

# MERI

Summary Report

VISIONS FOR STABILISING  
THE MIDDLE EAST

# Forum

# 2018





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Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq  
[www.meri-k.org](http://www.meri-k.org) | [info@meri-k.org](mailto:info@meri-k.org) | +964(0)662649690

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**MERI FORUM 2018**  
**VISIONS FOR**  
**STABILISING THE MIDDLE EAST**

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## Summary

MERI Forum 2018 Visions for Stabilising the Middle East 23-24, October, 2018. The 2018 annual MERI Forum brought together policy- and decision-makers, academics and opinion-leaders to share visions and solutions for a range of core issues and challenges that are facing the Middle East today, particularly in Iraq and Kurdistan. These include the ever-changing regional power dynamics, the perpetual security and political crises and pathways for the reformation of the governing system.

The conference themes and panels included:

- Overall framework and background ([MERI's opening](#))
- Reforming the governing system: Decentralisation and institutionalisation in Iraq ([Panel 1](#)).
- State-Building and Nation-Building in Iraq ([Panel 2](#)).
- Kurdistan in the New Middle East ([Panel 3](#)).
- EU in the Middle East: Responsive state-building to prevent violent extremism ([Panel 4](#)).
- Legitimate Stability in Iraq, and the role of the international community ([Panel 5](#)).
- Regional and Global Power dynamics in the Middle East: Conflict and Collaboration ([Panel 6](#) and [Panel 7](#)).

## Setting the Scene for MERI Forum 2018: Visions for Stabilising the Middle East

### **Diawer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI**

MERI Forum 2018 is held at a very sensitive time when the entire Middle East remains in turmoil. Local, regional and international powers are heavily engaged in rivalries, while the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq are entangled in conflicts and wars.

Obviously, the rival powers are not adequately engaged in dialogues among themselves for settling disputes or stabilising the region. Instead, they have resorted to more violence to solve problems, generating never-ending crises. Communities are increasingly polarised and militarised while ordinary citizens are paying the price.

Fortunately, this year's two general elections for Iraq's and Kurdistan Region's Parliaments and the processes of forming new governments in both Baghdad and Erbil created a new environment and brought about new opportunities for national reconciliation, improving the governing system, institutionalisation and the rule of law. It is time for Iraq's leaders and decision-makers, with the help of the international community, to implement reforms and reconcile with their citizens. Failing that, the factors of destabilisation are still plenty and extremist forces like Islamic State (IS) are still active among us, ready to dominate again. If the leaders fail to address the structural and functional weaknesses of the governing system as a matter of top priority, the people of Basrah, Mosul and Anbar and other cities may express their anger violently and threaten the very existence of Iraq as a state. This is why MERI, in its research projects, pays great deal of attention to identifying the structural and functional weaknesses of the governing system and offer solution as well as help with the solutions.



MERI Forum 2018 is designed along the lines of MERI's research activities. Over the past year, we carried out an extensive project on restructuring and empowering the local governments, Parliament and judiciary council in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and published the results in a book, with numerous policy recommendations for addressing the weaknesses of the governing system. We then began to study the structure of Ninevah's local government as a representative sample of Iraq's over all governing system, particularly the provinces that are not organised as Regions. We are well

aware that both Baghdad and Erbil governments have made reform their priority. Hence, two panels (one & five) are dedicated to debating these issues at this Forum.

A major part of MERI's research from 2014-2018 was dedicated to issues relating to the war on ISIS, stabilisation and reconstruction of the liberated areas, reconciliation between the various communities and the issues of the internally displaced people. In the near future, we will start a comprehensive project on the future of the displaced people and how an environment conducive to their return home can be created.

As part of our activities, MERI paid great attention to constructive dialogue both internally and externally. During the past years, MERI has conducted series of open and closed debates and dialogues among the rival powers to help stabilise the region, away from violence. For instance, after last year's referendum and the subsequent stalemate between Baghdad and Erbil, there was a need for ending the deadlock and reducing tensions. MERI took the initiative, in collaboration with Al-Rafidain Centre, and initiated the first step in opening dialogue between the political leaders on both sides. It was in February 2018 and in the holy city of Al-Najaf where we engaged the group of speakers who are now taking part in panel two of the Forum and discuss power sharing trust building.

For the sake of stability in other parts of Kurdistan in the neighbouring countries, MERI encourages all Kurdish political parties to look back at their experiences in a realistic and self-critical manner, and communicate new visions on how to win their political and civil rights and play important roles in stabilising their countries. MERI organised many events to stimulate dialogue between them, and here at this Forum a panel (three) is organised to complement our previous efforts.

Meanwhile, in a number of research projects and publications, MERI studied the policies of regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and international powers, such as the USA, Russia and European member states. We wanted the public in the Middle East to understand these powers' policies, and encouraged their leaders to engage in constructive dialogue to help stabilise this important part of the World, and save us from crises, rivalries and wars. This is the main purpose for organising panels six and seven of this Forum.

In addition, MERI collaborated with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and a number of European universities and think tanks, and obtained financial support from the EU within the framework of Horizon 2020 program. We conducted a three-year project on the European Union's policy in our region, and the fourth panel of this Forum is part of this line of research.

We should not underestimate the importance and impact of the participants' debate in this Forum. Most of the delegates are in positions that can influence the governing system and the decision-making processes. With their help, stability can be facilitated and the foundation of a peaceful region, where rule-of-law and good governance can be achieved, is laid down. The processes of dialogue, reconciliation and finding solution for the complex crises must be institutionalized, and through state- and nation-building a better environment conducive to peaceful coexistence can be created.

Here, it is necessary to remind the decision makers that successful reconciliation and nation-building will not succeed without the active participation of the more important half of the society, i.e women, our sisters, mothers, daughters and partners. It is no a secret that currently in Iraq the role of women among decision-makers and policy makers is evidently ignored. Not only they have become victims of displacement and their rights have been violated in various ways, but also they have been denied their roles and equal opportunity in leadership and the decision making process. Embarrassingly, this phenomenon is reflected in membership of our panels too. Therefore, it is expected from the top leaders to ensure that when new legislations and regulations are produced in accordance to the constitution, women's share should be protected in the entire system of governance.



