

HISTORICAL LANDMARK IN TÜRKİYE-İRAQ RELATIONS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

FATİH OĞUZHAN İPEK

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SUMMARY

This study argues that the problems between Erbil and Baghdad, and their prolonged existence prevent Türkiye from deepening cooperation with Iraq in terms of security, water issues, and economic relations.

Türkiye-Iraq relations in the post-U.S. invasion era progressed alongside the controversial Northern Iraqi independence referendum on Sept. 25, 2017. Security, water issues, and economic relations were the three crucial issues that came to the fore in bilateral ties. Türkiye's main priority for Iraq was its stability, territorial integrity, and political unity. Political instability had already created a security gap there while Baghdad's diminished security capacity opened up space for terrorist organizations, forcing Türkiye to increase cross-border operations. This study argues that the problems between Erbil and Baghdad, and their prolonged existence prevent Türkiye from deepening cooperation with Iraq in terms of security, water issues, and economic relations.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the rise and fall of the Daesh (ISIS) terrorist group forced Iraq to focus on internal issues. Therefore, Türkiye's relations with Iraq did not develop in a cooperation-oriented manner until recently. The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) 2017 referendum, in particular, pushed Ankara and Baghdad to adopt common stance and behaviors. With this *détente*, Ankara and Baghdad turned a page on their future relationship. The two sides emphasized common points like counterterrorism, mutual trade, and ensuring Iraq's territorial integrity. In the fight against terrorism, Türkiye increasingly started cross-border operations, as the Iraqi Federal Government did not take the necessary security measures against the PKK terrorist group. Nevertheless, Ankara-Baghdad relations, which have long developed on an economic basis, may be raised to the level of strategic partnership, covering the security dimensions, in line with Türkiye's expectations.

Türkiye's relations with the KRG had evolved in the opposite direction and both be-

came increasingly close. Although the 2017 referendum negatively affected the ties, Ankara and Erbil gradually began a normalization process after the KRG retracted from full independence. At this point, Erbil's frequent official visits to Ankara strengthened Türkiye's relations with the KRG on a win-win principle. Meanwhile, Türkiye has distanced itself from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the ruling partners of the KRG, which has recently attempted to establish close relations with the PKK. In response, Türkiye has established close relations with the KDP against the PUK and PKK. Balance and integrity between Baghdad and Erbil play a dominant role in Türkiye's Iraq policy. In other words, Ankara does not act unilaterally in relations with Baghdad and Erbil. As a result, its relations with Iraq require a coordinated policy between Baghdad and Erbil.

RELATIONS WITH THE IRAQI FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND WAR AGAINST PKK TERROR IN IRAQ

The tense relations that started with the Nuri al-Maliki government in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq continued until the KRG referendum united Ankara and Baghdad with common interests. Türkiye then signed an agreement with the KRG to establish a base in the city of Bashiqa near Mosul in November 2015, after the latter fell to Daesh in 2014. This also aimed to prevent the PKK from using Mosul as a strategic and logistical base for Syria. The Iraqi central government, however, reacted harshly to the establishment of the base. In 2016, the Iraqi Parliament went so far as to define Türkiye as an "occupying country." The KRG's independence initiative, a signif-

icant regional development, broke this impasse in ties and normalized bilateral relations.

The third Türkiye-Iraq High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was held during then-Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's official Iraq visit on Jan. 7, 2017. At a press conference afterward, Türkiye was described as a "friendly and neighboring country."¹ Following the KRG referendum, positive momentum was evident in Ankara's relations with the Iraqi central government. The fight against terrorism, the development of economic ties, and the water problem experienced by Iraq dominated bilateral talks. One of the characteristics of this period was Türkiye's dialogue with all Shiite factions in Iraq, as well as Sunni Arabs and Kurds. Therefore, it made efforts to bring all the parties to a common ground and eliminate the blockage in Iraq's government formation process. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in mutual high-level official visits between the two sides. More than 25 reciprocal visits took place over the last five years to help develop ties effectively and constructively.

