

Turkey and the Return of Trump

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Starting from November 6, 2024, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly congratulated "his friend Donald Trump" on X¹ for his victory, referencing the "struggle" Trump had undertaken to be "re-elected." The language and tone of this reaction immediately echoed the personal closeness the two men had displayed during Trump's first term, reinforcing the idea that a new era was beginning for Turkish-American relations, following the prevailing sense of stagnation during Joe Biden's presidency. However, in recent months, Turkey has adopted a cautious approach to the U.S. elections², stating its readiness to work with whoever emerged victorious. Indeed, Erdoğan was one of the few heads of state to phone the Republican candidate³ after the first attack Trump suffered during the summer. Yet, as was the case during Trump's previous election, several indicators suggest that Turkey's satisfaction primarily stems from the hope that the new presidency will not be worse than the previous one, rather than a belief that it will be significantly better. This is especially true as Donald Trump's election comes at a time when Turkey is experiencing a period of uncertainty.

Domestically, despite their victory in the 2023 general elections⁴, Erdoğan and the AKP appear increasingly destined for decline. Over the past year and a half, the Turkish economy has been reoriented by traditional measures, notably the central bank's key interest rate, which was abruptly raised from 8% to 50% and has been maintained at this level even more recently⁵, under the guidance of Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek. Despite slight and recent improvements—such as the stabilisation of inflation and the halt of the depreciation of the national currency—the Turkish economy has not returned to the prosperous years that had long kept the AKP in power, following its early electoral successes at the turn of the millennium.

¹ « Turkish president congratulates Trump on apparent presidential election victory », *Anadolu Anjansi*, November 6, 2024 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/2024-us-presidential-election/turkish-president-congratulates-trump-on-apparent-presidential-election-victory-/3385919>)

² SOYLU Ragip, "Trump or Harris? Turkey's can't decide which would be best", *Middle East Eyes*, November 1, 2024 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-harris-turkey-government-cant-decide>)

³ MARCOU Jean, « Après sa réélection, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commence un troisième mandat présidentiel », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, June 7, 2022 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2023/06/07/apres-sa-reelection-recep-tayyip-erdogan-commence-un-troisieme-mandat-presidentiel/>)

⁴ MARCOU Jean, « Après sa réélection, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commence un troisième mandat présidentiel », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, June 7, 2022 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2023/06/07/apres-sa-reelection-recep-tayyip-erdogan-commence-un-troisieme-mandat-presidentiel/>)

⁵ AKIN Ezgi, « Turkey's Central Bank holds interest rate at 50% », *Al-Monitor*, November 21, 2024 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/11/turkeys-central-bank-holds-interest-rate-50>)

In March 2024, during the local elections, the ruling party suffered its first true electoral defeat⁶, not only failing to regain the key metropolitan cities of Ankara and Istanbul, which it had lost in 2019, but also being decisively outpaced at the national level by the Kemalist CHP, the leading opposition party. The resulting challenge is not an easy one for the man who has governed Turkey for 22 years, as he now faces the task of halting the inexorable rise of the opposition, while also finding a way to amend the Constitution to allow him to run for the presidency again in 2028. Given the growing discontent, many believe that early elections could further accelerate this perilous deadline.

On the international stage, after its successes in mediating the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and demonstrating its ability to balance a bold stance between Kyiv and Moscow, Turkey has struggled to find its place in a Middle East shaken by the reactivation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since October 7, 2023. Marginalised in attempts to resolve this crisis, it has ultimately found itself caught between two sources of tension—on the Black Sea and in the Eastern Mediterranean⁷—that perpetuate a lasting instability, which is hardly conducive to the recovery of its economy.

In this context, Erdoğan's initial optimism following the announcement of the U.S. presidential election results was not enough to bridge the deep sense of perplexity into which the prospect of Trump's return had plunged not only the leaders but also the Turkish political class and society at large. However, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime changes the situation and represents, in many ways, a silver lining for Turkey that must be taken into account, even though the consequences of this event remain uncertain⁸. Beginning with an analysis of the diplomatic and political affinities between the Turkish and American leaders (1 & 2), this article focuses on two key issues—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian crisis, and the related Kurdish question—that could generate renewed conflict between the two countries (3 & 4). It then examines the future of their recurring disagreements (5) and assesses what might bring Ankara and Washington closer together, should a resolution to the war in Ukraine materialise (6).

