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# TURKISH-EMIRATI RELATIONS IN IRAQ AFTER 2003: A CONTAINED COMPETITION?

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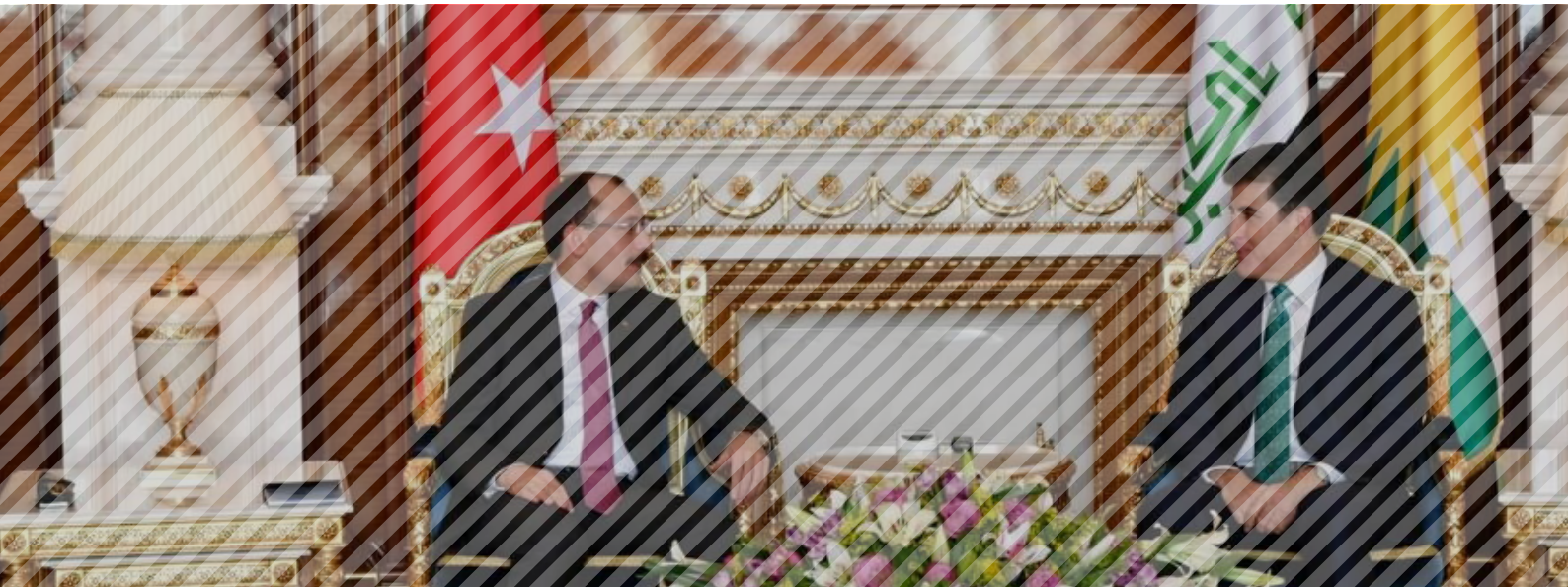
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## Executive summary

Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Gulf countries have been long collaborating and competing in Iraq since the US invasion of 2003. The United States (US) sought the support of regional allies to contribute to building the new political order as well as engage in economic reconstruction. Pre-war political and economic ties had helped Turkey and the UAE in establishing their influence in the country, and particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Local actors in Iraq often sought to build relations with each of these actors to balance others, primarily Iran. Over time, the conflicting regional agendas of Turkey and the UAE produced spill-over effects in Iraq, particularly since the 2017 Gulf crisis, thus undermining their ad hoc cooperation in the country.

This paper argues that Turkish and Emirati engagement in Iraq has been based on a long-standing business-oriented approach that provided their political interventions with extra durability (and vice versa), compared to some other regional actors that sought influence in Iraq. The dynamics underlying relations between Turkey and the UAE in Iraq are subtler and less visible for external observers than those between Turkey or Gulf countries and Iran who had more intense and extensive flashpoints.

### A. Introduction

Since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)<sup>1</sup> have competed in Iraq and influenced the country's politics. The two countries, in addition to Saudi Arabia and Jordan, are both United States (US) allies that Washington cooperated with in varying capacities to assist in the reconstruction and building the political order of post-invasion Iraq. However,

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the Gulf crisis of 2017 negatively affected their collaboration in Iraq. At the same time, the US also occasionally contained the growing competition between Iraq's neighbors to cultivate influence in the country.

For two decades now, Turkey has had two key concerns in Iraq: the first to counter the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an armed group designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, and EU countries, and second to expand business opportunities. For Turkey, the geographic proximity and ethnic and sectarian composition of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the Nineveh governorate made these two areas a starting point for projecting Turkish influence. The presence of a large minority of Arab Sunnis and the numerically less significant Turkmens has created both imperatives and pretexts for Turkey to cultivate influence in northern Iraq.

Meanwhile, for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the transborder tribal links of the governorates of southern and western Iraq (e.g. Basra, Muthanna, Dhi Qar, and Anbar governorates) rendered them suitable habitats for cultivating influence. For Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, countering Iran's influence has been a key goal. Both countries, however, diverged in their tactics and policies to achieve this goal, occasionally contradicting each other. With the defeat of the Islamic State group (ISIS) in 2017, the two countries worked to align their policies more than before.

The thin geographic and demographic barriers between these spheres of influence would not ultimately limit competition between Turkey and the UAE/Saudi Arabia. Neither demographic and ethnic lines, nor geopolitical imperatives could uphold those imagined buffers between the spheres of influence of those countries in Iraq over the long-term. This can be explained through the following four reasons:

***The geographic proximity and ethnic and sectarian composition of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the Nineveh governorate made these two areas a starting point for projecting Turkish influence***

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**First**, growing hostility to Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries in Shia-majority southern Iraq following the US invasion made the KRI a safe haven for foreign actors to cultivate influence. Iraqi Kurdish ruling parties also saw it as imperative to encourage Gulf countries to expand their political and economic presence to counter-balance Iran and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> In that regards, pre-war ties between Gulf actors and Iraqi Kurdish politicians paved the way for growing post-war economic and political engagement.

Geopolitically, it was safer for Gulf countries to plan for a long-term presence to challenge Iran (as well as Turkey) in the KRI and Arab Sunni-majority governorates, compared to Arab Shia-majority governorates. Gulf engagement further intensified in the KRI where numerous internally displaced Sunni tribals hostile to growing Iranian influence took refuge with the rise of ISIS. However, with the defeat of ISIS in 2017, engagement with the Arab Shia component in Iraq evolved as a vector of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's Iraq policy. Iraqi Shia politicians and constituencies who have become more hostile to Iran as its influence grew also developed interest in cultivating ties with Gulf countries.

**Second**, the relative tolerance of Turkish diplomatic and business presence in Shia-majority southern Iraq compared to the Gulf states allowed Ankara a more visible presence than that of Gulf countries. A prominent case is Turkish interest in the Basra governorate, following the US invasion.

In the Arab Sunni sphere, the relative ideological proximity between the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) allowed Ankara to have friends in the heavily tribal Anbar governorate through this party.

**Third**, apart from the IIP, the burgeoning relationship between Turkey and Qatar allowed Turkey to tap into Qatar's tribal contacts in western Iraq's Anbar (or rather, allowed Iraqi politicians allied to either country to cultivate relations with the other).

**Fourth**, Arab Sunnis became a strong point of intersection between the Turkey, UAE, engaged Gulf countries, and Jordan, whereby each of those countries attempted to politically influence Arab Sunni communities, at times unilaterally and at other times multilaterally. This has been mainly the case prior to Iraqi parliamentary elections.

