

## **A contribution by the Secretariat of COMECE in view of the planned EU Communication on “Elements for an EU Strategy for Iraq”**

*The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) brings together the Bishop delegates from the Bishops' Conferences of the EU Member States. COMECE is a partner of the EU institutions in the Dialogue foreseen by Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Through its permanent General Secretariat, based in Brussels, COMECE analyses EU policies on a day-by-day basis. As part of the worldwide network of the Catholic Church, COMECE maintains a long-standing and regular contact with local Church leaders in Iraq. The following contribution is based on insights from the local context as well as shared assessment and analysis.*

### **1. Elements of the local context**

Iraq has been experiencing **widespread violence** perpetrated by the so-called ISIS/Daesh as well as other armed groups **making use of factors of religious or ethnic belonging**. In many cases, the acts of violence against religious minorities implied **major crimes**, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, as recognised by the European Parliament<sup>1</sup> and the Council of Europe<sup>2</sup>.

The **territories liberated** from ISIS/Daesh are now facing **renewed disputes** involving **local as well as regional and international actors**, making also Iraq a **battle ground for geopolitical interests**. These clashes are creating **renewed anxiety and insecurity** in the population. The **continuous destabilisation** prevents progress in reconstruction of the country. There are reports of continuing acts of terrorism, systematic rape as well as widespread violations of human rights and the rule of law<sup>3</sup>.

Many towns still remain empty, marked by the **great material damage** on housing, basic infrastructures as well as on religious and cultural sites<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, explosive devices continue to pose a threat to people. **“Prohibited areas”** that have been set up in this regard are, however, often **instrumentalised** to exercise **control over the population and their property**.

**Deep spiritual damage** has been afflicted to the people in Iraq. The statistics on the death toll, the number of injured, of those who had to flee or have been displaced are not just figures, but they imply the **suffering of each human being** and his or her family. Families have been separated, communities torn apart, feelings of trauma, distrust, hatred and revenge are present in the society. The discoveries of mass graves underline the fact that the fate of many people still remains unknown.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Resolution of the European Parliament of 4 February 2016 on *Systematic mass murder of religious minorities by ISIS*, <http://bit.ly/21Q4s3h> .

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 27 January 2016 on *Foreign fighters in Syrian and Iraq*, <http://bit.ly/2A1HWjq> .

<sup>3</sup> Cf. UNHCR, *Iraq emergency* (16 November 2017), <http://bit.ly/2kKLNpO> .

<sup>4</sup> Cf. UN Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on the *Maintenance of international peace and security* of 24 March 2017 which notes that “intentionally directing attacks against religious buildings and historic monuments and buildings” may amount to war crimes, <http://bit.ly/2n8NE8g> .

About 3.2 million people continue to be internally displaced<sup>5</sup> and about 220 000 are refugees in other countries<sup>6</sup>. **Christians** are among the communities **particularly targeted** by the acts of aggression perpetrated by ISIS/Daesh. With their intention to eliminate Christianity, they chased away thousands of these indigenous people whose history, identity and roots in the territory of Iraq go back two millennia. Now, many of them – **willing to return** to their homes to re-build their **future** and live a **dignified life** as **equal** Iraqi citizens – are still facing high level of uncertainty and fear to become instrumentalised by some national and international actors in their power-sharing and land distribution disputes.

## **2. Assessment of regional and local implications**

Since the Iraq-Iran War in 1980s, Iraq has been at the heart of a **transformation crisis** of the Arab/Muslim countries and the Middle East. The wave of **successive crises** that Iraq has been experiencing therefore cannot be addressed without taking into account the **broader regional picture** and the developments in Iraq's neighbouring countries.

Linked to the regional dimension is the **ethno-cultural and religious aspect** which should also be an integral part of an EU strategy for engagement with Iraq. Iraq is not a religion-free area. Religious belonging is at the heart of the identity of Iraqi people. A variety of religious communities have peacefully coexisted for centuries, while some individuals and extremist groups have increasingly misused religious elements to pursue their imperialistic, political or economic interests in recent years.

