



**Middle East Dialogue  
Malta, May 12-13, 2017  
Summary Report**

The Middle East Dialogue, a regional Track 1.5 group in which officials and non-officials from the region and beyond meet to discuss current issues in their personal capacities, met May 12-13 in Malta. Following is a report of the discussions.

**Executive Summary**

While the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen are unquestionably linked in many ways and reflect common regional and even global geopolitical competitions, each has its own peculiarities. Dealing with them all together would be unwise. The regional and global powers involved need to understand the different circumstances and dynamics in each country and try to design responses appropriate to the current circumstances of each conflict. A larger negotiation framework based on accepted principles could help conflict management and resolution in each country.

Yemen looks ripest for a diplomatic outcome that could avoid an impending humanitarian catastrophe and open the possibility of a solution that does minimal harm to regional and global interests. The warring parties are exhausted. Putting the port of Al-Hudaydah under neutral control and establishing security in Sanaa are the vital first steps in the direction of an inclusive political settlement acceptable to all.

The war in Iraq will soon end with the defeat of ISIS, which however will only increase the urgency of the political and economic issues associated with post-war stabilization, reconstruction, and transition, including a proposed referendum on independence in Kurdistan intended to lead to an extended negotiation with Baghdad. Iraq will need international understanding, technical support, and foreign investment, even if it tries to minimize its call on international financial assistance.

Syria is still very much unsettled. The Russian/Iranian/Turkish negotiations in Astana may be able to produce some military confidence-building measures, including de-escalation zones, but there is no avoiding the bigger political issues that will need to be resolved under UN auspices in Geneva. U.S. resistance to involvement in both Astana and Geneva is problematic from the regional perspective, as is its insistence on using Kurdish forces against ISIS in liberating Raqqa as quickly as possible. Unless something changes, the likely outcome will be failure on the diplomatic front and a continuing Sunni insurgency against a victorious Syrian regime.

**Discussions**

Meeting for the first time since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and shortly before the presidential election in Iran, the Middle East Dialogue focused on continuing crises in the region (especially Iraq, Syria and Yemen) as well as consideration of principles that should guide regional efforts to resolve them and lay the foundation for a possible regional future architecture.



**I. The current situation: more of the same, with some shifts in emphasis**

*Main Takeaways*

The overall picture painted of regional and extra-regional policies in the Middle East emphasized continuing connections between domestic and foreign policy and consequent continuity, with leadership personalities nevertheless playing an enhanced role. There is a compelling need to find areas of commonality that will enable regional civil wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria to end, promote reconciliation in the Gulf, and form the basis for building a regional order.

*a. Leadership personalities playing an enhanced role*

President Trump, just past his 100-day mark, is committed to turning some aspects of traditional American foreign policy upside down, especially with respect to free trade, multilateralism, and human rights. Though not an isolationist, he is signaling that the U.S. has no permanent friends and no permanent adversaries. He prioritizes bilateral relationships. Within weeks, he scrapped the Trans Pacific Partnership, denigrated NATO and Germany, and offered warm words to Philippine President Duterte and even North Korea's Kim Jong-un. He also tried to institute a ban on immigration from some Muslim-majority countries, which the courts have blocked. A darkening cloud still hangs over the new administration: the persistent and multiple investigations of Russian interference during the campaign. The firing of the FBI director has guaranteed that the investigations will not be completed quickly.

President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov like Trump's blunt style and often use it themselves. They believe prospects for finding common ground in the Middle East, especially Syria, have improved.

Constitutional changes in Turkey will strengthen President Erdogan's already outsized role in foreign and security policy.

President Rouhani's victory at the polls, which occurred after this dialogue meeting, will make him a stronger player on Middle East issues, even if many of them remain the responsibility of the Supreme Leader.

*b. Continuing connections between domestic and foreign policy*

Despite the strong personality of President Trump, American institutions are proving resilient: courts, law enforcement, and Congress have not bent to all the President's wishes. Few high-priority presidential appointments have been made or approved in the Senate. The relatively few White House staff, consisting mainly of close business associates and family, are often clashing. Career diplomats and civil servants are running much of the executive branch, with substantial leadership on foreign policy from the widely respected Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, and Secretary of State.

