

GRF Viewpoint

Iraq's Geopolitical Centrality and Türkiye's Strategic Imperative

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Iraq occupies a uniquely consequential position in Türkiye's strategic environment. Its vast hydrocarbon reserves, geographic proximity, and role as a natural corridor between the Gulf and the Mediterranean render it indispensable to any serious Turkish vision of regional connectivity and energy security. Yet, despite this structural reality, Türkiye's Iraq policy has historically lacked continuity, often oscillating between security-driven reflexes and limited economic engagement.

Ankara's official commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty has remained consistent. However, policy implementation has not always reflected a comprehensive, long-term strategy. Internal instability in Iraq—shaped by decades of conflict, sanctions, and governance fragmentation—has further complicated sustained engagement. Nonetheless, the evolving regional context now presents a narrow but critical window for recalibration.

From Regional Risk to Strategic Opportunity

Heightened geopolitical tensions involving the US-Israeli military coalition versus Islamic Republic of Iran and the growing fragility of maritime chokepoints—most notably the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab al Mandab—have underscored the vulnerability of existing energy and trade routes. In this environment, Iraq's overland connectivity potential becomes strategically significant. For Türkiye, this is not merely a matter of diversification but of positioning itself as an indispensable node in emerging Eurasian and Middle Eastern supply chains.

Transforming Iraq into a reliable corridor requires a dual-track approach: stabilizing existing energy flows while investing in new infrastructure that binds Iraq more closely to Türkiye's logistical infrastructure and industrial ecosystems.

Energy Corridors as Strategic Anchors

Recent efforts by Baghdad to restore oil exports through the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline, including provisional arrangements with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), signal a pragmatic shift toward reactivating dormant capacity. Plans to connect Basra's southern fields to northern export routes via Iraq's "Strategic Pipeline" network further indicate an ambition to secure direct Mediterranean access. It is also conceivable with the significant LNG resources in Rumaila and Zubayr currently operated by Basra Gas Company were in mind within the scope of future supply lines being planned in by Iraqi competent authorities.

For Türkiye, the strategic objective should be clear: to consolidate its role not only as a transit country but as a **midstream hub**—integrating transportation, storage, processing, and distribution.

This requires proactive engagement with Iraqi authorities to ensure that pipeline integration, capacity expansion, and regulatory frameworks evolve in alignment with mutual long-term interests.

Beyond Energy: The Connectivity Paradigm

A narrow focus on hydrocarbons would be insufficient. What is required is a broader connectivity framework linking energy, trade, and transport. The concept of an “uninterrupted supply chain” should guide Turkish policy, integrating pipelines with railways, highways, and border infrastructure.

In this regard, long-delayed initiatives—such as the Ovaköy border crossing and the extension of railway line from Nusaybin directly into Iraq—should be treated as strategic priorities rather than technical projects. These investments would enhance resilience, reduce bottlenecks, and deepen economic interdependence.

The Development Road Project: Promise and Gaps

A major step in this direction has already been taken through the **Development Road Project**, formalized in a memorandum of understanding signed in Baghdad on 23 March 2024 by Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The project envisions a 1,200-kilometer multimodal transport corridor linking Iraq’s Basra/Faw port to Türkiye’s border, thereby creating a direct route from the Gulf to Europe that bypasses traditional choke-points such as the Suez Canal and Strait of “Bab al Mandab”.

With an estimated cost of \$20 billion, the Development Road Project has the potential to reshape regional trade dynamics and position Türkiye as a central logistical hub. While the initiative is strategically sound, key uncertainties remain. Türkiye’s functional role within the project—particularly as a midstream and terminal hub—has yet to be clearly defined. Critical questions persist regarding:

- the integration of Mediterranean terminal infrastructure,
- transit arrangements across the Turkish Straits,
- coordination with third-country investors,
- and the internal coherence of Iraq’s transport network.

Without clarity on these issues, the project risks underperforming relative to its geopolitical potential.

Policy Priorities for Türkiye

To fully capitalize on Iraq’s geopolitical centrality, Türkiye should adopt a more structured and forward-looking approach:

- **Institutionalize bilateral coordination** with Iraq through high-level strategic mechanisms focused on energy, transport, and trade integration.
- **Prioritize infrastructure alignment**, ensuring that pipeline, railway, and highway investments are conceived as parts of a single connectivity ecosystem.
- **Clarify Türkiye’s midstream role** within the Development Road Project, particularly in relation to storage, processing, and distribution capacities.
- **Promote multilateral ownership**, incorporating GCC partners in a framework that enhances economic interdependence and risk-sharing.
- **Balance security and economics**, ensuring that legitimate security concerns do not overshadow long-term economic and geopolitical opportunities.

Conclusion

Iraq is no longer merely a neighboring country to be managed through episodic policy responses; it is a strategic axis in Türkiye’s broader regional vision. The convergence of energy security concerns, shifting trade routes, and regional geopolitical uncertainty creates both urgency and opportunity.

A coherent, multi-dimensional Türkiye policy toward Iraq—grounded in connectivity, interdependence, and strategic foresight—has the potential not only to strengthen bilateral relations but also to reshape the economic geography of the wider region. The challenge for Ankara is to move decisively from reactive engagement to active strategic approach.