
COMMENTARY

The Development Road Project (DRP): Transforming the Nature of Türkiye-Iraq Relations

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Abstract

This paper examines why Ankara and Baghdad have committed to the Development Road Project (DRP), a long-term regional connectivity initiative, despite a history of strained bilateral relations since 2003. It argues that both countries are motivated by the prospect of significant material benefits, namely economic growth, job creation, revenue generation, and improved connectivity. To answer the primary question of why Ankara and Baghdad decided to pursue this strategic project together, the paper suggests that the DRP's economic promise outweighs long-standing political tensions. The secondary question of how these benefits will shape bilateral relations is addressed through the lens of theories of interdependence, regionalism, and connectivity, which together explain how the DRP could transform Turkish-Iraqi interactions from a state of discord to one of strategic partnership. By connecting Basra to Europe through Türkiye via new railways and motorways, the DRP could foster deeper interdependence, address mutual security concerns, and promote regional stability. Moreover, the involvement of Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar underscores the project's potential to attract diverse stakeholders, thereby enhancing its strategic value. Ultimately, the paper argues that the DRP could lay the foundations for sustainable cooperation, economic development, and stability in the wider Middle East, overcoming historical tensions and establishing a lasting partnership between Türkiye and Iraq.

Keywords

Development Road Project, Türkiye, Iraq, regional connectivity, economic integration, Middle East

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Introduction

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Baghdad on April 22, 2024, after 13 years, resulting in the signing of 26 agreements between Ankara and Baghdad.¹ Besides, the quadrilateral memorandum of understanding signed by Türkiye, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar for cooperation on the Development Road Project (DRP), went beyond the bilateral arrangements between Ankara and Baghdad and arguably put some flesh on the prospects and feasibility of the project.²

The DRP is envisioned to connect the Basra (Persian) Gulf to Europe via Türkiye with the construction of 1,200 km long railways and motorways from Basra to the Turkish border in the north. The Al-Faw Grand Port, whose construction is underway in Basra, is the starting point of the DRP and is set to be the largest port in the Middle East and one of the largest in the world once it is completed in 2025. With an envisioned 90-berth capacity, the Al-Faw Grand Port is expected to surpass the 67-berth Jebel Ali Port in Dubai, which is the largest in the Middle East at the moment. The 1,200 km long railway and motorway lines are planned to pass through the cities of Diwaniyah, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Mosul, reaching the Turkish border. The DRP will provide access to Türkiye's primary Mediterranean port, Mersin, and extend to Europe via a land route passing through Istanbul.³ The DRP is expected to generate an annual revenue of US\$4 billion and at least 100,000 jobs.⁴ This lucrative outlook has been Baghdad's main motivation for years in its long-term goal of creating a non-oil economy for Iraq. Aside from tapping into Iraq's connectivity potential, the DRP provides a very favorable alternative to other connectivity projects connecting Asia to Europe such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Due to the multimodal concept and additional loading and unloading points envisioned within the IMEC, it is projected to cost more and take longer to transport goods along the IMEC than the DRP.⁵

This paper aims to answer the question, "Why did Ankara and Baghdad jointly decide to become involved in a long-term strategic regional connectivity project despite the persistence of uneasy bilateral relations for most of the past two decades?" The tentative answer to the question is that both capitals expect strong material and tangible benefits via the realization of the project. The paper's secondary and complementary question asks how the expected material benefits will contribute to the transformation of the bilateral relations. The paper argues that the DRP could potentially transform the nature of Turkish-Iraqi relations in the post-2003 period. The paper draws on the interdependence

theory, regionalism, and connectivity theory to explain how interdependence, a deepened regionalism, and connectivity forged through the DRP could transform the nature of bilateral relations between Ankara and Baghdad.⁶

