



■ POLICY BRIEF

THE LEVANT CORRIDOR: *Rebuilding Trade between Iraq, Syria and Lebanon*

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■ AUTHORS

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (IRIS)

DR. MAC SKELTON

Executive Director, Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

ABDULLA AL-KALISY

Senior Researcher, Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

DR. ZMKAN ALI SALEEM

Senior Fellow, Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), American University of Iraq, Sulaimani; Lecturer in International Relations, University of Sulaimani

ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (IFI)

DR. JOSEPH BAHOUT

Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), American University of Beirut (AUB)

YEGHIA TASHJIAN

Regional and International Affairs Cluster Coordinator, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), American University of Beirut (AUB)

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RESEARCH PARTNERS



American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
Institute of Regional &
International Studies

Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)
American University of Iraq, Sulaimani



ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة والشؤون الدولية
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI)
American University of Beirut

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OMRAN
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Omran Center for Strategic Studies

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Executive Summary

This policy brief presents findings from an ongoing XCEPT research project examining the emerging trade pathway linking Iraq to Syrian and Lebanese ports on the Mediterranean. For more than a decade, analysis of this geography has focused on the movement of weapons, fighters and illicit goods along a land bridge extending Iran's reach toward the Mediterranean. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 broke the land bridge at its center, bringing to power a Syrian government keen to develop the country's role as a regional transit hub. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz in 2026 then forced Iraq to reroute oil exports overland through Syria. Damascus welcomed the convoys as an opportunity to advance its transit ambitions, while Lebanon has sought a share of the emerging energy trade. The prospect of a "Levant Corridor" built around expanded trade ties has begun to take shape; however, significant challenges remain.

Drawing on 71 interviews with policymakers, border officials, traders and transport operators across the three countries, this brief develops a pathway forward to improve overland transport infrastructures. Interviewees described delays of days or weeks at border crossings, inadequate inspection and logistics facilities, and deteriorating roads. The fiscal and political pressures facing all three governments leave little scope to upgrade every crossing at once. We therefore argue that investment should be concentrated on the crossings most important to the corridor, with attention to the security and political conditions along each route. The durability of the Levant Corridor will ultimately require Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut to align their infrastructure priorities, particularly at crossings where investment on one side depends on corresponding work on the other. This brief focuses on those infrastructure decisions. Customs procedures, documentation requirements and payment systems will be the focus of the next brief in this series.

Introduction

In April 2026, convoys of Iraqi oil tankers began crossing into Syria via the Al-Waleed/Al-Tanf crossing in Anbar Province and the Al-Rabia/Al-Yarubiyah crossing in Nineveh Province.¹ With the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed amid the US-Israeli war against Iran, Iraq moved forward with overland export routes even though the infrastructure at the border crossings was nowhere close to ready for this volume of trade. Between April and late September, at least 2.1 million tonnes of Iraqi fuel oil reached Syria's Baniyas port by truck. In relative terms the volumes are minor, amounting to only a few days of the roughly 3.3 million barrels per day that Iraq shipped through the Gulf before the closure.² Their significance lies in the pathway they opened, as the convoys carved out an alternative to a chokepoint that had carried nearly all of Iraq's exports and reopened crossings through which broader trade had already begun to move. In June, the head of Iraq's Parliamentary Committee on Border Points underscored these infrastructural gaps in an interview for this report:

“With the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the halt of Iraq’s maritime exports and imports, Iraq was forced to find other crossings through which to export its goods or import through them, and Syria was the only country with which we had three main land border crossings, so the move was towards activating these crossings. But even today, if you go to Al-Waleed or Al-Rabia, the crossings are still in disrepair. The buildings have

*nothing in them and they are working out of caravans and the like”.*³

Syrian authorities supported the Iraqi oil convoys despite equally vexing infrastructural deficits on their side of the border, as they saw the crisis as an opportunity to bolster the country's standing as a regional transit hub. Preparations to reopen the crossings had in fact been underway prior to the Hormuz closure. In February 2026, the Iraqi government was reported to be rehabilitating both crossings with the aim of restoring modest levels of bilateral trade with Syria.⁴ None of the authorities involved could have anticipated the miles-long convoys that would start arriving just weeks later.

As the war pressed on for months and the volume of Iraqi oil passing overland through Syria increased, the economic geography of the region started to change and drew the attention of neighboring states. Lebanon hoped to gain a share of the emerging energy traffic. In July 2026, a high-level delegation from Beirut led by the Lebanese Prime Minister visited Iraq with the aim of encouraging Baghdad to include Lebanon in its energy export pathways. Lebanon's Energy Minister underscored this point during the Baghdad visit: “Iraq could use oil storage facilities in Lebanon, particularly in Tripoli, for exports, as it is currently doing in Syria”.⁵ Lebanese authorities simultaneously engaged in constant direct talks with Syrian counterparts, emphasizing that the ports of Tripoli and Beirut should be fully integrated into Damascus' economic strategy.

