

# The EU's Mission to Iraq and the Country's Persistent Instability

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Persistent Instability

*By Domenico Farinelli*

## Introduction

On 7 September 2022, the Iraqi supreme court ruled that the national parliament could not be dissolved if not by itself (Aljazeera, Reuters, 2022). In doing so, it rejected a key demand made by Moqtada al-Sadr, a 48-years-old Shiite cleric followed by millions all around the country, who had vehemently asked for early elections. Currently, he leads the largest political group inside the Iraqi parliament, controlling as many as 73 of the chamber's 329 seats. The top court's decision followed a period of turmoil and social unrest that had started in late August when al-Sadr publicly announced that he was seriously considering withdrawing from politics. Since then, its supporters have engaged in numerous armed clashes with both security forces and rival militias, throwing the entire country into disarray. How can it be that Iraq's main political force advocates for a return to the polls, instead of taking part in the nation's government? The reason should be sought in the fierce rivalry that opposes different Iraqis Shiite parties and which is becoming increasingly violent.

## The "Muhasasa" system and the current year-long political impasse

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the United States tried to push the Iraqi State towards the adoption of democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the power vacuum that followed the fall of the dictator led to an extreme exacerbation of sectarian violence. To put an end to the situation, all the major Iraqi factions agreed to establish the "Muhasasa", an ethno-sectarian power-sharing system inspired to the Lebanon's one. Following that scheme, the prime minister was required to be a Shiite, the speaker of parliament a Sunni, and the president a Kurd. Initially, this system was intended to guarantee the rights of religious minorities, but it ended up generating endemic corruption, political instability, and economic collapse (Tim Petschulat, 2021). In fact, since the Shiites held the most important positions inside the government, they were able to drain nearly all the State's resources to suit their interests whilst other groups became increasingly marginalised as a result. Furthermore, divisions emerged inside the Shiite community, with one faction politically closer to Iran and another, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, advocating for more independence from Iraq's powerful neighbour. Following the general elections held in October 2021, al-Sadr's stubborn rejection to cooperate with pro-Iranian parties prevented his parliamentary group from forming a government, thereby creating a complex political impasse (Jane Arraf, 2022). Another cause for discomfort for al-Sadr is of a religious nature. Indeed, on 28 August 2022 Grand Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri publicly stated his imminent resignation from his clerical role. In doing so, he also urged his followers to support Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. This would not have been a problem if not for al-Haeri being one of the most prominent spiritual authorities leading the Iraqi Shiite community, considered by many the actual spiritual leader of the Sadrist Movement. Furthermore, since the doctrine requires that Shiites Muslims cannot engage in politics without being explicitly authorised by a senior doctor of Islamic law, this move could possibly put in question the very basis of al-Sadr's entire political career.

The frustration deriving from the political stalemate, coupled with the desire to openly show that he still enjoys widespread support from the masses despite having been partially delegitimised by al-Haeri's announcement that has pushed al-Sadr to engage in a hazardous display of force. He threatened his exit from the political scene precisely to trigger the violent protests staged by his followers, with the aim of demonstrating his determination not to be side-lined (Mohamad Bazzi, 2022). When the protesters entered the Baghdad's Green zone in arms threatening to occupy the national parliament, the country seemed to be on the brink of a civil war. At the very last moment, mediation efforts by the Iraqi president of the Republic Barham Salih succeeded in de-escalating the crisis, but the risk for a sudden degradation of Iraq's internal security conditions remains concrete (Akeel Abbas, 2022).

