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The Syrian Case in the Turkish Elections

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First: Introduction

Turkey will hold presidential and parliamentary elections on June 24. The elections were originally due in November 2019; however, President Erdoğan announced early elections last April.

Although Turkey has witnessed several elections entitlements during the past decade, the forthcoming elections are perhaps the most important in Turkey's modern history. The president elect will assume power based on the new authorities approved in the referendum in April 2017. After the elections, the country will transfer to a political system unlike the previous political system in place since the foundation of the republic.

Turkey's Supreme Court released a list of six candidates on May 13, 2018. The six candidates running in the elections are: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (AKP), Muharrem İnce (CHP), Meral Akşener (IYI), Selahattin Demirtaş (HDP), Temel Karamollaoğlu (Felicity) and Doğu Perinçek (Patriotic).

The Syrian case, with all its dimensions and ramifications, is, directly or indirectly, present in the elections. It is believed that the Turkish military's quick victories in Afrin were originally a main cause for holding early elections as President Erdoğan wanted to transform the victories into results in ballot boxes.

But the presence of the Syrian case in the elections is generally underrepresented in comparison to its presence in Turkey's foreign policy and the actual presence of Syrians in Turkey.

This report examines the presence or absence of the Syrian crisis in presidential candidates' speeches, surveys the dimensions presented as well as attempting to analyse the reasons these particular dimensions were presented and analyses the effect of the Syrian crisis on both voters and candidates.

Second: The Position of the Syrian case in Turkey's political scene

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, it has been present in the Turkish scene, and gradually shifted from being a foreign affair in a neighboring country, that requires accurate addressing on the part of Turkish politicians, to a part of the local scene. Not only has Syria become a part of the Turkish scene, but also Turkey has become part of the Syrian scene.



Since mid-2011, Syrians refugees began seeking refuge Turkey. The first cases were registered on June 7, 2011 when a group of 122 people arrived in Turkey. Most of them fled from Jisr al-Shugur to Kerboz village in Hatay in southern Turkey as the Syrian military carried out an extensive campaign on Jisr al-Shugur. The number of Syrians fleeing to Turkey had reached 8500 by the end of second week of June 2011. The accelerated influx of Syrians arriving in Turkey led the government to build the first refugee camp to house 5000 people in Altınözü in Hatay province in the first week of June 2011. However, the camp was filled in the first few day as the number of Syrians who took refuge in Turkey reached 8500 by the second week of June. The continued influx resulted in the building of the second camp in the area of Yayladağı.

The number of Syrians refugees in Turkey continued to increase until it reached 3.579.254 registered refugees with UNHCR at the beginning of June 2018. Thus Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees and the largest number of Syrian nationals outside Syria thus acting as the biggest host of refugees in the world.¹

These figures do not include Syrians residing in Turkey under status other than refugee or refugees who are not registered with UNHCR. Adding these people to the calculations, can increase the number of Syrians in Turkey to nearly 5.000.000.

The Turkish government not only adopted an open-door policy for refugees, but also offered generous support for refugees. The Turkish policy in dealing with refugees was distinguished in that it did not push refugees to stay in camps, it provides state aid and does not depending on INGO's aid².

Politically speaking, Turkey gradually became the main supporter for the Syrian opposition especially after other supporters withdrew from the scene. With the launch of the Astana Talks at beginning of 2017, and the stop of the Geneva Peace Talks on the other hand, Turkey became the sole guarantor for the political and armed opposition forces in Syria except for southern Syrian region.

¹ Operational Portal: Refugee Status, UNHCR, 7/6/2018: <https://goo.gl/KfESgF>

² Turkey's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Road Ahead, The World Bank, December 2015: <https://goo.gl/DgYw9i>



The Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) reaching the northern regions in 2014 and the International Coalition supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to fight ISIS, pushed Turkey to undertake direct military intervention in Syria. Turkey launched the Euphrates Shield operation on August 24, 2016, which was the first direct Turkish intervention in Syria. The operation ended on March 29, 2017 with the expulsion of ISIS from around 3000 Km² of Aleppo countryside.

