



# Supporting Democracy and Human Rights in Turkey: Can the United States and Europe Do More?

Amy Hawthorne, Merve Tahiroğlu, and Zachary White • March 2022

## SUMMARY

- Turkey's 2023 elections are a crucial opportunity to reverse the country's authoritarian trajectory, but electoral integrity is under threat. Meanwhile, Turkey's ongoing economic meltdown is exacerbating its governance and human rights crises.
- Turkey's democratic allies in the United States and Europe should demonstrate greater solidarity with members of Turkey's human rights community and pro-democracy civil society as they navigate this pivotal period. Doing so would advance these countries' stated values as well as their strategic interests.
- To extend support more effectively, the United States and Europe should craft a more consistent, better coordinated, and higher-level focus on human rights and democracy in Turkey.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the United States and European democracies have watched with dismay as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

has reversed Turkey's once-promising democratization process and turned its government into a leading violator of human rights. Erdoğan has centralized power, removed checks and balances, politicized key



Demonstrators participate in a rally at Istanbul's Boğaziçi University on International Women's Day, March 8, 2021. Photo: Boğaziçi Women+ Rights Solidarity Twitter account

institutions like the judiciary and election commission, promulgated numerous repressive laws, and imprisoned peaceful opposition figures, civil society activists, and journalists—all while fueling an ugly nationalism and conducting a more aggressive foreign policy. Despite occasional statements of concern, however, Turkey's Western allies too often have sidelined democratic values in favor of a transactional approach to dealing with Erdoğan. Now, as the United States and European governments seek to cooperate with Erdoğan against Russia's attempt to crush democracy and human rights in Ukraine, they must not lose sight of the threat that Erdoğan poses to democracy and human rights in Turkey.

To discuss why U.S. and European support of human rights and democracy in Turkey matters more than ever and how this support can be more effective, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) convened an **expert panel** in December 2021, featuring **Osman İşçi** of Turkey's Human Rights Association (IHD), **Merve Tahiroğlu** of POMED, and **Özge Zihnioğlu** of Liverpool University. This Policy Brief summarizes the panelists' key remarks.

### WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY MATTER?

Some Western officials may be fatigued by dealing with Erdoğan on rights and democracy issues and pessimistic about the prospects for democracy in Turkey. Yet, the panelists asserted, Turkey's democracy is not a lost cause: This authoritarian slide can be reversed and democratization can resume—and external actors can play a positive role in the process.

For one thing, democrats and human rights advocates in Turkey are resilient. İşçi observed that, despite significant repression under Erdoğan, many civic actors in Turkey—women's rights defenders, LGBTQ+ activists, journalists, academics, lawyers, labor activists, politicians—continue fighting for human rights. For another, Tahiroğlu added, opposition to Erdoğan's regime and support for democratization are growing among the public, especially as citizens associate the current economic crisis with Erdoğan's one-man rule. Public opinion polls show Erdoğan's popularity dropping as he faces crucial elections scheduled for 2023. Zihnioğlu

remarked that significant opposition victories in the 2019 municipal elections show that elections are still meaningful in Turkey and can produce a democratic change of government. Rather than giving up on democracy in Turkey at such a pivotal moment, she said, Europe and the United States should increase their support for democratic actors, values, and processes.

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A more democratic and rights-respecting Turkey is in the interest of the United States and Europe for several reasons, the panelists said. Tahiroğlu pointed to Turkey's significance in the global struggle against authoritarianism, a stated priority of the Biden administration. Turkey is an important member of multilateral institutions that are at the frontlines of this struggle, such as NATO, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe. Unfortunately, Erdoğan's disdain for democratic values has harmed these institutions' core principles and internal cohesion; a democratizing Turkey, in contrast, would be a more effective partner to push back against authoritarianism in Europe. Zihnioğlu made a similar values-based case for why the European Union (EU) should push harder for democracy and human rights in Turkey. How the EU handles these issues in Turkey is closely related to the EU's identity, she explained. If the EU wants to be seen as an organization that stands for democratic and human rights norms, it must stand up for them in Turkey. When the EU sidelines these values in favor of other interests, it sends a message to not only Erdoğan but also to other authoritarian leaders that the EU is willing to bend its principles.

Zihnioğlu pointed to other reasons why European countries should have an interest in a more democratic Turkey. EU member states cooperate with Turkey in a range of sectors, from trade to security, and it is in their interest to work with a leadership in Turkey that follows the rule of law and is accountable to its citizens—conditions that are enabled by democratic governance. Erdoğan's turn toward authoritarian rule has involved building closer ties with authoritarian governments that are adversaries of many EU members, a development that undermines common interests and cooperation between Turkey and European democracies.

### TOP CONCERNS

In outlining what human rights issues the United States and European governments should prioritize in Turkey, İşçi described the erosion of the rule of law and judicial independence as fundamental. But, he argued, the economic crisis is the most urgent rights problem facing the country today, because it exacerbates other pervasive problems, such as youth unemployment, domestic violence, and violations of workers' rights.

