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Voting Behavior of Turks in the GCC States within the Context of Turkish-Gulf Relations

Sinem Cengiz*

ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing scholarly interest in the electoral participation of Turkish citizens living abroad. Despite an existing body of literature on the Turkish diaspora, which is predominantly Eurocentric in nature, there has been a noticeable lack of consistent research into the voting behavior of Turkish expatriates residing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states with regard to their participation in home country elections. In this article, I delve into the voting patterns of Turkish expatriates living in the GCC states, with a specific focus on their political interests, party preferences, and ideological-religious perspectives within the context of Turkish-Gulf relations. Unlike Turkish expatriates in European states, who have tended to support conservative-nationalist parties, Turkish citizens residing in the

conservative GCC states exhibited a preference for left wing-oriented parties in elections held between 2014 and 2018. However, there has been a subtle shift in this trend in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, with some Turkish expatriates in the GCC states leaning toward the ruling alliance. What might be the potential factors influencing this change in voting behavior among certain Turks in the GCC states? I argue that the drivers behind this shift may be related to both the demographic profile of Turks residing in the GCC states as well as the impact of the Turkish foreign policy towards the broader Middle East, particularly concerning the GCC states.

Key words: Persian Gulf; Turkey; national elections; Turkish expatriates; voting behavior.

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COMPORTAMIENTO ELECTORAL DE LOS TURCOS EN LOS ESTADOS DEL CCG EN EL CONTEXTO DE LAS RELACIONES TURCO-GOLFOANAS

RESUMEN

En los últimos años se ha visto un creciente interés académico en la participación electoral de los ciudadanos turcos que viven en el extranjero. A pesar de que existe un cuerpo de literatura sobre la diáspora turca, que es predominantemente de naturaleza eurocéntrica, ha habido una notable falta de investigación consistente sobre el comportamiento electoral de los expatriados turcos que residen en los Estados del Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo (CCG) con respecto a su participación en elecciones de su país de origen. En este artículo se profundiza en los patrones de votación de los expatriados turcos que viven en los Estados del CCG, con un enfoque específico en sus intereses políticos, preferencias partidistas y perspectivas ideológico-religiosas dentro del contexto de las relaciones entre Turquía y el Golfo. A diferencia de los expatriados turcos en los Estados europeos, que han tendido a apoyar a los partidos nacionalistas conservadores, los ciudadanos turcos que residen en los Estados conservadores del CCG mostraron una preferencia por los partidos de izquierda en las elecciones celebradas entre 2014 y 2018. Sin embargo, ha habido un cambio sutil en esta tendencia en las elecciones presidenciales y parlamentarias de 2023, con algunos expatriados turcos en los Estados del CCG inclinándose hacia la alianza gobernante. ¿Cuáles podrían ser los factores potenciales que influyen en este cambio en el comportamiento electoral entre

ciertos turcos en los Estados del CCG? Se sostiene que los impulsores detrás de este cambio pueden estar relacionados tanto con el perfil demográfico de los turcos que residen en los Estados del CCG como con el impacto de la política exterior turca hacia el Medio Oriente en general, particularmente en lo que respecta a los Estados del CCG.

Palabras clave: Golfo Pérsico; Turquía; elecciones nacionales; expatriados turcos; comportamiento de votación.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the topic of diaspora and their electoral participation has grown in interest both politically and scholarly. There is an ever-expanding body of literature on diaspora politics that focuses on state policies to engage with its citizens living abroad. In the Turkish context, the country has developed a proactive diaspora engagement policy during the last decade. Turkey has a population of over 80 million, while Turkish citizens living abroad number around 7 million, with the majority (90 percent approximately) living in European states. A considerable number of these people hold Turkish citizenship which gives them the right to vote in elections. The 2014 presidential elections, which replaced the country's parliamentary system with a presidential model, were the first elections in which expatriates were able to vote from the states they reside in. Even though the expatriate vote does not make a huge difference in election outcomes, their voting preferences tell us a lot about how Turks living outside think about Turkish politics and the future of their country.

The voting preferences of Turkish expatriates indicates a clear variation depending on their country of residence. The expatriate vote tends to favor the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in European states, while the case is totally different in the GCC states, which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Turkish expatriates residing in the GCC states voted against the referendum in 2017, unlike the expatriates in Europe who voted in its favor. With a very large majority, Turkish expatriates residing in GCC states tend to vote in favor of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in all the elections, with the exception of 2023 elections, which was the sixth time that Turks living abroad were able to cast their vote.

