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Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues and U.S. Relations

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U.S. relations with Turkey take place within a complicated geopolitical environment, as Turkey also faces deep-seated economic problems and continues to recover from disastrous February 2023 earthquakes. U.S.-Turkey tensions that worsened after a failed 2016 coup in Turkey highlight uncertainties about the future of bilateral relations. Ongoing disagreements stem from U.S. support for Syrian Kurds linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish acronym PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization), and Turkey's 2019 procurement of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system. Congressional action has included holds and conditions on U.S. arms sales to Turkey, as well as support for certain sanctions against Turkey. Nevertheless, U.S. and Turkish officials emphasize the importance of the bilateral relationship and Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

At the same time, Turkey apparently seeks to reduce its dependence on the West, as it and other "midsize powers" such as Saudi Arabia and India seek advantages in a global system with growing great-power competition. Turkey's desire for greater strategic autonomy may partly explain its willingness to coordinate some actions with Russia, though the two countries retain significant differences on Ukraine and other issues. One analyst has argued that most of Turkey's core security problems around its borders and coastlines—involving Syria, Iraq, Greece, Cyprus, Libya, and the Caucasus—require it to deal with Russia, Iran, and various other actors without much help from the West. Turkey's future foreign policy course could depend partly on its leaders' willingness to risk breaks in traditional ties with Western powers while building other global relationships.

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. Under President Joe Biden, existing U.S.-Turkey tensions have continued alongside cooperation on other foreign policy matters. In a June 2023 CNN interview, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that Turkey is "charting an independent foreign policy but one in which we can have a constructive relationship with them." While Turkey's deepening ties with Russia remain a cause for U.S. concern, its 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 also have improved due to Turkey's support for Ukraine's defense; its limitation of Russian naval access to and from the Black Sea; and its moves toward rapprochement with Israel, some Arab states, and Armenia.

Citing the importance of NATO strength and interoperability, President Biden has voiced support for sales that would revamp 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 approve of Sweden joining NATO, and Turkey's tense relations with Greece. Turkey agreed to Finland's NATO membership in March 2023, but has conditioned approval for Sweden on it taking actions against individuals and groups that Turkey deems to be terrorists. In July 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed to send the NATO accession protocol for Sweden to Turkey's parliament and work closely with it to "ensure ratification," but the process could extend into the fall and potentially depend on additional action from Sweden, along with assurances of congressional support for the F-16 sale.

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 PKK, 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.

Domestically, many observers voice concerns about the largely authoritarian rule of President Erdogan. Despite major inflation and the earthquakes' aftermath, he emerged victorious in May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. An official international observer mission stated that while voters had a "choice between genuine political alternatives," government actions favoring Erdogan gave him an "unjustified advantage," amid broader debate about the electoral process and how it related to past Turkish elections.

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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). In a June 2023 CNN interview, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that Turkey is "charting an independent foreign policy but one in which we can have a constructive relationship with them."⁴

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 1** for a map and key facts and figures about Turkey.

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, June 1, 2023.

⁴ Transcript of CNN Interview, June 4, 2023, at <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2023-06-04/segment/01>.

Figure 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): \$36,786</p> <p>Real GDP growth: 2.7%</p> <p>Inflation: 38.2% (as of June 2023)</p> <p>Unemployment: 11.0%</p> <p>Budget deficit as % of GDP: 4.4%</p> <p>Public debt as % of GDP: 36.2%</p> <p>Current account deficit as % of GDP: 4.8%</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.

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. Many observers describe Erdogan as a polarizing figure, and elections have reflected roughly equal portions of the country supporting and opposing his rule.⁵

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 system of governance, which he cemented through victories in a 2017 constitutional referendum and 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. Some allegations of voter fraud and manipulation surfaced after the referendum and the elections.⁶ In a controversial ruling during the referendum, Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council (Turkish acronym YSK) decided not to enforce the normal requirement that only properly stamped ballots could be counted, leading some observers to question the outcome's legitimacy.⁷ 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 Movement Party (Turkish acronym MHP).

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.⁸ Some leading opposition figures in Turkey have accused Erdogan of planning, controlling, and/or using the failed coup to suppress dissent and consolidate power.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ U.S. officials have provided or announced various means of assistance to Turkey, including \$235 million in humanitarian

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 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).

⁷ See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, "Erdogan's Russian Victory," *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2023.

⁸ State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022, Turkey*; Turkey; European Commission, *Türkiye 2022 Report*, October 6, 2022.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Berkay Mandiraci, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux," International Crisis Group, February 18, 2022.

¹¹ See, for example, Nazlan Ertan, "EU raises \$7.5 billion for Turkey, Syria earthquake victims," *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2023.

assistance.¹² With Turkey's government estimating the economic toll from the earthquakes to be around \$104 billion—roughly 9% of Turkey's annual gross domestic product (GDP)—international pledges of assistance as of March 2023 totaled nearly \$7.5 billion.¹³

The disaster has affected Turkey's politics, society, and economy. The 10 southern Turkish provinces most directly affected account for about 10% of Turkey's GDP and 15% of its population, and host thousands of refugees from Syria's ongoing civil war.¹⁴

Analysts have speculated about the extent of the Erdogan government's responsibility for the damage and hardship stemming from the earthquakes,¹⁵ with some drawing comparisons to a major 1999 earthquake in northwestern Turkey that killed approximately 18,000 and prompted legal and regulatory efforts to improve building safety.¹⁶ Some media accounts and opposition politicians have alleged 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 destruction and fatalities.¹⁷ Erdogan has denounced criticism aimed at him or the government as fomenting disunity,¹⁸ and Turkey's justice ministry has ordered prosecutors to create "earthquake crimes investigation units" to consider criminal violations for substandard work.¹⁹ Erdogan acknowledged some problems with the government's initial response,²⁰ while mainly attributing the disaster to the quakes' size.²¹ 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.²²

Major Economic Challenges and Options

Ongoing financial problems in Turkey have considerably worsened over the past two years, with major inflation occurring in parallel with accelerated depreciation of Turkey's currency, the *lira*. After official annual inflation reached a 24-year peak of 86% in October 2022, it was just over

¹² 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.

¹³ *Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment*, March 2023, 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."

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Zeynep Bilginsoy and Suzan Fraser, "Turkey's lax policing of building codes known before quake," *Associated Press*, February 10, 2023.

¹⁷ *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.

¹⁸ Samson and Yackley, "Earthquake tests Erdoğan's leadership as Turkish elections loom."

¹⁹ Ben Hubbard, "Quake Response Testing Erdogan as Survivors Express Frustration," *New York Times*, February 12, 2023.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ben Hubbard et al., "As Public Anger Mounts, Turkey Detains Builders," *New York Times*, February 12, 2023.

²² Jared Malsin, "Concerns Mount as Erdogan Rebuilds," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2023; Ertan, "EU raises \$7.5 billion for Turkey, Syria earthquake victims."

