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REPORT

# Turkish Foreign Policy and the 2024 Municipal Elections: Navigating Regional Realities & Local Politics

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## Executive Summary

Turkish foreign policy has undergone significant shifts under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). In power since 2002, Erdoğan has positioned Türkiye as a more ambitious player in global politics and the international system, while simultaneously enacting autocratic policies at home to cement his role in Turkish politics. This was evident in the early to mid-2010s of AKP rule when the administration at the time pursued a policy of regional activism under former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Whereas previous Turkish administrations had a more pro-Western stance in foreign policy decisions backed by a staunchly secular military, Erdoğan and the AKP have fundamentally altered this course by charting a more independent path based on geopolitical considerations and pragmatism when most suited. None of this is more apparent than in policies pursued in the MENA region by the AKP, where regime change was pursued in countries such as Egypt and Syria during the Arab Spring but later deteriorated relations with such states as a result of these policy options.

Now with the economic crisis that has persisted since 2018, Türkiye has sought to rebuild ties with countries in the Middle East region, particularly after the May 2023 elections which saw Erdoğan's People's Alliance win the presidential and parliamentary elections against a six-party opposition coalition known as the Nation's Alliance. From investment deals, security agreements, and a change in personnel, the AKP have shifted focus to trying to stabilize the Turkish economy and diplomatic relations with countries in the MENA region, especially in the Gulf.

With just days to go before the local elections in Türkiye, Erdoğan and the AKP look poised to carry on their momentum after the May 2023 elections and re-capture certain municipalities currently governed by the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP). The opposition parties from the Nation's Alliance have mostly gone their separate ways, and it appears that the AKP have the advantage to re-take certain cities as the opposition remains bitterly divided. Yet with the cost of living crisis in the country persisting as well as the continued popularity of mayors Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş of İstanbul and Ankara respectively, there is no guarantee in a highly polarised political context. The key will be which voter bases go out to vote on 31 March. Thus, the 2024 municipal elections will reveal important insights for Turkish politics up into the next presidential elections until 2028.

## Section I

# Historical Background: Turkish FP Under the AKP

### 1.1 Türkiye's Regional Engagement in the MENA Region

Since the AKP (Justice and Development Party) rose to power in 2002, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began his tenure as prime minister the following year, the Republic of Türkiye has gradually shifted towards a more conservative, religiously-inspired politics – breaking from decades of secularism that had been set in motion by the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.<sup>1</sup> In much the same vein, Türkiye under Erdoğan has adopted an increasingly activist and 'multi-axial' foreign policy, in contrast to the Kemalist attitude that advocated a Western-aligned approach.

This section of the report traces and analyses the various shifts in Turkish foreign policy before, during, and since the Arab Spring of 2010-12. Before the Arab Spring, Türkiye had already sought to forge closer ties with its neighbours. However, it was the eruption of the Arab Spring that turned Ankara's Middle East policy around. The AKP saw the protest movements as an opportunity to gain soft power capital among Arab populations while ensuring that it could bring to power parties that shared its own Islamist model. The ambitions of the Arab Spring, however, failed to bear fruit, and Ankara found itself increasingly isolated from the region it had once tried to lead. In recent years, Türkiye has managed to patch up relations with many of the countries it stood at odds with (owing to its stance during the Arab Spring), including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Moreover, it has sought rapprochements with long-standing foes, Armenia and Greece, and augmented its regional standing via its rapidly expanding drone technology. Given these developments, Türkiye is often considered a rising middle power. Looking towards the peripheries of the Middle East, we also trace Türkiye's volatile relationship with Greece and Cyprus, as well as its decisive role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

#### **Turkish foreign policy before the Arab Spring: "Zero Problems with Neighbours" as a guiding principle (2004-2010)**

First conceived by Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2001 in his book "Strategic Depth" ("Stratejik Derinlik"), the "Zero Problems With Neighbours" policy was an attempt to "desecuritize" Türkiye's relations with its neighbours by offering a discourse "based on cooperation rather than competition."<sup>2</sup> Central to Davutoğlu's "Strategic Depth" doctrine is Türkiye's "inherent strength as a state lying at the cultural and historical crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia (...), (allowing) Ankara unique advantages in

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Kai. 2023. "Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions". Council on Foreign Relations.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/turkeys-growing-foreign-policy-ambitions>

<sup>2</sup> Özcan, Genker. 2012. "Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours". IEMed.

<https://www.iemed.org/publication/policy-of-zero-problems-with-the-neighbours/?lang=fr>

forging a new political, economic, and social order within the Middle East and the wider Muslim world.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, as Davutoğlu laid out when he became the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, the policy sought to cultivate stronger ties with Türkiye’s Middle Eastern neighbours. In this vein, economic cooperation and trade agreements were signed, for instance a Memorandum of Understanding with Saudi Arabia in 2008, as well as free trade agreements with Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Ankara acted as mediator between conflicting parties, for instance between Syria and Israel, regarding the status of the Golan Heights.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, a “Quadripartite High Level Cooperation Council” was created, gathering Türkiye, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, aimed at creating a sense of unity between “brotherly countries”. Especially with regards to Syria, Türkiye’s efforts yielded tangible results: “the AKP exerted great efforts to convert Türkiye’s relations with Syria from hostility over water, territorial disagreements and the harbouring of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) into one of increased trade, visa free travel, military cooperation, and friendship.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the policy was also understood as an opening gesture towards the EU. In order to meet Brussels’ accession criteria of transparent, civilian rule – a primary objective of Erdoğan’s foreign policy in the AKP’s first tenure – the “Zero Problems with Neighbours” approach marked a shift towards a demilitarised and appeased diplomacy. It ultimately allowed Erdoğan to sideline the once powerful military institution in the making of Turkish foreign policy by passing a law to “qualify Ankara for EU accession” in 2004.<sup>7</sup> However, as accession talks stalled around 2010, the AKP turned its attention towards the Middle East, with the Arab Spring of 2011 forcing Türkiye to reconsider its regional standing as a mediator.

## 1.2 Turkish foreign policy from 2011 to 2021: Navigating the Arab Spring and establishing regional leadership

### 2011-2016: Rising Turkish Power

With the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, the AKP pursued an active regional diplomacy, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates against the secular authoritarian regimes throughout the region. As the country’s economy was growing rapidly, Erdoğan and his associates felt emboldened to

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<sup>3</sup> Gingeras, Ryan. 2020. “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy”. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>

<sup>4</sup> Özcan, Genker. 2012. “Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours”. IEMed.

<https://www.iemed.org/publication/policy-of-zero-problems-with-the-neighbours/?lang=fr>

<sup>5</sup> Peter Walker, “Syria and Israel Officially Confirm Peace Talks,” The Guardian, May 21, 2008,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/21/israelandthepalestinians.syria>.

<sup>6</sup> Meliha Benli Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin. 2023. “Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: A Three Level Analysis of Foreign Policy Change”. Uluslararası İlişkiler, Vol. 20, No 78, 2023, pp. 79-96. DOI: 10.33458/uidergisi.1285200, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3092494>.

<sup>7</sup> Çağaptay, Soner. 2021. A Sultan in Autumn Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces. IB Tauris. p. 42. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4600>.



become an active diplomatic player.<sup>8</sup> However, given that the Arab Spring failed to yield the intended results of regime change, Ankara's Arab Spring policy drove a wedge between Türkiye and much of the Muslim world, whose authoritarian regimes remained in power. As a result, Türkiye stood more isolated than ever before on the regional scene – with Qatar and Libya's Tripoli-based government forming two exceptions.<sup>9</sup>

**Türkiye and Syria:** Ankara's intervention in the Syrian Civil War marked an important inflection point in Turkish foreign policy and domestic politics. In line with its support for the Arab Spring, Türkiye originally backed the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad. However, Ankara's attention gradually moved towards the increasingly organised Kurdish forces in Syria out of fears that their activities could lead to a renewed Kurdish insurgency in Türkiye itself. In 2013, as President Barack Obama refused to intervene militarily in Syria after President al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own population, Türkiye decided to pursue an independent approach. From 2015 onward, with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) posing serious threats to European and Middle Eastern security, the US supported the People's Protection Units (YPG) under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>10</sup> The YPG are the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), a libertarian socialist group pursuing "democratic autonomy" for the Kurdish people.<sup>11</sup> The PYD has ties to the PKK, which has been waging a guerilla war against Türkiye since 1984. As such, American assistance to the YPG irked the Turkish security establishment, severely affecting Turkish-American cooperation on the ground in Syria. In September 2015, emboldened by Obama's reluctance to intervene in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin deployed troops to embolden Assad's regime, leading to direct confrontation with the Turkish military: in November 2015, Türkiye shot down a Russian aircraft that had violated Turkish airspace. Shortly after, Putin imposed severe economic sanctions on Türkiye and launched airstrikes against opposition groups backed by Ankara.<sup>12</sup>

