



# IRAQ'S NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENDA

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**alling crude oil prices in 2020 caused Iraq's long-neglected infrastructure investments to be further delayed. The war and conflict environment in Iraq has not only stalled the necessary infrastructure investments but also rendered the infrastructure even more unusable, resulting in

serious problems in the energy and electricity systems of Iraq. Demonstrations took place in protest of power cuts, along with other variables such as economic instability, social problems, and security concerns, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi. The Iraqi government is working on a plan to build nuclear reactors as it tries to tackle widespread power outag-

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es that have caused social unrest. The nuclear energy agenda of Iraq means a lot more than just energy investments, as it is a multidimensional issue that requires various considerations such as Iraq's domestic and foreign policy, military priorities, potential activities of foreign forces currently in the country (or expected to be), social problems caused by electricity shortages, and the contribution of nuclear energy to the Iraqi economy.

## 1. HISTORY OF IRAQ'S NUCLEAR ENERGY AND PRESENT ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH A NUCLEAR REACTOR

Iraq's nuclear energy activities date back a long time. Iraq started nuclear research in the 1960s, and despite being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it founded a nuclear weapons program in the 1970s, supposedly for civilian applications. In 1976, France agreed to sell a research reactor to Iraq and in 1979, a deal was signed with Italy for the purchase of a plutonium reprocessing plant. Iraq also imported uranium from Portugal, Niger, and Brazil.<sup>1</sup>

Nuclear research that started at the Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center, located 18 km southeast of Baghdad, was inconclusive due to the attack of Israel in 1981 and the US in 1991.<sup>2</sup> With the collapse of the Baathist regime, the issue of nuclear energy returned to the agenda in Iraq, which sought to build a peaceful nuclear reactor to solve the electricity problem in the country.

As of 2021, the electricity supply is still one of the biggest problems faced by the Baghdad administration. By building a nuclear reactor, the Iraqi government aims to address the deepening electricity problem that has become a manifestation of the political and economic problems unsettling society. It is thought that nuclear energy production will help Iraq overcome the problem of increasing electricity demand and insufficient supply. Kamal Hussain Latif, Chairman of the Iraqi Radioactive Sources Regulatory Authority (IRSRA) said the country already faces a 10 GW (gigawatts) gap between capacity and demand and expects to need an additional 14 GW by 2030. Iraq currently

<sup>1</sup> Britannica, Nuclear Weapon, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/nuclear-weapon/Other-countries#ref988781> Accessed: 20.07.2021.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Carleton J. Phillips; Dr. Ronald K. Chesser; John Cochran; Jeff Danneels, "Iraq Nuclear Facility Dismantlement and Disposal Project", *Sandia National Laboratories*, pp.1-2.



Iraqi government is unable to deliver electricity to the Iraqi people struggling with hot weathers on their own.

has an electricity production capacity of 18.4 GW, including 1.2 GW imported from Iran. Latif predicts that demand will reach 42 GW by 2030.<sup>3</sup> In a statement in 2020, Latif pointed out that a proposal to build three power reactors by 2019 to cover half the demand had been submitted to the government's Electric Ministry, but that the project never materialized.<sup>4</sup> In this context, five countries

including the US, Russia, Argentina, South Korea, and France, were confirmed as candidates to build the country's new reactors.<sup>5</sup> The framework agreement signed in 2017, which solidified the technical cooperation between Iraq and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) shows that nuclear technology transfer is one of the eight priority areas.<sup>6</sup> Latif said Iraq was in the process

<sup>3</sup> "Iraq Aims to Go Nuclear to Resolve Crippling Power Shortages", Khalid el-Ansary; Anthony Di Paola, Bloomberg, 08.06.2021.

<sup>4</sup> "IRSRA: The Formation of a committee to start building nuclear reactors for research purposes", Iraqi News Agency, 24.09.2020.

