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Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues, May 2023 Elections, and U.S. Relations

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U.S. relations with Turkey (Türkiye) take place within a complicated geopolitical environment and with Turkey in economic distress and facing challenges after disastrous earthquakes on February 6, 2023. U.S.-Turkey tensions that worsened after a failed 2016 coup in Turkey—including ongoing disagreements over Syrian Kurds and Turkey’s 2019 procurement of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system—highlight uncertainties about the future of bilateral relations. Congressional actions have included sanctions legislation and holds on U.S. arms sales. Nevertheless, U.S. and Turkish officials emphasize the importance of continued cooperation and Turkey’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Observers voice concerns about the largely authoritarian rule of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Major inflation and the February earthquakes’ aftermath led to speculation that Erdogan and his electoral alliance might be vulnerable to a coalition of opposition parties in presidential and parliamentary elections that took place on May 14, 2023. In the elections, pro-Erdogan parties retained a majority of seats in parliament, though with a smaller margin than before. Erdogan led the presidential race but fell short of the 50% mark required for a first-round win. He will therefore compete in a May 28 run-off against opposition candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu, with the direction of some domestic and foreign policies potentially at stake.

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U.S. relations and F-16s. Under President Joe Biden, existing U.S.-Turkey tensions have continued alongside cooperation on other foreign policy matters. While deepening ties with Russia remain a cause for U.S. concern, Turkey’s emergence as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine after Russia’s 2022 invasion has arguably increased Turkey’s importance for U.S. policy. U.S.-Turkey relations have improved somewhat due to Turkey’s support for Ukraine’s defense; growing relationships with and arms exports to other countries that seek to counter Russian regional power; and openness to rapprochement with Israel, some Arab states, and Armenia. President Biden has voiced support for sales that would upgrade Turkey’s aging F-16 fleet, but some Members of Congress have expressed opposition. The Administration reportedly provided informal notification to Congress in January 2023 of a possible sale of F-16s to Turkey, plus associated equipment and munitions. Factors potentially influencing congressional consideration of the proposed sale include whether Turkey might agree to have Sweden join NATO alongside Finland, and Turkey’s tense relations with Greece. Congressional and executive branch action regarding Turkey and its neighboring countries could have implications for bilateral ties and U.S. political-military options in the region, as well as Turkey’s strategic orientation. The following are key factors in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Turkey’s foreign policy approach. For decades, Turkey has relied closely on the United States and NATO for defense cooperation. Turkish leaders have indicated an interest in reducing their dependence on the West, and that may partly explain their willingness to coordinate some actions with Russia. Nevertheless, Turkey retains significant differences with Russia in Syria, Ukraine, Libya, and Armenia-Azerbaijan. Turkey’s future foreign policy course could depend partly on how willing Turkey is to risk tensions or breaks in traditional relationships with Western powers while building other global relationships.

Major issues: Russia, Sweden-Finland-NATO, and Greece. In the wake of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Turkey faces challenges in balancing its relations with the two countries and managing Black Sea access, with implications for U.S.-Turkey ties. To some extent, Erdogan has sought to reinforce Turkey’s embattled economy by deepening economic and energy ties with Russia. Erdogan might assess that Western sanctions against Russia give Turkey increased leverage in these dealings. At the same time, Turkey has expanded defense cooperation with Ukraine. Turkey has become an important mediator between Russia and Ukraine on brokering a grain export corridor and other issues. Turkey approved Finland’s NATO membership in March 2023, but has conditioned final approval for Sweden on it taking action against people that Turkey considers to be terrorists. Long-standing disputes between Greece and Turkey over territorial rights in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean seas spiked in 2022 amid greater U.S. strategic cooperation with Greece, but tensions have somewhat subsided in early 2023 after Greece provided some post-earthquake relief assistance to Turkey.

Syria: ongoing conflict near borders. Turkish concerns regarding its southern border with Syria have deepened further during Syria’s civil war, due largely to (1) the flow of nearly four million refugees into Turkey, (2) U.S. efforts to counter the Islamic State by working with Syrian Kurds linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Kurdish acronym PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), and (3) the presence of Russian, American, and Iranian forces in Syria that complicate and somewhat constrain Turkish action. Turkey and allied Syrian armed opposition groups have occupied various areas of northern Syria since 2016, and Turkey’s military continues to target Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq.

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Introduction and Key U.S.-Turkey Considerations

This report provides background information and analysis on key issues affecting U.S.-Turkey (Türkiye)¹ relations, including domestic Turkish developments and various foreign policy and defense matters. Turkey has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1952. U.S. and Turkish officials maintain that cooperation on regional security matters remains mutually important,² despite Turkey's 2019 acquisition of an S-400 surface-to-air defense system from Russia and a number of other U.S.-Turkey differences (such as in Syria and with Greece and Cyprus).

Under President Joe Biden, some existing U.S.-Turkey tensions have continued alongside cooperation on other matters and opportunities to improve bilateral ties. While continued or deepening ties with Russia in certain areas remain a cause for concern for the Biden Administration and some Members of Congress, Turkey's support for Ukraine's defense and openness to rapprochement with Israel, some Arab states, and Armenia have somewhat improved U.S.-Turkey relations.³ President Biden has expressed support for selling F-16s to Turkey, and in January 2023 the Administration reportedly informally notified Congress of a potential F-16 sale, plus associated equipment and munitions (see "Possible F-16 Sale and Congressional Views" below).

Members of Congress may consider legislative and oversight options regarding Turkey. Congressional and executive branch action regarding Turkey and its rivals could have implications for bilateral ties, U.S. political-military options in the region, and Turkey's foreign policy orientation and financial well-being.

For additional information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas. See **Figure A-1** for a map and key facts and figures about Turkey.

Domestic Issues

Political Developments Under Erdogan's Rule

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (pronounced *air-doe-wan*) has ruled Turkey since becoming prime minister in 2003, and has steadily deepened his control over the country's populace and institutions. After Erdogan became president in August 2014 via Turkey's first-ever popular presidential election, he claimed a mandate for increasing his power and pursuing a presidential

¹ In late 2021, President Erdogan directed the use of "Türkiye" (the country's name in Turkish) in place of "Turkey" or other equivalents (e.g., the German "Türkei," the French "Turquie") in Turkish government documents and communications. In June 2022, the United Nations accepted the Turkish request to change the country's name at the body to "Türkiye." In January 2023, the State Department spokesperson said that the department would use the revised spelling "in most formal diplomatic and bilateral contexts" where appropriate. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names retained both "Turkey" and "Republic of Turkey" as conventional names, and the spokesperson said that the State Department could use those names if it is in furtherance of broader public understanding. State Department Press Briefing, January 5, 2023.

² State Department, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism" and "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu Before Their Meeting," January 18, 2023; State Department Press Briefing, January 18, 2023.

³ Alper Coskun, "Making the New U.S.-Turkey Strategic Mechanism Meaningful," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 12, 2022; Kali Robinson, "Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022.

system of governance, which he cemented in a 2017 referendum and 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. Some allegations of voter fraud and manipulation surfaced after the referendum and the elections.⁴ Since a failed July 2016 coup attempt by elements within the military, Erdogan and his Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym AKP) have adopted more nationalistic domestic and foreign policy approaches, perhaps partly because of their reliance on parliamentary support from the Nationalist Action Party (Turkish acronym MHP).

Many observers describe Erdogan as a polarizing figure, and elections have reflected roughly equal portions of the country supporting and opposing his rule.⁵ The AKP won the largest share of votes in 2019 local elections, but lost some key municipalities, including Istanbul, to candidates from the secular-leaning Republican People's Party (Turkish acronym CHP).

U.S. and European Union (EU) officials have expressed a number of concerns about authoritarian governance and erosion of rule of law and civil liberties in Turkey.⁶ Some leading opposition figures in Turkey have accused Erdogan of planning, controlling, and/or using the failed coup to suppress dissent and consolidate power.⁷

Meanwhile, Turkish authorities have continued efforts to counter militants from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish acronym PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization). These efforts include Turkish military operations targeting PKK and PKK-aligned personnel in Iraq and Syria.⁸

February Earthquakes and Their Implications

Two major earthquakes (magnitude 7.8 and 7.5) hit southern Turkey on February 6, 2023. Quake damage and its after-effects in areas of Turkey and Syria reportedly killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey and 8,000 in Syria, injured over 100,000 more, and directly affected the living situations and daily lives of millions. As Turkish authorities coordinate a humanitarian response involving significant international assistance, and facilitate access to Syrian border crossings, observers have sought to assess (1) factors contributing to the damage and its scope, (2) efforts to help victims and their families, and (3) present and future needs.⁹ U.S. officials have provided or announced various means of assistance to Turkey, including \$235 million in urgent humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ With Turkey's government estimating the economic toll from the earthquakes to be

⁴ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Limited Referendum Observation Mission Final Report, Turkey, April 16, 2017* (published June 22, 2017); OSCE, *International Election Observation Mission, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, June 24, 2018* (published June 25, 2018).

⁵ Kemal Kirisci and Berk Esen, "Might the Turkish Electorate Be Ready to Say Goodbye to Erdoğan After Two Decades in Power?" *Just Security*, November 22, 2021.

⁶ State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022, Turkey*; Turkey; European Commission, *Türkiye 2022 Report*, October 6, 2022.

⁷ Gareth Jenkins, "Five Years After July 15: Erdogan's New Turkey and the Myth of Its Immaculate Conception," *Turkey Analyst*, July 15, 2021; "Turkey coup: Top officers given life terms in mass trial," *BBC News*, April 7, 2021.

⁸ Berkay Mandiraci, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux," International Crisis Group, February 18, 2022.

⁹ See, for example, Nazlan Ertan, "EU raises \$7.5 billion for Turkey, Syria earthquake victims," *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2023.

¹⁰ U.S. Agency for International Development, "The United States Provides Additional \$50 Million to Support Earthquake Affected Communities in Türkiye and Syria," March 20, 2023.

around \$104 billion—roughly 9% of Turkey’s annual gross domestic product (GDP)—international pledges of assistance to date total nearly \$7.5 billion.¹¹

The disaster has affected Turkey’s politics, society, and economy, particularly in the midst of the country’s elections (discussed below). The 10 southern Turkish provinces most directly affected account for about 10% of Turkey’s gross domestic product and 15% of its population, and host thousands of refugees from Syria’s ongoing civil war.¹²

Analysts have speculated about how the crisis will affect support for President Erdogan and his government.¹³ A major 1999 earthquake in northwestern Turkey killed approximately 18,000, prompting legal and regulatory efforts to improve building safety.¹⁴ However, some media accounts and opposition politicians allege that in the years before the 2023 earthquakes, government officials and contractors prioritized economic benefits over adherence to construction codes, at least partly contributing to the scope of damage and fatalities.¹⁵ Erdogan has denounced criticism aimed at him or the government as fomenting disunity,¹⁶ and Turkey’s justice ministry has ordered prosecutors to create “earthquake crimes investigation units” to consider criminal violations for substandard work.¹⁷ Erdogan acknowledged some problems with the government’s initial response,¹⁸ while mainly attributing the disaster to the quakes’ size.¹⁹ He has announced a government-led recovery program, pledging to build 319,000 houses within a year, and 650,000 in total. Some local officials, engineers, and international donors have expressed concern that a quick rebuilding effort without detailed planning or clearer accountability measures could leave the new buildings vulnerable to future seismic activity.²⁰

Major Economic Challenges

Ongoing economic problems in Turkey considerably worsened in 2022 as its currency, the *lira*, depreciated in value around 28% against the U.S. dollar, after declining by nearly 45% in 2021. After official annual inflation reached a 24-year peak of 86% in October 2022, it was around 44% in April 2023,²¹ while some unofficial estimates have remained at over 100%.²² Many analysts

¹¹ *Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment*, March 2023, available at <https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Turkiye-Recovery-and-Reconstruction-Assessment.pdf>; Ertan, “EU raises \$7.5 billion for Turkey, Syria earthquake victims.”

¹² Nevzat Devranoglu, “Earthquake could cost Turkey up to \$84 billion - business group,” *Reuters*, February 13, 2023; Raja Abdulrahim and Emily Garthwaite, “For Syrian Refugees in Turkey, Quake Is a Disaster Within a Disaster,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2023.

¹³ Adam Samson and Ayla Jean Yackley, “Earthquake tests Erdoğan’s leadership as Turkish elections loom,” *Financial Times*, February 9, 2023; “Earthquake could shake up Turkish election,” *Al-Monitor*, February 10, 2023.

¹⁴ Zeynep Bilginsoy and Suzan Fraser, “Turkey’s lax policing of building codes known before quake,” *Associated Press*, February 10, 2023.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Samson and Yackley, “Earthquake tests Erdoğan’s leadership as Turkish elections loom”; Ben Hubbard et al., “Turkish Builders Under Intense Scrutiny over Shoddy Work,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2023.