It is more important to watch what the Administration is doing rather than listen to what it is saying or tweeting. Many people in the Middle East were frustrated with President Obama and wanted change. What Trump is offering is not yet clear, and some of what the President has done reflects continuity. Middle Easterners and others need to look to Congress and continuity in the executive branch for more durability and predictability in relations with the U.S.



In Moscow, there were exaggerated expectations right after the U.S. election among some in the Duma and the media. In the Russian administration, expectations were not so high. Realism prevailed: issues get resolved between the U.S. and Russia when interests converge. This was true even during Cold War. The key is to find the meeting points, which were already clear in the Obama administration. As far as Moscow is concerned, nothing has changed substantially, though the Russians fear Trump could find himself compelled to escalate against Iran because of divisive domestic issues.

Turkey has been consumed with domestic issues. Its constitutional referendum passed, but relations with the U.S. and EU will not change much, as the President always had the last word on these issues. Some institutions will be transferred from the prime minister to the president, and the President is considering creation of a National Security Council. Turkey's top priority is Syria. Despite sometimes supercharged rhetoric, Ankara expects no big changes in Washington.

In Iran, the domestic economy dominated the presidential campaign: conservatives focused on failure to improve peoples' daily lives while President Rouhani (successfully re-elected after the meeting) focused on the need for stability and continuity to enable further improvements. Regional crises are bringing security challenges, and economic strain is beginning to impose limits on Iran's commitments. The balance between the economy and security needs adjustment, with more focus now on the national economy so that Iran can rely on its own resources. Tehran may be prepared to modify regional policies to compromise if others are also willing, including on Syria at the talks in Astana.

*c. Areas of commonality*

Despite the change in the U.S. administration, more continuity rather than change is anticipated in the Middle East. No one is expecting dramatic breakthroughs or further breakdowns. All recognize that the current situation is unacceptably chaotic, requiring scarce resources and distracting attention from other priorities. None challenge the existing state structure. None want to be seen as supporting terrorists. All look forward to shifting resources to other priorities.

*d. Areas of disagreement*

The new American administration views Iran as an adversary on many regional issues, even if it has not followed through on its threats to tear up the nuclear deal. In Syria and Yemen, President Trump thinks Iran is taking advantage of irresolute behavior under President Obama and may be tempted to push back harder than his predecessor.

On Iran, the Russian leadership thinks President Trump should reconsider President Obama's arguments, especially on the nuclear deal. While Russia and Iran have strategic differences on the future of Syria, the Russians believe Iran should not be isolated. Moscow worries that Trump's sharpened rhetoric is emboldening Arab Gulf states, encouraging their combative positions, and hampering reconciliation in the Gulf, which is key to resolving Syria. Tehran would agree.

**II. Yemen: negotiated solution possible, if isolated from the broader regional competition**

*Main Takeaways*

Yemen is a test of the region's ability to isolate an issue and move competition in a political direction to end the fighting. We need to increase the costs of a military approach and decrease its



benefits. We also need to be thinking about guarantors for any eventual political settlement. Neutralization of Al-Hudaydah port and establishing security in Sanaa for everyone could be important first steps.

### *a. A Yemeni view*

While war in Yemen continues and creation of a secessionist council in the south is concerning, there is no competition between Russia and the U.S. there. Both are looking for a negotiated political solution. Yemen can still be a success story, even if the challenges are all too real: the humanitarian crisis and the presence of extremists (Islamist State and Al Qaeda). What needs to be done is to keep the political process open to all parties. Neither the Houthis nor former President Saleh should be excluded.

The key to de-escalation and humanitarian relief is the port of Al-Hudaydah. It is Yemen's most important port and third largest city, with more than 3 million people in the metropolitan area. A military attack on al-Hudaydah would be catastrophic for Yemen. The port should be put under neutral, possibly UN, control, in conjunction with a humanitarian ceasefire (on land and in the air), no cross-border attacks, and preparation of a security plan for Sanaa. The port would be rehabilitated and all shipments monitored to prevent arms trade once the Houthis pull back. Flights to Al-Hudaydah and possibly Sanaa might also restart. This all could have been done initially as an initiative for Ramadan, which was to begin towards the end of May.

