



TSC INSIGHTS

WILL ELECTIONS SET TÜRKIYE ON A NEW COURSE?

MAY 2023

Among foreign policy watchers, Türkiye's upcoming vote for president and parliament could be the most consequential election of 2023. Türkiye's current leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been president since 2014 and, before that, served as prime minister from 2003 to 2014. In many ways, he has fundamentally reshaped Türkiye's foreign policy, elevating Ankara on the world stage and cultivating a neo-Ottoman approach to world affairs. If Erdoğan wins, foreign policy is likely to follow the status quo. But an Erdoğan victory is no *fait accompli*, especially given the precarious state of the Turkish economy and the challenges responding to the devastating earthquake in early February. If Erdoğan loses to challenger Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, head of the Republican People's Party (CHP), it could fundamentally transform certain aspects of Turkish foreign policy, including Türkiye's relationship with the West.

Executive Summary

The outcome of the May 14 presidential and parliamentary elections will likely center on domestic issues. However, should President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lose the election, a change in leadership could effect significant changes in Türkiye's foreign policy and its relations with Washington. Although Washington might prefer a victory by Erdoğan's main challenger, Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, U.S. officials have worked out productive relations with Erdoğan on several regional and global issues, particularly the war in Ukraine, and there may be concerns about changing pilots mid-flight given these ongoing crises.

Turkish voters will weigh economic factors heavily as they prepare to go to the polls. High inflation, which is partly a function of Erdoğan's unorthodox economic policies,

accounts for his perceived vulnerability after two decades of electoral success. His efforts to lower interest rates in the face of high inflation, causing a sharp drop in the value of Türkiye's currency, have been widely criticized by global economists. Turkish economic policy is likely to be altered significantly if Erdoğan is defeated.

The elections will be unusual in determining not only the new president but also a parliament. Turkish policy might be difficult to predict in the event that one major party candidate wins the presidency and the opposition wins control of the national assembly, producing a divided government. On the other hand, should Erdoğan be re-elected, and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies retain a majority in parliament, Erdoğan's victory might further enhance the powers of the presidency and make future changes difficult.

A loss by Erdoğan is likely to set Türkiye on a new foreign policy course, potentially drawing Ankara closer to Washington and its European allies and away from support for Islamist movements such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. While it's likely that Erdoğan would drop objections to Sweden's accession to NATO if he is returned to office, an electorally successful Kılıçdaroğlu may prove for speedier ratification process.¹ However, Ankara's blanket association of regional Kurdish groups with Turkish opposition Kurdish organizations, and hostile relations with neighboring Greece, are unlikely to change no matter who wins the presidency.

The polls so far may show a close contest², but it would be imprudent to underestimate Erdoğan. He is skillfully using an appeal to nationalism, religion, and political loyalty in Türkiye's key institutions, to offset widespread concerns over the economy and the pace of earthquake recovery. His tenure at the helm proves his ability to skillfully navigate Turkish domestic politics and his ability to position himself as a steady influence, despite regional upheaval.

No Turkish president has ever been voted out of office. Anxiety will remain high surrounding the election results and the question of whether Erdoğan would accept a political defeat or maneuver to cling to power, as some fear.

