

# MERI

Summary Report

SHARING VISIONS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

# Forum

# 2015





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**MERI FORUM 2015**  
**SHARING VISIONS FOR**  
**THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST**





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## Introduction

This year's three day MERI Forum 2015 was hailed as a great success, consolidating our record since last year's inaugural MERI Forum 2014. This year, the Forum focused on Sharing Visions for the Future of the Middle East, and brought together senior ranking national and international policymakers, world-renowned academics, and opinion-makers who engaged in spirited debates on wide-ranging topics from the Kirkuk conundrum, combating ISIS, the displacement crisis, the Iran nuclear deal and its implications for the regional politics, the political crisis in Kurdistan, Erbil-Baghdad relations and the challenges of keeping Iraq united. As in 2014, this second annual Forum generated lively debates both inside and outside the conference hall, by engaging the delegates as well as viewers who watched the debates via MERI's live-stream or the numerous national and international media outlets.

This document reports in detail on the MERI Forum 2015 and summarises the debate in each session, and accurately reflects the contributions of each panellist individually. It is a document rich of speaker quotes, echoing the actual debates during the Forum. The concluding section is dedicated to describing how dialogue generated during the Annual Forum connects to MERI's research and public activities for the coming year. We hope this document will be a reliable reference of high interest to policy-makers, academics, media and the wider public.

# 1. The Future of Kirkuk, A Roadmap for Resolving the Status of the Province

- **Samuel Morris**, Research Fellow at MERI (Chair)
- **Hasan Toran**, Member of Parliament, Iraq
- **Rakan Saeed Aljobouri**, Deputy Governor of Kirkuk
- **Khalid Shwani**, Advisor to the President of Iraq
- **Daniel Augstburger**, Head of United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq in Kirkuk

The mixed panel of speakers from Turkmen, Kurdish, Arab and international descent brought forth a lively debate on the future of Kirkuk, as well as a critical evaluation of MERI's own research-based policy report on the topic (also titled: The Future of Kirkuk, A Roadmap for Resolving the Status of the Province). A large part of the debate centred on the applicability of article 140 of the constitution, and the difficulties surrounding its implementation. The issues of missing identity records and peoples' right of return in particular, form obstacles to conducting a census, which should be done prior to holding the referendum. All speakers agreed on the importance of future dialogue between parties and with the public, so that the people of Kirkuk are well informed on what is being discussed and planned, as well as what it means to vote yes or no during a referendum.



“The issue of land and ownership is a key issue that needs to be resolved in order to attract foreign investment.”

***Daniel Augstburger***

Evaluating MERI's report on Kirkuk, Hasan Toran noted it had 'positive and negative points'. He credited MERI on being the only institution to conduct a thorough analysis of the current situation in Kirkuk. However, his opinion differed on the question of how to move away from the current status



quo. Article 140, according to Toran, is still ‘the only roadmap to the future’. He stressed the importance of the constitution in finding solutions. However, the timeline associated with implementing article 140, has proven difficult to maintain.

In Mr Toran’s view, the census has been delayed mainly because of problems related to property disputes and a lack of valid documentation. He also pointed to the UN report of 2009, which called for more dialogue between parties prior to holding a referendum. He reiterated the distinction made in the report between hostile and confirming referenda, warning that “rushing into a hostile referendum without properly informing the people will only exacerbate tensions.” Instead, parties should discuss openly the possibilities and come up with a proposed solution. This solution can then be presented to the people and confirmed in a so-called “confirming referendum”. “The response to the referendum depends largely on how the question is formulated,” Toran explained. He also expressed concern about the current security situation and argued that “Kirkuk is a multicultural area and cannot be run by one party or people alone.” Therefore, he advocated for the formation of Turkemen and Arab militia so that they can have their own forces to defend their areas. Security, according to Toran, should be done by members of the own constituency, and this requires a “restructuring of the ministry of interior and defence.”

Rakan Saeed Al-Jobouri expressed his “reservations” about the applicability of Article 140. According to the governor, Article 140 was written “without taking into account the presence of Arabs in Kirkuk city.” With the aim of building trust between ethnicities, it is important to produce local solutions,



and this requires local dialogue. He mentioned the discussions that were produced towards the end of 2007 under sponsorship of the coalition forces as a prime example. He further identified the “wrong application of article 115 and 113 as the major problem today.” Mr Al-Jobouri added that the unbalanced distribution of power is the main reason for instability among entities at the moment. Six districts are currently under control of ISIS and only the Peshmerga is able to defend our territory. He appealed to the federal government in Baghdad to help as well, so that after the fighting, the focus can be placed on finding a solution that is welcome to everybody. Al-Jobouri also noted that the governorate will have a new community after liberation, and that it is important to merge those who have left and came back with the new community. In this respect, he said mistakes have been made. For example, some Arab areas that have been liberated were evacuated six months later. This does not contribute to trust and the aim of coexistence, according to the Deputy Governor.

