



# TURKEY AND IRAQ: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

WATHEQ ALSADOON

## INTRODUCTION

**S**ince the establishment of Iraq in 1921 and Turkey in 1923 as modern states, relations between the two countries have been based on two main routes. Even though there are many ties, such as religious and social ties, neighborhood and common history, and the problems between the

two countries are limited, these two routes are dominant. One of these routes is shaped within the framework of "traditional" cooperation, while the other is formed by "limited" conflicts that lead to the freezing of relations. The relations between the two countries did not turn into an advanced level of strategic cooperation, but they did not cause direct conflict either.



A meeting between the TOBB President and the President of the Iraqi Chambers of Commerce Federation occurred during the signing of the cooperation memorandum of understanding between the parties.

Over the decades, the two countries have had equal responsibility for missing out on the opportunities to establish political, security, and economic cooperation and coordination. Had they taken advantage of these opportunities, both the Iraqi and Turkish people would have gotten great benefits, and this would have helped both countries avoid many problems and crises. Iraq and Turkey are important to each other because while Turkey has the source of water, which is the “sine qua non” element for Iraqis, Iraq is Turkey’s gateway to the Gulf.

What would be the best way to break this stagnation in modern Iraq-Turkey relations? What would be the manner to break the vicious circle between the two countries that has not been resolved for decades: by resur-

recting the same problems, repeating mutual accusations, and keeping using the same unsuccessful approach to the problems they encounter? How can they avoid missing out on productive cooperation opportunities? How can they develop new visions and improve relations between them? This article discusses the factors affecting the relations between the two countries, their various dimensions, current interactions and future expectations. It tries to find answers to these questions by offering suggestions for unresolved issues and improving relationships as much as possible.

Respected readers may find that this article has a very positive tone and calls for rapprochement between Iraq and Turkey. Maybe some readers might think that the

positive approach is exaggerated. Some others may have the prejudice that the article favors Turkey, since the writer of the article is an Iraqi citizen residing in Turkey and working at a Turkish research center. It should be normal and acceptable to have such a difference in thoughts and opinions. We believe that it will not do any harm to call for rapprochement and cooperation between countries and peoples for the sake of common interest, and to ignore competition and differences, instead of deepening conflicts and fueling provocations that no one will gain and the opinions presented in the article serve not only the interests of Turkey, but also the common interests of Iraq and Turkey. In the world of tensions and crises, giving priority to the conflicts and mutual accusations means choosing the easy way out. On the other hand, the search for establishing an environment of peace, harmony and cooperation between countries on the basis of common interests poses a great challenge in itself.

### **IRAQ-TURKEY RELATIONS: THE NEED FOR A FRESH START TO OVERCOME OLD CONSTRAINTS**

In addition to international and regional factors and con-

ditions, some local powers in Iraq and Turkey have always put blocks in the way of developing and improving relations between the two countries. However, these factors stem from external factors and elements that are not related to the common interests of the two countries. Therefore, relations between the countries need real willpower to reassess the common interests and a fresh start based on objective and realistic visions of the challenges and opportunities for cooperation. There have always been parties and personalities trying to strain and undermine relations in both Iraq and Turkey. In Iraq, there are parties with foreign agendas to weaken the relations between the two countries. These parties have visions based on regional rivalry, parochial sectarian tendencies, nationalist tendencies, or hasty, misguided policies. Therefore, in order to improve relations between the countries, a new beginning for good Iraq-Turkey relations requires intercepting these parties' manipulating efforts and limiting the negative effects of their activities in politics and media. Therefore, the governments of both countries should regularly scrutinize the balance between the official positions of the countries and the negative attitudes by some parties whose purpose is to

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produce consumable media headlines and political show off.

The manner and management of diplomatic relations between the countries have developed in recent years. In fact, diplomatic activities were not limited to traditional channels represented by foreign ministries, embassies and consulates. In order to provide a suitable environment for reconciliation between the countries and to solve the problems, alternative channels have emerged. The information obtained through these channels contributed to the formulation of decisions and attitudes between the two countries. At the forefront of these alternative channels are joint academic-research activities, known as "academic diplomacy", such as conferences, symposiums and joint workshops. Joint academic-research activities achieve many goals in improving relations between countries. These platforms help to exchange ideas and suggestions on any problem between the two countries objectively, away from the deadlock of political attitudes. At the same time, they create a communication bridge between countries to overcome political tensions, setbacks, and even hostilities seen in bilateral relations. So, Iraqi and Turkish academics should try to keep communication channels open during periods when political relations between the two countries are declining or breaking.

