PAX

A Protection of Civilians snapshot

Colophon

PAX and the Protection of Civilians program

PAX works to build just and peaceful societies across the globe. PAX brings together people who have the courage to stand for peace. The PAX Protection of Civilians (PoC) program seeks to increase the effectiveness of PoC interventions by enabling civilians to hold local and internal security actors to account, and by enabling and motivating security actors to design and implement protection strategies that are civilian-centered.

PoC@paxforpeace.nl
www.protectionofcivilians.org
www.paxforpeace.nl

Contents

List of acronyms

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq
AOG	Armed Opposition Group
CF	(Shi'a) Coordination Framework
CMC	Communications and Media Commission
CSO	Civil society organization
DIB	Disputed Internal Boundaries
DNGO	Department of Non-Governmental Organizations
EUAM	European Union Advisory Mission
GoI	Government of Iraq
HSS	Human Security Survey
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham
IAA	Iraqi Al-Amal Association
IAF	Iraqi Armed Forces
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICTS	Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service
IDP	Internally displaced person
IFS	Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
INGO	International non-governmental organization
INIS	Iraqi National Intelligence Service
INSS	Iraqi National Security Service
IO	International organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KII	Key Informant Interview
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoPA	Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NMI	NATO Mission Iraq
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
ONSA	Office of the National Security Advisor
OPEC	Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PM	Prime Minister
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PoC	Protection of Civilians
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
SSR	Security Sector Reform
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNITAD	United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL
US	United States
WAHO	Wand Al-khair Human Organization

1. Introduction

A Protection of Civilians snapshot: Iraq 2024-25 provides an accessible overview of the main human security and protection of civilians-related challenges and developments in Iraq in recent years, focusing mainly on 2024 and early 2025. It draws strongly on knowledge and experience PAX and its partners have acquired through its Human Security Surveys (HSS) running from 2017 to 2024, which collect data on civilian perceptions of their own safety and security situation, and of security actor performance; as well as on PAX's policy and training work at the national level with relevant government and security institutions since 2021. This data is complemented with additional information that PAX's Protection of Civilians (PoC) team gathered through various field visits and conversations with partner staff and relevant interlocuters, as well as Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Combined, this provides a snapshot of the current state of protection of civilians in Iraq, covering trends and developments from the local level all the way up to the national level, and with attention for how international developments (may) impact Iraq going forward.

The report seeks to map out the biggest causes and concerns for insecurity in Iraq to identify the main protection priorities, as well as the pathways through which international institutions and bodies can support Iraq in addressing these. As such, the report is explicitly meant to feed into international discussions and decision making around the withdrawal of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), as well as for overall Security Sector Reform (SSR) support for the country. This is particularly relevant as, in May 2024, Iraqi Prime Minister (PM) Mohammed Shi'a Al-Sudani requested in a letter to the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General that UNAMI's work be terminated by the end of 2025. This decision was informed by the perception that there are "no longer any justifications for the presence of a political mission" in Iraq, as the country has made significant strides towards stability in recent years.[1] The UN Security Council subsequently voted unanimously to extend UNAMI's mandate only until 31 December 2025, following which it will cease all activities in the country.[2] As UNAMI is expected to transition out of Iraq, this report seeks to identify where and how other UN bodies or different international institutions can and should support the Government of Iraq (GoI) in ensuring the continued protection of civilians. This is also in line with Iraq's position that it wants to continue meaningful cooperation with the 22 specialized UN agencies operating in the country.

Content

PAX's main findings in terms of the 'PoC snapshot' are included in the Executive summary (section 2). This also contains our recommendations regarding the human security and PoC issues that need to be prioritized in the coming period, as well as more specific recommendations around UNAMI's withdrawal and SSR support needs in Iraq. The research methodology for this report, as well as PAX's working modalities in Iraq more generally are discussed in section 3. The remainder of the report consists of three parts. Part I provides an overview of the main contextual developments – both nationally (section 4) and internationally (section 5) – that form the backdrop to the most prominent human security and PoC-related issues currently faced in Iraq. In Part II, sections 6 and 7 look at the main SSR developments and actors, as well as the establishment of Iraq's recent PoC policy respectively. Part III builds on years of HSS work in the Salahaddin, Kirkuk, Basra, and Diyala governorates (sections 8-11) to provide an impression of specific human security concerns as they play out at Iraq's subnational level.

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1. Abbas Kadhom Obaid, "Letter dated 8 May 2024 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Iraq to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," *United Nations Security Council*, May 13, 2024.
2. United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Extends Mandate of Iraq Assistance Mission for Final 19 Months to Complete Liquidation Phase, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2732 (2024)," Press release, *United Nations Security Council*, May 31, 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15714.doc.htm.

2. Executive summary

Iraq is at a crossroads. It faces a period of transition now that active conflict against the Islamic State (IS) is over, and the police is transitioning from a more military-focused role to a civilian and community-centric force (i.e., from 'green to blue'). Furthermore, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) are returning to their areas of origin, and many former IS fighters and their families are being repatriated to Iraq. At the national level, Iraq is adopting new SSR and PoC policies. At the same time, the security conditions in the wider region are increasingly fragile, which will certainly impact Iraq as it is still heavily susceptible to external influences. This section presents the report's main findings, as well as our recommendations to improve the protection of civilians in Iraq. It is important to note that many of the international, national, and local trends discussed in this report have a complex interdependence on each other and cannot be understood in isolation. Regional and national trends have a direct impact on the way civilians perceive their security, and HSS results have shown that civilian perceptions are powerful tools in predicting future conflicts.

Main findings

Regional developments risk undermining stability in Iraq. The war in Gaza has had a direct impact on security in Iraq. Despite Iran's dwindling power, its influence on and in Iraq remains high as it continues to use Iraqi soil for its proxy wars and launching attacks against United States' (US) military targets. This has increased since the war in Gaza. Iraq has thus far adopted a pragmatic approach to the fall of the Assad-regime in Syria by trying to remain uninvolved in Syria's internal affairs. However, how this will evolve regionally is yet to be seen.

Iraq's national politics are characterized by increasing fragmentation and dissent. Political division became apparent in 2021-22 when it took over a year after elections to appoint the current PM, and for the first time in history, disunity was visible in the Shi'a bloc between pro-Iran and nationalist camps. This trend continued in 2024-25, where to maintain the status-quo within the [Shi'a] Coordination Framework (CF), three controversial laws were passed together. These laws have massive implications on human security, from undermining women's rights, pardoning former IS fighters without adequate rehabilitation and social cohesions plans in place, as well as on Kurdish and Turkmen residents claiming back their lands, especially in Kirkuk, because of former Arabization policies.

Iraq continues to face challenges related to widespread internal displacement and insufficient attention for rehabilitation, reintegration, and social cohesion programs. Within individual communities there are worries that conflict is likely to increase. IDP camps that formerly contained former IS fighters and their families have been closed, without the demobilization, rehabilitation, reintegration, and social cohesion programs that are needed to prevent (the reignition of) communal tensions and conflicts. This is compounded by large international funding cuts, from the US in particular, that jeopardize the continuation of existing programs.

Iraq is facing several economic challenges, which risk fueling popular discontent. Iraq's national budget remains highly dependent on oil revenues; any decrease in global oil prices drastically affects the country's ability to provide for its population's basic needs and services. US sanctions on Iran are impacting Iraq's direct access to electricity and gas. Unemployment remains high, particularly among youth. Combined, such frustrations have in the past led to large-scale popular protests, specifically in Iraq's southern governorates. Moreover, civilians surveyed in the HSS governorates also report a causal link between a lack of livelihoods with increased militarization of adolescent men, electronic extortion, and increased drug abuse in their communities.

There is a worrying trend of shrinking civic space in Iraq. Since 2023, (inter)national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and activists are increasingly being targeted. Representatives from Iraqi civil society have experienced death threats and outright violence, and hundreds of protestors and activists have been killed since 2020. Shrinking civic space translates into organizations receiving formal letters from certain Ministries asking their personnel not to work with them, facing restrictions on their mobility and access across the country to undertake programming, and being targeted for online slander on social media. Along similar lines, any references to the term 'gender' are banned, meaning that girls' and women's involvement in peace and political spheres is acutely challenged. As a result, many Iraqi and international NGOs have had to adapt their programming and the language they use to describe their work.

Concerns remain over a possible resurgence of IS. While officially defeated in 2017, IS sleeper cells still exist, with increasing attacks seen in Anbar, Ninewa, Salahaddin, and the Hamrin mountains in Diyala. It further remains to be seen whether IS can profit from a more volatile context in Syria and decreased US support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),

which guards many prisons and camps with (former) IS fighters. This risks significant spillover effects for Iraq.

The GoI has taken positive steps towards drafting and launching the Iraqi SSR and PoC policies. Both policies are fairly comprehensive and feature the country's ambitions on increased transparency, accountability, capacity building, as well as mitigation of and responding to civilian harm. The Iraqi PoC policy is the first such policy globally that applies to the entire national security apparatus, and which applies to both peace and conflict times. It is further laudable to see the efforts of most international organizations (IOs) and international actors on SSR remain coordinated through the Security Coordination Group. However, civil society organizations (CSOs) are not allowed to be a part of this group since information shared there is classified. This exclusion means that there is a lack of civilian representation in drafting and implementing, either directly or through Iraqi CSOs working on SSR.

Outlook

Civilians in different regions of Iraq – as indicated through our HSS and subsequent community engagement dialogues – overwhelmingly point to economic issues as the most likely cause for conflict in their communities in the near future. This is a potential crisis lurking under the surface in Iraq, ready to erupt at any time. At the community level, the lack of livelihoods has various causes and effects. The country is experiencing bleak economic conditions, making it difficult for the government to provide basic services and meaning that even skilled university graduates currently cannot find jobs. Circumstances are even harder for the many youth who were unable to access education while living under IS occupation and face structural barriers to entering the workforce. Further, many men and boys from across the country also joined militias in the fight against IS. Civilians argue that the increased militarization of youth has economic motivations, as joining a militia guarantees an income and a certain degree of power. After 2017, many of these men and boys returned to their areas of origin, where there were few economic opportunities and the main skill they had mastered was how to operate weapons. Other visible implications reported by communities include higher rates of drug abuse as a result of frustration, as well as an increased incidence of petty crimes and electronic extortion to generate money through illegal means.

In addition to economic challenges, civilians frequently point to governance issues as a likely cause for future conflict. This is a significant shift from when PAX first conducted its HSS in 2017, when civilians were

primarily concerned about the presence of IS and terrorist elements. There is currently a great deal of political dissent at the national level, which in many governorates has local implications: authorities are repeatedly replaced based on party politics, usually along ethnic and sectarian lines, thereby deepening these lines in society.

It thus seems that apart from external influences on Iraq, internally, livelihood and governance issues will increase fragility and threaten resilience. The lack of jobs along with the limited provision of essential services, and increased societal challenges like drug abuse, militarization of youth, and electronic extortion, could easily again trigger widespread public protests. This is especially true in the southern governorates, like Basra, though the same conditions will also affect Baghdad. In order to bring lasting peace in Iraq and prevent short-term conflict, policy makers must prioritize addressing these economic woes in an effective and timely manner.

Recommendations

Recommendations to the Government of Iraq

- **Abide by the commitments made on prevention of political interference** in security sector institutions.
- **Provide avenues for constructive dialogues between civilians and security providers** for improved trust building, and to incorporate civilian voices in security policies and their implementation.
- **Increase awareness on policies around electronic extortion**, such as Article 430, and adopt an effective dissemination strategy. This should also include reducing the taboos of such instances by engaging families, as well as tribal and religious leaders.
- **More strongly enforce the laws against drug trafficking and sale**. Simultaneously, desecuritize drug use and view it as a medical or psychological issue. Build and equip rehabilitation centers.
- **Address high levels of unemployment** by attracting foreign investments and the private sector. Agreements can also be made with neighboring countries in need of manpower for labor exchanged.

Recommendations to actors working on SSR in Iraq

- **Analyze and address the current gaps in the SSR approaches** and draft a joint action plan to address them in a timely manner.
- **Better engage with Iraqi and international civil society representation and civilians in SSR**

implementation. Institutionalize such practices rather than doing them on an ad-hoc basis.
- **Improve communication towards Iraqi civilians** on mandates, activities, and aims of SSR programs.
- **Jointly make clear and timely decisions on priorities on implementation and training** given overall funding cuts.
- **Identify which national processes can be improved through further support**, for instance, civilian harm commitments made in the Iraqi PoC policy, the lags in Law 20, reparations for Yazidis, as well as making amends for civilian harm caused by the Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF).
- **Identify which international SSR actors will support the Iraqi national PoC policy** and how, along with timelines and dedicated resources.
- **Better align Iraq's national PoC policy and PoC strategy** drafted by SSR partners with specific Iraqi ministries so as not to cause confusion. Cooperation and alignment need to be institutionalized, as opposed to happening in an ad hoc manner.
- **Institutionalize SSR practices and coordination** to avoid their successful implementation becoming or remaining personality dependent.

Recommendations to the UN concerning UNAMI's withdrawal

- **Proactively engage civilians on the process and implications of UNAMI's withdrawal**, including by UN agencies and in partnership with Iraqi civil society. Civilians would value increased communication on the transition, what it means, and how it will take place to quell any fears and uncertainties.
- **Meaningfully integrate the voices of Iraqi civilians and civil society on UNAMI's transition** and take appropriate measures to address their concerns.
- During the transition from a Special Political Mission to a UN Country Team (UNCT), **ensure that the UN maintains adequate leadership** to prevent gaps in cooperation between the host government and the UN system in the country.
- **Clarify which UNCT agencies will continue their presence and to what extent they will take over UNAMI's work** on political engagement; key reforms; human rights and accountability; dignified and voluntary returns of IDPs; demobilization, disarmament and reintegration; social cohesion and repatriating former IS fighters and their families; and safeguarding space for civil society and peace work to continue. Furthermore, provide clear and timely communication to civil society and the general public regarding these functions.
- **Ensure that the UNCT agencies that oversee SSR support Iraq's rollout of its national PoC policy**.

3. Methodology and PAX PoC work in Iraq

PAX has worked in Iraq for over two decades. The PoC team's flagship Human Security Survey started in 2017 in Basra, Kirkuk, and Salahaddin governorates, and was expanded to Diyala in 2021. The PoC team developed the HSS methodology to fill several perceived gaps in the contexts where it works. Significantly, data about local experiences and opinions regarding civilian security are rarely available, reliable, timely, or representative. When field research does occur in a conflict context, logistical and security realities generally result in convenience samples that make it hard to extrapolate about the broader population and may systematically exclude particular groups, such as women, youth, displaced persons, or minority identity groups. Further, research of this kind can be extractive, with the results rarely, if ever, being shared with respondents and their communities. These factors make it difficult to design or assess security interventions in ways that effectively take civilians' perspectives into account. PAX's PoC program seeks to take a different and more inclusive approach.