In line with Toran’s observations, Al-Jobouri mentioned it was important to solve the issue of missing identity records, so that Kirkuk can participate fully in provincial council elections.



He also agreed with Hasan Toran that the current balance of power is problematic. “If we have one party which is equipped with weapons and the other one is peaceful and has to beg for peaceful solutions, this is not fair and balanced,” he stated at the end of his speech. Khalid Shwani stipulated that what makes Kirkuk unique is not that it is a miniature version of Iraq, as is often stated, but that its demographic composition has changed so often and so drastically over the course of history. He stressed the importance of Kurdish-Arab dialogue and warned against parties trying to “reignite the 1958 bloody incidents.” Shwani does not believe there is “any Kurdish strategy to make Kirkuk a separate region.” Rather, “the strategy of the Kurds and Peshmerga is to take Kirkuk back to the KRG,” according to the Presidential advisor. He further stressed that “Arabs who have been living in Kirkuk for over 25 years should have the right to vote” and stated that negotiations on this are on-going.

It was clear to Mr Shwani, however, that the central government of Iraq is deliberately obstructing the implementation of Article 140. Finally, in response to his predecessors on the stage, Shwani warned that “to establish military forces from Arab and Turkmen communities in Kirkuk will only exacerbate current social and political tensions.” “If they want their own forces, they should join the Peshmerga,” according to Shwani.

The head of UNAMI in Kirkuk, Daniel Augstburger, questioned why Article 140 was not implemented. “In case of a political reason, the discussion about whether the article is still valid or not may be redundant”, Augstburger noted. He also identified problems surrounding land ownership and property rights as key issues in need of a solution. Reflecting on the current situation, the UN official concluded that there is dire need of financial assistance from both the international community as well as the federal government, to make sure that the governorate of Kirkuk is able to receive and absorb over half a million IDPs. Decentralisation, he claimed, is key so that the various provinces in Kirkuk are allowed to manage their own finances. In the long run however, “the refugees and IDPs cannot be integrated in society fully and have to go back.” Finally, Augstburger acknowledged the improvement of the security situation in Kirkuk stating that “law and order has prevailed since 2014” and “the people on the street and the population in general is highly appreciative of this. One way for us to live together is to ensure security for all groups.”

## 2. The Protection of Civilians and the Application of International Humanitarian Law (Joint session with Geneva Call)

- **Hervé Delphin**, Head of Unit in charge of the EU Humanitarian and Crisis Response in the European Neighbourhood, Middle East, Central and South-Western Asia (ECHO) (Chair)
- **Lise Grande**, Deputy United Nations Special Representative for the Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq
- **Pascal Bongard**, Director of Policy, Geneva Call
- **Jabar Yawar**, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Peshmerga, Kurdistan Regional Government
- **Youssef Al-Kelabi**, Security Spokesperson for Hashd Al-Shaabi

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict on civilians; protecting persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities, and restricting the means and methods of warfare. In opening this session, Hervé Delphin invoked the recent words of both the United Nations Secretary-General and the President of the International Committee for the Red Cross, in highlighting the importance of IHL not only as an act of humanity but critical to preventing further instability.

The protection of civilians and civilian areas is part of the common heritage that cuts across cultures and histories. Despite this, there is at present a multiplicity of actors in Iraq who are either not aware of IHL or do not feel bound by it. Such violations in this context include excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings and summary execution, enforced disappearance, unlawful court execution, destruction of cultural sites and civilian infrastructure, specific targeting of ethnic communities, children in armed

“We have a moral responsibility to urge states and non-state actors to adopt principles of IHL“

**Lise Grande**



conflict, the abduction and killing of civilians, and indiscriminate shelling. Lise Grande noted, “in the face of blatant inhumanity, the world has responded with disturbing paralysis.” She explained that this is in part because while non-state actors have a moral responsibility in this regard, it is difficult to know how to act or exercise it. As “IHL is at the very heart of multilateralism and humanity, and Nearly every country has ratified and signed the Geneva Conventions, urgent and coordinated action” is needed by the International Community, which shares collective responsibility for its implementation. Grande stated that the way forward is with sustainable conflict resolution; encouraging all armed groups to make a unilateral commitment to IHL compliance; encouraging state and non-state actors to develop IHL protocol; spreading this work to other contexts; and rejecting any form of amnesty for IHL

“We have opened training and awareness-raising courses to hundreds of Peshmerga fighters.”

*Jabar Yawar*



violations. Critical to this is an increase in member state funding to this issue and greater awareness of IHL in general. Grande also admitted that the UN has not done enough to ensure IHL implementation, and as the liberation process continues, she suggested establishing humanitarian corridors.

