THE LEVANT & IRAQ FORUM

Proceedings of the

LIF's 2nd Anniversary Meeting

The State and its Competitors in the Levant and Iraq



Khogir Wirya

Sofia Valentini

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen

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The Middle East Research Institute (MERI) engages in policy issues contributing to the process of state building and democratisation in the Middle East. Through independent analysis and policy debates, our research aims to promote and develop good governance, human rights, rule of law and social and economic prosperity in the region. It was established in 2014 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



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Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
E: info@meri-k.org
www.meri-k.org
X: @meri_info

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The State and its Competitors in the Levant and Iraq

Proceedings of the
Levant and Iraq Forum's Second Anniversary Meeting.
Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
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Khogir Wirya
Senior Research Fellow
Middle East Research Institute

Sofia Valentini
Intern, Middle East Research Institute

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen
The Levant and Iraq Forum Coordinator
President of the Middle East Research Institute

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Executive Summary

Amid geopolitical confrontation, unsettled political transitions and mounting pressure on non-governmental institutions, the Levant and Iraq Forum (LIF) reconvened in Erbil and debated three interconnected policy questions: (a) how to restore effective state authority while maintaining political inclusion; (b) how research institutions can support better policy and sustain cross-border collaboration; and (c) how recovery can be financed without entrenching the inequalities and governance failures that helped produce crisis.

The answer to all three questions is that the state in the Levant countries and Iraq is no longer the default holder of authority. It is one bidder among several, including armed factions, foreign patrons, Gulf capital, international organizations and diasporas, all competing for the use of force, people's livelihoods, capital and knowledge. Factions pay young men more than the state does for recruitment. Hezbollah runs services the Lebanese state cannot easily replace. Investors in Syria are risk-takers, operating without a predictable legal framework. Regional research is used by international actors more than governments. Where the state makes a claim without an offer that beats the alternative, the claim fails.

A Collaborative Network

The LIF members reported concrete cross-border collaboration, including joint work on a Syria–Lebanon economic corridor and a wider Syria–Lebanon–Iraq trade research agenda. These initiatives show the network can connect policy communities that have rarely worked together operationally. Members also acknowledged that intermittent conferences, personal relationships and broad declarations are no substitute for a recurring programme of joint research, member-led coordination and policy engagement. Written contributions received after the meeting proposed a three-track framework, thematic working groups, a joint research fund, a foresight initiative and programmes for emerging researchers and policymakers.

Armed groups

The debate showed that formal integration into the state does not by itself establish unified command, political accountability or trust between communities. The "post-non-state actor" window the Forum identified in 2025 produced three different outcomes:

- Iraq set a 30 September deadline to bring weapons under state control. US forces withdrew; the factions did not disarm. Pressure was applied without an exit route, and Iraq's post-2003 experience shows that integration without social and economic foundations unravels at the first security shock.
- Syria absorbed most former opposition factions quickly and by decree. The negotiated integration of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces has stalled on administration, Kurdish-language education and internal security, all of which wait on enforceable constitutional guarantees. Participants disagreed on whether security integration should precede, accompany or follow those guarantees.
- Lebanon has, for the first time, a state leadership that rejects Hezbollah's armed status. But disarmament of Hezbollah depends on Iran's calculations, on Israeli withdrawal from occupied southern territory, on the capacity of a weak national army, and on the state's ability to replace the services Hezbollah provides.
- Jordan's perspective showed that fragmented sovereignty imposes direct costs on stable neighbours, through smuggling, displacement, border threats and economic disruption.

Knowledge Institutions

The region's bottleneck is not the supply of policy analysis, but the state's capacity to absorb it. Irregular funding, weak interfaces between research and government, and legal frameworks that treat think tanks as interchangeable with service-delivery NGOs were identified as recurring obstacles. Baghdad's plans for a research fund for local organizations and distinct status for research institutions were welcomed, with the caution that public funding must not cost independence.

Reconstruction and Recovery

International aid has fallen sharply just as needs in Gaza, Syria and Lebanon have peaked. In Syria, sanctions relief and diplomatic re-engagement opened the door to recovery, but without a functioning banking system, transparent management of recovered assets or internal legitimacy, recovery has not followed. Gulf and diaspora capital carries fewer formal conditions than Western aid, but its conditions are implicit, expressed through who holds which port or airport. In Sinjar, the Nineveh Plains and Mosul, rebuilt infrastructure coexists with continued displacement, weak livelihoods and eroded trust. Reconstruction is not recovery which must be judged by sustained return, stable livelihoods and trust, not repaired buildings. Participants disagreed on whether economic breakthrough or justice and reconciliation must come first; where communities have suffered mass atrocity, the evidence favours the latter.

Taken together, the exchanges suggest that financing, integration agreements and legal reforms will hold only if they are matched by accountable institutions, community-defined priorities and an offer from the state that people find more credible than the alternatives. The perspectives and proposals reported here were voiced in discussion; they are not verified project commitments or collectively adopted decisions.



Policy Implications and Recommendations

A set of practice-oriented policy recommendations are included in this report for policy- and decision-makers as well as fellow academics in the Levant countries and Iraq on disarmament of non-state actors, reconstruction, intra-regional collaboration, connectivity and academic cooperation.

The recommendations below share one aim: to help policy- and decision-makers in the Levant countries and Iraq offer citizens something more credible than the alternatives. A better route out of armed defiance, livelihoods and services that compete with those of armed groups, guarantees backed by law rather than goodwill, a predictable environment for productive investment, and channels that put local expertise to use at home. They are offered for consideration, not as decisions adopted by the Forum.

(A) On armed groups and de facto authorities

- Distinguish incorporation from effective civilian command.

  Security-sector reform should monitor command structures, accountability, fiscal arrangements, internal security responsibilities and the persistence of autonomous decision-making, not only formal membership of state institutions.

- Pair pressure with an exit.

  Disarmament campaigns must offer armed groups a credible route into civilian political life. Iraq's 30 September deadline showed that pressure alone pushes factions to close ranks against the government.

- Agree on what is being asked.

  In Iraq, 'disarmament', 'confining arms' to the state and 'regulating' or 'freezing' arms are different demands advanced by various actors. Governments and partners should define the end state publicly before setting deadlines.

