

# Prospects of Iraqi-Turkish relations following President Erdogan's visit

Research and Translation Department



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## **Prospects of Iraqi-Turkish relations following President Erdogan's visit**

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent visit to Baghdad was an important step towards developing relations between Türkiye and Iraq, with the consolidation of political and diplomatic channels and agreement on sustainable solutions to the outstanding issues between the two countries.

Relations between Iraq and Türkiye play a vital regional role in both politics and security because of the significant geostrategic location held by both countries. In recent years, relations between the two countries have witnessed diplomatic tensions, yet current efforts indicate the intention to improve and strengthen bilateral relations.

Since 2021, signs of improving relations between Türkiye and Iraq have been witnessed, including high-level visits exchanged between officials of the two countries, as well as meetings and talks held to discuss common issues and cooperation in various fields.

However, there remain outstanding issues between the two countries that cannot be ignored and require comprehensive and agreed upon solutions. These include border issues, as well as counterterrorism, economic ties, immigration, security and water.

### **Economic ties and trade**

One of the key outcomes of the Turkish visit were economic and trade agreements, where protocols and memorandums of understanding were signed and joint economic and trade committees were established between Iraq and Türkiye<sup>1</sup>, reflecting the trend towards strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries. Through these agreements and mechanisms, technical barriers to bilateral trade are removed, enabling and facilitating investment, financing and trade.

While it is clear that these steps and agreements serve Türkiye's interests more than Iraq's, economic cooperation can also be beneficial to both parties, provided that common interests are balanced. This requires continuous efforts and constructive communication between the two nations to ensure the realization of mutual benefits and strong bilateral relations in the long term.

### **Water and drought challenges in Iraq**

The past several years has seen complaints and objections from Iraq regarding the release of water flows from Türkiye. According to Iraq, lack of water flows affects river levels and cause a shortage in the water resources available to the country, impacting Iraq's ability to meet its water, agricultural and environmental needs.

The lack of water flows from Türkiye towards Iraq has been and continues to represent a major challenge to Iraq's food security and environmental sustainability due to its impact on river levels and water reserves. The United Nations and other international organizations<sup>2</sup> are aware of these challenges and seek to support Iraq in handling these issues as well as providing sustainable solutions to the water crisis.

There has been constructive dialogue and cooperation between Türkiye and Iraq to deal with this complex water challenge. Potential solutions are likely to include coordinating water management policies between the two countries, enhancing cooperation in water

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ina.iq/207549--.html> وزير التجارة: شكلنا لجنة اقتصادية مشتركة مع تركيا "Minister of Trade: Agreement on joint economic and trade committee with Türkiye"

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Country Team in Iraq Sheds Light on Water Challenges and Promotes Cooperation on World Water Day 2024: Water for Peace. <https://iraq.un.org/en/264118-united-nations-country-team-iraq-sheds-light-water-challenges-and-promotes-cooperation-world>

analysis and monitoring, exchanging technology and knowledge in water resources management, focusing on more efficient water use and promoting sustainable practices in agriculture and other uses of water.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may have an interest in using the relationship with Baghdad to achieve progress in his economic and security agendas, such as enhancing economic cooperation and achieving regional stability, which requires him to engage flexibly with the water issue between Türkiye and Iraq.

### **Complex security tensions**

Cross-border security between Iraq and Türkiye is considered to be a complex and delicate issue, with Türkiye possessing a number of demands and objectives in this regard. It is possible that the Turkish President has a desire to strengthen his influence and showcase achievements that enhance his popularity, particularly following his party's defeat in the recent local elections in Türkiye<sup>3</sup>.

Erdogan's remarks on his country's expectations from Iraq in fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) reflects the ongoing security tensions between the two countries, with Türkiye considering the PKK a terrorist organization that it seeks to eliminate. Due to this fact, it is seen that Ankara believes Baghdad should cooperate effectively to combat this group.

On the other hand, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani seeks to reinforce his political position by withdrawing some of the privileges Türkiye has granted to the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and returning them to the central government in Baghdad.

The presence of Turkish bases in northern Iraq<sup>4</sup>, as well as efforts to combat the PKK, may have a significant impact on negotiations and relations between Iraq and Türkiye. This situation could also lead to tensions between Baghdad and the Iraqi KRG. Historically, political and security tensions have frequently appeared between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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<sup>3</sup> Erdogan declares local elections 'turning point' for Türkiye. <https://www.trtworld.com/elections/turkiye/2024>

<sup>4</sup> Iraq Reveals Presence of Five Turkish Military Bases on its Soil. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3780431/iraq-reveals-presence-five-turkish-military-bases-its-soil>

## Energy

Another challenging issue impacting the relationship between Iraq and Türkiye is the issue of oil exports from the northern Kurdistan region through Turkish territory without the approval of the central government in Baghdad. Indeed, these exports stopped more than a year ago as a result of judicial disputes and technical problems.

According to OPEC, the halt in oil exports from the Kurdistan region is estimated to incur losses exceeding \$14.5 billion<sup>5</sup>. Iraq is currently working to restart the Turkish Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which has stopped operating since ISIS took over large parts of Iraq in 2014. It is expected that 350,000 barrels of oil will be pumped daily to Türkiye when the line resumes operation<sup>6</sup>.

Relatedly, the neighboring Gulf states have shown great interest in the Development Road project proposed by the Iraqi Prime Minister last year, which could lead to greater trade agreements between countries in the region. Among the topics that were on the agenda of Erdogan's visit to Baghdad was the Development Road project, which aims to build a road and railway network that extends over a distance of 1200 kilometers and links the Gulf countries to Türkiye via Iraq by 2030. This project is expected to enhance communication as well as trade between the Gulf countries and Türkiye, bringing the Turkish market closer and more accessible for the Gulf states.

A four-way memorandum of understanding was consequently signed in Baghdad under the sponsorship of Al-Sudani and Erdogan, aiming to develop joint cooperation between Iraq, Türkiye, Qatar and the UAE in the strategic Development Road project<sup>7</sup>.

The agreements and memorandums of understanding signed by Iraq and Türkiye during Erdogan's visit reflect the bilateral desire to strengthen cooperation and communication. However, it is important to note that strong and stable relations develop over time and through continuous efforts. Outstanding issues must be addressed comprehensively to achieve sustainable progress in the level of cooperation and relations between the two neighboring countries.

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<sup>5</sup> OPEC urges Iraq to resume Kurdistan Region's oil exports amid economic concerns.

<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/34666-OPEC-urges-Iraq-to-resume-Kurdistan-Region%27s-oil-exports-amid-economic-concerns>

<sup>6</sup> Oil on tap: Iraq to resume Türkiye pipeline operations by April's end.

<https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/business/oil-on-tap-iraq-to-resume-Türkiye-pipeline-operations-by-aprils-end>

<sup>7</sup> على "طريق التنمية" .. توقيع مذكرة تفاهم رباعية بين العراق وتركيا وقطر والإمارات <https://rb.gy/88pc6s>

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