Interdependence suggests that countries are more likely to seek peace and cooperation when they have mutual economic interests or shared goals. When both parties benefit from trade or projects, they are less likely to engage in conflict, which would be detrimental to both. On the other hand, complex interdependence, introduced by scholars Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, extends the idea by emphasizing multiple channels of interaction, such as trade, diplomacy, and culture, beyond military or strategic concerns.⁷

In a world of high interdependence, military power becomes less useful because countries depend on each other for economic prosperity and stability. Instead, countries can use economic or diplomatic influence to achieve their goals. Interdependence theory argues that deeper ties between nations create incentives to maintain peaceful relations. It posits that war and conflict would disrupt mutually beneficial relationships, thereby acting as a deterrent against aggression.⁸

Likewise, regionalism often promotes economic cooperation, such as free trade areas, customs unions, or common markets, which help to increase trade and investment between neighboring countries. This economic integration aims to boost growth, reduce poverty, and improve competitiveness on a global scale. It promotes political cooperation and a shared sense of identity among neighboring countries. As countries within a region develop common goals, values, or cultural ties, they are more likely to cooperate on political issues and act together on the global stage.⁹

Regionalism can give smaller or developing countries more influence in international relations by forming larger blocs, such as the European Union

(EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This collective power allows them to negotiate more effectively with larger powers and to promote their interests in global institutions such as the United Nations. Although the DRP's four main stakeholders, namely Türkiye, Iraq, the UAE, and Qatar, do not form a formal alliance, they will still likely

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benefit from the collective power generated by the DRP. Regionalism theory recognizes different forms of regionalism ranging: from formal regionalism, where countries create official institutions and agreements like the EU, to informal regionalism, which is more loosely structured and focuses on informal cooperation without binding commitments.¹⁰

Turkish-Iraqi Relations after 2003

In the post-2003 period, despite cordial episodes between Ankara and Baghdad, the relations were overshadowed by distrust and discord—roughly until 2019—for two reasons.¹¹ The first reason was the heavy influence Tehran enjoyed over Baghdad, which was a negative force mostly due to the former's usual regional rivalry with Türkiye.¹² The second was the inevitable vacuum created by the collapse of the Iraqi state and the subsequent exploitation of the vacuum in the north especially by the terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹³ The PKK's free hand to flourish in northern Iraq and the lack of the central government's capacity to impose its authority to its fullest extent in the north created an environment in which Ankara and Baghdad found themselves at ontological odds with each other: on the one hand, Ankara continuously felt the need to address the PKK threat through sporadic cross-border military operations, since Baghdad could not, and on the other, Baghdad raised sovereignty issues, which were exacerbated at times of tension between Ankara and Tehran, in response to Ankara's military operations in northern Iraq.

It is important to highlight the rather uneasy nature of Ankara-Baghdad relations for the most part of the two decades post-2003 to understand better the transforming impact of the DRP on the bilateral relations. Ankara's relations with Baghdad started deteriorating with the withdrawal of the American military presence in Iraq in 2011. Nouri al-Maliki's premiership played a significant role in Baghdad's maintaining sour relations with Ankara; in the first place, al-Maliki was offended by Ankara's support to the al-Iraqiya Alliance led by Iyad Allawi.¹⁴ The tension between Ankara and Baghdad arguably gained a domestic political dimension with the withdrawal of the U.S. military from the country in December 2011 and the subsequent arrest of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi. This tension proved to be highly sticky over the years and even gained a discursive dimension within the scope of the Syrian civil war.¹⁵ Initially, tense relations between Ankara and Baghdad revolved around three key issues: Ankara's rejection of handing over al-Hashimi to Baghdad and later providing him asylum; Baghdad's heavily sectarian policies under al-

Maliki being influenced and supported by Tehran, which became more evident in Baghdad’s support for Assad in Syria; and finally, Ankara’s direct oil trade with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which Baghdad harshly protested.¹⁶

