



Proceedings of the The LIF's First Anniversary Meeting



**From Vision
to Viable Pathways**

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The LIF's First Anniversary Meeting
Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq**



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Executive Summary

The first anniversary meeting of the Levant and Iraq Forum (LIF), held on 6 October 2025, marked a turning point in regional policy brainstorming. It moved the debate beyond the familiar question of why regional cooperation is necessary to the more urgent challenge of how it can be delivered. Participants concluded that governance deficits, political exclusion, weak institutions, and unresolved grievances - not security concerns alone - are the principal drivers of regional fragility.

Rebuilding state legitimacy through inclusive governance was seen as essential to reducing the influence of armed non-state actors. Rather than waiting for comprehensive political settlements, the Forum advocated incremental, functional cooperation, beginning with cross-border initiatives such as border management and disrupting illegal trafficking to build confidence.

Economic recovery should proceed alongside reconciliation and governance reform, while decentralisation should be pursued through context-specific institutional design rather than ideological debates over federalism. Climate change and water security were recognised as shared regional security challenges requiring collective action.

Lasting stabilisation depends on stronger state institutions, sustained dialogue, youth engagement, and practical, locally owned reforms that build trust and resilience over time.

This report ends with a series of practical policy recommendations that remain effective under the ever-evolving regional dynamics.



Policy Implications and Emerging Recommendations

The LIF positions itself as a platform that not only generates ideas but also translates them into policy-ready recommendations and sustains engagement long enough for incremental progress to build credibility. The 2025 LIF meeting in Erbil produced several areas of broad convergence that can inform future policy.

- **A pragmatic path to regional stabilisation.**

A region seeking a middle ground between two unsuccessful models: (a) rigid centralisation, which often breeds exclusion and conflict, and (b) fragmented de facto governance, which entrenches non-state actors and external interference. Rather than pursuing an ambitious regional security architecture in the short term, a layered approach should be adopted. One that begins with practical cross-border cooperation, builds confidence through measurable achievements, and gradually evolves into deeper political and economic coordination rooted in inclusive governance and stronger state institutions.

- **Prioritise implementation over vision.**

While strategic visions are often readily available, states typically fail during implementation. Future policy efforts should therefore focus on the institutional and legislative mechanisms that translate dialogue into action, including legal drafting, institutional development, and politically feasible sequencing of reforms.

- **Build confidence through functional cooperation.**

Incremental, results-oriented cooperation is the most effective way to generate trust. Border management, particularly cooperation to combat illicit economies such as Captagon trafficking, was identified as a practical area where visible successes could pave the way for broader political collaboration.

- **Depoliticise shared existential challenges.**

Climate adaptation, water security, and environmental degradation are areas where cooperation should be insulated from political disputes. These transboundary challenges provide opportunities to pool expertise, strengthen technical collaboration, and create habits of regional cooperation.

- **Anchor connectivity in governance.**

Economic corridors and regional connectivity initiatives should complement, not substitute for, governance reform and political inclusion. Infrastructure investments are unlikely to deliver lasting stability without an accompanying social contract, while connectivity alone cannot overcome the exclusion, weak governance, and marginalisation that fuel radicalisation and the resurgence of non-state actors.

- **Pursue pragmatic decentralisation in Syria.**

Rather than becoming constrained by debates over terminology, focus should be on designing a decentralised governance model that accommodates diversity while safeguarding equal citizenship, institutional coherence, and state unity. The emphasis should be on legal and administrative design rather than labels such as federalism.

- **Strengthen dialogue and diplomacy.**

Sustained dialogue at track 1.5 and track 2 among policymakers, technical experts, academics, and advisors is essential for addressing politically sensitive issues, including decentralisation, resource sharing, constitutional reform, and transitional justice. Such mechanisms should be structured to generate practical policy options and maintain momentum beyond one-off meetings.

- **Link stabilisation to humanitarian recovery.**

Regional stability is inseparable from creating conditions for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and reversing humanitarian decline. Unfortunately, declining international assistance across several Levant and Iraq countries has exacerbated fragility. Sustainable return cannot be achieved through improved security alone; it also requires economic opportunity, functioning institutions, reliable public services, accountable governance, and continued international support to address the underlying drivers of displacement and enable long-term reintegration.



From Vision to Viable Pathways

The previous LIF meetings, since its first inauguration in October 2024, addressed the key challenges that faced the Levant and Iraq, including unresolved conflicts, fragile economies, cross-border armed actors, and shifting alliances had left the region operating in a state of prolonged uncertainty. At the LIF's first anniversary on 6 October 2025, held in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and with the participation of the LIF members and external guests, the harder question was examined: why does this fragmentation persist, and what can realistically be done to begin reversing it?

