

Annual Report



2014/15



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Middle East Research Institute (MERI)
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A Message from MERI's President

For MERI, the period between conception and foundation was brief. The Institute was registered in July 2013 and hit the ground running in May 2014, just as the Middle East was going through its toughest challenges for decades. The Institute very rapidly filled a niche in the overall politics and policy research, not only in the Kurdistan Region, but Iraq as a whole. Its establishment has been appreciated by policy- and decision-makers, academics and civil society alike.

By providing evidence-based policy research, MERI has been able to provide vision and strategy to both the public and private sectors. Its mission is forged around the principles of promoting human rights, nation-building, rule of law, institutionalisation and democratisation.

The Institute was able to begin its mission through the establishment of a series of research projects, public events, and numerous high impact publications. MERI has been able to provide much needed research into the areas of national security, democracy and governance, the disputed territories, reforming legislation for the protection of women and humanitarian crisis management, among many other projects.

The organisation managed to launch its profile with a number of high impact activities, designed to make a difference. The most important of which was the Institute's inaugural MERI Forum; its success has made it an annual event in the Kurdistan Region's calendar.

We are confident that, in the coming years, we will be able to build upon our foundations, establishing further connections with governmental and non-governmental organisations. We will rely on the support of these networks as we grow and build, identifying possible future collaboration and partnerships.

I would like to personally thank all those who have helped and supported MERI over the last year. This includes the Oil and Gas council (for the unconditional funding), all those who have attended our events, collaborated with our researchers and cooperated with the organization. Finally, I would like to thank the staff at MERI, without whom none of this would have been possible.



Prof. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen
President of MERI



The Institute very rapidly filled a niche in the overall politics and policy research, not only in the Kurdistan Region, but Iraq as a whole.



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Photos courtesy of Safin Hamid

1. The Past Year

MERI was launched in 2014, the year that proved to be one of the most turbulent and challenging years for Iraq as the country stumbled into one crisis after another. Beginning in January, relations between Baghdad and Erbil came to a standstill after Baghdad halted the 17% payment from the federal budget to the Kurdistan Region. This was in parallel with cries from the Sunni community with respect to their relative marginalization from the centre of power in Baghdad.

As the crisis in Iraq deepened, parliamentary elections took place on April 30, 2014, which resulted in the State of Law Coalition headed by Nuri al-Maliki winning the most seats in the parliament. Even before the first session was convened, Iraq found itself confronted with an existential crisis, as ISIS swept through Northern Iraq in a military blitzkrieg that left the Iraqi Army in tatters. The fall of Mosul on June 9 and ISIS foray into Anbar and Kirkuk provinces forced the Peshmerga to step beyond its territorial boundaries.

After weeks of stalemate at the political level in Baghdad where the formation of government was stymied with Sunni and Kurdish discontentment with Maliki continuing as Prime Minister, ISIS moved against the Kurdistan Region and the Sinjar area. Starting August, the international coalition led by the United States came to the rescue by initiating air strikes against ISIS. The Peshmerga ground defence and the coalition strikes were instrumental in pushing and containing ISIS advances and over the months have seen success in liberating areas such as the Mosul Dam and Sinjar.

At the political level, government was formed in Baghdad with Fuad Masum as President, Haidar Al-Abadi as Prime Minister and Salim Al-Jubouri as Speaker of the Parliament.

Realizing the imperative of pursuing power-sharing as a strategic necessity in the war against ISIS, Baghdad under Abadi has been forthcoming in attending to both Sunni and Kurdish grievances. An agreement over oil and the budget was inked with the KRG in December 2014 and Khalid Al-Obeidi, a Sunni, was appointed as Defence Minister. Though 2014 started with Baghdad pursuing a zero-sum politics, it ended with Abadi insistent on bringing all groups and communities within the national fold.

However, as 2015 commenced, significant challenges still persisted in Iraq. Today ISIS remains in control of a third of



Though 2014 started with Baghdad pursuing a zero-sum politics, it ended with Al-Abadi insistent on bringing all groups and communities within the national fold.

Iraq's territory, and Baghdad's utilization of the Hashd Al-Shaabi (or Popular Mobilisation Forces) in the war against ISIS have caused consternation amongst both the Sunnis and Kurds. The Iraqi Army is in a debilitated condition and its resuscitation is pivotal, as the Coalition Forces have made clear their intention not to send "boots on the ground" in Iraq.

Efforts to rebuild the Army and wage war against ISIS are compounded further with the declining prices of oil in the international market. With corruption and a huge public sector eating into Iraq's already dire finances, the declining oil prices will have a considerable impact on the Iraqi war state efforts. The only light at the end of the tunnel, in the past year, was Abadi's commitment to the process of dialogue and reconciliation with all components of Iraqi society and his determination to restructure the Iraqi state by tackling the issue of corruption and ghost soldiers.

2. About the Institute

The Middle East Research Institute (MERI), was established in 2014 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation. The Institute is based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. MERI is focused on policy issues relating to the people, the land and the system of governance in the Middle East in general, and Kurdistan and Iraq in particular.

Mission

To contribute to the process of nation building and democratisation in the Middle East via engagement, research, analysis and policy debates.

Values

Rigorous, independent and objective research and analysis.

Aspirations

To become a global leader in strategic research.

Objectives

To promote and develop: Human rights, Democracy, Good Governance, the Rule of Law, Social and Economic Prosperity.



3. Our People

MERI brings together leading experts in government and academia from all over the world who provide the highest quality research, policy recommendations, and analysis on the diverse research projects conducted by the Institute. Resident research staff of MERI is comprised of:

- Programme Directors
- Senior Research Fellows
- Research Fellows
- Junior Research Fellows
- Research Assistants

In addition to non-resident Associate Fellows, Advisers and Consultants, MERI collaborates widely with renowned academic leaders and senior fellows in internationally leading policy research institutions.