<sup>5</sup> "40 years after Israeli strike, Iraq looks to build nuclear reactors", Tzvi Joffre, Jerusalem Post, 16.06.2021.

<sup>6</sup> "New Iraqi committee to build nuclear reactors, combat electricity woes", Joe Snell, Al Monitor, 28.09.2020

Confirming the negotiations between Iraq and Russia, Rosatom announced that the documents regarding the cooperation between Russia and Iraq in the field of peaceful nuclear energy would be signed once the negotiations are concluded.

of developing a \$40 billion plan to build nuclear reactors.<sup>7</sup> In this context, Iraq's Radioactive Resources Regulatory Authority announced in April 2021 that talks were being held with Russia, France, and the United States to discuss the possibility of building nuclear reactors for civil use, and Latif said several preliminary meetings had been held by the government committee on building nuclear reactors for research purposes to study the feasibility of installing a nuclear reactor. The talks were followed by two visits to the Russian Embassy in Baghdad, and Latif announced the talks with the Russian authorities resulted in a memorandum of understanding, which included a number of items that would expedite the construction of the reactors, and that a series of meetings were also planned to be held with the French Embassy in Baghdad. A senior official revealed that a meeting with US officials had been requested in parallel with these meetings.<sup>8</sup>

Negotiations continued and nuclear reactors remained on the agenda throughout May-June 2021, when Latif hinted

that Iraq wants to build eight reactors capable of producing about 11 GW and that the first contract could be signed in 2022. Latif said they would seek funds from potential partners for the \$40 billion plan and pay back the costs over 20 years, adding that the authorities had discussed cooperation with officials from Russia and South Korea. South Korean authorities announced in 2021 that they want to support the construction of the power plants and offered the Iraqi officials a tour of the reactors in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) run by Korea Electric Power Corporation (Kepco). However, a Kepco spokesperson said the company was not aware of Iraq's nuclear plans and hadn't been in touch with Iraqi officials, or been asked to work on any projects there.<sup>9</sup> Latif revealed Iraqi cabinet was reviewing an offer from Russia's Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation to cooperate on the construction of the reactor. In addition, in an interview with Russian news agencies, he said Rosatom would build a nuclear reactor in Iraq and that they plan to build 8 nuclear reactors

<sup>7</sup> "Will Iraq's \$40 Billion Bet On Nuclear Power Solve Its Energy Crisis?", Michael Kern, Oil Price, 08.06.2021. <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Will-Iraqs-40-Billion-Bet-On-Nuclear-Power-Solve-Its-Energy-Crisis.html>, Accessed: 26.06.2021.

<sup>8</sup> "Iraq considers nuclear energy", Nuclear Energy International (NEI), 26.04.2021.

<sup>9</sup> "Iraq Aims to Go Nuclear to Resolve Crippling Power Shortages", Khalid el-Ansary; Anthony Di Paola, Bloomberg, 08.06.2021.

by 2030. Latif announced on 20 May 2021 that the Iraqi National Committee for Nuclear Reactors (NCNR) is working on 30 preliminary sites for nuclear reactors. According to Iraqi officials, 20 preliminary sites have been marked so far, and after "scientific studies", 5 sites will be deemed suitable, 2 of which will then be picked as main and the rest as alternative sites.<sup>10</sup>

In the process, the Iraqi government's meetings with Russian and Korean companies seem to have delivered more concrete results compared to other alternatives. Indeed, Rosatom announced in a statement on 15 June 2021 that the company was discussing a cooperation opportunity with the Iraqi partners in the field of nuclear energy.<sup>11</sup> Alexei Likhachev, the Director-General of Rosatom, said Russia would sign documents on cooperation with Iraq in the field of peaceful nuclear energy once the negotiations are concluded.<sup>12</sup> Although the invitation of Iraqi officials by the Koreans to inspect reactors in the UAE is considered an important and concrete step, Kepco, a Korean state subsidiary, has an agreement with the Russian state corporation Rosatom to jointly work on a project to interconnect the energy grids.<sup>13</sup> It is known that the Russian and South Korean governments have cooperation and partnership agreements in many fields, especially electricity. It is also known that Russia has significant shares in various South Korea-based private energy companies.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. US ATTITUDE TOWARD IRAQ'S NUCLEAR TALKS