1. Qadir, Hastyar. “Iraq’s Rabia Border Crossing with Syria Reopens after 12 Years”. Rudaw, 2026. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/categories/iraq/952220>; Arab News. “Iraq to Export Oil through Syria’s Baniyas Port amid Regional Conflict”. Arab News, 2026.

<https://www.arabnews.com/middle-east/iraq-to-export-oil-through-syrias-baniyas-port-amid-regional-conflict-2638561>.

2. Mahmoud, Sinan. “Iraq Imports Petrol through Syria in Another US-Backed Step towards Closer Ties”. The National News, 2026.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/09/27/iraq-syria-oil/>; “Iraq Transports Its Oil through Strait of Hormuz as US-Iran War Chokes Exports”. The National News, 2026.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/energy/2026/10/04/iraq-transport-its-oil-past-hormuz-for-first-time-in-decades-as-war-with-iran-chokes-exports/>

3. Interview conducted with the Head of the Iraqi Parliamentary Committee on Border Points and the Protection of National Product, 9 June 2026.

4. Iraq News Agency. “Border Crossings Announce the Commencement of Rehabilitation Work on the Rabia Border Crossing in Nineveh”. Iraq News Agency, 2026.

<https://ina.iq/en/local/45710-border-crossings-announce-the-commencement-of-rehabilitation-work-on-the-rabia-border-crossing-in-nineveh.html>.

5. Mahmoud, Sinan. “Lebanon Seeks Closer Economic Ties with Iraq as PMs Meet”. The National News, 2026.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/07/26/lebanons-prime-minister-visits-iraq-for-talks-on-fuel-oil-and-economic-co-operation/>.

The Syrian side was receptive. In a June 2026 televised interview, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa reflected this vision:

*“Beirut is the maritime outlet for Damascus, and Tripoli is the maritime outlet for Homs. Syria has now begun to form a strategic node of connection, regional and international as well, between East and West, and the Mediterranean coasts have taken on enormous importance for commercial transport and supply chains. Lebanon must take advantage of this situation”.*⁶

The common emphasis on economic integration across stakeholders in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut may come as a surprise to regional analysts who have grown accustomed to viewing these three countries through the lens of security.⁷ For over a decade, the geography linking Iraq, Syria and Lebanon was often discussed in policy circles less as a trading space than as an extension of Tehran’s reach toward the Mediterranean. Analysts described the emergence of a continuous “land bridge” through which the IRGC channeled weapons and coordinated with pro-Iran armed groups such as the PMF in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁸ The discourse had its reasons. The rise of ISIS in 2014 led to the formal closure of the land crossings between Iraq and Syria, and overland trade effectively ceased for a period of five years until 2019. Informal pathways and smuggling routes remained active, however, with armed groups and their cross-border networks substituting for state institutions and formal

commerce.⁹ It became the default to think of these borderlands as smuggling economies.

The oil convoys illustrate how much of that geography has been transformed over the past two years. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 broke Iran’s land bridge to the Mediterranean at its center, bringing to power a fledgling Syrian government diametrically opposed to Iran but in desperate need of economic growth and regional cooperation.¹⁰ In an attempt to attract external financing, Damascus started championing its strategic geography as the linchpin of its growth strategy. But not all regional neighbors were immediately convinced they wanted to align with this vision. While Damascus’ plan for enhanced north–south transit routes — linking Syria to Türkiye, Jordan and Saudi Arabia through the country’s major population centers — quickly gained traction and support from Ankara and Riyadh,¹¹ the east–west route would prove more complex. In the early months of 2025, the Iraqi government looked towards the new Syrian authorities, many of whom had fought for extremist groups in Iraq, with deep suspicion. Diplomatic engagement proceeded slowly, with very gradual and cautious exchanges of delegations focused on addressing ISIS remnants. The Hormuz crisis has shifted the picture. An official in Iraq’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed to the research team: “Iraq is heading towards developing its relations with Syria by linking economics to politics, not politics to economics.” He continued, “we have problems with them, yes, but we have shared interests”.¹²

6. Al-Sharaa made the remarks in a televised interview with Tony Khalife on Al Mashhad, June 2026. See “The Economy of Two Sister Nations: Syria and Lebanon Reorder Their Interests”. Noon Post, 2026. <https://www.noonpost.com/en/379999/>.

7. See for example Huber, Daniela, and Eckart Woertz. “Resilience, Conflict and Areas of Limited Statehood in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria”. *Democratization* 28, no. 7 (2021): 1261–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1940967>.

8. Al-Shakeri, Hayder, and Renad Mansour. How Supply Chains Fuel Transnational Conflict in the Middle East. Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) Research Project. Chatham House, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/11/how-supply-chains-fuel-transnational-conflict-middle-east>; Khatib, Lina. The Degradation of Iran’s Proxy Model. Middle East Initiative. Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center, 2026. https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/Belfer_%20Degradation%20of%20Iran%20Proxy%20Model_2.1.pdf.

