

Turkey Wants to Stitch Iraq and Syria Back Together (Part 2)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Ankara’s push for “soft recentralization” in Iraq will likely include more intensive efforts to establish the Development Road and prioritize Baghdad’s interests, though without abandoning the Kurdistan Region.

As discussed in [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-1\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-1), Turkey’s Syria strategy is rather circuitous, potentially involving simultaneous negotiations with the Assad regime and the United States while running the risk of damaging relations with Washington if the two governments fail to coordinate their moves. In contrast, Ankara’s Iraq strategy—which boils down to promoting Turkish money over Iranian guns—is more straightforward and likely to receive U.S. backing.

To this end, Ankara has conceived the Development Road, a proposed trade network that would run across Iraq and Turkey, connecting Asian and European markets via the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Initially, the project ran counter to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a U.S.-proposed route stretching from India through the Arabian Peninsula and Levant to Europe. Yet the Gaza war and [ongoing Houthi maritime attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/draw-win-houthis-after-one-year-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/draw-win-houthis-after-one-year-war) have raised security concerns about commercial shipping through the Red Sea, suddenly boosting the prospects of the Development Road at IMEC’s expense. With Gulf money behind the project, Turkish policymakers predict the Development Road’s initial routes could open as early as 2027. Washington should consider throwing its support behind this initiative as well, particularly if it needs to counterbalance Iranian influence in Baghdad following a full or partial U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

Reprioritizing Baghdad...

The Development Road serves several of Ankara’s longstanding strategic goals in Iraq. As Iran increased its leverage in Baghdad after Saddam Hussein’s ouster, Turkey’s influence retracted north to the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG)—specifically, to areas controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

More recently, however, Ankara decided to improve ties with Baghdad as part of its broader strategy to promote Iraq's recentralization. Among other steps, Turkey dispatched its intelligence chief, defense minister, and foreign minister to Baghdad earlier this year, producing several bilateral accords. Baghdad agreed to greenlight the Development Road and designate Ankara's nemesis—the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—as a “banned organization.” (Notably, multiple other countries have already designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, including the United States and European Union.) In return, Turkey promised to “fairly and equally” allocate shared water resources, namely, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, both of which originate in Turkey and flow down into Iraq.

...Without Abandoning the KDP

Even if Turkey succeeds in resetting ties with Baghdad, this does not mean it will abandon its Kurdish partners, whom it sees as important economic partners and crucial players in countering the PKK. As in Syria, Ankara's recentralization policy is a “soft” one, calling for the central government to reassert authority across the country while preserving Kurdish autonomy in the north.

Turkish officials will also likely use their economic ties with the KDP as a carrot-or-stick measure to prod the KRG's other leading political force, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), into combating the PKK. (The KDP is already helping with this effort.) To that end, they recently took economic measures against the PUK, such as suspending Turkish Airlines flights to the group's stronghold of Sulaymaniyah.

Ankara believes that the lucrative construction contracts for the Development Road's port, rail, and highway infrastructure will eventually pull elites in both Baghdad and the KRG into its orbit, while also garnering U.S. support for Turkish influence as a counter to Iran. If all of these stars align, Ankara would likely ask Baghdad to accept a Turkish military presence in the north aimed at preventing cross-border PKK infiltration. It would simultaneously ask the PUK to deny the PKK a haven in its territory, which abuts the proposed Turkish military zones (though see below for potential Iranian obstacles to this plan). In return, Turkey would integrate Iraq into its globalized economy and connect it to European markets via the new trade route.

U.S. Policy Implications

U.S.-Turkish interests are more comfortably and easily aligned in Iraq than in Syria, so the two partners should have less difficulty cooperating there. The Development Road project is key to this effort. Besides offering lucrative construction revenue in the short term and the promise of economic integration with European and global markets in the longer term, the proposed trade route would create a north-south axis from the Iraq-Turkey border to the Persian Gulf—in other words, cutting across the east-west “land bridge” that has helped Iran supply the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Hamas with weapons for years. In light of the current regional strategic picture, Washington should consider supporting both this project and Ankara's wider plans in Iraq, since both serve the paramount goal of counterbalancing Iranian influence.

Of course, all of these efforts will be affected by what happens in neighboring Syria, the other main arena of Iranian-Turkish competition. If Washington and Ankara reach an agreement on the future of northeast Syria **as described in Part 1 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-1>)**, Tehran will surely take steps to undermine Turkey's overall strategy in the Fertile Crescent. In addition to pressing the Assad regime to reject any broad deal with Ankara, Tehran could use its longstanding ties with the PUK to hinder Turkish plans against the PKK in Iraq.

Iran could also use its allies in Baghdad to politically sabotage the Development Road, slowing construction or otherwise delaying the project's implementation. Similarly, Tehran's Shia militia proxies could be tasked with increasing their **political pressure (**

[dissolution-pmf-northern-axis](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-stop-iraqi-kurdistan-bleeding)) and kinetic attacks (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-stop-iraqi-kurdistan-bleeding>) on Turkey-friendly actors, including the KDP and the various political factions that support the Development Road. By helping Turkey counter such moves, the U.S. government could serve several broader goals—from advancing great power competition in the Fertile Crescent (where Ankara is America’s natural ally against Tehran and its [increasingly close partner](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/boosting-military-support-ukraine-can-help-deter-iran) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/boosting-military-support-ukraine-can-help-deter-iran>) in Russia) to further opening the bilateral window created by other recent U.S.-Turkish developments (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-us-turkish-ties-new-relationship-not-reset>) (e.g., sending Ankara F-16s after it approved Sweden’s NATO accession).

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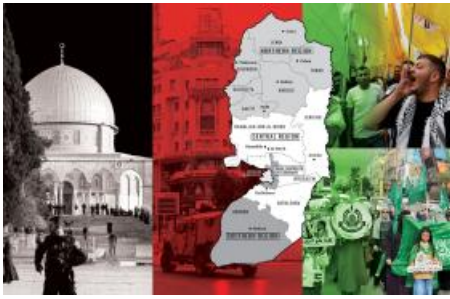
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