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GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES OF POST-ELECTION TURKEY: THE ISSUE OF REFUGEES FROM SYRIA

prof. dr. Suada A. Džogović

Abstract

Due to its geostrategic position, Turkey has taken in a large number of Syrian refugees since 2011. As a result, the country currently has the largest number of refugees in the world, which has had significant repercussions for domestic and foreign policies, as well as the socio-economic situation. Turkey's 2023 election campaign focused on the Syrian refugee crisis, with Erdogan and the opposition presenting their approaches to solving the problem. The outcome of the elections had a far-reaching impact on millions of Syrian refugees, drawing enormous attention from both the Turkish public and the international community as a whole. This media-based qualitative study examines the implications of Turkey's policy on Syrian refugees, particularly in the context of the May 2023 elections. The study analyzes the current status of refugees in Turkey and the attitude of the Syrian government towards them. It examines the changing positions of Turkey's new government and provides a comprehensive understanding of the region's complex political dynamics and current challenges. Erdogan's re-election appears to have ended his willingness to negotiate with Damascus, suggesting he remains skeptical that Damascus will be able to solve its key problems, particularly its ability to stem PKK attacks from northeastern Syria if Turkey withdraws its troops. However, as the 2024 municipal elections approach, it is clear that Erdogan's Syria policy will once again be in the spotlight. The stakes will be high for all political actors, and the outcome of the election could have a major impact on the future direction of Turkish foreign policy. The study concludes that one of the key factors influencing Turkey's anti-refugee attitude is the host society's concern about the current impact of refugees on the country's economic, social, and cultural structure. The results of this study also show that, in addition to internal factors, other factors can strongly influence the future direction of Turkish policy toward Syrian refugees. In particular, the inadequate solution to the refugee problem at the global level, the unstable influence of the EU, but also other international aspects, including the interests of Russia, are emphasized.

Keywords: 2023 Turkish Presidential Election, Turkish Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Refugee Crisis, Syrian Refugees in Turkey.

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS:

THE TURKISH PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN AND SYRIAN REFUGEES

Due to its geopolitical position, Turkey has the most refugees in the world. With the start of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011, Ankara went even deeper into the crisis, adapting its political approach to the new situation and using the refugee issue to build positive external relations with the EU and its member states. At the same time, the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey the deployment of Turkish forces in Syria, and the general status of refugees are constantly at the center of contemporary and global politics. This phenomenon was especially pronounced during the election campaign. Thus, in the elections held in May 2023, the refugee issue, that is, the issue of Syrian refugees living on Turkish soil, as well as Ankara's attitude towards Damascus and the Syrian issue in general was one of the main elements of the election campaign carefully followed by the citizens of Turkey, but also of Europe and the USA. Even then, analysts stressed that the position of refugees, along with government inflation and centralization, and the fallout from the earthquake that hit Turkey in February 2023, would determine the election's outcome. As a result, Syrian refugees became the 'target' of election campaigns.

In April 2023, Deutsche Welle (DW) published an analysis carried out among Turkish citizens on the situation of Syrian refugees and Turkey's general refugee policy. According to the results, almost 90% of Turkish citizens support the return of Syrians. The question is, however, to what extent this is possible because many Syrians[1] have lived in the country for more than ten years and Syria is no longer their homeland. The continuation of the open dialogue between Turkey and Syria is likely, but the opening gestures cannot be deepened in the short term. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), whose president is Recep Tayyip Erdogan, announced during the election campaigns that it would resolutely fight against illegal migration, and Erdogan himself clarified that during the new presidential term, as before, among other things, he would arrange for a voluntary and safe return of the Syrians. These views were closely followed by the citizens of Turkey, especially Erdogan's supporters in the pre-election period. When asked whether the party's policy towards refugees affects voters' voting behavior, "up to 60% percent of the participants answered 'yes'. (...). According to the Syrians Barometer, more than 88.5% of Turks want Syrian refugees to return, as do 85% of AKP voters."[2]

The second round of presidential elections in Turkey, held on May 28, 2023, represented a very sharp confrontation between Erdogan and his policy with his political opponent Kemal

[1] Deutsche Welle [DW], 2023.