9. Hasan, Harith, and Kheder Khaddour. The Transformation of the Iraqi–Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/03/the-transformation-of-the-iraqi-syrian-border-from-a-national-to-a-regional-frontier>.

10. Cafiero, Giorgio. Pragmatism Shapes Iraq’s Position Toward Post-Assad Syria. Arab Center Washington DC, 2025. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/pragmatism-shapes-iraqs-position-toward-post-assad-syria/>.

11. Gumrukcu, Tuvan. “Turkey and Saudi Arabia Aim to Build a Rail Link with Jordan and Syria, Minister Says”. Reuters, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-saudi-arabia-aim-build-rail-link-with-jordan-syria-minister-says-2026-06-14/>.

12. Interview conducted with an official at the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 June 2026.

■ REFRAMING THE DEBATE

Syria's connectivity and the overlapping regional stakeholders have attracted growing attention from academics and policy analysts over the past year.¹³ With the new government in Damascus highlighting its potential to serve as a regional transit hub, much of the ensuing analysis has approached the subject through the lens of large-scale external financing, examining Gulf, Turkish and international actors that are prepared to invest in Syrian institutions, roads and ports.¹⁴ However, decisions on financing made in powerful capitals are only one level at which trade corridors are being shaped. A second level consists of the decisions taken in Damascus as well as neighboring capitals — for our purposes Baghdad and Beirut — over which crossings and routes to prioritize for infrastructure investment, and the day-to-day management of shared crossings, customs procedures and transit.

An ongoing XCEPT research project led by the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, in partnership with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut and the Omran Center in Damascus, focuses on the east–west route linking Iraq to the Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon. Throughout this brief we refer to this route as the “Levant Corridor.” The term is our own, describing an interconnected economic geography taking shape across the three countries, rather than a formally announced program or

investment package. In order to understand the emergence of this corridor and its prospects for long-term durability, the research team has conducted fieldwork in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Interviews (71 to date) have engaged a wide range of stakeholders such as traders, truck drivers, clearing agents, policymakers, and border agents at key crossings between Iraq and Syria and Syria and Lebanon. Our aim is to explore whether a corridor that was securitized for more than a decade can successfully and durably transition towards formal economic exchange.

The fiscal and political constraints of all three countries leave little room for sweeping approaches to trade integration.¹⁵ These constraints are twofold. The first is fiscal. Infrastructure costs money, and none of the three governments is currently in a position to commit large sums. A Syrian official responsible for one of the main crossings with Iraq noted that the “volume of funding available for rehabilitating the infrastructure at the Al-Yarubiyah crossing and the rest of the crossings is small and limited” and that there were “no joint financing arrangements” with Iraq.¹⁶ As the subsequent sections will show, data from each of the three countries underscores similar financial constraints.

13. Marks, Jesse, and Nicholas Lyall. “The Road Through Damascus: How Syria Can Capitalize on the Post-Hormuz Economy”. *Foreign Affairs*, 2026. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/road-through-damascus>; Hall, Natasha. “With the Fall of Assad, Can Syria Rise?” *Survival* 67, no. 1 (2025): 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2459015>.

14. See for example Kardas, Saban. “Turkey’s Long Game in Syria: Moving beyond Ascendancy”. *Middle East Policy* 32 (2025): 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12807>; Pinfold, Rob Geist. “Myth Busting in a Post-Assad Syria”. *Middle East Policy* 32 (2025): 20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12799>.

15. See Barnes-Dacey, Julien. “A Year after Assad: The Search for Syria’s Future”. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2026.

<https://ecfr.eu/article/a-year-after-assad-the-search-for-syrias-future/>; Rached, Kardo, Hogr Tarkhani, and Halo Salh. “Fractured Sovereignty: The Decline of State Authority in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen”. *Policy Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2026): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.23.1.ra1>; Hamilton, Alexander. *The Political Economy of Economic Policy in Iraq*. Vol. 32. LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series. LSE Middle East Centre, 2020. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104086/>.

