



**مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط**  
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# Turkey's approach and important goals toward Iraq

**Farzad Ramezani Bonesh**



**Al-Bayan Center Studies Series**

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Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

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**Farzad Ramezani Bonesh \***

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After the independence of Iraq, relations between the country and Turkey (with 367 kilometres of the common land border) experienced ups and downs and various developments. Differences and cooperation between Iraq and Turkey have always existed after the First World War. Turkish foreign policy in the Arab world has been established on key elements such as cooperation, participation and respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.<sup>1</sup>

Also, promoting regional and international cooperation through bilateral and multilateral projects; Resolving conflicts through peaceful means and strengthening regional and international peace, stability and prosperity are among the guiding principles of Turkey's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Turkey has increased its field of action based on a hegemonic model, software and hardware capabilities. Some of the major goals include: maintaining and consolidating Turkey's position, geopolitical branding of Turkey in regional relations, portraying Turkey's role as an independent regional power, re-establishment of a quasi-imperial territory influencing the territorial domains of the Ottoman Empire and so on.

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1. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/i\\_-turkey\\_s-security-perspective\\_-historical-and-conceptual-background\\_-turkey\\_s-contributions.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_-turkey_s-security-perspective_-historical-and-conceptual-background_-turkey_s-contributions.en.mfa)

2. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/i\\_-turkey\\_s-security-perspective\\_-historical-and-conceptual-background\\_-turkey\\_s-contributions.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_-turkey_s-security-perspective_-historical-and-conceptual-background_-turkey_s-contributions.en.mfa)

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## **Improving the position of Turkey in northern Iraq and Ottoman nostalgia**

Although Turkey renounced its claim to Mosul in 1926 by signing a treaty<sup>3</sup>, its growing influence in Mosul and northern Iraq, the expansion of relations with Iraqi Turkmen and Sunni Arabs, and expanding its consulates, are considered significant. For many in Turkey, Mosul is the lost land of the Ottoman Empire. Also, from Turkey's point of view, the Turkmen have not been able to achieve their political, cultural and social rights. Turkey also considers the fair representation of all classes in Iraq<sup>4</sup>, the role of Turkmens as the second largest ethnic group in the Kurdistan region, and the fate of the multi-ethnic region of Kirkuk<sup>5</sup>, very important.

Turkey seems to be unhappy with the expansion of Iran's influence in northern Iraq. From the point of view of many people in Turkey, more connection between YBŞ and PKK, Shiite-led Popular Mobilization Forces or Hashd al-Shaabi (HSB)<sup>6</sup> with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Iran with PKK and Hashd al-Shaabi<sup>7</sup>, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Hashd al-Shaabi<sup>8</sup> is against the interests of Turkey.

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3. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/turkey-iran-iraq-sinjar-heats-up-turkish-iranian-rivalry.html>

4. <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/mesur-barzaninin-turkiye-ziyareti-ve-turkiye-ikby-iliskileri/>

5. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-role-of-turkey-in-the-middle-east/>

6. <https://www.al-monitor.com/tr/originals/2021/12/turkey-targets-pkk-linked-yazidis-inside-iraq>

7. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/abd-istihbarati-iran-destekli-gucler-turkiyeye-karsi-pkkyla-is-birligi-yapiyor/2580332>

8. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/abd-istihbarati-iran-destekli-gucler-turkiyeye-karsi-pkkyla-is-birligi-yapiyor/2580332>

## **Security interests in northern Iraq and cleaning up the PKK**

Since peace talks ended in 2015, at least 490 civilians, 1,200 members of Turkish security forces, and 2,750 PKK militants lost their lives according to a 2019 study by the International Crisis Group. The total deaths in the forty-year conflict surpass 40,000.<sup>9</sup> Turkey's conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)– recognised as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S. and the EU<sup>10</sup> – continues in south-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq. The presence of PKK in Iraq is considered a threat to Turkey's national security. Since last years, Ankara has been pressuring Iraq to carry out coordinated operations to expel the PKK and (Sinjar Resistance Units YBS forces from Sinjar, and has maintained its permanent military presence in northern Iraq. The YBS was formed, with the help of the PKK<sup>11</sup>, after IS swept across Sinjar in August 2014, murdering thousands of Yazidi men and abducting their women and children.