Overview of the Election Contest

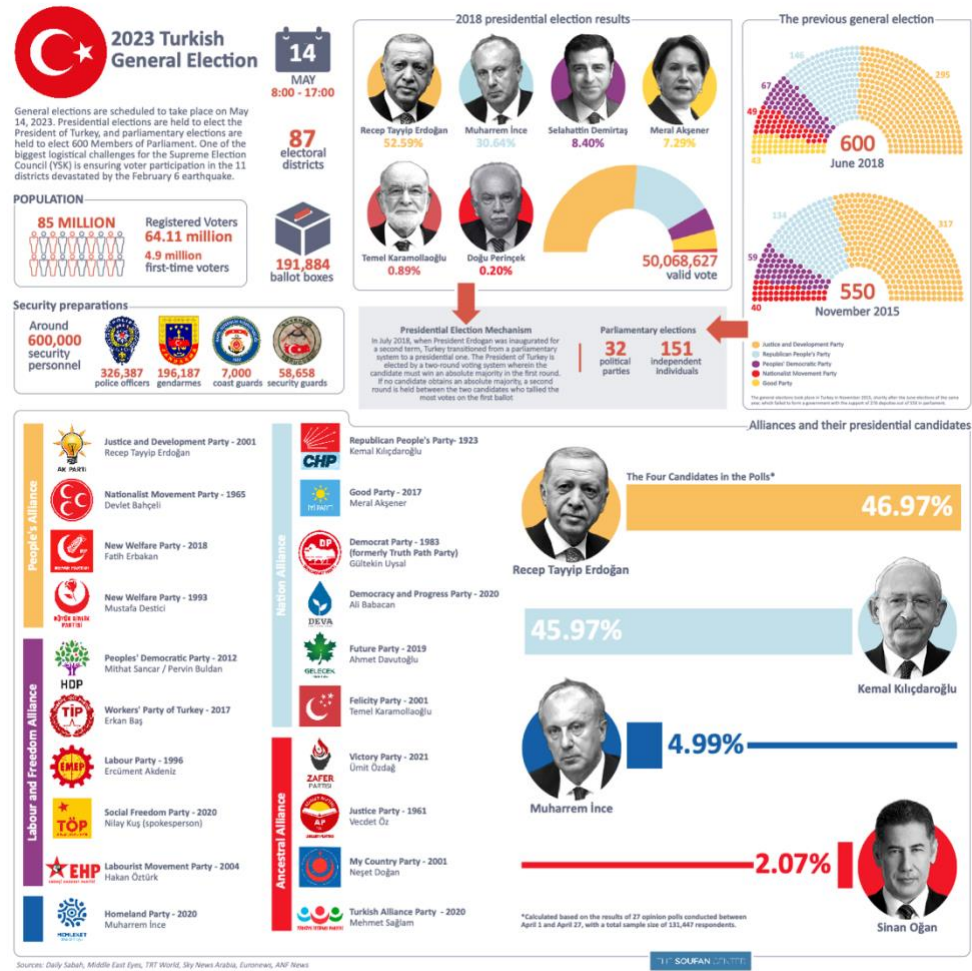
Türkiye's electoral system creates significant uncertainties and difficulties in forecasting the country's post-election policies. On May 14, voters will cast ballots for the president as well as 600 members of Türkiye's Grand National Assembly (parliament). If no presidential candidate can secure at least 50% of the votes, a

¹ Ragıp Soylu, "Sweden's NATO membership hangs in the balance with Turkey's election," Breaking Defense, 25 April 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/04/how-swedens-nato-membership-hangs-in-the-balance-in-a-turkish-election/>.

² "Turkey – 2023 presidential and general election," Politico Poll of Polls, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/#turkey-2023>.

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run-off will be held on 28 May between the top two vote-getters. An estimated 61 million voters will turn out on election day, adding their votes to an estimated 3 million voters abroad that will likely cast their votes during an April 27 – May 9 early and out-of-country voting period.



Since the presidential and parliamentary elections are two separate contests, the election could result in a divided government, in which the majority alliance in the country's parliament is different in party affiliation and ideology from the winner of the presidency. This outcome would place the parliament in a position to obstruct many of the initiatives of the president. All presidential polls show an extremely tight race for president and an uncertain outcome, but experts assess the election as having the highest chance of any thus far of ending Erdoğan's presidency.

There are questions about whether Erdoğan will peacefully yield power to his opponent if he is defeated at the polls because the 2023 election would represent the first time Türkiye would experience a transition from one directly elected

president to another. No Turkish president has ever been directly voted out of office. Some transitions in the past have not been peaceful, involving military coups as recently as 2014. Previously, a president was selected by the elected parliament.

