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IRAQ AND TÜRKİYE'S OPPORTUNITIES IN AN EVOLVING REGIONAL EQUATION

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Introduction

In recent years, the geopolitical transformation in the Middle East has been reshaping regional power balances, placing Iraq at the center of this evolving landscape. The gradual reduction of the United States' military role in Iraq, shifts in Iran's regional influence, the war between Iran, Israel, and the United States, and Baghdad's regional economic integration initiatives have further elevated Iraq's strategic importance.

Iraq's post-2003 political system, constructed around ethnic and sectarian power-sharing arrangements, has already constrained the prospects for long-term national integration.

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The rivalry and conflicts between the United States and Iran have turned Iraq into a field of contestation both militarily and politically. This situation is closely linked not only to Iraq's geopolitical position but also to the country's militia networks, sectarian power-sharing structure, and weak state capacity. For many years, the U.S. presence on the ground served as a constraining factor in the operational space of these militia groups. However, the gradual reduction of Washington's military role is increasingly exposing Iraq's security balance to competition among local and regional actors. This development is widely seen as one that could particularly enhance the political and military influence of militia groups aligned with Iran.¹

The war that spread across the region with Israel and the U.S. attacking Iran on February 28, has also had reflections on Iraq. Following attacks on Iran, Iraqi militia groups backed by Tehran are organizing attacks on Iraq, the

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Western targets while increasing their threats. Militia groups becoming part of the war, in addition to the country's fragile structure, may drag Iraq once again into the center of a proxy war.

On the other hand, despite the risks facing Iraq, it appears that during the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani the country has begun to achieve a degree of internal stability through infrastructure and economic development plans, as well as regional diplomatic initiatives, while also seeking more balanced relations abroad. In this context, a potential power vacuum that could emerge in a scenario where the influence of the United States and Iran in Iraq weakens or is rebalanced presents both significant risks and strategic opportunities for Türkiye. On the one hand, security risks such as the strengthening of Iran-backed militia networks and the spillover of regional conflicts into Iraq remain a concern. On the other hand, new avenues may emerge through economic projects, security cooperation, and diplomatic initiatives that could allow Ankara to expand its influence in Iraq.

Growing militia influence and the balance of power

Although Iraq's political system was restructured by the United States after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the demographic weight of the country's Shiite population and their political influence have enabled Iran to establish a broad sphere of influence in Iraq. This influence has not been exercised solely through

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diplomatic channels or political parties; it has also been cultivated through militia networks, economic linkages, and religious authorities. As a result, Iran's presence in Iraq reflects a far more complex structure than traditional interstate influence, characterized by the deep entanglement of state and non-state actors.

Militia networks have been among the most important instruments of Iran's influence in Iraq. Following the seizure of Mosul by Daesh in 2014 and the subsequent collapse of the Iraqi army, tens of thousands of volunteers joined armed formations after a mobilization fatwa issued by the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This process led to the emergence of the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi). In 2016, legislation passed by the

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Iraqi parliament formally integrated the Hashd al-Shaabi into Iraq's official security apparatus, granting them the status of a security institution directly linked to the prime minister.² However, this structure is not homogeneous. Within the Hashd al-Shaabi, there are numerous groups with different ideological and political orientations. While some of these groups maintain a position closer to the Iraqi state, others—particularly the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba—which maintain direct links with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, act as part of Tehran's broader regional strategy.³

Groups affiliated with the Hashd al-Shaabi have also become influential actors in Iraqi politics through their links with political parties. This situation has increasingly blurred the boundaries between militia power and political representation in Iraq. Militia groups represented in parliament through political parties are able both to access state resources and to exert influence over security policies.