⁶ MARCOU Jean, « Défaite de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan et de l'AKP aux élections locales en Turquie : le début d'une nouvelle ère », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, April 2, 2024 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2024/04/02/defaite-de-recep-tayyip-erdogan-et-de-lakp-aux-elections-locales-en-turquie-le-debut-dune-nouvelle-ere/>)

⁷ MARCOU Jean, « La mer Noire espace d'expression du potentiel stratégique de la Turquie », *Moyen-Orient*, N°64, October-December, 2024, p. 34 à 39.

⁸ MARCOU Jean, « L'embellie syrienne de la Turquie », interview par CHAIGNE-LOUDIN Anne-Lucie, *Les Clés du Moyen-Orient*, December 12, 2024 (<https://www.lescledumoyenorient.com/Entretien-avec-Jean-Marcou-L-embellie-syrienne-de-la-Turquie.html>)

1. Trump-Erdoğan Affinities: Can They Save an Inconsistent Bilateral Relationship?

A simple examination of the frequency of presidential meetings during the terms of Donald Trump and Joe Biden offers a clear picture of the nature of the relationship that Turkey's president has been able to establish with them. Erdoğan met with Trump in one-on-one meetings nine times between 2017 and 2020, while since 2021, he has been able to meet Biden only four times, and even then, only on the margins of international summits. In May 2024, a planned visit by the Turkish president to the White House was even canceled⁹, after Erdoğan had hosted Ismail Haniyeh, one of the leaders of Hamas, in Istanbul just two weeks prior. It should be noted that the arrival of Joe Biden in office inevitably reminded Erdoğan of the painful memory of the previous Democratic administration, in which Biden had been vice president. The second term of Barack Obama, which had begun under favorable conditions, had turned into a nightmare for Turkey due to both the Syrian crisis and its Kurdish implications, as well as the U.S. refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen, whom Ankara considers responsible for the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Given this context, for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump's presidency could hardly have been worse than the previous one. However, other factors need to be considered to understand the affinities between the two men.

This primarily involves, of course, the personalities and backgrounds of both men¹⁰. Donald Trump's unexpected victory, his populism, his criticism of elites, his claim to represent the forgotten masses of the ruling circles, his instrumentalisation of religion, his unapologetic bias, and his demonisation of the opponent could not fail to win the sympathy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as they reminded him of his own personal experience and some of his own practices. This political brutality, unconcerned with form and appearances, was immediately understood by Erdoğan, who himself is less comfortable with the approach of democratic presidents who attempt to balance ethics and statecraft in their strategic decisions.

This understanding was, in fact, immediately reciprocal. In the spring of 2017, the new American president was among the first leaders to congratulate the AKP leader¹¹ on his victory in the constitutional referendum that transformed Turkey into an authoritarian presidential regime, while most European leaders expressed concern about the future of Turkish democracy. However, it later became clear that this political affinity did not prevent disagreements from arising and escalating into a merciless confrontation. Thus, a year later, Donald Trump, seeking to capture the evangelical vote in the midterm elections¹², did not hesitate to impose severe economic sanctions on Turkey¹³ (freezing the assets of two Turkish ministers, increasing tariffs on Turkish products, etc.) to pressure it into releasing the American

⁹ ZAMAN Amberin, « Turkey postpones Erdogan's White House visit », *Al-Monitor*, April 24, 2024 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/turkey-postpones-erdogans-white-house-visit>)

¹⁰ GRAHAM David A. « What's so bad about Trump calling Erdoğan ? », *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/erdogan-trump/523362/>)

¹¹ DEWAN Angela, "Trump congratulates Erdoğan for referendum win", *CNN*, April 18, 2017 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/18/europe/turkey-referendum-trump-erdogan/index.html>)

¹² "Trump using Brunson to rally evangelical votes: report", *Anadolu Ajansı*, August 18, 2018 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trump-using-brunson-to-rally-evangelical-votes-report/1234574>)

¹³ SHAHEEN Kareem, "Turkey vows response to US sanctions imposed over jailed pastor", *The Guardian*, August 2, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/02/us-sanctions-turkey-jailed-pastor-andrew-craig-brunson>)

pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been arrested and sentenced as part of the purges following the 2016 coup attempt due to his alleged ties to the Gülen movement.

