



Turkey After Erdogan

Sinan Ciddi
Foreword by Henri Barkey
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Foreword

The Republic of Turkey will turn 100 years old this year. Fittingly, it will also hold presidential and parliamentary elections, which will be among the most consequential for the Turkish people since 1950. These elections will be equally critical for neighboring regions in which Turkey has played an active role — the Russian invasion of Ukraine has once again demonstrated the value of Turkey’s geographic position to the NATO alliance.

As Sinan Ciddi argues in “Turkey after Erdogan,” Turkey has been totally transformed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In his 20 years in power, Erdogan has taken control of just about every institution and imposed one-man rule. All decisions, big and small, are taken by him. Turkey, which was once a democracy, however flawed, is well on its way to becoming an autocracy. That is why these elections are so critical to Turkey’s future.

While he coasted to victory in previous elections, Erdogan now faces myriad formidable challenges. First and foremost, the average citizen has had to bear the brunt of spiking inflation and a far weaker lira, for which Erdogan’s unconventional economic policies are more than partly responsible. The Turkish public is also upset at the 4 million Syrian refugees Erdogan admitted — to his credit — after the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

If this were not enough, the devastating earthquake that killed tens of thousands last month has demonstrated to all the inadequacies of the personalistic regime Erdogan has constructed. From the unpreparedness of public institutions to the 2018 regulatory amnesty for substandard construction — which effectively condemned to death the residents of such buildings — the earthquake has added an altogether new layer of immediacy to the political maelstrom.

Ciddi, however, is not sanguine about the opposition’s prospects. Its leaders have yet to produce a coherent vision and have not shown the courage to tackle



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses the nation from a disaster coordination center in Ankara one day after the February 6, 2023, earthquakes. (Screenshot via Anadolu Agency)

difficult questions, such as the Kurdish issue. Alienating Kurdish voters may be costly because their support is likely necessary to best Erdogan.

For Ciddi, one of the most critical questions is whether, if Erdogan were to lose, he would agree to a peaceful transfer of power. No one really knows. In 2019, he concocted a scheme to re-run the Istanbul municipal elections when his party lost, only to be shocked when the voters “reelected” the original winner, Ekrem Imamoglu, by a larger margin.

Now, as Ciddi points out, Erdogan is looking for ways to prevent Imamoglu from becoming the opposition’s presidential candidate because just about every poll shows Erdogan would lose to him. To ensure Imamoglu is not eligible to run, a politicized court sentenced him to prison in December on a false charge. (He remains free while appealing the conviction.)

Meanwhile, Turkey has had numerous run-ins with Washington. One erupted after the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, which got the Turks kicked out of the F-35 aircraft program. In northern Syria, Erdogan has targeted America’s allies in the war against the Islamic State, the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units. Erdogan is also blocking Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO for reasons that have little to do with geopolitics but more with his desire for brinkmanship with the West.

Would Turkish foreign policy change if the opposition won the upcoming elections? Yes, but not completely.

Some of Erdogan's nationalist gambits have broad support. Both government and opposition agree on sending back the refugees (which is easier said than done). On Syria, a reversal will be hard, since Erdogan loyal media have demonized America's Syrian allies. If Erdogan were to win — legitimately or otherwise — his feeling of vindication may lead relations to deteriorate on both the foreign policy front as well as on issues relating to democracy.

That said, the earthquake has opened up a possibility for better relations with Turkey's neighbors, especially Greece, reminiscent of how a major quake in 1999 led all sides to shy away from brinkmanship and see the value of allies whose aid, goodwill, and patience is very much needed.

What is to be done in such a challenging situation? Ciddi has several prudent and smart recommendations for Washington and Europe. In short, he calls upon Turkey's allies to prepare for all eventualities and, most importantly, keep their powder dry by avoiding conflict with Erdogan before the May 14 elections.

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Introduction¹

After twenty years of dominating Turkish politics, Recep Tayyip Erdogan faces an electoral challenge to his hold on power. Turkish law requires Erdogan to hold presidential and parliamentary elections no later than June of this year. Until recently, polls put Erdogan slightly behind his potential challengers.² Economic conditions are dire. Last November, inflation hit a 24-year high of 85.5 percent.³ Two years ago, the Turkish lira traded at five to the dollar; now it's at 19.

Erdogan's political calculations became more complicated after two devastating earthquakes struck ten provinces in the country's southeast on February 6.⁴ The disaster destroyed major cities, affecting close to 10 million individuals directly. Although the official death count at the time of this writing stands close to 47,000,⁵ some estimates project the toll could rise to 100,000 with many more injured.⁶ Public outrage is growing. The anger is directed at a slow and apparently politicized government response that prioritized limiting the damage to Erdogan's reputation rather than saving lives.⁷ To that end, the government blocked access to Twitter to contain harsh criticism, while hampering individuals' ability to contact relief workers and alert them to their location.⁸ Politics aside, rescue efforts have suffered from a lack of coordination, resulting in lengthy delays before help arrived.⁹ Anger

1. The writing of this monograph began in May 2022 and the completed work was in the final stages of editing when two deadly earthquakes devastated southeastern Turkey on February 6, 2023.

2. @ozersencar1, *Twitter*, December 6, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/ozersencar1/status/1600112278149406720>)

3. "Turkey's Inflation Hits 24-year High of 85.5% After Rate Cuts," *Reuters*, November 3, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/turkeys-inflation-hits-24-year-high-855-after-rate-cuts-2022-11-03>)

4. Rhea Mogul, Gul Tuysuz, Isil Sariyuce, Kareem El Damanhoury, and Rob Picheta, "More Than 4,300 Dead in Turkey and Syria After Powerful Earthquake," *CNN*, February 6, 2023. (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/05/europe/earthquake-hits-turkey-intl-hnk/index.html>)

5. "New 6.3 magnitude quake rocks Turkey as death toll nears 47,000," *ABC*, February 20, 2023. (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/new-64-earthquake-strikes-turkey-death-toll-climbs/story?id=97337228>)

6. @risklayer, *Twitter*, February 9, 2023. (<https://twitter.com/risklayer/status/1623625522310676482>)

7. Ben Hubbard, Hwaida Saad, Raja Abdulrahim, Safak Timur, Steven Erlanger, and Gulsin Harman, "As Anger Swells Over Quake, Turkey Detains Building Contractors," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2023. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/11/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-earthquake.html>)

8. Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Turkey Blocks Twitter After Public Criticism of Quake Response," *Balkan Insight* (Turkey), February 8, 2023. (<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/02/08/turkey-blocks-twitter-after-public-criticism-of-quake-response>)

9. "Quake Survivors Wait on for News of Missing in Turkey and Syria but Hopes Fade; Death Toll Tops 25,000," *CNBC*, February 11, 2023. (<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/11/earthquake-death-toll-in-turkey-climbs-crossing-20660.html>)

is also directed at corrupt officials who worsened the devastation by facilitating shoddy urban planning, loose implementation of building codes, and a general lack of disaster management planning.¹⁰

As of this writing, Turkey's elections are still scheduled to be held. That could change if Erdogan seeks to wield the natural disaster as an excuse to postpone the vote. The West is now tracking this carefully. The elections have the potential to bring meaningful change to the country.

Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952, yet Erdogan has pursued an increasingly anti-Western foreign policy while dismantling the rule of law at home. The Turkish president has befriended Russian President Vladimir Putin and purchased advanced air defenses from Moscow.¹¹ He has held U.S. and European citizens in Turkish jails on false charges.¹² Members of Erdogan's inner circle in recent years helped Iran move tens of billions of dollars in violation of U.S. sanctions.¹³ And senior Hamas leaders operate freely in Turkey, while the U.S. Treasury has imposed round after round of sanctions on terror financiers operating on Turkish soil.¹⁴

For Washington, Turkey's election offers the possibility of a democratic restoration and the return of a valuable ally to the Western fold. Yet how likely is it that Turkish voters will reject Erdogan after he cemented his own power for two decades? Even if voters turn against Erdogan, will the election be free and fair? If

an opposition candidate prevails, will Erdogan respect the results? And if the opposition takes power, can it revive Turkish democracy and steer the country back in a westward direction?

U.S. and European leaders should not let their hope cloud their vision. Erdogan may win without rigging the vote. He also may ensure he wins by banning the most formidable opposition candidates and exploiting his considerable control of Turkey's electoral machinery. If Erdogan senses defeat, no one should expect him to leave quietly. If he loses office, he is likely to face corruption charges along with numerous members of his family, not to mention his inner circle.¹⁵ If defeat seems imminent, judges and elections officials loyal to Erdogan may overturn the results, as they attempted to do by annulling Istanbul's mayoral election results in 2019. Or he may even rely on the police and the armed forces. Indeed, he may not relinquish power after having lost an election.

Finally, Western leaders should temper their expectations that an opposition victory will lead Ankara to pursue rapprochement, at least in the short term. To be sure, opposition leaders do not share Erdogan's intense, ideological hostility toward the West. Yet anti-Western feeling has deep roots in Turkish politics, so the odds may not favor a reversal of many policies. Turks across the political spectrum resent Washington's partnership with a Syrian Kurdish militia in the fight against the Islamic State, since Ankara considers the militia a terrorist group. The failure of Turkey's effort

10. Jen Kirby, "Will Turkey's Earthquake Response Threaten President Erdogan's Grip on Power," *Vox*, February 9, 2023. (<https://www.vox.com/world/2023/2/9/23591279/turkey-earthquake-erdogan-response-elections>)

11. Aykan Erdemir, John Hardie, and Sinan Ciddi, "Collusion or Collision?" *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 3, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/12/03/collusion-or-collision>)

12. Aykan Erdemir and Eric S. Edelman, "Erdogan's Hostage Diplomacy," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, May 31, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/05/31/erdogans-hostage-diplomacy-western-nationals-in-turkish-prisons>)

13. Jonathan Schanzer, "The Biggest Sanctions-Evasion Scheme in Recent History," *The Atlantic*, January 4, 2018. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-turkey-gold-sanctions-nuclear-zarrab-atilla/549665>)

14. Aykan Erdemir, "Treasury Sanctions Jihadist Financiers in Turkey for the Seventh Time Since 2019," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 17, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/09/17/jihadist-financiers-in-turkey>)

15. Berivan Orucoglu, "Why Turkey's Mother of All Corruption Scandals Refuses to Go Away," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2015. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/06/why-turkeys-mother-of-all-corruption-scandals-refuses-to-go-away>); Howard Eissenstat, "Report – 'Erdogan as Autocrat: A Very Turkish Tragedy,'" *Project on Middle East Democracy*, April 12, 2017. (<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/erdogan-autocrat-very-turkish-tragedy>)

to join the European Union (EU) also generated animosity that persists to this day. Deep within the foreign ministry and Turkish armed forces, Erdogan's loyalists now hold dominant positions, and they are likely to remain in the bureaucracy for years to come. Nevertheless, the departure of Erdogan and the revival of Turkey's liberal traditions would offer the best hope for a course correction.