¹⁶ Samson and Yackley, “Earthquake tests Erdoğan’s leadership as Turkish elections loom.”

¹⁷ Ben Hubbard, “Quake Response Testing Erdogan as Survivors Express Frustration,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2023.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ben Hubbard et al., “As Public Anger Mounts, Turkey Detains Builders,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2023.

²⁰ Jared Malsin, “Concerns Mount as Erdogan Rebuilds,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2023; Ertan, “EU raises \$7.5 billion for Turkey, Syria earthquake victims.”

²¹ “Turkish inflation slows to 44% ahead of landmark election,” *Reuters*, May 3, 2023.

²² Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivileim, “Erdogan Faces Big Vote Test as Turkish Economy Suffers,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2023.

link the spike in inflation to the Turkish central bank's repeated reductions of its key interest rate since September 2021, with additional inflationary pressure possibly coming from external events such as Russia's war on Ukraine and interest rate hikes in the United States and other major economies.²³ The lira has been trending downward for more than a decade, with its decline probably driven in part by broader concerns about Turkey's rule of law and economy.²⁴

Throughout this time, President Erdogan has assertively challenged the conventional economic theory that higher interest rates stem inflation, attract foreign capital, and support the value of the currency. In replacing Turkey's central bank governor and finance minister in 2021, Erdogan established greater control over Turkish fiscal and monetary policy. In public statements, Erdogan has argued that lower interest rates boost production, employment, and exports.²⁵ Erdogan also has criticized high interest rates as contrary to Islamic teachings and as exacerbating the gap between rich and poor.²⁶

The currency and inflation crisis in Turkey has dramatically affected consumers' cost of living and the cost of international borrowing (mostly conducted in U.S. dollars) for banks and private sector companies. The government has sought to lessen the impact of inflation by providing tax cuts, minimum wage increases, greater access to early retirement benefits, and subsidies for basic expenses, along with borrowing incentives for banks that hold liras.²⁷ Turkey also has sought currency swaps from some Arab Gulf states, and has benefitted from Russian-origin inflows that contribute to U.S. warnings about potential sanctions evasion (see "Turkey-Russia Economic and Energy Cooperation" below).²⁸

Costs of ongoing humanitarian assistance and reconstruction from the earthquake crisis, along with disruptions to agricultural, industrial, and commercial activity, will likely strain Turkey's economy further.²⁹ With the overall cost estimated to approach \$104 billion, the Economist Intelligence Unit predicts some drag on economic growth.³⁰ Turkey's modest debt-to-GDP ratio of around 37% (see **Figure A-1**) may permit it some space to boost fiscal spending in response to the crisis. One analyst has said that financial assistance from international development banks will be necessary but limited because of the Turkish government's poor relations with the West.³¹

²³ Baris Balci and Inci Ozbek, "Turkey Rewrites All Inflation Forecasts but Won't Budge on Rates," *Bloomberg*, April 28, 2022.

²⁴ Mikolaj Rogalewicz, "Economic crisis in Turkey," *Warsaw Institute Review*, April 25, 2022.

²⁵ "EXPLAINER: Turkey's Currency Is Crashing. What's the Impact?" *Associated Press*, December 3, 2021; Carlotta Gall, "Keeping His Own Counsel on Turkey's Economy," *New York Times*, December 11, 2021.

²⁶ "Turkey will keep lowering interest rates: Erdogan," *Daily Sabah*, June 6, 2022; Mustafa Akyol, "How Erdogan's Pseudoscience Is Ruining the Turkish Economy," *Cato Institute*, December 3, 2021.

²⁷ M. Murat Kubilay, "Already vulnerable, Turkey's economy now faces massive earthquake recovery costs," *Middle East Institute*, February 13, 2023.

²⁸ Laura Pitel, "Turkey finance minister defends economic links with Russia," *Financial Times*, October 25, 2022; M. Murat Kubilay, "As liquidity problems worsen, Turkey turns to capital controls and informal FX flows," *Middle East Institute*, November 7, 2022.

²⁹ Mustafa Sonmez, "Massive earthquake cost to deepen Turkey's economic woes," *Al-Monitor*, February 11, 2023; Devranoglu, "Earthquake could cost Turkey up to \$84 billion."

³⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Turkey Country Report*, generated May 3, 2023 (based on April 11, 2023 forecasts).

³¹ Kubilay, "Already vulnerable, Turkey's economy now faces massive earthquake recovery costs."

May 2023 Elections

Background: Issues, Parties, Candidates, and Process

On May 14, 2023, Turkey held presidential and parliamentary elections. Largely in the context of Turkey's economic problems discussed above, public opinion polls before May 14 fueled speculation that Erdogan and his allies might be vulnerable to a coalition of six opposition parties led by the CHP and the Good (*Iyi*) Party (see **Appendix B** for profiles of selected party leaders).³² Despite Erdogan's potential vulnerability, some observers questioned the opposition coalition's prospects. They cited opposition disunity, Erdogan's political resilience, and the government's influence over judicial rulings, ability to provide economic subsidies, and effective control of around 90% of the media.³³

Questions that may persist as elections move to a May 28 presidential run-off (discussed further below) include whether free and fair elections could take place or Erdogan might cede power in the event of an electoral defeat.³⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit assessed that a close contest could lead to "divisive court challenges" and "political instability."³⁵

The opposition coalition agreed on a joint platform focused on returning Turkey to the parliamentary system that existed before the 2018 election, largely as a means of limiting executive power.³⁶ Opposition figures also have criticized the Erdogan government's approach to a range of foreign and domestic policy issues—including other subjects pertaining to democracy and rule of law in Turkey—and promised to make changes (see also "Foreign Policy Changes Under a Different President?").³⁷ In its platform, the opposition has hinted at more orthodox economic policies, saying that it would reduce inflation and impose no responsibilities on the Central Bank other than ensuring price and financial stability.³⁸

This year's parliamentary election took place under changes enacted in 2022 to Turkey's electoral law. As in the previous election in 2018, Turkey's 600 parliamentary seats were assigned to party lists under a proportional system for each of Turkey's 87 electoral districts. However, the 2022 amendment lowered the threshold for entering parliament. Under the modified law, parties that win seats can join parliament so long as they receive at least 7% of the national vote or belong to a larger electoral alliance that does so.³⁹ The previous threshold was 10%. Three main alliances contested the election:

³² See, for example, "Erdogan's rival boosted by withdrawal, poll lead ahead of Turkey vote," *Reuters*, May 11, 2023.

³³ Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's Resilient Autocrat," *Foreign Affairs*, May 4, 2023; Jamie Dettmer, "It's going to be hard to get rid of Turkey's Erdoğan," *Politico Europe*, March 18, 2023.

³⁴ "How free and fair will Turkey's election be?" *Economist*, May 12, 2023; Soner Cagaptay (editor and co-author), *Turkey's Pivotal 2023 Elections: Issues, Potential Outcomes, and What Comes After*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 19, 2023; Andrew Wilks, "Would Turkey's Erdogan accept an election loss after recent comments?" *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2023.

³⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Turkey Country Report*.

³⁶ CHP, "Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies (January 30, 2023)"; *Text of Agreement for a Strengthened Parliamentary System*, February 28, 2022.

³⁷ "A more democratic Turkey is within grasp, says Kemal Kilicdaroglu," *Economist*, May 5, 2023; Nektaria Stamouli, "Turkey's anti-Erdogan opposition vows a reset on EU and NATO," *Politico Europe*, March 15, 2023.

³⁸ CHP, "Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies (January 30, 2023)."

³⁹ Kayahan Cantekin, "Turkey: Parliament Passes Law Amending Election Laws and Lowering Electoral Threshold," Law Library of Congress, April 24, 2022.

- **People's Alliance**, which includes Erdogan's AKP, the MHP, and a few smaller parties.
- **Nation Alliance** (or "table of six"), which includes the CHP, the Good Party, and four smaller parties, including two led by prominent former AKP figures.
- **Labor and Freedom Alliance**, which includes a few small parties alongside the Kurdish-led Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkish acronym HDP). The HDP arranged to run under the aegis of the Green Left Party (Turkish acronym YSP) to prevent against its exclusion, because a case pending before the Constitutional Court could ban the HDP from future campaigns under its own name.

In March 2023, the Nation Alliance nominated CHP party leader **Kemal Kilicdaroglu** (*kuhl-utchedahr-oh-loo*) as its joint presidential candidate.⁴⁰ Kilicdaroglu's most important coalition partner, Good Party leader Meral Aksener (*awk-sheh-nar*), eventually agreed to support Kilicdaroglu after two other potential candidates who had polled more favorably against Erdogan—Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu and Ankara mayor Mansur Yavas—backed Kilicdaroglu in response to Aksener's last-ditch appeal for one of them to run. Imamoglu's prospects may have been undermined by a criminal conviction (pending final resolution on appeal) that he and other opposition figures charge is politically motivated.⁴¹ While Aksener's Good Party rejected a formal coalition between the Nation Alliance and the HDP, the HDP decided to support Kilicdaroglu in the presidential race instead of fielding its own candidate.⁴²

Two third-party presidential candidates appeared on the ballot alongside Erdogan and Kilicdaroglu:

- Muharrem Ince, who was the CHP's presidential candidate in the previous 2018 election. Early polls estimated that Ince might get 5% of the vote or more before his prospects faded. He ultimately announced his withdrawal on May 11.⁴³
- Sinan Ogan, an ultra-nationalist candidate who had previously served in parliament for the MHP.

May 14 First Round: Erdogan's Presidential Lead and Parliamentary Victory

In the May 14 elections, Erdogan fell a half-percentage point short of the 50% mark he needed to surpass to claim outright victory in the presidential race, garnering 49.5% of the vote. Kilicdaroglu received 44.9%, and Ogan appeared to outperform most pre-election polls by getting 5.2% (see **Figure 1**), with Ince receiving the remaining 0.4%. Erdogan's People's Alliance also retained its parliamentary majority, even though it slipped from 344 seats to 323 seats (see **Figure 2**).

⁴⁰ For profiles of Kilicdaroglu, see **Appendix B** and Suzan Fraser, "Challenger in Turkey presidential race offers sharp contrast," *Associated Press*, May 2, 2023; Amberin Zaman, "Meet Kemal Kilicdaroglu, Turkey's long-derided opposition head who could dethrone Erdogan," *Al-Monitor*, March 23, 2023; "Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: hope in the man who's never beaten Erdoğan," *James in Turkey*, January 10, 2023.

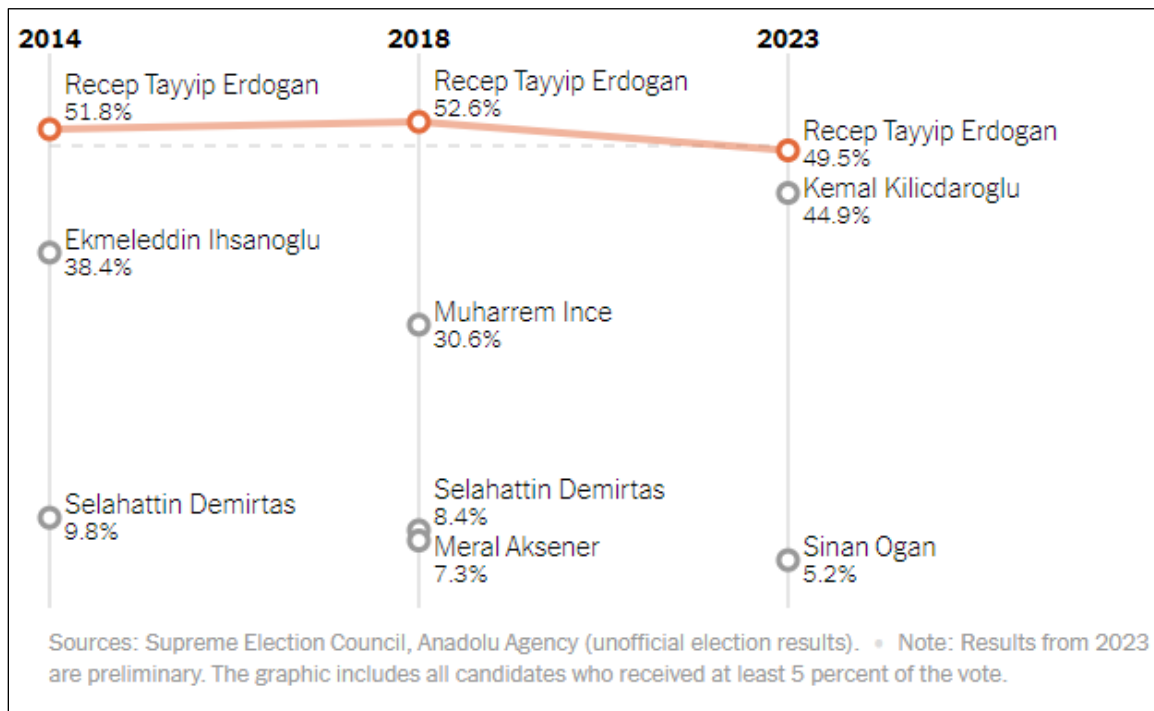
⁴¹ Ben Hubbard and Safak Timur, "Conviction May Sideline Rival of Turkish Leader," *New York Times*, December 15, 2022.