Following the elections held in 2021, the government formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani has sought to strengthen Iraq's internal polit-

ical stability while simultaneously pursuing a policy aimed at balancing relations between the state and militia groups. However, the close ties that some of these militias maintain with Iran have heightened concerns that such structures could undermine the sovereignty of the Iraqi state. The United States and several Western countries have also expressed similar concerns.⁴

From Iran's perspective, the strengthening of Hashd al-Shaabi is seen as an important component of its regional strategy. In this context, Iraq is regarded as a key part of the "axis of resistance" that Iran has established with Syria and Lebanon. The reduction of the U.S. military presence in Iraq and rising regional tensions have further increased the strategic importance of these militia groups. Consequently, the relationship between state authority and militia structures in Iraq is likely to emerge as a decisive factor shaping not only the country's political and security architecture but also the broader regional security landscape in the coming period.

The transformation of Iraq's security architecture and U.S. – Iran rivalry

The transformation of Iraq's security architecture over the past two decades has been closely tied to the presence of the United States military in the country and the evolving nature of that presence. The process initiated by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 not only brought an end to the rule of Saddam Hussein but also triggered a comprehensive effort to rebuild the country's security institutions. In

the years following the invasion, the restructuring of Iraq's security sector was carried out largely with the support of the United States and coalition forces. Two decades later, however, Washington has increasingly pursued a strategy of gradually reducing its military footprint in Iraq.

The transformation of the U.S. military presence in Iraq began particularly with the withdrawal of American combat troops from the country in 2011. However, following the rise of Daesh, a renewed military presence was established in 2014. Yet after the end of Daesh's territorial control in Iraq, recent statements and policy decisions indicate a shift in the U.S. role in the country—from direct combat operations toward advisory and training activities.⁵ This transformation has significant implications for Iraq's security architecture. For many years, the U.S. military presence functioned as a balancing factor among various political and armed actors in Iraq. In particular, the operational space of Iran-aligned militia groups was limited to a certain extent through the presence of U.S. forces and the support of the international coalition. However, the reduction of the U.S. military role is increasingly expos-

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ing Iraq's security balances to competition among local and regional actors.

The limitation of the U.S. military presence and the declining role of coalition forces are enabling militia structures to gain greater room for maneuver in both the security and political spheres. Indeed, the increase in attacks targeting U.S. military bases in recent years and the occasional direct threats issued by Iran-aligned militia groups toward Washington demonstrate how fragile the security environment in Iraq remains.

The impact of the rivalry between the United States and Iran on Iraq is not limited to the security sphere. This competition also directly affects Iraqi politics. While some political groups in Iraq advocate for closer relations with the United States, political blocs aligned with Iran argue that Washington's military presence in the country should be completely terminated.

From Iraq's perspective, the reduction of the U.S. military role presents both risks and opportunities. On the one hand, the withdrawal of the United States brings with it a process that requires Iraq to assume greater responsibility for its own security. In the long term, this could create an opportunity for the strengthening of Iraq's security institutions. On the other hand, the fact that state authority has not yet fully consolidated, combined with the strong presence of militia groups, indicates that this process also carries the potential to generate serious security risks.

For this reason, the future of Iraq's security architecture will largely depend on three factors. The first is the extent to which the Iraqi state can strengthen its security institutions;

the second is the degree to which militia groups can be integrated under state authority; and the third is how the impact of regional power competition over Iraq will evolve. In this sense, the transformation of the country's security architecture will affect not only Iraq's internal security balance but also the broader trajectory of regional power competition.

Türkiye's Iraq strategy: security, diplomacy and the Development Road

Developments in Iraq within the broader framework of regional security and geopolitical power balances directly and indirectly affect Türkiye and are therefore of close concern to Ankara. In recent years, Türkiye has emerged as one of the most prominent actors within the new geopolitical equation taking shape in Iraq. For a long time, Ankara shaped its Iraq policy largely around security concerns, particularly the threat posed by the PKK. However, in recent years Türkiye's approach toward Iraq appears to have evolved into a broader strategic framework. This new approach encompasses not only security considerations but also diplomacy, economic cooperation, infrastructure projects, and regional integration. Within this framework, the main objectives of Türkiye's Iraq policy include preserving Iraq's territorial integrity, strengthening the authority of the central state, ending the presence of the PKK in Iraq, and increasing economic integration between the two countries.