Whenever decision makers request remarks from researchers and academics after examining regional and international situations and making detailed analysis, they should be purely scientific and objective and should provide consultancy with their conscience instead of supporting stereotyped attitudes and policies. Likewise, in the evaluation of Iraq's relations with any country,

they should follow a path based on principles such as common interests, respect for sovereignty rights, security, integrity and stability of both countries; not partisan and sectarian interests. On the other side, Iraqi decision makers should be encouraged to adopt a new approach that aims to keep the various aspects of relations between the two countries (political, security, economic, cultural and social) independently as much as possible. Thus, any problem or regression in any of these aspects will not affect the other aspects and the communication channels stay open. It is better to keep in mind the famous phrase in international politics: "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer!".

The Iraqi academic-research community should be the third pole in Iraq's political life, as there are only two poles in Iraq: the government and its supporters, regardless of its performance, on the one hand, and the opposition on the other. The opposition, on the other hand, has two options: the conscious opposition, which aims to identify the flaws and errors in the government's performance and calls for reform, and the opportunist opposition, which aims only to hinder and overthrow the government, regardless of its consequences and repercussions for the country. At this point, for the rationalization and systematization of Iraq's domestic and foreign policy, the role of academics in restructuring the policy route to serve the interests of the country becomes clear. This can only be possible if the freedom of expression is strengthened, the necessary protection and support is provided to researchers and research centers, the work of these centers is paved, and the work done receives sufficient attention.



Meeting between General Othman Al-Ghanimi, former Chief of General Staff of Iraq (current Minister of Interior), and General Ismail Metin, Turkey's Second Army Commander. The meeting took place during the joint military exercise between the Iraqi army and the Turkish army on the Turkish side of the Turkey-Iraq borders during the period of the KRG referendum crisis in September 2017.

## THE CHRONIC PROBLEM BETWEEN IRAQ AND TURKEY: THE EXISTENCE OF PKK ELEMENTS IN NORTHERN IRAQ

It is known that this issue has been affected by international, regional and local factors as well as historical, political, social and even economic factors for decades. There are also serious differences in opinions, wills and attitudes when addressing this issue. The periods in late 2002 and after 2002, when AK Parti came to power in Turkey; the situation in Iraq before and after 2003; and the differences between the Kurdistan region, which was attached to the central government before 1991, and the Kurdistan region, which gained autonomy after 1991, can be given as examples. In 1991, which is considered a turning point, due to the regional and international conditions created by the Kuwait Occupation, the old regime weakened and lost its control over Northern Iraq. Thus, a historical opportunity was seized for

the independence project of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government.

Anyone who follows the Iraq-Turkey relations knows the direct and indirect causes of this problem, its historical developments and its reflections. It is also clear that there are differences of opinion in assessing this issue and its implications. That's why, any attempt between Iraq and Turkey to find a solution to the problem of the presence of PKK elements in Northern Iraq should not waste their time and effort by focusing on the past, but should move forward through a "realistic perspective" from the present to the future. It would be a futile effort to try to solve this problem by taking into account its historical realities and complexities. The parties involved will get lost in a maze and this will lead them to find a solution to a vicious endless debate. Therefore, there is a need for a new initiative agreed by the relevant parties in order to produce a realistic and objective solution with a deep sense of responsibility

against the dangers that may arise from the growth or neglect of the problem.

In order for such an initiative to mature and turn into a roadmap for the solution to the problem, there is a need for some fundamentals which will constitute a fulcrum, the most important of which are as follows:

1. The relevant parties responsible for finding a solution to the problem, namely the Government of Turkey, the Iraqi Central Government and the KRG Government, need to be clearly and directly identified. All international and regional parties trying to intervene or exploit the problem for agendas and interests that do not serve the interests of both countries and their peoples should be kept away from the solution process. Indeed, the gravity of the problem has reached the point that some European, Arab, and Gulf countries, which have enmity with Turkey, have acquired communication and coordination opportunities and have supported the PKK's armed militants who set out from Iraqi territory.
2. The parties should adopt a balanced and rational approach to their demands and goals while seeking real solutions to the problem. The main criterion of the solution should be to protect the sovereignty and security of Iraq, including the KRG, at the highest possible level. Likewise, Turkey's security and the interests of the Iraqi and Turkish peoples, including the Iraqi Kurds, should be considered. All these goals should be gathered into a single file, and the solutions produced should not be affiliated with the exter-

nal schemes and aims of the Kurds outside of Iraq.