⁴² Nicolas Camut, "Pro-Kurdish party rallies behind main opposition candidate in Turkish election," *Politico Europe*, April 28, 2023.

⁴³ "Turkish candidate Muharrem Ince drops out of presidential race," *Agence France Presse*, May 11, 2023.

Turkey now plans to conduct its first-ever presidential run-off election on May 28. Erdogan’s presidential victories in both 2014 and 2018 came in the initial round.⁴⁴ While Turkey’s economic challenges and the February earthquakes may have increased voter dissatisfaction with Erdogan, his first round electoral performance surpassed many observers’ expectations.⁴⁵ Erdogan’s lead over Kilicdaroglu and continued majority in parliament confounded aggregate pre-election polling that anticipated a Kilicdaroglu lead or victory and a hung parliament.⁴⁶ Despite some contentious rhetoric on election night, with Erdogan and Kilicdaroglu supporters accusing each other of announcing misleading information,⁴⁷ both camps accepted the outcome in preparation for the run-off.

Figure I. Turkish 2023 First Round Presidential Election Preliminary Results
(comparison with past two elections)



Source: *New York Times*.

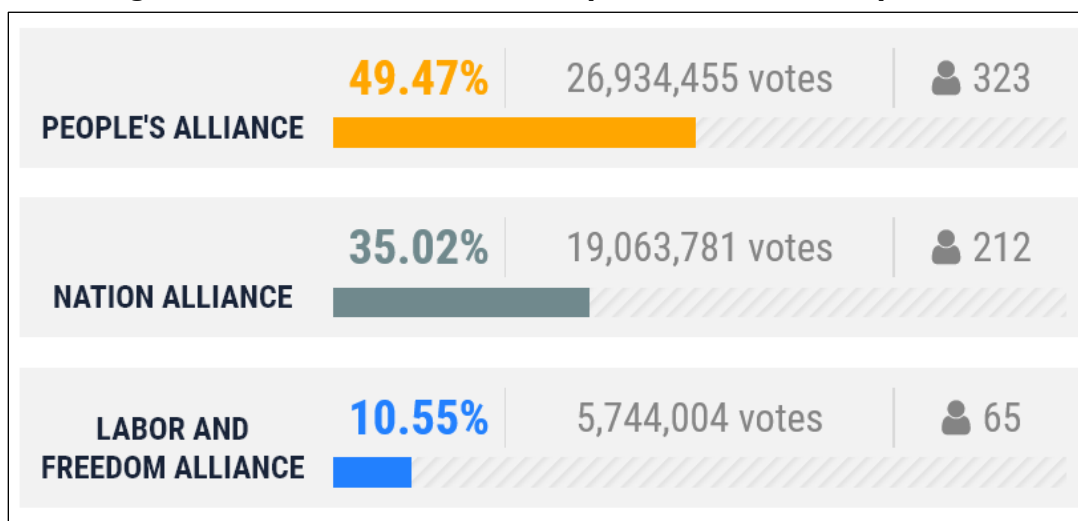
Note: A candidate is required to get more than 50% of the vote in the first round to prevent a run-off election.

⁴⁴ Prior to the 2014 election, the president of Turkey was elected by parliamentary vote rather than popular election.

⁴⁵ Peter Kenyon, “Takeaways from Turkey’s election as it heads toward a runoff,” *NPR*, May 15, 2023; Amberin Zaman, “Erdogan proves unbeatable as Turkey heads for runoff,” *Al-Monitor*, May 15, 2023.

⁴⁶ 600vekil.com, accessed on May 13, 2023.

⁴⁷ Ben Hubbard and Gulsin Harman, “In Turkey Vote, Erdogan Fails to Get Majority,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2023.

Figure 2. Turkish 2023 Parliamentary Election Preliminary Results

Source: *Daily Sabah* (based on underlying preliminary results from *Anadolu Agency*).

Notes: Figures include vote percentages and numbers for each alliance, as well as the number of seats won. The various alliances and parties that received the remaining votes are unlisted because none of them won parliamentary seats.

Observers for Turkey's elections include representatives from domestic political parties and civil society organizations, as well as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. These observers monitor polling station operations, voting, ballot counting, and the tabulation of results.⁴⁸ The OSCE international election observation mission (IEOM) said the following in preliminary findings and conclusions it released a day after the May 14 elections:

In the 14 May general elections, held in the wake of devastating earthquakes, voters had a choice between genuine political alternatives and voter participation was high, but the incumbent president and the ruling parties enjoyed an unjustified advantage, including through biased media coverage. The continued restrictions on fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression hindered the participation of some opposition politicians and parties, civil society and independent media in the election process. Nonetheless, the campaign itself was competitive and largely free for most contestants but characterized by intense polarization, and marred by harsh rhetoric, instances of misuse of administrative resources, and the pressure and intimidation faced by one opposition party. The election administration technically managed elections efficiently, but there was a lack of transparency and communication, as well as concerns over its independence. Measures designed to facilitate registration and voting for earthquake-affected citizens were limited, placing an additional burden on the voters to exercise their voting rights. Election day was generally well-organized and assessed positively by IEOM observers, however, instances of deficient implementation of certain procedures, particularly during voting and counting were noted.⁴⁹

One journalist added, "Fears of wide-scale fraud have proved empty so far, though there are multiple complaints pending, and there was little if any violence at the polls where a record

⁴⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "General Elections, 14 May 2023," available at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkiye/537642>; Hurcan Asli Aksoy and Salim Cevik, "Is extensive election fraud possible in Turkey's fiercest elections?" SWP (German Institute for International Politics and Security), May 10, 2023.

⁴⁹ OSCE, *International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Türkiye – General Elections, 14 May 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions* (published May 15, 2023).

portion of voters—88%—cast their ballots.”⁵⁰ On May 17, opposition officials said that they had raised complaints over possible irregularities regarding 2,269 ballot boxes nationwide for the presidential election and 4,825 for the parliamentary vote, but acknowledged that any corrections would be unlikely to change election outcomes.⁵¹

May 28 Presidential Run-off and Key Issues

Many observers view Erdogan’s May 14 lead and parliamentary victory as signs that he may have an advantage over Kilicdaroglu in a run-off.⁵² Major themes could carry over from the initial campaign. As mentioned above, Kilicdaroglu has argued that problems in Turkey have arisen under Erdogan on the economy, democracy, and human rights, and that the opposition has plans to fix them. Erdogan has trumpeted various accomplishments at home and abroad during his 20-year-rule—including with respect to Turkey’s defense and energy industries—and has criticized the opposition by saying that it has sided with terrorists and LGBT causes.⁵³

The following factors could affect the run-off outcome on May 28.

Nationalistic voters, particularly those who voted for Ogan in the first round. Some analysts have argued that the Kurdish-led HDP’s support for Kilicdaroglu could hurt his chances with some nationalistic voters.⁵⁴ Ogan has endorsed Erdogan for the run-off, but a key party leader from the alliance that supported Ogan has endorsed Kilicdaroglu. Observers speculate regarding the overall impact of these endorsements, and whether Kilicdaroglu’s efforts to attract nationalist support could dampen HDP voter enthusiasm for him.⁵⁵

Economic issues and market swings, including how voters assess Turkey’s continuing inflation and potential balance-of-payments problems alongside populist measures from Erdogan—including some announced in April and May—to help households.⁵⁶ With polls before the May 14 elections having predicted a strong opposition performance, Turkey’s stock market and currency strengthened, and then fell in value after election results proved the forecasts to be largely inaccurate.⁵⁷

Role of United States and Russia. In an run-off that may closely focus on the preferences of nationalistic voters, Turkish public attitudes regarding U.S. and Russian influences—and their importance—on Turkish policy and politics could play a role. While major changes in Turkey’s

⁵⁰ Zaman, “Erdogan proves unbeatable as Turkey heads for runoff.”

⁵¹ “Turkey opposition contests thousands of ballots after election,” *Reuters*, May 17, 2023.

⁵² Ragip Soyulu, “Turkey elections: Erdogan in a strong position ahead of presidential runoff,” *Middle East Eye*, May 15, 2023; Adam Samson and Ayla Jean Yackley, “Erdogan poll lead prompts soul-searching for Turkey’s opposition,” *Financial Times*, May 15, 2023.

⁵³ Jared Malsin, “Turkish Vote Heightens Tensions,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2023; “In Turkey vote, Erdogan defies forecasts of demise,” *Reuters*, May 15, 2023.

⁵⁴ Halil Karaveli, “Turkey’s Opposition Can’t Win Without the Working Class,” *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2023.

⁵⁵ “Turkey anti-immigrant party leader backs Erdogan’s challenger in runoff,” *Reuters*, May 24, 2023.

⁵⁶ Mustafa Sonmez, “Turkey Elections: Currency fears grow ahead of presidential runoff,” *Al-Monitor*, May 23, 2023; Ben Hubbard, “For the Winner in Turkey, One Prize Is an Economy at the Edge of Crisis,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2023; “Erdogan offers free gas pre-election after first Black Sea field shipment,” *Reuters*, April 23, 2023; Elcin Poyrazlar, “Erdogan gives public workers 45 percent pay rise in Turkey’s tight election race,” *Politico Europe*, May 9, 2023.

⁵⁷ “Turkey’s market rout deepens after Erdogan’s strong election showing,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2023; Ayla Jean Yackley and Adam Samson, “Erdogan holds upper hand as Turkish election goes to run-off,” *Financial Times*, May 15, 2023.

foreign policy direction may be unlikely (see further discussion below), Kilicdaroglu's statements hint that he might favor moving in a more pro-Western direction than Erdogan has taken.⁵⁸

In the days before the May 14 election, Kilicdaroglu pledged to re-emphasize Turkey's NATO membership and its efforts to join the European Union,⁵⁹ and claimed to have "concrete evidence" that Russian actors were responsible for "deep fake" online content criticizing the opposition.⁶⁰ Amid official Russian denials of involvement in Turkish elections, Erdogan criticized Kilicdaroglu for attacks against Russia, and said, "Our relations with Russia are no less important than those with the United States."⁶¹ An unnamed Turkish opposition figure was cited on May 12 as complaining that Russia has helped Erdogan maintain financial stability amid Turkey's economic crisis, pointing to media reports suggesting that Russia may have given Erdogan access to billions of dollars via some funds transfers and by deferring Turkey's obligation to pay for Russian energy imports to 2024.⁶²

On May 13, Erdogan was cited as saying that President Biden had given an order to topple him,⁶³ apparently referring to statements Candidate Biden made in a *New York Times* interview during the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign in support of efforts to defeat Erdogan via the electoral process.⁶⁴ That same day, a State Department spokesperson said that the United States does not take sides in elections, and is only interested "in the democratic process, which should be both free and fair."⁶⁵ After the first round of voting, the State Department principal deputy spokesperson said that U.S. officials are continuing to monitor Turkey's ongoing electoral process, adding:

But broadly we congratulate the people of Türkiye for peacefully expressing their will at the ballot box, and also congratulate the newly elected parliament. We'll continue to work together with whatever government is chosen by the Turkish people to deepen our cooperation and ... shared priorities.⁶⁶

Divided government? Since popular elections for president began in 2014, Turkey has not experienced divided rule. If the president's party coalition does not control parliament after the elections, parliament could check the president in various ways if a majority of members seeks to do so. The president has broad powers to appoint cabinet ministers and act in the absence of parliamentary initiative, but relies on parliament's approval in certain matters such as budgeting, international treaty ratification, and foreign military deployments.⁶⁷

It is unclear how voters might view the prospect of a Kilicdaroglu presidency alongside a pro-Erdogan parliamentary majority. Erdogan and his supporters warn that stalemate between the two branches of government could resemble past periods in Turkish history (such as during the 1990s)

⁵⁸ "A more democratic Turkey is within grasp, says Kemal Kilicdaroglu," *Economist*.

⁵⁹ Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivileim, "Turkey's Top Election Challenger Pledges Closer Ties to NATO and EU," *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2023

⁶⁰ "Erdogan rival says has evidence of Russia's online campaign ahead of Turkey election," *Reuters*, May 12, 2023.

