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Policy Report

Traffic congestion in the capital Baghdad

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Introduction

Baghdad city suffers from daily traffic congestion, which has become a worsening problem with negative effects on social life and daily activities. Most of the main roads and intersections suffer from traffic operation failure and high delay times, sometimes leading to a state of complete paralysis. The problem is not limited to peak morning and evening hours but has become continuous throughout the day, lasting up to 15 hours from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM and even extending to 11:00 PM in some areas.

Studies conducted on this matter have shown that previous solutions and treatments have proven ineffective and have not had a positive impact on resolving the traffic problem. The issue has persisted for years. Additionally, a significant part of the congestion crisis is attributed to the high population density in Baghdad Governorate and poor planning in managing proposed projects, resulting in increased traffic congestion in the capital on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the construction of massive residential complexes comprising thousands of housing units in the middle of the city can be described as a mistake. Transportation represents the lifeblood of the city, linking activities together and facilitating movement from one place to another. The dysfunction in Baghdad's transportation system has led to traffic congestion, delayed arrivals, increased fuel consumption, reduced comfort on roads, higher economic costs, and increased environmental pollution in the city.

According to statements from concerned authorities, the core of the crisis lies in the fact that Baghdad's streets cannot accommodate the current number of cars, which are operating on unprepared roads. The capacity is much lower than what is needed. Furthermore, the design of the streets has not been renewed or maintained for decades. Moreover, the behavior of Baghdad residents exacerbates the problem, as some individuals resort to sidewalk and street encroachment, closure of certain areas, disrespect for traffic officers, and violation of traffic regulations.

All the proposals and solutions put forward by successive governments in Iraq to solve the traffic crisis have not significantly contributed to resolving the problem but rather deepened it further. This report aims to focus directly on the magnitude of the problem, the measures taken by previous governments to address it, and then the current government's actions to provide a deeper analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of these steps. It will then focus on recommendations that could contribute to alleviating the traffic crisis in Baghdad.

Background

The capital city of Baghdad witnesses heavy traffic congestion, especially after the increase in the number of modern vehicles that entered Iraq in the previous years, specifically after 2003. Hundreds of thousands of vehicles have been registered, in addition to the increasing population growth and the rising demand for purchasing vehicles of all kinds by everyone. The number of vehicles in Baghdad Governorate has reached a large number compared to the capacity of the roads, which have not been developed or updated for more than three decades. As a result, traffic congestion increases with the real geometric traffic volume for this road. This phenomenon is evident in large cities, where population growth and limited transportation space lead to increased traffic congestion.

A report published by The Economist magazine shed light on the traffic movement in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, describing it as one of the worst in the Middle East in terms of traffic flow. Baghdad witnesses suffocating traffic congestion due to road deterioration, the spread of checkpoints, the increase in the number of cars, and the delay and corruption in infrastructure projects. Successive governments after 2003 failed to solve the problem and find a suitable alternative to reduce or mitigate it, despite Iraq previously having the most advanced transportation systems in the region. Baghdad streets are now congested with around 4 million vehicles, according to statements from the General Traffic Directorate, while the city's streets were built to accommodate only 200,000 cars.

There are several reasons that have contributed to the phenomenon of congestion in Baghdad. Government ministries and institutions directly related to citizens are concentrated within Baghdad and in densely populated areas.

Some private and governmental universities are also located in these areas, along with numerous commercial centers, vehicle repair complexes, factories, warehouses, and wholesale shops within residential areas and main roads and intersections. This leads to vehicle congestion and indicates a lack of modern engineering planning for Baghdad's streets. Moreover, Baghdad lacks modern transportation means such as buses, trains, and metros, which could reduce the size of the crisis. Another significant reason for traffic congestion is the increase in the number of vehicles after 2003, which has doubled. However, the current capacity of Baghdad's streets does not currently match the current number of vehicles.

