

Civil Society Dialogue Network Geographic Meeting

An EU Strategy for engagement with Iraq: Gathering input from INGOs

Tuesday 3 October 2017, Brussels

MEETING REPORT

Background

The overall objective of this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Geographic Meeting was to gather analysis and recommendations from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) on the development of an EU Strategy for Iraq.

The meeting brought together approximately 30 participants, including INGO representatives and officials from the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

This report is a summary of the comments and recommendations made by individual participants during the meeting, which did not aim for consensus. The views expressed may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation nor do they necessarily represent the views of all of the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the co-organisers (the EC and the EEAS).

Governance, human rights and reconciliation

The EU should:

- **engage more systematically with Iraqi civil society organisations (CSOs) across Iraq;**
This should happen early on in any policy, programming or implementation process. The EU's collaboration with CSOs would not only allow the EU to receive valuable input, but it would also show Iraqi authorities how fruitful such collaboration can be. Options for increasing engagement include:
 - having some aspects of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission monitored by CSOs;
 - pushing for the Coalition Working Group on Stabilisation (SWG) to hold at least one hearing to understand how CSOs perceive stabilisation.
- **increase and further tailor its support to the needs of CSOs in Iraq;**
Several participants pointed out that Iraqi civil society actors are also in conflict and scattered geographically, and need ways to interact with each other and to build their capacity to undertake advocacy. Options to support them include:
 - supporting the creation of civil society platforms to enable them to exchange, meet and engage in networking;
 - providing more technical support and training to Iraqi citizens and Iraqi CSOs.
- **foster relations between local communities and those political actors willing to engage constructively and in an inclusive manner,** for example by:

- investing in and supporting citizen platforms to develop advocacy strategies towards the authorities;

Several participants argued that the EU should help to create space for civil society actors to be active and to promote their ideas on reconciliation and peacebuilding. CSOs do not always have access to decision-making platforms, and the EU has the ability to help to make their voices heard when policies are being developed. In Iraq, the state has lost some/a lot/all of its legitimacy in some regions. In a context where national authorities are sometimes not able to meet local populations, platforms of citizens can be a helpful intermediary and an effective tool to respond to crises. This can help to fill the gap and rebuild trust between communities and local and national authorities.

- promoting and supporting inclusive decision-making processes which integrate the voice of marginalised groups, including women and youth, at all levels;

The EU should not impose strategies, but it should help to create spaces and platforms for Iraqi citizens to meet, build their own strategies and present them to the government. One participant stated that one of the best ways to build peace and prevent violence is for the government to deliver adequate basic services in all areas and treat all groups and individuals fairly. They added that the EU should help Iraqi citizens to advocate for their most important needs and priorities.

- **support the creation of spaces for inter and intra-communal dialogue** where people can meet, both within their own groups and with people from other groups, in order to create a sense of community and nationality and to encourage people to invest in a shared future. In doing so, the EU should aim to:

- support citizen initiatives aimed at creating a sense of investment in their own future and a sense of being able to have a meaningful impact on society;

Some participants stated that the existence of a national identity was a crucial issue in reconciliation, but that the EU should not push for a national identity to be imposed on people by glossing over differences. They added that reconciliation forums should both highlight the ways in which people are similar and celebrate differences – while showing that the latter do not prevent people from working and building together.

- support initiatives fostering intra-communal dialogue as a conflict management tool;

Some participants stated that the EU could help to create space for people to speak up within their own communities. They reported that it had been challenging for women in some communities to speak up on their suffering, and that many people had been focused on trying to survive for so long that they were not always ready to communicate and coordinate within their own groups, let alone with other groups.

- engage with religious and tribal leaders as a means of avoiding sectarian violence;

One participant agreed with bringing religious leaders on board and argued that leaders from all faiths should be part of the process, and that minorities should be protected. Another participant warned that the EU should ensure that it did not put too much emphasis on the engagement of religious leaders in order to avoid giving further legitimacy to sectarian divisions, and in order to also be able to reach those among the youth that are critical of religious leaders.