⁶¹ "Relations with Russia are no less important than those with US: Erdoğan," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 13, 2023.

⁶² Ragip Soylu, "Turkey elections: Why Kilicdaroglu suspects Russian interference," *Middle East Eye*, May 12, 2023.

⁶³ "On final day of campaign, Erdogan accuses Turkish opposition of working with Biden," *Reuters*, May 13, 2023.

⁶⁴ *New York Times* editorial board interview of Joe Biden, December 16, 2019, published on January 17, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/17/opinion/joe-biden-nytimes-interview.html>.

⁶⁵ "On final day of campaign, Erdogan accuses Turkish opposition of working with Biden," *Reuters*.

⁶⁶ State Department Press Briefing, May 15, 2023.

⁶⁷ Unofficial English translation of Turkish constitution available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2017.pdf?lang=en. See also Alan Makovsky, *Erdoğan's Proposal for an Empowered Presidency*, Center for American Progress, March 22, 2017.

in which fractious parliamentary coalitions may have contributed to socioeconomic challenges and ideological tensions.⁶⁸

Procedural questions or disputes. Turkey’s Supreme Electoral Council (Turkish acronym YSK) administers elections. It also investigates and rules on all irregularities, complaints, and objections.⁶⁹ Past YSK decisions favoring Erdoğan’s position that attracted controversy were (1) its 2017 ruling not to enforce the normal requirement that only sealed ballots could be counted in that year’s constitutional referendum, and (2) its 2019 ruling to repeat that year’s Istanbul mayoral election (the AKP candidate lost the second election by a larger margin than the first).⁷⁰ Additionally, the 2022 amendment to Turkey’s electoral law changed the selection process for judges who will preside over the provincial and district-level electoral boards that supervise voting, replacing a seniority system with a lottery. Critics have charged that the change may increase the chances of greater politicization of these boards.⁷¹

Turkish Foreign Policy

General Assessment

Turkey’s strategic orientation, or how it relates to and balances between the West and other global and regional powers, is a major consideration for the United States. Trends in Turkey’s relations with the United States and other countries reflect changes to this orientation, as Turkey has sought greater independence of action as a regional power within a more multipolar global system. Turkish leaders’ interest in reducing their dependence on the West for defense and discouraging Western influence over their domestic politics may partly explain their willingness to coordinate some actions with Russia, such as in Syria and with Turkey’s purchase of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system. Nevertheless, Turkey retains significant differences with Russia—with which it has a long history of discord—including in political and military crises involving Syria, Ukraine, Libya, and Armenia-Azerbaijan.

Turkish leaders appear to compartmentalize their partnerships and rivalries with other influential countries as each situation dictates, partly in an attempt to reduce Turkey’s dependence on these actors and maintain its leverage with them.⁷² Turkey’s future foreign policy course could depend partly on the degree to which Turkish leaders feel constrained by their traditional security and economic relationships with Western powers, and how willing they are to risk tensions or breaks in those relationships while building other global relationships.

Foreign Policy Changes Under a Different President?

In anticipation of 2023 elections, observers have speculated about how a new president’s foreign policy (including domestic policy with clear foreign policy ramifications) might differ from

⁶⁸ Andrew England, “Enduring pulling power of Erdoğan deflates opposition hopes,” *Financial Times*, May 15, 2023.

⁶⁹ YSK website available at <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/en/supreme-election-council/1841>.

⁷⁰ “Five new members and new chair to be elected to Supreme Electoral Council,” *Bianet*, January 5, 2023.

⁷¹ Kayahan Cantekin, “Turkey: Parliament Passes Law Amending Election Laws and Lowering Electoral Threshold,” Law Library of Congress, April 24, 2022; Suzan Fraser, “Turkish parliament approves contentious election law changes,” *Associated Press*, March 31, 2022.

⁷² Nur Ozcan Erbay, “Ankara to use compartmentalization in managing relations,” *Daily Sabah*, June 24, 2021; Stephen J. Flanagan et al., *Turkey’s Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, RAND Corporation, 2020.

Erdogan's if an opposition candidate wins.⁷³ Because of widespread nationalistic sentiment among Turkey's population and most of its political parties, a different president may have difficulty changing Turkish policies on some of the following matters of core security concern: Syria and Iraq (Kurdish militancy, refugee issues, and other countries' influence), Greece and Cyprus (Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean disputes), and Russia and Ukraine (conflict and its regional and global consequences).

However, a different president may be more likely to alter certain ongoing policies that may be more reflective of Erdogan's or the AKP's preferences than of broad national consensus. Such changes may include (1) providing more flexibility to central bankers and other officials on monetary policy decisions and other measures to address Turkey's economic problems, (2) giving greater consideration to European Court of Human Rights rulings, and (3) reducing Turkish support for Sunni Islamist groups like Hamas (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Syrian armed opposition factions.

Some Turkish opposition parties' foreign policy statements suggest that a different president might be less willing than Erdogan to say and do things that risk harming relationships with the United States and European countries.⁷⁴ Thus, despite the difficulties that may surround changing some policies (as mentioned above), a different Turkish president could conceivably be less inclined toward implementing those policies in a way that might worsen relations with Western states, such as by pursuing additional arms purchases from Russia or new military operations in northern Syria or the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean area. However, if a new, untested Turkish government feels pressure to signal its strength to various international actors or to placate multiple domestic constituencies within a coalition, that president may strive to match Erdogan's reputation for assertiveness. Conversely, a president facing lack of consensus within a coalition might become more passive on foreign policy.

U.S./NATO Strategic Relationship and Military Presence

The United States has valued Turkey's geopolitical importance to and military strength within the NATO alliance, while viewing Turkey's NATO membership as helping anchor Turkey to the West. The State Department's *Integrated Country Strategy* (ICS) for Turkey says that its sizable military (the second-largest in NATO) and its geographic location at the southeastern flank of the alliance gives it a critical role in regional security.⁷⁵ Turkey's proximity to several conflict areas in the Middle East and elsewhere has made the continuing availability of its territory for the stationing and transport of arms, cargo, and personnel valuable for the United States and NATO. In addition to Incirlik Air Base near the southern Turkish city of Adana, other key U.S./NATO sites include an early warning missile defense radar in eastern Turkey and a NATO ground forces command in Izmir (see **Figure A-2**). Turkey also controls access to and from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus (alt. Bosphorus) and Dardanelles Straits (the Straits—see **Figure A-3**).

For Turkey, NATO's traditional importance has been to mitigate Turkish concerns about encroachment by neighbors, such as the Soviet Union's aggressive post-World War II posturing leading up to the Cold War. Additionally, NATO security guarantees compensate Turkey for a

⁷³ Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Hinge Election," *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November 2022; Coskun and Ulgen, "Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy."

⁷⁴ Alper Coskun and Sinan Ulgen, "Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 14, 2022.

⁷⁵ State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*, May 13, 2022.

general lack of nationally owned strategic defense and deterrence capabilities.⁷⁶ In more recent or ongoing arenas of conflict like Ukraine and Syria, Turkey’s possible interest in countering Russian objectives may be partly motivating its military operations and arms exports.⁷⁷

Tensions between Turkey and other NATO members have fueled internal U.S./NATO discussions about the continued use of Turkish bases. Some reports suggest that expanded or potentially expanded U.S. military presences in places such as Greece, Cyprus, and Jordan might be connected with concerns about Turkey.⁷⁸ In March 2022 congressional hearing testimony, Turkey expert and former congressional committee staff member Alan Makovsky said that while the United States should make efforts to keep Turkey in the “Western camp,” Turkish “equivocation in recent years” justifies the United States building and expanding military facilities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece to “hedge its bets.”⁷⁹

Russia

Turkey’s relations with Russia feature elements of cooperation and competition. Turkey has made a number of foreign policy moves since 2016 toward closer ties with Russia. These moves could be motivated by a combination of factors, including Turkey’s effort to reduce dependence on the West, economic opportunism, and chances to increase its regional influence at Russia’s expense. Turkey also has moved closer to a number of countries surrounding Russia—including Ukraine and Poland—likely in part as a counterweight to Russian regional power.⁸⁰

Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine and Turkish Mediation Efforts

Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has heightened challenges Turkey faces in balancing its relations with the two countries, with implications for U.S.-Turkey ties. Turkey’s links with Russia—especially its 2019 acquisition of a Russian S-400 system—have fueled major U.S.-Turkey tensions, triggering sanctions and reported congressional holds on arms sales (discussed below). However, following the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, U.S. and Turkish interests in countering Russian revisionist aims—including along the Black Sea coast—appear to have converged in some ways as Turkey has helped strengthen Ukraine’s defense capabilities in parallel with other NATO countries.⁸¹ In addition to denouncing Russia’s invasion, closing the Straits to belligerent warships, opposing Russian claims to Ukrainian territory (including

⁷⁶ Can Kasapoglu, “Turkey,” *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance’s Relevance and Cohesion*, Thierry Tardy, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 97.

⁷⁷ Dimitar Bechev, “Russia, Turkey and the Spectre of Regional Instability,” Al Sharq Strategic Research, April 13, 2022; Mitch Prothero, “Turkey’s Erdogan has been humiliating Putin all year,” *Business Insider*, October 22, 2020.

⁷⁸ “Pentagon pushes back on claim that US to leave Turkey’s Incirlik base,” *Al-Monitor*, September 16, 2020; Joseph Trevithick, “Docs Show US to Massively Expand Footprint at Jordanian Air Base amid Spats with Turkey, Iraq,” *The Drive*, January 14, 2019.

⁷⁹ Prepared testimony of Alan Makovsky, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, “Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation,” House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism; and Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, March 31, 2022, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-examining-u-s-interests-and-regional-cooperation/>.

⁸⁰ Can Kasapoglu, “Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond,” Jamestown Foundation, October 12, 2022; Jeffrey Mankoff, “As Russia Reels, Eurasia Roils,” *War on the Rocks*, October 11, 2022.

⁸¹ Saban Kardas, “The War in Ukraine and Turkey’s Cautious Counter-Balancing Against Russia,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 3, 2022.

Crimea), and serving as a transit hub for natural gas to Europe,⁸² Turkey has supplied Ukraine with various types of military equipment—including armed drone aircraft and mine-resistant ambush-resistant (MRAP) vehicles⁸³—as well as humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, Turkey’s leaders likely hope to minimize spillover effects to Turkey’s national security and economy, and this might partly explain Turkey’s continued engagement with Russia and desires to help mediate the conflict (discussed below).

In January 2023, a media outlet reported that Turkey began transferring some dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (or DPICMs, which are artillery-fired cluster munitions) to Ukraine in November 2022. The report cited various observers debating the potential battlefield impact and humanitarian implications of the weapon’s use.⁸⁴ Turkish and Ukrainian officials have denied that any such transfers have occurred.⁸⁵

Turkey-Ukraine Defense Cooperation

Turkey and Ukraine have strengthened their relations since Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014.⁸⁶ In 2017, a Turkish security analyst attributed these closer ties to growing mutual interests in countering Russian influence in the Black Sea region and in sharing military technology to expand and increase the self-sufficiency of their respective defense industries.⁸⁷ Since 2020, the two countries have signed multiple agreements signifying closer cooperation, and also signed a broader free trade agreement (pending ratification) in February 2022.⁸⁸

In line with these agreements, Turkish and Ukrainian companies have engaged in or planned a significant expansion of defense transactions, including a number of joint development or co-production initiatives.⁸⁹ Turkish expertise with drone and other aircraft and naval platforms complements Ukrainian skills in designing and constructing aerospace engines and missiles.⁹⁰ As part of the deepening bilateral defense cooperation, Turkey has sold several Turkish-origin Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine since 2019,⁹¹ and some reports have suggested that the manufacturer has delivered additional TB2s to Ukraine at various times since Russia’s 2022 invasion.⁹² Additionally, Turkey is helping establish Ukraine’s naval capabilities by producing corvettes (small warships) for export.⁹³

⁸² State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability,” February 20, 2023.

⁸³ Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkey sends 50 mine-resistant vehicles to Ukraine, with more expected,” *Defense News*, August 22, 2022; Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, “The Stalwart Ally: Türkiye’s Arms Deliveries to Ukraine,” *Oryx*, November 21, 2022.

⁸⁴ Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, “Turkey Is Sending Cold War-Era Cluster Bombs to Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2023.

⁸⁵ Ragip Soylu, “Russia-Ukraine war: Turkey denies supplying Kyiv with cluster munitions,” *Middle East Eye*, January 14, 2023.

⁸⁶ For information on the Crimea invasion, see CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

⁸⁷ Metin Gurcan, “Turkey-Ukraine defense industry ties are booming,” *Al-Monitor*, May 1, 2017.