- Sequence security integration with credible political guarantees.

  Combine verifiable steps toward unified authority with representation, legal safeguards, local administration arrangements and community-level trust-building. In Syria, a permanent constitution guaranteeing all communities is the missing foundation, and guarantor states should stay engaged until it exists.

- Distinguish integration from assimilation.

  Integration that becomes forced absorption or exclusion will reproduce the conditions that produced armed groups in the first place.

- Treat armed-group transitions as a social and economic question.

  Design lawful civilian employment and reintegration pathways, and ensure the state can supply services in areas previously reliant on armed actors. In Lebanon, this is a precondition for any agreement with Hezbollah to hold.

- Reform the institutions behind the social contract. Alongside security-sector reform, invest in public administration, judicial independence and social justice, so that citizenship, the rule of law, accountability and effective decentralisation become the basis of the state's offer to its citizens.

(B) On sovereignty and borders

- Reaffirm the inviolability of international borders.

  With UNIFIL leaving Lebanon and occupation continuing in parts of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, regional think tanks should press international partners to uphold international law on borders and territory.

- Promote preventive, cross-border approaches to sovereignty-related risks.

  These include illicit trafficking, border management and displacement, with international burden-sharing proportionate to the costs neighboring states bear.

- Counter organized incitement.

  Support monitoring of cross-border hate speech and joint responses by research institutions and civil society organizations in affected countries.

- Support the negotiated settlement of border disputes.

  Where borders remain undemarcated or contested, as between Syria and Lebanon, support technical and diplomatic processes for settlement and joint management, informed by research on the legal and practical options.

- Adopt a human-security lens.

  Complement state-security frameworks with attention to community safety, social protection, access to justice, livelihoods and displacement.

(C) On financing recovery

- Treat recovery as a social and institutional process, not a construction target.

  Measure it by safe and voluntary return, people's ability to stay, viable livelihoods and trust, not by buildings completed or sanctions lifted.

- Community Partnership

  Make affected communities partners, with inclusive local decision-making and mechanisms of redress in recovery plans.

- Build justice into recovery.

  Criminal, reparative and preventive justice is an integral part of the recovery process. In Iraq, this includes reviewing the legal treatment of ISIS crimes as terrorism rather than genocide.

- Engage the diaspora

  Mobilise diaspora capital for return through dedicated investment mechanisms with sound representation and fiduciary safeguards, drawing on Yazidi, Chaldean, Assyrian and Syrian diaspora communities.

- Make recovered-asset funds transparent.

  The rules governing Syria's single fund for recovered state assets should be published and independently audited.

- Prioritise banking reintegration.

  Rebuilding Syria's banking system and meeting anti-money-laundering standards is the precondition for formal capital at scale.

- Keep strategic assets competitive and guard against elite capture.

  Ports, airports and infrastructure concessions should be allocated through transparent, competitive procurement, with assessment of public liabilities and distributional impacts.

- Favour production over construction.

  Steer capital to productive sectors, such as agriculture, digital infrastructure and employment-intensive industries, rather than real-estate speculation.

- Recover with the future in mind.

  Plan recovery around future risks and opportunities, not only past damage, so that reconstruction does not reproduce the fragmented markets and exclusions that preceded conflict.

(D) On regional connectivity

- Build redundancy, not rivalry.

  Corridor planning should favour multiple coordinated hubs so that national ambitions reinforce one another.

- Serve places, not just routes.

  Corridors should be designed to reach the places most in need of recovery, such as Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains of Iraq, rather than bypass them, and to support refugee return.

- Treat project concepts as hypotheses.

  Commission member-led research on the feasibility, financing and governance of proposed corridors and investments rather than treating announcements as established outcomes.

- Start from a functional integration roadmap.

  Map feasible cross-border initiatives, institutional barriers and partnership opportunities, advancing cooperation in areas of mutual interest while respecting national sovereignty.

- Prioritise shared networks.

  Focus connectivity on sectors with shared benefits: electricity interconnection and renewable energy, water networks and the joint management of shared basins, modernised crossings, roads and railways, and joint economic zones.

(E) On policy research institutions and the state

- Empower think tanks.

  Give think tanks distinct legal status, separate from service-delivery NGOs, Baghdad can do so through executive regulations under Law No. 12 of 2010.

- Create regular policy–research interfaces.

  Governments should establish standing channels to commission, receive and use local research.

- Diversify funding through transparent mechanisms.

  Options include competitive research funds financed by a share of private university profits (as in Jordan), a share of telecoms regulator revenues (already provided for in Iraqi law), tax incentives for donors (absent in Lebanon) and responsible private-sector contributions.

- Protect independence.

  Any funding architecture needs open eligibility rules, peer review, public reporting, conflict-of-interest safeguards and a clear separation between funding and conclusions.

- Empowering the youth.

  Invest in the youth exchange across the region as a low-cost, high-impact investment in long-term integration.

- Reconnect societies.

  Beyond youth exchange, support joint university scholarships, twinning between cities and municipalities, and cooperation among chambers of commerce and industry.

(F) On the LIF itself

- Consider a three-track work program.

  Conflict resolution and political dialogue; social peace and reconciliation; and economic development and regional integration. Agree specific priorities within each track rather than treating the framework as binding.

- Select joint research priorities.

  Select two or three joint research priorities per cycle, with named leads and concrete deliverables such as two-page policy notes, comparative studies or collaborative projects.

- Test a light, rotating coordination arrangement

  Possibly on a two-year cycle, with a focal point in each member institution giving about 5% of their time. Alternatively, members could consider a small part-time secretariat for administration and coordination, funded through joint grants.

- Hold regular meetings.

  Fix a calendar of regular online meetings, starting in January 2027. Suggestions ranged from quarterly to every four months; members should agree the frequency.

- Rotate in-person meetings.

  The next mid-year meeting could be in Lebanon when conditions allow, otherwise Baghdad by spring 2027, then Damascus, with members' sessions followed by wider sessions for the host country's research community.

- Create shared digital platform

  Create a shared digital presence, either a central LIF page linked to members' websites or a common page template, and circulate a quarterly electronic bulletin.

