



“In fact, the issue is always between two points”

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Prepared by: **Hakan Çalışkantürk**

2twoblackdots@gmail.com

<https://www.2blackdots.com>

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Geopolitical and Global Developments:

THE RISING STAR OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: ÇUKUROVA'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A "STRATEGIC ECONOMIC HUB" VIA ADANA AND MERSİN

Introduction: Global Trade Corridors and the Strategic Importance of the Eastern Mediterranean

Global trade has entered a new period of competition known as the "corridor wars." Countries are developing ambitious infrastructure projects that reshape trade routes. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) via the Middle Corridor and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced under the leadership of the United States, India, and the EU, offer alternative routes that will accelerate Asia–Europe trade. In this competitive environment, Turkey stands out with its geostrategic position, and the Eastern Mediterranean region is becoming a key point for these new routes. In particular, the Adana–Mersin region, known as Çukurova, has strong potential to become a logistics hub in the Eastern Mediterranean through major projects that will soon be implemented.

Geopolitical Developments and the Role of Turkey and TRNC

In recent years, the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean and the search for new trade routes have increased the geopolitical importance of the region. The shortest and most economical route for delivering natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe passes through Turkey. Energy experts emphasize that the most rational pipeline route from the region to Europe is through the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and then Turkey. This increases the strategic significance of the TRNC while positioning Turkey as a regional energy bridge. Moreover, located at the intersection of emerging global trade routes, Turkey aims to become the gateway to Europe for the Middle East (including the Gulf) with its growing infrastructure. At the center of this vision lies the Development Road Project, which aims to connect Iraq and the Gulf to Europe via Turkey.

The Development Road: An Economic Artery from Basra to Europe

The Development Road is a massive transport and logistics corridor that extends from the Persian Gulf to Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Upon completion, the Çukurova region, especially Adana and Mersin, will be candidates to become the "Rotterdam of the Eastern Mediterranean" with their ports, railways, airport, and industrial zones. In the sections below, we will examine the details of the Development Road Project and other critical infrastructure investments in the region, the economic/hinterland capacity of Çukurova, and its role in global trade networks. We will also conduct a comparative analysis with competing hubs such as Piraeus (Greece), East Port Said (Egypt), and Haifa (Israel) to highlight Çukurova's strengths.

The Development Road Project: A New Economic Corridor from Basra to Europe

The Development Road Project is a giant transportation corridor developed jointly by Iraq and Turkey, which will connect the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. As part of this project, the new Grand Faw Port in Basra will be linked to the Turkish border through a 1,200 km double-track highway and railway network across Iraq. From there, the line will extend through Turkey to reach European markets via the Mersin Port or Istanbul. Estimated to cost \$17 billion, the Development Road Project aims to establish a new trade bridge between Asia and Europe. While the Iraqi Prime Minister has described the project as an "economic river," the Director General of Iraqi Ports has emphasized its significance by stating, "All goods from the East will reach Turkey via this corridor; it will be a global passageway connecting Eastern trade to the West."

The Grand Faw Port and Logistics Connection

The Grand Faw Port is being constructed as the starting point of this corridor and is planned to become the largest port in the Middle East. Built by Daewoo with an investment of \$5 billion, the port will cover an area of 54 km² and have a capacity of 90 berths. Its 14,5 km breakwater has already entered the Guinness Book of Records. The first phase of the port is expected to be operational by the end of 2025. The Faw Port and the Development Road are complementary projects: goods arriving at the port will be quickly transported to Turkey and from there to Europe via road and rail. Once completed, Iraq aims to generate significant transit income and diversify its economy through this corridor. Indeed, in its May 2023 announcement, the World Bank described the initiative as a critical step that could turn Iraq into a regional transportation center.

A Land-Based Alternative to the Suez Canal

The Development Road will offer a land-based alternative to the Suez Canal, providing significant time and cost savings in Asia–Europe trade. Turkish logistics sector representatives estimate that the Basra–Turkey–Europe route could reduce current transit times by up to 15 days compared to existing maritime routes. Given the security risks and time losses in the Red Sea–Suez route, it is projected that the time required for transporting goods from Asia to Europe could decrease from 45 days to around 25. This would create considerable relief in global supply chains. The project not only contributes to Iraq’s reconstruction but also revitalizes regional trade by offering Middle Eastern countries a shorter path to Europe, representing a win–win opportunity.