Turkey pursued the 'safe zone' project along the Iraqi border with military bases, checkpoints, permanent deployment of 5,000 to 10,000 soldiers<sup>12</sup>, informal agreements with the Kurdistan Region (KRG) and military operations in northern Iraq<sup>13</sup> up to a depth of 60 to 70 kilometres. From the point of view of Turkey, the right to intervene in Iraq in line with the rights of self-defence derived from Article 51

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9. <https://ahvalnews.com/peoples-democratic-party/turkeys-pro-kurdish-hdp-open-joint-presidential-candidate-says-co-chair>

10. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>

11. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/international-wing-yazidi-force-sinjar-says-its-not-fighting-turkey>

12. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkeys-military-operations-in-syria-and-iraq>

13. <https://tinyurl.com/258mmze5>

of the United Nations Charter<sup>14</sup>, and the provisions of the agreement between the two parties in 1983 is still seen as legitimate.

Turkey, on the one hand, emphasizes preserving Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty and opposes the secession of the Kurdish region from Iraq. On the other hand, Ankara considers the PKK's presence in northern Iraq a major threat to Turkey's national security. Ankara has paid attention to Baghdad's failure to prevent attacks by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against Turkey and does not accept the PKK's presence in Iraq and expects all neighbouring countries to support the fight against this organization.<sup>15</sup>

From Turkey's point of view, the affiliation of PYD/YPG to PKK is clear.<sup>16</sup> In northern Syria, Ankara and the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Forces (YPG), remain pitted against each other.

Ankara is looking for a joint anti-terrorist operation with Iraq to clean up the PKK<sup>17</sup>, support the fight against terrorist groups<sup>18</sup>, encourage the Kurdish leaders of northern Iraq to fight with the PKK, and reduce the relations between the Sulaymaniyah leaders and the Syrian Kurdish forces and the PKK. Also, Turkey tries to cut Qandil's connection with Syrian Kurdistan and Turkish Kurdistan, control the Yazidi militias under the command of the PKK, more control over camps such as

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14. <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/turk-savas-ucaklari-irak-ve-suriye-de-kurt-hedefleri-vurdu/6423240.html>

15. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/what-erdogan-missed-skipping-baghdad-conference>

16. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/pkk.en.mfa>

17. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/erdogan-turkey-may-launch-joint-anti-pkk-operation-with-iraq>

18. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-will-never-accept-pkks-presence-in-iraq/2349358>

“Makhmour” and thousands of Kurdish refugees, and more direct and indirect pressure on Turkish Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq, and reduce the ability to feed and nurture PKK forces. In this regard, it is important to remove anti-Turkish groups from Sinjar and clean it up. The President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: “We will not allow Sinjar to become the second Qandil”<sup>19</sup>

Turkey wants to drag Kurdish parties into war with the PKK. It fears that greater PKK power in Sinjar, and the growing importance of Sinjar for the PKK, led to a stronger link between Qandil, northern Syria and Turkey. Although the Turkish military presence is opposed by Baghdad, from Turkey's point of view, the right to intervene with the removal of key PKK commanders and the immobility of large convoys is still legitimate.

Turkey does not want to witness questioning the legitimacy of its operation and military presence in Iraq,<sup>20</sup> filing a complaint to the United Nations, reducing Turkey's relations with others, dragging the war into Turkish territory, and targeting the Turkish economy.

Turkey also by using approaches such as negotiations with Europe and America about the PKK<sup>21</sup>, and Barzanis' cordial relations with Turkey <sup>22</sup>tries to solve the internal displacement crisis in Turkey caused by conflicts. This approach can help reduce the votes of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and increase the vote of the ruling party in the upcoming elections (2023). The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic

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19. <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/iraktaki-iran-destekli-sii-milisler-neden-turkiyeyi-hedef-aliyor/>

20. <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/iraktaki-iran-destekli-sii-milisler-neden-turkiyeyi-hedef-aliyor/>

21. <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/koseyazisi/pkkda-telas-tsknin-hedefi-kapsamli-tasfiye-312284>

22. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/where-are-turkey-iraqi-kurdish-relations-headed-195710>

Party is holding its 5th Ordinary Congress in Ankara ahead of Turkey's 2023 elections.