The al-Kadhimi government's efforts to tackle the electricity problem through nuclear reactors were also on the agenda during al-Kadhimi's meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to Paris in August 2020. Although Iraqi officials also sought a meeting with the US, the latter disregarded the issue. According to some analyses, the US prioritizes Israel's security, and steps to ensure stability in Iraq will not serve Washington's interests.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the US prioritizes Israel's security and gains political benefits from instability in Iraq does not suffice to explain the US position in the nuclear energy equation in Iraq. Because, the US also remained silent against the possibility of Russia building a nuclear reactor, and Russia's expansion in the region through energy activities does not serve Washington's interests either. Some suggest that discussions over nuclear talks involve the US, France, South Korea, and Russia. However, when the issue of US combat forces' withdrawal from Iraq, subject of the 3rd and 4th rounds of US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue Talks in April-July 2021, is evaluated within this context, the reluctance of the US and Russia's coming to the agenda indicate otherwise. In a possible nuclear talk between the US and Iraq, the US may even start linking its presence in the region to the protection of nuclear reactors and energy security, apart from the fight against the terrorist organization

<sup>10</sup> "Iraq nuclear power plants aspirations: Russia makes key partner in absence of US", ABNA, 27.06.2021.

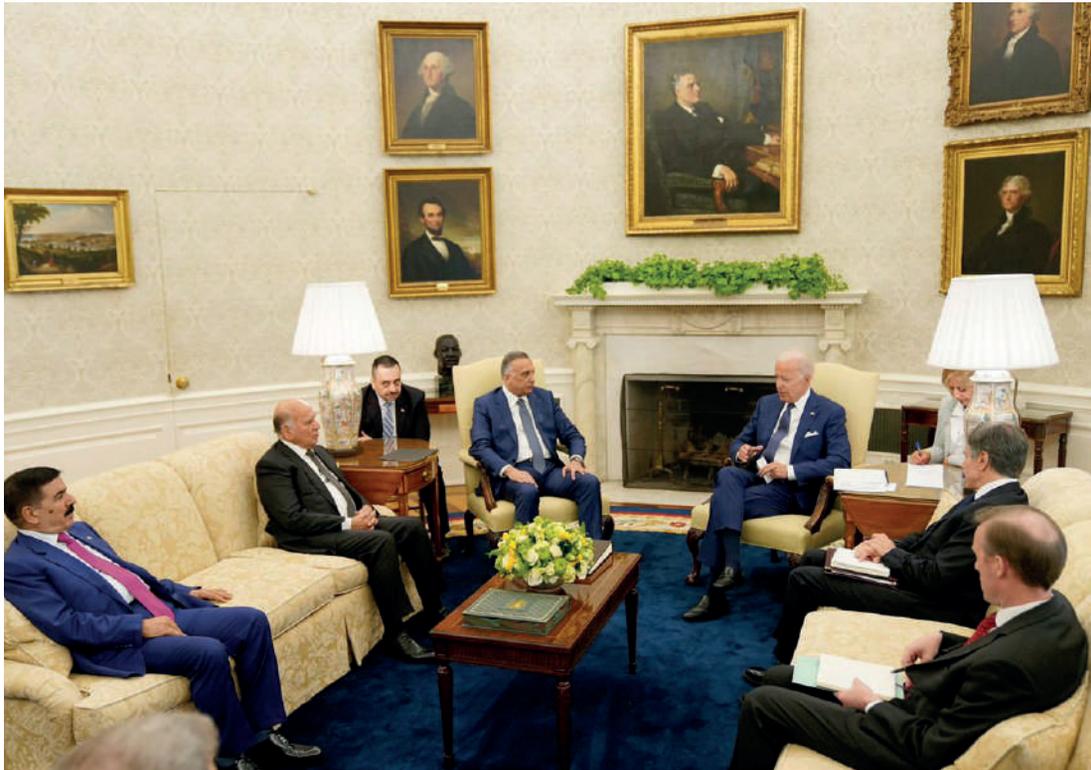
<sup>11</sup> "Rosatom discussing nuclear industry cooperation with Iraq — company", TASS Russian News Agency, 15.06.2021.

