
Iraq and the new Mashreq (Levant) Project

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Introduction

Baghdad is preparing for the Jordanian King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's expected visit to Iraq for the fourth tripartite summit. Talks on the trilateral relations focus on the new Mashreq (Levant) project, which in less than three years have held three summits and now going to host the fourth one.

The new Mashreq project in formality is the economic project which work on oil transports, energy projects and trade routes but amid the presence of US, China, Russia and Europe that have more active presence and there are efforts to build new regional alliances, the new Mashreq project can become a different geopolitical project if succeeded.

The questions whether this project will be achieved or not? And if did happen what will be its impact on the Kurdistan region?

The new Mashreq

In 2019 former Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi initiated the idea for strong economic cooperation between Iraq, Jordan and Egypt and they held first summit in March 2019 in Cairo. The second summit was in New York and third one was in Amman and the fourth scheduled to take place in Baghdad. Iraqi PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi during his visit to Washington discussed the new Mashreq project but he also mentioned in other occasions and stated as this is the government project [\[1\]](#). The new Mashreq originally was defined by the world bank in 2014 a group of seven Middle Eastern Countries appears to be well positioned to benefit from dynamic gains of integration given the geographical proximity to major markets [\[2\]](#).

The new Levant that Kadhimi proposed can be smaller version of what world bank defined. Kadhimi's new Mashreq is to integrate economic geography which is 1529109 square kilometers and contains more 156 million population, connects the Gulf with Mediterranean and Red Sea. According to the published information new Levant of Kadhimi and trilateral relations between Jordan, Egypt and Iraq have two important dimensions:

First: Economic dimension

The first thing in this regard to be discussed here is resume talks over Basra-Aqaba oil pipeline which Baghdad and Amman signed a framework agreement for the pipeline in 2013. The pipeline will be divided into two separate phases. The first phase from Rumaila in southern Iraq to Haditha in the western Iraqi province of al-Anbar, then from Anbar to Aqaba port on the Red Sea, designed to carry 2.25 million barrels per day (bpd). The second phase from Haditha to Aqaba with a capacity of 1 million bpd. But the political, security and economic factors have delayed the project [\[3\]](#).

Part of this economic cooperation is to sell oil for cheaper price to Jordan which according to some sources will be \$16 less than global prices, and 150k bpd will be allocated for Jordan out from 1 million bpd from Haditha to Aqaba [\[4\]](#). Also Egypt through "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement will strengthen cooperation ties with Iraq. Egyptian PM last year had visited Iraq and said "There is an agreement in principle between the two countries on the speed of activating the mechanism of oil for reconstruction" and during that visit Iraq and Egypt signed 15 memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and a program of cooperation in various fields. [\[5\]](#)

Another important issue is the Iraq and Jordan electrical interconnection deal and import electricity from Egypt to Iraq. The Iraqi and Jordanian governments in 2020 signed a contract to connect their electrical networks. And according to the

contract Jordan will provide Iraq in the first phase of the project with 1000 gigawatt hours annually in 2022 to a power station in al-Qaim -Anbar[6]. Jordan itself imports electricity from Egypt and via the electricity network between Iraq and Jordan with a length of about 300km Iraq will import electricity from Egypt. The Egyptian government boasts that it has achieved a surplus in power production amounting to about 25 megawatts over domestic consumption needs[7].

Activate port-land route in between the three countries that connects Baghdad, Amman and Cairo to facilitate the movement of workers and students is another part of the deal. Egyptian transportation minister stated the Arab Union Superjet Company, on the Egyptian side, and each of the Jordanian Jet companies, and the Iraqi delegations and private travelers agreed on the internal and international road transport and the price of a passenger ticket of \$ 130, including the price of the ferry between the ports of Nuweiba and Aqaba[8]. This will be a great facilitation for traveling between the three countries.

Second: Political dimension

The Jordanian Royal Hashemite Court (RHC) after third Mashreq summit made a statement and said " The summit, which is being held for the third time, is to strengthen economic, trade and investment cooperation between Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, in addition to discussing regional issues." [9]

Also PM Kadhimi ahead of the summit said that they will discuss regional developments as well. And in New York summit the three countries had discussed the Palestinian issue. Therefore talks between the three it has political dimension and if the new Levant succeeded then is likely to shape security dimension too.

The three leaders agreed to establish an executive secretariat for the development of the tripartite coordination mechanism, "to be based annually in rotation in one of the three countries, and to be based for a year from the date of this meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" in Jordan [10].