### **Hydro-politic and water problem**

While there is a perception in Turkey that Turkey has not fully utilized the country's water resources for the benefit of its people, the water case is one of the most prominent cases in the relations between Iraq and Turkey.

Turkey's integrated water project is considered vital for its economy, and its consequences will include irrigation of 1.7 million hectares of land, production of 27 billion kilowatt hours of electricity, and job opportunities for about 3.8 million people. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which make up 98% of Iraq's water resources, originate from Turkey, but Turkey's plans are one of the main factors drying up in Iraq, and reducing Iraq's share of water in the Tigris and Euphrates. Water reserves in Iraq have decreased by more than 50% due to poor rainfall and the water level of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers during the past year.<sup>23</sup>. However, until now, Turkey has not given an important privilege to Iraq in the field of water.

### **Security cooperation and arms export to Iraq**

The sales of Turkish defense and military equipment have increased in recent year. Ankara seems to hope that arms sales will increase the scope of geopolitical, defense and security cooperation. Turkey's military equipment and the low price of Turkish defense products are

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23. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iraqs-sandstorms-are-threatening-life-in-the-fertile-crescent-its-time-the-iraqi-government-takes-a-stance/>

important incentives for cooperation. Despite the previous welcome of some Iraqi officials for the purchase of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, helicopters and advanced weapons<sup>24</sup>, it seems that Turkey hopes that the sale of arms to Iraq can increase the scope of geopolitical, defense and security cooperation between the two sides. In this regard, Ankara wants to activate some delayed or stopped intelligence, security and military agreements.

There are also concerns about the consequences of Turkey's hydro political plans and their impact on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (which originate in Turkey).

In Turkey's cross-border water policy, it wants the fair, reasonable and efficient use of cross-border rivers for the benefit of the country. But fair use means efficient and effective use of water and water sharing is not applicable; instead, the principle of sharing benefits must be pursued.<sup>25</sup>

### **More energy imports from Iraq**

Turkey intends to be the center of energy trade in its region<sup>26</sup>. Turkey (with about 75% dependence on energy<sup>27</sup>), in its energy policy, pays attention to further strengthening its strategic position in the east-west and north-south corridors, creating diversity in routes and resources, and separate agreements with the Kurdistan Region. Also, the rich energy resources of Iraq could be a source of energy for Turkey to

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24. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/iraq-mulls-buying-turkish-drones-helicopters-military-hardware>

25. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/questions.en.mfa>

26. <https://enerji.gov.tr/bilgi-merkezi-petrol-boru-hatlari-en>

27. <https://enerji.gov.tr/homepage>

receive the right of energy transit in the field of energy diplomacy. From the point of view of many in Turkey, After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the development of Iraq's natural gas creates opportunities for the Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad tripartite cooperation.<sup>28</sup> There is even a plan to replace Iranian gas<sup>29</sup> with Iraqi gas.

### **Increasing exports to Iraq**

Trade between Iraq and Turkey decreased after political disputes and the presence of ISIS in Iraq, but Turkey (February 2018) allocated about \$5 billion to Iraq at the Kuwait Conference on Iraq Reconstruction.

The Center of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), the Board of Foreign Economic Relations (DEIK) and the Joint Trade Councils<sup>30</sup> play an important role in Turkey's multidimensional economic and trade approach.

Using trade and investment to reduce tensions is more effective than mere diplomacy. The sharp devaluation of the Turkish lira, the need for cash and potential swap deals with foreign countries, the shift in Turkey's economic outlook from positive to 'negative' in the evaluation of some credit institutions<sup>31</sup>, and the passing of the coronavirus epidemic, are all considered as Turkey's motivations to increase relation with Iraq.