The Turkish forces launched another military operation in Afrin to fight the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) on January 21, 2018. The operation ended with full Turkey control of the Afrin area in less than two months after the start of the operation.

In addition, the Turkish military began setting up observation points in Idlib province based on de-escalation deal brokered in the Astana negotiations in October 2017.

The Turkish opposition does not completely endorse the Justice and Development Party (AKP) policies regarding the Syrian crisis especially when it comes to the issue of refugees, the AKP's stance on al-Assad, and the AKP's relationship with the Syrian opposition. However, the AKP's stand against ISIS (the Euphrates Shield operation) and against the YPG (Operation Olive Branch) received great support from the Turkish political opposition.

The Syrian crisis continuously appeared in the Turkey's political scene in recent years and especially in the run up to the June election. Several opposition parties particularly the Republican People's Party (CHP) are noted to have hostile attitudes towards refugees, they made demands on the government to stop supporting the Syrian opposition and called for the re-normalize relations with al-Assad regime.

Third: The Syrian Case in Candidate Campaigns

The Syrian crisis was present to varying degrees in the speeches of the different candidate as for President Erdoğan, the issues related to the Syrian crisis are heavily present, they are nearly absent in Selahttin Demirtaş's speeches.

The following section will review the most prominent topics discussed by the six presidential candidates concerning the Syrian crisis since the start of the election campaigns until the publication of this report.

1. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Topics concerned with the Syrian case were significantly present in President Erdoğan's election campaign speeches. Almost all of his election speeches hint to these issues. In the following, we will review the most prominent topics Erdoğan addressed in his election campaign.

He declared that, "Some Syrians speak fluent Turkish, but I noticed that some of them work illegally. That's why we will grant them Turkish citizenship to allow them to work legally. Turkey will benefit from Syrians' expertise after they are naturalized. They have varied expertise and there are doctors, engineers and experts in different fields among them".³

The Kurdish case

On June 15, 2017, Erdoğan said, "We have demolished the terrorist corridor north of Syria and now we are bombing Qandil Mountain. We are saying to those who claim to be our friends: if you are real friends, do what should be done. And if you cannot find a solution, we will do so. We will have good news for you in the following days".⁴

In an interview with TV Channel 7 and Ülke TV on June 16, 2018, Erdoğan denied that any compromise was reached to leave the area east of Euphrates to those he called "terrorist organizations".⁵

On June 8, 2018, in an address to the Turkish military, Erdoğan said, "You crushed ISIS in the Euphrates Shield operation, you crushed (YPG) terrorists in the Olive Branch operation and now you are tightening grip on (PKK) terrorists in the Iraqi mountains. Why do you do all of this? It is for one people, one flag, one state and one homeland. This homeland was bequeathed to us by our ancestors and we will bequeath it to future

³ Erdoğan: We will naturalize Syrians to help them work legally in our markets, Turk Press, 4/5/2018:<https://goo.gl/wQKD9E>

⁴ We demolished the terrorist corridor north of Syria, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 15/6/2018:<https://goo.gl/NepGLg>

⁵ President Erdoğan hosted at Channel 7 and Ülke TV, 08/6/2018:
<https://goo.gl/2xFrCK>



generations. In the way we are proud of our ancestors today, future generations will be proud of you.”⁶

The Situation in Idlib

In response to the Russian air raids on Idlib towards the end of Ramadan, President Erdoğan said that Turkey is trying to establish peace in Idlib and that, “He does not know if the Syrian regime and Russian bombing will lead to a new wave of refugees from Idlib.” He added, “We are trying to prevent residents in the city of Idlib from being harmed and prevent a new refugee wave towards the Turkish borders. We are continuously in communication with Russia and Iran concerning this issue.”⁷

War on Qandil

During the last days of May, President Erdoğan began speaking about a campaign to target Qandil Mountains although the mountains are geographically located inside Iraqi territory. For Turkey, the mountains are directly connected with the situation in areas controlled by Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria.