38% in June 2023, while some unofficial estimates in early 2023 have remained at over 100%.²³ The spike in inflation could be linked to the Turkish central bank's repeated reductions of its key interest rate from September 2021 to March 2023—moving it down from 19% to 8.5%. Additional inflationary pressure may have come from external events such as Russia's war on Ukraine and interest rate hikes in the United States and other major economies.²⁴ The lira has been trending downward for more than a decade (see **Error! Reference source not found.**), with its decline probably driven in part by broader concerns about Turkey's rule of law and economy.²⁵ It has lost more than 80% of its value against the dollar since 2018, with much of the decrease coming after the major rate cuts began in 2021.²⁶

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 argued that lower interest rates boost production, employment, and exports.²⁷ Erdogan also criticized high interest rates as contrary to Islamic teachings and as exacerbating the gap between rich and poor.²⁸ He has insisted that Turkey will not turn to international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance, after Turkey in 2013 paid off loans that—in the aggregate—had been outstanding for 52 years.²⁹

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 protection for consumers who keep their bank accounts in liras, and borrowing incentives for banks that hold liras.³⁰ Turkey also has sought currency swaps and loans from some Arab Gulf states, and has benefitted from Russian-origin inflows (see "Turkey-Russia Economic and Energy Cooperation" below).³¹ Additionally, Russia has reportedly deferred to 2024 at least some of Turkey's payments for natural gas imports.³²

In the wake of Erdogan's May 2023 reelection (discussed below), the lira's value has declined further. Turkey's central bank revealed that as of the week of May 19, official statistics listed its

²³ Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilecim, "Erdogan Faces Big Vote Test as Turkish Economy Suffers," *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2023.

²⁴ Baris Balci and Inci Ozbek, "Turkey Rewrites All Inflation Forecasts but Won't Budge on Rates," *Bloomberg*, April 28, 2022.

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

²⁶ Rumeysa Koc, "Why is the Turkish lira's value still falling?" *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2023.

²⁷ "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.

²⁸ "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.

²⁹ "Turkey pays off the last installment of its debt to IMF," *Anadolu Agency*, May 14, 2013.

³⁰ M. Murat Kubilay, "Already vulnerable, Turkey's economy now faces massive earthquake recovery costs," *Middle East Institute*, February 13, 2023; "Erdogan offers free gas pre-election after first Black Sea field shipment," *Reuters*, April 23, 2023.

³¹ "Erdogan says Gulf states sent cash in relief for Turkey," *Reuters*, May 25, 2023; Natasha Turak, "Saudi Arabia drops \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank to help its struggling economy," *CNBC*, March 6, 2023; M. Murat Kubilay, "As liquidity problems worsen, Turkey turns to capital controls and informal FX flows," *Middle East Institute*, November 7, 2022.

³² Ragıp Soylu, "Turkey elections: Why Kilicdaroglu suspects Russian interference," *Middle East Eye*, May 12, 2023.

net foreign exchange reserves as negative for the first time in 21 years.³³ Thus, with a balance-of-payments crisis possible, Turkish economic policymakers appear to face the following important choices:

- **Whether to raise interest rates or maintain them at relatively low levels.** A more orthodox monetary policy course with higher interest rates might reduce inflation and attract more foreign capital via international financial markets, but slow economic growth and exports. Alternatively, Turkish officials could keep interest rates low, and use capital controls that limit or restrict the ability of investors to withdraw investments. Capital controls, however, can deter investment in the long-run. During the May 2023 election campaign, Erdogan took some measures aimed at preventing capital flight and providing relief to Turkish consumers and businesses from the effects of inflation.³⁴ Turkey's modest debt-to-GDP ratio of around 36% may give it some space to increase government spending in efforts to relieve inflation, though this flexibility could be limited by Erdogan's relief measures to date and the estimated \$104 billion cost Turkey faces from the earthquake crisis.
- **Whether to continue central bank interventions to strengthen the Turkish lira, or allow the lira to depreciate.** With Turkey's foreign currency reserves mostly depleted, the government's past strategy of selling reserves to bolster the lira's value appears less viable. The government could try to support the lira through alternative means, such as additional currency swaps or ad hoc financial arrangements with Russia, Arab Gulf states, and/or other authoritarian regimes. One report suggests, however, that Gulf states might balk at bailouts for Turkey without some policy changes to reduce risks of default, and that Russia's own financial concerns probably limit its willingness to help.³⁵ Absent central bank intervention, the lira is likely to depreciate further, which could boost exports and tourism, but might drive domestic consumers to withdraw from the Turkish banking system.

Prospects for Turkey's manufacturing-based economy, which has been relatively resilient to date and is anchored by its customs union with the EU, could remain favorable if Turkey can resolve its financial crisis quickly.³⁶ In June, Erdogan named Mehmet Simsek—a prominent AKP figure and professional economist—as Turkey's finance minister. In previous leadership roles under Erdogan (including as finance minister from 2009 to 2015), Simsek generally supported a more orthodox approach to monetary policy, and his appointment could increase international market confidence in Turkey if Erdogan gives Simsek flexibility to act.³⁷ Some observers assert that if Erdogan permits a change of course, it will be mixed or gradual rather than fully returning Turkey to orthodox practice on interest rates. Erdogan might seek to avoid austerity measures that could increase unemployment and create liquidity problems for businesses in advance of Turkish municipal elections scheduled for March 2024.³⁸

³³ "Turkey central bank's net forex reserves negative for first time since 2002," *Reuters*, May 26, 2023.

³⁴ "Analysis: Turkish lira's long decline a symbol of strife," *Reuters*, May 28, 2023.

³⁵ Ragip Soylu, "Turkey: Erdogan's tough options on the economy," *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2023.

³⁶ Alan Beattie, "Erdogan's monetary misadventures are pushing Turkey off course," *Financial Times*, May 25, 2023.

³⁷ Ezgi Akin, "Meet Turkey's Mehmet Simsek: Erdogan's last best hope for economic recovery," *Al-Monitor*, June 3, 2023.

³⁸ "Exclusive: Turkey's new cabinet almost certain to include Simsek," *Reuters*, May 31, 2023; Soylu, "Turkey: Erdogan's tough options on the economy."

In a sign that Simsek and a new central bank governor may be following a gradual approach on interest rates in an effort to avoid losing Erdogan's support, the central bank raised rates from 8.5% to 15% in late June.³⁹ After the increase, the rate remained more than 20% less than inflation. The central bank also appears to have stopped selling reserves to backstop the lira's value, and the currency's exchange rate has depreciated from around 20 per dollar at Erdogan's reelection in May to around 26 in mid-July.⁴⁰

May 2023 Elections: Another Term for Erdogan

Background

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 generally pro-secular Republican People's Party (CHP) and the nationalistic Good (*İYİ*) Party (see **Appendix B** for profiles of selected party leaders).⁴¹ 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.⁴²

Three main alliances contested the election:

- **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-utch-dahr-oh-loo*) as its joint presidential candidate.⁴³ 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

³⁹ Natasha Turak, "Turkey's central bank hikes interest rate to 15% in dramatic U-turn to fight inflation," *CNBC*, June 22, 2023.

⁴⁰ Koc, "Why is the Turkish lira's value still falling?"