The country's unstable and worsening economic situation appears to have strengthened the hand of Erdoğan's main challenger, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who heads the Republican People's Party (CHP). The CHP was the party of the Turkish state's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, although the party, like Türkiye itself, has undergone numerous iterations since then. Some call Kılıçdaroğlu, a 74-year-old retired civil servant, Türkiye's 'Gandhi,' but others criticize him for lacking political charisma and for obstructing politicians from his own party who were seen as having a better chance of winning. In contrast to past elections, the opposition is highly united around its main candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu, although experts note that the CHP lost every election under his leadership. Additionally, the vote could be affected by two minor candidates: Muharrem İnce, the leader of the right-wing, nationalist Homeland Party, running against Erdoğan for the second time following the last presidential elections in 2018. İnce was a member of the CHP and the candidate of the main opposition at the time and formed Homeland Party (MP) following his resignation from CHP in 2021. Another candidate, Sinan Oğan, nominated by the Ancestral Alliance, was a member of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Now an independent politician, Oğan served as a member of parliament between 2011 and 2015.

Perhaps the most complicated part of the race is the parliamentary elections, in which voters will face a long ballot paper with a list of 32 political parties. Türkiye is divided into 87 multi-member constituencies, which elect a certain number of representatives depending on the size of the population of each constituency. For a party to be represented in parliament, it must exceed the threshold of 7% or belong to a coalition that reaches the 7% threshold. Some cities are traditional strongholds of a particular party regardless of who the candidates are.

Erdoğan's Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the core of a broader People's Alliance that includes three other parties: the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Great Unity Party (BBP), and New Welfare Party (YRP). Kılıçdaroğlu's Republican People's Party (CHP) is the lead party in the Nation Alliance bloc that also includes the Good Party (İYİ), Felicity Party (SP), Future Party (GP), Democrat Party (DP) and Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA). Following a series of major defeats against Erdoğan and the AKP, the CHP victories in stronghold municipalities in the 2019 local elections were the first indicator that Erdoğan's popularity was eroding. Another coalition, the Labour and Freedom Alliance, groups the Green Left Party (YSP) and Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP)³ with YSP candidates

³ Following an official letter submitted to the United Nations by the Republic of Türkiye, the country's official name has been changed to Türkiye at the UN. In this article, the earlier spelling of the country, Turkey, has been retained when it was formerly used as part of a title or name.

from four other parties, including the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which came third in the last elections and currently faces possible closure. Another bloc, the Union of Socialist Forces, brings together Left Party (SOL), Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) and the Communist Movement of Turkey (TKH). The Ancestral Alliance, whose nominated presidential candidate is Ogan, includes the Victory Party (ZP) and Justice Party (AP). Once all the votes have been counted, the D'Hondt method will be used to determine the new MPs; the system aims to allocate seats to parties approximately in proportion to the number of votes received.

Main Domestic Issues at Stake

Politics

As in most democracies, domestic issues are expected to take precedence with Turkish voters, even though Türkiye is located in a volatile and dangerous region. Syria's civil war has led to 3.4 million registered Syrian refugees still living in Türkiye, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.⁴ Across the Black Sea, intense combat is taking place in Ukraine, instigated by the Russian Federation, of which Türkiye has always been wary. In the domestic context, Erdoğan's party and coalition support his moves to enhance the role of Islam in Turkish society and to establish an authoritarian-natured "executive presidency," even though doing so has undermined effective checks and balances. Following a failed military coup against him in 2016, Erdoğan has relied increasingly on repression, including through mass detentions and manipulation of counterterrorism rhetoric to prosecute individuals. He has particularly pursued those associated with the movement of religious leader Fethullah Gülen, who is in exile in the United States, and more broadly clamped down on civil society and media.

The opposition alliance led by Kılıçdaroğlu promises to bring back Türkiye's rule-of-law-based democratic parliamentary system. A Kılıçdaroğlu victory would also likely move Türkiye closer to its roots as a secular republic, downplaying the role of Islam in law and politics. The opposition alliance has listed its election vows under nine main headings: highlighting justice, anti-corruption, and education as some of the top priorities. It has also pledged to send Syrian refugees back to their country within two years on a voluntary basis. This has however also raised concerns among global humanitarian actors that such a push would further strain the already-stretched ability of relief organizations to help the Syrian people amidst an unresolved political stalemate where prospects for violence remain.