Pascal Bongard discussed Geneva Call’s work in conflict areas to educate and encourage non-signatory, armed groups on implementing IHL. Geneva Call has trained all Kurdish armed groups on IHL and is launching a new advocacy campaign in Iraq targeting all armed groups, political parties, religious and tribal leaders, civil society, and media. Through training, activities and outreach the initiative seeks to advocate for and highlight the rules of war, Geneva Convention, and conduct that all fighters should respect. Bongard noted that his organization uses media and social media, and presented the videos that Geneva Call has produced, *Fighter Not Killer*, depicting the rules of war. Jabar Yawar, speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Peshmerga, noted that all forces have received IHL training.





He pointed out the diversity of ethnicities and religions in the warzone that has both fuelled long and unresolved conflicts in the area, and has been used by ISIS for its own interests. In this current conflict, Yawar declared that there was no evidence of the Peshmerga violating IHL, but that there was no war where IHL has been fully upheld. On the mention of a possible humanitarian corridor, Yawar suggested that increased security would be needed to ensure that belligerents did not disguise as IDPs.

Youssef Al-Kelabi, like Jabar Yawar, noted that his fighting forces too have received IHL training. As public mobilization forces of volunteers, Al-Kelabi stated that work of Hashd Al-Shaabi was focused on civilian protection. He mentioned his forces' practices that abide by IHL with the authority to investigate, try and jail the accused in legal courts. In response to a question the safe passage of people into newly liberated areas, Al-Kelabi stated "we have a vendetta, not with families but with ISIS."

### 3. Winning the War Against ISIS: Visions and Strategies

- **Athanasios Manis**, Research Fellow at MERI (Chair)
- **Qubad Talabani**, Deputy Prime Minister, Kurdistan Regional Government
- **Sharwan Al-Waili**, Security Advisor to the President of Iraq
- **Stuart Jones**, United States Ambassador to Iraq
- **David Pollock**, Kaufman Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The war against ISIS has proven to be protracted in Iraq despite previous reassurances of the opposite. The organisation has taken control of large swathes of land, including important urban centres such as Mosul, Falluja and Ramadi. Despite military efforts of the international community, the Iraqi Army, and the Peshmerga forces, ISIS has managed to entrench its positions. Taking into account the unconventional nature of this war, ISIS's international recruitment, and ideological and religious motivations, it is important to define a victory and envisage innovative strategies.

Qubad Talabani opened with the declaration, “before thinking about a strategy or plan or vision to defeat ISIS, we need to take a step backward to define who ISIS is.” He refuted the claim that ISIS is a foreign group that can be expelled, but a regional force that enjoys local support by filling a political vacuum rather than a security vacuum. “Daesh has benefitted from a sense of frustration,” he pointed out that the areas they occupy in Iraq are neglected politically and economically, as well as its infrastructure: the root cause of their rise and success. He stipulated that a shift in political strategy to economic development and political inclusion was needed: “I do not see movement on the political track to fix politics in Iraq that should be side by side with the military strategy.” Any strategy must be holistic in approach, addressing gaps and weakness at military, political, and economic levels. The key is to



“I fear there is an imbalance between the military and the political aspect in combating ISIS”

**Qubad Talabani**

“think about the day after Daesh.” This sentiment that ISIS has been able to flourish where the state has been insufficient was echoed by Sharwan Al-Waili. Like Talabani, he warned that a social crisis would ensue when Daesh is removed from certain areas, as existing, unresolved issues regarding water, resources, property, and social tension among community members has only been exacerbated by this conflict; these non-military goals are required for security and stability. He went on to state that the government was now working to finalize a reconciliation program that he hopes, given the strong political will to implement, will “have great influence in connecting the fabric of society.” Al-Waili named the shortcomings of the Iraqi Army that made it unable to defend against ISIS’s onslaught: its lack of independence, lack of modern gear, and its control by inharmonious political parties instead of a constitution and high-ranking officials.

Stuart Jones began his remarks by stating plainly, “Daesh is losing this conflict and is going to lose.” He highlighted not just military achievements of the anti-ISIS partners – giving credit to the help of Peshmerga and public mobilization forces – but the efforts to cut off Daesh finances, destroy its weapons manufacturing, curb the flow of foreign fighters, and counter its messaging. He pointed to the evacuation of locals from Daesh-held areas as evidence that there has been political victory in many areas as well as military. Like the previous speakers, Jones warned of preparing for the stabilization of Iraq in the days after Daesh.







