

أثر الدعم الدولي على الحكم في إقليم كردستان العراق: الدبلوماسية الخارجية والتشردم
الداخلي

ثر يا ميرها ج يوسف

Soraya.yousif@soran.edu.iq

الدكتور ريباز علي إسماعيل

rebaz.smail@soran.edu.iq

سوران ، كلية الحقوق والعلوم السياسية والإدارة، قسم العلاقات الدولية

الكلمات المفتاحية: مبادرة البحوث الرئيسية، الدعم الدولي، الحوكمة، الدبلوماسية الخارجية،
التفتت الداخلي، نظرية الوكيل الرئيسي.

كيفية اقتباس البحث

يوسف ، ثريا ميرها ج ، ريباز علي إسماعيل ، أثر الدعم الدولي على الحكم في إقليم كردستان
العراق: الدبلوماسية الخارجية والتشردم الداخلي، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آب
2026، المجلد: 16، العدد: 8.

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The Impact of International Support on Governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: External Diplomacy and Internal Fragmentation

Thuraya Mirhaj Yousif
Soraya.yousif@soran.edu.iq

Dr. Rebaz Ali Smail
rebaz.smail@soran.edu.iq

Soran University, Faculty of Law, Politics and Management, Department of International Relations

Keywords : KRI, International support, Governance, External Diplomacy, Internal Fragmentation, Principal-Agent theory.

How To Cite This Article

Yousif, Thuraya Mirhaj, Rebaz Ali Smail, The Impact of International Support on Governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: External Diplomacy and Internal Fragmentation, Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, Auguts 2026, Volume:16, Issue8.



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خلاصة

تتناول هذه المقالة دور المساعدات الدولية في تنظيم الحكم في إقليم كردستان العراق، مع التركيز على التفاعل بين الدبلوماسية الخارجية والتشردم الداخلي. تنظر الدراسة إلى المساعدات الدولية ليس فقط كتعاون أمني أو اقتصادي، بل كعملية حوكمة تؤثر على النمو المؤسسي والتكامل السياسي، استناداً إلى نظرية الوكيل والموكل. تُظهر النتائج تفاعل الجهات الفاعلة الخارجية مع المؤسسات الإقليمية والفاعلين السياسيين داخل إقليم كردستان العراق. وتشير النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من أن المساعدات الدولية سهّلت تعزيز الوجود

الخارجي لإقليم كردستان العراق ومكانته من حيث الأمن الاستراتيجي، إلا أنها أدت أيضاً إلى تعزيز مؤسسات أمنية موازية وقنوات دبلوماسية حزبية. يُبين هذا الديناميكي أن أزمة التنسيق غير المتسق بين المانحين والعديد من الجهات الخارجية الرئيسية أضعفت دافع التغيير المؤسسي، وأصبحت، رغمًا عنهم، دعماً منهجياً للانقسام الحزبي. علاوة على ذلك، أدى غياب الرقابة الفعالة من الحكومة الاتحادية العراقية إلى فتح المزيد من إمكانيات الحكم الذاتي دون الوطني، ولكن مع تقليل آليات المساءلة، مما سمح باستمرار ممارسات الحكم المجزأة. لذا، تجادل المقالة بأن وظائف المساعدات الدولية تُشكل تأثيراً معقداً على الحوكمة، إذ يمكنها في آنٍ واحد تعزيز القدرة الدبلوماسية الخارجية لإقليم كردستان وتعميق التشردم المؤسسي الداخلي. وفي هذا السياق، تُسلط الدراسة الضوء على كيفية تأثير التدخل الأجنبي في نتائج الحوكمة في الأنظمة الفيدرالية المختلطة وأنظمة ما بعد النزاع، كما هو الحال في إقليم كردستان العراق.

