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## ***Iraq and Turkiye: A strategic realignment amidst regional shifts***

At odds for years, Baghdad and Ankara are today increasingly finding common ground against hostile actors and projects in their strategic West Asian geography.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

In a surprising shift, Iraq and Turkiye have moved beyond their [long-standing hostilities](#) to launch a pathway toward intensive strategic cooperation. For years, Baghdad condemned the presence of Turkish troops fighting Kurdish separatists on its soil as an illegal violation of its sovereignty – a stance it upheld as [recently](#) as last month.

Other contentious issues [blocking progress](#) between Ankara and Baghdad were Turkiye's [illegal oil imports](#) from the Kurdistan region and its siphoning off of [critical Iraqi water resources](#).

But quite suddenly, the two neighbors have agreed to redefine Turkiye's military presence in Iraq. Turkish forces will remain in the Persian Gulf country but with a new mission: [training Iraqi forces](#). This development not only marks a significant shift in their

bilateral relations but also reflects the swiftly changing dynamics and priorities in West Asia.

This transformation in Iraq–Turkiye relations occurs as both countries re-evaluate their regional roles, alliances, and obstacles. The tensions that once defined their relationship during the height of the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS have eased, giving way to a more pragmatic approach.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [called](#) the deal a “historic development,” adding, “We will elevate our collaboration to the next level through the joint coordination training centers envisioned by this agreement.”

His Iraqi counterpart Fuad Hussein, for his part, announced that the Bashiqa base would be converted into a joint Turkish-Iraqi training facility under the accord, with Turkiye eventually transferring control to Baghdad. But he did also note that while drafting such documents is straightforward, their implementation could pose challenges.

### **Security and trade rivalries bind Iraq and Turkiye**

For starters, the two neighbors increasingly face belligerent or uncooperative Kurdish political-military factions as a common challenge, compelling them to cooperate in new ways. In the case of Iraq, which features a semi-autonomous Kurdish region, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) hosting of [Israeli Mossad](#) centers and legal breaches have rendered this project a security liability.

Also of critical concern is the emergence of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor ([IMEC](#)), an ambitious US-sponsored project that threatens to create cross-continental trade routes that bypass both Iraq and Turkiye, providing a fresh incentive for the two countries to work together.

The corridor, championed by the US, Israel, and Persian Gulf states, seeks to create new commercial routes that could undermine the strategic trade corridors being established by Iraq and Turkiye. In response, Baghdad and Ankara have green-lit alternative [infrastructure projects](#) to safeguard their interests and ensure their continued relevance in regional trade.

The fourth meeting of the [Iraq–Turkiye High-Level Security Mechanism](#), held in Ankara on 15 August, was a pivotal moment in this new phase of cooperation. The meeting brought together top officials from both countries, culminating in [signing](#) a “Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Military and Security Cooperation and Counterterrorism.” This MoU represents a significant step forward, signaling a commitment to closer ties and shared security goals.

Earlier this year, on 22 April, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his “[historic](#)” first visit to Iraq in 13 years, a trip that laid the groundwork for the current increase in bilateral cooperation.

### **‘There is no corridor without Turkiye’**

Despite 27 agreements aimed at enhancing cooperation across various fields, a MoU on security cooperation was notably absent during that visit. Yet, as part of a landmark security deal, Iraq declared the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) a [banned organization](#) in March, aligning with Ankara’s decades-long policy.

Subsequently, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council, prompted by the Iraqi intelligence service, ordered the closure of three political parties and the confiscation of their assets due to alleged PKK affiliations.

This newfound cooperation is not without its challenges. The IMEC, which excludes both countries, poses a significant strategic threat. Turkiye, under Erdogan’s leadership, has been vocal in its [opposition](#) to this project, advocating instead for the [Development Road project](#) – a counterproposal that would enhance connectivity between Iraq, Turkiye, and Europe.

On 10 September 2023, during a conversation with journalists accompanying him to the G20 summit in India, Erdogan expressed strong disapproval of Turkiye’s exclusion from the IMEC initiative, stating, “There is no corridor without Turkiye.”

The Development Road, unveiled by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani in May, has already attracted significant investment from Persian Gulf states. With the inclusion of Iraq’s [Grand Port of Al-Faw](#), the project is now seen as a crucial component of Iraq and Turkiye’s joint strategy to remain central players in the region.

### **Joint cooperation**

The MoU signed between Iraq and Turkiye commits both states to [cooperative measures](#), including joint military training, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism efforts. It also emphasizes the importance of respecting each other’s sovereignty – a notable inclusion given Iraq’s previous objections to Turkish military operations on its soil. Establishing a Joint Security and Coordination Centre in Baghdad, under the Joint Operations Command, is a key element of this agreement, providing a platform for ongoing collaboration.

This cooperation is more than just a strategic alliance; it reflects the shifting priorities of Ankara and Baghdad. For Iraq, the partnership with Turkiye offers an opportunity to strengthen its security forces and bolster its economy through increased trade and investment.

The Development Road project, in particular, promises significant economic benefits, including improved infrastructure, job creation, and direct land connectivity with Europe. For Turkiye, this accelerated cooperation with Iraq also represents a strategic salvo at regional states seeking to elbow out Ankara from key West Asia equations. The IMEC directly threatens to marginalize Turkiye's role in regional trade, and so, the Development Road project seeks to maintain Ankara's position as a [key transit hub](#) between Asia and Europe.

Moreover, the collaboration with Iraq on security matters helps Turkiye address its own domestic challenges, particularly on the issue of Kurdish separatism, by ensuring that its southern border is more secure and that the PKK's influence in the region is diminished.

### **Regional realignment**

The recent developments also highlight the broader realignment taking place in West Asia. As traditional alliances shift and new partnerships emerge, countries like Iraq and Turkiye are finding common ground in areas previously sources of tension. This realignment is driven by a combination of security concerns, economic interests, and the desire to counterbalance the influence of external powers in the region.

The evolving relationship between Iraq and Turkiye also heavily reflects increased pressure on US military forces to withdraw from the country and [neighboring Syria](#) – where the occupation is more overt. As US–Iraq negotiations for a military withdrawal of American troops progress, one interesting question is whether the Turkish military will edge out the US in training Iraqi forces.

Either way, the recent agreement allowing Turkish forces to remain in Iraq under a new mandate is a significant step forward for the two neighboring states that were, until recently, exchanging verbal blows on a range of contentious issues.

While challenges remain, particularly in the face of competing regional projects like the IMEC, the new bilateral commitments could have far-reaching implications for the region's future.

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