- **pay special attention to the protection of human rights defenders** by:
 - appointing a focal point in the EU Delegation (EUD) in Baghdad for human rights defenders (HRDs), in order to put in place preventive measures for their protection;

- making public statements to defend the right of Iraqis to use their freedom of expression, including if they are expressing themselves on issues that are considered by some to be 'political'.
- **push to mainstream reconciliation in relief efforts in Iraq**, for example by supporting local relief organisations/service providers to build strategies on how to respond to complex conflict situations. One participant said that humanitarian organisations, including those addressing the needs of internally displaced people (IDPs), sometimes have to interact with authorities which are not seen as legitimate by local populations (e.g. some of the authorities that filled vacuums resulting from the departure of Daesh) and which can use relief as a tool to legitimise their presence on the ground. While some participants argued that humanitarian organisations should build their capacity to navigate conflict dynamics and contribute to reconciliation, others insisted that humanitarian action should be solely driven by needs.
- **play a stronger mediator role and support confidence-building measures in bridging differences between Baghdad and Erbil authorities**, for example by:
 - promoting and incentivising process-oriented solutions (e.g. joint management of infrastructures, borders, services, etc.). One participant said that civil society attempts to foster collaboration between Iraqis in Kurdistan and Iraqis from other parts of Iraq should inform and inspire EU mediation and confidence-building efforts.
 - supporting the safe return of Iraqi Kurdish parliamentarians to the Council of Representatives of Iraq in Baghdad. One participant argued that some Iraqi Kurdish parliamentarians would like to go back to attending parliament sessions in Baghdad, but that not everyone there is ready to welcome them. They added that EU and international pressure could be useful in achieving progress on this front.
- **provide an electoral observation mission to monitor the next general election in Iraqi Kurdistan** in coordination with other international actors.

Stabilisation and reconstruction

Several participants argued that stabilisation should not be synonymous with returning to the pre-crisis status quo. They recommended that the EU Strategy for Iraq should:

- **ensure that stabilisation and reconciliation efforts take the form of a political strategy** to build a new and inclusive vision for Iraq and rebuild trust between authorities and Iraqi citizens. The EU should be ambitious about addressing the root causes of conflict in order to break the cycle of violence, and develop a clear political strategy to help to prevent the emergence of future conflicts.
- **set out clear priorities and avoid making the new EU strategy too broad**: attempting to cover everything could result in the strategy meaning nothing.
- **systematically adopt a 'do no harm' approach** as part of any EU action in Iraq, for example by engaging in participatory conflict analysis in order to understand the potential negative ramifications of EU action.
- **adopt a long-term approach when engaging in peacebuilding**: In order to ensure that EU funding is not wasted, attention needs to be paid to how actions are followed up, and to whether or not monitoring and evaluation (M&E) measures take into account their impact on conflict dynamics. Focusing solely on the short-term can often lead to wasteful and harmful duplication and other negative results.

Stabilisation and displacement

Some participants stated that the EU Strategy for Iraq should be underpinned by a strong analysis of displacement patterns, of the needs of IDPs, of how those needs could be addressed by various stakeholders, and of how the issue of displacement is linked to reconciliation. They stated that the EU should:

- **use its expertise to accompany the Iraqi government in helping IDPs and in building a national return strategy;**
Some participants argued that addressing displacement and returns is a highly political process and population movements are often manipulated for sectarian political purposes. It is important to keep in mind that not all IDPs and refugees will be able to return. The EU therefore needs to have a broad range of possible, durable solutions for IDPs – not only returns.
- **continue to provide support to the Iraqi population beyond 2018;**
Some participants argued that the EU should not be too optimistic despite the progress against Daesh, and that its Strategy for Iraq should reflect the great political, economic and social challenges which remain in the country. Some participants mentioned in particular the long-term trauma and needs of the populations in the areas which were formerly controlled by Daesh. They also recommended the provision of specific support for children born in those areas and increased support for psychological and social actions and programmes.
- **increase support to youth organisations and initiatives;**
Some participants argued that working with young people to promote intra- and inter-community exchanges and dialogue is effective. They also provided examples of young people launching activities to create links between IDPs, refugees and their host communities.

