

# **HEDGE POLITICS: TURKEY'S SEARCH FOR BALANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Turkey has spent much of the past decade trying to expand its influence and remake the Middle East in its own image.
- This created a major battle line between the country and its rivals that stretched from Libya to Syria and the eastern Mediterranean.
- Yet, since mid-2021, Turkey has attempted to normalise its relationships with Middle Eastern countries.
- This shift has been driven by Turkish domestic politics, the emergence of a multipolar Middle East, and intensifying geopolitical competition.
- President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remains politically vulnerable at home, with a deteriorating economy and the opposition leading in the polls.
- His government's survival now depends on efforts to balance between great powers and draw financing from former rivals in the Gulf.
- The EU needs to adjust to this new Turkey by supporting the regional normalisation process, managing the Kurdish issue, and accepting that the country could join an expanded European community – albeit while retaining its strategic autonomy.

# Introduction

In late March, an Istanbul-based prosecutor investigating the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi wrote to Turkey's Ministry of Justice to ask for the case to be transferred to Saudi Arabia. This attempt to sweep the inquiry under the carpet allowed the Turkish government to start repairing its relationship with Riyadh. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited the Saudi capital, where he was photographed in a well-choreographed embrace with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. A few months later, Mohammed bin Salman made the trip to Ankara.

The sudden friendliness between the sides came as a surprise. After Khashoggi was brutally murdered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, the Turkish government spearheaded an international campaign to expose the Saudi state's role in the crime. Turkey shared a voice recording from the crime scene with its allies, while Erdogan himself wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* – where Khashoggi was a columnist – in which he blamed the Saudi regime for the murder.

This assertiveness was typical of the foreign policy Turkey had pursued for much of the previous decade, as it sought to remake the Middle East in its own image. Ankara supported offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, backed the Arab uprisings, publicly condemned Gulf states' domestic policies, and expanded its military activities in Syria and Iraq. In the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's gunboat diplomacy pitted it against a bloc comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Israel.

Yet the country has now changed tack. Ankara's recent overtures to Riyadh form part of a broader effort to improve its relationships with former rivals in the Middle East. Erdogan intends to adjust these relationships to the new reality both in the region and – more importantly for him – in Turkish politics. He now accepts that “we need to enter a new process with countries in the region with whom we share the same faith, same ideas. This is not a process about increasing our enemies but about winning friends.”

As ECFR's Julien Barnes-Dacey and Hugh Lovatt argue, Middle Eastern states are increasingly determined to reduce their reliance on the West and become more self-sufficient. Therefore, in an increasingly multipolar region, Turkey cannot afford to be a power with no partners other than Qatar. Nor does it want to be a satellite of the West. And Turkey's transformation into a national security state under Erdogan arguably leaves it without a model of Islamist democracy to try to export to Gulf monarchies. Ankara's main aim in the Middle East is now to engage in a geopolitical balancing act that strengthens Turkey's economy and protects its security interests as much as possible.

This is because, heading towards a general election in 2023, Erdogan is focused primarily on regime protection. After two decades in power, he faces a real prospect of electoral defeat. He needs to boost Turkey's beleaguered economy any way he can. And this cause seems best served by a return to transactional relationships with Gulf monarchies. For instance, Turkey could require financing from Gulf states to prevent a short-term balance of payments crisis or another currency devaluation. Moreover, Turkey should find it easier to get along with other Middle Eastern powers than it once did, because it increasingly resembles them.

The European Union and its member states will need to understand Turkey's newfound pragmatism in the Middle East – and the sense of vulnerability behind this – if they are to improve their own relationships with the country, seize emerging opportunities for cooperation with it on various policy issues, and prepare for a potential power shift in Ankara. This paper assesses how Erdogan's new approach is playing out across the region, the motivations for it, and its implications for European policy, identifying potential areas of cooperation and conflict. The paper assesses the domestic imperatives that push Erdogan towards this approach, including public discontent with the economy and Turkey's refugee policy. It explores how Turkey's current government or its increasingly united opposition might navigate these domestic and regional challenges in the run-up to the 2023 election, proposing several ideas for how European policymakers can maintain a stable relationship with Ankara.

## De-escalation on many fronts

By early 2021, Turkey was isolated in the Middle East, faced the threat of [EU sanctions](#), and was experiencing a sharp economic decline. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) maintained a drumbeat of accusations against external powers that were supposedly attacking Turkey. But this did little to prevent the country's economic problems from shaking the party's long-standing dominance of Turkish politics.

Over the course of the year, Turkey quietly reached out to Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and – finally – Saudi Arabia. Working through diplomatic and intelligence contacts, Ankara attempted to de-escalate its long-running disputes with all of them. The speed with which it did so surprised many European policymakers.

At the urging of then German chancellor Angela Merkel, Turkey pulled back its energy-exploration and naval vessels in **the eastern Mediterranean** – a move that staved off EU sanctions – and started direct talks with Greece. It also developed road map for de-escalation with France. As part of

an attempt to improve relations with US President Joe Biden, Erdogan temporarily scaled back Turkey's military campaign against the Syrian Kurds for much of 2021. And the Turkish government started negotiations with the EU on climate change and the renewal of the 2016 deal that provided financial aid in return for Turkey hosting millions of Syrian refugees.