16. Interview conducted with an official at the Al-Yarubiyah crossing, 15 August 2026.

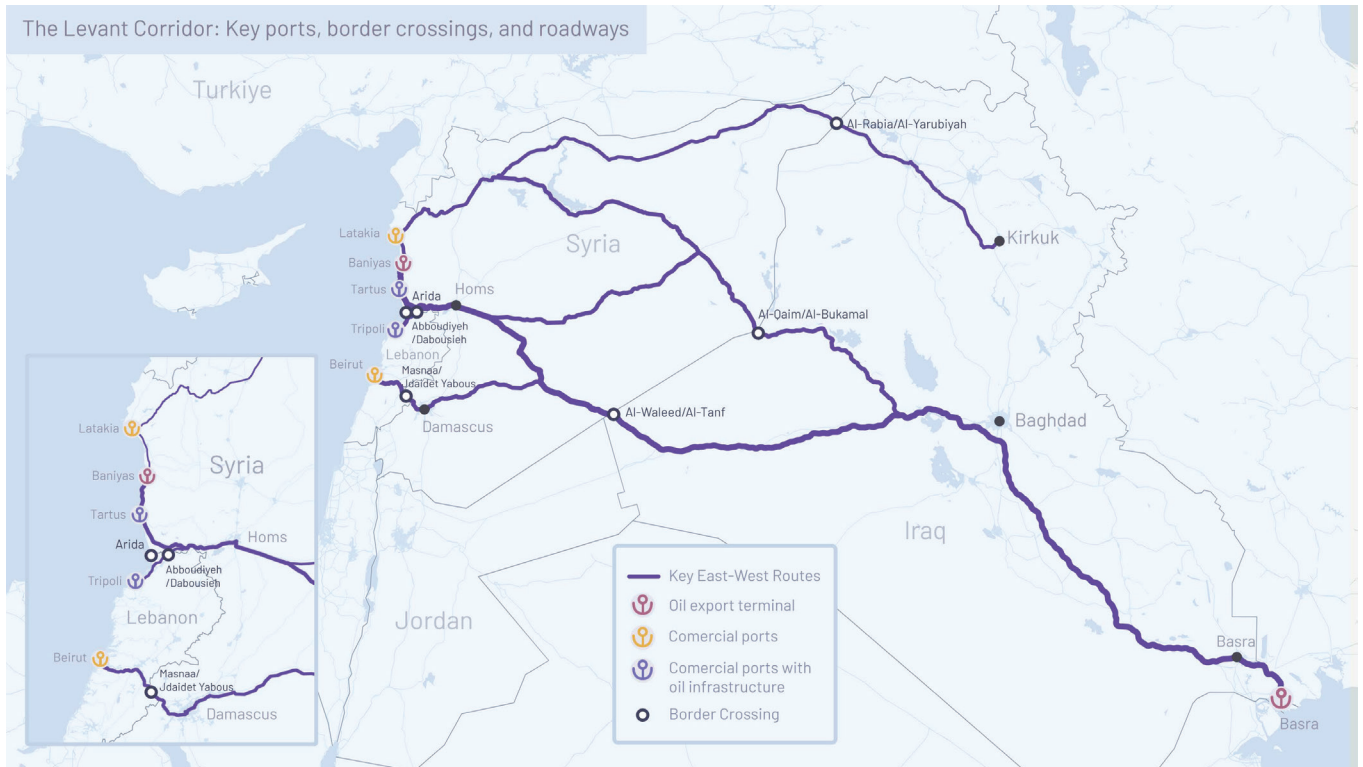


Figure 1 Main border crossings and ports linking Iraq, Syria and Lebanon

The second constraint concerns the evolving strategic importance of the east–west route itself. Damascus committed early to the transit corridor running through its major population centers toward Türkiye, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and it is this axis that has attracted central planning attention and the backing of Ankara and Riyadh. Because the east–west route remains secondary in the eyes of many Syrian officials, Damascus’ actual capacity to invest economic and political capital into infrastructure in coordination with Baghdad and Beirut is less than its rhetoric about becoming a regional transit hub might suggest.

These constraints do not foreclose the corridor’s development, but they do impose a discipline of sequence and prioritization. Since none of the three governments can fund every crossing at adequate levels, the corridor that emerges will reflect the investments they jointly prioritize now. The sections that follow therefore examine where infrastructural coordination and investment matter most given the commercial and political conditions along each border.

■ INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITIES AT THE IRAQ–SYRIA BORDER

“The most important thing we need to increase trade between us and Syria is the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development of the border crossings, as well as equipping these crossings with additional scanners and additional weighbridges so that they can receive large numbers, and also the electronic exchange of data between us and them”.

■ Omar Al-Waeli, Head of the Border Points Commission, Government of Iraq ¹⁷

The current crisis brought on by the Hormuz closure has given Baghdad and Damascus an alignment of incentives. However, this also forms part of a vision on both sides of the border that the Iraq-Syria crossings will take on a significant portion of trade in both countries. Al-Waeli told the research team, “We expect, according to precise data, that our crossings with Syria will be the most prominent and the most significant in terms of trade, economic exchange, and transit”.¹⁸ These expectations likely concern overland transit traffic rather than bilateral trade volumes. Iraq’s imports remain dominated by China (\$16 billion in 2024), Türkiye (\$13 billion), India (\$3.3 billion), Brazil (\$1.9 billion) and Saudi Arabia (\$1.7 billion), and Syria is unlikely to rival these partners in commercial terms.¹⁹ The significance of the crossings lies in the transit function they perform, carrying goods from a range of origins into Iraq and Iraqi exports toward the Mediterranean. The momentum towards economic integration — and beyond oil towards a broader array of sectors — will only sustain itself if the necessary infrastructures are in place to handle higher trade volumes. Infrastructural deficits became apparent as soon as the Iraq–Syria oil trade began. An official at Syria’s General Authority for Border Crossings and Customs noted that “most of the crossings were destroyed due to military battles, or had old infrastructure like the Al-Tanf crossing.”