⁴¹ See, for example, "Erdogan's rival boosted by withdrawal, poll lead ahead of Turkey vote," *Reuters*, May 11, 2023.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ 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.

opposition figures charge is politically motivated.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

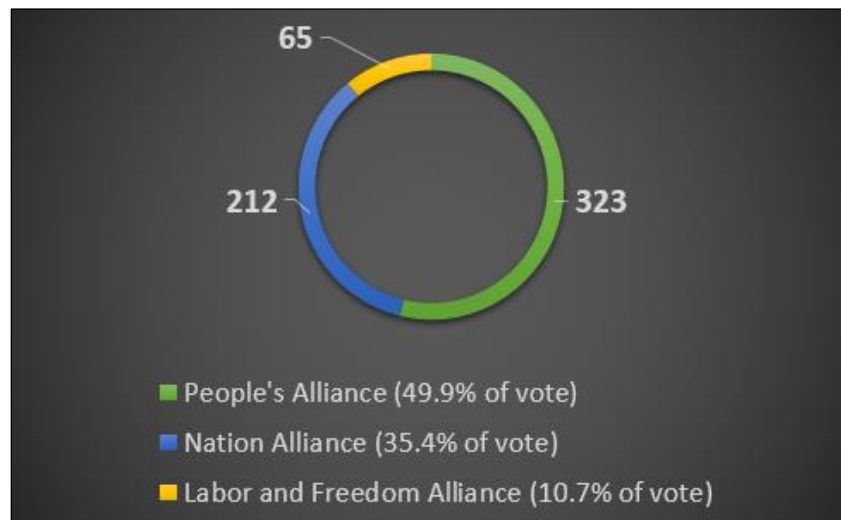
Results and Electoral Process

In the May 14 elections, Erdogan fell just short of the 50% mark he needed to surpass to claim outright victory in the presidential race, leading Kilicdaroglu by 4% as they prepared for Turkey’s first-ever presidential run-off election on May 28. About 87% of registered voters turned out to vote. Erdogan’s People’s Alliance retained its parliamentary majority, even though it slipped from 344 seats out of 600 to 323 (see **Figure 2**). 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.⁴⁶ Aggregate pre-election polling anticipated a Kilicdaroglu lead or victory and a hung parliament.⁴⁷

Erdogan prevailed in the run-off against Kilicdaroglu by a margin of 52%-48%, winning a new five-year term. Voter turnout in the run-off was around 84%. Under Turkey’s constitution, Erdogan might be entitled to run for one additional term if three-fifths of parliament’s members vote to schedule early elections.⁴⁸ Erdogan could seek to revise or remove presidential term limits via constitutional amendment.

Figure 2. Turkish 2023 Parliamentary Election Results

(out of 600 total seats)



Source: YSK.

⁴⁴ Ben Hubbard and Safak Timur, “Conviction May Sideline Rival of Turkish Leader,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2022.

⁴⁵ Nicolas Camut, “Pro-Kurdish party rallies behind main opposition candidate in Turkish election,” *Politico Europe*, April 28, 2023.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ See <https://600vekil.com/mayis-2023-secim-ongorusu>, accessed on June 2, 2023.

⁴⁸ Article 116 of Turkey’s constitution. Unofficial English translation available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2017.pdf?lang=en.

Note: The various alliances and parties that received the remaining votes are unlisted because none of them won parliamentary seats.

Observers for Turkey’s elections included representatives from domestic political parties and civil society organizations, as well as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). These observers monitored polling station operations, voting, ballot counting, and the tabulation of results.⁴⁹ The OSCE-PACE international election observation mission said the following in preliminary findings and conclusions it released a day after the May 28 run-off:

The run-off presidential election held on 28 May offered voters a choice between genuine political alternatives and voter participation remained high, however, as in the first round, biased media coverage and the lack of a level playing field gave an unjustified advantage to the incumbent. The election administration technically managed the election efficiently, but its lack of transparency and communication largely persisted. While the absence of regulation of several aspects of the second round did not provide legal certainty, positively, the Supreme Electoral Council (SEC) issued multiple regulations to remedy some of these legal gaps. In the subdued yet competitive campaign, candidates were able to campaign freely. However, harsher rhetoric, inflammatory and discriminatory language by both contestants, along with the continued intimidation and harassment of supporters of some opposition parties undermined the process. In an environment with restrictions on freedom of expression, both private and public media did not ensure editorial independence and impartiality in their coverage of the campaign, detracting from the ability of voters to make an informed choice. Election day was generally calm and well-administered. However, instances of deficient implementation of certain procedures, particularly during the vote count, were noted.⁵⁰

Other domestic and international commentators have expressed varying views about the conduct of Turkey’s elections. Many have echoed the OSCE-PACE mission’s assessment that Erdogan’s control over state resources and institutions gave him an unfair advantage during the campaign.⁵¹ Despite the high turnout for both electoral rounds, some analysts challenged whether the electoral process could be characterized as free.⁵² Although Kilicdaroglu said the election period was the most unfair in Turkish history, the opposition did not argue that various irregularities alleged by some sources would have changed the results.⁵³

Assessment and Implications

After the elections, analysts have sought to explain the outcome and President Erdogan’s abiding popular appeal. Many have concluded that key nationalistic and religious voter blocs maintain a level of ideological devotion or personal attachment to Erdogan—partly based on patronage networks or actions he has taken on their behalf—that appear to outweigh economic concerns

⁴⁹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “General Elections, 14 May 2023, and Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023,” 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.

⁵⁰ OSCE, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Republic of Türkiye – Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023* (published May 29, 2023).

⁵¹ “Recep Tayyip Erdogan is re-elected as Turkey’s president,” *Economist*, May 28, 2023; Fatma Tanis, “Erdogan cements his power with a victory in Turkey’s presidential runoff election,” *NPR*, May 28, 2023.

⁵² Soner Cagaptay, “Erdogan cements his power with a victory in Turkey’s presidential runoff election,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2023; Gonul Tol, “Erdogan Won by Exploiting Fear,” *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2023.

⁵³ Sources reporting alleged irregularities include Turkey recap, “Forever & All Reis,” June 1, 2023; “Turkey opposition contests thousands of ballots after election,” *Reuters*, May 17, 2023.

they might have.⁵⁴ Large numbers of these voters may have been hesitant to empower an opposition with legacy ties to Turkey's pre-Erdogan secular elite leadership, especially after Kilicdaroglu openly partnered with the Kurdish-led HDP.⁵⁵ Some observers argue that Erdogan also may have benefitted from perceptions that he is more capable of acting swiftly to address voters' material concerns—bypassing bureaucratic obstacles or political divisions—than his election rivals would have been.⁵⁶ It is unclear to what extent Erdogan's resilience shares features with that of authoritarian-leaning incumbents in other countries, or stems from socioeconomic factors unique to Turkey.

Erdogan's reelection and continued parliamentary majority will likely have implications in the following areas.

Economy. As discussed above, Erdogan's government has taken some initial post-election measures to address Turkey's ongoing currency and inflation crisis, given Turkey's largely depleted foreign exchange reserves.