Table (1): Number of Registered Vehicles in the General Traffic Directorate in Baghdad Bearing (Permanent - Temporary Inspection - New Plates) for the Years (2015-2021)

Year	Total Number	Percentage
2015	2.087.039	36.9
2016	2.255.849	37.0
2017	-	-
2018	2.409.390	36
2019	2.467.175	35.8
2020	2.479.898	35.3
2021	2.730.880	36.6

Source: The Directorate of Transport and Communications Statistics - Central Statistical Organization.

Due to the ambiguity of the actual number of cars in the capital, Baghdad, caused by the statistics published by the relevant authorities from the Ministry of Planning and the General Traffic Directorate, in a statement by the spokesperson for the General Traffic Directorate in the year (2022), it was stated that there are (3) million cars in Baghdad out of (7) million in Iraq in general. It was indicated that the capacity of Baghdad's streets can only accommodate (400) thousand cars at most, while it is expected that the number of cars in Baghdad will reach about (5) million vehicles by the end of 2023.

The magnitude of the crisis in Baghdad results in effects and consequences on the lives of citizens and the behavior of institutions, including a decrease in working hours and thus a decrease in productivity, negatively affecting individual and institutional income. Furthermore, it contributes to increased healthcare costs due to diseases caused by pollution resulting from congestion, increased air pollution from carbon dioxide emissions from vehicle exhaust, and increased fuel consumption as congestion is associated with the fuel consumption of those vehicles.

The "Iraq Future Foundation for Economic Studies and Consultations" mentioned in a report that each car in Baghdad wastes (570) liters of gasoline annually due to traffic congestion and congestion on the streets. The value of what one car in Baghdad wastes in fuel is equivalent to a loss of (314) thousand dinars per year, with an average travel of (20) km per day. This is attributed to congestion and bumps in the streets, as well as traffic accidents and the production of larger quantities of toxic gases that increase environmental pollution. The country incurs annual losses of around (500) billion dinars (\$342 million) due to traffic congestion in the capital Baghdad alone, due to daily fuel waste.

Measures of Previous Governments:

The government of Mr. Adel Abdul-Mahdi (2018-2020) took several measures to address traffic congestion. It also had the precedent of opening some streets in the Green Zone that had been closed since 2003, but they were soon closed due to security events that occurred. Accompanying the October protests, the government at the time approved several proposals presented to it by the General Traffic Directorate, including changing official working hours from one ministry to another, as well as official holidays for departments and universities. There would also be a reduction in the number of security checkpoints and placing them away from bridges, intersections, and congested areas. These proposals and others were adopted by the government, but no specific date was set for their implementation at the time, and they were not implemented on the ground in a real manner.

However, changing official working hours requires in-depth study because some ministries and government departments are interconnected in their operations, and this step cannot be considered a solution without expanding roads, reducing car imports, and building bridges. Similar steps were taken by the previous government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in 2017, except for some points proposed by the Baghdad Municipality at the time, which were not implemented, such as adopting more entrances and exits to Baghdad and choosing locations for these outlets far from crowded streets, as well as changing the entrances and exits of Camp al-Rashid to and from the Zaafaraniya area and establishing yards for goods exchange and unloading cargo outside Baghdad.

Regarding the contracts with a committee of experts and experienced urban planners from advanced countries in this field, it was mentioned that the Baghdad Municipality did not proceed with these proposals and did not reveal the reality of this committee.

A statement from the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in the year (2021) during the tenure of the government of Mr. Al-Kadhimi stated that it discussed with relevant authorities the mechanism for finding appropriate solutions to address traffic congestion in the capital, Baghdad. It affirmed that "the Iraqi government has taken several steps to address the phenomenon of traffic congestion within the capital, Baghdad, the most important of which are the project to develop the entrances to the five capitals, the (Al-Dora - Al-Yusufiya) road project, the circular road project for the capital, in addition to the suspended train project, and the construction of a road connecting the northern entrance of the capital to the direction of the Nahrawan area and reaching the southern provinces, as well as the construction of (13) bridges and tunnels, as these projects will contribute to alleviating the severity of traffic congestion."

The statement further mentioned that "the proposed treatments were discussed on short, medium, and long-term levels, and the General Traffic Directorate's vision to address traffic congestion, along with future projects for roads and bridges."

