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PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE ENERGY RELATIONS IN TURKEY–IRAQ COOPERATION: A POLITICAL AND GEO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Abstract. *This article analyzes the current state of energy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq and its place within the processes of regional security and economic integration. In particular, it examines the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the exchange of electricity, cooperation in the natural-gas sphere, and the strategic significance of the “Development Road” project. The study analyzes the political, economic, and geostrategic factors of the energy relations between the two states and assesses the prospects for developing sustainable energy cooperation.*

Keywords: *Turkey, Iraq, energy diplomacy, energy security, Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline, Development Road, geopolitics, electricity integration.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the question of energy has become one of the most important directions of states' foreign policy. Control over energy resources, the security of the routes by which they are transported, and access to energy markets are emerging as factors that determine strategic advantage within the system of international relations (Yergin, 2020). The Middle East in particular, as one of the regions possessing the world's largest hydrocarbon reserves, occupies an important place in global energy security.

The energy factor also acquires special importance in relations between Turkey and Iraq. Iraq is one of the world's major oil-exporting states, while Turkey is emerging as an important energy-transit hub connecting Europe and Asia. For this reason, cooperation between the two states affects not only their national interests but also regional stability and international energy markets.

In recent years a number of initiatives aimed at expanding cooperation in the spheres of oil, gas, and electricity have been put forward between Turkey and Iraq. In particular,

negotiations have intensified on the reactivation of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the integration of electricity networks, and the formation of new energy corridors within the framework of the “Development Road” project.

MAIN PART

Strategic Foundations of Turkey–Iraq Energy Cooperation

The formation of Turkey–Iraq energy relations dates back to the 1970s. It was in that period that the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline was brought into operation, enabling Iraqi oil to be delivered to international markets through the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. This pipeline has not only economic but also geopolitical significance, since it serves as an alternative route to the export channels running through the Persian Gulf. Although the operation of the pipeline was halted in 2023 owing to various political and legal disputes, active negotiations on its reactivation were conducted in 2025–2026. The Turkish government has repeatedly stressed that it favours making full use of the pipeline’s existing capacity of 1.5 million barrels per day (BP, 2024).

Turkey’s strategy of becoming an energy hub plays an important role in the development of this cooperation. Over the past decade Ankara has strengthened its transit potential by expanding cooperation with Azerbaijan, Russia, and the states of Central Asia, and relations with Iraq constitute the southern direction of this strategy.

The strategic importance of energy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq is not confined to oil exports. In recent years the two states have sought to convert their relations in the energy sphere into a model of comprehensive cooperation. This model encompasses the transport of oil and gas, trade in electricity, the petrochemical industry, and the modernization of energy infrastructure. A clear illustration is the proposal, advanced in negotiations between Ankara and Baghdad in 2025, to include precisely the gas, electricity, and petrochemical networks in a draft new energy agreement (Bilgin, 2021).

For Turkey, the strategic dimension of energy cooperation with Iraq is closely bound up with the country’s conception of itself as an international energy hub. In recent years Ankara has aimed to become one of the principal transit centres between Europe and Asia by increasing the number of energy corridors passing through its territory. Viewed from this standpoint, Iraq’s vast oil and gas resources occupy an important place in Turkey’s energy diplomacy. Representatives of the Turkish Ministry of Energy and

Natural Resources assess cooperation with Iraq as “one of the principal factors of regional stability and prosperity.”

From Iraq’s point of view, Turkey is one of the most important partners enabling the diversification of energy-export routes. A large part of the country’s oil exports passes through the Persian Gulf, a situation that ties the export infrastructure to certain geopolitical risks. For this reason the Baghdad government regards the Turkish route as an alternative and secure export corridor; in particular, projects for modernizing the Kirkuk–Ceyhan route and connecting the fields of southern Iraq to this system are under discussion.

A further strategic aspect of the cooperation is its regional, integrative character. Today the negotiations between Turkey and Iraq are moving beyond the framework of a single oil pipeline toward the creation of a broad energy corridor. According to proposals advanced by Turkey, a system for transporting oil and gas along the Basra–Haditha–Ceyhan route may be formed in the future. If this project is realized, the major oil fields in the southern regions of Iraq will gain direct access to the Mediterranean.