Domestic politics. While the 2023 presidential election was Erdogan's most difficult to date, and he won a smaller parliamentary majority than in 2018, he does not appear inclined to change his general approach to domestic governance, rule of law, and human rights. As he prepares to preside over the Turkish republic's 100th anniversary in October 2023 and lead the AKP's March 2024 municipal election campaign, Erdogan may return to points he emphasized during his reelection campaign that trumpet his accomplishments at home and abroad, and seek to paint his domestic rivals as sympathetic to Kurdish militants and LGBTQ causes. Some observers worry that the inclusion of Islamists from two small parties in Erdogan's People's Alliance could push social policy in a more religiously conservative direction.⁵⁷ However, Erdogan's majority does not depend on these parties, and he may have options to ally with a number of other parties, including some from the opposition.⁵⁸

The opposition faces a number of questions about its future. It had failed to unseat Erdogan before and after Kilicdaroglu became CHP leader in 2010, but many observers had expressed that Turkey's economic woes and the February earthquakes made Erdogan uniquely vulnerable in 2023.⁵⁹ In this context, it is unclear whether Kilicdaroglu can maintain his leadership position, and whether the CHP will continue its current partnerships and its common cause with the HDP. Some observers assess that Istanbul mayor Imamoglu could be Erdogan's most formidable long-term opponent, but his status could depend on whether he can successfully appeal his criminal conviction and win reelection in 2024.⁶⁰

U.S. relations and foreign policy. Erdogan appears inclined to pursue a largely transactional foreign policy course that hedges between the United States, Russia, and other international actors, in continuity with his past efforts to pursue greater autonomy for Turkey within an

⁵⁴ Michael Werz, "Erdogan's Reelection Illustrates the Bleak Future of Turkish Democracy," Center for American Progress, May 31, 2023; Adam Samson, "The patronage network behind Recep Tayyip Erdogan's bid for third decade in power," *Financial Times*, May 27, 2023.

⁵⁵ Alan Makovsky, "Erdogan Overcomes Opposition – and Economy – to Prevail in Presidential Runoff," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, May 30, 2023.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Tol.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Kamuran Samar and Joshua Askew, "What Erdogan's re-election means for Turkey and the West," *Euronews*, May 28, 2023.

⁵⁸ Ragip Soylu, "Turkey elections: Erdogan has MPs to play with after strong parliamentary showing," *Middle East Eye*, May 26, 2023.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Ragip Soylu, "Turkey elections: Why did Kilicdaroglu lose?" *Middle East Eye*, May 31, 2023.

⁶⁰ Nadeen Ebrahim, "Erdogan intent on taking back Istanbul after presidential victory," *CNN*, May 31, 2023.

increasingly multipolar global system (discussed further below). During the 2023 election campaign, Kilicdaroglu pledged to move in a more pro-Western direction,⁶¹ prompting Erdogan to say, “Our relations with Russia are no less important than those with the United States.”⁶² Also during the campaign, 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 When asked about his campaign comments regarding President Biden in a May 19 CNN interview, Erdogan insisted that he would continue to work with Biden if reelected.⁶⁵ President Biden called Erdogan the day after his reelection to congratulate him, and they “expressed their shared commitment to continue working together as close partners to deepen cooperation between our countries and people.”⁶⁶ Given Turkey’s ongoing economic concerns, one analyst has remarked, “Turkey still needs its commerce with the West, and that may impose a certain pragmatism on Erdogan’s foreign policy in the months ahead, whatever his anti-Western resentments.”⁶⁷

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 some change to this orientation within the past decade, as Turkey has sought greater independence of action as a regional power within a more multipolar global system. James Jeffrey, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, said after President Erdogan’s May 2023 reelection that “he is going to operate independently, and this is a rational decision, given not only their [Turkey’s] size and capabilities—it’s also reasonable from the standpoint of their experiences.”⁶⁸

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

⁶¹ Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilcim, “Turkey’s Top Election Challenger Pledges Closer Ties to NATO and EU,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2023.

⁶² “Relations with Russia are no less important than those with US: Erdoğan,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 13, 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 Transcript of CNN interview, May 19, 2023, at <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ctw/date/2023-05-19/segment/02>.

⁶⁶ White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Erdogan of Türkiye,” May 29, 2023.

⁶⁷ Makovsky.

⁶⁸ Remarks by James Jeffrey, Atlantic Council, “Post election transatlantic relations with Turkey,” May 31, 2023, at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/post-election-transatlantic-relations-with-turkey/>.

actors and maintain its leverage with them.⁶⁹ 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. For example, Turkey appears largely aligned with the United States and other NATO allies on their expressed priorities of assisting in Ukraine’s defense, and also continues to value NATO security guarantees (as discussed below). Nevertheless, one analyst has argued that most of Turkey’s core security problems around its borders and coastlines—involving Syria, Iraq, Greece, Cyprus, Libya, and the Caucasus—require it to deal with Russia, Iran, and various other actors without much help from the West.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ 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 3**). Turkey also controls access to and from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus (alt. Bosphorus) and Dardanelles Straits (the Straits—see **Figure A-1**).

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 general lack of nationally owned strategic defense and deterrence capabilities.⁷² 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.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ 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

⁶⁹ 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.

⁷⁰ Rich Outzen et al., “Five more years for Erdogan. What’s first on his agenda?” Atlantic Council, May 30, 2023.

⁷¹ State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*, May 13, 2022.

⁷² Can Kasapoglu, “Turkey,” *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance’s Relevance and Cohesion*, Thierry Tardy, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 97.

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ “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.

in recent years” justifies the United States building and expanding military facilities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece to “hedge its bets.”⁷⁵

Figure 3. 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.

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.⁷⁶ Turkey continues to

⁷⁵ 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, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-examining-u-s-interests-and-regional-cooperation/>.

⁷⁶ 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.

rely on Russia for around 40% of its natural gas imports,⁷⁷ but it may gradually reduce this dependence as it begins deliveries from a domestic offshore field in the Black Sea and increases liquefied natural gas imports from other countries.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ In addition to denouncing Russia's invasion, closing the Straits to belligerent warships, opposing Russian claims to Ukrainian territory (including Crimea), and serving as a transit hub for natural gas to Europe,⁸⁰ Turkey has supplied Ukraine with various types of military equipment—including armed drone aircraft and mine-resistant ambush-resistant (MRAP) vehicles⁸¹—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.⁸² Turkish and Ukrainian officials have denied that any such transfers have occurred.⁸³

Turkey-Ukraine Defense Cooperation

Turkey and Ukraine have strengthened their relations since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014.⁸⁴ 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

⁷⁷ Megan Byrne and James Cockayne, "Turkey Gas Imports: Russia Still Dominant," *MEES*, March 3, 2023.

⁷⁸ "Erdogan offers free gas pre-election after first Black Sea field shipment," *Reuters*; Rafiq Latta, "Turkey Pivots Away from Russia, Towards LNG," *Energy Intelligence Group*, June 1, 2023.

⁷⁹ Saban Kardas, "The War in Ukraine and Turkey's Cautious Counter-Balancing Against Russia," German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 3, 2022.

⁸⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability," February 20, 2023.

⁸¹ 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.

⁸² Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Turkey Is Sending Cold War-Era Cluster Bombs to Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2023.

⁸³ Ragıp Soylu, "Russia-Ukraine war: Turkey denies supplying Kyiv with cluster munitions," *Middle East Eye*, January 14, 2023.