[2] DW, 2023.

Kılıçdaroglu. Kılıçdaroglu is an economist and social democratic politician of the Republican People's Party (CHP). In mid-March 2023, amid widespread destruction caused by the earthquake that hit Turkey on February 6 with the greatest damage – material and human, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the holding of presidential elections in May, regardless of efforts followed in terms of recovery of the State, as well as its economic and social spheres.

A two years ago, in June 2022, Erdogan announced his candidacy and called on the leader of the largest opposition party, Kılıçdaroğlu, to follow suit. Kılıçdaroglu, who launched his campaign in March 2023, based much of his campaign on anti-immigration stance and policies. Therefore, it is clear that the political candidates in the Turkish primaries and their speeches proposed different ways to control the flow of Syrian migrants. Despite the different positions of the main candidates, it should be noted that the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has played an important role in managing the influx of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. However, the protracted conflict has negatively affected the country's political climate, leading segments of Turkish society and Western partners to disagree and criticize Erdogan's approach to the problem. For these reasons, the perception of refugees in Turkish society is changing. The aforementioned introductory categories are the basis of a contribution to the understanding and attempt to shed light on the current problem of Turkish society. The key questions we wanted to answer with this research were Turkey's current policy towards Syrian refugees is what steps Turkey has taken to improve their safety within its borders.

The study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of Turkey's policy towards Syrian refugees after the last elections. The research methodology used for this purpose included a careful review of selected reports and other relevant sources of information to draw evidence-based conclusions that provide valuable insight into Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. Due to the complexity of the refugee crisis and its impact on Turkish society, a holistic approach was necessary to understand the profound impact of this crisis on Turkish-Syrian relations, as well as on other countries in the region.

CROSS-SECTION OF THE SITUATION AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: POLITICS AND REFUGEES

Erdogan won the presidential election in Turkey, winning 52.14% of the vote. The re-election of the Turkish president "alleviated" the fears of many Syrians that Ankara's policy towards Syrian refugees could change drastically, as the opposition announced in its speeches and strategies. Erdogan's policy during his third term, which will last another five years, clearly

confirms that Ankara will continue to keep its troops in the northern parts of Syria. At the same time, the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey, currently estimated at more than 3 million, will reside there. Deutsche Welle (DW) states in its review and analysis that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is significantly higher, considering that "over 3 million refugees" are currently registered, not illegal ones or those with Turkish citizenship. According to official data, about 5.5 million refugees live in Turkey, among whom the largest number is by far those from Syria.[3] Khalifa and Waters (2023) point out that Ankara has been in talks with Damascus about restoring ties broken when war broke out and will continue to do so, but officials in Erdogan's new government see many national security concerns emanating from the country's southern neighbor. Therefore, in their opinion, a quick change of approach would be risky. The authors also point out that for the refugees, along with millions more displaced in northern Syria, the continuation of the status quo prevents, or at least delays, the reversal that would cause the end of [previous] Turkish policy [toward migrants][4]. However, this policy still leaves Syrian refugees in limbo, exposed to poverty, war, and the goals and conditions of Syria and Turkey. In his third presidential term, Erdogan has achieved a very stable and decisive position, which, however, requires facing numerous other challenges. The economic crisis in the country continues to be burdened by the attitude of the Turkish government towards Syrian refugees, which has been criticized by the voters of President Erdogan. In this regard, the move to prevent Sweden from joining NATO is very indicative. On the other hand, the joint statement of the three parties states that Sweden accepts Sweden's membership in NATO and undertakes to support efforts to revive Turkey's membership in the EU. At the same time, Ankara recalled its complaints and expressed its dissatisfaction.