On June 5, 2018, President Erdoğan said, “Today we fight the terror in its source before it arrives to us, like we did in Syria, Afrin and Jarablus. And now we will go in northern Iraq to Sinjar if that is necessary to do what needs to get done. And we have started to take the necessary steps to drain the other terrorist swamps after Afrin.”⁸

In another speech on June 11, 2018, President Erdoğan said he is seeking to drain the “biggest terrorist swamp” and added, “Whether the opposition agreed or not, we will drain the terrorist swamps in Qandil Mountain in Iraq from the herds of killers as we have done in Afrin, Jarablus, al-Bab, and Izaz in Syria. We will work to end this issue even if this annoys the supporters of the terrorist organization and its political extension.”⁹

⁶ Places shake wherever our faith-driven brave military step, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 6/8/2018: <https://goo.gl/HFN7nW>

⁷ Erdoğan performs Eid prayer in Istanbul, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 15/6/2018 <https://goo.gl/aDv1h3>

⁸ If necessary, we will intervene to do what needs to be done, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 5/6/2018 <https://goo.gl/eoRGVx>

⁹ We will drain terrorist swamps in Qandil Mountain, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 11/6/2018 <https://goo.gl/Jh36gN>



On June 11, 2018 he also said, “The children of Syria continue to live in terror. They do not know when the bombs will fall on their homes, streets and schools. And terrorist organizations move freely in Syria.”¹⁰

Stand on al-Assad

On June 11, 2018, Erdoğan said, “The masks fell one after another off the faces of those who want democracy for themselves only.” In a criticism of the opposition party leader he said, “He says we have no more friends left outside.... But if al-Assad is your friend, then keep walking with him. We do not have such friends. Our friend cannot be an oppressor. We continue to walk with the just ones.”¹¹

2. Muharrem İnce

Over the past few years, CHP have repeatedly called for the return of Syrian refugees to Syria and for Turkey to stop receiving any more Syrians. Since he announced his candidacy, Muharem İnce has been repeating this stance in his election speeches and interviews.

In an interview on May 25, 2018, Muharrem İnce promised voters that in the event he wins the election, he will close all the border crossings with Syria and prevent Syrians going to spend Eid in Syria from returning to Turkey. He said, “If you can go, stay and return again, then why do not you stay there? Why do you come back? Do you come to spend a holiday here? This is unacceptable. When they leave to Syria for holidays, I will close the door and they will stay there. Is Turkey a soup house?”¹²

Also, in an interview on May 28, 2018, when asked if al-Assad was a “red line” for him İnce responded, “I don’t particularly feel sympathy or hatred toward him. But there should be no room in when managing a state to get angry with anyone. The person who rules Turkey should not act emotionally.” He stressed the need to preserve Syria’s territorial integrity and that a new constitution should be adopted. He confirmed the necessity for elections to be held under U.N. monitoring with the participation of

¹⁰ Pressures on Muslims increase day after day, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 11, 6, 2018:<https://goo.gl/YCjkWt>

¹¹ Pressures on Muslims increase day after day, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 11, 6, 2018:<https://goo.gl/YCjkWt>

¹² CHP’s campaign promise: Syrian refugees will be sent back, Daily Sabah, 30/5/2018:<https://goo.gl/EtZNxn>

Syrians abroad. He added, “Luckily Syrians living in Turkey will return to their home after this structure is established.” He also expressed that he has no desire to spend 40 Billion dollars on Syrian refugees.¹³

On May 30, 2018, in an interview with the Russian Sputnik News Agency, İnce said, “The commitment to a friendly, good neighborly policy toward Russia is a natural issue with respect to Turkish foreign policy, and negative consequences emerge if it is abandoned. We can see it, particularly in Syria and we can (in the presence of good ties with Russia) solve the Syrian crisis and other related problems in a faster and easier manner. Russia and Turkey are in favor of Syria's territorial integrity. When I become president, I will send an ambassador to Damascus immediately.”¹⁴

