



Security Council

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Letter dated 26 March 2024 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to refer to Security Council resolution [2682 \(2023\)](#), in which the Council requested that I conduct and provide the Council with an independent strategic review of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The Council identified the following tasks: (a) assess the current threats to the peace and security of Iraq and the continued relevance of the Mission's tasks and priorities; (b) provide recommendations to optimize the mandate, mission structure and staffing of UNAMI; and (c) assess options to support the Government of Iraq in strengthening effective regional cooperation on issues outlined in paragraph 2 (b) (iv) of the resolution.

In October 2023, I appointed Volker Perthes to lead the independent strategic review. As part of the review, he held extensive consultations with the Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, political parties, minority representatives, civil society, including organizations representing women and young people, members of the Security Council and other international partners, independent experts, United Nations entities and the Government of Kuwait, consistent with paragraph 4 of resolution [2107 \(2013\)](#).

I therefore transmit herewith, for the attention of the Security Council, the report prepared by Mr. Perthes (see annex), and I thank him for conducting the review.

I also thank the federal Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, political representatives, civil society and all international partners and interlocutors for their collaboration and contributions throughout this exercise. I am also grateful to United Nations staff in Iraq for their commitment and efforts in support of the country and its people.

I would be grateful if you could bring the present letter and its annex to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

The United Nations stands ready to work with the Security Council and the Government of Iraq, as appropriate, on the implementation of the recommendations and any decisions of the Council with regard to the mandate of UNAMI.

(Signed) António Guterres



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Summary

Since the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) was established in 2003, Iraq has faced years of violence, uncertainty and structural changes. Today, Iraq is a sovereign nation with functioning State institutions and a consociational political system. It is home to pluralistic political processes. Its societal and political leaders accept that the core principles of democracy, good governance and human rights should be upheld in the new Iraq.

There are, however, worries about a reversal of the progress made so far. These are fuelled by the post-electoral events of 2022 and fears that the current political system could be dominated by one group. There is apprehension that the new regional escalation could set Iraq back. Nevertheless, Iraqis are hopeful that the ambitious agenda of domestic reform and regional cooperation of the Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, will succeed.

UNAMI has made an important contribution to the peace and security of Iraq. Naturally, views on the current and future relevance of the Mission diverge, not least across the political and societal spectrum in Iraq.

Current threats to the peace and security of Iraq

As successive Governments have made progress towards building functioning State institutions, threats to the peace and security of Iraq have evolved. The country is part of a volatile region, and it has occasionally contributed its own share to this volatility.

After taking note of diverse views, analyses and assessments and seeing the realities on the ground in several parts of Iraq, I have come to the conclusion that the country's stability today is threatened mainly by three phenomena: (a) the fragility of institutions; (b) the proliferation of armed actors; and (c) the possibility of the emergence of a new Da'esh or other forms of terrorism and violent extremism. These threats are exacerbated by uncertainties about the impact on Iraq of the current regional escalation.

The Iraqi political system has proven, at least in the past 18 months, increasingly capable of managing crises with less violence. Complex relations within and between confessional and ethnic groups are managed by formal and informal institutions. Despite increasing pressures, civil society organizations continue to function.

There are, however, concerns that the institutions that govern the country's political and socioeconomic processes are still fragile. Representatives of smaller communities, as well as political actors that define themselves as being outside ethno-confessional politics, fear that the institutions in their current form may not be able to safeguard the country's stability.

Concerns persist that the consociational system of power-sharing, which the international community has helped to build in Iraq, could also be stifling democracy and good governance. While government positions are shared among representatives of ethnically or confessionally defined communities, decision-making powers rest mostly with the parties of the Shiite Coordination Framework, the political bloc that currently holds the parliamentary majority. The prevalent method of allotting positions in government and public service on the basis of ethnic and confessional belonging (*muhasassa*) is blamed for entrenching political patronage, and it arguably limits accountability.

Most Iraqis are now encouraged by the state of relative peace. At the same time, the absence of the State's monopoly over the legitimate means of violence throughout Iraq goes against the conventional understanding of a key ingredient of domestic stability. Many of the armed groups, while part of the State's security architecture, are said to be more loyal to individual politicians or political groups. The ongoing efforts to reform the security sector do not extend to all security actors in Iraq. This overall situation presents a significant threat to the country's stability.

Da'esh no longer controls territory. However, the group still maintains active cells throughout Iraq. It carries out sporadic terrorist attacks. While a re-emergence of Da'esh in its past form is unlikely, root causes of violent extremism remain. They continue to threaten the peace and security of Iraq. Among them is the unresolved situation of thousands of Iraqis with actual or perceived links to Da'esh, and their families, in both the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. The fact that most of the missing or detained are Sunni Arabs risks feeding resentment within that community. The persistent crisis of displacement, which affects Sunni and other communities, most notably in Babil, Kirkuk and Ninawa Governorates, exacerbates this threat.

Some other issues identified as threats to the peace and security of Iraq in the past can still present risks to stability if neglected. While they are not likely to threaten the country's peace and security on their own and in the short or even medium term, they can amplify conflicts ignited by other causes. This includes what I refer to in the report as "unfinished business", such as Baghdad-Erbil relations or a constitutional review, as well as the activities of external armed actors in Iraq and emerging structural factors, such as the sustainability of the current economic model and the impact of climate change.

Relevance of the Mission

UNAMI has assisted Iraq since 2003. Its mandate has evolved from having a focus on humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and the restoration of State institutions to mediation of internal disputes, human rights and reconciliation, constitutional drafting and review, regional challenges and electoral assistance. Since 2007, its mandate has been extended and formulated on the basis of requests from the Government of Iraq on an annual basis. There have been several attempts to adjust the Mission's mandate and posture. The latest independent assessment was carried out in 2017.

UNAMI has become a constant in the Iraqi political scene. Government, political, security and civil society interlocutors continue to highlight its electoral assistance, as well as communication across and within the political, confessional, social, geopolitical and geographic divides. The Kurdish parties and representatives of the Sunni and smaller communities do not yet fully trust the country's political system. They continue to request the presence of an external guarantor of their rights and, in some cases, safety. They see UNAMI as that neutral third-party international presence. In addition, a number of medium- and long-term issues that cut across political and development fields benefit from advocacy and support from a senior United Nations official – something that the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq is currently also doing. The Mission's capacity-building and advocacy for human rights continue to be in demand across the board. Furthermore, the Mission continues to manage the logistics that enable most of the work of the rest of the United Nations system in Iraq.

During my visit to Iraq, the Prime Minister and his team informed the independent strategic review team that they appreciated the role that UNAMI has played. However, given the progressive stabilization of Iraq, they concluded that the Mission should complete its work by 31 May 2026. The Government of Iraq intends to reorganize its relationship with the United Nations system to work on development

and humanitarian issues directly with United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. This work should be coordinated through the United Nations country team in Iraq, not through a Security Council-mandated mission. In this context, the Government has requested that the UNAMI mandate be reduced to humanitarian and development issues from 31 May 2024, followed by a year-long transition of residual tasks to the United Nations country team in Iraq from 31 May 2025.

Considering the current threats and challenges to the peace and security of Iraq, I have concluded that the core political functions of UNAMI, notably its good offices and advocacy, remain relevant. Its capacity-building activities in the areas of electoral assistance, human rights and cross-cutting United Nations priorities are also pertinent. They support long-term needs and are expected to remain relevant beyond the Mission's eventual transition. They should therefore be gradually transferred to the United Nations country team as part of an overall reconfiguration of the United Nations presence in Iraq. Overall, UNAMI, in its present form, appears too big. Its mandate, priorities, activities, structure and staffing require streamlining to make it fit for the realities in Iraq.

Summarized recommendations to optimize the Mission's mandate, mission structure and staffing

No United Nations political mission should stay in a country forever. The prolonged presence of a third party may disincentivize local solutions and national ownership. "Unfinished business", as identified in the present review, may require decades to be completed. It should not be used to justify a "forever presence" of UNAMI.

Cognizant of the fragility of the Iraqi institutions and the volatile geopolitical environment, I believe that the Government of Iraq should be capable of assuming the responsibility of consolidating and representing the plurality of Iraqi voices on the issue of further United Nations assistance in the political sphere.

