



Delegation for relations with Iraq

16.3.2023

MISSION REPORT

following the visit to Iraq of 6-9 March 2023 and the Seventh Inter-Parliamentary Meeting with the Council of Representatives of Iraq

Delegation for relations with Iraq

Members of the mission:

Sara Skyttedal

Domènec Ruiz Devesa

Marco Campomenosi

(PPE) (Chair and Leader of the mission)

(S&D)

(ID)

Other participants:

Two members of the EP Secretariat

Introduction

At the beginning of the present term, the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with Iraq, envisaged an ambitious programme of activities and meetings in order to reinforce parliamentary and political ties with the Republic of Iraq and its parliament.

Despite efforts from both parties, parliamentary relations with Iraq were stalled for a long period due to - inter alia - the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and to internal instability in Iraq.

Against this backdrop, Members of the European Parliament highlighted the symbolic relevance of their visit, which marked the formal restart of joint parliamentary activities after the dark years characterised by the rise and the decline of the so-called Islamic State.

This visit, the first since 2011, had the clear objective to restore ties with the Council of Representatives of Iraq, acquire first-hand knowledge of the changes that had marked the Middle-Eastern country in recent years, and pave the way to a lasting and deeper cooperation at bilateral level with both the Council of Representatives of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Parliament.

The European Parliament's Delegation held extensive meetings in both Baghdad and Erbil. The EP Delegation finally visited war-shattered Mosul, which is currently being restored and rebuilt thanks to the financial support of the European Union.

The Iraqi and Kurdish authorities were really committed to make this visit possible, and the delegation could count on the very efficient support and assistance from the EU Delegation in Baghdad, the European Union's Liaison Office based in Erbil, and the European Union Advisory Mission to Iraq (EUAM).

Summary account of meetings

A. Bilateral and parliamentary relations

Relations between the European Parliament and the Council of Representatives of Iraq have traditionally been good but not very regular. The last Inter-Parliamentary Meeting (IPM) took place in 2015 in Brussels and the last IPM took place in Baghdad in 2011. The European Parliament visited Iraq in 2018 (Committee of External Affairs) and in 2022 (Sub-Committee on Security and Defence).

The IPM highlighted the strong interest by both parties to enhance parliamentary cooperation and ensure a regular calendar of meetings and reciprocal visits. Members of both parliaments agreed to work together towards the setting-up of the Joint Parliamentary Committee between the European Parliament and Iraqi Council of Representatives as foreseen in the EU–Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

Both parties agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation between the European Parliament and the Council of Representatives of the Republic of Iraq in areas of common interest, such as economic diversification, education, research, innovation, green and digital economy, and counteracting corruption and money laundering.

For the first time since the establishment of the EP–Iraq Inter-parliamentary relations, an extensive joint final declaration (attached to this report) was discussed and adopted. The EP delegation also took note of the request to provide some technical support to the Iraqi parliament as a way to enhance the role and efficiency of Iraq’s elected body.

Ms Sara Skyttedal, D-IQ Chair and leader of the mission, and her colleagues called for a strong, independent and cohesive Iraq, and asked the Iraqi authorities to effectively protect fundamental human and civil rights in the country. The D-IQ Chair expressed appreciation for the progress recently made by Iraq and called for an end to foreign interference in domestic Iraqi’s affairs.

Ms Sara Skyttedal stressed that the EP and its parliamentary diplomacy could play a significant role in defusing the current tensions in the region and support Iraq’s democratic transition process. The D-IQ chair praised Iraq for having built over the years an effective and result-oriented diplomacy aiming to secure stability and enhance international cooperation in the Middle East.

Both parties agreed to meet again in Brussels or Strasbourg in 2024.

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The EP Delegation also met the Kurdish Regional Parliament and its Deputy Speaker, Mr Hemin Hawrami in Erbil. The Kurdish Regional Parliament expressed its interest in deepening relations with the European Parliament and receive technical support.

B. The political context and bilateral political relations

The visit occurred after a long stalemate, which de facto prevented the formation of an effective executive for more than one year after the elections took place in October 2021. The Al Sudani executive was in fact formed only in October 2022, after a particularly intense phase of political instability marked by the temporary occupation of the premises of the Iraqi parliament in August 2022.