*With the defeat of ISIS in 2017, engagement with the Arab Shia component in Iraq evolved as a vector of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's Iraq policy*



While this paper focuses on how Turkey and the UAE came to cooperate and conflict in Iraq, it also addresses other countries as both Ankara and Abu Dhabi operate in Iraq in concert with other regional actors. Despite the plethora of countries competing to cultivate influence in Iraq, this paper chose to focus on the dynamics of Turkish-Emirati relations in the country for two reasons:

**First**, both Turkey, under the AKP's Erdoğan, and the UAE, under Mohammad Bin Zayid (MbZ), developed increasingly conflicting regional agendas over several decades, yet also managed to compete and collaborate in Iraq up until mid-2017. They were motivated to contain their competition due to their alliance with the US, as well as shared interests and common concerns over Iran. Nonetheless, following the 2017 Gulf crisis, Qatar and Turkey no longer shared a strong interest in jointly containing Iranian influence with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

**Second**, the two capitals' rivalry in Iraq is unique in that both are economic powerhouses with regionally and internationally appealing economic models. For example, this neither typically applies to Saudi Arabia, nor Iran despite their vast financial resources. The two countries' unique economic models constitute a form of soft power that draws demand from Iraqi actors for Turkish and Emirati contractors. This gives durability to their political interventions given the intertwinement of external-domestic interests.

This paper mostly relied upon open-source data in addition to a few interviews conducted by the author. US diplomatic cables sourced from WikiLeaks amount to one-third of the open-source data. Those cables provide a window to understand how Turkey, the UAE, and Gulf actors operated in Iraq via their respective dialogues with the US. US cables mostly cover the period between 2005 and 2011. Three structured interviews were conducted with Iraqi political insiders in November 2020. However, several casual conversations between the author and interlocutors relevant to the topic also contributed to some of the nuances presented in this paper.

One key limitation of this paper is that it only provides intermittent close-up accounts of Turkish and Emirati policies on Iraq. This is because WikiLeaks, a key resource for the

*The two capitals' rivalry in Iraq is unique in that both are economic powerhouses with regionally and internationally appealing economic models*

paper, does not offer US cables covering Turkish and Emirati policies on Baghdad during and after the fall of ISIS, which are crucial periods to understand how Ankara and Abu Dhabi's policies developed up to date. Second, this paper intentionally does not provide an extensive picture of the external linkages in KRI as the topic's complexity would require a separate research effort to do it justice.

This paper is composed of two key sections: the **first** addresses Turkish and Emirati (as well as Gulf and Jordanian) political engagement in Iraq, and their convergences and divergences. Firstly, I address how those actors attempted to mobilize Iraq's Arab Sunnis to partake in the post-2003 political order per US requests, then I focus on how Turkey and the UAE differed in their political engagement with Iraq's Shia Islamists. Thirdly, I explain how Turkey, the UAE, and others worked to organize Sunnis prior to some of Iraq's elections. The fourth and fifth subsections respectively explain how the trajectory of Turkey and UAE's local Iraqi allies were linked to the country's domestic dynamics, and how intensified regional hostilities since the 2017 Gulf crisis undermined cooperation between Turkey and the UAE's allies.

The **second** section is dedicated to conceptualizing Turkish and Emirati economic influence in Iraq and particularly in the Kurdish autonomous region. In this section I explain how business dealings have contributed to their interventions' long-term stability. The section starts with highlighting the importance of pre-war Turkish and Emirati economic relations with Iraq, mostly in the energy and real estate sectors. I first broadly address economic competition between Turkey and the UAE in the KRI. Then I address the two countries' competition in the energy sector in Iraq with a particular focus on Anbar and then the KRI. Finally, I focus on Turkish and Emirati economic activity in central and southern Iraq.

## **B. Political collaboration and competition between Turkey and the UAE**

### **1- Efforts to mobilize Arab Sunni politicians**

Ankara and Abu Dhabi, along with Riyadh, Doha, and Amman, and to a lesser extent Egypt, played roles in organizing Arab Sunni political engagement following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The US has been a catalyst in the roles those countries played to help organize and incentivize influential segments of Arab Sunnis to partake in the post-2003 order given their reluctance. Compared to Gulf countries, Turkey was, on one hand, more proactive in playing a bridge role between Arab Sunni politicians and the US. According to Hasan Turunç, Turkey played a role in convincing Sunni MPs to accept the "Status of Forces" agreement

with the US in 2008.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it made early inroads in communicating with some influential Islamist Shia political elites as shown in the next section.

Earlier, in December 2005, the Turkish government brought together Arab Sunni representatives and the US Ambassador in Istanbul. This meeting was preceded by a meeting the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs held with Tariq al-Hashimi of the IIP and Salih al-Mutlaq of the National Dialogue Council, as one US diplomatic cable reveals.<sup>4</sup> Then in July 2006, Ankara hosted Iraqi political parties in a conference held by UNAMI to discuss Iraq's constitution.<sup>5</sup>

In December 2006, Qatar sponsored a conference in Istanbul to bring together Iraqi Sunni figures, among them Harith al-Dhari of the Iraq's Association of Muslim Scholars, who had influence over Sunni anti-US armed resistance groups.<sup>6</sup> Ankara claimed it had no role in organizing the event, but the Turkish MoFA's Iraq envoy Oğuz Çelikkol met with participants on the event's sidelines to convince them to participate in the political process in Iraq. Turkey had originally postponed the conference from November because Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was scheduled to visit Turkey at that time. The Iraq Embassy in Ankara however protested the conference, especially given Dhari's arrest warrant on terrorism charges previously issued by the Iraqi judiciary.<sup>7</sup>

In parallel to liaising with Ankara, the US also sought the UAE's assistance in getting Sunni actors to participate in the political process in Iraq. A US diplomatic cable dating back to November 2005 reports a meeting in October between US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad and UAE's Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed (MbZ), Dubai's Prince Mohammad Bin Rashid (MbR), and Abu Dhabi's Hamdan Bin Zayed, in the presence of former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. MbR proposed a joint Abu Dhabi-Dubai operations room which would be tasked with "identifying people and organizations in Iraq that the USG could work with to encourage Sunnis to participate." MbR delegated the Dubai State Security Chief, Mohammad Qemzi, to follow up on forming the "operations room."<sup>8</sup>

Diverging from Turkey's ideological vision of democratic Islamism under AKP, according to a November 2005 US cable, UAE's MbZ summarized for Khalilzad his apolitical Islam theory for Iraq: "the promotion of Sufism would serve as an antidote to Muslim fundamentalism."<sup>9</sup> This religious orientation became the cornerstone of an Emirati

regional strategy to openly counter Turkey and Muslim Brotherhood-linked movements after the anti-MB military coup in Cairo in 2013. Guido Steinberg argues that UAE's Crown Prince MbZ saw his country as at war with the Muslim Brotherhood as early as 2004.<sup>10</sup>

Two years after his meeting with Khalilzad, MbZ grew more skeptical towards the Sunni actors the US asked him to engage in the post-2003 Iraqi political process. According to one US diplomatic cable from June 2007, Zayid says, "even as a Sunni himself, he said, he would not trust the Iraqi Sunnis any more than he can trust Maliki. 'How can you trust someone running policy whose payroll comes from Iran?' Mbz asked."<sup>11</sup>

The June cable demonstrates that MbZ only complied with US requests on Iraq due to the requirements of his relationship with the US. MbZ did not believe elections should be held in Iraq, rather he "said the decision to hold elections is proving disastrous and that what the country really needs is a strong leader who can hold the country together through a rough period of reform."<sup>12</sup>

Up to 2005 there was no apparent coordination between Ankara, Abu Dhabi, and Gulf countries over organizing and mobilizing Iraqi Sunnis. This could be backed by a question by MbZ to Khalilzad on whether Jordan and Turkey have been helpful to the US in Iraq.<sup>13</sup> MbZ's question implies that at that point the US had neither brought these countries together for that purpose, nor were they coordinating with each other. Joint action over Iraq between Turkey and the UAE only materialized in the years after.<sup>14</sup>

## **2- Diverging paths on Shia Islamist politicians**

Turkey and the UAE separately tested the waters of the post-invasion Shia Islamist elites and paramilitary groups who came to lead the new political system. Both countries showed different degrees of openness towards those politicians. Following the 2003 invasion, Turkey showed considerable interest in engaging Shia Islamists yet its relations go through ups and downs. The UAE minimally engaged with Iraqi Shia Islamists but it became more open to talks with them to challenge growing Iranian influence with the defeat of ISIS.