Twenty Years in Power

Erdogan once embodied Western hopes for the deepening of Turkey's democracy. He became prime minister in 2003 after his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* — AKP) won the November 2002 election. Further victories followed in 2007 and 2011. Erdogan built an electoral alliance that cut across all segments of society, gaining almost half of all votes cast in 2011, more than any party since the 1980s.¹⁶ The economy grew rapidly. The government followed an International Monetary Fund (IMF) stabilization plan, implemented financial and banking sector reforms, invested in infrastructure, made improvements in healthcare and education, and curbed inflation.¹⁷

Erdogan also met with success abroad. Turkey's Parliament passed multiple democratization packages between 2002 and 2004, enabling Turkey to begin accession talks with the EU and creating the potential for the union's first Muslim-majority member state. This was the high point of Erdogan's engagement with the West. He also invested substantial political capital to resolve the long-standing dispute in Cyprus between

the government in Nicosia and the Turkish Cypriot republic in the north that Ankara effectively controls. During the mid-to-late 2000s, Erdogan also oversaw a bold program of repairing Turkey's troubled relations with Arab governments. Dubbed "zero problems with neighbors," Erdogan's policy normalized or improved relations with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Erdogan even attempted to normalize Turkish ties with Armenia. Ankara further began to act as a mediator between Israel and Syria, although their differences proved unbridgeable. In 2009, newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama visited Turkey on his first trip overseas, telling parliament that Washington strongly supported Ankara's bid for EU accession and valued Turkey as "a resolute ally and responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions."¹⁸

Amid the uprisings of the Arab Spring, Western observers held up Turkey as the model of "a modern, moderate Muslim state that works."¹⁹ Yet Erdogan's response to the domestic Gezi Park protests of May 2013 demonstrated that Turkey was moving in the opposite direction. The government engaged in brutal violence to break up a small protest in Istanbul at a park where environmentalists gathered to oppose the construction of a shopping mall. In response, mass demonstrations erupted across the country, where disgust was already growing amid revelations of vast corruption within the government. The environmental focus of the initial protests quickly widened into calls for greater transparency, accountability, and adherence to democratic norms. Erdogan believed the protests were an orchestrated attempt to topple him — a contention at odds with available evidence.²⁰ Under

16. In 2002, the AKP won a parliamentary majority with 34.2 percent of the popular vote. In 2007, its share rose to 46.8 percent, followed by 49.8 in 2011.

17. Ekim Arbatli and Eren Arbatli, "Turkish Economic Development 2002-2015: Successes and Failures of a Resource-Poor Upper-Middle Income Country," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2017. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/files/arbati.new.pdf>)

18. White House, Press Release, "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament," April 6, 2009. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>)

19. Peter Kenyon, "The Turkish Model: Can It Be Replicated?" *NPR*, January 6, 2012. (<https://www.npr.org/2012/01/06/144751851/the-turkish-model-can-it-be-replicated>)

20. Ozge Zihnioğlu, "The Legacy of the Gezi Protests in Turkey," *Carnegie Europe*, October 24, 2019. (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/10/24/legacy-of-gezi-protests-in-turkey-pub-80142>)

Erdogan's direction, police crushed the mainly peaceful protests, leaving 11 dead and thousands injured.²¹

The move toward autocratic rule accelerated sharply after followers of exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen launched a failed coup attempt in July 2016. Erdogan responded with mass purges of the military, civil service, judiciary, and universities. He also accused the United States of "taking sides with the coup plotters," owing to Washington's refusal to extradite the Pennsylvania-based Gulen, or even serving as "the superior intelligence behind it."²² Erdogan then set about consolidating power at home.²³ Freedom House downgraded Turkey from "partly free" to "not free" following "a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, the mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrary prosecutions of rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued purges of state employees."²⁴ In 2014, Erdogan traded the premiership for the presidency, an office that technically had much less power. He wielded a constitutional referendum in 2017 that abolished the premiership while endowing the presidency with unprecedented powers. Under the new constitutional provisions, Erdogan has amassed executive, legislative, and judicial powers that enable him to rule by executive order with minimal to no checks and balances.²⁵ While a democratic façade remains, Erdogan has transformed Turkey into an autocratic state where the rule of law barely exists.²⁶

A Less-Than-Unified Opposition

As of this writing, the six opposition parties that comprise the "Nation Alliance" (*Millet İttifaki*) have still not chosen a candidate to challenge Erdogan at the polls. Nor has the alliance put forward a clear vision for how to repair Turkey's faltering economy, problematic foreign policy, and troubled democracy. Without greater resolve and focus, the opposition is unlikely to mount an effective campaign or weaken Erdogan's hold on power, even if voters turn against him.

To become president, a candidate must win more than 50 percent of the vote. If no candidate crosses that threshold, there is a run-off between the top two finishers. In 2018, Erdogan prevailed with an absolute majority.²⁷ Turkish law requires parliament to designate the day of elections at least 90 days in advance. Since an election must be held by June 18, parliament must fix the date no later than March 18. Voters will choose both the next president and all 600 members of parliament.

The main contenders for the opposition mantle are Kemal Kilicdaroglu and Ekrem Imamoglu, both of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* — CHP), the party of the republic's founding father, Kemal Ataturk. The CHP is by far the largest party within the alliance; it won 22 percent of the popular

21. Sinan Ciddi, "Political Opposition in Turkey: From Political Parties to the Gezi Protests," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2014. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43773626>); Kursat Akyol, "No Justice for Gezi Victims," *Deutsche Welle (Germany)*, May 30, 2016. (<https://www.dw.com/en/three-years-on-in-turkey-no-justice-for-victims-of-gezi-park-protests/a-19294078>)

22. Suzan Fraser and Elena Becatoros, "Erdogan's Turkey slams U.S. reaction to failed coup," *Associated Press*, July 29, 2016. (https://digitaledition.baltimoresun.com/tribune/article_popover.aspx?guid=fc51397c-b9e9-4d09-a42e-415edbc80ed3)

23. Carlotta Gall, "Erdogan Flush with Victory, Seizes New Powers in Turkey," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/world/asia/turkey-erdogan.html>)

24. "Turkey," *Freedom House*, accessed February 6, 2023. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2018>)

25. Alan Makovsky, "Erdogan's Proposal for an Empowered Presidency," *Center for American Progress*, March 22, 2017. (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/erdogans-proposal-empowered-presidency>)

26. Soner Cagaptay, "Erdogan's End Game: Will He Undermine Turkish Democracy to Stay in Power?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 4, 2022. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-end-game-will-he-undermine-turkish-democracy-stay-power>)

27. Gul Tuysuz, Isil Sariyuce, Angela Dewan, and Euan McKirdy, "Turkey's Erdogan Victorious in Election that Grants him Unprecedented Power," *CNN*, June 25, 2018. (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/24/europe/turkish-election-results-intl/index.html>)



Ekrem Imamoglu delivers a speech for his supporters during a protest in front of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality in Istanbul on December 15, 2022. (Photo by Yasin Akgul/ AFP via Getty Images)

vote in 2018. Kilicdaroglu, 73, is a retired bureaucrat from the Turkish social security administration and has led the party since 2010. He has a reputation for being honest and has criticized Erdogan's strongman rule and corruption while vowing to reestablish the rule of law and democratic governance. Kilicdaroglu also appears to have the backing of the other leaders of the alliance, but critics say he is too old, colorless, and uncharismatic and has spent too much time as opposition leader without scoring any significant victories against Erdogan.²⁸ Yet in 2017, Kilicdaroglu briefly shone by leading a "Justice March" from Ankara to Istanbul to highlight the need for an independent judiciary and fair treatment for the victims of mass arrests in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup. The march culminated with a rally in the capital at which hundreds of thousands of protesters cheered for the opposition leader.²⁹

Imamoglu, however, is the candidate Erdogan fears the most. The charismatic mayor, 52, is fighting a



Kemal Kilicdaroglu speaks during his party's group meeting at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara on December 20, 2022. (Photo by Mehmet Ali Azcan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

two-year prison sentence and political ban that a politicized court handed down in December 2022 — it convicted him of "insulting public officials" after Imamoglu referred to certain pro-Erdogan officials as "fools."³⁰ The nature of the charge illustrates the extent to which the government has undermined civil liberties. Imamoglu is known for his amiable personality and his ability to connect with voters personally. Polls indicate he would be a more formidable challenger than Kilicdaroglu.³¹

Imamoglu dealt AKP an embarrassing setback in 2019, when he mounted a successful mayoral campaign in Istanbul. Turkey's election officials nullified the first round of voting on spurious procedural grounds, forcing a revote. The second time around, Imamoglu won 54 percent, the best performance of any mayoral candidate in Istanbul in over 30 years. Even conservative neighborhoods that were once Erdogan strongholds voted for Imamoglu.³² Last year, he conducted a tour of Turkey's Black Sea region, including Erdogan's home

28. Berk Esen, "The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdogan?" *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, August 2022 (https://www.swpberlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C52_OppositionAllianceInTurkey.pdf)

29. Carlotta Gall, "'March for Justice' Ends in Istanbul with a Pointed Challenge to Erdogan," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2017. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/09/world/europe/turkey-march-for-justice-istanbul.html>)

30. Kareem Fahim and Zeynep Karatas, "Turkish Court Sentences Erdogan Rival to Prison for Insulting Officials," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2022. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/14/turkey-erdogan-ekrem-imamoglu/>)

31. Birsen Altayli, Ece Toksabay, and Orhan Coskun, "Analysis: Turkish Court Raises Stakes in Search for a Challenger to Erdogan," *Reuters*, December 16, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-court-raises-stakes-search-challenger-erdogan-2022-12-15/>)

32. Merve Tahiroglu, "Istanbul's New Mayor-Elect Emerges as Top Erdogan Rival," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 24, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/24/istanbuls-new-mayor-elect-emerges-as-top-erdogan-rival>)

province of Rize, where tens of thousands of people turned out to hear him speak.³³ Erdogan has good reason to want Imamoglu out of the race.