Improving relations with the United States and EU members was another key goal for de-escalation. For the Biden administration and EU governments, Turkey's assertive and revisionist moves in its own neighbourhood were a source of regional instability. Western leaders, including Biden, generally kept their Turkish counterpart at arm's length, avoiding the personalised diplomacy that had characterised Erdogan's relationship with Donald Trump, and choosing instead to meet him on the sidelines of multinational meetings. The de-escalation policy did not immediately improve relations with the Biden administration but, in time, Washington took note of Ankara's efforts to mend fences with other Middle Eastern governments. A significant boost for Turkey's image was its support for Ukraine – through the sale of armed drones to the country and its work to prevent Russian military vessels from entering the Black Sea. Erdogan eventually secured a meeting with Biden and EU leaders at the NATO summit in July, after agreeing to lift Turkey's veto on Sweden's and Finland's applications for NATO membership.

Turkish decision-makers claim that part of the reason for their policy of regional de-escalation is that Ankara achieved its main foreign policy goals between 2016 and 2020: preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish statelet in Syria and disrupting the creation of an energy corridor in the eastern Mediterranean that would bypass Turkey.<sup>[1]</sup> Both these aims are fundamental to Turkey's security interests – and, accordingly, could outlast the Erdogan era.

However, as Ankara reversed course, not everyone in the Middle East seemed to be waiting with open arms. Turkey was initially met with a cautious response when it attempted to reach out to other Middle Eastern states. Gulf countries and Israel promised greater cooperation with, and investments in, Turkey but have been hesitant to follow through until they are more certain that it has truly changed its strategic posture. Egypt has been even more hesitant than Gulf countries, settling for quiet institutional engagement with Turkey on issues relating to Libya and other parts of Africa. There have been no meetings between Erdogan and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

By engaging with **Israel** first, Ankara hoped to draw a former ally away from the anti-Turkey coalition that had formed in the Mediterranean. The departure in June 2021 of Israel's long-serving prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, helped Ankara make the case for re-engagement with Israel. In October 2022, following months of quiet diplomacy, Isaac Herzog became the first Israeli president to formally travel to Turkey in 14 years. Erdogan called it a "historic visit".

Turkey hoped that a thaw in its relations with Israel could start a new discussion on energy in the eastern Mediterranean and change the atmosphere<sup>[2]</sup> in the US Congress, which had been critical of Turkey for several years. Ankara also floated the idea of a pipeline from Israel's Leviathan gas fields to Turkey that could serve as an alternative to the East Med Gas Forum – and thereby create a new image for Turkey as a regional energy hub.

The idea of a pipeline from Israel to Turkey had been around for many years but was generally thought to be economically and politically unfeasible – especially since it would need to cross the territorial waters of either Cyprus or Syria, countries with which Turkey has no diplomatic relations. Iraqi officials reportedly want to export gas from Iraq's Kurdistan region to Turkey with the help of Israel.

De-escalation has put an end to mutual recriminations, and energised economic cooperation, between Turkey and Israel. But it has not resulted in a full realignment between the sides. Israel has assured Cyprus and its new partners in the Gulf that an improved relationship with Turkey will not come at the expense of the Abraham Accords. De-escalation has also failed to create a viable alternative to the planned energy pipeline project in the eastern Mediterranean.

**The UAE** has been Turkey's greatest political rival in the past few years, with the fight between them spilling into Europe. For nearly a decade, their relationship had been under strain due to the Libyan conflict, Turkey's belief that UAE supported the coup attempt against Erdogan in 2016, and Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab uprisings. Ankara's push for de-escalation with Abu Dhabi came after a high-profile Turkish mobster, Sedat Peker, escaped in May 2021 to Dubai – where he proceeded to make viral videos exposing corruption and lawbreaking in the upper echelons of the Turkish political system. Turkey reached out to Abu Dhabi to silence Peker, which eventually started a conversation intended to resolve the sides' differences.

In November 2021, after months of diplomacy, Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Erdogan in Ankara, where they discussed efforts to improve diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. In February 2022, Erdogan travelled to Abu Dhabi in a bid to further improve relations. Turkey's pro-government media outlets hailed the visit as the beginning of a massive rush of Emirati

investment in the country. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and other Emirati companies were reportedly interested in Turkey's healthcare and defence industries. And the Emirati and Turkish central banks signed a three-year, \$4.7 billion currency swap agreement.

The process of normalisation has been slower with **Egypt**. Ankara dispatched two diplomatic delegations to Cairo in 2021 to try to repair the damage caused by their disputes over the Libyan conflict, Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and plans for the Mediterranean pipeline that would bypass Turkey. This led to a detente, but not an embrace. Turkey and Egypt are cognizant of each other's influence in the region and careful to avoid escalation, especially in Libya. Cairo expects Ankara to recognise the legitimacy of the Sisi government – whom Erdogan had lambasted for years after the 2013 coup in Egypt.