However, after the failed coup attempt against Erdoğan in July 2016, Putin reached out to the Turkish President, "seeking to build a connection based on shared alienation with Washington and the West."<sup>13</sup> This rapprochement saw Moscow export its S-400 missile system to Ankara, which was condemned by NATO, and allowed both countries to establish a power balance in Syria. Türkiye seemed to move inexorably closer to Russia and away from its Western partners. In 2016, Putin accepted Turkish direct military intervention in Syria, as Operation Euphrates Shield established a stronghold in the Northern part of the country to fend off the YPG. However, this deal also allowed Russia and Assad to regain control of Aleppo, the opposition's stronghold. This arrangement in Syria lasts to this day, as the so-called "Astana process", consisting of Türkiye, Russia, and Iran, is regularly meeting to negotiate the

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cagaptay, Soner. 2021. A Sultan in Autumn Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces. IB Tauris. p. 40-50. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4600>

<sup>11</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center. 2012. "The Kurdish Democratic Union Party". <https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48526&reloadFlag=1>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cagaptay, Soner. 2021. A Sultan in Autumn Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces. IB Tauris. p. 40-50. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4600>

end of the civil war.<sup>14</sup> It is fair to say that the Syrian conflict war has brought about a “strategic realignment that has helped both countries pursue their respective objectives in Syria: The survival of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad’s regime for Moscow and the weakening of the Syrian Kurds for Ankara.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Türkiye’s Syrian affair granted Erdoğan leverage over the EU in managing refugee flows. On 18 March 2016, the EU and Türkiye signed a common declaration to deal with the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe. In exchange for €6 billion in EU funds, Ankara agreed to keep refugees from reaching EU borders. Brussels pledged to facilitate visas for Turkish visitors and reopen talks for Turkish-EU accession. However, this transaction has been marred by disputes, with Türkiye accusing Brussels of not sending enough financial aid and threatening to open its borders to the EU in 2020 as a sign of protest. Conversely, EU criticism of Erdoğan’s growing authoritarianism has further riled up tensions.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, intervening in Syria also served Erdoğan’s domestic goals. The fight against the YPG ensured wide popular support for measures curtailing the rights of Kurds in Türkiye, leading to the constitutional reform in 2017 establishing a strong presidential regime. As Francesco Siccardi points out, “successive military operations in Syria have helped Erdoğan connect with increasingly nationalistic constituencies and drum up support around key electoral dates”<sup>17</sup>, tilting the balance of Turkish politics to conservative, anti-liberal and pro-Russian policies. Additionally, the Syrian intervention reshaped the Turkish army’s credibility. Indeed, a substantial segment of military personnel was released subsequently to the failed coup attempt of 2016. This move further tamed the army’s political independence from the AKP but raised doubts about its effectiveness. The establishment of the northern Syria corridor, the construction of the infrastructure system and the distribution of humanitarian aid ensured Türkiye’s continued relevance. However, according to several human rights organisations, Turkish occupation of parts of Northern Syria has been marked by war crimes and severe ill-treatment.<sup>18</sup> Kurdish and Arab residents suspected to support Kurdish independence have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, and looting by armed actors, including the Turkish military. This “lawless climate of abuse and impunity” presents an additional hurdle on the path to safety in Syria.

### **2016-2021: *Mavi Vatan* - Regional Activism after the failed coup**

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<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera. 2023. “Russia, Syria, Turkey and Iran hold high-level talks in Moscow”. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/10/russia-syria-turkey-and-iran-hold-high-level-talks-in-moscow>

<sup>15</sup> Siccardi, Francesco. 2021. “How Syria Changed Turkey’s Foreign Policy”. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/09/14/how-syria-changed-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-85301>

<sup>16</sup> Kirişçi, Kemal. 2021. “As EU-Turkey migration agreement reaches the five-year mark, add a job creation element”. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/as-eu-turkey-migration-agreement-reaches-the-five-year-mark-add-a-job-creation-element/>

<sup>17</sup> Francesco Siccardi. 2021. “How Syria Changed Turkey’s Foreign Policy”. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/09/14/how-syria-changed-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-85301>.

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2024. “Syria: Abuses, Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Territories”. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/29/syria-abuses-impunity-turkish-occupied-territories>

As the “Zero Problems with Neighbours” policy failed to yield results after the Arab Spring, *Mavi Vatan* (or “Blue Homeland”) gained prominence as a leading inspiration for Türkiye’s foreign policy, especially after the failed coup attempt against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016. As military personnel accused of staging the conspiracy were removed, “the generals who survived the 2016 purges were determined to show their loyalty to the regime, for example, by intervening in Syria, a policy they had long opposed in the past.” Pro-Western staff was marginalised, with the so-called Eurasianist group (which favours a Turkish pivot to the East - also known as Ulusalçılar), gaining influence. Nationalists such as Admiral Cem Gürdeniz blamed the action on a conspiracy masterminded by NATO, the US and the EU because Türkiye was bolstering its ties with Russia. The *Mavi Vatan* doctrine posited that Türkiye should exert maritime claims in the Mediterranean Sea by securing access to gas reserves off the coast of Libya and Cyprus, in areas that Türkiye considers its territorial waters.<sup>19</sup> It represented a change to a more militarised and aggressive foreign policy, in line with the regime’s transition from a parliamentary democracy to a centralised presidential system.<sup>20</sup> *Mavi Vatan*’s confrontational attitude towards NATO and Türkiye’s Western neighbours, namely Greece and Cyprus, has led to episodic spats and increased tensions in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>21</sup>

**Türkiye, Libya and Africa:** As civil war raged from 2014 onward in Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Erdoğan supported the Islamist Tripoli-based regime, the Government of National Accord (GNA), which was also recognized by the UN as the country’s legitimate government - against Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) in Tobruk, which was backed by the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and a myriad of other actors.<sup>22</sup> Several factors can explain Türkiye’s renewed interest in Libya after 2014: first, Libya offers untapped economic opportunities, especially in the construction sector, where Turkish companies are eyeing contracts to reconstruct the country and exploit its oil resources.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, saving the GNA was a way to position Türkiye as a credible regional actor supporting the Muslim Brotherhood against its nemesis. Thirdly, forming an alliance with the Libyan government has helped Erdoğan break his isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, in 2014, Egyptian President Sisi reached out to Greece and Cyprus to delineate their maritime areas and strike a deal on natural gas exploitation in the Mediterranean Sea. As a response, in 2019, Ankara and Tripoli signed a maritime deal that allowed Erdoğan to curtail the emerging Cyprus-Egypt-Greece-Israel bloc and explore for natural gas – an exemplification of the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Turkish all-out support for the GNA

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<sup>19</sup> Gingeras, Ryan. 2020. “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy”. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>

<sup>20</sup> Cagaptay, Soner. 2021. A Sultan in Autumn Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces. IB Tauris. p. 71. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4600>

<sup>21</sup> Brunet, Romain. 2020. “Troubled waters: Greek-Turkish escalations in the Mediterranean”. France24. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200828-troubled-waters-greek-turkish-escalations-in-the-mediterranean>

<sup>22</sup> Altunışık, Meliha Benli; Martin, Lenore G.. 2023. “Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: A Three Level Analysis of Foreign Policy Change”. Uluslararası İlişkiler, Vol. 20, No 78, 2023, pp. 79-96. DOI: 10.33458/uidergisi.1285200, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3092494>

<sup>23</sup> Polat, Ferhat. 2023. “Türkiye-Libya Relations: A Post-Election Assessment”. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90195>

<sup>24</sup> Cagaptay, Soner. 2021. A Sultan in Autumn Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces. IB Tauris. p. 63. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4600>

became particularly visible in late 2019, as Haftar was closing in on Tripoli, before Turkish drones and commandos successfully fended him off in early 2020. As peace seems out of sight in Libya, President Erdoğan has reaffirmed his support for the GNA while making openings to Haftar's LNA, based in Benghazi, by sending 38 Turkish companies and 65 Turkish businesspeople to a trade exhibition in Benghazi in 2023.<sup>25</sup>

This economic and military activism is not limited to Libya but has also expanded to other African countries over the years. Turkish trade with Africa amounts to roughly \$45 billion – a \$35.4 billion increase in 20 years.<sup>26</sup> African markets are a promising exporting opportunity for Turkish firms. Nevertheless, Türkiye's African diplomacy is multidimensional and encompasses the provision of humanitarian aid, infrastructure projects, the construction of mosques, education programmes, and, last but not least, defence cooperation.<sup>27</sup> Originally centred on its military base in Somalia, Türkiye's military involvement in Africa has deepened considerably in recent years. Turkish drones and weapons are popular, and several African countries have acquired TB2s, including Niger, Ethiopia, and Chad. As such, Africa constitutes a promising avenue for Turkish soft and hard power.