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### **i. Turkish engagement**

A US diplomatic cable from October 2005 mentions that the Iran-backed Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) had a representative in Ankara.<sup>15</sup> This long-standing relationship between Ankara and SCIRI would later constitute a link with two influential Shia politicians who left the organization: Ammar al-Hakim, who stepped down from leading SCIRI and established the more liberal-leaning Hikma movement, and Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi (2018-2020), who was a senior figure in SCIRI and the Iraqi Interim Governing Council following the US invasion.

In 2005, Oğuz Çelikkol, the head of the Middle East and South Asia Department in Turkey's MoFA, received two envoys of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who led Jaysh al-Mahdi (JaM). The envoys asked the Turkish side if they could open an office in Ankara to improve their relations with the government, to which the Turkish side responded by saying they would do so "in a positive light." The Sadrists appealed to the Turks by showing an interest in finding a common ground with the Arab Sunnis over fears that "Kurds are overrunning Kirkuk, and of "Iranian penetration in Iraq."<sup>16</sup> According to a February 2006 US cable, Sadr requested to visit Ankara and the latter offered to rely US messages to him.<sup>17</sup> Turkey was positive, perhaps due to pressure as Sadr also went to Jordan and met the King during the same period.<sup>18</sup> Yet, this visit apparently did not materialize thanks to US pressure.

While sectarian contention in Iraq drove Arab Sunni governments to take a hostile stance towards the Nouri al-Maliki administration (2006-2014), the Turkish government sought to build bridges with the Shia religious establishment in Iraq. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shia cleric, accepted to meet Turkish President Abdullah Gül in Najaf, according to a December 2008 US diplomatic cable. The Turkish aim was to "make a point of countering divisions between Sunni and Shia."<sup>19</sup> Around a year after JaM was disbanded, in May 2009, Turkey allowed a large delegation led by influential cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr to convene in Istanbul. The Sadrists would repeat their old request to open an office, but this time also expressed their interest in setting up a satellite TV to be stationed in Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

***The communication channels that Turkish government opened with Shia actors supported the role Turkey played in conveying messages between the US and Iran in Iraq***

Iran was skeptical of Turkish networking in Iraq but tolerated it and probably preferred Ankara's presence in Iraq over the Gulf Arab states. However, the communication channels that Turkish government opened with Shia actors supported the role Turkey played in conveying messages between the US and Iran in Iraq. According to a May 2008 US cable, US Ambassador to Turkey, Ross Wilson, "urged the GOT" to highlight to Iranian officials the United States' concern about Iranian support for Jaysh al-Mahdi.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the Turkish special envoy to Iraq, Murat Özçelik, conveyed to the US Iranian concerns over "the continued presence of U.S. troops in Iraq, not on arriving at some form of agreement or common cause vis-a-vis the future status of Kirkuk or Iraqi Kurdish autonomy," according to a September 2008 US diplomatic cable.<sup>22</sup>

## ii. UAE and Gulf engagement

Gulf countries viewed the dominant Shia Islamist currents with skepticism and hostility despite having developed relations with entities like SCIRI prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Iraqi historian Ali A. Allawi, mentions that "Ayatollah al-Hakim became a welcome visitor to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. He was received with near head-of-state protocol, further cementing his status as the pre-eminent opposition leader."<sup>23</sup>

In the years following the US invasion of Iraq, Abu Dhabi sought to inaugurate an embassy in Iraq when others in the GCC were reluctant. But the UAE quickly developed a hostile perception of PM Maliki. While the UAE in mid-2008 was attempting to organize a trip for Maliki to visit Abu Dhabi, a US diplomatic cable dated to June 2008 mentioned that UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayid "chided al-Maliki for removing his tie when he visited Khamenei -- as if to dress more like his hosts in sympathy for their views; if he visited a synagogue 'would he wear a yarmulke' and how would he dress for the Pope?"<sup>24</sup>

Mowaffak al-Rubaie, Iraq's National Security Advisor, was another figure from the Dawa Party, like PM Maliki, whose relationship with the UAE did not bode well. According to a US diplomatic cable dating back to December 2005, Rubaie was invited to speak at a conference in Abu Dhabi on the Iraqi constitution. During the visit, Rubaie sought UAE support for Iraq's reconstruction and floated the idea of building hospitals in Sheikh Zayed's name in Iraqi governorates.<sup>25</sup> But a US cable from July 2007 reflects the transformation of Rubaie's relationship with the Emirati leadership, as Dubai Prince MBR, considered Rubaie and Maliki to be figures "influenced by Iran".<sup>26</sup> Later, Abu Dhabi declined meetings with Rubaie and preferred to have Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari (who is a Kurdistan Democratic Party member) as its Iraq interlocutor, which was "motivated in part by the desire to bolster Zebari's stature."<sup>27</sup>

Instead of engaging with Shia Islamist elites, Gulf countries developed a preference for engaging tribal elites in central and southern Iraq as well as anti-Islamist Shia elites. It was reported in a November 2008 US cable that the UAE and Qatar invited, in an unspecified date, the heads of Karbala's tribes, however, "the latter two reportedly [acted] at Saudi Arabia's expense."<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia may have multilaterally engaged in Iraq at least on a number of issues. The Gulf countries seem to have stepped up their tribal engagement after ISIS' defeat and increased their interests to softly counter Iranian influence. In May 2016, Thamer al-Sabhan, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Iraq, tweeted in support of Iraqi southern tribes for "standing with their Arab compatriots against who seek harm against them" (in implicit reference to Iran).<sup>29</sup> Then, in August 2017 at least 50 tribal leaders from Iraq were invited to attend a conference in Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> In a further development, in August 2021, Riyadh exclusively brought together Iraqi Sunni and Shia clerics in a summit under the auspices of the Saudi-led Muslim World League.<sup>31</sup>

Some Iraqi Shia attitudes towards capitals like Abu Dhabi and Riyadh gradually became more positive since 2017 when those two capitals sought better relations with increasingly pragmatic and liberalized Shia Islamists and tribes to counter Iran, as mentioned earlier. This would lead Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, Maliki's successor, to be ostensibly more well received than his predecessor. Another key example is how the mood in Saudi Arabia and UAE towards Muqtada al-Sadr would change when MbS received Sadr in July 2017 and MbZ received him in August the same year.<sup>32 33</sup> This contrasts the Emirati position represented in MbR when he advised the US to act against Muqtada al-Sadr by imprisoning him, which he thought would cripple the Sadrists' ability to win elections.<sup>34</sup> Still, the two capitals distrusted Tehran-allied Shia Islamists. For example, the UAE considered PM Abadi the "best bad option."<sup>35</sup> Such a pragmatic approach by the UAE and Saudi Arabia towards the increasingly empowered Tehran-allied Shia Islamists became imperative if either were to create a visible economic footprint in central and southern Iraq after the demise of ISIS.