When they received instructions from Damascus to open the crossing with Iraq, they had to send caravans and staff to work “within 48 hours to organize commercial work”.²⁰

The result has been congestion and long wait times en route to the Iraq-Syria border, compounded by backlogs at Syria’s Baniyas port. The procedures and checks on the Iraqi side prolong the process further. One oil tanker driver interviewed for this project described a routine run from Baghdad’s Dora refinery to Al-Waleed, a drive of ten to twelve hours that in practice takes the better part of a week.²¹ At the refinery, six to seven hours go to loading and documentation, as each opening of the tanker is secured with coded seals issued by the Ministry of Oil and the paperwork receives the stamp of Iraq’s State Organization for Marketing of Oil (SOMO). Customs documentation then takes two to three days to finalize. While it is processed, drivers wait at home or in parking areas along the highway, following a Facebook group where document-processing schedules are posted. The driver we interviewed waits in Fallujah, which lies along the route west, and sets out for the border once the group confirms that his papers are ready. Documents must then be stamped at three or four checkpoints along the highway, while the crossing itself typically takes several hours, and longer when

17. Interview conducted with Omar Al-Waeli, Head of the Border Points Commission in Iraq, 24 May 2026.

18. Interview conducted with Omar Al-Waeli, Head of the Border Points Commission in Iraq, 24 May 2026.

19. In 2024, Iraq’s top exports were crude petroleum (\$97.9 billion) and refined petroleum (\$8.9 billion), with China (\$38.3 billion), India (\$29.9 billion), South Korea (\$9 billion), the United States (\$7.7 billion) and Greece (\$5.4 billion) as the leading destinations. The top import origins were China (\$16 billion), Türkiye (\$13 billion), India (\$3.3 billion), Brazil (\$1.9 billion) and Saudi Arabia (\$1.7 billion). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. “Iraq (IRQ) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners”. OEC, 2024. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/irq>.

20. Interview conducted with the Head of Public Relations at the Syrian General Authority for Border Crossings and Customs, 11 June 2026.

21. Interview conducted with Iraqi oil truck driver, 15 October 2026.

tankers are queued. (These procedures, and the possibilities for streamlining them, will be the focus of the second policy brief in this series).

As Baghdad and Damascus engage in talks to improve connectivity, our interviews indicate that the route via the Al-Waleed/Al-Tanf crossing is where much of the effort should concentrate. The southernmost of the three crossings, it sits on the highway that provides the most direct route between Baghdad and Damascus. It already carries the tanker convoys that the Hormuz closure made necessary. Iraqi and Syrian traders described a preference for Al-Waleed/Al-Tanf over the central route of Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal (see Figure 1), citing longer distances as well as the presence of armed groups along the latter.²² The northern crossing of Al-Rabia/Al-Yarubiyah is likewise strategically important due to connectivity with Türkiye. Beyond the current crisis, Al-Waeli spoke of grand economic visions routed through the southern and northern crossings:

*“Day by day the commercial dimension through them is increasing and transit is increasing, and the great importance of the Rabia and Waleed crossings will emerge with the opening of the Grand Faw Port, this giant port, which will be the important and most prominent port for the passage of goods from the Gulf towards Iraq and from there to Syria, Turkey, and European countries”.*²³

But facilities conceived in February 2026 for a modest resumption of bilateral trade cannot carry a major strategic export route indefinitely. Permanent buildings, scanners, inspection bays and truck holding areas belong among the immediate priorities of corridor investment. The

absence of such facilities creates serious complications in cross-border trade. A Syrian official at the Al-Yarubiyah crossing noted:

*“The complexity in inspection and auditing procedures is a direct result of the absence of modern scanning and examination devices, as the crossing relies almost entirely on manual inspection and emptying parts of the loads, which consumes enormous time, exposes goods to damage, and creates endless queues”.*²⁴

On the Iraqi side of the border, infrastructure financing at the crossings has been minuscule, often reliant on provincial budgets. The head of Anbar’s Provincial Council claimed that most of the construction costs for the province’s two crossings with Syria are falling on a budget that cannot match the sudden increase in demand.²⁵ For now, Anbar has been willing to absorb this cost due to the immediate economic benefit that greater traffic will bring to the governorate. In the words of a Ministry of Finance official, “The people of the western region are preparing [the border] because they want to create an outlet...All of this is revenue that comes to the province”.²⁶ The durability of the crossing will depend on greater attention and commitment from Baghdad.

The most well-developed crossing from a purely infrastructural standpoint, the Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal crossing, also calls for the most caution in terms of long-term planning. One trader interviewed for this project described armed groups able to tax commercial traffic informally, and the presence of the Popular Mobilization Forces was cited as a source of risk that makes the route undesirable for some traders. The PMF’s presence, originally as part of an offensive against

22. Interviews conducted with traders in Baghdad and Damascus, February–May 2026.

23. Interview conducted with Omar Al-Waeli, Head of the Border Points Commission in Iraq, 24 May 2026.

24. Interview conducted with an official at the Al-Yarubiyah crossing, 15 August 2026.

25. Interview conducted with Hamid Daham, Head of the Anbar Provincial Council, 11 August 2026.

26. Interview conducted with an official in the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, 16 March 2026.

27. Despite these challenges, Iraqi and Syrian border officials confirmed that Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal remained the principal crossing through which the vast majority of non-oil trade between the two countries was conducted.