David Pollock noted that he agreed with the previous speakers, and went on to point out that the Kurdistan Region and Peshmerga have succeeded in pushing back Daesh while benefitting from a major increase in international support. This is something Kurdistan has not seen before, and signals the importance of the Kurdish partners the US, coalition, and Iraqi forces have in Iraq and Syria. As such, the US should change its weapons approval policy for Kurdish partners. He noted that the troubling Turkish policy on the Kurds has the potential to hamper success against Daesh in the future. Pollock recognized the success Iranian and Russian intervention has had, but stated that the US coalition with Iraq and Kurdish actors in Iraq and Syria has the greatest chance of success. He went further to say that while the US could take the lead and quickly change the pace of the fight against Daesh, the local parties should take the lead and win the war together.

The panel concluded with speakers highlighting the importance of international partners, including Russia, Iran, and Turkey, being on the same page with respect to eliminating Daesh - irrespective of other political concerns.

## 4. Population Displacement Crisis: Consequences and Political Solutions

- **Lise Grande**, Deputy United Nations Special Representative for the Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq (Chair)
- **Darbaz Mohammed**, Minister of Migration and Displacement, Iraq
- **Ali Sindi**, Minister of Planning, Kurdistan Regional Government
- **Belinda Lewis**, Deputy Head of Mission, British Embassy in Iraq

The displacement crisis in Iraq is huge, with over 4 million currently displaced, including 3 million from ISIS and 1 million from the Iraq invasion (2003). The bulk of these people have fled into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. For displaced persons and host communities, there are tremendous worries about access to services and security. This is a complex issue and all panellists noted the importance and their gratitude for the many people and institutions helping in this crisis and preventing it from becoming a large-scale human disaster. That said, there have been many challenges in providing appropriate support to both the displaced and the host communities in which they currently reside, including access to services, housing, and basic needs as most IDPs fled their homes with only what they could carry. The tense relationship between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and ensuing financial crisis has further complicated the social, political, and economic responses to the crisis.





Darbaz Mohammed pointed out that while the Iraqi government did develop monetary allocations for displaced families, it was in the end “bad budgeting for livelihoods.” Mohammed said that the biggest challenge in taking in so many IDPs is settlement: they cannot live a normal life with the available options. However, if the government builds new settlements they may wish to stay. While the IDP population is mostly Arab, Mohammed declared the “red line [for the government] is that displacement should in no way lead to demographic changes.” He went on to state that it was important to provide a living standard that is appropriate for this population but that the displaced need to be encouraged to return when it is safe to do so. As such, in his view, there is no other solution but to provide cash assistance and increase international and regional cooperation to help foster return in a way that is safe and lasting, which requires social reconciliation among the tribes and sects.

Ali Sindi started by discussing the different groups that have found safe haven in the KRI over the years, including refugees and IDPs, which have a different legal status according to international law. Because the UNHCR looks after refugees their situation is better than IDPs; as such, the KRG is urging the International Community to not distinguish the groups in this conflict. He worried that a low budget granted to planning and any austerity measures from the KRG limit the ability to provide for the displaced. Sindi also highlighted the need for more service provision for displaced people and host communities, particularly in the education sector so that “this generation is not left without education.”



The session ended with remarks from Belinda Lewis who highlighted the need for “courageous restraint and strategic patience” if all stakeholders are serious about the sustainability of the response to displacement. International actors, including the UK, must refrain from telling Iraq what to do, but instead work to foster local solutions to this crisis, provide resources and logistical support. All involved must recognize that results and impact take time – particularly the nuanced and subtle changes respect to the “social contract” between and among citizens and the state. She noted MERI’s recent report on a long-term strategy for displacement as a right step in changing the way stakeholders conceive of this issue. The UK seeks to provide niche expertise and recommendations on stabilisation, stimulating the private sector, and improving interface between police and prosecutors. The other necessary and long-term step in this process is addressing the politics and reconciliation between and within communities. This is both a top-down and bottom-up endeavour and requires a great deal of trust from all parties. The area where the international community can help is in creating opportunities for people to talk to one another.



“With returning IDPs, there needs to be security and an opportunity to earn a living.”

***Belinda Lewis***

## 5. The Future of Iraq: Democracy, Rule of Law and Institutional Reform

- **Salim Al-Jabouri**, Speaker of Parliament, Iraq
- **Barham Salih**, Former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region
- **Dlawer Ala'Aldeen**, President of MERI (Chair)

The urgency for institutional reform in Iraq was highlighted by Dlawer Ala'Aldeen in his introductory speech opening up the discussion. The president of MERI shared his observation that many Iraqis do not feel loyal or committed to Baghdad. Consequently, it is currently the external pressures from the International Community and Da'esh as a common enemy that keep Iraq united. The tensions between the central government in Baghdad and other governorates, however, are becoming increasingly problematic. The chairman underlined that only through the will and commitment of strong leaders such as these can a new balance be forged and the country be reconstructed.



“We should find an opportunity to regain good economic alternatives for oil revenue. This dependence is threatening the future of Iraq.”