2. An Affinity Tempered by the Volatility of American Inconsistency and the Concerns of Turkish Public Opinion

The recognition of the fragility of the personal relationship between the two men leads one to believe that the Turkish leader's alignment with Trumpist positions is also tactical, if not opportunistic. In power since 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have extensive experience in managing relations with Washington, having navigated through two Republican presidencies and two Democratic ones, each marked by the unpredictable nature of American diplomacy. In September 2024, in New York, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, while negotiating the reimbursement of the advance invested in the F-35 production program (from which Turkey had been excluded for purchasing Russian S-400 missiles), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his disillusionment with the United States¹⁴: "My hope is that the next presidency will not be worse than the previous one... Both Republicans and Democrats have disappointed us. We will see if this continues in the future." Thus, behind the publicly displayed sympathy toward the American billionaire, there also seems to be a resignation shaped by experience.

Moreover, an overly strong sympathy toward Trump is likely to increase the unpopularity of the Turkish government in a country that, weary of its leaders' illiberal tendencies, longs for a return to the rule of law. Recent opinion polls indeed indicate a fatigue with conservative values (such as a decline in women wearing the veil¹⁵, the rise of consumerist urban secularism¹⁶ among the youth¹⁷ distancing them from religious practice and even beliefs, and a rejection of the political instrumentalization of Islam¹⁸). Turkish public skepticism toward Donald Trump is also rooted in a long-standing undercurrent of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism dating back to the Cold War. However, this does not translate into genuine sympathy for Russia, despite the relations established by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with Vladimir Putin. In this sea of

¹⁴ GOCUMLU Burcu Calik « Turkish President Erdoğan hopes for positive post-election relations with US, eyes F-35 reimbursement », *Anadolu Ajansı*, September 26, 2024 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-erdogan-hopes-for-positive-post-election-relations-with-us-eyes-f-35-reimbursement/3342813>)

¹⁵ « La question du port du voile agite la classe politique », *France Culture*, 31 décembre 2022 (<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-reportage-de-la-redaction/la-question-du-port-du-voile-agite-la-classe-politique-turque-3864708>)

¹⁶ SOYLU Ragip, « La jeunesse turque de plus en plus laïque et moderne sous Erdoğan », *Middle East Eye*, March 21, 2019 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/en-bref/la-jeunesse-turque-de-plus-en-plus-laique-et-moderne-sous-erdogan-selon-un-sondage>)

¹⁷ "What has changed in youth in 10 years (20108-2018)?" *Konda Interaktif*, April 5-6, 2018 (<https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/rapor/what-has-changed-in-youth-in-10-years/12#firstPage>)

¹⁸ "Türkiye'de Kimlikler: Din, Ekonomi ve Siyaset, 2024 Değerler Araştırması », *ASBV (Ankara Sosyal Bilimler Vakfı)* 2024 (<https://www.sosyalbilimlervakfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/TURKIYEDE-KIMLIKLER-DIN-EKONOMI-VE-SIYASET-V2.pdf>)

distrust toward the outside world, a recent survey shows that Europeans remain the most appealing¹⁹ to respondents (particularly the youth), despite their rejection of Ankara's EU accession bid. Indeed, if Trump were able to broker peace in Ukraine, as he has promised, he might win the favor of some Turks, who have always been concerned with prolonged crises and conflicts at their borders. Nonetheless, fundamentally, Trump's return to power could prove very problematic for Turkey, and the close relationship between Trump and Erdoğan will not be enough to overcome their differences in their approach to the geopolitics of the Near East.

3. Erdoğan's Turkey and Trump's America: Opposites on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The first issue that comes to mind is, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The crisis of October 7 quickly undermined a growing rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. Since then, although formal diplomatic relations have not been severed, the diplomatic ties between the two countries have effectively ceased, and their concrete connections have significantly deteriorated.