Another important element of the strategic foundations is the “Development Road” project. Initially designed as a transport and logistics project, this initiative was subsequently enriched with energy components. The Turkish government is examining the possibilities of transporting oil, gas, electricity, and petrochemical products along this corridor. As a result, the project may become a multifunctional geo-economic space connecting the Middle East with Europe.

Turkey–Iraq energy cooperation is also organically linked with the concept of energy security. In contemporary international relations, the diversification of energy sources and the multiplication of transport routes are regarded as an inseparable part of states’ national-security strategy. From this angle, access to Iraqi energy resources creates an important strategic advantage for Turkey, while access to European markets through Turkey ensures export stability for Iraq. As a result, an energy interdependence based on mutual interests is taking shape between the two states.

Theoretically, this process can be explained through the concept of liberal institutionalism. According to this approach, the harmonization of economic interests and infrastructural interdependence encourage long-term cooperation among states. In the case of Turkey and Iraq, too, energy projects are emerging as instruments for activating

bilateral political dialogue, harmonizing economic interests, and strengthening regional stability.

A New Stage in Electricity Cooperation

Cooperation in the sphere of electricity has risen to a new stage in Turkey–Iraq relations in recent years. Iraq has long faced the problem of electricity shortages. Population growth, ageing infrastructure, and insufficient generating capacity are intensifying the country’s energy deficit.

In June 2025 an agreement was signed between the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity and the Turkish company Alifrin to double the electricity-transmission capacity. Under this agreement, the exchange of electricity between the two states is planned to be raised from 300 MW to 600 MW, and the project is being carried out through the Jazira–Kesk 400 kV line in Nineveh province. This project is important in several respects: first, Iraq gains the possibility of diversifying its energy sources; second, a foundation is created for the country’s indirect integration with European energy systems; and third, the interdependence in the energy sphere serves to stabilize the political relations between the two states.

Theoretically, this process is explained through the concept of “complex interdependence.” According to this approach, the deepening of economic and technological ties reduces the probability of conflicts among states and strengthens the mechanisms of cooperation.

Cooperation with Turkey in the field of electricity is developing precisely out of these needs. In 2024–2025 the expansion of electricity trade, the modernization of existing transmission lines, and the construction of new high-voltage networks were defined as priority directions in the negotiations between the two states. In particular, the modernization of the Jazira–Kesk transmission line created the possibility of doubling the volume of electricity supplied from Turkey to Iraq, which serves to improve significantly the electricity supply of Nineveh, Dohuk, and the adjacent regions of northern Iraq (Iraqi News, 2025).

One important aspect of cooperation in the field of electricity is that, unlike the oil and gas sector, it directly affects the daily living standards of the population. From the standpoint of political science, an improvement in the electricity supply is one of the important factors of state legitimacy and social stability. In Iraq, problems associated

with electricity have often led to mass protests and to a rise in social tension. For this reason cooperation with Turkey in the energy sphere is regarded not only as an economic instrument but also as a means of ensuring political stability.

Another important aspect of cooperation in the field of electricity is connected with the processes of regional integration. In recent years Iraq has sought to integrate simultaneously into several energy spaces: in particular, the country is endeavouring to develop ties with the electricity network of the Persian Gulf states, the Jordanian power system, and, through Turkey, the European electricity-transmission infrastructure. This policy is an important part of Baghdad's strategy of reducing energy dependence and diversifying its energy sources.

For Turkey, electricity exports are taking shape as a new direction in the country's energy diplomacy. Whereas Turkey traditionally focused, as a transit state, on the transport of oil and gas, in recent years the electricity trade has also acquired strategic importance. Ankara regards electricity exports as a means of strengthening economic ties with neighbouring states and of expanding its geo-economic influence in the region. Moreover, cooperation in the electricity sphere may in the future create an important foundation for the development of renewable energy sources. Over the past decade Turkey has accumulated considerable experience in wind and solar energy, while Iraq is one of the states with high solar-energy potential. In the view of specialists, future cooperation between the two states may extend beyond the import and export of electricity to encompass the construction of solar power plants, energy-storage technologies, and "green energy" projects.

The Development Road Project and New Energy Corridors

One of the most important initiatives determining the prospects of Turkey–Iraq energy cooperation is the "Development Road" project. This project begins at Iraq's port of Faw and envisages access to European markets through the territory of Turkey. Although the initial aim of the project was to develop transport and logistics infrastructure, the integration of oil, gas, electricity, and other energy infrastructure into it is planned for later stages.

