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TRANSFORMATIONS IN GERMAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY: THE VIEW FROM IRAQ

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Transformations in German Middle East Policy: The View from Iraq

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Abstract

The challenges faced by Germany's recent experience in Iraq reflect the complex and dynamic nature of engaging in conflict zones in the Middle East. An overlap between humanitarian concerns and national security interests formed the basis of Germany's initial decision to deploy soldiers to northern Iraq, but once there, the complex reality and shifting power dynamics meant that the Bundesrepublik needed to rebalance its engagement in order to maintain leverage as an honest broker in Iraq. During the post-IS phase, Germany's domestic security interests have aligned with Iraq's imperative to stabilise the liberated provinces and modernise the country's economy to attract greater foreign investment. Germany's experience in Iraq has shown that empowering local actors to take the lead while maintaining close coordination with the central government to ensure effective buy-in from relevant stakeholders is critical. As Europe takes a far more proactive and hands-on approach to the Middle East, there is much scope to broaden and deepen these exchanges.

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Introduction

The transformation in Germany's engagement in Iraq over the past four years illustrates a major shift in the Bundesrepublik's approach to pursuing its national interest in the Middle East. Germany's bilateral ties with Iraq have developed out of necessity rather than choice, and through that experience, a set of mutual interests have emerged between the two countries that can offer a framework for a long-term commitment to deepening that relationship.

While Germany only engaged in low-key diplomatic relations with Iraq during the initial post-2003 period because of its refusal to take part in the US-led war to topple Saddam Hussein, its decision to join the Global Coalition against the so-called Islamic State (IS) significantly raised both its profile among Iraqis and its weight among international actors in the country.

2014 German intervention

The fall of Mosul in June 2014 may have raised alarm bells in Berlin but it was not until IS attacked the Yazidis of Sinjar in August that the German government determined that it should play an active part in the international response to contain the threat of the transnational terrorist organisation. While the genocide against Yazidis and the impending humanitarian catastrophe may have shocked the German government into action, the realisation that a refugee crisis would hit Europe undoubtedly framed the German government's calculation to intervene.

"The lives of millions of people, the stability of Iraq and the whole region and ... due to the high number of foreign fighters, our security in Germany and Europe are being threatened," read a German government statement after the decision was taken to intervene. "It is our humanitarian responsibility and in the interests of our security to help those suffering and to stop the IS."¹

An estimated 400 German nationals had already travelled to Syria and Iraq by 2014, and by early 2017, that figure had risen to over 900.² The threat posed by returning German fighters to the country's domestic security was palpable.

1. Al Jazeera, Germany offers military aid against IS group, 2014.

2. Heinke, Daniel H., German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and its Implications, 2017.

Even though the unprecedented decision to break with its post-WW2 policy of refraining from providing material support to conflict zones was met with trepidation at home, four years on and with IS decimated in Iraq, that decision appears to have paid off.

Configuring an effective intervention plan

Among the most important decisions that the German government had to make was where it would focus its military efforts. While several of its European counterparts deployed soldiers to Baghdad, Germany decided that it would restrict its efforts to the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq. Given the particularly high political cost associated with German deployment, limiting its mandate to supporting the Kurdish Peshmerga in the secure semi-autonomous zone was the most favourable outcome at the time. By deploying a small contingent of 150 military trainers and advisors to Erbil, Germany was able to position itself to respond to the Yazidi genocide and provide material support to local forces that were battling IS. Additional German assets contributed to the US-led air campaign as part of Operation Inherent Resolve by supporting reconnaissance and refueling efforts.³

Since the first shipment of weapons arrived in Erbil on 25 September 2014,⁴ Germany delivered over 2,000 tonnes of weapons in more than 30 shipments to the Kurdistan Regional Government. These included over 20,000 machine guns and 8,000 pistols, as well as MILAN anti-tank guided missiles, which were critical to defending against deadly armoured suicide car bombs.⁵

Navigating local dynamics

Despite the fact that the German military mandate was relatively small and manageable compared to other counterparts in the anti-IS coalition, over the course of three years the Bundesrepublik ran into a number of problems that required adjustments to its mission.