⁸⁴ For information on the Crimea invasion, see CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

respective defense industries.⁸⁵ Since 2020, the two countries have signed multiple agreements signifying closer cooperation, and also signed a broader free trade agreement (pending ratification) in February 2022.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ Turkish expertise with drone and other aircraft and naval platforms complements Ukrainian skills in designing and constructing aerospace engines and missiles.⁸⁸ As part of the deepening bilateral defense cooperation, Turkey has sold several Turkish-origin Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine since 2019,⁸⁹ and some reports have suggested that the manufacturer has delivered additional TB2s to Ukraine at various times since Russia's 2022 invasion.⁹⁰ Additionally, Turkey is helping establish Ukraine's naval capabilities by producing corvettes (small warships) for export.⁹¹

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 partly alleviated global supply concerns.⁹² Under the deal, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and the U.N. sent representatives to a joint coordination center in Istanbul to oversee implementation and inspect ships to prevent weapons smuggling.⁹³ The arrangement lapsed in July 2023, and it is unclear if it might resume or if Turkey might help facilitate Ukrainian and/or Russian exports in alternative ways. Also in July 2023, Turkey allowed five previously captured Ukrainian military officers to return to Ukraine, triggering protests from Russia. Russian officials claim that under a Turkish-brokered prisoner exchange deal, Turkey had agreed not to return the Ukrainians until the end of the Russia-Ukraine war.

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.⁹⁴ The Turkish government has not joined economic sanctions against Russia or closed its airspace to Russian civilian flights.

⁸⁵ Metin Gurcan, "Turkey-Ukraine defense industry ties are booming," *Al-Monitor*, May 1, 2017.

⁸⁶ "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.

⁸⁷ Kasapoglu, "Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Dorian Jones, "Turkey Strengthens Defense Industry with Its Ukraine Partnership," *Voice of America*, February 4, 2022.

⁹⁰ 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.

⁹¹ Kate Tringham, "Update: Turkey launches first Ada-class corvette for Ukraine and cuts steel for second," *Janes Navy International*, October 3, 2022.

⁹² "Ukraine, Russia agree to export grain, ending a standoff that threatened food supply," *Associated Press*, July 22, 2022.

⁹³ See <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/background>.

⁹⁴ Patricia Cohen, "Turkey Tightens Energy Ties with Russia as Other Nations Step Back," *New York Times*, December 10, 2022.

In August 2022, Presidents Erdogan and Putin publicly agreed to bolster Turkey-Russia cooperation across economic sectors.⁹⁵ In April 2023, they participated in an event to begin operations at Turkey's first nuclear power plant (at Akkuyu on its Mediterranean coast), which was built by Russian state-owned company Rosatom. The plant is scheduled to start domestic electricity production in 2025.⁹⁶ Several months before operations began at Akkuyu, Rosatom had reportedly wired up to \$15 billion to a Turkish subsidiary involved in the project, possibly in part to help Turkey maintain foreign exchange reserves during its currency crisis.⁹⁷

Some of 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.⁹⁸

Some Turkish banks and companies appear to be limiting or considering limits on certain types of transactions and services with Russian businesses.⁹⁹ In February 2023, Turkey's then Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu denied that Turkish businesses were exporting electronic or technological products with potential defense applications to Russia, but publicly welcomed information sharing with U.S. and EU counterparts to ensure that businesses do not use Turkey to bypass Western sanctions.¹⁰⁰ Reportedly, Turkey began in March 2023 to enforce curbs on sanctioned goods transiting its territory to Russia.¹⁰¹ In April 2023, the Department of the

⁹⁵ "Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan agree to boost economic, energy cooperation," *Agence France Presse*, August 5, 2022.

⁹⁶ "Putin hails Turkey ties as first Turkish nuclear plant inaugurated," *Reuters*, April 27, 2023.

⁹⁷ Ragip Soylu, "Russia plans to buy Turkish treasury bonds via Akkuyu nuclear plant \$6bn loan deal," *Middle East Eye*, July 30, 2022.

⁹⁸ 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 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.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Spicer, "U.S. warns Turkey on exports seen to boost Russia's war effort," *Reuters*, February 4, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability."

¹⁰¹ "Turkey Blocks Transit of Goods Sanctioned by EU, US to Russia," *Bloomberg*, March 10, 2023.

Treasury placed sanctions on two Turkey-based companies and associated persons for assisting Russia or Russian entities.¹⁰²

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 on 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 movement¹⁰³ (which the government has blamed for involvement in the 2016 failed coup) and the PKK.¹⁰⁴ (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.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶

After the accession process began for Sweden and Finland, Turkey continued to press them to extradite people that Turkey considers to be terrorists, though Turkish officials said they were more concerned about terrorism-related activities in Sweden than in Finland. Under the June 2022 trilateral memorandum, Sweden and Finland agreed to address Turkey's pending deportation or extradition requests in various ways, but did not commit to specific outcomes in those cases.¹⁰⁷ Various sources, including Sweden's prime minister, have indicated that neither Sweden nor Finland would be inclined to make political decisions on extradition that contravene domestic judicial findings conducted under due process and the rule of law.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Russian Financial Facilitators and Sanctions Evaders Around the World," April 12, 2023.

¹⁰³ 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.

¹⁰⁴ Semih Idiz, "How long can Erdogan sustain threat to veto Finnish, Swedish NATO bids?" *Al-Monitor*, May 17, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Sources citing links between the PKK and YPG (or PKK affiliates in Syria) include State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2021*, 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.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum text available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ 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.

In line with Turkish official statements differentiating Finland from Sweden, Turkey's parliament approved Finland's NATO application in March 2023.¹⁰⁹ Finland formally joined the alliance in April.

Sweden's application to join NATO remains pending as of July, with Turkey and Hungary the only alliance members not to have approved it. During a May 30 visit to Sweden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the accession process has moved rapidly in historic terms, and that Turkey "has rightly focused attention on some of its security concerns that both Sweden and Finland have taken remarkable steps to address, important ones.... From the perspective of the United States, the time is now to finalize Sweden's accession."¹¹⁰ Blinken also said that while the Biden Administration is not linking the Administration's proposed F-16 sale to Turkey with Sweden's NATO accession, some Members of Congress are (see "Possible F-16 Sale and Congressional Views" below).¹¹¹

After new Swedish anti-terrorism legislation came into effect in June, and two court rulings that anticipate some extradition to Turkey,¹¹² President Erdogan agreed on July 10 to send the NATO accession protocol for Sweden to Turkey's parliament and work closely with it to "ensure ratification."¹¹³ President Biden and other U.S. officials welcomed Erdogan's commitment. Erdogan later clarified that Turkey's parliament might not consider Swedish accession until October (after its summer recess), and that he expected Sweden to provide a roadmap of steps it will take to implement the 2022 trilateral memorandum before sending the accession protocol to parliament.¹¹⁴ Based on statements from Erdogan and other reports, Turkey might also seek the following before its parliament considers Sweden's NATO application:

- At least some assurance of congressional approval of the potential F-16 sale.¹¹⁵
- The lifting of some implicit arms trade restrictions by NATO countries.¹¹⁶
- Increased support among EU countries to expand Turkey's customs union with the EU and provide Turkish citizens with visa-free travel to EU countries.¹¹⁷

Syria¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹ Turkey's priorities in Syria's civil war have evolved

¹⁰⁹ Ezgi Akin, "Turkey ratifies Finland's NATO membership," *Al-Monitor*, March 30, 2023.

¹¹⁰ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson at a Joint Press Availability."

¹¹¹ State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson at a Joint Press Availability."

¹¹² "With NATO membership in mind, Sweden hands over Turkish man convicted of drug offenses at home," *Associated Press*, June 12, 2023; "NATO applicant Sweden jails Kurdish man for attempting to finance PKK militants," *Agence France Presse*, July 6, 2023.

¹¹³ NATO, "Press statement following the meeting between Türkiye, Sweden, and the NATO Secretary General," July 10, 2023.

