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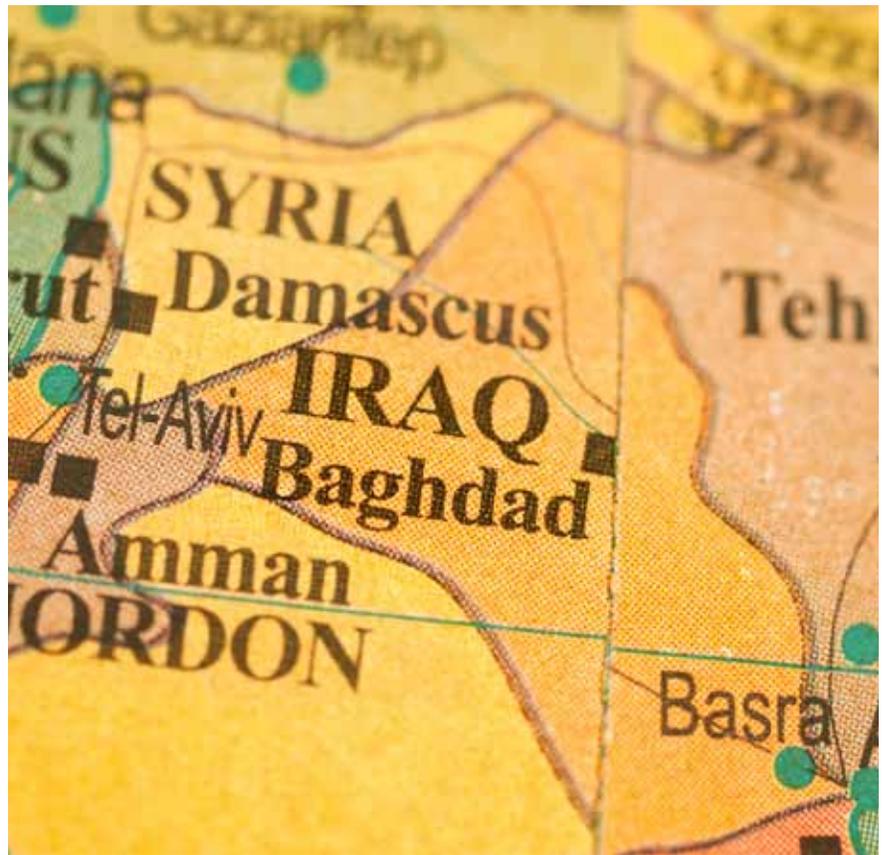
Middle East Institute

National Reconciliation and Negotiation: The Path Forward in Iraq and Syria

Initiative for Track II Dialogues, Middle East Institute, Co-sponsored
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Conference Report

As lines across the Middle East continue to be redrawn, a group of national security professionals and regional experts recently gathered to discuss national reconciliation in Iraq and Syria. “This is both the best and worst time to attempt reconciliation,” said Senior National Security Fellow at New America Douglas Ollivant, highlighting the necessity and extreme difficulty of confronting the issue amid escalating violence.

Ollivant, the former director for Iraq at the National Security Council under both Presidents George W. Bush and Obama, moderated the first panel of a conference held by the Middle East Institute, the Johns Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and New America. In the first session, which explored national reconciliation in Iraq, Ollivant was joined by Harith al-Qarawee of Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute; SAIS Senior Policy Fellow Abbas Kadhim; Director of the Initiative for Track II Dialogues at the Middle East Institute Randa Slim; and Bilal Wahab of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani. Although panelists brought different experiences and insights to the issue, the conversation consistently returned to several key themes.

“You are not reconciling if positions you give in Bagdad do not translate into better performance and better service delivery.”

Abbas Kadhim, Senior Policy Fellow, SAIS

The Challenges to Iraq’s Reconciliation

To begin, the internal divisions Iraq faces today are not new, nor are reconciliation efforts. Prior to 2003, the Iraqi government was highly centralized and controlled by Sunnis. The Saddam Hussein regime faced three main threats: foreign invasion, Kurdish separatists and proxies, and Iran-controlled Shi’ite Islamists. Following the collapse of the regime, however, Iraq’s internal political landscape changed dramatically. Sunnis lost control of the state and quickly became alienated, Kurdish institutions and aspirations for independence were suddenly strengthened, and the previously oppressed Shia gained control of the government. Since 2003, there have been three national reconciliation efforts aimed at integrating Iraq’s major groups and ensuring the sustainability of the state. Each of these initiatives was led by a different party applying a different approach, and each attempt failed. As several panelists noted, there are two main reasons for the repeated failure.