Turkey's interest in this case is the liberalization of the visa system or at least greater concessions to Turkish citizens in this regard. As for Turkey's other demands, it scored a "major victory" by getting the US to promise that President Joe Biden's administration would support a long-delayed deal to sell modern F-16 jets. According to a political analyst, such a promise derives its strength from the fact that Biden has the power to make decisions without consulting Congress.[5] Khalifa and Waters (2023) argue that one of Turkey's main concerns about Syrian refugees is the cooperation between the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, Turkey-Russia relations need constant recalibration, especially in light of the standoff with Moscow's ally Damascus.

The constant war in Syria poses a huge package of risks and an opportunity for conflict in Turkey itself. The position of Turkey and its border with Syria and the distance from the border

[3] DW, 2023.
[4] Khalifa & Waters, 2023.
[5] Al Jazeera, 2023a.

itself, as well as its history, contribute to this. From a geopolitical point of view, the relationship between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PPK), "whose northeastern Syrian branch, better known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fought against ISIL, is particularly interesting.[6]" However, the presence of Syrian troops near the Turkish border is seen as a means to advance Turkish security interests, because it undermines the legitimacy of the US presence in the region. As such, this could force the Kurdish government to find a reasonable solution with Damascus, further reducing the risk of secession.

The current political climate in Turkey is characterized by a complex web of foreign policy challenges. In particular, the multinational military alliance composed of Arabs, Chechens, Kurds, and Turkmen receives financial support from the United States and certain NATO countries such as Great Britain and France. These efforts brought the ruling AKP party into direct conflict with the aforementioned alliance. As a result of this geopolitical situation, the president-elect must find a delicate balance between internal and external challenges, including the welfare of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.

Relations with the United States are at a critical juncture due to Washington's support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the Kurdish YPG. The Americans announced their withdrawal from Syria. They will be replaced by Arab forces from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, all three of which have very poor ties to Ankara due to its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East. The Americans did not even consult Turkey on that idea, which pushed Turkey out of the new Syrian architecture[7]. However, Arab rapprochement with Syria is a special challenge for Turkey's foreign policy, as it would limit Turkey's position in Syria, and thus the normalization process.

PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Khalifa and Waters (2023) note that the two pillars of Turkey's national security policy are preventing a further influx of refugees among the nearly 5 million displaced people living insecurely in northwestern Syria, and weakening or even breaking the control of the SDF (and thus the PKK). So, As Syria's neighbor, Turkey faces far grander risks than most Arab countries that have moved to rebuild ties with Damascus. There remain serious doubts that the Bashar al-Assad regime is willing or able to resolve both issues satisfactorily. Turkey was at the height of short-term politics from the beginning of the conflict until the civil war that followed, which only pushed the country deeper into the conflict. Like the Western powers, Ankara initially took a hard line against Assad and supported the rebels who ousted the Syrian leader. But later, when it

[6] Khalifa & Waters, 2023.
[7] Ibid.

became clear that Assad would survive, she prioritized dual goals. To deter the SDF, Ankara has launched four strikes against Syria since 2016[8]. Turkey has regularly carried out drone strikes against certain Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) targets, posing a serious threat to any possible intervention. With an estimated deployment of around 10,000 troops stationed in three different areas of northern Syria, Turkey has emerged as a highly influential actor that can set the direction of the ongoing conflict. In these constellations, the government in Damascus sees Turkey as the occupying power, while the SDF has its reasons for doing so. On the other hand, millions of exiled Syrians see the only way out of the brutal regime in the protection of the Turkish army, thus creating a delicate balance of power in the region that complicates the overall situation.