“Setting aside the question of who will run, the opposition has thus far failed to convince voters it can do a better job than Erdogan or that it would govern Turkey in a way that addresses their concerns.”

Setting aside the question of who will run, the opposition has thus far failed to convince voters it can do a better job than Erdogan or that it would govern Turkey in a way that addresses their concerns.³⁴ Given voters’ economic concerns, the Alliance has said surprisingly little about how it would fight inflation or increase citizens’ purchasing power and access to job opportunities. One Turkish commentator considered “the lack of public enthusiasm for [the Nation Alliance] as a result of the opposition’s failure to generate a hope for change. The opposition is almost dead — quite sedate that it cannot excite the masses. They cannot say anything new.”³⁵ The CHP itself suffers from a historically rooted credibility gap. While it is the founding party of the Turkish republic, the CHP has not joined a governing coalition since the 1970s. Its name says it is the “people’s party,” but it suffers

from a reputation for elitism and being out of touch with the people.³⁶

Tactically, Kilicdaroglu stumbled as 2022 drew to a close. The CHP chairman visited both Washington and London but did not meet with officials. Instead, he held discussions with university students and civil society leaders, raising questions about the point of these foreign visits.³⁷ Domestically, Kilicdaroglu attempted to outflank Erdogan on the right by claiming that the president and the AKP have not provided legal protections for conservative women who chose to wear the headscarf in public.³⁸ The effort backfired. Erdogan countered that if the CHP were serious about shedding its elitist credentials and genuinely interested in protecting the rights of conservative women, it would join the AKP in proposing a constitutional change to enshrine those rights.³⁹ Seeing the trap he had walked into, Kilicdaroglu abandoned the initiative. Critics wondered why the CHP leader had picked that fight rather than attacking Erdogan’s weakest point, the economy.⁴⁰

Given the dire economic conditions in Turkey today, defeating Erdogan should theoretically be easy, no matter the opposing candidate. In December, Erdogan’s job approval rating stood at 45 percent, versus 52 percent disapproval.⁴¹ In addition to rampant inflation and an imploding currency, Turkey remains host to over 4 million refugees, most of

33. Imamoglu himself is also from the Black Sea region. Andrew Wilks, “Istanbul Mayor Challenges AKP Government on Visit to Erdogan’s Home Province,” *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2022. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/istanbul-mayor-challenges-akp-government-visit-erdogans-home-province>)

34. Pinar Tremblay, “Turkish Opposition Stumbles on United Platform,” *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2022. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/turkish-opposition-stumbles-united-platform>)

35. Ibid.

36. Sinan Ciddi, *Kemalism in Turkish Politics: The Republican People’s Party, Secularism and Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009). (<https://www.amazon.com/Kemalism-Turkish-Politics-Republican-Nationalism/dp/0415612810?asin=0415612810&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1>)

37. “Turkey’s Main Opposition Leader to ‘Snub’ US Gov’t Officials During Washington Visit,” *Turkish Minute (Germany)*, September 23, 2022. (<https://www.turkishminute.com/2022/09/23/to-snub-us-govt-officials-during-washington-visit>)

38. “Turkish Main Opposition to Submit Draft Law on Right to Wear Headscarf in Public,” *Duvar English (Turkey)*, October 4, 2022. (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-main-opposition-to-submit-draft-law-on-right-to-wear-headscarf-in-public-news-61380>)

39. Andrew Wilks, “Erdogan Floats Referendum on Headscarf, ‘Family Institution,’” *Al-Monitor*, November 2, 2022. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/erdogan-floats-referendum-headscarf-family-institution>)

40. Kristina Jovanovski, “Erdogan’s Party Fomenting Cultural War Ahead of Turkey’s Elections,” *The Media Line*, November 11, 2022. (<https://themedialine.org/top-stories/erdogans-party-fomenting-cultural-war-ahead-of-turkeys-elections>)

41. @metropoll, *Twitter*, December 29, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/metropoll/status/1608405424675364866/photo/1>)

them Syrian, whom the public resents for soaking up government resources and driving down wages.⁴² The war in Ukraine has also driven up energy prices, with a marked drop in tourism revenues from Ukrainian and Russian visitors.⁴³ Turkey also continues to deal with the economic fallout of the COVID pandemic, such as shortages and supply chain disruptions, and a general deterioration of public health.⁴⁴ Yet, rather than blaming Erdogan, there is a vast swath of the voting public that continues to believe that only Erdogan can solve Turkey's problems.⁴⁵ Erdogan is an effective speaker who has proven time and again that he can run potent campaigns. Even if they disapprove of Erdogan's performance, voters may still prefer their current strongman to an untested opponent.

A final dilemma facing the alliance is how to approach Kurdish voters and the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* — HDP), which commands strong Kurdish support. The HDP won

between 10 and 13 percent of the popular vote in the last three parliamentary elections. The party's co-chairman between 2014 and 2018, Selahattin Demirtas, has spent nearly seven years in prison on specious charges.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the Nation Alliance has refused to invite the HDP to join it, fearing Erdogan would brand the alliance as terror sympathizers, since many Turks associate the HDP with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both Ankara and Washington sanctioned as a terrorist organization.⁴⁷ Even so, if the alliance nominates a candidate acceptable to HDP leadership, the party may rally its base against Erdogan. A positive response is more likely if the alliance chooses Imamoglu as its candidate,⁴⁸ since Kurdish voters perceive him as a liberal who does not harbor toxic Turkish nationalist sentiments. For this reason, Imamoglu received widespread Kurdish support during Istanbul's mayoral race in 2019.⁴⁹ However, absent a current candidate acceptable to their voters, the HDP recently announced it would nominate its own candidate.⁵⁰

42. "Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions," *International Crisis Group*, January 29, 2018. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/248-turkeys-syrian-refugees-defusing-metropolitan-tensions>): Ethnic difference also explains hostility toward the refugees, since they are Arab, not Turkish.

43. Bobby Ghosh, "Turkey's Neutrality on Ukraine is Coming at a High Price," *Bloomberg*, April 18, 2022. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/turkeys-neutrality-on-ukraine-is-coming-at-a-high-price/2022/04/15/2c9b57c6-bc92-11ec-a92d-c763de818c21_story.html)

44. Ebru Voyvoda and A. Erinc Yeldan, "Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Turkey's Economy and a Policy Alternative for Protecting Labor Incomes," *Political Economy Research Institute*, July 13, 2020. (https://peri.umass.edu/images/Covid_VoyvodaYeldan_2_SummaryforPERI.pdf)

45. Selim Kuru, "The Voice of the People," *Kulturkampf*, May 5, 2022. (<https://kulturkampftr.substack.com/p/the-voice-of-the-people>); Interviews available via YouTube channels such as Medyali also document this enduring confidence in Erdogan. See: "medyali tv", *YouTube*. (<https://www.youtube.com/@medyali>)

46. "Turkish Court Sentences Demirtas to Jail for Insulting President: Lawyer," *Reuters*, March 22, 2021. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-demirtas/turkish-court-sentences-demirtas-to-jail-for-insulting-president-lawyer-idUSKBN2BE2NT>)

47. "Both Political Alliances Will Need Us on Their Side in Elections," *Duvar English* (Turkey), September 26, 2021. (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/both-political-alliances-will-need-us-on-their-side-in-elections-hdp-news-58956>)

48. Gonca Tokyo, "Swing Vote in Hand, Türkiye's Pro-Kurdish Party Holds Cards Close to its Chest," *Bianet* (Turkey), September 20, 2022. (<https://bianet.org/english/politics/267401-swing-vote-in-hand-turkiye-s-pro-kurdish-party-holds-cards-close-to-its-chest>)

49. Maaz Ibrahimoglu, "Kurdish Voters Look to Imamoglu to Fulfil Broken Promises of AKP," *Ahval* (Turkey), June 14, 2019. (<https://ahvalnews.com/istanbul-election-rerun/kurdish-voters-look-imamoglu-fulfil-broken-promises-akp>)

50. Murat Yetkin, "HDP to Name a Candidate: Turkish Poll Likely to End in 2nd Tour," *Yetkin Report* (Turkey), January 9, 2023. (<https://yetkinreport.com/en/2023/01/09/hdp-to-name-a-candidate-turkish-poll-likely-to-end-in-2nd-tour>): Even if the HDP fields its own candidate, this will have little impact on whether Erdogan avoids a run-off by securing a majority in the first round. The question is whether HDP voters will turn out to oppose Erdogan in a run-off.

Erdogan's Advantages as an Incumbent

The Turkish opposition can still unite around a strong candidate and a clear platform. However, it would still have to contend with Erdogan's extraordinary influence over the Turkish media, judiciary, electoral machinery, and law enforcement.

Pro-Erdogan outlets dominate Turkey's mainstream media, which filter and bend information to favor the president.⁵¹ Most Turkish citizens get their news from television, and the vast majority of networks are pro-Erdogan.⁵² Many media outlets deny coverage to opposition political parties and generally present a pro-Erdogan narrative.⁵³ A handful of Turkish outlets, such as Medyascope and Halk TV, remain effectively independent but tend to focus on the internal politics of the Nation Alliance, a safer topic than Erdogan's authoritarianism. Citizens who are keen to get more objective information often look to foreign outlets, such as BBC Turkish, Deutsche Welle Turkish, *Al-Monitor*, and the Turkish-language edition of *The Independent*, or to individuals they trust in their social media circles. In October 2022, Turkey's parliament passed a "disinformation law" designed to silence critical voices across all media platforms. The law empowers prosecutors to request the removal of

content anywhere from newspapers to Twitter feeds if legal authorities deem it to be disinformation and harmful to the public interest.⁵⁴ The law undermines investigative journalism and increases self-censorship among dissidents and reporters. With limited access to independent media, Turkish voters are likely to make less informed decisions at the polls.

The courts are another potent weapon for Erdogan. As noted, Imamoglu is fighting a prison sentence and Selahattin Demirtas, the HDP co-chair, has been jailed since 2016. The government has also pursued an effort to shut down the HDP completely, arguing before the Constitutional Court that the party has direct ties to the PKK.⁵⁵ This case is still pending, with fears that the HDP may be shuttered shortly prior to the election.⁵⁶ The high court also froze certain HDP bank accounts while it considers the case.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the HDP base may not turn to Nation Alliance candidates if the courts shutter the HDP, since the alliance includes nationalists who may repel many Kurdish voters.⁵⁸ If HDP voters stay home, it could change the outcome of a close election for president, parliament, or both.

