



**Dimensions**  
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**Analytical Report**



# The Possible Impact of the Presidential Election on Turkish Foreign Policy

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## PREAMBLE

Turkey is set to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14, 2023. Both the government and the opposition attach great importance to these elections, which coincide with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic; and are therefore historic and crucial for both parties.

Over the past years, the foreign policy of the ruling public coalition led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been criticized by the main opposition parties, which leads to the belief that the election results will have an impact on Turkey's dealings with foreign files and foreign military influence, in the event that a new president wins the electoral race, or the opposition obtains a large majority in parliament, for example, allowing it to intervene more broadly in shaping foreign policy.

As the Political system in Turkey is presidential rather than parliamentary, this study has focused on the presidential elections. Two scenarios have been reviewed: - R. T. Erdogan or Kamal Kılıçdaroğlu winning, as the two have the best chances among other candidates.

## SCENARIO 1: THE IMPACT OF ERDOĞAN'S VICTORY ON FOREIGN POLICY

After President Erdoğan's victory, Turkey's foreign policy analysis is based on current policies; a radical reversal in foreign policy is not expected, even if some modifications on these policies are made.

Turkey's foreign policy with Erdoğan's victory is expected to be as follows:

### 1. Refugees

Erdoğan's refugee policy is unlikely to change dramatically. Turkey has for years retreated from its open-door policy towards refugees coming to Turkey, especially Syrians. In this regard, Turkey has implemented two strategies:

#### THE FIRST STRATEGY:

is to limit potential waves of migration from Syria to Turkey and to show great restraint in receiving Afghan refugees<sup>1</sup>.

In the framework of reducing migration waves, Turkey has worked on containing potential waves of migration from Syria specifically within the Syrian borders through a military operation and the construction of a de facto "safe zone" in northern Syria, in addition to entering the "Astana" track and the "Sochi" talks, and reaching understandings with countries supporting the Syrian regime, through which Turkey ensured the reduction of escalation to very low levels in north-western Syria to stop the mass fleeing of the local population towards the Turkish border.

#### THE SECOND STRATEGY:

is to seek to open talks with the Syrian regime, with the aim of facilitating the return of a part of the Syrian refugees to their country, taking into consideration that the Syrians represent the largest mass of refugees on Turkish territory<sup>2</sup>.

(1) Dışişleri Bakanı Çavuşoğlu'ndan AB'ye: "Biraz para vereyim Türkiye mültecileri tutsun" anlayışı işlemez, t2 ,24 Eylül 2021

<https://bit.ly/3LUaPSP>

(2) Erdoğan-Esad görüşecek mi? İbrahim Kalın'dan açıklama, sozcu,03 Ocak 2023:

<https://bit.ly/44tBgpf>

Despite the aforementioned strategies, the return of refugees to areas under the control of the Syrian regime is not expected, as the majority fled from its practices in the first place; and of course Turkey will not resort to forced return of refugees because of its commitment to the standards of international law. Therefore, if Erdogan's government wins, it can take several steps to consolidate its policy of encouraging the return of refugees to their country:

- **The first step:** Providing incentives for refugees to return to Syria, especially the areas under the control of the Syrian opposition factions under the supervision of Turkey, whether through the provision of housing or employment opportunities. In this regard, the Turkish efforts to establish residential communities in north-western Syria, which increases the absorptive capacity of the population in the region <sup>3</sup>.
- **The second step:** To carry out new operations in northern Syria, expand the safe areas, provide humanitarian support and assistance, and create an investment environment for projects in the safe areas <sup>4</sup>.

In conclusion, Erdogan's government will take a balanced approach to the issue of refugees, and will maintain the action plan aimed at reducing waves of migration towards Turkey, and facilitate the voluntary and safe return of segments of refugees, especially those that can cause future economic and security threats on Turkish territory, as Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party will run a subsequent election round a year after the upcoming presidential elections, to compete for local administration. They will; therefore, aim at restoring the municipalities of major cities, especially Istanbul and Ankara, and thus realize the importance of cutting the way for right-wing parties to invest in the file of migration and refugees to increase their popular balance. At the same time; however, Erdogan's government will not go to exert pressure or impose a forced return that threatens the lives and security of refugees.