The security dimension has long played a decisive role in Türkiye's Iraq policy. In particular, the bases established by the PKK in northern

Iraq and its presence in areas close to the border are regarded by Ankara as a direct national security threat. For this reason, since 2019 Türkiye has launched a series of military operations in northern Iraq known as the "Operation Claw", significantly restricting the organization's freedom of movement along the border region.

The pressure generated by Türkiye's military operations has also reshaped the operational patterns of the PKK in Iraq. As the group's presence in mountainous areas has weakened, some of its elements have increasingly shifted toward urban environments, becoming more visible in cities such as Mosul, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah. This shift has brought the PKK into growing tension with Iraqi authorities and has gradually led the Iraqi central government to frame the organization as a security challenge. In recent years, the administration in Baghdad has increasingly described the PKK as a threat to Iraq's sovereignty.

Within this framework, it can be said that security cooperation between Türkiye and Iraq has significantly developed in recent years. In particular, high-level contacts held in 2024 demonstrated the emergence of a more coordinated approach between the two countries in the fields of security and intelligence. The intensive meetings between the two sides laid the groundwork for the establishment of a new security mechanism between Ankara and Baghdad. One of the most notable outcomes of these discussions was the decision of the Iraqi government to designate the PKK as a "banned organization." This decision is widely regarded as an important turning point in Türkiye-Iraq security cooperation.⁶

Another important dimension of Türkiye's Iraq policy is the strengthening of diplomatic relations. In recent years, Ankara has placed particular emphasis on improving its ties with Baghdad. The intensification of diplomatic contacts between the two countries, especially during the tenure of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, is considered one of the most concrete indicators of this new approach.

At the same time, the Erbil-Baghdad balance constitutes an important component of Türkiye's Iraq policy. While Ankara pursues a policy that supports Iraq's territorial integrity, it also maintains close relations with the KRG. Türkiye's ability to engage simultaneously with both Baghdad and Erbil can be seen as part of Ankara's broader strategy of maintaining balanced relations with the different political actors in Iraq.

One of the most prominent aspects of Türkiye's Iraq policy in recent years has been economic cooperation and infrastructure projects. In particular, the Development Road Project has emerged as a notable initiative in this context. The project, which includes an approximately 1,200-kilometer highway and railway corridor planned to extend from the Al-Faw Grand Port on the Persian Gulf to the Turkish border, aims to establish a new economic corridor between Iraq and Türkiye. Once completed, the project is expected to enable Iraq to gain faster access to global trade networks through the Persian Gulf and connect to European markets via Türkiye.⁷

The Development Road Project is not viewed merely as a transportation initiative but also as a broader regional development model.

In particular, the gradual reduction of the U.S. military role in Iraq and the possibility that Iran's influence in the region—despite its continued presence in Iraq—may face new tests following the developments in the Middle East after October 7 are creating a new strategic environment for Türkiye

The project envisages the establishment of industrial zones, commercial hubs, and logistics infrastructure along the railway and highway routes that will form the corridor. Such developments could enhance Iraq's economic diversification while simultaneously reinforcing regional trade networks. For Türkiye, the project represents a strategic opportunity at a time when trade corridors linking the Middle East and Europe are undergoing significant transformation.

Overall, Türkiye's Iraq policy in recent years appears to have evolved into a multidimensional strategy. Military operations in the security domain, the strengthening of diplomatic relations, economic projects, and regional cooperation initiatives constitute the core elements of this strategy. This approach also aims to enable Türkiye to adapt more effectively to emerging power balances in Iraq.

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Iran's influence in the region—despite its continued presence in Iraq—may face new tests following the developments in the Middle East after October 7 are creating a new strategic environment for Türkiye. Within this evolving equation, Ankara should seek both to reduce security risks and to deepen its economic and diplomatic relations with Iraq in order to expand its regional influence.