Experience from the past shows that **reliance on sectarianism** has been a failure. Processes of transition failing to generate **inclusive works of reconstruction** and **marginalising** certain communities have made clear that it is not enough to win a battle, if peace gets lost. **Lack of co-ownership** by **not effectively engaging all stakeholders in processes of dialogue and action** fostered convictions in parts of the Iraqi society of a new "Western colonialist threat". This also contributed to the rejection of the ideas of democracy and human rights by large sectors of some major communities.

The ability to allow the rebuilding of the country has not only been hampered by the **tendency to systematic instrumentalisation of community and religious feelings** fostering divisions in society, but also due to an **ineffective resource management**, even though Iraq has one of the world's largest reserves of crude oil and gas. Efforts to rebuild the economy after decades of conflict and sanctions have failed to make a **shift from** a system based on **exploitation** of natural resources **to a production-oriented economy**.

Moreover, there seem to be tendencies fuelling a **general feeling of insecurity and instability** in the Iraqi society, thus also impeding the return of forcibly displaced people. The **lacking vision for economy, prosperity and sustainable peace** is even more alarming, considering the **demographic situation** of the country with about **60% of the population under the age of 25 years**<sup>7</sup>. In light of absence of **adequate education and formation** during the occupation by ISIS/Daesh, there is a serious risk of a "lost generation". **Economic and employment opportunities** will be crucial to give young Iraqi men and women a **future perspective** in their country and to capitalise on the **demographic dividend**.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. UNHCR Statistics (16 November 2017), <http://bit.ly/2yLOs9N> .

<sup>6</sup> Cf. UNHCR Statistics (16 November 2017), <http://bit.ly/2kKLNpO> .

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook* (14 November 2017), <http://bit.ly/1ilCTJX> .

In an atmosphere of a **loss of trust in public institutions, Church actors and religious communities** are still contributing to **rebuilding efforts** in order to allow the return of the displaced people<sup>8</sup>.

### **3. Guiding principles for EU's strategic engagement with Iraq**

In the light of the above-mentioned considerations and their assessment, we recommend the following principles as a basis for the planned EU Strategy for Iraq:

In general:

- Help to develop a **strategy for economic opportunities and sustainable development** in order to fuel a **long-standing peace process** and to **allow the return** of forcibly displaced persons
- Promote the **rule of law, justice and reconciliation** as well as **good governance and human rights** in order to achieve a **people-centered, inclusive and sustainable peace process**

In concrete terms:

- Acknowledge the **importance of the religious dimension** and **involve religious actors in all their diversity as key stakeholders**
- Foster the **resilience<sup>9</sup> of individuals, families and local communities** with a **particular focus on young people**, on the basis of a **profound analysis of local capacities**
- Effectively **engage all local stakeholders at and across different levels** in processes of **dialogue and rebuilding** in order to ensure **co-ownership** and **inclusiveness** of all EU initiatives
- **Engage with** all key **regional, European and international actors** to address the crisis in its wider regional and international context
- Elaborate a **roadmap with specific objectives and deadlines** on the basis of temporality of action (short-/medium-/long-term) in order to ensure a continuum of engagement from humanitarian assistance to a stabilisation process leading to sustainable development of Iraq

### **4. Policy recommendations for the EU**

We encourage the European Union to make the following actions part of its engagement with Iraq, in particular to:

In the short-term:

- Provide quick **humanitarian assistance** and facilitate the provision of **basic services**, such as healthcare, electricity and access to clean water, and support effective **de-mining** of affected areas
- Support, including through the recently launched CSDP mission, the establishment of **trustful, accountable and inclusive institutions** capable of **stabilising** the country and

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<sup>8</sup> As an example can be mentioned the hosting of displaced students from different communities by the Archdiocese of Kirkuk (Iraq), <http://bit.ly/2zjvwDN> or the "Niniveh Reconstruction Committee" involving the Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox and Chaldean Catholic Churches putting into action plans to rebuild and repair more than 10.000 homes in the Niniveh Plains (Cf. Aid to the Church in Need, *Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2015-17*, <http://bit.ly/2yPyvzD>).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of a people-centered resilience approach, see COMECE/ Justice&Peace Europe/Pax Christi International, *Fostering resilience for sustainable peace* (2017), <http://bit.ly/2j8qVZZ>.