**Salim Jabouri**

Salim Al-Jabouri advocated strongly for adherence to the constitution in these times of crisis. “We cannot just improvise,” he asserted. “The constitution is the contract we have with the government and we cannot deviate from it.” The speaker of the House continued to stress the importance of inclusion



in coming up with reforms; “If we marginalise any one party, we will not achieve and accomplish any reforms.” Expressing the hope that Iraq would get new political parties, Al-Jabouri stated it would “change the oxygen in political life.” Most importantly, the Parliamentary Speaker urged for a solution between the KRG and Baghdad and their dispute surrounding the right to sell oil independently, calling it “one of the most divisive files currently on record.” In order to try and achieve stability for the citizens of the whole of Iraq, he asked the leaders of the KRG to help overcome their differences with Baghdad. Defeating IS, according to Salim Al-Jabouri, is not just dependent on the military aspect but also on finding political solutions to the issues in Iraq.

Barham Salih expressed a different perspective on the future role of the constitution. In his view, “it has become the source of many disputes, rather than a means of solving them.” He declared that the ‘Project for a New Iraq of 2003’ is now officially over, and that the implementation of the constitution that was drawn up then has failed. However, this doesn’t mean that no progress has been made. “Today’s issues cannot possibly be compared with those from before 2003.” But, according to Salih, it has become clear that ‘the new stage’ that was built previously “does not hold up politically and economically anymore”. Rather than coming up with a whole new constitution, the former leader argued it could be a better option to come up with a document that paraphrases the old constitution. Concerning the future of Erbil-Baghdad relations, Salih argued that only the Kurds can decide whether or not to separate from Baghdad. However, he cautioned, “The Kurds should never use independence as a political card to put

“The constitution has become a source for more disputes rather than a means of solving them.”

**Barham Salih**



pressure on Baghdad.” “We should produce real dialogue and come up with a framework in which we are true brothers, more than friends.” Whether the future is a confederate or federal Iraq, Baghdad and Erbil will have many reciprocal commitments that require cooperation. “We cannot let Da’esh come between us,” the former PM said. Not one party can impose a ‘solution’ on the other; all parties should contribute equally and work in partnership to identify mutual interests. In his closing remarks, Salih reiterated, “Any redesigning of the Middle East map should happen in a unified voice.”



## 6. Turkey-KRG Relations: Sharing Visions for the Future

- **Feridun Sinirlioglu**, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey
- **Nechirvan Barzani**, Prime Minister, Kurdistan Regional Government
- **Dlawer Ala'Aldeen**, President of MERI (Chair)

Turkey-KRG relations have evolved significantly since 2008. The two partners have increased their cooperation on a number of issues, including trade, energy and security. The bulk of Turkey's total trade value with Iraq, \$7 billion out of \$11.95 billion, is held by Kurdistan. In addition, in 2012, Turkey and the KRG cut a deal to build one gas and two oil pipelines connecting the Kurdistan Region of Iraq directly to Turkey. Finally, Turkey among other countries is providing training to Peshmerga forces fighting ISIS.

“The peace process in Turkey has been shelved, but not dead.”

***Feridun Sinirlioglu***



Nechirvan Barzani and Feridun Sinirlioglu discussed the past, present and future of KRG-Turkish relations given certain challenges and opportunities. Both highlighted that the relationship has become solid over time compared to the past and they described areas of close collaboration between the two partners. The two decision-makers discussed their relationship in the context of the Kurdish issue, the war against ISIS, and the Erbil-Baghdad disputes. Feridun Sinirlioglu stated “We are, as ever, determined to maintain and increase our support to you in your endeavours to attain more growth, development and stability.” In addition, Sinirlioglu reassured the public that “Turkey stands together with Iraq and the KRG in the fight against Daesh” and that “We are resolved to further improve our economic cooperation in every way.” During the question and answer session, the Turkish Foreign Minister underlined that the PKK

does not represent the Kurds and that Turkey is ready to cooperate with democratic parties. He also argued that power sharing and establishing unity in Syria and Iraq are key for defeating ISIS.

Nechirvan Barzani observed that with the ascendance of the AKP to power, the KRG considered the relationship with Turkey as particularly beneficial for Kurdistan. Kurdistan

has become a gateway to Iraq. The Prime Minister stated that at the moment the priority is to fight ISIS. “We never thought that we would face a terrorist organisation like ISIS,” he said. He also argued that

“Our relationship with Turkey has reached a strategic level, and it is mutually beneficial.”

*Nechirvan Barzani*

Kurdistan has shortcomings but compared to the past, the country has experienced important change. In addition, he mentioned that “the internal problems can be solved through dialogue and mutual understanding” and that economic problems have to be dealt with. Asked about the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Barzani stated, “This is a very internal issue for Turkey that can be solved in Turkey.” He also observed that the HDP missed an opportunity to form a government with the AKP. Finally, the Prime Minister said, “the [peace] process can be restarted. This should be solved through dialogue.”





