

## Can the Turkish Opposition's Refugee Policies Actually Improve Syrians' Situations?

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Brief Analysis

### With elections approaching, the Turkish opposition may have an opportunity to rethink Syrian refugee policies.

There are less than five weeks until Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections, which many are dubbing the most consequential vote in Turkish history. Citizens and emigrants alike say the results will determine everything from resolving the economic crisis to establishing a post-earthquake response. The largest departure from the status quo, however, may be the departure from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's policies which have turned Turkey into the largest host of refugees worldwide.

After twenty years as the country's leader, Erdogan's run may be coming to an end this May. Despite infighting that resembled a Turkish soap opera, the political opposition has put forth Kemal Kilicdaroglu from the Republican People's Party (CHP) as its candidate. Presidential polls from the end of March show him leading Erdogan by **2.6** ([https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/neck-and-neck-race-turkey-between-erdogan-and-kilicdaroglu?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=briefly%20turkey%204323%20April%203%202023%20231&utm\\_content=briefly%20turkey%204323%20April%203%202023%20231+CID\\_e42](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/neck-and-neck-race-turkey-between-erdogan-and-kilicdaroglu?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=briefly%20turkey%204323%20April%203%202023%20231&utm_content=briefly%20turkey%204323%20April%203%202023%20231+CID_e42)) percentage points. The country's pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) also announced that it would not field a presidential candidate, creating an even more united front against the incumbent Erdogan.

One of the top reasons for Erdogan's decline in popularity has been his initially humane—and now increasingly authoritarian—decisions related to migration. Erdogan first welcomed Syrians fleeing the civil war in the early 2010's, but later used the refugees as leverage to strike a \$6.6 billion deal with European governments in 2016. In brief, the deal enabled Turkey to receive compensation for taking in migrants who were trying to reach Greece and the protection of the European Union (EU). For every Syrian returned to Turkey, the EU was meant to resettle another from Turkey. As a result, Turkey now hosts more than 4 million refugees and asylum seekers, more than any other country in the world.

Since this influx, however, the welcoming attitude toward refugees has long faded from the Turkish public. Today, Turkey is reeling from an economic crisis and a surge in anti-immigrant sentiment and violence, making the hosting of millions of migrants a top political issue for the elections. Some had hoped the sheer destruction of the catastrophic February 6 earthquake might bring the divided communities in southern Turkey together, but far-right groups immediately used the opportunity to spread fabricated claims of Syrians looting shops. Displaced Syrians reported being kicked out of temporary shelters after the earthquake so as to make room for displaced Turks.

In mid-March, Kilicdaroglu traveled to the Turkish-Syrian border where he doubled down on his vow to send Syrian refugees back within two years of the election. He also said he would send Afghans to Iran. These promises are in line with Kilicdaroglu's earlier plan, which included normalizing relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in order to cooperate on the return of Syrian refugees, and then using unpromised funds from the EU to pay Turkish contractors to build houses, schools, and roads in Syria.

Although Kilicdaroglu's refugee policies may appeal to populist demands, they cannot be seen as anything other than an affront to the safety and dignity of Syrians. The United Nations still does not deem Syria a safe to return to, and any policy to the contrary appears to be more in line with political expediency than humanitarian values. Kilicdaroglu's aggressive campaign promises should cause concern for European governments who at the moment appear more concerned with their narrow interests, namely bracing for potential new waves of migration at their doorstep. Although Europeans have attempted to keep things calm, there has been a **steady increase** (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/dtm-europe-displacement-tracking-matrix-dtm-october-december-2022-quarterly-regional-report-q4-2022>) in migrants trying to reach European borders, and governments have had to respond in kind. Already fearful of being turned away at these borders, Syrians and Afghans are only growing more anxious as the election inches closer.

Despite this environment of fear, however, there are some indications of a different approach to the refugee problem in Turkey. Canan Kaftancioglu, provincial chair of the CHP in Istanbul, **said** (<https://www.ensonhaber.com/amp/politika/canan-kaftancioglu-ile-kemal-kilicdaroglu-nun-suriyeli-celiskisi>) in response to Kilicdaroglu, her own party head, that "whatever you do in a country where 10 million foreigners came in the 21st century... there is no reality to send all these people within the framework of universal law." The opposition coalition has since published a political manifesto that says it will respect international and national laws in its migration policy, an implicit reference to the principle of non-refoulement. The HDP, an important factor in the potential election success of the opposition, has largely opted out of weaponizing the issue of refugees, instead calling for **sensitivity** (<https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections>) to migrants' rights.

With Syria still unsafe for a return of refugees, the opposition's campaigning can potentially be seen as an attempt to renegotiate with European partners to restart fraught immigration discussions while extracting additional concessions. Kilicdaroglu, for example, **said** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-elections-erdogan-rival-kilicdaroglu-pledges-visa-free-travel-eu#:~:text=The%20Turkish%20opposition's%20joint%20presidential,We%20will%20win%20the%20presidency.>) this week he would make it possible for Turkish citizens to visit Europe visa-free once he assumes office.

Over the last decade, Turks have often felt left out to dry—expected to deal with the refugee crisis alone. One former political advisor who previously advised Kilicdaroglu explained to me that the earlier EU agreement turned Turkey into a "refugee warehouse." Between 2014-2022, **only** (<https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>) 57,000 Syrians from Turkey were resettled to third countries.

Since he initially struck the deal, Erdogan has also threatened to leave the agreement and open the gates for Syrians to go West, a longstanding point of leverage that has led to a litany of inhumane practices on both sides of the border. If the opposition wins, however, it could work with the Europeans to shift away from the current zero-sum approach to migration. Rather, dialogue could improve Turkish-European relations, increasing the financial incentives for Turkey to host migrant communities but also investing in pull factors to eventually make Syria a safer, more secure place for Syrians to return to.

Moreover, dialogue could prompt Western countries to reaffirm their efforts to resettle asylum seekers and encourage Turkey to shift away from the 'temporary protection' policy that has left millions in limbo, instead opting for longer-term forms of residency, formal work, and integration. This would be an immediate boon to Turkey, which needs all-hands-on-deck for reconstruction efforts since the earthquake. It would also somewhat alleviate public attitudes that Syrians steal jobs and don't pay taxes.

With only weeks left until the elections, everyone is taking a wait and see approach, including when it comes to the politicization of migrant communities. However, the upcoming election is actually the right time to shift away from mere stop-gap measures and begin discussing policies that can offer refugees options for local integration, resettlement, or voluntary returns. Regardless of the vote outcome, the status quo is no longer an option. ❖

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