Once Al-Hudaydah is open, an inclusive interim government needs to be appointed to work with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on reconciliation and a timeline for elections. President Trump could have helped a great deal by raising the prospect of an Al-Hudaydah deal and political settlement in his upcoming meetings with the Saudis, the GCC and Muslim leaders. Everyone is exhausted and wants a deal. Peace should be given a chance.

### *A Saudi View*

The Saudi attitude on Yemen has changed during the last two years of the Kingdom's military intervention, which succeeded in preventing an Iranian takeover that would have posed a threat analogous to the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Now things have changed. The Houthis are firing missiles into Saudi Arabia, with some risk to its desalination plants. The Iranians are still helping the Houthis, but the cost of the war is high and the growing chaos is problematic. There is a possibility of fragmentation in Aden and former South Yemen, where there are lots of rival militias. The war is affecting the Kingdom's position in the region and should end.

The solution lies in the Riyadh declaration, which called for multiparty democracy and coexistence in Yemen with regional and international support. The next step should be an interim solution. The Kingdom has had two goals:

- to weaken the Houthis so that they cannot control Yemen and invite Iran in; and
- to ensure that Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in Yemen, is not empowered.

These two conditions cannot be satisfied at same time. Pursuing both prolongs the war. No one can be eliminated. Yemen needs a formula of coexistence that ends war and creates conditions for an eventual political solution.



### *An Emirati view*

The problem in Yemen is the local stakeholders. Every week there are new domestic issues. President Hadi himself is an issue, not a capable president. He is legitimate, but uses that card to undermine others.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are fighting together and suffering casualties, but they have different views on internal Yemeni politics. Abu Dhabi does not support Islah (which originated in the Muslim Brotherhood), but does support the south. Saudi Crown Prince bin Nayaf supports Islah, but Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman not. No one is reliable in Yemen, where power sharing is still possible but democratic process is foreign.

The UN mediation failed because of its Western perspective. No one respects ceasefires. The international powers, including the UN, EU, US and China are needed to block smuggling through Al-Hudaydah.

### *An American view*

The immediate objectives should be:

- an end to fighting and re-initiation of the political process;
- security arrangements in Sanaa to allow all parties to return;
- restoration of the functionality of the central bank to enable money to flow into the economy through government salaries.

Al-Hudaydah is indeed vital, as 70-80% of supplies flow through it. Ramadan is the right moment to reopen the port. The threat in Yemen is not a national takeover or secession, but rather fragmentation that would enable the creation of many extremist hot spots. Al Qaeda has been taking advantage of the internal situation to build ties to tribes, who may fly the black flag but are not necessarily committed to global jihad.

Though President Hadi is the head of the legitimate government of Yemen, it is generally recognized that his restoration will last only a short time. Yemen needs to complete its 2011 transition process, which has gone on too long.

For both the Saudis and the Iranians, Yemen is the easiest place to ratchet back tensions, with immediate positive effects. Scaling back military support to the Houthis and encouraging them to negotiate seriously would bring quick benefits and enable the GCC to begin to resolve the problem. Otherwise, Yemen is a threat to GCC unity and even to Saudi Arabia's internal stability, as failure would reflect badly on the Deputy Crown Prince. The war in Yemen also makes it difficult for the U.S. to support the GCC as fully as it would like to do, because it makes military assistance controversial. Houthi success in Yemen would embolden elements in Iran who want to push an aggressive, hegemonic policy.

### *An Iranian view*

Yemen is indeed a place where Tehran can compromise, as it is not strategic for Iran, but doing



so depends on the diplomatic process used and how it unfolds. Iran is trying to preempt threats. If there is none from Yemen, Tehran can compromise more. If it is treated as part of the broader competition in the region, Iran will be able to compromise less. Yemen should be separated from other regional issues to the extent possible.