**Türkiye and Israel:** Türkiye was the first Muslim-majority nation to recognise the State of Israel in 1949. While the two countries for decades enjoyed a robust partnership, relations underwent a dramatic shift under Erdoğan's premiership. In the wake of the 2008-09 Gaza War, Erdoğan made headlines by storming off the stage at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, after lashing out at then-Israeli President Shimon Peres and accusing Israel of killing Palestinian babies.<sup>28</sup> Relations deteriorated further in the wake of the 2010 Gaza Flotilla raid, when a flotilla of six ships set sail from Türkiye towards Gaza, intent on breaching the Israeli blockade and purporting to deliver humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave. When one of the ships, the *Mavi Marmara*, refused to comply with Israeli orders to have its cargo inspected, the vessel was intercepted by Israeli commandos, and the ensuing violent altercation resulted in the death of nine passengers on board, sparking a diplomatic spat between Türkiye and Israel.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, like all actors in the region, Türkiye's relationship with Israel must be viewed through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When Hamas, the Palestinian militant organisation, expelled Fatah, its political rival, from the Gaza Strip in a bloody coup in 2007, Türkiye was one of only two countries to support the former, and it has afforded Hamas significant financial and political support ever since. Indeed, as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas finds common ideological ground with the AKP, and it established a presence in Türkiye in 2011 at the direct invitation of the Turkish government. After the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Saleh al-Aroui, the senior Hamas leader

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<sup>25</sup> Polat, Ferhat. 2023. "Türkiye-Libya Relations: A Post-Election Assessment". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90195>

<sup>26</sup> Le Touzé, Anne. 2023. "Comment la Turquie se positionne en Afrique. DW. <https://www.dw.com/fr/turquie-afrique-partenariat-strategie/a-65700500>

<sup>27</sup> Marcou, Jean. 2022. "La Turquie, une nouvelle puissance africaine". Orient XXI. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-turquie-une-nouvelle-puissance-africaine,5291>

<sup>28</sup> Goksedef, Ece. 2024. "What is behind Turkey's staunch support for Hamas in Gaza?". BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67861266>

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

recently assassinated by Israel, took up residence in İstanbul, before moving to Lebanon in 2015.<sup>30</sup> Erdoğan's vigorous defence of Palestinians has positioned him as the most visible supporter of a two-state solution in the Muslim world - even though Israel and Türkiye have gradually deepened their commercial ties.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.3 Unmanned diplomacy: Turkish drones as an influential foreign policy tool

Arms sales and the export of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) are a cornerstone of Erdoğan's regional diplomacy, which has often been labelled "drone diplomacy."<sup>32</sup> Built by his son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar, the TB2 was launched in 2014 and the Anka in 2018. Military drones have proven to be a major asset for Turkish foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> They have brought about new geopolitical and military alliances for Ankara: Drones need to be updated and repaired, a service often offered by Turkish industrials.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, exporting drones has enhanced Turkish soft power and prestige in the region: TB2s have been instrumental in several conflicts such as Ukraine's defence after the Russian invasion in 2022 and Azerbaijan's offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Today, between 24 and 27 countries in Europe (Poland, Ukraine), Africa (Ethiopia, Niger, Libya), and the Middle East (Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia) have acquired Turkish drones. UAVs are at the core of Türkiye's rapprochement with its Arab neighbours. Erdoğan paid a visit to Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in 2021, where the UAE announced a \$10 billion investment fund in Türkiye.<sup>35</sup> A few months later, both countries signed trade, defence, and technology agreements. Same goes for Saudi Arabia: After mutual visits between Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Salman and Erdoğan, the first purchased drones<sup>36</sup> and deposited \$5 billion in Türkiye's Central Bank in 2023.<sup>37</sup> In 2023, Türkiye's defence and aerospace exports totalled \$5.5 billion, a 25% increase compared to 2022, making it a valuable economic resource for a struggling economy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Foundation for Defense of Democracies. 2023. "10 Things to Know About Hamas and Turkey".

<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/29/10-things-to-know-about-hamas-and-turkey/>

<sup>31</sup> Soylu, Ragıp. 2024. "War on Gaza: Why Turkey hasn't severed all ties with Israel".

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/war-gaza-turkey-israel-has-not-severed-ties-why>

<sup>32</sup> Martins, Bruno Oliveira; Pinar Tank & Beste İşleyen. 2023. "Turkish Drones as a Foreign Policy Tool: A Technology-Mediated Search for Autonomy", MidEast Policy Brief, 1. Oslo: PRIO.

<https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/0204501c-9382-4a2d-a8d8-8b2b5e804167/Martins%20et%20al%20-%20Turkish%20Drones%20as%20a%20Foreign%20Policy%20Tool%20MidEast%20Policy%20Brief%201-2023.pdf?inline=true>

<sup>33</sup> Xingyi Wang. 2024. "Drone Diplomacy: Türkiye's Geopolitical Reach Through Advanced UAV Technologies".

London Politica <https://londonpolitica.com/middle-east-watch-blog-list/drone-diplomacy-turkiyes-geopolitical-reach-through-advanced-uav-technologies>

<sup>34</sup> ibid.

<sup>35</sup> ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Bakir, Ali. 2023. "Turkey's defense industry is on the rise. The GCC is one of its top buyers".

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>

<sup>37</sup> Gambrell, Jon. 2023. "Saudi Arabia says it deposited \$5B in Turkish central bank". AP.

<https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-turkey-central-bank-billions-deposited-bb88ec5963eedd593d5bf45bbb39c398>

<sup>38</sup> Yaylali, Cem Devrim. 2024. "Turkey's defense, aerospace exports rose by 25% last year".

DefenseNews. <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2024/01/08/turkeys-defense-aerospace-exports-rose-by-25-last-year/>

## Section II

# Turkish FP Post-May 2023 Elections: Change in Personnel & Approach

## 2.1 Revising Economic Policies

President Erdoğan faced several fundamental challenges following his re-election. Chief among these was the state of the economy which saw depleting foreign reserves, a rising account deficit, the challenging circumstances around the devastating 2023 earthquakes and the geopolitical shocks of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Ultimately, these factors contributed to soaring inflation, high consumer prices and a general devaluation of the Turkish Lira. Aiming to tackle inflation by lowering interest rates, which was perceived as a rather unconventional measure, has not reached its goal of stimulating domestic economic activity and instead spurred inflation rates, resulting in foreign as well as local investors losing trust in the economy and halting financial investments. In order to break this cycle, President Erdoğan decided to make adjustments to the financial branch of his cabinet and put a new 'economic duo' in charge of U-turning the economy: Mehmet Şimşek and Hafize Gaye Erkan.

### New Personnel

In 2023, Mehmet Şimşek was appointed as the Minister of Treasury and Finance. Şimşek has extensive experience with the economy, having been the country's finance minister between 2009 and 2015 and having served as the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs until 2018. He previously worked for Merrill Lynch, an American investment management division, and is overall a well-regarded economist by many foreign investors and politicians.<sup>39</sup> 2023 also saw the appointment of Hafize Gaye Erkan as the Governor of the Central Bank. Like Şimşek, Erkan had a well-respected career in the US Corporate world, having attended Princeton, Stanford and Harvard Business School, with well-respected positions at Goldman Sachs and Greystone.<sup>40</sup> However, on the second of February this year, Erkan stepped down due to allegations of family members exerting influence within financial institutions and thus appointed Fatih Karahan as governor, who is a former central bank governor and a well-regarded economist in Türkiye.<sup>41</sup> Both Şimşek and Erkan pledged to return to orthodox monetary policies, including the increase in interest rates to counter rising inflation and create price stability<sup>42</sup>, which new central bank governor Karahan is expected to continue as well. Reflecting on the

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<sup>39</sup> Al Jazeera, "Turkey's President announces new cabinet", June 3, 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/3/turkeys-president-erdogan-announces-new-cabinet>

<sup>40</sup> Al Jazeera, "Who is Hafize Gaye Erkan, Turkey's new central bank chief?", June 3, 2023.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/9/who-is-hafize-gaye-erkan-turkeys-new-central-bank-chief>

<sup>41</sup> Adam Samson, "Turkey's central bank expected to stay course after leadership shake-up", Financial Times, February 5, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/6b65e78a-7d7c-4250-acb1-bb6a4ff654a7>

<sup>42</sup> Adam Samson, "Investor favourite Mehmet Şimşek set to return as Turkish finance minister", Financial Times, June 2, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/e1e897ab-b68e-48cb-a053-f17a322b949c>

third and fourth quarter of 2023, the question remains: Has the duo delivered? The answer is two-fold.