<sup>12</sup> "Russia is going to build nuclear reactor in Iraq", Dale Robertson, Positively Scottish, 23.06.2021.

<sup>13</sup> "Korea and Russia agree to bolster cooperation in energy sector", Pulse News Korea, 24.09.2019.

<sup>14</sup> "Rus şirketi, Güney Kore enerji şirketinin yüzde 49 hissesini satın aldı", Habertürk, 06.03.2021.

<sup>15</sup> "Iraq nuclear power plants aspirations: Russia makes key partner in absence of US", ABNA, 27.06.2021.



During al-Kadhimi's meeting with Biden, who visited the US on 26 July 2021, the details of the US military withdrawal from Iraq, discussed within the scope of the 4th round of talks, constituted an important agenda item.

ISIS. The 8 reactors and 20 preliminary sites mentioned by Latif will require important security efforts, given Iraq's chaotic security environment. However, in the 4th round of Strategic Dialogue Talks held in July 2021, al-Kadhimi and Biden decided on the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2021, and that US forces would only provide consultancy, training, and support services in Iraq, meaning in terms of energy security, the US would no longer protect a nuclear reactor facility. Apart from the US military elements, there are US-based private companies providing technical services in Iraq. The attack in Erbil in April 2021 and all other attacks targeting US elements worried these contractors. Lockheed Martin, responsible for the maintenance of F-16's at Balad Air Base, even pulled 50 of its 70

base personnel to the US, and 20 to Erbil. For this reason, the US presence in Iraq in the medium term will be shaped by the relations it will have to develop with the Hashd al-Shaabi and Iran. Indeed, at times when political tensions between Iran and the US escalated, US troops and companies providing technical support in Iraq were targeted by the Shia militias. For this reason, if the US aspires to remain in Iraq in the medium term, it will need to consolidate its presence in the region not only with economic and military means but also with diplomatic means. In this context, the US will implement a foreign policy aimed at improving relations with the Shiites in Iraq or balancing them, which may also lead to a softening of relations between the US and Iran.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF IRAQ'S NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENDA

The increasing US tendency to shift military weight away from the Middle East to Asia and the withdrawal negotiations from Iraq may cause Russia, China, and Iran to fill the power vacuum in the region. If such a scenario occurs, it means that these three countries may coordinate their activities in Iraq to emerge as a new authority (Russia through its defense sector, China through energy investment, and Iran through its Shia identity and the activities of militia groups). Because Russia is seen as an ally in the Middle East, especially in the field of nuclear energy, and has energy investments in many Middle Eastern countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan, it has come to the fore in the negotiations. Russia's energy investments in South Korea may even have an impact on the nuclear reactor talks between South Korea and Iraq. In this context, the attitude of South Korea, which also has energy investments in Iran, towards the nuclear reactors planned to be built in Iraq, maybe shaped in parallel with Russia.

Israel is another regional actor that needs to be taken into consideration regarding the construction of a nuclear power plant in Iraq. Guided by historical memory, Israel seems unlikely to adopt a positive attitude towards nuclear power plants to be built possibly by Russia in Iraq, where Iran is effective. As is known, Israel destroyed the Osirak reactor in Iraq during Operation Opera on 7 June 1981. As nuclear talks in Iraq were moving ahead, the leaking of new documents on the anniversary of Operation Opera in June 2021, can be read as Israeli intimidation of Iraq. In this context, the leaking of new information and images regarding the destruction of the Osirak reactor, which was planned by Iraq with French support, came to the fore at the time of Iraq-France nuclear talks and Iran's nuclear negotiations. At a time when nuclear developments are taking place in Iraq and Iran's influence in the region has increased, Russia and Iraq's involvement in nuclear projects is seen by Israel as a threat to its own security. In this context, a possible US military withdrawal may cause undesirable developments for Israel.