⁴ "Operational Data Portal: Syrian Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR, 19 April 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

Economics

Türkiye's economy will be no less a factor in the election than the contrasting domestic political structure offered by Erdoğan and his main challenger. Erdoğan's unorthodox economic policies - intended to try to reduce living costs for the middle and lower classes, who are at the core of his political base - have fueled unrestrained and unsustainable inflation rates and caused the value of the country's currency, the *lira*, to largely collapse. Many experts attribute the inflation surge, which rose above 85% in 2022, as a key factor in causing Erdoğan's perceived electoral vulnerability. On the other hand, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Türkiye's gross domestic product (GDP) will grow 2.7% this year - not robust, but far from recession.⁵ The government had forecast growth of 5% before the massive earthquakes in February that will reduce economic growth by more than 2% in 2023.⁶

Close observers assess that the rampant inflation and the collapse of the *lira* are "unforced errors" of Erdoğan's own making. During 2020-2021, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, he repeatedly pressured the nominally independent central bank to lower its key interest rate, despite inflation that at that time was a high but perhaps still manageable 20 percent. Erdoğan argued that high interest rates caused inflation⁷ – the exact opposite of conventional economic thinking. December 2021, he replaced the country's finance minister with Nureddin Nebati, the third finance minister in a one-year period, who was able to push back somewhat on Erdoğan's insistence on further lowering interest rates. Kilicdarolu's Nation Alliance is promising to reduce inflation to single figures in two years and increase the national income per capita fivefold, although doing so would probably require a dramatic rise in interest rates that would make borrowing nearly impossible for many Turks.

Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief

The government's response to the February 6, 2023 earthquakes that hit southeastern Türkiye and northwestern Syria could weigh on voters as well. The quake damage and its after-effects killed more than 48,000 people in Türkiye and directly affected the living situations of millions. According to an assessment

⁵ "Republic of Türkiye," International Monetary Fund, April 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/TUR>.

⁶ Nevzat Dvaranoglu, "Earthquake could cost Turkey up to \$84 billion – business group," Reuters, 13 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/earthquake-could-cost-turkey-up-84-bln-business-group-2023-02-13/>. and M. Murat Kubilay, "Turkey's crisis management playbook: Donations, reconstruction, and inflation with an eye on elections," Middle East Institute, 3 March 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-crisis-management-playbook-donations-reconstruction-and-inflation-eye>.

⁷ The Economist, "Is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's monetary policy as mad as it seems?" The Economist, 27 January 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/01/27/is-recep-tayyip-erdogans-monetary-policy-as-mad-as-it-seems>.

prepared by Türkiye's Strategy and Budget Office, 3.3 million Turks were displaced, of which 2 million needed to be sheltered in tents or container camps.⁸ Potentially working against Erdoğan politically, some media accounts alleged that, in the years before the earthquake, government officials and contractors prioritized economic benefits over adherence to construction codes, at least partly contributing to the scope of damage and fatalities.⁹ Erdoğan acknowledged deficiencies in the government's initial response, although he sought to deflect blame by citing the size of the natural disaster. The government ordered prosecutors to create "earthquake crimes investigation units" to consider criminal violations for substandard work, and pledged accelerated efforts to rebuild homes for those who lost theirs.¹⁰

Influence of geopolitics on voters

Although geopolitics and foreign policy might not be front and center in the minds of Turkish voters, Türkiye's position in the global competition among great powers, and its role in the region, might undergo significant change if Erdoğan is voted out. There is a widespread view among experts that U.S. and European officials would prefer that Erdoğan not be returned to power, although some of his policies have, to an extent, advanced Western objectives and European security.¹¹ Erdoğan's engagement with President Vladimir Putin - particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine - has earned significant criticism and added to pre-existing strains resulting from Türkiye's 2017 purchase from Russia of the sophisticated S-400 missile defense system. After refusing U.S. insistence not to proceed with the order, Türkiye was subjected to U.S. sanctions in December 2020 under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) that penalizes defense cooperation with the Russian Federation. Among the penalties imposed, Türkiye was removed from the global F-35 Joint Strike Fighter partnership.¹²

⁸ Government of Türkiye, "Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment," 27 March 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/Türkiye/Türkiye-earthquakes-recovery-and-reconstruction-assessment>.