ISIS in 2017, has continued under the guise of securing the border and preventing the infiltration of ISIS remnants. While rare, combat involving the PMF and Iraqi forces against ISIS remnants does occur, most recently in August 2026.²⁷ Data from our research with truck drivers, traders, and border agents downplayed the direct risks from ISIS, focusing instead on the additional costs and informal bureaucratic processes that the PMF imposes. With the growth of Al-Waleed and Al-Rabia, Al-Qaim is already facing a decline in its overall trade volume and is no longer being used for oil. A clearing agent operating at Al-Qaim said it is undergoing renovations to become a crossing dedicated to passenger traffic and ordinary commerce.²⁸

To the north, Al-Rabia/Al-Yarubiyah forms a central component of the Development Road initiative,²⁹ and would allow Baghdad to develop a trade corridor towards Türkiye and Europe. While several border officials interviewed for this project stressed the crossing's importance due to these linkages to Türkiye and beyond, policymakers must also consider the potential political complications. As the same Ministry of Finance official candidly explained, "Our people in the federal government want to use [Al-Rabia] to strike the Kurds... they prepared it so that it would become a little pressure card against the Region".³⁰ While circumventing Kurdistan's Ibrahim Khalil crossing makes Al-Rabia/Al-Yarubiyah attractive from Baghdad's perspective, it is viewed far less favorably in Erbil and may increase tensions between Baghdad and the KRG.

On the Syrian side, most crossings were heavily damaged during the years of conflict preceding the

fall of the regime. Those that have reopened operate from temporary facilities while reconstruction proceeds. Officials working at Syria's three main border crossings with Iraq identified several infrastructure deficiencies, including a lack of advanced scanners and modern warehouses, limited truck-handling space, inadequate weighbridges and inspection facilities, unreliable electricity and communications, and weak digital customs systems. These shortcomings have created bottlenecks at crossings, raised transport costs, and left goods vulnerable to damage.³¹ A Syrian customs-clearance official at the Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal crossing emphasized the growing attention that the government had devoted to rehabilitating border infrastructure, while noting that Syria "continues to pay the price for inadequate infrastructure that is still recovering from years of neglect and destruction".³²

Syria's infrastructure planning has yet to catch up with the opportunity the east–west corridor now represents. The government committed early, in the months after the fall of the Assad regime, to the north–south pathway running through the country's major population centers and linking Damascus to Türkiye, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.³³ It is this route that has received central planning attention and state financing. The east–west route was approached far more tentatively, with the state relying on Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) contracts. In BOT contracts, a private company finances and builds a road, operates it for a set concession period during which it recovers its costs through user fees, and then transfers it to the state. Transport infrastructure is assembled piecemeal, contract by contract, rather than through the government committing its own resources. An official at the

28. Interview conducted with clearing agent in Al-Qaim, 18 October 2026.

29. The Development Road initiative is a multi-billion dollar and transnational project to build a 1,200 km transport and economic corridor, linking Basra's al-Faw Port in the south of Iraq to Türkiye, effectively connecting the Gulf region to Europe. However, this project requires numerous political and economic considerations. See Hasan, Harith. *Iraq's Development Road: Geopolitics, Rentierism, and Border Connectivity*. Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2024.

30. Interview conducted with an official in the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, 16 March 2026.

31. Interviews conducted with administrative, security and clearance officials at Al-Bukamal, Al-Tanf and Al-Yarubiyah crossings, August 2026.

32. Interview conducted with a clearing agent at the Al-Bukamal border crossing, 14 August 2026.

33. Interview conducted with an official in the Investment Office of the Syrian Ministry of Transport, 15 July 2026.

Syrian Ministry of Transport noted: “We are currently working on maintenance on all roads Iraqi trucks are taking, with future plans to create a better road through BOT approaches”.³⁴ That approach was understandable when trade with Iraq amounted to a trickle through a single crossing. It is much harder to justify now that Iraqi oil is moving

in massive convoys toward the Mediterranean via Syria, meaning that Damascus has the opportunity to become the linchpin of a new east–west corridor. If Syria wishes to match its rhetoric about the opportunity that Iraqi transit trade represents, its planning and financing decisions will need to reflect that priority.

■ INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITIES AT THE SYRIA–LEBANON BORDER

“We are working in Tripoli to build an integrated economic and logistical system that relies on the port, the special economic zone, the railway, and the airport within the concept of multimodal transport. This matter needs the securing of the economic infrastructure, and that is why we are developing the logistical concept at the Port of Tripoli... To be able to serve regional and economic trade, you must have hinterlands, storage sites, and logistical activities with added value, and this is unavailable in Beirut because it is surrounded by the city”.