Strategic Gains for Turkey

Turkey also stands to gain strategically from this project. The Development Road will transform Turkey into a critical logistics center at the crossroads of east–west and north–south trade axes. The new 1,200 km route will make a major contribution to Turkey’s goal of becoming a main artery in trade between the Middle East and Europe. The high-standard double-track railway to be constructed from Basra to the Turkish border will connect to Turkey’s railway network via the Habur/Ovaköy border gate and carry goods to Mediterranean ports like Mersin or İskenderun. In this way, a container originating from the Persian Gulf will be able to reach a Turkish Mediterranean port within a few days—without requiring maritime transport. According to the World Bank’s 2025 financing announcement, once the railway section within Iraq is modernized, the line is expected to transport 6.3 million tons of domestic freight, 1.1 million tons of international freight, and 2.85 million passengers annually. It is also projected to create 21,000 new jobs by 2037.

A "Dry Canal" Connecting the Gulf to the Eastern Mediterranean

The first international coordination meeting for the Development Road Project was held in Istanbul in August 2024 with the participation of Turkey, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. This project, which links the Gulf to the Mediterranean and Europe, is considered a beneficial initiative not only for the partner countries but also for all countries in the region. In conclusion, the Development Road will function as a “dry canal” stretching from the Persian Gulf to Çukurova, transforming the Eastern Mediterranean into one of the key intersections of global trade.

Key Infrastructure Investments on the Path to Becoming a HUB in the Çukurova Region

The Çukurova region is rapidly being reshaped by integrated infrastructure investments that enhance its potential to become a logistics, production, and export center in the Eastern Mediterranean. Among these investments are:

- **Çukurova Regional Airport:** Located between Adana and Mersin and nearing completion, this airport is expected to play a key role in cargo and logistics transportation. Once operational, it will significantly boost air cargo capacity and directly serve Organized Industrial Zones (OIZs), free zones, and agricultural areas.
- **Mersin Port and Container Terminal:** As one of Turkey’s most active ports, Mersin Port continues to strengthen its container handling capacity, digital port management systems, and hinterland connections. Mersin is among the few ports in the Eastern Mediterranean that can simultaneously serve feeder, transit, and mainline vessels.
- **TCDD Yenice Logistics Center:** Located near Tarsus, this logistics base enhances the functionality of both rail and road freight transportation. It connects the Mersin port with Anatolia and serves as a transfer and storage hub.
- **Free Zone and Industrial Zones:** The Mersin Free Zone and the Adana-Mersin OIZs house a diverse range of sectors including food, textiles, chemicals, and automotive sub-industry. These zones benefit from proximity to transportation corridors and form the industrial production base of the region.
- **Çukurova Railway Projects:** Within the framework of the high-speed train and logistics corridor projects connecting Mersin–Adana–Osmaniye–Gaziantep, the region is being equipped with high-capacity rail lines. These projects are designed to integrate the Mediterranean coast with Southeastern Anatolia and Central Anatolia in both freight and passenger transportation.

Together, these investments elevate Çukurova's position in regional and global logistics chains. They support **multimodal transportation** and reduce costs for industrialists and exporters. With its strategic location, robust logistics infrastructure, and energy advantage, Çukurova is advancing step by step toward becoming a competitive HUB.

The Contribution of Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant to the Regional HUB Vision

Located in Mersin, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) is not only an energy investment but also a strategic infrastructure that strengthens the Eastern Mediterranean's claim to become a logistics and industrial HUB.

Once fully operational, Akkuyu NPP will meet approximately **10% of Turkey's electricity needs**. The provision of **high-capacity, uninterrupted, and clean energy** is a vital input for the functioning of logistics infrastructures such as ports, airports, cold storage warehouses, railway operations, and industrial production zones.

In particular, this energy capacity will:

- Provide a **reliable energy source** for Mersin-Tarsus Organized Industrial Zone, Adana Hacı Sabancı OIZ, and Ceyhan Energy Specialized Industrial Zone;
- Ensure that **cold chain logistics**, which are critical for the storage and global shipment of agricultural and food products, can be maintained without interruption;
- Support the region's integration into **green logistics and production chains**;
- Contribute to Çukurova's development as a **carbon-neutral industrial and logistics base**, particularly with the widespread implementation of digital systems and automation in ports and customs;
- Further reinforce the **geopolitical position of the region** as a stable and secure energy node.