As per Türkiye's policy of preventing the PKK from gaining influence in Iraq, it carried out cross-border operations at points where the Iraqi central government was ineffective. Referring to Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, Türkiye declared it used its right to self-defense. Although Iraq evaluated Türkiye's operations as "unacceptable," the reaction did not cause serious tension between the two countries.² As of 2018, Turk-

ish cross-border operations have been key in its fight against the PKK. As part of these operations, Türkiye established military bases in the Hakurk region, 15 kilometers inside the Iraqi border. Türkiye's "proactive" strategy has prioritized the "preventive fight concept" since 2017. It established military bases at strategic Northern Iraqi locations that provided logistic support to the PKK and divided the transit routes between its camps.³

As per Türkiye's policy of preventing the PKK from gaining influence in Iraq, it carried out cross-border operations at points where the Iraqi central government was ineffective.

Another critical issue in the fight against the PKK is the Sinjar Agreement, agreed between Erbil and Baghdad in October 2020. The agreement was to clear out the terrorist organization from its base in Sinjar. According to the deal, no armed elements, other than federal and national security and intelligence units, would be allowed in the region. A joint committee between Baghdad and Erbil would supervise the steps.⁴ Türkiye closely followed this agreement and pushed the Iraqi central government to implement it. Yet, the Sinjar Agreement has not been fully implemented. Since new power relations occurred in Mosul after the agreement was signed, a new deal must be put forward to replace the current one.

1 Recep Tayyip Güler, "Türkiye'nin Irak Politikası", *Türk Dış Politikası Yılı 2017*, ed. Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnat ve Mustafa Caner, (SETA Yayınları: İstanbul: 2018), p. 164.

2 "Dışişleri Bakanlığı Sözcüsü Hami Aksoy'un TSK'nın Irak Topraklarındaki PKK Unsurlarına Karşı Düzenlediği Operasyonlar ve Bağdat Büyükelçimizin Irak Dışişleri Bakanlığına Çağrılması Hakkındaki Soruya Cevabı", T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 15 December 2018, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-78_-tsk-nin-irak-topraklarindaki-pkk-unsurlarina-karsi-duzenlediği-operasyonlar-hk-sc.tr.mfa, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

3 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün ve Serkan Çalışkan, "Pençe Operasyonlarının Son Halkası: Pençe Kilit", ORSAM, 30 April 2022, https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/pençe-operasyonlarinin-son-halkasi-pençe-kilit.pdf, (Access date: 19 April 2024); Murat Aslan, "Pençe Harekatları: Terörizmle Mücadelede Devamlılık ve Kararlılık", SETA, 20 June 2020, <https://www.setav.org/pençe-harekatları-terörizmle-mucadelede-devamlılık-ve-kararlılık/>, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

4 "Sincar Anlaşması: Bağdat ve Erbil'in İmzaladığı Anlaşma Neler Öngörüyor ve Uygulanabilir mi?", BBC Türkçe, 16 October 2020.

After a terrorist attack attempt on the Turkish Foreign Ministry on Oct. 1, 2023, Türkiye turned the page in its fight against terrorism. It implemented a more pragmatic method for coordinated operations between the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and the Ministry of National Defense (MSB). The newly developed two-dimensional method aims, on the one hand, to destroy the PKK terrorist organization's psychology and self-confidence. On the other, it aims to demonstrate that the organization's survival cannot be tied to the U.S., Russia, or Iran.⁵ The final point Türkiye and Iraq reached in the fight against terrorism was in March. A visiting delegation, including Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, issued a joint statement within the framework of the Security Mechanism Meeting. With this declaration, Iraq defined the PKK as a "banned organization" for the first time. Türkiye and Iraq also decided to establish Joint Standing Committees to work exclusively on counterterrorism, trade, agriculture, energy, water, health, and transportation. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed during President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit, incorporated the issues agreed on. With these contact mechanisms, Türkiye and Iraq can wage a joint fight against the PKK.⁶

Türkiye and Iraq have also made significant progress in the defense industry. Iraqi Defense Minister Juma Inad, who attended the International Defense Industry Fair (IDEF'21) in Istanbul on Aug. 19, 2021, met with then-Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar. Inad announced Iraq was interested in buying Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones and T-129 ATAK helicop-

ters. An agreement was later reached on purchasing the Bayraktar UAVs.⁷

On Oct. 2, 2021, then-Turkish Defense Industries President Ismail Demir visited Iraq. Demir, who met with Iraqi Defense Industry President Muhammad al-Daraji, reiterated Türkiye's support for Iraq's stability. At the same time, Muhammad al-Daraji confirmed that an agreement was reached on transferring military industry technology from Türkiye to Iraq. He added his country would supply small arms, ammunition, and aircraft tracking systems. In addition, a joint MoU was signed for Iraqi forces to monitor border, and terrorist operations, and produce security-tracking balloons.⁸