**III. Syria: everyone playing a different game, with only a slim hope for diplomacy**

*Main Takeaways:*

There is wide disagreement on what the wars in Syria are about: for Russia, Syria is about global politics, for Turkey it is security of its southern border and the Kurds, for the U.S. it is counter-terrorism and quick liberation of Raqaa, and for Saudi Arabia it is about Iran. To bridge these differences, we are relying on a process to bridge worldviews. Confidence building measures aimed at de-escalation negotiated at Astana could be a bridge to Geneva and a political settlement. It is not however clear how much control the global and regional powers have. Dynamics on the ground are changing and may affect the diplomatic situation.

*A view from Moscow*

There is still hope. The parties are all trapped in a long, dark tunnel. Everyone involved—global and regional powers—underestimated the dangers and challenges from civil war in a multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic society.

Russia was pushed to involvement not by Middle East but by global politics. Moscow is conscious of its own weakness in the region and limited financial resources. Moscow intended to establish bridges to the West through formation of a global anti-terrorist coalition, as was done with elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. Putin, like Trump, thought it would easy. Russia underestimated linkage between the Syrian civil war and terrorism. Neither can be solved without also solving the other.

In the short-term, military and political conditions are not conducive to settlement, but under the surface there are some tendencies in the right direction. Zones of control have emerged as spontaneous developments on the battlefield. They were not planned. The problem now is how to seize the opportunity by using them for to initiate stabilization, not partition. The military track was the priority during the last 2 years, but now it is time to think beyond the military context to establish de-escalation/stabilization/safe zones—what to call them is a public relations issue. There is no real difference.

The important thing is the stabilization concept, giving to everyone interested in a settlement an opportunity for governance on the local level. We should start from the bottom with political transition in areas liberated from ISIS. This approach is not a substitute for the Geneva talks on a political settlement, but rather an effort to create a breathing space. At this stage, everyone should concentrate on what is achievable. We need to create a minimum of trust with a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, improved conditions for refugees, and release political prisoners. It would be a mistake to put priority only on ISIS, as President Trump wants to do.

Experience in the Balkans suggests a mechanism that might work: in Eastern Slavonia, Russia



and America cooperated under the leadership of an American general for the military and political reintegration of the region into Croatia. This model could work with de-escalation zones.

We should seize the opportunity. No one can impose a solution suitable to his own exclusive interest, as others will undermine it. Russia and America have levers but they are not decisive enough to enforce a solution. Moscow and Washington have a lot in common. Only by acting in coordination can they drive a multilateral process to meet all interests. Washington should be thinking about a balanced outcome, not eliminating Iran from any political settlement.

The failure of the Russian/American ceasefire effort last year led to the Russian/Iranian/Turkish tripartite effort, which was intended to bypass Geneva. That will not happen. Astana may exhaust its potential, which is limited to a cessation of hostilities. De-escalation zones were an attempt to reactivate the tripartite process. Moscow understands U.S. disinterest but hopes Lavrov's recent meetings in Washington will lead to a bilateral Russia/US track. Without American involvement, de-escalation zones will not work.

#### *A Turkish view*

Ankara sees Moscow's de-escalation zones proposal as a Russian response to the American cruise missile attack. The zones are unlikely to succeed, as there will be many violations, there is no verification mechanism on the ground, and there are no penalties for violations. Turkey is participating in the Astana process, which is aimed at confidence building, but it is not an alternative to the Geneva political process.

Not much is likely to come of Astana, but there is no alternative from the Ankara perspective. Moscow, which wants to minimize its commitments in Syria, is more serious about a political solution than the Iranians, who are still investing a lot there. The Syrian opposition is terribly divided and there are many extremist spoilers. It will be almost impossible for Astana to produce anything concrete, but Turkey is vulnerable and has few other options.

The situation in northern Syria is particularly concerning for Turkey. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) there is engineering social change and creating a haven for terrorists. The arming of PKK-affiliated forces to liberate Raqqa betokens priority to short-term military objectives rather than long-term stability. It would have been better to postpone the attack on Raqqa. The American exploitation of the PKK will offend local actors and Ankara. The Turkish state is required for stability. Local Arab forces should be enlisted for the military tasks.

Turkey has few options. Its focus is on the north. Everything else is of secondary importance. Syria already partitioned in everyone's mind. Safe zones are needed, including in the area where Turkey is conducting the Euphrates Shield operation. This will be a real safe zone, including aerial protection.

