

Turkey Knocks France Out on Mosul Airport Reconstruction Project

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's involvement in the reconstruction of Mosul Airport could cause problems amidst regional tensions with France and Iran, but it is also emblematic of the growing economic ties between Turkey and Iraq.

In the wake of the demolition and destruction caused by ISIS, Turkey has actively attempted to take part in the reconstruction of Iraq. Most recently, despite encountering French rivalry in the bid to manage the reconstruction project of Mosul International Airport—a site that is still in ruin five years after the battle that expelled ISIS from the city—Turkey has unexpectedly secured the contract for the airport project.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi [inaugurated \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220810-iraq-launches-mosul-airport-reconstruction\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220810-iraq-launches-mosul-airport-reconstruction) the reconstruction of Mosul International Airport on August 10 after the Governor of Nineveh, Najm al-Jubouri, [announced \(https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/iraktaki-musul-havalimaninin-onarimini-turk-sirketler-yapacak/2658419\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/iraktaki-musul-havalimaninin-onarimini-turk-sirketler-yapacak/2658419) that the repair work was to be granted to the “internationally experienced partnership” of TAV Construction and 77 Construction, two Turkish companies. Considering the political and geopolitical significance that Turkey has attached to Mosul, in addition to the Iraqis’ negative perception of Turkey’s interest in the city, the project has a symbolic value beyond being a post-ISIS reconstruction project.

Mosul was recaptured in 2017 by Iraqi forces and a U.S.-led international coalition after three years of ISIS occupation. The city—home to 1.5 million inhabitants—lost its airport and many other buildings and infrastructure during the ISIS invasion and subsequent battles. Now, thanks to significant international support, the city is close to its pre-ISIS appearance. Nevertheless, the reconstruction period has been far from smooth, as many states have competed for the lucrative construction contracts.

Case in point, Turkey has been very insistent on repairing the Mosul airport since ISIS’ demise—due in large part to

the geographical proximity of Mosul to Turkey's political and economic hinterland. In the early stages, Turkish companies Kurk Construction, which usually handles construction projects in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and Kalyon Holding, which is involved in the construction of the Istanbul Airport and metro projects, were the **candidates (<https://www.dunya.com/sirketler/kalyon-ve-kurk-inaaat-musulu-fransizlara-kaptirdi-haberi-607081>)** for the Mosul Airport reconstruction.

However, the two companies ran into resistance from the start, especially with regards to their proposal for a build-operate-transfer model—a model in which the companies could first build and then subsequently manage the airport themselves before turning it over to the Iraqi government. Within this model, the companies had two **expectations (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/turkey-iraq-france-ankara-lost-construction-project-in-mosul.html>)**: that the airport's security would be provided by Iraqi forces, and that the Iraqi side would guarantee fifty thousand passengers per month for a twenty year period. Although common in Turkey, this build-operate-transfer proposal was not welcomed by the Iraqi government, who would have been required to pay approximately \$25 per passenger if the target could not be reached.

Unlike the Turkish proposal, French company Aéroports de Paris Ingénierie (ADPI) **offered (<https://www.meed.com/french-consultant-reviews-plans-for-four-iraqi-airports/>)** to undertake the project as contractors only, rather than operating the airport afterwards. ADPI is a well-known company already involved in the development of Baghdad, Basra, and the construction of the Duhok airport. Expecting their companies to receive the project, Turkey was disappointed when the Iraqi government authorized the Iraqi Civil Aviation Administration to negotiate and **sign (<https://www.adp-i.com/en/news-events/groupe-adp-and-adp-ingenierie-sign-new-airport-mosul>)** a contract with ADPI in January 2021.

Contextually, Iraq's agreement with ADPI over Kurk Construction and Kaylan Holding came as a shock, especially considering Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's **visit (<https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/iraqi-prime-minister-al-kadhimis-visit-to-ankara-and-its-importance-for-the-turkmens/>)** to Ankara in December 2020 and the already-tense showdown unfolding between France and Turkey in the Middle East. Publicly, it appeared that then-Turkish ambassador in Iraq Fatih Yildiz reluctantly accepted the situation, **stating, (https://twitter.com/FATIHILDIZ_MFA/status/1347293484085096449?s=20)** “It seems that someone else will be doing this project.”

Nevertheless, the contract quickly reversed back towards Turkey in subsequent months. A reliable source stated on the condition of anonymity that the shift from the French to Turkish companies at the last moment was due to the insistence of some local actors in Mosul and Prime Minister Kahdimi. It appears that these Iraqi political actors took the initiative to hand the project over to Turkish entities at the last moment in an effort to strengthen the Iraqi-Turkish relationship.