¹¹⁴ "Erdogan to put Sweden's NATO ratification to Turkish parliament in autumn," *Reuters*, July 12, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Turkey's F-16s in doubt after Erdogan says no Sweden vote before October," *Al-Monitor*, July 12, 2023.

¹¹⁶ "Exclusive: Canada unfreezes talks with Turkey on export controls after NATO move," *Reuters*, July 13, 2023.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ See CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

¹¹⁹ 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.

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.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ 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-2**).

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.¹²² 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.¹²³ 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 said in January 2023 that U.S. officials have advised allies against normalizing or upgrading relations with the Asad regime.¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ 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 105.

¹²¹ Rachel Oswald, "Sanctions on Turkey go front and center as Congress returns," *Roll Call*, October 15, 2019.

¹²² "Moscow hosts more Turkey-Syria rapprochement talks," *Associated Press*, April 25, 2023.

¹²³ "Syria resisting Russia's efforts to broker Turkey summit, sources say," *Reuters*, December 5, 2022.

¹²⁴ State Department Press Briefing, January 3, 2023.

¹²⁵ 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).

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 2019,¹²⁶ 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 2020.¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹ Such a disruption to U.S. defense transactions with Turkey had not occurred since the 1975-1978 embargo over Cyprus.¹³⁰

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.¹³¹ 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.¹³² Upgrades of Turkey's F-16 aircraft to the Block 70/72

¹²⁶ "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.

¹²⁷ 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.

¹²⁸ 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.

¹²⁹ CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

¹³⁰ Valerie Insinna et al., "Congress has secretly blocked US arms sales to Turkey for nearly two years," *Defense News*, August 12, 2020.

¹³¹ 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.

¹³² "Biden talks F-16s, raises human rights in meeting with Turkey's Erdogan," *Reuters*, October 31, 2021; Diego (continued...)

Viper configuration could include a new radar, other software and hardware enhancements, and structural improvements that significantly extend each aircraft's service life.¹³³

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.¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵

Responding to criticism of a possible F-16 sale from 53 Members of Congress in a February 2022 letter,¹³⁶ a State Department official wrote in March that Turkey's support for Ukraine was "an important deterrent to malign influence in the region."¹³⁷ 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."¹³⁸

The modernization of much of Turkey's F-16 fleet could give Turkey time to acquire or design a more advanced fighter,¹³⁹ though delivery of new F-16s could face a production backlog.¹⁴⁰ 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.¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴² Assuming the parties finalize contracts for Jordan and Bulgaria, Lockheed will have a backlog of

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.

¹³³ See description at https://www.lockheedmartin.com/content/dam/lockheed-martin/aero/documents/F-16/22-06570_F-16-Viper-6Panel_Digital.pdf.

¹³⁴ State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*.

¹³⁵ 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.

¹³⁶ Text of letter available at <https://pallone.house.gov/sites/pallone.house.gov/files/20220123%20Letter%20on%20Turkey%20F-16%20Request.pdf>.

¹³⁷ 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.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ 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.

¹⁴⁰ Bryant Harris and Stephen Losey, "Turkey F-16 sale in congressional limbo amid Lockheed backlog," *Defense News*, January 18, 2023.

¹⁴¹ Lockheed Martin: F-16 Production Q&A, provided to CRS on February 23, 2023.

¹⁴² Ibid.; Arda Mevlutoglu, "F-16Vs Instead of F-35s: What's behind Turkey's Request?" *Politics Today*, November 22, 2021.

148 aircraft.¹⁴³ 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.¹⁴⁴ Turkey is reportedly exploring Eurofighter Typhoons as a potential alternative to F-16s,¹⁴⁵ but it is unclear if consortium partner Germany would approve such a sale.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Turkey's air force could face difficulties adjusting to a non-F-16 platform.¹⁴⁷ 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.¹⁴⁸ Previously, Congress received notification in connection with some non-NATO countries' (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar) proposed purchases of U.S. equipment for Typhoons.¹⁴⁹ 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.¹⁵⁰

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.¹⁵¹ However, SFRC Chairman Bob Menendez has consistently expressed disapproval due to what he has termed Erdogan's "abuses across the region."¹⁵²

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.¹⁵³ Erdogan suspended dialogue with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after Mitsotakis appeared to raise concern about U.S.-Turkey arms transactions while addressing a

¹⁴³ Lockheed Martin: F-16 Production Q&A.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Iddon, "Turkey Questions the Wisdom of Having an All-American Air Force," *Forbes*, February 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Ragip Soylu, "Turkey exploring massive UK arms deal involving planes, ships and tank engines," *Middle East Eye*, January 20, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ 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.

¹⁴⁷ Soylu, "Turkey exploring massive UK arms deal involving planes, ships and tank engines."

¹⁴⁸ See footnote 170.

¹⁴⁹ 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).

¹⁵⁰ State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*.

¹⁵¹ "Biden supports F-16 sale to Turkey, is confident about congressional approval," *Reuters*, June 30, 2022.

¹⁵² Twitter, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 7, 2022 – 10:57 AM, at <https://twitter.com/SFRCdems/status/1600519759493304321>.

¹⁵³ 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.

May 2022 joint session of Congress.¹⁵⁴ 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.”¹⁵⁵

While Turkey-Greece disputes persist, tensions somewhat subsided in early 2023 when Erdogan and Mitsotakis renewed contacts in the context of positive diplomatic momentum from Greek post-earthquake relief assistance to Turkey.¹⁵⁶ At the July 2023 NATO summit in Lithuania, the two leaders met and agreed to build on this momentum with a high-level bilateral meeting in Greece this fall.

With U.S. officials already having notified a possible upgrade of F-16s for Greece to Congress in 2017,¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸ 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.¹⁵⁹ 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).¹⁶⁰

Turkey-Greece-Cyprus Tensions: Background and Some Ongoing Issues¹⁶¹

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-3** and **Figure A-4** 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.¹⁶² In 1983, Turkish Cypriot

¹⁵⁴ 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.

¹⁵⁵ Joint explanatory statement available at <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20221205/BILLS-117HR7776EAS-RCP117-70-JES.pdf>.

¹⁵⁶ “Turkey, Greece take strides in Ankara meeting as aid diplomacy continues,” *Al-Monitor*, March 22, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ 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.

¹⁵⁸ Aaron Stein, “You Go to War with the Turkey You Have, Not the Turkey You Want,” *War on the Rocks*, May 30, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁶⁰ State Department, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Greece,” October 31, 2022.

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

¹⁶² 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 (continued...)

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.¹⁶³ 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.¹⁶⁴ 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.¹⁶⁵ After Turkey’s then Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in October 2022 that the United States no longer was maintaining a balanced approach in the Aegean,¹⁶⁶ 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.¹⁶⁷

Congressional Notification Process

Informal Notification and Review

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.¹⁶⁸ 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 Viper upgrade packages, along with 900 air-to-air missiles and 800 bombs, at an estimated total value of \$20 billion.¹⁶⁹

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.¹⁷⁰ This time

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.

¹⁶³ Niki Kitsantonis and Anatoly Kurmanaev, “Sleepy Greek Port Turns into Pivotal Transit Point for American Military,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; Department of Defense News, “Strategic Port Access Aids Support to Ukraine, Austin Tells Greek Defense Minister,” July 18, 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Prepared testimony of Alan Makovsky, “Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation.”

