

ACTIVITY REPORT

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Beyond Daesh: Ending the Cycle of Conflicts, Towards Durable Solutions

IRIS AND KAS HOLD HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON WAYS TO STABILIZE IRAQ, THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ AND THE MIDDLE EAST

As the Mosul offensive progresses, the military defeat of ISIS in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region has come within reach. However, the crises that Iraq is facing are far from over: Millions of IDPs and refugees, economic stagnation and a lack of job opportunities, endemic corruption, political inefficiency, disputes over territory, and political and social marginalisation – all of these issues could potentially create fertile ground for the survival of extremist ideologies after the fall of ISIS as well as contribute to the continuation of economic and political instability and stagnation. In this context, the annual Sulaimani Forum, entitled “Beyond Daesh: Ending the Cycle of Conflicts, Towards Durable Solutions”, held by the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), supported by the KAS Syria/Iraq Office, dealt with possible sustainable solutions to the various challenges Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are facing today. The forum was held from 8 to 9 March 2017 in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

The inaugural address was given by Haidar al-Abadi, Prime Minister of Iraq. He began his remarks by congratulating the Iraqi people on the victories achieved against ISIS, but emphasised the need for social reconstruction and reconciliation following the liberation. He stated that the diversity of the Iraqi people should not be an obstacle towards unity and political stability.

Along this line, he also called on political parties to unite and put aside their differences, as well as on the security forces to unify and prohibit forces associated with political parties. In response to a question about the operations in Mosul, he said that the Iraqi forces are only using precise F16s in battle in an effort to avoid civilian casualties, and he also reported that more than 3,000 IDPs have already returned to the left side of Mosul, and that the number of IDPs from the right side has been much less than expected. As to post-ISIS politics, he spoke out against the impeachment of ministers as a way to further burden the prime minister, and said that he welcomes political opposition and constructive criticism of his reform efforts. He also stated that the people should administer their own cities and territories along with help from the central government, essentially advocating for a federalist system.

The first panel dealt with the human cost of war. It was chaired by Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent of the BBC. Before the panel, Yezidi survivor Fareeda Abbas, and author of “The Girl who Beat ISIS”, gave an emotional account of her ordeal during her imprisonment by ISIS. She appealed to the Iraqi and Kurdish governments to take real action in order to enable the Yezidis to return home and to bring the perpetrators to justice, pointing out that the Yezidis are facing genocide. Christos Stylianides, the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Emergency Crisis Management of the European Union, pointed to the adequate preparation for the humanitarian ef-

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

SYRIA/IRAQ

NILS WÖRMER

March 2017

www.kas.de

www.kas.de/syrien-irak

facts of the Mosul offensive, as well as the Iraqi military's effective protection of civilians. The latter was also underlined by Lise Grande, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Representative for Iraq of UNDP, who praised the Iraqi government for successfully implementing a humanitarian concept for its security forces. She also emphasised that IDPs will remain an issue even after the war, and that they should be given the choice as to where they wish to live. Darbaz Muhammed, the Iraqi Minister of Migration and Displacement, agreed with this. Muhammed also stated that "ISIS has become a community issue", arguing that reconciliation is essential to defeating ISIS's ideology. Choman Hardi, professor at AUIS, drew attention to the fact that "war is gendered" in the sense that it affects men and women differently, as men are seen as the aggressors that have to be annihilated quickly, while women can be destroyed symbolically, for example, through rape. David Miliband, President and CEO of the International Rescue Committee, pointed out the importance of global lessons of the crisis in Iraq, and of listening to the advice of civil society actors.

The second panel was entitled "Mosul Operation, an Update and Progress", and was chaired by Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Jabar Yawar, the spokesman of the Ministry of Peshmerga from the KRG spoke about the quick pace of progress of the Iraqi security forces and the Peshmerga in western Mosul, however, he also cautioned that ISIS is likely to re-emerge even after its defeat in Mosul, most likely in a form closely resembling al-Qaeda. He also expressed the need for a plan to counter ISIS's ideology following the liberation. Karim Nuri, the spokesman of the Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), spoke about the Hashd's role in the fight against ISIS, and mentioned the Tel Afar offensive, where he said that the Hashd has inflicted big losses against ISIS. Hayder Shesho, commander of the Yezidkhan Protection Forces, spoke about the current situation in Sinjar, and pointed out that around 40% of the territory is under ISIS control, and as a result of this, more than 80% of Yezidis still live outside of Sinjar. He stated that the rights of the Yezidis

have been violated since 2003, and called on the international community to apply pressure to the central government to protect minorities in Iraq. Hisham Al Hashimi, an analyst, mentioned that the Iraqi security forces have a good understanding of ISIS tactics and motivations, which has helped them to wage a successful operation against the group.