With the advent of DAESH, relations between Ankara and Baghdad gained another negative dimension as the latter protested against Ankara’s training of Iraqi forces against DAESH in Bashiqa, around 20 km to the northeast of Mosul. Baghdad criticized the move as an infringement upon Iraq’s sovereignty, and Baghdad made this particular point over and over again whenever Ankara targeted PKK positions in northern Iraq.¹⁷ Similar to the issue of the PKK and its potential—or even power—of pitting Ankara and Baghdad against each other, another contentious issue over the years was the sharing of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹⁸ Although there were abundant contextual issues and developments such as the ones mentioned above between the two capitals in the past two decades, two structural and core issues, namely Tehran’s heavy influence on Baghdad and the PKK’s free hand in organizing and operating in northern Iraq, prevented the bilateral relations from becoming more cordial and cooperative.

Baghdad’s Search for Balance in Foreign Policy

The DRP, along with Ankara and Baghdad’s mutual commitment to initiate it, marks the beginning of a new era in bilateral relations, characterized by strategic partnership and a shared vision for the future. This new era and its defining elements are poised to render the existing disagreements or differences between the two capitals of secondary importance.

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Notwithstanding Ankara’s eagerness to realize the DRP and positively transform the nature of relations with Baghdad, it is crucial to note the primary role of the latter in driving the

mutual interest in realizing the project. So much so that without the strong desire to elevate the bilateral relations by engaging in a strategic partnership with Ankara, it is safe to argue that the DRP could not have progressed so far.

Baghdad's strong desire to elevate bilateral relations with Ankara is rooted in its painstaking efforts roughly since 2019 to balance Tehran's heavy influence through cultivation of better relations with several regional and extra-regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, Türkiye, and the U.S. Starting with the former prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi,¹⁹ this strategic trend has been further strengthened by every succeeding prime minister, gaining greater steam by 2021 and culminating with stronger efforts by the incumbent Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.²⁰ With all the expected material benefits of the DRP, Baghdad's long-held strategic choice of balancing Tehran's influence through cultivation of closer relations with alternative actors seems to have paved the way for the DRP's launch.

The Positive Impact on Standards of Living and Regionalism

The DRP's expected benefits for Türkiye and Iraq are not unique to these countries or this particular regional connectivity project. Regional connectivity projects offer the prospect of elevating the standards of living of the participating countries' populations.²¹ More importantly, the improvement of living standards, whether it materializes or not, is an expected benefit of initiating or participating in such projects for the stakeholders or decision-makers. This is not without ground as there is evidence from regions such as South Asia that regional connectivity projects contribute to an increase in the level of standards of living of the populations at large.²² A growing tendency towards regionalism at the political level as an accompanying phenomenon is also observed.²³

Both aspects, i.e., an expected improvement in living standards both in Türkiye and Iraq, and a growing willingness towards regionalism at the political level, are observable in the case of the DRP. Temporally speaking, the mutual impetus to initiate the DRP came after decision-makers in both Türkiye and Iraq experienced periods when their respective populations felt economic displeasure. In Türkiye, it was a monetary policy driven by lower interest rates, to boost productivity, manufacturing, and the real sector in the Turkish economy, and the subsequent inflationary environment;²⁴ in Iraq, it was the widespread and months-long popular protests triggered by a far-reaching disillusionment felt towards the political elite.²⁵ Economic factors scored high in the accumulated popular resentment towards the political elite in Iraq based on the consecutive administrations' poor performance as seen in the failure to address the social and economic expectations of the wider public of the past two decades.²⁶

Conversely, while it remains uncertain whether Baghdad has shown any political inclination toward greater regionalism, Ankara has a well-established history of strong political commitment to regionalism.²⁷ In a way, Ankara has been pivoting in the region in many respects, epitomized by the normalization drive it launched simultaneously in early 2022 with Israel (until 7 October 2023), Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Syria, Armenia, and Greece.²⁸ This new sort of regionalism was informed by a common denominator among all traditional regional U.S. allies in terms of their displeasure with Washington’s faltering strategic commitment to allies, their increased level of strategic autonomy and hedging practices, and their reliance on oil-rich Gulf countries for financial resources and foreign investments.