⁸⁸ “Turkey, Ukraine Sign Military Cooperation Agreements,” *Associated Press*, October 16, 2020; Christopher Isajiw, “Free trade and drones: Turkey and Ukraine strengthen strategic ties,” Atlantic Council, February 11, 2022.

⁸⁹ Kasapoglu, “Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Dorian Jones, “Turkey Strengthens Defense Industry with Its Ukraine Partnership,” *Voice of America*, February 4, 2022.

⁹² David Hambling, “New Bayraktar Drones Still Seem to Be Reaching Ukraine,” *Forbes*, May 10, 2022. The TB2’s main producer, Baykar Technology, is planning to build a \$100 million factory in Ukraine that could be in position within about three years to manufacture the full range of the company’s drones—doubling Baykar’s overall production capacity. Jared Malsin, “Erdogan Seizes Chance to Give Turkey a Global Role,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2022.

⁹³ Kate Tringham, “Update: Turkey launches first Ada-class corvette for Ukraine and cuts steel for second,” *Janes Navy International*, October 3, 2022.

Turkey's maintenance of close relations with both Russia and Ukraine, and its ability to regulate access to the Straits has put it in a position to mediate between the parties on various issues of contention. In July 2022, Turkey and the United Nations entered into parallel agreements with Russia and Ukraine to provide a Black Sea corridor for Ukrainian grain exports that could partly alleviate global supply concerns.⁹⁴ Under the deal, which President Erdogan said on May 17 has been extended until July 2023,⁹⁵ Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and the U.N. have representatives at a joint coordination center in Istanbul to oversee implementation and inspect ships to prevent weapons smuggling.⁹⁶ President Biden has expressed appreciation for Turkey's efforts.⁹⁷

Turkey-Russia Economic and Energy Cooperation

Turkish officials have sought to minimize any negative economic impact Turkey might face from the Russia-Ukraine war, partly through boosting various forms of economic and energy cooperation with Russia. These efforts may stem from Turkish leaders' concerns about improving the country's economic profile in advance of 2023 elections.⁹⁸ The Turkish government has not joined economic sanctions against Russia or closed its airspace to Russian civilian flights.

In August 2022, Presidents Erdogan and Putin publicly agreed to bolster Turkey-Russia cooperation across economic sectors.⁹⁹ Turkey's Russia-related dealings could potentially lead to Western secondary sanctions against Turkey for facilitating Russian sanctions evasion. During a February 2023 trip to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to emphasize U.S. concerns about the dangers of "dark money flowing through their financial systems," Brian Nelson, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, delivered the following remarks to leaders of Turkish financial institutions:

We of course recognize Türkiye's reliance on Russian energy imports and trade in agricultural goods, and continue to work to mitigate adverse impacts to these economic activities.

However, the marked rise over the past year in non-essential Turkish exports or re-exports to Russia makes the Turkish private sector particularly vulnerable to reputational and sanctions risks. This is being driven by Moscow....

In engaging with sanctioned Russian entities, Turkish businesses and banks could put themselves at risk of sanctions and a potential loss of access to G7 markets and correspondent relationships.

Turkish businesses and banks should also take extra precaution to avoid transactions related to potential dual-use technology transfers that could be used by the Russian military-industrial complex.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ "Ukraine, Russia agree to export grain, ending a standoff that threatened food supply," *Associated Press*, July 22, 2022.

⁹⁵ "Erdogan says Black Sea grain deal extended for two months," *Reuters*, May 17, 2023.

⁹⁶ See <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/background>.

⁹⁷ White House, "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye," November 15, 2022.

⁹⁸ Patricia Cohen, "Turkey Tightens Energy Ties with Russia as Other Nations Step Back," *New York Times*, December 10, 2022.

⁹⁹ "Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan agree to boost economic, energy cooperation," *Agence France Presse*, August 5, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Department of the Treasury, "Remarks by U.S. Department of the Treasury's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson in Türkiye," February 3, 2023. See also Jared Malsin, "Turkish Exports Aid (continued...)"

Some Turkish banks and companies appear to be limiting or considering limits on certain types of transactions and services with Russian businesses.¹⁰¹ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has denied that Turkish businesses are exporting electronic or technological products with potential defense applications to Russia, but has publicly welcomed information sharing with U.S. and EU counterparts to ensure that businesses do not use Turkey to bypass Western sanctions.¹⁰² Reportedly, Turkey began in March 2023 to enforce curbs on sanctioned goods transiting its territory to Russia.¹⁰³ In April 2023, the Department of the Treasury placed sanctions on two Turkey-based companies and associated persons for assisting Russia or Russian entities.¹⁰⁴

NATO Accession Process for Sweden and Finland

Sweden and Finland formally applied to join NATO in May 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Turkey objected to the formal start of the two countries' accession process, delaying it for more than a month. Under Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the admission of new allies requires the unanimous agreement of existing members.

The Turkish objections centered around claims that Sweden and Finland have supported or harbored sympathies for groups that Turkey's government deems to be terrorist organizations, namely the Fethullah Gulen movement¹⁰⁵ (which the government has blamed for involvement in the 2016 failed coup) and the PKK.¹⁰⁶ (The United States and EU also classify the PKK as a terrorist group, but not the Gulen movement.) Turkey demanded that Sweden and Finland lift the suspension of arms sales they had maintained against Turkey since its 2019 incursion into Syria against the PKK-linked Kurdish group (the People's Protection Units—Kurdish acronym YPG) that has partnered with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition.¹⁰⁷ Turkey removed its objections to starting the accession process after NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg mediated a June 2022 memorandum between Turkey, Sweden, and Finland. In the trilateral memorandum, the three countries confirmed that no arms embargoes remain in place between them. Further, Sweden and Finland agreed not to support the YPG or Gulen movement, and pledged to work against the PKK.¹⁰⁸

Since then, Turkey has continued to press Sweden and Finland to extradite people that Turkey considers to be terrorists. Under the June 2022 trilateral memorandum, Sweden and Finland agreed to address Turkey's pending deportation or extradition requests in various ways, but did

Moscow's War Effort," *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2023; Ben Hubbard, "U.S. Presses Its Partners to Weed Out Illicit Trade With Moscow," *New York Times*, February 5, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Spicer, "U.S. warns Turkey on exports seen to boost Russia's war effort," *Reuters*, February 4, 2023.

¹⁰² State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability."

¹⁰³ "Turkey Blocks Transit of Goods Sanctioned by EU, US to Russia," *Bloomberg*, March 10, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Russian Financial Facilitators and Sanctions Evaders Around the World," April 12, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ For more information on Gulen and the movement, see archived CRS In Focus IF10444, *Fethullah Gulen, Turkey, and the United States: A Reference*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁰⁶ Semih Idiz, "How long can Erdogan sustain threat to veto Finnish, Swedish NATO bids?" *Al-Monitor*, May 17, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Sources citing links between the PKK and YPG (or PKK affiliates in Syria) include State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020*, Syria; Mandiraci, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux"; Barak Barfi, *Ascent of the PYD and the SDF*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum text available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf.

not commit to specific outcomes in those cases.¹⁰⁹ Sweden's prime minister and other sources have indicated that neither Sweden nor Finland are inclined to make political decisions on extradition that contravene domestic judicial findings conducted under due process and the rule of law.¹¹⁰ In January 2023, Turkish presidential adviser Ibrahim Kalin said that Turkey would only be in a position to agree to Sweden's accession after it passed new anti-terror laws, a process he estimated would take about six months.¹¹¹ Erdogan then called on Sweden and Finland to extradite "around 130" people.¹¹²

In January 2023, the *Wall Street Journal* cited unnamed U.S. officials predicting that congressional approval of a possible F-16 sale to Turkey (see "Congressional Notification Process" below) would be tied to Turkish approval of Sweden's and Finland's NATO accession.¹¹³ Several Senators from both parties, including Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Ranking Member Jim Risch and the 29 who wrote a February 2023 letter to President Biden, have indicated that they may only consider supporting an F-16 sale to Turkey if accession moves forward for both Sweden and Finland.¹¹⁴ In March, Erdogan hosted Finnish President Sauli Niinisto in Turkey and expressed his support for Finland's accession, and then Turkey's parliament approved it later in the month,¹¹⁵ paving the way for Finland's formal accession in April.

Although Turkey's parliament has ratified accession protocols for Finland, it has not done so for Sweden as of mid-May. (To date, Hungary also has not approved Swedish accession.) Sweden's parliament passed new anti-terrorism legislation in May 2023, which will take effect in early June.¹¹⁶ Anticipating the legislation's likely passage, Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said that when it comes into effect, Sweden could start taking "more decisive, concrete, and fruitful steps to address our security concerns," adding, "we'll see how fast they can move."¹¹⁷ It is unclear (1) whether and when Turkish ratification might proceed after that, (2) if Turkey's leadership after its elections might demand further Swedish actions, and (3) whether a potential future Turkish parliament would act in line with the Turkish president's wishes.¹¹⁸ Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg have both stated hopes for

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Steven Erlanger, "Sweden Says Turkey Terms on NATO Bid Go Too Far," *New York Times*, January 10, 2023; Ben Keith, "Turkey's Erdoğan Deploys Sweden and Finland's NATO Membership Bids to Further His Repression," *Just Security*, October 28, 2022.

¹¹¹ "Turkey 'Not in a Position' to Ratify Swedish NATO Bid," *Agence France Presse*, January 14, 2023.

¹¹² "Sweden, Finland must send up to 130 'terrorists' to Turkey for NATO bid, Erdogan says," *Reuters*, January 16, 2023.

¹¹³ Jared Malsin and Vivian Salama, "Biden Administration to Ask Congress to Approve F-16 Sale to Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Marc Rod, "Turkey risks 'serious consequences' if it blocks Sweden, Finland NATO accession, Risch warns," *Jewish Insider*, February 6, 2023; Text of February 2, 2023 letter from 29 Senators to President Biden available at https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/turkiye_f16s3.pdf. In August 2022, Senate Treaty Document 117-3 approved ratification by a 95-1 vote.

¹¹⁵ Ezgi Akin, "Turkey ratifies Finland's NATO membership," *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2023.

¹¹⁶ "Swedes tighten terror laws, likely to help NATO membership," *Associated Press*, May 3, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Filiz Kinik Oz, "Türkiye leaves door open to Sweden's NATO bid: Turkish presidential spokesperson," *Anadolu Agency*, March 26, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Article 87 of Turkey's constitution gives the Turkish parliament (or Grand National Assembly) the authority to ratify international treaties. Unofficial English translation available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2017.pdf?lang=en.

Turkey to approve Sweden's NATO membership—thus placing both Sweden and Finland within NATO—by the time of the alliance's July 11-12 summit in Lithuania.¹¹⁹

Syria¹²⁰

Turkey's involvement in Syria's conflict since it started in 2011 has been complicated and costly and has severely strained U.S.-Turkey ties.¹²¹ Turkey's priorities in Syria's civil war have evolved during the course of the conflict. While Turkey still opposes Syrian President Bashar al Asad, it has engaged in a mix of coordination and competition with Russia and Iran (which support Asad) since intervening militarily in Syria starting in August 2016. Turkey and the United States have engaged in similarly inconsistent interactions in northern Syria east of the Euphrates River, where U.S. forces have been based.

Since at least 2014, Turkey has actively sought to thwart the Syrian Kurdish YPG from establishing an autonomous area along Syria's northern border with Turkey. Turkey's government considers the YPG and its political counterpart, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to be a major threat to Turkish security, based on Turkish concerns that YPG/PYD gains have emboldened the PKK (which has links to the YPG/PYD) in its domestic conflict with Turkish authorities.¹²² The YPG/PYD has a leading role within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella group including Arabs and other non-Kurdish elements that became the main U.S. ground force partner against the Islamic State in 2015. Turkish-led military operations in October 2019 to seize areas of northeastern Syria from the SDF—after U.S. Special Forces pulled back from the border area—led to major criticism of and proposed action against Turkey in Congress.¹²³ Turkey has set up local councils in areas of northern Syria that Turkey and Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups—generally referred to under the moniker of the Syrian National Army (SNA)—have occupied since 2016 (see **Figure A-4**).

Erdogan has hinted at the possibility of repairing relations with Asad, after more than a decade in which Turkey has sought an end to Asad's rule. Since late 2022, senior Turkish officials have held a number of meetings with Syrian government counterparts in Russia.¹²⁴ Turkey is seeking Syria's help to push YPG fighters farther from the border and facilitate the return of Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Asad reportedly wants full Turkish withdrawal in return.¹²⁵ It is unclear whether the two leaders can compromise and how that would affect Turkey's relationship with the SNA and the overall dynamic with other stakeholders in northern Syria. In response to a question about potential Turkey-Syria rapprochement, the State Department spokesperson has said that U.S. officials have told allies that now is not the time to normalize or upgrade relations with the Asad regime.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Joint Press Conference with Swedish Defense Minister Pal Jonson in Stockholm, Sweden," April 19, 2023; "Stoltenberg sees progress in Sweden's NATO bid, talks to resume in March," *Reuters*, February 23, 2023.