Abstract

The article examines the role of international assistance in the organization of governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), focusing on the interplay between foreign diplomacy and internal fragmentation. The study views international assistance as not only a security or economic cooperation but as a governance process that influences the institutional growth and political integration based on the Principal-Agent Theory. The results demonstrate how external actors interact with regional institutions and political actors within the KRI. The findings indicate that even though international assistance facilitated the further external presence of the KRI and its position in terms of strategic security, it also led to the enhancement of parallel security institutions and party-based diplomatic routes. This dynamic shows that a crisis of incoherent coordination among the donors and several external principals diluted the motivation of institutional change and unwillingly became the systemic support of partisan cleavage. Moreover, the lack of strong oversight from Iraqi federal government also opened more possibilities of subnational autonomy but fewer accountability measures, thus permitting the continuation of fragmented governance practices. The article, therefore, argues that the functions of international aid are a complex influence on governance that can simultaneously enhance the Kurdistan Region's external diplomatic capacity and reinforce internal institutional fragmentation. In this context, the study highlights how foreign engagement may shape governance outcomes in hybrid federal and post-conflict settings such as the KRI.



Introduction

International engagement in KRI has been on the rise since 2003, especially in fragile states or sub-state entities like KRI, and has expanded dramatically since 2014, when the region became a key strategic security ally in the global war on ISIS (Sharif, 2021). The KRI has played a good role in keeping the region alive, specifically in terms of its international visibility. The creation of the formal diplomatic services, such as the Department of Foreign Relations in 2006, the increase in security cooperation as a part of the anti-ISIS campaign, and the creation of energy and trade relations with the neighbors were significant steps in the external relations of the KRI (Dalsooz, 2019). Nonetheless, along with the increasing amount of foreign assistance and diplomatic acknowledgments, there are evident connections between the foreign benefits and the consistent reforms of the inner governance which are questionable.

Although the international community is having profound involvement in the KRI, the research available has not fully explored how constitutional uncertainty in the federal structure and dependence of the region to external stakeholders define the quality of governance in Iraq. While international security support is supposed to build institutional capacity, the channels used by the international actors to deliver the same may support factional division and not build centralized governance. This gap indicates that it is necessary to explore this two-sided use of foreign assistance to maintain the stability of the region in both finances and security as well as limiting institutionalization and political integrity.

According to the gaps that have been mentioned above, this study is driven by the following objective:

Investigating the extent to which international assistance improves institutional coherence and mitigates internal fragmentation in the KRI.

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a qualitative research design. The documents are secondary sources, including policy reports, academic literature, and publications from international organizations related to foreign and governance engagement in the KRI. These materials were collected to examine international actors' patterns, institutional developments and political dynamics within the region. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, allowing the study to identify recurring themes and patterns regarding the influence of economic partnerships, diplomatic engagement, and security assistance on the internal political cohesion and the structure of the government in the KRI.

Literature Review

Such international aid in weak and post-conflict countries has often been termed a process of institutional stabilization, governance reform, and state conditioning (Paris, 2004; Fukuyama, 2004). These viewpoints imply that outside involvement is able to offset the poor administrative strength and constitutional frailty through supplying finance, technical expertise, and security assurances. Critical scholarship however questions the linearity of the assumption of external support to lead to institutional consolidation. Rather, results are found to be influenced significantly by domestic politics arrangements, the motivation of the elites and their accountability systems (Lake, 2010).

In situations where there exist divisive authority formations, foreign security aid yields especially ambivalent effects. Research in military assistance shows that, although foreign training and financing can improve discussion effectiveness, they at the same time can create parallel chains of authority in case provided through factional or party-based networks (Biddle, 2017). Equally, the studies concerning the partitioned political regimes show that donors tend to have a pragmatic approach towards prevailing elites instead of consonant state organs, which further enhances internal rivalry in lieu of ending it (Lake, 2010). This is dynamic more so in sub-state entities whereby political parties retain autonomous security or administration apparatus.

Furthermore, financial support and energy relations are also popularly regarded as methods of enhancing financial sustainability and administration modernization. Budgetary support and foreign investment can increase the capacity of governance and allow the provision of public service (Fukuyama, 2004). However, the aid dependency literature states that externally assured sources of revenue can undermine accountability at the domestic level as the principal relationship between the citizens and the international donors changes (Moss et al., 2006). Incentives in taxation accountability and internal reform are diminished when the governments are heavily dependent on external rents. As a result, administrative expansion can be brought about by external economic interaction even though institutional coherence may not be enhanced.