The HSS includes a series of complementary activities, including population-based research, community engagement, and advocacy. Its aims are 1) to increase the understanding of contextualized and civilian-centered security experiences, perceptions, and trends; 2) to enhance the 'claim-making capacity' of civilians to identify relevant protection priorities and hold security providers authorities to account; and 3) to guide and inform a wide variety of stakeholders who have an ability to impact protection issues through evidence-based advocacy at local and international levels. The HSS seeks to create or leverage opportunities for civilians to participate in security dialogues at the community level, where practical decisions by military, government, police, traditional leaders, and non-state armed actors deeply affect civilians' day-to-day lives.

PAX and its partners further continue the HSS cycle annually, which enables us to track trends and work to effect more sustainable change. Trained enumerators, selected by PAX's long-standing Iraqi partners, conduct face-to-face interviews, aided by a smartphone-based questionnaire. Through the HSS, PAX and partners collect data on the civilian population of various geographic areas within each targeted governorate. The HSS seeks to capture the security perceptions and experiences of all walks of life: men and women, young and old, displaced populations and host communities, and across all livelihoods and ethnicities. Once analyzed, results are discussed with respective

▲ HSS community engagement session in Diyala governorate, © *WAHO, 2022*.

communities and duty bearers, resulting in community initiatives aimed at contributing to improved PoC at the sub-national level.

While the data PAX collects is robust,[3] numbers in and of themselves are not as useful to policy makers. Through regular interactions with our partner staff, academics, district and governorate-level officials in various capacities, as well as Iraqi civilians, PAX and partners have a good understanding of the stories behind these numbers.

Furthermore, by entering the policy and technical advice arena since November 2021, the PoC team also has considerable insight into national-level developments based on engagements with government officials, staff representing diplomatic missions, IOs, INGOs, journalists, and political analysts.

While many conversations referenced in this report were conducted over years, and not specifically for this report, all respondents were asked if insights from those conversations can be used. Some semi-structured interviews were also conducted specifically for this report. The names of the respondents are not mentioned for privacy reasons. The entities interviewed and consulted include: PAX's Iraqi partners, specifically the Iraqi Al-Amal Association (IAA), the Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society (IFS), Wand Al-khair Human Organization (WAHO), and the Ashour Foundation for Relief and Development. Others include political analysts, PAX

staff, and representatives from UN agencies, the NATO Mission-Iraq (NMI) and the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM), and diplomatic representatives from various embassies. Also consulted were representatives from the Iraqi government, specifically the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) committee in the PM's office, advisors to the PM, the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA), the Ministry of Defense (MoD), the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Iraqi National Security Service (INSS), the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA).

Parts I and II of the report are based on the knowledge the team has amassed over the years of working in Iraq, amplified heavily by the interviews and conversations described above, and supplemented by online secondary sources. Part III is solely based on the HSS and conversations with partners and their staff members.

It is important to note that in the context sections, we have not covered all topics, but only those of which we have ample knowledge. An important topic often brought up, for instance, but not presented in this report is mis- and dis-information and its impact on human security. Second, we have only included profiles of governorates where we conduct the HSS, and in doing so have not presented similar profiles on other key governorates, like Ninewa.

Part I
Context

3. See PAX Protection of Civilians, "Human Security Survey: Survey Methodology," *PAX* (2024), https://protectionofcivilians.org/4199-2/ for more details on the HSS methodology.

4. National context

Iraq is at a critical juncture. While it is leaving behind the most intense phases of active armed conflict, it remains beset by both isolated, and complex interdependent security threats and a fear of rising terrorist activities. National politics are characterized by a fragile equilibrium and increasing signs of dissent and fragmentation. There are further widespread concerns over shrinking civic space and increased pressure on women's rights. Considering UNAMI's imminent withdrawal, many in civil society dread that without a relatively neutral monitoring presence in the country, this situation may deteriorate, and the gains made in the last couple of decades may be lost. These and other relevant trends, which form the background to many of the human security issues highlighted further on in this report, are discussed below.

Political developments

Iraqi politics are increasingly fragmented. With elections planned for later this year, political clashes and electoral propaganda are likely, increasing and exponentially channeling social unrest. Iraq is currently ruled by the Shi'a CF – an umbrella bloc of pro-Iran Shi'a parties – under PM Mohammed Shi'a Al-Sudani, who took power in October 2022. The 2022 Parliamentary elections divided Iraq's majority Shi'a population into two opposing pro-Iranian and nationalist camps, increasing political fragility at the national level. The currently necessary balancing act between Iraq's main political camps resulted in a controversial legislative tradeoff earlier this year, which roused emotions across the country (see the sub-section below). At the subnational level, political fighting and power grabs have occurred in Ninewa and Basra governorates,[4] both around sectarian lines and along political affiliations, increasing local tensions and bringing to light the dissent among the ruling CF.[5] The population at large is concerned about these developments. PAX HSS results show that respondents overwhelmingly state that they believe that the cause for future conflicts in Iraq will be related to national-level governance. This is discussed in greater detail in Part III.

Controversial political trade-offs

As a result of agreements made by the CF, Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish lawmakers struck a controversial deal in early 2025 by putting three legislative proposals in one 'basket'. With their combined support, the basket made it through Parliament. One interviewee referred to this as '3D-horse trading'.[6] The legislative package included amendments to the Personal Status Law and the General Amnesty Law, and the passing of the Land Restitution Law, backed by Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish parties respectively.[7]

Personal Status Law (Law n.188/1959):[8] Earlier this year, the fears of many civil society actors came true when Parliament approved a divisive amendment to the Personal Status Law, which is perceived to have disastrous effects on women's rights and which the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls criticized in a recent report.[9] In essence, it grants religious denominations further power to control family matters like marriage and inheritance, which is a significant step back for gender equality in Iraqi society.[10] Among other things, the amendment grants fathers preferential custody of children over mothers, deprives women of alimony when illness prevents them from fulfilling 'marital duties', and strips women of inheritance rights to real estate property.[11] It also enables marriage at 15 and authenticates unregistered marriages that are conducted by religious leaders. Both are expected to contribute to increases in child marriages, which are already prevalent in Iraq: 28 percent of girls are married before the age of 18.[12] Furthermore, these numbers only include registered marriages, meaning that the actual number in practice is likely higher.

General Amnesty Law (Law n.27/2016):[13] The passed amendments to this law aim to solve 'judicial injustices' by granting amnesty to those convicted of lesser crimes, and to solve the overcrowding conditions of Iraqi prisons.[14] More significantly, such amendments foresee in prisoners' releases by better differentiating between IS members and civilians who were coerced into cooperation with IS in areas formerly under its control. This is done by additionally allowing those convicted of serious crimes – including terrorism charges – to request a retrial. Observers are worried, however, that such amendments can reignite slumbering conflicts between formerly opposed communities as the law does not sufficiently allow for the adequate rehabilitation of prisoners, targeted transitional justice programs, or other efforts to increase social cohesion.[15]

The Property Restitution Law (Law n.3/2025):[16] This law seeks to reverse several demographic changes imposed by the regime of Saddam Hussein in Kirkuk by restoring lands confiscated during that period to their original Kurdish and Turkmen owners, many of whom were forcibly evicted from their properties. The lands were then given to Arabs as part of a broader Arabization policy. The law appears to be a step toward long-overdue justice, but it carries several political and social risks: It neglects the rights of current Arab residents, some of whom have lived there for decades. Many others have since sold their properties to other residents and moved elsewhere. There is also the risk of large-scale displacement of residents from Kirkuk, without fair compensation for their lost homes and/or livelihoods. This could lead to instability and local conflicts, especially in areas where IS sleeper cells still

4. On 9 March, Basra governor Al-Aidani dismissed the Basra Investment Committee chairman and took over the committee. Al-Aidani leads the Sadrist-aligned Design Alliance, which faced opposition from the Shi'a CF during the 2023 Iraqi Provincial Council elections. The Provincial Council Chairman Al-Badrani, whose party is part of the CF, in turn rejected Al-Aidani's decision on the dismissal. In Ninewa, the Provincial Council on 5 March voted to remove its Chairman but this decision was later overturned by the Iraqi Supreme Administrative Court. This court ruling is seen as causing further polarization among political alliances.
5. Johanna Moore et al., "Iran update, March 11, 2025," *Institute for the Study of War,* March 11, 2025, https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-march-11-2025.

6. Interview with PAX partner staff, 27 January 2025.
7. Amwaj Media, "Parliamentary 'horse-trading' over divisive laws sparks backlash in Iraq," *Amwaj Media,* January 29, 2025, https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/parliamentary-horse-trading-over-divisive-laws-sparks-backlash-in-iraq.
8. *Personal Status Law,* Law No. 188 of 1959 (Iraq), Official Gazette of Iraq, January 21, 2025, https://iq.parliament.iq/law/?entry=6873.
9. UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, "OL IRQ 4/2024," *United Nations,* September 10, 2024, https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29342.
10. "Iraq: Events of 2024," *Human Rights Watch,* accessed April 7, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/iraq.
11. Iraq Studies Unit, "The Political, Security and Social Fallout of Iraq's 'One Basket' Legislations," *Emirates Policy Center* (2025).
12. GHRTV World News, "Iraq's Personal Status Law Amendment is a Negative Step for Women's Rights," *GHRTV World News,* March 18, 2025, https://ghrtv.org/iraqs-personal-status-law-amendment-is-a-negative-step-for-womens-rights/; Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Personal Status Law Amendment Sets Back Women's Rights," *Human Rights Watch,* March 10, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/iraq-personal-status-law-amendment-sets-back-womens-rights.
13. *General Amnesty Law,* Law No. 27 of 2016 (Iraq), Official Gazette of Iraq, January 21, 2025, https://iq.parliament.iq/law/?entry=6872.
14. Lorena Stella Martini, "From Personal Status to General Amnesty: A Controversial Political Process in Iraq," *The Square,* March 12, 2025, https://www.thesquarecentre.org/2025/03/12/from-personal-status-to-general-amnesty-a-controversial-political-process-in-iraq/.
15. Iraq Studies Unit, "The Political, Security and Social Fallout."
16. *The Property Restitution Law,* Law No. 3 of 2025 (Iraq), Official Gazette of Iraq, January 21, 2025, https://iq.parliament.iq/law/?entry=6253.

exist.[17] Furthermore, as the law only applies to Kirkuk, this has triggered dissent in other parts of Iraq where land was seized under similar conditions.

While not a part of this 'basket deal', another rather controversial bill increasing internal strife within the political parties in the country is the '[Popular Mobilization Forces] PMF Service and Retirement Law', which Parliament withdrew from consideration, pending amendments to reduce the number of PMF members set for retirement. The key point of contention within the CF remains the retirement age stipulated in the bill, which could force the current chairman of the PMF, in charge since 2015, to step down, alongside an estimated 180 other high-ranking personnel, including the heads of various brigades and regional operational commands.[18] This would likely lead to a political crisis.

Shrinking civic space

Shrinking civic space in Iraq is a great cause for concern. It is evident, among other things, in instances of violent repression of protestors, the occasional targeting of journalists and activists, and the existence of (draft) legislation that does not align with International Human Rights Law (IHRL) standards, nor – in certain cases – with the Iraqi Constitution.[19] Proposed but not yet implemented amendments to the Freedom of Expression Bill enable arbitrary trials for anyone who makes public comments that violate "public morals and public orders";[20] the draft Cybercrime Bill would put in place punitive measures for those who publish online materials that are deemed

to negatively affect Iraq's "economic, political, military, or national security interests";[21] and the draft Right to Access Information Bill contains elements violating the free flow of information and freedom of expression.[22] Concerned with these developments and the last bill in particular, (inter)national CSOs and human rights groups have sent an open letter to the Iraqi Council of Representatives.[23] Similarly, over 1,000 journalists and lawyers have signed on to a campaign to demand amendments to the Right to Access Information Bill.[24]

Shrinking civic space is particularly evident in the backlash against gender. The current anti-gender campaign is the work of conservative Islamist political groups and individuals, providing a rare bridge between Shi'a and Sunni groups.[25] Since 2023, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (CMC) forbids mention of the terms 'gender' and 'homosexuality' in any public documents, by institutions or by media platforms.[26] This delegitimizes gender studies, gender participation, and gender programming by NGOs.[27] Iraqi civil society has further faced claims of 'proliferating homosexuality', which is criminalized in Iraq,[28] as well as contributing to 'moral decay' and the violation of 'religious and national values'.[29] In many cases if an Iraqi organization simply partnered with diplomatic missions which openly supported LGBTQIA+ rights in Iraq, or with INGOs which conducted LGBTQIA+ programming outside Iraq, without itself working on or advocating for such issues, the Iraqi organization was suspended and faced political and social consequences as a result.

In a country where women already fight for visibility and a voice, this is having a tremendous impact on

women and girls, as well as on CSOs working on women's participation. Many CSOs and women's activists face slander on social media, as well as from religious figures and their communities; with some reporting Friday sermons preaching against women's participation in public life.[30] During the first few weeks of this anti-gender campaign, NGOs and top women personnel had to keep a low profile due to threats. Over time, many NGOs have seen no other option than to change their programming language to make it acceptable to the CMC. According to PAX partners, decades of work on women's participation in peace processes has been erased overnight this way.

UNAMI's withdrawal

In May 2024, the Iraqi government formally requested the UN to terminate the work of UNAMI by the end of 2025. This request has been the subject of some contention. Shi'a parties are in favor of it, whereas Sunni and Kurdish parties are concerned that the Mission's departure can result in further Shi'a dominance, jeopardizing the interests of Iraq's various minorities.[31] Political analysts have alluded to the Mission's perceived failure to work effectively, for instance on the human rights file, as well as alleged collusion with various governmental and political factions, thereby questioning its neutrality, as factors that contributed to the GoI's decision.[32] Iraqi militias have further claimed that former Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Hennis-Plasschaert overstepped her role by criticizing the militias' influence in Iraq.[33] Such allegations point to growing dissent of the Mission among powerful stakeholders in Iraq. However, also interesting to note is that one political analyst lauded SRSG Hennis-Plasschaert's efforts in speaking with heads of all Iraqi political parties during elections, recommending the political affairs departments of embassies to do the same.[34]

Despite the criticism UNAMI has faced, many regard the UN's presence in Iraq as a stabilizing factor. CSOs consider the Mission's presence to reflect and bolster Iraq's commitment to democratic values and they worry that, without UNAMI, their work will face further restrictions and that activists will be targeted with impunity.[35] This sense of insecurity is exacerbated by persistent unclarity about what a UNAMI withdrawal will look like, especially with regards to its impact on programs that focus on human rights, accountability, and political engagement. Many CSOs urge the UN – when UNAMI departs – to retain the human rights file through the UN country team. They want some form of independent and reliable international oversight that can monitor and raise the alarm where needed about meager or slow-moving progress on human rights issues.[36] It is further unclear whether such civilian and civil society perspectives are being heard in decisions around a UNAMI withdrawal. While an independent commission, sent by the UN, interviewed some Iraqi CSOs on the role of UNAMI some time in 2022-23, it was not made clear to them that this was regarding the Mission's eventual withdrawal.[37]

It is also important to note that the situation following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has left many Iraqi civilians and partner staff with fears that, when the UN withdraws from Iraq, this could similarly result in a difficult situation for individuals and their families, who fear they will be left without assistance.[38] This is evident of the need for responsible withdrawal, as well as effective and timely communication with civilians.