Security Aspect of Regional Connectivity Projects

The security aspect of the DRP or the wider framework of the comprehensive understanding reached by Ankara and Baghdad also fits into the greater universe of regional connectivity projects. For instance, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused increased attention to military and non-military security in the EU-China connectivity within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁹ Part of the increased attention to security was due to infrastructure being a potential target for an adversary.

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Likewise, the security concerns caused by the PKK’s disruptive potential against the DRP’s infrastructure and the expected security benefits of the DRP

for Ankara are integral parts of the DRP-oriented long-term interdependence between Ankara and Baghdad. The DRP’s expected economic benefits bring Ankara and Baghdad closer especially in terms of their security cooperation, particularly of their fight against the PKK terrorist organization. Ankara is paving the way for a more secure environment for the DRP through Operation Claw-Lock in northern Iraq, and Baghdad is promising joint operations against the PKK in addition to designating it as a “banned organization” in Iraq.³⁰

Türkiye faces significant challenges in Iraq due to the presence of terrorist organizations like DAESH and the PKK, which pose security threats and hinder cooperative relations in the region. The geopolitical dynamics, including

tensions with traditional allies and the quest for strategic autonomy, influence Türkiye's approach to Iraq, as it seeks to establish stability and foster good relations without being entangled in regional rivalries. Türkiye's strategy emphasizes the importance of economic resilience and overcoming obstacles to maintain outreach and diversify relations in the Middle East, including Iraq.³¹

Although the DRP offers attractive economic prospects especially for Iraq and Türkiye, it is also about increasing the strategic value and significance of both Türkiye and Iraq in regional and international geopolitics.³² Like oil and gas pipelines increase the strategic importance of the regions or countries they traverse—a fact that has informed Turkish decision-makers' decades-long desire to turn Türkiye into an energy hub—railways, motorways, and marine routes connecting countries and areas for trade and logistics also increase the strategic value and significance of the countries and regions in question.³³ Connectivity projects and routes, like pipelines, involve many stakeholders as investors and beneficiaries,³⁴ who all—regional and global—attach great importance to the countries and regions through which the connectivity routes pass. The geographic locations of such countries are usually the most convenient routes for launching these projects and by initiating connectivity projects, from dormant, passive, or potential assets, their locations become active strategic assets. By initiating connectivity projects on their territories, countries render themselves indispensable actors in both regional and global geopolitics.

The DRP as an Investment in Stability

By spearheading the DRP, Türkiye and Iraq are investing in their long-term stability, which is a highly coveted and rare commodity in the Middle East. The lack of long-term stability, rapidly changing dynamics, frequent eruptions of conflicts across the region, etc. make long-term planning and implementation of development impossible for regional countries. A quick look at Iraq's post-2003 invasion history reveals the extent of destabilizing dynamics such as occupation, insurgency, state collapse, civil/sectarian war, violent extremism, and so on. Despite gigantic oil resources, a series of deeply destabilizing dynamics have been hindering the country's prospects of prosperity and development.³⁵ For decades, the aforementioned phenomena have resulted in the waste of national resources and capacities; overcoming this waste has been the main challenge for many countries in the region.³⁶ The initiation of the DRP is a way for Türkiye and Iraq to share the burden of building and sustaining their stability with partners and stakeholders. By constituting the main axis of a

precious value chain between Asia and Europe, Türkiye and Iraq, and especially Iraq and its stability, will become a priority for many countries from Asia and Europe. Thus, the latter will prioritize Iraq's stability, and contribute to it both politically and economically. In the absence of the DRP, Iraq's stability is not a high priority for many countries if they are not directly connected to Iraq in the form of a value chain or they don't neighbor it. Once Iraq's fate is linked to many countries, starting from the immediate region and reaching further to Asia and Europe via the DRP, they will share tangible interests such as trade, infrastructure, logistics, and investments.