In Iraq, the aggressive attitude of the Shia militias toward

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the US manifested in their attacks against the coalition forces carried out almost every day. The increasing influence of Hashd al-Shaabi and Shia militias in the country also had repercussions on Iraq's foreign policies. Al-Fayyadh's talks with Russia in 2017 for the S-400s are seen as a step that strengthened the Hashd al-Shaabi's relations with Russia. The use of Russian defense systems in the army and the Iraqi government's search for allies other than the US may play a role in consolidating the relations between Iraq and Russia. However, the disregard by the US of Iraqi demands for nuclear reactors to solve the electricity problem may lead to further Russian expansion in the Middle East. Thus, for Russia, which is an important player in the Middle Eastern market, especially in the de-

fense and energy fields, concrete results to be obtained from nuclear reactor talks with Iraq will be an important indicator in terms of breaking the US influence in the region. It can be foreseen that Russia, acting together with China and Iran, may enhance its relations not only with the Iraqi government but also with the Shia militias active in Iraq, and even engage in activities to fill the military gap in the region, in case of a US withdrawal. It should also be kept in mind that Russian forces had acted together with the Shia militia groups in the Syrian war. However, the US decision to pull combat troops from Iraq may result in NATO consolidating its Iraq Mission, preventing Russia and Iran from establishing a military presence in Iraq.

It is known that Iraq owes Iran \$4 billion for energy imports. Gas and electricity imports from Iran cover about one-third of Iraq's energy needs.<sup>16</sup> Iraq's energy dependence on Iran disturbs the US, and the limited or problematic alternatives increase Iran's activism in Iraq. Looking at the internal dynamics of Iraq, Iran has obtained an active position in the Iraqi domestic policy through the Shia militias as well as the energy sector. Iraq imports 1.2 GW of electricity from its energy partner Iran. Increasing attacks on Iraq's electricity infrastructure in 2020-2021 mainly targeted lines transferring electricity from Iran. The attacks even caused the Mirsad-Diyala line to go out of service. Even though no actor took responsibility for the attacks, the Iraqi government blamed ISIS. The attacks intensified in June 2021 as well. Mohamed al-Azzawi, a Hashd al-Shaabi official, announced ISIS had blown up two towers near Baqubah and that Iran had cut off electricity

<sup>16</sup> "Iran power cuts fuel fears in Iraq as scorching summer peaks", Samya Kullab, Washinton Post, 29.06.2021.

exports to Iraq. This line is known as one of the four power lines transferring 400 MW of imported electricity from Iran to Iraq.<sup>17</sup> The Salah-al Din Thermal Power Plant in Iraq, in the city of Samarra, was attacked just one week after its opening.<sup>18</sup> The Iraqi Ministry of Electricity announced that the power plant was targeted with Katyusha rockets and that some parts of the generating unit were severely damaged.<sup>19</sup> The Iraqi Security Media Cell, on the other hand, announced that investigating officers from the National Intelligence Service and the Ministry of Interior had prevented the bombing attacks of ISIS targeting two power transmission towers. Iraq's Minister of Electricity, Majid Hantoush, submitted his resignation to Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on 29 June 2021. The deterioration of power supply due to rising temperatures in the summer and the organized attacks on energy transmission towers ended up in Hantoush's resignation.<sup>20</sup> The Iraqi Ministry of Electricity has not been able to overcome the chronic summer power shortages for the last 18 years. According to some estimates, Iraq has lost 30 to 50 percent of its power capacity due to outdated circuits in the electrical infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> The increasing number of demonstrators protesting the power cuts along with the attacks on the electrical infrastructure also played a role in the resignation of Hantoush. On 30 June 2021, hundreds of people gath-