Economic developments

Iraq's economy is in a fragile state, with an unemployment rate at 16.3 percent.[39] This requires attention as respondents to our HSS in Diyala and Basra frequently cited poverty and lack of economic

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18. Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Iraq's PMF Law Is No Substitute for Real Security Reform," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2025).
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25. Remark made in an interview during PAX's trip to Iraq in September 2023.
26. Kurdistan24, "Amnesty calls on Iraq to reconsider decision to ban terms 'homosexuality' and 'gender'," Kurdistan24, August 11, 2023, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/392233/Amnesty-calls-on-Iraq-to-reconsider-decision-to-ban-terms-%27homosexuality%27-and-%E2%80%98gender%E2%80%99.
27. British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, "Letter Regarding the Ban on the Terms 'Gender' and 'Homosexuality' in Iraqi Government Institutions," BRISMES, August 29, 2023, https://www.brismes.ac.uk/news/letter-regarding-the-ban-on-the-terms-gender-and-homosexuality-in-iraqi-government-institutions.
28. Al Jazeera, "Iraq criminalises same-sex relationships with maximum 15 years in prison," Al Jazeera, April 27, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/iraq-criminalises-same-sex-relationships-with-maximum-15-years-in-prison.
29. PAX Protection of Civilians, "PAX PoC Program Annual Report 2023," PAX (2024).

30. Zahra Ali, "In Iraq, To Defend Gender Is to Refuse Violence," Jadaliyya, August 31, 2023, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45269.
31. Mohamad Al-Basem, "Iraqi Government Challenges UNAMI's Presence: What Are The Implications?" EISMENA, June 21, 2024, https://eismena.com/en/article/iraqi-government-challenges-unamis-presence-what-are-the-implications-2024-06-21.
32. Samir Daoud Hannoush, "The UN mission's exit from Iraqi," The Arab Weekly, May 22, 2024, https://thearabweekly.com/un-missions-exit-iraq.
33. Rudaw, "PM official accuses UNAMI chief of overstepping role," Rudaw, July 22, 2021, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/220720214.
34. PAX interview with a Baghdad-based political consultant, August 2024.
35. Kurdistan24, "Experts warn government's move to cancel UN Mission could harm Iraq's stability," Kurdistan24, December 21, 2024, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/816355/experts-warn-governments-move-to-cancel-un-mission-could-harm-iraqs-stability. This is reinforced by PAX's discussions with partners in 2024-25.
36. Al-Basem, "Iraqi Government Challenges UNAMI's Presence."
37. As shared by one of PAX's long-standing Iraqi partners, which was consulted by UNAMI.
38. Shared with PAX staff during various discussions in Iraq post-August 2021.
39. Kurdistan24, "Iraq's unemployment rate set to hit decade high in 2024," Kurdistan24, November 15, 2024, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/810808/iraqs-unemployment-rate-set-to-hit-decade-high-in-2024.

opportunities as the most likely factors to cause further conflict in their communities.[40] Basra already has been the epicenter of protests since 2018 due to a lack of jobs, the poor provision of public services, and limited livelihood opportunities, despite being the most oil-rich governorate of the country. Nationally, a big overarching concern is Iraq's heavy dependency on oil revenues, which previous governments have done little to decrease. Iraq has limited influence in the global oil market, and it is not a relevant decision-maker within OPEC, despite being the second-largest member in terms of production. If oil prices fall, this risks unleashing a cascade of economic woes and public anger.

At the same time, while Iraq's 2024 budget increased considerably, it was in large part due to expanding civil services. Approximately 40 percent of the national budget is currently spent on salaries and pensions.[41] Consequently, a critical issue for the government is securing sufficient cash to pay public sector salaries. When it is unable to do so, it risks significant backlash. For instance, when the Finance Minister announced it would not pay the salaries of public servants in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the KRG accused Baghdad of attempting to appropriate wealth from disputed areas. This reignited a conflict that had been temporarily contained through financial entitlements.

Meanwhile, US sanctions continue against Iraqi banks, companies, and financial institutions the US accuses of smuggling US dollars to Iran, and previously to Syria.[42] As a result, many individuals and organizations - including CSOs - are unable to withdraw dollars. Instead, they are given Iraqi dinars at less than black market rates.[43] In 2024, the Iraqi dinar weakened significantly against the US dollar.

This depreciation has increased import costs, driving up prices for everyday goods and causing higher inflation, and thereby undermining ordinary Iraqis' purchasing power.[44]

Other trends and developments

Internally displaced persons

Largely a legacy of past periods of armed conflict, Iraq remains beset by challenges around internal displacement. Over 1 million Iraqis are currently displaced, a large part of whom reside in IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). For some, particularly Yazidis and people with perceived affiliations to extremist groups, the chances of returning home soon are minimal.[45] Barriers to people's return include continued insecurity, stigmatization, limited access to services and economic opportunities, and lack of reconstruction of damaged houses. Since 2019, the GoI has embarked on a policy of closing IDP camps, resulting in forced evictions that hinder sustainable reintegration and recovery for displaced individuals.[46] Human rights advocates have criticized this move, stressing the importance of returns to be safe, voluntary, and dignified.[47] Similarly, last year, to encourage returns, the Iraqi government also announced that it would give each returning family 4 million Iraqi dinars (approximately 3,050 US dollars), household appliances, monthly social security stipends for low-income families, interest free loans, and job opportunities.[48] However, in 2025, budget allocations have not yet been approved by Parliament, hence there are not enough funds to provide the promised compensation, as was shared by returning Yazidis to Shingal and the Mayor of Sinjar.[49] This further slows

down results, while increasing people's discontent.[50] This is compounded by cuts in international funding (see section 6, 'US funding cuts'), which (threaten to) put an end to much-needed programs aimed at reintegration, peaceful co-existence, and social cohesion at a time when communities need effective programming to deal with the past. For instance, despite the genocide against the Yazidi communities being declared as early as 2014, and despite the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) operating on the ground between 2018-24, many Yazidis are yet to receive the expected compensation.[51]

Electronic extortion

Nationwide, there are increasing occurrences of electronic extortion. Often, victims are harassed over email or social media platforms, with threats of publishing confidential information unless the victims pay their extortionists, leak business secrets, or bug certain private conversations. Women and girls represent 80 percent of the extortion victims, many of them between 15-35 years old. This is also reflected in PAX's HSS results: In Diyala, over 66 percent of respondents reported that electronic extortion against women and girls in their communities had increased over the past 12 months. Respondents further indicated that many victims do not know where to access support.[52] This is deeply troubling as the practice of electronic extortion is contributing to increased divorces and suicides.[53] PAX partner WAHO has therefore begun implementation of awareness-raising sessions together with the community police and the MoI.

A potential IS resurgence

While IS was nominally defeated in 2017, sleeper cells remain active in Iraq and there is the continuous fear of a resurgence, particularly in Anbar, Ninewa, Salahaddin, and the Hamrin mountains in Diyala.[54] This threat is exacerbated by international developments. US funding cuts directly affect Iraqi programs aimed at the rehabilitation and reintegration of (former) IS fighters

▲ Example of a brochure created by WAHO to raise awareness around electronic extortion.

and their families (see section 5, 'US funding cuts'). The US is also decreasing its support to the SDF, which may affect the latter's ability to guard IS prisons in Syria and can lead to a resurgence there, with the potential for spillover to Iraq (see section 5, 'Syria').[55]

40. Abdullatif Sleibi, "HSS 2024: Data summary from Diyala, Iraq," *PAX* (2025), https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/hss-2024-data-summary-from-diyala-iraq-english/; Abdullatif Sleibi, "HSS 2024: Data summary from Basra, Iraq," *PAX* (2025), https://protectionofcivilians.org/infographic/hss-2024-data-summary-from-basra-iraq-english/.
41. Energy News, "Iraq: budget crisis expected in 2025 as oil revenues decline," *Energy News*, September 12, 2024, https://energynews.pro/en/iraq-budget-crisis-expected-in-2025-as-oil-revenues-decline/.
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43. Shafaq News, "2025: A storm of challenges in Iraq," *Shafaq News*, January 5, 2025, https://shafaq.com/en/Report/2025-A-storm-of-challenges-in-Iraq.
44. Shafaq News, "2025: A storm of challenges."
45. "Iraq Situation," *UNHCR Global Focus*, accessed March 18, 2025, https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/iraq-situation#:~:text=There%20are%20over%201%20million,Iraq%20(KR%2DI).
46. "Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2025," *IOM*, accessed March 19, 2025, https://crisisresponse.iom.int/index.php/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2025.
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50. Middle East Monitor, "Iraq: Stopping gov't grants."
51. As discussed during 'Erasures in Iraq' workshop hosted by the University of St. Andrews in April 2024.
52. Sleibi, "Data summary Diyala."
53. NIHR, "Iraq facing electronic extortion," *NIHR*, January 20, 2023, https://www.nihriq.org/?p=3515; Shafaq News, "Cyber extortion raises concerns for Iraqi families, women most affected," *Shafaq News*, April 21, 2023, https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Cyber-extortion-raises-concerns-for-Iraqi-families-women-most-affected.
54. Amwaj Media, "Deep Dive: Iraq overhauls mandate of spy agency amid concerns over IS resurgence," *Amwaj Media*, January 24, 2025, https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/iraq-overhauls-mandate-of-spy-agency-amid-concerns-over-is.
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Spotlight:
The climate/ environment-security nexus

Contribution by Nynke Schaap, Project Manager Climate, Environment, Peace and Security at PAX

Iraq is facing severe environmental challenges in the nexus of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change. These include desertification; sand and dust storms; wildfires; limited availability of water; water pollution; floods; loss of green areas; and pollution from waste and the oil and gas industry.[56] Climate change is accelerating and exacerbating existing challenges. In Diyala in February 2024, 24 percent of surveyed civilians identified climate change as causing environmental changes in their area, followed by corruption (22.3 percent), and lack of regulation (21.7 percent).[57] Furthermore, environmental challenges are both caused (in part) by conflict and themselves serve as a potential catalyst for further conflict and insecurity. The climate/environment-security nexus in Iraq should be an important area of consideration when thinking about human security and the protection of civilians.

The climate/environment-security nexus

Iraq is exemplary for the link between the environment and conflict. Decades of war have left their environmental scars on the country. The Gulf War (1990-91) and the Iraq War (2003-11) resulted, among other things, in tremendous amounts of military scrap contaminated with uranium, further degrading an environment that was already heavily affected by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88).[58] More recently, the IS occupation and subsequent liberation war have caused damage to the environment through oil fires and spills, an increase in artisanal oil refineries, (toxic) debris, military remnants, and damage to critical infrastructure and industrial sites.[59] The ongoing conflict between Türkiye and the PKK also causes environmental impacts.

When shelling occurs in combination with droughts, this can for instance result in wildfires.[60] This is also illustrative of how climate change – causing or worsening droughts – is a threat multiplier. The link between the environment and insecurity is further reflected by mass protests that took place in Iraq in 2018-19 when thousands of Iraqis took to the streets to demand better public services, particularly access to clean water.[61] This is a textbook example of the climate/environment-security nexus, in which governments' failure to address climate change and environmental challenges is met with civil uprisings, to which these authorities in turn often respond with undemocratic and violent measures.

The environmental challenges themselves are having a considerable impact on Iraq's society, economy, and stability. Most impacts relate to health and livelihoods,

▼ A taxi covered by soot from oil fires in Qayyarah, Iraq, during the war against IS, © *PAX, 2017*.

56. PAX, "Wildfires Rage Across Iraqi Kurdistan as Conflict Intensifies," *PAX*, January 8, 2025, https://paxforpeace.nl/news/wildfires-rage-across-iraqi-kurdistan-as-conflict-intensifies/; PAX, "Iraq's Waning Water Resources in 2021," *PAX*, December 15, 2021, https://paxforpeace.nl/news/iraqs-waning-water-resources-in-2021/#content.
57. Abullatif Sleibi, "HSS 2024: Data Summary from Diyala," *PAX* (2025), https://protectionofcivilians.org/report/hss-2024-data-summary-from-diyala-iraq-english/.

58. Wim Zwijnenburg, "In a state of uncertainty: Impact and implications of the use of depleted uranium in Iraq," *PAX* (2013), https://paxvoorvrede.nl/wp-content/uploads/import/import/in-a-state-of-uncertainty.pdf.
59. Wim Zwijnenburg and Foeke Postma, "Living under a black sky: Conflict pollution and environmental health concerns in Iraq," *PAX* (2017), https://paxforpeace.nl/publications/living-under-a-black-sky/.
60. PAX, "Wildfires Rage."
61. Human Rights Watch, "Basra is Thirsty: Iraq's Failure to Manage the Water Crisis," *Human Rights Watch* (2019), https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty-iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis.

further exacerbating and mutually reinforcing socio-economic and security challenges. Droughts and salinization have led farmers to give up farming and migrate to urban areas in pursuit of alternative incomes, including by joining armed groups.[62] Many people end up in slums where their health is at risk due to exposure to different sources of pollutants. Women, either in the slums or having stayed behind in rural villages, face new challenges to obtain an income, and are more exposed to the risk of sexual and gender-based violence.[63] These trends are particularly common in the south of Iraq.