Through the discussion of these solutions and proposals, it can be seen that nothing clear has been done on the ground, and the previous governments did not work on the proposals or prepare real programs for their implementation, especially the Baghdad Metro project, which was proposed by the previous government and strongly endorsed in its statements, or working on improving the entrances to the capital, Baghdad. Moreover, a member of the Baghdad Provincial Council revealed that "the government is not responsible for car imports, but rather imports are carried out by the private sector, and according to the constitution, every Iraqi citizen has the right to import a car, but it is the government's responsibility to prepare the roads."

Meanwhile, the Iraqi Ministry of Planning revealed in its latest report issued in December 2021 that the number of vehicles traveling on the streets of the capital, Baghdad, has exceeded (7) million vehicles, with an estimated number reaching (15) million vehicles by the end of 2035, due to the high population growth rate, which reaches (2%) annually, it reveals the failure of the previous government to implement any real steps to solve the crisis, except for lifting some security checkpoints in certain areas of the capital. None of the recommendations and measures proposed were implemented, despite being allocated funds.

Current Government Measures:

The current Prime Minister of Iraq announced the immediate implementation of the first three projects aimed at alleviating traffic congestion in the capital, Baghdad, as a beginning to solving the crisis of traffic congestion afflicting the city due to the large number of vehicles, in addition to closing some streets and passages due to the presence of party headquarters and important official departments.

During a ceremony held at the Ministry of Reconstruction and Housing, the Prime Minister stated that "the government has prioritized service projects in its program," indicating that "Baghdad today urgently needs service projects, especially since every employee needs two hours in Baghdad, which are essential for the capital."

For his part, the Minister of Reconstruction, Housing, and Municipalities clarified that "the three projects to alleviate congestion that have been initiated represent a qualitative leap for the residents of Baghdad," pointing out that "there is a new package of projects awaiting approval of the budget."

"The first package of congestion relief projects includes (19) projects, three of which were initiated, selecting (19) projects launched on the second of last March and initiated."

In January of last year, Iraqi security forces opened the entrances to the Green Zone for the movement of citizens' vehicles, while removing a large number of security barriers in the capital, Baghdad, as part of a plan to reduce traffic congestion in the capital.

Iraqi security authorities confirm that opening the Green Zone and the streets closed since 2003 and removing a number of security barriers in the capital, Baghdad, will not affect the security situation, and that there are security and intelligence plans in place to prevent any violations and prevent any unlawful acts.

The projects announced by the current government include the construction of a bridge over the Army Canal to connect Al-Dakhil Street with Palestine Street (Al-Muhandisin neighborhood). As for the second project, it involves building a bridge over the Army Canal to connect the "Jameela" area with the extension of Al-Jihad Street-Al-Ma'tham Gate. This project includes the construction of a bridge to cross the fast Army Canal road towards "Street 71" with a length of about (660) meters and a width of about (20) meters. The third project involves the construction of a bridge to connect "Street 77" with the Jerusalem intersection.

The first package of projects aimed at alleviating traffic congestion in Baghdad, announced on March 2nd of last year, includes (19) projects. These projects involve the development and establishment of roads, bridges, and overpasses on both sides of Karkh and Rusafa in Baghdad, as well as external roads connecting the capital to the central, northern, and western provinces. Iraqi, Chinese, and Turkish companies will be responsible for their implementation, according to the Minister of Housing and Reconstruction.

Additionally, on December 23, 2023, the first pedestrian bridge in Baghdad was opened over the Tigris River, connecting the Kazimiyah and Karrada areas in northern Baghdad, named the Freedom Bridge. This bridge is important for accommodating the influx of visitors during religious occasions and facilitating daily citizen movement. It may serve as a partial solution to Baghdad's traffic congestion.

