

Strategic Pivot: Türkiye-Iraq Cooperation Deepens

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(Murat Kula - Anadolu Agency)

This Policy Outlook explores the renewed era of collaboration between Türkiye and Iraq, focusing on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's latest visit to Iraq. It delves into critical areas like counterterrorism, economic development, transboundary waters, among other significant topics.

Introduction

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's official visit to Iraq on April 22, 2024, represents a pivotal moment in Türkiye-Iraq relations, delineating a trajectory of collaboration between the two neighbours. The purpose of this visit was to address critical issues such as counterterrorism, the Development Road, management of water resources, energy cooperation, and bilateral trade.

The Turkish President's involvement highlights the strengthening of current bilateral talks with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, and Nechirvan Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region. Importantly, the visit itinerary includes both Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (IKRG), underscoring its strategic importance.

President Erdoğan's diplomatic foray in Iraq is emblematic of Türkiye's multifaceted foreign policy capabilities. It prioritises counterterrorism but is based on a win-win framework with its neighbours, marking a significant juncture in Türkiye-Iraq relations.

This policy outlook examines the evolving trajectory of these relations, with a particular focus on the recent official visit.

Türkiye-Iraq Relations in Retrospect

President Erdoğan's recent visit to Iraq after 12 years marked a significant diplomatic event, given Türkiye's enduring interest in fostering political stability in post-Saddam Iraq. During Prime Minister Maliki's tenure, aside from misinterpreting Türkiye's concerns about the sectarian conflict plaguing Iraq as unwarranted interference in internal affairs, bilateral relations were characterised by cooperation with Baghdad and Erbil.

Reflecting on the relatively brief history of Türkiye's relations with post-Saddam Iraq, a notable agreement memorandum was signed during Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's visit to Türkiye in 2007.

Subsequent high-level visits, such as Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's visit to Ankara in 2008 and Prime Minister Maliki's reciprocal visit the same year, underscored a shared commitment to cooperation in bilateral relations. This culminated in the establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council between the two nations. This institutional framework facilitated Türkiye's investments in post-war Iraq's reconstruction.

Particularly noteworthy was then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad in 2009, which yielded the signing of 48

distinct agreements, constituting a significant diplomatic achievement. Erdoğan's visits to Baghdad in 2011, where he also visited Najaf and Erbil, conveyed crucial messages. One such message was Türkiye's stance against perceiving sectarian differences in Iraq as a divisive factor. Additionally, Erdoğan's visit to Erbil underscored Türkiye's diplomatic approach to Iraq, respecting the country's constitutional boundaries and demonstrating an adaptive capacity within these geopolitical realities.

Following Daesh's capture of Mosul in 2014, Türkiye established a military presence in Bashiqa and committed to training Peshmerga forces to counter ISIS. While these measures initially faced criticism from then-Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the grounds of 'interfering in sovereignty', tensions eased with al-Abadi's subsequent visits to Ankara in 2017 and 2018.

Leading up to Erdoğan's recent visit to Baghdad, bilateral relations have consistently focused on counterterrorism. Agreements signed underscore Türkiye's prioritisation of preventing the PKK from gaining operational leeway in northern Iraq and undertaking proactive measures to counter any facilitative actions. Türkiye has regarded both Baghdad and Erbil as indispensable partners in this endeavour, highlighting the significance of this issue during high-level exchanges and engagements involving military and intelligence delegations from both nations.

President Erdoğan's Visit Boosts the Spirit of Cooperation

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's first visit to Iraq in 12 years witnessed the signing of 26 agreements spanning various areas such as counterterrorism, trade, agriculture, healthcare, education, and transportation. Additionally, a quadrilateral agreement involving Türkiye, Iraq, the UAE, and Qatar was signed concerning the Development Road Project, which is considered the most tangible manifestation of the two countries' regional connectivity goals. It is worthwhile to delve into the significance of some key areas of cooperation.

Counterterrorism

The presence of the PKK terrorist organisation in northern Iraq has long been a top priority in bilateral discussions. Recently, the increased presence of PKK in the predominantly PUK-controlled city of Sulaymaniyah posed a significant national security threat for Türkiye. Demands for concrete actions on this issue, which both President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, along with MIT Director İbrahim Kalın, emphasised with great sensitivity, were met with reluctance from Bafel Talabani. Türkiye has consistently highlighted that PKK activities not only threaten Türkiye's border security but also pose a threat to civil-



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ians living in cities within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), jeopardising their daily lives and livelihoods.

Reports indicating PKK's acquisition of Iranian or Chinese-made [kamikaze drones](#) through the PUK, along with joint training, clarified the PUK's national threat status for Türkiye. Despite the PUK's indifference to this situation, Türkiye's closure of the airspace required for flights to Sulaymaniyah provided a clear response. While Erbil has shown understanding regarding Türkiye's concerns about the PKK, the lack of a similar stance in Sulaymaniyah resulted in the ongoing diplomatic efforts to address the insecurity risk in northern Iraq, ultimately leading the Iraqi federal government to list the PKK as outlawed.