During the meetings with H.E. Abdul Latif Rashid, President of Iraq, with the Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Fuad Hussein, MEPs reiterated the EP’s strong interest in the process of reconstruction and democratisation of Iraq. Members positively commented on the strong economic and technical support provided by the EU and its Member States to Iraq.

The EP Delegation congratulated H.E Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani on his election to the position of Prime Minister of Iraq and expressed the hope that the new Iraqi government may achieve the necessary economic and social reforms, ensure that the conditions for new elections are met (including the revision of the current electoral law), and find a sustainable understanding with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) on sensitive pending issues.

Discussions with the highest authorities of Iraq covered sensitive issues including the much-needed vote on a state budget (which would make it possible to access new resources at central and local level, create new jobs and ensure that the public administration is paid regularly). Participants evoked the need to pass a law that would end the dispute with the Kurdish

government about the share of oil-generated revenues that the Iraqi central state should transfer to its regional partner. The importance of fully implementing the agreement between Iraq's federal government and the Kurdish regional government about the disputed area of Sinjar was also discussed.

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In Baghdad, the delegation met with the NATO Head of Mission, Lt. General Giovanni Iannucci, and with the European Union Advisory Mission to Iraq (EUAM), represented by its Head of Mission Anders Wiberg. It held a final debriefing with the European diplomatic corps accredited in Iraq.

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In Erbil, the EP Delegation met with the Kurdish region's President H.E. Mr. Nechirvan Barzani as well as with the regional Prime Minister, Mr Masrour Barzani, and with Deputy Prime Minister Mr Qubad Talabani. The Kurdish president and prime minister belong to the KDP party while the deputy prime minister represents the second political force in Iraqi Kurdistan, PUK.

Iraqi Kurdistan is currently facing a serious political crisis, which has de facto paralysed the action of the local executive due to strong disagreements between the two major political parties active in the region. Topics discussed during these institutional meetings included the role of Kurdistan in the reconstruction of Iraq and the often-difficult relations between the Central Government and its regional partner as well as relations to neighbours.

C. Economic and trade relations with the European Union

The economic situation in both Europe and Iraq is marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian aggression against Ukraine was evoked in several meetings.

There was a general understanding that bilateral economic relations may be further enhanced and that it is important to count on reliable partners in a global economic scenario that is quickly and unpredictably changing. The discussions highlighted the interest in deepening bilateral trade and economic ties and to support new European foreign investments in Iraq.

Members made it clear that, despite the positive economic conjuncture marked by a sharp rise in oil prices, Iraq needs to quickly proceed with the diversification of its economy, which is almost completely dependent on hydrocarbons revenues. The creation of new jobs and a more effective insertion of the country into the global economy are needed. More stability may well attract more investors from abroad and help obtaining the appropriate knowhow needed for more sustainable economic development of the country.

The EU is supporting Iraq with various assistance schemes. In Mosul and Erbil, the EU Delegation visited two projects managed by UNESCO and funded by the EU. These projects aim at preserving and restoring the cultural heritage of Iraq while creating new job opportunities for both Iraqis (residents in the two cities concerned as well as IDPs) and refugees from Syria. Investments in tourism may represent an interesting form of economic diversification for Iraq, when full security conditions are met.

D. Human rights, social rights and women empowerment

Human rights, social rights, and the role of women and their empowerment in Iraqi society were also discussed at length. A specific emphasis was put on the long-standing issue of effectively protecting religious and ethnic minorities, which have been severely discriminated for a long time and were directly targeted by the violence of the Islamic State.

Members stressed that inclusive citizenship, respect for human rights, and gender equality are necessary preconditions for any future social and human development in Iraq. They called on Iraq to consider the full participation of women, youth, civil society, and all other components of Iraqi society, including ethnic and religious minorities, as well as the full protection of children's rights, as major priorities on the national, regional, and local levels.

The issue of effective return and possible readmission of Iraqi irregular migrants in full respect of their rights was also raised during several meetings, along with the obligations of the parties arising from relevant EU and international law. The majority of immigrants trying to reach Europe originate in Iraqi Kurdistan, the safest part of Iraq, and are often prompted by economic rather than security reasons. The Christian and the Yazidi diasporas are instead focused on other parts of the world, such as Canada or Australia.