From this perspective, Akkuyu NPP should not be evaluated solely as an electricity production facility, but also as one of the **structural drivers of transformation** in Çukurova's economic infrastructure.

Çukurova's Agricultural Strength and Hinterland

Çukurova is not only an industrial and logistical zone, but also one of the most fertile and productive agricultural basins in Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean. The region is characterized by high productivity, strong export capacity, and rich product diversity, particularly in fresh fruits and vegetables.

With the climate advantages of the Mediterranean basin and its fertile alluvial plains, Çukurova:

- Stands out in the production of citrus fruits, vegetables, wheat, corn, and cotton;
- Has infrastructure such as cold storage depots, packaging facilities, and agro-industrial sites that support large-scale export;
- Is positioned at the intersection of **land, sea, and air transport**, ensuring rapid access of agricultural goods to domestic and international markets;
- Plays a central role in Turkey's **agricultural exports**, especially to Europe, the Middle East, and the Turkic Republics.

Moreover, the region's hinterland includes neighboring provinces such as **Hatay, Osmaniye, Kahramanmaraş, Gaziantep, Karaman, and Konya**, all of which are connected to Çukurova by road and rail. This gives Çukurova the logistical capacity to serve as the **agricultural outlet and processing center** of an extended geography.

In this context, with its agricultural production potential, logistics capabilities, and hinterland dominance, Çukurova reinforces its claim to become a **strategic agro-logistics HUB**.

Çukurova's Trade and Industrial Capacity

The Çukurova region is home to one of Turkey's most dynamic industrial and commercial ecosystems. With strong infrastructure, proximity to raw materials, and access to markets, Adana and Mersin together form a high-capacity economic structure.

Key indicators of the region's economic capacity include:

- **Adana and Mersin Chambers of Commerce and Industry**, which represent thousands of active members and serve as the business hubs of the region;
- **Adana Hacı Sabancı OIZ**, one of Turkey's largest organized industrial zones, home to over 400 enterprises;
- **Mersin-Tarsus OIZ**, where sectors such as food, machinery, and plastics are concentrated;
- **Ceyhan Energy Specialized Industrial Zone**, where petrochemical and energy investments are clustered, acting as a strategic junction for raw material processing and export;
- Strong representation of SMEs and exporter companies that are integrated with ports, railway networks, and international markets.

According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) data, the share of Adana and Mersin in Turkey's total exports exceeds **4.5%**. The region also ranks among the top in Turkey in terms of industrial employment, added value, and investment capacity.

Moreover, as an industrial region producing **both agricultural and technological goods**, Çukurova has a **dual economic identity**. With its dynamic commercial structure and logistical integration, it forms a competitive corridor for both domestic and international investors.

Strategic Conclusions and Future Projections

The Çukurova Region, with its ports, railway network, international airport, industrial zones, and agricultural hinterland, is one of Turkey's most strategically located areas. With the support of mega projects such as the **Development Road**, **Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant**, and **Çukurova Regional Airport**, this region is quickly evolving into a **logistics, production, and energy HUB**.

The region's positioning at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia increases its attractiveness not only for Turkish investors but also for international stakeholders. As global trade corridors are being redrawn, the Eastern Mediterranean—particularly the Adana–Mersin axis—offers investors a secure, fast, and cost-effective base.

In the near future:

- **Çukurova will assume a central role** in the Gulf–Europe–Asia trade line;
- With **sustainable and smart logistics infrastructure**, the region will gain a strong position in the global competition;
- **Energy, food, and digital logistics investments** will increase in Çukurova, and employment will rise;
- The region will become an **attraction center** in the Eastern Mediterranean not only for transportation but also for finance, processing, and value-added exports.

In conclusion, **Çukurova** is no longer a region of potential—it is transforming into a **strategic reality**. As the **Rotterdam of the Eastern Mediterranean**, it stands as a candidate for being one of the most important economic hubs of the future.

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Prof.Dr. Murat KOÇ / Çağ University Regional Security Studies Application and Research Center