If the media and the courts cannot tilt the playing field sufficiently, Erdogan may try to change the outcome of the election, as he did before. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found that Turkey's governing party has interfered in elections

51. Jonathan Spicer, "Insiders Reveal How Erdogan Tamed Turkey's Newsroom," *Reuters*, August 31, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media>)

52. Andrew O' Donohue, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape," *Center for American Progress*, June 10, 2020. (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/turkeys-changing-media-landscape>)

53. Ibid.

54. Dorian Jones, "Turkey Slammed Over Proposed Social Media Controls," *Voice of America*, October 12, 2022. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-slammed-over-proposed-social-media-controls-/6786926.html>)

55. Meral Danis Bestas and Merve Tahiroglu, "Fundamentally a Political, not a Legal, Case" - A Conversation with Meral Danis Bestas on Turkey's Move to Close the HDP," *Project on Middle East Democracy*, September 3, 2021. (<https://pomed.org/fundamentally-a-political-not-a-legal-case-a-conversation-with-meral-danis-bestas-on-turkeys-move-to-close-the-hdp>)

56. "Constitutional Court Suspends HDP's Election Funds Amid Closure Case," *Bianet* (Turkey), January 5, 2023. (<https://m.bianet.org/english/politics/272451-constitutional-court-suspends-hdp-s-election-funds-amid-closure-case>)

57. Ece Toksabay, "Turkish Top Court Freezes Pro-Kurdish Funds as Elections Loom," *Reuters*, January 5, 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-top-court-blocks-pro-kurdish-hdp-bank-accounts-state-media-2023-01-05>)

58. For example, one of the alliance's six members is the *Iyi Parti* (Good Party), led by Meral Aksener, a right-wing nationalist party that is not supportive of Turkey's Kurdish democratic movement as advocated by the HDP. Although the HDP has not ruled out supporting the Nation Alliance's candidate for president, one cannot assume an endorsement is forthcoming.

since 2017.⁵⁹ Specifically, in 2018, the OSCE reported, “While all candidates have used harsh and denigrating rhetoric against each other, the incumbent president has repeatedly referred to other candidates and parties as supporters of terrorism.” The OSCE noted, “In five provinces, bans on assembly, public gatherings and press statements [were] been imposed. Opposition parties informed the [the authorities] that they [had] been obstructed in campaigning.”⁶⁰

Finally, Turkey’s Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) — the body that will certify election results and resolve legal disputes — is packed with Erdogan loyalists.⁶¹ The YSK also receives tabulations from all election precincts and tabulates country-wide results. Moreover, the state-run Anatolian News Agency (ANA), a wire service friendly to the AKP, then publishes what it deems to be the official results. In each election since 2015, ANA has faced severe criticism for calling victories for Erdogan and the AKP before the vote counting process was completed.⁶² ANA’s actions led to election monitors deserting their precincts, believing the election was over and that Erdogan had won.⁶³ This

enabled the distortion of tallies in precincts with votes still to be counted.

Additionally, it is unclear for now if observers from international organizations, like the OSCE, or domestic civil society organizations, such as *Oy ve Otesi* (The Vote and Beyond), will be able to monitor the vote. Under the newly passed disinformation law, the government could designate election monitoring outlets as entities that intend to harm public order and ban their participation.⁶⁴

Yet these incumbency advantages could lose their potency following the February 6 earthquakes. In his first speech to the nation following the disaster, instead of consoling citizens, Erdogan threatened to go after “provocateurs” who politicize the national tragedy. He also declared a three-month state of emergency in the 10 provinces affected.⁶⁵ Public opinion, however, may place blame for the earthquake response on Erdogan and the AKP, who have been in power since 2002 and had ample opportunity to enforce building codes and prepare disaster relief measures.⁶⁶ Indeed, the people see collapsed hospitals, roads, and airports — all built

59. Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights, “Interim Report 24 May – 13 June 2018,” June 15, 2018. (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/4/384600_2.pdf)

60. Ibid.

61. Kemal Kirisci and Berk Esen, “Might the Turkish Electorate Be Ready to Say Goodbye to Erdogan After Two Decades in Power,” *Just Security*, November 22, 2021. (<https://www.justsecurity.org/79306/might-the-turkish-electorate-be-ready-to-say-goodbye-to-erdogan-after-two-decades-in-power>); Nathan Kohlenberg, “Sentencing of Erdogan’s Rival Brings Risks of an Unfree Election and Autocratic Overreach to Turkey,” *Alliance for Securing Democracy*, December 14, 2022. (<https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/sentencing-of-erdogans-rival-brings-risks-of-an-unfree-election-and-autocratic-overreach-to-turkey>)

62. Gulden Sari, “Turkey’s Once-Venerable News Source Mired in Election Controversy,” *Coda*, May 15, 2019. (<https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/turkeys-once-venerable-news-source-mired-in-election-controversy>); “Turkey Election: OSCE Says ‘Serious Concerns’ Over Vote,” *BBC* (UK), November 2, 2015. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34704834>)

63. Diego Cupolo, “What Turkey’s Election Observers Saw,” *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2017. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/turkey-erdogan-referendum-kurds-hdp-fraud/523920>); Dasha Afanasieva, “Turkish Volunteers Flock to Monitor Knife-Edge Election,” *Reuters*, June 2, 2015. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-election-monitors/turkish-volunteers-flock-to-monitor-knife-edge-election-idUKKBN0OI20A20150602>)

64. The relevant provision of the law reads, “Those who publicly distribute information which is not really related with the security of the country inside or outside, public order or public health with the purpose of creating concern, fear or panic among the people in a manner that domestic peace may be destroyed will be punished with an imprisonment sentence of 1 to 3 years.” See: Hikmet Adal, “Disinformation Law ‘Final Stage of AKP’s Media Restrictions,” *Bianet* (Turkey), October 6, 2022. (<https://bianet.org/english/media/268138-disinformation-law-final-stage-of-akp-s-media-restrictions>)

65. Dasha Afanasieva, “Erdogan Announced the State of Emergency, Threatened,” *Ileri Haber* (Turkey), February 8, 2023. (<https://ilerihaber.org/index.php/icerik/erdogan-ohali-acikladi-tehdit-etti-150656>)

66. Jamie Dettmer, “Erdogan Races to Prevent Political Fallout from Earthquake,” *Politico*, February 7, 2023. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-prevent-political-fallout-earthquake-turkey>)

on Erdogan's watch by cronies close to him and the AKP.⁶⁷ Additionally, the head of the premier civilian disaster relief agency — the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) — has no experience in disaster relief management, yet he was appointed because of his close personal ties to Erdogan.⁶⁸

To deflect blame, the government ordered the arrest of over 130 building contractors, apprehending a few as they attempted to flee Turkey.⁶⁹ This is not likely to satisfy voters, who are beginning to ask why public officials licensed sub-standard buildings across the region and what happened to the earthquake relief fund to which homeowners contributed significantly.⁷⁰ Erdogan remarked in 2020, “We spent the [monies collected under the earthquake tax] on what was necessary. We really do not have the obligation to be accountable on where this was spent.”⁷¹ Erdogan may now have to give a more compelling answer. If voters who turned out for Erdogan in previous elections decide he has violated their trust, the physical destruction wrought by the earthquakes could become a metaphor for Erdogan's presidency.

What is impossible to know is whether Erdogan would refuse to leave office even after losing an election. Under Turkey's current presidential system of government, all military and law enforcement agencies are answerable to the president. The chief of the general staff and Turkey's chief of police report directly to Erdogan. Although provincial governors maintain day-to-day control of law enforcement, the governors and their district-level subordinates work for the Ministry of Interior, which, in turn, reports to Erdogan. Thus, both the Turkish

opposition and allies concerned for the future of Turkish democracy have ample cause for concern.

What Awaits a New President?

If the candidate of the Nation Alliance somehow becomes the next president, the task of rebuilding a trusted and competent government will be nothing short of herculean — and that was true before the earthquakes. It is possible, but not likely, that voters will deliver a split verdict, electing the alliance candidate for president while giving a parliamentary majority to the AKP and its allies. It is hard to forecast how such a situation would play out, but an AKP-led parliament would likely hamper reform. Nevertheless, the urgent tasks facing a new president would remain the same: restoring checks and balances, re-staffing state institutions to restore the rule of law, and replacing ruinous economic policies.

One priority the Nation Alliance has adopted — but emphasizes inconsistently — is returning the country to a parliamentary system of rule.⁷² Constitutional changes require a two-thirds majority of parliament, which even a landslide is unlikely to deliver to the opposition. The road to building a two-thirds majority in the new parliament will be even more difficult if the courts shut down the HDP, preventing it from winning any seats. Ironically, a new president might find it impossible to divest of the office's extraordinary powers.

Restoring the rule of law will also prove difficult, since one cannot legislate norms and values. Moreover,

67. Nektaria Stamouli, “Anger Grows at Erdogan Over Turkey's Earthquake Response,” *Politico*, February 10, 2023. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-earthquake-erdogan-opposition-anger-response>)

68. “Lack of Expertise of Top AFAD Official Overseeing Earthquake Rescue Operations Draws Ire,” *Duvar English* (Turkey), February 9, 2023. (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/lack-of-expertise-of-top-afad-official-overseeing-earthquake-rescue-operations-draws-ire-news-61804>)

69. *Ibid.*

70. The “earthquake tax,” as it is known in Turkey, is a permanent tax imposed on all homeowners after the last deadly earthquake in western Turkey in 1999. The fund's present value should be close to \$40 billion, but the government appears to have used it for other purposes. See: Sinan Ciddi, “Turkey's Earthquake: The Buck Stops with Erdogan,” *The National Interest*, February 8, 2023. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkey%E2%80%99s-earthquake-buck-stops-erdogan-206195>)

71. @SinanCiddi, *Twitter*, February 7, 2023. (<https://twitter.com/SinanCiddi/status/1622889632177221633>)

72. Merve Tahiroglu, “Opposition Leaders Unveil Plan to Democratize Turkey,” *Project on Middle East Democracy*, March 7, 2022. (<https://pomed.org/publication/opposition-leaders-unveil-plan-to-democratize-turkey>)

Erdogan has sown his loyalists throughout the judiciary, law enforcement, and the bureaucracy as a whole.⁷³ He achieved this goal by appointing civil servants on the basis of loyalty and readiness to implement presidential directives. Erdogan's prosecutors and judges continue to target high-profile critics on manufactured charges, as in the case of philanthropist and human rights activist Osman Kavala. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered the immediate release of Kavala from prison, but Turkish courts have not responded.⁷⁴ The task before Turkey's new leaders will be to re-staff the judiciary and other co-opted institutions. They will also need to codify appropriate police powers, and, more importantly, rebuild a culture of rule of law. This shift in institutional culture will require a civil service recruited and retained on merit, rather than allegiance to one ruler.⁷⁵ This could easily require a decade or more.