Stabilisation and reconstruction

The EU should:

- **ensure that the reconstruction process reduces inequality**, for example through targeted investments, and by pressuring Iraqi authorities to include rural and economically marginalized communities in their reconstruction plans;
One participant said that these parts of Iraq need to be ‘built back better’ through improved infrastructure and services. Another participant stated that equitable access to good livelihoods is key and could help to improve community dialogue. The EU should support widely-recognised good practices such as cash-based assistance, supporting business enterprise training and cash for start-up businesses.
- **prioritise the rebuilding of physical spaces for women, as well as women-focused services and livelihoods, and judge all reconstruction proposals on their potential contribution to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women;**
The EU should also urge the Iraqi government to consult local women’s organizations on a regular basis throughout the reconstruction process.
- **ensure that the reconstruction process pays particular attention to the dispossessed and marginalised**, and include language in its Strategy for Iraq on supporting people’s housing and property rights;
Many Iraqis will need help working through their property claims and acquiring the necessary civil documents. Iraqi authorities and the EU should support this process and ensure that it is not abused through unlawful expropriations or evictions. The claims of civilians with family ties to Daesh combatants must also be reviewed fairly with zero tolerance for collective punishment. The EU should also ensure that Iraqi authorities have a clear and safe way to receive

complaints from people who may be harmed by reconstruction efforts, and ensure that Iraqi authorities have the capacity to pursue such complaints. The EU should look at how to help people to prove ownership of buildings and properties, and should push to make more funding available to compensate those who have lost homes. It should also push the Iraqi government to abide by the relevant legal frameworks on compensation.

- **ensure that the reconstruction process has a coordination structure which is open to and inclusive of civil society;**

After years of work in conflict-affected areas, international and local NGOs have an enormous amount of expertise and experience to offer but there is a need for a mechanism which includes them at an early stage in the broader recovery process. The recent establishment of the Iraqi NGO Early Recovery Forum shows civil society's readiness to engage; the EU should encourage Iraqi authorities and the United Nations (UN) to reciprocate.

- **ensure the reconstruction process rebuilds communities, not just buildings, and avoid prioritising geographic areas in the long term.** Iraqi CSOs are starting to lead reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in their communities but they need more (and more sustainable) support. One participant argued that the EU Strategy for Iraq should not limit itself by focusing too much on specific areas, as circumstances and needs can change. One option could be to define criteria for determining how to select priority areas and review them regularly rather than to make an initial list, which may quickly become out-dated. It is also always vital to hear local voices when assessing needs. The EU and other donors should channel a significant percentage of reconstruction funds directly to local CSOs in Daesh-affected areas which can deliver real progress on key priorities such as peacebuilding and poverty reduction whilst also holding local and national authorities accountable. At the same time, several participants argued that the EU should not overly focus on those areas which had been occupied by Daesh to the detriment of areas from which its fighters originated. The communities which live in the latter areas are sometimes concerned about the fighters returning, and their needs, as well as the reintegration of fighters, should be addressed.

Coordination with donors, CSOs and the private sector

The EU should:

- **invest and engage with the Iraqi private sector, for both early recovery and long-term peacebuilding** as the financial inclusion of people and communities is critical to stabilisation; Some participants argued that EU support should go to private sector actors that are interested in contributing to long-term, sustainable reconstruction, and that the EU should conduct regular assessments and monitoring exercises, including to identify where opportunities for local growth lie. Some participants stated that while private sector engagement can yield positive results in stabilisation and reconstruction processes, the EU should be aware of the risks associated with it. The private sector's impact on local markets and local employment opportunities needs to be studied thoroughly. Particular attention should be paid to the degree of inclusiveness of private sector practices, as sustainability depends on engaging the various segments of communities, including women.
- **ensure transparency regarding the coordination between international donors and their development of strategies;** CSOs should be involved at all stages of the stabilisation and reconstruction processes, including in the design and planning phases, rather than just in the implementation of programmes.

- **develop guidelines for relief providers on how to work in the disputed territories**, as confusion about existing conflicting mechanisms makes the work of NGOs more difficult.