Moreover, on June 13, 2018, İnce said that if elected, “We will reinstate diplomatic relations with Syria immediately. We will do everything necessary to prepare the grounds for the return of the 4 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey whose hearts are full of joy and hope for their country.”¹⁵

3. Meral Akşener

Meral Akşener, the (IYI) Party candidate, shares the same stand as the CHP candidate, regarding Syrian refugees. She repeatedly calls for returning them to Syria and promised that if elected that she will return Syrians to Syrian in her first year as president.

On May 7, 2018, in a gathering for her election campaign in Mersin City in southern Turkey, Akşener said, “I promise you from here that Syrian refugees in Turkey will have Iftar in Ramadan 2019 with their brothers in Syria.” She said that Syrian refugees’ presence in Turkey has a negative

¹³ CHP presidential candidate İnce says he might talk to Assad if elected, Hurriyet Daily News, 28/5/2018:

<https://goo.gl/iZ5MF6>

¹⁴ Turkish Opposition Presidential Hopeful Wants to Restore Relations With Syria, Sputnik News, 30/5/2018:

<https://goo.gl/1Wj6L8>

¹⁵ We would immediately establish diplomatic ties with Syria: Muharrem İnce, Mehr News Agency, 13/6/2018:

<https://goo.gl/qDe56V>

effect on economy and claimed that the wrong policy Erdoğan has followed has doubled the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey.¹⁶

On May 14, 2018, Akşener said, “If you act like a real government, you would not be swallowed by a wave of migrants. There would not be Afrin and there would not be waves of refugees. We will act according to a foreign political plan that will call for Iftar in Ramadan in Syria in 2019.” She also declared she is working on a new policy towards refugees saying, “Everyone is happy when they are in their homeland.”¹⁷

In an election rally in May 31, 2018, Akşener said, “We will certainly send our Syrian brothers to their home after fixing our ties with Syria.”¹⁸

4 . Temel Karamollaoğlu

Temel Karamollaoğlu, the candidate of Felicity Party (Saadet) avoided talking about the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey and only addressed the Syrian issue by criticizing Turkey’s role in what he called “serving the imperialist project” in Syria and other places.

Karamollaoğlu said that Turkey played an important role in tragedies revealed in neighboring Iraq and Syria and that unfortunately Turkey serves the imperialist project in Libya, Iraq and Syria.¹⁹

On May, 20, 2018, when asked about his stand on the Syrian crisis, he responded, “We have announced our position towards Syria from the very beginning of the crisis. First of all, it should be noted that there is no problem that the Islamic countries cannot solve through dialogue. But imperialism and Zionism have occupied Muslims in fighting one another and they are exploiting the existing crises.”²⁰

¹⁶ Turkey’s presidential candidate vows to repatriate Syrian refugees if elected, Middle East Monitor, 7/5/2018:

<https://goo.gl/eVsUQB>

¹⁷ İYİ Party’s Akşener hints at sending Syrian immigrants back home, Turkish Minute, 14/5/2018:

<https://goo.gl/Mci1tR>

¹⁸ Fate of Syrian refugees hot election topic in Turkey, al-monitor, 8/6/2018:

<https://goo.gl/goi9Px>

¹⁹ Karamollaoğlu: Irak’ta, Suriye’de yaşanan acılarda vebalimiz çok büyük, Gazete duvaR:

<https://goo.gl/EjcVVX>

²⁰ Increasing cooperation with region must be Turkey’s top priority, Mehr News Agency, 20/5/2018:

5. Doğu Perinçek

Perinçek called for improving relations with the Syrian regime and expressed his readiness to receive al-Assad personally in Ankara if he is elected.

Perinçek said that, “The military operations to clean up terrorist organizations supported by the US and Israel in Syria and northern Iraq will end with a victory.”