Domestically criticised by the opposition for maintaining an ambiguous relationship with the Israeli state²⁰—combining harsh condemnations with the continuation of lucrative trade exchanges—Turkish leaders have sought to challenge the economic ties that had long served as a crutch for the deficient diplomacy between the two countries. In addition, Turkey has been highly active in international forums and networks to condemn Israel's position. Moreover, Turkey has called on the international community to recognise the State of Palestine and has praised countries that have done so, such as Spain, Ireland, and Norway in May 2024, and even Armenia in June of the same year, despite the lack of official diplomatic relations with that country. Finally, Ankara has joined South Africa in filing a genocide complaint against Israel before the International Court of Justice.

A further deterioration in Turkish-American relations cannot be ruled out if new, dramatic initiatives in favor of Israel are taken by Donald Trump and his inner circle. In this regard, the appointment of Mike Huckabee as U.S. ambassador to Israel caught attention in Turkey²¹. It is noteworthy that this is the first time the position has not been given to a Jewish American; Huckabee, an evangelical Christian, is closely aligned with conservative Israeli circles that are staunchly opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state. During Trump's first term, Ankara had not hesitated to declare his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel as "unacceptable," but the Middle Eastern conflict was then much less sensitive and central. Now, Turkey feels

¹⁹ CLANCY Laura, POUHTER Jacob & HERNANDEZ RAMONES Sofia, « How people in Turkey view international affairs », *Peer Research Center*, October 16, 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/10/16/how-people-in-turkey-view-international-affairs/>)

²⁰ MARCOU Jean, "Turquie-Israël. La persistance d'une relation ambiguë", *Orient XXI*, March 11, 2024, (<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/turquie-israel-la-persistance-d-une-relation-ambigue.7107>)

²¹ "Trump picks pro-settlement Mike Huckabee as US ambassador to Israel", *TRT*, November 14, 2024 (<https://www.trtworld.com/us-and-canada/trump-picks-pro-settlement-mike-huckabee-as-us-ambassador-to-israel-18231506>)

directly involved in the latest developments in the region. In the fall of 2024, during his opening speech for the parliamentary session, Erdoğan even wondered whether his country might not become Israel's next target²². More realistically, the Turkish government fears that the ongoing Israeli airstrikes and offensives might destabilise its neighbors (particularly Syria, Iraq, and Iran) and do not trigger new migratory flows that would strengthen persistent discontent with it

4. The Syrian Crisis and the Related Kurdish Issue: A Major Concern for Turkey Since Donald Trump's Election

However, the issue that is by far the most crucial for Turkey before Donald Trump²³'s inauguration is the Syrian crisis and the associated Kurdish question. While Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed optimism about the policy the new American president could pursue, it is likely that he remembers the U.S. special forces' withdrawal from supporting the Kurdish YPG militias, a process that Trump initiated in 2019, and hopes that this will resume in 2025. However, it cannot be forgotten that this situation also led to a serious diplomatic incident between Ankara and Washington. While Erdoğan took advantage of the American disengagement to launch a military offensive against these same militias in Syria, Donald Trump, in a memorable letter²⁴, urged him to exercise restraint (literally "not to play tough and not to be an idiot") and, recalling the Brunson affair, did not hesitate to threaten to "wipe out the Turkish economy."

In this case, it must also be noted that due to the reactivation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the strategic situation has evolved. In the new geopolitics of the Middle East, the Kurds, particularly the Syrian Kurds, have emerged as an important support point, even true allies, for the Americans. And even though they do not claim any particular ties with Israel, the Israeli state has now openly called on them to establish such links²⁵. Additionally, the appointments²⁶ of Florida Senator Marco Rubio to head U.S. diplomacy and National Guard veteran Mike Waltz as national security adviser have further complicated the situation. Rubio had expressed concern in 2019 about Trump's abandonment of the Kurdish militias, and it was likely him who

²² "Israel's next target will be Türkiye, Erdoğan says", *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 1, 2024 (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/israels-next-target-will-be-turkiye-erdogan-says-201105>)

²³ « How Turkey is preparing for Trump 2.0 », *The New Arab*, November 14, 2024 (<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-turkey-preparing-trump-20>)

²⁴ "Read Trump's full letter to Turkey's Erdoğan: Don't a tough guy, don't be a fool!", *PBS News*, October 16, 2019 (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/read-trumps-full-letter-to-turkeys-erdogan-dont-be-a-tough-guy-dont-be-a-fool>)