However, the impacts of environmental degradation are experienced throughout Iraq. In the KRI, wildfires lead whole villages to (temporarily) relocate, significantly impacting their livelihoods.[64] Green spaces throughout Iraq are vastly decreasing due to a combination of reasons, including trespassing, poor rural and urban planning and investments.[65] Also, throughout the country, civil society actors have linked (air) pollution to skin and respiratory system diseases.[66] And while there is insufficient proof of a direct causal link between the fuel industry and cancer, high cancer rates are observed in Iraq wherever people live or work near oil and gas sites.[67] Finally, there are growing concerns about biodiversity loss in Iraq and its implications.[68]

Government response and the way forward

Considering the above, action is urgently needed. But like many fragile and conflict-affected settings, Iraq lacks the governmental capacity to adequately address the climate and environmental challenges. Current government practices furthermore reflect a lack of political will and an overreliance on international funding. The allocated budgets for the Ministries of Water Resources and Agriculture are illustrative: While these ministries are most concerned with climate change impacts, combined they receive less than 1 percent of the state budget.[69] While specific initiatives do reflect some governmental recognition of environmental challenges and needs, such as the National Strategy for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment in Iraq 2024-2030 (a collaboration between the Iraqi government, UNDP, and the United States Agency for International Development), action is lagging.[70] There are limited concrete activities and if there is any collaboration with civil society it is often limited to the 'usual suspects' who enjoy close ties to the government. There are further concerns in relation to shrinking civic space (see also section 4, 'Political developments'), which is particularly evident for civil society working on environmental issues.[71] One of the worst examples of the risks faced by environmental actors in Iraq was the 2023 abduction of environmentalist Jassim Al-Asadi by an unknown armed group.[72]

While UN agencies tend to focus on the government in addressing Iraq's environmental issues, PAX believes that the way forward lies in working meaningfully and directly with civil society. Civil society has the potential to support the government in data-informed decision making, is best positioned to inclusively and meaningfully engage with affected communities, and has a strong sense of will and urgency. In PAX's flagship project, 'Strengthening Collective Environmental Action', we brought together civil society actors to collectively engage in environmental data collection as a basis for influencing decision making.[73] Several government officials welcomed this, acknowledging the lack of data-informed policies and action. Open and inclusive engagement with civil society and unearmarked funding to these actors and to intermediaries who can serve as convenors,[74] can help provide the necessary resilience to environment challenges, and ensure a safe and prosperous Iraq for current and future generations.

62. Oxfam International, "Unfarmed Now, Uninhabited When? Agriculture and Climate Change in Iraq," *Oxfam, World Vision and Save the Children* (2022); "Strengthening Collective Environment Action in Iraq," *PAX*, accessed March 8, 2025, https://paxforpeace.nl/what-we-do/programmes/strengthening-collective-environment-action-in-iraq/.
63. Ilham Makki Hammadi, "Climate change and pollution are increasing challenges for women and girls in Basra 2024," *Institut Francais and IAA* (2024); Bharat H. Desai and Moumita Mandal, "Role of Climate Change in Exacerbating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Women," *Global Law and Policy* 51 (2021): 137-57.
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67. BBC News, "Under Poisoned Skies," *BBC Media Centre*, September 28, 2022; Tom Brown et al., "Choking Kurdistand: How oil and gas burning is suffocating minorities in northern Iraq," *Choking Kurdistan*, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.chokingkurdistan.com.
68. "Strengthening Collective Environment Action in Iraq," *PAX*; Jolin Li, "What Are The Consequences of Biodiversity Loss?", *Earth Org*, https://earth.org/what-are-the-consequence-of-biodiversity-loss/.
69. Sameh W.H. Al-Muqdadi, "The complex system of climate change security and the ripple effect of water-food-socioeconomic nexus," *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development* 8, no. 6 (2024).
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5. International context

Iraq is situated in a volatile region, which has witnessed violence, conflict, and regime change over the last couple of years. Developments in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, to name but a few, can – or already do – contribute to instability that will also be felt in Iraq. Iran continues to wield significant influence over its neighbor, both in politics and through various militias. Occurrences from even further afield, such as changes in the United States' foreign aid policy, also have direct and indirect negative impacts on human security in Iraq.

The war in Gaza

Since the outbreak of full-scale war in Gaza, Iran-backed armed opposition groups (AOGs) have targeted members of the US-led international coalition against IS in Iraq, viewing them as allies of the US and complicit in Israel's asymmetrical violence against Palestinian civilians. Since October 2023, such groups have launched at least 170 attacks on coalition forces, including in Anbar and Baghdad, and Iranian drones heading for Israel have been shot down over Iraqi territory.[75] These events highlight the risk that Iraq – despite wanting to stay uninvolved – will get more closely drawn into regional conflicts or even become a battleground for proxy warfare because of Iranian influence of AOGs and Iran's use of Iraqi soil.

US-Iran dynamics

Iran's continued influence in Iraq threatens to turn the latter into a target of US maneuvering and sanctions as hostilities between Iran and the US persist. To increase pressure on Iran, the US in March put an end to the sanctions waiver that previously allowed Iraq to buy electricity from Iran.[76] Iraq is already facing massive electricity shortages, with some governorates seeing as little as 8 to 12 hours of electricity a day, and it has no immediate alternatives to compensate for this additional loss of energy. This recent cut will exacerbate Iraq's challenge of providing enough electricity to meet domestic consumption and will also result in increased reliance on diesel generators, exacerbating the climate and environmental challenges that Iraq is already facing (see 'Spotlight' on p. 22).[77] With growing dissatisfaction over the authorities' inability to guarantee access to electricity and 2025 being an election year, power shortages may well be politicized and form a basis for increased social unrest and instability.[78] On 10 March, the US also announced it would not renew Iraq's waiver to import Iranian gas.[79] Tehran, however, claimed on 16 March that this waiver is still in place. Approximately 43 percent of Iraq's electricity is generated from Iranian gas.[80]

It is worthwhile to note that public dissatisfaction with governance, unemployment, lack of services, and shortages in power and water in Iraq led to massive youth-led protests in 2018-19, with most Iraqis also boycotting the recent elections. This gap in expectations, election year competition, and any adverse fallout from the evolving situation in Syria (see later section) provide ingredients for social unrest and instability.[81]

Political tensions are also running high because of the threat of US sanctions on Iraq. The GoI is trying to prevent these sanctions, but efforts to that end are hampered by Iranian-backed Shi'a parties. The US, for instance, is pressuring Iraq to disarm and integrate Iranian-backed AOGs into the military. Nonetheless, a call by Iraq's Foreign Minister for disarmament, also to avoid US and Israeli economic and military responses, was immediately rejected by the armed groups Harkat Al-Nujaba, Ansar Allah Al Awfiya, and Kataib Hezbollah.[82]

US funding cuts

On 20 January 2025, the new US administration issued an executive order under which all foreign aid assistance was paused for at least 90 days, "pending reviews of such programs for programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy".[83] Within 6 weeks of the order, 83 percent of US foreign assistance globally had been terminated.[84] The order also led to much uncertainty and consternation in Iraq, where many (inter)national NGOs are dependent on US funding. The funding freeze has already caused former NGO staff to take lower-paid jobs, just to feed their families.[85] Many of the projects in Iraq that have been terminated because of this decision are focused on important human security issues, such as combatting extremism, rehabilitating and reintegrating former terrorist fighters, fostering social cohesion, assisting victims of torture, improving access to justice, and bolstering minority rights.[86] Particularly affected are IDP programs. While it has been some years since the end of the war against IS, at least 1 million people remain displaced.[87] Many of them rely heavily on NGO funding, and the suspension and/or decrease of aid has left hundreds of thousands of Iraqis without essential

75. United Nations Security Council, "Implementation of resolution 2732 (2024)," *United Nations* (2024), https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/S2024857%20EN.pdf ; Julian Borger, "US and UK forces help shoot down Iranian drones over Jordan, Syria and Iraq," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/14/us-and-uk-forces-help-shoot-down-iranian-drones-over-jordan-syria-and-iraq.

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81. Hamasaeed and Nada, "What Does 'Maximum Pressure'."
82. Seth Frantzman, "Iranian-backed militias in Iraq face an uncertain future," FDD's Long War Journal, January 28, 2025, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/01/iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq-face-an-uncertain-future.php.
83. The White House, "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," Press release, *The White House,* January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/.
84. Michelle Langrand, "International Geneva in crisis: the fallout from US aid cuts in numbers," *Geneva Solutions*, March 26, 2025, https://genevasolutions.news/global-news/international-geneva-in-crisis-the-fallout-from-us-aid-cuts-in-numbers.
85. PAX interactions with (former) NGO staff in Iraq, 26 January - 1 February 2025.
86. Langrand, "International Geneva in crisis." ; George Macauley, "USAID cuts cause closure of support for Iraqi torture and disappearance survivors," *Jurist News*, March 11, 2025, https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/03/us-aid-cuts-cause-closure-of-iraqi-torture-and-forced-disappearances-support-program/; Soran Rashid, "A bolt from the red, white and blue: US funding cuts leave Iraq-based NGOs reeling," *+964*, February 20, 2025, https://en.964media.com/32153/.
87. +964, "One million IDPs in camps across Iraq," *+964*, May 20, 2024, https://en.964media.com/19711/.

assistance. As shared by a notable INGO, as a result of US funding cuts, exhuming of mass graves and arranging dignified re-burials with families in Ninewa has also been halted. These victims were buried in mass graves by IS, and ceasing the re-burial process has a massive impact on the healing process of the deceased victims' families who have already suffered years of trauma because of the conflict.[88]

The US is not the only country to have made drastic funding cuts. The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France, and the UK have all significantly decreased their international development funding. Senior NGO officials and leading Iraqi CSOs have warned that many gains made in Iraq are now at risk of being reversed, while chances of new cycles of violence and extremism are increasing.[89]

Operation Inherent Resolve

In September 2024, Iraq and the US announced a two-stage transition plan to gradually draw down coalition operations in Iraq. The first phase, set to conclude by September 2025, entails a transition from Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) military leadership to a bilateral security partnership. The second phase, expected to continue through September 2026, foresees the continuation of operations against IS in northeastern Syria by former coalition partners from Iraqi bases, in consultation with the US, KRG, and Federal Iraq.[90] In February, the Pentagon announced the OIR coalition's intentions to expand its assets and multi-national personnel at the Erbil Airbase in the KRG, while transferring control of the Ain Al-Assad base in Anbar to Federal Iraq. The presence of US forces may make the KRG a target for Iran. While the KRG would potentially need certain security guarantees, including missile defense systems to deter any attacks, this move may lead to further rifts between Federal Iraq and KRI.[91]

Meanwhile, ongoing concerns regarding a possible resurgence of IS (see section 4, 'Other trends and developments'), might offer yet another reason to delay ending the coalition's mission.[92]

Syria

Many civilians and CSOs welcomed the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. At the same time, there are also concerns over potential regional spillover of unrest and conflict as the situation in Syria remains volatile and unpredictable. Several developments and potential scenarios underlie these concerns. For one, the US is considering pulling troops from Syria, leaving the SDF vulnerable to a lack of resources. The SDF currently guards many prisons and IDP camps housing IS fighters and their families, but it is uncertain whether they can continue to do so with decreased resources.[93] This risks creating security vacuums in places like Deir-ez-Zor on which IS can capitalize, and which creates potential spillover effects in Iraq, particularly Anbar and Salahaddin. Second, the increased power of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in Syria initially caused some fears in Iraq because of the organization's previous ties to Al-Qaeda. Shi'a leaders in particular perceived HTS as like IS in its extremist practices.[94] Finally, various minority populations in Iraq are concerned about the implications the Syrian regime change will have for minorities, such as the Kurds.[95] These fears appeared to be realized when in March, sectarian clashes occurred between pro-Assad fighters and security forces in Hama, Latakia, and Tartous. The clashes left 830 civilians dead.[96] For many minorities in Iraq, particularly the Yazidis, this violence brought back memories of what they had to endure, often less than a decade ago.[97]

Despite initial different, sectarian-based perspectives on how to deal with the new power holders in Syria,

Baghdad has so far adopted a pragmatic approach centered on non-interference and border security.[98] While the Iraqi authorities have largely kept out the situation in Syria, Iran-backed Iraqi militias have reportedly entered Syria to support the new regime. The GoI has publicly denied involvement, but these militias' actions show the extent of influence that Tehran wields in Iraq, including using Iraq to cross borders into Syria.[99]

Türkiye

Since 2015, Türkiye has been conducting airstrikes across the KRI because of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) presence. The monitoring organization Airwars has found credible evidence that at least 116 civilians have been killed in these strikes; Türkiye has not acknowledged any allegations.[100] The GoI has issued complaints that its sovereignty is being violated.[101] Additionally, border conflicts between the SDF and the Turkish military have caused thousands of deaths, which also have spillover effects on Iraq – particularly on the KRI – in terms of increased Turkish attacks on Iranian soil, increased fear amongst Kurdish civilians, and increased risk of civilian harm.[102]

On the other hand, Türkiye also recognizes Iraq's stability as crucial to the region. It shares the US' concern over Iran's influence, which has resulted in US-Turkish collaborations to support infrastructure and security institution reform projects in Iraq. An example is the Development Road project, which aims to establish a trade and transportation corridor that connects the Arabian Gulf, Iraq and Europe through Türkiye. For the latter, this reinforces its position as a logistical hub between East and West. For the US, the project is a means to reduce Iraq's economic dependency on Iran.[103] It remains to be seen whether Iran-backed AOGs will allow such Turkish influence to strengthen in Iraq at the expense of its own diminishing influence. With continuing rifts between Türkiye and Iran, Türkiye intends to capitalize on the end of the Iranian electricity sanctions waiver to further its energy, trade and connectivity goals in Iraq. To that end,

Türkiye has already taken steps to cultivate closer ties with the GoI. A future US troop withdrawal could further strengthen its hand there.[104]

88. PAX meeting with an INGO operating in Iraq, 19 March 2025.
89. Langrand, "International Geneva in crisis."; Jamal Al-Jawahiri, "Advocacy Letter on the Harmful Impact on the Iraqi Civil Society and Vulnerable Communities of the Suspension of US Development Funding," *PAX*, February 2, 2025, Iraq Partners Reflect on USAID Decision – PAX Protection of Civilians.
90. Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Myles B. Ciggins III, "After the Coalition: Evaluating the Next Steps for Foreign Forces in Iraq and Syria," *New Lines Institute*, March 18, 2025, https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/after-the-coalition-evaluating-the-next-steps-for-foreign-forces-in-iraq-and-syria/.
91. Van Wilgenburg and Ciggins, "After the Coalition."
92. Iraq Studies Unit, "Iraq in the face 2025 Challenges."
93. Nader Durgham, "US plans to withdraw all troops from Syria, report says," *Middle East Eye*, February 5, 2025, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-plans-withdraw-all-troops-syria-report-says.
94. Giorgio Cafiero, "Iraq and the new Syria: Navigating ties in the post-Assad era," *The New Arab*, March 5, 2025, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/iraq-and-new-syria-navigating-ties-post-assad-era.
95. Cafiero, "Iraq and the new Syria."
96. Mawadah Bahah, "Syria clashes - What happened?", *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/10/syria-clashes-what-happened.
97. PAX meeting with an INGO operating in Ninewa, March 2025.

98. Cafiero, "Iraq and the new Syria."
99. Cafiero, "Iraq and the new Syria."
100. "Turkish Military in Iraq and Syria," Airwars, accessed March 27, 2025, https://airwars.org/conflict/turkish-military-in-iraq-and-syria/.
101. Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups," *Center for Preventive Action*, March 7, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups.
102. Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict Between Turkey." https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups
103. Bilgay Duman, "Could Iraq be common ground for Türkiye-US co-op?" *Daily Sabah*, February 5, 2025, https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/could-iraq-be-common-ground-for-turkiye-us-co-op.
104. Gönül Tol and Alex Vatanka, "War of words as Turkey-Iran tensions escalate over Syria, Iraq," *Middle East Institute*, March 18, 2025, https://mei.edu/publications/war-words-turkey-iran-tensions-escalate-over-syria-iraq.