I therefore recommend that UNAMI begin to transition its tasks to national institutions and the United Nations country team in a responsible, orderly and gradual manner within an agreed time frame. I have concluded that the two-year period identified by the Government for the Mission's drawdown can be a sufficient time frame to make further progress and, thereby, to reassure more sceptical parts of the Iraqi political and societal spectrum that the Mission's eventual transition will not lead to a reversal of democratic gains or threaten peace and security.

It is natural that, after 20 years of the Mission's presence in Iraq, many of the country's political and civil society actors see in it a guarantee for the safe exercise of their rights and freedoms. While some actors will likely never want UNAMI to go, specific indicators of success, derived from the agenda of the current Government of Iraq, could convince them that a responsible and orderly transition of UNAMI would not threaten the inclusivity of the political system and the achievements in institution- and State-building made since Iraq regained sovereignty.

The next round of parliamentary elections with generally accepted results and the subsequent peaceful formation of the Government could be one important indicator. Others could include the functioning of credible institutions for dialogue and dispute resolution. Examples of areas in which such institutions could be enhanced or established are the situation in Sinjar, arguments over what used to be called disputed internal boundaries, Erbil-Baghdad dialogue, Erbil-Sulaymaniyah dialogue, dialogue between the federal Government and the governorates, dialogue processes involving other communities and dialogue processes between civil society and the authorities. Another set of indicators could include functioning effective and

independent human rights mechanisms being in place and assurances of a continued United Nations human rights presence beyond the UNAMI transition, the adoption of a long-discussed oil and gas law that ensures the fair distribution of revenue across regions and governorates, and a constitutional review.

During the transition period, from 31 May 2024, the Mission's priorities could be streamlined by:

(a) Reinvigorating partnership between the Government and UNAMI with a view to gradually transitioning the Mission's third-party role to nationally owned institutions. Joint efforts in this area could help to reassure minority groups, as well as women, young people and non-confessional political and civil society organizations;

(b) Preparing the transition of the electoral, human rights, public information and cross-cutting thematic capacities of UNAMI to the United Nations country team;

(c) Continuing to promote the Government's efforts in the areas of the fight against corruption, security sector reform, climate change and water management.

If this approach is acceptable, it is highly advisable that the United Nations and the Government should agree on a transition road map for UNAMI and a joint mechanism to oversee the transition. The road map could serve to identify the national institutions and the United Nations country team members that will carry on the Mission's specific residual tasks. Chapter IV of the report contains specific suggestions for the Security Council that might be helpful for streamlining the mandate of UNAMI.

With respect to regional cooperation, UNAMI should continue to promote dialogue and be available to support Iraqi initiatives to deepen integration in the region. At the same time, opportunities for regional cooperation, and the willingness of Iraqi and other regional actors to pursue them, have increased. In the light of the importance of regional cooperation for peace and security in Iraq, and in the Gulf region as a whole, the United Nations could invest dedicated capacity to support regional cooperation initiatives, including in the form of a regional office.

The Security Council will need to decide how to continue to support the residual aspects of the Iraq-Kuwait file after the transition of UNAMI. Options include delegating such tasks to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, creating a new United Nations structure for the file or assigning the task to a regional office for the Gulf region, if such an office were to be established.

The Security Council may also consider reducing the frequency of the reports of the Secretary-General to twice a year during the transition period. Longer intervals between briefings could allow for better analysis of progress.

The independent strategic review is the first time that the Security Council has asked the Secretary-General to stress-test the Council's mandate for Iraq against current threats to the country's peace and security. My recommendations are therefore at the strategic level. Once there is agreement at that level, the precise structure and staffing can be clarified by technical assessments.

In the meantime, it is pertinent for UNAMI to signal progress by initiating consultations with the Government of Iraq and the United Nations country team on the transition of its residual tasks. In the absence of an objective formula for determining how many substantive staff members are required to support the tasks of a political mission like UNAMI, I recommend that, in the same spirit of signalling progress, UNAMI start a gradual, but significant, reduction of its footprint.

Volker **Perthes**

I. Introduction

1. Acting on a request from the Government of Iraq for an independent evaluation of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the Security Council asked the Secretary-General to conduct and provide the Council, no later than 31 March 2024, with an independent strategic review of UNAMI.
2. In its resolution [2682 \(2023\)](#), adopted on 30 May 2023, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to conduct the review in consultation with the Government of Iraq, in addition to United Nations agencies, Member States, regional organizations, independent experts and civil society, as well as the Government of Kuwait, consistent with paragraph 4 of resolution [2107 \(2013\)](#). The Council identified the following tasks: (a) assess the current threats to the peace and security of Iraq and the continued relevance of the Mission's tasks and priorities; (b) provide recommendations to optimize the mandate, mission structure and staffing of UNAMI; and (c) assess options to support the Government of Iraq in strengthening effective regional cooperation on issues outlined in paragraph 2 (b) (iv) of the resolution.
3. Prior to the review, the Security Council had requested the Secretary-General, in its resolution [2367 \(2017\)](#) to conduct an independent, external assessment of the structure and staffing of the Mission, related resources, priorities and areas in which it had comparative advantages and synergies with other United Nations entities, in order to ensure that the Mission and the United Nations country team were configured to most appropriately and efficiently fulfil mandated tasks. The United Nations Secretariat conducted two other assessments, in 2012 and 2015, that touched upon questions related to the relevance of UNAMI and the evolving needs in Iraq.
4. On 13 October 2023, the Secretary-General announced my appointment as head of the independent strategic review, at the level of Under-Secretary-General. Shuhrat Sulaymanov was selected as a senior expert to support me. The review team was constituted in New York on 16 October. The review took place amid an ongoing major crisis and escalation in the Middle East, which had an impact on Iraq.
5. Following a desk review of relevant documents, the independent strategic review team held some 250 meetings in individual and group settings. From 16 to 27 October 2023, it discussed in New York the expectations and context of the review with United Nations senior officials and subject matter experts, as well as the Permanent Mission of Iraq, members of the Security Council and representatives of regional States. A dedicated discussion was held with the representatives of Kuwait who had travelled to New York from Kuwait City for consultations with the review team.
6. From 6 to 27 November, the team travelled to Iraq to consult with the Government of Iraq, the leadership of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, leaders of political parties and coalitions, governors and mayors, members of civil society, ambassadors of members of the Security Council, diplomatic representatives of neighbouring countries and heads and staff of United Nations entities working in Iraq. Six United Nations inter-agency thematic sessions were held on political, regional, security, human rights, protection, development, climate change and coordination issues. Aside from Baghdad, meetings with Iraqi counterparts and United Nations staff were held in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Mosul, Kirkuk, Ramadi and Basrah.
7. Between December 2023 and February 2024, the review team held discussions with leading international experts on the situation in Iraq and the Middle East. Other subject matter experts, including former United Nations senior officials, were consulted throughout the review. Further discussions with the leadership of Iraq, Iraqi

senior officials and Member State representatives were also held during the review period.

8. Interlocutors shared a broad range of views on the issues considered by the independent strategic review. On the current threats to the peace and security of Iraq, views ranged from maintaining that the Government no longer needs United Nations support to govern the country, manage the democratic political process and maintain friendly relations with its neighbours to believing that the political system is prone to reversal while security remains a challenge for Iraqis and for the country's neighbours. Others suggested that these challenges were within the range of normal for many countries that did not host Security Council-mandated United Nations missions. Many pointed to the risks and threats created or exacerbated by the recent escalation in the Middle East and how this could set back progress in Iraq.

9. A similar diversity of views was shared on the relevance of UNAMI. The Mission was viewed by some as an important third-party presence assuring the safe exercise of political rights and freedoms for Iraqi citizens, political actors and members of civil society. Some spoke of UNAMI as an important voice of the international community able to draw the attention of the authorities in Baghdad, Erbil and elsewhere in Iraq to sensitive and critical political, socioeconomic and human rights challenges. Others saw the political mandate of the Mission at this historical moment as creating parallel legitimacies in the country and stifling the evolution of local conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms.

10. Many interlocutors pointed out that the current Iraqi political system had managed to resolve existential threats while preserving the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. All interlocutors highlighted the important role that UNAMI had played during the previous 20 turbulent years. Today, Iraq increasingly plays an active role in the region again, with aspirations to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security. All expressed confidence in the leadership of the Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani.