Water sharing is another key issue in Ankara-Baghdad relations. When Türkiye started retaining water from the Ilisu Dam in June 2018, an attempt was made to create the perception that Türkiye had cut off water from Iraq. Türkiye, however, argued that Iraq had a water shortage due to inadequate infrastructure and water management issues. The Iraqi Federal Government requested Türkiye to increase water flow reaching Iraq from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. To prevent water from becoming a sticking point between the two countries and due to a drought in the Tigris River, President Erdoğan ordered the postponement of water retention.⁹

In addition, the Turkish president pointed out that rainfall in Türkiye was at the lowest level in 62 years and the problem could only be over-

5 Murat Aslan, "Türkiye'nin Terörle Mücadelesi: Yeni stratejiler", Anadolu Agency, 12 October 2023.

6 "Türkiye-Irak 'Güvenlik Mekanizması Görüşmesi'ne İlişkin Ortak Sonuç Bildirisi Yayınlandı", Anadolu Agency, 14 March 2024.

7 "Irak Türkiye'den SİHA ve ATAK Helikopteri Satın Almak İstiyor", Rudaw, 1 September 2021.

8 "Irak ve Türkiye Arasında Savunma Sanayisi Alanında İş Birliği", Anadolu Agency, 2 October 2021.

9 "Iraq Asks Türkiye to Release More Water Along Tigris, Euphrates as Drought Hits", *The Arab Weekly*, 17 July 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/iraq-asks-turkiye-release-more-water-along-tigris-euphrates-drought-hits>, (Access date: 19 Arpil 2024). 'Iraktaki Krizin Temel Nedeni: Su Yönetimindeki Hata', Anadolu Agency, 5 January 2019.

come with rational and scientific cooperation.¹⁰ While Ankara sees the water issue as an area of cooperation that serves the two countries' common interests, Baghdad accuses Ankara of taking an unfair advantage by building dams. Türkiye, however, argues that Iraq has faulty water management practices. Owing to factors such as global climate change, infrastructure deficiencies, and lack of water management, the solution to Iraq's water crisis depends mainly on its approach to the problem.¹¹

RELATIONS WITH KRG AND TWO-FOLD FOREIGN POLICY

The political détente of Türkiye-KRG ties, based on commercial cooperation in the 2010s, was disrupted in 2017 when the KRG veered toward independence. Türkiye, one of the countries to strongly oppose the referendum, considered that the issue threatened Iraq's territorial integrity and national security. To show its determination, Türkiye conducted a military exercise in the Habur Border Gate region, which opened to Iraq and Northern Iraq.¹² Likewise, the KRG attempted to capture Kirkuk, which was involved in the KRG referendum. Türkiye supported the Iraqi security forces' operation to liberate Kirkuk from Peshmerga control and bring it back under the central government.¹³

After the KRG referendum fallout, Türkiye's relations with the administration only normalized in mid-2018. Then-KRG Prime Minister and current President Nechirvan Barzani's official visit to Türkiye was a positive reset to relations between the two sides.¹⁴ Erbil-Ankara ties, which improved in 2018, yielded concrete results in 2019. While the frequency of high-level official visits between the two sides has increased, KRG officials have repeatedly said they stand with Türkiye against the PKK.¹⁵

Türkiye, one of the countries to strongly oppose the referendum, considered that the issue threatened Iraq's territorial integrity and national security.

A potentially relevant issue that will contribute to developing relations between Türkiye and the KRG is the export of natural gas from the region to Türkiye. The KDP seeks to export natural gas from the Khor Mor Gas Facility in Sulaymaniyah within PUK's sphere of influence. It does this by opening an additional pipeline to Türkiye, independently of the central government.¹⁶ In this context, on Feb. 4, 2023, KRG President Barzani officially visited Türkiye and met with President Erdoğan. They discussed the issue of sending KRG natural gas to Europe via Turkish territory.¹⁷ Notably, the visit came after

10 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Kalkınma Yolu Projesi'ni Bölgemizin Yeni İpek Yolu Haline Dönüştürceğimize İnanıyorum", Anadolu Agency, 21 March 2023.

