



## POLICY BRIEF

# Iraq evolving: Emerging threats, challenges and opportunities

*Based on the joint CFS-SSRC seminar on October 15<sup>th</sup> 2024, Copenhagen*



### Introduction

In the period 13-18 October 2024, Centre for Stabilisation (CFS) at the Royal Danish Defence College's (RDDC) Institute for Strategy and War Studies hosted a delegation from the Strategic Studies & Research Centre (SSRC) at the Iraqi Defence University for Military Studies (DUFMS) in Copenhagen.

The programme and visit were primarily organised by CFS, supported by NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) and NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), with the SSRC engaging in the planning process of the agenda and seminar topics. The visit featured an academic course, a workshop, and a joint seminar with the objective of

strengthening SSRC's academic fundament and fostering closer cooperation between the two centres through knowledge sharing. The initiative was financed by the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund's Programme for Iraq and Syria, with support from NATO DEEP.

The main objective of the seminar was to share knowledge on key topics relevant to the security situation in Iraq. This was pursued through three sections with Iraqi and Danish speakers, and conjointly moderated by Mr. David Vestenskov, Director of CFS, and s.Col. Irfan Ali Hasan from the SSRC throughout the seminar.

## Key takeaways from the seminar

### First session: Performance of present Sudani government in Iraq

Dr. Basim Khamees Khairullah from the SSRC held the first presentation of the first session on the topic: *Implementation of the government programme of the Sudani government 2023-2024*. Dr. Khairullah presented his analysis of the Iraqi government's 2023-2024 programme, highlighting a clear vision for the future with an ambitious agenda across 23 chapters, including key infrastructure and sectoral development projects in housing, agriculture, industry, and oil. He noted the favourable economic climate, including the rise in oil prices, and the formation of expert teams to support policy-making, which he credited as pivotal to the government's successes. Despite substantial progress, estimated at 75-80% completion, he acknowledged corruption as a persistent challenge, driven by specific parties that hinder further development.

Mr. David Vestenskov held the second presentation of the first session on the topic: *Security challenges for Iraq in the Sudani government period and beyond*. Mr. Vestenskov presented his perspectives on Iraq's security system, emphasizing the need for government-led reform and balanced cooperation to promote stability. He identified internal struggles within the security sector, where rival agendas, corruption, and nepotism among elites undermine unity, and highlighted NMI's role in the most stable path forward.

The Q&A session focused on Iraq's security and economic challenges. S.MG Abbas Lafta Oudah, Dean at the SSRC, highlighted Iraq's unified security system post-Daesh, noting that PMF is well integrated within the security structure while also acknowledging complex regional factors affecting Iraq's strategic environment. Dr. Khairullah addressed the feasibility of government projects within a limited timeframe, emphasising that Iraq's strategic planning transcends electoral terms. Mr. Vestenskov raised concerns over Iraq's dependency on oil revenue amidst population growth, with Dr. Khairullah responding that efforts are underway to diversify the economy through natural gas initiatives. Additionally, the challenge of internal displacement was discussed, noting that refugee numbers remain stable due to limited reintegration options, with some efforts focused on understanding the desires of displaced individuals regarding relocation. Lastly, questions surrounding the 2024 elections were raised, to which Dr. Khairullah responded that Iraq's history of successful elections suggests readiness for a smooth power transition despite potential challenges similar to those faced by other democracies.





**Second session:  
Regional instability following the Israeli war in Gaza**

Dr. Morten Valbjørn from Aarhus University held the first presentation in the second session on the topic: *The implications of the Israeli war in Gaza*. Dr. Valbjørn argued that the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel marked the end of the post-2011 Middle Eastern order and initiated a new, complex phase. He described October 7 as a turning point, signalling a shift back to regional dynamics more similar to the pre-Arab Spring period, with Palestine returning to prominence in regional and global discourse. He noted the cautious stance of Arab regimes towards the Palestine issue, contrasting with a stronger pro-Palestinian sentiment among populations, resonating globally as a symbol of anti-colonialism. Highlighting continuity amid change, he observed that, while traditional actors like Hezbollah remain influential, newer entities such as the Houthis are also emerging. Dr. Valbjørn outlined three potential scenarios: one where regional actors prioritise national interests over collective Arab identity, a destabilising conflict that could spread across borders, and a compromise reminiscent of the 1973 conflict. He concluded that the Middle East is in a critical, transitional period, where old dynamics are resurfacing within an altered geopolitical landscape.

Dr. Maytham Anedi Ali Al-Ibadi held the second presentation in the second session on the topic: *Precautionary measures to reconstruct internal policy and its positive effects*. Dr. Al-Ibadi highlighted the need for objectivity in assessing the Israeli war in Gaza's domestic, regional, and global impacts. He distinguished between repercussions, as inevitable effects of external conflicts, and implications that can be managed through proactive policy. Questioning if the war is an ultimate goal or a strategic step, Dr. Al-Ibadi discussed its potential to reshape societal

values, particularly in Iraq, and emphasised geo-economic concerns such as oil exports and trade control. Concluding, he underscored Iraq's need to balance crisis response with preserving core values in an evolving geopolitical context.