#### *An Iranian view*

Tehran is more optimistic about Astana, which is definitely a confidence building process. Iran welcomes the de-escalation zones, which are not the result of the U.S. missile attack and benefit Iranian interests. Iran is process-oriented and values a step by step technical process that will lead to compromise. The inclusion of Turkey is a positive development, because Ankara is realistic, focused on



the PKK, and ready to compromise with Russia and Iran, which views Syria as a national security issue.

Iranian policy is the result of checks and balances among different bodies in Tehran. Iran's strengthened position in Syria will be translated into diplomacy. In the end, there will be an adjustment of Syria policy, which the foreign minister can frame even if he does not control it directly. The costs of Syria for Iran are high and will lead in due course to a ceasefire and a political solution. Like Yemen, Syria will be more workable separate from other regional issues.

In the presidential debates, the candidates all responded to the question of how to strengthen the axis of resistance by citing the economy. Foreign Minister Zarif wants to make adjustments. Hezbollah is an existential issue for Iran, but not Syria.

#### *An American view*

Right now, American policy for Syria is all about counter-terrorism, especially the fight against ISIS and Al Qaeda's fellow travelers in Hayat Tahrir al Sham. That is why arms have gone to the Syrian Kurds. It is thought to be urgent to take Raqqa because of possible terror attacks planned there against the West.

Washington is uninterested in Astana, despite the presence of Acting Assistant Secretary Jones. If it works, the Americans will say "fine," but Syria is not regarded as an American problem. The Administration does not even want official observer status, as it is trying to avoid responsibility for Syria, especially without influence. The de-escalation zones have no enforcement mechanism and air raids continue. There will be no major U.S. deployment to Syria, as self-defense would not be possible.

The Americans are not much interested in Geneva either. Again they will be happy if it works, but President Trump does not want to be involved in nation-building anywhere. There will be no American funding for governance in Syria or for safe zones. The cruise missile attack was a one-off, gut reaction to the use of chemical weapons. It was aimed as much at the North Koreans and Chinese as at the Syrians. The Americans may even be prepared to hand "liberated" Raqqa over to a civilian presence friendly to Assad. The Iranian proposal from two years ago now looks pretty good: ceasefire, political rearrangements, a new constitution, and elections, even if it is important to remember that Bashar has never won less than 90% in Syrian elections.

Assad has won. His security forces will not be held accountable. Security sector reform is not on the agenda in either Astana or Geneva. The result will be a long-term Sunni urgency in eastern Syria as well as in Hama and Homs.

What can be done? We need more assistance to refugees, including contributions from Russia and China. If Assad is serious about stabilization, then he should let in humanitarian aid, which is still not flowing. He should stop the air raids and use of chemical weapons. These measures could lead to a ceasefire, though not a political settlement.

#### *A Jordanian view*

ISIS and other extremists are a threat both externally and internally. Jordan wants to keep them away from the border, fight them in Syria, and support moderate local groups inside Syria. Any process that de-escalates the violence, even if only part of Deraa is covered, is welcome, but Amman is not





involved. There is already a kind of safe zone in southern Syria. Jordan wants a political solution, one that removes the Hezbollah threat from its border.

Refugees and displaced people merit more attention.

*An Egyptian view*

For Cairo, the main concern is the Muslim Brotherhood, not only in Syria but also in other regional crises. Bashar al Assad has Egyptian political support because he blocks Islamists from power. The Syrian chief of intelligence has visited Cairo several times. This has led to rapprochement with Russia and Iran as well as disagreement with Saudi Arabia.

Cairo wants no power-sharing with Islamists. Even flirting with Brotherhood-affiliated Islah in Yemen is a red line for Egypt. Its military involvement in Yemen is aimed at securing the route to and from Suez through the Bab al Mandeb rather than combating Iran. For Egypt, the Iranian threat is remote. Cairo is supporting anti-Islamist Haftar in Libya and getting closer to Iran in Iraq.

*A Saudi View*

The Kingdom wants to generate U.S. interest in Syria, where the campaign against Iran is its main objective. It wants Iran out of Syria, which means both Bashar al Assad and Hezbollah must leave. Trump is better than Obama in the Saudi view because at least he is willing to listen.