11 "Uzmanlar Cevaplıyor: Dışişleri Bakanı Hakan Fidan'ın Kapsamlı Irak Ziyareti", SETA, 25 August 2023, <https://www.setav.org/uzmanlar-cevapliyor-disisleri-bakani-hakan-fidanin-kapsamli-irak-ziyareti/>, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

12 "TSK'dan Habur Sınır Kapısı'nda Askeri Tatbikat", NTV, 18 September 2017.

13 Gürler, "Türkiye'nin Irak Politikası", s. 179. "Erdoğan: Kürtler Kerkük'te İşgalci Konumundalar", BBC Türkçe, 5 October 2017.

14 "Neçirvan Barzani, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın Yemin Töreni için Ankara'ya Geliyor", Sputnik Türkiye, 8 July 2018.

15 "İKBY Başbakanı Barzani: Türkiye Köyleri Değil PKK Hedeflerini Vuruyor", Anadolu Agency, 27 January 2019.

16 Bekir Aydoğan, "Will Oil Dispute With Baghdad Shift Dynamics Within Iraqi Kurdistan?", Amwaj Media, August 26, 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/will-erbil-baghdad-oil-tensions-affect-kdp-puk-dynamics>, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

17 "Ortadoğu Gündemi 7-11 Nisan 2022", ORSAM, https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/ortadogu-gundemi-31-ocak-6-subat-2022.pdf, (Access date: 19 April 2024)

Iran cut off the natural gas supply to Türkiye for a short time. Subsequently, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani visited Qatar, where he emphasized energy cooperation. The Iraqi Federal Supreme Court (IFYM)¹⁸ however decided that the KRG oil and gas law was contrary to the federal government constitution.¹⁹

Due to the PUK's relationship with the PKK, Türkiye followed a two-dimensional policy in its relations with the KRG, centered on Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. PUK's covert collaboration with the PKK in Sulaymaniyah played a role in Ankara distinguishing the KDP from the PUK. When a helicopter crashed in Duhok on March 15, 2023, it appeared that the helicopter was purchased by a group within the PUK and given to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian extension of the PKK. Türkiye then suspended its flights to Sulaymaniyah on April 3.²⁰

Then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that the PKK has gradually taken control of Talabani's party in Sulaymaniyah and expanded its influence in the airport and other strategic areas.²¹ He urged PUK to end these relations so that Ankara-Sulaymaniyah can normalize ties.²² Therefore, one can say that the Ankara-Erbil

and Ankara-Sulaymaniyah lines have emerged in Türkiye's relations with the KRG. The KDP's possible role in normalizing relations between Ankara and PUK is highly significant. On Oct. 17, 2023, PUK President Bafel Talabani met with President Nechirvan Barzani.²³ They discussed the KDP's support for improving PUK's relations with Türkiye. Türkiye's extension of the flight ban on Sulaymaniyah until June 23, 2024, indicates that normalization efforts have yet to yield results. Türkiye's response may be harsher if PUK does not change its stance.

ECONOMY AND ENERGY

The problems between the Iraqi central government and the KRG, and the prolonged existence of these issues have dragged down Türkiye's economic ties with Iraq below their potential levels. Ankara-Erbil relations deteriorated after the KRG referendum, leading to discussions about opening alternative border gates, especially on the KRG-Türkiye border. There are currently two border gates between the two countries. One of them is the Habur Border Gate, which connects Şırnak's Silopi district to Duhok in northern Iraq. The other is the Üzümlü Border Gate, which connects Hakkari's Çukurca to Duhok. While the former forms the main trade artery with Iraq, the latter serves human transit for security and geographical reasons. Since these gates did not open to areas under the Iraqi Central Government's control, they caused taxation and security issues for Türkiye after the KRG referendum.²⁴ The "double taxation" practice was abolished in December 2019, as prod-

18 In 2014, Nuri Maliki's government filed a lawsuit in the commercial court affiliated with the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris. Although Haydar Abadi's government subsequently froze this case, the tensions between Abadi and the KRG on the one hand and between Abadi and Türkiye on the other prompted it to reactivate this case in early 2017. Adel Abdul Mahdi's government suspended this case upon the Kurdish leadership's request.