The Economy

Even before the recent natural disaster, which has caused an estimated \$84 billion in damage, Turkey's economy has suffered greatly under Erdogan in recent years.⁷⁶ The foundation for better economic policy is greater transparency, accountability, and prudence.⁷⁷ Independent scrutiny of government spending has been absent for a decade. The last time a government

spending audit was made public before parliament was in 2012-2013. Since then, the government has simply abandoned the process.⁷⁸ There is ample evidence of the misuse of public funds for political purposes. After the coup attempt of 2016, Erdogan leveraged public funds to consolidate control of the media. He personally pressured Aydin Dogan, owner of the Dogan Media Group, to sell the company to Erdogan sympathizer Yildirim Demiroren. The Dogan Group was one of Turkey's largest media conglomerates, with assets such as CNN Turk and Kanal D television and the *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* newspapers, to name a few.⁷⁹ Erdogan ensured the financing Demiroren needed by having Turkey's largest public lender, Ziraat Bank, extend a multibillion-dollar line of credit with no interest.⁸⁰

Restoring central bank independence will also be crucial. Erdogan's personal intervention in bank matters has helped drive the lira to abysmal lows. He has publicly pressured the bank to keep interest rates low and to replace governors at frequent intervals.⁸¹ While other central banks are raising rates to fight inflation, Turkey's has cut the rate from 16 to 9 percent, as of December 2022.⁸² In part, Erdogan wants to keep rates low to keep demand high and create the image of a buoyant economy ahead of this year's election. His policies also reflect his conspiracy theories about the

73. Selim Koru, "The Institutional Structure of 'New Turkey,'" *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 2021. (<https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-institutional-structure-of-new-turkey.pdf>)

74. Burcu Karakas, "Kavala: Infringement Proceedings Launched Against Turkey," *Deutsche Welle* (German), March 2, 2022. (<https://www.dw.com/en/osman-kavala-case-council-of-europe-launches-proceedings-against-turkey/a-60645377>)

75. "Briefing on Civil Service Reform in Turkey," *Center for Turkey Studies*, May 24, 2021. (<https://ceftus.org/2016/research/ceftus-briefing-on-civil-service-reform-in-turkey>)

76. Nevzat Devrangolu, "Earthquake Could Cost Turkey Up To \$84 billion - Business Group," *Reuters*, February 13, 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/earthquake-could-cost-turkey-up-84-bln-business-group-2023-02-13>)

77. Oya Ozarslan, "What Happened to Turkey's US\$128 Billion?" *Transparency International*, May 18, 2021. (<https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/turkey-128-billion-what-happened-central-bank>)

78. "Turkish Court of Accounts won't audit public spending for another three years: Report," *Hurriyet* (Turkey), December 12, 2013. (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-court-of-accounts-wont-audit-public-spending-for-another-three-years-report-59489>)

79. "Dogan Media Group Sale Completes Government Control of Turkish Media," *Reporters Without Borders*, March 22, 2018. (<https://rsf.org/en/dogan-media-group-sale-completes-government-control-turkish-media>)

80. "Turkish state bank may be behind purchase of independent media group," *Ahval News* (Turkey), March 23, 2018. (<https://ahvalnews.com/dogan-media/turkish-state-bank-may-be-behind-purchase-independent-media-group>)

81. Jared Malsin and Anna Hirtenstein, "Turkey's Erdogan Fires Central Bank Officials, Fueling Economic Uncertainty," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2021. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-erdogan-fires-central-bank-officials-fueling-economic-uncertainty-11634209321>)

82. "Turkey Policy Rate," *CEIC Data*, accessed February 6, 2023. (<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/turkey/policy-rate>)

nature of inflation, which he blames on a mysterious “interest rate lobby,” a euphemism for Jewish bankers.⁸³ Contrary to the consensus among economists, Erdogan rejects the idea that raising interest rates can remedy inflation. Rather, “Interest rates are the reason,” he says, “and inflation is the result.”⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, investor confidence has plummeted, with all major international credit rating agencies consistently downgrading Turkey’s debt to junk status.⁸⁵

An IMF bailout contributed to the resolution of Turkey’s last major economic crisis in 2001, which helped elect Erdogan and the AKP in 2002. The incoming Erdogan government adhered to the IMF’s strict conditions and an impressive recovery followed.⁸⁶ Yet now Erdogan is resisting a bailout, which would be unpopular domestically because of the IMF’s conditions. More importantly, this would entail transparency and accountability, which are anathema to Erdogan.

A new president would almost certainly have to court aid packages from the IMF and the World Bank. Estimates suggest that stabilizing Turkey’s economy would require the largest capital infusion in the history of the IMF and the bank.⁸⁷ To promote recovery, a new president will need to help Turkey regain the confidence of the international community. In 2001, the government of Bülent Ecevit recruited World Bank economist Kemal Dervis to rebuild Turkey’s economy. A new president could recruit a similarly respected figure while emphasizing transparency and accountability.

A Return to the Western Fold?

A former Turkish diplomat wrote in 2021:

if Erdogan is voted out of office, no one in Washington or Brussels should expect Turkey to suddenly turn into a collaborative ally. Structural changes in the international environment, broader bureaucratic and ideological trends in Turkey, and new facts on the ground that Erdogan has created will all limit the potential for “normalization” in post-Erdogan Turkey.⁸⁸

Has Erdogan clashed with the United States and Europe as well as regional states such as Greece, Cyprus, and Israel because Turkish national interests are at odds with those of Washington and its allies? Current tensions have contributed to Erdogan’s combative style and ideological commitments. However, the more structural the factors in play are, the less reason a new president will have to return to the Western fold. Personal attributes will also shape the foreign policy of a new president, yet Imamoglu, Kilicdaroglu, and the Nation Alliance itself have not clearly indicated how they will handle foreign policy, much less their vision for Turkey’s place in the world.⁸⁹ The CHP’s history as the party of Ataturk evokes assumptions that it is pro-Western, yet the CHP is a party of factions, with a strong anti-Western and Turkish nationalist vein last visible under Kilicdaroglu’s predecessor, Deniz Baykal. Additionally, the Good Party (IP), a senior member

83. Aykan Erdemir and John A. Lechner, “Erdogan’s Anti-Semitism Will Sink Turkey’s Economy,” *Foreign Policy*, December 24, 2018. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/24/erdogans-anti-semitism-will-sink-turkeys-economy>)

84. “Is Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Monetary Policy as Mad as it Seems?” *The Economist*, January 27, 2022. (<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/01/27/is-recep-tayyip-erdogans-monetary-policy-as-mad-as-it-seems>)

85. “Turkey – Credit Rating,” *Trading Economics*, accessed February 6, 2023. (<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/rating>)

86. Calum Miller, “Pathways Through Financial Crisis: Turkey,” *Global Governance*, October–December 2006. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27800631>)

87. Gina Heeb, “Turkey could need a bailout that dwarfs the record-setting \$50 billion loan that Argentina just got,” *Business Insider*, September 25, 2018. (<https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/turkey-bailout-could-dwarf-50-billion-loan-argentina-just-got-2018-9-1027564286>)

88. M. Hasim Tekines, “What Would a Post-Erdogan Turkish Foreign Policy Look Like?” *War on the Rocks*, December 8, 2021. (<https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/what-would-a-post-erdogan-turkish-foreign-policy-look-like>)

89. For a speculative look at what Turkey’s foreign policy may look like, see:

M. Hasim Tekines, “What Would a Post-Erdogan Turkish Foreign Policy Look Like?” *War on the Rocks*, December 8, 2021. (<https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/what-would-a-post-erdogan-turkish-foreign-policy-look-like>)

of the Nation Alliance, has a right-wing nationalist orientation. Moreover, anti-Westernism resonates with Turkish voters. Support for remaining within NATO continues to wane.⁹⁰ Thus, an opposition victory is not likely to have an immediate impact on this mindset.

Turkey, Syria, Russia, and the West

The conflict in Syria has become a major driver of this tension between Turkey and the West while bringing Ankara and Moscow closer together.⁹¹ Both Ankara and Washington pivoted away from their initial focus on pressuring the Assad regime to give up power. Erdogan shifted to an emphasis on degrading or eliminating the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG), an offshoot of the PKK, which both Ankara and Washington consider a terrorist organization. Under the direction of Washington, the YPG became an integral part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the ground force component of the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition. This infuriated Ankara.⁹² Erdogan apparently believed he could compel Washington to stop backing

the YPG by threatening to purchase the Russian-manufactured S-400 air defense system, a violation of NATO's rules and norms.⁹³ However, Erdogan miscalculated — Washington refused to break with the YPG. When Erdogan went ahead with the S-400 purchase, the United States imposed a limited arms embargo under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and ousted Turkey from the F-35 fighter program.⁹⁴ This represented the first time one NATO ally has sanctioned another. Many European governments also imposed limited arms embargoes, leaving Turkey isolated in the alliance.⁹⁵ Tensions worsened when Erdogan threatened to veto Finland and Sweden's formal application for NATO membership in 2022, citing both countries' (especially Sweden's) sanctuary to thousands of PKK members as well as their refusal to sell arms to Turkey.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, Turkey has moved closer to Russia. In Syria, Turkish troops have launched offensives against the YPG on three separate occasions since 2016, each time requiring buy-in from Putin.⁹⁷ The Turkish economy has also become more dependent

90. Galip Dalay, "Deciphering Turkey's Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, May 20, 2022. (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/deciphering-turkeys-geopolitical-balancing-and-anti-westernism-in-its-relations-with-russia>)

91. Francisco Siccaldi, "How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Europe*, September 14, 2021. (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/09/14/how-syria-changed-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-85301>)