Education

The EU should:

- **push the Iraqi government to do more to ensure that children, in particular IDPs, have equal access to schools and quality education;**
Several participants argued that the EU should in particular develop and implement a policy on early childhood, and support teachers financially as well as through training. Since children can face very different impeding circumstances, it is important to tailor the responses and ways of teaching to the specific needs of the targeted groups. In addition, rural and urban areas should get access to the same quality of education. Access to education is also particularly important to prevent radicalization and to strengthen employment prospects.
- **support reforms that help schools provide children with positive experiences of citizenship and participation;**
One participant explained that schools are in many ways the first environment in which children and young people experience being part of a citizenry. Schools can help them develop positive understandings of citizenship, and should provide them with opportunities to participate to some degree in school governance.
- **encourage the development of specialised support services**, including non-formal education pathways for children who have dropped out of the education system;
Some participants argued that the capacity of the Ministry of Education should be strengthened, not only to deliver a curriculum but also to understand the specific psycho-social needs of various groups.
- **support efforts to assess the needs of children systemically** in order to identify best practices and to improve and tailor service delivery.
- **push for the integration of a human rights perspective, for tolerance of all faiths and the absence of faith, for the development of critical thinking, and for peace education in the curricula;**
Some participants argued in favour of curricula reform in order to make education a better tool for positive citizenship. This goes beyond schools themselves and includes the education of government officials on human rights. The EU should also support projects which train people to think strategically about their interests and their needs, without imposing a vision of what they should think.
- **help to rehabilitate some school buildings into multidimensional service centres for children and youth**, for example social services, cultural spaces, health centres, job centres etc.
- **fund programmes which provide small grants to families to give their children access to secondary or tertiary education;**
- **use its influence on conflict parties so that they avoid using schools for military purposes and help to ensure that schools are safe;**
One participant said that it would be useful to provide guidelines to students in the event that military actors occupy their school. Iraqi authorities should also ensure that schools are safe environments, without contamination risks, unexploded devices, etc.

- **provide support to technical and vocational training and help to strengthen the ability of education structures to link up with the private sector** in order to ensure that graduates have access to job opportunities.

Security and justice sector reform (SJSR), disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and transitional justice

One participant argued that the EU should **make support to DDR a priority**, in particular in helping certain groups to disarm.

Transitional justice

The EU should:

- **go beyond matters of prosecution and compensation in its approach to transitional justice.** From a peacebuilding perspective, it is also important **to document human rights violations, to support storytelling projects, to work with people to enable them to express their suffering**, and to exchange stories of suffering between communities to help defuse tensions.
- **pay attention to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2379 on holding Daesh accountable for its actions in Iraq;**

One participant argued that it is problematic that UNSCR 2379 is only focused on Daesh. The fact that all of the procedures will be under the control of the Iraqi government should also invite caution, as years of unfair processes remain unaddressed in the country.

SJSR

The EU should:

- **support approaches which lead to a rapprochement between security forces and citizens rather than simply increasing the capacities of security forces;**
Several participants pointed out that the trust issues between local populations and security forces should be addressed (e.g. through better training, engagement with citizens, exchanges with CSOs, learning from programmes of community policing, etc.). Iraq's security forces should also reflect the diversity of the country's populations. On this last point, one participant stated that although security forces should be representative of local populations, this should be done carefully in the case of the armed forces, to avoid making the military institutions dysfunctional;
- **conduct deeper analysis to understand the complexity of security issues and power relations between and within communities;**
Contexts vary and solutions should be adapted accordingly. In some cases, lessons learned from elsewhere can yield valuable insights (in particular regarding what has not worked) but it is often difficult to transpose models from one country or region to another. What matters most is involving local actors in the process in order to understand the specific needs of local contexts.
- **engage with the Iraqi authorities to find alternatives to the detention system for minors,** for example systems of restorative justice;
More broadly, human rights violations are systemic in the prison system, and the EU should push the Iraqi authorities to improve conditions for prisoners.
- **push against some perceptions in Iraq that the death penalty is and should be used as a political tool;**
- **make the provision by the EU of any military training or aid conditional on human rights commitments from the Iraqi authorities;**

One participant suggested that the EU could push for a long-term plan to reform the armed forces to ensure their respect for human rights.

- **(continue to) support and build the capacities of civil society actors to monitor human rights violations committed by security forces and to engage with them;**

One participant recommended that the EU should contribute to building a space for mid-level actors which would bridge the gap between local populations on the one hand, and authorities and security forces on the other hand. It is important that Iraqis own these processes and put their own insights forward, but INGOs could help to transmit local voices to authorities and security forces.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The third phase of the CSDN will last from 2017 to 2020. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).