19 Bilgay Duman, "IFYM'nin IKBY Kararı ve Düşündürdükleri", ORSAM, 23 February 2022, <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/ifymnin-ikby-karari-vedusundurduklari>, (Access date: 19 April 2024); Watheq Sadoon, "Bağdat ve Erbil Arasında Süregiden Petrol Anlaşmazlığı", ORSAM, <https://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/bagdat-ve-erbil-arasinda-suregiden-petrol-anlasmazligi/>, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

20 Ortadoğu Gündemi: 3-9 Nisan", ORSAM, https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/ortadogu-gundemi-3-9-nisan-2023.pdf, s.3, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

21 "Dışişleri Bakanı Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu A Haber'de Açıkladı! Esad ile Görüşme Olacak mı?", A Haber, 4 October 2023.

22 "MİT Başkanı Fidan, Talabani'yi Ankara'ya Çağırır: PKK'yla İlişkinizi Kesin", Haber 7, 12 April 2023.

23 "Ortadoğu Gündemi: 16-22 Ekim", ORSAM, https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/ortadogu-gundemi-16-22-ekim-2023.pdf, p. 11, (Access date: 19 April 2024).

24 Recep Yorulmaz, "Yeni Sınır Kapıları ve Irak Ekonomisi", *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Volume: 9, No: 84, (October-November 2018), p. 76.

ucts leaving Türkiye were subject to taxation at the border gates under the control of the KRG and the Iraqi Central Government.²⁵ Finally, the Derecik Border Gate, which connects Erbil with southeastern Türkiye's Hakkari, was inaugurated on May 10, 2023, as the third border gate. The Derecik Border Gate is expected to contribute to border trade by preventing illegal routes.²⁶ It will be opened to tourist crossings initially, before being transformed into commercial crossing.²⁷ Meanwhile, Ankara and Baghdad are working to build a new gate connecting Ovacık and Iraqi territory under the central government, bypassing the KRG.

Another issue that exemplifies how problems between Erbil and Baghdad negatively affect Türkiye-Iraq ties is oil exports. Following the KRG referendum, the Iraqi Central Government stopped oil flow to Kirkuk. An agreement with the KRG has not yet been reached. Ankara and Baghdad, meanwhile, plan to build an oil pipeline to prevent the KRG from exporting oil.²⁸ This issue, which has been emphasized for several years, is expected to be implemented within the scope of the Development Road project, which will be discussed in detail below.

Considering that this project will open to Türkiye through the Ovaköy-Fişhabur Border Gate, Baghdad will bypass Erbil and secure oil exports to Türkiye. In 2014, however, Iraq filed a lawsuit before the International Criminal Court (ICC), claiming Türkiye violated the 1987 Kirkuk-Yumurtalik Oil Pipeline agreement. The

ICC ruled that Türkiye should pay \$1.47 billion in compensation. After this case, Türkiye stopped oil imports from the KRG.²⁹

The dispute between Baghdad and Erbil over oil exports prevents Türkiye from importing oil from Iraq.

However, Erbil and Baghdad must agree on oil export resumption. Additionally, Türkiye has some demands to restart imports from the oil pipeline, including conditions such as a reduction in compensation and oil prices.³⁰ As a result, the oil export issue also supports the main argument of the study. The dispute between Baghdad and Erbil over oil exports prevents Türkiye from importing oil from Iraq.

IRAQI DEVELOPMENT ROAD

Since 2010, Iraq has planned various projects to revitalize its economy. One of them is the construction of the Faw Port and the second is a project called the Development Road with Türkiye. The road aims to create a transportation corridor by building modern highways and railways from Basra to the Turkish border.³¹ To implement this project, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed S. Al Sudani made an official visit

25 Recep Tayyip Gürler ve Mustafa Şeyhmus Küpeli, "Türkiye'nin Irak Politikası 2018", *Türk Dış Politikası Yılı 2018*, ed. Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnat ve Mustafa Caner, (SETA Yayınları: İstanbul: 2019), p. 71-72.