Global Partners

Our global partners, whose pledges of collaboration were obtained from the outset are:

- The Brookings Institute, USA
- Carnegie Endowment, USA
- Chatham House, UK
- Royal United Services Institute, UK
- Reform, UK
- American Enterprise Institute, USA
- Council on Foreign Relations, USA
- Washington Institute, USA
- Centre for American Progress, USA
- Next Century Foundation, UK
- Centre for Strategic & International Studies, USA
- Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Norway
- Instituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

4. Our Research: Delivering on our Objectives

As a research institute dedicated to academic excellence, MERI carries out scholarly research on the political system, governance, economics, national security, international politics, health, environment, education and science and technology. MERI scholars prepare studies and provide independent analysis of critical challenges and opportunities facing the region. They offer expert consultation to governmental and non-governmental organizations in different fields and provide innovative and workable policy recommendations to institutions.

By maintaining a strong and uncompromising adherence to its core values of independent and objective research and analysis, MERI has become a reputable provider of critical perspectives for regional policy-makers and the general public. Since its formation, the Institute has been a visible actor at high-level policy promoting good governance, institutionalization and evidence-based policy making.

MERI engages public and private sector institutions in open and/or confidential debates on recent on-the-ground crosscutting developments through debates, seminars, workshops and conferences.

Research Programmes

Democracy and Governance

Nation Building
Democratic Institutions
Rule-of-Law
Good Governance

International Politics and National Security

Conflict resolution
Diplomacy
Reconciliation
Cooperation

Economics, Energy and Environment

Growth
Sustainability
Natural Resources
Human Capital
Investment

Science, Health, Education and Public Services

Public Services
Health Care
Innovation
Infrastructure

Community, Civil Society and Cultural Development

Human Rights
Gender
Culture
History
Religion

MERI Projects

MERI's five research programmes consist of a number of diverse projects. The projects aim to have a strong impact on institutional reform processes. The Institute's mandate does not end by providing findings and recommendations. MERI's role also incorporates the support for implementation of solutions. A prime example is the Democracy and Governance Programme with its project on Violence Against Women. In this and other projects, MERI supports reform efforts of state institutions by offering recommendations based on evidence and helps with implementing best-practices. The following pages provide an overview of the Institute's current projects:

1. Preventing Violence Against Women
2. Good Governance and the Justice System: A Rule of Law Initiative
3. Institutionalisation of Peshmerga Forces
4. Emergency Security Briefings: War Against ISIS
5. Middle East Economic Outlook: Oil-dependence vs Diversification
6. Accommodating Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Nineveh Plains
7. Kirkuk Research Project: Vision for a Lasting Solution
8. KRG-Turkey Relations: Opportunities and Challenges for a Solid Partnership
9. Estimating Iran-KRG Relations: Predicaments and Prospects
10. Displacement Emergency Response : Refugees and Internally Displaced People
11. Preserving Social Cohesion and Livelihoods

Preventing Violence Against Women

Democracy and Governance Programme

Data indicate that in the past years violence against women has dramatically increased globally and is still on the rise. According to official statistics, more than 5000 cases of violence against women in Kurdistan Region were reported in 2013 despite the passing of the Act of Combating Domestic Violence in 2011. MERI's project puts effort in capacity building measures in the form of institutional and individual development. The project consists of a Quality Assurance programme that aims to institutionalize the appropriate behaviour in policing to enhance the capacity to tackle domestic violence.

For this purpose, (a) MERI and collaborators produced a draft amendment of the existing law, which was submitted to the KRG for adoption; (b) an ambitious management and leadership programme was initiated for training police officers in PVAW stations; and (c) an electronic Quality Assurance database and a Quality Manual guiding the police through this program have been developed. Workshops and training sessions have been conducted by MERI to improve the quality of services provided to the public by adopting professional and transparent standards of policing and service delivery.

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More than 5000 cases of violence against women were reported in 2013.

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The police training is particularly useful in treating the victims and protecting their privacy. And I am confident that the Quality Assurance programme will eventually build trust between the police forces and the public”

Captain Flamina Wahid Fakhri, Head of Police at the Minare Police Station for Combating Domestic Violence

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Good Governance and the Justice System: A Rule of Law Initiative

Democracy and Governance Programme

A major pillar of stability in post-conflict societies is the rule of law, and its promotion is inextricably linked to the success or failure of nation-building efforts. To strengthen the rule of law, priority has to be given to institutionalisation and consolidation of democratic structures. The different levels on which this project aims to have an impact are: enhancing quality in bureaucratic procedures through management of leadership, advising on draft legislation in an inclusive process with all stakeholders and implementing an evidence-based policy approach. MERI's proposal as an overall reform effort to improve the quality of services is being implemented in the Ministry of Interior (Police Force) and Ministry of Justice (Public Prosecutors) as well as the Judicial Council (Judges). MERI has initiated a training programme and produced a Quality Manual and an electronic Quality Assurance programme, for implementation in all three institutions .

Partners for MERI's Rule of Law Initiative are:

Ministry of Justice, Kurdistan Region

Ministry of Interior, Kurdistan Region

Judicial Council of Kurdistan Region

Kurdistan Parliament

Ensuring sovereignty of law is crucial for the nation-building process.

“To strengthen the rule of law, priority has to be given to institutionalisation and consolidation of democratic structures.”



Emergency Security Briefings

International Politics and National Security

The fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014, marked a turning point in Iraqi security history. The rapid advancements of ISIS and the threat of disintegration of Iraq caused a sudden increase of international attention to the region.

To respond to the presence of global media and international organisations and their need for up-to-date information on the unfolding security situation, MERI initiated a series of Emergency Security Briefings to provide comprehensive and incisive coverage of political and security developments.

