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Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



Research Paper

Iraq Should Consider Extending the Mandate of the United Nations Mission

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Introduction

Iraq is scheduled to see the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) end this year, marking 22 years since its establishment. This decision comes amid escalating tensions between Israel on one side, and Iran and Hezbollah on the other, especially since last summer. With increasing regional tensions, Iraqi leaders should reconsider extending the mission's mandate.

UNAMI was established in August 2003 by UN Security Council Resolution 1500, just months after the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Iraq following the fall of the Baath regime. The mission's primary role was to support the Coalition Provisional Authority, led by Paul Bremer, and the Iraqi Governing Council in their efforts to establish democratic governance and restructure state institutions.

While the "United Nations Country Team," comprising approximately 22 agencies, funds, and programs, focuses on humanitarian assistance and achieving sustainable development goals, UNAMI plays a purely political role. Its mandate is renewed annually at the request of the Iraqi government, with reports submitted to the Department of Political Affairs in New York. Security Council Resolution 1770 of 2007 expanded the mission's role to include supporting political dialogue and reconciliation, providing electoral assistance, promoting human rights and judicial reform, and engaging with neighboring countries.

Review of UNAMI's Mandate

After assuming office in October 2022, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, with broad support from his ruling coalition, decided that UNAMI's role was no longer necessary. This decision was based on the desire to reinforce the image of sovereignty and independence, particularly in light of improved security

and relative political stability. The government sought to shed the image of reliance on international support and to emphasize that Iraq is capable of addressing its internal and external affairs without UN mediation.

In May 2023, Security Council Resolution 2682 commissioned an independent strategic review of UNAMI's work, led by Volker Perthes. The review included consultations within Iraq during the second half of 2023, involving meetings with government officials at both local and federal levels, party leaders, and members of civil society. The review focused on three main areas: current threats to peace and security in Iraq, recommendations for improving UNAMI's mandate, and ways to support Iraq in enhancing regional cooperation.

Perthes concluded that Iraq's political system had become more capable of managing internal and external crises with less violence. The report noted that the continued presence of an international mediator could weaken incentives for national solutions and diminish Iraqis' ownership of their political processes. It stressed that "no special political mission of the United Nations should remain indefinitely in any country." The report recommended gradually reducing UNAMI's mandate to focus on humanitarian and development activities, before transferring these tasks to the United Nations Country Team within two years as part of a so-called "organizational restructuring."

After the report's release, Al-Sudani sent an official letter to the UN Secretary-General in May 2024, requesting the mission's termination by December 31, 2025, stating that "there are no longer justifications for the presence of a political mission in Iraq." For the remainder of the period, he called for the mission's activities to focus on economic reform, service provision, sustainable development, climate change, and other non-political tasks.

Three weeks later, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2732, extending UNAMI's mandate for the final time in line with the timetable proposed by the Iraqi government. The resolution requested that the Secretary-General prepare a transitional and liquidation plan for the mission, to be completed by December 31, 2025.

Escalation of Regional Conflict

However, regional developments have accelerated beyond the expectations on which the decision was based, fundamentally altering the security environment in which UNAMI was preparing to leave.

Although the strategic review noted concerns about the resurgence of ISIS and the proliferation of armed groups, it did not fully anticipate the consequences of the war in Gaza. The report merely referenced “uncertainty regarding the impact of the current regional escalation on Iraq.” As violence intensified between Israel and Iran in the second half of the year, with increased confrontations with Hezbollah and Iran's first-ever direct ballistic missile strikes on Israel, fears grew that Israel might expand its strikes to include Iraqi territory, targeting factions linked to Iran as part of the so-called “Axis of Resistance.”

In November 2024, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar sent a letter to the Security Council affirming Israel's right to self-defense and calling for action against these factions, which he described as “arms of the Popular Mobilization Forces funded by the state.” Prime Minister Al-Sudani condemned the letter, considering it a potential pretext for aggression against Iraq, emphasizing that decisions of war and peace are the exclusive prerogative of the Iraqi state.

If not for the political and diplomatic efforts of the Iraqi government to pressure armed factions to halt drone attacks on Israeli targets, along with active regional

mediation, violence would likely have escalated to more dangerous levels.

A pivotal figure in these efforts was the new UN Special Representative to Iraq, Mohamed El Hassan, who arrived in Iraq in October 2024 at the peak of the crisis in Lebanon. Initially tasked with overseeing the termination of UNAMI, he quickly found himself at the center of a severe geopolitical crisis. As an Arabic-speaking diplomat from Oman, he was able to communicate effectively with Iraqi parties, including a rare meeting with the highest religious authority, Sayyid Ali Al-Sistani, in Najaf. This meeting resulted in a statement from Al-Sistani's office, widely regarded as a roadmap for ensuring Iraq's long-term stability. The statement stressed the need to "prevent external interventions in all their forms"—a reference to both Israel and Iran—and explicitly called for "ensuring that weapons remain in the hands of the state," a clear message to armed factions outside government control.

El Hassan's diplomatic efforts also extended to regional tours, including a visit to Tehran, where he urged Iranian leaders to help spare Iraq the consequences of regional conflict. His approach was marked by caution and calm, unlike some of his predecessors who were sometimes accused of overstepping their role in Iraqi internal affairs.

Redefining UNAMI's Mandate

Despite Iraq's demonstrated increased capacity to maintain internal peace, manage revenues, organize postponed local elections, negotiate with Erbil over Kirkuk, and reach a bilateral security understanding with the United States to prevent ISIS's return, the risk of regional instability remains. Iraq's efforts to strengthen economic and political ties with its neighbors, through projects like the Development Road and hosting the upcoming Arab League summit in May,

reflect growing confidence on the international stage.

However, maintaining a neutral third party such as UNAMI, with a direct channel to the Security Council, could be a strategically beneficial step. The presence of a mission with a clear and limited mandate may provide an additional stabilizing factor, helping to contain external tensions before they escalate into direct threats. It also gives Iraq a strong diplomatic card in managing regional pressures and offers a structured platform for communication with international parties, ensuring Iraq's interests are represented globally.

At the same time, Iraqi leadership seeks to assert sovereignty and reduce any perception of dependence on external actors. The challenge lies in balancing this aspiration with the realities of a volatile region, where even limited escalation can have wide-ranging consequences. A carefully calibrated UN role, restricted to external mediation, could provide Iraq with an additional diplomatic shield, enhancing stability without compromising national sovereignty.

Given how close Iraq recently came to being drawn into a spiral of regional turmoil, its leaders should seriously consider extending UNAMI's presence beyond the scheduled end date in December, with a renewed focus on supporting Iraq's stability and preventing external crises from spilling inward. Iraq's ability to navigate these challenges will determine its future as a stable, independent state in an increasingly turbulent region.

Research Identity

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Note: The opinions expressed in this research do not necessarily reflect the views of the center, but only the opinions of its author.

About center

Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning is a non-governmental and non-profit organization established in 2015 and registered with the NGO directorate in the general secretariat of the council of ministers in Baghdad.

The center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies, and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilizes the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The center also seeks to support economic reforms, and sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The center also seeks to support the development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

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