

US Withdrawal from Iraq and Conditions that Enabled ISIS' Spread: 2011 and 2021 Comparison

Author: LTC Octavian Dorobantu, ROU Army, CSAG CCJ5

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Key Points

- Recent ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria have demonstrated both a capacity and a willingness to retake territory, populations, and resources.
- In the wake of COVID-19 and the reduction of US forces, security gaps have grown, the prison system has weakened, there has been an uptick in sophisticated attacks, and an increased presence of foreign fighters.
- In 2010, the Obama administration made two strategic mistakes that reversed progress and sent Iraq spiraling back down the path of sectarian violence.
- There are a number of supply-and-demand factors contributing to the resurgence of the Islamic State: popularity of the group's ideology; turmoil in the region; the incoherent and inconsistent policies enacted to counter ISIS; and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The US-led coalition has destroyed the Islamic State's physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but the organization is not defeated.
- The US government must pursue a foreign policy that redirects focus away from a singularly counter-Iran mission and embraces and invests in a diplomacy-first approach.
- USCENTCOM must reinvigorate coalition partners to invest and train in the region and surge efforts to support Iraqi and Syrian partners.

Introduction – Background Information

In early 2019, the ISIS caliphate was declared “defeated”¹ after losing the Battle of Baghuz Fawqani. However, in 2020, a significant growth in IS attacks has been witnessed in their traditional heartlands of Syria and Iraq, as well as an increasing presence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region,² and across large parts of the African continent.²

¹ Bethan McKernan, “ISIS defeated, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announce,” The Guardian, Mar 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/23/isis-defeated-us-backed-syrian-democratic-forces-announce> (accessed Apr 24, 2021).

² Arian Sharifi, “Could the Islamic State – Khorasan province be the next chapter of the global terrorism?,” The Diplomat, Sep 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/could-the-islamic-state-khorasan-province-be-the-next-chapter-of-global-terrorism/> (accessed Apr 24, 2021).

² Danielle Paquette, Souad Mekhennet, and Joby Warrick, “ISIS attacks surge in Africa even as Trump boasts of a 100 percent defeated caliphate,” The Washington Post, Oct 18, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/islamic-state-attacks-surginafrica/2020/10/18/2e16140e-1079-11eb-8a35-237ef1eb2ef7_story.html (accessed Apr 24, 2021).

Despite the loss of territory, the ideology of ISIS was not defeated. There are indications that ISIS is re-establishing itself in the Middle East.

A Timeline of the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State

The Islamic State – also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh – emerged from the remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of al Qaeda founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004. It faded into obscurity for several years after the surge of US troops to Iraq in 2007, but it began to reemerge in 2011. Over the next few years, it took advantage of growing instability in Iraq and Syria to carry out attacks and bolster its ranks.

The group changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013.³ ISIS launched an offensive on Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014, followed by the ISIS leader -Abu Bakr al Baghdadi- announcing the formation of a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq, and renaming the group the “Islamic State”.⁴

A US-led coalition began airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq in August 2014 and expanded the campaign to Syria the following month. Over the next year, the American led “Operation Inherent Resolve” conducted more than 8,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.⁵ ISIS suffered key losses along Syria’s border with Turkey and by the end of 2015, Iraqi forces had made progress in recapturing Ramadi. But in Syria, ISIS made gains near Aleppo and still firmly held Raqqa and other strongholds.

In 2015, ISIS expanded into a network of affiliates in at least eight other countries.⁶ Its branches, supporters, and affiliates increasingly carried out attacks beyond the borders of its so-called caliphate. In October, ISIS’s Egypt affiliate bombed a Russian airplane killing 224 people.⁷ On November 13th, 130 people were killed and more than 300 injured in a series of coordinated attacks in Paris.⁸ In addition, in June 2016, a gunman who pledged support to ISIS killed at least four dozen people at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida.⁹ But by December 2017, the ISIS caliphate had lost 95% of its territory, including its two biggest strongholds, Mosul, and the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. The Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi declared victory over the Islamic State in Iraq on December 9, 2017.¹¹

In 2018, the focus of the campaign against ISIS shifted to eastern Syria, where a US-backed coalition of Syrian Kurds and Arabs known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) gradually captured key ISIS positions. The SDF briefly