More importantly, the DRP is set to be a boon and a powerful incentive for a lot of disparate domestic actors who have arguably been the main sources or causes of instability in Iraq for more than a decade due to, among others, their incompatible interests, power struggles, and sectarian tensions. Except for a tiny strip of the Kurdish region in the north, the DRP traverses a huge landmass that is home to the majority of the Iraqi population. By traversing and covering almost the whole of Iraq, the DRP is set to offer infrastructure, development, and economic benefits to all communities, Shiite or Sunni, and to all actors, military, religious, political, and civilian. This seems to be the main reason for the almost unanimous consent, or at least a tacit approval, to the DRP by many domestic actors in Iraq.³⁷ Highways, railways, logistical centers, business facilities, and possibly oil and gas pipelines promise to contribute to the prosperity of several actors and communities at both local and national levels. The economic promises of the DRP are expected to function as the common material interest of many disparate domestic actors and as a force to mitigate tensions among them, paving the way for Iraq's long-term stability.

Deepening and Leveraging Interdependence

Türkiye–Iraq bilateral relations have been marred by a series of complications since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.³⁸ Despite the bright spots of trade and energy as areas of cooperation, differences between Ankara and Baghdad over several issues have arguably weighed more, or at least cast a shadow over, the full potential of bilateral relations.

There is already a considerable level of interdependence between Türkiye and Iraq and a deep-felt appreciation of each other's significance as neighbors; however, the DRP is poised to elevate the existing interdependence to a whole new strategic level and become so crucial and central to the bilateral relations that it would render all differences secondary and trivial.³⁹ Thus, one of the

expected benefits of the DRP is its role in overcoming the disagreements between Ankara and Baghdad.

For Türkiye, one of the greatest expected benefits of the DRP is its intended function in ensuring the territorial integrity of Iraq. Aside from being a century-long normative and consistent foreign policy position, the territorial integrity of Türkiye's neighbors has always been an essential priority for Ankara as its lack would have real and direct implications for Türkiye's territorial integrity. Türkiye has been fighting a secessionist terror group, the PKK, since 1984, and the dissolution of the central state structures in Iraq and Syria has triggered a "territorial anxiety" for Türkiye.⁴⁰

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The activities of Syria's YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), considered by Ankara the PKK's Syria offshoot, have given Ankara reason to be concerned.⁴¹ Although Türkiye sporadically targets YPG/SDF figures and elements in northern Syria, mostly through covert drone strikes, it has a narrow area of maneuver in northern Syria against the unilateral aspirations of the YPG/SDF.⁴² Partly because of this limitation, Türkiye has concentrated its counterterrorism operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. However, Ankara is aware that eliminating PKK members through counterterrorism operations alone cannot ensure the end of the PKK's secessionist agenda. Baghdad's political determination to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity and the solidarity between Ankara and Baghdad in the face of a common enemy is crucial to preclude the PKK's secessionist aspirations. The DRP is set to transform the solidarity between the two capitals and promises to generate a positive dimension for solidarity by introducing a pull factor (an incentive) as opposed to the existing push factor, which is exclusively negative.

Logistical Convenience and Advantages

Connectivity projects are not only about logistical convenience. As showcased by the most high-profile connectivity project, the BRI, they envision a new geopolitical design and architecture, and they have transformative power over the regions they traverse, the regions they connect, and over the nature of relations and interactions among the partners of such projects. The DRP also arguably entails transforming the regions of Türkiye and Iraq, at the very

minimum; the regions they connect, namely Türkiye, the Gulf, Asia, and Europe; and, expectedly, the nature of interactions among these regions. Meanwhile the interconnectedness of these regions inevitably invites the partners to view each other through a different lens.⁴³ The integration of regions and countries with each other through connectivity projects entails envisioning a common future among the partners, which also means a new geopolitical reality.⁴⁴