For the moment, at least, there seems to be a gradual increase in engagement between the sides – which rests on confidence-building measures but no public displays of cooperation. The Turkish authorities pressured Egyptian dissident networks and Muslim Brotherhood-linked media outlets in Istanbul to moderate their tone on the Sisi regime. Some eventually shut down their operations in Turkey. Erdogan has curbed his vocal criticism of the Sisi regime and no longer displays his support for the Muslim Brotherhood by making the Rabia sign – a symbol of opposition to Sisi's ouster of the Morsi government.

Ankara's attempts at rapprochement with Cairo and Abu Dhabi have created a new dynamic in **Libya** (even if they have not led to a resolution of the political crisis in the country). Ankara and Cairo have tried to find common ground by preserving Libya's interim political structures, supporting its UN-led political process, and preventing direct military confrontation between the two main factions in the country. Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt seem to have quietly approved the decision to postpone the general election in Libya initially planned for December 2021. The current political stalemate and interim governance arrangements in Libya preserve separate zones of influence for Turkey and Egypt.

Ankara's primary aim in deploying forces to Libya in late 2019 may have been to disrupt the Mediterranean energy corridor that bypassed Turkey, but it also had several other goals. These were to expand its military footprint to the oil-rich city of Sirte, counter the Emirati-backed army of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, and help shape the new political order in Libya. Although Turkey has not achieved these goals, it has paused its military campaign against Haftar as part of its new approach to the region.

Turkey's dialogue with **Saudi Arabia** also started in 2021. According to diplomats familiar with the talks, a thaw in the relationship between the sides was always dependent on Ankara abandoning its quest for justice in the Khashoggi case. In the lead-up to Erdogan's May 2022 trip to Riyadh, the

Turkish authorities suggested that there was hope Turkey would receive billions of euros in Saudi direct investment and loans. During the trip, Erdogan finally met with Mohammed bin Salman to discuss, inter alia, investment and other financial arrangements, including currency swap lines between the Saudi and Turkish central banks rumoured to involve around \$15 billion. Despite the expectations about the trip in Ankara, Erdogan has yet to secure an influx of funding from Saudi Arabia – which suggests that Turkey could experience a balance of payments crisis in autumn.

Turkey also wants to develop a defence relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, hoping to position itself as a security provider for a region that feels let down by Washington. This is an ambitious goal, given that Turkey's burgeoning defence industry is still no match for that of the US. However, for the sake of the broader relationship with Turkey and to signal to other players that they have options, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries could step up their procurement from Turkish defence companies.

On his return from Riyadh, Erdogan faced no questions about the Khashoggi case from the reporters in his official entourage, merely commenting: “I repeated our commitment to Saudi Arabia's security and stability. I expressed that our security is no different than the Gulf region's security. We spoke about boosting our trade, doing away with customs problems, encouraging investments, and the projects our contractors could take on. We spoke about what we could do in defence.” A few weeks later, Turkish newspapers reported that Saudi Arabia was interested in buying TB2 drones, which are produced by Bayraktar – a company that has Erdogan's son-in-law as its chief technology officer – and have featured heavily in the war in Ukraine.

## Erdogan's domestic problems

Turkey's move towards de-escalation may have been accelerated by a sense of isolation in an increasingly competitive multipolar world order, but it is also driven by Erdogan's desire to deal with his domestic problems. He now faces the greatest political challenge of his time in power, with an economy in tatters and support for his party at a record low. Some of the main reasons to question his chances of winning the 2023 election are as follows.

### Refugees

With Syrians accounting for around 80 per cent of the roughly five million refugees in Turkey, Erdogan's Syria policy is heightening political tension at home. Ankara has been under growing domestic pressure for having encouraged the influx of millions of Syrian and other refugees from Asia. As Economic decline compounds public resentment of refugees, the Turkish president has announced

plans to return one million Syrians to a Turkish-controlled strip of territory in Syria. The Turkish government says it wants to conduct military incursions into Syria not just to fight Kurdish insurgents but also to create conditions for the voluntary return of refugees.

The opposition has been increasingly vocal about the refugee issue, criticising the government's former open-door policy and handling of the Syrian war more broadly. Kemal Kilicdaroglu – leader of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP), the AKP's biggest rival – has publicly called for a dialogue with the Assad regime on the voluntary return of Syrian refugees. He has also talked of convincing Syrians to leave Turkey. If the opposition gain power, Ankara would likely start to engage with the Assad regime – but there is little prospect of it persuading large numbers of refugees to return to Syria.

## Organised opposition

Long-known for their inefficiency and fragmentation, Turkey's opposition parties are now unified and, despite their ideological differences, have formed an electoral alliance aimed at defeating Erdogan – one similar to the anti-Netanyahu coalition in Israel and the anti-Orban alliance in Hungary. This presents a growing challenge to Erdogan's dominance of Turkish politics.

In 2019 an organised opposition bloc won municipal elections in several of Turkey's largest cities. In late 2021, several opposition parties – including the CHP and the centre-right Good Party – formed the so-called Table of Six to formally coordinate their electoral policies. In February 2022, they issued a 48-page declaration of intent to scrap Erdogan's executive presidential system and transform the country back into a parliamentary democracy.

While the opposition has not picked its candidate yet, polls suggest that Erdogan is less popular than some of his possible rivals, including the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul. With the election still a year away, the leading opposition candidate is unlikely to emerge until early 2023.

