



Nationalism and Turkish Foreign Policy Following the May 2023 Elections

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An analysis of the results of Turkey's May 2023 elections reveals that alongside President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's victory in the second round of the presidential elections, nationalist forces earned greater representation in the Turkish parliament. Since 2015 Erdogan and his party have been in a coalition with the party that represents Turkish ultranationalism—the National Movement Party. In parallel, there has been a general rise in nationalist sentiment in Turkish political discourse, in part due to the renewal of the armed conflict with the Kurds and the increased weight of the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey. In light of the close race before the latest elections, an effort was made among both the governing coalition and the opposition to pursue every vote, which led to the political strengthening of figures with ultranationalist positions. After the elections, Erdogan established a government that comprises primarily technocrats, and this serves as a moderating factor. Nevertheless, at any stage he will be able to appoint other figures who reflect the strengthening of the ultranationalist element of Turkish foreign policy.

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Introduction

On May 28, 2023, the incumbent Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won the presidential elections, earning another five-year term in office. Erdogan will enjoy a relatively large amount of leeway, not only because much power is concentrated in the Turkish presidency, but also because the coalition that supports him enjoys a majority in the parliament. Aside from the personal victory of the incumbent, the elections in Turkey illustrated the [power of national sentiment](#) in Turkish society and its political influence. This is despite the fact that most commentators presumed that the decisive factor in the elections would be the

serious economic crisis in Turkey, which in October 2022 led to an [annual inflation rate of 85 percent in Turkey](#) (unofficial estimates mentioned an inflation rate twice as high) and a devaluation of the Turkish lira, which [dropped by 77 percent against the dollar](#) over the five preceding years.

The results of the parliamentary and presidential elections indicated the strength of Turkish nationalism [in several ways](#). First, the National Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—MHP), which represents Turkish ultranationalism in the political system, received more votes than expected. The MHP, which made an alliance with Erdogan in 2015

and since then has supported him, was seen in the months preceding the elections as a party with weakening power. Polls predicted the party would suffer an electoral blow, and many experts assumed that the decision by the Turkish parliament in March 2022 to lower the electoral threshold from 10 percent to 7 percent stemmed from Erdogan's desire to ensure that his weakened ultranationalist ally would get into parliament. Ultimately, the MHP received more than 10 percent of the vote, and maintained its strength in parliament. The Good Party (İyi parti), which was established by MHP supporters who objected to the changes that Erdogan made to the system of government in Turkey in 2017 and is also identified with the Turkish nationalist movement, received almost 10 percent of the vote. In addition, many politicians who put nationalism at the core of their political activities are members of the various parties in parliament. Thus, nationalist voices will receive broad representation in the Turkish parliament in the next five years.

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Another sign of the growing influence of nationalist Turkish sentiments in the political system was the success of ultranationalist candidate Sinan Ogan in the first round of the presidential elections, in which he received 5 percent of the vote—much more than expected. This result for a candidate who had adopted an extreme nationalist stance proved the strength of nationalist sentiment among Turkish voters. In the two weeks between the two rounds of the elections, Erdogan and the opposition candidate in the presidential elections, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, invested great effort to persuade Ogan and his voters to support them. Prior to the second round, Ogan declared his support for Erdogan.

The change in Kilicdaroglu's tone in the lead-up to the second round of the presidential elections can also be considered evidence of the growing power of Turkish ultranationalists in these elections. The opposition candidate, who until the first round tried to mobilize supporters through a unifying narrative, identified the need to take into greater consideration the nationalist sentiments of the Turkish population, in light of the results of the first round. He changed his campaign tactic and emphasized his desire to take action against the Syrian refugees located in Turkey. Thus, the campaign between the two rounds of the elections appeared to be a competition between the two candidates over who was more nationalist. Clearly, then, the Turkish political reality following the May elections is an opportunity for ultranationalist elements in Turkey.

The Roots of Turkish Nationalism and its Manifestation since Erdogan's Rise to Power

Turkish nationalism has been a central phenomenon in the country's political life since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Republic, aspired to build a nation-state out of the ruins of the multinational Ottoman Empire, and defined nationalism as one of the six principles of the revolution that he headed. Repeated praise in the public discourse of the Turkish nation and a denial of any identity competing with Turkish national identity—both religious identities and ethnic identities, especially Kurdish identity—underscored the principle. Since then, Turkish nationalism has become an integral part of the political system in Turkey. Over the years, Turkish politicians have made efforts to prove their loyalty to the nationalist idea, and frequently leveraged national sentiment among the population to mobilize support. Following the military coup in 1980, Turkish nationalism was also strengthened by the Turkish military, which emphasized it to unify Turkish society

around a shared identity, at a time when intra-Turkish conflicts created internal chaos.