3. It should be fully understood by the Iraqi Central Government and the KRG Government that the armed militants of the PKK pose the greatest danger to Turkey's security and integrity, and that Turkey will not show tolerance and kindness at the expense of its national security. The Turkish government and all Turkish people, with different political orientations, have a common view on this issue. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil should have a serious intention to solve this problem, and the problem should not be used in media and political shows or for periodic bargains. Indeed, the PKK's activities have started to pose a threat to the security of Iraq and the KRG before Turkey. The situation in the city of Sinjar, the participation of armed militants of the PKK in the war against the Iraqi security forces while Baghdad tried to retake Kirkuk in October 2017, and the repeated attacks of the PKK on the Kurdish Peshmerga forces are the main proof of this. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil should clearly define the PKK as a foreign armed organization operating on Iraqi land, threatening Iraq's neighbors, having nothing to do with Iraq, and internationally classified as a terrorist organization. Likewise, after this organization began to spread in Iraqi lands, these governments should understand that it did not bring any good to the Iraqi people, neither Arab nor Kurdish.

4. Any serious attempt to resolve this issue must be realistic and involve political and security agreements between the Iraqi Central Government and the KRG Government. This initiative should understand the nature of the relations between the two sides and the limitations imposed on the Baghdad Government's assuming any security role in Northern Iraq after 2003. Considering the current political, security, and economic conditions in Iraq, these restrictions on the Baghdad government should not be expected to be lifted anytime soon.
5. A joint military operation center which will be operated in cooperation with the governments of Baghdad, Ankara and Erbil to combat the activities of PKK militants in Erbil would be helpful in order to prevent the repercussions of the military operations carried out by Turkey in Northern Iraq because these operations can be used by the anti-Turkey lobby in Iraq. This initiative will also develop cooperation opportunities to eliminate the problem. This step will be beneficial for all parties involved in resolving the issue in that it will give more legitimacy to Turkey's military efforts, a new security role for Baghdad in northern Iraq, and more credibility for Erbil in its efforts to resolve this issue.
6. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil should uncover and make more efforts to neutralize the direct and indirect political and economic activities carried out by the PKK through the Kurds in northern Iraq. There is news in the press that the PKK was able to

elect Kurdish politicians affiliated with it to the KRG parliament and the Iraqi parliament. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil must regain control of some of the official and unofficial border crossings and economic key points seized by the PKK during the war against the terrorist organization ISIS in Syria. Likewise, operations should be launched to combat illegal activities such as smuggling weapons, people, oil derivatives carried out by the PKK.

### **ECONOMIC COOPERATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSOLIDATE THE COMMON SECURITY BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES**

In the past decades, a dialectical question has emerged in the political thought literature: "Does politics produce the economy or does the economy produce politics?" As the whole world focuses on decreasing investments and economic resources while the demands and economic needs of countries and peoples increase, the answer to this question tends to be "the economy makes politics".

All the theorists working on the "post-coronavirus world order" agree that the next period will be full of difficulties, and the biggest challenge will be in the field of the economy. Therefore, all neighboring and non-neighboring countries should not miss or neglect any opportunity for economic cooperation.

The economy now affects not only politics but also common security between countries and contributes to respect for sovereignty. Economic cooperation between

None of the two neighboring countries have such opportunities for economic cooperation as Iraq and Turkey. What is meant by economic cooperation is not the traditional trade of goods and consumables, but strategic economic projects that ensure common security and long-term stability between the countries.



Habur Border Gate is the only active border gate on the Turkey-Iraq borders.

the two countries plays an important role in preventing crises and problems. For example, the economic cooperation between Turkey and the Russian Federation, especially in the oil and gas sector, has contributed to the prevention of the crisis between the two countries in the areas of conflict they have been involved in for years. Despite the fact that they have different visions and goals in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh and support opposing sides in these conflicts, economic cooperation between Turkey and the Russian Federation has continued.

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Iraq's national income still largely depends on oil sales, and this dependence is not expected to diminish anytime soon, according to current indicators. All oil producing and exporting countries are trying to increase their oil export routes in case of any emergency that may lead to the closure of any export route. Iraq currently has two routes for exports, one of which is the Persian Gulf, through which most of its exports are made, through the Strait of Hormuz. However, due to the US-Iran-Gulf tension, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz region are referred to as a tension zone with high security risks. In addition, it is highly probable that these routes can be closed at any stage of a possib-

le escalation in the US-Iran tension and the international shipping movement could be suspended.