26 "Türkiye'nin Erbil Başkonsolosu: Derecik-Zet Sınır Kapısı Sınır Ticaretine Katkıda Bulunur", Rudaw, 10 May 2023.

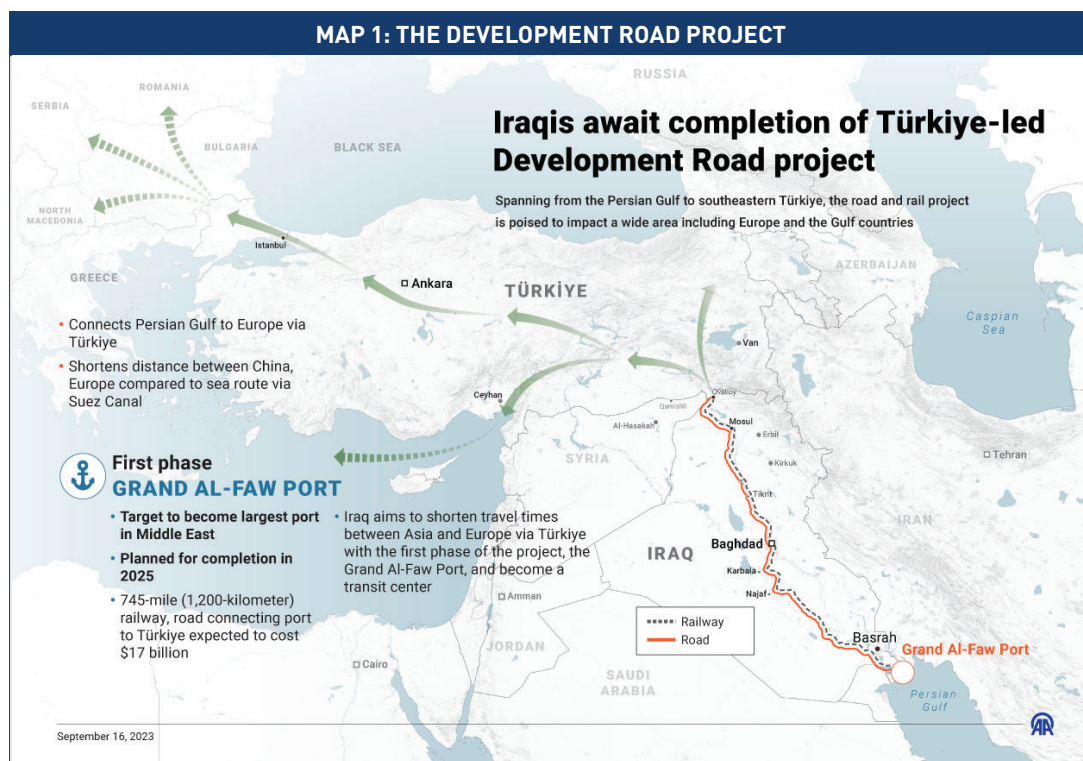
27 "Zet Sınır Kapısı Bugün Açılıyor", Kurdistan 24, 5 May 2023.

28 "Irak-Türkiye Arasında Yeni Petrol Boru Hattı Yolda", Al-Monitor, 18 September 2019.

29 "Iraqi Kurdistan Faces End of Era as Independent Oil Exports Under Threat", Amwaj Media, 29 March 2023.

30 Omar Al-Nidawi, "Can Oil and Water Mix?: Creating Opportunities for Iraq-Türkiye Cooperation", *Middle East Institute*, 31 August 2023; بعد شروط انقرة "التعجيزية" .. هل يحتاج العراق إعادة تصدير نفطه؟ "عبر تركيا؟" (Ankara'nın "imkansız" şartlarından sonra.. Irak'ın petrolünü Türkiye üzerinden yeniden ihraç etmeye ihtiyacı var mı?), Al Sumaria, 17 August 2023.

31 İbrahim Karataş, "Irak'ın Kalkınma Yolu Projesi: Riskler ve Avantajlar", ORDAF, 17 December 2023.