## The Kurdish issue

As discussed, the aim of preventing the creation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq or an autonomous zone in Syria continues to be at the core of Turkish foreign policy. But, over the years, Ankara has taken a wide range of approaches to achieve this goal, ranging from peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to repressive measures at home and military incursions into Syria and Iraq.

The Kurdish issue is also an irritant in Turkey's relations with the EU and the US: Western

governments have criticised Turkey's successive military interventions against US-backed Kurdish groups in Syria. Ankara's threat to veto Sweden's and Finland's applications for NATO membership were part of an effort to disrupt Western support for the Syrian Kurds. It only relented after both countries provided written statements that they would not support the PKK or its Syrian affiliates.

The issue will undoubtedly remain front and centre in Turkish politics until the election – with the government often using it as an instrument to accuse the opposition of leniency on terrorism. Erdogan frequently claims that the opposition has a partnership with the PKK. This rhetoric prevents the Table of Six from openly cooperating with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which has the support of 11-13 per cent of voters.

Current Turkish policy on the Kurdish issue makes no distinction between civil society actors, political movements, and armed groups affiliated with the PKK or its sister organisations in Syria, Turkey, and Europe. The policy rests on continuous counter-insurgency operations in Turkey and beyond, as well as a desire to stretch the 30km-deep pocket of Syrian territory that Ankara and its proxies control across the entire Syrian border, thereby creating a contiguous "safety belt" on its southern flank. Turkey has no intention of abandoning this security zone, as shown by its creation of permanent administrative structures there. And Erdogan recently threatened to make further military incursions into Syria to enlarge the zone, despite the objections of the US and Russia. How this plays out will depend on the vagaries of Turkey's electoral politics more than anything else.

Turkey's forever war on the PKK in Syria and Iraq, along with its crackdowns on the HDP, is a key part of Erdogan's national platform and a lynchpin of the AKP's relations with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This securitised approach to the Kurdish issue has held the governing coalition together, but it has also damaged Erdogan's overall popularity by alienating conservative Kurds who once saw the AKP as an agent of change. The approach will continue to create instability until the election, as the government may attempt to both ban the HDP and violate its 2019 agreements with Russia and the US by stepping up its military campaign in Syria. The Kurdish issue is also a minefield for the opposition, which needs the support of Kurdish voters to gain a comfortable lead over Erdogan but cannot openly side with HDP for fear of government criticism.

Turkey's Kurdish issue is a litmus test of its democratic standards. It is unclear whether the country will return to its rule-of-law framework any time soon – but it will certainly not do so before the election.

The EU's long-term goal should be to establish guidelines and mechanisms to prevent the Kurdish issue from being a constant irritant in Turkish-EU relations. This could involve encouraging Turkey to moderate its approach after the election; engaging in a dialogue with Turkey and the Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF), with the promise that the group would reduce the influence of the PKK in its ranks; and promoting dialogue between Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as between Syrian opposition factions, to improve economic connectivity across Syria. Greater connectivity between administrations in northern Syria – those controlled by Turkey, the opposition, the regime, and the Kurds – would help create sustainable economic conditions and may prevent further refugee flows into Turkey. It would also significantly reduce the risk of military escalation in the region.

The EU should prepare for a scenario in which the Syrian Kurds, under pressure from Turkey, seek closer links with the Assad regime or Russia. Lasting stability in Syria depends on European capitals, Ankara, and the Syrian regime accepting the need for an inclusive policy on the Kurds and other opposition groups. In return, Syria's Kurds and opposition groups will need to commit to uphold the country's territorial integrity.

## Economic distress

Since 2018, Turkey has experienced an economic decline marked by skyrocketing inflation and a fall in living standards. According to research by Metropoll, 66 per cent of Turkish voters no longer believe Erdogan can fix the economy. Official statistics show that inflation hit 78.6 per cent in June. But the true figure is likely more than 150 per cent, as reported by ENAG, an independent watchdog. Turkey is now facing the prospect of another currency crisis as it heads towards the election campaign.

It is unsurprising that Turkey's economic decline began in 2018 – the year the country officially transformed into an executive presidency that concentrated power in Erdogan's hands. The independence of Turkey's economic institutions, including the central bank and regulatory agencies, has rapidly deteriorated since then. Most economists blame this institutional decay, as well as Erdogan's unorthodox economic policies, for Turkey's economic predicament.

Turkey's state coffers are empty. Going against the conventional economic wisdom, Erdogan has long argued that high interest rates are the main cause of the country's economic problems. So, rather than allow the central bank to raise rates to control inflation, the government has used its foreign exchange reserves to try to stabilise markets, selling the reserves through state banks. In June, the Turkish central bank's net foreign currency reserves stood at \$7.38 billion, the lowest in two decades. The reserves had shrunk by \$4.8 billion in just one week in May due to the government's interventions in the market. This is not a sustainable policy, especially in the face of global recessionary pressure. Despite state interventions, the lira has been among the worst-performers against the US dollar this year.