³ BBC news, “Islamic State and the crises in Iraq and Syria in maps,” Mar 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east27838034> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

⁴ BBC News, “ISIS leader calls on Muslims to ‘build Islamic state,’” Jul 01, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28116846> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Liam Stack, “How ISIS expanded its threat,” New York Times, Nov 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/14/world/middleeast/isis-expansion.html> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

⁷ Barbara Starr and Catherine Shoichet, “Russian plane crash: US intel suggests ISIS bomb brought down jet,” CNN, Nov 04, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/04/africa/russian-plane-crash-egypt-sinai/index.html> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ralph Ellis, Ashley Fantz, Faith Karimi and Elliot McLaughlin, “Orlando shooting: 49 killed, shooter pledged ISIS allegiance,” CNN, Jun 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/index.html> (accessed Apr 25, 2021). ¹¹ Maher Chmaytelli and Ahmed Aboulenein, “Iraq declares final victory over Islamic State,” Reuters, Dec 09, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate-idUSKBN1E30B9> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

suspended its offensive in November 2018 after Turkish attacks on Kurdish positions diverted its attention. On December 14th, the SDF captured the town of Hajin.¹⁰ Hajin's fall reduced ISIS territory to a few villages along the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border.¹¹

On December 19, 2018, President Donald Trump declared that ISIS was defeated and signaled his intention to withdraw all 2,000 U.S. troops supporting the SDF in Syria. But the SDF continued its offensive and in February 2019, launched the final siege on ISIS forces in Baghouz, the last holdout. The March 23, 2019 capture of Baghouz formally ended the caliphate's occupation of territory. The mass surrender of ISIS fighters and their families presented a challenge: how to prevent jihadist organizations from transforming into insurgencies in Iraq and Syria. The Baghdadi era of ISIS ended on October 26, 2019, when the leader was killed in a US raid in northern Syria. The raid temporarily decapitated the group's leadership, but it did not end its functional or ideological existence.¹²

As of early 2021, ISIS no longer holds physical territory in Iraq,¹³ but ISIS cells of fighters continue to operate within Iraqi communities, organizing and conducting more limited capability attacks.¹⁴ As ISIS is able to organize deadly attacks, abandoning the counter-ISIS fight provides ISIS with the opportunity to reconstitute and pursue its objectives through the ways and means such as the murder of US citizens, terror attacks, and propaganda.¹⁵ The current ISIS leadership goals are:

- US to withdraw from the Middle East;
- the destruction of US regional partner governments; and
- to create a Middle East caliphate.¹⁶

ISIS's murderous record attests that the ISIS threat is perennial and that underestimating the likelihood of a resurgence would be dangerous.¹⁷

The Prelude...

In 2006, AQI had lost its charismatic leader and chief strategist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Over the next few years, the organization lost its base of support as Iraq's Sunni tribes turned against it and began fighting beside US and Iraqi troops to expel the terrorists from their communities. By 2010, Iraq had emerged from its civil war and AQI

¹⁰ Martin Chulov, "ISIS withdraws from last urban stronghold in Syria," *The Guardian*, Dec 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/14/kurdish-led-fighters-take-last-isis-town-in-syria-activists-say> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Peter Baker, Eric Schmitt, and Helene Cooper, "ISIS Leader al-Baghdadi Is Dead, Trump Says," *New York Times*, Oct 27, 2019 (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

¹³ BBC, "Trump hails fall of Islamic State Caliphate in Syria," Mar 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47682160> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

¹⁴ Katherine Bauer, Matthew Levitt, and Aaron Y. Zelin, "After Baghdadi: How the Islamic State Rebounds," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Oct 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-baghdadi-how-islamic-state-rebounds> (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ben Connable, James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Raphael S. Cohen, Becca Wasser, "Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Strategic Risks and Recommendations," RAND, www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE362/RAND (accessed Apr 25, 2021).

¹⁷ Ibid.

had become irrelevant.¹⁸ The US in Iraq was on the verge of achieving a lasting victory after a costly seven-year occupation and the deaths of nearly 4,500 US troops. Unfortunately, President Barack Obama made strategic mistakes that reversed that progress and sent Iraq spiraling back down the path of sectarian violence.