Resource: Anadolu Agency

to Türkiye this March, and both parties said they were determined to develop economic relations and the project. Turkish President Erdoğan defined the project as the region's reborn Silk Road, attributing strategic importance to Türkiye, Iraq, and a vast region from Europe to the Gulf. The Development Road would extend to Europe via Türkiye after passing through major Iraqi cities such as Najaf, Baghdad, and Mosul.³²

The project involves high-speed trains and is planned to be completed by 2029. It also includes oil pipelines called the "Dry Canal."³³ Türkiye and Iraq's desire to connect Asia to Europe and increase regional cooperation and economic opportunities with this project is at the highest level.

32 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Kalkınma Yolu Projesi'ni bölgemizin Yeni İpek Yolu Haline Dönüştüreceğimize İnaniyorum", Anadolu Agency, 24 March 2023.

33 "Iraq showcases \$17-Billion Development Road Project that Will Link Asia to Europe", The National News, 27 May 2023.

Implementation of the Development Road may face difficulties. Alternatives such as China's Belt and Road project and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor may reduce the impact of the Development Road. Conversely, the Development Road could also be seen as complementary or alternative to these projects. The U.S. may also persuade the Belt and Road countries to give up on the China-backed project. In addition, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor may not be economical and practical for transportation. The Development Road prioritizes regional development. While the Gulf countries see the project as the shortest way to reach Europe, Türkiye has declared its support. Using Türkiye's Development Road as a reverse route, Ankara can export to Jordan and the Gulf countries via road and rail. However, there may be internal challenges to implement-

ing the project. It may make it difficult for Iran, which is excluded from the project, to access the Persian Gulf and Syria. Additionally, the perspective of other political and economic powers in Iraq on the project is also essential. One of the biggest obstacles to commercial breakthrough may be the PKK's obstruction of trade on the Development Road. However, deep cooperation in transportation and trade between the two countries can outgrow political and military issues, motivating the Iraqi central government to fight the PKK.³⁴

PRESIDENT ERDOĞAN'S LANDMARK VISIT TO IRAQ

President Erdoğan's visit to Iraq this year has the potential to open a new page in bilateral relations between Türkiye and Iraq which have gradually developed since the KRG referendum. The first presidential-level visit to Iraq in 13 years was crucial to unlocking longstanding problems between Ankara and Baghdad. The agreement reached during President Erdoğan's visit includes the determination to maintain and deepen relations in many areas, especially economy and security.

During the visit, 26 cooperation agreements were signed in military, economic, cultural, and scientific fields. The basis for these agreements has been a well-developed diplomacy between Ankara and Baghdad for the last eight months. During this period, the Turkish government discussed security concerns and potential cooperation issues with the Iraqi government. The first leg of this diplomacy, where there is still a long way to go, aimed to create a road map for developing bilateral relations. In this context, with an MoU on the strategic framework, joint standing

committees were established to work exclusively on counterterrorism, trade, agriculture, energy, water, health, and transportation.

The agreement reached during President Erdoğan's visit includes the determination to maintain and deepen relations in many areas, especially economy and security.

The main issue, however, that prevents potential cooperation between the two countries is Iraq's failure to adopt a tough stance against the PKK. As a result of Türkiye's recent efforts, Iraq has banned the PKK but has not yet classified it as a terrorist organization. Ankara and Baghdad established the "Security Joint Coordination Center" to accelerate security coordination between the two sides. By security cooperation between the two countries, Iraq is expected to control the border areas. Baghdad's failure to take necessary action would prompt the Turkish Defense Ministry to conduct air operations in northern Iraq. Improving relations in other areas will be futile without progress in combating terrorism affecting Iraq's stability and development.

President Erdoğan also visited Erbil and discussed with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani about taking more effective action against the PKK. Strengthening relations with the KDP plays a critical role in the fight against the PKK. In this equation, Türkiye is isolating the PUK administration in Sulaymaniyah due to its close relationship with the PKK.

