

# Putin's Position in MENA and the Turkish Elections

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Putin's shift in MENA policy suggests efforts to smooth the way for Erdoğan's electoral bid.

The principle of holding ground is one of the key pillars of Russian foreign policy during the Putin era, which centers around the doctrine of protecting every gain won in the realm of international affairs. This mentality of holding tightly is likely what has driven Moscow to monitor the upcoming Turkish elections seriously and closely, as it tries to keep pace with the many developments in Middle Eastern countries wherein it plays a role at the expense of its opponents. Russia's recent foreign policy movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) signal a particular concern regarding the electoral success of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who while a frequent tactical adversary of Russia possesses many of the same traits as Putin in terms of governing style and practices. Recent policy decisions have paved the way for Erdoğan to remain in the seat of power once again.

These converging contexts are prompting Moscow to provide suitable support for Erdoğan during the current electoral cycle in Turkey. The ruling elite in Moscow appears eager to see Erdoğan's star continue to shine in Ankara, even if this survival does not guarantee (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-08-05/putin-erdogan-are-rivals-with-much-in-common>) that the vacillating, pragmatic, and authoritarian Turkish leader will come squarely into the Russian fold. Nevertheless, in Russia's eyes Erdoğan's survival over potential opponents is an essential means of ensuring the balance of Russian interests for the next five years with a regional actor who has ties to NATO, and has a neighboring geography and close military points in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Such partiality is visible in Russian Arabic media coverage (<https://arabic.rt.com/world/1434059-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AC-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB->

<https://forum.rtarabic.com/world/1435725-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-260-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9/>) of Turkey's recent devastating earthquake. To date, Russian media has highlighted Russian aid efforts while generally refraining from negative coverage on the way Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has dealt with the earthquake, despite growing anger in Turkey over the lack of accountability in applying building codes and failures in coordinating post-earthquake relief. Moreover, the Russia Today news agency has focused on any successful efforts of the Turkish rescue teams, such as [rescuing \(https://forum.rtarabic.com/world/1435725-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-260-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9/\)](https://forum.rtarabic.com/world/1435725-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-260-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9/) a child who remained for 260 hours under the rubble, but little else.

On February 6, the Kremlin likewise issued a statement that Putin "expresses his [deep condolences \(https://www.youm7.com/story/2023/2/6/%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%89-%D8%B6%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF/6074299\)](https://www.youm7.com/story/2023/2/6/%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%89-%D8%B6%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF/6074299)" directly to the Turkish president. Similarly, Aleksander Kurenkov, the Russian Minister of Emergency Situations said, "The Ministry of Emergency Situations is always ready to extend its hands to help friendly states in distress," with Turkey being a "friendly state." While the very prospect of elections in Turkey is now being called into [question \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-earthquake-threw-turkeys-election-plan-into-turmoil-2023-02-14/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-earthquake-threw-turkeys-election-plan-into-turmoil-2023-02-14/), the ways in which Russia has covered the quake highlights Putin's preference for Erdoğan, which are also visible in Moscow's foreign policy decisions in the past months.

### Strongman Similarities

Despite clashing on numerous past occasions—including [Turkey's downing of a Russian military plane in Syria \(https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-erdogan-upda/update-2-turkeys-erdogan-says-does-not-want-escalation-after-russian-jet-downed-idUSL8N13K1DR20151125\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-erdogan-upda/update-2-turkeys-erdogan-says-does-not-want-escalation-after-russian-jet-downed-idUSL8N13K1DR20151125) during a [direct targeted \(http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/11/25/putin-sends-air-defense-missiles-to-syria-to-deter-turkey.html\)](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/11/25/putin-sends-air-defense-missiles-to-syria-to-deter-turkey.html) operation, the [killing \(https://www.smh.com.au/world/russian-bombing-mistake-kills-three-turkish-soldiers-in-syria-20170210-gu9r5d.html\)](https://www.smh.com.au/world/russian-bombing-mistake-kills-three-turkish-soldiers-in-syria-20170210-gu9r5d.html) of  [\(https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-denies-responsibility-strikes-kill-33-turkish-troops/story?id=69277062\)](https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-denies-responsibility-strikes-kill-33-turkish-troops/story?id=69277062) Turkish soldiers in Syria by Russians, and bloody clashes between the two nations' allies in Libya, Ukraine, and the Caucasus—Erdoğan is a known quantity for Putin, making his reelection an appealing prospect. Both, for example, exploit their nations' history and imperial legacy as a way of marketing their policies. The two men also similarly rose to power through their involvement in local party leadership during times of economic downturn in their respective countries, then won control through seizing the highest position of influence therein.

The tactics that they employ to remain in power are also strikingly similar. Putin was able to change the constitution to clear the road for his return to power through extending the term of the presidency after a brief stint as Prime Minister. Erdoğan did the same by expanding the powers and term of the presidency, then jumping into that position after the opportunity for him to remain as prime minister ended. Both Putin and Erdoğan also used political puppets from their own parties to advance these policies—[Dmitry Medvedev](#)

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-puppet-president-medvedev-s-betrayal-of-russian-democracy-a-789767.html>) and Binali Yıldırım (<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/2017/02/25/%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A3%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84>), respectively.