On the other hand, from 2014 and 2015 onwards, Turkey's image in Shia political constituencies would be affected negatively for multiple reasons, among them the

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increasingly complicated relationship over the quota of water flowing from upstream Turkey, increasing military intervention against the PKK in the KRI and Nineveh, and Turkey's support for Syrian armed opposition groups in Syria. Moreover, similar to how a segment of Shia Islamist politicians long accused Saudi Arabia and other Gulf actors of supporting al-Qaeda and ISIS in Iraq, Turkey was increasingly targeted by those same accusations for a period of time.

### **3- Regional collaboration over Iraqi elections riddled by skepticism**

A US diplomatic cable dating back to November 2007 mentions deliberations between Turkey, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Egypt in Cairo.<sup>36</sup> But the cable does not mention when the six parties convened, thus, making 2006 and 2007 two possible dates for one or multiple meetings. Turkish-Emirati cooperation indeed never meant that the two countries saw eye-to-eye on Iraqi politics after 2003, even before their evidently tense relationship with the onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011. The UAE was skeptical of some of Turkey and Qatar's political allies in Iraq as represented in Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi of the IIP. The aforementioned cable attributed to the UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed saying "VP Tariq al-Hashemi is linked to the Muslim Brothers and is not trusted in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Jordan, even if they say otherwise."<sup>37</sup>

At this point, Qatar, a future strategic ally of Turkey and a partner in Iraq, was not part of this early Turkey-Gulf Arab-Jordan ad hoc coordination over Iraq, but joined them several years later. While strengthening bilateral ties with Turkey who visibly supported Sunni participation in the post-2003 order, Qatar had apparently kept a dual track of supporting the IIP and the Sunni armed resistance groups who stood staunchly against the post-2003 Iraqi political order. Yet, it is unclear if Qatar's non-participation in the crystallizing joint Turkey-Gulf Arab-Jordan coordination was due to its Iraq policy or due to its turbulent relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In the period between 2009 and 2010, governmental representatives from Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia met in Amman to discuss support for a joint electoral list that happened to be Iyad Allawi's al-Iraqiya for the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections.<sup>38</sup> Allawi managed to create convergence once more between Iraq's neighboring countries around himself after the 2003 invasion, as they had also supported him before Saddam Hussein's toppling. In that meeting, the UAE representative was staunchly against including the IIP's al-Tawafuq list into Iyad's alliance, but not resistant to a post-elections alliance.



The IIP's inclusion within al-Iraqiya would have enabled the party to gain a sizable amount of seats in the elections based on the Sainte-Laguë counting method that empowered mid-sized parties such as IIP at the time, which the UAE did not desire.<sup>39</sup> But perhaps no less crucially, Turkey allegedly did not obstruct IIP's exclusion from the Allawi-led list during a meeting between the five countries.<sup>40</sup> VP Tariq al-Hashimi did however join the al-Iraqiya list, but only after resigning from the IIP and setting up his own party, possibly embodying a Turkish-Qatari-Emirati compromise.

The Turkish government fully embraced the Allawi electoral alliance to the extent that Murat Özçelik, the Turkish special envoy to Iraq, said that his country "would provide training and other campaign assistance to some coalitions, including Allawi's al-Iraqiya Alliance".<sup>41</sup> As Stratfor reported around April 2010, Murat Özçelik, played "an active role deciding who will get elected from the Iraqi Turkmen list (led by the Turkey-backed Turkmen Front which was part of Allawi's Iraqiya)".<sup>42</sup> The way Turkey exerted influence over Allawi's electoral alliance in the north suggests that perhaps all or some of the five countries that backed the al-Iraqiya list had a role in vetting candidates in adjacent geographic regions in which they had vested interests in. This particularly could have been the case for Saudi Arabia and Jordan in southern and western Iraq, respectively.

The Allawi alliance constituted a melting pot for the domestic interests of those countries who shared varying degrees of skepticism or hostility towards Iran in Iraq, including Turkey who conveyed Iranian messages to Washington. While the UAE from an early date had sought to place the post-2003 Iraqi Interim Government under a person like Iyad Allawi to play the "role of foil to Iran",<sup>43</sup> it wasn't until 2010 that Turkey's Özçelik "argued that the US, Turkey and others should support Iraqi leaders who pushed back against Maliki's "centrist tendencies", which left Iraq more exposed to control by Iran."<sup>44</sup>

#### **4- The fall and rise of Arab Sunni political elites**

The fallout between VP Tariq al-Hashimi and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi in 2012 on the one hand and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki rise in 2013,<sup>4546</sup> had negative implications for Turkey as it weakened friendly actors in the Iraqi government.

Hashimi was very close to the Turkish government to the extent that he would seek Turkish pressure on Maliki to implement reforms, according to a December 2008 US diplomatic cable.<sup>47</sup> Another politician such as Issawi, along with the IIP, had strong influence in the Anbar governorate which, along with Nineveh, constitutes the demographic weight of Arab Sunnis. Turkey already had a solid alliance in Nineveh with the Nujayfi brothers who

also had political influence in Anbar via local allies, but the Nujafis would later lose influence in the 2018 elections. The IIP's gradual decline in Iraqi and Anbari politics after 2010 was followed by the gradual gravitation of wealthy Sunni politician Khamis al-Khanjar towards Qatar and Turkey away from the Saudi Arabia and UAE orbit. UAE and Saudi Arabia also found partners in politicians such as Ahmed Abu Risha, the commander of the US-backed Awakening Councils, the Karbuli brothers, and Mohammad al-Halbusi, the 2018 Parliament Speaker.

The April 2014 elections brought together many of the above-mentioned actors who shared different regional links. The 'Mutahidon' (United) list included the Nujayfis, Karbulis, Ahmed Abu Risha, and the IIP's Salim al-Jbouri.<sup>48</sup> While the UAE was always unfriendly to the IIP, Jbouri's inclusion might have been facilitated thanks to his allegedly good relations with Jordan.<sup>49</sup> Jbouri later rose in the parliament to become speaker on July 15, succeeding Osama al-Nujayfi. Jbouri, as the speaker, may have contributed to increasingly lukewarm relations between Ankara and the IIP. Jbouri approved a request made by PM Haidar al-Abadi to oust MP Athil al-Nujayfi, who was accused of weakening the Iraqi army in Nineveh and thus aiding the rise of ISIS as the governor of Nineveh at the time.<sup>50</sup>

The Nujayfis' trajectory is considerably owed to their posture towards the Iran-led axis in Iraq which they rejected to cooperate with during the war against ISIS. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan allegedly asked Iran for Osama al-Nujayfi to continue being the parliament's speaker. While Iran responded positively, it was conditioned upon Nujayfi's inclusion into an Iran-friendly electoral alliance. Nujayfi allegedly rejected such a prospect.<sup>51</sup> The local political dynamics of Nineveh changed against the Nujayfis' favor,<sup>52</sup> causing their later poor performance in the next elections held in 2018.