The new Mashreq as geopolitical project

The new Levant or in other words the trilateral relations between Egypt, Jordan and Iraq it will be meaningful when seen as text of alliance, political and economic rivalries in the Middle East. In the past decade China and Russia have been trying a lot to leave their political and economic fingers in the Middle East and some of the European countries especially France is racing for that too. The Russian military intervention in Syria and establishment of its base in the Middle East along with efforts to sell war and defense technologies to the Middle East countries are samples of the Kremlin efforts to play more role in the region. America's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, and decline of US commitment in protecting its allies under Trump administration and even suspend selling weapons to Saudi Arabia under Biden pushes the traditional allies look for new ways to protect their own security. This has created good opportunity for Russia and China to build their presence in the region. Russia with %19.3 imported arms in the region after US is second largest arms supplier to the Middle East and North Africa. And China with %2.5 is the sixth one in MENA. Russia is seeking for new arms market and China is trying to benefit from India-Pakistan conflicts, US and Iran tensions to invest in the coastline of these countries. Chinese support for Gwadar sear port in Pakistan, China's 25 years deal with Tehran and its efforts to make agreement with Iraq within "oil-for-reconstruction" are indicators of growing Chinese influence. In general America's shifts away from the Middle East created more space for China and Russia and this affected the polarity and at the regional level can increase political and economic conflicts among different blocs.

The Qatar-Pakistan-Turkey bloc is in relations with three major powers. And An Arab-Israeli bloc about to be formed and they are also seeking for a balance in their relations with three major powers. And there are talks about the Arab NATO

and century deal with the support of US, Israel with assistance from Russia is fighting Iran in Syria, and Saudi Arabia which is 75 years old ally of US, now is seeking for arms and explosives from Russia and is trying to develop its relations with China. The Iranian bloc is mixture of of Iranian state and several non-state actors is more in the camp of China and Russia. If the Iraq, Jordan and Egypt alliance succeeded and developed it has potential to become the fourth regional alliance in the Middle East!

Barriers for new Mashreq project

The Iraq, Jordan and Egypt steps for strong economic allinace can have important political and security outcomes as well. This is candidate for the fourth important alliance that about to be shaped and due to increasing role of major world actors and clashes of economic and political interests, the conflicts expected to increase. In general we can say that the trilateral relations of Egypt-Jordan and Iraq will create important opportunity to Iraq and put it on the new route to export energy and rely less on strait of hormuz and Turkish port.

It seems that Iraq in the long term through dividing export of Basra oil via jordan and some via Hormuz strait and export north oil via Turkey is to make balance between interests of Ankara, Tehran and alliance of new levant. The question here is Kadhimi going to stay? Will the Iraqi government work on this? Will the internal situation of Iraq stabilize or not?

The new levant will give that opportunity to Iraq can solve part of its electricity problem and reduce Washington pressures on its reliance on the Iranian energy. This is also an opportunity to improve relations with the Arab world, economic development and more independence to Baghdad. Iraq with young population and due to the presence of Najaf Shia authority is candidate to become main authority in the Shia world, and is likely that support of some of the major world powers it comes from this perspective and the Pope's visit to Iraq can be seen in this point of view. Although without more political and economic independence is not possible to make this happen. But if the new levant succeed will create such opportunity for Iraq. The question here Iran and its non-state actors proxies can make what kind of impact on the acting and policy of Iraqi government?

The increase economic cooperation between Jordan and Egypt means more market and economic opportunity for them, but moving their companies and labor force to Iraq will threaten Turkish and Iranian economic interests. A while ago Mohsen Rezayee secretary of the Iranian Expediency Discernment Council said that it does not make sense that we protect Iraq's security and economic achievement are for other countries!

In the Mashreq project Jordan see itself as connector. And this contradicts with the Turkish project to connect Iraq with the world and particularly the al- Faw- Turkish border road project. And clashes with Iran's intention to reach the mediterranean sea via Iraq and Syria.

Egypt through this project with large population can find market and can send labor force to Jordan and Iraq. And this is exactly on the contrary to the interests of Iran and Turkey which they see Iraq as important market. And politically Egypt will reach borders with Turkey which has created problems for Turkey in Libya and Mediterranean sea.

Conclusion

In general the new Mashreq can increase political and economic options for Iraq and empower Iraq among different blocs across the region. But due to weakness of Iraqi government, uncertainty in internal politics and external interferences raise doubts around the project to be achieved.

The new levant can become a sword with two heads for Kurdistan region. Economically will decrease role of KRG's corridor to link Iraq with Turkey, Iran and Syria. And if good political and security cooperation between Egypt, Iraq and

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[10] <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2020/08/25/jordan-egypt-iraq-cooperation>