In the Q&A session, Dr. Abbood asked Dr. Valbjørn about the influence of Arab Cold War parallels and whether normalisation efforts affect current dynamics. Dr. Valbjørn responded that, despite recent shifts, the Abraham Accords — the agreements normalising relations between Israel and several Arab nations, promoting peace and cooperation — remain, with speculation about Saudi Arabia's participation in normalisation. He noted that while Palestine was previously sidelined, recent events have revived international discussion on a two-state solution. s.Col. Hasan raised concerns about potential double standards in Western responses to Ukraine and Gaza, noting strong EU actions toward Russia, but a completely different approach to Israel. Dr. Valbjørn somewhat agreed, highlighting limitations in the liberal paradigm of international law. Mr. Vestenskov asked Dr. Al-Ibadi about the conflict's effects on Iraq. Dr. Al-Ibadi emphasised Israel's geopolitical objectives, suggesting that the conflict's resolution must be regional-driven, with Hamas' actions viewed as reactions to prior events. Finally, Dr. Valbjørn responded that a “grand bargain” might be ideal but is unlikely, noting that Palestine was largely forgotten by the international community as well as the regional countries until October 7 2023.

### **Third session: Closing of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR)**

s.Col. Mohsin Fadil Mohsin Zirjawi was the first presenter in the third session on the topic: *The future of Iraq with the United States less present*. In his presentation, s.Col. Zirjawi presented a detailed analysis of U.S.-Iraqi relations, tracing their history back to the early 20th century. He argued that the 1991 Gulf War marked a pivotal shift, and that the U.S. presence has changed a lot since 2007 where 78,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Iraq. Today, the U.S. focuses on advising Iraq and sharing intelligence, with cooperation built on joint dialogue and economic ties. He noted public concerns that this erodes Iraqi sovereignty, but stressed that U.S. presence at Iraq's invitation, primarily targets Daesh. s.Col. Zirjawi also highlighted Iraq's internal stability and its desire to reclaim influence in the regional arena.

Dr. Maria-Louise Clausen held the second presentation in the third session on the topic: *NATO's changing role in Iraq*. In her presentation, Dr. Clausen discussed the importance of understanding the researcher's position, whether being an insider or outsider in relation to the research area. As an outsider herself, she reflected on NATO's evolving role in Iraq, contrasting the classical training mission from 2004-2011 with the current NATO Mission Iraq's (NMI) strategic advisory focus. She highlighted the importance of tailored advice and continuous dialogue, while noting the public's limited understanding of NATO's role, often viewed as a cover for U.S. presence. She also stressed NATO's shift toward addressing threats from Russia and China, while maintaining attention on counterterrorism and transnational challenges in the Middle East.



During the Q&A session, several important topics were discussed. s.MG Al-Janabi raised discussions about Iraq's partnership status with NATO. It was clarified that while Iraq is not officially part of NMI, there are different levels of partnerships with NATO. Regarding the future of the NMI and the winding down of the OIR mission, Dr. Clausen highlighted potential challenges, particularly the political and security vulnerabilities of the NMI. She emphasised that any casualty could potentially jeopardise the entire mission's future, making it quite fragile. However, she also noted that the reduction of the OIR mission could create opportunities for NMI's evolution, with Europe taking on a more prominent role while the U.S. redefines its involvement. Mr. Vestenskov raised the concern of the closing of OIR's effect on NMI's ability to conduct its mission. Here, s.Col. Zirjawi answered that challenges were more obvious in 2011, and that Iraq now has a government program that is able to manage the situation, with positive signs on Iraq's ability to reintegrate into the national community as a stable state. s.Col. Zirjawi expects a bright future for Iraq.

## KEY FINDINGS

### First Session: Performance of present Sudani government in Iraq

- **Government Programme:** Iraq's 2023-2024 plan covers 23 sectors, with an estimated 75-80% completion, though corruption continues to pose significant challenges.
- **Economic Conditions:** Higher oil prices and the involvement of expert teams have supported economic decision-making, but the long-term sustainability remains uncertain.
- **Security Sector Issues:** Internal rivalries, corruption, and nepotism weaken Iraq's security sector, with decentralisation seen as a potential, though uncertain, path to stability.
- **Economic Diversification:** Iraq is working to reduce its reliance on oil, focusing on natural gas, but these efforts are still in development.
- **Displacement Concerns:** Refugee reintegration options remain limited, with ongoing efforts to address internal displacement challenges.

### Second Session: Regional instability following the Israeli war in Gaza

- **Shifting Regional Dynamics:** The October 7 attack marked a return to pre-Arab Spring dynamics, with Palestine regaining prominence in regional and global discussions.
- **Diverging Arab Responses:** Arab regimes remain cautious on Palestine, while public sentiment shows strong pro-Palestinian support, resonating as an anti-colonial symbol globally.
- **Conflict Scenarios:** Three possible outcomes include prioritising national interests, regional conflict escalation, or a compromise like the 1973 conflict, signaling a critical transitional period for the Middle East.
- **Impact Management:** The Israeli war in Gaza could reshape societal values and geopolitical concerns, such as oil and trade, requiring Iraq to balance crisis response with preserving its core values.
- **International Double Standards:** There are concerns over differing Western responses to Gaza and Ukraine, highlighting limitations in the liberal international law framework.

### Third Session: Closing of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR)

- **Evolving U.S.-Iraq Relations:** The U.S. presence in Iraq has shifted from a large military force to an advisory role focused on intelligence sharing and countering Daesh, amid concerns over Iraqi sovereignty.
- **NATO's Strategic Shift:** NATO's role in Iraq has evolved from a traditional training mission to a strategic advisory focus, with an increasing emphasis on threats from Russia and China while continuing counterterrorism efforts.
- **Concerns Over NATO's Role:** There is a perception among the Iraqi public that NATO's involvement serves primarily as a cover for U.S. presence, highlighting the need for better communication about NATO's objectives.
- **Future of NMI and OIR:** The winding down of the OIR mission may present challenges for NMI due to political and security vulnerabilities, but it could also open opportunities for Europe to assume a more prominent role in Iraq's future.