##### **5- Polarizing regional geopolitics sabotage collaboration in Iraq**

In preparation for the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, representatives from the five countries of Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan held meetings in Ankara and Istanbul in March 2017 to bring together an array of Iraqi Sunni politicians friendly to those countries. Another round of meetings was held in July

***Polarization between Ankara, Doha, and Gulf capitals and its repercussions for joint organization of Arab Sunni politicians coincided with Iran gaining a more pivotal position***

in Baghdad and Erbil. The embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on Qatar in May 2017 undermined the joint Turkish-Gulf Arab-Jordan collaboration in Iraq, as Iraqi politicians close to either side took positions on the crisis. A key example is the Sahwa leader Ahmed Abu Risha who castigated Qatar during the Gulf crisis through the Dubai-based Al Arabiya, according to Qatar-linked and London-based the New Arab newspaper.<sup>53</sup>

Polarization between Ankara, Doha, and Gulf capitals and its repercussions for joint organization of Arab Sunni politicians coincided with Iran gaining a more pivotal position through its crucial role in forming the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a plethora of mostly Iran-allied Iraqi paramilitary groups, in the fight against ISIS. These paramilitaries' political rise pushed several Arab Sunni politicians to pragmatically ally with them, leaving a polarizing effect not only between those Arab Sunni constituencies who rejected such alliances and others who did not, but furthermore in between Sunni politicians allied with Iran-friendly elements. Each of the Iran-friendly Sunni politicians would accuse the other of betraying their communities and glossing over grievances caused by Iran-friendly paramilitary groups.

The 'National Axis' was one of the first Arab Sunni electoral alliances of the 2018 elections that brought together politicians known to be close to Turkey and Gulf Arab states. The alliance brought together Jamal al-Karbouli, Osama al-Nujayfi, Khamis al-Khanjar, Ahmed Abullah al-Jbouri, Salim al-Jbouri, and Falah Hasan Zaidan.<sup>54</sup> But the alliance's cohesion proved to be short-lived as the two Turkey-friendly politicians Nujayfi and Khanjar parted paths in 2018, with the former joining the Shia 'Islah' parliamentary alliance led by politicians Muqtada al-Sadr, Haidar al-Abadi, Ammar al-Hakim, and Iyad Allawi and Khanjar joining the PMF-backed 'Bina' parliamentary alliance led by Hadi al-Ameri, Faleh al-Fayyadh, and Nouri al-Maliki. Nujayfi and Khanjar however came together in October 2020 by forming the 'Iraqi Front' in the Parliament, along with the IIP and other politicians, to oust Mohammad al-Halbusi from the Parliament's Speakership.<sup>55</sup>

***The ramifications of the May 2017 Gulf crisis were also felt in the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq where the KRI has transformed into a theater that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have sought to utilize against Turkey***

Similar to fissures between Ankara-friendly political forces, Mohammad al-Halbusi left al-Hal Party of the Riyadh-friendly Jamal al-Karbouli who nominated him for the Speakership, and established his own party, al-Taquadum, in April 2019.<sup>56</sup> Mohammad al-Karbouli, Jamal's brother who developed ties with the UAE, also left al-Hal and joined Taquadum. However, feeling marginalized, he left the party in February 2021.<sup>57</sup> Jamal al-Karbouli was arrested for corruption in April 2021,<sup>58</sup> with speculations about Halbusi playing a role in clearing the political scene of some of his backers who turned into competitors. With al-Hal Party leaving the Bina alliance in 2019, it probably lost the backing needed from Iran-friendly elements.<sup>59</sup>

While the internal divisions between Ankara and Abu Dhabi-Riyadh's respective allies are rooted in local Iraqi politics, they were further exacerbated by the 2017 Gulf crisis. The dual effect of the PMF's rise and the 2017 Gulf crisis pushed key Sunni politicians to engage politically with Iran's allies with a greater deal of pragmatism than previously, regardless of their regional backers' positions on such moves. An outlier in the case of Ankara's local partners is the Nujayfi brothers who tried to distance themselves from the PMF and Iran. Domestic cleavages and coalition-building in Iraq do not necessarily follow the trajectory of Middle Eastern politics, although they are indeed impacted by them. For example, the Nujayfis, rejecting an alliance with Iran-allied paramilitaries, believed the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement following the 2017 Gulf crisis to be "temporal" and they should not subordinate themselves to the fluctuations in the two capitals' relationship.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, the Nujayfis apparently did toe Turkish policy on Iraqi Kurdish politics.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond Baghdad, the ramifications of the May 2017 Gulf crisis were also felt in the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq where the KRI has transformed into a theater that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have sought to utilize against Turkey. Government-supported media in the UAE and Saudi Arabia was supportive of the September 2017 Kurdish referendum, out of spite against Turkey and Iran who saw the referendum as a threat to their national security. However, Abu Dhabi officially stood against the referendum. By mid-2020, Turkish state-owned media would re-publish an exclusive story run by the New Arab newspaper which accused Abu Dhabi of financing the PKK in northern Iraq.<sup>62</sup> In early January 2021, Al Arabiya broadcasted interviews conducted with PKK-affiliated militants in the Qandil Mountains of the Iraqi Kurdish region.<sup>63</sup>

### **C. Business as a tool for durable external intervention**

Business dealings, investments, and humanitarian aid provided Ankara and Abu Dhabi's political interventions with durability as economic opportunities cemented common interests between them and local Iraqi actors, especially in the KRI.<sup>64</sup> However, the trajectory of both countries' political and security relations with the Iraqi government, KRI, and other local actors would be impacted in ways that at times undermined their business opportunities.

Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, both Turkey and the UAE ended up overshadowing Saudi Arabia's political outreach in Iraq as both countries engaged with Iraq with a substantial amount of pragmatism and a business-oriented approach to politics. Turkey and UAE's post-2003 policies in Iraq partly predicated on their pre-war roles as economic lifelines for Iraq under President Saddam Hussein when the UN imposed sanctions on the country in 1990. Such a state of pre-war economic dependency on Saudi Arabia existed, but Riyadh did not capitalize on it in the post-2003 era. More crucially, Riyadh for a long time opted for an explicit zero-sum approach versus Iran in Iraq that contributed to its quick isolation, as it especially found very little appeal in the Iraqi Shia constituencies at the time.

Iraq's reliance on Turkey for imports dates back to the 1980s during the Iraq-Iran war.<sup>65</sup> While Turkey did shut down the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil exports pipeline in compliance with UN sanctions in 1990, the pipeline became operative again as part of the UN resolution 986 (1995) and the oil-for-food UN sponsored program.<sup>66</sup> Turkey became the sole channel for UN-authorized Iraqi oil exports. Iraq tried to win over its neighbors, among them Turkey, with preferential trade agreements.<sup>67</sup> Although a no-fly zone was enforced from Turkey, Ankara did not seriously interrupt Iraqi smuggling networks passing through its territories.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, the UAE became Iraq's key trade intermediary for re-exports in 1995. In late 2001, both countries signed a free trade agreement. The Emirates News Agency mentioned in 2001 that bilateral trade including private sector under the oil-for-food program totaled \$5bn.<sup>69</sup>

*Turkey and UAE's post-2003 policies in Iraq partly predicated on their pre-war roles as economic lifelines for Iraq under President Saddam Hussein*

The KRI also emerged as a cornerstone for Turkey and the UAE's economic investments in post-2003 Iraq due to several factors. Many years before, the Kurdish region turned into a key hub for various Iraqi opposition groups that were supported by Turkey, Western, and Arab countries, especially Gulf countries. For Turkey, countering the PKK necessitated building local coalitions. Such political connections, in the case of Turkey and the UAE, enabled them to build bridges that later helped them to acquire business opportunities.

For quite different reason, Turkey and the UAE came to view the KRI as a critically important zone to cultivate influence. For Turkey, such influence in the region was about exerting enough geopolitical influence to enable it to preempt potential Kurdish cession and develop interests with incumbent Kurdish parties to cement a common front against the PKK. The UAE saw its business presence in the region as a means to challenge Iran (as well as Turkey) in the Kurdish region.

As a result of strong ties that Iraqi Kurdish leaders built with Ankara and Abu Dhabi alike, Iraqi Kurdistan President Nechirvan Barzani helped Erdoğan and MbZ conduct a phone call in late August 2021 to ease tensions between their countries, according to investigative journalist Amberin Zaman.