When Erdogan came to power in 2003, he presented himself as a leader who aspired to amend Turkish politics and limit the power of the security establishment in the political system. In part this involved adopting a more flexible version of Turkish nationalism. Erdogan placed a greater emphasis on Islam as identity, which enabled him, *inter alia*, to back away from the rigid approach toward the Kurdish minority that had characterized the previous decades. In the first few years of Erdogan's rule, the Kurds received a series of symbolic rights that enabled greater visibility of Kurdish culture in Turkish society. Erdogan also launched a process of negotiation with the Kurdish underground, at first covertly and later openly, which was presented as a way to end the ethnic conflict in Turkey.

But in 2015 the Turkish President [changed his approach](#) regarding the utility of talks with the Kurdish minority, after he did not receive a majority in the parliamentary elections, in part because Kurdish voters preferred to vote for the pro-Kurdish party and not for Erdogan's party, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—AKP). Following his failure to mobilize the Kurdish population in his favor, the Turkish President turned his back on these sections of society and looked to ultranationalist voters. He adopted a rigid nationalist line and renewed the war on Kurdish terrorism, and the Turkish authorities began to persecute Kurdish politicians. This new stance also enabled Erdogan to form an alliance with the MHP and to ensure a parliamentary majority. Erdogan made Turkish nationalism in its rigid form the heart of his narrative. This posture also influenced the Turkish government and the apparatuses connected with it, including the education system and the media, which is controlled primarily by the state or by figures associated with the regime. The war on the Kurdish underground, which spilled over into northern Iraq and northern Syria,

and the ensuing losses suffered by the Turkish military, have also restored a militaristic version of Turkish nationalism in the public discourse.

Also contributing to the strengthened nationalist forces in Turkey in recent years is the issue of the Syrian refugees. In the first few years of the civil war in Syria, Erdogan and his government opened Turkey's gates to Syrian refugees, presenting it as an act that demonstrated the Turkish nation's Muslim solidarity. Since then, [according to official numbers](#), Turkey has hosted 3.6 million Syrian refugees on its soil. The Turkish military entry into northern Syria and the economic crisis in Turkey, which has intensified since 2018, have negatively affected attitudes toward these refugees in Turkey. While Turkish soldiers are fighting on Syrian soil, [many in Turkey](#) accuse the Syrians of cowardice for having fled their country instead of fighting for it. Furthermore, the patience of many Turkish citizens toward the Syrian refugees has declined in parallel with the deterioration of economic conditions in Turkey. The Syrian refugees are blamed for enabling the development of a black economy that harms Turkish workers, and many deplore the benefits that the Syrians receive from the government while Turkish citizens are suffering.

Sentiments against the Syrian refugees have been expressed [in various ways](#). First, the change in attitude toward the Syrians has strengthened Turkish nationalism. The refugees have stopped being seen as fellow Muslim brethren and have been presented more and more as "foreigners." Demonstrations against the refugees, sometimes violent, have been held throughout Turkey, and opposition to their presence on Turkish soil has also influenced the political system in the country. In the 2019 municipal elections, Erdogan and his coalition suffered defeats in the big cities, where the numbers of Syrian refugees are highest. This caused the opposition to harden its tone on the issue; some of the new mayors took determined action against the refugees, and Turkish leaders also changed their narrative,

with new promises that the refugees would be returned to Syria. In addition, in 2021 a new ultranationalist party, the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi—ZP) was established and boosted by the continued attacks against the Syrian refugees, which in turn exerted pressure on the entire Turkish political system.

In the background of the 2023 election campaign, therefore, Turkish nationalism, an important phenomenon throughout the history of Turkey, was even stronger than in other periods. This situation posed different challenges to the candidates. On the one hand, Erdogan suffered harsh criticism from the opposition, which presented him as liable for the unwanted presence of the Syrian refugees. On the other hand, he and his allies based their campaign on identity politics, with an ultranationalist tone and accusations against the opposition that it is supported by foreign forces and by Kurdish terrorism; Erdogan tried to position himself as safeguarding the Turkish nation.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu faced a different dilemma. The opposition's candidate was aware that he had to appeal to the country's conservative-nationalist population in order to win, especially after the results of the first round illustrated the power of national sentiment. However, the opposition's victory was unattainable without the support of Kurdish voters, particularly at a time when Kurdish national sentiment in Turkey had also [strengthened](#) in response to political developments in recent years. Kilicdaroglu did his best to find a way to cope with these conflicting developments. He relied on his alliance with the Good Party in order to persuade nationalists who opposed Erdogan, and benefited from the fact that the pro-Kurdish party did not put forward a candidate of its own and supported him, without forming an official alliance. Between the two rounds of elections he focused [his nationalist narrative against the Syrian refugees](#) in order to win the support of the conservative population without alienating the Kurdish population. [This tactic, however,](#)