Iran will however not seek a Syria deal, as it already controls “useful” Syria. The crisis will therefore continue. The Kingdom will pressure the Americans to get involved step by step. Raqqa will be the beginning.

There is no avoiding a serious political process in Syria. Astana must come to Geneva, where political transition is the main issue. Saudi Arabia will use its leverage on the Syrian opposition, even if its power on ground has largely been lost. If the Americans will protect safe zones and eventually a no-fly zone, the Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates will support transition and reconstruction.

*A view from Abu Dhabi*

Counterterrorism is the main issue, but removal of Assad requires a plan for the day after. The UAE is not against Astana if it leads to a real solution, but the future of Syria should not be in Iranian hands. Iran and Hezbollah should get out.

**IV. Iraq: unity in diversity, but only for now**

*Main Takeaways:*

While the war against ISIS in Iraq is going reasonably well, the post-war challenges will be enormous. Converting military into political and economic cooperation will be difficult, not least because the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is committed to holding an independence referendum that will raise expectations in its youthful population and because Baghdad will face enormous challenges once the liberation of its territory from ISIS is complete.

*A view from Baghdad*



The last three years have brought real progress against ISIS, with Tikrit, Beiji, Ramadi, Falluja, most of Ninewa and 90% of Mosul liberated. The rest of Mosul, Tal Afar, Hawija and other population centers will follow. The diverse liberating forces, which have suffered big losses, have developed new cooperative relationships.

The real problem now is how to regain the trust of the people. Prime Minister Abadi wisely decided not to bomb cities from his first day in office. Displaced people are returning. A new norm is needed for the relationship between citizens and their local governments, as well as the national government. This will require a shift of paradigms that ends the feeling of marginalization. The new reality is that 61% of population was born after 1991 and 40% after 2001. The next two or three governments will face big problems, because 9 million people are paid either salaries or pensions by the government.

Sectarian and ethnic differences will remain, but the current government is treating all as Iraqis: everyone is proud of the counter-terrorist Golden Brigade. Baghdad and Erbil have developed trust. Disagreements remain but are now managed. Iraqi identity is prevailing over sub-identities. The Kurdish *Peshmerga* and the Iraqi security forces are fighting against a common enemy. Liberation of the east side of Mosul depended on trust and cooperation, which were greatly enhanced by success.

With the defeat of ISIS comes the need to rebuild trust among citizens and between citizens and the governing authorities, not only at national level but also at the provincial and local levels. People need real jobs. The problem is not just Sunnis: people in Basra and Erbil want jobs as well. Technology is increasingly important in determining oil prices, which are not going up. Iraqi government expenditures were cut 50% between 2013 and 2016. Tax collection is becoming much more efficient and revenue is up by a factor of three. Customs collection is also rising sharply. Iraqi oil production is rising but that will not solve the problem. There is no substitute for economic and financial reform that reduces subsidies. The economy needs diversification.

For stability, Iraq needs not only internal social reconciliation but also regional interconnections. The pipeline to Jordan, a new gate on the Saudi border, and increased trust with Kuwait, Turkey and Iran are important. The American invasion created sharp differences among Iraqis, but Baghdad continues to need a strong relationship with Washington. On the domestic front, the key is more decentralization that will empower the provinces to compete for business. The state is over-centralized. It needs to devolve authority to the provinces. The provinces need to delegate authority to cities.

No one wants to reject completely the Kurdish ambition for separate country, but the Iraqi constitution—approved in Kurdistan—says Iraq is a federal but united country. If there is a new demand, the constitution provides for amendment. Kurdistan has problems too and cannot survive on its own. Its oil production will not support independence at current prices. Everyone knows dysfunction in Iraq is apparent. Basra may be less sure of unity than Kurdistan. A redefinition of the state's relationship with its citizens is necessary. Everyone is asking for it. People throughout Iraq need greater transparency and fairness. Billions have been lost in uncompleted projects. The country needs reform, not separation. Independence is not the solution.