- Convene webinars

  Convene two or three thematic webinars a year connecting research with policy discussion.

- Apply for joint funds

  Apply for funding jointly, with a small share allocated to coordination, and expand national research networks while screening members for professional integrity and independence from armed groups.

- Dialogue

  Preserve the LIF's flexible, independent Track 1.5 and Track 2 identity.

A Forum Moving to Implementation

The Levant and Iraq Forum (LIF) was launched in October 2024 to connect research institutes, policy professionals and civic actors across Iraq and the Levant in support of peace, regional cooperation and eventual integration. Its first report (published in July 2025) which was combined with the proceedings of the first mid-year meeting of June 2025, set out the rationale and institutional vision.

During the LIF's first anniversary meeting (October 2025 in Erbil) and subsequent report (published in August 2026), the forum emphasized practicable pathways, inclusive governance and incremental cooperation.

The second anniversary meeting of 11 October 2026 revisited those ambitions in a more acute security environment and asked a more operational question: what have members accomplished together, and what structure is needed to turn episodic encounters into lasting collective work?

In keeping with the previous meetings, the second anniversary meeting of the LIF brought together representatives of institutions from Iraq (including the Kurdistan Region), Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (Palestinian representative could not make it), with public officials and policy practitioners. Two closed member working sessions reviewed the LIF's progress and institutional future, the second with officials responsible for non-governmental organisations in federal Iraq and its Kurdistan Region.

Two additional sessions were held in the afternoon of 11 October 2026, the first of which examined armed groups and contested sovereignty, while the second examined recovery, finance, reconstruction and regional connectivity. All sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule; this report synthesises their substance without identifying speakers.



A Region Rebalanced

The latest 40-Day war, involving Iran, Israel and the United States, was the backdrop to all of the LIF sessions. The war did not create the region's problems, but it disrupted the balances that had held them in place. Participants described its effects as both an opening and a threat.

The War Repriced the Competition

The war involving the United States, Israel and Iran did not settle the competitions in the region; it changed the prices. It weakened Iran-backed bidders, cut Hezbollah's supply line through Syria and drew European and Gulf interest toward the region. For now, the state's offer looks stronger relative to its rivals'.

But almost every opening discussed at the meeting was created from outside: US pressure, Israeli strikes, sanctions relief, European energy needs and Gulf capital. The region's states are reacting to shocks, not driving them. The question for 2026 and beyond is whether they can convert openings made by others into order they own before those openings close.

Three National Strategies, Three Failure Modes

- Iraq balances instead of bidding

  Iraq's system works by brokering among competitors: Washington and Tehran, the main communal leaderships, the factions. That has avoided civil war, but the state rarely makes an offer of its own. The 30 September deadline tried to exploit a shift in the balance without the instruments to follow through. Pressure without an exit gave the factions no reason to accept the state's terms and a reason to unite against them. One of Iraq's problems is too much balance.

  In Iraq, governing has long meant balancing: externally between American and Iranian influence, and internally between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish leaderships. Decisions emerge only after this balancing are duly considered. Often, major crises, such as the latest war or the regional shock that followed 7 October 2023, tip the balance. Interestingly, as one participant argued, most political actors demonstrate good intentions and know the solutions to the country's main challenges; however, they lack a unified decision or effective tools to implement them. As an example, the new Iraqi government tried to use the moment by setting a 30 September deadline for factions to hand over weapons. The deadline passed then reset, and the factions are still largely armed.

- Syria monopolises by decree

  Syria outbids through speed and compulsion: absorb the factions first and build structures later; keep the economy moving and assemble governance along the way. This has delivered real results, including 80–90% of factional integration and about 3 million returns. But compulsion wins compliance, not loyalty. It stalls exactly where a rival can still make a counter-offer. An opaque asset fund and the division of ports and airports among Gulf patrons risk recreating, under new names, the crony networks Syria says it is dismantling. Syria's problem is too little balance.

- Lebanon decides without the means to bid

  For the first time, Lebanon's leadership has declared that Hezbollah may not hold arms. But the state cannot match Hezbollah's social services, cannot adequately fund its army, and cannot remove the main justification for Hezbollah's arms while Israel occupies the south. Lebanon has the will but not the leverage.

- Jordan pays for its neighbours' lost bids.

  Smuggling, refugee hosting and Iran-linked networks reach Jordan because its neighbours are losing their own competitions. Its concern with "contested sovereignty" is, in effect, the external cost of failures elsewhere.

Sovereignty, Borders and International Law

The LIF's founding vision is a region where borders matter less: a space of trade, movement and shared prosperity. This year, participants were equally concerned with borders that are being violated. The two concerns are not in conflict. Borders can only be opened safely by states that are secure in them; a border lowered by consent is the opposite of one erased by force.

Reasserting International Borders

One participant warned that the region risks returning to an era in which states reject borders and occupy territory at will. Syria, Lebanon and Palestine were singled out as vulnerable states. With UNIFIL due to leave Lebanon by the end of 2026, the participant called for the region's think tanks to reaffirm the inviolability of international borders and to raise the issue directly with European counterparts. Respect for international law was framed not only as the right position but as one in the region's own interest. Those who speak openly about violations, the participant noted, increasingly pay a price for doing so.

Security as a Shared Interest

It was argued that the LIF network should treat regional and international security as a common concern, and expand to connect all the countries of the region. Existing Track 2 work on Palestine and Syria already studies how developments in Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank affect Jordan's internal dynamics.

Borders in the Mind

Physical borders are not the only ones that matter. Research shared at the meeting has systematically monitored hate speech between Iraqis and Syrians, and between Jordanians and Syrians. It found the hostility runs both ways, and documented cases quantitatively. It is now analyzing whether these campaigns are spontaneous or organized. The finding matters because hate speech affects official relations, not only public sentiment. A joint initiative with Jordanian partners to address it stalled when the war began.