## 7. The Iran nuclear deal and its impact on regional dynamics

- **Jane Arraf**, Journalist (Chair)
- **Alireza Miryousefi**, Director for ME Studies, Institute for Political and International Studies, Iran
- **John Jenkins**, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Bahrain
- **Ken Pollack**, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute, USA

October 19, 2015 was the “Adoption Day” for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the JCPOA or Iran Agreement) between Iran and the P5+1. For its part, Iran has committed to implement the Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the “Road-map for the Clarification of Past and Present Outstanding Issues.” The EU and the US, in turn, issued conditional sanctions waivers with effect from Implementation Day. This is a milestone as the deal came into force 90 days after its endorsement by the UN Security Council.



“Economic development is in the benefit of all countries. It prevents the basis for violence and terrorism.”

**Alireza Miryousefi**

Thanks to the diverse panel of senior academics and policy-makers, the wisdom of the Iran Nuclear Deal and its regional implications were fiercely debated. One question raised by the speakers was whether the Iranian Deal would prove to be transformational or transactional; would the deal dramatically transform the relations between Iran and its neighbours, as well as its status in the international community, or will it be more an exchange of favours, a quid-pro-quo among executives in the United States and Iran.

Alireza Miryousefi reflected on the consequences of lifting the sanctions: “Definitely there is no magic veil that changed everything overnight.” However, he assured the audience that unfreezing Iranian assets is a good thing for both Iran and the region. No one benefits from a poor Iran, and these assets will help alleviate poverty which in turn reduces extremism and sectarianism, according to Miryousefi. Additionally, he said that Iran plans to improve its relations with its neighbours. Part of this is dealing with the legacy of imperialism in the region that determined its borders. “We have a good motivation for negotiation,” Miryousefi said in regards to reaching regional understanding and cooperation.

John Jenkins opened with questioning just what type of deal was made between Iran and the P5+1: technical non-proliferation, transformation of its international and regional relationships, or signalling internal reform. The answer, he believes, lies in the deal’s implementation, the terms of which are unclear. But he remarked that it is probably a good thing and that “it is healthy to maintain pessimism of the intellect, and optimism of will.” For example, he sees potential for the



two regional powers whose competition underpins a lot of conflicts – Saudi Arabia and Iran – to “Negotiate a way through conflicts, including Yemen and elsewhere and not at the expense of national interests.”

Ken Pollack also began by questioning the nature of the agreement. He stressed that if Iran wants a more constructive, cooperative relationship with the United States, this is the time for them to act as Obama “is the best partner that Iran is ever likely to get in the White House.” It all depends on Iran’s

behaviour over the coming months, according to Pollack. Will it keep to its promises? Will it behave confrontationally in the region, or look for solutions?



He believes that if tacit cooperation is seen with the Iranian government, the deal can shift from transactional to transformational. The Obama Administration desperately wants this deal to be transformative – with Iran playing a positive role in Syria and Yemen, and being seen as less confrontational with the US and its regional allies. For President Obama, this deal will be a major part of his legacy, and will determine the US's future policies in the Middle East. He concluded that it is, however, unfortunate that the Obama Administration set aside human rights abuses in Iran in order to get the deal.

## 8. The Challenges of Keeping Iraq United

- **Tanya Gilli**, Former Member of Iraqi Parliament (Chair)
- **Brendan O’Leary**, Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania
- **Lukman Faily**, Iraqi Ambassador to the United States
- **Farhad Alaaldin**, Political Advisor to the President, Iraq

Discussion here mainly touched upon issues related to the lack of common vision in Iraq, the implementation of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 and potential alterations in the legal status of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including independence and confederation, as a result of the constitution’s poor implementation. Different scenarios of keeping Iraq united and the challenge of dividing Iraq along sectarian or ethnic lines were also debated.

Lukman Faily argued that the federal components of Iraq should assume responsibility for the country’s problems and give solutions, as no other external stakeholder, including the U.S. and Iran, is willing to do so. Accordingly, he identified the divisive discourse between the different federal elements as the main source of discord and highlighted the need for a common narrative. In addition, he talked about the need for a shared vision that can be developed through confidence and trust-building policies.



“A confederation with Baghdad represents a half-way house between amending the constitution and going for independence as it leaves the exterior structure of Iraq intact.”

***Brendan O’Leary***

Brendan O’Leary presented a pessimistic account over the future of the Iraqi Constitution arguing that its implementation has been a failure and that it is questionable if the constitution will continue to exist in its current form in the near future. Some of the reasons cited for this failure relate to how federalism



was implemented. More specifically, Iraqi Prime Ministers blocked the establishment of regions “both legally and illegally.” The Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s and the governorates’ rights, including continuous consultation on natural resources, have not been respected. Instead the federal government is “still using a Saddam Hussein era framework.”

