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The Contest between Neo-Ottomanism and the Axis of Resistance: The Security Implications of Iran–Turkey Strategic Rivalry for Iraq

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Iraq's post-2003 political transformation has turned the country into an arena of regional competition. The weakening of state institutions, emergence of armed non-state actors, regional upheavals, the rise of ISIS, and subsequent changes in Syria have intensified external involvement in Iraq. Among the influential regional projects are Türkiye's Neo-Ottomanism and Iran's Axis of Resistance. Although distinct in ideological foundations and instruments, both seek strategic influence in Iraq and the wider region.

Türkiye has pursued influence through diplomacy, trade, infrastructure, cultural engagement, and military operations, while emphasizing state-centered security con-

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cerns, particularly the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Iran has cultivated political, religious, and security networks, presenting regional partnerships as strategic depth and deterrence against external threats. Their interaction affects Iraq's sovereignty, institutional cohesion, and ability to pursue an independent foreign policy.

This study examines how Iran–Türkiye strategic rivalry shapes Iraq's security across political, military, economic, societal, and environmental sectors. It asks how the two actors construct security threats, mobilize audiences, and employ securitizing or desecuritizing strategies in the Iraqi context. Drawing on the Copenhagen School, the study conceptualizes security not merely as material danger but also as a process through which issues are framed as existential threats and exceptional measures are justified. It argues that sector-specific and shifting security narratives contribute to a layered and unstable security environment for Iraq. This distinction is central to Iraq's security.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design and relies on documentary and library-based sources. It applies the Copenhagen School's securitization framework to examine Iran's Axis of Resistance and Türkiye's Neo-Ottomanist regional approach in Iraq. The analysis identifies relevant actors, referent objects, threat constructions, target audiences, and measures justified in the name of security.

Evidence is organized thematically across five sectors: political, military, economic, societal, and environmental. A comparative reading traces how each regional actor frames risks and opportunities, and how securitization and desecuritization vary by issue and context. The study also considers Iraq's domestic institutions and other regional and international actors insofar as they condition bilateral competition. Its findings are interpretive rather than causal measurements and are limited by the scope and availability of documentary evidence. Sources are read in their political and historical context, with attention to the distinction between declared threat perceptions and observable policy instruments, where feasible.

Findings

The findings indicate that Iran and Türkiye advance different but overlapping forms of influence, and that their rivalry affects Iraq unevenly across security sectors. Politically, Iran's ties with parties and networks associated with the Coordination Framework and resistance currents have supported its leverage within Iraq's political system. These relationships are often justified through narratives of resistance, religious solidarity, and protection against external threats. Türkiye, by contrast, has relied more heavily on state-to-state diplomacy, formal agreements, and engagement with Baghdad, while also cultivating relations with actors in northern Iraq. The coexistence of these channels complicates Iraqi political autonomy and can deepen internal divisions.

In the military sector, Türkiye frames the PKK's presence as a direct security threat and has used cross-border operations and military positions in northern Iraq to address it. Developments surrounding the PKK's 2025 dissolution process may create openings for desecuritization, although their implications remain contingent. Iran-linked Popular Mobilization Forces and Islamic Resistance formations are associated with deterrence and resistance narratives. Escalations involving the United States and Israel have also exposed Iraq to spillover risks, demonstrating that its security environment cannot be reduced to bilateral competition.

Economically, Türkiye's trade, infrastructure links, and proposed Development Road project offer connectivity and development opportunities, while also expanding Ankara's leverage. Water-related diplomacy is intertwined with these relations. Iraq's energy ties with Iran, meanwhile, remain vulnerable to external sanctions and changes in US waivers, with interruptions in gas supplies creating domestic pressures. Economic interdependence therefore functions both as an incentive for cooperation and as a source of strategic vulnerability. Societally, Türkiye's influence draws on education, media, aid, and cultural ties among some Sunni Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish communities. Iran's influence is sustained through religious and cultural networks, Arabic-language media, links with Kurdish actors, and the Arbaeen pilgrimage. These channels shape political identities and competing narratives of belonging and threat.

Environmentally, Türkiye's upstream position in shared river basins and its

dam infrastructure provide leverage over water flows. Bilateral oil-for-water understandings have not resolved concerns over predictable, binding allocations. Iran also affects some tributaries, though its influence is more localized. Across sectors, Iraq's limited institutional capacity and fragmented authority constrain its ability to manage these pressures and preserve policy independence. These patterns also reveal that interdependence reshapes Iraqi policy choices and vulnerabilities across multiple sectors.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Iran–Türkiye rivalry in Iraq reflects competing regional order projects rather than a simple contest for influence. Through different political networks, security practices, economic ties, and cultural instruments, both states shape how threats are defined and which responses are considered legitimate. The Copenhagen School framework helps show that Iraqi insecurity is produced not only by material capabilities but also by sector-specific securitizing narratives that can normalize exceptional measures and external intervention.

The rivalry's effects are neither uniform nor exclusively bilateral. Military escalation involving the United States and Israel, local armed actors, institutional fragmentation, and transnational political discourses further complicate Iraq's security environment. Türkiye's security framing around the PKK, Iran-linked resistance and deterrence narratives, economic dependencies, societal outreach, and water politics interact in ways that narrow Baghdad's room for maneuver. At the same time, diplomatic and economic engagement may offer openings for cooperation and desecuritization where threat-centered approaches are restrained.

Reducing these vulnerabilities requires strengthening sovereign Iraqi institutions and their capacity to formulate and implement coherent policy. Baghdad should pursue regional dialogue, promote transparent security arrangements, and seek enforceable and predictable mechanisms for shared water management. Diversifying economic and energy relationships, while protecting social pluralism and institutional accountability, could also lessen exposure to external leverage. Such measures cannot eliminate strategic competition, but they may help prevent Iraq from becoming a platform for proxy confrontation.

Ultimately, sustainable Iraqi security depends on shifting regional engagement away from zero-sum competition and toward rules-based cooperation that respects sovereignty. Desecuritizing selected disputes and addressing domestic governance weaknesses are therefore essential complements to managing external rivalry.

Future research could test these interpretations through interviews with Iraqi officials, community representatives, and policy experts, and by tracking whether changes in regional diplomacy translate into durable institutional outcomes. Such follow-up would also clarify which mechanisms most effectively reduce the risks of escalation while preserving Iraq's capacity to make sovereign choices. In policy terms, balanced engagement should not mean equidistance in every dispute; it should mean transparent decisions grounded in national priorities and accountable institutions. This finding reinforces the importance of institutional resilience and accountable policymaking in Iraq.

Key words: Neo-Ottomanism; Axis of Resistance; Securitization; Iran–Turkey Strategic Rivalry; Iraq's Security Environment.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.