(3) Yeni umut: Bir Yaşam Evi, İhh, 10 Şubat 2021:  
<https://bit.ly/418XXMw>

(4) Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Gerekirse güvenli bölge sahamızı genişleteceğiz, AA, 30 Ekim 2019:  
<https://bit.ly/3LzIP6w>

## 2. Relationship with the Syrian regime

The current Turkish government has moved to improve the level of relations with the Syrian regime, and held a high-level meeting with it in December 2022, which included defence ministers and heads of intelligence, in addition to holding quadripartite technical talks with the participation of the deputy foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime, with the aim of preparing the ground for the meeting of foreign ministers, and then a summit between Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad if conditions matured.

It is true that the new path entered by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government with the Syrian regime is useful in terms of election calculations, as it contributed to the removal of an important paper from the hand of the Turkish opposition, which has long promoted its ability to communicate with the Syrian regime with the aim of solving the problem of Syrian refugees, but Erdogan will not probably mind resuming the path even after his success in the elections, if there is a chance to achieve certain gains.

**Factors that will influence the development and progress of this route are:**

- **The first factor:** The response of the Syrian regime and its supporters to Turkish interests, the first of which is to stop demanding the immediate withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria without implementing any political solution that guarantees stability, in addition to showing the Assad regime's seriousness in combating the PKK, facilitating the return of Syrian refugees, and accepting a political path with the Syrian regime<sup>5</sup>.
- **The second factor:** The shape of the relationship between the United States of America and the Erdogan government, in the event that America continues to ignore Turkish interests,

(5) Erdoğan-Esad görüşecek mi? İbrahim Kalın'dan açıklama, sozcu,03 Ocak 2023:  
<https://bit.ly/44tBgpF>

such as continuing to support the protection units – the Syrian arm of the PKK – in addition to maintaining sanctions on the Turkish defence industries and not facilitating the arms deals needed by the Turkish Air Force, it is expected that Ankara will maintain its approach to developing its relations with Russia within the framework of the balance of foreign relations. Therefore, we may see progress in the Turkish relationship with the Syrian regime as a kind of strengthening the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, and finding a political alliance that puts pressure on America in Syria, and helps undermine the PKK project in Syria.

In general, even if the course of developing relations between Turkey and the Syrian regime continues, it is not expected that Turkey will abandon its interests and vision for a solution in Syria in full, and will work to maintain a good relationship with the Syrian opposition and constantly seek to integrate it with the final solution, and it is expected that the Syrian regime will actually reduce the hardening it is currently showing towards Turkey in order to improve relations with it, as it is currently counting on variables after the elections and the arrival of a new Turkish administration that is more positive towards it, but in the event of a victory, Erdogan will be forced to deal more realistically.

### 3. Turkish presence in Syria and military operations outside the borders

It is expected that, if Erdogan wins, he will continue the approach of using military force to confront threats outside Turkish borders, especially as all the parties allied with the Justice and Development Movement represented by the Nationalist Movement, the Welfare Parties again, and the Grand Union support military operations to combat terrorist organizations outside Turkey.

Moreover, the anti-terrorism policy currently pursued by the Turkish government has achieved a popular backing that it will likely seek to preserve and increase.

Erdogan will maintain, and may even increase, the presence of Turkish forces in Libya, seeking to defend Turkey's economic interests and embody the Blue Homeland theory of the desire to expand Turkey's influence in its vital water sphere<sup>6</sup>.

### 4. Relationship with the Syrian regime

Many of the steps taken by Turkey under the current AKP government, whether military operations or keenness to develop defence industries, showed a balanced policy that does not depend entirely on the West, and in this context, Turkey's rapprochement with influential international non-Western actors such as Russia and China, Ankara bought the Russian air defence system "S-400".

It is expected that Erdogan will continue to pursue a balanced policy between the West and the East, working to avoid significant tension in Turkish-Western relations, while trying to take advantage of the rising Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East to achieve the greatest possible gains.