## Panel 1: Reforming the Governing System: Decentralisation and Institutionalisation in Iraq

- **Qubad Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government**
- **Bashir Khalil Hadad, Deputy Speaker of Iraqi Parliament**
- **Ali Dway Lazim Al-Fartusi, Governor of Misan**
- **Nawzad Hadi, Governor of Erbil**
- **Turhan Mufti, Minister for Iraqi Governorate Affairs (Chair)**

In his introductory talk, **Qubad Talabani**, focused on the challenges the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) faced during the turbulent years of 2014-2018, the reforms they undertook to overcome these challenges, and the barriers for decentralisation in the KRG's administration. The budget cut from Baghdad, Islamic State onslaught, widespread corruptions, overemployment in the KRG, and demonstrations were among the challenges Talabani referred to. He argued that the issue at stake was the very survival of the government and the Region. The Cabinet's unity and determination in initiating reforms were critical, emphasised Talabani. The biometric registration of 1,200,000 employees, identifying ghost employees, and streamlining 413 different services the KRG provides for citizens, are among the reforms. "The reform process is not finished yet", emphasising that "the next KRG government must sustain the reform process and make it a top priority". As for the 'devolution of power', Talabani believed that further research must be conducted to make correct decisions on how to devolve power appropriately and minimise bureaucracy. Local government officials need to have clarity who they report to, the central or the local authorities.



**Turhan Mufti**, panel chairman, explained that this panel is designed to focus on the challenges the local governments have faced in the past four years, and the prospect of decentralisation, in both Iraq and Kurdistan Region (KRI). He emphasized that decentralisation does not need laws alone, it also needs culture. Iraq needs a sound communication culture between governorates and the central government and also among governorates themselves. Such a relation must exist between KRG and Baghdad as well. Decentralisation must be accepted as a culture for successful relations. Mufti claimed that decentralisation in Iraq is a process characterised by lots of ebbs and flows, as the policies and laws are dependent on the political mood. As an example, he referred to second and third amendments of law number 21 of 2008. While the second amendment was in line with



decentralisation policy, because of change in political mood the third amendment is not in favour of decentralisation. Meanwhile, Mufti referred to differences in authorities of the KRG governorates and those of the other governorates of Iraq due to presence of different laws for each group. Later, the high-ranking policy- and decision makers each tackled the issues from different perspectives.

**Bashir Khalil Hadad** emphasised that Iraq is a federal state and devolution of power to Regions and Governorates in Iraq is based on the constitution and the law number 21 of 2008. However, these laws are imperfect, they overlap and are not implemented properly. In keeping the problems found in Kurdistan Region, he described how he found officials in the Iraqi governorates he visited were confused about who the ultimate decision-makers were, their local governor or the ministers in Baghdad. Failure to implement the law and provide services was inevitably amongst the causes of authorities' confusion and resulted in people's demonstrations. In terms of Baghdad-Erbil relations, Haddad argued that even though according to the constitution Kurdistan Region has its powers and competencies; nevertheless, these are not properly delegated, as Kurdistan does not receive its constitutional share of budget. In Haddad's view, the solution for such problems is via thorough implementation of the constitution. He also believes that law number 21 of 2008 gives too much power without appropriate checks and balances to the governorates, therefore should be reviewed by the Iraqi Parliament.

Denoting that the issue of decentralization is a new, post-2003 experience in Iraq, Nawzad Hadi argued that political rivalries have crippled the governing system and governors do not have a free hand in expending the budget that is allocated to the governorate. He argued those governorates which have had a political party winning a majority vote are served better than the ones where no party wins outright. Often governors have the budget at their disposal, but cannot use them to their optimal effect due to party political rivalries. He referred to the case of Basrah where the governorate executives were unable to provide services and complete strategic projects in spite of having \$2

billion dollars at its disposal.

In disagreement with Dr Hadad, Nawzad Hadi argued that the Iraqi laws (No. 21 of 2008) and the Constitution give the right level of authority and sovereignty to Iraqi governorates (other than those in the KRI), but in reality the devolution of power has not materialized in accordance with the laws. He believes in the KRI, power has not been sufficiently devolved.

**Ali Dway Lazim Al-Fartusi** considered decentralization “a pillar of democracy and good governance”. However, decentralization has not been smooth process in Iraq. In Fartusi’s view ministry officials are not eager to delegate the powers easily to the governorates. He considered Law No. 21 of 2008 problematic, requiring further amendment to protect local governments from external hindrances. The law has already been amendment three times, in 2010, 2013 and 2018. Al-Fartusi calls the latest amendment “dangerous” as there is regression in authorities endowed to the governorates. He noted that the earlier amendments were never given the chance to be implemented.



## Panel 2: State Building and Nation Building in Iraq

- **Yahya Al-Kubaisi, Advisor, Iraqi Centre for Strategic Studies, Amman**
- **Adnan Al-Zurfi, Member of Iraqi Parliament**
- **Jafar Eminki, Politburo Member, Kurdistan Democratic Party**
- **Lukman Fayli, Former Iraqi Ambassador to Japan and the USA**
- **Talib M. Karim, Deputy Chair, Al-Rafidian Centre, Al-Najaf (Chair)**

Dr **Talib Karim** introduced the session which was focused on the role of political leaders and parties in promoting the rule-of-law and institutionalization, enforcing the constitution and complementing it with required legislations. These desperately needed in order to address the country's major challenges, institutionalizing dialogue between Iraqi communities and promoting reconciliation and stability. Meanwhile the panelists were asked to discuss the repercussions of sectarianism on the process of state building and nation building in Iraq.

**Yahya Al-Kubaisi** denoted that Iraq's problems started from the day it was created by colonial powers, as force was used to build a nation-state. In Europe nation-building predates or runs in parallel with state-building, but in the artificial country called Iraq they run in opposite directions. Kubaisi further clarified that in pre-2003 period Iraq was ruled by Sunnis when force and education were utilized to impose a Sunni Arab identity on the country. A singular vision was promoted that was not acceptable by other segments of the Iraqi society, including Shiites, Kurds, Turkmen, Christians and others. After 2003 the only change that has occurred is that Shiite identity has replaced the Sunni one. The problem of promoting a singular vision is that their promoters would not accept any vision contrary to theirs. Chauvinistic reactions to Kurdistan referendum prove this fact.