6. SSR initiatives

Part II
SSR and PoC

Iraq is transitioning from green to blue, i.e., from a context of armed conflict that required a predominantly military response to a situation of peace, where law enforcement can revert to its traditional policing work. SSR is an important element in this transition. If implemented well, it contributes to improved human security and protection of civilians. This section outlines the most prominent SSR activities ongoing in Iraq, as well as the international actors involved in supporting this work. Nonetheless, despite positive and well-coordinated SSR initiatives, implementation remains an uphill battle. In part, this is due to dwindling funds as Iraq is falling lower on the priority list for donor countries. Another key challenge is the government's inability to enforce decisions regarding the dissolution of militias and the PMF. Such issues remain largely under the influence of Iran.[105]

It is laudable to see the efforts of most IOs and international actors remain coordinated. For instance, most SSR partners such as NMI, EUAM, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations' Development Program (UNDP), together with the OIR are part of the Security Coordination Group, an SSR coordination mechanism in Iraq. However, NGOs and CSOs, even those working on SSR, are not allowed to be a part of the coordination mechanism since information shared there is classified. This exclusion also means that there is a lack of civilian representation, either directly through Iraqi CSOs working on SSR, or through INGOs like PAX which conduct large surveys on civilians' perceptions of their own safety and security.

National SSR Strategy

In March 2024, PM Sudani approved the national SSR Strategy (2024-32), outlining Iraq's approach to SSR and aligning it with concurrent initiatives to reform the Iraqi economy, strengthen social cohesion, and tackle the impact of climate change.[106] Under this Strategy, all SSR entities are working on Iraq's

105. Iraq Studies Unit, "Iraq in the Face of 2025 Challenges."
106. United Nations Security Council, "Implementation of resolution 2682 (2023)," *United Nations* (2024), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/N2411674.pdf.

transition from green to blue.[107] The document includes ambitions to strengthen oversight and accountability structures, criminal justice reform, transparency, information sharing, capacity building of federal and KRG-affiliated security institutions, and community reconciliation mechanisms. It further explicitly mentions the prevention of political interference in security sector institutions. While there are concerns over shrinking civic space throughout Iraq (see section 4, 'Political developments'), the strategy on paper at least contains the right commitments, mentioning expanding cooperation with Parliamentary committees, Provincial councils, and CSOs. Interestingly, under the strategy's declared goal to enhance civilian confidence in Iraq's security apparatus, it mentions using questionnaires to assess civilians' satisfaction with security actor performance as a tool to measure progress. This is consistent with civil society views on the importance of a civilian-centric approach to security. Overall, however, several IOs and entities working on the strategy have expressed concerns that implementation is lagging.[108]

Iraq's main SSR actors

The United States

Through its embassy, the US was long one of the best-resourced actors working on SSR in Iraq. This has changed with the recent funding freeze (see section 5, 'US funding cuts'), jeopardizing some hard-won achievements. The US ran a multitude of exercises with entities like the MoD, MoI, INIS, INSS, the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (ICTS), the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Joint Operations Command Iraq, MoPA, and ONSA. Moreover, the embassy was in the process of drafting SSR implementation plans with several key entities, including but not limited to, the INSS, the PMF, the INIS, the ICTS, and the MoI.[109]

NATO Mission Iraq

NMI is one of the largest multilateral entities working on SSR in Iraq. Launched in 2018, it is a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission that assists Iraq in building more sustainable, transparent, inclusive, and effective armed forces and security institutions. In the long term, this should enable the authorities to independently be able to stabilize the country, fight terrorism, and prevent the return of IS. While NMI has an overarching Memorandum of Understanding with ONSA, it advises the MoD, MoI, the Federal Police Command, and the Prime Minister's National Operations Center.[110] NMI's primary role is to work with the MoD, specifically the service commands and military academies. NMI has drafted a comprehensive, well-rounded PoC strategy with the MoD, and is currently working towards having it finalized by relevant Iraqi authorities. NMI will also have a role in implementing the strategy.[111] Importantly, it makes explicit references to Iraq's national SSR Strategy, showing that these efforts are not taking place in silos. It is further strongly focused on assessing, investigating and responding to civilian harm resulting from military operations. Overall, the strategy consists of ten objectives, providing much detail on how to operationalize these various goals, as well as expected timelines and required resources.[112]
Other priorities for NMI include facilitating the transition from green to blue, advising the Directorate of Human Rights, integrating PoC and IHL in training scenarios, and developing university curricula. Increasingly, NMI is shifting its focus from training activities to a purely advisory role in the near future.[113]

Some of NMI's effectiveness in supporting SSR is hampered because it only has a mandate to work in the Baghdad region. It is limited in its ability to travel beyond that region and cannot go to the KRI. Iraqi government entities have expressed concerns that NMI therefore does not see the 'real Iraq'.[114]

European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq

EUAM-Iraq is the second-largest SSR-focused actor in Iraq. It launched in 2017, following a request by the GoI to advise ONSA, MoI and other relevant, non-military authorities on how to undertake civilian SSR, and will continue until at least April 2026.[115] The mission primarily works with the MoI, also on issues such as drugs, human trafficking, and money laundering. Like all SSR actors in Iraq, it is supporting the transition from green to blue, and also leads a Strategic Coordination Group on Policing.[116]

UNDP and IOM

Within the UN structure, UNDP and IOM are both partially focused on SSR-related activities. UNDP has been working on SSR and justice reform since 2015, under an ONSA-led framework. As part of its work with the police, UNDP in 2021 launched the 'model police station initiative', building six police stations in Basra, Baghdad, Fallujah, Ramadi East, and western Mosul. However, much of the funding for this project is currently on hold, following reporting by UK newspaper The Guardian, which alleged bribery and corruption in UNDP's Funding Facility for Stabilization.[117] IOM runs the flagship community policing program in Iraq, since 2012, in cooperation with the MoI. This aims to counter drivers of irregular migration by contributing to creating safer communities, strengthening security, and preventing and responding to crime by improving trust and cooperation between communities and law enforcement institutions. As of October 2024, this includes an estimated 177 community police across the country.[118] PAX's partner NGOs working in Diyala, Kirkuk, and Salahaddin governorates are generally positive about the community police's effectiveness, as are similar organizations working in Ninewa. They share that civilians often feel more comfortable reporting to members of the community police than the formal police.

107. PAX meeting with IOs and CSOs working on SSR, October 2024.
108. PAX meetings with IOs working on SSR, December 2024.
109. PAX meeting with US embassy officials working on SSR, December 2024.
110. "NATO Mission in Iraq," NATO, accessed March 11, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/ge/natohq/topics_166936.htm.
111. PAX meeting with NMI staff, March 2025.
112. This analysis is based on the copy PAX received. However, the strategy is not currently available for public dissemination.
113. PAX meeting with NMI staff, March 2025.
114. PAX exchanges with various security ministries.

115. Council of the EU, "EUAM Iraq: Council extends the mandate of the EU advisory mission on security sector reform until 2026," Press release, EU, April 29, 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/29/euam-iraq-council-extends-the-mandate-of-the-eu-advisory-mission-on-security-sector-reform-until-2026/.
116. PAX meeting with EUAM representatives, October 2024.
117. Simona Foltyn, "UN to investigate claims of corruption in Iraq aid project," The Guardian, February 5, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/05/un-to-investigate-claims-of-corruption-in-iraq-aid-project.
118. IOM Iraq, "Perceptions of Police, Security and Governance in Iraq," IOM (2020).

7. National PoC policy

As of 2024, Iraq has officially adopted its first Protection of Civilians policy. Internationally, it is one of only a handful of countries to have this and it is the first one in the MENA region. It is an important, explicit recognition of the importance of PoC, and a significant step towards improved protection and security of Iraq's population. The policy development occurred with the support of PAX and our partner organization, the Iraqi Al-Amal Association (IAA).

From training on PoC to a policy on PoC

Prior to 2021, it was difficult for civil society to work directly with Iraqi authorities, security institutions in particular, on matters related to PoC. The predominant sentiment was that security is the government's concern and area of expertise, not civil society's. High-profile security incidents in late 2021 in Babylon governorate, where law enforcement individuals used their official position to settle personal enmities and in doing so killed civilians,[119] opened the door for more meaningful engagement with civil society. The ONSA requested PAX to do a pilot training on PoC for the entire security apparatus, including the MoD, MoI, MoPA, INIS, INSS, ICTS, and the ONSA itself. These training sessions were an important contributing factor in enhancing understanding of, and buy-in for the concept of PoC. Policymakers present at the training further considered that such training would be more impactful and sustainable if backed up by a PoC policy. From June 2022 onwards, engagements with ONSA began to focus on drafting Iraq's first PoC policy in addition to the ongoing training work. In doing so, Iraqi authorities benefited from the experience of CSOs,

▲ Attendants at the official launch of Iraq's PoC policy, © *Nahrain Center, NSA, 2025.*

their access to civilian perspectives on security needs and concerns, and from existing international models on PoC. These included the NATO PoC policy (2016),[120] the UN PoC policy,[121] the Swiss Strategy on PoC (2014),[122] and the US Department of Defense's Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (2022).[123]

By the time the draft policy reached the Permanent Committee on IHL at the PM's Office in mid-2024, the Iraqi penholders had taken two important decisions: this policy would apply to Iraq's entire security apparatus, including in the KRI; and that given Iraq's current transition process, the policy would be applicable for both conflict and peace times. Both provisions set the Iraqi policy apart from other PoC policies that exist globally. Moreover, since Iraqi civil society partners were included in the writing and training processes, they were able to ensure that civilian and civil society perspectives were incorporated into the policy. The inclusion of

perspectives based on decades of civil society work in Iraq, as well as from PAX's HSS – which collects data on civilian perspectives of their own safety and security, and uses the data to convene dialogues between civilians and their security providers – have made this a truly Iraqi policy, written by Iraqis and reflecting Iraqi perspectives.

From policy to implementation

The policy, which was finalized in March 2024 and officially launched in February 2025, is grounded in IHL and IHRL, the Iraqi Constitution, and all international conventions that Iraq is a signatory to.[124] The policy is also strongly focused on accountability. It intends to strengthen the legal accountability of members of military and security institutions for any violations

119. i24 News, "Iraq sentences police officer, informant to death over deadly operation," *i24 News*, February 13, 2022, https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/the-gulf/1644774916-iraq-sentences-police-officer-informant-to-death-over-deadly-operation.

120. NATO, "Policy for the Protection of Civilians," *NATO* (2016).
121. United Nations Department of Peace Operations, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping," *United Nations* (2023).
122. Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "Strategy on the protection of civilians in armed conflict," *Swiss Confederation* (2014).
123. US Department of Defense, "Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan," *United States* (2022).
124. Republic of Iraq, Prime Minister's Office, "National Protection of Civilians Policy in Iraq," *Republic of Iraq* (2025).

▲ Awareness-raising session on the PoC policy for Iraqi security forces, organized by the PM's office and IAA, *© IAA, 2025.*

of international law that impact the lives, property, or rights of civilians. Further, the policy commits to providing compensation "for civilian harm caused [by Iraqi security forces] during periods of peace and armed conflict". The section on PoC during armed conflict includes attention for protection of cultural property, as well as private and public infrastructure. The policy is also forward leaning in its attention for various practical aspects. For example, when discussing implementation mechanisms, the policy not only states "holding to account anyone who violates human rights", it also mentions creating a hotline through which civilians can report on any instances of civilian harm to all concerned ministries, and for these ministries to take necessary, urgent legal measures regarding these violations.

The PM has officially approved the policy. Looking ahead, the focus is on implementation and compliance. As a first step, the PM's office and the IAA are currently carrying out awareness raising. In more than 60 sessions across Iraq, they are presenting the policy to military, law enforcement, and CSOs. PAX and IAA will further be involved in assisting two key security ministries, tentatively the department of police affairs in the MoI and the task force unit within the MoD, with the policy's operationalization. Furthermore, PAX

is also committed to strengthening the civilian harm mitigation capacities as outlined in the policy, however, more international support is needed in setting and maintaining the right independent capacities in a sustained way within the Iraqi security apparatus.
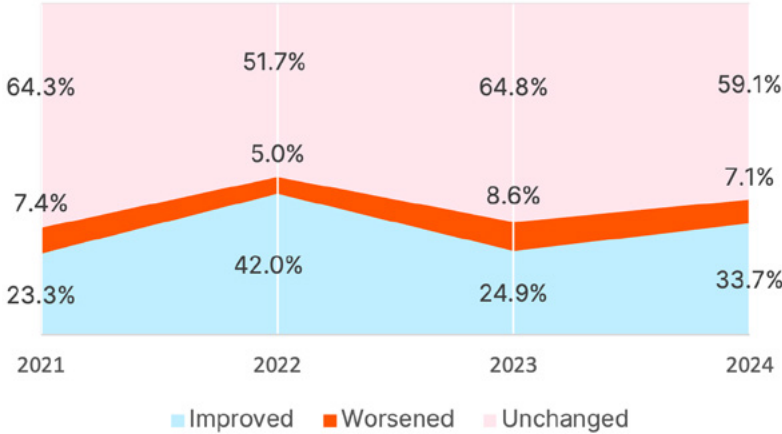
Part III
Governorate profiles

8. Profile: Basra

Chart 1: Line chart showing percentages for 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024.
Unchanged: 64.3% (2021), 51.7% (2022), 64.8% (2023), 59.1% (2024).
Worsened: 7.4% (2021), 5.0% (2022), 8.6% (2023), 7.1% (2024).
Improved: 23.3% (2021), 42.0% (2022), 24.9% (2023), 33.7% (2024).
Legend: Improved, Worsened, Unchanged

Basra is Iraq's southeasternmost governorate [capital: Basra], and host to more than 7 percent of the country's total population.[125] The governorate demonstrates an ethno-religious composition where Shi'a Arabs constitute the majority, followed by a (significant) minority of Sunni Arabs, and several smaller groups. Geographically, Basra borders Kuwait to the south, and Iran to the east, with the governorate being situated along the Shatt Al-Arab waterway which connects to the Persian Gulf. Notably, this geography allows for the successful operation of the ports of Basra and Umm Qasr, positioning the governorate to be a hub for trade and transportation.

