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Policy Briefs

The Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi triangle: Reviving an Arab axis in changed circumstances

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Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi welcomed his two guests to the Baghdad of “peace and Arabism,” where they were slated to discuss economic and strategic integration. [Reuters]

The leaders of Jordan, Egypt and Iraq came together in Baghdad on 27 June 2021 for a much-anticipated meeting. The third summit between the three leaders since 2019, this one marked the first visit to Iraq by an Egyptian head of state since 1990. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi welcomed his two guests to the Baghdad of “peace and Arabism,” where they were slated to discuss economic and strategic integration.

The soaring rhetoric and ambitious goals of the summit recalled the ill-fated Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). Established in 1989 as an alliance between Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, the council collapsed in 1990 after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. This latest attempt to revive the old axis seems to be motivated by some of the same reasons as the old one, but will the new iteration fare any better than the ACC?

It is no secret that what unites the three countries is crisis, both political and economic. All three states suffer from high poverty and declining prosperity, with per capita GDPs that are substantially lower than their Middle Eastern peers like Turkey and Iran, to say nothing of the Gulf states. Jordan is facing crushing debt and negative growth rates and has been placed in an increasingly untenable position between Israeli intransigence in the West Bank and Jerusalem and the tide of Gulf Arab normalisation of ties with Israel. In addition to its economic woes, Egypt is currently embroiled in a tense standoff with Ethiopia over the latter’s insistence on moving ahead with the second filling stage of the Renaissance Dam. As for Iraq, it seems to be in a permanent

state of domestic and regional crisis. Riven by ethnic and sectarian rivalries, the weak central government is unable to restore a sense of Iraqi national identity or contain Iran's broad influence over matters of state.

In some ways, all three states were in a similarly precarious position in 1989, though the particulars differ. Egypt was straining under the impact of Sadat's economic liberalisation and the Arab boycott, and Jordan was no better off. Iraq had just emerged from eight years of war with Iran, burdened by debt and the pressing need for reconstruction. And then as now, the three states harboured varying degrees of resentment at what they saw as Gulf states' refusal to provide the assistance needed to surmount the economic and political challenges facing them.

But despite these historical echoes, conditions today are wholly different. Iraq was a leading Arab power in 1989, even after the Iran-Iraq war. Its confidence and military capabilities made it a credible threat in the region, in turn making the ACC a genuine potential counterweight to the Gulf Cooperation Council. There is no cognate in the revived axis. Even Egypt has lost much of its regional influence and standing over the last two decades. If the goal of the new alliance is, like that of the ACC, to pressure Arab Gulf states, none of its three members have the necessary political, economic or military weight. If, on the other hand, the goal is to stem Iranian influence in Iraq and the region—as it seems to be for al-Kadhimi—the likelihood of success is equally slim. Indeed, freeing the Iraqi state from Iranian influence currently looks near impossible without a grinding civil war.

In the end, the complex individual motives and objectives of the three states combined to produce a wan concluding statement that did not live up to the high hopes and ambitious statements that preceded the summit. After calling on Israel to choose peace and expressing support for Egypt in its conflict with Ethiopia, the three states expressed their intention to explore free movement for workers and tourists. The sole concrete achievement was an agreement to link the three countries' electrical grids, a project will take at least three years. No one knows what the intervening period may bring or how it will shape domestic developments or the larger regional landscape.

**This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available [here](#).*