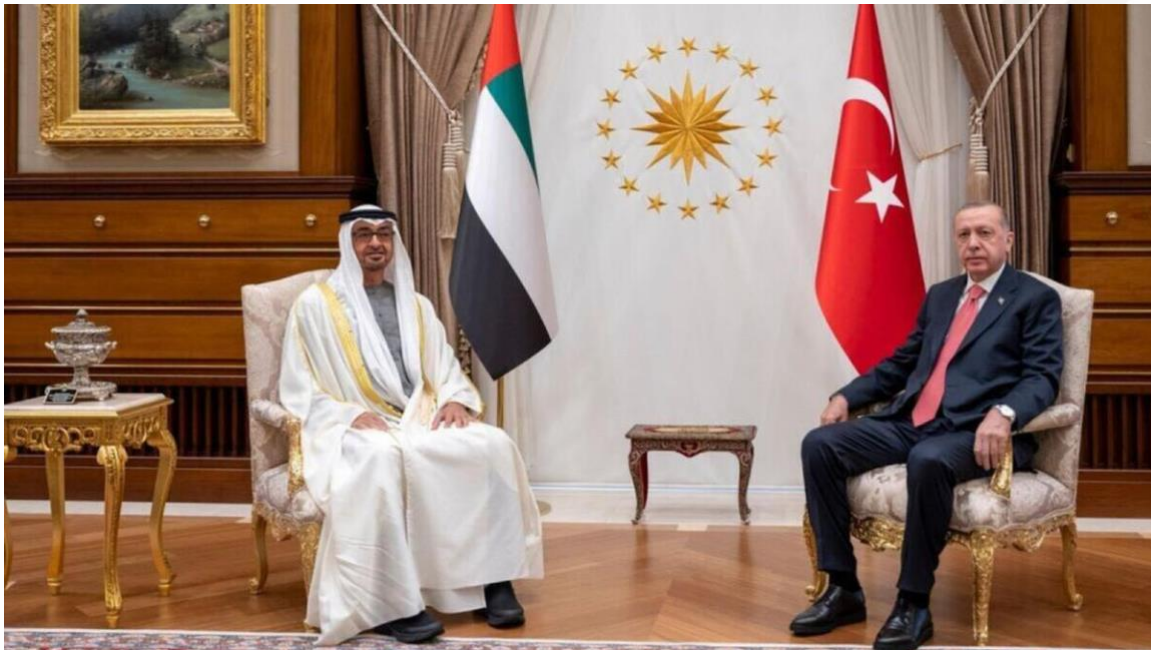




## What Does a Third Erdoğan Presidency Herald for the GCC States?

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Votes have been counted in Turkey's 2023 presidential election run-off between the incumbent President Erdoğan, under the banner of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), a party he established in 2001, and opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the left-leaning CHP (Republic People's Party). President Erdoğan achieved [52.14 percent of the vote](#), securing another five years in office. The run-off reflects significant divisions between the AKP's socially conservative base in the [Turkish heartland](#) who support neo-Ottomanism (a revival of 'greater Turkey'), and those seeking alternative solutions to Turkey's domestic and foreign policy challenges in the capital, Ankara, and Istanbul, as well as the more insecure areas along the border. The final speeches were indicative of pitches on core socioeconomic issues, such as Kemal Kilicdaroglu's attempt to garner votes by promising to [send Syrian refugees home](#) or President Erdoğan's speech against LGBTQ issues, in favor of traditional family values.

The AKP had implemented a 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' strategy, a priority policy and possible factor in the AKP's landslide 2002 election. It failed to achieve traction in the Caucasus due to other prevailing regional dynamics but bore some fruit in the Balkans



and South Europe, and in Erbil, where a Turkish consulate general was established in March 2010 along with flourishing Turkish energy and investment relations. However, the policy was overshadowed by the Arab uprisings in Syria and US withdrawal from Iraq. Turkey and Turkish-backed rebels have since attacked ISIS positions across the Syrian and Iraqi borders, the Turkish Army has established positions in Idlib Governorate, and sought to sustain a buffer zone on the Turkish border with Syria. Ankara has done this to prevent a Kurdish statelet from developing and to counter terrorist attacks in Turkey which it often blames on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). To this end, it has also launched numerous operations, including Claw-Sword in November 2022 in northern Syria and Iraq in response to the November 13 terror attack in Istanbul. This direct military approach was tempered in the summer of 2022 by [Israel lobbying the US to pressure Turkey](#) not to continue operations in northern Syria which could ultimately harm the Kurds and benefit Iran.