92. Cameron Abadi, "Why Is Turkey Fighting Syria's Kurds?" *Foreign Policy*, October 17, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/17/turkey-claim-syrian-kurds-terrorists-not-isis-yppg-pkk-sdf>); "Syria War: Turkey will never accept US alliance with Kurds – Erdogan," *BBC* (UK), May 17, 2017. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39944167>): The YPG is the military arm of the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

93. There is another possible explanation for why Turkey acquired the S-400 system: to shoot down any NATO-manufactured fighter aircraft in the event of another coup attempt. In the coup attempt of 2016, several rebel-aligned Turkish F-16 fighter jets apparently locked on to Erdogan's presidential plane and could have shot it down. A Russian missile defense system is widely believed to be able to prevent this from occurring again. See: Tom Karako, "Coup-proofing? Making Sense of Turkey's S-400 Decision," *CSIS*, July 15, 2019. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/coup-proofing-making-sense-turkeys-s-400-decision>)

94. Mike R. Pompeo, Press Statement, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA231," December 14, 2020. (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/index.html>); Aaron Mehta, "Turkey officially kicked out of F-35 program, costing US half a billion dollars," *Defense News*, July 17, 2019. (<https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/07/17/turkey-officially-kicked-out-of-f-35-program>)

95. Robin Emmott, "EU governments limit arms sales to Turkey but avoid embargo," *Reuters*, October 14, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-eu-france/eu-governments-limit-arms-sales-to-turkey-but-avoid-embargo-idUSKBN1WT0M4>)

96. "Why Turkey is blocking bids by Sweden and Finland to join NATO," *The Economist*, May 22, 2022. (<https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/05/22/why-turkey-is-blocking-bids-by-sweden-and-finland-to-join-nato>)

97. Aykan Erdemir, Sinan Ciddi, and John Hardie, "Collusion or Collision? Turkey-Russia Relations Under Erdogan and Putin," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 2021, pages 13-17. (<https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/fdd-monograph-collusion-or-collision.pdf>)

on Russia.⁹⁸ Since the early 1990s, Turkish-Russian economic ties have flourished as Ankara's exports to the former Soviet Union diversified to include textiles, agricultural produce, and tourism. In terms of imports, Turkey relies heavily on Russian gas, the loss of which would cripple its ability to generate power for industry and heating for homes. Although Turkey now imports 45 percent of its natural gas from Russia, down from a high of 65 percent, the dependence persists.⁹⁹ Erdogan also contracted with Rosatom, a Russian state-owned firm, to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant, which will require Russian operators and a supply of fuel from Russia once operational.¹⁰⁰ All of this might make it hard for Ankara to return to the Western fold. Indeed, if Ankara wanted to pivot westward by transferring its S-400 systems to Ukraine or backing Western sanctions against Russia, Putin could deploy a number of punitive measures, such as halting Turkish agricultural imports, terminating the construction of the Rosatom plant, cutting off gas and oil supplies, or working against Turkish interests in Syria.¹⁰¹

Despite the political polarization in Turkey, Syria policy remains a point of consensus. The CHP has lent parliamentary support to virtually all of Erdogan's military incursions in northern Syria, viewing them as necessary to protect the homeland against Kurdish

separatists.¹⁰² On the issue of Turkey's Syrian refugee population, the CHP echoes AKP talking points, declaring that all refugees should return to Syria.¹⁰³ Voters have clearly lost patience with the refugees and deeply resent the U.S. partnership with the YPG. More broadly, voters believe the West seeks to undermine Turkish interests. In a recent Pew Research Center poll, 72 percent of Turks identified the United States as a threat to Turkey, while only 54 percent felt that way about Russia.¹⁰⁴ A new leadership cannot wish away these sentiments and would have to work hard to alter public perceptions.

Turkey and the EU

Erdogan brought Turkey close to becoming the first Muslim-majority member of the EU. Reversing previous intransigent policies, Erdogan sought peace on Cyprus rather than advocating for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a territory effectively controlled by Ankara. Erdogan oversaw the negotiation and implementation of the 2004 Annan plan, which nearly brought peace to the divided island.¹⁰⁵ The EU displayed regrettable shortsightedness, however, by not offering Turkey a final accession date to join the union. Several EU states then blocked the Turkish accession process, which resulted in Erdogan turning his back on the

98. Galip Dalay, "Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of recent Conflicts," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, August 4, 2021. (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021RP05>)

99. Dimitar Bechev, "Turkey's energy relations with Russia: How should the West respond?" *Middle East Institute*, March 10, 2021. (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-energy-relations-russia-how-should-west-respond>)

100. Vusala Abbasova, "Russia's Rosatom Gets Go-Ahead from Turkey to Begin Construction of Fourth Unit of Akkuyu NPP," *Caspian News* (Azerbaijan), October 31, 2021. (<https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/russias-rosatom-gets-go-ahead-from-turkey-to-begin-construction-of-fourth-unit-of-akkuyu-npp-2021-10-29-0>)

101. Selin Girit, "Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite," *BBC* (UK), January 2, 2016. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>)

102. Hazal Duran, "Why Did the CHP Change Its Position Over Syria Again?" *Politics Today*, October 24, 2019. (<https://politicstoday.org/why-did-the-chp-change-its-position-over-syria-again>): The exception to consistent CHP support was a vote in October 2021, where the CHP joined the HDP to oppose extending the mandate for military operations in Syria and Iraq.

103. Murat Yetkin, "Erdogan signals a u-turn on Syrian Refugees," *Yetkin Report* (Turkey), April 20, 2022. (<https://yetkinreport.com/en/2022/04/20/erdogan-signals-a-u-turn-on-syrian-refugees>)

104. Jacob Poushter and Dorothy Manevich, "Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats," *Pew Research Center*, August 1, 2017. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats>)

105. Warren Hoge, "Cyprus Greeks and Turks Agree On Plan to End 40-Year Conflict," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2004. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/14/world/cyprus-greeks-and-turks-agree-on-plan-to-end-40-year-conflict.html>)

entire Europeanization project.¹⁰⁶ During the war in Syria, Erdogan exacted a measure of revenge on Brussels by exploiting European fears of mass refugee flows from Syria through Turkey into Europe.¹⁰⁷ As host to roughly 4 million refugees, Erdogan has periodically threatened to open the flood gates and allow the refugees to overwhelm Europe's borders.¹⁰⁸ To forestall such a move, the EU delivered substantial economic assistance to Ankara.¹⁰⁹ Erdogan has also pushed for the union to grant visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and a new EU-Turkey Customs Union deal to include agricultural goods while also urging EU entities to quash negative accession progress reports focused on human rights abuses.¹¹⁰

“As host to roughly 4 million refugees, Erdogan has periodically threatened to open the flood gates and allow the refugees to overwhelm Europe's borders.”

A confrontational approach to the EU is actually a reversion to the historical norm. In the early 2000s, the CHP under the Deniz Baykal ran on a nationalist, anti-Western platform that contrasted with the AKP's

opening to Europe. Baykal opposed all of Erdogan's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement over Cyprus, which was and remains a precondition for Turkey to join the EU. During Baykal's tenure, the CHP even opposed negotiations to begin Turkey's accession process with the EU, arguing that EU requirements would result in Turkey giving up its sovereignty and national will.¹¹¹ Under Kilicdaroglu, the party has distanced itself from Baykal's more nationalist tilt. Still, Turkish voters remain furious at the EU's muddled and exclusionary accession process.¹¹²

Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean

At the World Economic Forum in 2009, Erdogan appeared with Israeli President Shimon Peres to discuss the Israeli war against the Hamas terrorist group in Gaza that year. In the final minutes of the panel, Erdogan lashed out at Peres, saying, “When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill.”¹¹³ The next year, a flotilla of aid ships departed from Turkey with the intention of breaking the Israeli Navy's blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. The Israelis stopped the flotilla and boarded one of the ships, resulting in a melee that led to the deaths of several Turkish activists. In 2011, Turkey downgraded diplomatic ties with Israel and

106. Each candidate for the European Union is offered a final accession date at the outset of the accession process, which usually lasts about 10 years. France and the Republic of Cyprus were instrumental in blocking Turkey's accession process on procedural grounds in 2007. The process has stalled ever since. See: William Chislett, “Turkey's 10 years of EU accession negotiations: no end in sight,” *Real Instituto El Cano*, October 5, 2015. (<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/work-document/turkeys-10-years-of-eu-accession-negotiations-no-end-in-sight>)

107. On one occasion in February/March 2020, Turkey released hundreds of Syrian refugees into no man's land at the Greek-Turkish border. Kemal Kirisci, “As EU-Turkey migration agreement reaches the five-year mark, add a job creation element,” *Brookings Institution*, March 17, 2021. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/17/as-eu-turkey-migration-agreement-reaches-the-five-year-mark-add-a-job-creation-element>)

108. “Turkey threaten to let asylum-seekers flood into Europe,” *The Economist*, March 5, 2020. (<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/03/05/turkey-threatens-to-let-asylum-seekers-flood-into-europe>)

109. EU-Turkey Statement & Action Plan, *Official Journal of the European Union*, November 20, 2019. (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/carriage/eu-turkey-statement-action-plan/report>)

110. Ilke Toygur, “A New Way Forward For EU-Turkey Relations,” *Carnegie Europe*, January 26, 2022. (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/01/26/new-way-forward-for-eu-turkey-relations-pub-86264>)

111. Sinan Ciddi, “The Republican People's Party and the 2007 General Elections: Politics of Perpetual Decline?” *Turkish Studies*, October 8, 2008. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683840802267413>)

112. Max Hoffman, “A Snapshot of Turkish Public Opinion Toward the European Union,” *Center for American Progress*, September 27, 2018. (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/snapshot-turkish-public-opinion-toward-european-union>)

113. The Davos and flotilla incidents resulted in the withdrawal of ambassadors. Katrin Bennhold, “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2009. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html>)

facilitated the opening of Hamas offices in Turkey.¹¹⁴ Yet the over the past year, Erdogan has made gestures toward reconciliation, such as hosting a state visit by Israeli President Isaac Herzog, followed by a meeting with then Prime Minister Yair Lapid.¹¹⁵ Ankara appears to be interested in building a new gas pipeline and is working to reestablish intelligence sharing and military procurement relationships.¹¹⁶ The challenge for Turkey is to repair the damage of the past decade, during which Erdogan undermined a once-solid partnership. As long as Turkey hosts Hamas, meaningful reconciliation with Israel is unlikely.¹¹⁷

“The challenge for Turkey is to repair the damage of the past decade, during which Erdogan undermined a once-solid partnership. As long as Turkey hosts Hamas, meaningful reconciliation with Israel is unlikely.”