Al-Kubaisi further argued that even attempts at nation building through using democratic principles in the 2005 constitution have not been successful, as voting in Parliament is based on sectarianism and sectarian majority monopolizes the decision-making and legislation processes. The way forward to deal with the current nation- and state-building crisis, in al-Kubaisi's view, is to accept that Iraq is a pluralistic society that needs to be ruled in a pluralistic manner. A nation state must be based on a political identity that is acceptable and recognized by all, and the idea of establishing a singular nation must not be reflected in the state-building process.



While agreeing with al-Kubaisi that in the pre-2003 period there was an attempt by Sunni elite to create a Sunni identity for Iraq, **Adnan Al-Zurfi** disagreed with him in that Shiites are attempting to create a Shiite identity for the new Iraq. Al-Zurfi referred to the opposition of the Shiites religious leaders to following such a strategy and quoted Ayatollah Sistani advising Ibrahim Ja'fari, Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, to avoid forming the Cabinet without Sunni participation, and not to “repeat historical mistakes. Al-Zurfi emphasised that the Shiites have not attempted to change the national school curricula to impose their sect or doctrine. Al-Zurfi also complained that parliamentarians and government officials act as though they represent their sect in the Parliament and advocated that Kurdish representatives must represent people from all over Iraq and vice versa.

**Jafar Eminki** reiterated that when state-building process precedes the nation-building the outcome will always be problematic. He asserted that the Iraqi state was a failure from the beginning, because it did not have the institutions and mechanisms needed for creating a civil, democratic nation. Even both permanent Iraqi constitutions were written under occupation, one under British colonialism and the other one under American occupation. Violence and weapons of mass destruction were used against Kurds under both constitutions.

In Eminki's words, the question is “are Iraqis incapable of writing a national constitution by themselves?” His own answer was that the Iraqis' free-will has been taken away and they are prisoners of religion, ethnicity and social environments which are unsuitable for establishing a civil society and a civil state. Furthermore, he stated that the state should be there to serve its citizens, but in Iraq, so far there exists people (Kurdish people, Shiite people, Sunni people, etc) but no civil democratic nation.

Lukman Faily started with the question. “We had a British state with an Iraqi cover and an American

state with an Iraqi cover, the question is can we have an Iraqi state with an Iraqi cover?” He later problematized the concepts of Iraqi nation and Iraqi state and further clarified that in the whole Middle East the concepts of state, nation and even citizens are not clear. There is a clear overlap or mix ups between Islamic nation or Arab nation, vs specific state’s nation. In Faily’s view, now the search must be for stability factors and for a generational solution as opposed to an urgent immediate solution.



## Panel 3: Kurdistan in the New Middle East

- **Mala Baxtiyar, Politburo's Executive Chair, Patriotic Union on Kurdistan**
- **Nazmi Gur, Former Deputy Leader, People's Democratic Party, Former Member of Parliament, Turkey**
- **Khalid Azizi, Leadership Committee Member, Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran)**
- **Dlawar Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI (Chair)**

In his introduction, **Dlawar Ala'Aldeen** defined the framework for the debates in this panel, which is designed to explore Kurdistan's role in the political and security dynamics of the Middle East, and discuss the weaknesses and challenges the Kurds face in the states they live in. He asked the speakers to identify the opportunities the Kurds have for winning their civil and political rights, and address the question of the presence or absence of shared visions. Ala'Aldeen emphasized that the speakers have been invited not as party or country representatives, but as individual political leaders to present their own personal visions which must have been shaped by their experiences. They were invited to extract lessons from the past and predict the role of the Kurds in the new Middle East.

**Mala Baxtiyar** characterised the major problems of the Middle East as “the persistence of backward social and ideological beliefs and governing systems”. In his view, while enlightenment in Europe paved the way for the ascendance of democracy, in the Middle East enlightenment and consequent social, religious, administrative and philosophical reforms as prerequisites of democracy did not occur. As a result governing systems in this region, whether monarchic, republic or leftist etc, have all been anti-democratic. These regimes never hesitated to use brutal force in the face of challenges to their visions or viewpoints. “We did not commit any crime when we asked for a referendum”, but the Iraqi government used force against us.

Baxtiyar also stated that in both the unipolar and bipolar systems, the Kurds were the victim, as they were sacrificed in agreements such as Algeria agreement of 1975. He concluded that the current chaotic world is more in the Kurdish interest, as problems rose among global powers, and regional powers have created opportunities for Kurds. He referred to the case of Rojava Kurds in Syria that gained control over their areas due to presence of disagreement between the USA and Russia as well as among regional powers. Furthermore, Baxtiyar counted lack of strategic vision for domestic and international policy formulation and lack of “real friends” as two main problems of the Kurdish parties and Kurds.

**Nazmi Gur** divided the Kurdish status and struggle in the Middle East in to two phases, the one hundred years before the second Gulf War and the new phase after the Gulf (and Syria's) war. In the first phase, the Kurds were divided and oppressed by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish movement was faced by incremental cruelty and bloodshed. However, in the new stage the Kurds have been able to secure a federal status in Iraq and made great progress in Syria. In Iran and Turkey the situation is different and centralized regimes continue to stand against the Kurdish political rights.

Nevertheless the democratic struggle of the Kurds continues in Turkey and Gur was optimistic about the long term future. He saw the solution for the Kurdish fragmentation in holding a national conference to select representatives who can represent the Kurds internationally. Otherwise, the four countries Kurds are scattered in will continue dividing the Kurds and setting them against each other.

**Khalid Azizi** tackled the issue from an Iranian Kurdish perspective. He stressed that he always called for dialogue between the Kurds and Tehran as the way to solve the Kurdish issue in Iran. "My call was responded by missiles forty nights ago". Azizi believes that Iran's decision-makers do not want dialogue, instead they resort to their military might.

Moreover, Azizi does not think that current level of democracy provides the ultimate solution for the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, as democracy is not yet institutionalized. Instead, he believes political agreements would work better and advises that the Kurds should search for partners in the Middle East. While he is pessimistic about openness of Iran to the Kurdish issue, Azizi hopes that the federal system in Iraq succeed and become a model to be applied in Iran and other countries where the Kurdish exist as minorities.