⁹ Zynep Bilginsoy and Suzan Fraser, "Turkey's lax policing of building codes known before quake," AP News, 10 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-2023-turkey-syria-earthquake-government-istanbul-fbd6af578a6056569879b5ef6c55d322>.

¹⁰ Ben Hubbard, "Anger Over Quake Response Challenges Erdoğan Ahead of Election," New York Times, 11 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/11/world/europe/earthquake-turkey-Erdoğan-election.html>.

¹¹ David Hearst, "Turkey elections: Would Kılıçdaroğlu Surrender Ankara's Independence?" Middle East Eye, 21 April 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-elections-would-Kılıçdaroğlu-surrender-ankara-independence>.

¹² "IntelBrief: Ukraine War Erodes Russian Arms Sales," The Soufan Center, 15 March 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-march-15/>.

Since the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Erdoğan has advanced himself as a mediator to try to end the conflict, in the process causing some U.S. and European officials to view him as downplaying Western concerns about the threat Putin poses not only to Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity but to European security more broadly. On the other hand, his diplomacy did help to produce Moscow's acquiescence on a resumption of Ukrainian grain exports in mid-2022 – a key factor in limiting food scarcity and inflation in Africa and other regions.¹³ Erdoğan has approved the export to Ukraine of Türkiye's effective Bayraktar (TB-2) armed drone, which Ukrainian forces have employed to a significant effect on the battlefield.

Kılıçdaroğlu has sought a contrast with Erdoğan by portraying himself as a reliable ally of the West - pointedly visiting Washington, the United Kingdom, and Germany during his campaign and promising visa-free travel in Europe within three months of taking office. Unal Cevikoz, a retired ambassador and chief adviser on foreign affairs to Kılıçdaroğlu, told journalists that a Kılıçdaroğlu government would be determined to normalize its relations with the international community, the European Union, and NATO, as well as base its foreign policy, in general, on "non-intervention of domestic affairs of neighbors, impartial foreign policy and adherence to international norms." At the same time, Türkiye's strategic concerns about Russia's intent and capabilities, as a major Black Sea power, have long constrained Türkiye's options. It is highly unlikely that Kılıçdaroğlu would seek to - or could - completely shun Putin or strictly enforce Western sanctions against Russia.

Presumably, Kılıçdaroğlu might align with Washington's views that Türkiye not purchase more sophisticated Russian weaponry, and he could seek to try to return Türkiye to the U.S. F-35 program. Viewing Kılıçdaroğlu as a more reliable partner than Erdoğan, members of the U.S. Congress might turn from opposition to support for the \$20 billion sale of U.S.-made F-16s, which Ankara requested in 2021. In January 2023, U.S. officials notified Congress of an intent to proceed with the sale. U.S. and European leaders expect that a Kılıçdaroğlu government would drop Türkiye's opposition to the accession of Sweden to NATO; Erdoğan relented to Finland's membership but has continued to demand that Sweden expel anti-Türkiye Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) opposition figures as a condition of supporting Stockholm's membership. Although this opposition may not continue long should Erdoğan win, it is even more likely to drop under Kılıçdaroğlu. Longstanding tensions with neighboring Greece have deep roots in both Türkiye and Greece and are unlikely to calm no matter who wins either the Turkish or the Greek snap legislative elections that will follow closely thereafter on May 21. Kılıçdaroğlu's

¹³ "Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre," United Nations, accessed 4 May 2023, https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative?gclid=Cj0KCQjwr82iBhCuARIsAO0EAZzEDB_Zxilyh0-OZKuQAZJzqdCblwdnsr6_bSA4391f0q9nu235yTQaAnOdEALw_wcB.

campaign has taken a hard line against the European Union's position that favors Greece's position on the control of a number of islands in the Aegean.

