



**Middle East Dialogue
Muscat, September 23-24, 2016
Summary Report**

On September 23-24, the Middle East Institute's Initiative for Track II Dialogues convened its ninth meeting of the Middle East Dialogue in Muscat, Oman. Participants included current and former officials and senior experts from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Syria, Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iran, Russia, China, the United States, and the United Nations. The meeting addressed the Syrian conflict and likely scenarios, preparations for the anticipated battle for Mosul and post-ISIS challenges in Iraq, and prospects for regional cooperation.

Executive summary

All of the participants agreed that regional countries are key to stabilization in Syria today but none indicated a clear end game for the conflict that accounts for its multilayered complications. Although they agree on the need for a political solution, they are relying on military means to shape the context in anticipation of a new U.S. Administration. In Syria, the Bashar al Assad government is losing control of the security and economic sectors. All countries recognize that the spiraling dynamics are leading to a regional conflagration that will be hard to walk back from. They continue to be locked in existential battles with little common ground on key issues including the definition of terrorism, the future of non-state actors, and the fate of Assad. Underpinning pro-Assad positions is a desire to see a transition in Syria with key state institutions intact in order to avoid the risk of a deeper security and political vacuum.

Discussions about scenarios divided between the short and long term. Regarding the latter, a proposal was tabled to organize a regional conference with the US and Russia backing to work out the parameters of a future Syria based on a process of reverse engineering. Feedback on this proposal covered enabling conditions for such regional dialogue. Meanwhile, an interim approach to de-escalate the conflict should side-step the issue of Assad's future and focus on freezing front lines with sufficient confidence building measures and a clear enforcement mechanism. Building these elements into an agreed freeze arrangement would distinguish it from past ceasefire and freeze proposals, which, by omitting these elements, failed to account for the structural dimensions of the conflict inside Syria.

The discussions on Iraq revealed worrying trends whereby everyone is downplaying the military difficulties in retaking Mosul while still grappling with post-ISIS liberation challenges. It was suggested that regional and international coordination should be stepped-up to address the key challenges, including the likelihood of massive Iraqi displacement and humanitarian crises and shaping and implementing power-sharing

arrangements inclusive of minorities. Another major challenge is countering ISIS in the long-term by cultivating legitimate Sunni representation and ensuring good governance in Iraq and Syria. Finally, there was some common ground around the need for coordinated efforts to combat narrative, funding, and logistical recruitment tactics by ISIS. As with Syria, participants continued to shy away from addressing the role of non-state actors.

A silver lining appeared in that all participants welcomed the idea of exploring a regional cooperation institutional framework. It was agreed to begin by exploring agreement around a set of principles and priority issues for cooperation. Discussions intended to concretize a regional cooperation agenda are planned for the next two years of the Middle East Dialogue.

Syria Scenarios

All participants agreed that regional parties are driving the conflict today; and that they are the key actors for stabilization. At the same time, internal Syrian dynamics are influencing regional attitudes and positions, as well as impacting overall conflict resolution opportunities. A third dynamic at play today is the gaming brought about by the US election cycle. One of the risks is that the parties to the conflict will run-the clock out until the next administration is at the helm, the consequence of which could be more casualties. Although the parties agree that Syria requires a political solution, everyone is relying on military means to influence the political context in anticipation of the next administration. Moreover, as many commented, no one has a clear end game that adequately reflects the multidimensional realities of the conflict.

While there is interest in seeing the US resume a more engaged role in the region in 2017, participants indicated that future US interventions should aim toward balancing emerging regional interests and alliances rather than a hegemonic posture. Perceptions of negligence and poor management of the conflict to-date are reinforcing mistrust of the US. Syrians also expressed growing suspicions of Russian aims, as they appear to converge more and more with Iranian positions on the ground.

The discussions highlighted Assad's weakening role in Syrian affairs. The Syrian central economy and social fabric is disintegrating, leaving warlords entrenched and pre-existing systems of legitimacy and loyalty destroyed. This breakdown is mirrored in the security sector, which the governing elite has lost control of. Security and the political economy are completely localized, with communities relying on sectarian-based support networks, including Hezbollah and identity-based militias. Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition lacks consensus on feasible alternatives.

The impact of these trends is manifesting in the wider conflict. In the absence of an overarching mechanism or agreement capable of addressing and responding to these spiraling dynamics, participants equally recognized the likelihood of regional catastrophe. A weakened Assad is leading Russia, Iran and other regionals to reassess his centrality to a deal, but there remains strong ideological disagreement over "his" fate, along with concerns about the ability to deliver the "state" in a transitional scenario given the lack of control Assad has over security forces. Similarly while lip-service continues to be paid to inter-Syrian dialogue, there was general

consensus that it is i) impractical, albeit for differing explanations as to why; and ii) secondary to regional order dynamics.