High-level political and military officials, representatives of international and local business community, various Consul Generals, and a large section of international and local press participated in the briefings. The briefings helped political and security representatives to articulate accurate information directly to local and international communities. They further contained the spreading of disinformation, which is characteristic for crisis situations. To inform a wider audience, the results of the Emergency Security Briefings were disseminated in real time. MERI continues holding Security Briefings on an ad-hoc basis.

Emergency Security Briefings included the following topics:

KRG–Baghdad: The Formation of a New Government

Iraq’s Protracted Political Process in Motion

KRG–Baghdad Relations

Political Unity in Kurdistan Region

Current Security Developments

Middle East Economic Outlook

Economics, Energy and Environment

A new scenario, based on persistent low oil prices, in tandem with political transitions and amidst difficult social conditions, is dramatically challenging the progress in the economic agendas of most countries in the Middle East. This is especially crucial for economies such as Iraq, with a high dependency on oil resources and ill-prepared fiscal fundamentals. The biggest economic threat of the region is hence not a decrease in oil prices, but a stalemate in pushing for structural reforms in the economy.

MERI has been providing regular evidence-based updates on the most pressing issues affecting the development of the Middle East, including post-conflict development, energy economics, fiscal policy, management of common natural resources and private sector development. Through publications and commentaries, this project is a window to provide insights to the public, journalists and representatives from business and administration of the dynamics, challenges and needed actions around Middle East's economic development.



Source: International Monetary Fund

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The biggest economic threat of the region is not a decrease in oil prices, but a stalemate in pushing for structural reforms.

Accommodating Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Nineveh Plains

International Politics and National Security

The project seeks to develop accommodation strategies that could help foster dialogue and reconciliation between the marginalized minorities in Nineveh Plains and the government in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region through the creation of an advisory body composed of minority representatives. Management of interethnic relations by institutionalising channels of contact between marginalized minorities and government so that democratic governance and participation of minorities in policy decisions improves. Addressing the issue of minorities is intimately connected with the democratisation of the Iraqi state. The better the response mechanism of the Iraqi state in addressing minority concerns, the healthier will be the status of democracy in Iraq.

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Addressing the issue of minorities is intimately connected with the democratization of the Iraqi state.



Kirkuk Research Project

International Politics and National Security

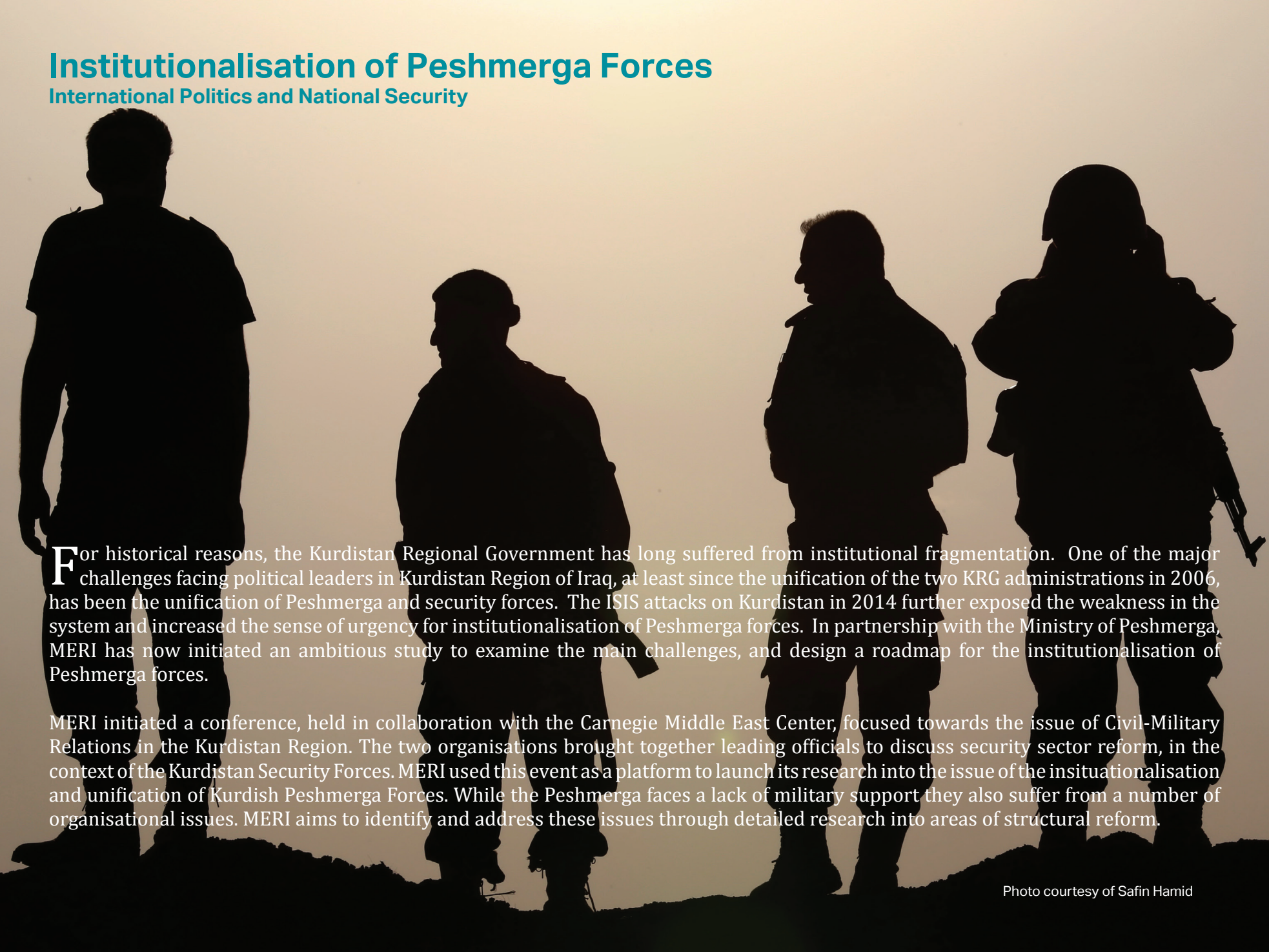
Since 2003, successive governments have failed to solve the quarrels over the disputed territories despite a constitutional framework being in place. While there is extensive literature on the resolution of the Kirkuk issue, prior to the sudden emergence of ISIS, no research into the post-June 2014 situation exists. The fall of Mosul and the ensuing events has had a considerable impact on the internal dynamics in Kirkuk. It is critically important to identify these trends to be able to constructively engage in policy recommendations for the resolution of Kirkuk's status. MERI initiated a project to study the changes on-the-ground and the perspectives of the diverse entities in Kirkuk.

