

The Iraq-Turkey Reset

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/), [Selin Uysal \(/experts/selin-uysal\)](/experts/selin-uysal/), [Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab/)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Selin Uysal \(/experts/selin-uysal\)](/experts/selin-uysal/)

Selin Uysal is a 2023-24 Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute, currently in residence from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.



[Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab/)

Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

From water rights to PKK violence, a recent summit seemed to remove several long-festering thorns from the bilateral relationship, creating potential challenges and benefits alike for U.S. interests in Iraq and beyond.

On April 22, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan [traveled \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-iraq-push-reset-ties-cooperation-against-pkk-2024-04-22/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-iraq-push-reset-ties-cooperation-against-pkk-2024-04-22/) to Baghdad to meet with Iraqi prime minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, marking his first visit there in thirteen years. The trip produced several significant bilateral agreements on energy, water, security, trade, and transportation, signaling a mutual desire to improve relations. Given the tumultuous nature of Iraqi-Turkish ties since the 1950s, this development could represent a historic turning point. Why are Ankara and Baghdad patching up their ties now, and what implications does this reset hold for the broader Middle East and U.S. policy?

A Relationship in Free Fall for Decades

Ties between the two countries fell into disarray following the 1958 coup against Iraq's King Faisal II. The putsch

and subsequent rise of a socialist Baath regime in Baghdad pitted Iraq and NATO member Turkey against each other during the Cold War. Various bilateral disagreements emerged as well, including over water rights in the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where Turkey holds upstream control. Relations continued to suffer after the Cold War in the 1990s, when Iraq's mountainous north became a haven for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that had been waging war against the Turkish government since the 1980s.

The end of Saddam Hussein's rule in 2003 did not mend the relationship. Turkey's refusal to participate in the U.S.-led coalition and Iran's growing influence after the war prevented Ankara from establishing any clout in Baghdad. Turkish influence remained limited to Iraq's small Turkmen community, the Sunni Arab bastion in Mosul province, and the Kurdistan Region in the north. For its part, Baghdad was preoccupied with internal strife and the challenge of balancing relations with Iran and the United States, leaving it with little bandwidth to develop a coherent Turkey policy.

Why the Summit May Change Everything

By directly addressing several perennial issues between the two countries, the Erdogan-Sudani summit promises to upgrade the relationship substantially while advancing Turkish influence in Baghdad.

Water management. Ever since Turkey began constructing large hydroelectric dams on the Tigris and Euphrates in the 1970s, Iraq and Syria have expressed deep concerns over Ankara potentially weaponizing water against them (Iraq is downstream for both rivers, and Syria for the Euphrates). In 1983, the three countries formed a Joint Technical Committee to discuss management of the rivers, but they never reached a trilateral settlement despite inking bilateral arrangements. In 1987, for instance, Ankara signed a treaty with Damascus to release 500 cubic meters of water per second (<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/turkiye-nin-sinirasan-sular-politikasi-firat-dicle-havzasi/1377914>) from the Euphrates; three years later, Damascus signed an agreement with Baghdad promising 58 percent of that water to Iraq. An Iraq-Turkey agreement remains the missing link.

Moreover, Ankara has at times decreased or cut off the flow of both rivers when collecting water for its large dams, such as Keban, Karakaya, and Ataturk on the Euphrates and Ilisu on the Tigris. It has also done so for geopolitical reasons, such as when it blocked the Euphrates in 1990 after Iraq invaded Kuwait (at the time, Turkey had no major dams that would have allowed it to block the Tigris). Such moves have made Baghdad and Damascus feel vulnerable about their water security, spurring them to push back against Turkey in other ways, from strengthening ties with the Soviet Union during the Cold War to sheltering the PKK.

During last month's summit, Turkey and Iraq signed (<https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraq-turkey-ink-cooperation-framework-agreement-on-water/>) a cooperation framework agreement and various memorandums of understanding aimed at "fairly and equally allocating cross-border waters and establishing a goal for the efficient and sensible use of water." Ankara has also committed to providing technical assistance on water management, including modern irrigation systems and techniques. The real test lies in whether Turkish companies can implement agribusiness projects on Iraqi soil amid a chronic local governance deficit and potential threats of violence from the PKK and Iran-backed militias.