The Obama administration helped broker a power sharing deal that essentially reinstated Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister after his electoral defeat by a predominantly Sunni political coalition in Iraq's 2010 parliamentary elections. This undermined the fragile foundation of Iraqi democracy and disenfranchised the Sunni minority, whose cooperation during the Sunni Awakening had been so critical to ending Iraq's cycle of violence.

What happened?

In 2008, Maliki had emerged from the Shia civil war as "undisputedly the most powerful Shia political leader" in Iraq.¹⁹ Some of Maliki's opponents formed Iraqiya, a nationalist, non-sectarian coalition, with the goal of unseating him in the 2010 elections. The Iraqiya coalition was significant because it was led by a moderate Shia named Ayad Allawi that had the support of many of Iraq's Sunni tribal leaders (the same group that boycotted the 2005 elections).²⁰ The inclusion of Sunnis in the 2010 political process was critical to ensuring the government's legitimacy and avoiding further sectarian conflict.²¹ Iraqiya won the most seats in the parliament and had the first chance to form a government and nominate a prime minister.²² Instead, Maliki employed a series of political maneuvers meant to delay, undermine, and contest the election results. His tactics included allegations of election fraud, demands for recounts, disqualification of Iraqiya candidates under the guise of de-Baathification, and obtaining a reinterpretation of the constitution from Iraq's Supreme Court allowing him the first chance to form a government.²³ The Obama administration's decision to support Maliki, despite his legally dubious methods of contesting the election results, undermined Iraq's democratic process.

The Obama administration needed a functioning Iraqi government in place to facilitate the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011. In the interest of political opportunity, the administration forced Iraqiya into accepting a power sharing arrangement that was not representative of the will of the Iraqi electorate. Despite his bloc losing the election, Maliki ended up more powerful than ever, having obtained the US' tacit support thereby undermining Iraq's democratic processes. This result helped fuel renewed sectarian grievances, which were held in check by the continuing presence of US troops.

The administration mishandled the withdrawal of US forces in 2011, leaving the Sunnis vulnerable and the Iraqi security forces (ISF) unprepared to take responsibility for the country's security. Many Sunni leaders in that time said once the US soldiers left, the minority Sunni population of Iraq suffered under a government dominated by the Shiite majority. That government stopped paying most of them and even arrested many. Obama continued to support the government even as Sunni fear and anger grew. He stated in 2013, "We were encouraged by the work

¹⁸ Abdulrazaq, Tallah, and Gareth Stansfield, "The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul." *The Middle East Journal* 70 no. 4, 2016, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/634688> (accessed Apr 26, 2021).

¹⁹ Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), 42.

²⁰ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 313.

²¹ Leila Fadel, "Iraqi Officials Put Voter Turnout at 62 Percent," *Washington Post*, Mar 9, 2010, www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/03/08/AR2010030801766.html (accessed Apr 27, 2021).

²² Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), 47.

²³ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 313.

that Prime Minister Maliki has done in the past to ensure that all people inside of Iraq — Sunni, Shia and Kurd — feel that they have a voice in their government.”²⁴

As a consequence of the US withdrawal, the Iraqi army’s capabilities deteriorated dramatically. "They really did become relatively complacent, and then flat out just didn't train," said Major General Paul E. Funk II, speaking after abruptly returning to Iraq on a training mission in 2014. "[They] just didn't spend the money to do it, didn't maintain the systems and therein lies the problem."²⁷ Corruption was running rampant. Supplies were stolen; soldiers were for not reporting to duty. Almost simultaneously, a civil war broke out in Syria. The remnants of AQI (under a new name ISIS) exploited the conflict to renew their jihad and rebuild their combat power.

Iraq’s Sunni minority—alienated and abandoned—began fighting back against oppression by the Maliki government. In 2014, the Sunnis welcomed ISIS back into Anbar province and helped them seize nearly a third of Iraq’s territory, establishing the physical caliphate ISIS had always dreamed of building.