(6) Libya tezkeresi neden önemli? Libya'ya Türk askeri gitmezse, yeniakit, 30 Aralık: <https://bit.ly/3LY5PMt>



With regard to the relationship with European countries, it is expected that the relationship between tension and attraction will continue, as a result of the dispute over the agreement to send refugees to Europe, and Turkey's membership in the European Union, in addition to Turkey's differences with Greece on the demarcation of maritime borders and disputed islands, which cast a shadow in one way or another on Turkey's relationship with the Europeans, and Europe will continue to be indignant at the balanced Turkish policy between it and Russia in light of the high level of tension between Europe and Russia.

The above does not mean that Erdogan will break with Europe if he wins, but there will be keenness to continue the balance in relations. This balance has transpired during the Russian conflict with Europe after the invasion of Ukraine, where Turkey avoided engaging in the conflict directly and played the role of mediation, but agreed to join Finland close to the borders of Russia to NATO<sup>7</sup>.

## 5. Arab countries

With Erdogan's election victory, Turkish foreign policy is expected to fully return to what it was in 2002-2010, and the current Turkish government has already begun to take practical steps ahead of the elections, developing its relations with Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

If Erdogan wins the election, it is believed that he will accelerate the momentum that this policy has recently gained with Arab countries. Another factor that enhances this possibility is the normalization processes between the different countries in the region, such as the normalization between the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia with Iran, and between the UAE and Bahrain with the Syrian regime, and the talk about the return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League, which is a motive for Turkey to take advantage of this stage.

In sum, if Erdogan wins the election, he is not expected to enter into a power struggle and compete with Arab states again.

(7) Finlandiya'nın Nato'ya katılım protokolüne ilişkin teklif Tbm genel kurulunda kabul edildi, TBMM, 31 MART 2023: <https://bit.ly/3LEtuAx>

## 6. Organization of Turkish States

Arguably, if Erdogan wins the election, cooperation with the Organization of Turkish States will increase, which is a strategic goal for the People's Alliance.

On the other hand, the Organization of Turkish States shows positive feelings towards Erdogan, as members of the Organization of Turkish States during the extraordinary summit in March 2023 made statements in support of President Erdogan.

Therefore, Turkish foreign policy after Erdogan's victory will focus on attaching importance to upgrading the relationship with the Organization of Turkish States, especially after the success achieved in Azerbaijan, given the important interests these countries provide to Turkey specifically in terms of enhancing energy security, diversifying Turkey's options in this field and not relying entirely on Iran and Russia<sup>8</sup>.

(8) Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türk devletleri Avrupa'nın enerji güvenliğinde anahtar konuma geldi, DHA, 16 Mart 2023: <https://bit.ly/3HHielr>

## SCENARIO 2: THE OPPOSITION'S VICTORY AFFECTS TURKISH POLITICS

The opposition could win the May 14, 2023 election, in three different candidates. The first is Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance, the second is Muharrem İnce, and the third is Sinan Öğan, the candidate of the Good Alliance. However; the total number of votes that İnce and Ögancan get is almost 10% of the votes, which makes Kılıçdaroğlu the favorite among the rest of the opposition candidates, considering that the Republican People's Party he leads the largest opposition bloc represented by the six-party table, so this scenario will focus on the possibility of Kılıçdaroğlu winning alone.

It is difficult to predict what kind of foreign policy Kılıçdaroğlu will pursue if he wins, given that he has six parties in the Six-Party Alliance, and that he has the support of a seventh party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, all of which have differing perceptions of domestic and foreign policies.

Although the Nation Alliance has issued a declaration on the foreign policy that it will follow if he wins, there are no guarantees that he will abide by it and not return to the politics of the Republican People's Party after its leader Kılıçdar won the presidency, under a presidential rather than parliamentary system that gives the president great powers.

### 1. Refugees

There is a declared refugee policy for the Nation Alliance led by the Republican People's Party, which states their intention after winning the presidency to conclude readmission agreements with the countries of origin of immigration, increase the number of deportation centres, prevent the heavy and uncontrolled presence of refugees in neighbourhoods,

districts and governorates, and emphasize the return of Syrian refugees to their country within two years< However; there is no clear definition of the executive mechanisms to implement this policy, so it can be concluded that it is incomplete, uncomprehensive, or unrealistic and is only to attract the votes of those who object to their country's reception of refugees<sup>9</sup>.

