

# Iraqi Stability at Risk: Preventing the pitfalls of the fight against ISIS

Recent political crises in Baghdad and Erbil, together with ongoing demonstrations, affirm that the necessity for a more assertive commitment of the international community to address current challenges in Iraq is greater than ever. PAX strongly believe this requires a comprehensive approach that does not focus exclusively on ISIS-affected areas, but on all of Iraq. The military campaign against ISIS in Iraq is strengthening non-state armed groups throughout the country and the political parties with which they are aligned. This trend is weakening and dividing Iraqi state structures, with an all-time low level of confidence of Iraqi citizens in the state. It also makes it harder for civil society to play a constructive role and represent the interests of citizens because their natural counterparts, state institutions, are increasingly weak. Currently, new armed groups are set up to prepare for a Mosul offensive. These militias, often influenced by external actors, severely threaten the human security of civilians and are perceived by Iraqis as a similar threat to ISIS. This is particularly relevant for communities who have endured ISIS rule and are considered hostile to both Baghdad and Erbil governments.

Current UN-led stabilization policies in the areas where ISIS has retreated have a short-term time frame and have a negative political impact as they solidify changed power dynamics on the ground. Moreover, a multitude of initiatives are disconnected and often operate from different strategic departure points. This lack of a comprehensive and coordinated approach with a long-term vision is counterproductive and may contribute to renewed conflict.

## Recommendations

Therefore, PAX reiterates its call to national and international stakeholders to develop a conflict-sensitive approach in the newly accessible areas, and in its coordination with non-state armed groups as well as state-led armed groups, ensure human security for all communities and improved collaboration with political and humanitarian interventions. Additionally, it is important to develop a broader perspective that also supports the mitigation of the wider effects of the war on ISIS. Given the current alarming state of affairs in Iraq, the international community cannot afford to suffer from "Iraq Fatigue". The EU, UNAMI, UN agencies and the Working Group on Stabilisation of the International

Coalition against ISIS should develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach with a long term vision by:

## Stabilisation in the newly-accessible areas:

- ◆ Critically assessing the outcomes of the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilisation (FFIS) and ensuring that the new UN Funding Facility for Expanded Stabilisation (FFES) will target deep-rooted conflict drivers and will also focus on reconciliation, compensation, social cohesion and truth finding instead of a mere timeframe extension;
- ◆ Revising the “ISIS-only” focus of its stabilisation policies and coming to a more comprehensive approach that also supports the mitigation of the wider effects of the war on ISIS, such as the mass militarisation of the population;
- ◆ Actively and systematically including civil society in policy consultations to facilitate mediation between militias, tribes and returning communities to avoid revenge, forced or denied return and renewed displacement; and
- ◆ Investing in local and community reconciliation efforts that complement national reconciliation policies, and in particular involve youth and women.

## Wider effects of the war in Iraq:

- ◆ Focusing on political agreements that deal with deeper-rooted conflict drivers to break the cycle of violence in Iraq while enabling and supporting spaces for civilian, non-sectarian actors to operate and influence policies on all levels and in all Iraqi provinces;
- ◆ Supporting the development of an additional funding instrument complementing the stabilisation framework that addresses the wider effects of the war on ISIS and the weakening of the state in the rest of Iraq;
- ◆ Supporting concrete, localized plans of UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security and UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security by facilitating a greater role of youth and women in peace-building through advisory councils and decision-making platforms, supporting inclusion in community and governmental decision making bodies;
- ◆ Preparing with local and national civil authorities programs for future demobilization or integration of the numerous militias into regular army or local security structures; and
- ◆ Developing an active policy to ensure the return of minors in armed groups to schools and educational programs.

## National reconciliation:

- ◆ Creating space for and supporting the involvement of civil society, in particular youth and women, in a public debate on national reconciliation in order to come to a broader public vision of what it entails and what should be done by authorities.

## The UNAMI mandate and international coordination:

- ◆ Strengthen the mandate and capacity of UNAMI by tasking it to lead the coordination of actors in the development of a broad strategy to address deeper conflict drivers.

## **Newly accessible areas: role of militias**

Military successes and territorial gains against ISIS in the provinces of Salah Eddin, Kirkuk, Diyala, Anbar and Ninewa have changed the reality on the ground in Iraq. Armed groups, unified and legitimized under the Peshmerga and Popular Mobilisation Unit banners, are dominating the areas where ISIS has retreated, building on the citizens' historically rooted lack of trust in Iraqi authorities. The military campaign against ISIS has led to mass militarization of communities, which is strengthening militias and the political parties with which they are aligned, while further weakening and dividing national and provincial authorities, such as the Parliament, Governorate administrations and provincial councils.