Aid deliveries to the Idlib region increased significantly after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck southern Turkey and northwestern Syria on February 8, causing extensive damage. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad opened two additional crossings from Turkey to increase aid to earthquake victims and extend their operation by three months from May to mid-August. However, none of the resolutions mention the crossings, which Vasilij Nebenzja, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, said will remain open for the time being[9]. Turkish troops stationed in Syria's northwestern Idlib province allow Ankara to abide by a 2020 ceasefire with Russia that has protected millions of people and stemmed the flow of refugees. It also allowed the former al-Qaeda affiliate Tahrir al-Sham, which is still designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations and many countries, to consolidate control of the region. In northern Aleppo, Turkish troops, police, and intelligence agencies monitor a Syrian faction known as the Syrian National Army, which has been widely accused of corruption and crime. Further east, Ankara occupies areas it won from the SDF in 2018 and 2019. The Turkish people do not welcome the deployment of Turkish troops in Syria and the influx of Syrian refugees. Citizen dissatisfaction with the country's immigration policy is growing, with many claiming that the presence of refugees does not bring any economic benefits to Turkey and only deepens existing divisions and poverty. The combination of economic crisis and nationalist sentiment in particular fueled anti-Syrian rhetoric during the presidential election, ultimately worsening the situation for refugees in the country. At the same time, experts point out that Turkey faces the threat of huge demographic changes because most refugees will not be able to return home due to political or other life reasons. The influx of Syrian refugees shows that its positive impact is mainly aimed at the informal economy.Verme and Schüttler (2021) show in their analysis that most estimates of employment and income outcomes are statistically insignificant. "When significant, decreases in employment and wages are more likely to occur than increases with decreases strongly

[8] Ibid

[9] Al Jazeera, 2023b.

[10] Khalifa & Waters, 2023.

associated with the short-term, middle-income countries, females, young and informal workers." [11]

Throughout history, military action has always played a crucial role in enhancing national power and garnering popular support. However, Turkish President Erdogan's policy towards Syria has made the Turkish people tired. The situation is exacerbated by a rise in xenophobia, which has prompted nearly all major political parties in Turkey to seek ways to "repatriate" Syrian refugees. President Erdogan advocated the "voluntary" return of the refugees, while the opposition proposed forced repatriation and the normalization of relations with the Syrian government through the return of the refugees. As a precautionary measure, President Erdogan therefore contacted the Syrian government.

"Turkish opposition parties went so far as to promise normalized relations with Assad to ease refugee return and reduce Turkish military involvement in Syria. Partly to deflate such arguments, Erdoğan himself began making public overtures toward Damascus in mid-2022, participating in a series of discussions hosted by Russia, later also attended by Iran. His perceived attempt at mending fences with the Syrian regime sparked alarm among Syrians in both Türkiye and northern Syria, who feared they would fall victim to a bargain between Ankara and Damascus."[12] The next municipal elections to be held in 2024 will certainly focus on the issue of Syrian refugees in Turkey. The current status quo, which was achieved by the victory of Erdogan in the last elections, leaves unanswered some big questions related to Turkish involvement in Syria, and thus the problem of Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as the future of the rebels and the areas controlled by Turkey. Thus, the deployment of Turkish troops prevented further regime offensives and established the autonomy of these areas around Damascus.

Khalifa and Waters (2023) state that Ankara now believes, and rightly so, that ceasing its deterrence role and allowing regime forces to return would likely push many more refugees into Turkey, with huge domestic political consequences. "Maintaining control of these areas indefinitely is politically and financially costly, but arguably less so than the alternative in the Turkish government's eyes.[13]" Turkey's fight with the SDF was also limited to measures to stop the war. Several members of the SDF, many of whom are linked to the PKK, which Ankara has been pursuing for years, have been killed in Turkish drone strikes in northeastern Syria. However, none of its military actions weakened the group's pressure on the territory or reduced its access to strategic resources, of which oil is the most important. Sometimes the attacks resulted in civilian casualties, which caused an international reaction. Moreover, some of the missiles fell alarmingly close to US forces in Syria and Iraq, further worrying and complicating Ankara's relationship with Washington. A possible Turkish ground operation, which Erdogan

[11] Verme & Schuettler, 2021.
[12] Khalifa & Waters, 2023.
[13] Ibid.

has repeatedly threatened, would probably achieve little more than pushing SDF and PKK fighters a few kilometers from the border.[14] Khalifa and Waters (2023) believed that Erdogan's re-election is likely to bring little change to Turkey's Syria policy. His victory appears to have been a source of relief for Syrians worried about the outcome of the rebels' victory. Meanwhile, those who support the administration and the FDS don't have much reason to celebrate. The Turkish government's priority in Syria remains unchanged: addressing the threat posed by the SDF and deterring regime attacks in Idlib that could lead to further moves against Turkey.

