady income. Those excluded from this insider's game were subject to the whims of the regime and lived a highly precarious and vulnerable existence as a result.

65. It is worth noting that before 2003, nearly one third of marriages in Iraq were between members of different sects. There are still many mixed families and mixed communities in Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi tribes often have more than one religious identification and can include Sunni and Shia clans. For Iraqis, belonging to a tribe is a central pillar of identity. Unfortunately, the perilously demagogic leadership of Saddam Hussein fomented dark suspicion and animosity among groups that had previously coexisted and interacted peacefully. Iraqi sectarianism is thus a relatively recent

phenomenon, and its exacerbation has been a central element of the country's national tragedy (EASO, 2017).

66. The war in 2003 also fomented sectarianism which only exacerbated the crisis of the state. One unintended consequence of de-Ba'athification was that it triggered a dismemberment of the Iraqi state, depriving it of its institutional foundations and memory as well as skilled technocrats (Benraad, 2018). Ex-members of the Ba'ath party were excluded from the political process and considered accomplices of Saddam Hussein. Many ultimately joined extremist groups including Daesh.

67. In the wake of that war, an identifiably Shia-led government assumed the reins of power. Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani worked closely with US authorities in Iraq (Canet, 2021), although some Shias were hostile, particularly those close to Moqtada Al Sadr, the son of one of Iraq's most prominent Shia clerics. The Sunni population, however, felt systematically excluded from the political process and endured discrimination at the hands of the new Shia elite. Al Qaeda and later Daesh exploited these grievances to help radicalise Sunni communities and recruit new adherents. The so-called Caliphate that Daesh eventually established exacted a huge toll on those unfortunate to live under its brief but terrifying rule. That experience hardened sectarian barriers in the society, and the defeat of Daesh triggered another round of score settling and legal discrimination against those groups alleged to have engaged with that terrorist organisation or simply lived where it ruled. Schools refused to enrol their children, mothers were denied access to public support, and mukhtars (community mayors) prevented these families from moving into their neighbourhoods.

68. During Daesh's brutal attacks on the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar in 2014, terrorist fighters kidnapped and enslaved Yazidi women, some of whom had no choice but to marry those who were decimating their communities. A number of these women ended up in the notorious al-Hol refugee camp in Syria where Daesh terrorists and their families are now held in captivity by PYD/YPG who also use them as bargaining chips against the West and release them when it suits their agenda. Since 2019, PYD/YPG released more than 10.000 Daesh militants and family members/suspects who had been held in detention centres in Syria. The Yazidi women were permitted to return to Iraq, but their children have not been permitted to leave Syria. The children are not accepted in the Yazidi community, and the mothers are effectively exiled. That unresolved issue remains a source of considerable tension and legal dispute (Chulov and Mando, 12/3/2021).

69. Hundreds of thousands of Turkmens, Christians, Shabeks and Yazidis were displaced during the conflict, and many continue to live as refugees. It is estimated that 80% of Yazidi women between the ages of 17 and 75 and 100% for those held in captivity suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Conditions for this distressed community, already beset by a genocidal massacre, a devastating lack of economic opportunity, and forced displacement have worsened due to the COVID pandemic. Female survivors, in particular, are looking to put those involved in perpetrating crimes of genocide, rape and kidnapping on trial. Such trials would advance the rule of law and help heal this highly traumatised community (Murad, 2021). Yazidi Internally Displaced People (IDP) communities are also unable to return to their ancestral hometown of Sinjar due to the PKK's presence and despotic control of the district.

70. Between 2003 and today, the number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from roughly 1.5 million to fewer than 400,000, out of a population of 39 million Iraqis (Prier, 2021). Christians suffered disproportionately in 2003: gangs and militias preyed on this minority community, provoking a tragic Christian exodus. Daesh also drove Christians out of northern Iraqi cities like Mosul and Qaraqosh. Some 100,000 are now vulnerable refugees in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.

71. In March 2021, Pope Francis visited Iraq to meet with Iraq's leaders, clerics, and the Christian community. The visit was of great symbolic importance and included a direct meeting in the holy city

of Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of many of the world's Shia Muslims. The Pope thanked al-Sistani for speaking out for the protection of minority religious communities during the civil strife that has beset Iraq. For his part, al-Sistani endorsed calls for granting Christians full rights in the country. Some Shia militias have continued to persecute Christians, so the meeting with al-Sistani communicated a powerful message. In Ur, Francis noted that freedom of conscience and of religion were "fundamental rights" that should be respected everywhere. "We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion." (Sherwood, 2021). It is a message that he also delivered to worshippers at the Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad where in 2010 militants killed 44 worshippers, two priests and security forces. Ultimately, the survival of Iraqi Christians in Iraq hinges on the precise form the Iraqi state ultimately assumes. Pope Francis visited the country not simply to lend support to a religious community, but also to convey a political and social vision rooted in tolerance for all Iraqis (Prier, 2021).