For Turkey, this project strengthens the country's position as a regional transit hub, while for Iraq it offers the possibility of diversifying export routes and accelerating economic development. Moreover, the project may alter the geo-economic map of the

Middle East, since it serves the formation of a new economic space along the Persian Gulf–Turkey–Europe axis.

The Geopolitical Significance of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan Pipeline

One of the central elements of energy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq is the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline (Reuters, 2025). This pipeline is not merely an energy infrastructure of economic significance but a strategic instrument that directly affects the balance of power in the Middle East, regional integration, and energy security. For this reason the Kirkuk–Ceyhan project should be assessed not only as a mechanism of oil export but also as an instrument of geopolitical influence.

Commissioned in 1977, this pipeline served for many years as an important source of revenue for the Iraqi economy. The design capacity of the pipeline is 1.5 million barrels per day (OPEC, 2024). However, owing to political disputes, security problems, and legal disagreements, its capacity has not been fully utilized. In 2023, following a decision of the International Court of Arbitration, exports through the pipeline were halted, and this had a significant negative effect on Iraqi oil exports.

According to the Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Alparslan Bayraktar, Ankara has an interest in the pipeline operating at maximum capacity once it is reactivated. Turkey assesses this pipeline not merely as an economic project but as a strategic infrastructure serving European energy security. Analyzed from the standpoint of neorealist theory, energy infrastructures emerge as one of the instruments of power and influence among states: Turkey seeks, through this pipeline, to strengthen its status as a transit state in the region, while Iraq strives to enhance its economic security by diversifying its export routes.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the most important feature of the pipeline is that it creates the possibility of diversifying Iraq's export routes. The main part of the country's oil exports is carried out through the Persian Gulf; but the Persian Gulf region has for many years been an area of international political tensions and security threats. For this reason the export corridor running through Turkey performs the function of a strategic alternative for Baghdad, and the multiplication of export routes serves to strengthen the state's economic security.

For Turkey, too, the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline has geostrategic importance. Over the past twenty years Ankara has sought to present itself as the principal energy bridge

between East and West, a policy reflected in major energy projects such as TANAP, TurkStream, and Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan. The Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline is one of the most important links of this strategy in the southern direction. As a result, Turkey is gaining the possibility of strengthening its position as an intermediary between resource-rich states and consumer markets.

The geopolitical significance of this pipeline is also closely connected with European energy security. The Russia–Ukraine conflict and the ensuing energy crisis compelled European states to diversify their energy sources. Under such conditions, the possibility of delivering Middle Eastern hydrocarbons to Europe through Turkey acquires particular strategic importance, and the Kirkuk–Ceyhan route may in the future become an important element of Europe’s alternative energy-supply system.

One of the factors that raise the geopolitical value of the pipeline is its role in the political processes connected with the Kurdistan Regional Government. As is well known, an important part of the oil reserves in northern Iraq is located in the Kurdistan region. In recent years various disagreements have arisen between Baghdad and Erbil over the distribution of oil revenues and over export powers. As a result, the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline has become not only an international energy project but also an important instrument in Iraq’s internal politics, and decisions connected with its operation have often affected the political relations between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

In addition, the pipeline intersects with the interests of other major regional states. While Iran seeks to preserve the priority of the export routes running through the Persian Gulf, Turkey has an interest in the development of the northern corridors, and the United States has for many years supported a policy of integrating Iraq’s energy sector into the international market. In this respect the Kirkuk–Ceyhan project has become a space in which several geopolitical interests intersect at once (International Energy Agency, 2024).

According to the theory of energy geopolitics, controlling the routes by which energy resources are transported often confers a greater strategic advantage than controlling the resources themselves. The case of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline illustrates precisely this situation: although Turkey is not a state rich in oil resources, it is emerging as an important actor in regional energy policy through its control of transport infrastructure, which affords Ankara political influence alongside economic benefit.

In sum, the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline is not a simple instrument of economic cooperation between the two states but an important element of regional energy security, geopolitical competition, transit diplomacy, and international integration processes. For this reason the stable operation of this pipeline is of importance not only for the interests of Turkey and Iraq but also for the economic and political stability of the entire Middle East region.