3. Global Coalition, Germany's Military Contribution Against Daesh In Iraq, 2017.

4. Deutsche Welle, German weapons delivery heads to Iraqi Kurdistan, 2014.

5. Deutsch Welle, Germany resumes weapons shipments to Iraqi Kurd, 2016.

In January 2016, German reporters found that some of the Bundeswehr-issued G3 assault rifles and P1 pistols were being sold on the black market in Iraq. After the German government demanded an explanation from Kurdish authorities, a KRG investigation found that 30 of the 28,000 weapons delivered had been lost or sold illegally by the Peshmerga (although German officials have privately suggested that the figure is around 90 weapons).⁶ Arms shipments were temporarily suspended until German authorities were satisfied by Kurdish reassurances and both parties signed an end user agreement to ensure that the arms could not be sold to third parties. By August 2016, the arms shipments had resumed.⁷

Another far more serious unforeseen development risked dragging Germany into a conflict between competing Kurdish factions. Historic rivalries between the two leading Kurdish parties, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), are well established, and even led to a civil war in the mid-1990s. In the post-2003 era, those rivalries have been somewhat moderated by a commitment to ensuring a united Kurdish front in order to maximise bargaining power in Baghdad. Nevertheless, it is well documented that Peshmerga units hold allegiances to either the KDP or PUK, and competition over resources and influence is prevalent.⁸ Throughout the course of the campaign against IS, the PUK often complained that international military aid was being funneled to Peshmerga forces linked predominantly to the KDP. It became increasingly challenging for foreign donors including Germany to ensure fair and balanced distribution of aid in order to maintain impartiality and avoid escalating tensions between rival factions.

Meanwhile, the KDP's dominance over so-called disputed territories in northern Iraq, including Sinjar, has been tempered by the emergence of rival Kurdish armed groups, notably the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), which is effectively the Iraq-based wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In March 2017, video footage emerged that appeared to show clashes in the village of Khanasor in Sinjar district between KDP Peshmerga equipped with German-issued weapons, and Yazidis linked to the YBS. This once again put Germany in a difficult position, firstly because German military aid was intended solely for use against IS, but secondly because the optics of German-issued weapons being used against Yazidis in Sinjar

6. Deutsch Welle, Germany demands explanation after Kurdish arms sales reports, 2016.

7. Deutsch Welle, Germany resumes weapons shipments to Iraqi Kurd, 2016.

8. Helfont, Samuel, Getting Peshmerga Reform Right: Helping the Iraqi Kurds to Help Themselves in Post-ISIS Iraq, 2017.

is antithetical to the spirit of the entire mission.⁹

Beyond these two problematic episodes, Germany's decision to restrict its support solely to the KRG risked undermining its diplomatic ties with Baghdad. Though it may not have been anticipated when the initial decision was taken by Berlin to intervene, the emergence of a major political rift between Baghdad and Erbil in 2017 over the latter's aspirations for independence meant that Germany had to offset its military commitments in Erbil with reinforced political engagement in Baghdad in order to maintain its leverage as an honest broker. Germany, along with the international community as a whole, formally opposed the September 2017 independence referendum.

"The German government considers the territorial integrity of Iraq to be indispensable. It rejects any unilateral referendum on the independence of the Kurdistan region that has not been agreed on with the central government in Baghdad," stated a government spokesperson.¹⁰ The aftermath of the referendum and subsequent moves by Baghdad to assert federal control over the disputed territories, including Kirkuk, added greater incentive for the Germans to rebalance their relationships in Iraq.