In a candid, reflective, and forward-looking manner, participants no longer debated whether cooperation was necessary; they debated what kind of cooperation was possible in a region where governance deficits, fragile economies, weak institutions, shifting alliances, mistrust between communities, and the legacy of armed groups continue to undermine state authority. As such, the conversation transitions from vision to viability.

Fragility as a System, not a Moment

Fragility in the Levant and Iraq is often misunderstood as primarily a security problem, however, the LIF meeting participants emphasized that it is rooted more in governance and inclusivity, which are the common denominators across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and beyond. As one participant noted, “the region's repeated cycles of radicalization, from Ramadi to Mosul to parts of Syria and elsewhere, cannot be understood without examining how segments of society have been excluded from governance.” In this framing, disenfranchised communities become the breeding ground for radicalism, and states end up spending vastly more on coercive security than they do on building inclusive political and economic systems. It was argued that without addressing the “gap of inclusion,” regional connectivity projects such as roads, rail networks, and corridors, remain vulnerable to shocks and reversals, because infrastructure cannot substitute for a legitimate social contract.

As such, the persistent role of armed non-state actors should not be treated solely as external spoilers, for these actors often emerged from environments where governance had collapsed or where communities felt unrepresented. In several contexts, these groups had evolved into de facto governance structures, providing services and exercising authority in the absence of the state. The challenge, therefore, was not simply to remove them, but to rebuild state legitimacy in ways that made their presence unnecessary.

In consequence, confidence-building between people and authorities is a strategic priority. Trust cannot be rebuilt through slogans; it requires result-oriented, sustained and incremental processes, credible intermediaries, and visible “success stories” that demonstrate cooperation is possible before attempting to settle maximalist political disputes.

Borders, Security and Armed Non-State Actors

Is the region entering a “post-non-state actor” phase. This may be defined not as collapse of armed groups, but as their retreat or reduced intensity, creating a window of opportunity for state rebuilding and regional cooperation. It was suggested that Iranian proxy networks under international pressure, appear to be retreating, certain militant landscapes have changed, and the intensity of past years has declined in some theaters. The warning embedded in this reading was that such windows close quickly: without rapid institution-building and cooperative initiatives, the same actors can reconstitute, and the region can slide back into a more acute cycle of violence. The re-emergence of ISIS cells and persistent extremist vulnerabilities were cited as evidence that the underlying conditions remain unresolved.

The discussion highlighted the importance of balancing immediate security needs with long-term state-building. Participants warned that externally supported or hybrid border forces, if left outside national military structures, could evolve into new non-state power centres, undermining state authority. At the same time, reconfigured border units drawing on experienced counterterrorism personnel were seen as a practical way to improve border governance and security. Cooperation on border management, particularly disrupting Captagon trafficking, was presented as a confidence-building measure, offering visible and measurable results that could foster trust before addressing more contentious political issues. The central challenge is reconciling short-term stabilisation with sustainable institutional integration.

The Levant and Iraq area remain trapped in a cycle where fragile governance produces insecurity and exclusion, insecurity invites non-state actors and external interference, and those forces in turn block the institutional reforms required for stability and economic recovery. However, regional connectivity projects and economic corridors are appealing as an off-ramp, but without credible governance and inclusion, such projects risk becoming either hollow symbolism or new sites of contestation. Functional cooperation, hence, precedes political settlement. Rather than waiting for grand political agreements, participants emphasized the importance of small, practical initiatives capable of building trust and demonstrating progress across the region.



Economic Development, Reconciliation, and Sequencing

Economic cooperation was viewed as inseparable from reconciliation and governance reform, with participants arguing that reconstruction funding and infrastructure projects alone cannot deliver lasting stability. Rebuilding physical infrastructure without addressing political divisions, societal fractures, and unresolved grievances risks reproducing the very conditions that fuel instability, as Iraq's experience demonstrates. While economic recovery and reconciliation should proceed in parallel, reconciliation was seen as the higher priority because identity-based conflicts and lingering grievances can undermine development efforts. Participants also advocated a broader ecosystem approach, strengthening government institutions while preserving space for civil society, academia, and think tanks to act as trusted intermediaries and sustain dialogue during periods of weak state capacity.

Federalism, Decentralization, and the Politics of Terminology

Decentralization and federalism, especially in relation to Syria's future, emerged as the most substantive debate in the Erbil meeting. Beyond ideologies, the debate was more about the terminology and the variation in national models. The legacy of centralized one-party systems across the region caused confusion and lack of understanding. It was proposed that a structured dialogue on decentralization federalism, what it is and how it can take different forms, could be a useful Track 1.5 or Track 2 agenda, particularly for Syria.