Intra-Regional Relations: Rapprochements: Fast and Slow

Bilateral relations in the region moved unevenly over the year:

- Iraq–Syria: Oil relations reportedly went "from zero to a hundred" almost overnight after the war, sealed by a public handshake in the weeks before the meeting, following earlier private contacts. Participants cautioned that Iraqi suspicion of Syria predates the fall of the Assad regime. It is rooted in a long history of rivalry between the two states and Syria's role as a transit route for terrorism into Iraq following 2003.
- Syria–Jordan: Described as a "honeymoon", with daily ministerial and institutional contact and active civil-society ties.
- Syria–Lebanon: Relations are stuck, entangled in unresolved border, security and trade questions.

The analytical point

Last year the Forum argued that functional cooperation, such as joint action against Captagon trafficking, could build trust before political settlement. This year's discussion adds a condition. Functional cooperation presumes that each side controls its own side of the border. Where occupation, contested sovereignty or organized incitement undermine that control, cooperation needs a political floor first: shared respect for borders, and active work against the narratives that turn neighbors into enemies.

Corridors, Hubs and the Economics of Stabilisation

Economic corridors returned to the agenda with new momentum. The driver this time is external: Europe, looking for cheaper and more secure sources of energy, goods and services after disruption at Gulf chokepoints, sees the Eastern Mediterranean and its hinterland as the next opportunity. The question for the region is whether it can shape that interest or will simply be shaped by it.

From one corridor to many hubs

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) began as a single route agreed between the United States and India. Regional voices have since argued for several Eastern Mediterranean hubs rather than one, including Syrian and Lebanese ports alongside Israeli ports in future and Egypt's Suez Canal. The organizing principle is resilience through redundancy: alternative routes so that no single disruption can cut the region off. One proposal presented Jordan as the natural first entry point for European engagement, and an initiative paper is to be circulated to members.

Corridors already in motion

LIF members described work already under way:

- A joint Syrian–Lebanese study of a trade corridor between the two countries, focusing on how an economic route can support refugee return and stabilize the Syria–Lebanon file. A first online

workshop has been held; papers are expected, and the project is open to members from other countries.

- Research on a legitimate trade corridor linking Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, conducted with a university partner in the Kurdistan Region.
- Iraq's ambition to serve as a hub linking Turkey to the region, with a possible pipeline to Syria, and Lebanon's ambition to serve as a hub of its own.

The Iraqi picture is mixed. Participants described an economic crisis, compounded by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, but also real room for growth. They also noted broad openness to the region across parliament, political parties, civil society and academia in Baghdad, which creates space for regional projects led from Iraq.



Three tensions the region must manage

- Whose agenda?

  Last year, the Forum concluded that rebuilding must be led from within; external actors can advise but not impose. A corridor agenda set mainly by European energy and investment needs could reverse that. The region's priorities, including reconciliation and governance, should set the terms of external engagement, not follow from it.

- Hubs or rivals?

  Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria each see themselves as a hub. Redundancy is a strength only if it is coordinated. Uncoordinated, the same ambitions become competition for the same investors.

- Who corridors serve?

  Any corridor framework must account for political sensitivities, unequal bargaining power, local market access and community consent. Above all, it must avoid creating transit routes that bypass the places most in need of recovery. Several of the corridor concepts discussed were presented as longer-term visions; their viability, financing and political assumptions require independent assessment before they are treated as plans.

The Forum's 2025 warning still applies: corridors without inclusive governance risk becoming either hollow symbols or new sites of contestation.

What is actually being built

The financing discussion added two concrete elements. A proposed EU–Jordan–IMEC platform would build multi-layered corridors around energy and industry, linking the Levant and Iraq to the Gulf and then to Europe. Meanwhile, a Saudi–Jordanian–Syrian fiber-optic data link of about 4,500 km and roughly $1 billion is already under way, with the potential to connect Iraq and Turkey. It sits alongside the Hejaz Railway and Turkey's Development Road. The contrast is telling. The corridors discussed in European capitals remain plans, while the first operational link is digital and financed from the Gulf. Connectivity may arrive through data and Gulf capital before trade and European investment.



The Non-State Actor Challenge in the Levant

Who Speaks for the State?

What does it actually mean for a state to exercise authority over armed groups? Three cases, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and the view from Jordan produced a sharper answer than the question invited. Formal integration into state institutions does not by itself bring armed groups under state control. Control depends on whether the state can offer what the armed group offered: security, income, services and representation.

In October 2025, the Forum suggested the region might be entering a "post-non-state actor" phase, in which armed groups were retreating rather than collapsing. It warned that such windows could close quickly. The 2026 meeting suggests the window was real but used very differently in each country.

Syria moved fastest and furthest. Iraq tried and stalled. In Lebanon, Israeli occupation of southern territory has narrowed the window to what one participant called a "small space" with modest effect. The re-emergence of armed militants, including the incident in Hasakah days before the meeting, showed that the underlying conditions remain.

Iraq: three words for one demand

Iraq's 30 September deadline produced only half of what it promised. The government had linked two outcomes: factions would hand over their weapons, and US and coalition forces would withdraw. The Iraqi army is strong on the ground, but still depends on international support for technology and intelligence, while ISIS and other extremist groups remain active.

The deadline also exposed a problem of language. Three different demands are in circulation:

- Disarmament: the full removal of factional weapons. This is the US demand, and participants judged it beyond Baghdad's current capacity.
- Confining arms to the state: the position of the Marjaiya in Najaf, of several Shia political forces, and of Kurdish and moderate Sunni leaderships.
- Regulating or freezing arms: the formula adopted by factions that have entered political life and say they are cooperating.

The Iraqi government is caught between these demands. Even the cooperating factions do not speak for the whole armed landscape; others reject any discussion of their weapons.

The central diagnosis was that Baghdad applied the stick without the carrot. A participant contrasted Iraq with Spain, where the state pressed ETA hard while also opening a route into political life; ETA gave up its arms in 2017. In Iraq, the pressure came without an exit. The result was that factions began to coordinate a united position against the government. A direct confrontation would be extremely costly and could slide into prolonged civil conflict.

Participants also pointed to Iraq's assets. Washington has so far declined to treat Iraq as a hostile state despite attacks on US interests, recognizing that the factions do not represent the country.

