

Erdogan seeks rapprochement with Iraq

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On April 22, 2024, Turkish President Erdogan paid his first official visit to Baghdad since 2011. During the visit, he met with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid and Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

According to Turkish media reports, the agenda of the talks had been prepared since last fall and included a wide range of issues: regional and international security, economy, energy, trade, etc. This is also evidenced by the composition of the Turkish delegation, which included almost all the heads of security forces, economic bloc ministers and political advisers. Considering the uneasy relations between Ankara and Baghdad, such a broad format of negotiations can be interpreted as Erdogan's attempt to comprehensively resolve many issues that have accumulated between the two countries since the large-scale transformations in the region triggered by the so-called "Arab Spring". First, according to Turkish analysts, Erdogan is interested in the question of possible cooperation between Ankara and Baghdad in the eliminating of PKK resistance centers in northern Iraq, the prospects of restarting the Kirkuk–Ceyhan oil pipeline, which has been shut down for a long time, and the construction of a new highway between the countries with a length of more than 1000 km.

The first issue remains extremely complicated for Turkey: despite regular reports by the Turkish Armed Forces about successful operations to destroy "*Kurdish militants*" in the Iraqi mountains, the PKK continues to generate forces there and transfer them to the territory of Turkey itself. The interest in launching the pipeline is probably related to the raw material shortage of the Turkish oil refining industry, which has been deprived of the opportunity to earn money with "smuggled" Russian oil put under the sanctions pressure of the U.S. Treasury Department. What is more, the continuation of the military confrontation between Iran and Israel, as predicted by economic analysts around the world, will lead to a near doubling of world oil prices. This will be too much for the Turkish economy, which is already in a critical state. Erdogan may be trying to ensure the country by agreeing to buy relatively cheap Iraqi oil, especially against the backdrop of predictions that Iran is ready to cut off its hydrocarbons to Turkey in the event of war. Turkey is also motivated by the issue of road links through which Ankara seeks access to the Persian Gulf, bypassing Iran.

In turn, according to experts, the Iraqi side is primarily interested in the possibility of at least formal control over the actions of the Turkish army in its northern border zone. Another problem for Baghdad is the desire of Erbil (*the capital of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in northeastern Iraq*) to receive half of the revenues from the oil pumped through its territory to Turkey. Baghdad wants to get Ankara to make payments directly with it so that it can allocate money to the Kurdish Autonomy from the Iraqi budget instead of from Turkish banks, as was before. Another, almost the most important problem for Iraq in relations with Turkey is the water issue. Over the past few years, Turkey has been taking disproportionately large amounts of water from the Euphrates and Tigris by building complexes of reservoirs and dams in the upper reaches of these rivers on its territory. The Iraqi agricultural industry

has suffered greatly, as has its population, which has been deprived of access to drinking water. In the run-up to and during the talks, Ankara confirmed its agreement to significantly increase the water flow to Iraq, but on the condition that Turkish construction companies that must be awarded the tenders for the building of the reservoir complex and the new irrigation system in the Arab country.

In general, the Turkish press is pining on Erdogan's visit, but the tangle of contradictions in the relations between the two countries is so complicated, and, especially thanks to Turkey's efforts, that it will hardly be possible to find simple and mutually acceptable solutions on all the issues. The difficulty lies in the fact that the government in Baghdad is more like a "*government of the capital*" than the country, torn by contradictions and internal centrifugal forces. The "looseness" of the Iraqi sovereignty, which has given shelter to a multitude of paramilitary groups and ethno-religious movements, could contribute to the emergence of another powerful wave of destabilization in the country, due to the "weak and will-less" government, which has allowed the de facto occupation of its northern regions by Turkey. This, in turn, could lead to the collapse of Ankara's and Baghdad's plans for an oil pipeline, new roads and irrigation complexes that the parties are trying to build in the hope of attracting the attention and capital of China, India and Europe.

There are many problems and questions regarding the Turkish-Iraqi rapprochement and the adopted "road map" of cooperation. However, the pro-government media in Turkey are avoiding them, preferring to present the public with a glossy package of the multi-faceted Iraqi agenda. In a sense, Erdogan's tried-and-true method of compensating for his country's economic and social failures at the expense of external "breakthroughs" is working.

On the other hand, on the eve of his departure from big politics, Erdogan may be attempting to organize for his inexperienced successor those areas of Turkish foreign policy that he himself has managed to disentangle over the course of two decades.