¹²⁰ See CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

¹²¹ For background, see Burak Kadercan, "Making Sense of Turkey's Syria Strategy: A 'Turkish Tragedy' in the Making," *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2017.

¹²² See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, "U.S. Safe Zone Deal Can Help Turkey Come to Terms with the PKK and YPG," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 7, 2019. For sources linking the PKK to the YPG (or PKK affiliates in Syria), see footnote 107.

¹²³ Rachel Oswald, "Sanctions on Turkey go front and center as Congress returns," *Roll Call*, October 15, 2019.

¹²⁴ "Moscow hosts more Turkey-Syria rapprochement talks," *Associated Press*, April 25, 2023.

¹²⁵ "Syria resisting Russia's efforts to broker Turkey summit, sources say," *Reuters*, December 5, 2022.

¹²⁶ State Department Press Briefing, January 3, 2023.

U.S.-Turkey Arms Sales Issues

How Turkey procures key weapons systems is relevant to U.S. policy in part because it affects Turkey's partnerships with major powers and the country's role within NATO. For decades, Turkey has relied on certain U.S.-origin equipment such as aircraft, helicopters, missiles, and other munitions to maintain military strength.¹²⁷

Russian S-400 Acquisition: Removal from F-35 Program, U.S. Sanctions, and Congressional Holds

Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 system, which Turkey ordered in 2017 and Russia delivered in 2019,¹²⁸ has significant implications for Turkey's relations with Russia, the United States, and other NATO countries. As a direct result of the transaction, the Trump Administration removed Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program in July 2019, and imposed sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44) on Turkey's defense procurement agency in December 2020.¹²⁹ In explaining the U.S. decision to remove Turkey from the F-35 program in 2019, the Defense Department rejected the idea of Turkey fielding a Russian intelligence collection platform (housed within the S-400) that could detect the stealth capabilities of F-35s in Turkey.¹³⁰ Additionally, Section 1245 of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 116-92) prohibits the transfer of F-35s to Turkey unless the Secretaries of Defense and State certify that Turkey no longer possesses the S-400. Turkey has conducted some testing of the S-400 but does not appear to have made the system generally operational. Turkey may need to forgo possession or use of the S-400 in order to have CAATSA sanctions removed.

An August 2020 article reported that some congressional committee leaders placed holds on major new U.S.-origin arms sales to Turkey in connection with the S-400 transaction. The executive branch customarily defers to such holds, though they are not legally binding.¹³¹ Such a disruption to U.S. defense transactions with Turkey had not occurred since the 1975-1978 embargo over Cyprus.¹³²

¹²⁷ Turkey also has procurement and co-development relationships with other NATO allies, including Germany (submarines), Italy (helicopters and reconnaissance satellites), and the United Kingdom (a fighter aircraft prototype).

¹²⁸ "Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles," *Reuters*, December 29, 2017. According to this source, Turkey and Russia reached agreement on the sale of at least one S-400 system for \$2.5 billion, with the possibility of a second system to come later.

¹²⁹ Archived CRS Insight IN11557, *Turkey: U.S. Sanctions Under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas; State Department, "CAATSA Section 231 'Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries,'" December 14, 2020. Sanctions were not imposed on other Turkish ministries or agencies that might independently conduct defense-related transactions.

¹³⁰ Department of Defense, "Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Ellen M. Lord and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy David J. Trachtenberg Press Briefing on DOD's Response to Turkey Accepting Delivery of the Russian S-400 Air and Missile Defense System," July 17, 2019.

¹³¹ CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

¹³² Valerie Insinna et al., "Congress has secretly blocked US arms sales to Turkey for nearly two years," *Defense News*, August 12, 2020.

Possible F-16 Sale and Congressional Views

Background (Including Turkey-Greece Issues)

In the fall of 2021, Turkish officials stated that they had requested to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter aircraft from the United States and to upgrade 80 F-16s from Turkey's aging fleet.¹³³ President Biden reportedly discussed the F-16 request with Erdogan during an October 2021 G20 meeting in Rome, indicating that the request would go through the regular arms sales consultation and notification process with Congress.¹³⁴ Upgrades of Turkey's F-16 aircraft to the Block 70/72 Viper configuration could include a new radar, other software and hardware enhancements, and structural improvements that significantly extend each aircraft's service life.¹³⁵

After Russia's early 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's potential to boost NATO's strategic and military strengths amid an evolving European security crisis may have increased the Administration's interest in moving forward with an F-16 transaction with Turkey. While Turkey has acted more independently of the West under Erdogan, its sizable military and geographic location remains important for the alliance.¹³⁶ Turkey partners in a number of ways with the United States and its other allies—including by using F-16s in NATO missions based in the Baltic and Mediterranean Sea regions.¹³⁷

Responding to criticism of a possible F-16 sale from 53 Members of Congress in a February 2022 letter,¹³⁸ a State Department official wrote in March that Turkey's support for Ukraine was "an important deterrent to malign influence in the region."¹³⁹ While acknowledging that any sale would require congressional notification, the official added, "The Administration believes that there are nonetheless compelling long-term NATO alliance unity and capability interests, as well as U.S. national security, economic and commercial interests that are supported by appropriate U.S. defense trade ties with Turkey."¹⁴⁰

¹³³ For information on Turkey's F-16s, see "Turkey – Air Force," *Janes World Air Forces*, June 23, 2021 (posted November 7, 2022); "Turkey" at https://www.f-16.net/f-16_users_article21.html.

¹³⁴ "Biden talks F-16s, raises human rights in meeting with Turkey's Erdogan," *Reuters*, October 31, 2021; Diego Cupolo, "In troubled US-Turkey relations, F-16 deal seen as path for dialogue," *Al-Monitor*, November 1, 2021. For background information, see CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

¹³⁵ See description at https://www.lockheedmartin.com/content/dam/lockheed-martin/aero/documents/F-16/22-06570_F-16-Viper-6Panel_Digital.pdf.

¹³⁶ State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*; "U.S. Relations with Turkey (Türkiye)," Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, January 9, 2023; Kasapoglu, "Turkey," *The Nations of NATO*, pp. 103-105; Gareth Jennings, "Turkey joins NATO Baltic Air Policing for first time since 2006," *Janes Defence Weekly*, July 7, 2021; NATO Allied Air Command, "Turkish E-7T Provides Airborne Command and Control for Exercise Ramstein Alloy," April 14, 2022.

¹³⁸ Text of letter available at <https://pallone.house.gov/sites/pallone.house.gov/files/20220123%20Letter%20on%20Turkey%20F-16%20Request.pdf>.

¹³⁹ Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs Naz Durakoglu, quoted in Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. says potential F-16 sale to Turkey would serve U.S. interests, NATO – letter," *Reuters*, April 6, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The modernization of much of Turkey's F-16 fleet could give Turkey time to acquire or design a more advanced fighter,¹⁴¹ though delivery of new F-16s could face a production backlog.¹⁴² According to Lockheed Martin, the F-16 production rate at the Greenville, South Carolina plant is four aircraft per month, though it plans to increase this rate with a growing list of buyers.¹⁴³ Other countries receiving or possibly receiving new or upgraded F-16Vs include Greece, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Morocco, Bahrain, Jordan, Bulgaria, the Philippines, and Slovakia.¹⁴⁴ Assuming the parties finalize contracts for Jordan and Bulgaria, Lockheed will have a backlog of 148 aircraft.¹⁴⁵ Based on current production rates, it could take three years or more for Turkey to start accepting delivery of new F-16Vs.

If unable to upgrade their F-16 fleet, Turkish officials have hinted that they might consider purchasing Western European alternatives.¹⁴⁶ Turkey is reportedly exploring Eurofighter Typhoons as a potential alternative to F-16s,¹⁴⁷ but it is unclear if consortium partner Germany would approve such a sale.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, Turkey's air force could face difficulties adjusting to a non-F-16 platform.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, European weapons transfers to Turkey could be subject to the congressional review process described below if such weapons were to include U.S.-origin defense articles meeting the specified notification threshold.¹⁵⁰ Previously, Congress received notification in connection with some non-NATO countries' (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar) proposed purchases of U.S. equipment for Typhoons.¹⁵¹ If Turkey cannot procure F-16s and encounters obstacles to European alternatives, its next steps toward preserving its military aviation capabilities and NATO interoperability would be unclear. The State Department's ICS for Turkey states

If NATO and the West continue to not support Turkey's pursuit of defense modernization, Turkey may be forced to turn to Russia or China to fulfil those defense capability gaps in areas where its indigenous defense industry cannot produce the required capability.¹⁵²

¹⁴¹ Burak Ege Bekdil, "Russian invasion of Ukraine is reviving Euro-Turkish fighter efforts," *Defense News*, March 9, 2022. Turkey does have a limited ability to make modifications to some of its F-16s. It has reportedly been working with various Turkish domestic contractors to upgrade the avionics in the country's 36 Block 30 aircraft. It cannot domestically upgrade the avionics of its other F-16s—thus explaining its interest in a purchase from the United States—because it only has source codes for Block 30 versions. Burak Ege Bekdil, "Locally made AESA radar to extend life of Turkish F-16 jets," *Defense News*, November 17, 2022; Gastón Dubois, "Project ÖZGÜR: Turkey starts modernizing its F-16 with indigenous technology," *Aviacionline*, June 3, 2022.

¹⁴² Bryant Harris and Stephen Losey, "Turkey F-16 sale in congressional limbo amid Lockheed backlog," *Defense News*, January 18, 2023.

¹⁴³ Lockheed Martin: F-16 Production Q&A, provided to CRS on February 23, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Arda Mevlutoglu, "F-16Vs Instead of F-35s: What's behind Turkey's Request?" *Politics Today*, November 22, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Lockheed Martin: F-16 Production Q&A.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Iddon, "Turkey Questions the Wisdom of Having an All-American Air Force," *Forbes*, February 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Ragip Soyulu, "Turkey exploring massive UK arms deal involving planes, ships and tank engines," *Middle East Eye*, January 20, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Tanmay Kadam, "Can Russian Su-35 Fighters Triumph Eurofighter Typhoons as Turkey Explores Alternative to 'Backlog-Ridden' F-16 Jets?" *EurAsian Times*, January 29, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Soyulu, "Turkey exploring massive UK arms deal involving planes, ships and tank engines."

¹⁵⁰ See footnote 172.

¹⁵¹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) Transmittal 08-101, September 26, 2008 (73 *Federal Register* 61399, October 16, 2008); State Department Directorate of Defense Trade Controls (DDTC) Transmittal 17-079, May 24, 2019 (84 *Federal Register* 65608, November 27, 2019); DSCA Transmittal 20-11, November 4, 2021; DDTC Transmittal 18-014, November 2, 2018 (84 *Federal Register* 65608, November 27, 2019); DDTC Transmittal 20-074, September 2, 2021 (86 *Federal Register* 73075, December 23, 2021).

¹⁵² State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*.

At the end of the June 2022 NATO summit in Spain, where Turkey agreed to allow the Sweden-Finland accession process to move forward (pending final Turkish ratification) and President Biden met with President Erdogan, Biden expressed support for selling new F-16s to Turkey as well as for upgrades. He also voiced confidence in obtaining congressional support.¹⁵³ However, SFRC Chairman Bob Menendez has consistently expressed disapproval due to what he has termed Erdogan's "abuses across the region."¹⁵⁴

In addition to ongoing U.S.-Turkey tensions regarding Syrian Kurdish groups in northern Syria, Turkey-Greece disputes regarding overflights of contested areas and other long-standing Aegean Sea issues (referenced in the text box below) spiked in 2022 and attracted close congressional attention.¹⁵⁵ Erdogan suspended dialogue with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after Mitsotakis appeared to raise concern about U.S.-Turkey arms transactions while addressing a May 2022 joint session of Congress.¹⁵⁶ In December, the final version of the FY2023 NDAA (P.L. 117-263) excluded a House-passed condition on F-16 sales to Turkey (Section 1271 of H.R. 7900) related to potential overflights of Greek territory. However, the joint explanatory statement accompanying the NDAA included a provision stating, "We believe that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies should not conduct unauthorized territorial overflights of another NATO ally's airspace."¹⁵⁷ While Turkey-Greece disputes persist, tensions have somewhat subsided in early 2023. Erdogan and Mitsotakis have renewed contacts in the context of positive diplomatic momentum from Greek post-earthquake relief assistance to Turkey.¹⁵⁸

With U.S. officials already having notified a possible upgrade of F-16s for Greece to Congress in 2017,¹⁵⁹ U.S. decisions on bolstering Turkey's F-16 fleet could have significant implications for the security balance between Turkey and Greece, and for relations involving the three countries.¹⁶⁰ In the past three years, Greece has strengthened its defense cooperation and relations with the United States and a number of regional countries such as France, Israel, and Egypt.¹⁶¹ Enhanced U.S.-Greece defense cooperation has included an expanded U.S. military presence and increased U.S.-Greece and NATO military activities at Greek installations (see also text box below).¹⁶²

Turkey-Greece-Cyprus Tensions: Background and Some Ongoing Issues¹⁶³

¹⁵³ "Biden supports F-16 sale to Turkey, is confident about congressional approval," *Reuters*, June 30, 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Twitter, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 7, 2022 – 10:57 AM, at <https://twitter.com/SFRCdems/status/1600519759493304321>.