Wild Card in the Election: Policies in Türkiye's "Near Abroad"

To date, Erdoğan has sought to portray himself as a deft steward of Türkiye's response to the many conflicts, trends, and threats roiling the region during his tenure. Kılıçdaroğlu and other opponents have painted Erdoğan's regional policies as weak and ineffective, but it remains unclear how significant any regional policy change would be, if at all, if Kılıçdaroğlu is elected. Some of Erdoğan's policies, such as providing the TB-2 armed drone to close ally Azerbaijan against historic Turkish adversary, Armenia, have had broad domestic support and stirred pride in Türkiye.¹⁴ The drone supplies were key to Baku's late 2020 offensive that regained territory lost to Yerevan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ Ankara also has intervened on behalf of a U.N.-backed government in Tripoli, Libya, against threats by Russia and UAE-backed anti-Islamist warlord Khalifa Haftar, whose Libyan National Army base is eastern Libya. Supplies of the TB-2, as well as the deployment of military advisors, were decisive in helping Tripoli turn back a 2019 attempt by Haftar to seize Tripoli and gain control over all of Libya.

The victories of Türkiye's allies in these battles helped preserve Türkiye's national security interests and demonstrate its considerable strategic capabilities and it would be difficult for Kılıçdaroğlu, if elected, to change these policies significantly. Successive U.S. administrations have thanked Türkiye for its help in securing Kabul during 2001-2021, although that deployment ultimately could not help prevent the Taliban's takeover of the country in August 2021, after the chaotic U.S. departure from the country which left the Taliban in power. On the other hand, some of Erdoğan's policies, particularly his hard line against Syrian and some Iraqi Kurdish groups, have put him at odds with NATO-leader Washington, likely causing concern among some Turkish voters who are attracted to Kılıçdaroğlu's more pro-Western message.

The Gulf states: Erdoğan's regional policy over the past two years has focused on exchanging visits and mending relations with several of the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Egypt. Leaders in these states had shunned Erdoğan for years because of his support for the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011 and the Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood,

¹⁴ Umar Farooq, "The Drone Problem': How the U.S. Has Struggled to Curb Turkey, a Key Exporter of Armed Drones," ProPublica, 21 July 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/bayraktar-tb2-drone-turkey-exports>.

¹⁵ "IntelBrief: 'Frozen Conflict' between Armenia and Azerbaijan Heats Up Over Nagorno-Karabakh," The Soufan Center, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-frozen-conflict-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-heats-up-over-nagorno-karabakh/>.

that were empowered by the rebellions. Some voters might view Erdoğan's estrangement from several wealthy Gulf states as having deprived Türkiye of the investment and cash infusions that the Gulf states tend to provide to regional allies that support their policies. Saudi Arabia and the UAE even went so far as pressuring their Gulf neighbor, Qatar, to close Turkish bases in Qatar. That demand, among others, was dropped when the intra-Gulf rift – in which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt broke relations and broadly boycotted Doha - was largely resolved in January 2021.

Yet, even though he might be perceived as more closely aligned with the policies of the Gulf states than is Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu's policies, particularly toward Saudi Arabia, might not necessarily differ from Erdoğan's. In mid-2022, before becoming the presidential candidate of a unified opposition, Kılıçdaroğlu pledged to hold Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) accountable for the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Following the June 2022 MbS visit to Türkiye to rebuild relations with Erdoğan and Türkiye, Kılıçdaroğlu told Turkish media: "Our account with [MbS] has not been closed either. He may be playing Erdoğan on his finger, but Türkiye is a great state, he will be made to pay for what he has done in our land."¹⁶

Israel: There is no significant prospect that an Erdoğan loss would restore the strategic relationship that Türkiye and Israel exhibited during the 1990s, which included permission for Israel's air force to use Turkish air space to train. The relationship presented the potential for an Israel-Türkiye alliance directed primarily against Iran. However, Israel-Türkiye relations soured after Erdoğan's Islamist-leaning AKP took power twenty years ago, largely because of Erdoğan's support for the Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas, which capitalized on broad disillusionment with the Palestinian Authority and won an election, taking control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. Tel Aviv considers Hamas a pro-Iranian adversary and terrorist organization. Relations between Tel Aviv and Ankara deteriorated sharply in 2010 when Israeli forces attacked a Turkish civilian flotilla (Mavi Marmara) headed for the Gaza Strip, seen by many as a demonstration of support for the Palestinian people living under the tremendously difficult conditions of the Israeli blockade of Gaza, but also seen by many and particularly Tel Aviv as an expression of support for Hamas. Nine Turkish activists in the flotilla were killed in the incident. Erdoğan has sought to rebuild relations with Israel over the past few years, but his Islamist orientation and overall policy directions place limits on relations with the government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Yet, Kılıçdaroğlu's past statements have referenced the Mavi Marmara incident as well, suggesting that a CHP government would not seek to revive a close partnership with Israel. He said