## Panel 4: EU in the Middle East: Responsive State-Building to Prevent Violent Extremism

- **Ramon Blecu**, European Union’s Ambassador to Iraq
- **Steven Blockmans**, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels
- **Tine Gade**, Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of the International Affairs
- **Kamaram Mohammed**, Research Fellow, MERI
- **Morten Boas**, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Chair)

In his opening remarks, **Morten Boas** noted the difficulties associated with preventing radicalization and violent extremism, especially in areas where statehood and state’s control are weak or limited, and where governance is dysfunctional. According to Boas, foreign countries in general can assist Middle Eastern states to properly develop and implement their internal institutions, but they cannot substitute these states in their own state-building process. In terms of radicalization and violent extremism, the main goal is to understand why these phenomena take place. Boas underlined that it is not just a matter of religious factors or reasons, but also economic (unemployment), social (disempowerment and exclusion), and environmental ones, among others. He stressed the need for more focus on local knowledge and the identification of conflicts’ root causes, through an up-take of experiences from the field based on a bottom-up approach, rather than adopting a detached strategy based on abstract frameworks and policies developed in Brussels.

Also, he contended, there should be more balance between narrow security measures, and development-oriented ones, broadening the perspective of the intervention and making the latter the priority. He concluded by noting that the current context of socio-political fragmentation in most of MENA countries, caused by the



lack of a sound agreement on the composition of the polity, is the main obstacle towards an effective prevention of violent extremism.

Ambassador **Ramon Bleuca** acknowledged that Europe's engagement in Iraq came from the realization that security does not start at home, but rather from outside the borders. However, EU roles and objectives have changed with time. Initially, EU's objective included conflict resolution and crisis management, based on the realization that the world has become more dangerous, divided and less predictable. The EU has its own instruments and policies to achieve such objectives, and its strategy in Iraq has evolved from a reactive mode of confronting ISIS to a much more proactive and forward-looking mode. Bleuca referred to six categories of challenges in the region, namely: collapse of the post-colonial order; surfacing of tribal, ethnic and sectarian identities due to implosion of state institutions; Shiite awakening; Sunni frustration and anger for feeling they are at the receiving end of regional and international order; Kurdish demand for more political empowerment; and risk of wider regional confrontations (as conflicts now, such as in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, etc are interlinked). Finally, Bleuca expressed his optimism for Iraq, as he argued that the country has moved from being the source of evil in the region towards becoming a model through facing the mentioned challenges, defusing conflict and finding ways of cooperative engagement.

**Steven Blockmans** argued that currently, while violent extremism affects the local communities, it also sends negative shockwaves internationally, and the borders between internal and external security has been blurred. Foreign fighters, including battle-hardened Europeans are one aspect of this problem. Hence, the EU has its own objectives in countering violent extremism externally. That is while the EU as an international organization above and beyond the member states only has a supporting role. Indeed, the EU is very efficient in internal security and counter terrorism and has strong coordination mechanisms



and networks, but less so externally. The four external objectives of the EU are: (i) better understanding and tackling the root causes of violent extremism; (ii) capacity building of state, sub-state and non-state actors; (iii) strengthening vulnerable communities by establishing resilience; (iv) enhancing preventive and counter violence capabilities by emboldening civil society and media.

In achieving the objectives, the EU has faced four challenges. These are, the problem of donor coordination, the issue of local ownership (the question of who is local, for instance Baghdad government or Erbil?), conflict sensitivity or insensitivity of the EU (based on internal dynamics), and the problem of EU falling out of synch with its own self-declared respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

**Kamaran Palani** suggested that both the Iraqi government and the KRG don't make a clear distinction between terrorism and violent extremism. The same thing is true for countering terrorism, countering violent extremism and preventing violent extremism. Iraq is more focused on countering terrorism, and its approach is characterized by hard security/military approach, direct impact and short term gains. Preliminary findings of study by MERI, based on a survey, interviews and literature review shows that there is a significant lack of trust in political and security institutions in Iraq. This is demonstrated by the low turnout in the election. People feel excluded from the decision making process at both local & national levels.



Palani argues that without the community engagement, the threat of violent extremism cannot be addressed. He also highlighted:

The absence of a coherent strategy to combat violent extremism in both Erbil & Baghdad, and the gap between the policy world and the research-practitioner world, whereby the challenge lies in creating a language that both understand.

The challenge to conducting research in Iraq is that your findings will be very different when conducting research in Kurdistan, then when conducting research in Southern Iraq.

The need to foster understanding of the complex dynamics in the region, without oversimplifying it.

The difficulty of applying a human security or responsive state-building approach because of protracted conflict; as the country currently finds itself in the stabilisation phase.

The feeling of uncertainty that is paramount where extremists promise to provide certainty. People do not feel that the police is there to protect them. As a result, people start to take security matters into their own hands. Clearly, community policing can foster positive results, it can also become very problematic,

particularly due to the division that is plaguing Iraq.

The importance of continuing interaction with various stakeholders involved. International organizations might be very valuable in linking those in government that are open to the human security agenda with those working in research, and with local communities.

The need to strengthen local governance, as well as to (re)create legitimate institutions at the state level. Tine Gade explored the question of the role played by official Islamic institutions in preventing violent extremism in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Lebanon and what lessons can be learnt for Iraq?" In Saudi Arabia official institutions are involved in this process in two ways: First, via rehabilitating the jailed Jihadists through using Wahabism and stressing on the need to obey the ruler. Second, through launching preventive programs for the public. Meanwhile, after the emergence of ISIS, new institutions such as the 'Global Centre for Combating Extremist Ideology' are established outside the official religious institutions.

Morocco is the third MENA country suffering from the problem of foreign fighters after Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. In Morocco as a part of anti-salafism policy, salafi jihadis were pardoned by a Royal Decree in 2015 and most of them established faith-based NGOs or Islamic schools, and became close to government. Moreover, Islamic curricula and institutions were reformed.

