

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Erdogan's April 2024 Visit to Iraq: An Assessment

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## **S***ummary*

Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Iraq in April 2024 came after a gap of 13 years. The two countries signed 26 cooperation agreements spanning defence, security, water, and infrastructure development, among others. While Iraq's designation of the PKK as a banned organisation addresses Türkiye's security concerns, the Development Road Project involving Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar and the UAE aims to establish a major trade corridor and boost economic integration.

## Introduction

In recent months, Türkiye and Iraq have witnessed significant improvement in their bilateral relations. On 22 April 2024, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Iraq and met his counterpart, President Abdul Latif Rashid and Iraq’s Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al-Sudani.<sup>1</sup> Erdogan also met the Kurdish Regional Government’s (KRG) President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani in Erbil to discuss counterterrorism along with regional and global issues.<sup>2</sup>

The visit was important for both countries as it was the first visit to Iraq by Türkiye’s President in 13 years. About 26 cooperation agreements were signed, encompassing multiple sectors, including water policy, strategic framework, defence industries, tourism, energy security, among others.<sup>3</sup> Erdogan affirmed that his visit was a “new milestone in the Türkiye-Iraq relations”.<sup>4</sup> The comprehensive nature of these agreements, spanning several sectors, highlights the willingness of both countries to promote a multifaceted strategic partnership.

However, the successful implementation of these agreements may face challenges stemming from domestic and regional instabilities, and evolving priorities to secure national interests. Additionally, overcoming logistical and financial hurdles, as well as garnering enduring political will and resources, will be essential for the long-term sustainability of connectivity agreements.

## PKK in Iraq

On 14 March 2024, Türkiye and Iraq issued a Joint Statement on the Security Mechanism Meeting in Baghdad when Türkiye’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan met his counterpart Fuad Hussein. Discussions related to coordinated action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) Türkiye welcomed the decision of the Iraqi National Security Council to designate PKK as a ‘banned organisation’ on the same day (14 March 2024). The Joint Statement highlighted that PKK poses a security threat to both Iraq and Türkiye, and the presence of PKK in the territory of Iraq violates the Iraqi constitution.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [“President Erdoğan Meets with President Rashid of Iraq”](#), Directorate of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 22 April 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Esra Tekin, [“Turkish President, Officials from Kurdish Regional Government Discuss Counterterrorism”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 22 April 2024.

<sup>3</sup> [“26 Agreements Signed Between Türkiye and Iraq”](#), Directorate of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 22 April 2024; [“The MOUs Signed Between Iraq and Turkey”](#), *Iraqi News Agency*, 22 April 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [“We Have the Political Will to Enhance Our Relations with Iraq”](#), Directorate of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 22 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> [“Joint Statement on The Security Mechanism Meeting Between The Republic of Iraq and The Republic of Turkey in Baghdad”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Iraq, 14 March 2024.

The PKK, recognised as a terrorist organisation by Ankara, Washington, and the European Union, maintains its presence in the northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan near the Turkish borders. Türkiye routinely carries out aerial attacks and maintains many military outposts in this area. In April 2022, Türkiye initiated Operation Claw-Lock to strike the PKK group’s hideouts in the Metina, Zap and Avasin-Basyan regions of northern Iraq, close to the Turkish border. As part of Operation Claw-Lock in north Iraq, Turkish security forces ‘neutralised’ more than 900 terrorists, as reported by the National Defense Ministry on 16 May 2024.<sup>6</sup> Türkiye’s National Defense Ministry spokesperson Brig. Adm. Zeki Akturk stated that 1,000 terrorists have been neutralised since 1 January 2024.<sup>7</sup>

With Turkish operations nearly eliminating its domestic presence, the PKK has shifted much of its activities to northern Iraq. Ankara maintains numerous military bases in the region. It frequently conducts operations against the PKK, which has a stronghold in the Qandil Mountains, about 40 kilometres southeast of the Turkish border in Erbil, under the nominal control of the KRG. Türkiye’s military involvement in northern Iraq spans over two decades, including participation in the U.S.-led anti-Daesh coalition in 2014 and 2015. Despite intensified Turkish operations dismantling PKK hideouts in Metina, Avashin-Basyan, Zap and Gara districts, Baghdad is yet to officially recognise the PKK as a terrorist organisation, creating ongoing strains between Türkiye and Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

Turkish officials repeatedly urged Iraq and the KRG to designate the PKK as a terrorist group, stressing that the PKK’s presence in Sinjar, Makhmour, Qandil and Sulaymaniyah threatens Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ankara has expressed readiness to collaborate with Baghdad against both the PKK and Daesh. The Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) regularly conduct cross-border operations in these regions, targeting PKK hideouts and bases to prevent attacks against Türkiye.<sup>9</sup> These operations have often strained bilateral relations between Türkiye and Iraq. During the recent meeting with Erdogan, Iraqi President Rashid emphasised the importance of respecting Iraq’s sovereignty and security. Similarly, Prime Minister Al Sudani conveyed to the Turkish President that Iraq would not tolerate any breaches of its territorial integrity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Utku Simsek, [“Türkiye ‘Neutralized’ Total of 931 PKK/YPG Terrorists in Northern Iraq during Operation Claw-Lock”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 16 May 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [“Türkiye Almost Done Clearing Terrorists Off its Southern Border”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 4 March 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> [“Iraq Won’t Tolerate Violation of its Sovereignty, PM Tells Erdogan”](#), *Press TV*, 22 April 2024.