The counterterrorism dimension during Erdoğan's Iraq visit was built upon this foundation, culminating in a tangible consensus regarding cooperation. The Turkish military continues airstrikes against PKK clusters in the region, a practice set to continue as per official statements. Türkiye expects understanding and support from Iraq, akin to recent times. Given the sophisticated military capabilities in countering the PKK, Türkiye anticipates concrete steps to prevent the terrorist organisation and its affiliates from gaining ground and operational freedom.

The nuanced difference in Baghdad's approach should also be seen as a significant change. Previous [accusations](#) of "sovereignty infringement" directed at Ankara during counterterrorism operations in northern Iraq have now shifted to a collaborative approach and mutual under-

standing. This shift aligns with the principle stated in Article 7 of the [Iraqi Constitution](#), which states, "The State shall undertake to combat terrorism in all its forms, and shall work to protect its territories from being a base, pathway, or field for terrorist activities".

In terms of counterterrorism, Türkiye is aware of Iraq's current military capacity limitations. Therefore, within the scope of cooperation, deals are also in place regarding military modernisation, military training, and the defence industry. Türkiye aims to take significant steps towards border security by targeting the establishment of a [security corridor](#) approximately 30-40 km inside Iraq's borders. This initiative not only aims to protect border security but also demonstrates Türkiye's respect for Iraq's sovereignty by involving Iraq as a partner in this process. As this cooperation develops in the planned areas, there is also an expectation of a significant potential increase in Iraq's capabilities to combat Daesh and Al-Qaeda terrorism.

Economic Dividends

President Erdoğan's recent visit to Iraq marked a significant milestone in the ongoing efforts to strengthen economic ties between Türkiye and Iraq. One of the key outcomes of this visit was the signing of several agreements aimed at enhancing bilateral trade and economic cooperation. Notably, the Türkiye-Iraq bilateral trade volume reached a substantial \$20 billion in 2023, with exports from Türkiye amounting to \$12.8 billion and imports standing at \$7.2 billion. These figures underscore the robust economic



relationship between the two countries and highlight the potential for further growth in trade activities.

During his official visit, President Erdoğan expressed optimism regarding the future expansion of trade relations between Türkiye and Iraq. The agreements signed during the visit signal a commitment to fostering a conducive environment for economic collaboration and creating opportunities for businesses. Additionally, Türkiye's construction firms have been actively involved in Iraq, undertaking 1,080 projects worth an impressive \$33.3 billion so far. This substantial investment showcases Türkiye's commitment to contributing to Iraq's economic development and infrastructure enhancement.

Central to the economic partnership between Türkiye and Iraq is the ambitious \$17 billion [Development Road project](#). This transformative initiative aims to improve regional connectivity by establishing a comprehensive railway and highway network spanning 1,200 km. The project includes strategic infrastructure such as the Al Faw Port, envisioned as the largest in the Middle East, and Ovaköy on the Türkiye side. By linking the Gulf region with European markets, the Development Road project is poised to facilitate trade, enhance transportation infrastructure, and create new avenues for economic growth and employment opportunities in both Iraq and Türkiye.

The Development Road project holds immense promise for Iraq's [economic diversification](#) efforts. Reducing dependency on oil revenues and promoting sustainable economic development are critical objectives for Baghdad, which aligns with Iraq's broader goals of modernising its

infrastructure and attracting foreign investments to drive long-term economic prosperity.

In the broader strategic context, Türkiye aims to collaborate with regional partners, including the UAE and Qatar, to expand and optimise the benefits of the Development Road project. The involvement of these key stakeholders underscores the project's significance as a catalyst for regional connectivity and economic integration. Furthermore, it is imperative to underscore a significant geopolitical aspect concerning regional connectivity. The escalating regional tensions stemming from Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, which has persisted for over six months, have notably [hindered](#) the realisation of the IMEC project proposed during last year's G20 Summit. The UAE, poised as a key destination within this project due to its pivotal role as a hub for goods from the Indian Ocean, has faced setbacks within the current geopolitical context. However, the introduction of the Development Road project has positioned the UAE as one of the stakeholders in a mutually beneficial framework. This development presents Iraq with substantial economic prospects, particularly in terms of attracting foreign investment.

Management of Water Resources

President Erdoğan's visit to Iraq paved the way for the strategic cooperation framework. The latter provided critical areas beyond counterterrorism efforts and the Development Road project that would enhance Türkiye-Iraq collaboration.

One crucial aspect is the issue of transboundary waters, specifically the flow of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Türkiye to Iraq. The sharing of these waters has been a topic discussed in numerous bilateral meetings recently.

Furthermore, the region's vulnerability to adverse effects from global climate change has amplified this issue, making it critical for Iraq. It has been stated that the construction of the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River, which Iraq has opposed, has led to a 34% reduction in the water reaching the country. To address this, a technical delegation from Iraq conducted an [inspection visit](#) last year, focusing on increasing the water conveyance level from 340 cubic meters per second to 400 cubic meters per second. During President Erdoğan's recent Iraq visit, this issue was deliberated, and potential solutions were addressed through a [10-year deal](#). In the near future, the development of modern and efficient techniques for water usage and enhanced cooperation among technical teams will likely be worked between the parties.