Türkiye's economy is still struggling with rising inflation and increasingly high prices for basic needs, ranging from food to housing, particularly in well-populated urban areas. In December 2023, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) went up to almost 65%; an increase by 25% from June 2023 and an all-time annual high in 2023.<sup>43</sup> İstanbul alone has experienced a nearly 80% increase in the cost of living and has, next to Ankara, become the city with the highest cost-of-living ratio.<sup>44</sup> And even though the Consumer Confidence Index, which captures the "consumers' assessments and expectations on financial standing and general economic situation", has risen from 68 points in August 2023 to 80.4 points in January 2024<sup>45</sup>, a recent survey undertaken across the country's population shows that almost two thirds of respondents believe that the biggest problem remains the economic crisis.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the challenging outlook, there have been notable achievements and incremental progress since the implementation of conventional monetary policies. With the new path of steadily increasing interest rates, which have been provisionally raised to 50% in order to continue the disinflation process<sup>47</sup>, two sectional developments are worth noting: A change in the Foreign Trade Balance and a diversified effort to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs).

### **Türkiye's Foreign Trade Balance**

As defined by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, the balance of foreign trade describes the "difference between the value of exports and that of imports".<sup>48</sup> A significant factor of Türkiye's economic crisis was its foreign trade deficit, meaning that the country's imports exceed the value of its exports. While the trade deficit was at \$12.5 billion in July 2023, it was reduced by more than half to \$6 billion in December 2023.<sup>49</sup> This is a clear indicator that domestic demand has been reduced, while export value has been increased; a vital step to narrow down the account deficit.

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<sup>43</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Consumer Price Index, December 2023", press release, January 3, 2024.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Consumer-Price-Index-December-2023-49657&dil=2>

<sup>44</sup> Turkish Minute, "İstanbulites see 78 percent annual increase in cost of living", December 5, 2023.

<https://turkishminute.com/2023/12/05/istanbulite-saw-78-percent-annual-increase-cost-of-living/>

<sup>45</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Consumer Confidence Index, January 2024", January 23, 2024.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Consumer-Confidence-Index-January-2024-53787&dil=2>

<sup>46</sup> Turkish Minute, "Turks see high cost of living as country's primary concern: survey", February 2, 2024.

<https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/02/02/turk-see-high-cost-living-as-country-primary-concern-survey/>

<sup>47</sup> Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, "Press Release on Interest Rates (2024-01)", January 25, 2024.

<https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/EN/TCMB+EN/Main+Menu/Announcements/Press+Releases/2024/ANO2024-01>

<sup>48</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, "Foreign trade balance (national accounts)", definition, accessed February 8, 2024.

[https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1421#:~:text=The%20foreign%20trade%20balance%20is,products%20\(goods%20and%20services\)](https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1421#:~:text=The%20foreign%20trade%20balance%20is,products%20(goods%20and%20services))

<sup>49</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, December 2023", press release, January 31, 2024.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-December-2023-49630&dil=2>

Despite a spike in July 2023, import levels have been slowly, yet significantly reduced since President Erdoğan's re-election in May 2023. While the value of imports was at more than \$32 billion in May and July respectively, it shrunk by \$3 billion in December 2023. A shift among the import countries can also be observed. In February 2023, the main import partners were Russia (13.7%), Switzerland (11.5%) and China (10.1%).<sup>50</sup> However, while both Russia, a crucial exporter of natural energy resources for Türkiye, and Germany remain essential trade partners, China claimed Russia's position accounting for 12.3% of imports to Türkiye in November 2023. Additionally, in sharp contrast to February's import levels, the UAE and the United States made up 9.8% of imports in total in November 2023.<sup>51</sup> A similar trend is visible when it comes to exports, which have risen from \$19.8 billion in July 2023 to \$23 billion in December 2023.<sup>52</sup> While Germany, Italy, the US, and Russia (in that respective order) were the main export destinations for primarily electrical machinery, transport vehicles and manufactured goods in February 2023<sup>53</sup>, the UAE and Iraq became the second and third-largest importers of Turkish goods followed by the US in November 2023.<sup>54</sup>

There is no doubt that Germany, for instance, remains a crucial destination for Turkish automotive products and textile goods. However, in order to grow to its ambitions of becoming a lucrative regional, and ultimately a global trading partner, Türkiye has been looking East and expanding its exports to the Gulf, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. While the automotive industry remains Türkiye's primary sector of export<sup>55</sup>, especially in the light of its steep increase in production in contrast to the last two years and Türkiye's ambition to export its newly built TOGG car models to European markets, the defence sector experienced a similarly soaring demand, particularly in the Gulf and in Russia. In July 2023, Türkiye's defence company Baykar signed a deal with Saudi Arabia's defence ministry to export, which CEO Haluk Bayraktar calls "the biggest defence and aviation export contract in the history of the Turkish Republic".<sup>56</sup> The deal includes exports of \$3 billion worth of advanced and highly demanded AKINCI Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) alongside technical support, training and logistical assistance.<sup>57</sup> Next to the UAE, Russia has similarly benefitted from Türkiye's military-linked items vital for Russia's armed forces and its fight against Ukraine, which includes a list of 45 dual-use items, such as microchips and communication equipment, first exported to surrounding countries and then redirected to Russia. In 2023, these exports were reportedly worth \$158 million, while between 2015 and 2021 they averaged only \$28 million, ultimately raising concerns among Western countries who

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<sup>50</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, February 2023", press release, March 31, 2023.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-February-2023-49622&dil=2>

<sup>51</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2023", press release, December 29, 2023.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-November-2023-49629>

<sup>52</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, December 2023."

<sup>53</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, February 2023."

<sup>54</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, "Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2023."

<sup>55</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkish auto industry output surges to nearly 1.5M units in 2023", January 15, 2024.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/automotive/turkish-auto-industry-output-surges-to-nearly-15m-units-in-2023>

<sup>56</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkish company to provide drones to Saudi Arabia", July 18, 2023.

<https://www.hurriyettailynews.com/baykar-inks-turkiyes-largest-ever-defense-deal-with-saudi-arabia-184808>

<sup>57</sup> Ali Bakir, "Turkey's defense industry is on the rise. The GCC is one of its top buyers.", *Atlantic Council*, August 4, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>



failed to cut off the trade of these items due to their use for both the commercial and military sector.<sup>58</sup> In general, both shifting trends in imports and exports signal that Türkiye has not only been attempting to close up the foreign trade deficit, but has also been aiming to diversify and balance its trading partners in pursuit of a non-binary policy.

### **Attracting new Foreign Direct Investments**

Türkiye's currency crisis unveiled a series of fiscal and monetary shortcomings, leading the government to attempt to cover the account deficit by selling its existing assets<sup>59</sup> and eventually depleting its own foreign reserves. While the previous section highlighted that Türkiye's exports showcase a slightly positive trend, external measures seem indispensable to stabilise the Turkish Lira and stimulate domestic growth. In other words, Türkiye needs and is seeking cash. With the interest rate hikes and the tightening of fiscal policies through tax raises, however, the Turkish market is beginning to slowly recover and attract foreign investors once again. In fact, since President Erdoğan's re-election, there have been comprehensive attempts by Şimşek, former central bank governor Erkan and the president to attract external investors. Two trends in particular have been noticeable: Investments from the Gulf and an economic rapprochement with US investors.

### **Investments from the Gulf**

In July 2023, President Erdoğan kicked off his Gulf tour to the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia opting to attract foreign investors. While ties with Saudi Arabia in particular have been rather frosty in the previous years due to the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in İstanbul in 2018, investments from the Gulf to Türkiye have picked up significantly ever since. Trade volume with the Gulf countries between 2013 and 2020 has reached \$22 billion, which Türkiye reportedly aims to triple in the following five years.<sup>60</sup> Highlighting the significance of the Gulf FDI's to Türkiye's economy, Minister of Finance Şimşek has had his third visit to the region in October 2023 to further deepen ties and get investors on board.<sup>61</sup> Both partners have acknowledged that mutual trade opens up lucrative advantages for both parties, especially in the sectors of infrastructure, energy and increasingly also defence. So what has been accomplished so far?

Multiple deals, arrangements, and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) have been reached. During the state visit in the UAE in July 2023, Türkiye and the Kingdom established a Joint Economic and Trade

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<sup>58</sup> Adam Samson, "Turkey's exports of military-linked goods to Russia soar", *Financial Times*, November 27, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/1cef6628-32eb-49c9-a7f1-2aef9bce4239>

<sup>59</sup> Brad W. Setser, "Turkey's Increasing Balance Sheet Risks", *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 6, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/turkeys-increasing-balance-sheet-risks>

<sup>60</sup> Serhat S. Cubukcuoglu and Mouza Hasan Almarzooqi, "What's behind growing ties between Turkey and the Gulf states", *Atlantic Council*, July 21, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/whats-behind-growing-ties-between-turkey-and-the-gulf-states/>

<sup>61</sup> Mehmet Ergöcün, "Turkish finance minister visiting Gulf countries to woo investments", *Anadolu Ajansı*, October 24, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-finance-minister-visiting-gulf-countries-to-woo-investments/3031337>

Commission<sup>62</sup> (JETCO) to deepen bilateral commercial relations and go extensively beyond non-oil trade. Furthermore, the UAE has pledged to multiple deals worth approximately \$51 billion that are supposed to boost the Turkish economy and initiate megaprojects in the sectors of infrastructure and energy<sup>63</sup>, especially in areas affected by the February 2023 earthquakes.<sup>64</sup> The parties have also looked into opening up possibilities for Turkish contractors to operate in the UAE following an initial ban on Turkish firms. Similarly in Saudi Arabia, President Erdoğan has managed to strike deals that include the sale of Turkish UCAVs worth more than \$3 billion and sign several MoUs in the sectors of defence and energy. As part of Saudi's Vision 2030 initiative<sup>65</sup>, which includes an investment of \$3.3 trillion and a shift from economic oil dependency towards public sector investments, Investment Minister Khalid Bin Abdulaziz Al-Falih highlighted that there will be growing opportunities for Turkish companies to take crucial parts in projects ranging from real estate and infrastructure to agriculture and mining. The general advantages for bilateral trade between Türkiye and the Gulf countries are therefore not only brought forward by Foreign Direct Investments in Türkiye, but also provide an extended access to new markets in the GCC allowing Türkiye to strengthen its economic foothold in the region and become a pivotal trade hub for the Gulf.