## Connectivity Projects

A quadrilateral MoU between Iraq, Türkiye, Qatar and the UAE was signed in Baghdad on 22 April 2024 for the strategic Development Road Project.<sup>11</sup> The agreement aims to establish frameworks for the project’s implementation, which is expected to boost economic growth, enhance regional and international cooperation through augmenting economic integration, increase international trade, facilitate movement and commerce, provide a competitive new transport route, and promote regional economic prosperity.<sup>12</sup>

The Grand Faw Port project in Basra, southern Iraq, slated for completion by 2025, is an undertaking to establish the largest maritime hub in the West Asia region. This project, encompassing an extensive network of railway and highway infrastructure spanning from the port through major Iraqi cities to the Turkish border, is envisioned as a significant nexus facilitating trade and transit between Asia and Europe. With an estimated capacity of 90 berths, surpassing the 67-berth Jebel Ali Port in Dubai, the Grand Faw Port is poised to become a pre-eminent trans-shipment hub.<sup>13</sup> Incorporating multi-modal transportation arteries, energy transmission lines and communication networks, this holds the potential to engender substantial economic dividends for concerned stakeholders while adapting Iraq’s transition towards a sustainable non-oil-based economy upon its projected culmination in 2050.

During the Development Road project summit in Baghdad on 27 May 2023, Prime Minister Al-Sudani highlighted the initiative’s potential to establish a robust economy through employment, financial leverage and increased gross national product.<sup>14</sup> Intensive coordination between Ankara and Baghdad has followed, with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan playing a key role. In October 2023, railway representatives from Türkiye, Iraq, the UAE and Qatar met in Ankara. In January 2024, an agreement on the Ovakoy-Faysh Khabur border crossing point was reached between Iraqi, Turkish and PEG consulting firm (Italian company) officials. Envisioned as the ‘new Silk Road’, this US\$ 17 billion project aims to facilitate regional trade and peace, with expected financial contributions from Türkiye, Gulf countries and China.<sup>15</sup>

The Turkish and Iraqi governments have committed US\$ 23.8 billion towards the project, with Türkiye allocating investments for railways and highways within its borders. Türkiye has planned 615 km of new railways and 320 km of new highways,

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<sup>11</sup> John Lee, [“Four-Country MoU Signed for Iraq’s Development Road Project”](#), *Iraq Business News*, 23 April 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Mehmet Alaca, [“Turkish President’s Iraq Visit to Boost Momentum for Development Road Project”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 22 April 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

with US\$ 5.8 billion earmarked for railways between Gaziantep and Ovakoy, and US\$ 2 billion for highways between Sanliurfa and Ovakoy.<sup>16</sup>

Iraqi Transportation Minister Razzaq Muhaibis al-Saadawi emphasised that neighbouring countries are eager to invest.<sup>17</sup> Al-Saadawi remarked that Al-Faw port will feature various components such as petrochemical refineries, natural gas filling stations, ship havens and water treatment facilities, alongside tourism areas and industrial zones ready for investment. The connection between Al-Faw and Umm Qasr port is 73 per cent complete, and an underwater tunnel linking them is 45 per cent finished. A special law is being drafted to facilitate investment and ensure security, which the Iraqi Army will manage. Al-Saadawi noted that the Development Road project would provide a faster alternative to routes like the Suez Canal, reducing shipment times by around 12–15 days.

However, the proposed route for the Development Road project, which avoids the Kurdistan Region’s territory by following the Tikrit-Mosul route, has raised concerns among KRG authorities. This avoidance of the Kurdistan Region is perceived as a lingering response to the 2017 independence referendum, with Baghdad aiming to penalise the Iraqi Kurds by curtailing their oil exports and disrupting their economy. The Development Road is planned to enter Türkiye through the Ovakoy border crossing rather than the Ibrahim Khalil crossing, potentially further undermining the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)’s economy. The central government in Baghdad will control Ovakoy, reducing trade through Ibrahim Khalil, seen as another punitive measure against the Kurds. The Ovakoy project has been in development for some time, with Türkiye collaborating directly with Iraqi Turkmen communities in Tal A’far, Mosul and Kirkuk to facilitate its implementation.<sup>18</sup>

## Hydro Politics and Energy Issues

Iraq is contending with significant water scarcity and desertification, issues that have been compounded by prolonged conflict and insufficient water management practices. The nation’s water infrastructure is both outdated and inadequately maintained, resulting in many regions within Iraq lacking access to safe drinking water. Furthermore, the construction of substantial dams and irrigation systems in Türkiye and Syria has diminished downstream water flow, sparking disputes with neighbouring countries as well as internal conflicts within Iraq. This includes

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dilara Aslan Ozer, “[Development Road Project to Ensure Economic Integration: Minister](#)”, *Daily Sabah*, 3 June 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Hoshang Hasan, “[Turkey’s ‘Development Road’ Threatens Kurdish Gains in Iraq and Syria](#)”, Kurdish Peace Institute, 18 May 2024.