He also said, “In order to protect the territorial integrity of Turkey and Syria, we will continue to negotiate with the Syrian regime, and we will be committed to proceed through joint action.” He added, “As soon as I take office, I will invite Bashar al-Assad to Ankara. I will meet with him at the airport. In this way, we will improve bilateral ties with Syria, which is a key actor in Turkey's relations between Iran, Russia and China.”²¹

6. Selahattin Demirtaş

Selahattin Demirtaş did not address the Syrian crisis in any of his interviews and election speeches. In any case, these have been few as he is still detained.

Four: The effect of the Syrian Case on the Elections

Without a doubt, the Syrian case has become a key topic of interest for decision makers in Turkey. Regardless of who will win the presidential election, this will not change due to three important considerations:

1. **The geographical consideration:** Around 5 million Syrians reside in Turkey (this is the largest concentration of Syrians living outside Syria).
2. **The security and military consideration:** Turkey is fully in charge in the Euphrates Shield and Afrin regions and it is present as observer in Idlib. Turkey also neighbors on the Autonomous Administration region that acts as a direct security threat to Turkey.

<https://goo.gl/DV1QB1>

²¹ Turkey's presidential election: where candidates stand on foreign policy, TRT World, 29/5/2018:

<https://goo.gl/J3VdxU>

3. **The political consideration:** Turkey has become a fundamental partner in the Astana Process and it also represents the Syrian opposition's last international supporter.

But for the Turkish voter in general, the Syrian issue overlaps with their direct interests due to demographic considerations with the social and economic effect it has on Turkish voters' lives. Also, some voters are concerned with the Kurdish political and military entity in Syria and have a negative or positive stand regarding this entity.

It is noted that in their election campaigns, Muharrem İnce and Meral Akşener attempted to address the fears of a segment of Turkish voters towards Syrian refugees' presence in Turkey. Both tried to offer promises to return refugees to their country. President Erdoğan also promised to return refugees but did not express it in a strict and peremptory manner. In contrast, the remaining candidates avoided addressing the issue of refugees' in their campaigns.

Regarding ties with Syria, İnce and Perinçek vowed to restore relations with the Syrian regime to the point that Perinçek promised to personally receive al-Assad at the airport if elected. However, in general, this discourse does not seem to be attractive to voters. Hence, İnce addresses the matter quite shyly in his speeches and the issue is completely absent from the speeches of the remaining candidates.

It must also be noted that the five candidates with the exception of Erdoğan did not present the military accomplishments achieved in Euphrates Shield operation and in Afrin. Akşener only criticized what she considered wrong policies that led to the need for the Turkish government to intervene in Afrin.

The main candidates did not comment on the Turkey's developing foreign policy role nor did they promise to limit it. Although a large segment of Turkish voters do not agree with the AKP policies, but Turkey's status abroad attributed to its developing military, political and economic role beyond its borders is received well by Turkish voters and enhances voters' national pride.

Temel Karamollaoğlu was the only exception in this regard as he stigmatized Turkey's foreign intervention in participating in creating



tragedies plotted by Israel and part of an imperialist project. The comments align with the classic Felicity Party discourse.

In general, it is observed that the Syrian case was a marginal topic for the five candidates with the exception of Erdoğan despite the Syrian case being central in Turkey domestic and foreign policy. This disparity can be explained in relation to the Turkish voters' general perception of a positive Turkey role in Syria which led the president to focus on what voters perceive as military and political victories. In turn, this approach led the remaining candidates to avoid addressing the Syrian issue.

It is expected that the Turkish-American endorsed deal regarding Manbij - which was signed in Washington on June 4, 2018 and was implemented by Turkish soldiers patrolling Manbij vicinity on June 18 - will have a positive effect for the AKP and Erdoğan in the ballot boxes. The deal can be considered a testimony to the Turkish government's capability to manage relations with Washington and its ability to achieve field victories in its endeavors to limit Kurdish (YPG) influence in the northern regions of Syria.



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