²⁵ « Israel foreign minister calls for ties with Kurds and other minorities in the Middle East », *Middle East Eye*, November 11, 2024 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-foreign-minister-calls-kurds-minorities>)

²⁶ BOURCIER Nicolas, « Ankara des prises de position passées de l'entourage de Donald Trump », *Le Monde*, November 16 2024 (https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/11/16/ankara-s-inquiete-des-prises-de-position-passees-de-l-entourage-de-donald-trump_6396785_3210.html)

convinced Trump to dissuade Erdoğan from attempting to exploit the situation. Waltz, for his part, has repeatedly shown his strong support for the Kurdish militias in Syria, prompting the Turkish daily *Hürriyet* to react to his appointment, describing him as a "PKK-YPG fan²⁷." These elements collectively paint the scenario that not only the Turkish government but also the entire Turkish political class has feared since the beginning of the Syrian crisis: the emergence of a shared border stretching from the Qandil Mountains to the Idlib enclave, with the PKK becoming a recognized regional actor and relying on the strongholds it has established (Qandil, Sinjar, Rojava...) in the territory of the failed states of Iraq and Syria.

It is clear that the fall of the Ba'athist regime reshuffles the cards in a very favorable way for Turkey, as it contributes to isolating the Kurds. Of course, this depends entirely on how the new rulers of Damascus approach the Kurdish issue in the new Syria and what their relationship will be with the entities governing Rojava (SDF-PYD-YPG). Already, it is observed that while some factions (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) have prioritised dialogue, others (the Syrian National Army, closely aligned with Ankara) have not hesitated to forcibly expel the Kurds from the Manbij district, fulfilling a long-standing Turkish ambition dating back to its first military intervention in Syria in 2016²⁸. It is worth noting that as it reopens its embassy in Damascus and moves closer to the new Syrian leaders, the Turkish government has resumed the stance it adopted at that time, positioning itself as a hero in the fight against "all terrorists," whether jihadists (ISIS) or Kurds (SDF-PYD-YPG)²⁹, and increasingly reproaching the United States for maintaining its special forces in Rojava.

5. The Future of Recurring Stalled Issues

Beyond the thorny Syrian issue, one might wonder what will become of several long-standing, unresolved issues. One of the primary concerns is Turkey's renewal of its combat air fleet. Recall that during Trump's presidency, Turkey was excluded from the F-35 production and acquisition program due to its purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles. This next-generation aircraft, which Turkey had ordered about 100 of, largely paid for, was intended to provide Turkey with air forces that aligned with its ambitions. Under President Biden, Ankara reluctantly strengthened its fleet with F-16s, managing to secure the possibility of acquiring 40 of these planes and modernising 40 others³⁰, albeit after having to agree to Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. However, this compromise only partially meets Turkey's

²⁷ « Dış politikaya şahin atamalar : Trump'a PKK dostu güvenlik danışmanı », *Hürriyet*, November 13, 2024 (<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/dis-politikaya-sahin-atamalar-trumpa-pkk-dostu-guvenlik-danismani-42590371>)

²⁸ MARCOU Jean, «L'armée turque exclue de la bataille de Mossoul », *OVIPOI-IFEA*, October 18, 2016 (<https://ovipot.hypotheses.org/14572>)

²⁹ DİNCEL Serdar, « Türkiye acting carefully to ensure Daesh-ISIS, PKK terrorists do not exploit post-regime Syria: Foreign Minister », *Anadolu Ajansı*, December 8, 2024 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-acting-carefully-to-ensure-daesh-isis-pkk-terrorists-do-not-exploit-post-regime-syria-foreign-minister/3418087>)

³⁰ MARCOU Jean, « Les États-Unis acceptent la vente de nouveaux F-16 à la Turquie », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, February 7, 2024 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2024/02/07/les-etats-unis-acceptent-la-vente-de-nouveaux-f-16-a-la-turquie/>)

expectations, which has recently turned toward the *Eurofighter*³¹, proposing to purchase about 40 units, while awaiting the ability to produce its own aircraft, the *Kaan*. This option is not finalised, as Germany has recently lifted the veto³² it had imposed on the sale, but negotiations are still in their early stages. Meanwhile, the S-400s purchased by Turkey have never been activated, raising the question of how Trump will approach this issue, as he had blamed his predecessor for the F-35 debacle. In any case, the matter is far from resolved, with the two countries currently negotiating the repayment of Turkey's advance payment.