O’Leary also referred to the debacle of budgetary allocation that does not correspond to what the Constitution provides and underlined the complete failure of the Constitution to establish a federal supreme court and a federal second chamber. His proposal for dealing with the problems that derive from the implementation of the constitution is that Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should establish a confederation.

Farhad Alaaldin argued that Iraq is an exceptional case because it is “neither divided nor united.” International and regional stakeholders, including the U.S., Russia, and Kurdish parties, have not taken any decision to break up Iraq. He highlighted that dividing Iraq is a big challenge. There are many questions that have to be answered before that takes place, such as if it should be divided along sectarian or ethnic lines. He particularly warned about challenges that a division of Iraq along sectarian lines pose on the ground, as it would be difficult to divide Shias and Sunnis. He finally argued that the Kurds can work for independence but are not ready to seek it out at the moment, as important elements of state building are still needed within the region.



## 9. Internal and External Crisis Facing Kurdistan: Challenges and Opportunities

- **Ali Bapeer**, Leader of Kurdistan Islamic Group
- **Mohammed Amin Faraj**, Leader of Kurdistan Islamic Union
- **Rowsch Shaways**, Polit Bureau Member, Kurdistan Democratic Party
- **Adnan Mufti**, Polit Bureau Member, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
- **Shorsh Haji**, Former Iraqi MP, Change Movement
- **Dlawer Ala'Aldeen**, President of MERI (Chair)

Kurdistan is at a crossroads not seen since the formation of a unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2006. Political institutions are confronting a mounting number of serious internal and external challenges. Internally, the KRG is faced with a political stalemate and worsening economic crisis which taken together have led to an increase in social grievances. The Presidency issue should have been resolved in August, but it remains an issue of contention between the different political parties. The political and economic stalemate has led to violent protests and the breakdown of the national unity government.

Externally, the KRG is dealing with serious security threats such as ISIS, as well as many outstanding differences with Baghdad over oil and the future of disputed territories. In addition, the escalation of the war in Iraq and Syria has pushed thousands of IDPs and refugees into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) that are in dire need for housing, food, healthcare and education. These internal and external challenges are intertwined and involve many actors, further complicating the path to their resolution.

Ali Bapeer laid out the steps that have to be taken in order to strengthen Kurdistan's future. He highlighted that looking at the past should occur on the basis of building a better future without "reopening old wounds." Furthermore, he argued that "the current crisis, frankly, is an outcome of our past shortcomings." He referred specifically to the lack of a "neutral" parliament that monitors governmental activities and to the weak judiciary that "does not have a say in many things that are happening." He also talked about the need to normalise the political crisis by starting to "discipline our

media channels.” Then, he referred to principles and practical steps for Kurdistan to solve its problems. He underlined the need for mistakes to be acknowledged, and for responsibility to be taken by those who possess more power. In terms of practical steps, he suggested that “freedom and sovereignty should be restored in our region, steps that have been taken in a state of emotions should be cancelled and the parliament speaker and ministers should resume their jobs and get back to work.” Finally, he pointed out that after political normalisation and legality have been restored, then it is possible to talk about radical reforms.

Mohammed Faraj referred to the mistakes of the past, such as dividing accomplishments instead of dividing responsibilities. He paid

particular attention to the disillusioned young people of the KRI. “When young people leave the country, this is a big indicator that they are not satisfied. Those that stay demonstrate against the government. If we don’t think about this, it will have dire consequences,” he noted. He also underlined that “without compromise, we won’t get anywhere.” Regarding external challenges, he argued that the problems between Erbil and Baghdad are not small as they have a serious effect on the economic prosperity of the KRG. Faraj talked also about how the internal and external challenges can turn into opportunities. For example, he said that the Kurds are fighting ISIS and this is something that Kurdistan needs to exploit politically. Then he questioned the extent to which Kurdistan is exporting oil on its own and has managed to build an independent economy. Finally, he underlined the need for compromise and dialogue among the different parties.



“The current crisis is an outcome of our past shortcomings.”

*Ali Bapeer*



Rowsh Shaways spoke about the political and economic crisis in Kurdistan and Erbil-Baghdad relations. He argued that before the political crisis, the priority was to remain united and act together on the basis of a national accord. He continued by declaring that “those political parties that are not convinced of this should take another path... You should openly declare this in case your objective is not unity and accord.” His argument was that the basis for cooperation between political parties is either consensus or accords. According to Shaways, the foundational principle should be accord. He then said that each party has to review their policies because “the circumstances



we are living in are the result of our collective mistakes. No one is innocent,” he stressed. Regarding the economic crisis, he advocated for diversification of the economy but admitted that this is not something easy to implement. He also argued that the public sector is bloated and in need of reforms that all parties together should agree to and support. “Let no one say that one party will cut off the livelihoods of x number of families,” he characteristically said, bringing to the fore the idea that the political costs associated with economic reforms have to be shared by all parties. Finally, he discussed the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil noting that “despite all the negotiations, Abadi’s only achievement has been the agreement with the KRG. However, after the agreement he cut off half of the KRG budget.” Shaways believes the blame for the stalemate should not be put on the KRG, as Baghdad has been trying to limit the powers of the KRG and harm Kurdish interests since 2003.