As a second route, a smaller portion of Iraqi oil is also exported through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline. The 970 km long Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline consists of two pipelines, one opened in 1977 with a daily carrying capacity of 1,100,000 barrels, and the second opened in 1987 with a daily capacity of 500,000 barrels. However, these lines have been neglected over the years, no projects have been implemented for improvement and maintenance, and the line has been subjected to many attacks and sabotage by PKK militants. For this reason, the capacities of these lines have decreased below 300,000 barrels per day.

In order to have an alternative point for oil exports, the Iraqi government has negotiated with the government of Jordan the idea of the construction of a pipeline to transport Iraqi oil from Basra to Jordan's Red Sea Port of Aqaba in recent months. The construction of the Iraq-Jordan line requires large amounts of funds that the Iraqi government currently lacks and a long time to operate. In addition, the export of Iraqi oil from the Port of Aqaba in the Red Sea is not more advantageous than the export of the oil from Turkey's Ceyhan Port in the Mediterranean, which is closer to Europe.

It goes without saying that the best alternative for the export of Iraqi oil is to agree with Turkey on a strategic project to improve the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline. The capacity of this line should be increased to the point that it is able to transport all of Iraq's oil export capacity in case of a cessation of shipping in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Since this project will provide significant be-

nefits to Turkey's economy, there is no doubt that the Turkish Government and Turkish companies will be helpful on the financial side of the project. As a matter of fact, these companies have gained great experience in this field by undertaking giant projects in energy transmission in the Russian Federation and Central Asian countries.

Beyond the economic benefits it will derive from oil exports, Iraq will also gain a great advantage at the security and political level. Because the security and stability of Iraq, especially in Northern Iraq, where the project would be located, will become a vital issue for both Turkey's economy and national security.

Iraq has a special strategic location that makes it an important regional and global meeting point. In recent statements and articles, the possibility of Iraq's involvement in China's Silk Road Project has been mentioned more frequently. In addition, issues such as the construction of railway projects between Basra and Iran or Kuwait, and the competition (or contention) between the ports of the region behind the delay of Iraq's big Faw Port project continue to be on the agenda. Regardless of what is real and what is hypothetical from all these projects and ideas, the most applicable and beneficial ideas for Iraq have not been mentioned in these speeches and articles. For example, connecting Iraq and Turkey with a railway passing through Northern Iraq will increase the importance of ports in Iraq. Likewise, it will enable Iraq to turn into an international trade gateway between Europe, the Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Taking advantage of Turkey's experience in the transportation sector, especially while developing the railway network in Iraq, will further increase the

chances of the project's success. It is known that Turkey is one of the leading countries in this field and has managed to build an advanced railway network that passes over and under the sea, through tunnels and valleys in the mountains, and all kinds of difficult terrain. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the connection of Iraq with Turkey by rail will be a new factor that will increase the importance of Iraq's security and stability for Turkey. On the other hand, the development of Iraq's rail network will create many new job opportunities for Iraqis who are grappling with terrible unemployment. If this project is implemented, the foundation of the idea of transforming the Iraqi lands into the "Global Dry Channel", which connects the northern countries with the southern countries, can be laid.

Iraq today faces a severe housing crisis, with its infrastructure deteriorating and worsening in the wake of the devastation wrought by the war against ISIS. It will suffice to remind that half of the city of Mosul, where more than one million inhabitants lived, was completely destroyed during its liberation from the terrorist organization ISIS. Turkish construction companies have proven that they have the ability to do business at low cost in a short time. Therefore, it is possible for Iraq to take advantage of Turkey to rebuild its cities damaged in the war against ISIS. Iraq has the opportunity to do this in two different ways: The first is to develop investment projects that do not burden its already heavily worn-out treasury. The second is the \$5 billion grant that Turkey committed at the Iraq Reconstruction Conference held in Kuwait in February 2018 and stipulated that it be used exclusively through Turkish companies. These steps (if taken) will give a new

impetus to Iraq-Turkey relations with their political, security, economic and social dimensions, as well as contribute significantly to the solution of the housing, infrastructure and unemployment problems in Iraq.