Moreover, the implications of the external engagement on governance are more complicated in asymmetric political surroundings. This is in light of the fact that studies on internationalized governance have pointed out that third parties can act as extra centers of power in the local political set ups (Lake, 2010). Consequently, local elites can work out with varying external patrons in order to increase their internal bargaining power. Instead of fostering institutional cohesion, this engagement may increase



factionalization whereby allocation of aid cuts across partisan politics. These tensions may be well learned using Principal-Agency Theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989). The theory describes the role played by the information asymmetry between the agent and the principal in creating moral hazard, opportunism, and selective compliance. With an externally supported system of governance, the chain of accountability is multilayered with the citizens being domestic principals, and the international donors being external principals. Therefore, when the monitoring and enforcement mechanisms are externally located, political elites (agents) can also focus on the responsiveness of outside funders, rather than home constituencies. This multiprincipal institution raises the chances of fragmented policy execution and targeted institutional change.

However, in the KRI, the available literature has been majorly about diplomatic presence, collaborations in security against ISIS and energy diplomacy. Nevertheless, there is scanty literature that brings together these external dimensions with internal fragmentation of governance using a single theoretical framework. Even though there are studies which show the stabilizing role of coalition military assistance, there are also studies which point out the existence of the partisan security structures and the unresolved federal-regional tensions. Equally, the economic studies highlight the value of the government in oil export in financial independence, but highlight revenue instability and intergovernmental wrangles as structural limitations.

Thus, the question as to how international assistance can build capacity, and also reproduce fragmentation in sub-state governance systems, continues to be unaddressed. Using Principal-Agency Theory to support the relation between the donors, the political elites and the domestic institutions, this article is a contribution to the body of literature in that it focuses on whether the international assistance enhances institutional coherence, or whether it unintentionally bolsters internal fragmentation in the KRI.

Theoretical Framework

The Principal-Agent Theory supports the research. According to the theory, the relationships of the delegation generate monitoring problems and information asymmetries; without monitoring, agents could hide the aspects of eligibility and also be involved in colluding with politically connected (Jensen & Meckling 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989). It is for examining how international assistance restructures governance dynamics in the KRI, the delegation relationships in fragile political systems become multidimensional rather than linear (Miller, 2005).

In classical statements a principal gives up authority to an agent to perform particular tasks on its behalf. Nonetheless, due to their superior information regarding implementation, agents in most cases are likely to be opportunistic unless there are effective mechanisms of monitoring and enforcement (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). In addition, in case of two or more principals, agents can change loyalty in a strategically manner to the actor that offers more incentives or less supervision (Dixit, 1996). This multi-principal dilemma is one that is of particular concern in externally supported systems of governance.

In the KRI, citizens function as domestic principals who delegate authority to regional governing elites. However, international donors providing military assistance, diplomatic recognition and financial support simultaneously become external principals (Lake, 2010).

Security aid is a good example of such dynamic. The use of foreign military assistance may promote the capacity to work and the tactical organization (Biddle, 2017). However, when aid is issued by partisan or parallel chain of command and not by uniform institutions, it is likely to change the incentive structure among agents at the agent hierarchy. The factional networks may have agents who are loyal to the leadership of the party or outside sponsors, rather than institutionally embedded. Under a Principal-agent approach, this is indicative of poor monitoring and goal difference between the principals and the agents (Eisenhardt, 1989). In addition, economic relief and energy alliances create more complications of the agency. The governance elite loses the accountability of this relationship between the citizens and the rulers when this is achieved by external rents instead of domestic taxations (Moss, Pettersson and van de Walle, 2006). Rent-based financing can limit the importance of fiscal bargaining within the nation, and therefore, domestic principal leverage. Accordingly, external aid can help to improve administrative survival and undermine institutional coherence and horizontal accountability.

Moreover, the KRI exists in an unclear federal system that is regulated by the constitution, and it establishes conflicting centers of authority between the cities of Erbil and Baghdad. Under these circumstances, the agents can tactically use jurisdictional ambiguity to benefit themselves politically (Weingast, 1995). To the extent that several principals such as federal institutions, international donors, and constituencies issue conflicting mandates, the agents may choose to obey one principal, stall reform or be associated with the resourceful principal. This is a dynamic that aggravates fragmentation as opposed to solving it.