In the third panel, regional cooperation and competition and frameworks for stability were discussed. It was chaired by Robin Wright, Joint Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. Hoshyar Zebari, former Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs and Finance, pointed out that the formation of a regional security structure could be hampered by the deep animosities held by regional actors. As for Iraq, Zebari mentioned its "divided loyalty" between Iran and the US. Muwwafaq al-Rubaie, former Iraqi National Security Advisor compared Iraq to a buffer zone between the Arab and non-Arab regional powers, making it necessary for Iraq to be strong and united so it can "block, deter, or confront" the surrounding powers. Basat Ozturk, Turkish Deputy Undersecretary of Defence, and Elena Suponina, Advisor at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, outlined their respective countries' role in the region. Hassan Ahmadian, professor at the University of Tehran, pointed out that when talking about Iran's regional and international role, its perception as a threat, its exclusion from the international scene, and its demonisation should be taken into account. Tarek Mitri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, pointed out that while no state in the region supports ISIS, each state has a different perception of how to fight it best, further complicating regional cooperation.

The fourth panel entitled "Iraq's Political Scene: Mapping the Settlement or Settlement of the Map?" was moderated by Lukman Faily, former Iraqi Ambassador to the United States. Salim al-Jabouri, Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, spoke about the future of Iraqi politics, and stressed the need for a civil state in order to represent all Iraqis, including minorities, as well as to create a

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

SYRIA/IRAQ

NILS WÖRMER

March 2017

www.kas.de

www.kas.de/syrien-irak

positive electoral environment. He also stated that reform needs to occur from executive procedures free from international interference, and that reconciliation and rehabilitation should be a priority in the post-ISIS period. Adil Abdelmahdi, the former Vice President of Iraq, spoke about sectarianism, and stressed that the government should be the leading actor in unifying Iraqis. He also stated that federalism and decentralisation should be the way forward. His Beatitude Louis Raffael Sako, Chaldean Patriarch, put forward several recommendations for the future of Iraqi politics, among which included the separation of government and religion, the need to reconsider the constitution, and the change to educational curriculums. Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff, Office of the Presidency of the KRG, spoke about the need for leadership that will lead Iraq towards a state of citizens, rather than a state of components. He also cautioned against the current militarisation of politics in Iraq, which was necessary due to the fight against ISIS, but will become an issue inhibiting reconciliation after ISIS. Aram Shaykh Muhammad, Deputy Speaker of Parliament, mentioned two important political issues in his remarks: the need to change the political formula of delaying laws and bills in parliament, as well as solving the issue of disputed areas. Mina Al Oraibi, member of the board of trustees at AUIS, emphasised the need to address the effects of regional actors, as instability in the region could have an impact on Iraq.

The second day of the conference started with a conversation with Francis Fukuyama that was hosted by Barham Salih, founder of AUIS. Fukuyama drew attention to the fact that, out of the three factors that constitute a modern democratic political order, democratic accountability is the easiest to achieve, while the monopoly of force, service provision, and the rule of law that limits the state are often much harder, especially in the Middle East. He also pointed out that the Middle East is now in the same stage as Europe was in the late 19th century, with urbanisation and modernisation often leaving people disoriented and more prone to accepting ideologies, or filling this gap with religion.

The fifth panel was titled "Crisis of Governance and Imperative of Reform", and was moderated by Thamir Ghadban, former Iraqi Minister of Oil. Naufel Al Hassan, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office focused on the Iraqi legal system, and how its outdated laws have inhibited efficient governance. He stressed the need for the amendment or replacement of many of the current laws, as well as a more efficient system for pushing laws through parliament. He also spoke about the issue of widespread corruption in Iraq, which is partly caused by its cash-based economy, as well as the massive number of government employees. He advocated for a long-term strategy to facilitate the shift of some of these public sector employees to the private sector. Amanj Rahim, Chief of Staff of the Council of Ministers in the KRG, spoke about the economic crisis in the KRI. He mentioned that the factors leading to this crisis included the mismanagement of economics, as well as the over-hiring of government employees (there are more than 1.4 million people on government salaries in the KRI). Sherko Jawdat, member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, mentioned several aspects that Iraq should focus on in order to achieve good governance, among which include; establishing a good environment for governance, promoting civility among Iraqis through education and media, appointing technocrats as representatives, activating parliament, and promoting the rule of law. Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy spoke about the danger of "resurgent authoritarianism" in Iraq, but also mentioned several aspects that make him hopeful for Iraq's future. Tamara Cofman Wittes, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute spoke about possible ways for Iraq to rebuild social trust. These include inclusive and transparent governance, decentralised governance, and the use of human capital.