11. While the desk review of relevant documents, as well as qualitative interviews, provided the primary source of information and analysis for the present report, the review team also drew on the analytical framework for peace operations provided by the Secretary-General's policy brief entitled "A New Agenda for Peace". Due attention was paid to the geopolitical dimension of threats to the peace and security of Iraq, as well as to the need for sovereign nations to fulfil their own responsibility to build trust with neighbours and within their own populations, prevent conflicts and violence and peacefully resolve conflicts when they arise.

II. Iraq two decades after the establishment of the Mission

A. Historical context

12. Since UNAMI was established in 2003, Iraq has faced years of violence, uncertainty and structural changes. The United Nations has remained by the country's side throughout. Many United Nations staff members have sacrificed their lives while supporting the people of Iraq.

13. It is worth highlighting some key milestones to establish the context and clear analytical baseline for the independent strategic review. In May 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority was established to exercise executive, legislative and judicial authority in Iraq following the military operation led by the United States of America that deposed Saddam Hussein. On 28 June 2004, an interim Government was established. The Coalition Provisional Authority was dissolved. In October 2005, a

new Constitution was adopted. The first parliamentary elections under the new Constitution were held in December 2005, with four further parliamentary elections held since then. In 2006, Iraq was plunged into years of political and sectarian violence. Successive Governments have managed to contain and resolve multiple security and political challenges, increasingly on their own, as the political system continued to evolve.

14. As relative stability was restored, United States combat forces withdrew in 2011. In 2014, the emergence of Da'esh became the next test for Iraq. At its peak, Da'esh held about one third of Iraqi territory, including key infrastructure. The crisis displaced several million Iraqis, with approximately 1.1 million still not in their homes. The current Government has stated that the displacement crisis should be resolved by mid-2024. Da'esh committed heinous crimes, drawing global condemnation. Among other things, the group developed and used chemical weapons. The United States-led international counter-Da'esh coalition was established in September 2014 to support Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting Da'esh in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. At the same time, following a fatwa by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Popular Mobilization Forces were established in Iraq to protect the country from Da'esh.

15. The military defeat of Da'esh at the end of 2017 brought about several new trends, the long-term impact of which on the peace and security of Iraq is yet to be seen. Da'esh remnants moved underground, carrying out terrorist attacks on rare occasions. Thousands of largely Sunni males with actual or perceived links to Da'esh have been detained. Family members of Da'esh elements, including children, remain in limbo in camps in the Syrian Arab Republic and in reintegration programmes in Iraq. Confessional and ethnic-based paramilitary groups emerged stronger. They were organized under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which have been recognized as a branch of the State security apparatus since 2016. Some statistics suggest that the number of Popular Mobilization Forces members may exceed that of the Iraqi military.

16. The external military presence in Iraq has also evolved. United States forces today play a largely advisory and support role as part of the international anti-Da'esh coalition, with much lower numbers and capacity than between 2003 and 2011. Calls for the departure of these forces increased following the killing in Baghdad of the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassem Suleimani, and the Deputy Head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, in 2020. The recent crisis in the Middle East upended an informal ceasefire that had been in place between the coalition and Iraqi factions since May 2022, and calls for the departure of United States forces have again become louder, alongside a spiral of tit-for-tat attacks between the United States military and Iraqi factions. Turkish military forces have expanded their presence and unilateral action against the Kurdistan Workers' Party in parts of northern Iraq. Türkiye justifies its military activities in Iraq with the right to self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. Iraq has protested against Turkish strikes and has called for the departure of the Turkish forces.

17. In November 2023, when the independent strategic review team visited Iraq, the country was relatively safe and pluralistic. A federal system of government was in place. Transitions of power through elections had been a regular occurrence since 2005. Iraqi political leaders had largely accepted the elections and the subsequent processes of translating votes into government formation as a way to participate in the management of the country. Formal and informal mechanisms for conflict resolution existed. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq enjoyed autonomy in many areas of governance and security. The review team was able to hold open and frank discussions with civil society organizations.

18. The very fact that the review team was able to meet freely with different political, security and civil society groups in many parts of Iraq and that all interlocutors spoke with no visible constraints was evidence of the democratic achievements. Construction sites could be seen throughout the country, promising jobs and improved services. Iraqis appeared on average cautiously more preoccupied with economic prospects and advancement in life rather than with the fear of falling victim to armed violence and not being able to provide basic needs for their families.

19. At the same time, the situation witnessed by the review team had been in place for only about 18 months. Memories of armed violence were still fresh in people's minds. Reports of sporadic armed activities, even if now describing areas further away from population centres, continued to appear in newsfeeds. Space for civil society activity was described as shrinking, including in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

20. The Government of Iraq does not control all the military and security actors operating in the country. Iraq has also, involuntarily, become host to foreign militant groups such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which maintains operational bases in northern Iraq outside the control of the federal Government or the Kurdistan Regional Government. Moreover, unclear command and control over the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Peshmerga forces presents challenges for the Government of Iraq despite their legal status.

21. The politics of present-day Iraq are governed by consociational power-sharing arrangements.¹ Deficiencies associated with such arrangements were easy to spot. The country's political space was described as polarized and fragmented. Many fear that the arrangements stifle democracy and good governance. The system seems to be generally accepted, however, by a large majority of political actors because of its ability to ensure that all components of the country's ethnically and confessionally pluralistic population are represented in governing structures.

22. The current political system in Iraq has demonstrated the ability to manage internal and external crises. On several occasions, the means used to manage such crises were considered repressive, at least by parts of the political and societal spectrum. Three major political crises have emerged and been managed by the system since the defeat of Da'esh in December 2017: (a) protests in 2019 and their violent suppression that led to early elections in 2021; (b) protracted government formation that led to the withdrawal of the Sadrist Movement from the Council of Representatives in 2021–2022; and (c) most recently, in November 2023, the dismissal of the Sunni Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohamed Al-Halbousi, owing to a ruling of the Federal Supreme Court. It remains to be seen whether the latest crisis will be resolved politically. Fears were expressed to the review team that the next Speaker – a position reserved for the Sunni component – would effectively be chosen by the dominant Shia political parties rather than by the Sunnis themselves through their members of the Council of Representatives or Halbousi's Taqaddum party. This attested to perceptions of imbalance and unfairness in the political system.

23. The Prime Minister, as witnessed by the review team, commands broad support among all components of Iraqi society. His Government has embarked on an ambitious agenda of domestic reform and regional cooperation. Provincial council elections were held on 18 December 2023. They were the first since April 2013 and the first in Kirkuk Governorate since 2003. By the time the present report was finalized, in mid-February, new governors had been elected in most governorates for

¹ Consociationalism refers to a political system in which Governments include representatives of all ethnic and/or confessional communities according to an implicit or explicit power-sharing formula.

the first time since the provincial councils were dissolved in 2019. This was yet another test that the Iraqi political system passed. Furthermore, rising oil income helped the current Government to adopt a roughly \$150 billion per year budget for 2023–2025. This is seen as a major political achievement and should allow for the implementation of a more solid planning and execution of service and development projects.

24. The Government of Iraq has made visible efforts to position the country as an active and constructive regional player. The launch of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in 2021 as well as the contribution to the facilitation of recent reconciliation initiatives, including between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, evidenced the country's return to the regional arena. On 27 May 2023, the Government of Iraq launched the Development Road project – a new transport infrastructure project that would link the Gulf Cooperation Council countries with Türkiye and Europe through Iraq. A trilateral framework involving Egypt, Jordan and Iraq has emerged. The hosting of the twenty-fifth Arabian Gulf Cup in Basrah in January 2023 symbolized the return of Iraq to the social common space of the region. Iraq is increasingly engaging in the global climate change agenda. At the same time, its neighbours remain apprehensive about the potential territorial ambitions of some political forces in Iraq, as was evident in reactions to the ruling of the Federal Supreme Court in September 2023 on the Khor Abdullah situation and continued cross-border security incidents.

25. Attacks by Iraqi factions on coalition forces and counter-strikes qualified by the United States as retaliatory were ongoing when the present report was finalized. At the end of January 2024, talks restarted between the Iraqi authorities and the United States under the auspices of the Iraq-United States Higher Military Commission about the future of the coalition and future bilateral military relations between Iraq and the United States. There are fears that the ongoing regional escalation may negatively affect Iraqi achievements in State-building and domestic security.