An intervention from the floor drew the wider lesson from Iraq's post-2003 experience. Several factions were integrated into state structures then, but the problem returned, larger, at the first security setback. Integration needs social, cultural and above all economic foundations. As long as an armed group pays a young man more than the state does, he will join it.

Syria: integration by decree and by negotiation

Syria offered two models, side by side, and the contrast between them was one of the most useful findings of the meeting.

- The decree model

  The government did not wait for institutions, laws or trust. Integration of former opposition factions into the national army was made mandatory from day one, and proceeded in stages: nominal merger, sorting, retraining, redeployment and finally dismantling of the old structures. By this account, the process is 80–90% complete. The logic is a snowball: build a critical mass loyal to the state, then grow it until it can protect the political project.

- The negotiated model

  The integration of the SDF has taken a different path. It needed steps forward and back from all sides to build a minimum of trust, and that trust is not yet complete. Military integration has gone well and is in its final stages. But the administrative side is lagging. Problems remain over appointments, including in ministries in Damascus. Points agreed on have not all been implemented. Official recognition of Kurdish-language education remains incomplete, and internal security arrangements are unresolved.

The biggest obstacle, in this integration, is the absence of a permanent constitution that guarantees all communities. Without it, every step depends on goodwill. The tension in Hasakah in the days before the meeting was attributed to online incitement demanding that the state "impose its sovereignty" on a province already run by its own Kurdish and Arab citizens. People take up arms when they do not feel safe; a constitution that protects everyone equally removes that need.

A second participant framed the risk as the difference between integration and absorption, that is integration that turns into assimilation, exclusion or elimination. Syria and Iraq collapsed because their regimes denied the existence of their peoples and communities. Repeating that model would produce the same result. The participant warned that integration which began by decree could end by decree in a single day, unless it is anchored in democratic institutions. They called on the guarantor states such as France, the UK, the US, and Turkey in its own role, to stay engaged, and pointed to the agreed provision on local administration as the legal basis to build on.

What the Contrast Shows

The decree model challenges the common assumption that trust must come before integration. It worked, fast, where factions lacked a separate territorial base and an organised political constituency. The SDF case shows its limits. Where an armed actor governs territory and represents a community with historical grievances against the state, integration needs legal guarantees that decree cannot supply. Syria's emerging approach is therefore a hybrid: top-down where possible, negotiated where necessary. Whether the hybrid holds will depend on the constitution.

Taken together, the Syrian discussion suggested that durable integration must solve both sides of the problem at once. The state needs effective and accountable command over security forces; citizens and communities need confidence that those forces will not be used against their rights. Decades of coercive rule have made fear of the state a political fact in its own right, so rebuilding authority must be visibly distinguished from rebuilding the institutions communities once feared. Participants gave differing assessments of how far military integration has progressed and how serious the remaining administrative and educational obstacles are.

Lebanon: a decision without the means

Lebanon's case turned on what has changed and what has not. The Taif Agreement disarmed the civil-war militias but exempted Hezbollah and some Palestinian factions. The justification was Israel's military presence in the south; the enabler was Iranian and Syrian support.

Four changes have been identified since then:

1. Lebanon's president and prime minister have taken a clear position that Hezbollah is a political party that may no longer hold arms.
2. The fall of the Assad regime cut the main supply line for Hezbollah's weapons.
3. The war involving the US, Iran and Israel may lead Iran to reposition Hezbollah.
4. Israeli strikes have weakened Hezbollah, killing first-tier leaders and destroying communities in the south.

But two constraints still block disarmament. First, Iran regards Hezbollah as its "ace card" and will not give it up easily while it faces threats from Israel and the US. Second, participants reported that Israel has reoccupied the "yellow line" in southern Lebanon and razed around 63 localities, including towns of over 30,000 people. Roughly 400,000 Lebanese cannot return home. Christian villages near the border have become almost cut off from the rest of the country.

The US–Iran situation may open a small space, but its effect is likely to be modest. Progress would need an internal agreement between the government and Hezbollah, negotiations with Iran, and a clear timetable for Israeli withdrawal. Above all, the state must be able to fill the economic and social vacuum - schools, healthcare and services - that Hezbollah would leave. The Lebanese Armed Forces remain weak and underfunded, and US caution about strengthening any force that could threaten Israel limits support.

The Lebanese case exposed a dilemma common to all three countries: a state cannot consolidate legitimate authority simply by removing one security provider. It must first create confidence in the institutions that will take over. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's parallel military authority and continued Israeli military activity in the south both constrain Lebanese sovereignty, and tie Lebanon's population to a wider regional confrontation. The meeting did not resolve this tension, but it clarified why sequencing, guarantees and regional diplomacy matter.

Jordan: the cost of sovereignty contested next door

Jordan does not have an armed-group problem of its own, but "it pays for its neighbors"'. One participant framed this as a problem of contested sovereignty at three levels:

- Territorial sovereignty: the state's ability to control its borders and stop its territory being used by armed groups, criminal networks or foreign actors.
- Political sovereignty: the ability of national institutions to decide free of external coercion or competing internal power centers.
- Strategic sovereignty: the ability to set security, economic and diplomatic priorities without becoming hostage to regional and great-power rivalries.

When neighbors lose these, stable states bear the costs. For Jordan, those costs fall in four areas: border security, now a matter of managing smuggling, drugs, weapons and armed groups exploiting weakly governed areas; the unresolved Palestinian question, including fears of forced displacement and changes to the status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem; refugee hosting that outstrips Jordan's fiscal capacity and the international support it receives; and pressures on the economy, energy and water. The Iran war adds direct exposure through possible strikes on bases inside Jordan, Iranian-aligned networks, smuggling, sleeper cells, and disruption to tourism, trade and supply chains.



The proposed response is to move from managing the consequences of crises to a pre-emptive policy that links national and regional security, using preventive diplomacy, economic cooperation and international burden-sharing. Jordan's stated position on Palestine remains a two-state solution.

The sequencing debate, and what it missed

The panel was asked whether disarmament should come before inclusion, or the two proceed in parallel. Evidence suggests sequences fail or succeed for reasons other than their order:

- Iraq's 'pressure-first' approach failed because it offered no exit.
- Syria's decree-first approach succeeded with factions that had no independent constituency, but not with the SDF.
- Lebanon cannot sequence at all while an external occupation gives the armed group its justification.