ered in front of the al-Aziziyah power plant to protest the long-lasting power cuts in the governorate of Wasit, before security forces opened fire.<sup>22</sup> In a tweet flood, the Sadrist Movement linked the electrical problems to 18 causes and proposed 15 solutions. In addition, the Sadrist Movement launched a hashtag on Twitter to dismiss the Minister of Electricity Hantoush.<sup>23</sup> On 5 July 2021, Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kadhimi officially accepted the resignation of Electricity Minister Majid Mahdi Hantoush, who submitted his resignation on 29 June due to pressures arising from the electricity problem.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is possible to say that attacks on power plants and transfer lines have a direct impact on Iraqi domestic policy.

Another negative development in the field of energy is that large investors want to exit Iraq. Iraq's Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul-Jabbar said BP is considering pulling out of the giant Rumaila field and that the Russian company Lukoil wants to sell down its oil stakes in the West Qurna-2 field, adding that the investment environment in Iraq is not suitable for large investors to continue their activities and that all investors are looking for either another market or another partner.<sup>25</sup> When the nuclear power agenda is evaluated in this context, it can be said that any country to sign a nuclear reactor agreement with Iraq will be able to have troops in

<sup>17</sup> "ISIL Blows Up Iran's Power Transmission Line to Iraq", Fars News Agency, 17.06.2021.

<sup>18</sup> "Daesh attacks Salah-al Dim power plant in Iraq", Atalayar, Alba Sanz, 28.06.2021.

<sup>19</sup> "Islamic State claims responsibility for rocket attack on Iraqi power station", Reuters, 28.06.2021.

<sup>20</sup> "Iraq's Minister of Electricity submits his resignation", Shafaq, 29.06.2021.

<sup>21</sup> "Iraqis struggle with sizzling temperatures as blackouts hit", The Arab Weekly, 08.07.2021.

<sup>22</sup> "Irak güvenlik güçleri elektrik kesintisini protesto eden göstericilere ateş açtı: 4 yaralı", Sami Anwar Rashad, Ahmed; Safiye Karabacak, Anadolu Ajansı, 30.06.2021.

<sup>23</sup> "Sadrist movement launches a hashtag to dismiss the Iraqi Minister of Electricity", Shafaq, 27.06.2021.

<sup>24</sup> "فروتن ح دجام ءابركللا ريزو طلاقتمرا لبق ي يظالكا ءفطصم ءارزولاس يىر", Nasnews, 05.07.2021.

<sup>25</sup> "Iraqi oil minister says BP and Lukoil mulling exits", The Arab News, 04.07.2021.

Activities to be carried out by Turkey in the region through its investments may constitute an alternative to Iran and at the same time strengthen the balancing policy of the Iraqi government.

the region due to the security needs that may arise.

#### 4. IMPORTANCE OF IRAQ'S NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENDA FOR TURKEY

Turkey is considered an important alternative in Iraq's pursuit of diversification of electricity suppliers. Many authorities have called on Turkey to make investments in Iraq. During al-Kadhimi's visit to Turkey in 2020, Turkey's investments in Iraq, especially its electricity exports, were an important item on the agenda. In the same year, Baghdad Mayor Alaa Maan expressed Iraq's willingness to benefit from Turkey's know-how in development for the reconstruction of Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Turkey's 150 MW of electricity exports to Iraq began in December 2020 and will continue until 1 November 2021.<sup>27</sup> In April 2021, the power plant in Muthanna, built by the US company General Electric (GE) and Turkey's Enka, and has the capacity to provide 500 MW of electricity, was inaugurated by Prime Minister al-Kadhimi himself.<sup>28</sup> Turkish companies have energy investments in various