The objective is to produce a policy report on the situation of Kirkuk that identifies key reasons why Kirkuk remains contested. More importantly, it will propose creative solutions to what is becoming an intractable situation. Researchers conducted not only interviews and focus groups with community representatives in Kirkuk, but also travelled to the frontlines in order to attain information and provide valuable analysis. MERI is now in the process of finalizing an in-depth policy report that combines up-to-date analysis of various perspectives and specific policy recommendations for stakeholders. This report will be launched in Summer 2015.



Institutionalisation of Peshmerga Forces

International Politics and National Security



For historical reasons, the Kurdistan Regional Government has long suffered from institutional fragmentation. One of the major challenges facing political leaders in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, at least since the unification of the two KRG administrations in 2006, has been the unification of Peshmerga and security forces. The ISIS attacks on Kurdistan in 2014 further exposed the weakness in the system and increased the sense of urgency for institutionalisation of Peshmerga forces. In partnership with the Ministry of Peshmerga, MERI has now initiated an ambitious study to examine the main challenges, and design a roadmap for the institutionalisation of Peshmerga forces.

MERI initiated a conference, held in collaboration with the Carnegie Middle East Center, focused towards the issue of Civil-Military Relations in the Kurdistan Region. The two organisations brought together leading officials to discuss security sector reform, in the context of the Kurdistan Security Forces. MERI used this event as a platform to launch its research into the issue of the insituationalisation and unification of Kurdish Peshmerga Forces. While the Peshmerga faces a lack of military support they also suffer from a number of organisational issues. MERI aims to identify and address these issues through detailed research into areas of structural reform.

Photo courtesy of Safin Hamid

Estimating Iran-KRG Relations: Predicaments and Prospects

International Politics and National Security

Iran is an important player in the Middle East and its policies in the wake of the American invasion in Iraq have acquired seminal importance. The recent nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 states opens further avenues for Iran's increased role in the Middle East as well as international politics. The KRG faces a dire need to shape a policy with respect to Iran which is mindful of recent events and policy trends. The policies of the KRG privilege Turkey over Iran while the war against ISIS proves that Iran, perhaps, is more seminal to KRG's security than Turkey.

Iran and the Kurdistan Region share a long history of engagement precipitated by the factor of geography and regional geopolitics. While, dense interactions characterise Iran-KRG relations, it is insecurity and distrust which still marks relations between the two sides. Why has this been the case? What steps can the KRG and Iran take so that mutual security and socio-economic benefits are advanced?

The project seeks to identify the parameters of KRG's policy towards Iran in light of political, economic, social, cultural, military and geostrategic variables. The purpose is to identify win-win strategies for both Iran and the KRG so that regional stability and security is enhanced. It is in this regard that a specialized study with policy recommendations is needed to research and analyse the subject of Iran-KRG relations. Furthermore, not only policy and relations, the study also aims to put into perspective the decision-making structure as well as relevant mechanisms through which decisions relative to Iran are made within the KRG. A report will be launched in the summer 2015.

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The policies of the KRG privilege Turkey although recent events prove that Iran is more seminal to KRG's security.



KRG-Turkey: Opportunities and Challenges for a Solid Partnership

International Politics and National Security

Interstate competition, sectarian violence and economic decline increasingly depict a bleak picture of the Middle East. Against this backdrop, KRG-Turkey relations present a different paradigm that involves dialogue and cooperation on a number of different issues, including security, energy and trade. The Kurdish question in Turkey, the uncertainty in Erbil-Baghdad relations and the competition between Turkey and Iran for influence in the region cast their shadow on the process of strengthening the relationship further. To make things worse, the activities of ISIS in Iraq and Syria has put KRG-Turkey relations to the test.

Deepening and widening Turkey-KRG relations requires institutionalisation of the relationship moving beyond KDP-AKP collaboration that will include various political stakeholders.



KRG-Turkey relations represent an island of optimism for greater cooperation among regional stakeholders in the Middle East.

How can this relationship become a solid partnership that transcends doubts of being reversed?

MERI's research has three main objectives. On the one hand, it will analyse the present internal and external dynamics to the KRG-Turkey relationship and on the other hand define opportunities that should be used and challenges that should be addressed. The final objective is to deliver realistic and practical recommendations that political circles as well as business and civil society actors can endorse on both sides for the establishment of a solid partnership.

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MERI engaged with stakeholders in emergency response in order to define policy recommendations to make the region more resilient to humanitarian crises.

Since June 2014, more than two million people have been displaced internally, of which 40% fled towards the Kurdistan Region. The KRG response to this massive influx of displaced families has suffered from contingency gaps that undermined its effectiveness. As the internal conflict in Iraq is still far from being solved, violence can still trigger further waves of displacement within the country and towards the Kurdistan Region. Learning from previous mistakes and incorporating best practices would increase public authorities' resilience in humanitarian crises. For this purpose, MERI has undertaken field research with stakeholders involved in emergency response management in order to identify the gaps in KRG's emergency response and define policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the region's readiness for future crises. This includes engaging with representatives of different KRG bodies, the Government of Iraq, humanitarian NGOs and UN-related agencies.