■ Official, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Lebanon ³⁵

During the July visit to Baghdad, Lebanon’s Energy Minister proposed that Iraqi oil now stored and loaded at Baniyas could also move through Tripoli. The route to Tripoli enters Lebanon at the northern crossings of Abboudiyeh/Dabousieh and Arida, which have long been neglected in Lebanese infrastructure planning and would require substantial upgrading. Further south, the Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous crossing remains the busiest point on the border, carrying the agricultural produce, foodstuffs, consumer goods and construction materials that make up the bilateral trade with Syria. Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous connects onward to the Port of Beirut, which is hemmed in by the city. Tripoli, with its larger basin and space to expand, is the port most capable of receiving traffic from Iraq and beyond.

The southern pathway through Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous remains Lebanon’s principal overland gateway to Damascus and the Gulf. According to a Lebanese Member of Parliament who sits on the Public Works and Transportation Parliamentary Committee, before the Syrian war more than 250 trucks crossed Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous each day, and approximately 550,000 tons of fruits and vegetables were exported through it annually.³⁶ Now the crossing suffers from years of neglect. Lebanese officials view this neglect as a key driver of the country’s inability to capture a larger share of the corridor’s trade.

34. Interview conducted with an official at the Syrian Ministry of Transport, 15 July 2026.

35. Interview conducted with an official at the Directorate General of Land and Maritime Transport at the Lebanese Ministry of Public Works and Transport, 15 June 2026.

36. Interview conducted with a Lebanese Member of Parliament and Member of the Public Works and Transportation Parliamentary Committee, 8 June 2026.

37. Interview conducted with a Lebanese banking and financial expert, 2 June 2026.

38. Interview conducted with a Lebanese trader, 19 May 2026.

A Lebanese financial expert described Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous as “fifty years old” and “virtually unusable,” suffering from “heavy, unorganized traffic and activity”.³⁷ Traders interviewed for this project echoed these assessments. One trader reported “queues at Masnaa stretching for dozens of kilometers”.³⁸ A key reason for these delays was the absence of functioning laboratories at the border crossings and ports to test samples of goods entering Lebanon. As a prominent figure in one of Lebanon’s trade syndicates explained, “The shipment has to remain waiting while the sample goes to the laboratory, is analyzed, and the results are returned, and that process takes four or five days”.³⁹ Additionally, Syrian traders noted that the difficulty of obtaining entry visas into Lebanon discourages them from using the crossing at all.⁴⁰

The works required are costly, and subject to the constraints of Lebanese governing institutions that constantly face issues of misallocated funds for state projects that stall in the planning or funding phase. The changes required include completing the highway, installing modern inspection equipment, expanding truck holding areas, and creating dedicated lanes for commercial and perishable goods. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted that perishable goods are disproportionately affected: “We require storage sheds, forklifts, laborers, and road expansions to facilitate cargo offloading; currently, there are perishable goods that we are forced to offload under direct sunlight due to the lack of warehouses or forklifts”.⁴¹ Planning has in fact begun. A dry port has recently been established in the Bekaa. More ambitiously, the Lebanese government has

identified a new site for the Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous crossing, approximately two kilometers from the border, with discussions underway to expand the adjoining logistics zone through cooperation with Syria.

The northern crossing between Syria and Lebanon is a project of a different kind. Should the Levant Corridor mature into a channel for large-scale transit, it is this route that would carry most of the weight. Centered on the Abboudiyeh/Dabousieh and Arida crossings, the Port of Tripoli, the Tripoli Special Economic Zone and the planned activation of Qlayaat Airport for cargo operations, it is the pathway along which Iraqi oil, and in time transit trade in other goods, could reach a Lebanese port. While Tripoli is geographically close to both the Syrian ports of Tartus and Latakia, Syrian officials largely downplayed potential competition, explaining in interviews that Tartus and Latakia should be understood as complementary to, rather than in competition with, Tripoli.⁴² Geography supports this approach, as Tripoli’s basin is larger than either Syrian port. Proximity to regional hubs such as Homs and Damascus offers a quick route to the Mediterranean. Homs in particular anchors this geography. The city sits at the junction of Syria’s north–south corridor and the east–west routes from Iraq, and it long served as the inland hub for trade moving through Tripoli’s port, a role it is well placed to resume as reconstruction proceeds.

39. Interview conducted with a prominent figure in one of Lebanon’s trade syndicates, 20 May 2026.

40. Interviews conducted with Syrian traders in Damascus, May–June 2026.

41. Interview conducted with a customs clearance agent at the Masnaa border crossing in Lebanon, 10 August 2026.

42. Interviews conducted with Syrian officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Economy and Trade, July 2026.

43. Interviews conducted with a Lebanese journalist and researcher, Member of Parliament, trader, board member of a news agency, June–August 2026; for more context see Shaya, Paul. *The Gulf’s Return to Lebanon?* Arab Gulf States Institute, 2025. <https://agsi.org/analysis/the-gulfs-return-to-lebanon/>.