Transnational political behavior is complex, including differing interests in politics and partisan preferences. The diversity of the Turkish diaspora and the variations in its voting preferences indicate that it is not possible to speak of a monolithic and unified community. Though small in numbers compared to Turks living in Europe, analyzing the voting motivations of expatriates in the GCC states is important not only to understand contemporary Turkish electoral politics and provide insights about the profiles of the Turkish expatriates living in the GCC states, but also to highlight how those voting behaviors could affect Turkish foreign policy in the Gulf region. The results of the 2023 elections indicate a clear variation in the voting tendencies of expats living in GCC states, as their voting preferences were divided between the ruling People's Alliance and the opposition Nation Alliance.

While most voters living in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed the ruling alliance and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, expats in Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE cast ballots in favor of the opposition alliance and its candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. These trends were notable and are worth analyzing.

This article aims to shed light on an understudied dimension of voting patterns of Turkish expatriates, with a special focus on those living in the GCC states. In doing so, it examines the factors that could have potentially influenced the voting behaviors of Turkish citizens in GCC states, while also shedding light on the potential impact of the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in general, and the GCC states in particular. Yet the study acknowledges the political behavior of Turkish expatriates in the Gulf region, and elsewhere, cannot be captured simply due to the complexity of the transnational political behavior.

It is essential to acknowledge that due to the small number of Turkish expatriates residing within GCC states, and the realities of temporary residency as dictated by these states' migration regulations, it is challenging to assert that Turks in the GCC states could have the potential to form a Turkish diaspora with a reality similar to those living within Western states, and that these populations could potentially have implications on the future of Turkish-Gulf relations. Consequently, in this article, the term "Turkish expatriates" is preferred over "Turkish diaspora" when referring to Turks residing in the GCC states.

The present article is comprised of six sections. Following this introductory section,

the next offers a brief overview of the current literature on external voting and the factors influencing the political engagement of citizens abroad. The third section provides a historical background about Turkish labor emigration to GCC states. The fourth section examines the voting preferences of Turkish citizens living in GCC states in prior elections, including the presidential election of 2014, two parliamentary elections (June 2015 and November 2015), the constitutional referendum (2017), and the joint presidential-parliamentary election of 2018. The fifth section sheds light on the driving forces that shape the voting behavior of Turkish expatriates in the GCC states and how Turkish foreign policy towards the GCC states has affected voting patterns in the last elections held in May 2023. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings of expatriate voting behavior in the Gulf context.

EXTERNAL VOTING AND COMPLEX COMMUNITIES

Diaspora voting, or external electoral participation, is a legal right that enables expatriates who are temporarily or permanently residing abroad to exercise their democratic right to vote in home-country elections (Elgujja, 2021). Today, it is considered to be a crucial element of democratic politics as many states in the world have granted the voting right to their citizens based abroad in order to ensure their political participation. Existing research suggests that 115 states, out of 214, have granted their citizens the right to cast their votes from abroad; however, this happens in different forms depending on each country's

specific laws (Braun & Gratschew, 2007). As granting voting rights has become an increasingly world-wide practice and a democratic norm, expatriate voting emerged as a field of research in various academic disciplines since the 1990s, such as area studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, electoral studies, and migration studies (Yaldız, 2019). The existing scholarship offers broad insights regarding external voting by highlighting the contextual, country specific factors, transnational political space, voting behaviors and procedures, electoral system, and level of the electoral participation and its determinants.

There exist two contradicting approaches towards external voting. Proponents of external voting consider the practice as a democratic right of universal suffrage, arguing that expatriates should also have a say about the future of their country (Bauböck, 2007). On the other hand, critics argue that expatriates have chosen to reside abroad; therefore, they are not part of the 'social contract' which concerns those living within the country (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). The practice is also criticized for states using it for political and pragmatic reasons to maintain close ties with their diaspora (Lacy, 2007). Lafleur (2013) notes that external voting is considered by states as part of broader diaspora policies that see citizens abroad as an important source of support in elections. Home states adopt an instrumental approach towards their diaspora, focusing mainly on the commercial and the foreign policy gains that could be obtained through their votes. In this regard, Bauböck (2007), who developed the 'stake holder citizenship' approach, argues that "external voting should be granted to tempo-

rary absentees and conflict-forced migrants, but should be ruled out for generations born abroad because the latter category has no stake in their parents' states of origin" (p. 2394).

Since voting is the most basic act of political participation, one of the most fundamental questions in comparative politics about electoral participation is why to people vote and what factors motivate their voting preferences. There are several factors that account for why people vote (or not). The first factor to consider is a voter's motivation, which is shaped by different socio-cultural and psychological contexts (Szulecki *et al.*, 2021). The second factor is the context of the country of residence that shapes the decisions and preferences (Goldberg *et al.*, 2021). The third factor is that voters can be influenced by their "in-between positionality", which influences their sociopolitical status both in the host and home states (Szulecki *et al.*, 2021, p. 993). Thus, the decision to vote can be influenced by both the environment in which a person lives and the place to which they feel they belong to. Limited, yet still important, studies provide a good account on the driving forces behind the electoral participation and effects of the political empowerment of the diaspora. Boccagni and Ramirez (2013) explain that emigrants' involvement is predominantly driven by "patriotic-homesick drives, rather than strictly political expectations." (p. 748). Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen (2015) identify legal voting procedures, geographical and political proximity, and the electoral campaigns of political parties as the main factors that influence diaspora electoral participation. Applying rational choice theory to voting be-

havior, Downs (1957) argued that migrants' political participation might be related to a number of factors which one could rationally believe to maximize their expected economic utility. Beside expectations of economic utility, there are also expectations of political utility. While the economic component refers to voters' material well-being related with voting for a particular party, the political component refers to the factors related to "ideology, religion, patriotic feelings and even racial, ethnic or linguistic identification" (Fidrmuc & Doyle, 2005, p. 12). The studies that suggest migrant voting behavior is affected by the institutional environment of the host states underlines that political preferences of migrants are influenced significantly as they adapt to the norms and values of the host country (Fidrmuc & Doyle, 2005). Thus, migration can lead to movement towards a different political system with diverse political standards, norms and traditions. In this context, the importance of demographic, socio-economic and psychological factors play a role in external voting (Harder & Krosnick, 2008).

Focusing on the case of Turkey, Mencütek (2015) argues that "citizens' motivation for voting abroad was largely dictated by the symbolic dimension of citizenship, and desire to formally participate in politics" (p. 145). Mencütek and Sevi's studies also explain voter's motivations to vote with reference to motivational link between origin country and diaspora. According to Sevi *et al.* (2020), expatriate voting is linked to the strength of voters' ties to their home country and their voting preferences appear to differ with geographic and political variables associated with

the host states. Various factors, deriving from the political environment in country of origin as well as the host country on the one hand, and the characteristics of voters, on the other, determine electoral participation and voting preferences of citizens living abroad.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: TURKISH LABOR EMIGRATION TO THE GULF STATES

Within the context of “Labor Recruitment Agreements” signed with several European states, Turkish laborers started to migrate to Europe en masse in the 1960s (Adar, 2019). This was considered as the first flow of Turkish emigration, which was triggered by Western European states’ demands in the labor market and their immigration policies that aimed to attract a skilled workforce in the aftermath of World War II (Köse, 2021). Labor recruitment agreements that applied to Turkish workers, who were initially considered as “guest workers” (Adar, 2019, p. 7), had unforeseen consequences for both sides as it had led to a flow of emigration that continued for decades (Aydın, 2014). Initially, economic motivations were the main factor that encouraged migration to Europe; however, this changed over time due to the political and socio-economic developments in Turkey (Adar, 2019).

From the 1970s onwards, the second phase of migration took place as Turkish workers started to seek new employment opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region due to the economic stagnation that occurred in Europe in the 1970s. The oil crisis in 1973 decreased the demand for foreign workers in Europe (Adar, 2019) and

eventually brought an end to official labor recruitment in those states (Arkılıç, 2020). Thus, the year 1975 marked the end of large-scale Turkish labor migration to Europe (İçduygu & Sert, 2011), leading to what has been called the “demise of bilaterally arranged migration.” (ILO, 2010). As Western Europe began to close its doors to immigrant labor, the Turkish government of the time, under the pressure of a high unemployment problem, began to search for new markets for labor-exporting processes and within this context it sent 342 male workers to Saudi Arabia (İçduygu & Sert, 2011). While economic stagnation altered the policies of the Western European states toward migration, the oil boom in the Middle East created new opportunities for low-skilled Turkish emigration (Köse, 2021). This shift in the direction of Turkish emigration between 1975 and 1980 towards an alternative labor market formed in the oil-exporting MENA states was the second major labor-motivated movement in the post-World War II era (İçduygu & Sert, 2011).

In the 1980s, a large number of Turkish male laborers began to emigrate to MENA states. The rise in oil prices after 1973 increased the income of the oil-exporting MENA states with very small populations and led to demand for foreign labor (Appleyard, 1995). This demand for labor paved the way to large flows of contract workers from other developing states (İçduygu & Sert, 2011). Official figures illustrate that the Turkish workforce’s major flow has been toward Libya, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and this is followed by other Gulf states (Lawless & Seccombe, 1986). In contrast to the Western European context, the entry of the Turkish workforce into the MENA market was through

Turkish construction companies, in which only Turks were employed (Gül, 1992). Turkish construction companies were given contracts in the region, which also catalyzed labor exports to these states, in particular to Saudi Arabia (Köse, 2021). While the number of Turkish workers in Libya decreased when the Turkish companies left the country, Saudi Arabia remained as the largest and most stable market for Turkish workers. This was also because Saudi Arabia recruited seasonal workers from Turkey during the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*) season.

In the Gulf context, the discovery of oil in the 1970s and the rise in revenues derived from its exploitation significantly changed the demographic balance in the Gulf states (Essomba, 2017). Foreign workers started to migrate to Gulf states in the early 1970s in the wake of the massive development plans and investment programs (Alsahi, 2020). The national labor-force was not only small in number but also lacked the necessary skills for the development of infrastructure and other projects, eventually pushing these states to “import” laborers from abroad (Kapiszewski, 2001). The other reason to import foreign workers was the cultural, economic and social realities within the region, which meant that the rate of participation of women and upper- and middle-class men was minimal (İçduygu & Sert, 2011).

Labor migration from Turkey to oil-exporting states to work in both the construction and service sectors occurred within this broader context. Turkey signed bilateral labor agreements with Qatar in 1986, the first bilateral labor agreement in the 1980s, and bilateral economic cooperation agreements that

paved the way for labor exchange with Kuwait (1982), Saudi Arabia (1974), UAE (1984), Bahrain (1990), and Oman (1995). 400,000 Turkish workers went to Middle Eastern states between 1970-1986 (Gül, 1992).

Table 1
The numbers of Turkish
workforce in Europe and the MENA

YEARS	EUROPE AUSTRALIA	MENA STATES
1962-1973	641,959	8,933
1973	132,670	3,146
1983	464	52,006

Source: Gül (1992).

However, the onset of the First Gulf War in 1990-91 and subsequent developments in the region interrupted Turkish migration. Although a considerable number of Turkish migrants continued to work in the region, this did not lead to a formation of a Turkish diaspora community as emerged in western states due to the “contract bounded nature of Middle Eastern migration.” (Köse, 2021, p. 73). Also, unlike some Turkish migrants in western states who gained citizenship in their host countries and became part of a Turkish diaspora community (Köse, 2021), those in the MENA region didn’t obtain such a right. One of the main characteristics of foreign labor migration in the Gulf, which differs from the Europe, is that labor migration is considered a “temporary” movement (İçduygu & Sert, 2011, p. 72). The measures and the laws, such as the sponsorship system (*Kafala* system), and

not granting citizenship, discourages staying in host states permanently. Under a sponsorship system, migrant workers can only receive visas and residence permits to work in one of the six GCC states if a citizen or an institution from these states has sponsored them (Longva, 1999). Through this system, the guarantor takes the economic and legal responsibility of the employed migrant workers, with the right to decide the duration of their stay in the country.