¹⁶ Ragıp Soylu, "Turkey's opposition promises to target Israel, Saudi Arabia and Greece," Middle East Eye, 27 June 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkeys-opposition-promises-go-after-israel-saudi-arabia-and-greece>.

in June 2022: "There is a price for martyring our citizens in international waters...My message to Israel is that this issue is not closed to us."¹⁷

Iran: Several experts on Turkish foreign policy have argued that Ankara and Tehran are able to keep their various disputes within limits and well short of erupting into armed conflict between them. However, Ankara's support for Azerbaijan has aggravated tensions with Iranian leaders, who are increasingly wary of Azerbaijan's intent and capabilities, both of which are fueled by Baku's close relations with Tehran's main regional adversary, Israel. Kılıçdaroğlu's generally more pro-Western orientation could align his approach toward Iran more closely with that of Washington and the European Union – both of which have hardened policy over the past year in response to Iran's repression of a women-led uprising and its supplies of armed drones to Russia. Still, Iran is a rising regional power, and Kılıçdaroğlu's Iran policy options might reflect much change from those pursued by Erdoğan.

Syria/Regional Kurds: Along Türkiye's borders with Syria and with Iraq, Erdoğan's foreign policy record is mixed. However, it is not clear that Erdoğan had expansive options available to him, or that Kılıçdaroğlu, if elected, would have much latitude to depart dramatically from Erdoğan's policy. Ethnic Turkish voters tend to favor a hardline against any Kurdish groups that espouse or tolerate violence against the Turkish state, whether those Kurdish groups are in Türkiye or over the border in Syria or Iraq.¹⁸ In Syria, Erdoğan's government tried to promote the overthrow of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad when the Syria rebellion erupted in 2011, but Iran and Russia intervened from 2013-15 to keep Assad in power. Turkish policy has steered clear of directly battling Russia over Assad's fate, particularly as it became clear that Assad would restore control over much of the country, and Türkiye has acquiesced to some level of reconciliation with Damascus.

In the hopes of staving off a further refugee crisis, Ankara continues to support rebels in northern Syria, including Islamist groups formerly aligned with al-Qaeda, who are now confined largely to the northwest province of Idlib. Erdoğan also has threatened to seize additional territory along the border to secure a buffer zone against Syrian Kurdish groups there. In so doing, Erdoğan has strained relations with the United States, which is partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia against remaining elements of the Islamic State organization. Türkiye asserts, contrary to the U.S. position, that the SDF's core element, the People's Protection Units (YPG), is an offshoot of the Türkiye-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist group by both Washington and Ankara. The November 13, 2022 bombing in Istanbul, which Ankara blamed on the YPG and

¹⁷ Soylu, "Turkey's opposition promises to target Israel, Saudi Arabia and Greece."

¹⁸ Sadiq Basha, "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate Speech: Online Discourse in the Aftermath of the Istanbul Bombing," *European Eye on Radicalization*, 30 March 2023, <https://eeradicalization.com/misinformation-disinformation-and-hate-speech-online-discourse-in-the-aftermath-of-the-istanbul-bombing/#>.

which killed six persons, was the deadliest terror attack in Türkiye in more than five years and likely further hardened Turkish voters against the PKK and its fellow Kurds in the region. Following that attack and Türkiye's retaliatory air strikes in Syria, U.S. officials sought to express understanding for Ankara's concerns. The Pentagon stated: "As [the United States calls] for de-escalation, we recognize Türkiye's legitimate security concerns. We will continue to discuss with Türkiye and our local partners maintaining ceasefire arrangements."¹⁹ The issue remains an enduring one. Turkish authorities carried out raids in late April in Diyarbakir that rounded up dozens of Kurds accused of supporting the PKK.