In March 2018, following the formation of the new coalition government in Germany, a cabinet motion to amend the soon-to-expire training mandate in the Kurdistan Region was approved by the Bundestag. The decision was taken to retain the same number of trainers in the country but to divide them equally between Erbil and Baghdad. However, given the impending Iraqi parliamentary elections that were scheduled for May 12 and the uncertainties surrounding the formation of the next government (that have yet to be resolved), the mandate in Erbil was only extended until June and the new expanded mission that incorporates Baghdad until October, pending a review.¹¹

Addressing the German parliament, defence minister Ursula von der Leyen explained how Germany would transition away from counterterrorism training for the Kurdish Peshmerga towards a broader programme that would include mine

9. Gebauer, Matthias, *Kurdenmiliz kämpft offenbar mit deutschen Waffen gegen Jesiden*, Spiegel Online, 2017.

10. The Federal Government, *Referendum on Kurdish State: The territorial integrity of Iraq is indispensable*, 2017.

11. The Federal Government, *Bundeswehr Mandate for Iraq: A contribution to stabilization*, 2017.

sweeping, field medicine and defence against biological and chemical weapons. “So, in future, we will stand on two feet in Iraq, with one of them in [Kurdish-populated] Erbil, the other close to Baghdad,” von der Leyen said, illustrating Germany’s desire for a sustainable and balanced approach to its engagement in Iraq.¹²

The task of upgrading Germany’s footprint in Baghdad will prove to be challenging given the relatively small size of its diplomatic representation in the capital. Located in the middle-class district of al-Mansour, the German mission houses a very small team of rotating diplomats, including a resident ambassador. Security and logistical constraints mean that scope for expanding the mission is highly restricted. The German government however, took the decision in 2017 to deploy staff from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), who are hosted by the British embassy.

Additionally, Germany’s military engagement in Iraq could be expanded by it taking on a greater role within the proposed NATO training mission that is expected to be launched in July.¹³ The mission’s focus would “train Iraqi instructors, and develop Iraqi military schools so that [e]xpertise can reach thousands of others,” according to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. Germany’s defence minister has already indicated her government’s support for the mission.¹⁴

The stabilisation imperative

Germany has given over EUR 1.3 billion in financial assistance to Iraq since 2014, making it the second biggest donor after the US. It has taken the lead among coalition members on stabilisation efforts in the liberated provinces of Ninewa, Salahadin and Anbar and is the leading contributor to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s stabilisation and resilience programmes, having provided over EUR 263 million by the end of 2017. The projects are based on priorities determined by Iraqi authorities and include rehabilitating electricity grids, repairing water systems and clearing rubble to ensure that schools and hospitals can be reopened, and short-term employment through public works schemes. Germany’s method in this regard is no different to the international community’s

12. Deutsche Welle, Berlin wants to expand Bundeswehr training mission in Iraq, 2018.

13. Rudaw, NATO plans launch of Iraq training mission in July, 2018.

14. Emmott and Ali, At U.S. urging, NATO agrees training mission in Iraq, 2018.

cooperative approach. As the German ambassador to Iraq put it during a visit to Mosul, “Germany is committed to support recovery in Iraq, but we firmly believe that it is the people of Iraq who will ultimately determine how successful and sustainable that recovery will be.”¹⁵

Central to stabilisation efforts is encouraging IDPs to safely return to their places of origin. To date, some 3.7 million IDPs have made the journey home, while two million remain displaced.¹⁶

Iraq’s ability to overcome the current fiscal crisis and reduce its reliance on oil will have a large bearing on its long-term economic stability. The 2018 Iraqi federal budget incorporates German financial assistance schemes, namely a EUR–500-million loan through the KfW Development Bank on behalf of the federal government, which will be used to finance electricity projects.¹⁷

By supporting economic stability in Iraq and the safe return of IDPs, Germany, along with its European counterparts, has a very straightforward calculus in mind: as more displaced persons return home to find safe and secure communities with a vibrant economy that offers prospects for employment, the rate of illegal migration to Europe will decline. This cuts to the heart of Germany’s foreign policy imperative in the Middle East: while the threat of terrorism has fallen, Europe needs to do all it can to ensure that it does not have to deal with another wave of refugees in the future.