(AA, 2018)

Similar to the policies of the UAE, Turkey has sought a rapprochement with Syria. In 2021, the Turkish foreign minister met with his counterpart Faisal Mekdad to resume intelligence and diplomatic cooperation. But [Syria's President Assad resisted Russian brokered talks with President Erdoğan](#) in December 2022 for fear it would enhance his credentials going into the Turkish presidential election. In March 2023, despite Assad's intransigence, Turkish-imposed economic sanctions had eased in the lead-up to Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. Turkey currently hosts more than 3 million Syrian refugees, some as part of the controversial '[EU-Turkey deal](#)' signed in 2016. Any deal between Turkey and Syria is likely to have profoundly negative consequences for these refugees but would help Turkey decouple its internal and neighborhood politics and focus



on addressing the continued fallout from the February 6 earthquake and a weak economy.

Turkey–Iraqi relations have experienced strain due to Turkey’s military presence in northern Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government’s crude oil exports through Turkey, as well as a water-sharing dispute over Turkey’s [decades-long project](#) to build 22 dams along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers aimed at producing energy and providing jobs. These issues were discussed in a meeting between President Erdoğan and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al Sudani in April 2023 without any clear progress being made beyond some additional water flow. The damming has been labelled by activists as a [‘cultural tragedy’](#) which could exacerbate the effects of climate change. Whilst being too late to help roll back the damming of the Tigris, regional electricity grid connections between GCC states, Iraq, and Turkey may help stabilize internal energy markets.

President Erdoğan’s [highly centralized and dysfunctional](#) system of governance, including a politicized judiciary and stifling of parliamentary democracy is unlikely to change. His re-election will be welcomed by regional autocrats as definitive evidence of the status quo in Turkey and limit any reforms that might spark similar calls in their own countries. Normalized relations with states such as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Armenia, and the UAE may help President Erdoğan and his newly appointed foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, former head of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) address the shifting regional geopolitical landscape and some domestic economic imperatives as well. An economic crisis has been in full swing since 2018, including high unemployment, rising loan defaults, high inflation, and a precipitous drop in the value of the Turkish lira.

Apart from attracting FDI, Turkey’s construction, real estate, and tourism companies could gain a great deal by involving themselves more closely in the priorities across the GCC states’ various national vision plans. Unlike other states such as Russia, Turkey and the GCC states do not have oil and gas export interests in common and therefore without the development of commercial interests they remain perilously detached from one another. Turkey [resisted US pressure](#) in 2022 to help persuade Saudi Arabia to modify its policies in OPEC+, and indeed this stance is in line with its national interests to strengthen its economic relations in the Gulf.

In continuing to push for normalization and economic cooperation, including a [Turkey – UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement \(CEPA\)](#) deal signed in March 2023 and ratified on May 31, 2023, prior to the presidential election, the UAE had secured its core interests in trade, economic development, and diversification. UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed was quick to visit Turkey in June 2023 to seize the initiative and consolidate the momentum already generated in advancing relations with President Erdoğan. The deal follows others CEPAs with India, Israel and Indonesia, designed to expand UAE trade and investment ties, and ultimately its soft power influence. In the Turkish case, it will help the UAE to better compete with Qatar which has maintained a close security partnership with Turkey since 2014 and invests heavily in its defense



industry. The UAE is well placed to develop renewable energy projects with Turkey and its neighbors in a similar vein to the [water-for-energy deal](#) between the UAE, Israel and Jordan signed in November 2022.

UAE policy has had a ripple effect on the behavior of other states. President Erdoğan is set to visit Saudi Arabia again this year after his last visit in April 2022. Egypt and Turkey have [agreed on a timetable](#) for upgrading their relations. However, without the fundamental antipathies having been negotiated, it is hard to see how many of these relations will be durable over the longer term. Turkey's policies in the Eastern Mediterranean are also bound to dominate, especially relations with Israel, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Greece-- areas where some GCC states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have significant interests.

Turkey remains important in NATO, especially as the war in Ukraine continues, and in terms of NATO enlargement. The Turkish government signaled its consent to admit Finland as a NATO member in April 2023 but prizes national security and counterterrorism (i.e., the PKK) above NATO expansion. Hence President Erdoğan will wield a veto on Sweden until it stymies pro-PKK activity. An [MoU between Turkey, Finland, and Sweden on counterterrorism](#) may help paper over the cracks between their respective positions. This highlights a potential pathway for further de-escalation between other actors, notably Turkey and Greece in their maritime disputes, between the EU and Turkey on several issues over democratic norms and the rule of law, and between Turkey and Qatar and the so-called 'Quartet' of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, on continued discrepancies between their respective foreign policies.

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