[failed](#), evidenced by the defeat at the ballot box and a decline in support for the opposition's candidate in Kurdish regions between the first and second rounds, and decreased mobilization of Kurdish voters. Furthermore, the elections proved that the economic promises or the more positive discourse that Kilicdaroglu tried to promote had less of an impact on voters than Erdogan's ultranationalist speeches.

In the reality following the May elections, the awakening of nationalist sentiment in Turkey will continue to influence the entire Turkish political system. With a record presence of ultranationalist representatives in parliament, the government will find it easier to pass laws based on an nationalist line. In addition, despite his victory, Erdogan is aware of the need to take into consideration nationalist sentiments among the Turkish population, including on the issue of the Syrian refugees. The results of the elections also emphasized the political profit obtained from leveraging these sentiments. Therefore, the new government in Turkey will presumably continue its rigid policy against the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey and against its leaders.

Within the opposition, the defeat could lead to a change regarding nationalism in the position of the various parties. After the quiet attempt to rely on Kurdish voters to oust Erdogan proved to be insufficient for achieving victory, some members of the opposition might also adopt a new line regarding minorities in Turkey. This would likely occur in the Good Party, which is rooted in uncompromising Turkish nationalism. In the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—CHP), which presents itself as the successor to Ataturk and also includes more nationalist streams, some will demand a return to a more traditional nationalist line.

Consequently, with a government that will consolidate its power by enlisting nationalist sentiment among the conservative population in Turkey and an opposition that is more reticent on the Kurdish issue, the chances of returning to

negotiations with the Kurdish underground are slim. In addition, the hardening of Turkish policy toward the Syrian refugees seems more than likely. Moreover, the Turkish system is already preparing for the municipal elections that are scheduled for 2024, which creates another incentive for all the political actors to continue their rhetoric against the Syrian refugees as well as anti-Kurdish rhetoric—proven to be effective in mobilizing voters whose support will be needed again in the coming year.

Nationalism and Turkish Foreign Policy

There is a seeming contradiction between Erdogan's decision to establish a government of technocrats, some of whom have more dovish stances than their predecessors, and the strengthening of ultranationalist voices in the Turkish parliament. The choice of officials who are primarily technocrats suggests that at least in the short term, and especially because of the precarious economic situation, Erdogan will opt to continue the line that he pursued before the elections, attempting to achieve calm in some of the political arenas. At the same time, the decision to choose [a government of technocrats will make it easier for Erdogan](#) if he subsequently decides to shift his foreign policy in an ultranationalist direction, because it will be easier for him to fire people who lack a political support base.

One of the most prominent doctrines that symbolize the rise of the ultranationalist element in Turkey is the Blue Homeland doctrine (Mavi Vatan), whereby the defense of Turkey's maritime borders—as Ankara sees them (in contrast with the Greek and Cypriot view according to the Convention on the Law of the Sea)—is no less important than defending the land borders. The doctrine was first presented in 2006 but was developed further as part of Erdogan's efforts to improve ties with ultranationalist groups in Turkey. It led to a proactive Turkish foreign policy, especially in 2019–2020, in a way that its neighbors saw

as provocative. The policy included, inter alia, a controversial agreement to demarcate the exclusive economic zone with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, as well as the dispatch of research ships accompanied by battleships to areas that the Greeks or Greek-Cypriots see as their exclusive economic zone.

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One of the factors that led Turkey to sign the agreement with the GNA was the plan to build the EastMed pipeline, which was supposed to transport natural gas from Israel to Europe via Cyprus and Greece. Although the Trump administration supported the plan, the Biden administration [voiced](#) its opposition, and today other plans are advanced that have not yet aroused the same antagonism from Ankara as the EastMed pipeline, but could draw Turkish criticism in the future. Among them is a proposal to construct a pipeline between Israel and Cyprus to export natural gas and to establish liquefaction facilities in Cyprus, as well as an [underwater electric cable](#) that would connect the power grids of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, and from there hook up to the power grids of other European countries. Turkey could renew its plans to send research and drilling ships to areas in dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean, even though it has had greater success so far in discovering natural gas sources in the Black Sea, where its economic borders are defined.

