

# Syrian Perspectives on the Turkish Elections

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Emad Bouzo is a Syrian-American doctor and writer, interested in cultural and historical realities in the Middle East and international politics. He has published several pieces in newspapers across the region.



Brief Analysis

**Though Syria policies were at the center of the Turkish elections, the future for many Syrians remains unclear even after an Erdoğan victory.**

**S**yría and Turkey share a 900-kilometer border, and many Turkish, Syrian, and Kurdish families have roots on both sides. Consequently, Syrians usually keep a close eye on Turkish elections, but especially so during the country's most recent ones—resulting in a narrow victory for incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Throughout this period, the Syrian question and its ramifications were at the heart of both candidates' campaigns. Syrians, like Turks, were split between the two camps—President Erdoğan's People's Alliance on one side and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's "Table of Six" on the other. Even in light of Erdoğan's win, it is important to examine each electoral alliance's position on Syria, as these viewpoints reflect how Turkey's domestic rhetoric on challenges related to Syria is shaping both Turkish and Syrian perspectives.

The fate of the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey was central to this round of elections, with both candidates exploiting the issue to win votes. Some even resorted to using populist and racist rhetoric, blaming Syrian refugees for Turkey's current economic and social woes. The ruling People's Alliance did little to refute such allegations against Syrians, perhaps because that would require them to admit the role that Erdoğan's policies have played in these crises.

Although the two sides agreed that the refugee crisis in Turkey should be handled by repatriating refugees to Syria, they expressed major differences on how this repatriation should occur. Opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu initially promised to expel all Syrian refugees over a two-year period if he was elected. He then ramped up his rhetoric in the lead-up to the runoff election, promising that repatriation would be carried out in a single year—a change he hoped would gain the vote of Turkish nationalists.

Erdoğan, for his part, did not use this same language of "expelling" refugees, but instead euphemistically made reference to facilitating their voluntary return to Syria. His electoral platform made frequent mention of a plan to build cities in areas of northern Syria under Turkish control using funding from Qatar and regional and

international humanitarian relief organizations in order to repatriate hundreds of thousands of refugees over the course of several years. In reality, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has recently pursued a policy of harassing refugees in order to encourage them to return to Syria on their own. The government has overlooked growing anti-Syrian sentiment among the Turkish public, which has led to crimes, including murder, against Syrians.

Beyond repatriation, the Turkish opposition also raised the issue of Syrians who have obtained Turkish citizenship. Some opposition politicians claimed that granting Syrians Turkish citizenship was an AKP tactic to increase the number of sympathetic voters for the recent elections. This prompted the opposition to promise a review of citizenship procedures for Syrians if Kılıçdaroğlu won the elections.

In response to the allegations, Süleyman Soylu, the former AKP Minister of Interior, stated that before the elections, 231,000 Syrians had obtained Turkish nationality, of whom 131,000 had the right to vote. He said that this was a relatively small number of votes and would not make a difference in a country of more than 64 million voters. It is worth noting that a relatively significant number of Syrians who have so far obtained Turkish citizenship are of Turkish descent. Erdoğan also recently justified in an interview that these refugees included doctors, engineers, and businessmen, among others, and that all advanced nations try to attract these skilled immigrant workers.

A third issue that arose during the elections was the fate of the three areas under Turkish control in northern Syria. These areas include northern Aleppo, Afrin, and the strip of land between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, which together contain around one thousand small population centers and several larger cities. If the Turkish opposition were to have won the elections, it is not unlikely that they would have withdrawn from these areas in order to pursue a deal with the Syrian regime. A Turkish withdrawal from these regions would have placed additional pressure on the Idlib Governorate, which contains more than three millions civilians, half of whom are internally displaced or forcibly relocated from elsewhere in Syria. This area is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group which the United States considers a terrorist organization. The only outlet from this governorate to the rest of the world is through Turkey, which means its long-term prospects depend upon the Turkish government's policies. In contrast to the opposition, President Erdoğan stated in a CNN interview several weeks ago that he had no intention of withdrawing from northern Syria as long as the "terrorist threat" remained in that region. Such ambiguous language is a catch-all for groups including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the eastern Euphrates region, ISIS cells in the Syrian desert, and even HTS in the Idlib Governorate. The People's Alliance stance on these three issues led most Syrians who oppose the Syrian regime to stand with Erdoğan and his alliance.