¹⁵⁵ Alexis Heraclides, "The unresolved Aegean dispute: Problems and prospects," *Greece and Turkey in Conflict and Cooperation*, New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 89-108; Ryan Gingeras, "Dogfight over the Aegean: Turkish-Greek Relations in Light of Ukraine," *War on the Rocks*, June 8, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Greek Prime Minister's website, "Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' address to the Joint Session of the U.S. Congress," May 17, 2022. Erdogan and Mitsotakis have spoken in the wake of the February 2023 earthquakes, in the context of Greek assistance in relief and recovery efforts.

¹⁵⁷ Joint explanatory statement available at <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20221205/BILLS-117HR7776EAS-RCP117-70-JES.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ "Turkey, Greece take strides in Ankara meeting as aid diplomacy continues," *Al-Monitor*, March 22, 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Government of Greece – Upgrade of F-16 Aircraft to F-16 Block V Configuration," Transmittal No. 17-54, October 17, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Aaron Stein, "You Go to War with the Turkey You Have, Not the Turkey You Want," *War on the Rocks*, May 30, 2022.

¹⁶¹ See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁶² State Department, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Greece," October 31, 2022.

¹⁶³ See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

Since the 1970s, disputes between Greece and Turkey over territorial rights in the Aegean Sea and broader Eastern Mediterranean have been a major point of contention, bringing the sides close to military conflict on several occasions. The disputes, which have their roots in territorial changes after World War I, revolve around contested borders involving the two countries' territorial waters, national airspace, exclusive economic zones (including energy claims), islands (and their use for military purposes), and continental shelves (see **Figure A-5** and **Figure A-6** for maps of some of the areas in dispute).

These tensions are related to and further complicated by one of the region's major unresolved conflicts, the de facto political division of Cyprus along ethnic lines that dates from the 1974 military clash in which Turkish forces invaded parts of the island to prevent the ethnic Greek leadership from unifying Cyprus with Greece. The internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (sometimes referred to as Cyprus), which has close ties to Greece, claims jurisdiction over the entire island, but its effective administrative control is limited to the southern two-thirds, where Greek Cypriots comprise a majority. Turkish Cypriots administer the northern one-third and are backed by Turkey, including a Turkish military contingent there since the 1974 clash.¹⁶⁴ In 1983, Turkish Cypriot leaders proclaimed this part of the island the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," although no country other than Turkey recognizes it, and U.N. Security Council Resolution 541 (1983) considered the Turkish Cypriot claim to be legally invalid.

Turkish officials have complained about a significant new U.S. military presence at the Greek port of Alexandroupoli (alt. Alexandroupolis), located around 10-15 miles from the Turkish border.¹⁶⁵ U.S. officials have explained that they are using the port as a transit hub to send equipment to allies and partners in the region as part of a broader NATO response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶⁶ In the March 2022 congressional hearing testimony mentioned above, Alan Makovsky said that having facilities at Alexandroupoli allows NATO to bypass logjams or closures of the Straits to transport troops and materiel overland to allies and partners.¹⁶⁷ After Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in October 2022 that the United States no longer maintains a balanced approach in the Aegean,¹⁶⁸ U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeff Flake released a statement saying that there has been no shift in U.S. security posture to favor Turkey or Greece, and that the NATO allies' collective efforts are focused on ending Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁶⁹

Congressional Notification Process

In February 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly confirmed the Biden Administration's support for and engagement with Congress on a possible sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Turkey.¹⁷⁰ One month earlier, media sources—citing unnamed U.S. officials—reported that the Administration had provided informal notifications to Congress about possible F-16 sales for Turkey and possible sales of up to 40 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to Greece. According to these reports, the January informal notification on Turkey was for 40 new F-16 Vipers and 79 F-16

¹⁶⁴ Turkey retains between 30,000 and 40,000 troops on the island (supplemented by several thousand Turkish Cypriot soldiers). This presence is countered by a Greek Cypriot force of approximately 12,000 with reported access to between 50,000 and 75,000 reserves. "Cyprus - Army," *Janes Sentinel Security Assessment - Eastern Mediterranean*, February 3, 2021. The United Nations maintains a peacekeeping mission (UNFICYP) of approximately 900 personnel within a buffer zone headquartered in Cyprus's divided capital of Nicosia. The United Kingdom maintains approximately 3,000 personnel at two sovereign base areas on the southern portion of the island at Akrotiri and Dhekelia.

¹⁶⁵ Niki Kitsantonis and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Sleepy Greek Port Turns into Pivotal Transit Point for American Military," *New York Times*, August 19, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Department of Defense News, "Strategic Port Access Aids Support to Ukraine, Austin Tells Greek Defense Minister," July 18, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Prepared testimony of Alan Makovsky, "Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation."

¹⁶⁸ "Cavusoglu says US siding against Turkey in the Aegean, East Med," *Kathimerini*, October 21, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Twitter, U.S. Embassy Türkiye, October 18, 2022 – 3:32 AM, at <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyTurkey/status/1582273449145212928>.

¹⁷⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability."

Viper upgrade packages, along with 900 air-to-air missiles and 800 bombs, at an estimated total value of \$20 billion.¹⁷¹

After the State Department informally notifies the SFRC and House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) of a possible Foreign Military Sale (FMS) or Direct Commercial Sale (DCS) of major defense equipment, articles, and/or services meeting certain value thresholds, the proposed FMS or DCS requires formal notification to Congress before it can proceed. In most cases, the State Department submits the formal notification 20 to 40 days after informal notification.¹⁷² This time period gives the committees opportunity to raise concerns in a confidential “tiered review” process. If a Member of Congress places a hold (as mentioned earlier, not legally binding) on the proposed transaction, formal notification usually does not proceed.¹⁷³ Under provisions of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA, P.L. 90-629, 82 Stat. 1320), the executive branch can proceed with a sale—if not blocked by legislation—15 days (for NATO allies like Turkey and Greece) after formal notification.¹⁷⁴

As mentioned above, congressional consideration of the potential F-16 sale to Turkey may depend on Turkey’s approval of NATO accession for both Sweden and Finland.¹⁷⁵ With Turkey already having approved Finland’s NATO membership, the U.S. focus has turned to Turkey’s approach to Sweden’s situation. Shortly after the reported informal notifications of possible aircraft sales to Greece and Turkey, the *New York Times* cited Chairman Menendez as welcoming the F-35 sale to Greece while strongly opposing the F-16 sale to Turkey. Regarding the F-16 sale, he said

President Erdogan continues to undermine international law, disregard human rights and democratic norms, and engage in alarming and destabilizing behavior in Turkey and against neighboring NATO allies. Until Erdogan ceases his threats, improves his human rights record at home—including by releasing journalists and political opposition—and begins to act like a trusted ally should, I will not approve this sale.¹⁷⁶

In a March SFRC hearing featuring Secretary Blinken, Chairman Menendez elaborated on objections he has against various Turkish foreign and domestic policies, and opined that Turkey does not deserve to receive F-16s unless it addresses some of the issues he mentioned.¹⁷⁷

The Administration’s reported informal notifications of potential sales to Turkey and Greece come amid ongoing tensions between the two countries over maritime boundaries and U.S. regional involvement (as mentioned above).¹⁷⁸ By harmonizing the informal notification on F-35s

¹⁷¹ “US working with Congress towards Turkey F-16 sale,” *Al-Monitor*, January 13, 2023; Malsin and Salama, “Biden Administration to Ask Congress to Approve F-16 Sale to Turkey”; Michael Crowley and Edward Wong, “U.S. Plan to Sell Fighter Jets to Turkey Is Met with Opposition,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2023.

¹⁷² CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr. The thresholds for NATO allies (and Japan, Australia, South Korea, Israel, and New Zealand) are \$25 million for the sale, enhancement, or upgrading of major defense equipment; \$100 million for the sale, enhancement, or upgrading of defense articles and defense services; and \$300 million for the sale, enhancement, or upgrading of design and construction services. For all other countries, the thresholds are \$14 million, \$50 million, and \$200 million, respectively.

¹⁷³ CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; CRS In Focus IF11533, *Modifying or Ending Sales of U.S.-Origin Defense Articles*, by Paul K. Kerr and Liana W. Rosen.

¹⁷⁵ See footnote 113 and footnote 114.

¹⁷⁶ Crowley and Wong, “U.S. Plan to Sell Fighter Jets to Turkey Is Met with Opposition.” Alexander Ward et al., “Menendez vows to block plan to sell fighter jets to Turkey,” *Politico*, January 13, 2023.

¹⁷⁷ SFRC Hearing, March 22, 2023, transcript available at <https://plus.cq.com/alertmatch/558656174?0&deliveryId=105309916&uid=congressionaltranscripts-7694906>.

¹⁷⁸ CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

for Greece with the one on F-16s for Turkey, the Administration may be seeking to reassure Greek leaders and popular opinion that the United States is not favoring Turkey over Greece.¹⁷⁹ One journalist has argued

A Greek acquisition of F-35s—coupled with the ongoing procurement of two dozen 4.5-generation Dassault Rafale F3R fighters from France and the upgrade of the bulk of its F-16 fleet to the most advanced Block 72 configuration—will give the Hellenic Air Force a technological edge over its much larger Turkish counterpart. That will remain the case even if Turkey secures this F-16 deal.¹⁸⁰

In response to the news of a possible F-35 sale to Greece, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu called on the United States to “pay attention” to the balance of power in the region.¹⁸¹

As Turkey approaches its May 28 presidential run-off election, congressional committee leaders’ concerns regarding a possible F-16 sale appear to endure. At some point, the Administration may consider whether, when, and how to address congressional concerns, and/or move forward with a formal notification of the sale. In April 2023, the Administration formally notified a possible sale of avionics that Turkey had requested in 2019 to increase the NATO interoperability of its F-16s on certain information sharing and flight safety issues.¹⁸² Despite apparent congressional acquiescence to the avionics sale, SFRC Chairman Menendez said afterward that he continues to oppose the sale of F-16s to Turkey.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Malsin and Salama, “Biden Administration to Ask Congress to Approve F-16 Sale to Turkey”; Crowley and Wong, “U.S. Plan to Sell Fighter Jets to Turkey Is Met with Opposition.”

¹⁸⁰ Paul Iddon, “Balance of Power: Why the Biden Administration Wants to Sell Turkey F-16s and Greece F-35s,” *Forbes*, January 16, 2023.

¹⁸¹ Andrew Wilks, “Turkish FM travels to Washington seeking to seal deal for F-16 fighter jets,” *Al-Monitor*, January 17, 2023.

¹⁸² Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Türkiye – F-16 Avionics Upgrade,” Transmittal No. 21-34, April 17, 2023; CRS correspondence with Turkish official, April 17, 2023.

¹⁸³ “Menendez reiterates opposition to sale of F-16 fighters to Turkey,” *Kathimerini*, April 22, 2023.

Appendix A. Maps, Facts, and Figures

Figure A-I. Turkey at a Glance



Geography	Area: 783,562 sq km (302,535 sq. mile), slightly larger than Texas
People	<p>Population: 83,593,483. Most populous cities: Istanbul 15.8 mil, Ankara 5.4 mil, Izmir 3.1 mil, Bursa 2.1 mil, Adana 1.8 mil, Gaziantep 1.8 mil.</p> <p>% of population 14 or younger: 22.1% (2022)</p> <p>Ethnic groups: Turks 70%-75%; Kurds 19%; Other minorities 6%-11% (2016)</p> <p>Religion: Muslim 99.8% (mostly Sunni), Others (mainly Christian and Jewish) 0.2%</p> <p>Literacy: 96.7% (male 99.1%, female 94.4%) (2019)</p>
Economy	<p>GDP per capita (at purchasing power parity): \$36,176</p> <p>Real GDP growth: 2.8%</p> <p>Inflation: 43.7% (as of April 2023)</p> <p>Unemployment: 10.4%</p> <p>Budget deficit as % of GDP: 3.8%</p> <p>Public debt as % of GDP: 37.0%</p> <p>Current account deficit as % of GDP: 4.4%</p> <p>International currency reserves: \$128.3 billion</p>

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); ArcWorld (2014); DeLorme (2014). Fact information (2023 projections unless otherwise specified) from International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database; Economist Intelligence Unit; Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The World Factbook*; and Turkish Statistical Institute.