Preserving Social Cohesion and Livelihoods

Economics, Energy and Environment

At a time when around 40% of Iraq's displaced families in 2014 sought protection in Kurdistan, the inhabitants of the region have felt the impact of the displacement crisis - combined with a political and economic crisis - on their daily lives, from food prices to employment. Tensions between displaced groups and the host community have been rising. To avoid this, there is the need to promote livelihoods restoration and social cohesion in Kurdistan by identifying where the origin of these impacts are located.

The project analyses the impacts of the humanitarian crisis on a number of socio-economic areas in Kurdistan and develops an 'Early Warning System' to identify where intervention is needed. Hence, evidence-based information is crucial to mitigate internal tensions. MERI started the monitoring of several indicators that are considered to drive social tensions in Kurdistan, as part of setting an 'Early Warning System' to inform conflict mitigation.

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There is a need to promote livelihoods restoration and social cohesion in Kurdistan by identifying where the origin of impact is located.

5. Publications: Commentary, Opinion and Analysis

Publications on Fight Against ISIS

2014 proved to be a pivotal year for Iraq and the Kurdistan region. From January onwards the security situation deteriorated, culminating in the fall of Mosul in June. Islamic State fighters took control of large areas of Iraq, opening a new chapter in the history of the region. With the focus of the international community once again fixed on the security situation in Iraq, MERI provided insight and analysis into the situation.

Exploiting deep social, political and sectarian tensions the terrorist organization may have irreparably damaged Iraq's fragile social fabric. Even best case scenarios point to the counter-insurgency as being a long and difficult process. The coming year will prove to be of great significance for Iraq's Security Forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the International Coalition as they attempt to wrest control from insurgent forces across Iraq.

Security developments are now tied to the future stability of the Kurdistan Region, Iraq and the entire Middle Eastern region. Utilising its position as a locally based research institute, MERI has tracked the ever-changing security situation and provided analysis through publications, research and media outlets.

Some of our publications on the ISIS crisis include:

- The Caliphs' big gamble
- Countering ISIS: predicaments and prospects
- Coalition forces clash with Islamic State fighters
- As battles rage in Kirkuk, political solutions are needed
- The price of failure
- The game has changed; action is needed

Publications on Economic Development

A new scenario based on persistent low oil prices, in tandem with political turmoil and amidst difficult social conditions, has dramatically challenged the progress in economic agendas of both, Iraq and Kurdistan Region. Both governments are highly dependent on the oil sector and suffer from ill-prepared fiscal fundamentals. For that reason, a major contention point has been the sharing and use of oil resources. Many developments have taken place during 2014 especially over the negotiations for resource-sharing between Baghdad and Erbil, and the formulation of a consensus federal budget in crisis context.

However, the biggest economic threat for the Iraqi and the Kurdish governments is not a decrease in oil prices, but a stalemate in pushing for structural reforms in the economy. The economic situation in both, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, has merited a detailed analysis in order to define the immediate priorities for both governments if they have to move away from becoming entrenched as a rentier state.

Publications on economic issues include:

- Farewell to growth in Iraq, until when?
- Iraq's federal budget: some insights
- Baghdad-Erbil agreement on oil and budget: deepening Iraq's federalism?
- No institutional evolution for Kurdistan's economy
- As displaced families return to Nineveh, how to address social cohesion?

Publications on Foreign Policy

The Middle East faces internal and external challenges whose effects cannot be alleviated without the implementation of foreign policies that go beyond parochial national interests. Foreign policy should be considered as an effective tool that can minimise, as much as possible, the transaction costs of interstate interaction. Subsequently, this will help governments to focus on their domestic problems and suggest and implement new constructive ways in a collaborative manner. Only in that way, it will be possible to lift the spectre of insecurity and uncertainty that casts its shadow on the region. The use of soft power through the expansion of trade collaboration and cultural exchanges should help towards that direction.

MERI will continue to study and assess foreign policy output in the Middle East with an eye on conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Towards that end, articles, reports and conferences will be delivered in a timely fashion.

Our Foreign Policy publications include:

- The Middle East at breaking point: Turkey's neighbourhood policy and the need for enhanced 'Soft' Power
- Explaining the riddle of Turkish foreign policy in Syria: dilemmas, risks and limitations
- The Ankara-Erbil strategic relationship; will it survive?
- Turkey, Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government

Publications on Middle East Politics

Middle East politics was characterized by increased bloodshed and violence as the civil war in Syria intensified and Iraq descended into further instability and chaos with ISIS marauding into Mosul, Anbar, Tikrit and Salahaddin and in the process capturing almost one-third of Iraq. The dramatic collapse of the Iraqi Army, the defensive incursion of the Peshmerga into Kirkuk and already tense relations between Baghdad and Erbil, on the one hand, and Baghdad and Sunni tribes on the other called into question both the idea of the Iraqi State as well as its sovereign power and authority.

MERI's publications on the Middle East reflected emerging realities and the dire need for defeating terrorism through nation-building, good governance and the institutionalization of dialogue and reconciliation. Majority of states in the Middle East including, Iraq, Syria, and Libya are characterized by a democratic deficit and failure to practice inclusive politics that is sensitive to all segments of society. It was precisely this failure, which fuelled resentment in the local population leading to the rise of extremist ideologies such as ISIS in Syria and Iraq. As the Middle East takes shape and contends with an existential struggle against ISIS, the question is not merely a victory on the battle front, but a larger political struggle aimed at winning the hearts and minds of people who have been denied political power and representation for long.

Titles on Middle East Politics include:

- Good Governance in Kurdistan Region of Iraq – In 2020
- Countering terrorism through Nation-Building
- The Middle East in turmoil: The need for dialogue and reconciliation
- Post-Maliki Iraq: An uncertain future?
- The emerging Middle East order: who can shape it and how?
- Iraq as we knew it, is no longer
- Elections in Tunisia: stability in an unstable Middle East



6. Dialogue and Diplomacy

Fostering a culture of dialogue and debate are a central part of MERI's mission. The Institute is in a position to provide space to freely debate contemporary issues that impact the Kurdistan Region, Iraq and the wider region as a whole.