The motivation and interest of both Ankara and Baghdad in launching the DRP is not only about logistics; however, if this had been the case, the DRP still makes perfect sense. The existing routes in international trade and shipment between Asia and Europe are mainly the Suez Route through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal or the Cape Route via the Cape of Good Hope. The latter has already substituted the former to a great extent due to the ongoing Red Sea crisis brought about by the disruptive attacks of Ansar Allah, or Houthis, in Yemen. However, the average time of shipment via the Cape Route is 45 days, a considerable leap from the average time of shipment via the Suez Route which is 35 days. The DRP with an estimated 25 days promises to shorten even the average time of shipment via the Suez Route.⁴⁵ Indeed, the ongoing regional conflict and instability surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have caused what is probably a temporary disruption of the usual route and volume of international trade. However, even at the best of times and based on the assumption of peace and stability, both the Suez and Cape routes offer transportation that is both longer and comes at a higher cost.

On the other hand, no matter how temporary, the forced diversion of international trade from the Suez to the Cape Route has already taken a huge toll.⁴⁶ The volume of maritime traffic through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal dropped by 80% from the pre-crisis level. The fleets from the carriers which preferred diversion accounted for 62% of the global shipping capacity.⁴⁷ This crisis and the affiliated toll provide a conducive environment for boosting the DRP by giving additional impetus to Baghdad and Ankara.

The conducive environment for making the case for the DRP is not only created by the temporary and contextual Red Sea and Gaza crises. In the greater scheme of global economic activity both in terms of global trade and global GDP growth, there has been an economic slowdown since 2010, which has not recuperated yet and has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁸ Under these circumstances, every penny matters for both individual countries and the global economy. Hence, the marginal significance of cutting costs and transportation distance in international trade has dramatically increased.

The Gulf Dimension

It is natural for both Ankara and Baghdad to court funds and investment from outside as they would struggle to find the necessary investment, which is estimated to be around US\$17 billion, for such an ambitious project, especially during a time of economic and financial hardship for both.⁴⁹

There are two natural and desired hinterlands for the DRP: the Gulf and the Middle East as the immediate inner circle, and East Asia as the desired outer circle. These circles signify both the DRP's main beneficiaries and stakeholders, but also its desired funders. As the capital powerhouse of the region, the Gulf is the most logical and immediate candidate to invest and, later, benefit from the project in the short

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and medium terms. And within the Gulf, particularly the UAE and Qatar come to the forefront among other Gulf countries with their huge financial capital but more importantly, their long-time ambition for a greater role in regional and global geopolitics. Furthermore, especially the UAE is known to be extremely interested and involved in the logistics sector and several connectivity projects. As the UAE has long positioned itself as a hub between Asia, Africa, and Europe, another connectivity project in which the UAE will be a significant stakeholder offers the value of strategic diversification.⁵⁰ The UAE's AD Ports Group already signed a preliminary agreement with the General Company for Ports of Iraq to develop Al-Faw Grand Port and its economic zone.⁵¹

Potential Problems for the DRP

Despite all the DRP's promises and expected benefits for many domestic, regional, and international actors, the project is not without risks and questions of sustainability. From a financial perspective, potential investors and stakeholders can always question the project's feasibility. However, as long as there is strong political will on the part of key stakeholders and financial stakeholders, financial issues can be considered secondary. Yet, the DRP could face political and military challenges.

First, outsiders, i.e. regional countries that are not intended as part or partners of the DRP, could take steps to undermine the DRP in various ways, depending

on their respective capacities or the instruments at their disposal. The DRP's main regional outsiders appear to be Iran, and Israel. With close ties to many Iraqi religious, political, and military actors, Iran's potential to undermine the DRP is arguably greater than that of Israel. The latter has a vested interest in seeing the IMEC come to fruition rather than the DRP.