The Iranian position that Syria is a national security interest for Iran (i.e., non-negotiable) remains steadfast; however, realizations of the chaotic situation in Syria, emerging regional and international alliances around the conflict, and the perception of opportunity linked to the JCPOA is creating greater openness to regional/extra-regional dialogue around scenarios. Meanwhile, the Gulf reads the JCPOA as responsible for Iranian aggressive and ideological acts, with a growing fear of Iranian intentions, and continued Saudi rhetorical insistence on making Assad the end game in Syria.

Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation meanwhile is meant to create new dynamics in the north that will improve the negotiating position of the Syrian opposition. Turkey views a No Fly Zone as a functional option to secure moderate Sunni hold over key northern territory; thereby defending against terror threats presented by the YPG and ISIS. Although Iran and Russia reject a NFZ both see common cause with Turkey's new posture. In general, Russia's position is turning toward more regional security and containment, with US cooperation.

Continuing disagreement was registered as to Assad's future: Turkey and Saudi Arabia continue to insist on his departure (with Turkey amenable to discussing a role for Assad during the transition period while Saudi Arabia remains opposed to any role of Assad during and post-transition period), as Russia and Iran insist on him staying. Another corresponding fissure is between those who continue to hold out for a "unified state" and others who believe that the time has come to begin building consensus around power-sharing or decentralization options. Iran's and Russia's warming to Turkey's ostensible bridging role, combined with wide disillusionment with Assad's governance, suggests that there may be room to test alternatives within a regional framework.

A proposal for next steps was made to organize a conference to discuss the parameters of a future Syria and what it will take to get there, side stepping the hard question of Assad's fate. In the meantime, an interim scenario of de-escalation should be pursued based on: a freezing of front lines; preserving state institutions (especially the military); and the delivery of humanitarian goods. There was agreement that this might work with international and regional buy-in inclusive of: Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey with Russia and the US. A second important element that would distinguish it from previous freeze attempts would be to gain Syrian buy-in and address local structural conflict systems (i.e., a multidimensional platform), missing from previous initiatives. A third key element would be clear enforcement mechanisms and confidence building measures -- the latter of which could be pursued bi-laterally or regionally or both.

As discussions on Iraq highlighted, a Syrian Arab and Kurdish rapprochement would be an enabling condition for regional dialogue on alternative scenarios.

Gulf and Saudi contributions suggested other conditions would include initial common agreement between regional actors on the problem and/or regional cooperation principles (see Part III below), including ending the use of anti-terrorism as subterfuge and addressing the rise

of non-state actors/interference. In this regard, there was little agreement or even admission on the role of all parties in contributing to the rise of militias and the huge complicating factor they present to regional order.

Likewise, the point was made, but not widely acknowledged, that demographic re-engineering under terrorism pretexts is creating generational traumas that will ultimately enable ISIS in the longer term. Relevant to Syria, it carries over to Iraq.

Iraq and post-ISIS challenges

The discussions on Iraq suggested a better outlook for the country than Syria because there is less contestation over the state, which has institutions and dialogue channels in place. Nevertheless, the prospect of retaking Mosul from ISIS carries a huge set of challenges that impliedly risk of the country plunging into civil war if not well managed. Participants characterized these challenges are both “ideological” and “territorial”.

Participants downplayed the challenges in retaking Mosul. Key participants spoke of military plans that have been agreed to liberate the city of a tactical nature and weighted more toward the territorial challenges, leaving the broader ideological ones hanging in the balance. Iraqi participants outlined a list of official and unofficial groups that would be a part of the operation; thereby, raising the stakes of post-liberation competing territorial claims. There was a suggestion that the Kurds and Iraqi government would divide territory based on their corresponding military gains. But the expected involvement of other non-state actors, including the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) and Sunni and minority coalitions, combined with the multiethnic makeup of the city, further implied potential weak links in the military plans.

There was general recognition of post-liberation challenges. There was agreement that more effort was needed to address the anticipated humanitarian fallout from the operation, specifically concerning the projected displacement of some 1 million persons. There was also agreement about the need to fill the vacuum of Sunni representation in Iraq generally and in Mosul in particular. Agreement was also registered amongst Iraqis on the need to resolve outstanding power-sharing issues between the central government and Kurdistan. However, disagreement arose over the depth of Sunni, Kurdish and minority grievances in Iraq and the ability of the central government to adapt and respond to these grievances.

A key take-away from the discussions is that the military operation in Mosul will require a surge in humanitarian aid – beyond the pledges of the July 2016 conference, and a focus on political questions that go to the heart of the identity of the state and its social contract with its citizens. And while it was argued that Iraq is better equipped to handle these issues than Syria, it was pointed out that Syria may have a better chance of defeating ISIS in the long term because of the lack of Sunni leadership in Iraq that is viewed as authentic by large swathes of Arab Sunni Iraqis. There was agreement that without multilayered coordinated action to counter ISIS in terms of narratives, funding and logistics, the threat would likely linger in the form of an insurgency.

