

Erdoğan's Iraq Visit: Toward a New Regional Paradigm?

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Amidst the backdrop of heightened tensions in the region, the recent visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Iraq marks a moment of significant historical importance. Beyond its symbolic value, this diplomatic engagement has sparked far-reaching discussions and agreements with the potential to reshape the collaborative framework between Türkiye and Iraq. Moreover, these developments may have far-reaching political and economic effects for neighboring countries as well.

The historical relationship between Türkiye and Iraq has been marked by a complex interplay of factors, requiring careful observation of unfolding events. Since the formation of both nations, their interactions have ranged from cooperation to conflict. Initially, Türkiye maintained a stance of cautious neutrality towards Iraq. However, the ascent of Saddam Hussein in the late 1970s altered this dynamic; Saddam's aggressive policies and belligerent actions, including conflicts with Iran and Kuwait, strained relations between Türkiye and Iraq. Türkiye aligned itself with international efforts to counter Hussein's militancy, particularly during the Gulf War in 1991.

In the following decades, Türkiye's engagement with Iraq fluctuated, with limited success in dealing with Kurdish factions and strained relations with the central Iraqi government. This led to a diplomatic stalemate, prompting Türkiye to reevaluate its approach. Since 2008, Türkiye has pursued a new strategy of engagement with various Iraqi stakeholders. Spearheaded by diplomatic efforts led mostly by Hakan Fidan, Türkiye aimed to enhance its security and promote economic prosperity through well-designed initiatives and regional plans. Officials maintain that the efforts were synchronized with the

national interests of Türkiye, while also being grounded in a regional development framework that aimed to benefit all parties involved.

President Erdoğan's recent visit to Iraq is a manifestation of these efforts at the highest level, offering prospects for constructive dialogue and collaboration between the two nations. By building on past successes and addressing longstanding challenges, both Türkiye and Iraq have the opportunity to forge a mutually beneficial relationship that could have positive implications for the wider region. However, countries in the region have previously discussed numerous agreements and megaprojects that either failed to progress or became obsolete due to political and military concerns. There are multiple indicators suggesting that current conditions and regional dynamics are favorable for a change in the foundation of relationships between countries in the region.

Türkiye-Iraq Relations

Both Iraq and Türkiye have traditionally placed a high value on their bilateral relationship, and neither can afford to ignore it. Türkiye has three main reasons for closely following and engaging with developments in Iraq. First, there are deep historical, kinship (Turkmen), and geographical ties. Today, they are neighbors, sharing a nearly 400-kilometre border. Secondly, Türkiye sees itself as a regional power, alongside its roles in industry, commerce, and agriculture; it actively seeks opportunities to collaborate economically with neighboring countries like Iraq to expand its economic sphere. Given Iraq's rich resources and the need for rebuilding and development across all sectors, Türkiye sees itself as well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to these efforts. Thirdly, Türkiye is concerned about protecting its national security and interests, particularly in combating terrorism. The presence of armed groups in Iraq, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), poses a threat to Türkiye's stability and interests. The PKK is recognized as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the United States, the EU, and other international bodies. Türkiye sees addressing this threat as critical for its security and stability, and even further views it as an existential threat to its survival.

For Iraq, its relationship with Türkiye stands out as a crucial priority among its ties with neighboring countries and the region. In this context, there is limited room for political maneuvering or disputes, largely because 70% of the water entering Iraq originates from Turkish territory. Conversely, Türkiye serves as Iraq's gateway to Europe. This is important for several reasons. Strategically, Türkiye plays a significant role in transporting and exporting Iraqi oil. Additionally, both countries occupy unique positions in global trade routes, acting as a vital bridge between Asia and Europe. This geographical advantage enhances their potential for economic cooperation and mutual benefit.

Erdoğan's Visit: A Gamechanger?