B. Current threats to the peace and security of Iraq

26. Threats to the peace and security of Iraq, as identified in recent years in Security Council resolutions and reports of the Secretary-General, largely remain valid. The independent strategic review team analysed the threats and other challenges in the context of the accomplishments that Iraq has made. In Iraq today, not every challenge to social or political processes can qualify as a threat to the country's peace and security. Not all threats and challenges have the same risk of materializing. Not all that materialize will existentially undermine the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

27. Some of the challenges to peace and stability that could be fatal in other country contexts may in fact be sources of stability, even if temporary, in Iraq. For example, while the central State does not, or does not fully, control the Popular Mobilization Forces and Peshmerga, both forces have without doubt prevented a resurgence of Da'esh. Some other challenges to the sociopolitical system and to relations with neighbouring countries could, if left unaddressed and depending on other contextual factors, develop into threats to domestic and regional stability.

28. Having heard diverse views, taken note of various analyses and assessments and seen the realities on the ground in several parts of Iraq, I have come to the conclusion that there are three main threats to the country's stability today: (a) the fragility of institutions; (b) the proliferation of armed actors; and (c) the possibility of the emergence of a new Da'esh or other forms of terrorism and violent extremism. These threats are exacerbated by the ongoing regional escalation.

Fragility of institutions

29. While Iraqi State institutions have managed to resolve existential crises over the past years, as described in paragraph 22 above, non-dominant groups and civil society actors are still not fully confident that these institutions would not collapse or work for only parts of Iraqi society and the political spectrum. Representatives of the ruling coalition are aware of the fragility of certain institutions. Without continuous national efforts to consolidate State institutions and democratic practices, the actual and perceived fragility of national or subnational institutions could evolve into a serious threat to the peace and security of Iraq. The withdrawal of the Sadrist Movement from the Council of Representatives, the boycott by smaller political parties of the parliamentary elections in 2021, the violent response to the protests of 2019 against the lack of services, corruption and sectarian policies, the invocation of legal texts from “Saddam’s era” in court rulings, the continued allocation of public jobs on the basis of ethnic and confessional belonging (*muhasassa*) or the dismissal of the Sunni Speaker of parliament from office, even if due to a court ruling, are all viewed by Iraqis as signs of continuing, if not deepening, fragility often owing to institutional biases within the system.

Proliferation of armed actors

30. Although most Iraqis have experienced relative peace over the past several years, the absence of the State’s monopoly over the legitimate means of violence throughout Iraq is a matter of concern. It also goes against the conventional understanding of ingredients of domestic stability and security. Ongoing efforts to reform the security sector do not cover all the security actors in Iraq and do not deal with those that are covered in one comprehensive framework. This situation presents a significant threat to the country’s stability.

Emergence of a new Da’esh

31. While Da’esh no longer controls territory, the group continues to maintain active cells throughout Iraq. It still carries out sporadic terrorist attacks. The challenge is compounded by the unresolved situation of thousands of Iraqi families associated with Da’esh in camps in the Syrian Arab Republic, along with challenges in processing their return and reintegration in Iraq. Tens of thousands of Iraqis suspected of having links with Da’esh remain in detention in Iraq or missing. The Sunni community is most affected by this situation. The risk of continued or renewed resentment breeding new forms of violent extremism cannot be ignored.

32. Crises of displacement and the missing are linked to this threat. Some communities have been displaced several times. Different groups are implicated in real or perceived efforts to change local demography in areas of strategic importance for individual confessional and ethnic communities. The most notable examples are the Sinjar area of Ninawa Governorate and the Jurf al-Sakhar/Jurf al-Nasr area of Babil Governorate, as well as other localities in Ninawa and Kirkuk Governorates where disputes over internal boundaries have strained relations between communities and between the federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government for many years. Minority communities, in particular in Ninawa and Kirkuk Governorates, are still suffering the impact of at times unintended demographic changes.

C. Other current challenges to the stability of Iraq

33. Some other issues identified in Security Council resolutions and reports of the Secretary-General as threats to peace and security in the past can still present risks to stability if neglected. While they are not likely to threaten the peace and security of

Iraq on their own or in the short or even medium term, they can amplify conflicts ignited by other causes. Three clusters of such issues stand out: (a) “unfinished business” in implementing past undertakings and commitments in political and security areas; (b) activities of external actors in Iraq; and (c) emerging structural factors such as climate change, water scarcity, a demographic challenge and economic development. I was encouraged to observe in my conversations with senior officials of the federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government that all these issues are high on their agenda.

“Unfinished business”

34. Chief among the issues that I cluster as “unfinished business” are the relations between Baghdad and Erbil. Although both sides uphold their commitments under the existing power-sharing and security arrangements, tensions persist over the extent of Kurdish autonomy under the Iraqi federal system, the sharing of oil revenue, budgetary questions, the implementation of article 140 of the Constitution designed to address authority over Kirkuk Governorate and other disputed areas, and the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement.

35. While largely united on matters related to regional autonomy, relations between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan have so far prevented the integration of the Peshmerga forces loyal to the two parties under a single security umbrella in all the governorates of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Nor are economic and financial policies in the region fully integrated. Efforts to resolve outstanding issues between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, as well as between the two leading Kurdish parties, continue.

36. Open constitutional issues mainly concern the establishment of the second chamber of parliament (the Federation Council) and a constitutional review, which itself is bound to unravel other outstanding files. The Government of Iraq has indicated that efforts relating to the constitutional review are being undertaken in parliament, but they require time.

37. There are many other tasks that are unfinished but remain critical elements of State-building. In addition to those described above, they include a national census and an “oil and gas law”. These tasks remain unfinished for a reason. In some cases, they are too complex to resolve or would demand greater unity of purpose than is currently available. In others, they may have been overtaken by events.

Activities of external actors

38. Challenges of an external, transnational or mixed external-domestic nature that could develop into threats to the peace and security of Iraq result from the transborder character of terrorism, violent extremism or drug trafficking. The situation in the neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic remains a source of many challenges for Iraq. The presence and operations of the military forces of Türkiye and the United States-led international counter-Da’esh coalition, even if the latter is present at the request of the Government of Iraq, remain contentious. Iraq has repeatedly protested against attacks on targets within Iraq by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye and the United States. While these countries qualify such attacks as self-defence, Iraq sees them as violations of sovereignty. Mindful of the importance of maintaining and developing relations with its neighbours, Iraq has called for the resolution of bilateral security files through dialogue. The presence of foreign militant groups such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party continues to jeopardize the stability of Iraq and relations with its neighbours.

Emerging structural factors

39. The oil-based economy, revenue generation and income distribution of Iraq cannot as such be called a threat. They certainly raise questions, however, about the sustainability of the country's current socioeconomic and political-economic set-up on which the *muhassassa* mechanism is built. This mechanism is about allotting positions in government and public service on the basis of ethnic and confessional belonging. *Muhassassa* is blamed by many for entrenching political patronage and arguably limiting accountability within the country's political system. Over the past 20 years, governance in Iraq has changed for the better in many aspects. The way in which revenue is being shared has, however, remained almost intact.

40. There are alarming economic statistics: some 90 per cent of the State budget comes from oil revenue, currently calculated at a minimum price of \$70 per barrel. Around 40 per cent of the workforce, around 4 million Iraqis, hold government-paid jobs. Counted by household, the livelihood of 20 million Iraqis depends at least partly on the State budget. While some 700,000 government jobs have been added recently, the creation of new such jobs is unlikely to keep up with the pace of population growth.

41. While it is encouraging that the Government has committed to diversifying the economy by allocating about \$40 billion yearly to investments, including in infrastructure, this may not stop the deepening of poverty as growth and economic opportunities do not match the increase in the population. This could cause instability and further push outward economic migration. In addition, more than a third of the population is under 14 years old, which will place further strains on the State budget in the coming years if the current model, whereby the majority of entrants into the labour market would expect employment in the public sector, remains unchanged.

42. Many of the key elements of the Iraq-Kuwait file have been addressed over the past 30 years, including the exit of Iraq from its obligations with regard to the file under Chapter VII of the Charter upon the conclusion of compensation payments for the occupation of Kuwait in 1990–1991. However, the remaining unresolved issues will continue to sour the restored relations between the two countries. The remains of 308 Kuwaitis and third-country nationals are still missing. The search for the remaining Kuwaiti properties and archives is ongoing. A tripartite body comprising representatives of Iraq, Kuwait and the International Committee of the Red Cross continues to facilitate these efforts, even if progress is slow. The completion of all outstanding issues is of great importance for Iraq and Kuwait.