It is clear that high quality and affordable Turkish products are highly regarded in the Iraqi market compared to products from other neighboring countries or China. However, most of the time, Turkey's exports to Iraq face various obstacles and restrictions. There are many reasons for these obstacles. Some of these reasons stem from the Iraqi government's measures to protect the domestic market (which are legitimate restrictions). Others appear in campaigns to defame Turkey's exports to Iraq for reasons related to regional competition in the Iraqi market rather than to the interests of the Iraqi consumer. At this point, a strategic opportunity emerges for Iraq that will combine the benefits of Turkish products with investment opportunities that will stimulate the Iraqi economy. Through investment projects that will reduce unemployment and increase tax revenues, a compromise can be reached for exporters and manufacturers in Turkey to open factories in Iraq.

The water sharing problem in Iraq-Turkey relations also has economic dimensions. For a long time, in the event of a water crisis in Iraq, the Iraqi government and the public blamed Turkey and its dam projects as the main cause of the crisis. However, it is seen that the reactions of the Iraqi public have started to differ in the recent water crisis in Iraq. As a matter of fact, Iraqis, especially the "High Taqlid Authority" in Najaf, started to blame the Iraqi governments that came after 2003. Iraqis accuse their governments of not following a successful strategy in the

management of water resources in Iraq, not developing new projects and even not completing dam projects initiated during the old regime. In this context, the Iraqi public and the High Taqlid Authority demanded that the Iraqi governments stop making accusations against Turkey and make efforts to benefit from Turkey's experience in this field by establishing more coordination and cooperation with Turkey on this issue. If a strategic partnership is established between Iraq and Turkey in order to improve and develop the water resources of Iraq, more transparency and mutual understanding will be created about the needs of both countries in terms of water resources. This strategic partnership will also bring the issue of water sharing between the two countries to the level of technical and economic cooperation, and will save it from political conflicts and unscathed smear campaigns. As an indication of its desire to develop cooperation with Iraq in the field of water sharing, in April 2019, the Turkish Government appointed AKP Deputy (former Minister of Agriculture and Forestry) Veysel Eroğlu as the Presidential Special Representative for Iraq. However, the Iraqi government is still acting slowly in this regard.

It is obvious that there may be other ideas to improve the strategic economic coo-

peration between the two countries. The existence of such strategic economic projects between the parties will upgrade the relations to a strong level of cooperation. In addition, it will increase Turkey's sensitivity towards Iraq's security, stability and integrity and will also cause Iraq to display a similar attitude towards Turkey.

## CONCLUSION

The hypothesis that two neighboring countries can reset and resolve all conflicts and unresolved issues between them is a difficult hypothesis to implement in today's world full of security, political, economic and social turmoil. For this reason, in the contemporary approach to mastermind the relations between countries (neighboring and non-neighboring), efforts are made to establish a common ground for reconciliation, to provide common interests as much as possible and to minimize the effects of problems.

It is necessary to reverse the factors that negatively affect the relations between Iraq and Turkey and to use them for the benefit of the two countries and their peoples. There are opportunities for strategic cooperation based on mutual respect for the sovereignty, security and integrity of the two countries.

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### Watheq Alsadoon

Director of the Arabic Studies Department at ORSAM since 2020. Iraq Studies expert at ORSAM since 2018. Fellow researcher at ORSAM 2015-2018. A faculty member on the permanent staffing in University of Mosul in Iraq 2008-2018. Lecturer and senior researcher in the Regional Studies Center in University of Mosul 2008-2018. A visitor faculty member in College of Political Science in University of Mosul 2008-2017. Holds a Ph.D. in History of International Relations, Master's degree in Strategic and Military Science. His research concentrated on the Iraqi affairs, security strategies and the security dimension in the international relations. He wrote the books "Weakness and Strength Factors in Iraqi -Turkish Modern Relations" at 2017, "The security dimension in the Contemporary Iraqi-Turkish relations" at 2014. His joint books "Political Decision Making in the Arab Gulf Countries" at 2013, "Studies in Contemporary Caucasus History" at 2011,"Iraq and Arab Gulf Countries" at 2010. He has more than 30 research paper published in Iraqi, Arab and Turkish journals and tens of articles which published in the periodicals, newspapers and websites. He obtained a research fellowship and scholarship to cover a research program from the Institute of International Education (IIE) in New York 2014-2017. He certified as a political analyst at TRT Arabi TV, Anadolu News Agency.



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#### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA  
**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20  
**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr  
**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)