### **Economic Rapprochement with US Investors**

Between 2003 and 2021, the United States had the second-biggest share of Foreign Direct Investments in Türkiye.<sup>66</sup> However, Türkiye's economic volatility and unorthodox policies adopted in recent years have raised serious concerns amongst Western and American investors, who saw Türkiye's political and financial landscape as 'unsafe' to invest in. The Office of the United States Trade Representative also reports that American FDIs in Türkiye in 2022 have decreased by almost 8% contrary to the year before.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, since the appointment of the new 'economic duo', multiple attempts by the Government have been undertaken to promote the Turkish market in the US. In September 2023, Şimşek attended the 13th Türkiye Investment Conference, which was jointly hosted by the government and Goldman Sachs in New York. The Minister of Treasury and Finance addressed multiple investors as well as managers to present opportunities and challenges to Türkiye's economy in the medium-and long term, stressing that price stability and the disinflation process rank amongst the priorities.<sup>68</sup> More

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<sup>62</sup> Asia Business Outlook, "UAE And Turkey Widening Trade Relations", November 1, 2023.

<https://www.asiabusinessoutlook.com/news/uae-and-turkey-widening-trade-relations-nwid-5239.html>

<sup>63</sup> Hassan Jivraj, "UAE pledges \$51bn of bilateral agreements with Turkey", *Investment Monitor*, July 21, 2023.

<https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/news/uae-pledges-51bn-of-bilateral-agreements-with-turkey/>

<sup>64</sup> Hassan Jivraj, "What's in store for FDI in Turkey under President Erdoğan 2.0?", *Investment Monitor*, August 9, 2023. <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/features/whats-in-store-for-turkey-fdi-under-president-erdogan-2-0/>

<sup>65</sup> Ugur Aslanhan, "Saudi investment minister invites Turkish firms to participate in Vision 2030", *Anadolu Ajansi*, July 19, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/saudi-investment-minister-invites-turkish-firms-to-participate-in-vision-2030/2948212>

<sup>66</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Investment Office, "FDI in Türkiye", accessed February 8, 2024.

<https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/whyturkey/pages/fdi-in-turkey.aspx>

<sup>67</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Republic of Türkiye", accessed February 8, 2024.

<https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/europe/turkey#:~:text=U.S.%20foreign%20direct%20investment%20>

<sup>68</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "Türkiye drawing interest of investors: Şimşek", September 21, 2023.

<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkiye-drawing-interest-of-investors-simsek-186419>

recently, former central bank governor Erkan and her team travelled to the US to attend the “Investor Day”<sup>69</sup> - an event hosting 200 executives from the largest investment funds and institutions - at the JPMorgan headquarters in order to give presentations on fiscal as well as monetary outlook and generally gain trust of the high-level participants. In fact, Pimco and Vanguard, both managing assets worth \$10 trillion, have engaged in pursuing Turkish assets and local bonds after a return to higher interest rates and an ease of monetary regulations<sup>70</sup>, although the exact size and nature of the investments are yet to be revealed.

The FDI streams from the Gulf as well as the American investment giants’ steps to slowly regain their trust in the Turkish economy could trigger a domino effect and attract other foreign investors in case of positive returns. After all, JP Morgan Chase considers the Turkish Lira a key emerging market in 2024 and the inflation prediction for the end of 2024 is currently held at 36% by the central bank; 3 per-cent points lower than initially predicted.<sup>71</sup> While the current outlook is that Karahan will most likely stay the course of tight monetary policies, investors are likely to remain cautious for the time being and await the outcomes of the local elections. These elections will likely be the key indicator for whether President Erdoğan will maintain the course set by Şimşek towards reducing inflation and achieving price stability. If economic policies remain unchanged, however, we can anticipate a surge in external investments and increased activity in the Turkish market.

## 2.2 Manoeuvring Foreign Policy

Just like Türkiye’s economic dimension, the country’s foreign policy and its personnel have been similarly adjusted. 2023 marks Türkiye’s 100th anniversary as a republic - the ‘centenary’ - in which President Erdoğan seeks to neutralise previously fragmented relationships and embark on the vision of the “Century of Türkiye”, which pivots around a more inclusive international order, greater regional as well as global engagement, and stronger independence. Previous regional challenges such as the “Anti-Türkiye” alliance and tensions in the Aegean Sea are only a handful of reasons that led Türkiye to reconsider its increasingly offensive foreign policies and instead get involved in regional rapprochement as well as mediation. Thus, we can expect a continuation of the balancing acts between commitments to Western governance, including NATO and bilateral trade with Western states, and overall greater strategic autonomy. Main components of the new foreign policy agenda are the appointment of Hakan Fidan, Türkiye’s dynamic rapprochement with several MENA countries (UAE, Qatar, Egypt, and Israel) as well as key developments in Türkiye’s relations with the West.

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<sup>69</sup> Daily Sabah, “Türkiye's economy team to hold closely watched investor talks in US”, January 9, 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiyes-economy-team-to-hold-closely-watched-investor-talks-in-us>

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Spicer and Marc Jones, “Exclusive: US giants Pimco, Vanguard invest in Turkey after its return to rate hikes”, *Reuters*, January 5, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/us-giants-pimco-vanguard-invest-turkey-after-its-return-rate-hikes-2024-01-05/>

<sup>71</sup> Muhammet Mercan and James Wilson, “Monitoring Turkey: Inflation set to persist in the near term”, *ING Bank N.V.*, November 8, 2023. <https://think.ing.com/articles/monitoring-turkey-inflation-to-persist/#:~:text=at%20dusk%2C%20Istanbul-Turkey%3A%20At%20a%20glance,and%20uncertainties%20surrounding%20administered%20prices>

### **New Personnel**

Newly appointed foreign minister Hakan Fidan replaces Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu<sup>72</sup>; an experienced diplomat who was foreign minister for eight years. Fidan, formerly the chief of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and “spymaster” since 2010, is a close ally of President Erdoğan and has played a crucial role over the last few years, be it in behind-the-scenes diplomacy such as in the 2015 peace talks with the PKK or overseeing military operations in Iraq. Fidan’s intel is a helpful asset to leave a more significant footprint in Türkiye’s foreign policy, navigating the country through global governance and balancing regional as well as global interests amidst the Russia-Ukraine War and tensions within the Middle East.

### **MENA Relations: Rapprochement in Security, Defence and Development**

Apart from reviving and extending trade relations, President Erdoğan’s Gulf tour served the purpose of deepening diplomatic ties and diversifying relations. At the GCC Summit in Doha last December, Türkiye’s president stressed his opportunism for mutual cooperation in multiple sectors and also emphasised the need for greater efforts to ease tensions in the region. While the Gulf states will make their partnership with Türkiye dependent on projected profits, a diversification of bilateral relations will help fuel interdependence and solidify Türkiye’s strategic autonomy amongst the Muslim countries.

**Türkiye and the UAE:** Next to JETCO and the overall economic-trade nexus, the two countries have also deepened their political ties. After a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in July, UAE’s Tawazun Economic Council and Türkiye’s Defence Industry Agency (SSB) have had a first meeting of their working group in October, where both parties have committed to stronger cooperation for strategic defence and establish a foundation for enhanced technology management, with the next meeting being held in Türkiye 2024.<sup>73</sup> Deepening relations in both economic and political/security dimensions comes after almost a decade of rivalry and competition, and could redefine power dynamics within the Middle East. Growing interdependence could also mean greater strategic autonomy to shape the flow of trade and political alignment in the region, and potential political independence from the West.