In Lebanon's case, official Islamic institutions are weak and only apply domestic policy role. Radicalism in Lebanon has two main sources, salafism imported from outside and radicalism created as the result of political competition in the country. For instance, at times concessions are given to radical Salafi preachers for political reasons. It is suggested that more autonomy be granted to Dar Al-Fatwa to enhance its popular credibility.

Gade concluded that the lessons for Iraq are, (a) to grant more autonomy to the religious institutions, (b) the phenomenon of having the Islamic institutions under the indirect control of the Shiite government is not favorable, and (c) economic and political root-causes of ISIS must be addressed to have the Sunni scholars' support against violent extremism.

## Panel 5: Legitimate Stability and the role of the international community in Iraq

- **Stuart Adam, The British Acting Consul General in Erbil**
- **Eric Strating, Deputy Ambassador, The Netherlands**
- **Bruno Pasquino, Italian Ambassador to Iraq**
- **Hansi Escobar, Spanish Ambassador to Iraq**
- **Farhad Alaaldin, Advisor to the President of Iraq (Chair)**

**Farhad Alaaldin** helped focus the panel’s discussion on the urgent necessity to improve Iraq’s stability, not only in terms of security, but also at the economic and political institutions’ levels. To achieve these objectives, the role of the international community and the contributions made by the speakers’ respective countries are pivotal. Stability is not the end point, but only a middle phase in the path towards good governance, economic growth and, ultimately, prosperity.

**Stuart Adams** highlighted the long-term commitment of his country, the UK, to the recovery of Iraq in the aftermath of the war against Daesh, as well as to its “sovereignty and territorial integrity”. As Adams outlined, the British strategy is based on five broad priorities:

(a) the promotion of an effective and inclusive governance in both Baghdad and Erbil aimed not only at “overcoming the key disagreements between [the two parts] on oil revenues” but also at enhancing the coordination between the central government and the provinces in delivering the services which are demanded by the population;

(b) The Security Sector Reform program could promote a process of normalization and help the Iraqi government as well as the KRG to create modern and efficient security forces, “capable of preventing future insurgencies and securing Iraq’s borders,” but also of regaining the trust of the population, without losing sight of constitutional framework of the country and aimed at preserving the state’s monopoly on coercive force.

(c) Renewed effort to implement economic and financial reforms. From London’s perspective, these are crucial to create a fiscally sustainable system and an empowered finance Ministry that tackle corruption, while reforming the Banking and public sectors can also help to speed up the

reconstruction process.

(d) The British strategy was to promote Human Rights and the restoration of an inclusive social environment, in which the rights of ethno-religious minorities and IDPs are protected and a sustainable long-term effort to counter extremism and promote reconciliation could take place.

(E) The necessity to create a better business environment not only for attracting international companies and investments, but also for stimulating the growth of an internal dynamic business class.

Adams stressed the necessity to build a good education system to sustain this environment through the forging of a “qualified and motivated work force.” The British diplomat concluded emphasizing the firm commitment of Great Britain to help Iraq in rebuilding itself, in conjunction with the International community.

The Dutch Deputy Ambassador **Eric Strating** put forward a similar point-based strategy for what he defined as a “Focus country” in the foreign policy agenda of the Dutch Government. While close to the British one in structural terms, this multi annual strategy appeared to be more focused on specific issues. Mr. Strating highlighted that:

given its abundance of natural resources, Iraq is more in need of technical expertise rather than fiscal assistance, and that Netherland is more than willing to provide it on the basis of sincere common interests. He underlined the necessity to improve the security situation as an essential requirement to have internal stability, and, in turn, prosperity. In this regard, The Netherlands can offer training support and capacity building in the security sector, helping both the governments in Baghdad and Erbil to implement reforms, professionalize the armed forces and strengthening its security partnership within the NATO and EU missions, shifting the focus from a strictly military effort against Daesh to a stabilization one.

The need for a sustainable management of refugees and IDPs, which, in bilateral terms, translates into a pragmatic approach adopted by the Dutch authorities, making it easy for irregular Iraqi migrants in The Netherland to return to Iraq, since “their country needs them.” Meanwhile, the Dutch will support the reconciliation process and the creation of a safe environment for returnees and IDPs.

Work and income policies in Iraq must be greatly fostered, in order to develop a strong private sector which will provide new job opportunities and mitigate the need for Iraqis to seek them abroad. Mr.

The rehabilitation of both a neglected Iraqi agriculture and dysfunctional water resources management requires the expertise and breakthrough technological innovation which Netherland can provide. However, the diplomat also stressed the necessity to improve the business environment for encouraging Dutch



companies to invest and come to Iraq, addressing not only visa issues and security concerns, but also payment arrears from Baghdad.

Ultimately, Human Rights, defined by Strating as “a cornerstone of Dutch foreign policy,” must be unconditionally respected and implemented by Iraqi authorities at all level of the society, as they represent an essential prerequisite for a continuing engagement between the two countries. On the basis of the above priorities, Netherland can allocate \$50 million annually for Iraq, besides the funds already devoted to international organizations and development agencies.

The Italian Ambassador to Iraq **Bruno Pasquino** shared the same visions and concerns, and focused on Italian’s experience that could help Iraq to regain stability and effective governance. He referred to the Italian’s commitment to Iraq’s stability, both in terms of security, as Italy is the second largest contributor to the coalition against Daesh, and humanitarian assistance. Besides the training and modernization program for the Iraqi Armed forces, including the Peshmerga, Italy may in fact present its own model of local governance and decentralisation. Italian municipalities, for example, retain ample powers in managing and implementing services according to their communities’ needs. These can be applied in Iraq within the constitutional framework as well as preserving its territorial integrity. Furthermore, the Italian Ambassador stressed the importance of economic development in Iraq, as a key driver for prosperity and social stability at the broad national level. In his words “Italian companies are willing to come to Iraq” but only in a context of security and cooperation promoted by the Iraqi authorities. The energy sector emerged as the most important in this sense, since Italy is seeking energy security for sustaining its medium-sized enterprises sector, and Iraq may represent an ideal partner to the ultimate benefits of both Rome and Baghdad.