The issue of the exclusive economic zone is also related to the continuation of the dispute regarding the future of Cyprus—a central issue in Turkish foreign policy that has aroused strong feelings in Turkish society since the 1960s with a distinct nationalist tone. While international mediation efforts since 1974 have

advanced attempts to reunite the island, since 2020 Erdogan has spoken explicitly of a two-state solution to the Cyprus issue. In light of the rapprochement to some extent between Turkey and Greece following the earthquake in Turkey and the aid that Athens offered to Turkey, greater goodwill might be displayed by the sides in the Cypriot context, or at least a continuation of the status quo on the island, but it is unclear how long this positive momentum might last.

The increase in the use of anti-American rhetoric, which in itself [is not a new phenomenon](#), is also part of the nationalist sentiment in Turkey. The view that the United States is trying to sabotage the success of Turkey in general, and of Erdogan in particular, is a recurring motif in statements, albeit sometimes only implicit, by the government in Ankara. In this context, the removal from the new government of former Minister of the Interior Suleyman Soylu, who was a hawkish figure who expressed anti-American sentiment in the most public manner, is encouraging news for Turkey's relations with the United States. Nevertheless, even his dismissal does not mean that Turkey's approach toward Washington has changed significantly, or that the issues in dispute between the countries have been resolved, such as the Turkish insistence on continuing the deployment of the Russian S-400 air defense system acquired in 2017, or the dispute surrounding US support for the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine, which on the one hand again clearly demonstrates Turkey's geostrategic importance for NATO, also creates new tensions between Ankara and Washington. Especially prominent has been the dispute surrounding the addition of Finland and Sweden to NATO (an issue that has been resolved in the meantime). There was a direct connection between the Turkish opposition to these countries joining NATO and Turkish nationalism, especially as a main point of friction between the countries, and

in particular between Turkey and Sweden, regarding the latitude enjoyed by Kurdish exiles in the Scandinavian countries. Indeed, Turkey has raised demands that the government of Sweden extradite Kurdish activists to Turkey.

Some ultranationalists are also skeptical about the European Union. While Erdogan's continued rule and his autocratic tendencies will in any case likely stymie progress in the negotiations surrounding Turkey's acceptance into the European Union, if this issue does reach a point of decision, and Turkey becomes the first country whose process of joining the EU begins but ends in failure, then this will serve as confirmation of the skepticism of ultranationalists. The hardening of the Turkish stance toward the Syrian refugees could also lead to the renewal of tensions between Ankara and its European neighbors, who have clashed over this issue in recent years, at times when it seemed that Ankara was trying to send the refugees further into Europe.

The rigid positions expected regarding the Kurdish arena and the Syrian refugees also highlight the difficulty that Turkey will have in reaching an agreement with the Assad regime about the future of northern Syria. Following four military operations in Syria since 2016, Turkey controls territories in northern Syria that are home to [about four million people](#). Turkey hopes to obtain external funding that will enable the construction of housing for the Syrian refugees in the areas under Turkish control in northern Syria. So far, aside from Qatar, it does not seem that Ankara has succeeded in convincing international actors to help it in this respect, but [according to authorities, about 550,000 Syrian refugees](#) have already returned from Turkey to Syria. From Assad's perspective, a basic condition for normalization with Turkey is a Turkish withdrawal from the territories that it controls in northern Syria. Although before the elections in Turkey Russia pushed for progress in the talks between Ankara and Damascus, these talks did not yield significant results. At the same time, the person who stood behind these

talks was Hakan Fidan, who is now Minister of Foreign Affairs, and beforehand was director of the Turkish intelligence agency. No senior public figure in Turkey understands the complexity of the Syrian arena better than Fidan, which could contribute to progress on this issue. The refugee issue is expected to gain new prominence in the 2024 municipal elections, and therefore it is likely that Fidan, with Erdogan's backing, will try to make progress in the talks with Syria.

Another issue influenced by nationalist positions are Turkey's relations with Armenia and Turkish support for Azerbaijan regarding the conflict over control of the Karabakh region. Since Azerbaijan gained independence in the early 1990s, a narrative has developed in Turkey and in Azerbaijan in which they are two states but one nation. This narrative directly connected Azerbaijan to Turkish nationalism, and therefore Ankara's position toward its Azerbaijani neighbor is also affected by the strength of nationalist sentiment in Turkey. Azerbaijan's military success in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 significantly weakened Armenia and led Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, more than his predecessors, to express conciliatory positions toward Ankara and Baku. This could encourage progress in the negotiations between Baku and Yerevan and between Ankara and Yerevan, and will perhaps lead to the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which could have *significant formative effects* on the Caucasus. Nonetheless, both in Azerbaijan and in Turkey there are those who think it is possible to exploit Armenia's weakness for even more serious concessions than those that Pashinyan currently offers. Furthermore, given that no change is expected in the continuing Turkish policy of denying the Armenian genocide (a policy that Azerbaijan also supports), there is no expectation of a solution on this central issue in the Turkish-Armenian conflict.