This status is further reinforced by the fact that Basra contains a significant proportion of Iraq's oil.[126] Despite being considered Iraq's economic capital, Basra's population continues to experience economic stagnation, persistent poverty, and the poor provision of basic services.[127] Moreover, large-scale smuggling and drug trafficking through Basra's ports, combined with the worsening water crisis, has generated new patterns of conflict, often perpetrated by Iran-backed Shi'a militias.[128]

Economic inequalities, reinforced by a lack of political transparency, accountability, and rampant corruption, have resulted in numerous crises and incidents with a major impact on civilian security. Ranging from being one of the centers of warfare during the Iraq War, to a cornerstone of PMF recruitment and mobilization,[129] Basra offers a unique microcosm of Iraq's economic and security woes. Even following IS' defeat, Basra's population has seen a continuous deterioration of livelihoods. While Basra is home to an estimated 60 percent of Iraq's oil reserves and provides Iraq with 80 percent of the overall national revenue,[130] unemployment is high at 21.8 percent, far higher than the national average of 16.5 percent.[131] Economic issues and lack of basic services have triggered numerous large-scale protests which have escalated since the summer of 2018. Basra's resource and security dynamics have also sparked cyclical tribal conflicts in various parts of the governorate, particularly over access to oil and related employment opportunities. The consequent proliferation of weapons within tribes, and the absence of a strong security apparatus, have also worked towards the widespread displacement of civilians.[132]

In line with monitoring the above dynamics, PAX has been collecting civilian perceptions annually in Basra since 2017 under its flagship HSS project (see section 3 on the HSS methodology) with its partner, the Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society (IFS). Below is a brief profile from the data collected between 2021-24 on the main security trends as per civilian perceptions in all districts of the Basra governorate.[133]

Recent security trends

Overall, surveyed civilians indicate that their personal security situation has improved, or generally remained the same, over the period 2021-24. Despite this, some variation can be seen in 2023, with a noticeable dip in civilians who indicated improvements in personal security (42 to 24.9 percent), and a rise in those reporting a worsening security situation (8.6 percent). Broadly, this shift may be explained by the rise in inter-Shi'a conflicts over Basra's oil resources,[134] and the tensions resulting from the run-up to provincial council elections and their conclusion,[135] which saw further security incidents and clashes between the

125. "Basra Urban Profile," *UN-Habitat* (2020), https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/basra_urban_profile_-_english.pdf.
126. "Rumaila Oil Field,", Projects, NS Energy, accessed October 17, 2019, https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/projects/rumaila-oil-field/.
127. The New Region, "In oil-rich Basra; two worlds, two classes," *The New Region*, February 25, 2024, https://thenewregion.com/posts/278/in-oil-rich-basra-two-worlds-two-classes#:~:text=Despite%20hosting%20over%203%20million,unofficially%20doubled%20the%20poverty%20rates.
128. AFP, "'Worse than a jungle': the cartel controlling Iraqi borders," *France24*, March 29, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210329-worse-than-a-jungle-the-cartel-controlling-iraqi-borders.

129. Al-Monitor, "Will Shiite militias become Iraq's Basij?," *Al-Monitor*, September 30, 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/09/iran-iraq-basij-basra-pmu.html; Al-Jazeera, "Iraq cleric issues call to arms against ISIL," *Al-Jazeera*, June 14, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/6/14/iraq-cleric-issues-call-to-arms-against-isil.
130. Harith Hasan, "The Basra Exception," *Carnegie Middle East Center – Diwan*, September 19, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2018/09/the-basra-exception?lang=en.
131. ILO, " Final Internal Project Evaluation for "Increasing Access to Employment Opportunities for Vulnerable Urban Population in Basra City in Response to the COVID 19 Crisis"," TVET Jobs, (2025).
132. Emirates Policy Center, "Tribes of Basra: The Political, Social, and Security Issues," Emirates Policy Center (2022).
133. Detailed results can be found on "Human Security Survey in Iraq," PAX Protection of Civilians, https://protectionofcivilians.org/projects/human-security-survey-iraq/. All data summaries are also available in Arabic. More detailed data disaggregated by district and gender can be shared on request with trusted partners. All data is anonymized.
134. Ranj Alaaldin, "Shiite rivalries could break Iraq's deceptive calm in 2023," Brookings, March 1, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/shiite-rivalries-could-break-iraqs-deceptive-calm-in-2023/.
135. "Observers warn of potential conflict between CF and Sadrist movement in southern Iraqi cities," Shafaq News, December 11, 2023, https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Observers-warn-of-potential-conflict-between-CF-and-Sadrist-movement-in-southern-Iraqi-cities.

Sadrist Movement, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH), and the PMF.[136] These clashes were compounded by an uptick in general violent incidents against civilians by unidentified perpetrators.[137] HSS data reflects this change in civilian security, with 37.7 percent of civilians indicating a likelihood of being a victim of violence in 2023, a notable jump from 2022 (25.8 percent). Results for this indicator in 2024 mirrored improvements in overall governorate security, with only 28.5 percent of civilians indicating a risk of becoming a victim of violence.

Markedly, the personal security of civilians and their potential to become victims of violence, is strongly linked to the level of sectarianism in the governorate's subdistricts. In further support of the unique political and security developments of 2023, the HSS recorded an analogous peak in civilian perceptions of the degree to which sectarianism impacts their communities in 2023 (44.5 percent). This peak also levelled out with the improvement in civilian personal security in 2024.

With an eye to the role Basra's ports play in drug trafficking in Iraq, and after input from partners operating in Diyala, the HSS also began asking civilians about the prevalence of drug use in communities. Civilian respondents indicated that drug use was increasing in their communities in both 2023 and 2024 (68.2 and 49.9 percent respectively). The most cited explanations include poor policing of borders (20.4 percent), the economic situation in the governorate (17.2 percent), and administrative and governmental deficiencies (16.8 percent). These responses acutely correspond to Iraq's escalating drug problem, and fit within Basra's socio-political context, where corruption and the influence of profiteering by Iran-backed groups has generated patterns of addiction in a population struggling to find livelihood opportunities, and attain basic services. Drug users are often criminalized in the country, and many also resort to petty crimes to finance their drug habit.

Performance of security actors

It is imperative that civilians can trust the security actors within their communities. Between 2021-24, civilians in Basra indicated an overwhelming trust in the police's ability to work towards their security. Results

in 2024 indicate that 55.7 percent of respondents stated that the police were very effective in protecting civilians, while 39.9 percent stated that they were mainly effective. When asked what is needed to further improve the performance of the police, the main answers included increased presence in communities (17.6 percent), for the police to better trained (15 percent), and for them to be better equipped and more visible (both 11.9 percent).
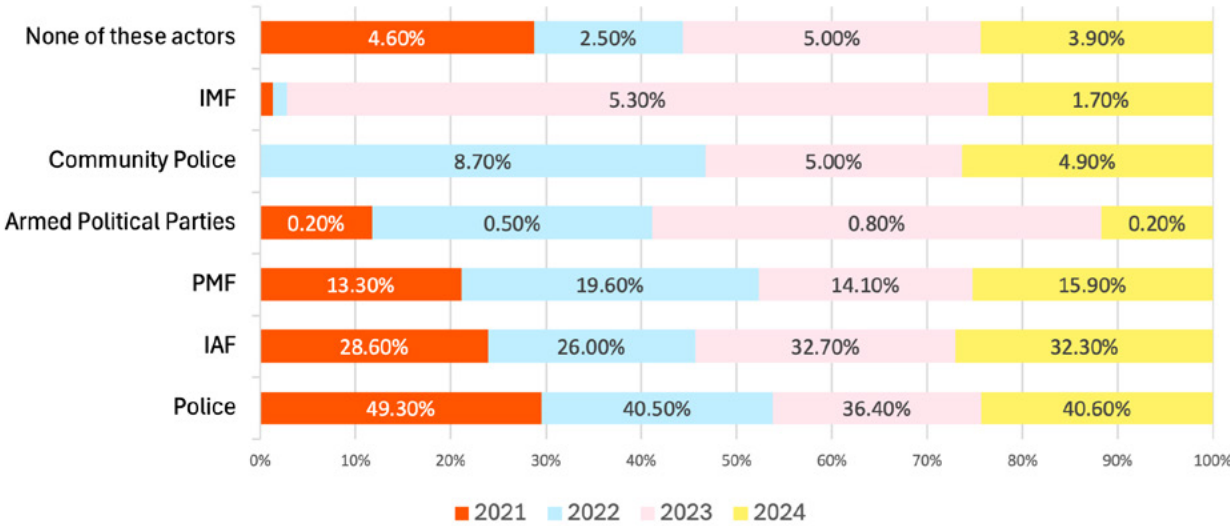
The IAF were a close second in terms of civilian trust levels, with civilians consistently approving of their performance between 2021-24. In 2024, 24.4 percent of respondents indicated that the IAF was very effective in protecting civilians, while 70.5 percent indicated that the IAF was mainly effective. Altogether, this positive perception of formal security forces speaks to the continued reliance of civilians on the traditional security apparatus, and the consequent benefits an investment in training and capabilities may have on how protected civilians feel. However, in Iraq's transition from green to blue (see section 6), a decreased IAF presence, if not carefully filled by the formal police, may end up being filled by armed militias, having a negative impact on the security perceptions of the governorate.

In line with this, between 71 and 78 percent (in 2021 and 2024 respectively) of civilians feel that political and security actors need more information about civilians' priorities to improve the security situation in their communities. This clearly shows the need for increased community engagement programs and the need for effective dialogues between civilians and their security providers. While this is an essential feature of HSS, this needs to be done at a more systematic level in the country.

Perspectives on future security dynamics

The HSS conventionally asks respondents a series of questions to determine what they feel will be the cause for future conflicts in their communities. Such questions can be useful for security providers and policy makers to be more proactive and pre-emptive in mitigating potential issues before they arise. The graphs in this section represent the main answers provided by civilians from 2021-24.

136. "Basra: Explosive device near AAH headquarters; gunfire targets government buildings.," *Shafaq News*, March 17, 2024, https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Basra-Explosive-device-near-AAH-headquarters-gunfire-targets-government-buildings.
137. "A woman was killed and others from one family were injured in an armed attack in Basra," *National Iraqi News Agency*, January 3, 2024, https://ninanews.com/Website/news/Details?key=1099028.

▼ **Table 1** Which of the following security actors do you generally trust to work towards improved security in your community?

	2021	2022	2023	2024
None of these actors	4.60%	2.50%	5.00%	3.90%
IMF			5.30%	1.70%
Community Police		8.70%	5.00%	4.90%
Armed Political Parties	0.20%	0.50%	0.80%	0.20%
PMF	13.30%	19.60%	14.10%	15.90%
IAF	28.60%	26.00%	32.70%	32.30%
Police	49.30%	40.50%	36.40%	40.60%

Overall, most respondents agree that political issues are a significant contributor to insecurity. The main factors respondents believe are likely to lead to conflict in Basra are a combination of economic, security, and political dilemmas. The answer option *Poverty or a lack of livelihood opportunities* has occupied a consistently high spot between 2021 (17.8 percent) and 2024 (15.4 percent), closely followed by *tribal conflict,* which notably exceeded the former economic factor in 2022 (20.9 percent). Despite the perception that poverty is a major conflict driver, respondents primarily advocate *for (civilian) disarmament and security sector reform* as a vital development necessary for lasting peace in Iraq (19.6 percent in 2024). This change is closely followed by a call for the *improved quality of, or access to, justice* (14.3 percent in 2024).

PAX's partner, IFS, while strongly concurring with the results of the HSS, feels that at the community level, one of the biggest issues in Basra is the tribal mindset, which also restricts women's and girls' participation in peace initiatives. Tribal enmities, which are often also politically backed, lead to a great deal of insecurity and violence. Moreover, for young and adolescent boys, there is an urgent need to demobilize the ones who had previously joined PMF, and to reintegrate them into society. This is sensitive work, and many CSOs working on this are targeted. Due to a lack of livelihoods, young and adolescent boys are also drawn towards militias as it gives them a feeling of power, or towards drugs, which is criminalized in Iraq. Basra's geopolitical location keeps it under the influence of Iran. Finally, the impacts of climate change, especially bad air quality and water pollution, are causing massive health issues in Basra, and are a priority for many NGOs, including IFS.
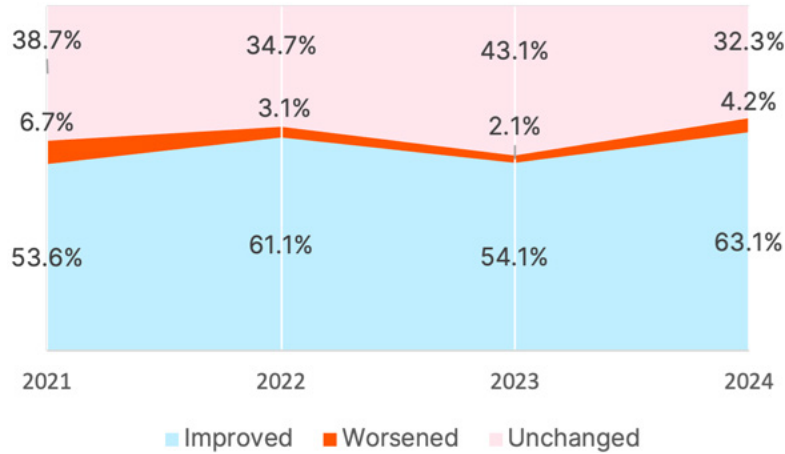
9. Profile: Diyala

The governorate of Diyala [capital: Baqubah] lies at a strategic geographical location, bordering Baghdad in the south, KRI in the north, and Iran in the east. Diyala embodies almost all conflict dynamics in Iraq: it is part of the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs), claimed by Federal Iraq and KRI. Oil-rich Khanaqin, historically, was targeted under the Arabization efforts and contains the only legal border crossing between Iran and Iraq in northern Diyala. The governorate has a mix of Arab and Kurdish residents, as well as Shi'a and Sunnis. As a result, politics have always remained contentious.

Between 2006-2008, Al-Qaeda presence and activities destabilized the governorate. In that same period, Shi'a militias, Iran-backed groups, as well as sectarian leaders also contributed to aggravating sectarian differences in the governorate,[138] which many civilians to date remain traumatized by. This has been compounded by IS' takeover in 2014 of parts of northern Diyala, while also attacking strategic cities in the south. By January 2015, Diyala was the first governorate during the war against IS to have been declared 'liberated' by Iraqi forces.[139] However, IS continued carrying out isolated attacks in Jawlala and Saadiya in the north, killing civilians and local authorities. For years after the declared end of the war against IS, sleeper cells continued to use the Hamrin mountains as cover.

In line with monitoring the above dynamics, PAX has been collecting civilian perceptions annually in Diyala since 2021 under its flagship HSS project (see section 3 on the HSS methodology) with its partner, Wand Al-khair Human Organization (WAHO). Below is a brief profile from the data collected between 2021-24 on the

▼ **Chart 2** How did your personal security situation change in the last year?