In line with the observations of his colleagues, **Hansi Escobar** confirmed Spain's active efforts to help Iraq in its path towards stabilization and sustainable growth, even though international support alone cannot resolve the country's problem. "Iraq has to be the first helper of itself", said Escobar, and highlighted several crucial challenges that Iraqi leaders must address.

- The exponential demographic growth – the highest in the MENA region, which in turn contributed not only to a worrying increase of youth unemployment, but also to a worsening trend in terms of internal migration and hyper urbanization, which serve as an incubator for violence proliferation. This negative combination directly damaged the self-sustainability of the economy, and it is further aggravated by a housing deficit, with 40% of the population still living in conditions of poverty and deprivation. In this regard, he suggested a reform to undercut the cost in the real estate sector, prioritizing low cost and social housing.
- The necessity for structural reforms of the economic sector, especially in the public sector, which is too big, providing more than 42% of the total jobs, and corroded by a slow and dysfunctional bureaucracy. The Banking sector also needs urgent reform in support of the private business. Agriculture and water management as well as land distribution are also core issues requiring urgent reform.
- The need for a sustainable and eco-friendly energy planning is needed for the future, as Iraq has enormous potential for solar energy use, with Spain ready to provide its expertise in this sector.
- Creating an inclusive political dialogue aimed at tackling corruption and nepotism is urgently required in order to foster an effective governance.
- The panel concluded with the speakers emphasizing the importance of an international and concerted effort to sustain Iraq, where the central government and the local institutions must work together, and all the groups and communities of the country actively participating in the decision-making process.



## Panel 6: Global and Regional Power dynamics: Conflict and Collaboration (1)

- **Ebtesam al-Ketbi, President of the Emirates Policy Centre**
- **Taha Özhan, Research Director at Ankara Institute**
- **Ranj Alaaldin, Brookings Institute**
- **Mohammed Bin Saqar Alsulami, International Institute for Iranian Studies**
- **Steven Blockmans, Centre for European Policy Studies (Chair)**

The current turmoil in the Middle East and its shifting power dynamics were the focus of this panel, explained **Steven Blockmans**, which also took into account the role of the international players in shaping and influencing the developments at the regional and local levels. The uncertain future of the Iran Nuclear Deal clearly represents one of the main game-changers in this respect, as the incremental US sanctions may produce a realignment in the current set of regional alliances. The panellists agreed that power rivalries and lack of cooperation represent the main roadblock to normalization of relations among the most influential regional powers.

Indeed, Conflicting interests on larger scale are exacerbating this trend of instability, thus highlighting the necessity for new political and diplomatic approaches in order to end conflicts and promote a virtuous cycle of stability and collaboration. The panel tried to present the best countermeasures as well as the proper solutions to reverse this negative trend, in order to understand whether it is possible to effectively influence the events in the region.

**Ebtesam Al-Ketbi** believes that the situation in the Middle East region is still in flux with increasing instability. This is coupled with a changing world that is no longer bi-polar, and not even clear if it has turned unipolar or multi-polar. In this state of flux, milestone events, such as 9/11, Iraq war in 2003 and the Arab Spring since 2011 have shaken the political scene in the region and awakened the historical grievances. Currently, there is more room for conflict than cooperation in the region; nevertheless, major regional powers (Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) avoid direct military confrontations for achieving their aims.

Al Ketbi also argued that the changing relations among major international players are influencing the changes in alliances and enmities in the region too. Meanwhile, continued existence of failed states like Syria and Yemen means the continuation of proxy wars. Similarly, ideological survival of ISIS and active presence of Hizbullah and Huthis herald the possibility of further conflicts in the future. Meanwhile, Al-

Ketbi believes that American sanctions and withdrawal from the nuclear deal must aim at change in Iran's behavior, and if this occurs more stability will be witnessed in the region. She concluded that an independent and stable Iraq will be a good friend for the USA, Iran and Arabs and will be the factor of stability and development in the region.

**Taha Özhan** considered efforts such as MERI Forum important in fostering much needed debates and creating common grounds in the region. He believes that the current regional arena displays an interplay between three kinds of state-actors, both internal and external, whose specific features inevitably affect the outcomes of their policies. The first category encompasses those states having maximum military and political capacity but minimum vision, a combination that, in the Middle East, has proven to be disastrous. This has only exacerbated the pre-existent problems, helping them to turn into “a virus with a contagious ripple effect.” In Özhan's opinion, the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal perfectly instantiates this category. At the same time, there are states with limited military or political capacity but substantial vision. Yet, also in this case, the consequences are likely to be damaging, as policies reveal to be ambitious but groundless, creating “hallucinations and unrealistic expectations” that cannot be concretely achieved. The third category of states he referred to are those that have neither capacity nor vision, but being co-opted by the interests of more powerful allies and becoming instrumental to further unrest. As a result, Özhan noted, there is an increasing and widespread trend of political securitization and military build-up, which, in turn downplay the role of politics and create a vicious circle of violence, as the Syrian civil war demonstrates. He also underlined the declining and limited scope of the three dominant political cultures of the region, including the Arab, Persian and Turkish ones, which are described as “aged, matured and tired” vis à vis the “young, energetic [although] inexperienced” actors: Israel, the KRG and the Palestinians.



According to Özhan, a possible solution to this quagmire may be an astute and subtle geopolitical approach, in which military means represent a short-term solution concurrently sustained by political and diplomatic tools. In this regard, he illustrated the strategy adopted by Turkey in Syria, based on limited military interventions and active political engagement with both allies and, especially, foes to reach a peaceful compromise. While acknowledging that “this is not the best solution,” he nonetheless considered it as an “improvement” compared to previous results.

**Ranj Alaaldin** concurred that a battle for regional supremacy is ongoing, although he presented a less optimistic vision for the foreseeable future with respect Özhan. According to Alaaldin, competition rather than cooperation will likely prevail because the conflicts which have emerged in the recent years are “far from settled,” and the seeds and grievances that fuel them are continuously revived as long as these conflicts last, remaining vivid in the memory of people for generations and producing a “conflict relapse” dynamic. As he explained, “war time conditions created a momentum for further conflicts” and the fact that non-state military groups are replacing conventional forces in many confrontations not only makes the business of war cheaper, but it also exacerbates it, since many of these groups only rarely adhere to international norms and principles regulating combat actions. Another factor he highlighted was the lack of a shared and positive framework which can establish precise rules to limit the use of military means in the region, which are too easily employed to achieve political objectives. Such an enduring ‘conflict relapse’ situation is exemplified by the confrontational narratives used by influential powers such as Iran, which is still engulfed in a mind-set of perpetual conflict with the West, or plainly re-emerged between the KRG and Iraq in the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum of September 2017. According to Alaaldin, the Peshmerga and the ISF frustrated three years of cooperation and goodwill while fighting against Daesh, yet fail to build on that momentum.