Therefore, against this backdrop, what did Erdoğan's visit bring to the table that is new and powerful enough to create a paradigm shift? With the instability in Iraq exacerbated by the United States' occupation in 2003, the current Sudani government prefers to engage in security cooperation with Türkiye in combating terrorism. The collaboration between Iraq and Türkiye fundamentally corresponds to two points.

First, systemic, or structural, dynamics largely shape this collaboration. The 2003 US invasion, the 2005 constitution, and the sectarian policies established by the Maliki government have disrupted the structural balances in Iraq. Despite nearly 20 years passing since the invasion, successive governments have failed to build a new system. The Sudani government, however, looks to overcome these dilemmas by maintaining close relations with Türkiye. Indeed, Türkiye defends Iraq's territorial integrity and believes that combating PKK terrorism will contribute to Iraq's political stability. As a result, the Baghdad government's acceptance and adoption of Türkiye's Iraq policy is paving the way for a new model of cooperation between Türkiye and Iraq. The PKK's designation as a 'banned organization' by the Iraqi government is illustrative of this. offering Türkiye its support in the fight against the PKK, the central Iraqi government aims to expand its power throughout the territory of Iraq, supported by economic development brought forth through the projects with Türkiye.

Ankara has consistently urged Baghdad to formally designate the PKK as a terrorist entity. However, this designation has yet to materialize due to several factors, including Iran's sway over the Baghdad administration and its amicable ties with the PKK, as well as Baghdad's limited influence in Kurdistan Region

of Iraq (KRI) territories. Baghdad has historically regarded the PKK matter as a bilateral issue between the Kurds and Türkiye, thus refraining from direct involvement. Nevertheless, when Türkiye conducted military operations within Iraqi borders, various political factions in Baghdad criticized Türkiye, citing violations of Iraq's sovereignty. In response, Türkiye contended that Baghdad's reluctance to confront the PKK necessitated independent action.

Türkiye's fight against the PKK also impacts the security dynamics in the region. While Türkiye collaborates with Baghdad to end the presence of the PKK in Iraq, this situation simultaneously alleviates the security concerns of Gulf countries. The Gulf countries contribute to regional stability by supporting Türkiye's fight against the PKK. Therefore, Türkiye's rapprochement with Iraq and President Erdoğan's engagements in Iraq emerge as factors with the potential to reshape regional balances that were not particularly seen before in the region. Particularly considering Iran's influence, Türkiye's close relations with Iraq could affect the power dynamics in the region. Gulf countries perceive the rapprochement between Türkiye and Iraq positively, seeing it as a means to counterbalance Iran's influence in the

region, protect their own interests, and pave the way for a potential new development paradigm under Türkiye's leadership.

Erdoğan's visit also incorporates an important element in the economic sphere. In the past, Türkiye consistently upheld a policy of differentiating its economic interests from its security concerns when engaging with Iraq. Significantly, notwithstanding the political tensions, bilateral trade between the two nations continued unabated, culminating in a trade volume of \$20 billion by the end of 2023. Türkiye is highly motivated to further develop this economic partnership, as it acknowledges Iraq as a substantial market for its goods. Türkiye's development initiatives and overarching vision are designed to engender considerable prosperity for both countries and the regions around them. Türkiye is focusing this development initiative on a region that has been freed from terrorist activity. The agreements between Türkiye and Iraq have additionally been endorsed by significant Gulf actors, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, thereby reinforcing the development projects' foundations, and conferring regional ownership and importance on these agreements. This is a unique initiative for Türkiye to embark on in the region.

