

A Domestic Audience for Turkish Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

With elections in the balance, Erdoğan is playing a risky game of international normalizations in the hope that the Turkish electorate will approve of economic ties and immigrant solutions.

In Turkey, the line between domestic politics and foreign policy has become so thin that it is almost indistinguishable. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's meshing of the local and international spheres has become the cornerstone of his re-election campaign. Built on the premise that improving Turkey's tumultuous foreign policy will yield financial benefits for an ailing economy, foreign policy has been given the full force of executive directive.

As a result, a largely successful [series \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/erdogan-turkey-uae-saudi-arabia-monarchy-islamism/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/erdogan-turkey-uae-saudi-arabia-monarchy-islamism/) of normalizations with former rivals—namely, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—has been executed. Nevertheless, Turkey's opposition remains skeptical of these moves. And with polling data pointing to an increased likelihood for a government change in Turkey, the future of these normalization efforts remains unclear. While Erdoğan continues to peddle his fine-tuned version of foreign policy—tailored to meet the demands of a disenfranchised electorate—these new engagements are yet to be set in stone.

Benefits of Normalization

With varying degrees of success, Ankara has sought to reap the economic benefits of diplomatic normalization. Emirati investment into Turkey has already materialized as the two countries continue to move toward reconciliation, and an already robust economic relationship now benefits from strong leadership on both ends. The UAE recently purchased Turkey's famed [TB2 \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/uae-receives-first-batch-turkish-armed-drones\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/uae-receives-first-batch-turkish-armed-drones) drones, in a deal which will likely see Ankara supplying Abu Dhabi for several

years.

In a similar vein, Erdoğan hopes for a significant transfer of sums into the Turkish economy from cash-rich Saudi Arabia, likely in the form of a currency swap agreement or a significant acquisition of Turkish assets. The Kingdom, just like the UAE, appears interested in Turkey's burgeoning defense sector.

In fact, Turkey's military industrial complex has become the crux of Erdoğan's policy of triangulating between the domestic and international realms, utilizing the defense industry's prowess

(<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/turkiye-s-top-7-major-defence-industry-breakthroughs-in-2021-explained-53086>) as a tool to hasten otherwise slow bilateral normalization processes. The prospect of tapping into Turkey's homegrown defense industry has motivated Gulf capitals to mend ties with Turkey, leading to the current state of relations.

Israel and Turkey have also successfully undergone a restructuring of their relations, culminating (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/21/israeli-turkish-leaders-hold-first-meeting-since-2008>) in an announcement last month that both parties have agreed to appoint ambassadors. Of course, the domestic benefits of normalizing ties with Israel are somewhat less apparent than that of ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Turkish citizens en masse continue to resonate with the Palestinian cause, and there is little likelihood of hard currency transfers from Israel into Turkey.

Nevertheless, the silver lining for Turkey has been much anticipated energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, with a possible gas pipeline agreement that would see Israeli gas transported into European markets via Turkey. And while there has yet to be any announcements on such a prospect, the promise, itself, has already left financial spectators buoyant.

There are also more nuanced benefits for Ankara in normalizing with the Israelis. Erdoğan can and will likely try to push through to Washington via his new relationship with Israel. The lack of executive contact between Ankara and Washington and the Biden administration's overall distance from Erdoğan has left Turkey with a number of unresolved policy priorities. Currently, the most significant of these is the issue of modernizing Turkey's F-16 fleet, which is lagging due to constraints set by Congress.

A Turkish-Israeli détente significantly improves Erdoğan optics in Washington, and could result in some of his ambitions being achieved. In previous years, Israel advocacy groups in DC worked on Turkey's behalf (<https://www.meforum.org/394/the-remarkable-turkish-israeli-tie>)—Erdoğan hopes that a similar understanding can be reached now. An expedited sale of new F-16 fighters is an argument that few would be able to oppose back home, handing Erdoğan a victory that could easily be weaved into his domestic agenda. Moreover, given current tensions between Greece and Turkey, the F-16 matter would significantly improve Erdoğan's hand.