Furthermore, work has begun on a multi-lane bridge project over the Tigris River in Jadriyah, central Baghdad. This project includes expanding Abu Nuwas Street and connecting the banks of the river, linking the Karrada area in Rusafa with the Al-Nasr Square in Karkh with a vehicle bridge. It also includes the construction of a parallel bridge to the river channel with a length of (2650) meters and another bridge connecting Al-Aaras Island to Al-Nasr Square with a length of (850) meters.

Analysis and Evaluation:

The general budget for the year 2023 allocated 1.8 trillion Iraqi dinars to the Ministry of Housing, Reconstruction, and Public Municipalities as part of the investment program for projects aimed at alleviating congestion in Baghdad. This includes projects related to highway construction, as well as initiatives outlined in the ministerial agenda concerning transportation and telecommunications. This reflects the government's keen interest and financial commitments towards addressing traffic congestion in Baghdad.

Currently, the Municipality and the Ministry of Housing have undertaken several projects in Baghdad to reduce traffic congestion, including the construction of pedestrian bridges, vehicular bridges, and overpasses. While some progress has been made in completing these projects, ongoing efforts are required to finish them. Additionally, efforts have been made to build residential cities outside the capital, remove barriers hindering traffic flow, register vehicles through the Traffic Directorate, and regulate bicycles and three-wheeled vehicles.

However, the effectiveness of the government's achievements, such as bridges and overpasses, may be limited if essential projects, such as the Baghdad Metro, are not completed. Given the continuous population density growth in Baghdad, it is imperative to focus on advanced transportation projects.

The Baghdad Metro project, previously proposed by past governments but clouded by suspicions of corruption, should be seriously considered by the current government. Adopting modern and advanced transportation methods and learning from successful international experiences are crucial. Many successful countries, such as the Netherlands, have effectively managed traffic congestion by investing in public transportation networks, including trains, buses and bicycles, as well as the necessary infrastructure for bicycles, have been provided, encouraging their use as a means of transportation.

The Netherlands also relies on effectively managing traffic through the use of smart traffic signals and information technology. Singapore has implemented a comprehensive traffic management system, including congestion charges and mobile applications to guide drivers to alternative routes. It has also provided an integrated network of high-quality public transportation, including trains, buses, and metros. Switzerland has focused on smart car systems and incentivizing public transportation, while Japan has heavily relied on high-speed trains and metros.

There are various strategies and technologies that can be used to improve traffic flow and reduce congestion in cities, and several countries have successfully tackled traffic congestion. The mentioned countries serve as models, and their experiences can be adopted and implemented by the government. It is one of the priorities of the current government to develop the transportation sector and public services for citizens, as indicated by the financial allocations in the general budget or included in the government's agenda. Furthermore, the strategies of relevant entities such as the Ministry of Planning or the Municipality of Baghdad and their financial allocations are essential.

Conclusion:

The responsibility for traffic congestion does not fall solely on a specific ministry or department but is a shared responsibility among various ministries and relevant agencies. It is essential to leverage international experiences and emulate successful practices from those with expertise in this field. Resolving the traffic congestion issue in Baghdad depends on the seriousness of the Iraqi government in implementing proposed solutions, recommendations, and initiatives.

1. **Diversification of Transportation:** This involves relying on public transportation, specifically Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), which offers flexible, integrated, fast, and secure services. BRT operates on a separate system from regular traffic, making it less costly than metro systems. Integrating BRT with the metro system can effectively connect Baghdad with its suburbs and junctions.
 2. **Transit-Oriented Development (TOD):** Globally, there is a trend towards developing urban areas around public transportation hubs. In Baghdad, implementing TOD involves creating rapid transport stations near multifunctional development centers (residential, commercial, educational, service, health, and entertainment). This approach aims to increase public transport usage while reducing reliance on private cars. Planning for sustainable urban expansion focused on transportation is crucial.
- Implementing these solutions requires strategic measures, including completing and executing Project Ring Road No. 4, which plays a significant role in reducing heavy vehicle congestion in Baghdad's streets. Studies show that heavy vehicles constitute 25%-30% of Baghdad's traffic, and Ring Roads No. 1, 2, and 3 complement the urban transport system, filling gaps and achieving an integrated urban transport system in Baghdad.

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