Another important issue was the stance of the two electoral coalitions regarding the areas under the control of the U.S.-backed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Although the Kurdish issue is very sensitive for most Turkish parties, the opposition alliance held various negotiations with the Kurdish-affiliated People's Democratic Party (HDP). This resulted in an agreement whose parameters remained unclear, but which helped the opposition gain a significant percentage of the Kurdish vote.

For his part, Erdoğan considered the Autonomous Administration a strategic risk for Turkey—along with the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Autonomous Administration in Syria provides a potential model for Turkey in which an autonomous Kurdish region within Turkey could materialize. Erdoğan has made numerous unsuccessful efforts to block U.S. aid from reaching eastern Syria, and he continues to use the Autonomous Administration issue as a key justification for Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian regime, which likewise agrees that the Kurdish self-governance should be brought to an end. As a result of Erdoğan's proposed "close coordination" with Assad on this issue, a significant number of Syrian Kurds supported the opposition alliance instead.

In the end, a majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey celebrated Erdoğan's victory. The press reported that "Syrian

refugees breathe a sigh of relief as Erdoğan wins ([https://url.emailprotection.link/?b2rtNu6YWt-BP-dai-zH9ogPOHaN0NwJq71uuGgoMholsJQgRFGDFwKYZpcCVzDqz2\\_Gix-zw9uP0p1AHioK8bfctkbWCZZJXyGun6Fkw00T7dc5JuHfJhqP76sPmuohxVDPObVJ7U9-HnxlMtQOk17Lo4y5R36pbtmA\\_sJttSNmwqeOlhSa4HxJzHAvmHoiNrFmQx8X5XFN-9x3lgr-hNiHyKnGj0Tdxzk3Z2iXKK3QNP8Uc\\_rERRSywJa6P\\_jQc](https://url.emailprotection.link/?b2rtNu6YWt-BP-dai-zH9ogPOHaN0NwJq71uuGgoMholsJQgRFGDFwKYZpcCVzDqz2_Gix-zw9uP0p1AHioK8bfctkbWCZZJXyGun6Fkw00T7dc5JuHfJhqP76sPmuohxVDPObVJ7U9-HnxlMtQOk17Lo4y5R36pbtmA_sJttSNmwqeOlhSa4HxJzHAvmHoiNrFmQx8X5XFN-9x3lgr-hNiHyKnGj0Tdxzk3Z2iXKK3QNP8Uc_rERRSywJa6P_jQc)).” Celebrations in Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria were even more raucous and included fireworks. However, Syrian Kurds were left feeling more uneasy, perhaps even more so than Kurds in Turkey, due to fears of another Turkish military operation targeting their regions. Most Syrian Kurds feel that they will be forced to pay the price of any deal reached between the Syrian regime and Erdoğan. The Syrian regime and its allies were disappointed by Erdoğan’s victory, especially since Erdoğan will now be stronger as a result of his alliance winning a majority in Parliament. He will no longer be forced to offer concessions for electoral reasons, and the Syrian regime will no longer be able to impose the same preconditions for negotiations, such as a withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Syria. Turkey is expected to join forces with Lebanon, Jordan, and other Arab League states in order to secure the safe return of refugees to Syria. The Syrian regime is of course not keen for that to happen.

However, the trajectory of the past decade has made clear that it will be difficult to trust President Erdoğan after the many shifts that have occurred in his stances and policies, particularly when it comes to Syria. This will be especially true if he insists on turning east and strengthening alliances with Russia and China, while continuing to pick fights with Europe and the United States. Such dynamics could potentially bring him closer to the Syrian regime.

During the tenuous period that lies ahead, it will be best for Syrians to exercise patience, maintaining ties with all Turkish political forces instead of relying on a single political actor. It would not be surprising if Erdoğan’s extended time in office is followed by a period in which the majority of the Turkish electorate shifts away from his policies, as often happens when leaders stay in office longer than they should. Considering the ever-changing political landscape in Turkey, Syrians should hedge their bets rather than viewing Erdoğan’s victory as a decisive conclusion. ❖

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