Moreover, it seems unlikely that Erdogan, even now re-elected, will articulate a long-term vision for Turkish policy in Syria, given the uncertainty of what the end of Syria might look like and the fact that Turkey, despite its influence, is not the only or even the most important player with the right voice. Therefore, in a way, Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons will be left on the hook. Although Ankara is unlikely to show much inclination to change its policy, it should be checked whether it can achieve some of its goals, especially related to the SDF, through diplomatic channels in Syria[15]. Inflation, the influx of refugees and the attitude of Turkish politicians towards it have only damaged Turkish society. This mainly affects the lower classes, who feel inflation the most. In his speeches, Kilicidaroglu announced that his policy would primarily target immigrants.

In this sense, he also planned to amend Turkey's refugee agreement with the EU and even build walls to prevent uncontrolled immigration. According to him, the decision to promote the visa regime in several countries should be reconsidered.[16] For years, anti-Syrian sentiments have been intertwined with anti-Erdogan sentiments of some secular segments of society, argues Donelli (2023). However, since 2019, the trend is gradually changing.

Many side effects of Turkey's inclusive policies have occurred, especially in the suburbs of major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. Donelli (2023) notes how the socio-economic pressure of the growing Syrian presence has worsened inter-ethnic relations and increased hostility towards the government's refugee policies. The growing dissatisfaction was a factor during the 2019 elections. The COVID-19 pandemic, the depreciation of the Turkish lira, and the resulting high inflation are factors that have worsened the attitude of the Turkish public towards refugees. In addition, many Erdogan voters have changed their attitudes towards government policies. For this reason, this issue became the most important in the political debate leading up to the presidential election."[17] "Kilicdaroglu's campaign further raised its anti-refugee tone by warning that the number of refugees and migrants could rise to 30 million. The rhetoric has led to an increase in xenophobic commentary, both online and in public, and an increasingly

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Deutsche Welle, 2023.
[17] Donelli, 2023.

uncomfortable environment for Syrians and other refugee populations."[18] Due to these reasons, as well as inflation and poverty, acceptance The number of Syrians in society is decreasing, and even the AKP is changing its view on the problem, considering that, after several years in Turkey, Syrian refugees are still in this country. More than 3.5 million Syrians currently living in Turkey benefit from temporary protection. In addition, 100,000 people hold valid residence permits. Some 200,000 to 300,000 people were granted Turkish citizenship. So almost four million in total. According to Erdogan, the number of illegal refugees is about 400,000.

They are mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Africa. In addition, approximately one million refugees are awaiting deportation to their home countries. [19] Many Syrians have lived in Turkey for more than 10 years. Their children go to school and their adults have jobs, although most of them are employed illegally. "As the parties claim, it is impossible to return them in a few years (...). In addition, almost 900,000 children were born in Turkey to parents from Syria, but Syria is not their homeland."[20] Furthermore, many Turkish, Syrian, and Kurdish families have roots on both sides. According to Akbulut-Yüksel et al. (2022) the influx of Syrian refugees "increased crime in regions with high refugee intensity, and the increase is associated with congestion in the lower segment of the Turkish labor market." [21]

International organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities have implemented several other labor markets in the context of integration policies, such as entrepreneurship, skills acquisition, trades, and other training and qualification programs. Some of them are specially designed for women and young people. However, for Tumen (2023), most of these efforts "remained small and local, and coordination with the central government is not particularly strong. Therefore, these efforts have not significantly improved the overall environment for work and integration into the labor market."[22] Unfortunately, cases of conflict against immigrants are frequent, and this is especially true for Syrian refugees.