This has increased Turkey's need for external financing to prop up the lira. Ankara hopes that the

normalisation of its relationship with Gulf Arab regimes can ease the pressure on its central bank reserves and prevent another currency crisis. Unlike loans from international lenders such as the International Monetary Fund, foreign exchange loans from Gulf states come without restrictions on monetary policy. The latter will not be a panacea for Turkey's structural economic problems but could provide temporary relief ahead of the 2023 election. The Turkish government is keen to attract investment and tourism from Middle Eastern states, to make up for the decline in Russian and Ukrainian tourism.

## Foreign policy

Foreign policy remains a deeply contested arena in which Erdogan's Turkey demonstrates both strength and vulnerability. The country's global image and position are important to Turkish voters – a source of both pride and concern.

Turks are inconsistent in the demands they make on their leaders – simultaneously suspicious of Turkey's Western allies and keen on the kind of closer ties with the West that could improve its economy and their living standards. Fifty-eight per cent of Turks have an unfavourable view of the US and 54 per cent consider it a “threat” to Turkey's national security. According to Metropoll, 48 per cent of Turks blame the US and NATO for the war in Ukraine, but more than 50 per cent continue to support Turkey's NATO membership. That number is even higher with Europe: roughly 60 per cent of Turks approve of the Turkish EU membership bid, and more than half want to send their children to study in Western countries, even though many suspect that the West does not have Turkey's best interests at heart. Ankara's Syria policy remains unpopular due to the presence of Syrian refugees and Turkish support for Syrian proxies, but the public generally backs the fight against the PKK (although, during the peace process, nearly 70 per cent supported talks with the group).

Erdogan has traditionally shaped the domestic narrative and used his high profile internationally – shuttling between meetings with world leaders, while straddling the line between the Middle East and NATO countries – to generate support at home. But, due to the strains on Ankara's relations with European governments and the Biden administration, he has been unable to reclaim his role as *dünya lideri* (global leader) or *asrın lideri* (leader of the century), as his supporters like to call him. Turkish diplomats have repeatedly complained to their European counterparts about Erdogan's lack of invitations to EU summits. And Erdogan himself has publicly griped about his lack of access to Biden. Accordingly, his recent meetings with Middle Eastern leaders are partly designed to polish his image at home.

Russia's war on Ukraine has restored Turkey's self-image as a key geopolitical player and given

Erdogan more visibility than at any time in the last few years. Most Turks support their country's balancing act and quasi-neutral position between the West and Russia. But foreign policy remains the AKP's soft underbelly. This is because the party has overseen Turkey's cyclical crises with the EU and NATO states, which have had a severe impact on its economy – particularly the investment climate.

Turkish citizens receive a daily dose of state propaganda on their country's irresistible rise and other powers' coordinated efforts to prevent this. Yet voters increasingly find the image of Turkey the government promotes to be at odds with their economic reality.

The government regularly describes the opposition as an instrument of dark forces that want to weaken Turkey. It has different sets of talking points for different audiences, but Erdogan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli have a clear message for the Turkish public: the West, George Soros, and other supposed enemies are trying to subjugate and divide Turkey. By April 2022, Osman Kavala – Turkey's foremost civil society leader and one of the founders of Open Society in the country – had spent four and a half years in detention. A court then sentenced him to life in prison, designating the 2013 Gezi Park protests he was involved in as a foreign plot to overthrow the government. Much like their counterparts in Russia and Hungary, the Turkish government views liberal-leaning civil society organisations and human rights groups as part of a fifth column that serves Western interests. The opposition has defended the Gezi Park protests and criticised the Kavala verdict.

Despite this anti-Western narrative, both the government and the opposition publicly endorse Turkey's EU accession process – with the latter viewing it as a means to re-establish Turkey's rule of law architecture. For instance, in a recent communiqué, opposition parties stated their commitment to Turkey's "EU orientation" and "restoring its prestige". They want Turkey to pivot to Europe but privately acknowledge that it may no longer have the option of full EU membership.

The EU needs to use the post-election period as an opportunity for realignment with Turkey on the Middle East and other issues. However, it should prepare for the likelihood that, in the short term, the country will suffer from domestic instability that results in polarised domestic politics and a compartmentalised relationship with the West characterised by both conflict and cooperation. Europeans should put forward substantive policy proposals that re-energise the Turkey-EU dialogue after the election. For instance, Turkey could be interested in joining a broad, multitiered European community that would allow for greater cooperation on security, refugees, and energy.

## **An opposition victory**

In the event of an opposition victory in the 2023 election, the new government in Ankara might

attempt to pivot to Europe and would almost certainly try to reset Turkey's relationship with the EU and the US. But, inevitably, economic ties and regional security issues will ensure that Turkey's foreign policy focuses on the Middle East.

A coalition made up of Erdogan's opponents would likely continue along the path to normalisation with Middle Eastern regimes. The leading opposition parties – the CHP and the Good Party – prioritise secularism as a primary feature of Turkey's external relations. They have long criticised the government's Middle East policy, including its sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood and its meddling in conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Egypt. In 2017 Kilicdaroglu called the Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist organisation” and accused Erdogan of meeting its representatives.

Regardless of who wins the election, Middle East issues – including the wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and the food crisis in the region – could serve as an important opening for cooperation with Europe. As Turkey returns to a more traditional foreign policy focused on protecting its security and economic interests, it has a chance to stabilise relations with regional powers and contribute to the resolution of all three conflicts.