The first and essential necessity, Alaaldin noted, is to depart from these corrosive narratives and invest in politics and good governance rather than military solutions, highlighting how “winning the peace is more important than winning the war.” So far, this litmus test has not been passed successfully by Baghdad. In the case of Iraq, he maintained that the huge institutional gap now existing between the central government and the provinces can be addressed only through a decentralization framework which, by devolving a fair share of power and authority to the local administrations, may produce “the ideal breeding space for the development of a unifying narrative.” Social and political inclusion, thus, must be the core features of the rebuilding process, further fostered by the mitigating role of Civil society at large.

On the mention of the Iranian Nuclear deal, Alaaldin candidly stated that it had both positive and negative effects. Indeed, while, on the one hand, it succeeded in bringing to the negotiating table potential opponents thus enhancing positive talks, on the other hand it has failed to address all the problems concerning Iran’s

activities in the region, especially in Syria or even in Iraq, confirming the need to adopt a multidimensional approach in this regard. “Iran has still to prove to be an honest and committed broker of peace in the region.” Iraq is on the edge between (a) evolving in a space in which the Arabs and Iran can forge a consensus, or (b) becoming the new battle ground between Iran and the U.S. and their allies.

**Mohammed Bin Saqar Al-Sulami** pinpointed the factors that changed the Middle East from the cradle of civilizations to the cradle of conflicts and later stressed on the ways to overcome the problems. He argued that lack of trust among regional states, the curse and blessing of oil, absence of good governance, lack of political vision and negative role played by the world superpowers in the region are the root causes of problems in the Middle East.

Al-Sulami believes that the problem between Saudi Arabia and Iran is political one and not related to religious or national causes. He argued that if Iran changes her conduct and try to build confidence with the governments in the region, stability would be achievable and Iran will be saved from crisis. Al-Sulami stressed that Iraq must tackle the root causes of the emergence of ISIS and its other conflicts. He added that Iraq should not be the scene of regional rivalries and proxy wars.



## Panel 7: Global and Regional Power dynamics: Conflict and Collaboration (2)

- **Fatih Yildiz, Turkish Ambassador to Iraq**
- **Ramon Blecuca, European Union’s Ambassador to Iraq**
- **Alberto Fernandez, President of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks**
- **Lukman Faily, Former Iraqi Ambassador to Japan and USA**
- **Tanya Gili, Former Member of Iraqi Parliament (Chair)**

This panel complemented the themes emerged in the previous session (6), explained **Tanya Gili**, and help analyse the regional power dynamics from a broader perspective. The speakers were asked to focus on the trend of rivalry and confrontation, underlining the current and future developments in terms of stability in many areas.

**Fatih Yildiz** characterised the bonds between Turkey and Iraq and emphasised the shared interest in having a stable relationship and a secure borders. He described security as a primary concern for Turkey, as “both Daesh and the PKK remain a threat for Ankara”. He also highlighted a series of challenges which still affect Turkey and the rest of the Middle East. The first is the “historical tragedy of the Palestinian people” as Israel continues the “illegal occupation” and denial of their political rights. According to Yildiz, “as long as we cannot redress this deep feeling of injustice emanating from Palestine there is no better future for us all in this region, including here in Iraq.” Secondly, he mentioned the war in Syria, where a story of political stalemate and failed diplomatic solutions is still continuing, and whose consequences for Turkey, especially in terms of refugees and security, have been severe. Turkey is indeed hosting 3 million Syrian refugees, more than any other country, and, for this reason, Ankara is trying to address these issues by actively cooperating with key partners on the ground.



Yildiz considered Iraq as the third challenge, where political unity as well as territorial integrity are still at stake, where inclusiveness has not been fostered enough and where ethno-sectarian identities appear to remain the main lens through which governance and policies are implemented. He explained that Turkey is at the forefront to help Iraq to become more inclusive and stable.

The fourth challenge was Iran. According to Yildiz, it was crucial to maintain the nuclear deal with Iran even after the withdrawal of one of its main contributors, which he described as “a matter of concern”. The Turkish Ambassador stressed Turkey’s commitment in this regard, and the necessity to engage Iran through diplomatic means rather than sanctions and military threats. He concluded by highlighting Turkey’s multifaceted orientation when it comes to foreign policy, in light of its bridging geo-political position “with an eye on Europe but also very much embedded in the Middle East”. This can help Ankara to work effectively and positively with a wide range of partners to bring peace and stability in the region.

The EU ambassador to Iraq **Ramon Blecu**a emphasized the necessity to put the Middle East in perspective, and described how ‘the threat to multilateralism’ represents the main challenge for the region, with power dynamics evolving in an increasingly uncertain way. At the global level, he noted, the partial decline of multilateral processes has resulted in trade wars, the abandonment of international treaties and the resort to military means for resolving disputes. These issues, in turn, are reflected on crucial power relations and alliances, ranging from the future of NATO to the long-standing partnership between the EU and Turkey. Ultimately, these are affecting the role of the ‘revisionist powers’, such as China, Iran or Russia.

As a result of these issues, there are increasing tensions everywhere, and conflicts, especially in the Middle East, are exacerbated to the point of unintended consequences. He mentioned the example of the JCPOA, which is defined as a “safety net for keeping in check not only the Iranian nuclear ambitions, but also the regional tensions.” The failure of this agreement risks to produce an escalation of violence which, according to Blecu, would come at “one of the most dangerous moments in the recent history



of the region,” characterized by a system of alliances that may easily – if not automatically – drag the Middle East into war, in a sort of World War I scenario. The EU diplomat warned that “there is no war that ends the way it is intended at the beginning,” and, given the increasingly global and interlinked nature of conflicts, a single spark in one area may easily trigger a confrontational ripple effect, as the case of Daesh and its metastases in Libya or Afghanistan demonstrate.