### **1. The race between Turkey and the UAE to establish economic presence in the KRI**

In 2003, the UAE envisioned molding post-US invasion Iraq in its own image. This was not defined by an anticipated rivalry with Turkey, but rather against neighboring Saudi Arabia. A US diplomatic cable from May 2003 shows that Emirati officials envisioned a resurgent post-war Baghdad as an economic counterweight to Riyadh in the region. This Emirati approach crystallized with MbZ's ascendance. Zayid's rise marked the UAE's rise from Saudi Arabia's junior partner to a more assertively independent partner. To influence Baghdad's new political elites, Abu Dhabi sought to transfer Emirati technical expertise to Iraq. The UAE offered to support Iraq's economic recovery and to rehabilitate Iraq's Central Bank, and dispatched ADNOC officials to support the Iraqi oil sector.<sup>70</sup> Eying strong regional autonomy at the time, Iraqi Kurdish politicians, such as Barham Salih, viewed the Emirati federal system as an emulatable model to regulate Erbil and Baghdad relations.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, the historical ties between northern Iraq and Turkey's southeastern towns and metropolitan cities (Van, Diyarbakir, and Şanlıurfa),<sup>72</sup> the Iraqi Kurdish region's landlocked position, and Turkey's growing regional economic status all underlie Ankara's belief of deserved superiority in the KRI against more distant and late-coming economic competitors, such as the UAE. Turkey was quick to translate nurtured political and business contacts with Kurdish

politicians into tangible diplomatic and economic gains in the KRI. The first official Turkish visit to KRI's capital of Erbil came in 2008 to kick-start strategic dialogue with the KRI. A Turkish consulate was inaugurated in Erbil in 2010. The UAE moved soon after to establish diplomatic presence in the KRI. By late 2011, the Iraqi government approved the establishing of an Emirati consulate in Erbil, which took place the following year.<sup>73</sup> Later, in 2014, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce (DCC) inaugurated an office in the KRI.<sup>74</sup> Saudi Arabia, another competitor to Turkey and Abu Dhabi's key regional partner in Iraq, inaugurated its consulate in Erbil in 2016.<sup>75</sup>

Turkey and the UAE primarily compete in two sectors in the KRI and Iraq: energy and real estate construction. According to a 2016 report by Christina Bache Fidan, 75 to 80 percent of construction projects in the KRI have been carried out by Turkish companies. Turkish companies represented over 50 percent of foreign companies registered in the KRI. Turkey also supplied 80 percent of consumer goods (e.g., furniture, food products, and textiles).<sup>76</sup> Bache Fidan mentions that the KRI's share of Turkey's exports to Iraq rose from 50 percent in 2007 to 67 percent in 2013.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, the KRI accounted for 50 percent of total trade between Dubai and Iraq in 2012, according to a report by the DCC.<sup>78</sup> Iraq was also the second key destination for the DCC's members in terms of re-exports.<sup>79</sup> While Turkey was an early coming actor in the KRI's banking and real estate sectors compared to the UAE,<sup>80</sup> it was not the case in the energy sector.

## **2. The Turkish-Emirati Competition in the Energy Sector**

The competition between Turkey and the UAE in Iraq's energy sector has been primarily in the gas sector, focused in the KRI, and secondarily in electricity. Turkey and the UAE also eyed developing gas fields in the areas under Baghdad's jurisdiction.

### **i. Anbar governorate**

In 2008, Turkey discussed the possibility of bringing gas from the Akkas gas field in Anbar governorate through Turkey onwards to Europe. Turkey also considered the possibility of extending a pipeline that passes through Syria before reaching Turkey.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, around that time, the UAE was "actively studying" building a gas city by utilizing gas pumped from the Akkas field in Anbar, Basra governorate and the KRI.<sup>82</sup> At the time,

*Anbar continues to draw the interests of UAE and Saudi Arabia that currently view it as a potential conduit for a US-backed scheme to export electricity from Saudi Arabia and the GCC to Iraq*

both Turkey and the UAE had local allies in Anbar that may have had factored into their energy plans. Ankara's allies were the IIP who had strong influence over local governing structures. On the other hand, the UAE were friends with tribal figures such as Ahmed Abu Risha. According to a US diplomatic cable from June 2009, Risha supported the UAE's Dana and Crescent Petroleum's plans to build the gas city.<sup>83</sup>

Neither Turkish nor Emirati schemes appear to have materialized in Anbar at the time. Yet, Anbar continues to draw the interests of UAE and Saudi Arabia that currently view it as a potential conduit for a US-backed scheme to export electricity from Saudi Arabia and the GCC to Iraq. Anbar's current economic importance for Saudi Arabia lies in the Arar border-crossing that was inaugurated in November 2020 after 30 years of closure.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Turkey does not appear to currently have an interest in making major inroads in the governorate.

## **ii. The KRI**

Turkey appeared relatively concerned about early UAE business inroads in the KRI. In mid-July 2008, Deputy Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu told Matthew Bryza, a US diplomat, that while his country was waiting for Baghdad to approve an energy law before Turkish investment could take place in the KRI, Dana Gas did not wait and already made a \$600m investment to supply gas to two power plants in the Kurdish region.<sup>85</sup> Other UAE companies that operated in the autonomous region are Crescent Petroleum, Gulf Keystone Petroleum, and the Abu Dhabi National Energy Company.

Turkey and the UAE have had different priorities for gas utilization and electricity provision in Iraq and the KRI. Turkish companies mostly prioritize gas exports from Iraq while Emirati companies mostly prioritize local gas consumption for industrial and electricity-generation purposes.<sup>86</sup> Another symbolic example is electricity provision. While in 2012 the Abu Dhabi National Energy Company was seeking a substantial share in a gas-fired Sulaymaniyah plant,<sup>87</sup> Turkey's key interest in this sector has been supplying the KRI and Nineveh with power, a role Turkish companies have played since 2003.<sup>88</sup>

Turkey would like to see gas flowing from northern Iraq to Europe through its evolving energy land bridge. A leaked diplomatic US cable from October 2008 says: "the Iraqis were lukewarm to the idea as the Iraqi delegation noted it needed to decide on domestic usage first before contemplating exports of natural gas."<sup>89</sup> To lobby for its export-oriented approach to Iraqi gas, Turkey attempted to secure US support for its



endeavor through institutionalizing Turkish-Iraqi-US energy cooperation. Leveraging Western countries' fear of Russian energy power in Europe helped Turkey to secure US support.

However, the Emirati and Turkish priorities in the gas sector are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On 15 August 2008, the UAE's Crescent Petroleum declared that it was partnering with Turkey's Türkerler Holding to bring 3.5 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) of gas from the KRI to Turkey by 2011.<sup>90</sup> Such a partnership could have been thanks to US support for Turkish, Iraqi Kurdish, and Emirati business interests in the KRI. Later on, Dana Gas joined a gas export scheme to Turkey in late 2009 when it partnered with Crescent Petroleum in a consortium of European energy companies to transport natural gas from the KRI to Europe as part of the Turkey-centric Nabucco gas pipeline project.<sup>91</sup> The project aimed to bring gas from Iraq and Azerbaijan, among other countries, to Europe to reduce European reliance on gas imports from Russia. But as early as at least 2011, the Nabucco project had showed signs of infeasibility that led to its eventual faltering.<sup>92</sup> UAE companies were not party to any scheduled Turkey-destined Iraqi gas exports after the Nabucco project's failure.