After the earthquake in the region, many Syrians were accused of theft and robbery, which led to an increase in violence and physical confrontations directed at them. Due to this hostile environment and the woes of poverty, many Syrian refugees find their security in Turkey increasingly endangered. As a result, more and more Syrians are leaving Turkey for Europe, where they want more security and stability. Indeed, this alarming situation highlights the need for further assistance to these vulnerable populations and should involve not only the Turkish but also the European Union and other international actors. However, there are also differences of opinion. In this context, Imrie-Kuzu, D. and Özerdem, A. (2023) state that "whilst the state of

[18] Verme & Schuettler, 2021.
[19] Khalifa & Waters, 2023.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

precarity negatively impacts Syrian refugees in Turkey, an increasing number of scholars suggest that Syrians are integrating well in that country due to cultural similarities and relatively 'liberal' refugee policies."[23]

These views are confirmed by Erdogan's speech to the citizens gathered at the meeting in Ankara, in which he points out that the sending of around 500,000 refugees to briquette houses in the north of Syria has already begun, and that the construction of houses for one million refugees continues. Also, he added that they are working with Qatar on a project to build houses that can accommodate a million refugees.[24] Recently, President Erdogan expressed his readiness to start talks with Syrian President Assad. However, Assad has made it clear that such talks will only take place if Turkey agrees to withdraw its forces from Syrian territory. Despite this, many experts believe that Erdogan is unlikely to seek to normalize relations with Assad in a way that threatens Turkish interests, especially after recent elections. As the situation develops, it remains to be seen how these two leaders will fare in this sensitive geopolitical landscape.

The Carter Center's latest report on Turkey highlights four specific roles the country must play to address the plight of Syrian refugees, especially in light of recent elections. First, Turkey has significant control and influence over much of Syria, giving it the ability to create a buffer zone that can also serve as a destination for Syrian refugees. Turkey has a great deal of control over the region, with Turkish companies and government ministries taking on a range of tasks, from building hospitals to establishing a postal service. Second, tens of thousands of Syrian militants remain part of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in northern Syria. These fighters could face a lack of protection if these areas are returned to Turkey. Third, Ankara's main focus in Syria is the suppression of the PKK and SDF. Turkey sees the SDF as controlling the PKK and posing a threat to its security. The Carter Center report highlighted concerns that the PKK/SDF could create an independent Kurdish region in Syria, which would inspire similar action in Turkey. Fourth, the possibility of the return of Syrian refugees remains a key point of contention between Turkey and the Syrian government. While Turkey wants to facilitate the return of refugees, many are reluctant to do so, citing concerns about their safety, poor economic conditions, and ongoing instability. Also, the Syrian government may not be ready to accept them due to Syria's difficult economic situation, which makes it difficult to house a large number of returnees. In addition, many people in the Syrian government associate the refugees living in Turkey with the opposition. [25]

The political, economic, and strategic conditions are expected to contribute to motivating the Turkish government and Damascus to continue the policy of normalization.

[23] Imrie-Kuzu & Özerdem, 2023.
[24] Anadolu Agency, 2023.
[25] The Carter Center, 2023.

During the elections, Erdoğan promised to solve the refugee problem, because it is primarily a security, economic and geopolitical necessity. But a potential failure could undermine the AKP's future power. Therefore, normalizing relations with Damascus and quick solutions for the return of refugees should be a priority for the new Turkish government.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

Since the outbreak of armed conflicts in the Middle East, the refugee crisis has become a major problem not only in Turkey but also globally. In this context, Syrian refugees have had a significant impact on internal relations and political debates in Turkey for years. However, the strong earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023, especially contributed to such a situation, confronting the Turkish government with new challenges and problems related to Syrian refugees. Refugee rights and policies were among the most contentious issues in Turkey's parliamentary elections in May 2023. While Erdogan's proposed approach represented a modification of his earlier stance on refugees, his opposition opponent had a clear anti-refugee policy. As a result, the fate of the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey was highly uncertain, and the outcome was closely watched by Turkish citizens and the entire world.