44. Belhaj, Ferid. *Owning the Recovery: Supporting Lebanese–Led Reconstruction Without Repeating the Past*. Middle East Institute, 2026. <https://mei.edu/publication/owning-the-recovery-supporting-lebanese-led-reconstruction-without-repeating-the-past/>.

The obstacles to near-term progress on both the northern and southern routes are nonetheless substantial. The Gulf investors most often identified as Tripoli's natural financiers, Saudi Arabia above all, have tied meaningful engagement to progress on Hezbollah's disarmament.⁴³ This is not unusual as conditional funding has been a perpetual component of the funding environment in Lebanon.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf actors may need to shift their priorities internally in the face of the current conflict. Additionally, Saudi Arabia may prioritize the north–south route through Syria in a bid to ensure it holds an outlet that is not determined by an unstable Lebanese context.

The politics of shifting trade northward carries its own weight domestically within Lebanon. Infrastructure in Lebanon redistributes economic activity between communities, and the fate of the long-proposed Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous tunnel is instructive. Druze political leaders opposed the tunnel because bypassing the existing road would reduce economic activity through Druze communities.⁴⁵ Projects that shift trade toward the north are likely to provoke similar suspicions, particularly if Sunni factions concentrated in the north are seen as redirecting economic activity away from Beirut and Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous. Several communities and sects depend on the formal and informal economies that those crossings sustain.

At Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous, progress depends on joint approaches to infrastructure. An official at the Lebanese Ministry of Public Works and Transport outlined this complexity:

*“The current crossing [on the Lebanese side] is about ten kilometers away from the actual border of Syria, Jdeidet Yabous. We, the Lebanese state, have designated a new site that is approximately two kilometers away from the Syrian border. There are overlapping real estate plots at that site; consequently, we requested from the Syrian government to cede these plots to us so that they can be annexed to the Lebanese real estate plots.”*⁴⁶

The overlapping plots at Masnaa point to a deeper reality of the Lebanese–Syrian relationship. The two countries are tied together historically, socially and economically. Beirut served historically as the maritime outlet for Damascus, and Tripoli for Homs, and commercial and family ties between the two countries persisted even in periods when their political relationship was tumultuous. These ties carry renewed significance in the present moment. Syria needs Mediterranean capacity faster than its damaged ports can provide it, and the Lebanese ports lie closer to Homs and Damascus than any alternative available in the near term. Lebanon, for its part, is in the depths of a financial crisis and cannot revive its transit economy without Syrian cooperation on the crossings and roads that connect it to markets further east, including Iraq and the Gulf. Cooperation at this level will not come easily to two states in the middle of their own transitions, with sensitive unsettled files between them and communities on each side attentive to who benefits. It is nonetheless the only route available as neither country can develop its side of the corridor alone.

45. Interview conducted with a Lebanese researcher, 18 May 2026.

46. Interview conducted with an official at the Directorate General of Land and Maritime Transport at the Lebanese Ministry of Public Works and Transport, 15 June 2026.

■ THE PATHWAY FORWARD

Infrastructure investments across the Levant Corridor must be prioritized in line with fiscal realities and political conditions on the ground. On the Iraq–Syria border, the Al-Waleed/Al-Tanf crossing offers the most direct route between Baghdad and Damascus and already carries the bulk of the oil trade. Both governments should concentrate on completing permanent facilities and connecting road networks there while the current alignment of incentives holds. On the Syria–Lebanon border, the question of priority depends on the frame of reference. Viewed bilaterally, Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous is and will remain the mainstay of Syrian–Lebanese trade. Viewed from the perspective of a multi-country corridor that could in time carry not only Iraqi oil but other goods requiring access to the Mediterranean, the priority is Tripoli. Developing the crossings, connecting infrastructure and port will take years and considerable investment. But the preparatory work of feasibility studies and planning can begin even while the war continues.

The scale of Gulf and international financing is an important factor. But as this brief has shown, the corridor is equally being shaped at a second level, through the decisions taken in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut over which crossings and routes to prioritize and through the bilateral arrangements governing shared crossings. To date, that second level has been driven strictly by bilateral engagements. The Lebanese delegation's visit to Baghdad, Iraqi–Syrian talks over the border crossings, and Lebanese–Syrian discussions over the Masnaa/Jdaidet Yabous logistics zone are each important steps. But a corridor running through three countries will ultimately require trilateral

coordination, in which Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut align their infrastructure priorities rather than negotiating them piecemeal.

The demands of coordination only deepen when attention turns from infrastructure to procedure. Building roads, terminals and inspection facilities is expensive. Aligning customs procedures, documentation requirements and payment systems involves comparatively little capital, yet it requires the three governments to share data, harmonize their rules and sustain a level of administrative trust. Whether Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut can manage this form of cooperation will test the viability of the corridor as much as any infrastructural investment decision. The question of procedure will be the subject of the second brief in this XCEPT series.



American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
Kirkuk Main Road, Sulaimani
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

iris@auis.edu.krd
auis.edu.krd/iris