Thus, the Principal-Agency Theory allows this research to define the international assistance as not only a capacity-building, but the



reorganization of the accountability levels. Institutional coherence is only enhanced when the monitoring mechanisms are co-located, incentive structure is similar, and chain of delegation is centralized. On the other hand, when foreign aid comes into play with fragmented political systems and a poor oversight institutions, then it may actually strengthen internal fragmentation even though it improves short-term stability (Lake, 2010; Dixit, 1996).

Discussion and Analysis of Findings

Institutional Legitimacy and Expansion of Diplomacy

The development of the KRI's foreign relations since 2003 and especially after 2014 contributed to the rise of the international presence and diplomatic status of the region to a considerable degree. The KRI became a dependable partner in the region because of enhanced security coercion and the opening of diplomatic missions overseas. This trend is indicative of more general claims within the literature on post-conflict governance, which also indicate that outside involvement can be a source of institutional stabilization and capacity building. Roland Paris (2004) and Francis Fukuyama (2004) are of the view that external intervention tends to recompense ineffective administrative capacity by offering financial aid, security assurances and technical skills. In the example of the KRI, international diplomatic activity strengthened the symbolic legitimacy of governing institutions and increased the opportunities of the region to relate with international forces. But, outside evidence indicates that greater diplomatic involvement did not imply more internal institutional consolidation. Although the KRI became known on the international level and established new diplomatic networks, these processes tended to develop together with established political networks instead of strengthening the coherent institutional framework.

This process echoes the point that David A. Lake (2010) makes, when he observes that the key to pragmatic collaboration with the dominant political elites is often preferred by international participants rather than a systematic enhancement of institutionalized state structures. In KRI, the international actors tended to prioritize collaboration with existing leadership institutions, especially in the sphere of security instead of advancing institutional changes in all their aspects. As a result, external diplomatic legitimacy was enlarged whereas internal institutional integration was confined. Considering the Principal-Agents Theory, the dynamics can be viewed as an external principal to a domestic agent relationship. Information asymmetry and lack of congruence between the incentives of the principals and the agents in the agency relationship is a characteristic of the agency relationship as postulated by Michael C.

Jensen and William H. Meckling (1976), and by Kathleen M. Eisenhardt (1989). The role of international actors in the KRI case was of external principals which offered legitimacy, resources, and even diplomatic recognition, and regional political elites were the agents of the choice in reaction to the incentives. Since external assistance was frequently associated with short-term strategic goals, specifically security cooperation, the institutional growth thus followed a tendency to focus on operational efficiency as opposed to institutional integration on the long-run basis.

Economic Dependency and Structural Partnerships

The other central point of international interaction with the Kurdistan Region was economic diplomacy and foreign investment. The external investment and oil export agreements increased the fiscal capacity of the regional government to a great extent, providing it with the opportunity to finance the salaries of the public sector, the infrastructure developments and the administrative institutions. This finding is in line with the proposals in the governance literature that the external financial involvement can be used to aid institutional capacity building in frail political systems. Administrative structures can be reinforced with the help of financial resources and international alliances, in connection with which governments can increase the scope of their governance (Francis Fukuyama, 2004).

However, the data presented in the KRI also demonstrate the dangers that are noted in the literature on aid-dependency. According to a study conducted by Todd Moss and others (2006), the dependence on externally produced revenues can undermine domestic accountability instruments as it undermines the fiscal relationship between the governments and citizens. The oil exports and foreign economic relationships that contributed to the establishment of external revenue streams in the KRI case brought both financial stability in the short-run and the lack of motivation to diversify the revenue streams or enhance the domestic taxation frameworks. This led to administrative growth as well as fiscal reliance on externalities as well as unstable world markets. Principal-Agency Theory can be used to interpret these developments as well. Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling (1976) hold that the agency problems get worse when the agents are more accountable to the principal agents who have a stronger command over financial resources and the monitoring systems. Within the framework of the KRI, the international economic partners became more significant participants of the country as they helped to provide an investment and access to markets. The result is that the political elites were under pressure to focus relationships with



other external actors of the economy instead of enhancing domestic accountability mechanisms. This dynamism helps to explain how economic diplomacy was able to stabilize administration and also enhance structural dependency at the same time.