Erdogan has also stoked tensions across the Eastern Mediterranean. In contrast to the previous policy of advancing security and economic goals, Erdogan sent Turkish drilling ships to search for hydrocarbons in contested waters, violating his neighbors' sovereignty.¹¹⁸ Ankara refuses to recognize

its neighbors' exclusive economic zones (EEZs), even threatening to annex the Turkish Republic on Cyprus.¹¹⁹ With such moves, Erdogan has effectively ensured that Turkey's accession to the EU will never happen. If anything, Turkey's posture in the region has galvanized the Mediterranean states to coalesce through security guarantees as well as the creation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). In the process, Israel has solidified its relationship with Greece and Cyprus, isolating Turkey and easing the way for transporting Eastern Mediterranean natural gas to European markets.¹²⁰ More recently, while visiting Washington in May 2022, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis implored Congress not to sell Turkey either F-16 jets or upgrade kits for older models.¹²¹ For his part, Erdogan continued to threaten Greece and Cyprus by warning that Turkey may “come all of a sudden one night” to wage war.¹²²

Turkish voters back Erdogan's aggressive stance in the Mediterranean because they still resent the transfer of sovereignty over the Aegean islands from the Ottoman Empire to Greece a century ago. Such historical grievances are not easy to address. Additionally, Turkey takes issue with international legal precedents that extend the islands' territorial waters to a distance of 12 nautical miles from shore, since this would transform

114. “Turkey denies allowing Hamas to Operate in its territory,” *The Times of Israel* (Israel), November 28, 2014. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkey-denies-allowing-hamas-to-operate-in-its-territory>)

115. “Israel PM meets Turkish president, first time in 14 years,” *Associated Press*, September 21, 2022. (<https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-middle-east-israel-turkey-0a900046d22ed473daa4075105ff9025>)

116. Erdogan also appears to be interested in repositioning Turkey as a major gas supplier and as an alternative to Russia by shipping Israeli gas through Turkey. Sean Matthews, “Opponents of US arms sales to Turkey mobilize in Washington,” *Middle East Eye* (UK), May 19, 2022. (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-us-lawmakers-opponents-arms-sales-mobilise-washington>)

117. Boris Zilberman, “Don't Fall For Erdogan's Not So Charming Offensive,” *The National Interest*, May 28, 2022. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/don-t-fall-erdogan-s-not-so-charming-offensive-202669>)

118. Tolga Demiryol, “Natural Gas and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, September 7, 2020. (<https://tr.boell.org/en/2020/09/07/natural-gas-and-geopolitics-eastern-mediterranean>)

119. “Turkey's Increasingly Assertive Foreign Policy,” *Strategic Comments*, September 30, 2020. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13567888.2020.1830557>)

120. Mark Regev, “The evolution of Israel-Greece ties, from enemies to allies – opinion,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), July 28, 2022. (<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-713376>)

121. Sean Matthews, “Opponents of US arms sales to Turkey mobilize in Washington,” *Middle East Eye* (UK), May 19, 2022. (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-us-lawmakers-opponents-arms-sales-mobilise-washington>)

122. Andrew Wilks, “Tension rises as Turkey, Greece voice festering grievances,” *Associated Press*, September 6, 2022. (<https://apnews.com/article/nato-middle-east-greece-recep-tayyip-erdogan-19903884a66cd3116ee318b8d0283ccd>)

the Aegean Sea, according to Turkish officials, into a “Greek lake.”¹²³

This outlook is inspired by retired Admiral Cem Gurdeniz’s “Blue Homeland” policy, which seeks to redefine Mediterranean maritime borders by advancing a maximalist interpretation of Turkey’s territorial waters and corresponding EEZ rights. Blue Homeland’s proponents argue that Western powers have cheated Turkey out of its rightful claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹²⁴

Erdogan’s revanchist rhetoric continues to stoke nationalist sentiments. The opposition (particularly the CHP) has historically supported aspects of Erdogan’s position — in particular, limiting the islands’ territorial waters to six nautical miles from shore — but avoided such a belligerent tone.

Institutional Constraints on Turkish Foreign Policy

The presidential system in place since 2017 empowers Turkey’s chief executive to chart foreign policy in a personalistic manner (although Erdogan also managed to do so as prime minister). With extended powers, Erdogan has conducted Turkey’s foreign affairs with little to no input from the foreign ministry, the national security council secretariat, and the military. A new president would ideally recommit to a process that is

more deliberative and institutionalized. However, the institutions have transformed under Erdogan.

Historically, Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) earned praise for being the least politicized arm of bureaucracy. Yet beginning with Ahmet Davutoglu’s tenure as foreign minister (2009–2014), the government began to appoint foreign service officers at both the junior and senior levels based on allegiance to the AKP/Erdogan line. In 2018, the MFA began selecting political appointees as ambassadors.¹²⁵ In 2020, Ankara sent its first political appointee ambassador to Washington. The envoy, Murat Mercan, was a known Islamist figure in Turkey who rose up alongside Erdogan.¹²⁶ In Ankara, the recruitment of diplomats close to the regime has, according to Semih Idiz, “enabl[ed] nepotism, cronyism and sycophancy with a huge disregard for impartiality and expertise.”¹²⁷

This malaise also extends into the realm of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). Purges of the officer corps occurred initially following the so-called Sledgehammer and Ergenekon trials in the early 2010s as a means to eliminate senior officers who bore overtly anti-Erdogan sentiments. Analysts correctly assessed the purges as Erdogan’s effort to eliminate alternate power centers.¹²⁸ According to Metin Gurcan, the additional purges following the coup attempt of July 2016 led to a “38% reduction

123. For more on the history of tensions in the Aegean between Greece and Turkey, see: Ryan Gingeras, “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>)

124. Aykan Erdemir and Philip Kowalski, “‘Blue Homeland’ and the Irredentist Future of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *War on the Rocks*, September 30, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/blue-homeland-and-the-irredentist-future-of-turkish-foreign-policy>)

125. Sinan Ciddi and Steven A. Cook, “Could This Man Save Turkey?” *Politico Magazine*, June 24, 2019. (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/06/24/ahmet-davutoglu-turkey-tayyip-erdogan-227212>); Gokcen Tuncer, “Dışişleri “gelenekle” mi devam etmeli, “yenileri” buyur mu etmeli? [Should Foreign Affairs Continue With “Tradition” or Welcome “Now Ones”?],” *The Independent* (Turkey), September 21, 2019. (<https://indyturk.com/node/73051/haber/d%C4%B1%C5%9Fi%C5%9Fleri-%E2%80%9Cgelenekle%E2%80%9D-mi-devam-etmeli-%E2%80%9Cyenileri%E2%80%9D-buyur-mu-etmeli>)

126. Amberin Zaman, “Erdogan’s man takes on mission impossible in Washington,” *Al-Monitor*, January 28, 2021. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/turkey-new-ambassador-washington.html>)

127. Semih Idiz, “Patronage marginalizes qualified Turkish diplomats,” *Al-Monitor*, December 3, 2021. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/patronage-marginalizes-qualified-turkish-diplomats>)

128. Dani Rodrik, “Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law?” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, May 11, 2011. (https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_vol10_no1_Dani%20Rodrik.pdf)

in the number of generals, which then numbered 325 in three branches and an 8% reduction from 32,451 officers.”¹²⁹ Erdogan accused a former ally, Fethullah Gulen, of masterminding the attempted coup and dismissed a significant number of the TAF’s commanding ranks, alleging the purged officers were members of the “Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization.” Erdogan’s purges have resulted in a shortage of officers, especially in the Air Force, which has limited its operational capability.

These purges facilitated the early promotion of officers deemed loyal to Erdogan. Reputedly, the TAF’s senior leadership now includes many “Eurasianists” who favor alliances with Russia and China and are deeply suspicious of NATO, the United States, and the EU.¹³⁰

Establishing a depoliticized military that is respectful of civilian governance and oversight will be difficult in Turkey, mainly because Turkey has never had one. The military carried out numerous coups in the latter half of the twentieth century. Before Erdogan, the TAF acted as the self-proclaimed arbiters and protectors of Ataturk’s secular republic. Rather than depoliticize the TAF, Erdogan attempted to build a military loyal to him by reinventing its doctrine and purpose.¹³¹ Yet if Turkey is once again to become a trusted and integral member of NATO, Erdogan’s successors must rebuild the TAF based on merit and respect for civilian authority.

Confusion After the Cold War

During the Cold War, shared perceptions of the Soviet threat motivated Turkey, the United States, and the rest of NATO to coalesce to prevent Moscow from gaining a foothold on the alliance’s eastern flank. Today, there is little that binds Turkey and the West.¹³² Indeed, the Biden administration spent its first year mostly ignoring Turkey, mainly because it saw engagement with an intransigent Erdogan as a waste of time, with few mutual interests to pursue.¹³³ Then the war in Ukraine altered calculations, ushering in a brief wave of optimism that Turkey, fearful of Russian aggression in the region, would naturally want to collaborate more closely with the United States and NATO to contain Putin’s ambitions. For Turkey, the war reinforced that it still sits on prime real estate; it is the only major NATO power on the Black Sea with the ability to control the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits. Yet efforts to reset U.S.-Turkish ties have proven fruitless. Both sides appear to be overestimating their respective countries’ importance towards the other.¹³⁴ The Biden team quietly floated the idea that if Turkey transferred its S-400 missiles to Ukraine, it would mend ties with NATO and generate goodwill with Congress.¹³⁵ Congress then might lift CAATSA sanctions and allow the Turkish Air Force to acquire the latest version of F-16 fighter jet as well as upgrade kits for its existing fleet. But the plan fizzled. Erdogan likely concluded that good relations with Moscow have greater value. His successors may face

¹²⁹. Metin Gurcan, “How post-coup purges depleted Turkey’s Military,” *Al-Monitor*, September 16, 2016. (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/09/turkey-military-needs-two-year-fill-ranks-emptied-by-purge.html>)

¹³⁰. Suat Kiniklioglu, “Eurasianism in Turkey,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, March 22, 2022. (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eurasianism-in-turkey>)

¹³¹. Yesim Dikmen, “Erdogan says to close military schools, rein in armed forces,” *Reuters*, July 30, 2016. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security/erdogan-says-to-close-military-schools-rein-in-armed-forces-idUSKCN10A0HH>)

¹³². Steven A. Cook, “Neither Friend nor Foe,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 2018. (<https://www.cfr.org/report/future-u.s.-turkey>)

¹³³. Mitch Prothero, “Turkish President Erdogan keeps getting ignored by Biden, and looks desperate to get his attention,” *Business Insider*, March 11, 2021. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-ignoring-erdogan-turkey-looks-desperate-attention-analysis-2021-3>)

¹³⁴. Alper Coskun, “Making the New U.S.-Turkey Strategic Mechanism Meaningful,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 12, 2022. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/12/making-new-u.s.-turkey-strategic-mechanism-meaningful-pub-87117>)

¹³⁵. Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. suggested Turkey transfer Russian-made missile system to Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 19, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-suggested-turkey-transfer-russian-made-missile-system-ukraine-sources-2022-03-19/>)

a similar calculus even if they would prefer not to be dependent on Putin.