Before the sixth panel, Qubad Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, gave remarks providing an update on the current progress of reforms in the KRG. For example, he mentioned the successful creation of six custom points in the KRI, the introduction of an electronic system to distribute

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

SYRIA/IRAQ

NILS WÖRMER

March 2017

www.kas.de

www.kas.de/syrien-irak

salaries for government employees to prevent irregular salaries, and the continued cooperation with international companies and institutions to conduct audits and to receive recommendations.

The sixth panel, which dealt with job creation and economic growth, was chaired by Abdulwahab Alkebsi, Deputy Director of Programs at the Center for International Private Enterprise. He pointed out that the fact that 60% of the Iraqi and 50% of the KRI's population are under 20 represents both a great opportunity and a great challenge, as 35% of Iraq's youth are unemployed. Alkebsi drew attention to the fact that even university graduates often do not meet the requirements of the private sector job market and are unprepared for the positions that they will fill, a point that was underlined by Bayad Jamal of the Bayad Corporation and AUIS Alumnus, who added that the private sector's development has been further hampered by a lack of infrastructure and fiscal policy. Abdulrazzaq Albdul Jalil Al Essa, Iraqi Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research and Acting Minister of Finance, mentioned the importance of universities being politically independent, so that graduates can be appointed based on their skills and not on their political affiliation. Christine van den Toorn, Director of IRIS at AUIS, named the measures taken by AUIS to reach an 80-95% employment rate of graduates over the past few years, namely a progressive curriculum that teaches critical thinking, a career services centre, and connecting students to companies through internships and partnerships. Mahdi Alaq, Iraqi General Secretary of the Council of Ministers, pointed out the importance of increasing the prestige of work in the private sector by providing its employees with the same benefits and merits as government workers. Talabani spoke again on this panel, drawing attention to the "astounding bureaucracy" that has hampered development in the KRI, with the registration of a company taking up to 42 working days and many separate steps, each of which allows for potential corruption. Douglas Silliman, the US Ambassador to Iraq, underlined this by stating that, two years ago, it took 150 signatures

– including ten signatures from the same official – to purchase land for a company. Today, this number has been reduced to 75 signatures; however, it still takes two to three years to get approval.

After this panel, Jane Arraf from NPR moderated a conversation with General Talib Shaghathi, Head of the Counter Terrorism Service, Iraqi Security Forces, and Akeel Abbas, professor at AUIS. General Shaghathi came from the battlefield in Mosul to provide a first-hand account of the situation there, stating that both the operation and the protection of civilians were going well. Concerning the issue of human rights abuses committed by members of the Iraqi security forces, he claimed that only three cases have been reported, all of which have been prosecuted. Shaghathi also mentioned human rights awareness training that the counterterrorism forces receive. Besides this, he refuted the claims of several thousand being killed or wounded in battle as "overstated". Abbas pointed out that the participation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces is important, but also that it has also increased sectarian tensions.

The last panel dealt with US foreign policy in the Middle East, and was chaired by John Jenkins, Senior Director of IISS. All of the panellists agreed that Trump's foreign policy regarding Iraq and the region has yet to be determined, but several key observations were made during this panel. Susan Glasser, the Senior International Affairs Correspondent for Politico argued that Trump's policies revolve around his desire to win and to be the first president to accomplish what others have failed to do, and that he prioritises this need over policy outcomes. Peter Bergman, National Security Analyst at CNN, mentioned some of his expectations for Trump's policies regarding the region. He expects that US policy towards Saudi Arabia will remain the same, as well as Iran, as Defence Secretary Mattis has stated that the Iran nuclear deal should remain, however, he expects an increase in US forces in Afghanistan. Nabil Fahmy, the former Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that Trump's policies are staunchly anti-terror and anti-Iran and he is very much pushing

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

SYRIA/IRAQ

NILS WÖRMER

March 2017

www.kas.de

www.kas.de/syrien-irak

for US allies to carry their share in alliances. Jon Alterman, Senior Vice President at the Center for Strategies and International Studies, stated that this administration could be facing a crisis in the next six months, especially regarding Iran. He also mentioned that Trump's style of administration is based on his experience as a reality TV star, and that he is constantly trying to improve his performance and ratings. Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute outlined two models that the Trump administration could form regarding foreign policy; one where he leaves foreign policy to his national security team, and only intervenes occasionally on topics that catch his interest, and the other in which he actually sets the agenda and his experts will constantly be playing catch up. However, despite these two models, the Trump administration's priorities include defeating ISIS and pushing back Iran, which could possibly result in a conflict in Iraq or the KRI.