For several years, the CHP has publicly called for the normalisation of relations with Egypt and Syria. If the opposition won the election, this would expedite the process on both tracks. The fact that both leading opposition parties voted against the deployment of Turkish forces in Libya suggests they support a more traditional, hands-off approach to conflicts in the Arab world.

Ankara's incremental engagement with the Assad regime or gradual normalisation of relations with it – almost a certainty if the opposition win – would be a seismic shift in the region.

As discussed, the CHP has stated that it would encourage the voluntary return of refugees by talking to Damascus. With domestic tensions building, the refugee issue will dominate Turkey's political landscape for some time to come. Both the opposition and the government will try to please the public by putting forward ideas about how to voluntarily repatriate Syrians and other refugees – even though, historically, such efforts have rarely succeeded.

Syria remains an open wound for Turkish politics and a source of constant domestic tension. The current government may have opposed the Assad regime for a decade, but this will not necessarily prevent it from revisiting its Syria policy. An Erdogan victory in 2023 could also result in a thaw in relations between Turkey and Syria – especially if the Syrian Kurds seemed close to a deal with Damascus. Erdogan has revealed that Turkey's foreign intelligence agency is already in contact with the Syrian authorities. If Ankara believed that the Syrian Kurds were poised to reach an agreement with the Assad regime, it would likely reach out to Damascus to prevent them from gaining formal

autonomy.

This has huge implications for European and Western positioning in Syria. A thaw in relations between Ankara and Damascus would bring the Assad regime one step closer to readmission into the international community. It would also force the EU to reconsider its Syria policy – calling into question its refusal to engage with the Syrian regime in ways that could help stabilise the country. European policymakers need to prepare for a post-election scenario in which Ankara gradually normalises its relationship with the regime. In the long run, Europe has an interest in a stable and inclusive Syria at peace with its own population. Europeans should develop political mechanisms and oversight to ensure that this happens in a responsible manner and in support of a political solution, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

## How Europe and Turkey can coexist

Turkey's changing attitude towards its Middle Eastern neighbours contrasts with the permanent state of instability and chaos in its relations with Europe. This is probably because the Turkish-European conversation is structured around the rules of an earlier era – and no longer corresponds with Turkey's domestic reality or the new geopolitical environment created by Russia's war on Ukraine. European states need to adjust to the shifts in Turkey's position in the Middle East and its domestic politics. They should draw on the lessons of these shifts as they rebuild their own relationships with Turkey.

In the run-up to the election, Europeans would do well to distance themselves from Turkey's deeply polarised domestic politics. But, in the long run, it will be important for the EU to find a way to restructure its relationship with Erdogan's Turkey or a post-Erdogan Turkey. The country is a key ally and an occasional rival on the union's doorstep. It also has a major role to play in the new European security order that will emerge from the war in Ukraine. Turkey has been part of the domestic debate in influential European states, including the United Kingdom (during the Brexit debate), Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. As shown by Erdogan's recent threat to veto Sweden's and Finland's applications for NATO membership, Turkey is as much an internal Western matter as an external one.

The Gulf and North Africa are two of the most obvious areas in which Turkey's new policy and the EU's desire to become a more geopolitical actor can lead to greater cooperation – and a healthy dose of competition – between them. Ankara's position in the Middle East affects Europe on issues ranging from migration to energy and security. Turkish and European interests largely overlap in areas such as stabilisation, trade, efforts to counter Russian influence, and the provision of security guarantees to

regional powers. Therefore, the EU should welcome a more cooperative Turkey as a key partner in the region.

Of course, Turkey's internal dynamics might change in unpredictable ways. Even in a post-Erdogan Turkey, there would be questions about the country's role in Libya, Syria, and Iraq, as well as its growing economic dependence on Gulf states. And, as analyst Sinem Adar rightly points out, "the EU and Turkey are sleepwalking without a compass". The EU's Strategic Compass, adopted by Foreign Affairs Council in March 2022, calls for "tailored bilateral relations" with Turkey but does not categorise the country as a future partner or a member of an expanded European community. While the EU's current efforts to distance itself from Turkey could be effective up until the 2023 election, the union will eventually need to develop policies for stable, multi-tiered engagement with the country that cover several areas and conflict zones.

## Recommendations for the EU

For starters, the EU probably needs to accept that Turkey will remain autonomous and somewhat disconnected from the transatlantic security agenda, no matter what happens in its domestic politics. A post-Erdogan government might moderate Turkey's Europe policy and attempt to resuscitate its moribund EU accession process, as the opposition has pledged to do. But, given that the EU no longer seems interested in accepting Turkey as a member state, a complete realignment of their relationship may not be in the cards. Therefore, the EU needs a Turkey policy that can replace the accession framework.

This will require European leaders to think of Turkey as a major power in the Middle East with which they have a mixture of shared and competing interests – rather fall into the trap of categorising it as either an ally or a rival. Yet the relationship between the sides need not be confrontational. The EU and its member states should become comfortable with the idea of non-binary engagement along the lines of the "principled transactionalism" advocated by Lovatt and Barnes-Dacey.