In further contrast with U.S. leaders, Ankara also claims that the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq is failing to deny safe haven to PKK forces that conduct attacks over the border into Türkiye. Turkish forces frequently shell what they claim are PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdish-controlled territory, earning criticism from the United States, whose 2500 military personnel are helping preserve stability not only throughout Iraq but in the Kurdish territory of the north. However, another potential flashpoint between Washington and Ankara over Kurdish issues came in early April; Western officials pointed the finger at Türkiye for mounting a drone strike on a convoy targeting the Syrian Kurdish leader General Mazloum Abdi, commander of the SDF, near Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, during his visit there to meet with Iraqi Kurdish leaders. Three U.S. bodyguards were in the convoy. Türkiye denied responsibility for the strike. In contrast to Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu, if elected, might try to accommodate Washington's concerns about Iraq and potentially reduce the tempo of Turkish cross-border military operations against PKK bases in northern Iraq.

Conclusions

The outcome of the May 14 presidential and parliamentary elections will be momentous for Türkiye and the broader region. Turkish voters will weigh economic factors heavily when they go to the polls, and high inflation accounts for Erdoğan's perceived vulnerability after two decades of electoral success. The elections will be to seat not only a president but also the parliament. The polls may show a close contest between Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and that of his rival, Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Yet, it would be imprudent to underestimate Erdoğan, who is skillfully using an appeal to nationalism, religion, and political

¹⁹ United States Department of Defense, "DOD Statement on Escalating Actions in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey," 23 November 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3227725/dod-statement-on-escalating-actions-in-iraq-syria-and-turkey/>.

loyalty in Türkiye's key institutions to offset widespread concerns over the economy and the pace of earthquake recovery.

Political loyalty, religion, regional identity, and nationalism might prove compelling in influencing voters. Many support Erdoğan's "neo-Ottoman" geopolitical vision and believe he is returning Türkiye to its rightful place on the world stage, as a leading power that commands broad respect and demonstrates leadership throughout the region.²⁰ Compared to two decades ago, Türkiye is far more prominent globally, often throwing around its weight in regional forums and delicately balancing East and West. For many Turks, Erdoğan has made the country relevant again in foreign policy, and the success of Türkiye's drone industry is also a source of pride.

Regional issues will indeed be important in determining who prevails in the election, along with the economy and how voters feel the Erdogan government performed with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, following the earthquakes. But even with the economy, it is important to realize that entrenched economic elites connected to Erdoğan will continue to support him, even if they don't particularly support him personally. Over his long tenure, Erdoğan has used the patronage system to his benefit, cultivating close connections in powerful Turkish institutions including the judiciary, media, and the military. So while the economy may be sputtering, Erdoğan will still get credit from the new economic class he helped create, particularly through the economic wheel of crony capitalism.

Erdoğan is skillfully using religion to walk a fine line with Türkiye's Kurdish population, a demographic that will be critical to the outcome of the election. Kılıçdaroğlu's recent statement about being a member of Türkiye's Alevi religious minority, could cause a stir among some voters. As such, Erdoğan is attempting to appeal to some voters along conservative religious lines, including attempting to win the hearts and minds of segments of the Kurdish population, while also taking advantage of his strategic relationship with the Barzani clan, a politically powerful Kurdish family that controls Iraq's Kurdistan region.

Lastly, it is important to remember that no Turkish president has ever been voted out of office. Anxiety will remain high surrounding the election results and whether, if he does lose at the polls, Erdoğan decides to accept legitimate political defeat or maneuver to cling to power.

²⁰ Jajati K. Pattnaik, and Chandan K. Panda. "Interrogating Erdoğan's Neo-Ottoman Geopolitical Imagination," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 8, Iss. 3 (December 2022): 347, DOI:10.47305/JLIA2283338p. and "IntelBrief: Erdoğan Positioning Turkey as the Center of the Muslim World," The Soufan Center, 16 October 2018, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-erdogan-positioning-turkey-as-the-center-of-the-muslim-world/>.



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