Adnan Mufti focused on regional developments, the quality of democracy in Kurdistan and the political and economic crisis. More specifically, he argued that one should assess how developments in Syria,



Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Turkey affect Kurdistan. He further talked about the violation of democracy in Kurdistan and that the Parliament is an important institution that needs to be respected. Today’s parliament has been significantly weakened when compared with the past, according to Mufti. He expressed anxiety that the civil war mentality still exists in Kurdistan’s





political scene. “In the meetings of the five parties, I was saying frankly that if we do not tackle the causes of the civil war, this region will go down,” he said. “We need political agreement to omit the traces of civil war,” he continued. With regard to the economy, he noted that it would not be fair to use the circumstances for political gains. “How are we criticising the departments of the government that belong to the people? We need to draw on positive developments,” Mufti concluded.

Shorsh Haji mainly discussed the political objectives of the Change (Gorran) party since 2009 and the political crisis in Kurdistan and their solutions. He argued that Gorran party has managed to elect deputies because it has been conveying the protest of the people since 2009. “The people’s protest was against the lack of rule of law, equality, monopolies and corruption. We were a civil, moneyless and without an army movement in comparison to the other two parties that had money and armies,” he said. Gorran movement put forward a number of reform packages, such as the institutionalisation of Peshmerga in order to target the disparity among the parties and grievances of the people. In addition, he emphasised that “the parliamentary system is the best way to avoid the monopoly of power by one party.” He rejected all kinds of violent protests against “police forces, party headquarters or other targets,” while endorsing peaceful demonstrations.



“We need to institutionalise and unify the Peshmerga forces, and to nationalise the security and police forces.”

**Shorsh Haji**

He underlined that “the KRG is a project for everyone, and we have a sense of ownership.” Finally, he argued that building confidence and going back to the negotiating table is the only way forward.



“Will you promise to instruct your party media channels to stop the negative political campaign starting from 8 p.m tonight? Please answer by ..... Yes or No”

***Dlawer Ala'Aldeen***

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## Conclusion

By all accounts the MERI Forum 2015 covered a lot of ground in terms of topics of pressing concern to Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and the wider Middle East including among others, Kirkuk and other disputed territories; domestic politics and political crisis; the war against ISIS; the unity of Iraq; social cohesion relating to the unity of Iraqi and Kurdish societies as well as the refugee and displacement crises; the domestic economy; geopolitics in the region; and international humanitarian law.

In convening such high-level panels and making room for the participation of diplomats, government officials, civil society representatives, and media, the MERI Forum 2015 fostered greater debate and, more importantly, action on these issues. An important and concrete outcome of the Forum, for example, was the Kurdish political parties agreeing to stop using their media platforms for slandering campaigns against one another and to continue dialogue to end the political stalemate. MERI will continue to serve as a neutral institution providing space for discussion to resolve this crisis and pave the way for more inclusive and open political debate. For the years to come, the Kurdistan Region will need an impartial platform committed to fostering high level and content-based debate.

Through our engagement and cooperation with international and local actors, MERI has started new research projects on social cohesion in areas of displacement and return; improving livelihoods and agricultural resilience in newly liberated areas. Partnering with the UN and local NGO's, such projects feed into our broader research programme on economic diversification through reform in the KRI. MERI will continue to expand on existing research programmes, such as economic policies and reforms, as well as resilience-based strategies for resolving the displacement crisis.

In addition, MERI is determined to work with our Swiss partner “Gevena Call” to promote the importance of civilian protection by and to all armed groups in Iraq. The objective is to reduce violence and to prepare the ground for post-conflict reconciliation.

In addition, the institute continues and expands its research on Middle Eastern dynamics and developments. MERI has very recently been awarded research funding in the context of Horizon 2020 by the European Commission to conduct research on the effects of Middle Eastern dynamics on EU-Turkish relations. It has also been awarded another Horizon 2020 grant to study the effectiveness of EU crisis management mechanisms in Iraq. MERI will conduct research in close collaboration with a broad network of academic institutions and think tanks in Europe and the Middle East.

The findings from this work will be disseminated with the publication of high-quality articles produced in collaboration with local, national, regional and international partners. Our comprehensive research programme, coupled with continuing developments in the region, assure us there will be plenty to discuss at next year’s MERI Forum – where we hope to receive you again.





# MERI Forum 2015

**Sharing Visions for the Future of the Middle East**



**Middle East Research Institute**

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