43. Longer-term threats and threat-amplifying challenges to the peace and security of Iraq are also emerging from climate change. Iraq is the fifth most climate-vulnerable country in the world, while also being a significant contributor to carbon emissions owing to gas flaring.² Rising temperatures, decreasing rainfall and continued desertification are some of the visible manifestations of climate change in Iraq, with a significant risk of food shortages, price volatility and water quality issues. Many governorates have already been affected by migration induced by climate change, due mainly to water scarcity, pollution and soil salinity.³

44. The Government of Iraq is concerned that the construction of dams in the upstream countries of Türkiye and the Islamic Republic of Iran could further limit water flow into Iraq. The scarcity of water for irrigation is increasingly causing

² United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook 6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People* (2019). Available at www.unep.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6.

³ International Organization for Migration, "Migration, environment and climate change in Iraq" (2022). Available at <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11411/files/documents/Migration%2C%20Environment%20and%20Climate%20Change%20in%20Iraq.pdf>.

communal conflicts. The expert community is calling for improving water use efficiency in Iraq itself, especially as the country is trying to develop its agriculture. While Iraq, being a downstream country, prefers third-party assistance in resolving water and climate-change issues with its neighbours, upstream countries have expectedly expressed a strong preference for the continuing bilateral resolution of these issues.

III. Continued relevance of the Mission's tasks and priorities

A. Mandate evolution

45. On 22 May 2003, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to appoint a Special Representative for Iraq. The Council established UNAMI on 14 August 2003, some four months after the launch of the United States-led military operation and less than a year before Iraqi State sovereignty was restored. On 19 August 2003, an attack on the UNAMI headquarters at the Canal Hotel killed 22 people, including the Special Representative, Sérgio Vieira de Mello. These circumstances shaped the mandate and posture of UNAMI.

46. The UNAMI mandate initially focused on efforts to restore and develop State institutions of Iraq. Since 2007, the mandate has been extended and formulated on an annual basis at the request of the Government of Iraq. New topics have been added over time to reflect developments on the ground and cross-cutting priorities on the agenda of both Iraq and the Security Council. The current mandate continues to touch upon many State-building processes, including elections, constitutional review, security sector reform, social services, economic reform, rule of law and governance.

47. The good offices function in support of the facilitation of reconciliation, dialogue and consensus-building among Iraqis has been central to the Mission's mandate since 2003. The Head of Mission, the Special Representative, has facilitated the resolution of, or efforts to resolve, several recurrent and emerging inter- and intra-confessional political situations. These have included arguments over what used to be called disputed internal boundaries, some disputes in the context of government formation processes and aspects of the Erbil-Baghdad dialogue. Two of the numerous examples of the Mission's support for Iraqi efforts to resolve complex regional situations are the resettlement of Camp Ashraf residents in 2016 and the security agreement between Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2023.

48. Today, the Mission's activities are focused on good offices, the provision of electoral assistance, human rights monitoring and capacity-building, the promotion of cross-cutting United Nations priorities and the provision of logistical and security support for most United Nations activities in Iraq. UNAMI reports to the Security Council on the remaining aspects of the Iraq-Kuwait file and participates as an observer in the Tripartite Commission, in accordance with resolution [2107 \(2013\)](#).⁴ Cross-cutting United Nations mandates promoted by UNAMI include women and peace and security, the protection of women, youth empowerment, children in armed conflict and climate change.

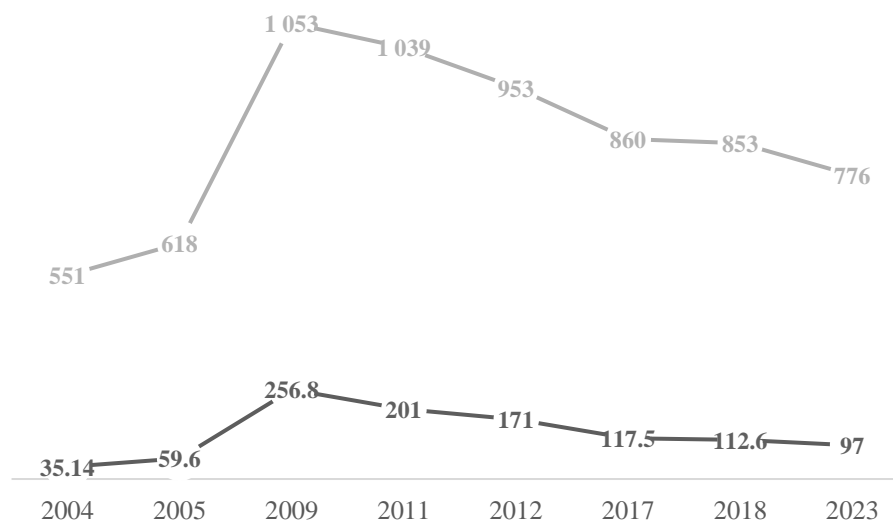
⁴ The Tripartite Commission and its Technical Subcommittee are chaired by the International Committee of the Red Cross and composed of representatives of Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and France. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq joined as an observer in 2014.

49. UNAMI is an integrated mission that brings 22 other United Nations entities operating in Iraq under the single leadership of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq.⁵ This leadership is exercised through one of the two deputies of the Special Representative, namely the United Nations Resident Coordinator. The priorities of the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes in Iraq are guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The latest framework, covering the period 2020–2024, is focused on the transition from humanitarian assistance to contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through a more upstream policy and legislative reform. Social cohesion, the economy, governance, the environment and sustainable solutions for internally displaced populations were jointly identified by the United Nations and the Government of Iraq as strategic priorities to guide United Nations engagement and cooperation.

50. As of November 2023, UNAMI comprised 238 international and 453 national staff (authorized total for the 2023 budget: 280 international and 494 national staff and two United Nations Volunteers). A review of the Mission’s mandate over the past 20 years demonstrates that, despite the continued addition of new elements to its mandate, the Mission has seen several downsizing and restructuring exercises. For reference, the budget for 2009 included 459 international and 594 national staff. The Mission’s current budget also provides for 245 military contingent personnel, from Fiji and Nepal, comprising the Guard Unit, which provides perimeter physical protection for United Nations compounds in Baghdad and Kirkuk. The other United Nations entities in Iraq had 495 international and 1,603 national staff in November 2023.

⁵ The following United Nations entities are present in Iraq: Department of Safety and Security, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, International Trade Centre, Mine Action Service, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, United Nations Children’s Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Population Fund, World Food Programme and World Health Organization.

Figure
United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq budget and staffing



Light grey: number of UNAMI staff (national and international)
 Dark grey: budget in millions of United States dollars

B. Continued relevance of the Mission's tasks and priorities

51. Consultations with political and societal leaders in Iraq confirmed that UNAMI is still an integral part of the Iraqi political space. The Mission has played an important role in the country since 2003. It has been a constant for many political and civil society actors for the past 20 years.

52. Government, political, security and civil society interlocutors highlighted to the review team the Mission's unique role in promoting communication across and within political, social, geopolitical and geographical divides. Most continue to see UNAMI as a neutral third-party international presence. Electoral assistance and human rights activities are seen by many as particularly valuable for supporting the Mission's third-party role.

53. The Government of Iraq has communicated its appreciation for the Mission's efforts over the past 20 years in building and supporting Iraqi institutions. The Government has informed the review team that it would now like to see UNAMI complete its work in Iraq within a defined timespan, and its remaining tasks transferred to the United Nations country team. The Government would like the United Nations in Iraq to focus on humanitarian and development activities and for these to be coordinated through the United Nations country team, not a Security Council-mandated mission.

54. In discussions with the review team during its visit to Iraq, the Prime Minister and his team indicated that 31 May 2026 would be an appropriate end date for the Mission's work. Before then, the Government would like UNAMI to focus on humanitarian and development files starting from 31 May 2024 and transfer residual tasks to the United Nations country team between 31 May 2025 and 31 May 2026. This, the Government indicated, would help Iraq to revert to "normalcy" in cooperation with the United Nations system and remove the stigma of being an unsafe country in need of external assistance. Government representatives stressed that Iraq

had reached an acceptable degree of stability and security and had sufficiently improved relations with its regional and international partners.