Nevertheless, a new president would have the power to reset the tone of the bilateral relationship, which has soured considerably. Although it is not possible now to reposition Turkey as a stalwart ally of the United States, a new president could immediately adopt policies that would distance Turkey from Russia, such as divesting Turkey of its S-400s, immediately ratifying Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO, and playing a more constructive role in countering terrorism and illicit finance.¹³⁶ This would require Turkey to terminate its ongoing relationship with terrorist entities in Syria, such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, and expelling Hamas from its territory, or even designating it as a terrorist organization.¹³⁷ Such measures would go a long way to start building trust between Washington and Ankara. One must bear in mind, however, that the two countries will still have significantly divergent regional interests. A new president will be unlikely to impose punitive measures against Moscow in the form of financial sanctions like those implemented by the West. Putin's likely response would be too costly to Ankara and could result in Turkey losing its supply of Russian natural gas. Additionally, Turkey's hostile stance towards the SDF/YPG will not likely change, even if Ankara and Washington reconcile. Turkey's new leader will have strong incentives to be guided by public opinion, which perceives the Syrian Kurds as a clear and present danger that must be eliminated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nation Alliance has pledged to restore “a strengthened parliamentary system” if it wins the coming elections. Turkey was founded as a parliamentary democracy, not a government dominated by a president. Although Turkey's parliamentary system was not a shining example of democracy, it nevertheless established a system of checks and balances over the years, which Erdogan's presidential system of government dismantled.¹³⁸ The republic Erdogan leaves behind is largely bereft of an independent and capable civil service. A strengthened parliamentary system should emphasize the separation of powers, rule of law, and democratic safeguards to prevent one person from dominating. This, in turn, will make it possible to hire and retain civil servants according to merit rather than loyalty to a single person. A fundamental redesign and staffing of the judicial branch will also be necessary to revive the rule of law. Restoring parliamentarism will likely require the consent of the population via national referendum, as this was the means by which Erdogan promulgated the presidential system in 2017.¹³⁹

There are other institutional and structural challenges. Prosecutors, judges, and law enforcement officers of Turkey are also subservient to the executive branch (i.e., Erdogan).¹⁴⁰ More broadly, the civil service must be overhauled and stripped of its political leanings.

136. In January 2023, the U.S. and Turkey announced the joint imposition of sanctions on several ISIS-related entities inside of Turkey linked to terrorism financing and recruitment. See: Sinan Ciddi, “U.S. and Turkey Take Joint Action to Disrupt ISIS Financing,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 10, 2023. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/01/10/us-turkey-disrupt-isis-financing>)

137. Sinan Ciddi, “Erdogan's Coming U-Turn on Syria,” *The Dispatch*, January 11, 2023. (<https://thedispatch.com/article/erdogans-coming-u-turn-on-syria>)

138. The 1961 Constitution — commissioned by the Turkish military — established an identifiable set of institutional checks and balances that clearly demarcated the realms of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

139. Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, “Turkey: Erdogan's referendum Victory Delivers ‘Presidential System,’” *Congressional Research Service*, April 20, 2017. (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IN10691.pdf>)

140. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “Turkey 2020 Human Rights Report,” March 2021. (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/TURKEY-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>)

The Nation Alliance must fully grasp the severity of the circumstances it faces and focus on rebuilding Turkey's democracy and economy. For the latter to occur, a credible economic management team is an absolute minimum requirement. Like Kemal Dervis following the 2001 financial crisis, those appointed to spearhead economic policy must be granted broad powers and independence so they can make tough decisions, such as concluding agreements with international financial institutions, including the IMF and the World Bank. Success on the economic front will be pivotal to a new government's popular support and longevity.

But before any of this can occur, Erdogan must leave the scene. The opposition must not take for granted that Erdogan will lose the upcoming election or leave office quietly. The experience of the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul and other big cities showed that heightened vigilance and monitoring of polling stations are crucial to ensure the integrity of the vote. The alliance must agree upon and coordinate election security and monitoring measures well in advance. At this point, there is little evidence this has occurred. Finally, if voters remove Erdogan from office, there needs to be an alliance-wide consensus on the question of what to do with Erdogan. He will likely face charges of numerous crimes, mainly in the realms of corruption and abuse of power. The ability to rebuild Turkish democracy will depend in part on the means by which Erdogan is held accountable for his actions but also to the extent that domestic peace is preserved.

In such a fluid situation — with even greater uncertainty after the earthquakes — it will be difficult for U.S. policymakers to determine how best to support

a democratic outcome in Turkey, but they should consider six broad guidelines:

- **Defend a free and fair election process.** The United States should speak out on behalf of election integrity and the rule of law without favoring a candidate. Erdogan's allies will accuse the United States of election meddling. However, the administration and Congress can mitigate this by declaring the United States stands with a democratic Turkey and that the will of the people must be respected. At present, it is uncertain whether the government will permit monitors to observe the electoral process as in previous years. Election monitoring organizations must keep a close eye on any changes to regulations. If Erdogan prevents monitoring, the U.S. government should immediately call for a reversal of his decision.
- **Provide generous disaster relief.** Turkey will need considerable help to overcome the damage caused by the multiple earthquakes, and the United States should spearhead relief efforts by petitioning national governments and international institutions to step up. The World Bank announced a contribution of \$1.78 billion,¹⁴¹ while the United States released \$85 million¹⁴² in addition to sending relief teams led by USAID. This should only be the beginning. Turkey must see that it has the support of its allies, particularly Western ones, especially because Ankara often accused the West of working against Turkey's interests. Standing by Turkey in its darkest hour is the best way to remind the Turkish government and people who its real friends are.
- **Hold off on punitive measures.** Erdogan's anti-Western policies will not change before the election. He continues to block Finnish and Swedish

¹⁴¹. The World Bank, "World Bank Announces Initial \$1.78 Billion for Türkiye's Recovery & Reconstruction Efforts After Earthquake Disaster," February 9, 2023. (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/02/09/world-bank-announces-initial-1-78-billion-for-turkiye-recovery-reconstruction-efforts-after-earthquake-disaster>)

¹⁴². Max Matza, "US Pledges \$85m for Turkey - Syria Earthquake Relief," *BBC* (UK), February 10, 2023. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64591010>)

membership in NATO,¹⁴³ escalate tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, attack U.S. partners in Syria, and host Hamas representatives. Yet new punitive measures, likely in the form of sanctions, could harden the Nation Alliance's views toward Washington without affecting Erdogan's behavior. At the same time, there is no reason to reward Erdogan by selling him F-16s or making other concessions. Such moves would only favor his re-election.

- **Address Russia after the election.** If the opposition prevails, the U.S. should take the pulse of Turkey's new leadership to assess its interest in taking a stronger position against Russia, given the widening impact of the war in Ukraine and the vital role Turkey could play. To create incentives for Ankara, the White House and Congress should prepare a roadmap for rolling back sanctions against Turkey if the new government moves in the right direction. Such a roadmap should provide a clear indication to Ankara of precisely what it would stand to gain by dispossessing itself of its Russian-made S-400s.
- **Prepare an economic rescue package.** Turkey's economy required a major IMF bailout well before the earthquakes. The bailout will be critical to ensuring Turkey's stability, which is of vital concern to European financial stability. If Turkey defaults on its existing debt obligations, the financial ripples could extend across the region and beyond. The United States and EU must ready the IMF, the World Bank, and other multilateral institutions to take action should new leadership in Turkey take

over. Of course, Turkey's eligibility for loans should depend on strict transparency and oversight of government spending.

- **Encourage the EU to prepare incentives.** Given the extent of Turkey's democratic backsliding under Erdogan, EU accession talks may remain a pipe dream for the foreseeable future. That said, there are ways the European Commission can encourage Turkey's return to functional democratic governance and economic growth, such as spurring the renewal of the Customs Union that Turkey enjoys with the EU. At present, Turkey cannot export most agricultural goods to Europe. Inclusion of agriculture in a revamped agreement could open a new market for Turkey and lower its reliance on Russia, where large quantities of Turkish agricultural exports are presently sold. Finally, if Ankara is prepared to respect decisions from the European Court of Human Rights and take other verifiable measures to reestablish the rule of law, the EU should work with Turkey to establish visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, a key Turkish request.

In the wake of man-made and natural disasters alike, the 2023 elections present an unprecedented opportunity for Turkish voters to stop the country's slide into authoritarianism. But the hard work will come after the ballots are cast. Turkey is in dire need of governmental and economic reform. Once that process begins, Washington must be ready to help lead the way, with help from other Western allies, after years of tumultuous ties with a particularly challenging partner.

143. In late January, a far-right activist burned a copy of the Quran outside the Turkish embassy in Sweden. Ankara condemned the incident, and Erdogan vowed to block the Swedish NATO bid. "Erdogan Seizes on Quran Burning as New Pretext to Block Sweden's NATO Accession," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 25, 2023. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/01/25/erdogan-seizes-on-quran-burning-as-new-pretext-to-block-swedens-nato-accession/>)

Acknowledgments

This work was complete and nearing publication just as two deadly earthquakes struck Turkey on February 6, resulting in massive loss of life and untold misery. We mourn those who lost their lives, and our hearts go out to the untold numbers of Turks (and Syrians) who must now begin to rebuild.

Rebuilding is exactly the theme of this monograph. Turkey has suffered several political earthquakes in recent decades. Whether Turkey can now pick up the pieces is a core question I attempt to answer in this report. My goal is not to ignore the current humanitarian crisis. Rather, my aim is to look beyond it, with an eye to Turkey's future.

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