Natural Gas Cooperation and New Prospects

In recent years the question of natural gas has also begun to occupy a special place in Turkey–Iraq relations. Although Iraq is one of the states with large gas reserves, the insufficient development of its gas-processing and transport infrastructure means that the country is unable to meet its domestic needs in full.

According to World Bank data, a large part of the associated gas extracted in Iraq is burned off (gas flaring), as a result of which billions of cubic metres of gas remain outside economic circulation (World Bank, 2024). From this standpoint, Turkey is regarded as the most suitable transit route for bringing Iraqi gas to international markets. In recent years negotiations on developing gas pipelines and expanding gas trade between Turkey and Iraq have intensified, and the initiatives advanced by Energy Minister Bayraktar also include the integration of oil and gas transport with the Development Road project. If these projects are realized, Iraq will increase its export potential, while Turkey will strengthen its position as an alternative gas hub for Europe.

Political Factors Affecting Turkey–Iraq Energy Cooperation

The development of energy cooperation depends in many respects on political factors, which may be divided into internal and external factors. The internal factors include:

- political instability in Iraq;
- the question of powers between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government;
- institutional problems in the energy sector;
- corruption and the low effectiveness of governance.

The external factors, in turn, consist of the following:

- the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and Iran;
- the energy policies of Russia and the European Union;
- China’s economic activity in the Middle East;
- regional security problems.

In particular, the energy agreements concluded by the Kurdistan Regional Government with foreign companies have repeatedly been criticized by Baghdad. The Iraqi Ministry of Oil has noted that these agreements were concluded without the consent of the central government, which has a negative effect on the management of energy policy from a single centre.

Energy Security and Regional Integration

Energy security is one of the principal categories of contemporary international relations. Cooperation between Turkey and Iraq serves three important components of this concept:

- the diversification of energy sources;
- the security of energy-transport routes;
- the integration of energy markets.

In 2025 the increase of electricity-transmission capacity from 300 MW to 600 MW inaugurated a new stage of energy integration between the two states. Through this project Iraq is achieving an improvement in its electricity supply, while Turkey is strengthening its role as a regional energy hub. Viewed from the standpoint of energy security, the strengthening of interdependence emerges as a factor that reinforces cooperation between the states.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that energy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq is moving beyond the framework of bilateral economic interests and becoming an important component of regional geopolitical and geo-economic processes within the system of contemporary international relations. The energy sphere is taking shape as one of the most stable and long-term directions of relations between the two states, serving as an important factor not only in economic development but also in ensuring political stability, transport–logistics integration, and energy security.

The analysis shows that the interests of Turkey and Iraq are converging on the energy question. While Iraq is interested in exporting its vast oil and gas resources to international markets through secure and diversified routes, Turkey is consistently implementing its strategy of becoming the principal energy-transit hub between East and West. This convergence of interests is turning the energy sphere into the principal pillar of the

strategic partnership between the two states. In the course of the study the geopolitical significance of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline was analyzed separately, and it was found that this infrastructure is not merely a technical object ensuring oil exports but a strategic instrument affecting the balance of power in the Middle East, regional energy security, and the geopolitical processes connected with international energy markets.

Cooperation in the sphere of electricity, moreover, demonstrates the formation of a new qualitative stage in the relations between the two states. The growth in the volume of electricity exchange and the interconnection of energy infrastructures serve to deepen economic cooperation, to institutionalize political dialogue, and to activate the processes of regional integration, confirming that the energy sphere is becoming one of the elements of “soft power” in contemporary international relations. A number of factors, however, hinder the development of this cooperation, including political instability in Iraq, disagreements over energy powers between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, regional geopolitical rivalry, security problems, and volatility in international energy markets. For this reason the long-term effectiveness of energy projects remains dependent in large measure on the strengthening of political stability and institutional cooperation.

On the basis of the results, it may be concluded that in the coming years Turkey–Iraq energy cooperation will move beyond the trade in oil and gas to encompass new directions such as electricity, renewable energy sources, logistics and transport corridors, and regional energy integration. The new geo-economic space taking shape within the framework of the Development Road project, in particular, creates important opportunities for further deepening the strategic cooperation between the two states. In general, energy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq is emerging as one of the important factors shaping the energy and geopolitical architecture of the Middle East, and its successful development may contribute significantly not only to the national interests of the two states but also to regional stability, international energy security, and the integration of the Middle East into the world economic system.

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