Not only is it in Germany’s interest to prevent further illegal migration into Europe, the government also needs to address the challenges of existing refugees in the country. In April 2018, German authorities announced plans to repatriate up to 10,000 failed Iraqi asylum seekers by establishing migration advisory centres in Baghdad and Erbil, which will help facilitate the process by creating education and employment opportunities, including cash-for-work programmes where locals take part in reconstruction efforts to help their reintegration into Iraqi society. The programme known as “Perspektive Heimat” was discussed during a visit to Iraq

15. UNDP, Generous contribution ranks Germany as top contributor to stabilization in Iraq, 2017.

16. International Organisation for Migration, Iraq Displacement Matrix, May 2017

17. Iraq Databank, Text of the General Budget of the Federal Republic of Iraq for fiscal year 2018, 2018.

by the Minister of Development Gerd Müller.¹⁸ According to German authorities, some 240,000 Iraqi refugees are currently living in Germany.¹⁹

Future trajectory in Iraq

The overlap between Germany's dual refugee and security burden and Iraq's need to diversify its economy and encourage private sector growth and investment offers a broad framework on which to articulate a set of mutual interests between the two countries.

Since 2003, the degree of European engagement in Iraq has been largely a function of America's commitment to the country. That approach appears to have shifted following the election of President Trump. Trump's mercurial nature means that American policy in Iraq can no longer be relied upon as a firm benchmark for the EU's own strategy. The recent decision by the Trump administration to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran underscored the divergence in visions. Indeed, many Europeans are concerned that American escalation with Iran could trigger a new wave of illegal migration to Europe. Additionally, the United Kingdom's planned exit from the European Union means that coordination on Middle East policy will also recede. While significant differences on Iraq policy have yet to emerge between the US, UK and EU, it is clear that the expanding footprint of the European missions, including Germany, signals a determination on their part to play a much more proactive role in securing their foreign policy objectives. As one German expert noted, gone are the days when the US could be relied upon to provide security for Europe. "We cannot afford to not know what is going on anymore," he explained. For that reason, there is no substitute for being engaged and present on the ground.²⁰

Lessons learned

In summary, a number of lessons can be extracted from Germany's intervention in Iraq since 2014. First and foremost, great care needs to be taken when providing military aid to ensure that Germany contributes to de-escalating rather than exacerbating rivalries between local stakeholders. Even though the existential threat of IS united the country against a common enemy, it did not negate the internal differences that continued to play out throughout the course of the war.

18. Deutsche Welle, German development minister heads to Iraq for reconstruction talks, 2018.

19. Deutsche Welle, Germany wants to facilitate repatriation of thousands of Iraqis, 2018.

20. Author's discussions with German officials and experts in Baghdad, May 2018.

For that reason, Germany must be extra cautious in the way it chooses to engage with post-IS Iraq.

Secondly, respect for sovereignty is critical, especially when German engagement extends to sub-national actors. Poor coordination with the central government can lead to mistrust, which is difficult to rectify. Not only should interventions be undertaken with the full consent of the relevant authorities, but engagement strategies should also be formulated that are closely aligned with the stated needs of national and sub-national actors. This will lead to greater buy-in and, consequently, interventions are more likely to yield positive results.

While Germany's strategic interests in Iraq may be well defined, its priorities need to adapt to the changing context. Iraq's priorities following the formal end of military operations against IS are very different to those of the war period. There is much scope for developing closer ties based on shared experiences such as federalism and post-war reconstruction.²¹

Ensuring that German and Iraqi priorities are aligned requires extra effort to understand dynamics on the ground. But there is much appetite on both sides to build on the experience of the past four years and step up interactions and exchanges, not only between the two governments but also among civil society and academic institutions.²²

21. For a discussion on the challenges of federalism in Iraq, see Al-Mawlawi, "Functioning Federalism" in Iraq: a critical perspective, 2018.

22. Based on author's discussions with German officials in Berlin. See Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Iraqi delegation from Baghdad visits Hamburg and Berlin, 2017, and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Decision-Makers from Baghdad Visit Berlin, 2018.

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