55. Political representatives of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Sunni Arab community, smaller communities and members of civil society remain apprehensive about the stability of Iraqi institutions and security. For them, UNAMI remains an additional guarantee for their participation in the governing of the country and the exercise of their rights. Several interlocutors opined that a discussion about optimizing UNAMI at the present time should be about increasing the Mission's presence rather than reducing it, in view of the number of unresolved political issues. With respect to the streamlining of UNAMI, these interlocutors agreed that in 2023 the country was very different from how it had been in 2003 in many aspects. They proposed sharpening the Mission's focus on current needs in the areas of civil, political and socioeconomic rights and equitable revenue- and power-sharing.

56. While the good offices role of UNAMI remains in demand, if not by all participants in Iraqi politics, the function of advising, supporting and assisting with tasks related to State-building no longer describes the relationship between the Government of Iraq and the Mission. Despite disagreements about the sustainability and accountability of some Iraqi national institutions, UNAMI has completed what it was able to do to support State-building. In reality, its role in this area has long been limited to advocacy on various aspects of sustainable development and good governance. Such advocacy has, indeed, lent political clout to the United Nations country team's capacity-building support for individual government agencies and civil society organizations in such areas as security sector reform, judicial and legal reform, accountability, reconciliation, anti-corruption, essential civil and social services, climate change mitigation and economic reform.

57. There is a discrepancy between the Mission's Security Council-mandated role and what is presently possible and needed in Iraq. The discrepancy pertains to activities related to State-building, in particular in terms of the scale and scope of such activities, and partly to the facilitation of regional dialogue on the complex issues contained in resolution [2682 \(2023\)](#).⁶

58. For a significant part of the Iraqi political scene, this feels like a form of tutelage, which intentionally or unintentionally limits the freedom to act and undermines Iraqi sovereignty. Several Iraqi policymakers have lamented that Iraq was being unfairly singled out from among other countries by being the subject of Security Council debates on its domestic and sovereign processes, such as government formation or constitutional issues. Where the Mission leadership pursues United Nations norms and values in its reporting and advocacy, civil society actors and human rights defenders have criticized UNAMI for what they see as not effectively protecting human rights and civic space. At the same time, the authorities may feel that the Mission is taking sides with protest movements or opposition forces.

59. Such assumptions and expectations, whether correct or not, lead to misgivings and mistrust. This situation has arguably already created unrealistic expectations and assumptions among various segments of the Iraqi political space, including civil society and security actors, as well as among UNAMI leadership and staff, Security Council members and external actors.

60. A review of the Mission's activities has demonstrated that there is a fine balance between supply- and demand-generated activities when it comes to supporting an

⁶ Border security, clearance of landmines, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, energy, trade, environment, water, adverse impacts of climate change, in particular those contributing to desertification and drought, resilience-building, infrastructure, public health and refugees (resolution [2682 \(2023\)](#), para. 2 (b) (iv)).

internal political process with established institutions and civil society actors. While a supply-driven approach made sense at the early stages of supporting the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty and statehood, those very State institutions have long been capable of defining their own needs.

61. With the above analysis of the past and current mandates and activities of UNAMI in mind, I have concluded that UNAMI continues to play four functional roles that remain relevant in Iraq today: (a) good offices; (b) technical assistance in the areas of elections and human rights in support of good offices; (c) advocacy of cross-cutting United Nations mandates and values; and (d) logistical and security support for the broader United Nations presence in Iraq.

62. The good offices function in the context of Iraq today means creating and maintaining spaces for dialogue. In an environment in which trust is low owing to years of conflict, this role also means clarifying the intentions of stakeholders with their partners by reducing the asymmetry of information through constant communication with and among all stakeholders regardless of their political, financial or military weight. Non-dominant communities and civil society actors see these functions of UNAMI as critical for ensuring that their rights and concerns are not forgotten or put aside.

63. All Iraqi parties have turned to UNAMI at different times to avail themselves of this critical function, especially during political crises and armed conflicts. Naturally, individual actors try to exploit the presence of an international mission to boost their own political weight. This is almost unavoidable in a post-conflict environment. It is also manageable through clear communication of the Mission's non-partisanship and defence of United Nations norms and values.

64. UNAMI plays an important role in advocating United Nations cross-cutting priorities as set out by the Security Council and the General Assembly. These priorities were relevant before UNAMI was established and will remain so long after UNAMI. During its presence, however, UNAMI contributes through its advocacy and support to creating and maintaining an enabling political environment for the work of the entire United Nations family and that of other national and international actors, not least in such areas as the promotion of human rights and basic freedoms, gender equality, the protection of women and children, the fight against corruption, security sector reform and addressing climate change.

65. As part of its advocacy, UNAMI has a unique role in keeping the various challenges to Iraqi stability that I clustered as "unfinished business" high on the country's agenda. These priorities are described in paragraphs 34–37 of the present report. The regular reports of the Secretary-General to the Security Council also help to maintain attention on the continued need to support Iraq in these areas.

66. Once critical for the establishment of nascent institutions, UNAMI continues to support the functioning of the Independent High Electoral Commission and various human rights bodies. At this point, which is different from the era of State-building, UNAMI provides very targeted technical support to these bodies, as they continue to improve performance. Unlike good offices, which require constant high-level diplomatic engagement by the Special Representative, this type of support could increasingly be provided directly by individual United Nations entities as well as by bilateral donors. However, effective support in such areas requires a firm commitment from the Iraqi authorities that political space will remain available and that progress will not be reversed in the absence of high-level United Nations advocacy – space that is currently kept open by UNAMI and the Security Council.

67. Lastly, UNAMI plays a critical role as the primary enabler of most of the United Nations system's work in Iraq by managing living and office spaces in compounds at

four United Nations hubs and by providing security, transportation and logistical support for United Nations operations. While this set-up, in which the Mission acts as a service provider on a cost-recovery basis to United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, is cost-efficient and essential, it requires dedicated logistical, security, coordination and protocol support. In addition, UNAMI provides most of the operational resources for the Kuwait Joint Support Office, which supports 18 United Nations missions. The enabling activities of UNAMI (security, mission support, operational costs and uniformed personnel) make up approximately 72 per cent of the Mission budget and staff, according to budget documents for 2023 and 2024.

IV. How to optimize the Mission's mandate, mission structure and staffing

A. Mandated tasks and eventual transition

68. No United Nations special political mission should stay in a country forever. Prolonged third-party presences may actually disincentivize local solutions and national ownership.

69. My analysis of the current threats to the peace and security of Iraq, as outlined above, may not be totally congruent, but certainly overlaps with the Government's own assessments. I am also convinced that the Government should be capable of developing and consolidating an overall Iraqi position out of the many national voices in Iraq with regard to further United Nations assistance in the political sphere – and that it has the responsibility to do so. I therefore recommend that UNAMI begin to transition its tasks to national institutions and the United Nations country team in a responsible, orderly and gradual manner within an agreed time frame.

70. Bearing in mind the findings described in earlier sections of the report as well as the diverse positions and views expressed on the future of UNAMI, I recommend that the horizon for the Mission's mandate and a responsible transition of its tasks be expressed through both a timeline and an indicator-based approach. Introducing only a time-bound horizon risks freezing all UNAMI activities as some national and international counterparts may choose to wait out the completion of the Mission's mandate. However, time horizons may help to discipline, or self-discipline, national and international actors to reach their own goals without unnecessary delays. Indicators help to create transparency about progress. At the same time, indicator-based approaches alone risk linking mandate completion to goals that are unrealistic to achieve or difficult to objectively measure, not to mention the challenge of finding the relevant authoritative body to assess political indicators in a sovereign nation.

71. The two-year transition period indicated by the Government of Iraq in its conversations with the independent strategic review team can allow for an orderly reconfiguration of the United Nations presence in Iraq, if managed in a cooperative spirit between the Government, UNAMI and the United Nations country team. The Government is of course entitled to request a shorter transition period. This would not be advisable, however. Aside from creating enormous challenges for planning and executing the transition of substantial and support activities to the country team, a sudden, non-gradual drawdown would create an atmosphere of uncertainty and provoke additional mistrust between the Government and the ruling coalition on the one hand and significant numbers of societal and political actors as well as parts of the regional and international community on the other.

