



# PERSPECTIVES

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## What Biden's Victory Means for Turkey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** If Joe Biden remains loyal to his pre-election rhetoric, he might punish Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey with a slew of sanctions for buying critical weapons systems from Russia and helping to weaken US sanctions on Iran. But Biden's history with Erdoğan gives mixed indicators of how he might deal with Turkey's increasingly authoritarian leader. Biden will not be able to opt for a pragmatic approach to Ankara completely free of concerns over civil liberties and human rights—Turkey's ever-widening democracy deficit makes that impossible. But Erdoğan's team can "buy" a new *modus operandi* with Washington under Biden.

From the first day of the US presidential race, pro-Erdoğan media and pundits vocally supported the incumbent even though Donald Trump's planned design for the Middle East, including Arab-Israeli normalization, clashed with their Islamist, anti-Israeli, pro-Hamas militant *raison d'être*. "Devil you know" thinking fails to fully explain that support, especially as Trump was widely viewed as an anti-Islamic racist. Why, then, would Turkey's Islamists side with a pro-Israeli, allegedly Islamophobic US president? Because they viewed a prospective Biden administration as potentially devastating to the Erdoğan government.

When in 2019 a perfect storm was expected in Turkey's relations with the US, Trump confounded expectations by warmly [praising](#) Erdoğan shortly before his state visit to Washington with generous words. "He's a friend of mine, and I'm glad we didn't have a problem because, frankly, he's a hell of a leader, and he's a tough man," Trump said. "He's a strong man, and he did the right thing and I really appreciate it, and I will appreciate it in the future."

## Favors from Trump

The meetings in Washington went much better than expected, despite several deeply problematic dossiers. They ended with an exchange of compliments and paved the way for Trump to put off the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which would have imposed [sanctions on Turkey](#) at a time when its economy was on the brink of collapse.

The sanctions garnered massive support in Congress after Turkey insisted it would activate a Russian-made long-range air and anti-missile defense system on its soil. Washington feared that activation of the S-400 system would compromise US and NATO aerial military assets stationed in Turkey. Trump apparently did not share this fear. And as it turned out, there was more to his generosity to Turkey's Islamist strongman than sidestepping the CAATSA.

It eventually surfaced that Erdoğan had been pressing Trump for months to quash a [criminal investigation](#) into a Turkish state lender—an investigation that threatened not only the bank but members of Erdoğan's family and political party. Halkbank was being probed on charges that it had undercut Trump's policy of economically isolating Iran, a centerpiece of his Middle East plan. Without Trump's help, Halkbank could have been slapped with sanctions worth several billions of dollars. And it still can—unless Joe Biden morphs into another Erdoğan fan at the White House.

Biden's history with Erdoğan gives mixed signals as to the possible future direction of his dealings with an increasingly authoritarian leader.

As VP, Biden paid four official [visits](#) to Turkey between 2011 and 2016. His portfolio with Erdoğan contained difficult dossiers like northern Syria, the fight against ISIS, and US military and logistical support for Kurdish fighters. But Erdoğan got his much-wanted go-ahead for a military [incursion](#) into northern Syria from Trump, not his predecessor, in October 2019. Turkish troops have deployed there, tensely neighboring Kurdish troops who are viewed by Ankara as terrorist forces and by Washington as allies.

Erdoğan often accused the Obama administration of strengthening one terror organization to defeat another. He complained of “thousands of trucks” full of arms the US administration purportedly sent to Kurdish fighters in Syria in order to fight ISIS. With Biden at the helm, Erdoğan will have reason to worry about closer bonds being forged between Washington and Syrian Kurds.

## **Biden's Vision for Greece**

Biden's political career features support for groups and countries Turkey has traditionally viewed with hostility. In October, the Biden campaign published a "[Vision for Greece](#)" official statement that made these points:

Joe has long opposed the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus and supported a comprehensive settlement to reunify the island as a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality. In 2014, he visited the island, the first sitting Vice President to do so in more than 50 years, and led White House diplomatic engagement on the Cyprus question.

Joe recently called on the Trump Administration to press Turkey to refrain from further provocative actions in the region against Greece, including threats of force.

Joe has long been a strong supporter of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and given unwavering support for the ability of the Patriarchate to function in its role as the center of the Greek Orthodox Church. He treasures his visit in 2011 to the Patriarchate and each of his meetings with His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. He has called on Turkey to permit the reopening of the Halki Seminary and criticized the recent decision of the Turkish government to convert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Joe Biden has always been a friend of the Greek-American community, in Delaware and around the country. He is grateful for the longstanding support of the community.

Joe Biden will work with our close ally Greece to advance stability in the eastern Mediterranean.

Unlike President Trump, Joe will call out Turkish behavior that is in violation of international law or that contravenes its commitments as a NATO ally, such as Turkish violations of Greek airspace.

