



**Middle East
Research Institute**

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MERI Forum 2019

Ending Wars – Winning Peace in the Middle East

4 - 6 November, 2019,

Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Framing the Forum

Introduction to MERI Forum 2019



The 5th annual MERI Forum was held from the 4th-6th of November in Erbil. The forum brought together academics, policy makers, civil society actors and politicians to provide a platform for dialogue; promote the exchange of visions; and invite creative solutions for some of the most pressing issues in the Middle East today. Every fall, the forum concludes with expressions of hope for sustainable peace, political stability, and development in the coming year. However, global, regional, and local powers continue to engage in rivalries and violent, multi-actor confrontations; Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are inevitably enmeshed in these dynamics.

MERI President **Diawer Ala'Aldeen** introduced the central topics and dynamics for discussion at the forum, emphasising the need for policy experts and politicians to predict events, debate solutions, and provide evidence-based policy advice. Very rarely have rival regional and local powers engaged in constructive dialogue for peace, stability, and the rule of law. Instead, to solve problems, most of these powers have resorted to populism and

violence, creating additional crises. Ala'Aldeen argued that policy development has often been predicated upon, and defined by, security considerations rather than sustainable political and economic agendas. Concurrently, regional powers have become increasingly polarized, while local communities, who are the ultimate victims of rivalries between the political elite, have become increasingly fragmented, divided, and militarised.

During last year's MERI Forum, discussion centered on the drivers and spoilers of stability and reconciliation. A strong emphasis was placed on the responsibility of decision-making powers to bolster state-building processes or risk paving the way for instability and opportunism. However, after years of bloody warfare and immense sacrifices made by the people of Rojava and coalition partners, new complexities and a more aggressive fire have engulfed this region and led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands more civilians. The unfolding chain of events in Iraq and Syria have not yet reached their final phases.

“New tensions and complexities are on the way, but can we adopt a new vision and engage the main actors in dialogue to design and implement a new road map?” - Dlawer Ala'Aldeen

Participants in the 2018 MERI Forum predicted that, should Iraq's ruling elite fail to prioritise the reformation of the governance system, people of all provinces might raise their voices in protest. The two successive elections that followed, deciding the composition of the Iraqi and Kurdistan Region Parliaments, were seen as possible precursors to a fresh start for the political process. As a result, a new sense of optimism was birthed, particularly regarding the prospect of reconciliation between Erbil and Baghdad.

In Baghdad, the new Cabinet of the Federal Government was formed successfully, albeit with some difficulty, and was empowered to carry out much-anticipated reforms. However, the Prime Minister, who did not have a parliamentary faction and did not enjoy strong support from political powers, remained vulnerable to internal and external power dynamics. The Federal Government's actions, for whatever reasons, did not meet people's expectations. Less than a year after its formation, people took to the streets. Protests erupted, signaling widespread dissatisfaction with the entire political system and the inability of political leaders to secure livelihoods and basic services for their constituents. Unfortunately, while protesters demanded human rights and public services, political leaders maintained old games, and remained focused on debating electoral reform and constitutional amendments. The first, fourth, and sixth panels of the 2019 MERI Forum were designed to identify central challenges, exchange visions, and debate solutions related to this crisis.

In Erbil, however, events evolved differently. The Kurdistan Regional Government took advantage of the new atmosphere and, after years of division among the main political parties, formed a coalition government in 2019. Cabinet members adopted a manifesto and programme of 52 articles of reform. Despite still being in its infancy, the Cabinet has demonstrated 'team spirit' and has quietly made some good decisions. Meanwhile, the Parliament has sought to pass complementary legislations. The 2019 MERI Forum dedicated panels five, seven, eight and nine to this topic.

In his introduction, Ala'Aldeen referred to MERI's comprehensive study on reforming the system of governance. This study culminated in a book entitled [State-Building](#), which discusses structural reforms and mechanisms for empowering the local government, Parliament, and Judicial Council in Kurdistan Region, and proposes practical policy recommendations to address existing weaknesses in the governance system. MERI intends to closely observe the actions of the KRG and, where appropriate, offer academic assistance to decision-makers with a view to move reform processes forward. MERI recently supported several of the KRG Ministries in designing long-term visions, drafting new legislations, and enhancing efficiency.

A major part of MERI's research in past years has also been dedicated to the war on IS, stabilisation of the liberated areas, the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and co-existence amongst Iraq's diverse communities. In 2019, in collaboration with USIP, MERI conducted fieldwork within IDP communities on return dynamics and resilience, particularly among Christians and Yezidis. Together, MERI and USIP will be publishing a comprehensive [policy report](#) on the research findings from this project. Thus, the third panel of this year's MERI Forum was designed to debate the contours and complexities of IDP return in Nineveh.

Another area of focus for MERI is providing analysis on the policies of regional powers, including Turkey and Iran, as well as global powers, like the US, Russia, and European countries. MERI believes it is important for the people of the Middle East to understand the policies of these powers, and encourages these powers to engage in dialogue with one another in order to stabilise this important part of the world. The recent escalation in unwanted conflict provides evidence of a deterioration in the fabric of powers within the region. Ala'Aldeen outlined how the sudden withdrawal of US forces in Syria has created a vacuum that puts previous achievements against IS and the stability of Northern Syria at risk. This subject, and the positions of regional and global powers towards it, provided the theme of the second and sixth panels.

Gender equality constitutes one of MERI's main areas of research and is an important target of its lobbying campaigns. Fortunately, over the past 20 years, women in Kurdistan Region, thanks to their struggle and that of the civil society as a whole, have achieved major milestones. There was a time when protecting quotas for women was essential to help them come forward, and the KRI still has a long way to go before opportunities are made equal and quotas are no longer necessary. However, it is a source of pride for the Kurdistan Region that women are now reaching professional, political, and social leadership positions based on their own merits.

“When we talk about stability, reconciliation, and community development, we cannot ignore the role of women, their rights, and the importance of equal opportunities.” - Dlawer Ala'Aldeen

The fifth panel of the 2019 MERI Forum was dedicated to exploring how women in leadership might use their positions to lobby more effectively for women's empowerment,

particularly by enhancing the roles and increasing the opportunities available to other women.

Ala'Aldeen ended his opening remarks by highlighting the need for cross-sectoral engagement and dialogue. Together, he emphasised, we can impact decision-making processes, help pave the way for stability, and lay the foundation for a peaceful region characterised by good governance and the rule of law.

“The processes of dialogue, reconciliation, and finding solutions for complex crises must become institutionalised. This will help create a modern state and common nation where an environment of co-existence can be achieved.” - Dlawer Ala'Aldeen