### **The EU mission in Iraq and its role in the country's stability**

On 18 December 2011, the United States completed the withdrawal of their forces from Iraq, complying with an agreement that they had previously concluded with the local government. Then in late 2014 "Islamic State", a Sunni jihadist group, emerged in the western regions of Iraq. By taking advantage of the many weaknesses of the State institutions, it managed to conquer around a third of the country's territory. Since the national army had melted away in front of the enemy's advances, an international intervention was necessary to restore Baghdad's authority over these lands. Moreover, after the defeat of Islamic State, the nation's entire security apparatus had to be rebuilt literally from scratch. It is for this reason that in October 2017 the Iraqi government turned to the EU, asking for advice on how to undertake some radical civilian Security Sector Reforms (SSR). In response, the EU launched the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM-Iraq). Operating within an initial mandate of one year, which was then extended to 2022, the mission has played an important role in improving the country's security conditions. Its main task is to support the coherent implementation of the civilian-related aspects of the Iraqi National Security Strategy. In practice, the work of EUAM-Iraq consists in advising and supporting the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in designing and implementing these reforms, with a particular focus on the protection of the civilian population. In addition, the mission conducts regular visits at regional and provincial levels to help the Iraqi government to strengthen countrywide coordination, as it relates to SSR. Finally, since the central State's security forces are the only shield that can uphold the citizens from sectarian violence and terrorism, it is of essential importance that they do not turn violent and start committing abuses themselves. Consequently, EUAM-Iraq also exerts a constant control over these forces, ensuring that Iraqi security forces continue to respect the integrity of civilians, especially during times of extreme tension like the one the country is undergoing right now. In doing so, the EUAM-Iraq offers a fundamental external control on the Iraqi security forces, further contributing to protecting ordinary citizens from suffering unjustified violence.

## Prospects for future cooperation in and beyond the security field

Iraq is one of the most prominent countries in the Middle Eastern region, boasting a booming young population, a promising internal market, and multiple opportunities for development. Above all, the country is a major oil producer, being a founding member of the OPEC organisation and possessing the 5th largest oil reserves in the whole world. The latter sum amounts to approximately 145 thousand million barrels, meaning that they represent about the 8.4% of the world's total stock (OPEC, 2022). With this incredible fortune at their disposal, the Iraqi people have what it takes to defeat poverty once and for all. At the same time, EU member states are in desperate need for energy supply, due to the Russian war in Ukraine making it impossible to enjoy any form of genuine cooperation with Russia, at least in the short term. It seems clear that there are many interesting opportunities to expand bilateral trade and investments between Iraq and the EU. To do so requires a strong, legitimate, and accountable government to be installed in Baghdad as well as the country to be safe and secure for both local citizens and foreign visitors. If the nation's immense resources are diverted to the pockets of a restricted elite, the Iraqi people cannot benefit from the nation's growth. This in turn increases the risk that individuals will end up following extremist leaders, supporting terrorist organisations, posing a direct threat to the security of the EU member States themselves (Bernard-Henri Lévy, 2022). This situation dramatically recalls the experience of Afghanistan, where endemic corruption ended up in totally delegitimizing the political leadership of the country, led to the failure of all stabilization and state-building programs, and fostered popular support to the Taliban movement. Despite having invested billions of dollars in aid, western powers weren't able to attend any of their political objectives in the country. After having lost thousands of soldiers, the US-led coalition finally retreated from Afghanistan in 2021, leaving behind it the same desperate situation it had found twenty years before (SIGAR, 2021). To avoid repeating the same error, western missions to Iraq should focus more on the country's civil society. Hybrid projects, which involve public-private partnerships, could be an intelligent expedient to avoid that the Iraqi State's heavily corrupted officials divert the international funds directly to their pockets. Making the common people the real protagonist of our engagement could spread the support for western agendas among the Iraqi population, encouraging the transition to a more open and democratic civil society. Moreover, the radicalisation of Iraqi politics and the degradation of the country's security conditions give an important opportunity to corrupt leaders and foreign agents to exploit the widespread sense of fear and hate to obtain consensus and suit their interests. In fact, hostile foreign powers, such as Iran and Russia, could take advantage of the political chaos affecting the country to manipulate Iraq's internal political processes, pursuing aggressive geopolitical agendas that collide with the EU's values and objectives. For all these reasons, the security cooperation [RM1] between the EU and Iraq should be further strengthened and expanded, as well as the good governance of the country should be encouraged and actively sustained. They lie at the very basis of every other development in bilateral relations, being an essential precondition for expanding ties in a constructive and mutual beneficial way.

Furthermore, this security agenda should be supported by a strong commitment in terms of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, aimed at breaking the vicious cycle that always connects poverty, underdevelopment, and political instability. Operating within the framework of the EU external action, the Union's member States should continue sharing their know-how with Iraq, further assisting Baghdad in the construction of an efficient and reliable security sector so that the country can finally return to the rule of law and resume the path of peaceful development.

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