



A New New Turkey? What an Opposition Victory Would Mean for Ankara's Foreign Policy

TURKEY PROGRAMME – *Turkey elections countdown series*

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Summary

- The opposition foreign policy platform seeks to improve relations with the West while simultaneously continuing to pursue a more independent foreign policy.
- Securing the safe, voluntary, and legal return of Syrian refugees through rapprochement with the Assad regime, as the opposition proposes, will prove a non-starter.
- Ultimately, a democratic Turkey that calibrates its foreign policy to the interests of its citizens rather than the interests of one man will be a stronger and more reliable actor on the global stage.

Introduction

It seems increasingly clear that if Turkey held a free and fair election next month, opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would defeat President Erdoğan, bringing an end to his two-decade hold on power.¹ It is, unfortunately, too soon to tell how far Erdoğan will go in manipulating the election, or how effective his efforts will be. But if Kılıçdaroğlu and his six-party opposition alliance wins, the impact on Turkish foreign policy will be dramatic.

It is difficult to predict how any new political leader will behave once in office, all the more so one with little foreign policy background, representing a diverse political coalition at a time of intense domestic and international change. Indeed, speculation about how the opposition would steer Turkey's foreign relations has varied widely. Some observers envision a quick reversal of Erdoğan's anti-Western approach, while others warn that we might see a striking degree of continuity driven by the opposition's own anti-Western attitudes.² Perhaps unsurprisingly, a careful review of the opposition's record and rhetoric suggest something in between.

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If Kılıçdaroğlu comes to power, his government will almost certainly make a sincere and successful effort to improve relations with Turkey's Western allies. At the same time, practical and ideological differences will just as certainly remain, while divisions within the ruling coalition may lead to some initial incoherence and uncertainty. In trying to balance competing views and priorities, the new government will be aided by a flush of goodwill from the United States and Europe, as well as the return of a more professional and institutionalized diplomatic corps. As a result, Ankara will likely continue to pursue a more independent foreign policy, but do so more constructively, with less of the needless antagonism that has marked relations with the West over the past decade. Bilateral problems will not disappear, and mutual frustrations will continue to surface, but they will be managed more effectively. Ultimately, a democratic Turkey that calibrates its foreign policy to the interests of its citizens rather than the interests of one man will be a stronger and more reliable actor on the global stage.

Parsing the Opposition Platform

When Turkey's opposition coalition published a lengthy political program covering its domestic and foreign policy vision, the country's pro-government press was quick with its criticism. In an article titled "Turkish opposition's foreign policy: Irrelevant," *Sabah* columnist and SETA general coordinator Burhanettin Duran declared the Turkish opposition's foreign policy to be irrelevant. Erdoğan, he wrote, succeeds by "interpreting international changes accurately, making timely moves and winning elections."³ The opposition, in contrast, displayed a dangerous romanticism about the ability to restore ties with the West within the framework of a vanished liberal order.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/polls-show-Erdoğan-lags-opposition-by-more-than-10-points-ahead-may-vote-2023-03-13/>
<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/Erdoğan-brink>

² For two thoughtful assessments that strike a balance between these competing claims, see: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/turkish-opposition-seeks-challenge-Erdoğan-his-own-game> and <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-post-Erdoğan-vision-of-turkish-opposition-opportunities-and-limitations>.

³ Elaborating on this point, he noted that: "Obviously, it takes a lot of skill to strike that golden balance." <https://www.setav.org/en/turkish-oppositions-foreign-policy-irrelevant/>

And yet, while Erdoğan loyalists have been eager to paint the opposition's foreign policy pronouncements as both naïve and pro-Western, Western analysts have been more inclined to criticize them for being contradictory, confusing, or simply "gobbledygook."⁴ After reviewing the opposition's *Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies*, a more charitable assessment might be that it reads like any party platform designed to forge consensus among diverse constituencies. The style of pairing unobjectionable but irreconcilable cliches will be familiar to anyone who has heard American politicians announce that they will be "principled but pragmatic" or perhaps "pragmatic but principled."

In this spirit, the general tenor of the proposals in the *Memorandum* is that Turkey will peacefully resolve all of its bilateral disputes, but without compromising on any of the issues that created these disputes in the first place.⁵ For example, vis-a-vis Turkey's maritime disagreements with Greece, the opposition believes:

A democratic Turkey that calibrates its foreign policy to the interests of its citizens rather than the interests of one man will be a stronger and more reliable actor on the global stage.