The Opposition's Foreign Policy

The opposition to Erdoğan in Turkey is grouped around an ambivalent "table of six"—a consort of politicians who, despite their difference in ideologies, have united to oust the incumbent president. Given their inherent heterogeneity, the foreign policy priorities of this group are difficult to ascertain. Indeed, amongst their ranks is former prime minister and former Erdoğan confidante Ahmet Davutoğlu, who is credited for shepherding Turkey's proactive foreign policy, particularly during the inception of the Arab Spring.

Davutloğlu ascribed to the executive agenda many of the foreign policy decisions that Erdoğan is seeking to reverse, such as Turkey's former anti-Assad policy and years of tensions with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. On the other side of the consort is the nationalist "Good," or IYI, party, poised to make major gains in elections next year. IYI has remained reserved on foreign policy issues and has instead voiced a position of skepticism on both Russian and Chinese expansionism. The party largely conforms to a pro-NATO position.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP)—the largest party in the alliance—has expressed sharp views on Erdoğan's foreign policy direction. Kılıçdaroğlu, who himself is also poised to become a presidential candidate, has openly opposed Turkey's bilateral normalizations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and has vowed to revisit the issue of normalizing with Israel. Coinciding with the chairman's skepticism of the ongoing normalization processes is his ominous pledge to work with "regional countries" in the form of a "Middle East Cooperation Organization." As part of this model, Kılıçdaroğlu has vowed to enhance ties with Syria, Lebanon, and Iran to achieve a sense of regional coherence.

At a time when Turkey's ties with the Gulf capitals and Israel are improving, the cohort's discourse runs counter to these very processes. Clearly, the opposition is tailoring their foreign policy to electoral calculations just as much as Erdoğan is. Kılıçdaroğlu believes that he can galvanize skepticism on the Gulf monarchies and Israel, compound them with overall anti-United States rhetoric, and thus construct a narrative that is antithetical to Erdoğan's.

The Question of Assad

Most recently, the president has turned towards mending ties with a far more elaborate foe, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This process yet again entails electoral calculations. However, this on a far more elaborate scale. Erdoğan calculates that by striking an accord with Assad, he can initiate a process in which some of the four million Syrians living in Turkey return to Syria.

Erdoğan is shifting in this direction as his traditional bases of support now demand that migrants leave the country, leaving Erdoğan and his party scrambling for a solution. Economic distress and the societal discontent caused by the increasingly visible presence of migrants are the two main parameters shaping the electoral discourse in Turkey. Erdoğan believes that novel methods in foreign policy can address each of these issues, hence his drive to unilaterally resolve long-standing disputes with a foe like Assad.

Nevertheless, engaging with Assad has been difficult, as Ankara and Damascus share no formal diplomatic relations. After Turkey's foreign minister revealed that he had met his Syrian counterpart in Belgrade last year, Turkish officials have persistently declared that higher level contacts can and should materialize. Erdoğan, himself, revealed that he had hoped to meet Assad in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit earlier this month. The president likely believes that he can seal an agreement once leader-to-leader contact is established.

This changing reality has only been underlined by recently unearthed meetings between Turkey's intelligence chief and his Syrian counterpart in Moscow—meetings in which a list of initial demands is alleged to have been exchanged between the parties. Indeed, Russia appears to be playing a key broker role in the process, triangulating between Ankara and Damascus with the thought that a reconciliation between the two would serve the Kremlin's interests.

As the domestic and international spheres of policy-making become increasingly entangled in Turkey, the viability of some of Turkey's new foreign policy endeavors are increasingly doubtful. Despite the risks he has taken, current polling suggests that Erdoğan's diplomatic endeavors have had little to no impact on electoral projections. The Turkish electorate is either disinterested in the process or is dissuaded by the prospects it entails, as a rehabilitation of the economy has yet to materialize. Given the situation, Erdoğan will now make a final play with Assad, hoping that the return of migrants will make meaningful impacts in the polls if an accord can be made before summer. Regardless of whether Erdoğan's strategy will work to ensure him another electoral victory, the politicization of foreign policy makes for a risky game of myriad uncertainties ❖



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