72. Although Turkmens constitute the third largest component of the Iraqi society, their marginalisation is a serious problem that must also be addressed. Tens of thousands of indigenous Turkmen residents of Talafer, who fled the city either because of Daesh or from fear of reprisals because of their Sunni affiliation, continue to live in exile, either as IDPs or refugees. In the specific case of Kirkuk which can be considered as a microcosm of Iraq itself, a just and equal solution is needed so that Turkmens, Arabs, and Kurds – as well as the Christian and other minorities – can live in peace. Resolving the Kirkuk issue in an inclusive and equitable manner would provide a positive example for the rest of the country. In this regard, the reconciliation effort provides an important model for bringing together previously divided ethnic groups. Iraq must heal the deep emotional scars, injustices, and traumas induced by decades of war, violence, and deprivation. For its part, the Iraqi government must redress the wrongs of the past while working to overcome the myriad divisions that threaten the very coherence of the Iraqi nation and the functioning of the state. Failure here will simply open new spaces for violence. This is a tall order for a state that is already at the limits of political, human, and financial capacities and it will undoubtedly require sustained international support to address these challenges.

73. A report released by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, details that Iraqi authorities have routinely denied prisoners their rights from arrest through prosecution. This leaves them vulnerable to violence and various forms of abuse while in custody. There are more than 40,000 inmates in prisons across Iraq. Roughly half of them were arrested on terrorism charges, but partly due to the complex situation and the lack of resources, no specific evidence is gathered against them. The Iraqi security agencies are commonly accused of torture or other forms of ill-treatment. Although mechanisms exist for registering allegations of torture, authorities often ignore them. Of 1,406 complaints received by Iraq's High Judicial Council in 2020, only 18 investigations have been closed, and the results are unclear (Loveluck, 3/8/2021). "Effective prevention and prosecution of torture and other forms of ill-treatment would counter the narratives of terrorist groups and reduce their ability to exploit such practices to justify their own acts of violence", according to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet (UN News, 38/2021).

VI. DOMESTIC POLITICS AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

74. Iraq's current Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi came to power after two Prime-Minister-designates failed to form a government. Al-Kadhimi had been a prominent member of the Iraqi opposition during the years of Saddam Hussein's rule. He co-founded and served as the executive director of the Iraq Memory Foundation, which has systematically documented the crimes committed by Hussein's regime. Al-Kadhimi also worked as a journalist at Al-Monitor from 2012 to 2016, when he was appointed as the head of the Iraqi intelligence service (Mamouri, 2020). He assumed the position of Prime Minister in May 2020, with strong support from the international community which recognises him as a man of principal and dedication to national restoration.

75. Al-Kadhimi directly oversees the intelligence service and has sought to bring a degree of coherence to the country's highly fragmented security apparatus. Most of his ministers are technocrats with little or no affiliation to political parties. The Finance Minister, Ali Allawi, for example, is a prominent Iraqi academic who served as minister of trade, defence, and finance after 2003. He was the executive director of Arab International Finance and previously worked at the World Bank Group in Washington (Mamouri, 2020).

76. Al-Kadhimi quickly laid out priorities for his government, which included: early elections and electoral reform, combatting COVID-19, settling outstanding issues with the Kurdistan Regional Government, maintaining state control over arms, and addressing the persistence of violence against protesters. While the Prime Minister can directly shape some policy areas in pursuit of these goals — including security and foreign affairs — others require the cooperation of the Council of Representatives, such as on electoral and financial reforms. Al-Kadhimi has established a close rapport with President Barham Salih and the Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbusi. He also enjoys strong ties with Iraq's key constituencies, as well as the goodwill of almost all Allies, key regional capitals, and the international community in general. Since assuming office in May 2020, al-Kadhimi has pushed hard for political and economic reforms to address the country's chronic problems. But he has confronted stiff resistance. Despite domestic and international constraints, he has made several attempts to bring armed militias under state control. At this critical stage, al-Kadhimi's non-sectarian and inclusive approach deserves the strong support of the international community.