In addition to the larger regional implications of a Turkish contract, it is believed that the French loan model was ultimately deemed unsuitable. Turkish companies also argued that they could construct the airport at less cost, making the Turkish side a more attractive option for Iraq. Mosul Deputy Luqman Rashidi **said (<https://www.tebaajansi.com/irak/musul-havalimaninin-onarimi-turk-sirketlere-teslim-edildi-h297407.html>)**, “...we prevented the project from going to the French because they wanted to carry out the project in return for a loan. In our meeting with the Prime Minister, we stated that Mosul has its own budget and there is no need to carry out the project on credit.”

It has also been suggested in Iraq that the United States was uncomfortable with France's involvement in Mosul, hence the final decision to sign with TAV Construction and 77 Construction. Following the U.S. troop withdrawal from the region, some Iraqi observers see French President Emmanuel Macron's actions as suggesting an interest in turning a possible power vacuum into an opportunity to consolidate French influence in Iraq and the Middle East.

Macron made two visits to Iraq in September 2020 and August 2021 within a year of the United States' announced decision to reduce the number of U.S. troops in the country.

Like Kadhim, the United States likely preferred a rise in Turkish influence, especially in the context of the Iran-backed militias that maintain an active presence in Mosul. While certainly uncomfortable with increased French involvement in Iraq, Iran and the Iran-backed militia groups in Mosul would much prefer French companies on the airport bid, considering France as the lesser evil in comparison to Turkey.

With tensions escalating in the bitter rivalry between Turkey and Iran, Mosul has become a critical location in which both countries hope to exert influence. Although Iran's support of Mosul militia groups has given it an edge, Turkey hopes to weaken Iran's influence using its historical ties to Mosul and its relationship with the Sunni community. In recent years, Turkey has **intensified (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-war-northern-iraq-numbers>)** attacks against militia groups such as the Turkish and U.S. designated terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq. Many PKK members have in turn **joined forces (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/pentagon-iran-backed-militias-pkk-coordinated-vs-turkish-troops-iraq>)** with Iran-backed groups to target Turkish forces. In this respect, the Mosul Airport project has become yet another stage on which larger regional battles can play out—not just between Turkey and France, but also with the involvement of the United States and Iran.

Turkey's success in getting the airport project is also notable in that it comes at a time when anti-Turkish sentiment is at its peak in Iraq, especially after the July **attack (<https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/turkish-shelling-kills-civilians-including-three-children-in-iraqi-kurdistan>)** that killed nine holidaymakers in Zakho, northern Iraq. Iraqis widely blame Turkey for the strike, though Ankara has repeatedly denied that its troops were responsible.

Nevertheless, this political obstacle and the many others that preceded it did not ultimately outweigh the advantages of a Turkish contract in the airport debate. Turkey already has strong economic interest in Iraq. The trade volume between Iraq and Turkey now **exceeds (<https://shafaq.com/en/Economy/Turkey-aims-to-increase-the-trade-volume-with-Iraq-to-50-billion-dollars-a-year>)** \$20 billion, and several hundred Turkish companies—including companies that are **very active (<https://www.meed.com/turkish-firms-successful-in-iraq/>)** in the field of construction—operate in the country.

After **pledging (<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2018/02/14/turkey-pledges-5-billion-as-nations-commit-funds-for-iraq-reconstruction>)** \$5 billion in loans at a Kuwaiti conference in support of Iraq in 2018, Turkey has made a number of other **proposals (<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2018/02/14/turkey-pledges-5-billion-as-nations-commit-funds-for-iraq-reconstruction>)**. These include the renovation of the Mosul and Kirkuk airports; the opening of a new border crossing; the construction of a 570 kilometer-long railroad connecting Mosul and Baghdad; the modernization of Iraq's irrigation infrastructure; and even the **participation (<https://www.zawya.com/en/projects/projects-iraq-to-sign-deal-for-rail-link-with-turkey-w8jb5c7w>)** of Turkish companies in the construction of rail lines for the Faw port in Southern Iraq.

On major projects such as the reconstruction of the Mosul Airport, it is no secret that diplomatic and political initiatives often impact the final decision. The fact that Turkey was ultimately successful in taking the airport bid shows that Ankara's political and economic potential still carries weight in the minds of Iraqi officials. Beyond its physical presence in the country, Turkey's soft power still remains an important factor in Iraq's dynamics. Its ability to secure the airport project likewise gives Ankara hope for future relations and new projects in the country.

Of course, competing interests from Iran are still very much in play, especially as Iraq struggles with its own major domestic political crisis. Turkey still faces serious weaknesses when competing for influence in Mosul and elsewhere, and the airport project will undoubtedly be affected by these realities. Specifically, Turkey will continue

to struggle with maintaining security for its projects and broader presence in Mosul. It is possible that the airport project will become a target for militia groups, along with the Mosul-based Turkish military base and Turkish consulate.

Although the government crisis in Iraq has muted immediate reactions against Turkey's success in securing the airport contract for now, the implications of the project in the context of political chaos in the country and growing regional tensions remain. In spite of their recent success, larger trends suggest that pressure against their airport bid is far from the last hurdle Turkey will have to overcome in its efforts to grow its economic influence in Iraq. ❖

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