It appears that every armed group in the region is a product of the region's own experience. Iraqis armed themselves against Saddam Hussein's state; Syrians, Kurds and Arabs alike, armed themselves against the Baath security state rather than a foreign enemy. The task in Syria is thought to be to rebuild the state on the basis of justice; otherwise, the region will build, once again, a state its people fear. The argument fits the Syrian case closely. It fits Iraq's factions, many of which operate within the state, and Hezbollah, whose arms were justified against Israel, less well.

The same sequencing dilemma returned in the discussion of reconstruction finance: build governance first, or keep the economy moving and build as you go. Syria gave the same answer to both questions.



Reconstruction & Recovery

Reconstruction Is Not Recovery

Recovery should be measured by who returns and stays, whether they have stable work, and whether they trust their neighbors and the future, not by buildings completed or restrictions removed.

The question is one of model, not money: Who sets the priorities? Who decides where investment goes? What governance regulates the process? And how can reconstruction avoid becoming a tool for reproducing inequality and entrenching political influence, rather than a path to stability? Should national reconstruction proceed in parallel with regional linkage at functional, economic, societal and political-security levels?

Syria: the door is open, but no one has entered

Lifting sanctions in Syria has opened doors that people have not yet walked through. Syria is seen as entering a new phase, with about 99% of sanctions lifted and diplomatic relations restored with many countries. But lifting restrictions is permission to begin, not recovery itself.

Recovery was described as requiring recognition at three levels:

- Diplomatic recognition, now well advanced: more than 60 states engage with Damascus and have reopened embassies or consulates.
- Financial recognition and trust, which is only beginning.
- Internal legitimacy, the trust between Syrians themselves, which is also only beginning.

The harder task is building the institutions of a new political economy without rebuilding the old networks. Syria is laying the building blocks: ministries of finance and education are being cleaned up, a technology working group has been announced, and an investment authority and a border-crossings and customs authority have been created. Drawing on its neighbors' experience, the government decided from day one to place all assets returned to the state in a single fund, managed by a designated committee. Its procedures were described as clear to those inside it but opaque to those outside.

Capital is arriving in three forms, with very different effects:

- Real estate: fast, but with little real social impact.
- Strategic infrastructure: above all a fiber-optic data link of about 4,500 km, running from Saudi Arabia through Jordan and Syria to the Mediterranean and beyond. It could connect Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and the wider region, and serve Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 as well as Syria. The Hejaz Railway and Turkey's Development Road were cited as related projects.
- Agriculture: large Gulf investments in food security, which will take years to bear fruit.

The constraints are severe. By this account, Syria is more than 30 years behind its neighbors on every indicator. It lacks reliable data and has no state-level early-recovery plan. Above all, it has no functioning banking system, so it cannot join the international anti-money-laundering framework. The World Bank has estimated reconstruction costs at $216 billion, yet its grant to Syria's central bank for governance and restructuring was $100 million. The EU has begun a strategic partnership with Syria, but its funding is likely to be slow.

Syria's bet, therefore, is on early recovery without loans that carry political conditions. Its attitude to conditional borrowing has moved from rejection to caution. Investment so far comes mainly from risk-tolerant investors in an unpredictable legal environment: diaspora Syrians, including through Syrian-American business networks, and Syrians who hold Saudi or Emirati citizenship. This lowers political conditionality. So does a division of strategic assets in which external investors do not yet compete: the UAE in logistics and ports, including Tartus; Saudi Arabia at Aleppo airport; and Qatar at Damascus airport.

Returns are the strongest indicator of progress. About 3 million refugees and displaced people have returned home in under two years, according to UNHCR figures cited at the meeting. Afrin was described as a full return. The population of Idlib's camps has fallen from 1.8 million to about 700,000.

A question from the floor asked whether the countries investing in Syria attach conditions, and whether a form of muhasasa — quota-sharing — is emerging. The answer reframed it as a choice between two philosophies: build a governance system while the economy keeps moving, or halt economic life for two years to build governance first. Syria has chosen the former.

Iraq's Nineveh: rebuilt cities, limited return

An intervention based on recent fieldwork in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains introduced the idea of the empty city. Material recovery has been relative but real; human recovery has not. People have come back, but the cities remain empty. Three vacuums explain why:

- Demographic: more than a decade after the genocide, about 200,000 Yazidis have not returned. Many families have not returned to Mosul or the Nineveh Plains either.
- Economic: people return to places without jobs, in the Nineveh Plains as in Sinjar. Where jobs exist, they are often temporary and tied to the presence of international organisations.
- Social: trust has declined, and the link between generations has broken.

The participant described a form of moral displacement that outlasts physical return. A family may come back to its house and find the neighbourhood gone. It may find the neighbours, but no longer trust them. Beyond this lies an existential anxiety, a loss of faith in the future. A whole community now lives abroad, cut off from the one at home. Recovery means rebuilding the relationship between generations, not only ending displacement. Mosul, by this account, has been rebuilt as buildings, not as a city. Return is not going back to a house but recovering dignity and trust in the future. Survivors must therefore be partners in recovery, not recipients of it.

Sinjar is often portrayed as a Yazidi issue, but the participant described it as a question of relations, and lost trust, among all its communities. Justice was presented in three forms:

- Criminal justice, complicated by the legal treatment of ISIS fighters as terrorists rather than as perpetrators of genocide.
- Reparative justice, because the whole community needs compensation.
- Preventive justice, the most important: guarantees that genocide will not happen again.

There were grounds for cautious optimism. The current government has signaled interest in development as a route to resolving Sinjar, and Turkish, regional and international interests now converge on it. The Nineveh Plains were described as a laboratory of pluralism, but one marked by continuing emigration, weak return and demographic change.

The proposed shift is to turn these areas from zones of competition into zones of integration. Sinjar lies about 50 km from the Turkey–Syria–Iraq border triangle; the Nineveh Plains are a short distance from Mosul, Dohuk and Kirkuk. Both could be linked, with Mosul, into the regional economic connections discussed elsewhere in this report. The financing proposal was specific: a diaspora investment fund for return, drawing on an estimated 140,000 Yazidis in Germany, 180,000 Chaldeans in Michigan and thousands of Assyrians elsewhere.