Here, the Turkish-Russian model of “competitive cooperation” provides an insight into how Turkey can co-exist with a regional heavyweight in a transactional arrangement. Turkey and Russia are able to recognise one another’s spheres of interest and agree to disagree in ways that sustain bilateral relations. Europe and Turkey need to find ways of managing their differences in various domains while cooperating in others. Turkey could play a stabilising role in some parts of the Middle East but create instability in others. Or it could provide security in the Gulf but oppose Cypriot claims on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean. Europeans need to understand that Turkey will not always have the same interests as Europe – but can be a supportive partner in some areas.

Today’s Turkey seems like a national security state in the style of other Middle Eastern countries. Yet it is still the most democratic Middle Eastern nation – one with a polarised society that has long experienced the ebb and flow between democratisation and illiberalism.

Erdogan has been instrumental in reinforcing Turkey’s self-image of autonomy and exceptionalism. However, while Turkish voters may decide to part ways with him, they are unlikely to abandon these ideas. In a chaotic region and with two wars raging on its borders, Turkey will engage in the same type of strategic balancing that characterised its foreign policy among great powers in the late Ottoman era. Today, it wants to manage relations with Russia, China, the EU, and the US as a means to protect its own interests.

The main driver of this process will be Turkey’s political elite and wider society – not European influence. This means that the EU will need to focus on areas of mutual concern with Turkey and better manage their differences. It should do so in the following ways.

## **Re-engage with Turkey after the 2023 election**

The EU should begin by establishing working groups with Ankara on the Middle East, the Balkans, European security, energy, and migration. This would help them sideline the moribund accession process and establish a more transactional relationship.

More broadly, the EU should conduct a post-election review of its relationship with Turkey – especially if there is a new government in Ankara that is interested in a pivot to Europe. As part of this, the union should state publicly and unequivocally that the door is open for a democratic Turkey to join a broader, multi-tiered European community that also involves the UK, Ukraine, and Western Balkans countries. This option should be open to Turks, should they want it. With a broad industrial base, a sizeable population, significant military capabilities, and a strategically important position for energy corridors, Turkey has much to contribute. If the EU left Turkey out of the grouping, this would

only reinforce its siege mentality and create permanent tension in the country's relationships with Greece and other European states.

## Compartmentalise cooperation in the Middle East

There is a great deal of overlap between Turkish and European interests in the conflicts in Libya and Yemen. In Libya, Turkey's efforts to normalise its relationship with the UAE have improved cooperation between the two countries, resulting in a relative de-escalation between some warring factions. Europe should use this opportunity to make progress on governance issues in Libya, in line with the Berlin process.

Meanwhile, Saudi-Turkish rapprochement could affect the war in Yemen, as there are rumours that Saudi Arabia is in discussions to buy Turkish drones to use in the conflict there. The EU could work with Turkey to ensure that this new venture does not have a negative impact on prospects for peace or the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

## Create trade and energy partnerships with Turkey

In recent years, Turkey's robust business community has been making inroads into Africa. The EU could increase its economic access to Middle Eastern and African markets by partnering with Turkish companies in the infrastructure, construction, and energy sectors. This could also help the union address some of the supply chain issues it has faced in relation to manufacturing in Asia. Turkey's private sector and industrial workforce already operate under guidelines that are broadly in synch with European norms – on account of the country's customs union with the EU.

The EU should also encourage Turkey's efforts to work with Russia and Ukraine to provide a safe corridor for grain exports from the Black Sea region. Together, Ukraine and Russia supply almost one-third of global imports of wheat and barley. Ukraine is also a major exporter of sunflower oil and corn. Shortages have been driving up prices across the Middle East and Africa; the UN World Food Programme is already warning of "hunger catastrophe" if Russia continues to block Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea.

Ankara has been working with the United Nations to establish a mechanism that can create and monitor safe corridors for Ukrainian grain exports from Odessa and other ports. The Turkish government has also spoken to the Kremlin about this issue. The EU could not provide the transport ships or naval escorts for such operations, as Russia would undoubtedly reject this as direct Western involvement in the Black Sea. But the union could create a fund to help cover high insurance premiums or assist with mine-sweeping operations off the coast of Odessa, along routes set out by

Ukraine.

## **Prepare for Ankara's re-engagement with the Assad regime**

As discussed, if Ankara re-engages with the Assad regime after the election, this may provide a key moment for the EU to adjust its relationship with Syria. The deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation in the country – in both regime-held and opposition-run areas – contributes to instability in the Middle East. It is important for Europeans to ensure that the process of normalisation with the regime takes place in a conditional and responsible manner – in support of a political resolution of the conflict, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Both the US and the EU have said that they will not lift their sanctions on the Assad regime until there is irreversible progress towards that goal. But, with the combat phase of the conflict largely over, Syria's neighbours and the EU need to ease the economic hardships of ordinary Syrians by opening up new avenues of commercial activity for them.

The EU has an interest in maintaining stability and preserving the current administrative structures in the north of the country. This will require coordination with Russia, efforts to prevent a flare-up in the fighting between Turkey and the Kurds, and humanitarian relief and stabilisation aid in areas outside the regime's control. Greater connectivity between territories controlled by Turkey, the regime, and the Kurds would lay the groundwork for a sustainable increase in economic activity.