Erdoğan's victory created a more favorable situation for Syrian refugees in Turkey regarding the positions held by the opposition, mainly through negotiations with the Syrian government in the context of maintaining the status quo and the safe return of refugees. But the question is how much normalization will be achieved, especially since Turkey needs to be relieved of the burden of refugees. Also, there are other possibilities, such as a return to conflict, especially if one side takes military action to achieve its goals. At the same time, other factors, such as Russian pressure on the Turkish government and Damascus, could strongly influence future developments, potentially increasing the role of the Arabs.

The refugee crisis has a special depth with no end in sight. Historically speaking, the main cause of the crisis is Iran and Saudi Arabia, that is, the constant conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis. In this protracted conflict for regional hegemony, interference by the West and Russia against or in favor of one side or the other would only further destabilize the region. Therefore, a joint analysis would be a possible solution to the fundamental problems in the region, primarily the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Kurdish issue, water resources, gas flow... However, such a solution requires the participation of all major actors in the region, primarily Turkey. In other words, the solution to the refugee crisis and the creation of a new Middle East must come primarily from Syrian society. [26]

[26] Džogović, 2018.

In recent years, Turkey has faced various internal security challenges, including terrorism and Kurdish separatist movements. These events can significantly influence the country's foreign policy decisions. Therefore, the government's main focus is often on addressing internal security issues, which can influence its decisions in regional and international activities. At the same time, Turkey faces tensions with Western countries, particularly the United States and some European Union member states, arising from various issues such as disagreements over regional conflicts (such as Syria and Libya), human rights issues, and arms purchases. This level of cooperation or confrontation with Western powers could also have significant implications for Turkey's foreign policy choices.

Turkey is working hard to increase its influence in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This is evident through its involvement in conflicts such as Syria and Libya, as well as through its efforts to expand economic and diplomatic ties with neighboring countries. This quest for regional influence may have implications for regional stability and global power dynamics, confirming Turkey's central role in Syrian politics. The role of Turkey in international relations will be shaped by a variety of factors, such as ensuring domestic security, fostering positive relationships with Western nations, advancing regional influence, and addressing the concerns of some European nations regarding its increasing power. How these dynamics evolve will undoubtedly impact Turkey's foreign policy decisions and its level of significance and influence on the global stage.

GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES OF POST-ELECTION TURKEY: THE ISSUE OF REFUGEES FROM SYRIA

SUMMARY

Due to its geostrategic position, Turkey has taken in a large number of Syrian refugees since 2011. As a result, the country currently has the largest number of refugees in the world, which has had significant repercussions for domestic and foreign policies, as well as the socio-economic situation. Turkey's 2023 election campaign focused on the Syrian refugee crisis, with Erdogan and the opposition presenting their approaches to solving the problem. The outcome of the elections had a far-reaching impact on millions of Syrian refugees, drawing enormous attention from both the Turkish public and the international community as a whole. This media-based qualitative study examines the implications of Turkey's policy on Syrian refugees, particularly in the context of the May 2023 elections. The study analyzes the current status of refugees in Turkey

and the attitude of the Syrian government towards them. It examines the changing positions of Turkey's new government and provides a comprehensive understanding of the region's complex political dynamics and current challenges. Erdogan's re-election appears to have ended his willingness to negotiate with Damascus, suggesting he remains skeptical that Damascus will be able to solve its key problems, particularly its ability to stem PKK attacks from northeastern Syria if Turkey withdraws its troops. However, as the 2024 municipal elections approach, it is clear that Erdogan's Syria policy will once again be in the spotlight. The stakes will be high for all political actors, and the outcome of the election could have a major impact on the future direction of Turkish foreign policy. The study concludes that one of the key factors influencing Turkey's anti-refugee attitude is the host society's concern about the current impact of refugees on the country's economic, social, and cultural structure. The results of this study also show that, in addition to internal factors, other factors can strongly influence the future direction of Turkish policy toward Syrian refugees. In particular, the inadequate solution to the refugee problem at the global level, the unstable influence of the EU, but also other international aspects, including the interests of Russia, are emphasized.

Keywords: 2023 Turkish Presidential Election, Turkish Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Refugee Crisis, Syrian Refugees in Turkey.

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