## **The Armenian Genocide**

Another traditional fault line on the Washington-Ankara axis is the Armenian genocide issue. In April 2020, Biden [vowed](#) to officially recognize the 1915 Armenian genocide if elected to the White House, a move past presidents have avoided for years. "If elected, I pledge to support a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide and will make universal human rights a top priority for my administration," he wrote in a post. The genocide issue

will probably become the first stress test for US-Turkish relations under Biden as in April 2021 Armenian diaspora groups will remind him of his commitment (April 24 is Armenian Genocide Commemoration Day.)

Erdoğan's ambitions in former Ottoman lands from Iraq and Syria to eastern Mediterranean and Libya, military tensions with Greece, acquisition of former Soviet weapons systems, and rhetoric claiming an aspiration to "liberate Jerusalem to make it a Muslim capital" will all pose serious challenges to the new US president should he choose to be pragmatic with Turkey rather than ideologically hostile. But Russia deserves to be a special dossier.

### **Transactional Opportunism and Russia**

As pragmatism and diplomacy often win out over sentiment even in times of difficult relations, Biden may try to build a *modus operandi* with Erdoğan based on transactional opportunism. This means that despite theoretical negatives, it might be possible to reset relations. But Erdoğan's deep commitment to Russian president Vladimir Putin on scores of geo-strategic matters, including critical military equipment like the S-400 system (and likely future cooperation on the more advanced S-500 system), the Russian effort to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant, and Turkey's dependency on Russian natural gas may all make a new Turkish-US *modus operandi* immensely difficult to work out.

Biden [views](#) Russia as the biggest threat to America's security. Ideally, he and his team will have Turkey as an ally and integral partner in countering Russian and/or Iranian power games in the region. But even though it is a Sunni state and a NATO ally, Turkey is both too Muslim to play that part against Shiite Iran and too committed to Russia to be useful to America.

### **Support for Turkish Opposition**

Biden may prefer to pursue a less pragmatic policy on Turkey. It was a bombshell in Turkey when [video](#) of a *New York Times* interview with Biden from December 2019 surfaced this year. In the video, Biden repeatedly says he is "very concerned" about developments in Turkey, calling for "a very different approach" to Erdoğan by "engaging" with elements of the Turkish opposition leadership as he did during his vice presidency. "We can support those elements in the Turkish leadership that still exist and get more from them, embolden them to be able to take on and defeat Erdoğan," Biden said, "not by a coup," but via the electoral process.

Biden cannot opt for a pragmatic paradigm with Turkey that is completely divorced from concerns over civil liberties and human rights. Turkey's

ever-widening democratic deficit makes that impossible. *Freedom House* has put Turkey on its list of “[not free](#)” countries in its 2020 assessment. Some of the other countries in Turkey’s [grouping](#) are Afghanistan, Angola, Belarus, Brunei, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, North Korea, Nicaragua, Qatar, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. According to the *World Justice Project*, Turkey [ranks](#) 107 out of 128 countries on rule of law. And according to *Reporters Without Borders*’ [press freedom ranking](#) Turkey is 154<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, scoring worse than Pakistan, Congo, and Bangladesh.

Former Republican Congressman Vin Weber [said](#):

The problem is not just that Biden has a different attitude toward Turkey but that he made an issue of it occasionally in the election. He criticized Trump for in his words ‘coddling dictators’ and mentioned Erdoğan among others...

Biden is almost compelled to take a bit harder line toward relations with Turkey, but he is not going to rupture. There are basic things that will prevent him from making matters much worse. One, of course, is security relationships.

Will it be a blend of pragmatism and ideological caution, then? It's too early to say. But earlier dealings between Biden and Erdoğan suggest that Biden’s anti-Erdoğan rhetoric may fade, and a good working relationship could conceivably develop between the new president of the cradle of democracy and the Islamist wannabe sultan.

“Biden’s election will not change relations between Turkey and the US,” [said](#) Turkish VP Fuat Oktay. “It’s only a matter of a period of transition.”

In a 2014 diplomatic rift between Turkey and the US, then-VP Biden officially [apologized](#) to Erdoğan for remarks suggesting that Turkey helped facilitate the rise of the radical terror group ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In earlier remarks, Biden said Erdoğan had admitted erring in allowing foreign jihadist fighters to cross Turkey’s border into Syria, eventually leading to ISIS.

In August 2016, Erdoğan [received](#) another apology from VP Biden for not having visited Turkey immediately after a failed coup the previous month. On a visit to Ankara, Biden offered Turkey America’s “absolute and unwavering support.”

A senior Turkish diplomat agreed with the way Biden-sceptics viewed Trump’s often successful negotiating tactics. “I’d agree with the argument that Trump, a *sui generis* politician, talked friendly and acted tough although

his support for Erdoğan's government sometimes went beyond 'talking friendly,'" the diplomat told me in a telephone conversation.

Erdoğan's team may already be aware that they can "buy" a new *modus operandi* with Washington under Biden. "It is typical that rhetoric dominates an election race. But afterward facts on the ground will take prominence," said Turkish VP Oktay.

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