77. In response to demands made by demonstrators at "Thawrat Tishreen", the government initially agreed to hold early elections in June 2021. In January 2021, however, the government postponed these, moving the elections forward to 10 October 2021. The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) had invited 71 Arab and foreign countries and international organisations to monitor these elections. The UN Security Council adopted a resolution supporting an extensive international mission of 150 observers, which the Iraqi government accepted, and this mission provided support for the IHEC, including on media, logistical and electoral aspects.

78. Almost a year after Mustafa al-Kadhimi's nomination, some argue that his government has not lived up to initial expectations and the living conditions in the country are still not improving. Iraq has the world's 19th highest COVID-19 infection rate – a number that is likely to be an undercount because of the country's low testing capacity (Alshamary, 2020). The Prime Minister had also promised to seek justice for the hundreds of protesters who lost their lives. In October 2020, he formed an official committee to investigate those crimes. Al-Kadhimi has made several calls for reconciliation and inter-community dialogue. In August 2020, he declared "Iraqis of all sects are yearning for a new Iraq that believes in peace and rejects violence" (ICSSI, February 2021). Again, in March 2021, he called on political forces, young protesters, and the opposition to join in a comprehensive national dialogue and promoted it as "the only way to build a state and well-establish the state concepts to empower its success" (Abu Zeed, 2021). Many Iraqi political forces have already confirmed they would participate in this national dialogue. On behalf of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masrour Barzani welcomed the initiative "involving the political parties in order to resolve all problems and conflicts." However, the Fatah Alliance (which at the time held 48 of the 329 seats in the Council of Representatives) sharply opposed this proposal, affirming that "it is useless to hold a national dialogue before achieving full sovereignty and the exit of foreign forces."

79. Indeed, the presence of foreign forces in the country remains a critical fault line in this divided country. Political factions and militias loyal to Iran want all remaining US and coalition troops to leave. On 25 March 2021, the Rab'Allah militia threatened to target US forces and their agents during a military parade in the streets of Baghdad. The procession also sought to undermine al-Kadhimi's credibility ahead of the new round of strategic Iraq-U.S. talks on the status of remaining US troops

and bilateral relations. In response to the Rab'Allah's parade, on 30 March the Iraqi government deployed heavily armed units of the Iraqi Army and Special Operations forces in the main squares and streets of the capital.

80. Most political parties operated in exile during the years of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Their leaders returned in 2003 armed with ideas and, in some cases, a sense of entitlement, but without recent governmental experience or familiarity with life in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Following the US-led invasion, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) became the sovereign of Iraq. During this period, any political actor seeking to shape policy needed to cultivate strong relationships with the CPA. The CPA worked well with sectarian-based political parties, and these became quickly entrenched in the country's new governing elite. The country's political parties continue to cultivate foreign governments for support and legitimisation and most political parties benefit directly from foreign financial contributions.

81. The 2005 Constitution defines Iraq as a unitary federal state with a "republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic" system of government. Iraq's nascent democracy has suffered from the gap between its governance model as laid down in the Constitution and the manner in which power is actually wielded. Politicians are nominated and appointed based on their ethnic or sectarian identity rather than their politics, ideas, merit, or competence. This informal system is known as al-Muhasasa (Al-Shadeedi et van Veen, 2020): this is a Lebanese style of sharing out of top-level executive functions among the main sectarian groups (Shia, Sunni, Kurds, minorities). For example, the offices of President, Speaker of the Parliament and Prime Minister are staffed by respectively a Kurd, a Sunni, and a Shia. Votes are sought to enhance leverage in national level bargaining, but the sectarian system essentially predetermines what can be won and it encourages populist and sectarian rhetoric instead of clear political programmes transcending ethnic and religious divisions.

82. The al-Muhasasa system has become a source of grave dissatisfaction among Iraqis from all sects because of the poor outcomes it generates for its citizens. Elite resistance to change, a lack of government responsiveness and the repression of dissidents have simply eroded the confidence of Iraqis in their political system. The Parliament is now directly associated with widespread corruption and sectarianism. It should hardly be surprising that turnout at the parliamentary elections in May 2018 was the lowest since 2005 (Al-Shadeedi et van Veen, 2020).

83. Iraq's sectarian political system has failed to stave off mounting political fragmentation within each of the sectarian groups. The composition of the parliament following the 2018 elections included 184 Shia, 70 Arab Sunnis, 58 Kurds, 8 Turkmen, and nine members representing other minorities. Far from consisting of unified sectarian blocs, it was marked not only by sectarian divisions but also by highly fragmented Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish factions (Mikail, 2020). The presence of armed groups operating outside state control has paralysed the political system. Indeed, Shia parties compete vigorously with one another, and no Shia political leader can claim influence across Iraq's entire Shia population. In the 2018 elections, the three main Shia parties had emerged with comparable results: 54 seats for Sairoun (Muqtada Al-Sadr), 48 seats for the Fatah Alliance (Hadi Al-Ameri) and 42 seats for Al-Nasir (Haider Al-Abadi). The nationalist and trans-sectarian Sairoun as well as Al-Nasir have backed al-Kadhimi's government, while the Fatah Alliance, a coalition of Iranian-supported militia groups, stands in opposition.