**regulating conflicts** with a view to **working for sustainable development** with and for **all communities** through fully implementing the **rule of law** and **human rights**

- Help to **preserve evidence of crimes** and to ensure **accountability** of perpetrators by restoring the **credibility of judicial institutions** leading to **fair administration of justice**
- Encourage processes of **disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration** of former fighters
- Promote an **inclusive participation to the reconstruction process** (of cities, schools, infrastructures, churches, religious and cultural sites,...) that should **benefit all communities**
- Promote **joint and inclusive education practices** involving **all communities in their diversity** (ethnic and religious communities, displaced people, refugees,...) and **focusing on common principles** in order to develop within the whole society a culture of peace by promoting respect for the rule of law, democratic principles, human rights, responsible freedom, solidarity, justice and mutual respect
- Promote the **involvement of families** in education as key actors in development and cohesion of the society
- Promote a positive **involvement of religious actors**, especially their action in confronting ideologies of violent extremism, including through a robust mandate of the *EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU*
- Contribute to the creation of **economic and employment opportunities**, in particular, for young people and small enterprises by developing a stable business environment, building the necessary local capacities and supporting private investment
- Promote adequate **formation** and **vocational training** for young men and women, empowering them with the necessary skills to take an active part in economic, social and political life
- Recognise and support the activities of **Churches, religious communities and other faith-based actors** in the provision of basic services, such as healthcare, education as well as humanitarian relief and development by granting them **equal and non-discriminatory access** to respective EU **funding** mechanisms
- Foster trust by supporting **people-to-people contacts** within Iraq as well as in the region, and strengthen **exchanges** between the region and the countries of the European Union at and across different levels (youth, professionals, entrepreneurs, academics, scientists,...)
- In the framework of **early warning**, perform **systematic monitoring and analysis** of the local situation in dialogue with all key local stakeholders, including religious actors, in order to adequately **react** to new developments at **an early stage**
- In **assessing the situation** and **preparing visits**, fully **involve all stakeholders** in the reality of their **diversity**, especially religious authorities
- Facilitate a **regional conference of political and religious leaders** on future perspectives for the region

- Contribute to the efforts of the **United Nations**, notably the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, to advance inclusive national and regional dialogue and to promote political, legal, judicial, administrative and economic reforms

In the medium- and long-term:

- Facilitate **mediations** and support peaceful and inclusive **dialogue processes** to **overcome divisions**, while **preserving Iraq's cultural and demographic diversity**; promote platforms for **encounter and cooperation** with **participation** possibilities for all stakeholders, including:
  - state and non-state actors
  - civil, military, humanitarian and development actors
  - ethnic and religious communities in all their diversity and specificity
  - civil society
  - economic actors
  - persons and families
  - local, national, regional, European and international actors
- Promote **long-term processes of reconciliation**, the restoration of **mutual confidence** and **dealing with the violent past**, with the involvement of Churches and religious actors
- Facilitate the **return** of internally displaced people and refugees to their homes, support their **reintegration** into society and the **restoration of their fundamental human rights**, including their property rights
- Use tools of **economic diplomacy**, in particular to:
  - tackle corruption
  - ensure that financial assistance is adequately spent
  - put an end to the debt increase
  - improve customs control
  - enhance domestic resource mobilisation
- Support the **transition** from exploitation of natural resources **to an economic system dedicated to production** by allowing **employment** and **fair repartition of resources**

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The Secretariat of COMECE

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