Increasing the trade volume between Iraq and Turkey is important for Ankara. Trade exchanges between the two countries reached to \$21 Billion last year. Turkey has become the second source of export

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28. <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/mesrur-barzaninin-turkiye-ziyareti-ve-turkiye-ikby-iliskileri/>

29. <https://tinyurl.com/258mmze5>

30. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-africa-ties-to-progress-based-on-win-win-principle>

31. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/world-59619476>

to Iraq after China.<sup>32</sup> So, Ankara is eager to increase this partnership.

Iraq, as a very large market of 40 million people and suitable for technical engineering, is an important opportunity for Turkish companies. In addition, Turkey supports<sup>33</sup> the development of regional transportation projects such as the new Istanbul–Basra<sup>34</sup> highway and railway project in line with its geographical position between continents and regions. Also, in addition to the opening of border crossings, Ankara has also concentrated on the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the opening of Turkish bank branches, and the expansion of the presence of Iraqi tourists in Turkey.

### **Expansion of Turkey's soft power**

Turkish cultural diplomacy<sup>35</sup> has continued vigorously. Intellectual and cultural issues have also risen to the fore within the context of Turkish diplomacy. Ankara is trying to strengthen its position and soft power by using the presence of students from Iraq, Turkish cultural centers,<sup>36</sup> Turkish language and literature groups<sup>37</sup>, Turkish education centers, and the Younes Amre Foundation.

### **Obstacles and prospects of Turkey's approach in Iraq**

Despite the meetings of officials and mechanisms such as the “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council” between the two countries, the two main issues of water and security are among the most important

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32. <https://ina.iq/eng/15623-iraq-proposes-an-economic-bloc-includes-turkey-and-iran.html>

33. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa)

34. <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/opinion/28112021>

35. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/site\\_media/html/TKGM-Prestij-Kitab%C4%B1-R1.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/TKGM-Prestij-Kitab%C4%B1-R1.pdf)

36. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>

37. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>

challenges in the development of relations between the two countries.

Although it seems that the special envoy of the Turkish president will travel to Iraq<sup>38</sup>, but despite the operational plans until 2071<sup>39</sup> for water management in Turkey, the water issue can be a source of tension in the relations between the two countries. In fact, negotiations to guarantee Iraq's share of water are difficult and uneven.

Differences such as the presence of Turkey's approach in northern Iraq are important source of crisis, that failure to resolve them in the short and medium term could have a negative impact on the dimensions of cooperation.

Many people in northern Iraq consider Turkey responsible for the displacement of the residents of more than 300<sup>40</sup> villages and violation of honor, supporting the dormant cores and remnants of ISIS, violating human rights, and displacing more than 300 villagers.

Although the Kurdistan Democratic Party has become increasingly dependent on Turkey, local sensitivities and the strength of Kurdish nationalism, and the risk of the PKK emerging as a champion of Kurdish nationalism will be more challenging for Turkey.

The incompatibility of the two executive powers of Iraqi Kurdistan policy (Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is also important. On the other hand, the Iraqi authorities constantly consider Turkey's military approach as

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38. <https://news.am/eng/news/705918.html>

39. <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/turkeys-first-water-council-opens-amid-shortage-worries/news>

40. <https://almaalomah.me/2022/06/02/601186/>

“continuous violations of the Turkish army” and the clear occupation and violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

The continuation of the dispute in this area can even lead to an official complaint from Turkey to the UN Security Council, the termination of relations with Turkey<sup>41</sup>, the internationalization of the crisis<sup>42</sup>, the redrawing of the border with Iraq, and the withdrawal from the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 .<sup>43</sup> Iran's influence and the approach of pro-Iranian groups in Iraq to Turkey also make Turkey's work difficult in Iraq .<sup>44</sup>

What is clear is that Turkey's behavior and goals in Iraq come from a variety of factors and variables. In fact, Turkey does not want the trade and economic spheres to be harmed by the security and geopolitical interactions between the two countries. However, the greater success of the Justice and Development Party's approach in relations with Iraq can play an important role in reducing the votes of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and increasing the share of the Justice and Development Party in the next year's elections in Turkey

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41. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/336911>

42. <https://tinyurl.com/26m2akzg>

43. <https://tinyurl.com/24g8n3v9>

44. <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/mesrur-barzaninin-turkiye-ziyareti-ve-turkiye-ikby-iliskileri/>