Thinking for the State:
Think Tanks, Civil Society and Decision-Making

The bottleneck in the region is not the supply of policy analysis but the state's capacity to absorb it. That was the clearest message of the morning session with officials responsible for civil-society affairs in Baghdad and Erbil. Research institutions across the region produce more, and often better, analysis than governments can use.

Iraq: support without a framework

The Kurdistan Region's civil society began after 1991, earlier than the rest of Iraq, hence it is relatively more developed. Around 6,000 NGOs have been registered in the Kurdistan Region since 2013, compared with roughly 7,000 in the rest of Iraq, along with about 900 international NGOs, of which more than 400 are active. A much smaller share of local NGOs is active.

Registration rules were described as safeguards rather than obstacles: they aim to prevent money laundering, the financing of terrorist groups and activities seen as threatening communities' cultural and religious values. Funding remains the core challenge, worsened by the economic situation in both Baghdad and Erbil.

Under the former regime, nothing that could be called civil society existed outside the Iraqi state control. The transition to political pluralism in 2003 produced a wave of civil-society organizations, of which think tanks are among the most prominent. Their legal basis is the Iraqi NGO Law No. 12 of 2010, grounded in a constitutional commitment to support civil society.

Successive governments have maintained that they value think tanks as strategic tools for decision-making. But the relationship remains uninstitutionalized. Ministries and advisers draw on think-tank research without any formal framework governing how. Participants reported several steps now under way:

- A distinct status

  Iraqi law does not currently distinguish think tanks from other NGOs. The law itself cannot be changed soon, but approval has been obtained to amend its executive regulations and guidelines so that research institutions have a distinct status.

- Direct engagement

  Policy- and decision-makers engage directly with policy institutes and think tanks

- The funding challenge

  Government funding for civil society has been almost non-existent. With public finances under strain, Baghdad is now looking at funding from successful self-financed institutions, notably private universities, which might contribute 1–2% of their profits to a central fund. Allocation would follow criteria of available expertise and demonstrable impact. Support was due to begin in the week after the meeting. Also, Iraq's Communications and Media Commission is already required by law to

allocate a share of its revenues to media and research institutions, an existing mechanism that could be used. In this context, two complications were raised. Private universities may prefer to set up in-house research centers to keep the money internal rather than pay into a common fund. And NGOs that see think tanks receiving support they do not, may resent it.

- Local expertise

  Some Iraqi institutions rely on international consultancies or donations. Officials expressed a preference for building and using Iraqi expertise, which exists.

State-Think Tank Relationship: Four Regional Models

The discussion revealed four models of the relationship between research institutions and the state.

1. The party bureau as think tank

   In the region's political tradition, a party's political bureau has been the brain of the system. It does the thinking and planning, but not on the basis of gathered evidence or rigorous study. Governments in both Baghdad and Erbil long assumed that think-tank funding would come from abroad, and created no domestic mechanism for it. That assumption is only now beginning to change.

2. The institutionalized model

   Jordan offered the most developed alternative, with three channels. A) national research-support fund, located within the higher-education system and reporting to the prime minister's office, financed by 2% of all universities' profits. B) research centers attached to state institutions, funded by law. C) Humanitarian and social NGOs, which rely on external funding.

3. The externally sustained model: Lebanon.

   Lebanese civil society dates back to 1909. It was badly damaged during the civil war of 1975–90 and revived afterwards. The problem now is not hostility to civil society but its weakness after successive shocks. Lebanon offers no tax exemptions for donors to civil society, which discourages domestic giving and in effect taxes donations twice.

4. Syria's emerging model

   In Syria, research has been neglected under pressure from political authorities of every kind. Yet cross-line cooperation persisted even in the worst conditions; humanitarian aid moved from Qamishli to areas struck by the 2023 earthquake. Interestingly, civil society in Syria has outgrown traditional state control. It now has larger and more skilled human resources than many government institutions, and holds information and analytical capacity that governments preoccupied with daily crises cannot match. The gap between civil society and government is the problem. If the government does not fill it, international actors will.

Potential Funding Partners for the Civil Society?

Regional businesses, diaspora networks and Gulf-based actors were identified as potential partners, with the caution that private finance brings its own preferences and incentives. No single financing instrument emerged as an agreed solution. Instead, the discussion pointed to criteria any future mechanism should meet: transparency, productive investment, risk-sharing, local ownership and measurable return. A diaspora investment mechanism, for example, would need careful attention to representation, fiduciary safeguards and the priorities of current residents as well as displaced communities.

The LIF's contribution, in this view, lies in producing credible evidence on local needs, assessing funding mechanisms and connecting researchers, communities and potential investors, without positioning itself as an investment authority.

Companies from Iraq and the wider Middle East increasingly fund think tanks in Washington, hoping to influence US policy, while the region's own research institutions go unfunded. Pressing these companies, and Gulf governments, to invest in regional civil society would help close the funding gap, since early warning and evidence serve governments as much as civil society. A proposed survey of how civil society has adapted to the loss of external funding, and what its priorities should be if funding returns, would make a natural joint LIF study.

Distrust, independence and tools

Governments and security services across the Middle East do not easily trust NGOs, based on a generalization that is considered a great mistake. Think tanks funded by foreign donors are suspected of serving foreign agendas; and those funded by the state may come to serve the governments. Ironically, such domestic state funding solves one dependency by creating another. Transparent allocation criteria, independent oversight and a mix of funding sources, state, private sector and international, offer the best protection.

A sustainable funding architecture would therefore need open eligibility rules, peer review, public reporting, conflict-of-interest safeguards and a clear separation between financial contributions and influence over conclusions. These safeguards were not set out in detail at the meeting, but they follow from the network's stated commitment to professional integrity and evidence-based research.

Comparative experience also points to a distinction worth preserving: funding charitable service delivery is a different task from funding research that informs public policy, and the two should not compete for the same mechanisms.