Energy Cooperation

Another significant point that deserves emphasis in cooperation is the issue of oil exports from Iraq to Türkiye. Following the [decision](#) by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) arbitral tribunal that halted the flow of oil through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan Pipeline due to allegations of oil imports from the KRG without permission from the central government of Iraq between 2014 and 2018, the flow was stopped on March 25, 2023. Recently, both Iraqi

officials and the Türkiye side have indicated discussions to resume oil flow, with significant progress reported. With the latest visit, Baghdad aims to open the pipeline by early May. Despite some interpretations suggesting bypassing the KRG post-court decision, it is crucial to note that given the historical disputes between Baghdad and Erbil regarding oil revenue sharing, the situation may not be straightforward. Nevertheless, suppose the Türkiye-Iraq cooperation in the energy sector leads to such a development, facilitating the transmission of 350,000 barrels of oil per day and boosting federal budget revenues. In that case, it will also benefit Erbil as a viable trade route.

Potential Challenges and Recommendations

President Erdoğan's recent visit has given a renewed impetus to the Türkiye-Iraq cooperation, spanning crucial regional risk factors and the potential outcomes they may engender. While Türkiye aspires to substantial gains in the region through various collaborative avenues such as counterterrorism and regional connectivity, it must remain vigilant against potential disruptive actions from parties unwilling to reciprocate the same intent and goodwill. Of particular concern is the possibility of terrorist clusters in northern Iraq, with the consequential damage from increasing air operations being evident, potentially cross-



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ing the Iranian border, specifically the Iran-facing side of Mount Qandil.

Recent alarming developments in [PUK-PKK relations](#) underscore the imperative of addressing the Iran factor. Türkiye should underscore unequivocally the necessity for PKK terrorism not to find refuge in new locations and for no neighbour, covertly or overtly, to sanction this, developing responsive measures if necessary. The rational contribution of the PUK leadership, mindful of the economic repercussions due to the closure of Sulaymaniyah's airspace by Türkiye last year, is pivotal to the collaborative process, aligning with regional prosperity and security interests, thereby benefiting the local populace.

If the stance of the PUK fails to meet the expectations set by the series of agreements with the federal government, it could lead to increased tensions between Sulaymaniyah and Baghdad, as well as the repercussions of the administrative crisis being felt by the public. Despite PUK leader Bafel Talabani's efforts to whitewash his ludicrous engagement with PKK and YPG terrorist elements under the guise of maintaining open communication channels, this approach is counterproductive for Sulaymaniyah in the long run. Cosying up to a terror network is neither a moral nor rational stance. What the populace seeks in PUK-administered areas is a sense of security and improvement in socio-economic conditions through services such as education and healthcare. Therefore, the PUK should be aware of the consequences of providing a safe harbour to the PKK, which would have a boomerang effect, potentially leading to a loss of authority in the PUK administrative region.

There are also risks associated with the Development Road. While the route's strategic advantages would augment the regional significance of Türkiye and Iraq, Iran has been sceptical about this mega project. Despite Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's past statements about Iran's potential involvement, Iran was notably absent from the quadrilateral agreement signed during Erdoğan's visit.

Given Iran's significant sway over Iraqi internal politics, Türkiye must carefully navigate these factors. It remains essential to highlight the long-term advantages and mutual benefits of this collaboration for Iraq's development and nation-building, emphasising its strategic importance.

Contrary to concerns that this project might diminish the role of Iranian ports, enhanced regional connectivity is likely to offer greater benefits than maintaining current levels of isolation.

However, given the shadowy nature of Iran's proxies across the region, prudence is warranted, and both parties should meticulously undertake security measures to prevent any potential sabotage of the Development Road project.

As such, counterterrorism efforts and the Development Road project must be high on the agenda and not become mere transient issues subject to shifts in Iraqi cabinets. These are strategic undertakings that require enduring

efforts. Ultimately, they will benefit Iraq's nation-building efforts, which have been ongoing since the 2005 Constitution. Consequently, establishing and sustaining diplomatic communication through permanent working groups and mechanisms is crucial for institutionalising cooperation.

The Way Ahead

Considering all areas of cooperation, the developing relations between Türkiye and Iraq hold the potential for substantial benefits for both nations. Ankara, cognizant of Iraq's complex federal political structure and regional challenges, is committed to nurturing this emerging partnership. President Erdoğan's visits to Baghdad to meet with Prime Minister Sudani, and Erbil to meet KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, exemplify this commitment to collaboration.

In its dealings with Iraq, Türkiye communicates its concerns clearly while ensuring no party feels side-lined, developing solutions that are advantageous for all parties involved. Driven by a spirit of goodwill and mutual benefit, this period signifies a move toward positive and constructive interaction. In particular, Türkiye is focused on addressing and mitigating the PKK threat, aiming to eradicate terrorism as an ongoing concern in the region while maintaining amicable relations with its neighbours.

Iraq, for its part, should capitalise on this partnership to pursue long-term goals like economic diversification and socio-economic improvement across its governance zones. Drawing on its role as a supportive neighbour, Türkiye is ready to act in good faith, using initiatives like the Development Road to provide lasting advantages in trade and employment for Iraq.