84. The 70 Arab Sunni members of parliament are also divided among various parties and coalitions, starting with the National Coalition (17 Arab Sunni MPs). Some of these groups have adopted an expressly pro-Sunni stance, but others are nationalist and trans-sectarian. The post-2018 elections situation differs considerably from 2005, when most Arab Sunnis boycotted parliamentary elections.

85. Kurdish unity has also proved elusive and votes from that community are divided between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP – 25 seats) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK – 18 seats). The attempt to launch a Kurdish independence referendum has further fragmented Kurdish politics. While both parties strongly favour Kurdish autonomy, they do not agree on how best to manage the day-to-day affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Mikail, 2020).

86. Over the past few months, Thawrat Tishreen protestors themselves have been moving into politics. Some analysts suggest that these new groups could bring real change to Iraq's political system (Schaer, 2021). One of the best-known activists, Alaa Rikabi, has now founded a party called "Imtidad". Another young leader, Tallal al-Hariri founded the "October 25" party, named after one of Iraq's largest anti-government protests. Hussein al-Gharabi, an activist and a lawyer, co-founded the National Home party. The three share several goals: to replace the al-Muhasasa system that institutionalises clientelism and a culture of bribery and replace it with a government of technocrats selected for their expertise (Vohra, 2021). They regard themselves as secular and have spoken out against Iranian and clerical influence in Iraqi politics – a position that has angered armed groups supported by Tehran.

87. Compared to the long-established parties, these new entrants are inexperienced and underfunded. But the new electoral law, ratified in November 2020, gives them hope. Aimed at giving political independents a better chance of winning seats in parliament, the new law has turned Iraq's 18 provinces into 83 electoral districts and prevents parties from running on unified lists. In the past, one party could win an entire province and then seat candidates from its list in the chamber. Now, seats will go to whoever wins the most votes in a local electoral district. Some experts suggest that these new parties could make a difference in the new system. To challenge established parties, these newcomers would need to overcome outstanding disagreements and agree to field one candidate in each of the different district instead of competing against each other (Schaer, 2021).

88. However, Iraq's current security environment undermines political participation. These new parties do not campaign with the same confidence as established parties, fearing persecution by armed groups (International Crisis Group, 26 July 2021). Violence against activists has gone from indiscriminate killings to targeted assassinations. In May 2021, the death of Kerbala-based activist, Ihab al-Wazni inspired many of new protest political parties to declare a boycott of the elections (Alshamary, 24 June 2021). Activists complain that the government has been unable to provide security during the campaign. Close ties and blurred command-and-control lines between the Interior Ministry and the Popular Mobilisation Forces resulted in extensive paramilitary repression. These are all matters that Iraq's leaders will have to address to stabilise the country over the long-term (International Crisis Group, 26/7/ 2021).

89. On 10 October 2021, Iraq held parliamentary elections for the first time since 2018. These were the country's fifth parliamentary elections since the 2003 US-led invasion. Despite some concessions made to Thawrat Tishreen activists, the 2021 elections were marred by a record low turnout of roughly 43 percent, fuelled by voter apathy, widespread disdain for the Iraqi political class, and formal election boycotts by young activist groups (Abdul-Zahra, 2021). Political groups derived from Iraq's Shia majority emerged as the election's clear victors. Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Sadrist organisation won 73 seats, the most by any party. This represented an increase of roughly 20 seats from the previous elections, while former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shia Dawa (State of Law) Party gained 34 seats (Arraf, 2021). Notably, the pro-Iranian Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, previously the second largest block in parliament and the primary political group representing Shia PMFs, suffered a sharp decline from 48 to roughly a dozen seats. In response, Fatah representatives have denounced early poll results as a "scam" and are moving to formally contest the vote. Finally, the secular nationalist al-Takadum (Progress) Movement led by Sunni parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbussi, secured the second most votes at 38 seats, while the Kurdish Democratic Party gained 32 seats (France24, 2021).