However, it can be said that Kılıçdaroğlu will be tougher on refugees than Erdoğan, but this will not prevent him from renegotiating with the European Union the renewal of the refugee readmission agreement signed between Ankara and Brussels in 2016, if he finds that this approach will strengthen his relationship with Europe and achieve financial revenue. He might even try to convince Europe to work on improving the standard of living inside Syria and develop policies that encourage the return of refugees.

## 2. Syrian regime

Based on the text of the common policies and Kılıçdaroğlu's statements, it can be said that Kılıçdaroğlu wants to contact the Assad regime directly. Although many experts believe that the establishment of relations with the regime is the foreign policy consensus reached by the six-party table, the Future Party, and therefore Ahmet Davutoglu, is not for this view, Davutoglu seeks to see Syria without the present Syrian regime, and therefore if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is handed over to Davutoglu and his team, Turkish foreign policy may reach a dead end on the subject of the Syrian issue, because President Kılıçdaroğlu will want to establish relations with the regime, but the Turkish Foreign Ministry led by Davutoglu will not respond to this policy.

Also, Kılıçdaroğlu has recently repeatedly attacked Erdogan for Russia's killing of Turkish soldiers in Idlib province in 2020, which reinforces the hypothesis of Kılıçdar's desire for rapprochement with the United States of America more if he wins, and thus his commitment to the American vision towards the Syrian file, as Washington does not encourage to this day to normalize relations with the Syrian regime.

(9) Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türk devletleri Avrupa'nın enerji güvenliğinde anahtar konuma geldi,DHA,16 Mart 2023:  
<https://bit.ly/3HHielr>

### 3. Turkish presence in Syria and military operations outside the borders

It is very likely that Kılıçdaroğlu will shape foreign policy on the principle of "peace at home". "Peace in the World" by Atatürk.

The CHP previously voted in parliament in 2021 against extending the Turkish military's mission in Iraq and Syria, so Kılıçdaroğlu could be reluctant to carry out new military operations in Syria and Iraq<sup>10</sup>.

What testifies to this is the existence of several important names in the Republican People's Party (CHP), such as Szekin Tanri Kolo, who oppose military operations by the Turkish armed forces outside the borders. In addition, the unofficial partner of the six-party table, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which has not nominated a presidential candidate and supports Kılıçdaroğlu, is also opposed to military interventions by the Turkish army, and the possible rapprochement of the Turkish opposition, if it succeeds in the elections with the United States of America, will prompt it to respond to the demand to stop military operations against the PKK in Iraq and Syria.

Although new military operations may be halted, Kılıçdaroğlu is unlikely to make a rapid and complete withdrawal from Syria, Iraq and Libya because of the presence of high nationalist parties within the alliance of the nation, such as the Good Party, in addition to the lack of support for the Turkish bureaucratic institutions in the Foreign Ministry, Intelligence and the Ministry of Defense for a complete and rapid withdrawal. There is also the possibility of the leaders of the six table parties assuming bureaucratic tasks within the Turkish institutions.

(10) Tezkereye 'hayır' oyu veren CHP'ye bölgeden destek: CHP, Kürtlerle olan mesafesini kısalttı, 27 Ekim 2021: <https://shorturl.at/joLNY>

## 4. West (Europe and America)

The six-party table and Kılıçdaroğlu want to restore relations with the West to what they see as the correct course of the relationship, as he and his team see Turkey as part of the Western axis of the world order.

Therefore, Ankara's position in international politics during the Kılıçdaroğlu period will largely be on the side of the West. Although they state that they will not go west or east, the steps they have taken and the promises they have made show the opposite.

A strong indication that Kılıçdar will side with the West is the positions and statements made by Kılıçdaroğlu after traveling to countries such as the United States, England and Germany and announcing the selection of the head of the Progress and Democracy Party Ali Babacan as head of the economic team, where Babacan, who adopts a liberal financial policy, has confidence in Western banks and financial circles<sup>11</sup>.