Figure A-2. Map of U.S. and NATO Military Presence in Turkey



Sources: Created by CRS using data gathered from the Department of Defense, NATO, and various media outlets since 2011.

Note: All locations are approximate.

Figure A-3. Map of Black Sea Region and Turkish Straits

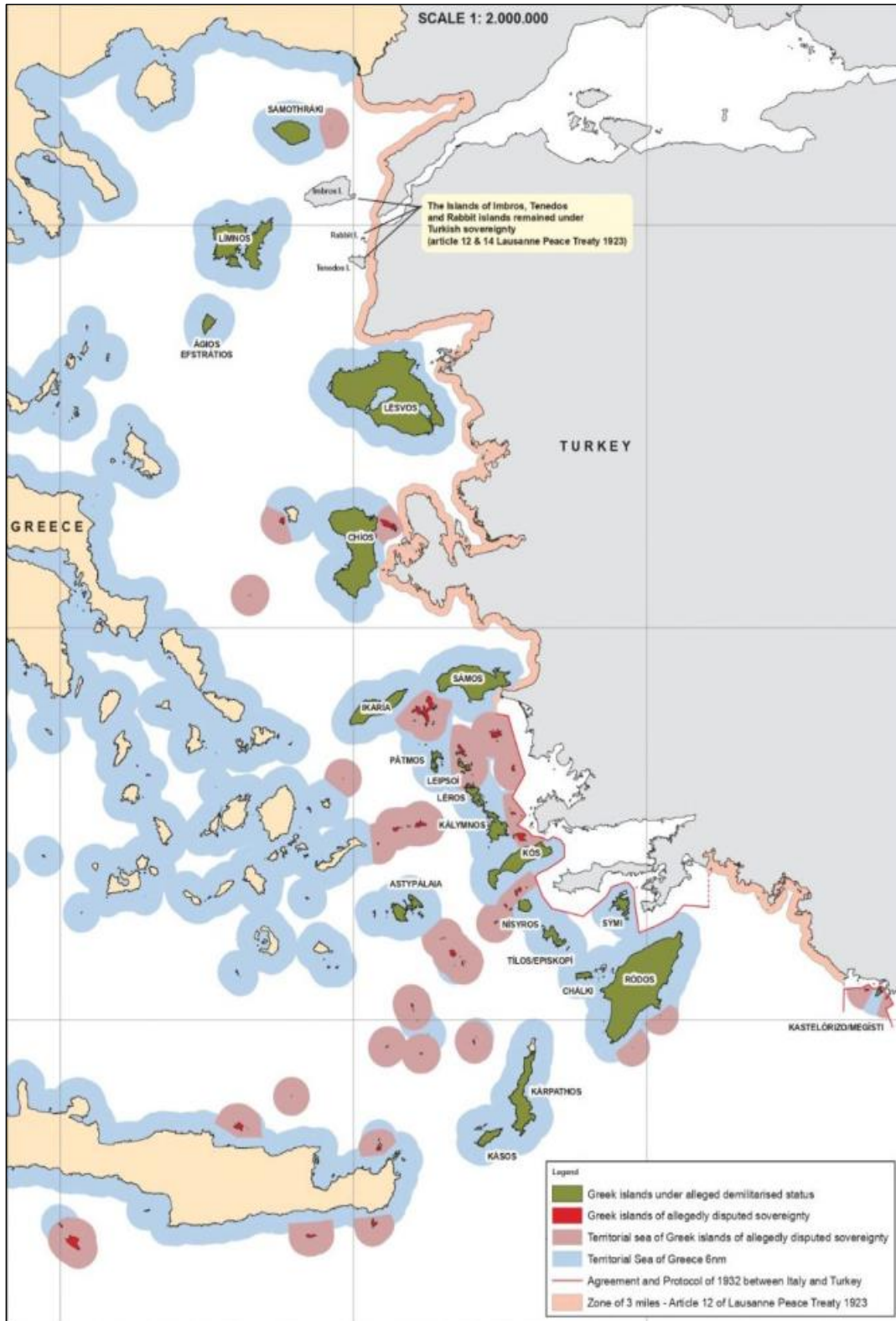


Source: Nikkei Asia, March 2022.

Figure A-4. Syria Conflict Map

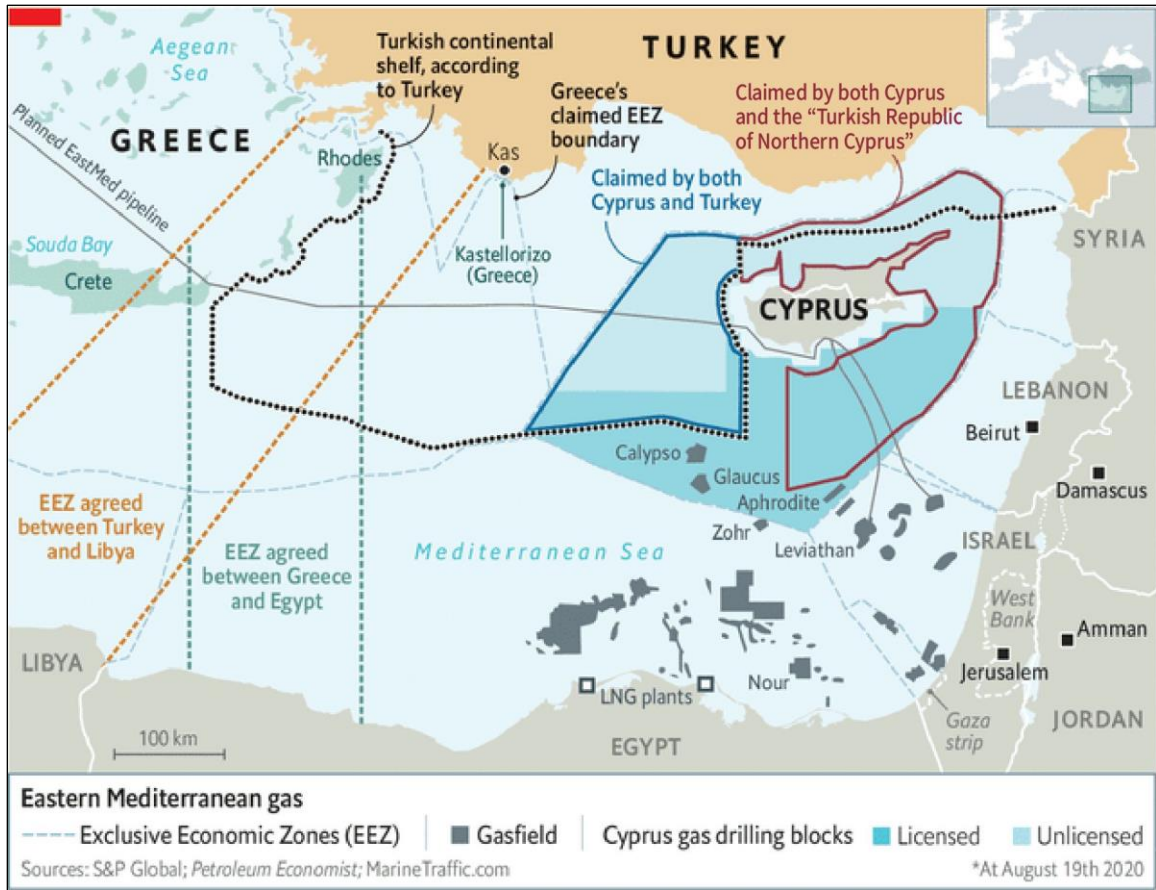


Figure A-5. Some Areas of Aegean Dispute



Source: Greek Reporter, June 2022, at <https://greekreporter.com/2022/06/09/turkey-challenge-greece-sovereignty-16-maps/>.

Figure A-6. Competing Claims in the Eastern Mediterranean



Source: Main map created by *The Economist*, with slight modifications by CRS.

Note: As stated elsewhere in this report, in 1983, Turkish Cypriots administering a portion of the island of Cyprus proclaimed that portion to be the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,” though no country other than Turkey recognizes it, and U.N. Security Council Resolution 541 (1983) considered the Turkish Cypriot claim to be legally invalid.

Appendix B. Profiles of Selected Turkish Party Leaders



Recep Tayyip Erdogan—President of Turkey and Leader/Co-Founder of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

(pronounced *air-doe-wan*)

Born in 1954, Erdogan was raised in Istanbul and in his familial hometown of Rize on the Black Sea coast. He attended a religious *imam hatip* secondary school in Istanbul. In the 1970s, Erdogan studied business at what is today Marmara University, became a business consultant and executive, and became politically active with the different Turkish Islamist parties led by eventual prime minister Necmettin Erbakan.

Erdogan was elected mayor of Istanbul in 1994 but was removed from office, imprisoned for six months, and banned from parliamentary politics for religious incitement after publicly reciting a poem drawing from Islamic imagery. After Erbakan's government resigned under military pressure in 1997 and his Welfare Party was disbanded, Erdogan became the founding chairman of the AKP in 2001. The AKP won a decisive electoral victory in 2002, and has led the government ever since. After the election, a legal change allowed Erdogan to run for parliament in a 2003 special election. After he won, Erdogan replaced Abdullah Gul as prime minister.

Erdogan and his personal popularity and charisma have been at the center of much of the domestic and foreign policy change that has occurred in Turkey since he came to power. Erdogan became Turkey's first popularly elected president in August 2014 and won reelection to a newly empowered presidency in June 2018. Many observers assess that he seeks to consolidate power and to avoid the reopening of corruption cases that could implicate him and close family members or associates.



Kemal Kilicdaroglu—Leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP)

(*kuhl-utch-dahr-oh-loo*)

Born in 1948 in Tunceli province in eastern Turkey to an Alevi (religious minority with some relation to Shia Islam) background. Kilicdaroglu is the leader of the CHP, which is the main opposition party and traditional political outlet of the Turkish nationalist secular elite. In recent years, the party has also attracted various liberal and social democratic constituencies.

After receiving an economics degree from what is now Gazi University in Ankara, Kilicdaroglu had a civil service career—first with the Finance Ministry, then as the director-general of the Social Security Organization. After retiring from the civil service, Kilicdaroglu became politically active with the CHP and was elected to parliament from Istanbul in 2002. He gained national prominence for his efforts to root out corruption among AKP officials and the AKP-affiliated mayor of Ankara. Kilicdaroglu was elected as party leader in 2010 but has since faced criticism for the CHP's failure to make electoral gains at the national level. The CHP made notable gains—particularly in Istanbul and Ankara mayoral races—in 2019 local elections.



Devlet Bahceli—Leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP)

(*bah-cheh-lee*)

Born in 1948 in Osmaniye province in southern Turkey, Bahceli is the leader of the MHP, which is the traditional Turkish nationalist party of Turkey that is known for opposing political accommodation with the Kurds.

Bahceli moved to Istanbul for his secondary education, and received his higher education, including a doctorate, from what is now Gazi University in Ankara. After a career as an economics lecturer at Gazi University, he entered a political career as a leader in what would become the MHP. He became the chairman of the MHP in 1997 and served as a deputy prime minister during a 1999-2002 coalition government. He was initially elected to parliament in 2007.

Bahceli and the MHP have allied with Erdogan, providing support for the 2017 constitutional referendum and joining a parliamentary coalition with the AKP in 2018.



Meral Aksener—Founder and Leader of the Good (Iyi) Party
(*awk-sheh-nar*)

Born in 1956 in Izmit in western Turkey to Muslims who had resettled in Turkey from Greece, Aksener is the founder and leader of the Good Party. She founded the party in 2017 as an alternative for nationalists and other Turks who oppose the MHP's alliance with Erdogan.

Aksener studied at Istanbul University and received a doctorate in history from Marmara University, becoming a university lecturer before entering politics. She was first elected to parliament in 1995 with the True Path Party, and served as interior minister in the coalition government that was ultimately forced from office in 1997 by a memorandum from Turkey's military. She served in parliament with the MHP from 2007 to 2015 and served for most of that time as deputy speaker.

Aksener became a forceful opponent of Erdogan after the MHP agreed in 2016 to provide him the necessary parliamentary support for a constitutional referendum establishing a presidential system of government. She left the party and campaigned vigorously against the proposed changes, which won adoption in 2017 despite the controversy that attended the vote. After founding the Good Party, she ran as its presidential candidate in the 2018 elections.

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