



A delegation of the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) researchers visited Washington D.C. from September 5th to the 9th. They included Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, Dylan O'Driscoll, Khogir Wirya Mohammed, and Dave van Zoonen, resident researchers at MERI. The team met with numerous Washington-based think tanks, policy-analysts, senior U.S. government officials and legislators to present the findings of their research, recently published reports and to discuss ongoing U.S. engagement with the region.

During the mission, MERI aimed to convey three main messages. Firstly, the delegation emphasised the need for sustained and constructive engagement from the U.S. government with the political situation in Iraq and its Kurdistan Region (KR). In recent years, the U.S. focus on Iraq has contracted to a narrow pursuit of interest focused primarily on defeating the Islamic State (IS). Instead, U.S. policy-makers, and in particular the next administration, should define their interests in Iraq and the KR to be broader than that. If the U.S. is to advance a global agenda of peace, stability and good governance, it needs to recognise it has a stake in the domestic political dynamics of Iraq. This then compels a more active role of political leadership which can help guide local policy-makers through deadlock by forging compromises, thus averting potential armed conflicts and further disintegration in the future.

Secondly, Dr. Dylan O’Driscoll presented his recent report: *The Future of Mosul; Before, During and After the Liberation*. The main point raised in the report is that the non-military planning for the liberation of Mosul is nowhere near complete. Prior to any military action in Mosul city there has to be significant preparation for the influx of IDPs, as well as a viable plan for post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation and security. Additionally, the political and structural failures that led to the rise of IS in Iraq have not been addressed, and thus there needs to be a deal for the governance of post-IS Nineveh prior to any liberation attempt.

Thirdly, researchers Dave van Zoonen and Khogir Wirya discussed the findings from their research on the state of minorities in northern Iraq, inter-and intra-community tensions, and perceptions on reconciliation. The study, commissioned by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), is presently ongoing and targets five religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq: Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, Sabaeen-Mandaeans and Shabaks. Initial findings, however, reveal a high risk for new armed clashes, even as IS is being pushed back, if disputes concerning the political status and security situation in newly liberated minority areas remain unresolved. Inter-community dialogue is much more likely to yield meaningful results if it is supported and promoted internationally by a third-party such as the U.S.



MERI Discusses the State of Minorities at the USIP

The team participated in roundtables organised at USIP, the Brookings Institution and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The discussions centred around MERI’s recent reports and research regarding Mosul and minority issues as well as the internal political dynamics in Iraq and the KR. Fellow attendees at the roundtables included senior policy-analysts from the current U.S. administration, expert academics and senior fellows from other Washington-based think tanks, military advisors from the Pentagon, senior



MERI Meets USIP Leadership

humanitarian officers, and other government officials. As all participants were eager to hear MERI researchers’ analyses of the current situation on the ground in Iraq, post-discussion Q&A sessions were vibrant and frequently went into extensive overtime. Expressing his

appreciation for MERI’s ongoing efforts, Brookings’s senior fellow Kenneth Pollack, chairing one of the roundtables remarked, “Just a few years ago, we as Middle East analysts used to lament the dearth of local think tanks and analyses coming from the region. Now, MERI has filled that gap and is here to help us better understand the local dynamics and current situation on the ground.”



MERI delivers a Roundtable at the Brookings Institution

In addition, the team participated in a number of panels. At the Hudson Institute, Dlawer Ala’Aldeen and Dylan O’Driscoll joined Michael Pregent and Bilal Wahab in a discussion on the Mosul liberation and its aftermath. The discussion was chaired by Hudson Senior Fellow Eric Brown. The panellists touched



MERI Participates in a Panel at the Hudson Institute

upon different aspects ranging from the need to provide Sunni Arabs in Iraq with a political alternative to ISIS, more comprehensive and careful planning of the humanitarian and military aspect of the offensive, to the role of the next U.S. administration in the post-IS governance of Iraq and the economic crisis. A video of the full discussion is available [here](#).

Another panel was held at the Kurdish Policy Research Centre entitled “Turkey’s intervention in Rojava and its consequences” where Professor Dlawer Ala’Aldeen shared his views about the political dynamics in Rojava, causes of the current political instability and ways to mitigate further escalation. Other panellists included Alisa Marcus, senior journalist and author of the book *Blood and Belief*; the PKK and the Kurdish fight for independence, and Salih Muslim, co-chairman of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), who addressed the audience via Skype. A video of the full discussion is available [here](#).



Kurdish Policy Research Center

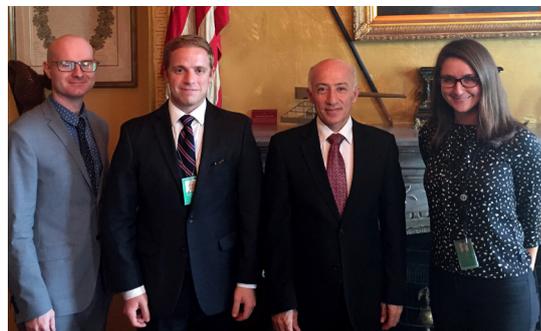
The panels and roundtable discussions were interspersed by closed meetings with senior policy-makers, legislators and analysts in the U.S. government and current administration. Speaking mainly on minority issues, inter-community tensions and approaches to reconciliation to prevent future cycles of violence, the MERI team met with staff and advisers from members of the Caucus for International Religious Freedom such as Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, Congressman Juan Vargas and Senator Bill Cassidy. MERI also met with U.S. Ambassador at-large for international religious freedom, David Saperstein, and his special advisor for



Congressman Juan Vargas

Religious Minorities in the Near East, Knox Thames. Additionally, researchers Dave van Zoonen and Khogir Wirya presented the findings of their study on perceptions of reconciliation among minorities to the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom.

Covering national security issues surrounding the Mosul offensive and the need for sustained U.S. political engagement with the governments of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, the MERI delegation met with senior members of the U.S. State Department such as Deputy Assistant Secretaries Joseph Pennigton and Mark Storella, as well as members of the National Security Council – part of the Executive Office of the President of the United States. The main messages conveyed during these meetings concerned the need to increase the scope and interest of the U.S. engagement with Iraq and the Mosul offensive to move beyond a one-dimensional military focus to include constructive engagement with the political dynamics in the KRI and Iraq. If future stability is to take hold in the aftermath of IS’ defeat in Mosul, MERI argued, the U.S. must recognise its stake in the regional political dynamics and take a more active role in attempting to forge compromises between major political forces between and in Iraq and the KRI.



MERI Meets Members of National Security Council



KRG Representation office in Washington D.C.

MERI’s delegation concluded its visit by holding an interactive seminar at the KRG Representation office where Dlawer Ala’Aldeen spoke to the Kurdish diaspora, members of various religious communities, academics and journalists addressing various topics followed by an engaging Q&A session. Members of the audience were keen on hearing Ala’Aldeen’s views on the current political deadlock in the KR, the future of Mosul and Erbil-Baghdad relations.

MERI’s trip to Washington was met with an eager audience keen on gaining more sophisticated, nuanced and up-to-date knowledge concerning the political, military and humanitarian situation on the ground. Additionally, the mission served to increase readership of MERI reports in relevant and senior policy-circles and increase awareness regarding MERI’s research capacity, expertise and areas of focus. It enabled the institute to directly advocate for policy recommendations by appealing to senior officials and opinion-makers, further advancing MERI’s core mission of improving human rights, democracy and good governance in the Middle East.