After the Nabucco project, Turkey continued its endeavor to bring gas from northern Iraq to its territory. In 2013, the KRI and Turkey signed an agreement to bring 4 bcm/y of gas to Turkey by 2017 increasing eventually to 20 bcm/y by 2025.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, a gas pipeline would be built with a maximum capacity of 20 bcm/y of yearly gas exports.<sup>94</sup> Later in 2015, the KRI stated it would send 10 bcm/y of gas to Turkey by 2017-2018 with a possible delay to 2019.<sup>95</sup> However, the 2013 and 2015 Turkish-KRI talks over gas and building a pipeline *de facto* stopped and did not come to fruition.

The year 2017 represented a critical year in which the KRI's plans for gas exports were shaped by two key geopolitical events: Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum and to a lesser extent the Gulf crisis. Since 2017, Russia became a key player in the KRI's energy sector, thus becoming an important variable in Turkey-Iraq/KRI energy relations. In February 2017, Russian energy giant Rosneft made an investment in KRI when it was financially vulnerable due to plummeting global oil prices and complicated budgetary relations with Baghdad. Russia initially provided \$2.1bn for pre-paid oil deliveries between

***In February 2017, Russian energy giant Rosneft made an investment in KRI when it was financially vulnerable due to plummeting global oil prices and complicated budgetary relations with Baghdad***

2017 and 2019.<sup>96</sup> Rosneft also secured a deal with the KRI to build a 30 bcm/y gas pipeline that connects the semi-autonomous region with Turkey. In October 2017, the KRI sold Russia its 60 percent share in the company that runs the region's oil pipeline network.<sup>97</sup> This *de facto* allows Russia to control pipelines that supply Turkey with oil and gas. Aljazeera English's journalist Mariya Petkova argues that Russia's financial bailout of Erbil helped it "gain enough political leverage" to move forward with holding the September 2017 independence referendum despite the strong opposition from Baghdad, Ankara, Tehran, and Western actors.<sup>98</sup>

Russian involvement in the region's energy sector that year was crucial for the holding of the referendum, and its involvement may have itself been impacted by the Gulf crisis.

The UAE likely helped Russia's business entry in the KRI's oil sector in 2017 for two reasons:

**First**, the financial boost that Russia gave to Erbil helped the latter to partially settle debts with Dana Gas and Crescent Petroleum, as Erbil and the two Emirati companies were in a dispute under investigation by the London Court of International Arbitration. The two Emirati companies were likely to win the dispute. To settle the dispute cordially, the Emirati companies may have convinced Russia's Rosneft to step in to help Erbil in order for the latter to be able to settle the debts in their favor.

**Second**, the prospect of Emirati intervention mentioned above is supported by the fact that Russia's Rosneft and the UAE's Crescent Petroleum signed a strategic partnership in May 2010 that lays the foundations for joint oil and gas exploration and development efforts in the Middle East.<sup>99</sup> Given that Crescent holds a 20 percent share in Dana Gas, the latter also enjoys a relationship with Rosneft.<sup>100</sup> The long-term relationship between the Russian and the UAE companies can allow each side to influence the other's investment decisions, which can also bear geopolitical implications for Iraq as in the case of the 2017 Kurdish referendum.

The UAE benefits from Russia's influence over how much gas and oil can pass to Turkey from the KRI and Iraq in the future. While the UAE cannot block oil and gas

*The UAE benefits from Russia's influence over how much gas and oil can pass to Turkey from the KRI and Iraq in the future*

from going to Turkey over the long-term thanks to geography, it can attempt to limit Turkey's economic influence on its southern frontiers by encouraging the involvement of influential actors with complicated relationships with Turkey.

### **3. Turkish, UAE economic engagement in southern and central Iraq**

Turkey's ultimate economic goal in Iraq is to further connect the two countries with a network of energy pipelines, roads, and rail from Iraq's furthest point in the south, the Basra governorate, to Turkey's southeast, thus linking the Persian Gulf, Turkey, and Europe. Similar to how the UAE developed imperatives and interests to operate in territory nearby Turkey, the latter also has done so in Iraqi territory adjacent to Gulf Arab states.

The Grand Faw port project in Basra has been a key area for Emirati and Turkish economic interests. The port itself – once finished – should reduce Iraqi reliance on UAE's Jebel Ali port and, on the other hand, increase the prospects for linking Turkey economically with the Persian Gulf, as Ankara has been aspiring lately.<sup>101</sup>

In October 2009, Turkey inaugurated a consulate in the city of Basra, a step encouraged by the US at the time. Over a year before opening its Basra consulate, Turkey aimed to set up a trilateral committee comprised of Iraq, Turkey, and Kuwait to launch an industrial development zone near the city of Basra. Ryan Crocker, the US Ambassador to Iraq, told his Turkish counterpart Murat Özçelik that Arab countries' absence was creating a vacuum for Iran to fill, and thus, Turkey's engagement in Basra was needed.<sup>102</sup> According to another US diplomatic cable from April 2008, Turkey accepted a US task to convince Kuwait to open a diplomatic mission in Baghdad and re-open its borders with Iraq.<sup>103</sup> While Turkey's relations with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh were not fraught with serious crises at the time, compared to post-2011, Turkey's engagement in southern Iraq apparently never involved coalition-building with those two capitals (including Qatar), unlike the case with Kuwait. This was likely due to Ankara's cautiousness about who to engage with in Iraq's south given Iran's sensitivity.

Softly building a presence in the governorate, Turkish firms sought bids in 2009 to implement cement, water, and housing projects.<sup>104</sup> To win the hearts and minds of Basrawis, the Turkish consulate in the governorate, for example, inaugurated in 2012 a Futsal stadium financed by Turkish firms.<sup>105</sup> Turkey was however forced to halt its diplomatic presence in Basra (and Mosul for the most part) in 2014 when the threat of ISIS escalated.

Turkey continues to project soft power in southern and central Iraq. For example, Turkish contractors constructed hospitals in the cities of Karbala and Nasiriyah that were inaugurated in mid-2021.<sup>106 107</sup> According to Turkey state-owned Anadolu Agency, Turkish companies are also constructing hospitals in the governorates of Basra, Maysan, Wasit, and Salahaldin (in Tuz Khurmatu and Dujail) in southern Iraq and central Iraq. The series of hospitals Turkey is building might be the equivalent of what Mowaffak al-Rubaie sought from the UAE in 2005.

Unlike Turkey, the UAE to date does not have a consulate in the governorate. In 2011, the Chief of Basra's Investment Commission, Haidar Ali Fadil, called on the UAE to open a consulate in the governorate.<sup>108</sup> Besides UAE companies' interest in energy contracts in the KRI, Emirati (and to a lesser extent Saudi) construction and energy companies also stepped up their pursuit of economic opportunities in central and southern Iraq following ISIS' defeat in 2017. Yet, as early as 2009, UAE energy companies such as Dana Gas had an interest in developing a gas city in Basra, similar to what it sought in Anbar.<sup>109</sup>

Before ISIS' rise in 2014, UAE-based companies, such as the al-Hamra consortium, sought to develop hotels and resorts in the Karbala governorate, a key Iraqi city for religious tourism.<sup>110</sup> Later, in early 2018, Iraq's National Investment Commission was reportedly close to signing a \$10bn contract with the UAE's Emaar Properties and Eagle Hills to construct "al-Rashid Scheme" in Baghdad, which is unlikely to have materialized.<sup>111</sup> In mid-2021, the Iraqi government contracted Emaar to develop a 1000 acres area in the vicinity of the Baghdad International Airport for a residential complex.<sup>112</sup>

UAE energy companies' appetite in central and southern Iraq has grown in recent years. In 2018 and 2021, UAE companies engaged in talks to develop oil projects in the governorates of Diyala, Dhi Qar, Basra, and Muthanna in central and southern Iraq.<sup>113</sup>  
<sup>114 115</sup> Under Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, March 2021 was a crucial month for boosting Iraqi relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as each country committed to \$3bn of investments to Iraq.<sup>116</sup>

