REBUILDING CHALLENGES IN IRAQ: OUTLINE FOR A GCC-EU AGENDA

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On 16th May, the Bussola Institute held a Workshop on Iraq and its current geopolitical situation, entitled "Rebuilding Challenges in Iraq: Outline for a GCC-EU Agenda". This seminar was organized around the main challenges and opportunities facing Iraq under its new government, and assessed the main risks to its stability in the medium and long term.

Ramon Blecua, Head of the EU Delegation in Iraq, Ranj Alaaldin, Research Fellow at Brookings Doha Centre, Dr Nussaibah Younis, Senior Advisor at the European Institute of Peace, and Angus Taverner, Senior Researcher at Bussola Institute, presented their views in a discussion moderated by Dr Christian Koch, Senior Advisor at Bussola Institute. The workshop was also attended by a number of senior figures from across Brussels including Dr Fadhil Al-Raheem, Iraq’s Chargé d’Affaires in Belgium. Through their formal and informal contributions, the Workshop explored the main lines of cooperation and areas of potential synergy between the EU and the GCC states that could help and support Iraq on its path to reconstruction and development.

There was general consensus among the panel that Iraq is at a critical juncture in its history. Although there are key challenges ahead in economic, social, demographic and environmental terms, it is also a moment of opportunity for the country as evidenced by the many positive signals that have fostered local and regional optimism and also demonstrated the resilience of Iraq in the face of some extreme challenges.

Despite war and the experience of the Islamic State (IS), Iraq has still managed to hold conclusive elections in 2018, and achieve another peaceful transition of power, which has ultimately led to the formation of a ‘technocratic’ government that continues to be popular among the Iraqi population: a sequence of events that one contributor described as “unprecedented in the region”.

There have also been signs of warming relations between Iraq and the GCC states as evidenced by the reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad in 2017, and the two visits by Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi to Riyadh over the past 12 months. Europe also seems to have acknowledged the crucial importance of Iraq in terms of both its security and investment, as Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi’s recent visits to Tunis (where he met Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), Paris and Berlin have indicated.

Contributors also emphasised the new government’s prioritisation of political and economic development in order to transcend sectarian divisions. They noted efforts to integrate all groups within the political arena to encourage cross-sectarian cooperation. From this basis, the Iraqi state has started the process of transforming an internal weakness into a potential asset that should have positive repercussions on the regional and international scene.

Despite continued volatility in the region, the Iraqi government has become a conciliatory actor, capable of speaking with all regional and international players. By refusing to take sides and no longer being perceived as a threat to the region, Iraq has successfully reduced the impact of external conflicts on its internal stability. In short, the Workshop’s contributors argued that Iraq is becoming a cornerstone of a new security paradigm that has the capacity to transform former hegemonic confrontation between regional powers into a framework for regional collaboration.
The panel concurred that the agendas of the EU and the GCC intersect in this regard: the EU, as a global actor seeking to develop its international expertise in crisis management, and the GCC states, as local players with an ever-increasing involvement in regional affairs. Contributors agreed that the time is right for Iraq to collaborate on the development of a new regional framework. Areas of complementary activity include: energy, transportation, financial services, resource management and trade. However, the panel also acknowledged that Western powers, by focusing their policy-making principally on counter-terrorism and defeating IS over the past five years, have arguably failed to develop a properly comprehensive strategy for Iraq; a situation which today risks further complication because of the latest tensions between Iran and the United States.

Despite the optimism and the evident opportunities, the panel agreed that it remains to be determined how a sustainable and inclusive political order post-IS and post-war can be achieved in order to ensure the country does not return to conflict. As pointed out by one of the contributors, one of the main risks to Iraq’s stability remains the issue of the Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

It is estimated that about 1.75 million population of 38.2 million have been unable to return to their homes since the military defeat of IS. There are complex political realities to overcome, which the Iraqi government still needs to tackle if this particular challenge is to be overcome. Moreover, this a pressing issue that presents a direct challenge to the continued stability of the country, the region and its neighbours.
One contributor described the challenge posed by IDPs as an example of the kind of unique challenge that Iraq must overcome before it can return to full normality. She explained that the internally displaced fall broadly into three categories, each requiring a different approach:

(i) First there is the group of IDPs who have traditionally lived in areas where the fight against IS was seized on as an opportunity to change longer term demographic reality. Many of these areas, including Jurf al-Sakhar in the Baghdad belt, are regarded as strategic points for political or economic reasons and are hence prized by conflicting national parties that have sought to prevent the return of specific groups in order to preserve the newly established demographic equilibrium.

(ii) The tribes from which some members of IS emerged represent a second (and largest) group. Here the main challenge is that whole tribes are being prevented from returning to their traditional homeland areas because they are held responsible at a tribal level, even though culpable individuals are already in the Iraqi criminal justice system. In most cases, victims expect the offending tribe to take responsibility for the actions of these individuals and offer compensation. Certain schemes and agreements have been put in place by local tribes, provincial governments and the United Nations to provide solutions to this issue but there is still much to do before it is resolved comprehensively.

(iii) Finally, IS family members represent a third group. They account for 300,000 individuals, mostly women and children, held in camps across Iraq. At present, there is little engagement with them, nor willingness to do so, either in ideological or humanitarian terms. These 300,000 individuals pose a further threat to Iraq’s stability in the medium to long term and, even though the Iraqi government acknowledges the risks associated with this group, it does not have sufficient resources to develop a strategy for their return to the community and reintegration.

Considering the scale of resources, efforts, political pressure and dedication needed to solve these issues, there is a general agreement that Iraq would benefit from the support of international players, such as the EU and the GCC.
To wrap-up the discussion, the experts reiterated that this is a real moment of opportunity for Iraq as it has established itself as a unique player in the new architecture of the region and emphasised that clear lines of cooperation are emerging for the EU and the GCC to leverage their complementarities and support peace and state-rebuilding in the country.

**Recommendations**

During the discussion and through the contribution of the panel, a number of recommendations pertaining to the EU’s and GCC’s involvement in Iraq were suggested:

(i) The situation in Iraq has direct repercussions on the stability of the EU. The EU’s policy-makers therefore need to develop a more coherent and comprehensive strategy for Iraq.

(ii) Iraq continues to face significant challenges: a combination of waste, inefficiency and mismanagement. The EU should collaborate with the GCC in bringing its expertise and support to the Iraqi government to encourage and support improved governance and the implementation of sometimes unpopular policies.

(iii) The EU, through its crisis management expertise, should support the Iraq government in addressing the challenges posed by IDPs and work with the GCC states, to play a mediation role in the resolution of tribal tensions.

(iv) By proving resilient to the many challenges posed by IS, Iraq has demonstrated its capacity to address terrorism and extremist discourse. The expertise developed by the Iraqi government and civil society should be harnessed by the EU and its policy-makers in efforts to continue the process of confronting radicalisation in Europe.

(v) The EU and the GCC should explore areas of mutual interest that can be leveraged to help and support reconstruction efforts in the country, especially through the participation to infrastructure projects.