**Turkiye and Qatar:** Amongst the restoration of relations with other Gulf countries, the strong Turkish-Qatari relations (economically and politically) have been substantiated further. Since the early 2000s, Türkiye and Qatar have grown to associate with similar political views when it came to regional power dynamics, such as the support for the Muslim brotherhood-affiliated groups or intervening in Libya in the early 2010s.<sup>74</sup> While Qatari FDIs have increased significantly since 2018 (\$20 billion by the end of 2019) and boosted Türkiye’s struggling economy, Qatar enjoyed protection from an established

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<sup>72</sup> Daily Sabah, “Türkiye’s new foreign minister reiterates ‘national vision’”, June 6, 2023.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiyes-new-foreign-minister-reiterates-national-vision>

<sup>73</sup> Defence Turkey, Tawazun Council and Türkiye’s Defence Industry Agency (SSB) Kickstart Collaboration in Abu Dhabi”, February 12, 2024. <https://www.defenceturkey.com/en/content/tawazun-council-and-turkiye-s-defence-industry-agency-ssb-kickstart-collaboration-in-abu-dhabi-5777>

<sup>74</sup> Engin Yüksel and Hasim Tekines, “Turkey’s love-in with Qatar”, *Clingendael*, January, 2021.

<https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/drivers-of-turkish-qatari-relations.pdf>

Turkish military base where Qatari armed forces have been trained and military equipment upgraded.<sup>75</sup> Türkiye's military and humanitarian support was particularly crucial amidst the four-year-long Qatar Blockade initiated by the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which isolated Qatar entirely from its neighbouring states and led to a national crisis. Since President Erdoğan's election, the relationship has further been expanded. Fidan and Erdoğan attended the High Strategic Committee meeting where 12 agreements were signed encompassing labour, humanitarian aid, and education to set up Turkish language centres, investment and technology.<sup>76</sup> Qatar will continue to be an ideologically aligned partner of Türkiye, especially in the current regional conflict climate, with high importance on economic cooperation and the maintenance of deeper cultural integration.

**Türkiye and Egypt:** After a decade-long chill in relations that started following Erdoğan's condemnation of the 2013 coup that ousted President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, the two countries have recently recommenced their diplomatic ties on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2023. Both President Erdoğan and President El-Sisi have expressed their commitments to deepen bilateral relations, with Egypt becoming a top 20 export destination for Turkish products (primarily steel, vehicle products and minerals) following the relative normalisation of trade relations in 2022. Most recently, at the Egypt Defence Expo (EDEX) in December 2023, where more than 400 companies and several Turkish arms manufacturing companies took part, Turkish Deputy National Defence Minister Celal Sami Tüfekci stated that Türkiye and Egypt will aim to develop relations in the defence industry and that Türkiye will transfer knowledge and defence products in the form of vehicles, UCAVs and weaponry to Egypt. That was arguably a move to secure Turkish influence of military capabilities in Northern Africa through Egypt's naval access to the Mediterranean Sea and to contribute to the securitisation of the region in light of the situation in Israel and Gaza.

**Türkiye and Israel:** The Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 posed a significant challenge to the political and economic ties between the countries as President Erdoğan initially aimed to revive the relationship with Israel, which has seen a doubling of its trade volume between 2010 and 2021.<sup>77</sup> More recently, President Erdoğan, alongside other MENA states, including Iran, the UAE, Qatar, and Jordan, publicly condemned Israel's military reaction to the attacks. Türkiye had recalled its ambassador and also backed up South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice in the Hague, welcoming the

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<sup>75</sup> The Economist, "How Qatar and Turkey came together", January 21, 2021.

[https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/how-qatar-and-turkey-came-together?utm\\_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm\\_source=google&ppccampaignID=18156330227&ppcadID=&utm\\_campaign=a.22brand\\_pmax&utm\\_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad\\_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiA2eKtBhDcARIsAEGTG40AHjNct7QrXgVx7Ygs30Jjh4g4Xbf9wirZpZ3K6sVfMQIZ09DLvoaAtDtEALw\\_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/how-qatar-and-turkey-came-together?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18156330227&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiA2eKtBhDcARIsAEGTG40AHjNct7QrXgVx7Ygs30Jjh4g4Xbf9wirZpZ3K6sVfMQIZ09DLvoaAtDtEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds)

<sup>76</sup> Zafer Fatih Beyaz, "Türkiye, Qatar sign 12 agreements, issue joint declaration after high strategic committee meeting", *Anadolu Ajansı*, December 12, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-qatar-sign-12-agreements-issue-joint-declaration-after-high-strategic-committee-meeting/3073023>

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Wilks, "Gaza war pushes tumultuous Israel-Turkey ties into 'deep freezer'", *Al Jazeera*, November 14, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/gaza-war-pushes-tumultuous-israel-turkey-ties-into-deep-freezer>

preliminary ruling of ordering Israel to take measures to ‘prevent genocide and further bloodshed’.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, President Erdoğan repeatedly emphasised the need for permanent peace, considering Türkiye as a mediator similar to its intermediary role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He also proposed a “guarantor system”, where Türkiye (in tandem with Qatar) would serve as a guarantor for the Palestinians and Western states would serve as a guarantor for the Israelis, with the overarching goal of a two-state solution<sup>79</sup>. However, Türkiye’s previous ties to Hamas, including President Erdoğan calling the group a “liberation movement”<sup>80</sup> as well as facilitating fundraising streams in the past<sup>81</sup>, and lack of direct influence on either party pose clear limitations to the concept. Yet, Qatar, which has gained a formidable level of trust from both warring sides, could initiate progressive discussions on humanitarian peace and mobilise other influential states, such as Egypt, to play a more significant role and thus prevent a dangerous power vacuum in the future by offering support for a legitimized governing authority and general reconstruction efforts, in coordination with Turkish military capabilities.

**Relations with the West:** While the “Century of Türkiye” vision embraces inclusiveness and strives for greater autonomy, relations with the West are deemed just as important and will not be abandoned. Foreign Minister Fidan emphasises that while there is a need to reform global governance to tackle social injustices and maintain international peace, Türkiye will be acting in full cooperation with NATO, based on mutual solidarity as well as respect on issues such as national security and regional stability, and is still open for EU accession.<sup>82</sup> And even though Türkiye’s stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, its military strikes in Northern Iraq as well as Syria, and an ambivalent relationship with the US posit a rather fragmented Türkiye-West dynamic, critically constructive developments since President Erdoğan’s re-election, which is not without its challenges, have been visible: Reconciliation with Greece, a UK-Türkiye defence deal, and the approval of Sweden’s NATO bid.

**Reconciliation with Greece:** After several years of political and territorial disputes, which almost escalated in a military confrontation in the Aegean Sea in 2020, a ‘declaration on friendly relations and good neighbourliness’ was signed in December 2023 during President Erdoğan’s first Athens visit in six

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<sup>78</sup> Diyar Guldogan, “Turkish President Erdogan welcomes interim ICJ ruling on Israel”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, January 26, 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-president-erdogan-welcomes-interim-icj-ruling-on-israel/3119919>

<sup>79</sup> Tugba Altun, Busranur Koca and Sumeyye Dilara Dincer, “Türkiye proposes guarantor formula for Israel-Palestinian issue: Turkish foreign minister”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, October 17, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-proposes-guarantor-formula-for-israeli-palestinian-issue-turkish-foreign-minister/3022412>

<sup>80</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, “NATO, Gaza, and the future of US-Turkish relations”, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 5, 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/article/nato-gaza-and-the-future-of-us-turkish-relations/>

<sup>81</sup> Adam Samson, “US ‘profoundly’ worried over Turkey’s financial links to Hamas”, *Financial Times*, November 30, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/d2483bf8-fce6-4bf6-b5db-7e30f1d922ce>

<sup>82</sup> Hakan Fidan, “Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the ‘Century of Türkiye’: Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, commentary, September 22, 2023. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/Hakan%20Fidan/Makaleler/article-by-minister-of-foreign-affairs-hakan-fidan-titled-turkish-foreign-policy-at-the-turn-of-the--century-of-turkiye---challenges--vision--objectives--and-transformation.pdf>

years.<sup>83</sup> This agreement premises enhanced cooperation across tourism, education, energy, and defence. Overall, both countries are committed to increasing the trade volume from \$5 to \$10 billion and turning the Aegean into a ‘Sea of Peace’. Still, the road to reconciliation and regional peace will not be without challenges. While the US has agreed to the deal of selling 40 F-16 fighter jets to Türkiye as part of its approval of the Swedish NATO bid, the deal came in a double package<sup>84</sup> as 20 F-35 fighter jets have been delivered to Greece to prevent any quantitative or qualitative defence imbalances. Even though Greece and Türkiye are NATO allies and aim to deepen their cooperation on defence, a subtle arms race in the Mediterranean to safeguard national interests on issues such as territorial boundaries and gas discoveries should be watched out for and could potentially disrupt newly revived ties.

