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K n o w l e d g e f o r A l l

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Workshop No. 10

Mobilizing Diasporas and Gulf Private Investors for the Reconstruction of Syria and Lebanon

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

The collapse of the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria and the election of a new President and Prime Minister in Lebanon have opened a new political and possibly economic development phase in the two countries. In both cases, the Gulf countries are expected to respond rapidly with multiple cooperation initiatives.

Beyond agreements at the governmental level, the workshop intends to focus on the potential role of Syrian and Lebanese diasporas, in the Gulf as well as in Europe (including Turkey) and the rest of the world. These diasporas are numerically very large (in the case of Lebanon, larger than the resident population in the country itself; in the case of Syria equaling about 50% of the national population according to many estimates), and in many cases economically well integrated in their respective host countries.

3. Context

MENA has been a hotbed of regional conflicts almost without interruption since the end of World War II. Notwithstanding the launch of several regional integration schemes agreed at various points in time between all or some of the region's governments, very

little regional trade integration has taken place. Integration approaches relying primarily on government-to-government agreements systematically fell foul to subsequent political conflicts and have failed to generate appreciable results.

At the beginning of the oil boom era (1970s) it appeared that closer regional integration might be brought about by movement of (largely professionals or skilled) people from the more densely inhabited, but less oil endowed countries to the oil-rich but population poorer countries, notably in the Gulf, in need of professional skills.

The GCC was formed as Gulf-only integration scheme, and its member countries have pursued closer economic ties with the United States, Europe and - increasingly important – Asia, rather than with regional neighbors. The growing influence of Iran over the Assad regime in Syria, the Hizballah in Lebanon, and on successive Iraqi governments after the demise of the Saddam Hussein regime further accentuated the difficulty in relations between the GCC countries and the Levant in particular.

The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring led to a major destruction of the country's economy and turned half of the population into refugees in neighboring or distant countries, or internally displaced persons. In Lebanon, inability to steer a nationally agreed political course has hindered economic development and led to progressive national decline, culminating in the disastrous explosion of 2'750 tons of ammonium nitrate in the port of Beirut in 2020 with consequent adverse economic repercussions.

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria is potentially a turning point for the entire region, and in particular for Lebanon, the two countries being closely linked economically and politically. Historically, ties between Syria and the Gulf countries – in particular Saudi Arabia – have also been very close, including because of personal and family links.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the GCC countries' reaction to the new political situation in Syria has been swift and strongly supportive: the new leader of Syria, Ahmed al Sharaa, was born in Riyadh (in 1982) where his father worked as petroleum engineer at the Ministry of Petroleum. Indeed, several initiatives have been taken to establish economic cooperation between Syria and in particular Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

However, the huge task of reconstructing Syria, facilitating the return of millions of refugees from Turkey and Lebanon, and creating conditions more favorable to economic growth in Lebanon and the rest of the region is such that, on their own, promised government initiatives are unlikely to be sufficient without the mobilization of diasporas and their business networks in the region as well as, possibly, from outside the region (Germany and Turkey are obvious examples). The engagement of private actors from the Gulf as well as from interested countries will also be called for.

For the GCC, these developments open the door to a new perspective of regional development, at a time when the collapse of globalization and increasing subordination of trade to security considerations threaten to confront their development strategy with increasingly intractable trade-offs and conflicting requests from trade partners and security providers.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The objective of the workshop is to provide a strategic perspective for the involvement of diasporas and the private sector in the next phase of the development of the Levant – hopefully a Levant Renaissance.

Policy indications for governments to encourage the engagement of diasporas and the private sector are also important potential outcomes of the workshop.

Diasporas have been important economic actors already in the past – both distant and recent. Remittances have played a crucial role in the survival of family members left behind, and indirectly in supporting local economic activities in agriculture and services. Family and other connections have been a crucial facilitating tool to support emigration and relative success in destination (host) countries. Exploring the role of diasporas, especially in recent history, is an important foundation to discussing their potential role in the future.

The capabilities of diasporas are an important topic for research and discussion. Diasporas encompass entrepreneurs with various degrees of success and more or less significant business contacts abroad, that may catalyze the involvement of other private sector entrepreneurs – from the Gulf or elsewhere in the world. Diasporas also encompass individual managers or professionals who may have the capability of mobilizing their respective companies/institutions or transfer precious scientific/technological/managerial know-how to support the reconstruction of their countries of origin.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

Expected paper proposals may focus on the numerical dimension, level of integration in the host country, economic capabilities of either the Lebanese or Syrian diaspora in any one or more GCC countries, or countries elsewhere in the world.

- Dimension of the diasporas: there is considerable uncertainty and divergence of estimates concerning the numerical dimension of diasporas, especially in countries in which immigration from the Levant dates from a more distant past. We presume that interest should be concentrated on people that have left their countries in the past 50 years either for economic reasons or to escape from hostilities. Papers discussing the dimension and composition of diasporas in different receiving countries are welcome.

- The level of integration of diasporas in the host countries is important as it influences the desire for returning to the country of origin and also - possibly more importantly- the ability to contribute newly acquired financial or human capital that may contribute to a new phase of development of the country of origin. Thirdly, business ties between the diaspora and the private sector in the host country may set in motion a multiplier effect, facilitating investment by the latter.
- In the context of the workshop, case studies of individual diaspora entrepreneurs, or variously defined diaspora subgroups, may also be relevant and welcome.

Papers may also focus on government policies to encourage the mobilization of diasporas for the reconstruction of their countries of origin. There is a very broad spectrum of policies that are relevant in this respect, from treatment of property rights to credit and monetary policies, treatment of foreign direct investment, specific cooperation schemes e.g. to rebuild necessary infrastructure or real estate, and more. Papers may focus on one aspect or policy or adopt a broader approach.

Finally, papers on the response of the governments of countries hosting large and recent diasporas with respect to various potential forms of cooperation with Lebanon and Syria towards reconstruction and a new phase of development are also important, including discussing political conditions that may be attached in some cases.

6. Publication Plans

We aim at publishing a book or special journal issue, collecting all papers that will be discussed at the workshop. The workshop directors have working relationships with several publishers (Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, I.B. Tauris, Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge and more) and Journals. We will decide in due course of time which is the preferable outlet for the book.

Following the workshop at Cambridge, authors will be requested to review their papers and submit final versions by December 2026. The goal is to publish by Summer 2027.

7. Workshop Directors

Giacomo Luciani teaches at the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po (since 2010), and at the University of Geneva in the Master of Commodity Trading (since 2008). From 2008 to 2023 he also taught at the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and in 2010-13 he was Global Scholar at Princeton University. His latest publications include:

- *When can Oil Economies be deemed Sustainable?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021)
Editor and contributor (with T. Moerenhout) (Open access: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-15-5728-6>)
- *Combining Economic and Political Development - The Experience of MENA* (Brill 2017) Editor and contributor (Open access: <http://poldev.revues.org/2239>)

Samir Makdisi is emeritus professor of Economics and served as deputy president of AUB from 1993-98. He was founding director of AUB's Institute of Financial Economics (1984-2007) and has published seminal works on democracy, economics, and development in the Arab world. He was Lebanon's Minister of Economy and Trade in 1992. His latest publications include:

- *Aftershock of the Arab Uprisings: Reconstruction, National Peace and Democratic Change* (Routledge 2023) Editor and contributor (with R.Soto)
- *Democratic Transitions in the Arab World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) Editor and contributor (with I. Elbadawi).