Second, major powers such as the U.S. and China are likely to see the DRP as a rival and take steps to undermine its prospects. One of the ways in which they could undermine it could be by discouraging their respective allies and partners from participating in the DRP, thereby undermining the viability of the project from the outset.

Finally, Iraq's existing fault lines and vulnerabilities pose a significant risk to the DRP's realization. Ethnic and sectarian fault lines, coupled with the plethora of military and political formations are the main static risk factors in Iraq. In addition, the entanglement of Iraq's complex internal map of actors with external actors, such as Iran, further increases Iraq's vulnerability to instability. Regional tensions and conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proved capable of threatening Iraq's stability, as Iraq was caught between Iran and the U.S., on the one hand, and Iran and Israel, on the other, in the context of the ongoing Israeli invasion of Gaza.

Conclusion

The DRP represents a transformative initiative that could redefine Turkish-Iraqi relations, fostering deeper economic, political, and security ties between the two nations. Creating a strategic trade corridor connecting the Basra Gulf to Europe via Türkiye aligns with Iraq's long-term economic diversification goals beyond oil and Türkiye's aspiration to reinforce its role as a regional hub. This ambitious infrastructure project, which involves cooperation between Ankara and Baghdad and with the UAE and Qatar, signals a significant shift in regional connectivity and diplomacy. It promises to enhance the strategic importance of Türkiye and Iraq in regional and global geopolitics, while generating substantial economic benefits, including job creation, increased trade, and improved living standards.

In addition to the economic benefits, the DRP has significant implications for regional stability and security. By addressing the shared concerns regarding the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq, Ankara and Baghdad are positioned to enhance their security cooperation. Iraq's better comprehension of the PKK

threat and its designation of the group as a “banned organization” represents a significant advancement in the resolution of a long-standing source of discord between the two countries. The DRP provides both countries with a framework for transforming their relationship from one characterized by security concerns to one centered on mutual economic and strategic benefits. Furthermore, the involvement of numerous regional stakeholders in the project, including affluent Gulf states such as the UAE and Qatar, introduces an additional dimension of international collaboration that could safeguard the project from geopolitical disruptions and contribute to a more stable Middle East.

On a broader scale, the DRP exemplifies the capacity of regional connectivity projects to reshape relations among nations by fostering interdependence and shared interests. Similarly with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has reoriented global trade routes, the DRP promises to create new linkages between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, thereby challenging existing routes such as the Suez Canal and the Cape of Good Hope. The reduction in transportation costs and time that will result from this initiative will not only benefit Iraq and Türkiye, but will also encourage global investors and traders to consider this route as a viable alternative to current options. The DRP will transform Iraq and Türkiye from mere transit points to indispensable actors in global supply chains, affording them greater leverage in regional and international geopolitics.

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It is also important to note that the DRP has the potential to act as a stabilizing force within Iraq. By facilitating the provision of infrastructure, development, and economic opportunities in regions that have historically been affected by sectarian and political divisions, the project has the potential to serve as a unifying force for the country. In this context, the DRP’s promise of broad-based development is not merely an economic benefit, but a catalyst for long-term stability in Iraq, which, in turn, enhances regional security.

In conclusion, the DRP is both an infrastructure project and a pivotal strategic transition in Turkish-Iraqi relations, regional geopolitics, and global trade. By fostering economic interdependence, improving security cooperation, and

promoting regionalism, the DRP has the potential to transform the relationship between Türkiye and Iraq, and the broader Middle East. The project offers a unique opportunity for regional actors to invest in stability, prosperity, and cooperation, thereby laying the foundation for a new era of diplomatic and economic partnerships. As the project progresses, its success will likely depend on the ability of all stakeholders, both regional and global, to navigate the complex political and security dynamics of the region while maintaining their commitment to the shared vision of connectivity, development, and peace.

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