Expanding Economic Interests

Gulf countries view the Development Road Project, proposing a 1,200-kilometre land route, as a mechanism to facilitate increased trade and cooperation with Europe. Almost all Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar, have made diversification of trade beyond oil and natural gas a primary priority. Prior to the Development Road Project, Gulf countries had begun increasing their investments in Iraq. Post-2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar have pursued political policies towards Iraq, thereby increasing their economic investments in various areas. For instance, the UAE-owned AD Ports Groups, which engages in comprehensive port management activities with numerous subsidiaries, such as DP World, recently signed an agreement with the General Company overseeing Iraqi ports to secure the contract for the expansion of the Al-Faw Grand Port. In this regard, the Erdoğan visit went beyond the mere symbolic realm; it was an offer and agreement for a new regional development paradigm based on win-win economics. The only requirement for Türkiye's projects to come to

fruition is the elimination of terrorism. It is an economic promise with a military or political component.

The line separating security and economic concerns in Türkiye's Iraq policy is undergoing a transformation. The initial economic intention of the Development Road project, which aims to establish a rail transport network and a 1,200-kilometre transborder road linking Türkiye with the Persian Gulf via Al-Faw Grand Port, now assumes a security dimension due to the PKK's presence along specific segments, particularly after Mosul.

The Gulf countries view the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project as a means to enhance commerce and collaboration with Europe while also reducing the maritime distance between China and Europe through the Suez Canal. It would rival the only international maritime route now passing through the region via the Red Sea and become one of the primary competing transportation routes in Eurasia. Iraq, Türkiye, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates signed an initial agreement in Baghdad for cooperative efforts on the project. The project, which was announced in 2023, is expected to cost \$17 billion. All four nations would reap direct benefits from the initiative, while others

would harvest indirect benefits as well. Upon the project's completion, it is estimated that an annual revenue of \$4 billion will be generated. *The New Arab* quoted Nabil Al-Marsoumi, an economic expert, in 2023, stating that '[t]he shipments that arrive by sea through Al-Faw port will cross to Türkiye and Europe through the dry canal. They will also transport Turkish and European goods to Iraq, and from there to the Gulf states, Iran, Syria, and Jordan' and 'will transform Iraq into a major transportation station for European countries after Turkey.' Its feasibility, however, diminishes as long as terrorist threats persist and remain unresolved in the absence of bilateral cooperation.

Redefining the PKK?

Successful realization of this project necessitates PKK clearance from these areas. Over time, the PKK has extended its influence not only within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, notably Sulaymaniyah, but also in territories under Iraqi government control, such as Mosul and Kirkuk. Consequently, in light of the PKK's expanding activities and the imperative to secure the Development Road project, critical to Iraq's economic

advancement, the Baghdad government has proscribed the PKK as a 'banned organization' within its borders. Though falling short of Türkiye's expectation for formal terrorist designation, Ankara has expressed satisfaction with this measure, as affirmed by the Turkish Foreign Ministry's welcome of the decision. The Houthi rebels' attacks against international shipping from Yemen have glaringly demonstrated the vulnerability of chokepoints and international commercial arteries, and the capabilities that violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have over global trade vital to every country.

Türkiye's overarching aspiration from Iraq is a collaborative effort against the PKK. Ankara requests that Iraqi military and security forces join Turkish operations against the PKK within Iraqi territory. However, this objective faces hurdles due to Baghdad's reluctance. Nonetheless, Baghdad could provide logistical support and intelligence sharing to Türkiye in addressing the PKK issue. Additionally, Baghdad could act against PKK-affiliated individuals within Iraq. Such cooperation would suffice for Türkiye, at least in the immediate future, particularly as a significant Turkish ground offensive against the PKK in KRI territories is anticipated this summer.

Intensive Turkish diplomatic efforts played a fundamental role in Iraq's decision to blacklist the PKK. Since assuming the foreign ministerial post, Hakan Fidan has made multiple visits to Baghdad from August 2023 on, accompanied by various high-ranking officials. Moreover, Turkish officials engaged in discussions with leaders of the Iran-aligned Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Ankara and Baghdad, aiming to foster constructive relationships across diverse segments of the Iraqi government. These engagements have seemingly yielded positive outcomes, as evidenced by the tempered criticism of Türkiye by Iran-backed entities.

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