

Türkiye-Iraq Water-Energy Cooperation is a critical hydro-strategic step

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Abstract

The article discusses the significance of the "Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field" between Türkiye and Iraq, signed in April 2024, and a “mechanism document” on Sunday 2 November 2025 for the financing of cooperation projects in the field of water as a critical step toward enhancing transboundary water diplomacy in the Middle East. This agreement promotes collaborative water management projects in the Tigris and Euphrates basins.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein signed the “Mechanism Document for the Financing of Projects Under the Framework Agreement on Water Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the Republic of Iraq.” This is an concrete implementation step of the “Water Cooperation Framework Agreement,” signed during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s visit to Baghdad in 2024.

Under the mechanism, infrastructure modernization and construction projects aimed at the efficient, effective, and sustainable use of Iraq's water resources will be undertaken by Turkish companies, with financing to be provided through a system based on Iraqi oil sales.

It integrates water resources, security, energy, and trade within a holistic framework, offering a new paradigm for resolving regional water challenges amidst climate change and geopolitical instability.

The Türkiye-Iraq agreement, involving oil-for-water projects, exemplifies this shifting paradigm towards actionable transboundary water cooperation, paving the way for enhanced regional stability and integrated resource management.

Keywords: *Water-Oil ,Middle East,Türkiye-Iraq, , Holistic Framework*

1. Introduction

The "Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Iraq", signed in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, on April 22, was approved and published in the Official Gazette dated August 16, 2024. The water framework agreement between Türkiye and Iraq aims to increase

cooperation in water resources and issues such as security, regional development projects, and trade development. Therefore, unlike other agreements, it allows both countries to implement the agreement. Iraq's provision of oil in exchange for Türkiye's water projects and water management support in the agreement will facilitate the implementation of the agreement.



Drought in the Region

Through this arrangement, Türkiye aims to enhance its contribution to improving Iraq's water infrastructure and increasing the efficiency of its water resource management.

Decline in water resources in the region due to global climate change and the resulting water stress also felt in Türkiye.

These agreements moves water negotiations beyond the traditional water-sharing framework and instead outlines a vision for the most efficient and collaborative use of water in the region. The agreement ultimately aims to maximize the efficiency of water resources through joint projects. Under the agreement, Türkiye will increase its contribution to the development of Iraq's water infrastructure and the more efficient use of its water resources. The "Framework Agreement on Water Cooperation," signed on April 22, 2024, and the "Financing Mechanism" document, signed on November 2, 2025, signal the beginning of a new strategic era in economic and trade relations between the two countries.

Oil supply and water project support cooperation between Iraq and Türkiye will be a mutually beneficial step forward in the region.

Oil supply cooperation in return for water project support is an intriguing concept that highlights the interdependence of natural resources and the strategic partnerships that can form around them. This arrangement could be a win-win for countries or regions facing specific resource

challenges—oil-rich nations needing water solutions and water-rich but energy-scarce regions seeking fuel security.

The agreement will play a role in increasing mutual cooperation and trust between the two countries on water management. The ultimate goal of the signed agreement is to ensure more efficient use of water in the region. This will be achieved not only through water sharing negotiations but also through an innovative approach to cooperation in the water-energy field. Iraq's Development Road project will also play a significant role in this vision of cooperation between the two countries. In April 2024, a multilateral memorandum of understanding on the IDRP was signed between Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the UAE.

The project's Iraq-Türkiye connection holds significant potential as a "shortcut" in Asian/European logistics. This project has the potential to enhance economic infrastructure and logistics integration between Türkiye and Iraq. For Türkiye, this project offers the opportunity to function as a logistical bridge and offers economic development potential for Iraq. However, it should not be overlooked that the project's success depends on financing, security, and geopolitical parameters.



Figure 1. Route of the Development Road Project.

A Regional Cooperation Vision

The simultaneous implementation of the Türkiye-Iraq Water and Energy Cooperation Framework Agreement (2024) with the Development Road Project is no coincidence; it demonstrates that the cooperation is being addressed with a broad regional vision. There is also a project in the region, such as the GAP, that will support the development of this cooperation. Combining the agricultural production capacity of the GAP with the export infrastructure provided by the Development Road could create a new logistics route for agricultural and industrial exports.