First, each national reconciliation effort lacked a mediator who had moral and political credentials and commanded the respect of all parties. With the possible exception of Egypt, which retains its status as a regional leader, all potential mediators—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United States, and the Arab League—are polarizing to one of Iraq’s major political groups. One of the key sticking points requiring mediation is the issue of power sharing within the Iraqi government. According to Kadhim, reconciliation has thus far been viewed in terms of how many government positions go to how many people in each community. This is “a quota system, not real reconciliation,” he noted.

Second, each reconciliation effort failed to properly address the competing post-Saddam narratives of the Sunni, Shi’ite, and Kurdish communities. Most important, the perspectives of Kurds and Shi’a, who endured decades of repression, differ markedly from that of the Sunnis. Reconciling these competing narratives such that all sides feel that their grievances have been addressed remains the principal long-term challenge in Iraq. The chaotic political environment stemming from a lack of national reconciliation permitted the rise of ISIS and other extremists groups purporting to recover lost Sunni political power. The initial evaporation of the Iraqi military in the face of ISIS, coupled with the expansion of the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces into areas such as Kirkuk, has magnified Kurdish desire for independence. Shi’ite militias, instrumental in containing ISIS, will undoubtedly form political agendas, further complicating the political landscape.

In the context of this current fragmentation, panelists agreed, it is more important than ever that Shi’a, Sunnis, and Kurds locate their common interests. The alternative, a weak, divided Iraq in which violent extremist groups periodically emerge, is undesirable for all parties. Slim quoted a

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Randa Slim, Director of the Initiative for Track II Dialogues, Middle East Institute

senior Iraqi official, who said, “We can defeat ISIS militarily now, but without national reconciliation we are not sure we can prevent it from returning again.”

Prospects for Political Negotiations in Syria

The conference’s second panel examined the prospects for political negotiations in Syria. The speakers were former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute Robert Ford; Senior Program Officer at the United States Institute of Peace Hind Kabawat; Senior Analyst at the Congressional Research Service Kenneth Katzman; and Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress Suat Kiniklioglu. Vice President for Policy and Research at the Middle East Institute Paul Salem moderated the panel.

Panelists began by discussing the difficulty of achieving a cease-fire in Syria, whether at the local, regional, or national level. Specifically, any cease-fire must contend with the profoundly divergent political objectives held by a wide array of Syrian and international actors.

Within Syria, local dynamics tend to determine the likelihood of a limited cease-fire. “In one area, there is a truce, but why? Because [the area] is close to the military hospital and [Bashar al-Assad’s forces]...can’t get access [otherwise],” noted Kabawat, speaking on the bottom-up pressures to halt the fighting. Indeed, several of the local truces between the regime and opposition forces are not the result of a political solution but rather of logistical constraints. But truces lacking a strong political foundation are unsustainable and often result in more deaths when they collapse.

The continued failure to reach a viable cease-fire has regional and international implications, said Kabawat. First, the longer Assad stays in power, the greater the incentive for people to join extremist opposition groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Second, Assad’s ability to remain in power signals to dictators around the world that if people rise and demand democracy, they and their aspirations can be crushed with violence.

Assad’s role in postconflict Syria lies at the core of any cease-fire talks. Opposition leaders have recently expressed willingness to discuss the details of a transitional government without assurances that Assad will be removed. “The American government thought that was very progressive,” said Ford, who took part in these negotiations in Geneva. Despite this important shift by the Syrian opposition, however, the Assad regime continues to refuse to discuss changes to the government, at any level.

The Assad regime’s lack of interest in cease-fire talks is largely a result of the continued support it receives from Russia and Iran. Both countries have put forward their own plans for ending the Syrian conflict. “It

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Kenneth Katzman,
Senior Analyst, Congressional
Research Service

is not the same as the Geneva process, when many Americans and Russians tried to come together to chart a way forward,” noted Ford. “This is very different.” Neither Russia nor Iran has placed significant pressure on Assad to negotiate. As Katzman—speaking only on his own behalf—noted, Iran in particular has adopted a very formulaic Syria policy, as if pulling it out of a regional political playbook. Specifically, he said, offering the Iranian perspective, “When a pro-Iranian regime or group is threatened, you immediately flood weapons to that group. You send the Revolutionary Guards to advise...you do not compromise, you do not talk about compromise, you do not show weakness.” Not all regional actors have involved themselves so centrally in the conflict or its negotiation talks. Neighbors such as Turkey, which shares a 900-kilometer border with Syria and holds 1.5 million refugees, are primarily concerned with resolving the massive Syrian refugee problem.