Participants argued that in Iraq, federalism acquired an undeservedly negative reputation, not because the concept itself failed, but because the model envisioned in the 2005 Constitution was never fully implemented. Essential legislative foundations required, to operationalise the system - particularly those governing oil and gas resource management - were never enacted, meaning federalism was never truly given the opportunity to function as intended. Rather than becoming trapped in debates over terminology, participants suggested focusing on a credible process of decentralisation. They emphasised that governance exists along a spectrum, ranging from highly centralised systems to near-confederal arrangements, and that each country must determine the appropriate balance in light of its history, demographics, and political realities.

In Syria, federalism has added sensitivity due to the historical legacy of the French mandate period, during which the country was created and partitioned into sectarian-defined entities. For many nationalists, that experience fused decentralization rhetoric with a fear of externally driven fragmentation. Yet it was also acknowledged that decentralization is needed and that Syria's early local council experiences during the revolution offer an indigenous foundation to build on. The core message across these contributions converged: Syria requires decentralization to manage diversity, but it must be designed in a way that avoids sectarian territorialization and instead reinforces equal citizenship and rule of law. The challenge now lies in transforming these experiences into legitimate, nationally recognized governance structures that preserve unity while allowing local autonomy.

Climate, Resources, and the Next Frontier of Instability

Beyond governance, there was a shared existential challenge that transcend political divides across the L&I region. Water scarcity, climate change, drought, and food insecurity in northern Syria and Iraq were repeatedly mentioned as urgent issues requiring collective action. Control of water sources by upstream neighboring states, Turkey and Iran, further underscored the need for coordinated regional responses. These environmental pressures were seen not only as humanitarian concerns but as potential drivers of future conflict across the region, if left unaddressed.

Climate cooperation could be one of the few areas that “transcends politics” and is simultaneously existential and practical, making it a plausible entry point for regional pooling of expertise and capacity. Cross-border environmental governance could serve as both a confidence-building mechanism and a way to address looming shocks that will otherwise intensify displacement, economic fragility, and inter-communal tensions.

According to participants, the L&I region remains without a shared agenda for its own security and survival, even while non-state actors and extremist groups have demonstrated cross-border strategic thinking. It was stressed that parts of Syria and Iraq are already facing drought and food insecurity, while upstream control by neighboring states shapes water vulnerability in ways that are fundamentally regional and cannot be solved within national borders alone. The implication was clear: climate and water are not “soft” issues; they are future conflict drivers and should be treated as core security questions.

Rebuilding from Within and the Limits of External Engineering

Deep societal trauma, resulting from years of conflict and economic hardship have eroded public trust in governance models, and future solutions must be acceptable to populations who have endured repeated shocks. Evidence-based scientific studies, careful design, and sensitivity to public perception were deemed essential to avoid further instability.



Rooted in Lebanon's experience: internal civil war is categorically different from struggling against authoritarianism or external domination, and the costs of sliding into internal war endure for generations. Hence, rebuilding must be led from within; external actors can advise, but cannot impose reconstruction or national re-foundation. That emphasis on internal agency was echoed in multiple contributions, particularly in calls for forums that can grapple with sectarian grievances, justice, transitional justice, missing and disappeared persons, and equitable resource distribution.

However, there is a hard regional reality: refugee-hosting countries are reaching the limits of their capacity, while international support is shrinking. Assistance is being cut, institutional capacity in humanitarian agencies is under strain, and displacement pressures continue. As such, regional stabilization is not only about individual countries' internal politics; it is also about reducing destabilizing spillovers into Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and beyond.

From Dialogue to Direction

Regional cooperation must begin with achievable steps: strengthening governance and inclusion, pursuing functional cross-border initiatives, encouraging youth engagement, and addressing shared environmental challenges. Designing governance systems that reflect local realities rather than imported models is of paramount importance. Connectivity and economic integration will only be sustainable if anchored in legitimate, inclusive state structures. In moving from vision to viable pathways, the participants emphasized transitioning from diagnosing regional fragmentation to identifying where practical momentum can begin.

The Youth

Promotion of youth and academic exchange across the countries of the L&I region was considered an important investment in integration. Future diplomacy must involve younger generations, encouraging cultural and scientific exchange to counter decades of isolation and mistrust. Facilitating direct contact between students, researchers, and young professionals was seen as a low-cost, high-impact initiative capable of generating long-term dividends for regional cooperation.



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