MERI has undertaken a series of events, bringing together opinion-formers, academics and decision-makers, in a constructive and independent setting. These events range from large conferences, bringing together international delegates, to small off-the-record discussions focused on specific policy issues. The Institute also held a number of political and security briefings aimed at raising awareness of the on-going security situation in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Whether it is to increase dialogue, assist diplomacy or disseminate information, MERI's events have provided a forum for debate that was not previously possible.



Interaction of this kind is vital to advance critical and pragmatic thinking on difficult topics. Bringing multiple actors together, in this fashion, provides the basis for the rigorous research and policy work that the Institute is dedicated to.





MERI Forum 2014

MERI's inaugural Conference, held on 4-6 November 2014, was an unprecedented event in that it gathered academics, journalists and decision-makers from across the political spectrum in Iraq on one platform of dialogue. The title, 'The Middle East in Transition – The Need for Dialogue and Reconciliation' reflects the ambition of MERI to be a constructive force in a tumultuous region. In light of the ISIS's advances in Iraq, the Forum was well placed to take on some of the most pressing issues with regards to policy fields such as security and economy.

Over the course of three days, topics including the war against ISIS, Sunni re-engagement, the disputed territories, Baghdad-KRG relations, as well as Iran and Turkey's roles in the region, were discussed in panel sessions with pertinent panellists and interventions from the floor. Apart from representation of the various political stakeholders in Iraq, and representatives from neighbouring countries were invited, as well as academics from across the globe.

Impact

During the Forum, Salim Al-Jubouri, Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, put forward the idea of the establishment of a Council of Wisdom in Iraq. This council would address the idea of Dialogue and Reconciliation in Iraq, which prompted a favourable response from the President of Iraq, Fuad Masum. Salim Al-Jabouri proposed Fuad Masum as the patron of such Council to which the President agreed. The dissemination and reach of the output from the Forum, through local and international media, also led to positive responses from Baghdad and the newly elected Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, who welcomed further action and initiative to enhance the prospects for dialogue and reconciliation in Iraq.

Another immediate impact attributed to MERI Forum 2014 was the ice-breaking session when KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani and Minister of Natural Resources, Ashty Hawrami, engaged Mr Baqir Jabr Al-Zubaidi in a debate about the future of relations with Baghdad and outstanding issues relating to civil aviation restrictions over Kurdistan Region and the Oil and Gas negotiations. Mr Al-Zubaidi who represented Baghdad's Government, made a commitment to address both issues upon his return. Indeed, the aviation restrictions were lifted within days and Baghdad's Minister of Oil, Mr Adil Abdel-Mahdi was sent to Erbil to directly negotiate a mutually rewarding deal with KRG Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani.



Gultan Kisanak

Mayor of Diyarbakir
Former Co-chairman of Peoples'
Democratic Party



Women are the
row material
for the struggle
against ISIS.



“ Reconciliation is not an end but a means for achieving peace.

Fuad Masum
President of Republic of Iraq



“ Our crisis is one of trust. There is no trust among political parties and people of Iraq.

Salim Al-Jubouri
Speaker of Iraqi Council of Representatives



“ Kurdistan is considered to be an active component and partner in the international coalition against terror.

Barham Salih
Former Prime Minister - KRG



“ From Kurdistan's experience, planting the seeds of tolerance and finding solutions to political issues are not impossible.

Nechirvan Barzani
Prime Minister - KRG



“ Turkey needs Kurdistan and Kurdistan needs Turkey.

Ashty Hawrami
Minister of Natural Resources - KRG



“ The current Iraqi government is ready to reach a strategic agreement concerning the disputes with the KRG.

Bayan Jabr Al-Zubaidi
Minister of Transport - Iraq

MERI & Al Sharq Forum: Policy Debate on Turkey–KRG Relations



Turkey is a regional power and an important neighbour for Kurdistan Region. After decades of tensions, relations between Turkey and the KRG are improving for the mutual benefit of both sides. Although the rise of ISIS and the security and economic crisis have exposed cracks in their relations, it is of utmost necessity that both entities continue to work together to strengthen their strategic partnership. In a conference titled “Turkey, Kurds, and the Kurdistan Regional Government: Strengthened Partnership in a Region in Turmoil”, KRG-Turkey policy-makers, advisors and academics came together to discuss, in an open, frank and transparent way, the present and future trajectory of relations between Turkey and the KRG. The conference was jointly held by MERI and Istanbul based Al-Sharq Forum.

Kirkuk Policy Debate



At this event, MERI brought together experts, policy-makers and academics of Kurdistan Region to debate the future of Kirkuk in light of post-June 2014 developments. Important themes such as Article 140, normalization process, de-facto situation and the 2009 UNAMI report were discussed. Attendees highlighted a number of points, which will contribute to a policy report to be published by MERI.

Focus group

A focus group meeting attended by representatives of the communities was held in Kirkuk. Attendees debated significant issues, open and constructively, in a friendly and tension-free atmosphere.

Interviews with key stakeholders

Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with representatives of the constituencies, political parties, academics and experts. Valuable data was collected through several interviews.

Future of the disputed territories

MERI also dedicated an entire session for the subject of the disputed territories during MERI Forum 2014. The panellists consisted of international and local experts and provided important and constructive contributions.

World Leaders @ MERI



MERI offers a platform for exchange for regional and international leaders. In our first year we hosted, among others, the following prominent leaders in our headquarters in Erbil.