Turkey can be a major partner for the EU in efforts to achieve these goals. While Turkey may continue to block deliveries of humanitarian aid to Kurdish-run areas, the EU can cooperate with the country in Turkish-controlled areas and take a compartmentalised approach to humanitarian work elsewhere.

## **Address the Kurdish issue**

It is impossible to prevent Turkey's conflict with the Kurds from affecting EU-Turkish relations. But the EU can still improve the situation.

The Turkish threat to veto Sweden's and Finland's NATO accession showed that it is critical for Turkey and European states to reach an understanding on the Kurdish issue. Such an understanding should protect Europe's democratic standards but also address Turkey's concerns about PKK activities in Europe.

The current political climate in Turkey is characterised by hostility towards the political wing of the

Kurdish movement in Turkey, the HDP. Yet the election could change this. Erdogan might moderate his approach to the issue at the eleventh hour, aiming to peel the Kurds away from the opposition camp – as he has in the past.

While Europeans have little influence on the dynamics of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, they should continue to insist that the country upholds democratic standards and the rule of law. Europeans do have a say in how the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state spills into Europe – particularly among the Kurdish diaspora. European countries should make it clear to Turkey that they will preserve free speech and civil liberties at home but prevent the PKK from using their territory to conduct fundraising or recruitment operations. Although the Erdogan government might not readily accept this distinction, Europeans should endeavour to sustain both their own democratic standards and counter-terrorism cooperation with Turkey.

## **Promote intra-Kurdish dialogue in Syria after the Turkish election**

The EU would find it much easier to deal with the Kurdish issue if Turkey returned to its 2009-2015 peace process with the PKK. But there is little prospect of that at the moment. And, if Turkey were to do so, this initiative would be driven by its domestic politics alone.

Nonetheless, the EU could still encourage a post-election Turkey to engage in dialogue and economic partnerships with Syrian Kurds, so long as the SDF removed PKK cadres from its governance structures. The union could do so by promoting a dialogue between the SDF and other Syrian Kurdish groups, as well as between Syrian Kurds and other Syrian opposition groups. As discussed, Europeans could also push Turkey to improve the connectivity between different areas of Syria – which would be important for creating a liveable environment for Syrians outside regime-controlled areas.

## **Explore eastern Mediterranean energy deals**

The eastern Mediterranean will become an increasingly critical arena of geopolitical competition for the EU, especially in its quest to reduce its dependency on Russian gas. While the region is no match for Russia in gas production, it could be helpful to Europe in modest ways. Nonetheless, at this point, it would be neither politically realistic nor economically feasible to build long, expensive pipelines in the eastern Mediterranean. Initiatives to tap into the region's resources would only make sense only if there were both new energy infrastructure there and a way to integrate Turkey into such efforts.

Europeans should support Turkey's efforts to de-escalate its disputes with other powers in the eastern

Mediterranean. But they should also remember that Turkey's relationship with Greece could deteriorate in the run-up to the 2023 election unless the EU works to de-escalate the dispute between the two countries. If there is to be a stable and lasting solution to the stand-off between the sides in the region, the EU will need to push for Turkey's inclusion in energy exploration and production arrangements there.

In the best-case scenario, the planned East Med Pipeline – which excludes Turkey and connects Egyptian, Israeli, and Cypriot gas fields to Europe – would have carried an estimated 10 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year, or roughly 20 per cent of Russia's gas exports to the continent. Yet the project no longer seems politically or economically viable, due to Ankara's assertive posturing in the eastern Mediterranean between 2018 and 2021. Meanwhile, a Turkish-Israeli pipeline also seems unrealistic, given that it would need to pass through Cypriot territorial waters and that Turkey has no diplomatic relationship with the Republic of Cyprus.

The EU could use its diplomatic strength to weave some of these strands into a sustainable energy architecture for the eastern Mediterranean – one that involved Turkey and eased tensions in the region, particularly those between Turkey and Greece. One approach to this could be to invite Turkey to join the East Med Gas Forum; another could be to promote an agreement between Turkey and Cyprus on an equitable distribution of hydrocarbon revenues between the Turkish and Greek communities on the island (even in the absence of a final settlement on the Cyprus issue). The launch of an eastern Mediterranean energy forum could also work.

All these steps would become easier with EU leadership and mediation. By starting a structured conversation on any of these issues, the EU could improve its relationship with Turkey and prevent further escalation in the eastern Mediterranean.

## About the author

Asli Aydintasbas is a senior policy fellow at ECFR and a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution. She writes a Global Opinions column for the *Washington Post*. Prior to joining the foreign policy community in 2016, Aydintasbas had a long career in journalism, during which she focused on Turkey, its domestic evolution, and foreign policy in an age of regional transition and geopolitical competition. Aydintasbas is a regular commentator on Turkey for international media outlets. Her articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Forbes*, *Politico*, and *Newsweek*. Aydintasbas previously wrote a bi-weekly column for Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* (2016-2018) and for *Milliyet* (2008-2015). She hosted a popular daily television show on CNN Turk, *Karşı Gündem* (2013 to 2015), which featured discussions on Turkey's

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[1] Conversation with a leading member of the AKP, March 2022.

[2] Conversation with a senior Turkish diplomat in Europe, May 2021.

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