Other key rights issues include women's and LGBTQ+ rights, especially following Erdoğan's 2021 decision to withdraw Turkey from the [Istanbul Convention](#), the most important international treaty on combating gender-based violence. The Kurdish issue is also crucial, İşçi contended, as it is intimately related to other major problems, including the shrinking space for political and civic activism and violations of freedom of expression. Finally, İşçi said, Turkey's human rights community is focused on defending the integrity and fairness of the upcoming national elections.

### WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?

The panelists agreed that a more consistent and higher-level U.S. and European focus on human rights and democracy in Turkey is needed. This means keeping human rights and democracy issues on the agenda in all diplomatic



*President Joe Biden meets with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accompanied by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, on October 3, 2021 in Rome. Photo: Adam Schultz/White House*

engagements with the government of Turkey, İşçi argued, and not simply raising such issues occasionally or only in meetings specifically dedicated to these concerns. Governments, along with global institutions like the United Nations, should pay closer attention to the analysis of their own human rights officers who track these issues in Turkey—and prioritize their policy recommendations.

Regarding the U.S. approach, Tahiroğlu emphasized the need for President Joe Biden to weigh in, privately and publicly, on key democracy and human rights issues, with Erdoğan. When statements on human rights and democracy come only from U.S. officials but not from Biden himself, she argued, these issues will appear to Erdoğan as a low priority for the United States. Tahiroğlu also noted that Erdoğan and his government are not the only audiences in Turkey for U.S. messaging: Civil society and human rights defenders in Turkey are eager to hear U.S. support for rights and values, and words from the U.S. president have the greatest impact in this regard. Tahiroğlu

also called for increased U.S. support and solidarity for organizations and institutions working inside Turkey to defend human rights and to advocate for democracy.

Drawing on lessons from the EU's experience with democracy and human rights assistance in Turkey, Zihnioğlu recommended three ways to improve such support. First, the EU should try to help human rights and democracy NGOs in Turkey play a larger role in policymaking. Such participation is not a well-established tradition in Turkey, and civil society's influence on policymaking has only shrunk as power has shifted from parliament, where NGOs previously had enjoyed more access, to the presidency. The EU could restructure its current funding programs to support initiatives that encourage real policymaking collaboration between civil society and public institutions.

Second, the EU should strive to bolster local rights defenders' resilience, and that means investing more in rights organizations' human resources. Human rights activism is about



*Left-Right: European Union Council President Charles Michel, President Erdoğan, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pose for photos during a meeting at Turkey's presidential palace on April 6, 2021. Photo: Presidency of Turkey*

changing social and institutional practices, behaviors, and understandings—a long-term process that requires expertise built over many years and that is made more challenging under repressive conditions. Rather than continuing to fund mostly short-term projects, Zihnioğlu called on the EU to provide core funding to NGOs to help cover longer-term costs such as staff salaries, capacity-building, and open-ended initiatives.

Third, Zihnioğlu suggested that the EU reconsider how it manages democracy and human rights assistance for Turkey. In recent years, the EU has responded to Turkey's authoritarian turn by cutting officials in Turkey out of the process of managing **pre-accession funds**, instead distributing the funds through Brussels or the EU delegation in Ankara. Zihnioğlu argued that despite some downsides to including officials in Turkey in the management of these funds, doing so would enhance local perceptions of the legitimacy of such EU aid. In light of the increasing stigmatization in Turkey of Western funding for civil society, it

is important to strengthen the perception of local ownership.

The panelists agreed that the United States and European actors—especially Turkey's biggest donor, the EU—should do a better job of coordinating their policies on democracy and human rights assistance for Turkey. Although the EU in recent years has lost a great deal of its leverage with Turkey, especially when it comes to pushing for domestic reforms, Zihnioğlu argued that the EU may need to play the leading role due to pervasive anti-American sentiment in Turkey. She called for an EU engagement strategy with Turkey that balances incentives for reform with a firm stance on democracy and human rights.

## CONCLUSION

The United States and Europe need to do much more to help promote democracy and human rights in Turkey, both to adhere to their values and to secure various strategic interests.

Turkey's current authoritarian circumstances are temporary and change is possible, but the agents of democratic change in the country, such as civil society, need more support from Turkey's democratic allies. As Turkey faces a critical election next year—one that could

begin to reverse the country's authoritarian trajectory, but whose integrity remains under significant threat—it is all the more important that the international community demonstrate greater solidarity with Turkey's defenders of democracy and human rights.



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**THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY (POMED)** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED Policy Briefs and other publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED or its Board of Directors. For more information, please contact Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne at [amy.hawthorne@pomed.org](mailto:amy.hawthorne@pomed.org).



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