¹⁶⁶ “Cavusoglu says US siding against Turkey in the Aegean, East Med,” *Kathimerini*, October 21, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Twitter, U.S. Embassy Türkiye, October 18, 2022 – 3:32 AM, at <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyTurkey/status/1582273449145212928>.

¹⁶⁸ State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability.”

¹⁶⁹ “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.

¹⁷⁰ CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr. The thresholds for NATO (continued...)

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.¹⁷¹ 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.¹⁷²

As mentioned above, congressional consideration of the potential F-16 sale to Turkey may depend at least to some degree on Turkey’s approval of NATO accession for both Sweden and Finland.¹⁷³ 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.¹⁷⁴

In a March SFRC hearing featuring Secretary Blinken, Chairman Menendez elaborated on objections he had 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.¹⁷⁵

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).¹⁷⁶ By harmonizing the informal notification on F-35s 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.¹⁷⁷ 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-

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.

¹⁷¹ CRS Report RL31675, *Arms Sales: Congressional Review Process*, by Paul K. Kerr.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*; CRS In Focus IF11533, *Modifying or Ending Sales of U.S.-Origin Defense Articles*, by Paul K. Kerr and Liana W. Rosen.

¹⁷³ See footnote **Error! Bookmark not defined.**. Several Senators from both parties, including 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. 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.

¹⁷⁴ 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.

¹⁷⁵ SFRC Hearing, March 22, 2023, transcript available at <https://plus.cq.com/alertmatch/558656174?0&deliveryId=105309916&uid=congressionaltranscripts-7694906>.

¹⁷⁶ CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁷⁷ 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.”

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.¹⁷⁸

In response to the news of a possible F-35 sale to Greece, then Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu called on the United States to “pay attention” to the balance of power in the region.¹⁷⁹

Developments After Turkey’s May 2023 Elections

Following the end of Turkey’s May 2023 election cycle, congressional committee leaders’ concerns regarding a possible F-16 sale may have softened somewhat. In April 2023, these leaders apparently acquiesced to the Administration providing formal notification of 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).¹⁸⁰ A few days before President Erdogan’s reelection, HFAC Chairman Michael McCaul was cited as saying that he believes he and the other three Members who oversee major possible arms sales (SFRC Chairman Menendez and Ranking Member Jim Risch, and HFAC Ranking Member Gregory Meeks) “will approve the transfer once Turkey ratifies Sweden’s membership in NATO, and after recent approvals for Greece to buy U.S.-made F-35 warplanes and to get upgrades to its F-16s.”¹⁸¹ McCaul also said, “We’ve been assured that after the [Turkish] election, regardless of the winner, that Sweden will be recognized as a NATO ally.”¹⁸² As of June, these four Members have reportedly expressed support for the Administration to provide formal notification to Congress of the potential F-35 sale to Greece.¹⁸³

After Erdogan’s victory in May, President Biden said that Erdogan “wants to work on something on the F-16s. I told him we wanted a deal with Sweden, so let’s get that done.”¹⁸⁴ Chairman Menendez has said that Sweden might be the “whole equation” for some Members of Congress,¹⁸⁵ but is only “part of the equation” for him.¹⁸⁶ He suggested in May that if Turkey approves Sweden’s NATO membership and ends “belligerence” toward Greece and perhaps other neighbors such as Armenia, as manifested by “substantive commitments and various indications that would actually take place, there’s a path forward—at least for me.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁸ Paul Iddon, “Balance of Power: Why the Biden Administration Wants to Sell Turkey F-16s and Greece F-35s,” *Forbes*, January 16, 2023.

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Wilks, “Turkish FM travels to Washington seeking to seal deal for F-16 fighter jets,” *Al-Monitor*, January 17, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Türkiye – F-16 Avionics Upgrade,” Transmittal No. 21-34, April 17, 2023; CRS correspondence with Turkish official, April 17, 2023; “Menendez reiterates opposition to sale of F-16 fighters to Turkey,” *Kathimerini*, April 22, 2023.

¹⁸¹ Joe Gould et al., “McCaul open to selling F-16s to Turkey — even if Erdoğan wins,” *Politico*, May 25, 2023.

¹⁸² Gould et al.

¹⁸³ “F-35 deal comes closer within Greece’s reach,” *Kathimerini*, June 1, 2023.

¹⁸⁴ White House, “Remarks by President Biden Before Marine One Departure,” May 29, 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Several Senators from both parties, including 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. 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.

¹⁸⁶ “Senior US lawmaker wants change from Turkey before F-16 sale approval,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; “Bob Menendez still opposes sending F-16 jets to Turkey, even as Washington and Ankara negotiate on the matter,” *Politico Congress Minutes*, May 31, 2023; Gould et al.

After Erdogan agreed in July to send Sweden's accession protocol to Turkey's parliament and work toward its ratification, National Security Advisor Sullivan said that the Administration would move forward with the F-16 sale in consultation with Congress.¹⁸⁸ Menendez called for additional assurances from the Administration to enhance Greece's security in the region before approving the sale.¹⁸⁹ While stopping short of expressing assent to the sale, Risch, McCaul, and Meeks voiced general optimism on a path forward, with Meeks saying that Turkey cannot resume its violations of Greek airspace.¹⁹⁰ Erdogan said on July 12 that Turkish F-16s have never been used against Greece and "we do not plan on using them."¹⁹¹

The Administration may consider whether, when, and how to address congressional concerns, and/or move forward with a formal notification of the sale.

¹⁸⁸ Nazlan Ertan, "US to advance Turkey's F-16 sales as Sweden's NATO bid moves forward," *Al-Monitor*, July 11, 2023.

¹⁸⁹ David Sivak, "Bob Menendez says there 'may be a pathway' for sale of F-16s to Turkey," *Washington Examiner*, July 11, 2023.

¹⁹⁰ Joe Gould, "F-16s for Turkey aren't a done deal until these lawmakers say it's OK," *Politico*, July 11, 2023. On July 8, six Representatives sent a letter to Secretary Blinken requesting that any U.S.-Turkey sales agreement for F-16s include "mechanisms that provide for the pause, delay, or snapback of the transfer of American weapons to Turkey if it resumes its destabilizing actions in the Eastern Mediterranean that threaten or undermine U.S. national security interests or NATO security architecture." Text of letter available at <https://pappas.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/pappas.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/07.08.23-letter-to-secretary-blinken-on-turkey-f-16-sale-snapback-mechanisms.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ "Erdogan claims F-16s have not been used against Greece, no plans to do so," *Kathimerini*, July 12, 2023.