Kurdish-controlled areas, where various regions and communities vie for the limited water resources available.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, Iraqi authorities have raised concerns regarding Türkiye’s construction of dams, which they argue is diminishing Iraq’s water supply.<sup>20</sup> The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, crucial sources of fresh water for Iraq, have their origins in Türkiye. Climate change is expected to intensify the existing water scarcity in Iraq, potentially leading to severe consequences. The Framework Agreement Memorandum for Cooperation in the Field of Water, valid for 10 years and signed during Erdogan’s visit to Iraq, will seek to resolve mutual issues. Al-Sudani remarked that the agreement with Türkiye “will help in the improvement of water management in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers”.<sup>21</sup>

Baghdad and Erbil have long disputed the distribution of oil revenues. In 2014, the Kurdish region began independently exporting oil via a pipeline to Türkiye’s Ceyhan port. Baghdad denounced this action as “smuggling” and “robbery” and subsequently filed a case against Türkiye at the International Court of Arbitration, claiming a breach of the 1973 Iraqi-Turkish pipeline agreement.<sup>22</sup> The central government in Baghdad deems it illegal for Erbil to export oil independently of the Iraqi national oil company, while Kurdish authorities argue that this practice offsets budget transfers withheld by Baghdad.

Since March 2023, an oil pipeline connecting the semi-autonomous Kurdish region to Türkiye has been non-operational following the arbitration court’s decision, which mandated Ankara to compensate Iraq US\$ 1.5 billion for oil exports that circumvented the central government in Baghdad.<sup>23</sup> According to an estimate by the Association of the Petroleum Industry of Kurdistan representing international oil companies in the region, the cessation of oil sales has resulted in over US\$ 14 billion in lost revenues for Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

## **Türkiye’s Engagement with Kurdistan Regional Government**

President Erdogan met with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani in Erbil to discuss counterterrorism and regional and global issues. Erdogan expressed satisfaction with Iraq’s gradual move away from violence and

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<sup>19</sup> [“Water in Crisis - Turkey, Syria, and Iraq”](#), The Water Project.

<sup>20</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Suzan Fraser, [“Kurdish Separatists and Water Issues Loom Large in Long-awaited Visit of Turkey’s Erdogan to Iraq”](#), *The Associated Press*, 22 April 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Kersten Knipp, [“Turkey-Iraq Ties: Renewed Progress, But PKK Issue Remains”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 24 April 2024.

<sup>22</sup> [“Ruling Halts Oil Exports from Iraq’s Kurdish Area via Turkey”](#), *Associated Press*, 26 March 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Suzan Fraser, [“Kurdish Separatists and Water Issues Loom Large in Long-awaited Visit of Turkey’s Erdogan to Iraq”](#), no. 20.

<sup>24</sup> [“Turkish President Erdogan Makes Rare State Visit to Iraq”](#), *Le Monde*, 22 April 2024.

emphasised the need to resolve the PKK issue. He highlighted Türkiye’s commitment to unity in the fight against terrorism and the importance of advancing this effort. Erdogan mentioned that comprehensive legal agreements signed in Baghdad also encompass cooperation with the KRG region, stressing that these agreements, along with the Development Road project, aim to promote the welfare and peace of all of Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Erdogan underscored the necessity for Baghdad and Erbil to maintain a healthy dialogue and cooperative relationship without external interference. Erdogan expressed Türkiye’s desire to enhance commercial relations with Erbil and emphasised the importance of opening the Ovakoy-Faysh Khabur Border Gate and initiating vehicle crossings at the Derecik-Zeti Border Gate. Additionally, he conveyed confidence that the rights and political representation of the Turkmen people in the region would be safeguarded.<sup>26</sup> During his visit, Erdogan also met Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Masoud Barzani.

## Conclusion

The evolving developments in Türkiye–Iraq relations mark a shift towards deeper cooperation and strategic alignment between the two neighbouring nations. The recent high-level engagement, coupled with the signing of many agreements across various sectors, signals a shared willingness to address common challenges and unlock economic opportunities.

The Strategic Framework Agreement and accompanying MoUs on defence, security and military training lay the foundation for enhanced collaboration in combating terrorism and maintaining regional peace. Iraq’s designation of the PKK as a ‘banned organisation’ can be considered a crucial step in addressing Türkiye’s longstanding security concerns, potentially paving the way for joint efforts to neutralise the threat. While Türkiye has prioritised the elimination of PKK, Iraq has focused more on water issues.

Furthermore, the Development Road Project, a multi-billion dollar initiative involving Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar and the UAE, holds the potential to transform regional trade dynamics, facilitate interconnectivity, and drive economic growth. However, as Türkiye and Iraq navigate the evolving developments, their commitment to cooperation and mutual understanding will specifically depend on addressing their respective domestic challenges as well as bilateral issues predominantly relating to security, energy and water.

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<sup>25</sup> Esra Tekin, [“Turkish President, Officials from Kurdish Regional Government Discuss Counterterrorism”](#), no. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

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