Security Support and Domestic Division

The international partnership in security between the Kurdistan Region and foreign nations increased at a rapid pace during the ISIS campaign. The military training programs, logistical support, and financial support of coalition partners enhanced the operational capabilities of the regional security forces and enhanced the KRI in the region as a strategic security partner. These advancements indicate the results of the literature on military assistance that point to the fact that foreign training and financial aid could lead to operational efficiency and the enhancement of the performance of the local security institutions. Nevertheless, the studies also show that this kind of assistance can have unintended institutional effects. By providing support via factional or politically related networks instead of single command structures, Stephen Biddle (2017) posits that foreign military assistance may establish parallel chains of command. This trend is supported by evidence in the KRI, with aspects of international security assistance occasionally being dispersed among party-oriented security organs rather than totally centralized military forces. Therefore, whereas foreign assistance enhanced the tactical capabilities, it also interrelated with the prevailing political lines. This trend is also indicative of the larger thesis proposed by David A. Lake (2010), who observes that donors tend to act in pragmatic terms with the current elites, instead of concentrating on the formalization of state institutions. In the political systems that are divided like in the KRI whereby the political parties have traditionally established their own security systems, any external involvement can thus strengthen the current structures of power and not solve them. The outcome is a system of governance in which there is overlapping authority and institutional fragmentation. This scenario creates a variety of chains of delegation both domestic and international principals as seen in a Principal- Agent perspective. According to Kathleen M. Eisenhardt (1989) such environments enhance the chances of selective compliance and opportunistic behavior in agents. The domestic elites in the KRI case worked in complicated systems of accountability with internal political players, international security organizations and the Baghdad federal authorities. These overlapping connections generated strategic alignment incentives to certain principals, hence leading to fragmented outcomes of governance despite the augmented security capability.



Stabilized Institutional Support and Organizing External Support

Although the process of fragmentation is defined by the above-mentioned dynamics, the results of this research also suggest that international support may be used to aid institutional stabilization provided in the form of coordinated and structured processes. In the cases with the external support based on centralized coordination, the standardization of training programs, and clearly outlined institutional reform goals, the enhancement of the administrative cooperation became more noticeable. These were especially observed in such developments as the professionalisation of the aspects of the regional security sector and enhancement of the coordination of various governance bodies. These effects are aligned with theoretical knowledge on the Principal- Agency theory, especially on the research by Kathleen M. Eisenhardt (1989) where she asserts that monitoring mechanisms and the conformity of incentives in the minimization of information asymmetry between the principal and the agent is an important element in the Principal- Agency theory. As the international assistance was integrated with systematic control and reporting mechanisms, institutional alignment, the capacity of the external principals to survey the result of governance enhanced. This, in its turn, made the opportunistic behavior less possible and promoted institutional coherence. Simultaneously, the results depict a more general paradox that is designated in the sphere of the literature regarding the subject of internationalized governance. Whereas international engagement would enhance the capacity to build administration and operational performance, its institutional impacts are highly reliant on domestic political frameworks. As it has been argued by scholars like Roland Paris (2004) and David A. Lake (2010), external aid can both promote governance stabilization and bolster any political division that already exists based on its interactions with the local institutions. The KRI experience shows that international support can also improve institutional coherence only when the accountability structures and coordination mechanisms are centralized enough to take in external support.

Link to the Principal-Agent Theory

The study is based on the Principal-Agent Theory, an analytical tool used to examine the effects of delegation relationships on governance outcomes, especially in politically complex and externally assisted systems of governance. The theory frames governance as a form of a relationship where a principal entrusts an agent with the power to act or execute policies on behalf of the principal. Delegation gives the opportunity to administrative functions and policy implementation to



expertise actors, but it also creates structural problems of information asymmetry, limitations of monitoring, and possible conflicts of interest between principals and agents (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989). In this context, agents usually have more information about the implementation of policies and institutional processes than the principals who gave them the authority. This informational power could restrain the capacity of principals to entirely observe the actions of the agents. In the case of weak or disintegrated oversight mechanisms, agents can be opportunistic, and instead of working towards the greater interests of the principals, they might seek to fulfill their interest or those of a specific group. This situation can lower the accountability of the institutions and deteriorate the performance of governance.