Triggering ISIS Resurgence in the Middle East

A report from the Middle East Institute²⁵ claimed that Islamic State are “demonstrating both a capacity and a willingness [...] to retake territory, populations, and resources” in both Syria and Iraq. Moreover, according to Iraqi military officials, attacks are becoming more complex and sophisticated.²⁶ As well as the resurgence in attacks, the group has increased their online recruitment²⁷ and retained large reserves of funds.²⁸ There are a number of supply-and-demand factors contributing to the resurgence of Islamic State:

- the popularity of the group’s ideology;
- the turmoil of the regions in which it operates;
- the incoherent and inconsistent policies enacted to counter it; and
- the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Popularity of ISIS Ideology

While ISIS’s territorial losses in 2019 looked promising, they operate on a different timescale than much of the rest of the world. With “success measured in decades,”³² loss of land is seen as ‘temporary’ in the wider jihad and small gains will be seen as great victories. In the short-term, tangible assets matter less than the spread of the jihadist ideology. To be clear, for the rank-and-file of ISIS, the ideology is not necessarily religious in nature. ISIS

²⁴ Alice Fordham, “Did Obama withdraw from Iraq too soon, allowing ISIS to grow,” NPR, 19 Dec 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/459850716/fact-check-did-obama-withdraw-from-iraq-too-soon-allowing-isis-to-grow> (accessed May 05, 2021). ²⁷ Ibid.

²⁵ Elisabeth Dent, “US policy and the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria,” Middle East Institute, Oct 21, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-policy-and-resurgence-isis-iraq-and-syria> (accessed May 07, 2021).

²⁶ Qassim Abdul Zahra, Bassem Mroue and Samya Kullab, “IS extremists step up as Iraq, Syria, grapple with virus,” AP News, May 03, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/22cf69f5f7ab4a3268fd224107fadc61> (accessed May 07, 2021).

²⁷ Clare Meyer, “Terrorists ramping up recruitment and propaganda efforts,” ASIS International, Nov 04, 2020, <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/today-in-security/2020/november/terrorists-ramp-up-recruitment-propaganda-efforts/> (accessed May 10, 2021).

²⁸ Ian Talley and Benoit Faucon, “Islamic State, defeated US foe, still brims with cash, ambition,” The Wall Street Journal, Sep 10, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-defeated-u-s-foe-still-brims-with-cash-ambition-11600464409> (accessed 10 May 2021). ³² Paul Rogers, “ISIS the long term prospect,” openDemocracy, Jun 29, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/isis-long-term-prospect/> (accessed May 15, 2021).

fighters are motivated by a range of factors²⁹ including security, identity, justice, adventure, and even the prospect of death. ISIS is popular because they offer the young, the disenfranchised, and the disillusioned an alternative: belonging, direction, status, and reward. They do this through highly sophisticated public relations and recruitment strategies. This enables ISIS to tap into local grievances around the world and inspire revolutionary fervor amongst disenfranchised identity groups. For every fighter killed, another can be recruited and for every inch of land lost, another can be recovered later. As long as the ideology survives, so does the movement as it bides its time.

Conditions for ISIS Resiliency

The conditions for the re-establishment of ISIS in Iraq and Syria persist today. Arising from the security vacuum left behind by the US invasion of Iraq and exploiting the conflict in Syria, ISIS has been able to take advantage of the lack of a security apparatus, ethno-religious grievances and the porous borders of the Middle East. In 2021, Iraq continues to see civil unrest over high unemployment, corruption, and the lack of basic services provided by the government. Additionally, Iranian influence and the presence of proxy militias (which were initially intended to fight ISIS) are also creating tensions between Sunni and Shia groups in Iraq. In Syria, which is entering its tenth year of civil war, the situation remains unstable³⁰ and increasingly protracted due to the number of internal and external actors involved. With neither a political nor a military settlement in sight, the Syrian state remains highly fragile and susceptible to the Islamic State using the rapidly changing dynamics to re-establish a new foothold.

Policy

Perhaps the most concerning policy-related factor is the discernable lack of a policy in relation to the prisons and displacement camps in former ISIS territory. Overcrowded camps, such as Al-Hawl (Al-Hol), have become a “cauldron of radicalization”³¹ for the estimated 70,000 (predominantly children) living there. The responsibility for the rapidly-declining security of the camps³² has been left to a small contingent of the SDF, who are powerless to stop the spread of ISIS ideology. In the prisons, many foreign fighters wait while their home governments decline to repatriate them.³⁷ All entailed, this is a time bomb of individuals who are suffering, surrounded by violence with extremely limited options for the future other than to succumb to the relative security and sway of IS or similar non-state entities.

²⁹ Patrick Tucker, “Why do people join ISIS? Here’s what they say when you ask them,” Defense One, Dec 08, 2015, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/12/why-do-people-join-isis-heres-what-they-say-when-you-ask-them/124295/> (accessed May 15, 2021).