The Aegean Sea should be seen as an area of peace, cooperation, and good neighborliness. We will work to achieve this goal and will not allow any development that may harm our areas of sovereignty in the Aegean Sea.

More broadly, the opposition intends to:

Solve all unsolved problems between Turkey and Greece through diplomacy, dialog and results-oriented negotiations in a manner consistent with international law and justice and without compromising Turkey's national interests.

Likewise, amidst renewed threats of violence between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the *Memorandum* announces that:

We will further strengthen our brotherly ties with Azerbaijan on the basis of mutual security.

We will decisively pursue steps aimed at solving problems between Turkey and Armenia.

We will contribute to transforming the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a lasting peace.

Indeed, the opposition's have-our-cake-and-eat-it-too framing is replicated on the most significant security issues facing Ankara. On managing relations with the US and Russia, for example, the platform seeks to simultaneously reflect the current government's longstanding push to rebalance relations away from a perceived dependence on NATO, while also implying that the opposition would re-rebalance this effort in a more pro-NATO way. In this vein, it provides two bullet points in rapid succession:

We will establish relations with the United States of America on an institutional basis with an understanding that both parties are equal and advance the alliance relationship based on mutual trust.

⁴ https://twitter.com/Nick_Ashdown/status/1636422476556058628?s=20

⁵ A partial English translation of the program has been published. Where possible, the translated document is quoted. For items that do not appear in this document, the author's translation is provided.

<https://en.chp.org.tr/haberler/memorandum-of-understanding-on-common-policies-january-30-2023>

<https://chp.org.tr/yayin/ortak-politikalar-mutabakat-metni/Open>

We will maintain relations with the Russian Federation with an understanding that both parties are equal and strengthened by balanced and constructive dialog at the institutional level.

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With reference to Turkey's fight against the PKK, the opposition has also staked out an approach that seeks to replicate the tough-on-terrorism stance of the current government (and, of course, all its predecessors), but combine it with a commitment to democratic values and addressing social causes. Thus, immediately after stating that "we will pursue the struggle against terrorism and all terror organizations unyieldingly with all elements of our strength," the platform states:

We will pursue the struggle against terrorism with an approach grounded in all the appropriate data from the fields of psychology, sociology, criminology and victimology, and with an understanding which prioritizes eradicating the root causes of terror, following rational methods and employing socio-economic measures while taking maximum care to balance freedom and security with operating legally in a manner appropriate for a state governed by the rule of law.

How the opposition resolves these contradictions, were they to win, would reflect the way the internal politics of the coalition played out, along with the resulting staffing choices. It is uncertain how the proposed 6-party structure, with five plus 2 vice-presidents, would work in the foreign policy realm, and how the horse-trading over more pressing domestic issues might influence key decisions. Widespread popular anti-Americanism would undoubtedly constrain the opposition's choices, all the more so if their political mandate, cohesion and parliamentary majority proved weak.⁶ Even in places like Libya and Idlib, where the opposition has criticized Turkish military deployments, the optics of withdrawing forces with no corresponding diplomatic gains could subject the government to heavy criticism. Some moves, like warehousing Turkey's S-400s, could be done relatively quietly. Others, like actually reaching a negotiated settlement with Greece over Exclusive Economic Zones, would likely face more public criticism than the new government was willing to risk.

Policy will also be shaped by the opposition's personnel decisions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They have promised to "reinstate the role and duty" of the MFA and emphasize merit over political preference in future hiring decisions. Assuming the CHP took the lead in filling top positions, they could draw on an experienced and talented cadre of senior diplomats affiliated with the party. The opposition would also likely draw on others who served under Davutoğlu and Abdullah Gül, as well as many younger diplomats who would continue to serve. Together, this would facilitate the creation of a more professional institution that could help reconcile and implement the conflicting aspects of the opposition's policy as effectively as possible.

Clarity in Contradiction

Ironically, what emerges from the many contradictions in the opposition's program is a relatively clear expression of how they hope to confront the challenges facing their country. That is to say, they have no intention of abandoning Turkey's long-standing national security priorities, or the AKP's more recent push for a more prominent and

⁶ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/mepo.12674>

independent role on the world stage. However, they do intend to place a greater emphasis on diplomacy and cooperation with democratic partners in their attempts to pursue these goals.