Coordination of Energy and Water Management, along with the Development Road, will create a crucial dynamic for regional development. This vision will present a strategic opportunity for Türkiye and Iraq in terms of ensuring the integration of water and energy security, which are key to economic growth in the region, and the establishment of an international logistics route.

This approach moves Türkiye-Iraq relations away from traditional transboundary water diplomacy and toward a multidimensional water-energy-transportation axis. However, the implementation of this approach in the region also carries certain hydrological, geopolitical, security, and financial risks. Türkiye recognizes the Euphrates and Tigris river basins as a single basin. The only agreement for this basin is the 1987 Protocol on Economic Cooperation between Türkiye and Syria, under which Türkiye committed to maintaining an annual flow rate of 500 m³/s in the Euphrates tributary on the Syrian border. Following this protocol, according to the 1989 Syria-Iraq Water Sharing Agreement signed in Damascus, Syria committed to releasing 58% of the water coming from Türkiye to Iraq.

Türkiye has not officially recognized this agreement. It has been argued that a third-party jurisdiction over the international status of the Euphrates could not be established without Türkiye's participation. Therefore, the 1989 Damascus Agreement was binding only between Syria and Iraq and did not create any obligations for Türkiye under international law. However, due to internal instability in Iraq after 2003 and the Syrian civil war after 2011, technical committee meetings were not held, and the measurement and sharing of Euphrates River flows effectively ceased.

The ongoing political uncertainty in Syria appears likely to delay the determination of the water to be released from the Euphrates to Iraq. In this case, Türkiye-Syria water-energy cooperation will be conducted through the Tigris River waters, and the signing of a trilateral agreement will take time. This creates the risk that uncertainty regarding Iraq's use of the Euphrates waters will continue beyond Türkiye's control. Overcoming the thresholds created by these risks will be directly related to a trilateral water management agreement in the basin and the elimination of political uncertainty in the basin.

Conclusions

The exploitation of transboundary water, energy, and food trade-offs can open economic opportunities in trade agreements and strategic development of future infrastructures in a transboundary context. Flexibility is also an important approach to transboundary water governance that is not confined to questions around allocation and a focus on water volumes but maintains an open attitude to a wide range of possible benefit-sharing opportunities (social, economic, environmental, and security benefits).

At any one time, there may be momentum toward the achievement of different benefits, and it is important to realize these broader processes for maximum effectiveness.

Therefore the benefits from cooperation can be more significant than the benefits from water resources management alone, extending from water use to broader issues of economic cooperation, politics, and security, and facilitating trade-offs beyond the water sector. At the

same time, the interaction can be considered as a means to build mutual understanding and trust between the parties both about shared waters and more broadly.

The water framework agreement signed between Türkiye and Iraq includes oil supply cooperation in return for water project support is an intriguing concept that highlights the interdependence of natural resources and the strategic partnerships that can form around them. In summary, this can be taken as an example of shifting paradigm to Actionable transboundary water cooperation on the ground.

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Biography



Dursun Yıldız C.E. (MSc.) is a hydropolitics specialist and Director of the Hydropolitics Academy Association located in Ankara-Türkiye. He is a civil engineer and used to be Deputy Director at State Hydraulic Works in Türkiye; completed a hydroinformatics post graduate course at the IHE in Delft, a Technical training program in USBR-USA, and a master's degree in Hydropolitics at the Hacettepe University-Türkiye. He has over 5 years of teaching experience in some Turkish Universities and now works as head of his own Hydro Energy & Strategy consulting company located in Ankara. He has published several international articles and 15 books. He received the Most Successful Researcher Award on International Water Issues from Turkish Agricultural Association in 2008 and from the Central Union of Irrigation Cooperatives in 2016. He received the Professional Services Award of Excellence from İstanbul Çekmeköy Rotary Club in 2021.

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