Although in early versions of the Principal- Agent Theory, it was common to assume a rather straightforward relationship between a single principal and a single agent, in the modern instances of governance, there are various principals with varying preferences and expectations (Miller, 2005). These environments can bring about a strategy in which agents can respond to the competing principals by giving priority to the actors that give them more incentives, resources or political protection (Dixit, 1996). International actors have become more directly part of international governance due to diplomatic recognition, security cooperation, and economic partnerships. These actors act as effective external principals as far as creating incentives and strategic action of regional governing elites is concerned, in terms of strategic behavior (Lake, 2010). A good example of this relationship can be given in security cooperation. Military support and training programs conducted by other countries enabled the Peshawar to enhance their military capacity to protect themselves during the war with ISIS. Outside assistance comprised of training programs, logistical support, and financial aid aimed at raising the effectiveness of security-sector (Biddle, 2017). In other instances, however, such support appended to in place of, but not necessarily as part of, partisan or factional security nets. In a Principal- Agency setting, this can undermine centralized systems of monitoring and enable some agents to act more powerfully in response to factional leadership or external sponsors than to institutional power.

The application of the Principal- Agency theory to the KRI thus permits this study to take international assistance as a means of institutional capacity-building as well as a structural variable that transforms the incentives to governance and accountability relationships. Outside aid can enhance administrative competence, diplomatic interaction and security potential. Simultaneously, the existence of numerous principals, domestic

constituencies, federal authorities, and international partners, provide a complicated environment where the governing elites have to manage with their conflicting demands and interests. It follows that the effects of the international assistance on governance coherence in the KRI are not only determined by the level of external assistance but also on the nature of institutional provisions defining how the assistance is to be provided. With coordination in assisting others, easy monitoring systems and provision of good monitoring systems, assistance can help in enhancing the capacity of governance and good relationships of accountability. On the other hand, external help, which works with broken political institutions or parallel systems of power, can tend to support the pre-existing rifts in the governance system inadvertently. In this study, the Principal-Agent Theory thus comes in as a framework concept to the understanding of the effects of international interaction on the ability of institutions and internal disintegration of the governance structure of the KRI. Through analysis of the relations between domestic principals, governing elites, federal institutions, and international actors, the theory can be used to understand how external aid may both contribute to stability in governance and also transform internal politics of political power.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article was an effort to analyze how external diplomatic engagements and international assistance influence institutional unity and internal fragmentation in the KRI. International support has functioned as both a stabilizing mechanism and a structural constraint. While diplomatic expansion and security cooperation enhanced the region's external legitimacy and operational capacity, institutional consolidation remained incomplete due to partisan structures, constitutional ambiguity, and fragmented accountability chains.

The findings demonstrate that international engagement strengthened security coordination and administrative survival, yet it did not uniformly produce unified governance structures. Assistance delivered through parallel or politically selective channels reinforced factional autonomy rather than centralized reform. Economic partnerships similarly increased fiscal sustainability but deepened dependency on externally anchored revenues, thereby weakening domestic accountability incentives.

Trust, monitoring, and incentive alignment emerged as decisive mediating variables. International assistance mitigated fragmentation only when tied to unified reform frameworks and structured oversight. Where monitoring was weak or politically fragmented, aid unintentionally reproduced institutional incoherence.

Principal-Agent Theory clarifies these dynamics by showing how multiple principals, international donors, federal authorities, and domestic constituencies create overlapping and sometimes competing delegation chains. When agents prioritize external principals over domestic



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oversight institutions, fragmentation intensifies despite improvements in capacity and recognition.

Therefore, several policy recommendations follow from this analysis:

- International assistance should be conditioned on institutional integration rather than factional coordination, ensuring that support is channeled through unified command and administrative structures.
- Economic partnerships should incorporate fiscal transparency benchmarks and reporting mechanisms that strengthen domestic accountability.
- Security sector reform should prioritize centralized monitoring and standardized training frameworks to reduce parallel command structures.
- Finally, clearer federal-regional competencies and constitutional clarification would reduce overlapping authority structures and improve institutional coherence.

Only when international support is embedded within coordinated oversight systems and aligned with long-term governance reform can it effectively mitigate internal fragmentation. Otherwise, external diplomacy risks reinforcing the structural divisions it seeks to stabilize.

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