**UK-Türkiye Defense Deal:** A possibly unexpected deal on defence cooperation has been reached by the United Kingdom and Türkiye, particularly in the context of Türkiye’s previous rejection of the UK’s request to send warships to the Black Sea to strengthen Ukrainian defence forces. Nonetheless, the defence deal talks started in July 2023, when ministerial discussions were held at the İstanbul Defence Industry Fair.<sup>85</sup> The talks bore fruit, as in November 2023, both parties signed a statement of intent to commit to “closer collaboration between both countries’ defence industries, the identification of possible joint training exercises in the Mediterranean, and the exploration of security support around North Africa and the Middle East”.<sup>86</sup> Despite differing perspectives on the Russia-Ukraine as well as the Israel-Hamas war, the United Kingdom, a more autonomous player since Brexit, has been playing a crucial part in delivering arms to Türkiye, showing interest in engaging in Türkiye’s development of its prospective Kaan fighter jet programme.<sup>87</sup> With the new deal in mind, increased trade and further integration in defence this year is a realistic possibility.

**Approval of Sweden’s NATO Bid:** After approving Finland’s NATO bid in April 2023, a moment of relief swept across Europe when Sweden’s bid to join the organisation was ratified by Türkiye’s parliament and signed off by President Erdoğan in January 2024.<sup>88</sup> While the 20-month delay has caused severe frustrations amongst Western countries, Türkiye has gained crucial geopolitical concessions along the journey to approval. A primary concern of Turkish authorities was the presence of members of the

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<sup>83</sup> Niki Kitsantonis and Safak Timur, “Greece and Turkey, Long at Odds, Vow to Work Together Peacefully”, *New York Times*, December 7, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/07/world/europe/greece-turkey-declaration-of-friendly-relations.html>

<sup>84</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, “US advances fighter jet sale to Turkey, Greece; Congress likely to approve”, *Reuters*, January 27, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-advances-fighter-jet-sale-turkey-greece-congress-likely-approve-2024-01-27/>

<sup>85</sup> Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom, “UK and Turkey continue to strengthen ties at Defence industry fair”, July 26, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-turkey-continue-to-strengthen-ties-at-defence-industry-fair>

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom, “UK and Türkiye to boost stability, security and prosperity”, November 23, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-turkey-continue-to-strengthen-ties-at-defence-industry-fair>

<sup>87</sup> Peter Felstead, “UK and Türkiye sign accord on closer military co-operation”, *European Security and Defence*, November 26, 2023. <https://euro-sd.com/2023/11/major-news/35275/uk-turkiye-sign-defence-accord/>

<sup>88</sup> Hüseyin Hayatsever and Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Turkey approves Sweden’s NATO membership bid after 20-month delay”, *Reuters*, January 24, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-set-approve-swedens-nato-membership-bid-after-long-delay-2024-01-23/>

terror organisation PKK in Sweden, which Türkiye has been actively fighting particularly since the collapse of the peace talks<sup>89</sup> in 2015. In response, Sweden formalised a new anti-terrorism bill that makes it illegal to be a part of a terror organisation. Additionally, countries such as the Netherlands and Canada lifted their bans on arms exports to Türkiye and have resumed their sales, which are critical for Türkiye's military campaigns against Kurdish militant networks in Northern Syria and Iraq. Finally, the abovementioned sale of F-16 fighter jets by the US and the approval by Congress have been a primary source of leverage for Türkiye to sign off Sweden's bid.

While the "Century of Türkiye" concept envisions greater state-level inclusiveness in the form of multilateralism and simultaneously stronger independence, President Erdoğan's foreign policy manoeuvres concerning the Swedish bid raised doubts about Türkiye as a Western ally and fit NATO member resulting from its "adapt-as-you-see-fit" approach. And while relationships with Gulf states have opened new windows of political and economic opportunities and influence, Türkiye is aware that it cannot afford to lose the West, neither in trade nor in geopolitics. Reconciliation with Greece, which might be a means through which to strengthen ties between Türkiye and the EU, and the approval of the Swedish bid are steps to mend and balance out previously fragmented relations, with room for diplomatic openness and interest-dependent determination. Nonetheless, implementing the "Century of Türkiye" will also likely depend on the AKP's electoral performance in the upcoming local elections, as success in key cities will arguably legitimise both the government's foreign policies and domestic decisions in terms of public projects and urbanisation plans.

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<sup>89</sup> Reuters, "What is the PKK, the Kurdish rebel group behind bomb blast in Turkey", October 2, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-pkk-kurdish-rebel-group-behind-bomb-blast-turkey-2023-10-02/>



## Section III

# Ballots and Battlegrounds: The Landscape of Turkish Politics in the 2024 Municipal Elections

### 3.1 Party Strategies and Campaign Issues: Local Cooperation, The ‘Third Way’ & Techno-Nationalist Securitisation

As the Municipal elections near on 31 March, many political parties in Türkiye are attempting to pursue different strategies. This is particularly true for opposition parties given the breakup of the Nation’s Alliance after the May 2023 elections.<sup>90</sup> In fact, it seems that the AKP may have an electoral advantage due to the opposition’s fragmentation following the split. Opposition parties have chosen to field their own candidates in most municipalities. However, the chronic economic crisis in the country still continues to be a looming issue for voters as inflation and living costs continue to rise. Inflation in Türkiye increased to 64.8% by December 2023 and economists predict that the peak is still months away despite the government implementing a more orthodox economic policy since.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, the AKP’s strategy in the upcoming election will look at ways to address the economic crisis predominantly in urban cities such as İstanbul, where the effects of rising costs are felt the most as well as ways to increase the voter turnout amongst their base.

With the exception of the People’s Alliance headed by the AKP-MHP, parties have for the most part decided to go their separate ways and have branded their candidates as a ‘third way’ to pull Türkiye out of polarizing politics. One relevant example includes former Co-leader of the HDP (Now the DEM Party formerly known as the Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party) Selahattin Demirtaş, who regarding a third-way policy remarked that the “DEM Party should be able to negotiate with both AKP and CHP.”<sup>92</sup> It is nevertheless important to note that Demirtaş’s strategic comments are probably more targeted at the CHP, since the AKP is currently in an alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP who are vehemently against any cooperation with DEM, so any talks would seem now unlikely. Not all parties are pursuing a third-way policy, nevertheless. Similarly to the collaboration in the 2019 local elections, the CHP and DEM announced that they would be cooperating in local municipalities such as Esenyurt, Mersin, Şanlıurfa and Adana.<sup>93</sup> Thus, cooperation is still fostered in strategic municipalities as a way to rally around popular candidates and increase voter turnout.

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<sup>90</sup> Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Turkey’s Good Party Refuses to Join Anti-Erdogan Alliance in Local Polls,” *Balkan Insight*, December 8, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/05/turkeys-good-party-refuses-to-join-anti-erdogan-alliance-in-local-polls/>.

<sup>91</sup> Beril Akman, “Turkey’s Inflation Ends Year near 65% with Peak Months Away,” *Bloomberg.com*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-03/turkey-inflation-undershoots-forecast-ends-second-year-near-65>.

<sup>92</sup> “Selahattin Demirtaş’tan Siyasette Üçüncü Yol Formülü: ‘Dem Parti Hem Akp İle Hem Chp İle Görüşebilmeli,’” *Medyascope*, February 9, 2024, <https://medyascope.tv/2024/02/09/demirtas-dem-parti-ucuncu-yol-siyaseti-icin-hem-akp-ile-hem-chp-ile-gorusebilmeli/>.

<sup>93</sup> “CHP İle Dem Parti İş Birliğinde Anlaştı,” *TRT Haber*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/chp-ile-dem-parti-is-birliginde-anlasti-838581.html>.

The İYİ Party led by Meral Akşener is also pursuing its own third-way strategy after its breakaway from the Nation's Alliance. Yet this has led to much internal division within the party as some members have been critical of the decision to run their own mayoral candidates instead of working together with other parties to appoint joint candidates: a strategy that had proven successful in 2019. Additionally, party leader Akşener has become increasingly critical of İstanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, member of the CHP, despite him being the most popular candidate in the majority of polls. Speaking at İYİ Party's İstanbul candidate promotion program, Akşener took aim at İmamoğlu saying "Those who have their hands in their headquarters, who have their eyes on other positions, who spend their spare time in İstanbul, cannot govern this city."<sup>94</sup> This is in stark contrast to their relationship previously: Akşener had rushed to İmamoğlu's side after a Turkish lower court imposed a political ban on the İstanbul mayor in December 2022 following his criticism of the Higher Electoral Board's (YSK) decision to re-run the 2019 mayoral elections.<sup>95</sup> Nationalist voters are becoming more disgruntled with İYİ's continued in-fighting and resignations, despite the party's attempts to consolidate their voter base. If this controversial approach continues, it is unlikely that they will win any municipalities. This could benefit the AKP as the İYİ party's voter turnout decreases.