In contrast to Türkiye's security concerns, Iraq also has expectations over water flow from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. A 10-

³⁴ Karataş, "Irak'ın Kalkınma Yolu Projesi: Riskler ve Avantajlar".

year agreement was signed on managing water resources between the two countries. The Iraqi side has been drawing attention to the decrease in water levels from Türkiye and Iran for three years. While Türkiye has received the lowest rainfall in the last 62 years due to climate change and drought, Iraq's inadequacies in water management leave it vulnerable to drought. Therefore, instead of discussing quantity, Türkiye recommends focusing on scientific studies on efficient water use. Within the framework of the agreement reached during President Erdoğan's visit, Turkish companies are expected to take part in improving Iraq's water infrastructure.

Speaking of the Development Road, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar were involved in the project, which was the paramount cooperation issue between Türkiye and Iraq. The increase in attendee countries on the Development Road will contribute to both the project's financing and cargo supply and operation. The trade volume with Iraq, which reached \$20 billion last year, may increase to \$50 billion once the project is completed.

The road aims to reduce transportation time from 35 days through the Suez Canal to just 25 days. Disruptions in the Suez Canal increase the Development Road's strategic importance. The project's provision of uninterrupted transportation to every European country via road and rail, from al-Faw Grand Port in the Persian Gulf to London, would reinforce Türkiye's strategic position.

One of the other areas of cooperation between the two countries is agricultural cooperation. A two-year action plan between the two countries in agriculture and forestry includes experience sharing. In this context, Iraq lifting a ban on egg imports from Türkiye and the development of seed trade will increase foreign trade volume.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the rise and fall of the Daesh led Iraq to focus on internal issues. This situation prevented Türkiye from developing cooperation-oriented relations with Iraq. However, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's controversial referendum on independence in 2017 pushed Türkiye and Iraq to adopt common attitudes and behaviors and heralded a new era in Ankara-Baghdad relations. The two countries have since focused on issues like fighting terrorism, increasing trade, and ensuring Iraq's territorial integrity. Türkiye raised security concerns by launching cross-border operations against the terrorist PKK. Concerns have increased that the Iraqi Central Government is not taking adequate measures against the PKK.

In contrast to Ankara's prior tense relations with Baghdad, Türkiye strengthened its cooperation with the KRG in the economic and security fields. However, the KRG's decision to proceed with the referendum provoked a crisis in Ankara-Erbil ties, which prevailed until the KRG backed off the referendum. Türkiye then followed a two-dimensional policy in its relations with the KRG, exhibiting different attitudes towards the KDP and the PUK due to the latter's close relationship with the PKK. Türkiye has tried to persuade the PUK to give up on its relationship with the PKK while strengthening relations with the KDP. If the PUK insists on its current policy, Türkiye's attitude toward the PUK may become even harsher.

Still, the problems that exist between the Iraqi Federal Government and the KRG discourage Türkiye from raising its relations with Iraq to the level of strategic partnership. This is evident in disputes over oil exports between the Iraqi central government and the KRG, which affects Türkiye's oil imports from Iraq.

Finally, building a trade and transportation corridor of modern highways and railways would increase regional cooperation. Türkiye and Iraq began to cooperate on a win-win principle to deal with the difficulties that the project may face, like obstruction from the terrorist PKK. Thus, Iraq's development vision and securing of international investments necessitate counterterrorism efforts.

In this regard, Türkiye urges the Iraqi side to collaborate in its fight against the PKK

through military training and joint military operations. In order to reach its full potential, Türkiye must continue its holistic Iraq policy by dealing with Baghdad, while not ignoring Erbil. Given the diplomacy between Türkiye and Iraq in the past eight months, it is possible to improve the bilateral relations to a strategic partnership with the al-Sudani Government, following a balanced policy based on common interests and good neighborliness.

HISTORICAL LANDMARK IN TÜRKİYE-İRAQ RELATIONS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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SETA | ANALYSIS

Türkiye-Iraq relations in the post-U.S. invasion era progressed alongside the controversial Northern Iraqi independence referendum on Sept. 25, 2017. Security, water issues, and economic relations were the three crucial issues that came to the fore in bilateral ties. Türkiye's main priority for Iraq was its stability, territorial integrity, and political unity. Political instability had already created a security gap there while Baghdad's diminished security capacity opened up space for terrorist organizations, forcing Türkiye to increase cross-border operations. This study argues that the problems between Erbil and Baghdad, and their prolonged existence prevent Türkiye from deepening cooperation with Iraq in terms of security, water issues, and economic relations.

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