companies in Iraq, mostly in the north of the country. Nuclear energy developments in Iraq may facilitate the rapprochement between Turkey and Iraq, which cooperated with Russia in the Akkuyu Nuclear Project and also offer investment opportunities for Turkey in terms of increasing electricity demand. Turkey's presence in Iraq as an energy supplier and investor can support Turkey's hard power elements. In this context, with its increasing contribution to Iraq in the field of energy supply, Turkey may strengthen its say on important issues of national interest, such as the Sinjar Agreement, which the governments in Baghdad and Erbil have agreed on but did not (or could not) implement. In addition, in the period 2020-2021, as Erbil became more critical of the terrorist organization PKK, investments to be made in the KRG may lead to further marginalization of the organization in the region and facilitate its isolation. Thus, regarding the presence of PKK, which Turkey perceives as the primary threat in Iraq to its national interests, the process will yield positive results for Turkey. On the other hand, activities to be

<sup>26</sup> "Baghdad mayor urges Turkish firms to invest in Iraqi capital", Daily Sabah, 29.12.2021.

<sup>27</sup> "Turkey begins electricity export to Iraq", Nuran Erkul Kaya, Anadolu Agency, 28.12.2021.

<sup>28</sup> "PM Opens New GE-Enka Power Station in Muthanna", Iraq-business News, 19.04.2021.



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carried out by Turkey in the region through its investments may constitute an alternative to Iran and at the same time strengthen the balancing policy of the Iraqi government. Indeed, if Turkey can replace Iran in energy exports, this will reduce the Baghdad administration's energy dependence on Tehran. In

addition, the support to be given in the field of energy may also eliminate the false claims in Iraq about Turkey, particularly about water supply. Therefore, the energy sector offers a significant opportunity for Turkey to obtain important results in a short time both in Erbil and Baghdad.



Petrol-rich Iraq has been grappling with power outages for the last 30 years.

### CONCLUSION

International investments in the energy and fuel sectors in Iraq are hampered by the unfavorable security environment in the country, as stated by various Iraqi officials. Developments such as the negotiations on US military withdrawal from the region, the considerations of international companies such as Lukoil and BP about selling down their assets in the region, and Lockheed Martin's pulling of its personnel from Balad Air Base for security reasons, brought Iraq closer to Russia in terms of nuclear energy. In this context, Alexander Voronkov, the General Director of Rosatom Middle East and North Africa, points out that the construction of a nuclear power plant constitutes a com-

plex, comprehensive, and multifaceted task, adding that Rosatom can help with several areas such as design and construction, refueling, operation and maintenance services, modernization of generating units, staff education and training, and raising the level of public acceptance of nuclear energy.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Iraq's agreement with Russia on nuclear reactors is not just an issue of energy and investment but an agenda item that will increase Russia's influence in the region.

The fact that Russia has many energy investments in various Middle Eastern countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan, and has an important place in the world energy market, positively affects its

<sup>29</sup> "Russia Proposes 'VVER' Reactors for First Saudi Nuclear Power Plant", Asharq al-Awsat, 12.07.2021.

relations with the region countries. For Russia, which is trying to use a combination of hard and soft power, energy diplomacy is seen as an important foreign policy element. It is predicted that a significant change may occur in the political approach of Iraq, as well as of other region countries, if Russia undertakes the building of a nuclear reactor in Iraq. Therefore, having a strong alliance with China at the global level and with Iran at the regional level, Russia is likely to emerge as an important figure in Iraq's domestic and

foreign policy in the medium term. As such, the process of US military withdrawal from Iraq, which was discussed in the 3rd and 4th rounds of negotiations between the US and Iraqi governments, should be evaluated while keeping in mind that Russia, China, and Iran may increase their influence in the region. In addition, it should be remembered that the steps towards the resolution of the electricity problem will be an important variable for the outcome of the elections in Iraq scheduled for 10 October 2021.

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