Kılıçdaroğlu wants to return Turkey to the F-35 program, and to achieve this goal he will have to respond to the demand of the United States of America that Turkey abandon the S400 air defence system and review the relationship with Russia in general.

In addition, some of the opposition leaders within the six-party table confirm that they will cancel the Akkuyu nuclear power plant project between Turkey and Russia. Moreover, it seems that the tendencies of the opposition parties in general are to abandon the state of balance between Russia, America and the West, and bias towards the Western axis.

Kılıçdaroğlu views Greece and European countries positively, so if he becomes president he will maintain good relations with Europe and the United States. Furthermore; he will pursue a more friendly policy towards Greece. He is also expected to make greater efforts to achieve the conditions of membership within the European Union.

(11) Kılıçdaroğlu announces the nomination of Ali Babacan as leader of the team that will take over the economy if he wins the presidency, official Twitter account, May 2023 ,3: <https://shorturl.at/iuwCG>

## 5. Arab countries

Kılıçdaroğlu makes peaceful statements in his speech towards the Middle East and Arab countries, and states that he will contribute to ending tension in the region through the establishment of the Organization for Peace and Cooperation in the Middle East, which will take over the task of combating terrorism instead of unilateral Turkish operations.

Although a regional policy prioritizing cooperation and counterterrorism through the Middle East Peace and Cooperation Organization has been cited, Kilicdar has repeatedly criticized Erdoğan's moves to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Turkey's foreign policy if Kılıçdaroğlu is elected would likely be more conservative than Erdoğan's toward relations with Arab countries, in exchange for a greater focus on the West.

## 6. Organization of Turkish States

Based on the joint policy agreement and the statements of officials, it can be said that Kılıçdaroğlu will maintain Turkey's relationship with the Organization of Turkish States, but to a lesser extent than Erdoğan, especially on the subject of Azerbaijan. There were friendly statements towards the OIC countries calling for the preservation of "brotherly ties", while ignoring the mention of the victory of Karabakh, which is of crucial importance for Azerbaijan, one of the most important countries of the Turkish organization.

Moreover; in the Cyprus case, although it was noted that steps would be taken to achieve a just and lasting solution to the Cyprus issue, which is the national issue of Turkey, the phrase "two equal administrations" in the JPA could be interpreted as a pro-Western policy on Cyprus.

In other words, even if there were a rapprochement with the Turkish states, this would certainly not happen in the context of a challenge to the West or in creating a balance with the West.

# Conclusion

The May 14 election is crucial for Turkish foreign policy, because it could bring with it a new government with a foreign policy different from that pursued under the AKP government.

Erdogan's election victory will lead to the continuation of the foreign policy pursued in recent years, including the files of normalization with the Middle East countries, the continuation of special relations with Russia, the continuation of military operations beyond borders, balancing with the West, and heading towards independence in foreign policy.

Contrastively, Kılıçdaroğlu and the six-party table do not envision a clear picture of foreign policy, because the table is simply an alliance of different ideologies. What allies them together them now is the sole goal of overthrowing Erdogan. Therefore, the overall political program declared by the table is practically a framework of the minimum consensus, while the actual foreign policy will be drawn by the president whenever he wins, as he will not be bound at that time by any previous consensus.

It is worth noticing that the Nation Alliance, which has nominated Kılıçdaroğlu as its candidate, has devoted only 12 pages to foreign policy in the 240-page Joint Policy Agreement. Moreover, as mentioned above, the phrases and sentences in these 12 pages are generally vague.

If Kılıçdaroğlu adheres to the JPA, it can be concluded that Turkey's foreign policy will be unambitious, and lacking strategy.

Even if Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP have solely controlled Turkish foreign policy away from the six-table consensus, we can expect a more neutral foreign policy with a tendency to modify the policy and telting towards more restraint regarding interference in foreign issues, such as Libya, Syria, the eastern Mediterranean, Ukraine, Karabakh, the PYD and the YPG. As a final conclusion, Erdogan's election victory will mean the continuation of Turkish foreign policy, but Kılıdaroğlu's victory will mean a major restructuring of foreign policy.





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