Appendix A. Maps

Figure A-1. Map of Black Sea Region and Turkish Straits

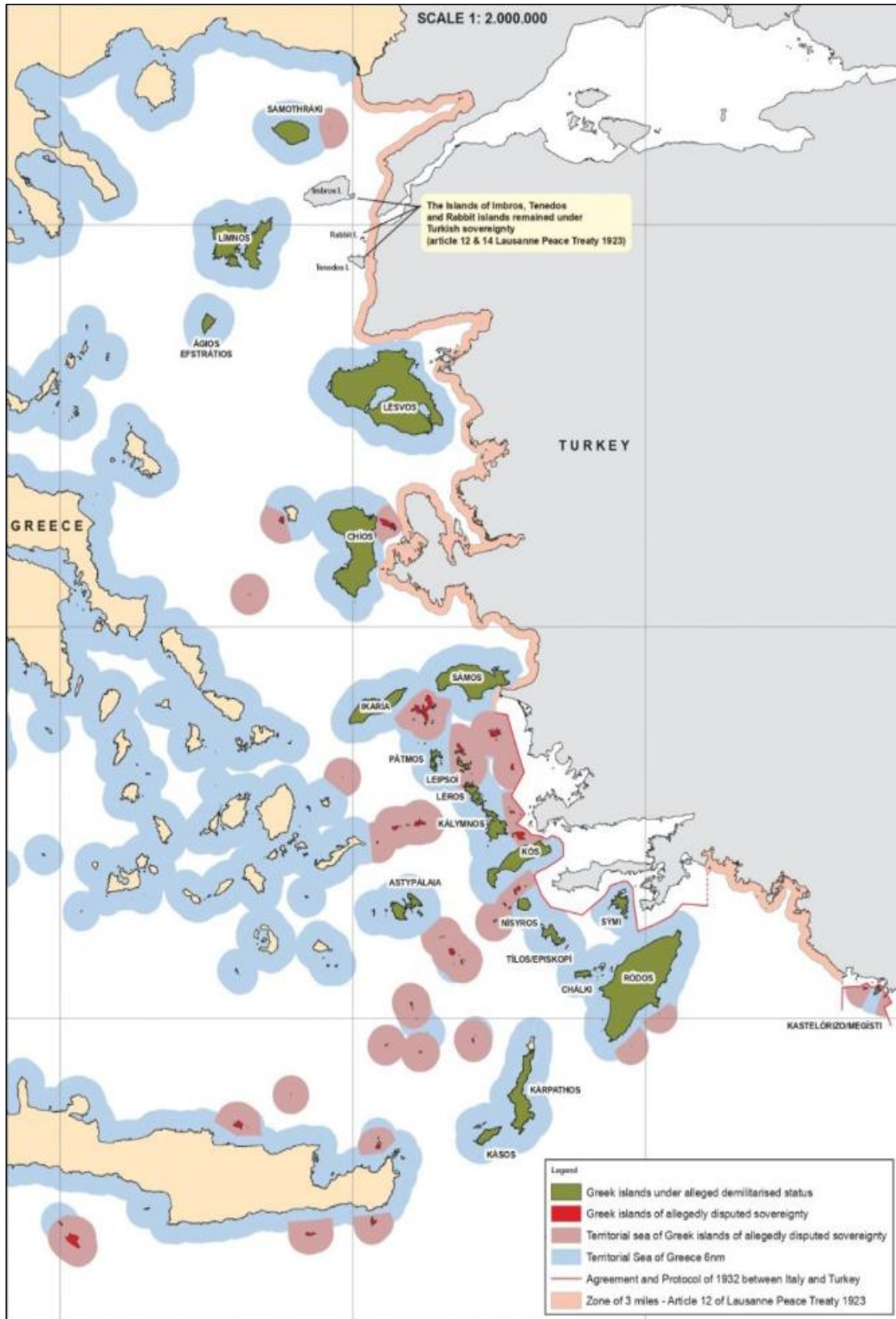


Source: Nikkei Asia, March 2022.

Figure A-2. Syria Conflict Map

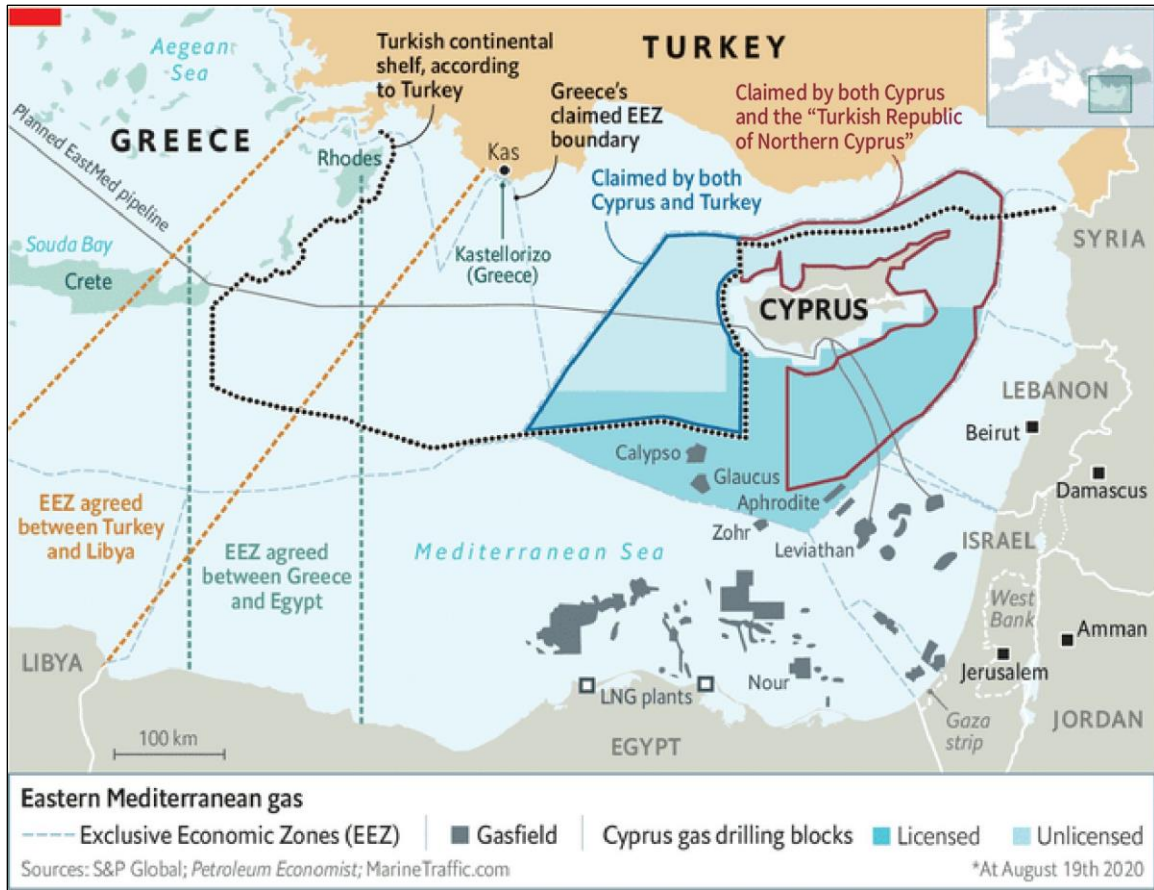


Figure A-3. Some Areas of Aegean Dispute



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

Figure A-4. 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. He won another presidential term in May 2023. 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 faced criticism for the CHP's failure to make electoral gains at the national level, especially as Erdogan's opponent in the 2023 presidential race. The CHP made notable gains—particularly in Istanbul and Ankara mayoral races—in 2019 local elections.



Devlet Bahçeli—Leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)
(bah-cheh-lee)

Born in 1948 in Osmaniye province in southern Turkey, Bahçeli 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.

Bahçeli 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.

Bahçeli 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 Akşener—Founder and Leader of the Good (İYİ) Party
(awk-sheh-nar)

Born in 1956 in İzmit in western Turkey to Muslims who had resettled in Turkey from Greece, Akşener 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.

Akşener 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.

Akşener 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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