90. With his party commanding the largest share of the vote, al-Sadr and his supporters will be the decisive voice in determining the next Iraqi Prime Minister. Since al-Sadr does not possess an outright majority, however, he will have to enter into negotiations with other parties to form a coalition government. These negotiations could prove lengthy and contentious. In 2018, it took roughly 8 months of backroom dealing to form the current government led by incumbent Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (Abdul-Zahra, 2021). For his part, al-Kadhimi did not formally submit his candidacy in the 2021 elections (he is an independent without a political party), but he has indicated his wish to serve another term (Arraf, 2021). He could secure another mandate as a compromise candidate like he did in the aftermath of the 2019 Tharwat Tishreen protests, although that outcome is far from certain.

91. Despite voter apathy, boycotts, and contested votes, the 2021 elections represent a significant if small step forward for Iraqi democracy. Observers judged the elections to be mostly free and fair, and there was a significant downturn in violence compared to previous elections, demonstrating the degree to which the security situation in Iraq has improved since the ostensible defeat of Daesh in 2017. Previous votes had been marred by terror attacks (Abdul-Zahra, 2021). The elections marked the sixth transfer of power since 2003, a remarkable achievement for a country widely considered to be amongst the world's most violent, fragile, and corrupt. The 2021 election was also notable as the first to take place under a new election law which guarantees at least 83 of the available 329 seats be reserved for women candidates (Reuters, 2021).

VII. CONCLUSIONS

92. Iraq is situated in a region of significant strategic and economic importance, and this is a central reason why the international community has a strong stake in its stability. It is also a region in which both China and Russia are ever more deeply engaged. NATO's decision to increase its presence in the country is a tacit recognition of these dynamics.

93. It is important to understand the situation in Iraq through both a regional and broader strategic lens. Among the positive region-wide developments in recent years have been the virtual eradication of Daesh in Iraq and Syria, Kuwaiti efforts to mediate between Qatar and the Arab Quartet, clear signals from the Gulf that a new approach to the Yemen conflict is needed and the onset of new talks about how the United States and Iran might reengage with the JCPOA and all the issues that have been linked to this important but now largely moribund agreement.

94. It is very important that NATO remain engaged in Iraq and supportive of its government at this delicate moment. Doing so would help enhance the government's capacity to conduct military operations against terrorist groups, increase public confidence in the state, and provide the needed stability and reforms to improve the investment environment. It would also help Iraq to eliminate those vulnerabilities that have had a destabilising impact on the country and the broader region. NATO governments should also strongly support implementation of the Sinjar Agreement.

95. The coalition supporting the Iraqi training mission should demonstrate a high degree of strategic patience in Iraq and accordingly be prepared to remain in place as long as it is needed and as long as circumstances suggest that it can make a positive difference. The key here is that the Iraqi state itself must continue to show progress in building up its legitimacy, competence and accountability. The coalition should also push for a great bargain among the factions in Iraq resisting the overt interference of Iran in the country's domestic politics. That bargain should include the KRG. This would help Iraq cope with Iran from a position of strength and could suggest to Iran that it needs to pursue a more conciliatory policy with its neighbours.

96. Continued support is needed for Iraq's core state institutions, while efforts to counter corruption and human rights abuses and advance civil society's capacity to participate in decision making are essential. Both the Iraqi state and the many militia groups operating in that country must be held accountable for human rights abuses. This is critical to building trust in the Iraqi state and shoring up public support for it. It is nearly impossible for the state to counter the narrative of extremist militia groups if it is also engaged in systematic rights abuses. Iraq should be encouraged to enact a comprehensive anti-torture law aligned with international human rights law and a plan to implement it.

97. Iraq's new-found activism in regional diplomacy is welcomed and should be encouraged. It is uniquely positioned to conduct a constructive dialogue with most of the region's players and has been willing to encourage its neighbours to find common ground in order to bolster regional security and peaceful coexistence.

98. The commitment of NATO Allies to support security reform in Iraq sends an important diplomatic message that Iraq's independence and continued viability remain an important interest for key international players. This should be part of a broader deterrence strategy against those states that would undermine Iraqi sovereignty, while offering support to reform and reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Iran needs to be deterred from interfering in the internal politics of its neighbours, a practice which has helped put much of the region on a knife edge. All of this must be done while recognising that ultimately, Iraq itself is responsible for its own future and must take the lead in advancing these goals. Revitalising the diplomatic process with Iran could be helpful to Iraq although there are clearly risks to doing so as well. Returning to a sober dialogue with that county might make it possible to resurrect the JCPOA, build in additional protocols to provide much needed reassurance and lower tensions in a region threatened by persistent internal and cross-border rivalries. It is increasingly difficult to foresee success on this front if the issue of Iran's adventurism beyond its borders is not resolved.

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