Within the context of national mobilization against ISIS in Federal Iraq and the dominance of Kurdish political parties in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-dominated areas, Sunni and minority communities in all areas of Iraq are pressured to join or support militias out of fear of being branded a possible ISIS member. Youth in impoverished areas of Ninewa, such as Rabia and Sinjar, are recruited to join the militias because there are no other job opportunities. These militias, often influenced or even led by foreign actors, compete with each other (sometimes resulting in inter-militia violence, as recently happened in Tuz Khormato) and could be equally threatening to civilians as ISIS.

Meanwhile, the forced change of demographic composition in newly-accessible areas that are part of the disputed territories (that have been subjected to Arabisation under the previous regime) or are border territories, has completely shifted the demographic balance as a consequence of (or with the excuse of) the war on ISIS. The lack of a unified political effort by Iraqi actors to secure and stabilize areas results in a power vacuum where such demographic engineering can take place, leading to an ongoing legacy of forced migration and prevention of return, potentially sowing the seeds of future conflict for many years to come.

## Policies of stabilization

In the wake of new military successes against ISIS, current displacement (currently 3,5 million, majority Sunni) is likely to grow with populations considered hostile to both Erbil and Baghdad governments. The return of these populations will depend greatly on the success of the so-called stabilization policies of the International Coalition and the Iraqi government. Apart from physical reconstruction and service delivery, it is vital to critically assess the social components of these stabilization policies in order to develop a context where human security is ensured for communities who stayed during ISIS control and that displaced communities can safely return.

Current UN-led stabilization policies focus on 'a momentum, which is short term, to reestablish trust in the government and prevent a power vacuum'<sup>1</sup>. Even though this is clearly important, this policy focused on the short term overlooks the importance of including a strategy that aims at transforming deeper conflict drivers that enabled the rise of ISIS in Iraq in the first place. The international community needs to focus on a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the goal of the quick return of refugees and internally displaced persons as a key objective. Politically complex issues, such as transitional justice, reconciliation or the status of disputed territories are not taken up in a comprehensive manner. A multitude of international (UN, EU, bilateral, INGO), regional and local initiatives are not connected and often operate from different strategic departure points. Even if it is not intentional, short-term stabilization efforts have direct political impact by solidifying changed power dynamics, especially when it comes to coordination (and therefore legitimization) with the armed "liberators" controlling the newly-accessible areas. The short-term stabilization focus is therefore counterproductive and may lead to renewed conflict.

## Militarization and fragmentation of the State

The mass militarization of the Iraqi population and the civil war have led to increased instability and insecurity for all citizens of Iraq, including areas far from the frontlines with ISIS. Militias reinforce the narrative of general antipathy against the government, professing that they are more legitimate as war heroes than corrupt politicians. The current political paralysis and 'freezing' of Parliaments in Baghdad and Erbil contributes to a "fragmentation within the fragmentation" leading to further destabilization and absence of rule of law. This plays into the hands of many radical actors, aligned with both ISIS and Shia militias, who will want to present themselves as the strong actors that can save the country. Meanwhile, it also facilitates a rise of forms of tribal law and traditions that are particularly harmful to women,

<sup>1</sup> Lise Grande, Deputy Special Representative of UNAMI, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator in Iraq, in a presentation on stabilization progress in Iraq, at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, 05-04-2016.

# PAX Iraq Alert iii | May 12<sup>th</sup> 2016

children and minorities, particularly in Southern Iraq. It is becoming more difficult for civil society to play a constructive role and represent the interests of citizens because their natural counterparts, state institutions, are increasingly weakened.

By addressing these challenges with concrete policy measures, the international community can help prevent the pitfalls of the fight against ISIS and pave the way for long-term peace and stability.

**The Iraq Alert is a policy brief published by the Dutch peace movement PAX.**

**PAX headquarters  
Utrecht**

Thirsa de Vries  
[devries@paxforpeace.nl](mailto:devries@paxforpeace.nl)  
+31 (06) 48981497

Sam van Vliet  
[vanvliet@paxforpeace.nl](mailto:vanvliet@paxforpeace.nl)  
+31 (06) 20420641

**EU Liaison Office  
Brussels**

Astrid Schrama  
[schrama@paxforpeace.nl](mailto:schrama@paxforpeace.nl)  
+32 (0) 4953 87083

**UN Liaison Office  
New York**

Alexandra Hiniker  
[hiniker@paxforpeace.nl](mailto:hiniker@paxforpeace.nl)  
+1 917-618-2330