Pressuring the PKK. In the 1990s, the PKK built numerous camps along Iraq's mountainous border areas with Iran and Turkey, taking advantage of the power vacuum and eventual U.S.-enforced no-fly zone in the north. Both before and after Saddam's ouster, Ankara frequently ordered military incursions to target these camps, spurring harsh criticism from Baghdad for violating its sovereignty. Today, Turkey maintains nearly forty (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/06072020>) military outposts inside Iraq and has intensified pressure on the PKK using drones and seasonal military campaigns. Ankara is also concerned that the PKK-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) are receiving Iraqi government funds as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

This issue underwent a sea change shortly before Erdogan's visit, with Iraq formally designating the PKK as a **"banned organization. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/iraq-bans-pkk-security-ties-turkey-gain-momentum#ixzz8UZ2bb43n>)"** Hence, Turkey's next military incursion, unfolding with Baghdad's blessing, could conceivably result in a permanent Turkish cordon sanitaire inside Iraqi territory. Erdogan has **vowed (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-11/turkey-threatens-to-expand-cross-border-iraq-operation>)** to establish such a zone in order to defend the border against PKK infiltration. In return, Baghdad gets a water deal and a share in the so-called "Development Road," as discussed below.

Development Road and economic integration. The summit witnessed concrete planning for the proposed Development Road trade route connecting the Indian Ocean with Europe. Part of the route will run from Iraq's planned **al-Faw port (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/02/can-turkey-iraq-pull-dry-canal-project>)** overland to Turkey's Mediterranean ports. The accelerated planning was spurred by the recently announced, U.S.-supported India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a route that was formally announced last September and would bypass Turkey and Iraq if implemented. The Development Road proposal has become more viable since then due to the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel war, which has been accompanied by attacks on Red Sea shipping and other challenges to the U.S.-proposed corridor. During the summit, Erdogan promised Sudani that Ankara will invest in the Development Road, which has also garnered financial backing from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

If implemented, the project would create more economic interdependence between Turkey and Iraq, forcing them to hash out their differences instead of repeatedly escalating tensions. Companies from Turkey's robust construction sector would likely build much of the highway and railway infrastructure across Iraq. And militias seem more inclined to take a slice of the resultant revenue rather than sabotage the project.

The Kurdistan Region's role in this initiative remains unclear. Many in the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) worry that the Development Road will bypass their territory and weaken their monopoly over cross-border trade with Turkey. In the meantime, Ankara has moved against the KDP's rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), accusing it of harboring the PKK. For example, Turkish Airlines has stopped flights from Ankara to the PUK stronghold of Sulaymaniyah, further isolating the group.

Iraqi re-centralization. In the bigger picture, Ankara wants to boost the **re-centralization dynamics (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/paradox-centralization-and-state-fracture-iraq>)** that have guided many of Baghdad's actions in recent years. In 2017, Ankara worked with Baghdad (and Tehran) to halt the Kurdistan Region's independence bid. More recently, the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline has been shut down since early 2023. Although the situation arose from an Iraqi complaint against Turkey at the International Chamber of Commerce, the outcome served their shared goal of re-centralization—that is, the Kurds can no longer export oil independently and must turn back to Baghdad for a viable solution.

The continued pipeline freeze suggests that Ankara will back Sudani as he reasserts central authority, without sacrificing Turkish leverage over the increasingly divided Kurdistan Region. On the latter count, Erdogan met with KDP leader Masoud Barzani during his April visit for the first time since 2017, indicating that he will continue cultivating good ties with the group, improving relations with Baghdad, and showing no leniency toward the PUK.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Turkey's renewed focus on Iraq presents challenges and opportunities for the United States, especially given Washington's frequently strained relationship with Ankara. For one, the shift is primarily motivated by Turkey's anticipation of an eventual U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Furthermore, as the Middle East has become an arena for growing U.S. economic competition with China, Turkey aims to play a role in reshaping global trade routes, in part

through cooperation with Iraq. The vacuum left by a U.S. withdrawal might also strengthen Turkey's entente cordiale with Iran. Although Tehran's stance on this possibility remains unclear, it seems to be cautiously tolerating Ankara's economic and military initiatives in Iraq.

At the same time, Turkey's interest in Iraq could wind up aligning with certain U.S. priorities. Strengthening Baghdad's ties with a different neighbor could serve as a useful counterweight to Iran's influence. More broadly, Ankara aims to establish a north-south axis of Turkish influence stretching across Iraq to the Persian Gulf, perhaps impeding Tehran's long-sought "land bridge" to the Mediterranean.

For now, Washington should continue its wait-and-see approach, cautiously allowing Turkey to deepen relations with Iraq while leaving the door open to potential trilateral and multilateral synergies, including between IMEC and the Development Road. The same goes for the European Union, which may favor the Development Road's potential benefits through the existing EU-Turkey Customs Union. Yet any EU support for Ankara's projects in Iraq will depend on a Turkish-European reset that has yet to materialize.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Turkish Research Program. Selin Uysal is a visiting fellow at the Institute, in residence from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Bilal Wahab is the Institute's Wagner Senior Fellow and author of its recent study "[Family Rule in Iraq and the Challenge to State and Democracy](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/family-rule-iraq-and-challenge-state-and-democracy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/family-rule-iraq-and-challenge-state-and-democracy>)." ❖

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