72. On the basis of the above considerations, I recommend starting the gradual transition of the Mission's tasks following a new mandate decision by the Security Council in May 2024 and aim for completion of the transition by the end of May

2026. I also recommend adopting a limited number of specific indicators that can reassure Iraqi political actors of the sustainability of the current political system and their continued safe participation in it, with or without the Mission's presence.

73. The indicators proposed below are drawn from the current Government's own programme and priorities. They represent milestones that can be achieved within the two-year time frame. The Government's agenda itself is ambitious and depends, among other things, on sufficient political will among Iraqi political actors. There should also be an opportunity to quickly build up the necessary capacities of UNAMI if the situation deteriorates, given the volatile regional and geopolitical situation. In my assessment, which is based on what I have heard from Iraqi interlocutors representing a broad cross-section of the political spectrum, the achievement of, or significant progress towards achieving, these milestones would reflect a situation in which UNAMI can safely transition its functions to national institutions and the United Nations country team, successfully mitigating any doubts. The milestones would be as follows:

- Council of Representatives elections are held in due course and peacefully; election results are accepted and a new Government is formed without resort to major violence.
- The Council of Representatives undertakes, and ideally finalizes, a constitutional review.
- The federal system and the Constitution are seen as working and provide, among other things, for functioning institutions to sustain structured and regular dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad, as well as credible and functioning mechanisms to address domestic political or financial disputes.
- National human rights bodies are effective and independent, and assurances are in place for a sustainable United Nations human rights presence beyond the Mission's transition.
- An agreement is reached between Baghdad and Iraqi regions and governorates on the equitable sharing of oil revenue; this could be done by adopting the long-discussed "oil and gas law".
- An accepted working mechanism for dealing with the missing and arbitrarily detained in all regions of Iraq is in place.
- There is continued progress in the provision of security in all areas of Iraq. Among other things, this would be indicated by further progressive transfers of security tasks in the governorates from the military to the police ("bluing the green") – a main project on the agenda of the Minister of Interior.

74. These indicators are not conditional. However, significant visible progress towards reaching the milestones by early 2026, after the next regular round of parliamentary elections and government formation, should sufficiently reassure Iraqi political and civil society actors who would prefer a prolonged presence of UNAMI, as well as the international community, about the stability of the country's constitutional order, the functionality of its institutions and the ability of the State to mitigate threats and challenges to the country's peace and security. It would underline that UNAMI has indeed successfully completed its mandated tasks. Substantive progress cannot be delivered by the Mission, but by Iraqi actors under national ownership and with the support of UNAMI and the United Nations country team, as well as other international actors, if so required. Lack of progress with regard to these indicators, while not expected, would allow the Government and the Security Council to have another look at decisions about the timing of the transition.

75. The broad consultations carried out by the review team have also confirmed the consensus that, irrespective of its duration, the Mission's mandate, mission structure and staffing should be substantially changed in order to respond to current needs in Iraq. There is consensus that these needs have been different in 2023, in 2007 when the mandate was last significantly revised and in 2003 when the Mission was established.

76. The revision of the Mission's mandate for its remaining duration could therefore focus on responding to current threats and challenges to the peace and security of Iraq. This review has identified three threats to the country's peace and security and three main challenges to its stability. The table below contains my proposal for how the Security Council could reinvigorate the Mission's mandate in response to these threats and challenges.

Table

Proposals for reinvigorating the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq in response to threats and challenges

<i>Threats to the peace and security of Iraq, and challenges to stability</i>	<i>Proposed response with respect to the Mission's mandate</i>
Fragility of institutions	Refocus the Mission's good offices function on working in partnership with the Government of Iraq in engaging federal and regional political actors to consolidate nationally owned mechanisms for political dialogue, dispute resolution and crisis management, as well as community-level reconciliation; and continue the provision of electoral assistance and the promotion of human rights
Proliferation of armed actors	Task UNAMI with advocating with all Iraqi security actors, as well as with relevant regional and international actors, the deepening and consolidation of efforts to develop and implement security sector reform in Iraq that creates a peaceful and safe environment for all Iraqis, with the country living in peace with its neighbours and positively contributing to international peace and security
Emergence of a new Da'esh	Task UNAMI with supporting the Government of Iraq in creating political, social and economic opportunities for all communities, as well as establishing community reconciliation mechanisms, addressing the root causes of violent extremism and dealing with the situation of displaced and missing persons
"Unfinished business"	Task UNAMI with working with the Government of Iraq and supporting relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes in the development, within their expertise and capacities, of activities to support efforts related to the constitutional review, including the establishment of the Federation Council and Baghdad-Erbil relations in respect of budgetary allocations and security matters, including by adopting an "oil and gas law"

Threats to the peace and security of Iraq, and challenges to stability

Proposed response with respect to the Mission's mandate

Regional relations and external actors

Reiterate the request to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq to support the Government of Iraq in efforts to promote regional cooperation on the issues contained in paragraph 2 (b) (iv) of resolution [2682 \(2023\)](#), while searching for further opportunities to support dialogue and cooperation in the Gulf region

Emerging factors

Task UNAMI with working with the Government of Iraq and the United Nations country team to support the Government's efforts to diversify the economy, promote good governance, mitigate climate-related risks and water scarcity and deal with illicit transnational activities such as drug trafficking

77. Should the Security Council decide to work with this proposal for streamlining the language of the Mission's mandate, it would be important that all the other issues contained in previous annual resolutions remain highlighted in the preambular part of the mandate. In my view, most of them relate to "unfinished business". Efforts should continue in order to mitigate and resolve these issues.

78. For the remaining duration of the Mission, the Special Representative should refocus its priorities in consultation with the Government of Iraq and in line with the optimized mandate, as follows:

(a) Reinvigorate partnership between the Government and UNAMI that would focus on enhancing nationally owned institutions for dialogue and dispute resolution, with a view to gradually transitioning the Mission's third-party role to those institutions. Joint efforts in this area between the Government and UNAMI could help to reassure minority groups as well as other key constituencies, such as women, young people and non-confessional political and civil society organizations. The function of the third-party presence can only be transitioned to accepted national institutions. The United Nations country team would not be in a position to assume this role;

(b) Prepare the transition of the electoral, human rights, public information and cross-cutting thematic capacities of UNAMI to the United Nations country team;

(c) Continue to promote the Government's efforts in the areas of the fight against corruption, security sector reform, climate change and water management, for which the United Nations country team would take the lead in programmatic activities within the United Nations.

79. In all the areas listed above, UNAMI and the United Nations country team should work in partnership with the Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government and other relevant Iraqi authorities as well as key national political and civil society actors in determining the modalities for a responsible, orderly and gradual transition.

80. In the area of good offices, UNAMI should focus on supporting the Government's efforts to enhance nationally owned mechanisms for dispute resolution, crisis management and reconciliation. In areas in which such efforts have been entirely driven by UNAMI, the Government and UNAMI should agree on joint action to put in place credible Iraqi-owned mechanisms. Such mechanisms could be enhanced or established in regard to the situation in Sinjar, arguments over what used

to be called disputed internal boundaries, Baghdad-Erbil dialogue, Erbil-Sulaymaniyah dialogue, governorate-federal government dialogue, as well as civil society-national and local authority dialogue mechanisms.

81. These mechanisms should independently define their agendas and involve relevant national and international actors in support of their efforts. Recent successful examples include efforts to transform the Iraqi national committee for monitoring and reporting on children in armed conflict into a permanent committee on the prevention of child rights violations. The committee was established as part of the implementation of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, as agreed between the United Nations and the Popular Mobilization Forces. The transformation of the committee would build directly on joint efforts by the United Nations and the Government and lead to the domestic institutionalization of child protection. It should be clarified that UNAMI is mandated to support and assist the Government of Iraq, not replace or parallel it in delivering its essential tasks.

82. Areas in which UNAMI provides technical and advisory assistance to specific government agencies could be prepared for an eventual transfer to United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, Iraqi institutions or stand-alone United Nations offices after UNAMI completes its mandate. One should therefore speak of a reconfiguration of the United Nations presence in Iraq rather than the withdrawal or exit of UNAMI. Areas in which the country team would take greater responsibility may include electoral assistance, human rights, including women's empowerment and equality, public information and the media. The successful and responsible completion of the Mission's tasks should necessarily include leaving behind functional and effective United Nations capacities to support the Government and people of Iraq in such areas. Thus, following the Security Council's next decision on the mandate of UNAMI, the Government of Iraq and the United Nations should begin consultations on a transition road map for the Mission that defines specific needs and ensures the necessary levels of cooperation in those areas.