- Carla Del Ponte, former Chief Prosecutor of two United Nations international criminal law.
- Cem Özdemir, Co-chairman of the German political party Alliance '90/The Greens
- Dieter Lamlé, former head of protocol for Berlin and current German Consul General in Erbil
- David Miliband, former UK Foreign Secretary and current CEO of International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Ján Kubiš, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Iraq



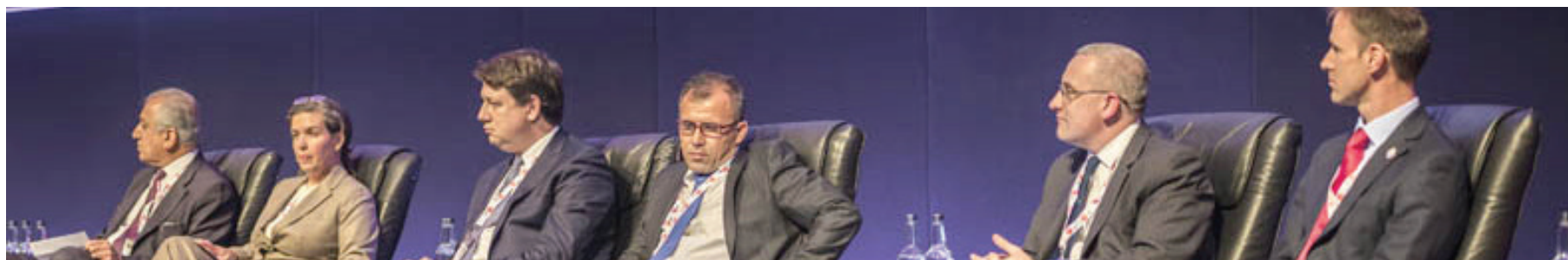
Iraqi leaders, Sunni, Kurds and Shia continue to visit MERI on a daily basis. Among the many are KRG Ministers, Ministers of the central government in Baghdad, parliamentarians, tribal leaders and many more.

- Professor Gilles Keppel, Science Po Paris
- Tom Malinowski, US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
- Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chairman of the International Commission of Inquiry for Syria
- Darko Mocibob, UN Strategic Assessment Mission
- Geeta Kuttiparambil, UN women

MERI @ World Events

As part of our research, MERI Scholars regularly visit prominent international events to present and exchange ideas with counterparts in leading institutions. To name a few, MERI scholars participated in a high-level roundtable titled “Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government” at the Wilson Centre in Washington DC. Further, they provided written evidence in front of the Common Select Committee of UK Parliament. The evidence was an integral part of the 2015 report on UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Here is a selection of global institutions where MERI provided an important contribution:

- Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington DC
- Common Select Committee, UK Parliament
- London School of Economics and Political Sciences
- Atlantic Council Summit 2014, Istanbul
- World Economic Forum, Young Global Leaders, Davos
- Kurdistan Region Oil and Gas Conference 2014, London
- Royal United Services Institute
- Institute of International Affairs, Rome



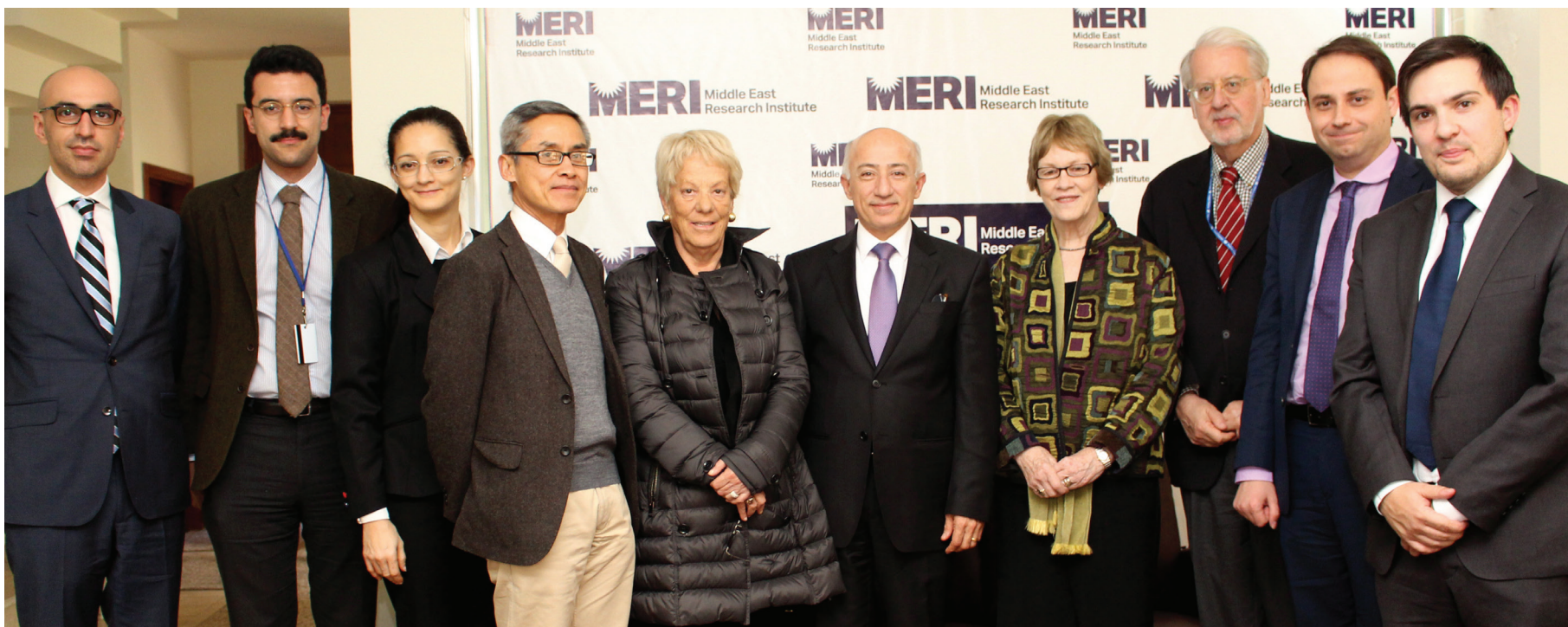
7. MERI and the United Nations

Since the onset of the humanitarian crisis in the region in Summer 2014, MERI has maintained high-level strategic contacts with the different agencies within United Nations. The violent conflict in both Iraq and Syria has attracted most of the interest. MERI hosted Sokol Kondi, Head of Office at UN Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), to discuss the internal politics of Iraq and hosted the International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to discuss the conflict in Syria and the spillover effect on Iraq. In addition, a delegation from the UN Strategic Assessment Mission visited MERI for a briefing on the impact of UNAMI in the developments in Iraq.