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Unchanged	38.7%	34.7%	43.1%	32.3%
Worsened	6.7%	3.1%	2.1%	4.2%
Improved	53.6%	61.1%	54.1%	63.1%

■ Improved ■ Worsened ■ Unchanged

main security trends as per civilian perceptions in all districts of the Diyala governorate.[140]

Recent security trends

Civilians in Diyala report that their personal security is improving since 2021, with over half the population reporting a positive improvement across all four years. The dip in 2023 can be attributed to at least three IS attacks in Muqdadiya, as well as an attack on unarmed farmers in Khalis. Many kidnappings and assassinations have also occurred, which many civilians claim are the result of tribal disputes.[141]

During community engagements in 2021, it was decided to add a question on the prevalence of drug use in the community, at WAHO's recommendation. Between 2022-24, over 60 percent of respondents shared that drug use had increased in their communities. The three most common answers when asked why drug use had increased included administrative and governmental weakness (23 percent), poor border control (23 percent) and the economic situation (18 percent). Drug use is a growing trend in Iraq, many attributing it to increased unemployment for graduates, decreased levels of education and therefore livelihood opportunities, and porous borders, especially with Iran. Drug users are often ostracized from their communities, sometimes forming small gangs and resorting to petty crimes. Drug use is also criminalized in Iraq, as opposed to treating drug addiction as the product of societal issues.

Similarly, on the recommendation of our partner and community consultations, PAX added questions on electronic extortion to the survey in 2022 (see also section 4, 'Other trends and developments'). WAHO also conducted various awareness-raising campaigns on this issue together with the police as part of community engagement initiatives.

In line with the governorate's history mentioned above, over 60 percent of surveyed civilians indicated that sectarianism has a big impact on their communities.
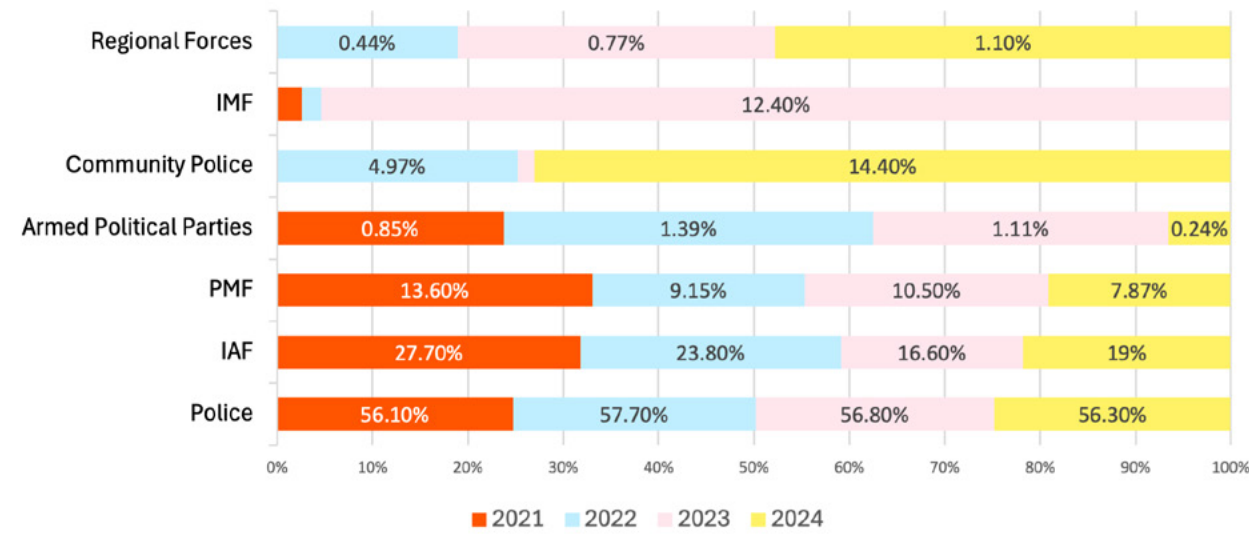
Performance of security actors

It is imperative that civilians are able to trust the security actors within their communities. Overwhelmingly, civilians in Diyala trust the police the most. Over 50 percent believe that the police is very effective and over 30 percent believe that the police is mainly effective in protecting civilians. When asked what is needed to further improve the performance of the police, the main answers included: having more police presence (21 percent), for the police to be more responsive to civilians' needs (7 percent), and for the police to be better trained and equipped (22 percent). Community police is a close second in terms of perceived effectiveness in protecting civilians, with over 45 percent of civilians finding them to be very effective across the four years. This shows that

138. "Diyala," Institute for the Study of War, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.understandingwar.org/region/diyala-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89.
139. AFP Iraq, "Iraqi forces 'liberate' Diyala from ISIS: officer," Al-Arabiya News, last modified May 20, 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/01/26/Iraq-forces-liberate-Diyala-province-from-ISIS-officer-.

140. Detailed results can be found on "Human Security Survey in Iraq," PAX Protection of Civilians, https://protectionofcivilians.org/projects/human-security-survey-iraq/. All data summaries are also available in Arabic. More detailed data disaggregated by district and gender can be shared on request with trusted partners. All data is anonymized.
141. As shared in validation session conducted with enumerators after data collection.

10. Profile: Kirkuk

investment in police training and capabilities may have a direct positive impact on how protected civilians feel.

Similarly, between 82 and 91 percent (in 2021 and 2024 respectively) of civilians feel that political and security actors need more information about civilians' priorities to improve the security situation in their communities. This clearly shows the need for increased community engagement programs and the need for effective dialogues between civilians and their security providers. While this is an essential feature of HSS, this needs to be done at a more systematic level in the country.

Perspectives on future security dynamics

The HSS asks civilians what they feel will be the cause for future conflicts in their communities. Such questions can be useful for security providers and policy makers to be more proactive and preemptive in mitigating potential issues before they arise or become more widespread. The graphs in this section represent the main answers provided by civilians from 2021-24.[142] The main concerns are economic in nature or relate to

lack of service provision and national level governance issues. These issues have caused protests across Iraq already for many years.

As shared by WAHO, the main issues to be addressed in the governorate remain the lack of livelihoods, and governance-level issues at the federal level, which in the case of Diyala reminds civilians of the ethno-sectarian strife from 2008-08. In 2023-24, there was evidence of such governmental issues at the governorate level when the various political parties could not agree on appointing a new governor.[143] At the community level, the main challenges remain high levels of drug use and treating drug users as criminals, and electronic extortion. Furthermore, the proliferation of unlicensed weapons in the hands of civilians exponentially exacerbates tribal issues, spreading fear among civilians.

Kirkuk [capital: Kirkuk] is Iraq's most diverse governorate and a microcosm of the entire country. Home to Shi'a, Sunnis, as well as a Christian minority, and to Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen. The region around the city accounts for 40 percent of Iraq's oil production and 70 percent of its natural gas production, which makes the question of 'ownership' of Kirkuk both strategically very important and highly contentious.[144] As such, it was targeted by the Ba'ath party under its Arabization policies in the 1970s to make it into an Arab majority governorate and is currently part of Iraq's DIBs.

IS began its assault of Kirkuk in June 2014, soon occupying its Arab-majority areas, only to be liberated towards the end of 2017. During this time, the KRG retained exclusive control over the city and the governorate's oil fields. Following a referendum for an independent Kurdistan in September 2017, Federal Iraq took control of the governorate.

Politically speaking, the governorate remains of interest to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, the Arab coalition, the Qiade coalition, and the Arab Aruba alliance.[145] In line with the governorate's contentious history, it took eight months following the Provincial elections in December 2023 to appoint a new governor. For the first time since 2017, a Kurd holds this position.[146]

In line with monitoring the above dynamics, PAX has been collecting civilian perceptions annually in Kirkuk since 2017 under its flagship HSS project (see section 3 on the HSS methodology) with its partner, the Iraqi

142. Please note that only those answers are included in the graph which were most chosen by respondents.
143. Michael Knights and Ameer al-Kaabi, " Diyala Governorship Shows Badr Leaning on Maliki to Remain Competitive," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 19, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/diyala-governorship-shows-badr-leaning-maliki-remain-competitive; "State of Law nominates Waddah al-Tamimi for Diyala governor," Shafaq news, March 4, 2024, https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/State-of-Law-nominates-Waddah-al-Tamimi-for-Diyala-governor; KirkukNow in Diyala, "Diyala Provincial Council Elects Local Committees: We Have Been Deprived of All Positions, Sole Kurdish Representative," KirkukNow, August 21, 2024, https://www.kirkuknow.com/en/news/70457.

144. "Kirkuk," The Forum for Cities in Transition, accessed April 1, 2025, https://citiesintransition.net/fct-cities/kirkuk/.
145. Mehmet Alaca and Bekir Aydogan, "The Delicate Balance in Kirkuk: What Does the Future Hold for the Governorate?," Al Sharq Strategic Research, September 17, 2024, https://research.sharqforum.org/2024/09/17/the-delicate-balance-in-kirkuk-what-does-the-future-hold-for-the-governorate/.
146. "Kirkuk governorship clash exposes tensions between, within ethnic blocs," Amwaj.media, August 21, 2024, https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/kirkuk-governorship-clash-exposes-tensions-between-within-ethnic-blocs.

Chart 3: Legend — Improved, Worsened, Unchanged

	2020	2023
Unchanged	32.0%	38.9%
Worsened	15.1%	5.0%
Improved	51.9%	55.4%

Table 3: Legend — 2020, 2023

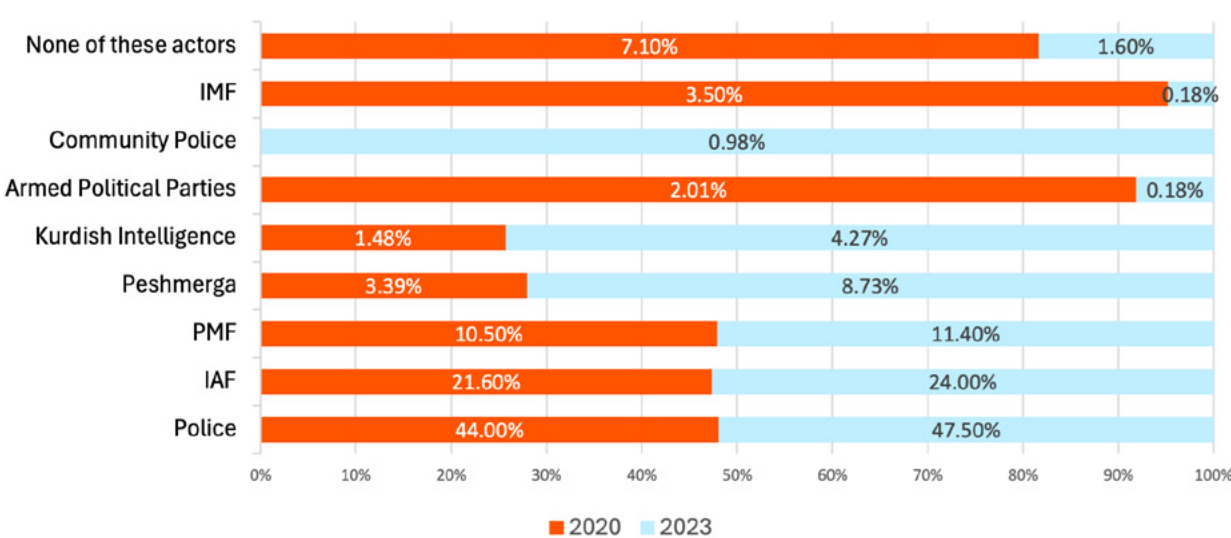| Actor	2020	2023
None of these actors	7.10%	1.60%
IMF	3.50%	0.18%
Community Police		0.98%
Armed Political Parties	2.01%	0.18%
Kurdish Intelligence	1.48%	4.27%
Peshmerga	3.39%	8.73%
PMF	10.50%	11.40%
IAF	21.60%	24.00%
Police	44.00%	47.50%
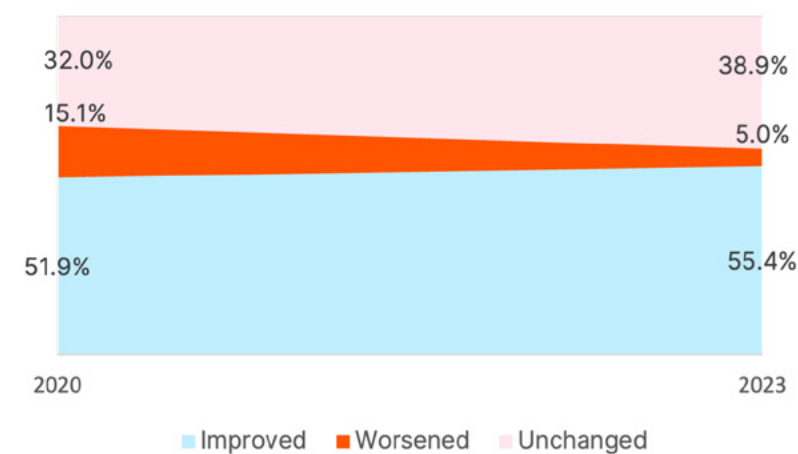
Al-Amal Association. Below is a brief profile from the data collected in 2020 and 2023 on the main security trends as per civilian perceptions in all districts of the Kirkuk governorate.[147]

Recent security trends

Civilians in Kirkuk report that their personal security is improving since 2020, with over half the population reporting a positive improvement across all four years. While more or less the same number of civilians reported their security as improving from 2020 (52 percent) to 2023 (55 percent), a far lesser amount reported a worsening of security; from 15 percent in 2020 to 5 percent in 2023. Following a similar trend, from 2020 to 2023, the number of civilians expecting to become a likely victim of violence in the coming twelve months decreased from 43 to 29 percent, showing a relatively positive trend in how civilians perceive their security. This can be attributed to Iraq generally stabilizing, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, as well as the promise of provincial elections, which had not taken place since 2013 in Federal Iraq and 2014 in the KRI.

Performance of security actors

It is imperative that civilians are able to trust the security actors within their communities. Civilians in Kirkuk mainly trust the police, garnering over 44 percent trust, followed by IAF garnering over 20 percent trust across both years. Over 54 percent believe that the police is very effective and over 26 percent believe that the police is mainly effective in protecting civilians. For IAF, over 66 percent reported the actor as being very effective in 2020 compared to over 48 percent in 2023, attributable to the fact that the IAF played a strong role in the liberation campaigns against IS. When asked what is needed to further improve the performance of the police, the main answers included: having more police presence (25 percent), and for the police to be better trained and equipped (32 percent). For the IAF, the answers for improving performance were the same. Such data can be useful for policymakers on SSR.

Interestingly, the level of trust for the community police to work towards improving security in communities when comparing to other actors, was less than 1 percent in 2023; this may be attributed to the fact that approximately only 15 percent reported a consistent presence in their community, with none being present in the district of Dibis. However, those civilians who did encounter community police, reported them as being

either very effective (48 percent) or mainly effective (15 percent). Interestingly, there were glaring differences in male and female respondents: 73 percent of women versus 27 percent of men reported the community police as very effective; 2 percent of female respondents versus 46 percent of male respondents reported the actor as being mainly ineffective. This demonstrates how women are more likely to trust and therefore report crimes to the community police than to other formal security actors.

Building on the above, between 81 and 85 percent (in 2020 and 2023 respectively) of civilians feel that political and security actors need more information about civilians' priorities to improve the security situation in their communities. This clearly shows the need for increased community engagement programs and the need for effective dialogues between civilians and their security providers. While this is an essential feature of HSS, this needs to be done at a more systematic level in the country.

Perspectives on future security dynamics

The HSS asks civilians what they feel will be the cause for future conflicts in their communities. Such questions can be useful for security providers and policy makers to be more proactive and preemptive in mitigating potential issues before they arise or become more widespread. The main causes in both 2020 and 2023 include: armed insurgence and terrorist groups (17 percent in both years); competition over

resources, such as oil, land and water (20 percent in 2020 and 16 percent in 2023); and poverty or lack of livelihood opportunities (11 percent in 2020 and 13 percent in 2023).

When asked about the three changes needed to bring lasting peace to Iraq, the main answers across both years included: military suppression of armed insurgencies and terrorists (13 and 18 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); disarmament and SSR (20 and 14 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); and improved quality and access to justice (19 and 18 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively). This shows that SSR programs also need to have strong elements of justice within the policy and implementation.

As shared by IAA, the main issues to be addressed in the governorate remain the lack of livelihoods, and governance-level issues, which are compounded by the fact that while the governorate is being managed by Federal Baghdad, there is significant Kurdish and Turkmen populations, as well as influence by Kurdish political parties. Given the diversity of security issues in the governorate, with the city and district of Kirkuk being a relatively safe place with women feeling relatively comfortable in public spaces, the opposite is true in the Hawija and Daquq districts. The most pressing needs include programs on social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and tolerance, not only between various sects and ethnicities, but especially between families of former IS fighters and host communities. Children of such families are being ostracized, which can potentially lead to psychosocial issues.
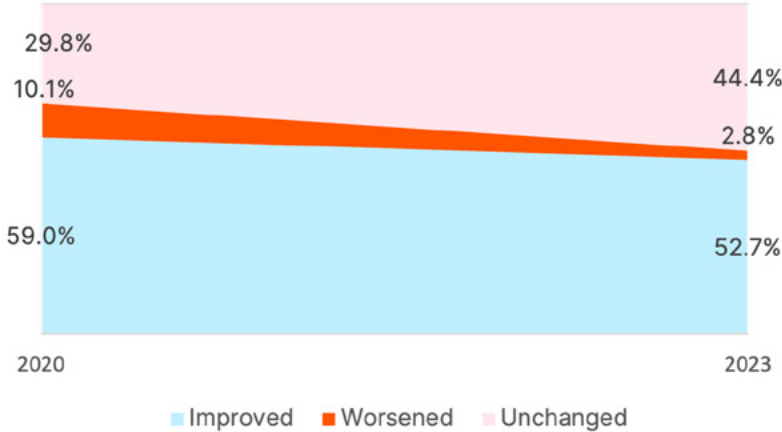
147. Detailed results can be found on "Human Security Survey in Iraq," PAX Protection of Civilians, https://protectionofcivilians.org/projects/human-security-survey-iraq/. All data summaries are also available in Arabic. More detailed data disaggregated by district and gender can be shared on request with trusted partners. All data is anonymized.

11. Profile: Salahaddin

Chart 4 How did your personal security situation change in the last year?

2020	2023
29.8%	44.4%
10.1%	2.8%
59.0%	52.7%

■ Improved ■ Worsened ■ Unchanged

Salahaddin [capital: Tikrit] is a northern governorate that is well-connected to many parts of the country and is hence often considered to be of strategic importance. Besides directly bordering Baghdad in the south, Salahaddin also shares internal borders with Diyala, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Anbar, and Ninewa. The governorate is predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs, with small groupings of Shi'a Arab, Kurdish, and Shi'a Turkmen communities. Significantly, Salahaddin is also home to several Iraqi tribal confederations, with cities and towns around the governorate being influenced and characterized by tribal dynamics.[148]

Salahaddin remains vital to Iraq's economy through its oil production and refining capacity in districts like Tikrit[149] (Ajil and Alas oilfields) and Baiji (Baiji refinery and related axillary industries such as fertilizer factories and power plants).[150] Nonetheless, despite the considerable wealth and resources such sites offer, they continue to suffer from interruptions, shutdowns and bottlenecks resultant from the expulsion of IS, which used such sites as a major source of revenue in the period 2014-17, and the new power structures that replaced the group.[151]

Salahaddin was one of the main governorates that witnessed a strong concentration of IS operations, with the group sustaining a low-grade insurgency across disputed areas up to 2023.[152] IS' official defeat in mid-2017 allowed for the return of many IDPs, but asymmetric attacks against civilians and security forces remained a prominent issue in rural areas due to an acute security vacuum.[153] Markedly, although the Shi'a-led PMF units and non-local armed forces were a major contributor to the expulsion of IS, their dominant role in the governorate has birthed new political divisions which have harmed various civilian groups – particularly Sunnis – in tit-for-tat retaliations.[154] This was particularly the case in clashes between the PMF and Kurdish Security Forces over the disputed Tooz Khurmatu district.[155] Overall, although urban areas of Salahaddin have seen marked improvements in security provision, tensions between Iraqi and KRG forces, and the security gaps that continue to allow for asymmetric violence by IS and other armed groups in rural areas, pose a distinct risk to civilian protection and safety.

In line with monitoring the above dynamics, PAX has been collecting civilian perceptions annually in Salahaddin since 2017 under its flagship HSS project
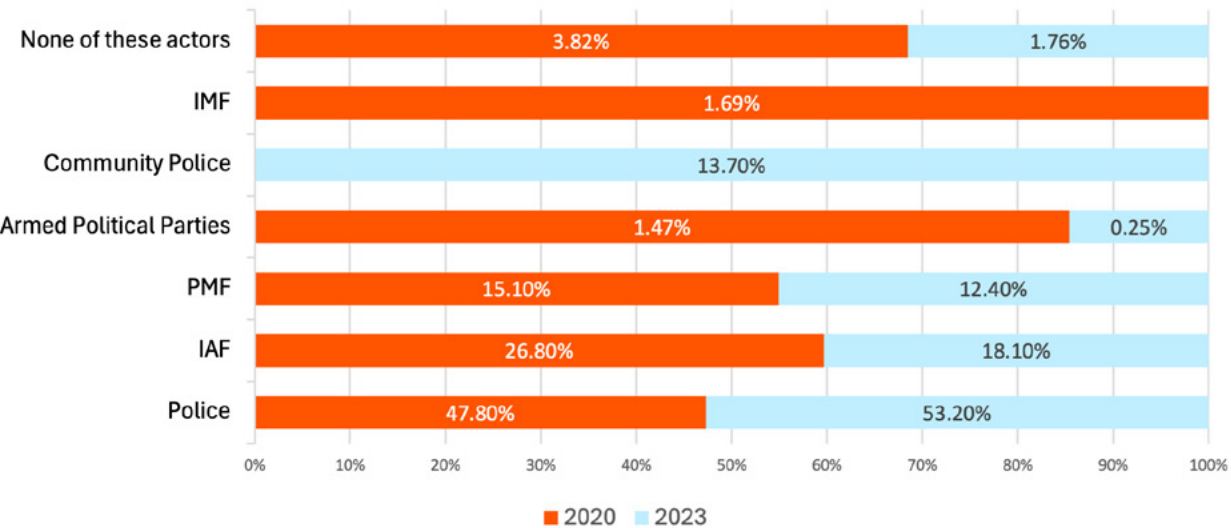
(see section 3 on the HSS methodology) with its partner IAA. Below is a brief profile from the data collected in 2020 and 2023 on the main security trends as per civilian perceptions in all districts of the Salahaddin governorate.[156]

Recent security trends

Overall, the majority of surveyed civilians in Salahaddin indicate that their personal security situation has improved or generally remained the same since 2020. Year-by-year changes are not significant in the context of civilians reporting improvements from 2020 to 2023, but there is a major shift in the number of civilians indicating that their security situation got worse; from 10 percent in 2020, to a noticeably lower 3 percent in 2023. Similar results are seen in the drop in the number of civilians who believe that they are likely to become victims of violence, with 23 percent of civilians reporting that they were very or somewhat likely to become victims in 2020, as opposed to 17 percent in 2023. Given the wide gap between the two data collection points, a variety of factors may explain this positive change: from a general move to stability

148. Newlines Institute, "Intelligence Briefing: A Thousand Hezbollahs: Iraq's Emerging Militia State," *Newlines Institue*, May, 2021, https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Shia-Militia-Briefing-Newlines-Institute-1.pdf.
149. "Salahuddin oil wealth not exploited due to restrictions," *Shafaq News*, May 14, 2020, https://shafaq.com/en/Economy/salahuddin-oil-wealth-not-exploited-due-to-restrictions.
150. "ISHM: JANUARY 7 – JANUARY 14, 2021," Enhance Understanding, Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, effective January 14, 2021, https://enablingpeace.org/ishm287/
151. Ellen Ioanes, "ISIS is staging attacks in symbolically important places to send a message: We're back," *Business Insider Nederland*, October 24, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.nl/isis-oil-field-and-raqqa-attacks-send-a-message-2019-10?international=true&r=US.

152. ISW Press, " Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, April 5, 2023," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 7, 2023, https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-april-5-2023.
153. Maxwell B. Markusen, "The Islamic State and the Persistent Threat of Extremism in Iraq," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November, 2018, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf.
154. Erica Gaston and Andras Derzsi-Horvath, "Iraq Afer ISL: Sub-State Actors, Local Forces, and the Micro-Politics of Control," Global Public Policy Institute, March 2018, https://gppi.net/assets/Gaston_Derzsi-Horvath_Iraq_After_ISIL.pdf; "Flurry of Sunni Triangle ops sparks questions over Islamic State," Al-Monitor, March 15, 2021, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/iraq-sunni-triangle-security-islamic-state.html.
155. "Why Tuz Khormato clashes were more than just local skirmishes," Al-Monitor, April 5, 2016, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/05/turkey-iraq-tuz-khurmatu-new-sunni-shiite-front.html#ixzz6QwHzMcot.
156. Detailed results can be found on "Human Security Survey in Iraq," PAX Protection of Civilians, https://protectionofcivilians.org/projects/human-security-survey-iraq/. All data summaries are also available in Arabic. More detailed data disaggregated by district and gender can be shared on request with trusted partners. All data is anonymized.

	2020	2023
None of these actors	3.82%	1.76%
IMF	1.69%	
Community Police		13.70%
Armed Political Parties	1.47%	0.25%
PMF	15.10%	12.40%
IAF	26.80%	18.10%
Police	47.80%	53.20%

■ 2020 ■ 2023

in Iraq and the Covid-19 pandemic tapering off, to a decline in IS attacks,[157] and the return of IDPs to the governorate.[158]

Performance of security actors

It is imperative that civilians are able to trust the security actors within their communities. Civilians in Salahaddin indicate that the police are the most trusted security provider in the governorate, garnering the trust of 48 percent of civilians in 2020 and 53 percent in 2023. The effectiveness of the police in protecting civilians throughout the given period was also perceived highly, with respondents in 2023 primarily reporting that the police were either very effective (52 percent) or mainly effective (37 percent). Results in 2020 were analogous (57 and 36 percent respectively). When asked what is needed to further improve the performance of the police, the main answers included increased presence in communities (22 percent), for the police to be better trained (14 percent), and for them to be better equipped (13 percent).

The IAF were the second-most trusted security actor in Salahaddin, garnering 27 percent and 18 percent of trust in 2020 and 2023 respectively. Despite a drop in the percentage of respondents reporting trust in the security actor in 2023, 41 percent rated the performance of IAF as very effective and 45 percent rated as mainly effective, with similar results in 2020 at 49 and 39 percent. When asked what is needed to further improve the performance of the IAF, the main answers included increased presence in communities (24 percent), for the IAF to be better equipped (13 percent), and for them to be more visible (12 percent).

Building on the above, between 79 and 87 percent (in 2020 and 2023 respectively) of civilians feel that political and security actors need more information about civilians' priorities to improve the security situation in their communities. This clearly shows the need for increased community engagement programs and the need for effective dialogues between civilians and their security providers. While this is an essential feature of HSS, this needs to be done at a more systematic level in the country.

Perspectives on future security dynamics

The HSS asks civilians what they feel will be the cause for future conflicts in their communities. Such questions can be useful for security providers and policy makers to be more proactive and preemptive in mitigating potential issues before they arise or become more widespread. The main causes in both 2020 and 2023 include: armed insurgence and terrorist groups

(17 and 14 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); poor governance at the national level (18 and 16 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); and poverty or lack of livelihood opportunities (20 and 23 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively). The armed insurgence and terrorist groups allude to issues within Tooz Khurmato, as well as in relation to IS attacks in recent years.

When asked about the three changes needed to bring lasting peace to Iraq, the main answers across both years included: military suppression of armed insurgencies and terrorists (16 and 13 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); political reform at the national level (20 and 18 percent in 2020 and 2023 respectively); and economic development, as well as improved access to education (20 percent in both years).

PAX's partner IAA agrees with the results of the data, indicating the need for economic reforms to mainly address challenges around lack of livelihoods, and improved governance at the national level. The latter was especially prominent when the Federal Supreme Court ousted Mohammed Al-Halbousi as the Speaker of Parliament. Despite hailing from neighboring Anbar, Halbousi was the highest Sunni official in Parliament, and therefore his termination had reverberating issues in all Sunni-majority governorates, including Salahaddin.

IAA also advocates for the need for more peace initiatives involving the youth in Salahaddin. They have already begun that by holding many events in the larger cities of Tikrit and Al-Alam, including holding a musical festival involving groups from Dohuk, Basra, and Salahaddin to demonstrate that the youth of the governorate want to foster inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace. They have also rehabilitated a youth sports center in Al-Alam in order for youth to have space to hold dialogues.

157. "Iraq in 2023: Challenges and prospects for peace and human security," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 17, 2023, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2023/iraq-2023-challenges-and-prospects-peace-and-human-security.
158. IOM Iraq, "Displacement Tracking Matrix, IRAQ Master List Report 131 (September-December 2023)," IOM, March 2024.

Make peace work.

PAX Netherlands Peace Foundation
Sint Jacobsstraat 12
3511 BS Utrecht
The Netherlands

+31 (0)30 - 233 33 46
info@paxvoorvrede.nl

paxforpeace.nl

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