Unlike in the Syria context, discussions around Iraq saw the issue of non-state actors more directly acknowledged, although participants disagreed about the threat they posed. It was argued that paramilitary non-state actors, who want to keep their military infrastructure independent of

the state and are often organized along sectarian lines, present the greatest challenge. The threat was downplayed by Iranian participants, who portrayed the Popular Mobilization Unit's role as aiding the collective Iraqi counterterrorism effort and different from Hezbollah due to the absence of an Israeli corollary. Nevertheless, it was mentioned that Iraq had still failed to fully disarm and absorb non-state militias from 2003 and is now dealing with a larger set of well-armed non-state actors than before. The question becomes acute as security and policing post-liberation remains unresolved but intertwined with competing territorial claims that are likely to arise following the military operation to dislodge ISIS.

While the US has been effective in helping Kurdistan and the Iraqi central government coordinate the military phase, regional cooperation is needed for combating the ISIS threat in the longer term. There was disagreement over whether Iran or Turkey could play that role. Some suggested that Turkey's agenda in Iraq is not clear – with one Iraqi participant adding that it was harmful to Iraqi interests. Some suggested that what Iraq needed was less external interference. Following discussion that sought to differentiate between foreign interference and coordinated regional support for Iraqi policies that can work, it was agreed that regional cooperation was needed in the form of regional participation in the a command and control role in fighting ISIS and in terms of figuring out the “second priority” in the anti-ISIS fight (i.e., post-liberation).

It was made clear that regional agreement should be broached on other forms of combating ISIS as a matter of top priority, including addressing recruitment factors amongst disaffected populations, committing to participatory and inclusive civilian governance, and real power-sharing. It was also pointed out that regional economic powerhouses should contribute financially to the rebuilding of liberated areas.

In response to an argument against external interference in Iraq, it was pointed out that Iraq should instead formulate its foreign and security policy and work with regional countries to ensure that they respect and engage those policies.

Finally, participants from Saudi Arabia insisted that regime change in Syria should be the first priority and once it is addressed it will be in position to help cultivate Sunni leadership to address representative gaps in Iraq.

Regional Cooperation

Following a presentation on modeling different patterns of regional architecture of cooperation in the Middle East, it was agreed that an institutional arrangement was needed to end the state of conflict prevailing between states in the region. There was common recognition that states cannot grow and thrive and maintain national security if all of their resources are directed toward waging conflicts. There was enthusiasm for enabling an infrastructure for sustained communication between states of the region, which is not happening now. At the same time there was discussion about the challenge of collective action and building political capital to manage short-term risks for longer-term benefits.

The OSCE and ASEAN systems were offered as examples of regional cooperation. A three tiered approach was proposed beginning with a set of shared principles, identifying and agreeing on baskets of issues around which cooperation can be pivoted, and the negotiation infrastructure

that must be put in place among regionals. There was wide agreement that it was in the region's interest to cooperate around the principle of non-confrontation. Many participants also validated the principle of respect of state sovereignty while others endorsed a commitment to eradicate non-state actors. In the end more discussion is needed on a fuller set of principles, particularly around the issue of non-state actors, where a lack of agreement hung over the majority of the discussions.

There were differences on which issues to start with. Many thought it would be easier to begin with less political issues such as economic or environmental matters, of high public interest. Education was also mentioned as being of critical importance, as was reducing poverty levels. Over time it would then be possible to move to harder issues such as security. However, it was pointed out that what may be perceived as less political might still entail immediate risks or require political capital investments up front. In that case, it might be justified to start with security up front. It was decided that starting with identifying and agreeing on common principles could split the difference.

In terms of process, some questions were raised about the complications of involving all countries of the Middle East. A two-layered approach was recommended involving deeper cooperation between a core group of states and a more inclusive outer layer of countries; similarly there was agreement to move in phases, starting with a core group of states. In the context of the discussion of the ASEAN example, it was argued that China had a strategic interest in stabilizing the Middle East, defeating ISIS and had expressed a willingness to play a constructive role on regional issues.

In conclusion, it was agreed that there is clear interest in exploring regional cooperation and a workable architecture. Therefore the next meeting will be devoted to creating a useful brainstorming space for this theme. The agenda will include a session for updating on regional events. The rest of the meeting will then include two parts: 1) regional experiences in building cooperative mechanism. The ASEAN experience will take center stage, including briefings and inputs from experts; and 2) starting a discussion on common principles via a negotiation simulation exercise.