The second issue concerns Greek-Turkish relations. Although these relations are currently experiencing an exceptional phase of détente, the underlying problems (implementation of maritime law in the Aegean Sea, the status of the Dodecanese, the Cyprus issue, sharing gas resources, and delineating exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean) remain unresolved. In this regard, it is worth remembering that in 2020, the final months of Trump's presidency were marked by heated exchanges between Turkey and the United States³³, with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo being accused by Ankara of losing his neutrality as a mediator due to his perceived partiality. Now, it is the future U.S. Secretary of State who worries the Turks³⁴. Marco Rubio has previously made his pro-Greece stance clear, notably being one of the key proponents of the *EastMed Act*, which in 2021 lifted the U.S. arms embargo on Cyprus³⁵ that had been in place for decades. His nomination has caused alarm not only within the Turkish government but also among the broader political class, especially as Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus have hardened their stance, now insisting that the Cyprus issue can only be negotiated on the basis of recognizing two states. Devlet Bahçeli³⁶, the leader of the far-right MHP, a member of the ruling coalition, and someone who often vocalizes what Erdoğan privately thinks, expressed his concern in November 2024. He declared in front of his parliamentary group that Trump would have to decide "whether he respects international law" or chooses "to ignore Turkey's sovereign rights."

³¹ « La Turquie voulait le F-35, elle va maintenant obtenir le chasseur Eurofighter Typhoon », *Turquie News*, October 16, 2024 (<https://www.turquie-news.com/la-turquie-a-recherche-le-f-35-et-maintenant-il>)

³² « Germany took a step toward clearing Turkey's Eurofighter jet buy, Turkish official says », *Reuters*, November, 2024 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-took-step-toward-clearing-turkeys-eurofighter-jet-buy-turkish-official-2024-11-14/>)

³³ SMITH Helena, « Mike Pompeo in Greece amid tensions with Turkey over gas reserves », *The Guardian*, September, 2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/28/mike-pompeo-due-in-athens-amid-spiralling-tensions-between-greece-and-turkey>)

³⁴ KOKKINIDIS Tasos, « Turkey alarmed by Marco Rubio's Pro-Greece and Cyprus Stance », *Greek Reporter*, November 13, 2024 (<https://greekreporter.com/2024/11/13/turkey-rubio-greece-cyprus/>)

³⁵ KAMPOURIS Nick, « US Congress Ends Decades-Old Arms Embargo on Cyprus », *Greek Reporter*, December, 2019 (<https://greekreporter.com/2019/12/18/us-congress-ends-decades-old-arms-embargo-on-cyprus/>)

³⁶ BOURCIER Nicolas, « Ankara s'inquiète des prises de position passées de l'entourage de Donald Trump », *Le Monde*, November 16, 2024 (https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/11/16/ankara-s-inquiete-des-prises-de-position-passees-de-l-entourage-de-donald-trump_6396785_3210.html)

The final issue concerns the future of the Gülen movement in the United States. The recent death (on October 20, 2024)³⁷ of Fethullah Gülen, the immensely wealthy imam, once a supporter and then a sworn enemy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who voluntarily exiled himself to Pennsylvania in 1999, does not eliminate a potential source of conflict between the two countries, particularly between Erdoğan and Trump. After the AKP came to power, in addition to infiltrating the high ranks of the Turkish administration, which was hostile to the new government, the movement effectively neutralised the influence networks held by the secular politico-military establishment in the United States. Though weakened by the repression it now faces in Turkey and some of its areas of influence (such as Africa), the movement retains its resources and nearly intact ability to act in the United States. It is highly likely that it will continue to leverage these, especially considering the positions taken by prominent figures within the movement, such as NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom³⁸, who appears to have supported Donald Trump in the most recent election.

6. Hopes for Stabilising the Ukrainian Crisis

Last but not least, the war in Ukraine appears to be the issue on which Erdoğan and Trump could converge most swiftly and effectively. Certainly, Turkish leaders immediately condemned the Russian "special operation" in Ukraine, calling it a violation of sovereignty and an affront to international law. However, they quickly announced their refusal to apply the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian crisis has allowed Ankara not only to demonstrate its ability to maintain a precarious balancing act between East and West but also to showcase its considerable skills in mediation³⁹.