Although Assad continues to enjoy strong Russian and Iranian support, the domestic and international political landscapes are changing. First, as Ford explained, the regime suffers from a manpower shortage. Perhaps even more important, protests have recently begun within the Alawite community, which has endured significant casualties and is genuinely afraid of the jihadis. Meanwhile, Iran—already weakened by economic sanctions that limit its oil exports—risks overextending as it struggles to prop up the Assad regime while also supporting Shi‘ite forces in Iraq and Syria. Finally, it is becoming logistically more difficult for Iran to support Assad due to ISIS’s positions in Syria and Iraq and American jets flying over Iraq. If these pressures continue to mount, they could encourage a change in the Syrian regime’s approach to cease-fire negotiations.

Keynote Speaker: Matthew Spence

Following the two panels, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy Matthew Spence delivered the conference’s keynote speech, in which he outlined the U.S. Defense Department’s approach to the fight against ISIS.

Spence was quick to point out that the United States cannot rely solely on its military power to defeat ISIS, because ISIS is not just a military entity. In the territory under its control, the group recruits teachers, accountants, and lawyers to bolster its efforts at state-building. To counter ISIS’s state-building initiatives, the United States is working to cut off its finances, stop the inflow of foreign fighters, and counter the group’s propaganda campaign.

In designing a military response, the Department of Defense and its coalition partners have made it their objective to deny ISIS’s forces space in which to operate. Fourteen other countries have joined the U.S.-led

airstrikes in Iraq, Spence noted. The strikes are targeting ISIS revenue sources, supply lines, logistical networks, and leadership. Coupled with peshmerga and Iraqi ground troop offensives, the air campaign is proving effective, forcing ISIS to maneuver in smaller groups and hide its larger weapons. Under sustained pressure, the group has been forced to change the way it communicates internally, and it is gradually losing territory.

In Iraq, the United States has seen progress in several areas that are key for countering ISIS. First, under the new leadership of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the country is witnessing a level of political inclusion that remained elusive under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Abadi is embracing all Iraqi groups and has placed Sunnis in political positions of real influence, including minister of defense. Abadi has also reached a hydrocarbon-sharing agreement with the Kurds, and his effective leadership thus far bodes well for the stability of Iraq. Second, the capabilities of the peshmerga and Iraqi ground troops are improving. Working with its coalition of fourteen nations, the United States is training and equipping nine Iraqi and three peshmerga brigades. These forces will be a professional army fighting for all of Iraq, with lower levels of corruption than before, said Spence.

In Syria, the United States and its coalition partners are working to both defeat ISIS and ensure that the next Syrian government does not include Assad, who, after three years of civil war, has lost legitimacy. However, the Syrian conflict is politically very different from Iraq's. As a result, the United States does not enjoy the cooperation with coalition partners that it does in Iraq. Nevertheless, as in Iraq, coalition strikes against ISIS in Syria have limited its forces' mobility and restricted its revenue streams by targeting oil fields under its control.

Difficult challenges remain, but according to Spence, the situation in Syria is much more promising than it was previously. With U.S. support, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar are training vetted, moderate Syrian opposition forces. The training includes sessions on human rights and focuses on providing opposition fighters with the skills and equipment necessary to defend themselves against both the Assad regime and ISIS. Future trainings will improve the forces' offensive capabilities, said Spence, but the current goal is to ensure that opposition forces are not placed in a position where they must turn to either the regime or ISIS for protection from the other.

Due to the U.S.-led coalition's response in Iraq and Syria, there is no longer a sense that the United States is disengaged from the Middle East, Spence concluded. In addition to leading these efforts, the United States continues to participate in nuclear negotiations with Iran. However, only an unwavering commitment to stabilizing the region, including a willingness to devote enormous resources, will ensure the success of the current U.S. strategy.

SAIS is one of the world's leading graduate schools devoted to the study of international relations. The Washington, DC, campus is located on Massachusetts Avenue in the city's Dupont Circle neighborhood and enrolls approximately 640 full-time graduate students and midcareer professionals. SAIS has trained more than 16,000 alumni in all aspects of international affairs. The school also has campuses in Bologna, Italy, and Nanjing, China. During the graduation ceremony, SAIS will confer graduate degrees upon approximately 390 students.

Founded in 1946, the Middle East Institute is the oldest Washington-based institution dedicated solely to the study of the Middle East. Its founders, scholar George Camp Keiser and former U.S. Secretary of State Christian Herter, laid out a simple mandate: "to increase knowledge of the Middle East among the citizens of the United States and to promote a better understanding between the people of these two areas."

MEI has earned a reputation as an unbiased source of information and analysis on this critical region of the world, a reputation it has meticulously safeguarded since its creation. Today, MEI remains a respected, nonpartisan voice in the field of Middle East studies.

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