It is also noteworthy that members of the opposition alliance have been consistently positive in their descriptions of the first decade of the AKP's foreign policy.

In this context, it is also noteworthy that members of the opposition alliance have been consistently positive in their descriptions of the first decade of the AKP's foreign policy. During this period, the AKP sought to play a more active role in the world and Turkey's neighborhood, but sought to do so in concert with Washington, Europe and their partners in the Middle East. Writing for the Carnegie Endowment, Sinan Ülgen and Alper Coşkun cited CHP Deputy Chair and chief foreign policy advisor Ünal Çeviköz as saying that he believed the "turning point" for the AKP's foreign policy was Erdoğan's famous "one minute" moment at Davos.⁷ Then, following the Arab Spring, "Ankara totally reoriented its foreign policy principles by backing Muslim Brotherhood-linked political movements in the region in a radical departure from the established tenets of Turkey's republican-era foreign policy." Thus, it had begun to "take sides" and follow an "ideology-driven" and "sectarian" policy. Similarly, they quote İYİ Party Deputy Chair Ahmet Erozan as saying that, with the Arab Spring, "Turkish foreign policy has departed from its decades-long practice of noninterference." In his view, this was exemplified in Syria, "where Turkey not only championed regime change in a neighboring country but also got involved in organizing and supporting the political and military opposition to Damascus." Against this backdrop, Çeviköz articulated what a better approach would look like in words not dissimilar from those popular in the 2000s: "[G]iven Turkey's geography, which is the epicenter of many conflicts old and new, Ankara should be in a position to reach out to all the relevant parties to a dispute."

Just as it was during the 2000s, the devil, moving forward, will be in the details. To date, however, the details which opposition members have discussed are consistent with a concerted effort to mend Turkey's frayed ties with its Western partners.

On NATO, Çeviköz has explicitly stated that the opposition would not block the accession of Finland and Sweden, adding: "If you carry your bilateral problems into a multilateral organization, such as NATO, then you are creating a kind of polarization with all the other NATO members with your country."⁸ Likewise, opposition members have criticized Erdoğan's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missiles on national security grounds. While they have not said how, specifically, they would address the issue posed by the existing missiles, this, coupled with the platform's promise to return to the F-35 program, suggests a much more flexible approach. Similarly, Çeviköz has also criticized the "asymmetric" relationship between Turkey and Russia, noting that in future dealings with Moscow: "We will simply emphasize the fact that Turkey is a member of NATO, and in our discussions with Russia, we will certainly look for a relationship among equals, but we will also remind Russia that Turkey is a member of NATO."⁹

On a number of other foreign policy issues, the opposition has also staked out policies that suggest the possibility of greater alignment, or at least less friction, with Western partners. On China, for example, representatives from the CHP and Gelecek party have emphasized that they would be more critical of the persecution of the country's Uyghur population,

⁷ Unsurprisingly, the representative from Davutoğlu's Gelecek party was also enthusiastic in their assessment of Turkish foreign policy during this period, without necessarily offering any criticism of the shift that occurred during the Arab Spring.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/14/political-change-and-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-88387>

⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-anti-recep-tayyip-erdogan-opposition-reset-eu-nato/>

⁹ Ibid

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and that this was a potential area of cooperation between Washington and Ankara.¹⁰ In regard to Cyprus, the opposition platform calls for a solution “ensuring the sovereign political equality of the two communities.” This, of course, is easier said than done, but it nonetheless represents an important departure from Erdoğan’s rhetoric regarding a two-state solution on the island (particularly when coupled with opposition criticism of the government’s interference in Turkish Cypriot politics).

The opposition’s emphasis on a “non-ideological” foreign policy will undoubtedly come as a relief to Washington’s partners and allies in the Middle East. CHP representatives in particular have been clear that this means abandoning support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood and improving ties with countries like Israel and Egypt. Erdoğan has also sought rapprochement with both of these countries over the past two years, though these efforts have been dogged by deeply entrenched suspicions and complicated by the fact that Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood members remain active in Turkey.¹¹ While the CHP has made it clear that it would continue to champion the rights of the Palestinian people, they have also argued that Ankara would be best placed to do so if it could also engage with Israel from a position of trust.¹² This, too, will be easier said than done, but it is an approach that will certainly earn Turkey goodwill in Israel.