³⁰ Charles Lister, “2021 will be a defining year for Syria,” Middle East Institute, Jan 12, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/2021-willbe-defining-year-syria> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³¹ Loisa Loveluck, “At a sprawling tent camp in Syria ISIS women impose a brutal rule,” The Washington Post, Sep 03, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcd14c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html (accessed May 17, 2021).

³² Al Jazeera, “UN says 12 murdered at Al-Hol camp in Syria since the start of the year,” Jan 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/22/un-says-12-murdered-at-al-hol-camp-in-syria-since-start-of-year> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³⁷ Raiyah Butt, “Calls for Western governments to repatriate nationals in Syrian detention camps,” International Observatory for Human Rights, Oct 26, 2020, <https://observatoryihr.org/news/calls-for-western-governments-to-repatriate-nationals-in-syrian-detention-camps/> (accessed May 17, 2021).

Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has left its mark on almost every corner of the globe and on every industry and human activity. For ISIS, it has provided ample opportunity for exploitation. As the governments of both Iraq and Syria struggle to tackle the pandemic, they have limited resources left for the fight against ISIS. For many analysts, the increase of ISIS attacks in 2020 was a direct result of the security gaps left behind by the distraction of COVID-19. With attention diverted to the public health and economic crises brought on by the pandemic, nation-states (not least the US) are increasingly looking inward with foreign policy taking a back seat to more pressing domestic issues. ISIS has also found more novel ways to exploit the presence of the pandemic. Early in 2020, ISIS called on its followers already located in western countries, to actively catch and spread the disease amongst the “Crusader nations.”³³ At the same time, ISIS leaders claimed that devout Muslims would be spared from disease, asserting it to be the work of God (a punishment for unbelievers and enemies of their version of Islam).³⁴ These claims have also spurred the group’s recruitment efforts by drawing attention to government failures³⁵ to protect their citizens and offering (false) hope of protection through affiliation to the group.

Conclusion

The current situation in Iraq is somewhat analogous to 2011. The US-led coalition to defeat ISIS has destroyed the ISIS physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but the organization is not defeated. The Department of Defense believes that “ISIS is probably still more capable than Al Qaida at its peak in 2006-2007,” and “is well-positioned” to rebuild its physical caliphate.³⁶ Moreover, the underlying causes of conflict in Iraq, which allowed for the birth of AQI and its rebirth as ISIS have not disappeared. Iraqi democracy is still in its infancy, and sectarian conflict in the country remains an ever-present threat.

The Iraqi Security Forces, while vastly improved since their collapse in 2014, remain reliant on the assistance and support of the US military. As the US prepares for a possible future withdrawal, policymakers would do well to learn from past mistakes and continue to employ all the instruments of national power to stabilize Iraq, improve its democratic institutions, and prevent it from once again becoming a fertile ground for jihad.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- Maintain OIR’s current Coalition as a bridging force to support ISF while setting the conditions for the NATO Mission in Iraq to succeed.
- Encourage and support regional allies’ security cooperation activities while continuing to ensure and enhance ISF’s planning, command, and control capabilities.
- Maintain sufficient access, basing, and overflight in order to maintain power projection.

³³ Jason Burke, “Opportunity or threat? How Islamic extremists are reacting to corona virus,” The Guardian, Apr 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/opportunity-or-threat-how-islamic-extremists-reacting-coronavirus> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³⁴ James Gordon Meek, “Terrorist groups spin COVID-19 as God’s smallest soldier attacking west,” ABC News, Apr 02, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³⁵ International Crisis Group, “Contending with ISIS in the time of Corona virus,” Mar 31, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³⁶ Jeff Seldin, “Islamic State ‘Well-Positioned’ to Rebuild Caliphate,” VOA, Aug 16, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-wellpositioned-to-rebuild-caliphate/4530937.html> (accessed May 17, 2021).

- Continue supporting ISF and the Peshmerga in their fight against ISIS while advocating the need for enhanced coordination, cooperation, and unification against common threats.
- Continue urging Iraq to resist the malign influence of Iran.
- Engage the UN, EU, and individual nations to support the appointment of an independent Higher Electoral Commission in Iraq while continuing to support good governance, delivery of basic services, anti-corruption measures, and private-sector growth.