The EP delegation met H.E. Najjib Michael Moussa, the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul and a *Sakharov prize* finalist. MEPs were briefed about the way the Catholic prelate was able to save most of the rich cultural heritage of both the Chaldean and the Yazidi communities in Mosul. The Delegation also met H.G. Mar Abris Youkhanan, Bishop of the Assyrian Church, in Erbil.

During their stay in Erbil, Members met select civil society representatives and discussed the role of women and minorities in Iraqi and Kurdish society. Participants to this restricted meeting stressed that the protection of human rights and civil rights remains limited, and that civil society representatives are still exposed to sectarian and political violence.

Conclusions

As mentioned above, the visit was a genuine success in terms of parliamentary diplomacy from many points of view. It allowed for the reinstatement of parliamentary relations with the Council of Representatives of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Parliament, and highlighted the convergence of both parties on a number of key political issues.

The decision to replicate the Inter-Parliamentary meeting next year in Brussels as well as the signing, for the first time ever, of a final joint declaration mark real progress with respect to bilateral understanding at parliamentary level.

While the mission as such was very positive, drawing attention to possible fields of cooperation such as trade, research, innovation, security, and clean and renewable energies, there are still some issues that require further improvement. The European Parliament should continue to closely follow the situation in the country, sustain Iraq's democratic transition, and concentrate on assistance projects to increase the protection of minorities, women, and youth in the country. Other focus areas are the fight against corruption and diversifying the economy.

The high level of institutional meetings demonstrates the strong interest Iraq has in working with the EU and its Parliament, as well as the existence of a climate of trust and the solid reputation D-IQ has been able to secure during the present term.

The mission was well perceived in Iraq, with very positive comments by the local press. Nevertheless, person-to-person contacts with the local population were rather limited due to stringent security measures, especially in Baghdad. It is difficult to estimate the impact of the visit on EU citizens; however, feedback from the EU diplomatic corps and EU economic operators in Iraq was positive. Several interlocutors wished that the presence of the EU and its Parliament in the country could be further reinforced.

Proposals for follow-up

Look into the possibility of establishing a Joint Parliamentary Committee between the European Parliament and the Council of Representatives of Iraq, in order to monitor issues of common interest and strengthen parliamentary ties. Cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Parliament could also be improved.

Organise the Eighth EP–Iraq IPM in Brussels or Strasbourg in 2024.

In cooperation with the relevant EP Committees and sub-Committees (AFET, SEDE, DEVE, DROI), continue to monitor the political, economic, and social situation in Iraq.

FINAL PROGRAMME
Seventh EP-Iraq Interparliamentary Meeting,
Bagdad and Erbil, 6-9 March 2023

Monday, 6 March 2023	Bagdad
Meeting with H.E Fuad Hussein Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of foreign affairs	
Meeting with H.E Abdullatif Jamal Rashid, President of Iraq	
Meeting with H.E Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq	
Meeting with H.E Mohamed al-Halboussi, Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Iraq	
Meeting with H.E Qassim al Araj National Security Advisor	

Tuesday, 7 March 2023	Bagdad-Erbil
Meeting with Lieutenant General Giovanni M. Iannucci NATO Mission Iraq Commander	
National Museum EUAM event on protection of cultural heritage + short visit	
Inter-Parliamentary Meeting with Chair and MPs of the Committee on External Affairs of the Parliament of the Republic of Iraq	
Meeting with the EU HoMs to Iraq	

Wednesday, 8 March 2023	Erbil
Meeting with H. G. Mar Abris Youkhanan (Bishop of Erbil of the Assyrian Church)	
Meeting with H.E. Mr. Nechirvan Barzani (KDP), KRG President	
Meeting with Hemin Hawrami (KDP), Deputy speaker of Parliament of the Kurdistan Region	
Meeting with H.E Masrour Barzani, Prime Minister	
Meeting with H.E Qubad Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister	
Working dinner with representatives of the Kurdish institutions and civil society	

Thursday, 9 March 2023	Mosul/Erbil
Visit of EU funded project revive the spirit of Mosul, implemented by UNESCO and meeting with CSOs, international partners.	
Meeting/Lunch with Archbishop Najib Mikhael Moussa.	
Visit of the EU funded project Erbil Citadel with Mr. Paolo Fontani, UNESCO	

PARTICIPANTS

Ms Sara SKYTTEDEL, Chair
Mr Domènec RUIZ DEVESA, Vice- Chair
Mr Marco CAMPOMENOSI

2 Members of the Secretariat of the European Parliament