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UN plays an important role in bridging gaps between local actors and harmonizing its activities to coincide with current geopolitical realities where borders are becoming irrelevant.

Especially relevant is the fact that MERI was granted in April 2015 a research project by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq to evaluate the feasibility of transforming the refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region and the neighbouring towns into resilient communities. This project aligns with the strategic objectives of the UNDP-led humanitarian coordination cluster on ‘sustainable livelihoods and social cohesion’, in which MERI has been an active member helping in defining the scope, priorities and objectives.



8. Outreach

MERI mentions, a selection of recent articles where MERI received international media coverage



27 January 2015

"ISIS is still well-entrenched in the areas it controls and still has access to human and other resources"



20 November 2014

"MERI's Draft Amendment Law on Combating Domestic Violence introduces new measures aimed at better protection of women's and children's rights."



02 October 2014

"Iraqi Kurds Expand Autonomy as ISIS Reorders the Landscape"



20 October 2014

"Islamic State's advances, including the Peshmerga's inability to protect the minority Yazidi population was a wake-up call that the Peshmerga forces "need to be institutionalized"



02 October 2014

"Fight against ISIS could make for strange bedfellows"



29 January 2015

"Low oil prices and the conflict with IS have caused a dramatic fall in growth, requiring a new urgency to economic reform"



04 February 2015

"As oil prices continue to drop and competition multiplies, many doubt OPEC's ability to further control prices and ensure market stability, and openly question its very existence."



25 August 2014

"MERI president discusses the challenges facing Iraq including the formation of a new government, pressures facing Iraqi Kurds and the strengthening of the terrorist group ISIS."



Republic of Iraq
Council of Representatives

07 September 2014

"The Speaker of Iraqi Parliament expressed his support for MERI."



18 November 2014

"Iraq's Dubai Hits the Pause Button"



28 January 2015

"MERI and the Istanbul-based Al-Sharq Forum organized a conference in Iraq's Irbil on Monday with the attendance of several Iraqi-Kurdish and Turkish academics, bureaucrats and journalists."



27 January 2015

"MERI Forum created a platform for dialogue and debate on the Middle East. MERI Forum brought together diverse members of the public to debate current political events impacting both Iraq and the wider region."

Social Media

In the digital era, interaction with relevant stakeholders and the public requires an intensive usage of social media. MERI's social media presence has become a prominent source for disseminating insightful analysis. Our written pieces, events and our project updates have been widely debated and shared through platforms such as Twitter.



9. The Year Ahead

2014 was a difficult year for democracy, security and stability in the Middle East, and in particular, in Iraq and Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The war against ISIS has been absorbing much of the scarce political capital and economic resources. To make matters worse, ISIS is entrenched in Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. No one can say with certainty when ISIS will be defeated in Iraq, and contained in Syria.

How fast ISIS will be eliminated in Iraq will depend on a number of internal and external factors; to name but a few: the level and efficiency of cooperation between Erbil and Baghdad on the ground; the degree of reengagement of Sunnis and the protection of their basic human rights in liberated areas, as well as in the rest of Iraq; the determination of the United States and European countries to fund the war and provide military support to Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi Army; the overall activities of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Gulf Countries vis-à-vis ISIS in Iraq and Syria; and finally, the price of oil.

Pragmatism does not give much room for an optimal result that would ensure the end or containment of ISIS. Clearly, there are diverging interests between different actors fighting ISIS. In addition, regional and international stakeholders remain sceptical about what the post-ISIS order might mean for their interests in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, global economic developments, such as volatile oil prices continue to affect decision-making in the war against ISIS.

The hope for the year ahead is that ISIS will be defeated militarily. It is equally important for it to be defeated ideologically as well. The political elites, civil society and the public should press ahead with addressing deeper causes of this new phenomenon. Especially the central government in Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government should push for more dialogue and reconciliation between different components of Iraq. Simultaneously, democratisation, human rights promotion, nation-/state-building and economic planning should be considered as top priorities. These are all interlinked and uprooting the ISIS ideology will also depend on how well Iraq's leaders will perform in all these different areas of concern.

MERI is here to guarantee that there is space for intellectual stimulation, open public debates and practical solutions in a spirit of good will and critical thinking. Our first year has been an important and successful year for us, in terms of laying the ground for addressing the above issues. Our main aim for the year ahead is to deliver practical solutions for a number of issues, including democracy, national security and economic prosperity. All this will take place in consultation with regional and international actors, state institutions, civil society and academia. We are certain that MERI will continue to make a difference in Iraq and the Middle East in the year ahead.

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MERI FORUM 2015

3rd – 5th of November

Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

With our annual MERI Forum, we want to help foster a culture of dialogue throughout the Middle East, underpinning the ultimate goal of peace, stability and prosperity.



Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to all those who helped, and continue helping us in our mission to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the Middle East. MERI's first year was a turbulent year and without the invaluable guidance of many, none of what we achieved would have been possible. We are therefore thankful to all scholars, policy-makers, partners and members of the public for sharing their wisdom with us. We also greatly appreciate the support of our donors, particularly the Oil and Gas Council, who gave us their unconditional backing for what we think is right. We will continue with our mission based on our core values of independent and objective research and analysis.

Thank you!

MERI – Middle East Research Institute

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Erbil,
Kurdistan Region, Iraq

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