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Commentary

THE GULF'S STAKE IN STRONGER ARAB STATES

The Cases of Lebanon, Syria & Iraq

Dr Lina Khatib

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The Gulf has a direct stake in the emergence of stronger, more capable, and more autonomous states in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Recent history is a reminder that weak or contested states in the Levant create instability beyond their borders, and they make sustained political cooperation, economic integration, and predictable state-to-state relations much harder. As Gulf countries benefit from a more stable Arab regional order, reinforcing state resilience in these three countries is a strategic investment.

Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq have all struggled with weakened state authority. In Lebanon, state institutions have long coexisted with powerful political, military, and social structures operating partly outside their authority, limiting the state's ability to exercise sovereignty consistently. Recently, however, the country has been taking measures to restore and strengthen state authority and institutions.

The war in Syria fractured territorial control, hollowed out institutions, displaced populations, and weakened the relationship between citizens and the state. Currently, the country is tackling the dual challenge of reconstruction in the physical sense alongside rebuilding functioning institutions to establish a more durable state-society relationship, whereby the state can deliver to its people.

In Iraq, armed political and economic networks have become embedded within parts of the formal state itself, constraining the autonomy and authority of its institutions. This has consequently compromised the state's efforts to exercise a monopoly over arms and to fight corruption. The Iraqi state is currently implementing measures to tackle those issues.

These are primarily domestic challenges, but they also have important implications for the Gulf. Weak or contested states reduce the predictability of regional politics and make durable state-to-state relations more difficult to build. They complicate investment decisions, constrain economic cooperation, and create recurring demands for external mediation and crisis management. They also limit the ability of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq to participate as effective and autonomous partners in wider Arab political and economic initiatives.

Ongoing geopolitical shifts in the Middle East carry opportunities for these three countries. Lebanon is taking serious steps to join international trade corridors such as the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). Syria and Iraq are discussing ambitious plans for an oil pipeline. Additionally, there is growing momentum among the business leaders of these countries toward increasing economic cooperation across their borders. There are also efforts in the three countries to restore the state's position as the sole representative of the nation in international affairs, after decades of compromised sovereignty.

This, in turn, creates an opportunity for a different Gulf relationship with the Levant.

Rather than primarily viewing Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq as arenas of instability, competition, or crisis, the Gulf can engage with them as Arab states whose stronger institutions would contribute to a regional order characterized by greater cooperation.

Gulf actors are already playing an important role in supporting institutional capacity over individual political actors in all three countries by backing reforms that improve governance and administrative effectiveness. The Gulf's economic engagement with the Levant has also shifted away from the provision of aid to prioritizing investment and trade. This achieves two important goals simultaneously. In the first place, it supports the target countries' economies, contributing to stability and strengthening the path toward prosperity. Economic connectivity also increases state resilience. At the same time, targeted investment strengthens legitimate state structures.

Support for these processes also advances Gulf interests, as more capable states make for more reliable political, security, and economic partners. They reduce the need for repeated Gulf intervention in crises, create more predictable environments for investment and trade, and strengthen prospects for regional connectivity. This, in turn, would benefit the Gulf's own economic and institutional growth goals in sectors where regional complementarity is essential, such as artificial intelligence (AI). The advantages of stronger Arab states are not limited to the individual states in question but are a regional gain.

About the Author



Dr Lina Khatib is Director of Global Policy and Systemic Risks at the Security Futures Lab at the Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford. She is an expert on geopolitics and security and has been Middle East director at Chatham House, Carnegie, Stanford University, and SOAS. She is also a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative, an associate fellow at Chatham House, and on the advisory boards of the Iraq and Syria Britain Business Councils.

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Author: Dr Lina Khatib
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