A further gap is methodological. The region's think tanks lack shared scientific tools for analysis, monitoring and foresight. The LIF can help close this gap through joint work and exchange.

From Dialogue to Collective Action: The LIF's Next Phase

The LIF was launched at the MERI Forum in 2024 and has organized three additional meetings so far. Its founding idea was that the Levant and Iraq share so much diversity, history, trade, and borders that their think tanks should lead the thinking on long-term integration, rather than wait for it to happen. If things are left to nature, not much will happen. Leading means initiating.

The network has already produced a number of visible and less visible outcomes. Operationally, the LIF has allowed partners to really get to know each other through work. Members reported that the LIF has introduced institutions that had never met. Their relationships have crossed national and institutional boundaries, connecting organizations with shared concerns but few existing channels for cooperation. Syrian members stressed that, for institutions emerging from years of isolation, contact with regional peers is itself a significant step.

Syrian and Lebanese members, for example, now run a joint corridor project, and members described the Forum as having widened and deepened their contacts. There are emerging cooperations with an academic institution in Sulaymaniyah on Lebanon–Syria–Iraq trade connectivity, and to links with the American University of Beirut. These are research activities, ongoing or prospective, not infrastructure projects. Members saw renewed Syria–Jordan institutional contact and evolving Syria–Iraq economic relations as openings for cooperation, while noting that borders, security concerns and political distrust continue to obstruct engagement, especially between Syria and Lebanon.

The Challenge of Continuity

A recurring assessment was that personal connections and occasional conferences need structured follow-through. The LIF is a light network in which institutions keep their autonomy, initiate joint projects and, where appropriate, allocate limited staff time or project resources to coordination. Members favored a predictable calendar over a rigid institutional hierarchy. Members can draw other credible research institutions in their own countries into the network, enlarging it without requiring every organization to attend every meeting.

The Constraint

The planned 2026 spring meeting in Lebanon could not take place because of the conflict, and conditions in southern Lebanon remain untenable. Rotation, which is central to the network's regional character, depends on security the network does not control.

A proposed three-track framework

The meeting identified economic corridors, borders, social cohesion, inclusion and security as possible joint priorities, and stressed territorial integrity and international law. Economic cooperation was seen as a potential incentive for rapprochement, but not a substitute for legitimate governance or reconciliation. A written contribution received after the meeting proposed organising these priorities into three parallel and complementary tracks. The framework is offered for members to discuss in the future.

- Conflict resolution and political dialogue

  Joint research and policy exchange to find common ground for just and sustainable solutions, respecting the rights of peoples, state sovereignty, non-interference and independent national decision-making. The Forum would use its cross-border networks to set out options and engage decision-makers.

- Social peace and reconciliation.

  Broad, trusted dialogue among political, social, economic and cultural constituencies to address polarisation. Credible participation rules and practical follow-up would be needed if dialogue is to lead to reconciliation rather than remain a one-off event.

- Economic development and regional integration

  Research on infrastructure investment, investment guarantees and risk-sharing, alongside opportunities in tourism, agriculture, trade, industry and services. The aim would be to identify productive, employment-generating projects and partnerships. Transparency, productive investment, risk-sharing, local ownership and measurable return must be carefully addressed.

The three tracks are interdependent but should not be collapsed into one. Political dialogue can lower barriers to cooperation, reconciliation can make agreements socially sustainable, and viable economic projects can offer incentives for peace.

Finally, members will need to choose a limited number of realistic deliverables matched to their capacities.



Final Words

The second-anniversary meeting reaffirmed the LIF's ambition to help the Levant and Iraq move beyond recurrent conflict toward practical cooperation.

- Regional connectivity can support recovery only if it is governed transparently and reaches the places most in need, rather than becoming a new site of exclusion, patronage or competition among external patrons.
- Institutional cooperation can generate useful regional research and dialogue, but only with simple coordination arrangements and sustained, independent financing. The region's research institutions are better at producing analysis than its governments are at absorbing it.

The Forum hopes for the region that rest heavily on outsiders, should show that the region's own institutions can set the terms of their internal engagement. The immediate step is to choose a manageable number of joint outputs and agree how to coordinate them without compromising members' independence. A light institutional framework, measurable joint work and rigorous scrutiny of regional financing proposals would turn a shared vision of integration into credible, inclusive and evidence-based steps: from dialogue to collective action.



The Levant and Iraq Forum's Second Anniversary Meeting.
11 October 2026

Meeting Participants

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen	Middle East Research Institute	Iraq
Fuad Smail	Middle East Research Institute	Iraq
Khogir Wirya	Middle East Research Institute	Iraq
Saad Salloum	Masarat Foundation; Al-Mustansiriya University	Iraq
Mohammed Eliwa	Ishtar Center for Democracy Support	Iraq
Kais Al Khatib	Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan	Jordan
Rasha Fityan	Politics and Society Institute	Jordan
Said Al Masri	Board Member, Arab Thought Forum	Jordan
Yara Alzubi	Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung	Jordan
Makram Ouaiss	Lebanese Center for Policy Studies	Lebanon
Omer Shaaban	Pal-Think for Strategic Studies	Palestine*
Ammar Kahf	Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Syria	Syria
Nasser Haj Mansour	Syrian Center for Studies and Dialogue	Syria
Sherwan Yousef	De-Facto Dialogue Program, Syria	Syria
Suzan Alloush	De Facto Platform	Syria

Guest Speakers:

Ashraf Al Dahan	Non-Governmental Organisations Department, Baghdad	Iraq
Falah Hassan	Non-Governmental Organisations Department, KRG	Iraq

** Could not take part in the proceedings.*

The State and its Competitors in the Levant and Iraq

Levant and Iraq Forum's Second Anniversary Meeting.

Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
11 October 2026

Organisers

Middle East Research Institute

Middle East
Research Institute

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
(Jordan)

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ADENAUER
STIFTUNG

The State and its Competitors in the Levant and Iraq



THE LEVANT & IRAQ FORUM

A growing network of regional think tanks created to provide a much-needed platform for engagement among researchers, policymakers, civil society leaders, and international partners

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info@meri-k.org
WWW.MERI-K.ORG
x.com/meri_info | facebook.com/meri_info
Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq