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Combatting a Geopolitical Void:

The EU's Role in the Future of Iraq

By

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RETHINKING SECURITY IN 2020

SERIES

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing battle against Islamic State (IS) has come to a sudden pause, following the assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani by a United States airstrike on the 3rd of January 2020. Future international involvement in Iraq is uncertain, and the effects of this decision are yet to be seen. Significantly, the European Union's insufficient response to the high tensions in the region further impact the role that the international community has in promoting stability and peace within Iraq, ensuring that IS does not reemerge in a fragile context.

Given the international coalition's presence in Iraq has lasted for over five years, the government's decision on the 5th of January, 2020, to expel all foreign troops in Iraq could lead to a resurgence of IS, especially since the country doesn't seem to have the capacity to combat IS without foreign aid on security, intelligence and military training.

The potential reemergence of IS is impacted by more than just Soleimani's assassination, but given the international response to the event, there could be long-term ramifications on the Iran-US relations. The US and Iran were previously aligned against a common enemy in Iraq and Syria, where they worked together on multiple occasions to combat the Islamic State. The geopolitical impacts of this event could also leave room for new actors to emerge in Iraq, such as China and Russia.

Key Takeaways

> The Iraqi security system is currently incapable of tackling the challenges of a fragmented security state on their own, and therefore rely on international cooperation for capacity building measures.

> The immediate withdrawal of foreign troops could cause a power vacuum as well as confrontation between the United States and Iran.

> The European Union counters the Iranian presence within Iraq, without which the country could become further engrained in the US-Iranian tensions.

This report explores how rising tensions in the region could cultivate an environment for IS to gain power once again, or conversely, for new global actors to emerge within Iraq to combat IS. The EU should continue to support all parties in the conflict, as they remain strategically positioned to support both Iraq and the international coalition with their ongoing fight against IS as well as their support in capacity building within Iraq.

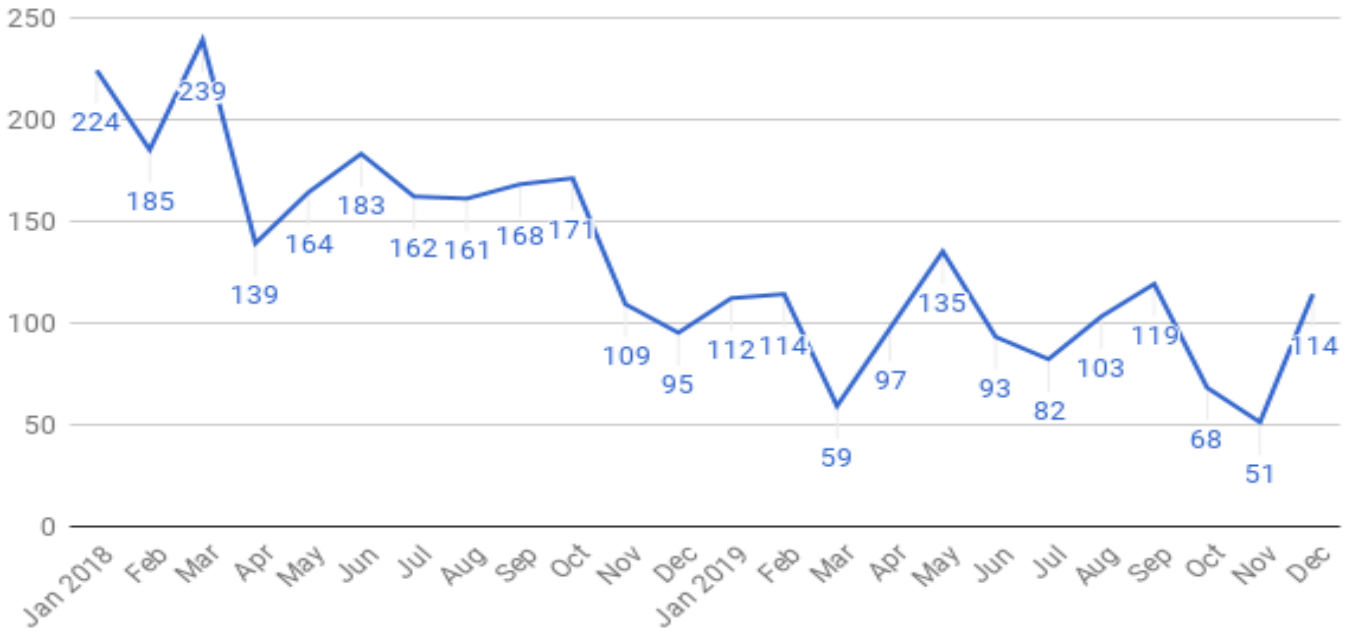
THE THREAT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN 2020

The danger that IS still poses to the security and stability of Iraq cannot be underestimated. Prior to the assassination of Soleimani by the United States and the subsequent rise in tensions between the US and Iran, IS was carrying out more attacks in December of 2019 than in the last quarter of the year (see chart below). The rise in the number of attacks carried out by the IS can be traced to a number of different factors, including US movement of troops into and from different areas in Syria. The Iraqi security forces as well as the international coalition have remained vigilant in trying to thwart the threat of IS in Iraq and Syria.[1]

In noting the increase in the number of attacks, international presence and cooperation remains crucial to supporting the mission against IS. Iraqi security forces continue to improve their capabilities, yet lack important aspects to forge the fight on their own, such as intelligence capabilities and financial support in their mission.

Future missions and international cooperation in Iraq remains uncertain, as recent events have ultimately shifted the geopolitical dynamics within the country. Iraq remains fragmented on multiple levels, which has ultimately caused divisions in the support of different international actors. There are some groups that support the United States' presence in Iraq, while others prefer Iran to remain. In addition, certain groups are also calling for an end to all foreign intervention.

Without a clear indication of what Iraq wants from the international community, the prospect of improved capacity building and the ability to combat groups such as IS remains impossible. Furthermore, there is no known correlation between the killing of Soleimani and a future resurgence of IS, but the group has regained certain power in both Iraq and Syria in



Iraq Attacks 2018-19

[1] Jennifer Cafarella, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou, "ISIS'S SECOND COMEBACK: ASSESSING THE NEXT ISIS INSURGENCY," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 23, 2019, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/isiss-second-comeback-assessing-next-isis-insurgency.

recent months. The newly named leader of IS, Ibrahim Al-Hashemi Al-Qurashi noted in a public address: 'The conflict in Iraq has merely entered a new stage, and Iraq's cannon and planes would be of no avail in their fight against ISIS'.[2]

Currently, the goals of IS are unknown, as the group has reverted back to guerilla tactics in order to incite violence and fear where security is weak. The international coalition presence and their potential withdraw from Iraq risks a potential fracture in the long-term mission of preventing IS from re-establishing territory in Iraq or Syria. The terrorist group has been working to rebuild their footholds since their reported defeat in October 2019.[3]

The upcoming weeks remain crucial in monitoring the developments within the security sector, particularly in the fight against IS. Soleimani was one of the key figures in executing a strategy of fighting IS in Iraq.[4] Soleimani was not solely responsible for the demise of IS in 2019, but his role in fighting the group is undeniable; 'without Soleimani, the ground war against ISIS would have been much weaker. There is a very good chance that ISIS will come back.' Noted by Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a former Iraqi National Security Advisor.[5]

Following the attack on Soleimani, reports of the increasing power that IS has remain largely speculative, although there have been recent attacks carried out by the group, there is no evidence that Soleimani's killing will have direct impacts on a potential IS resurgence. The EU and the international community more broadly have a unique opportunity to continue to promote peace and stability in Iraq.

INTERNATIONAL TROOPS IN IRAQ

The Islamic State entered Mosul in June 2014. The international community came together, at the invitation of the Iraqi government, to help combat the group in both Iraq and Syria. The United States led the coalition of 81 countries and international institutions, including NATO and the European Union[6] in training missions and military campaigns throughout Iraq.[7] The United States provides the largest number of troops and military support staff in Iraq, with just under 6,000 troops stationed in the country, European countries provide substantial support to the ongoing missions in Iraq as well.[8]

On the 5th of January, 2020 the Iraq Parliament ruled to expel all foreign troops in the country, including the international coalition which has been fighting against the Islamic State since 2014. In 2014, with the rise of IS, the Iraqi government called upon the international community to send support through ground troops, intelligence sharing and capacity building in their security and intelligence sectors.[9] European troops have been an integral part in this battle against IS, sending troops to fight in Iraq and improve the security capabilities of the Iraqi forces both through the international coalition and the NATO mission to Iraq.

[2] "ISIS Spokesman Dismisses Trump's Declarations Of Annihilating ISIS, Declares War On Israel: 'Oh Soldiers Of The Caliphate Everywhere... Go For The Israeli Settlements And Marketplaces; Turn Them Into Lands For Testing Your Weapons... Attack The Jews And Slaughter Them,'" MEMRI, January 27, 2020, https://www.memri.org/reports/isis-spokesman-dismisses-trumps-declarations-annihilating-isis-declares-war-israel-oh.

[3] Gemma Fox, "Isis Caliphate Defeated: A Timeline of the Terror Group's Brutal Project | The Independent," The Independent, October 27, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-timeline-caliphate-iraq-syria-territory-defeated-a8782351.html.

[4] Vivienne Walt, "Why Iraqis Are Worried About an Islamic State Resurgence After Soleimani's Death," Time, January 8, 2020, https://time.com/5761448/why-iraqis-are-worried-about-an-islamic-state-resurgence-after-soleimanis-death/.

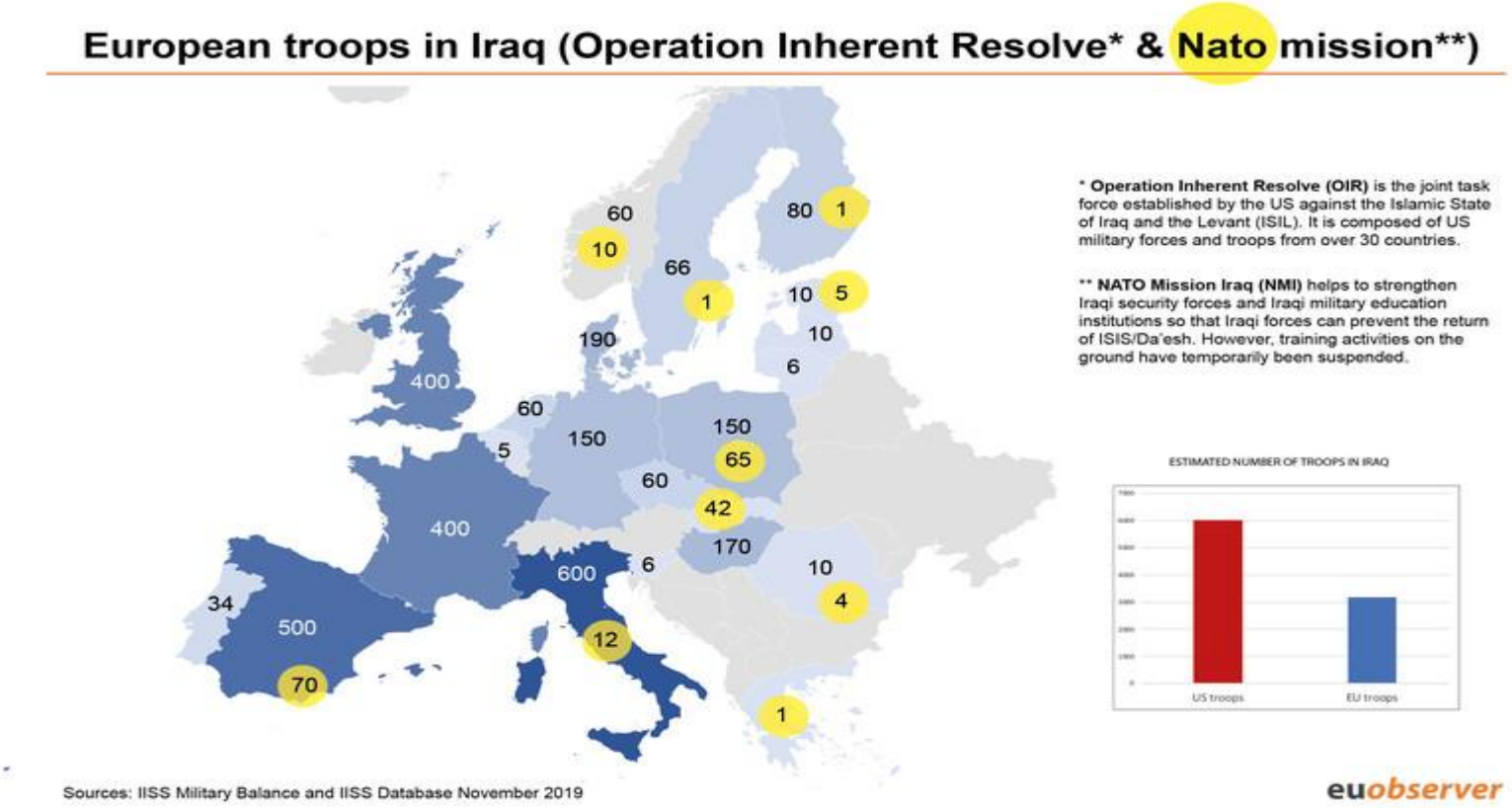
[5] Walt.

[6] Carmen-Cristina Cîrlig, "The International Coalition to Counter ISIL/Da'esh (the 'Islamic State')," Briefing (European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), March 17, 2015), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/551330/EPRS_BRI%282015%29551330_EN.pdf.

[7] "Operation Inherent Resolve-Coalition," Operation Inherent Resolve, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-CJTF-OIR/Coalition/.

[8] Peter Crowley, "Iranian Influence in Iraq May Not Be a Bad Thing," *Antiwar.Com* (blog), January 20, 2020, https://original.antiwar.com/peter_crowley/2020/01/19/iranian-influence-in-iraq-may-not-be-a-bad-thing/.

[9] Michael Gordon, "Iraq's Leader Requests More Aid in Fight Against ISIS - The New York Times," New York Times, December 3, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iraqi-leader-seeks-additional-aid-in-isis-fight.html.



The support of the international community was quintessential in IS's downfall, but the rising tensions after Soleimani's death forced Iraq to re-evaluate the level of foreign involvement in the country. This decision was made in response to the US airstrike that killed Iranian Soleimani just two days earlier. The US-led coalition conducting Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) paused their training activities and operations over security concerns from repeated attacks from Kata'ib Hezbollah and rising tensions following Soleimani's assassination.[10]

Newly elected President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen committed to creating a more "geopolitical Commission", boasting "a stronger Europe in the world"[11], yet these notions have hardly been put to actions, particularly in the case of Iraq. Her untimely response to the airstrike in Iraq came days after the event took place, leaving the EU to look disengaged from the situation on the ground, once again exposing how the EU remains a bystander in many international affairs.[12] Her statements that were eventually made reflected an inconsistency in the EU's position on foreign policy matters, particularly in Iraq. While the EU's official statement was based on passive action, the E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) reaffirmed their support to Iraq and combatting IS, through coalition action.[13]

Since Soleimani was killed, the EU has held high-level meetings, shared public statements through official EU channels as well as through the diplomatic capacity of individuals within the European Union. All of these actions have promoted lackluster solutions or ideas towards the situation in Iraq.

Significantly, after a special meeting of College of Commissioners on the situation, Vice President (HRVP) invited Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif to Brussels, and announced a special Foreign Affairs

[10] Ebony Bowden, "US Military Carries out 'Defensive Strikes' in Iraq, Syria against Kataib Hezbollah," *New York Post* (blog), December 29, 2019, https://nypost.com/2019/12/29/u-s-military-carries-out-defensive-strikes-in-iraq-syria-against-kataib-hezbollah/; "CJTF-OIR Statement on the Ongoing Defeat Daesh Mission" (January 5, 2020), https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Releases/News-Releases/Article/2050464/cjtf-oir-statement-on-the-ongoing-defeat-daesh-mission/.

[11] European Commission, "The von Der Leyen Commission," Press Release, European Commission - European Commission, September 10, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5542.

[12] David Herszenhorn, Rym Momtaz, and Jacopo Barigazzi, "As Crisis Engulfs Middle East, EU Is off the Pace," POLITICO, January 6, 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-iran-crisis-ursula-von-der-leyen-reaction/.

[13] "Germany: Trump's Iraq Sanctions Threat 'Not Helpful,'" Al Jazeera, January 6, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/germany-trump-iraq-sanctions-threat-helpful-200106075133013.html.

Council for 10 January, where EU Foreign Ministers called for immediate de-escalation, maximum restraint and the condemnation of every attack on coalition forces.[14] . These conclusions, outlined by HRVP Borrell in his address to the European Parliament, directly contradict to what individual members of the European Union are doing in Iraq. While HRVP Borrell noted their continued support for Iraq's stability and reconstruction, and praised the achievements of the global coalition's work to collectively combat IS, multiple countries from the EU made moves to withdraw their troops from Iraq.[15] Following the escalations in Iraq, NATO moved half of their military personnel out of Baghdad,[16] Germany has reaffirmed their support for the mission in Iraq, and paused their missions only temporarily, while other countries like Slovakia and Romania have fully withdrawn all of their troops out of the country.[17]

While many countries within the European Union that have sent troops to participate in the international coalition in Iraq are doing so under their own national authority, there seems to be a disconnect between the military actions of certain countries, and the diplomatic remarks of the EU as an institution. The EU is advocating for a diplomatic solution in Iraq, while also recognizing the concern for the resurgence in the Islamic State and the work of the international coalition in combatting the group. The EU continues to advocate for a diplomatic resolution in Iraq, while ignoring the significant role that the EU has militaristically. While advocating for diplomacy, the EU must also take into account how troops within the country could impact the future of EU-Iraq relations. The potential consequences of these disparities not only threaten the progress that the international coalition has made in combatting IS, but impact the role these actors have in the country, which could ultimately give rise to other international actors looking to take advantage of the precarious situation in Iraq.

There are a number of potential outcomes if Iraq decides to end foreign engagement in the country. If EU member states were to leave Iraq, the security state could decrease rapidly, resulting in multiple different issues alongside the possibility of IS gaining strength in Iraq as well as Syria. Furthermore, if the international coalition leaves Iraq, a gradual departure will be more likely to provide Iraq with the security and capacity measures than if foreign troops were to leave directly. The role that the international community has in Iraq has ultimately made the country reliant on the role of foreign aid, for this assistance to end will likely have ramifications which extend beyond a deterioration in the security of the state.

FILLING THE VOID: NEW GEOPOLITICAL ACTORS TO FIGHT THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Ursula von der Leyen Commission has committed her presidency to ensuring Europe as a geopolitical actor on the world stage, but has so far failed to adequately position the EU as a key player in Iraq. The EU, which has both a diplomatic and military role within Iraq faces great challenges as part of the international coalition. Although the EU has provided substantial financial support (1.2 billion euros)[18] since 2014, the EU is not seen as a key stakeholder in Iraq and given recent events and is at risk of losing their influence to countries such as China and Russia.[19]
Strong global actors beyond the United States and the European Union have been working to foster stronger relations with Iraq in recent years, and may see

[14] "Foreign Affairs Council, 10/01/2020," accessed January 20, 2020, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2020/01/10/.

[15] "Iran/Iraq : Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the European Parliament Plenary Debate on the Situation in Iran and Iraq Following Recent Escalations," Text, EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission, accessed January 24, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iraq/73003/iraniraq-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-european-parliament-plenary_en.

[16] Ron DePasquale, "Some NATO Troops Begin Leaving Iraq," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/world/middleeast/nato-troops-iraq.html.

[17] John Vandiver, "Germany, Other NATO Allies Move Soldiers out of Central Iraq," Stars and Stripes, January 7, 2020, https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/germany-other-nato-allies-move-soldiers-out-of-central-iraq-1.613791.

[18] "Iran/Iraq."

[19] Interviews with local experts from Iraq.

advantages from the impending US withdrawal from the country. Both Russia and China have offered assistance to Iraq in recent years, to the great delight of Iran. In late 2018, Russia offered to help train Iraqi forces and to build a comprehensive security system for the country by selling them their aerial defense system.[20] Following the airstrike that killed Soleimani, Russia again offered to sell the Iraqi government their S-400 air defense system to 'ensure the county's sovereignty and reliable protection of airspace.'[21] This proposed deal reignites the perception that Russia is attempting to increase its influence within Iraq. China has positioned itself to provide the necessary financial support that will not only boast Iraq's economy, but facilitate movement towards stronger, future cooperation between the two.[22]

The role of other geopolitical actors such as Russia and China has been culminating within the region for years, this can be seen as the case in Syria, which the Iraqi government maintained neutral towards in fear of alienating the United States, whom they have relied heavily to fight IS as well as through other military and capacities, such as intelligence and armament.

The EU must be aware of the changing geopolitical dynamics within Iraq. If the international coalition is no longer present in Iraq, the EU's relationship with Iraq will continue to devolve, likely through less direct involvement in the country. Different actors in the international community, including Russia and China recognize the disunity within Iraq, which further complicates the interactions that policy makers can take. The opportunities that exist for the EU to contribute to the long-term stability in Iraq extend beyond a military relationship, as the EU can contribute through capacity building, intelligence sharing and development projects.

[20] Ruslan Mamedov, "Russia Eyes Opportunities with New Iraqi Decision-Makers," Al-Monitor, October 24, 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/russia-iraq-cooperation-new-government.html.

[21] "Russia Offers Iraq S-400 Air Defense System to Protect Airspace," *AMN - Al-Masdar News* (blog), January 7, 2020, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russia-offers-iraq-s-400-air-defense-system-to-protect-airspace/.

[22] John Calabrese, "China-Iraq Relations: Poised for a 'Quantum Leap'?," Middle East Institute, October 8, 2019, https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-iraq-relations-poised-quantum-leap.

KEY INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

While the BIC recognizes the sovereign ability of each EU Member State, the lack of coherence between EU diplomatic actions and the military actions of individual states has resulted in an ambiguous action plan for the EU's role in Iraq. Contradictory to the Commission President von der Leyen's goal to strategically position Europe in geopolitical affairs, the response to the ongoing situation in Iraq undermines such goals.

Collectively, there have been no official decisions regarding the withdrawal of international troops from Iraq, following the decision of parliament on the 15th of January. The fragile circumstances of Iraq's ability to decisively remove foreign military presence could have ramifications beyond those in which Iraq is able to address on their own. Iraq must reason strategically with their abilities to combat the threat of IS that still exists within the country, as well as neighboring Syria. The strategic support that Iraq receives from the international community, whether monetary or militaristic in nature, the capacity building that the international coalition has supported Iraq with is jeopardized under current circumstances.

The threat that the Islamic State poses extends beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria, regardless of the statements declaring the group to be dead, this type of rhetoric is underestimating the potential threat that the group poses, further hinders Iraq's desires for stability. In the coming weeks and months, it will be vital for Iraq to continue to monitor the state of national security to identify if IS is re-emerging around the country, as well as in bordering Syria.

The aftermath of the international coalition's withdrawal from Iraq could lead to changing geopolitical dynamics within the country and the region. Increasing influence from Iran is likely to allow for actors such as Russia and China to enter into the country, both filling the security gap as well as providing financial assistance to Iraq, bolstering their economy and security sectors which were once held by aid from western actors.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

> EU Members States and EU policy makers in the European Union must create coherent policies for the EU in Iraq. Identify action plans that create viable options for the EU to support the current situation in Iraq both through diplomatic and capacity building measures.

> The EU should diplomatically encourage Iraq's parliament to form a final and comprehensive solution to the status of international troops in the country. The EU must recognize that an untimely or rapid withdraw from Iraq could have widespread and long term consequences for the peace and stability of the fragmented country.

> The EU should continue to support member states participating in both the NATO and international coalitions fighting IS to improve the security situation in Iraq by fulfilling their promises to the coalition, as well as through continued capacity building support, ultimately noting that respect for the Iraqi government's wishes and the potential for new actors to fill the void by Russia and China's growing influence within the country.

> It is essential to generate a swift and proper response from the EU regarding their role in Iraq, militaristically, diplomatically and financially. Without such clear visions of the future EU-Iraq partnership, Iraq will turn towards other international actors to fill the geopolitical gap that her Commission aimed to produce.

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The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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