Turkey has thus succeeded in securing Russia's agreement to resume Ukrainian grain exports under its auspices and that of the UN, through a secure corridor in the Black Sea. While this "grain initiative," launched in July 2022, was denounced by Russia a year later, it continues in practice, as Moscow lacks sufficient operational capabilities in this maritime space to put an end to it. It should also be noted that from September 2022 onwards, Turkey facilitated several successful prisoner exchanges between the two warring parties, and in August 2024, it played a key role in what was described as the "largest prisoner exchange between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War⁴⁰," with those released passing through Ankara's airport.

³⁷ JEGO Marie & PIERRE Angèle, « Mort du prédicateur turc Fethullah Gülen, ancien allié du président Erdoğan devenu son pire ennemi », *Le Monde*, October 22, 2024 (https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/10/22/deces-du-predicateur-turc-fethullah-gulen-ancien-allie-du-president-erdogan-devenu-son-pire-ennemi_6358061_3210.html)

³⁸ NISE Jake & RASKIN Alex, Enes Kanter Freedom declares support for Donald Trump despite previous bashing of his ally Elon Musk", *MailOnline*, November 15, 2024 (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/nba/article-14088067/enes-kanter-freedom-supports-donald-trump-elon-musk.html>)

³⁹ MARCOU Jean, « L'été chaud de la diplomatie turque », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, September 13, 2022 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2022/09/13/lete-chaud-de-la-diplomatie-turque/>)

⁴⁰ JÉGO Marie & LEPARMENTIER Arnaud, « L'échange de prisonniers entre l'Occident et la Russie, le plus important depuis la chute de l'empire soviétique », *Le Monde*, August 2, 2024,

With these achievements, Erdoğan, who can engage with both parties, believes he possesses significant leverage to play a role in the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict, a process often discussed by the incoming American president.

In this regard, on November 20, 2024, Erdoğan expressed regret that President Biden had decided to authorise Ukrainians to use long-range missiles against Russia⁴¹. Peace in Ukraine would undoubtedly serve Turkey's economic interests, but it could also impose less favorable trade-offs. One of these could be the prospect of facing a resurgent, superpower Russia in the Black Sea, particularly as the ongoing conflict since 2022 has weakened Moscow in this maritime space, with Turkey having blocked the passage of its warships through the straits. Another challenge might be the need to silence its support for the Crimean Tatars. However, Erdoğan has demonstrated his ability to navigate such compromises, notably by moderating his stance on the Uyghur issue in recent years to win favor with China. Additionally, the fall of the Syrian regime has weakened Russia and removed the threat posed by a regime closely allied with Moscow on Turkey's southern border.

As a conclusion...

On November 12, 2024, while returning from Baku, where he had attended COP29, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tempered his initial optimism about Donald Trump's return to power, acknowledging that some "messages" from the new presidential team were "concerning." However, he also stated that it was too early to draw definitive conclusions, continuing to believe that the changes shaping international relations could be beneficial for Ankara. The shift that occurred in Syria at the beginning of December 2024, which ended Bashar al-Assad's regime, proved him right.

At this point, and in the context of Trump's potential return to power, Turkey's perspective can be summarised by two main sentiments. The first is cautiously optimistic, based on the observation that the regional situation cannot get worse. Thus, the current president's desire to end ongoing conflicts (even though his approach remains unclear) deserves consideration, especially given that the recent developments in Syria provide Ankara with new advantages⁴². However, the second sentiment is characterised by concern, stemming both from Donald Trump's well-known positions on the Middle East and from a series of negative signals, particularly the appointment of presidential advisors who, in the past, have had profound disagreements with Turkey or have shown outright hostility toward it.

(https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/08/02/l-echange-de-prisonniers-entre-l-occident-et-la-russie-un-succes-diplomatique-au-gout-amer_6264733_3210.html)

⁴¹ « Erdoğan warns of 'new, bigger war' after US missile decision", *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 20, 2024 (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-warns-of-new-bigger-war-after-us-missile-decision-202826>)

⁴² « Türkiye, US to hold key talks on 'new Syria'", *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 11, 2024 (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkiye-us-to-hold-key-talks-on-new-syria-203513>)