Risks and new opportunities in bilateral relations

The political and security dynamics that have emerged in Iraq in recent years demonstrate that the country continues to occupy a central position in regional power competition. The gradual reduction of the U.S. military role, Iran's sustained influence in Iraq through political and militia networks, and rising regional tensions stand out as key factors reshaping Iraq's security architecture. During this period, Iraq has sought to strengthen state authority and foster stability through economic development projects, while also facing pres-

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ures from ongoing regional power struggles. However, assessments suggesting that Iraq is entirely under Iranian influence do not fully reflect reality. Iraqi politics has a complex structure in which numerous actors and power centers compete with one another. Competition among Shiite political blocs, internal divisions within Kurdish political movements, and the search for different alliances among Sunni political actors make it difficult for a single actor to establish absolute dominance in Iraq. This situation also allows Iraq, at times, to pursue a balancing policy in its foreign relations.

In this context, the multidimensional approach that has emerged in Türkiye's Iraq policy in recent years is particularly noteworthy. Rather than addressing its relations with Iraq solely from a security perspective, Ankara has been attempting to develop a broader strategy that also encompasses diplomacy, economic cooperation, and regional integration. While the "Terror-Free Türkiye" process constitutes the security dimension of Türkiye's Iraq policy, the diplomatic relations developed with Baghdad and economic initiatives such as the Development Road Project aim to expand Ankara's influence in Iraq across multiple domains.

Recent diplomatic developments between Iraq and Türkiye indicate the emergence of a broader potential for cooperation between the two countries. The coordination mechanisms established in the field of security and the common approach developed against the PKK demonstrate that the foundations of a strategic security partnership between Türkiye and Iraq are being laid. By further institutionalizing this cooperation, the two countries

could move existing security coordination mechanisms to the next stage, establish joint action platforms, expand cooperation in the defense industry, and potentially even lay the groundwork for a regional security pact. In particular, Türkiye's recent advances in the defense industry represent a significant opportunity both for supporting Iraq in terms of military equipment and for sharing knowledge, expertise, and experience.

At the same time, large-scale economic initiatives such as the Development Road Project illustrate that Türkiye–Iraq relations are evolving beyond a purely security-centered framework. The growing risk of regional confrontation within the U.S.–Israel–Iran triangle has further elevated Türkiye's importance for Iraq, whose economy remains heavily dependent on oil revenues. Tensions in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz have already demonstrated how disruptions in oil supply—the backbone of Iraq's economy—can trigger severe economic contraction. In this context, the development of new energy corridors between Türkiye and Iraq, in addition to existing

pipeline infrastructure, would be strategically significant both for unlocking Iraq's energy potential and for strengthening Türkiye's role as a regional energy transit hub while also enhancing its own energy security.

Within this framework, Iraq's economic reconstruction process, infrastructure initiatives, and emerging regional trade corridors present substantial opportunities for Türkiye. The success of Ankara's Iraq policy will depend on its capacity to manage existing security risks while effectively leveraging the economic and diplomatic opportunities generated by these developments.

In conclusion, a scenario in which the influence of the United States and Iran in Iraq weakens or becomes rebalanced could produce a power vacuum that generates not only security challenges but also strategic opportunities for Türkiye. Pursuing a multidimensional and balanced policy toward developments in Iraq will therefore be crucial for Ankara, both in terms of strengthening regional stability and expanding Türkiye's long-term strategic influence in the country.

Endnote

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Notes



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ABOUT

Duman completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in the Department of International Relations at Kırıkkale University in 2004 and 2007, respectively. He received his Ph.D. in 2024 from the Department of International Relations at Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University with a dissertation titled "The Ethnicity-Sectarianism Nexus in Iraq after 2003: The Case of the Turkmens." Since 2004, Duman has served as a researcher, analyst, and coordinator at various think tanks in Türkiye. As of November 2024, he has been working at Anadolu Agency, where he currently serves as Director of Strategic Analysis. In addition to this role, he teaches courses on the Middle East at several universities. Duman's research primarily focuses on the Middle East, particularly Iraq, while he also conducts studies on Turkish foreign policy and the Turkic world. He has numerous national and international publications and has participated in many panels, conferences, and seminars. He frequently provides expert commentary to various media outlets and has also served as an international observer in election monitoring missions in several countries.



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