83. For the duration of its existence, UNAMI should continue to support the Iraq-Kuwait file, while also assessing how the file could be supported after the Mission's transition. Options could include delegating such tasks to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs at United Nations Headquarters or assigning them to a regional office for the Gulf region if such an office were to be established.

84. The Security Council may consider reducing the frequency of the reports of the Secretary-General to the Council, from the current pattern of three times a year to twice a year. Longer intervals between briefings would allow for better analysis of progress in areas of the Mission's activities that are increasingly focused on longer-term issues.

85. Lastly, Member States may agree in the future to introduce new mechanisms related to national and regional prevention strategies, as proposed in the Secretary-General's policy brief entitled "A New Agenda for Peace". Such mechanisms could provide venues for carrying forward residual long-term tasks in the area of conflict prevention by special political missions such as UNAMI.

B. Opportunities for regional cooperation

86. There is a close connection between domestic stability in Iraq and regional developments. The improving domestic situation in Iraq is an important source of regional stability. Growing interest among the States of the Gulf region in furthering cooperation and building confidence is similarly important for the stability of Iraq itself. While geopolitical tensions that affect regional cooperation persist, there are

emerging opportunities for cooperation on matters pertaining to regional security, climate change, trade, water, energy, culture and sports.

87. Given the troubled and conflictual history of regional relations, the current atmosphere of rapprochement in the Gulf region warrants the full support of the United Nations. As UNAMI continues to advocate cooperation among regional States on issues mentioned in paragraph 2 (b) (iv) of resolution 2682 (2023), I would also like to recommend that the United Nations establish dedicated capacity to help to consolidate linkages among the States of the Gulf region. This would be in the spirit of the specific recommendations contained in “A New Agenda for Peace” for the United Nations to assist Member States in building regional frameworks. Drawing on experiences in other regions, such dedicated capacity could be in the form of a regional office promoting regional dialogue and confidence-building.

C. Mission structure and staffing

88. The present review marks the first time that the Security Council has asked the Secretary-General to stress-test what the Council itself had been asking UNAMI to do in Iraq for 20 years against the current needs of the country and the region in the area of peace and security. My recommendations are therefore at the strategic level. Once there is agreement on the way forward at the strategic level, the precise organizational structure, staffing level and resource requirements can be clarified by technical assessments.

89. While the technical assessments should aim for a responsible reduction of substantive and mission support staff, there is also a need to demonstrate progress by beginning a gradual but substantive reduction of the UNAMI footprint. Staffing reviews should take into account constraints and opportunities related to staff mobility within the United Nations Secretariat and regulations related to rest and recuperation to ensure continued coverage.

90. Alternatives for providing logistical, administrative and security support for the work of the United Nations country team, which is currently done by UNAMI, should be explored.

91. The present security posture of the United Nations in Iraq, with a Guard Unit of 245 personnel and United Nations civilian safety, security and close protection staff of 233, massive T-walls and numerous armoured vehicles, reflects the Canal Hotel legacy, years of sporadic violence and fear of a decentralized national security architecture rather than the prevailing security environment. I recommend a review of the security posture of the United Nations in Iraq from the perspective of both the current presence of UNAMI and the United Nations country team and the expected transition of the Mission’s tasks.

92. With respect to the mission structure, and without prejudice to future technical reviews, I believe that it needs to be streamlined with a view to providing the most efficient support for the key tasks of the Mission. The current structure represents the continued addition of new units reporting directly to the Head of Mission, whose primary tasks should be good offices and advocacy, not day-to-day management of the eight units in the current organization chart, in addition to two Deputy Special Representatives. The tasks of the Deputy responsible for political affairs and electoral assistance and the Chief of Staff should be reviewed with a view to lifting the management burden from the Head of Mission.

93. UNAMI is advised to review its footprint in the governorates with a view to starting a gradual reduction to signal progress in transitioning its key tasks to national authorities. As proposed in previous reviews, the Development Support Office should

be merged with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, with an appropriate footprint adjustment to meet the needs of the Resident Coordinator.

94. Once there is agreement on the way forward, the Government or Iraq and the United Nations Secretariat may wish to agree on establishing a joint mechanism to oversee the responsible, orderly and gradual transition of UNAMI as described above.

V. Conclusion

95. The nature of threats to the peace and security of Iraq has evolved. Iraqi institutions have found ways to mitigate many of the threats of the past. Some of the mitigation measures, such as the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the distribution of positions in the public sector according to ethno-sectarian quotas (*muhassasa*), require attention so as not to evolve into new threats to the country's stability in the future.

96. The Government of Iraq has communicated to the independent strategic review team its intention to establish a clear two-year timeline for the eventual transition of UNAMI. The Mission is in Iraq at the Government's request. Therefore, this intention should be given the utmost consideration. At the same time, in order to reassure those in Iraq who are most apprehensive about the Mission's departure, I recommend combining a time horizon with an indicator-based approach.

97. There is a discrepancy between what UNAMI is tasked with doing and what it can do on the ground. It cannot fully address all the current threats, especially as they are being exacerbated by the unfolding regional escalation. Thus, for the time horizon to be agreed with the Government of Iraq, the Mission's mandate, priorities and tasks should be clarified to focus on what is needed in this historical context. I have assessed that a third-party presence is most relevant at this time to support Iraqi efforts to consolidate nationally owned conflict resolution, crisis management and reconciliation mechanisms. UNAMI should also ensure the continuity of technical assistance in elections and human rights, both deemed critical for consolidating State institutions in the long term.

98. Even the Mission's perpetual presence would not mean, let alone guarantee, that all the "unfinished business" in implementing past undertakings and commitments in political and security areas would be resolved. Today, ownership of these issues is with Iraqi institutions. They have the capacity to advocate peace and stability inside the country and with external actors. The United Nations should remain available to support Iraq if requested.

99. No United Nations mission should stay in a country forever. There is a dilemma between not leaving Iraq behind by prematurely transitioning key political tasks and letting national leaders take ownership of the future of their country in which all components feel safe and represented. Given the difficult path that Iraq has travelled to be where it is today, if the current leadership feels that it no longer needs support from the United Nations in the political area, it should be encouraged to take full ownership for leading Iraq forward. The Security Council could offer to finalize the outstanding tasks in the remaining time of the Mission's existence.

100. However, in the hope that the review will be used to streamline UNAMI, a list of targeted recommendations that could help in navigating the present report is provided below:

- To the Security Council:
 - Launch a time-bound and indicator-based transition of the Mission's tasks to national institutions and the United Nations country team in a responsible, orderly and gradual manner (see paras. 54, 55 and 69–74).
 - Streamline the Mission's mandate for the transitional period on the basis of current threats to the peace and security of Iraq (see paras. 76 and 77).
 - Reduce the frequency of UNAMI briefings to twice a year (see para. 84).
- To the Government of Iraq:
 - Consider if and how UNAMI could support Iraq in addressing current threats and challenges (see paras. 26–44), bearing in mind the proposed refocusing of its priorities (see paras. 78–80) and its current functional roles (see paras. 61–67).
 - Engage in consultations with the United Nations and the Security Council with a view to identifying the residual tasks that UNAMI would hand over to national institutions and the duration for the transition of such tasks (see paras. 79–83).
 - Establish a joint mechanism with the United Nations to oversee the Mission's transition and the reconfiguration of United Nations engagement in Iraq (see para. 94).
- To the Secretary-General:
 - Task relevant departments with undertaking civilian capacity and security posture reviews, with a view to proposing appropriate reductions in the Mission's footprint (see paras. 89 and 91).
 - Consider establishing dedicated capacity to consolidate and promote regional initiatives and cooperation (see para. 87).
- To UNAMI:
 - Refocus priorities in consultation with Iraqi counterparts (see paras. 78–83).
 - Initiate consultations with the Government of Iraq and the United Nations country team on the transition of the Mission's residual tasks, in order to signal progress (see paras. 79 and 82).
 - Streamline the Mission's organizational structure (see para. 92).

101. I would like to thank the Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, political leaders, civil society and UNAMI for their hospitality and support during the independent strategic review team's visit to Iraq. I would also like to thank them all, as well as the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, other United Nations entities and their staff, Security Council members and thematic experts, for their openness in sharing candid views and knowledge with me.