Baghdad is not expecting the rest of the world to pay for reconstruction, but Iraq fought ISIS on behalf of everyone and hopes that others will want to take advantage of investment opportunities to



prevent the resurgence of ISIS and Al Qaeda. This will require not only money from international sources but also better ways of managing reconstruction inside Iraq than in the past. Now the urgent need is not reconstruction but rather stabilization, which is being led by the prime minister and the provincial governors with participation of all the relevant ministers and support from the UN Development Programme and many nongovernmental organizations. 95% of population has returned to Tikrit, where the university has reopened and 16,000 students have enrolled. 75% of the population in liberated areas of Anbar has returned. One of the many urgent projects is review of the educational curricula, which too often preach hatred not only of Shia and Kurds but also of Sunnis.

The Iraqi security forces have improved dramatically. In the counter-terrorism forces and the rest of army, half of the commanders are Sunni. Local police ran away first in 2014. Now they are the holding forces. The Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) were essential to the initial response to ISIS, but most of their troops will go back to their jobs. Others will be integrated into state institutions as individuals, not as groups. The same will be true for tribal fighters, who will need vocational training and reconstruction jobs. The world's expertise on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) will be put to good use in Iraq. The goal is to have all military forces under the command and control of the Iraqi Army.

The bigger problem is on the civilian side. Revenge killings are a real threat unless a major effort is made for reconciliation. After six months or a year, the government could face serious problems if it cannot deliver. Once fighting finished, Baghdad needs to work fast to provide hope: the economic factor (jobs, loans, investment, etc.) will be more important than politics.

But politics will also be complicated. The Iraqi parliamentary system relies on two political processes for formation of a government: the election of members of parliament province by province and the formation of a majority coalition. None of the previous prime ministers have won the parliamentary election. All have come to power based on a post-election coalition.

### *A view from Erbil*

The fight for Mosul is going well. The *Peshmerga* did the initial phase. The Iraqi army is also performing well. It moved through Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory and is cooperating closely with the *Peshmerga*. The chemistry is good.

Big challenges will arise after liberation, when the common enemy is defeated. The issues then will be stabilization, administration, governance, and services. ISIS is the product of an environment that could generate more ISIS in the future. Neither the *Peshmerga* nor the PMUs will go inside Mosul, only local forces backed by the Iraqi Army. Post-ISIS, Iraq needs to rebuild the trust of its citizens as well as the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad.

The good relations established at the military level need to be transferred to the political sphere. The view from Erbil is that the KRG has done everything possible to improve relations but that Prime Minister Abadi is limited in responding because he is under attack from his own constituents.

The planned referendum on independence between September and November this year is needed in Erbil's view because Iraq is a failed federal state. Too many constitutional and political promises have been breached. The referendum, which is being planned by all the political parties except



Gorran, is not synonymous with independence and will not lead immediately to a declaration of independence. The referendum will start a negotiation process of one or two years, which will consider issues like Kirkuk and the proposed northern and southern pipelines. In disputed territories, the elected councils will choose whether to participate.

No doubt the KRG has its own problems arising from the ISIS attacks, the huge influx of displaced people, the fall in oil prices, and the failure of Baghdad to transfer all the funding owed. The KRG has responded with cuts in subsidies and government salaries. Oil companies are now returning in anticipation of an end to fighting and reconstruction in Mosul will boost the KRG economy.

The Iraqi constitution's preamble is clear that implementation is a prerequisite for unity. Because of his past failures, the return of Maliki to power in Baghdad would lead to an immediate declaration of independence in Kurdistan.

#### **V. Conclusion**

There are no easy solutions in the Middle East, where the perspectives of major stakeholders on each conflict situation vary significantly. But there are common concerns: terrorism, state collapse, displacement, and economic implosion. The trick is combining these common concerns into courses of action to which the stakeholders can agree. In Yemen, neutralization of Al-Hudaydah port and security in Sanaa are the most promising possibilities. In Syria, no end is in sight, though many are hoping that the combination of the Astana and Geneva diplomatic processes will generate an endgame involving an end to the fighting as well as political transition of some sort. In Iraq, a government victory over ISIS will allow stabilization, reintegration and reconciliation to begin, while posing problems for relations between Erbil and Baghdad.