According to Blecua, there are also positive developments. Iraq, for instance, should be praised for “its capacity to integrate multiple identities,” an aspect which may represent a good basis for a virtuous future of the region. Such a precious capacity, he highlighted, is a heritage of the rich history of the country, always characterized by a multi-layered system of intra-communal relations that kept the social fabric together. The introduction of “exclusive identities” by the Colonial Powers destabilized such social balance, while the rise of Daesh and its extreme reinterpretation of Islamic orthodoxy have almost destroyed it. Blecua concluded by stressing the necessity to implement a comprehensive reconstruction process which can revive the historical cultural diversity of the Iraqi society, exemplified by what was the city of Mosul before 2014. He finally underlined that the EU is at the forefront in promoting reconciliation, inclusiveness and sustainable governance in Iraq.

Former US diplomat **Alberto Fernandez** partially disagreed with the previous analyses, noting that the worsening and exacerbation of the current dynamics in the Middle East should not be considered only as a future possibility, but primarily as a persistent regional pattern for the last forty years, since “the structural reasons for such a deep crisis have never been addressed.” These very causes, such as disastrous governance and “corruption on a global scale”, are endemic to the region and are still affecting “a situation which is likely to get worse before it gets better.”

The picture presented by Fernandez was even more dire as he described the crisis of MENA not just in socio-political and economic terms, but also “intellectual and spiritual” ones. He noted how the factors and grievances that led to the rise of Daesh are all still unaddressed, and how the lack of thirst for real change and reforms continues to undermine any serious effort to bring stability in many regional countries, especially those within the Arab League. Fernandez praised the actual US government for its realistic efforts to reverse what he defined as the “disastrous mistakes” made by the Obama administration, from the disregard for ISIS’ emergence in 2013 to the bloody mirror effect of the JCPOA in the Syrian conflict, where Iran and its allies have established a firm foothold through the blood of the Syrian population. He defined the Trump’s administration’s strategy in the Middle East as a “real response to the unchecked aggression by revisionist powers such as Iran,” coupled with a real effort “to re-forge ties with [Washington’s] traditional allies in the region,” such as Turkey or many countries of the Arab world. Nevertheless, he pessimistically stated that whilst the US commitment can certainly help to

put in place a minimum level of stability, at the same time the endemic problems have to be addressed first and foremost by the local governments, and “neither multilateralism nor any foreign system can do more for the region than the region does for itself.”

Fernandez voiced a cautious optimism with regard to Iraq. He acknowledged the sincere attempts to address crucial problems such as sectarianism and ethnicity, and he noted that the last elections in the country have produced positive, although premature, signs in this regard. The military defeat of Daesh certainly represents an added value and builds confidence for the future, but it must go hand in hand with a serious effort to improve governance and provide good services to the Iraqi population. According to Fernandez, indeed, the recent popular protests in Basra and other parts of the country are an encouraging signal, because they demonstrate the people’s will to fight for their rights, but as long as the government do not listen to these demands, things will not improve. Finally, Fernandez emphasised that Iraq has to find its own place, based on independence, territorial sovereignty, democracy and institutional strengthening. The US and the West are committed to these outcomes.

**Lukman Faily** began his remarks with a provocative question: where does the Middle East fit in the debate regarding global challenges and developments? Does it complement the current – global – concerns or does it contradict them, remaining entangled in more local ones? Does it keep pace with globalized problems or is it still focused on typical 19th century dynamics? For instance, while terrorism is certainly a global phenomenon which is extensively considered and faced in the region, environmental issues are almost absent from any serious local debate. According to Faily, the progressive, but steady, change in global dynamics can be positive as it may push Iraq, and the Middle East as a whole, to take on a more proactive role, since many of these dynamics directly affected it.

At the same time, he noted that there seems to be a lack of both historical leadership and a strategic framework to face and address all these crucial problems, as the tools at the disposal of many countries are inadequate or even detrimental to achieve any positive outcome. He noted how regional platforms such as the Arab League or many Islamic religious organizations have lost influence and are, to some extent, declining. Indeed, given the extensive international support for most of the challenges which trouble the region, it is essential to frame the analysis in terms of being proactive rather than reactive. The issue of human trafficking, for example, has to be managed mainly by Europe or require also Middle Eastern countries’ active cooperation?

The former Iraqi diplomat highlighted that such a perpetual situation of conflict and socio-political crisis has left irreversible damages, such as the exodus of minorities abroad or the Yazidi massacre, which

will remain a scar for life, and has exacted a huge price on the Iraqi population, in terms of physical, cultural and economic destruction. Still, noted Faily, Iraq's neighbours and allies are asking Baghdad to take position in the new struggle between Iran and the US, rather than rewarding it for its major effort against Daesh.

Faily moved on by emphasizing the necessity to put into the equation a series of variables, which he defined "wild cards," that may profoundly affect the future of Middle Eastern dynamics. Firstly, the current direction of US foreign policy and the uncertainty about Washington commitment to the region. He contended that the 'new-realism' narrative adopted by the Trump administration may continue even after Trump's presidency, since the president is only the tip of a broad diplomatic and political establishment. The second factor was the lack of political and institutional capacity to address problems. The issue of identity, characterized by a lack of clarity, as well as the role of non-state actors such as Daesh were also mentioned by Faily, who stressed how the combination between these factors and the exponential demographic growth in the region, has resulted in a widespread economic stagnation. In a pessimistic vein, he stated that "there are too many wild cards," and the lack of capable leaders and effective platforms inspires little confidence for any prospect of dialogue and cooperation, as no actor is willing to admit its mistakes. Faily concluded that Iraq is certainly evolving, even though this process does not have a clear vision about where the end-game is. Furthermore, Iraq can be considered as an "early warning" actor in the Middle East for possible conflicts, thanks to its multicultural nature.



# MERI Forum 2018

**Visions for Stabilising the Middle East**



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Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq  
info@meri-k.org | +964(0)662649690  
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WWW.MERI-K.ORG