***March 2021 was a crucial month for boosting Iraqi relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as each country committed to \$3bn of investments to Iraq***

In March, the governor of Muthanna, a governorate adjacent to Saudi Arabia, accompanied Kadhimmi to the country.<sup>177</sup> The following month, UAE's Etihad Credit Insurance clinched a deal to back General Electric's seven power plant projects of Qudus, Khairat, southern Baghdad, Hilla, Mussayab, Haidariya and Karbala,<sup>178</sup> all of which are in central and southern Iraq. In June 2021, it was reported that an Abu Dhabi government company agreed with the Iraqi government to develop at least 2 GW of solar power capacity in central and southern Iraq.<sup>179</sup> Up to date, it does not appear that Turkish energy, oil, and gas companies have made similar inroads in central and southern Iraq.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Turkey and the UAE politically engaged with Iraq and deepened their economic interests in the country following the US invasion based on pre-war political networking and economic linkages. For many years, both countries' varying concerns about Iranian influence and the US demand for its allies to engage with post-2003 Iraq were factors that encouraged the two countries to collaborate in Iraq, despite growing mutual skepticism. This collaboration mainly took the form of encouraging Arab Sunni political elites to build political coalitions for elections in the post-2003 political order. Their involvement in Iraq was partly driven by regional peer pressure, whereby if one US regional ally was reluctant to get involved, another regional ally would step up instead.

This led to a series of ad hoc meetings between the two countries, along with other countries, to bring together politicians prior to parliamentary elections. Such collaboration extended to business in the Kurdish region when Turkish and UAE companies were part of a grand but short-lived US and EU-backed project before 2010 to export gas from northern Iraq to Europe via Turkey. After the Gulf crisis, the UAE worked to block such projects and furthermore, along with Saudi Arabia, attempted to utilize the Kurdish region as a battleground against Turkey.

Turkey and the UAE developed divergent approaches to engagement with Shia Islamist politicians. Compared to Turkey's openness, UAE and other Gulf Arab states came to engage with Iraqi Shia politicians more skeptically, driven by the fear of Tehran and its Iraqi allies and proxies building influence in Iraq following the invasion. The Gulf Arab states' lukewarm attitude towards Shia Islamist elites after 2003 was one reason, among

several, for why Turkey became a more favorable Sunni interlocutor for several of those elites for over a decade, after which late-coming Gulf capitals started to reach out to soft Shia Islamist elites, such as former SCIRI and Dawa Party politicians and clerics as well as others who sought to distance themselves from Iran, such as cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

While the US was thus a catalyst bringing Ankara and Abu Dhabi together in Iraq for many years, the Gulf crisis of May 2017 negatively affected their collaboration and furthermore fueled a proxy conflict in the country. With Iran siding with Doha and Ankara in the Gulf crisis, Iran was no longer a strongly common concern bringing together Turkey and the UAE in Iraq, as it used to help bridge gaps between them before. The regional cleavage between the Turkish-Qatari camp and the Emirati-Saudi camp in 2017 helped exacerbate intra-Sunni divisions in Iraq.

As the Iran-backed PMF became a pivotal actor in Iraq with the defeat of ISIS, Iraqi politicians backed by Turkey and Gulf countries had to ally themselves with Iran-backed Iraqi political forces. Before ISIS' rise in Iraq, Ankara's political allies were very influential actors in the Iraqi government. Afterwards, several of those political actors, such as the Nujayfi brothers, were no longer calling the shots. The IIP's relations with Ankara weakened and the party itself became weaker than before. Khamis al-Khanjar has however filled part of the political gap for Turkey. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's Sunni friends in Iraq such the Karbulis and parliament speaker Halbusi and others gained considerable power in the 2018 elections.

Since 2018 in particular, Turkey's changing domestic politics represented in the alliance between the ruling AKP and the ultra-nationalist MHP would gradually help securitize Ankara's approach in Iraq and divert attention and resources to combating the PKK in the KRI and northern Iraq. A larger Turkish military footprint in northern Iraq became an increasing source of friction with paramilitaries allied with Iran. Also, as Turkey fights the PKK, the latter receives more support from strong Iran-allied paramilitaries.

***Possible Emirati role in supporting  
Russia's entry into the KRI's energy sector  
harmed Turkish energy interests in Iraq***

In the Turkish-PKK conflict, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia found an opportunity to provoke Ankara in Iraq, at least providing media support to the armed group by having them interviewed on al-Arabiya. As such, Ankara's Gulf rivals did not need to pour significant amounts of resources. More significantly, a possible Emirati role in supporting Russia's entry into the KRI's energy sector harmed Turkish energy interests in Iraq, despite the overall growing trade ties between Ankara, Erbil, and Baghdad. This has been one marker signifying the shift in Turkish-Gulf competition in Iraq taking a less restrained form.

Abu Dhabi and Riyadh market themselves, at Ankara's expense, to a segment of Shia political circles and Kurdish parties as less problematic actors and beneficial interlocutors that could balance Ankara and Tehran. However, their activities are more likely to constitute an annoyance to Ankara's interests, contributing to short-term limitations rather than long-term structural damage. Key Iraqi paramilitaries and political parties allied with Iran remain hostile to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's attempts to gain political and economic influence in the Shia-majority central and southern Iraq. In contrast, Turkey's presence is comparably more tolerated by Iran's local allies. However, the more Turkish-paramilitary tensions increase over the PKK in northern Iraq in the future, the less likely it is that Turkey will enjoy room to invest and project soft power in Iraq's central and southern regions.

## Endnotes

- 1- The abbreviation 'UAE' and the word 'Emirati' are interchangeably used throughout the paper in reference to the same entity.
- 2- For example, according to a US diplomatic cable, in October 2003, Masoud al-Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, complained to Emirati Foreign Minister Hamdan Bin Zayed Al Nahyan during a visit to the UAE about anti-PKK Turkish airstrikes in northern Iraq. See: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o3ABUDHABI4704\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o3ABUDHABI4704_a.html)
- 3- Hasan Turunç. Turkey's Global Strategy: Turkey and Iraq. LSE Research Online. May 2012. [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43503/1/Turkey%27s%20Global%20Strategy\\_Turkey%20and%20Iraq\(lsero\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43503/1/Turkey%27s%20Global%20Strategy_Turkey%20and%20Iraq(lsero).pdf)
- 4- "(S) Iraq: Turkey Encourages Sunni Participation, meets with Sadrists," WikiLeaks, dated October 7, 2005, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o5ANKARA6099\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o5ANKARA6099_a.html)
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- 6- "Turkey/Iraq: Controversial Sunni Conference Proceeds in Istanbul; Iraqi Embassy Protests," WikiLeaks, dated December 15, 2006, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o6ANKARA6671\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o6ANKARA6671_a.html)
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- 9- Ibid.
- 10- Guido Steinberg, "Regional Power, United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner," SWP, July 8, 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/regional-power-united-arab-emirates/>
- 11- "Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Talks Iran/Iraq with Usnavcent Commander Vice Admiral Cosgriff," WikiLeaks, dated June 11, 2007, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o7ABUDHABI964\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o7ABUDHABI964_a.html)
- 12- Ibid.
- 13- Ibid.
- 14- Turkey, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, and Jordan may have had ad hoc deliberations over Iraq prior to 2003 as they all shared support to the US-backed Iraq National Accord (INA) anti-regime front led by Iyad Allawi. Ali A. Allawi, an Iraqi historian, describes the INA as "set up by Saudi and western intelligence, particularly the British MI6".
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