Finally, even though nationalist sentiments do not necessarily oppose Turkey's efforts at normalization with Middle East countries,

Turkey's increased economic dependence on loans from the Gulf states could arouse indignation among nationalist elements, given that Turkey is selling its assets and undermining its sovereignty to make independent decisions in order to obtain economic benefits. Two prominent examples: in November 2021 the United Arab Emirates *decided* to set up a \$10 billion investment fund to invest in Turkey, and before the elections Saudi Arabia *deposited* about \$5 billion in the Turkish central bank in order to contribute to the stabilization of Turkey's currency. In this context, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Ankara in June 2022 was described by the Turkish opposition as a series of humiliations for the Turkish nation. It also seems that Erdogan prefers to rely on aid from the Arab Gulf countries, as was manifested in his July visit to three Arab Gulf states, *rather than submitting a request* to the International Monetary Fund's aid program, which would be seen as humiliating. This highlights the dilemma for nationalist elements.

The normalization with Israel in 2022 is part of Turkey's other normalization efforts in the Middle East. At the same time, Israel's image remains negative almost throughout the spectrum of Turkish public opinion. The National Movement Party, Erdogan's main coalition partner, is no different in this respect, and its leader, Devlet Bahçeli, *has made derisive statements* against Israel. On the other hand among opposition figures, including Kilicdaroglu, even more harsh criticism of Israel has been voiced, including a *statement* that the *Marmara* case (regarding the flotilla to Gaza) is not closed. In this respect, Erdogan himself did not approach normalization with Israel out of a basic change in attitude, but out of pragmatic motivations that related to the results of the 2020 elections in the United States, Turkey's regional isolation, and the deterioration of its economic situation.

The rise of ultranationalists in the Turkish parliament should concern Israel because some of them, especially those who are also anti-American, see Israel in a negative light.

Conclusion

The growing power of ultranationalists in the Turkish parliament will remain with Erdogan in his current term. However, their large-scale entry into the Turkish parliament should not necessarily be seen as a new phenomenon but as an expression of political needs—integrating them in existing and new parties due to motivations of attempting to strengthen the competing blocs, given the narrowing gap between them. Moreover, one of the factors contributing to the rise of Turkish ultranationalism is the dire economic situation. The position holders that Erdogan has appointed in the new government, both the minister of finance and the governor of the Central Bank, indicate a certain pragmatism and a willingness to return, if only partially, to a more orthodox economic policy, which signals the beginning of an exit path from the economic crisis plaguing Turkey.

A middle way for Erdogan to cope with nationalist sentiments while retaining diplomatic leeway is emphasizing the independent dimension of Turkish foreign policy—meaning that Turkey’s support cannot be seen as taken for granted by one of the blocs, in particular the Western bloc. This policy, while often perceived as defiance by the West, enables Erdogan to cooperate with the West at important junctures, if he deems this necessary for advancing Turkish foreign policy. In the past, when he needed to, Erdogan also came out against former allies—whether these were members of the Gulen movement, who had helped him weaken the political power of the Turkish military in his first two terms in office,

or the Kurds, with whom he tried to cooperate in his third term. Thus, there is no certainty that Erdogan will necessarily remain in an alliance with the ultranationalists, even though since 2015 this has proven to be relatively convenient. The Turkish President’s control over the public discourse in Turkey also allows him to frame policy changes in his favor relatively easily, which increases his leeway and gives him greater flexibility, including in foreign policy.

The rise of ultranationalists in the Turkish parliament should concern Israel because some of them, especially those who are also anti-American, see Israel in a negative light. Moreover, an aggressive foreign policy on Ankara’s part, even if it is not aimed directly at Israel, could be directed at actors with whom Jerusalem has a close relationship. In the short term it seems that Turkey still has the motivation to adhere to its normalization with Israel and with other countries in the region. Yet in the longer term, in particular once Turkey succeeds in emerging from its economic crisis, it could return to a more proactive and assertive foreign policy, which, as occurred in 2019-2020, could also pose challenges for Israel.

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