The Syrian Challenge

The area in which the opposition has been most consistent in its policy prescriptions, and will almost certainly face the greatest challenges following through on them, are the interlocked issues of Syrian refugees and relations with the Assad regime. The CHP has consistently promoted rapprochement with Assad and has indeed sent several delegations of its own to Damascus over the years. In the face of growing anger directed at Syrian refugees in Turkey, the party has argued that only through rapprochement with the Syrian regime can Turkey facilitate the widespread, voluntary repatriation of Syrians. Tellingly, Erdoğan himself has come to co-opt this approach: many analysts suggest that his recent push to improve relations with Assad is aimed at convincing voters that this will help bring about the return of Syrian refugees.¹³

In its platform, the opposition has offered a clear but unrealistic vision of how they expect this process to occur. In a final section on “Migration and Refugee Policy”, they say they will “ensure the return of Syrians under temporary protection to their country in the shortest time possible in a manner consistent with domestic and international law.” To do this, they will “work closely with international organizations and the Syrian administration,” while also seeking opportunities for Turkish businesses to participate in Syria’s reconstruction. To bring peace to Syria and facilitate the return of refugees, the opposition promises to “increase contacts with all countries and stakeholders, begin both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, and support efforts aimed at finding a political solution in accordance with UN Resolution 2254.” Finally, to ensure that returning refugees are “secure in their lives and property” and “have their full rights recognized,” they will “support the creation of the necessary monitoring, verification and inspection

¹⁰ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/14/political-change-and-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-88387>

¹¹ <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/%CE%BD%CE%AD%CE%B5%CF%82-%CE%B4%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AD%CF%82-%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%BB%CE%B1%CE%B9%CE%AC-%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%B2%CE%BB%CE%AE%CE%BC%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85/>

¹² <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/14/political-change-and-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-88387>

¹³ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/how-realistic-is-an-erdogan-assad-rapprochement/>

mechanisms" in cooperation with the UN High Council on Refugees and other international organizations.

Needless to say, for anyone who has paid attention to Assad's behavior over the past decade, the possibility that he would welcome refugees back in significant numbers, far less recognize their rights or provide a safe and secure home for them, is difficult to countenance. Instead, the regime remains resolute in seeking to regain control of its entire territory, and has thus far predicated rapprochement on Ankara withdrawing its forces from the country. Moreover, were Turkey to actually leave Idlib and Afrin, it would potentially face an even larger influx of refugees. At best, the opposition would be left negotiating with the regime to maintain a veneer of autonomy in the regions it was withdrawing from in order to mitigate this new refugee flow. It would also almost certainly seek to forcibly seal its southern border to prevent any further refugees from crossing into Turkey. Perhaps, over time, a small number of refugees could be persuaded, or pressured, to return once Assad had consolidated his control, but this would fall far short of the opposition's campaign promises.

Both sides would do well to act quickly in areas that could create mutual benefits, while bracketing issues on which disagreement is likely to continue.

In addition to working with the Syrian regime, the opposition has promised to review Ankara's 2016 refugee deal with the EU, declaring that it "will not allow Turkey to be treated as a 'buffer country.'" Moving forward, European countries could well prove happy to work with Ankara in ensuring that refugees were stopped even farther from their own borders and supporting Ankara in trying to secure repatriation agreements for new arrivals. These efforts would have minimal impact on the current refugee population and might well be at odds with the promise to operate in a matter consistent with international law. But they could nonetheless succeed in transforming xenophobia into an issue which united Turkey and Europe rather than dividing them.

Conclusion

Many Western officials may well be resigned to another decade of Erdoğan, and a handful may even believe that, if nothing else, he represents the devil they know. Still, were the opposition to emerge victorious, they would greet the news with an outpouring of enthusiasm and welcome the opportunity to reset relations with Turkey. In this context, both sides would do well to act quickly in areas that could create mutual benefits, while bracketing issues on which disagreement is likely to continue. Signing off on Sweden's NATO membership, resolving the S-400 impasse, and approving future arms sales would be obvious first steps for Ankara and Washington. Brussels, in turn, could work with Ankara to implement the provision of the refugee deal that offers Turkish citizens visa-free travel as soon as Ankara amends its anti-terror laws. Turkey's Western partners should also offer a new opposition government additional assistance in supporting and integrating the large refugee population that is almost certain to remain in the country. More broadly, when tensions occur, as they inevitably will, Ankara's allies should remember that, in the long run, a democratic Turkey will always be a more influential and ideologically aligned partner than the alternative.