### Features of Russian Regional Support for Erdoğan

Notably, as Erdoğan has attempted to make gains in a number of [foreign policy files](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/domestic-audience-turkish-foreign-policy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/domestic-audience-turkish-foreign-policy>) to bolster his reelection campaign, Russia has proven amenable to allowing Ankara leeway in areas even where major tensions exist. First off, Putin has recently worked to ease the pressure on Turkey's presence and that of its allies in Tripoli, Libya by reining in the hostility of Haftar and his men against the Turkish-backed Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh. These efforts have reduced direct conflict with Russia's allies in Eastern Libya during the lead-up to elections, allowing Erdoğan to point to the Libyan file as an ongoing sphere of his influence.

This policy likewise extends to Syria—another frequent point of conflict—where Russia is trying to [pressure](https://www.rtarabic.com/world/1413231-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86/) (<https://www.rtarabic.com/world/1413231-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86/>) the Assad government to accept Erdoğan's desire to demonstrate his openness to the Assad government, despite years of hatred between the two sides. This process will likewise be impacted by the recent earthquake. For his part, Erdoğan [wishes](https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3776376/turkish-opposition-leader-plans-return-syrian-refugees) (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3776376/turkish-opposition-leader-plans-return-syrian-refugees>) to take the issue of repatriating Syrian refugees in Turkey away from the grips of the Turkish opposition, which has blamed him for causing this crisis, fomenting the Syrian conflict, and consequently aggravating the Turkish economy. These efforts are likewise an attempt to placate the Turkish popular base, where popular [sentiment](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-anti-syrian-sentiment-turkey) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-anti-syrian-sentiment-turkey>) against the Syrian refugee community in Turkey is high, as are hopes that overtures to Assad will facilitate the refugees' return.

Also notable is the broad Russian media campaign to turn Turkey into a key energy corridor to the West, thereby transforming it into Russia's main gas [distribution hub](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russia-could-turn-turkiye-into-a-hub-for-gas-supplies-to-europe-putin-177660) (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russia-could-turn-turkiye-into-a-hub-for-gas-supplies-to-europe-putin-177660>) to the outside world. Russia is also helping revitalize the Turkish economy through enhancing economic partnerships and domestic marketing of the benefits of tourism in Turkey; figures show a [major increase in Russian tourism](https://tass.com/tourism/1555327) (<https://tass.com/tourism/1555327>) in 2022 as compared to the previous year. Russia has also advanced numerous narratives painting Erdoğan in a victorious light since the onset of Russia's incursion into Ukraine through the "famous grain deal," as well as by casting the man as a peacemaker who can balance his NATO membership and his relations with Moscow for the sake of food and global security.

Moscow's pattern of political thinking is designed to strengthen the Turkish president's tendency to openness

towards the Russian axis in opposition to NATO policies that do not align with his style of rule. The risk in this regard is that Turkish-Russian rapprochement and Putin's gifts will prompt Erdoğan to buck Western policies, and American ones in particular, along with those of their local allies in the Middle East, especially in Syria, Libya, Iran, Iraq, and Somalia. Putin's exploitation of the Turkish leader's pattern of authoritarian and autocratic thinking is spurring the latter to become even more so in his decision-making, all while destabilizing his nation's relations with the West. It is clear that Moscow would be pleased to have Turkey join the bloc that is taking shape in the region around Sino-Russian cooperation in MENA. This is likewise facilitated by Putin's prominence as a skilled player in the Middle East, where he publicly names his colleagues, intervenes on their behalf to shield them from defeat, and provides them with whatever they need to survive.

This is an appealing prospect for more regional leaders than just Erdoğan; left unchecked, Putin's overtures will likely convince the local ruling entities in the Middle East to grow closer to Moscow as they expect and then receive the same support and succor. Such messaging is all the more compelling after the perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region since the Afghanistan debacle has sunk into the region's mind. To many in the Middle East, the United States seems unconcerned with the key problems and issues occurring therein. It is uninvolved in the process of ending the conflicts in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and is unable to find ways to open channels for resolving unfinished business in other failed states, like Iraq and Lebanon. As such, the United States must understand this Russian operation and confront it through methods that support other partners and allies, strengthen their positions, and work to reorient Turkey back towards its own bloc. ❖

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## RECOMMENDED

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### BRIEF ANALYSIS

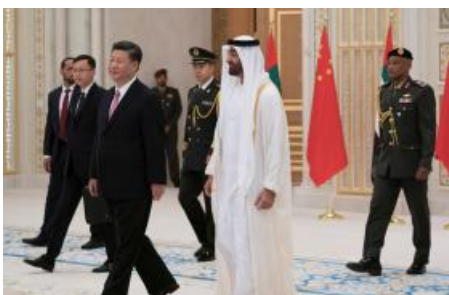
#### [The Gulf Navigates a Multipolar World](#)

Feb 24, 2023



Fawzi al-Zubaidi

[\(/policy-analysis/gulf-navigates-multipolar-world\)](#)



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Michael Singh

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Feb 22, 2023



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/israel-planning-export-gas-lng-ship)

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