Lastly, the AKP will continue to rely on populist and nationalist rhetoric closer to election day, as it did successfully in the previous May 2023 presidential elections. In the last few years in particular, the AKP regime has been effective in instrumentalizing a new form of techno-nationalism as a way to consolidate its voters within a security-based framework.<sup>96</sup> The government has done so through events such as Teknofest (known to be one of the largest yearly technology festivals) where the AKP showcases the latest developments in the Military-Industrial sector. Additionally, the government employs both inclusionary and exclusionary practices as a way to increase its political legitimacy at home. Through its alliance with the Ultra-nationalist MHP, the AKP is able to reach out to a majority of right-wing voters while at the same time marginalizing the Kurdish political movement and leftist parties in Türkiye through the judiciary and executive branches of government. This creates a sort of dual effect in Turkish domestic politics, where there is an increasing focus on regime security and mounting military capacity at the expense of the deterioration in the rule of law, resulting in concerns of electoral irregularities emerging once again ahead of the elections, similarly in 2019 when the Supreme Election Council (YSK) decided to re-run the İstanbul mayoral elections which led to İmamoğlu winning with a 800,000 vote difference. Just last week, Turkish President Erdoğan announced another

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<sup>94</sup> Akşener, İmamoğlu'nu Hedef Aldı: Gözü Başka Mevkilerde Olanlar BU Şehri Yönetemez," *Artı Gerçek*, February 18, 2024, <https://artigercek.com/politika/aksener-imamoglu-nu-hedef-aldi-gozu-baska-mevkilerde-olanlar-bu-sehri-yonetemez-284642h>.

<sup>95</sup> "Turkish Court Gives Jail Term, Political Ban to İstanbul Mayor İmamoğlu," *Duvar English*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-court-gives-jail-term-political-ban-to-istanbul-mayor-imamoglu-news-61619>.

<sup>96</sup> Mehmet Yaşar Altundağ and Abdullah Esin, "Techno-Nationalist Rhetoric Consolidates Erdoğan's Power in Turkey," *The Loop*, February 13, 2024, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/techno-nationalist-rhetoric-consolidates-erdogans-power-in-turkey/>.

military operation in Northern Iraq and Syria<sup>97</sup> that would occur after the Municipal Elections, further highlighting its focus on militarised security in its fight against the PKK to shore up nationalist support. An additional challenge the AKP could face is the splitting of the pious religious vote with the New Welfare Party (YRP), a right-wing Islamist party headed by Fatih Erbakan, the son of former Turkish Prime Minister in the 1990's, Necmettin Erbakan, who was removed from power by the Turkish military in what many have dubbed as a 'Post-Modern Coup' on 28 February 1997. The YRP has been consolidating its own party identity since the last elections and could have the potential to pull away pious voters who are dissatisfied with the AKP in certain cities.

### 3.2 Key Battleground Cities: All Eyes on Ankara, Hatay, and İstanbul

With the candidates more or less determined in most municipalities, there will be key cities to focus on in the weeks ahead as campaigning continues. Yet within the metropolitan cities, certain mayoral candidates in city districts are having disagreements with central party administrators regarding the process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the CHP's selection process. In an attempt to create their own identity and move away from party politics, certain candidates have also begun to run as independent candidates to differentiate themselves.<sup>98</sup>

Ankara, the capital, has always been known to be a battleground city between the AKP and opposition. The current mayor is Mansur Yavaş. He has been known for his nationalist background, as he switched from the MHP to the CHP in 2019 and has enjoyed popularity as mayor due to his reputation for focusing on municipal projects and not expressing many opinions on national politics, unlike İmamoğlu. One such project has been the focus on Agricultural development. Although the majority of voters live in urban areas, the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality (ABB) has put a large emphasis on helping rural farmers access low-cost crops. The BAKAP Agricultural Campus, an agricultural green space located in Ankara's Gölbaşı district, is one example of an initiative to improve food access to low-income citizens and farmers as inflation continues at a high rate.<sup>99</sup> In addition, the Municipality government has completed 18.1 million square meters (M2) of projects between 2019 and 2023.<sup>100</sup> Yavaş will likely highlight these achievements associated with the expansion of green spaces throughout the campaign trail, as captured in his slogan "less talk, more work". Meanwhile, the AKP's candidate for Ankara, Turgut Altınok, announced measures to increase municipality workers' salaries and made a bid to increase public service capacities, wanting to make transportation free for all university students as well as provide free meals to 400 thousand primary students in Ankara. All in all, both mayors' strategies will involve keeping promises focused on a local level amid the continuing economic crisis.

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<sup>97</sup> "Turkish President Erdoğan Plans Mass Military Operation in Iraq, Syria against PKK," *Duvar English*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-president-erdogan-plans-mass-military-operation-in-iraq-syria-against-pkk/>.

<sup>98</sup> Şükrü Genç Bağımsız Aday Olacağını Açıkladı!, *Halk TV*, accessed February 25, 2024, <https://halktv.com.tr/gundem/sukru-genc-bagimsiz-aday-olacagini-acikladi-808081h>.

<sup>99</sup> Eray Görgülü, "Aiming for rural votes, municipalities support farmers but fall short on sustainability", *Turkey Recap*, February 21, 2024, [https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/aiming-for-rural-votes-municipalities?utm\\_campaign=email-half-post&r=1l9y4w&utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/aiming-for-rural-votes-municipalities?utm_campaign=email-half-post&r=1l9y4w&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).

<sup>100</sup> "Yeşil Alanlar," Mansur Yavaş, February 26, 2024, [https://www.mansuryavas.com.tr/yesil-alanlar/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.mansuryavas.com.tr/yesil-alanlar/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).

In Hatay, the candidate selection process for the CHP has become increasingly controversial. Their candidacy of Lütfü Savaş received initial backlash from Hatay residents, who complained that he was not held accountable enough for the February 2023 earthquakes that killed over 50,000 people last year. Despite these protests, the CHP administration decided to keep him on as a city candidate.<sup>101</sup> Originally mayor of Antakya from 2009 to 2014, another region heavily affected by last year's earthquakes, Savaş switched from the AKP to the CHP to run for the mayor of Hatay in 2014 and has held the position since. Yet, despite winning previous elections, he remains unpopular among Hatay residents. Other than frustrating residents, this has sparked intense debate regarding the CHP's selection of candidates with little consideration from local party members on the ground. To protest the decision, former Turkish footballer Gökhan Zan, known to be critical of the government's response to the earthquakes, declared himself a candidate for the Turkish Workers' Party (TIP). Zan has become increasingly popular amongst leftist voters in the region, and his candidacy could split the left vote away from the CHP and benefit the AKP's candidate, Mehmet Öntürk. However, with the recent scandal embroiling Zan over alleged bribery, his legitimacy as a candidate could be weakened as TIP withdraws his candidacy despite the nomination deadline passing.<sup>102</sup> Hatay thus remains a contested area as campaigns continue, with no party having a clear advantage and controversy amongst and within parties directing voters' attention.

Yet the biggest battleground city arguably for all parties will be İstanbul. Whoever wins as mayor will have the grand responsibility of managing a city that is responsible for roughly 30% of Türkiye's GDP. The İstanbul election will also be the most important for CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's political career, as he tries to cement himself as the future leader of the CHP and a possible presidential candidate for the 2028 elections. İmamoğlu's campaign will continue to focus on the social services it has provided to İstanbul's residents, from building Türkiye's largest bread factory to opening over 100 nurseries.<sup>103</sup> This has thus far been successful for İmamoğlu, as he still consistently leads in most polls ahead of the AKP's candidate, Murat Kurum. Kurum, who is a former minister of Environment and Urbanization, will have his work cut out for him on the campaign trail as his time as minister has been criticized for the failure to handle summer wildfires in 2021 and 2022, as well as a haphazard response to the February 2023 earthquakes. Many residents in İstanbul view Kurum as Erdoğan's man rather than a charismatic politician who can deliver social services to the city. Nonetheless, victory is not guaranteed for İmamoğlu. Other parties such as the İYİ party and the DEM party have nominated their own candidates which could split the vote in favour of Kurum. Both the İYİ Party and the DEM aim to consolidate their voter base and create their own party identities. Yet İmamoğlu's unique trait is that due to his charismatic charm and ability to rally support from right-wing voters in İstanbul, this election

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<sup>101</sup> "Main Opposition CHP Decides to Move Forward with Hatay Mayor Savaş's Re-Candidacy after Days of Struggling," *Duvar English*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/main-opposition-chp-decides-to-move-forward-with-hatay-mayor-savass-re-candidacy-after-days-of-struggling-news-63866>.

<sup>102</sup> "TIP Withdraws Gökhan Zan's Mayoral Candidacy upon Bribery Allegations," *Duvar English*, March 18, 2024, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/tip-withdraws-gokhan-zans-mayoral-candidacy-upon-bribery-allegations-news-64029>.

<sup>103</sup> "Neler Yaptık İcraatlar & Faaliyetler," Ekrem İmamoğlu, February 26, 2024, <https://www.ekremimamoglu.com/neler-yaptik/>.



will be crucial in determining just how salient party cleavages are in the metropolitan city, and whether he will be able to reach out to nationalist and Kurdish voters in İstanbul, similarly to how he did back in 2019.



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