In light of this situation, Turkish immigration to the MENA region can be categorized into two successive and interrelating periods. The first period covers the 1970s to 1980s, which saw a decline of Turkish labor migration to Europe and triggered the start of emigration to the MENA states due to the oil crisis, which became a turning point in the patterns of Turkish labor migration. This was also the decade in which most of the Gulf states gained their independence and saw the emergence of oil as an important resource, affecting not only their economies but also politics (İçduygu & Sert, 2011). The second period between 1980s to mid-1990s was dominated by labor flows toward the MENA states, which could be described as “the major influx” (Girgis, 2005) as the migrant population reached 33 percent of the total population (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005). On the other hand, in this period, the demographic tendency in the MENA migration shifted again due to the turmoil in the region. The Gulf states started to become concerned about the political costs of hosting Arab migrants as workers (Castles & Miller, 2003), mainly Palestinians and Yemenis that were involved in political disputes

in the region (Halliday, 1985). This trend has caused the Gulf states to welcome Asian and European, including Turkish, migrant workers. Also, as the oil prices began to decrease in the mid-1980s, it was expected that the mass migration to the Gulf region would see a decline; however, in reality the mass labor migration was instead replaced (Castles & Miller, 2003).

In early 2000s, Turks comprised a noteworthy group, ranking as the fourteenth biggest nationality in the Gulf region (Kapiszewski, 2001). The 2000s became the revival period for Turkish contract-based and project-tied, mainly state-affiliated, labor migration to the Gulf region in terms of scale and scope. İçduygu and Sert (2011) highlight two drivers for this trend; firstly, a conservative government coming to power in Turkey that paved the way for the closer relations with the Gulf states. The structural transformation of the Turkish economy, in which ‘Anatolian Tigers’, who were eager to do business with Gulf states, played an important role in sending Turkish companies to the region (Altunışık, 2011). The second factor was that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 made the Gulf states safer destinations within the broader MENA region to do business (İçduygu & Sert, 2011). Kirişçi (2009) argues that economy became the primary driver in Turkey-Gulf relations as the country emerged as a ‘trading state’ in the region. In this context, between 2001-2008, Saudi Arabia became the major destination country for Turkish labor, while Qatar became the second most popular destination to Turkish migrant workers, who numbered just 34 in 2002, but increased to 4879 in 2007. Since the 2000s,

five companies in particular, *Limak*, *Cengiz*, *Kolin*, *Kalyon* and *Mapa*, which enjoy close relations with the Turkish government and the ruling AKP, have been heavily involved in construction projects in the Gulf states, and have brought a large number of Turks to these states.

VOTING PREFERENCES OF TURKS IN THE GCC STATES: ELECTIONS BETWEEN 2014-2018

Although the majority of the states recognize external voting practice, which is an essential feature of democratic citizenship, Collyer (2014) classifies the states that grant this right into three main groups. The first group of states allow citizens residing abroad to vote in elections within its territories; the second group organizes constituencies outside their borders so that citizens can vote abroad; and the third group reserves seats in the parliament for representatives of the diaspora, which are elected by voters residing abroad. Turkey practices the second system, which is the most common one today, and grants the right to citizens to vote abroad, regardless of their length of stay in other states, whether permanently or temporarily.

Turkey's desire to maintain close ties with its citizens residing abroad, and the ruling party's perception of the impact of the diaspora vote, paved the way for the decision to enfranchise expatriates (Mencütek & Erdogan, 2016). The elections indicate that expatriate vote appears to indeed benefit the ruling party. As an outreach effort to citizens residing in other states, Turkey even opened a special agency, named the *Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities* (YTB) in 2010 as a

stand-alone government institution. The YTB was established under the aegis of the office of the prime minister, which was then abolished under Turkey's new presidential system, and now operates under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (TRT Haber, 2018). The idea of forming a separate body that solely works on the issues of Turks abroad dates back to 1990s; however, it was limited to a state ministry tied to the Prime Ministers' office (Akçapar & Aksel, 2017). The institution, which was created in order to foster Turks' participation in home-country politics while without losing their cultural heritage in the states they reside in (Adar, 2019), also acted effectively to garner expatriate attention regarding political participation.

In the years 2014-2018, there were five elections in Turkey: a presidential election (2014), two parliamentary elections (June 2015 & November 2015), a constitutional referendum (2017), and a joint presidential-parliamentary election (2018). Expatriate voters made up about 5 percent of the Turkish electorate in all five elections. Since expats were permitted to vote in national elections at consulates and embassies in 2014, Turkish citizens in Europe have tended to support conservative-nationalist parties. However, voters in the GCC overwhelmingly backed left-wing opposition parties in the 2014 presidential vote; the June and Nov. 2015 legislative polls; the 2017 referendum; and the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections.

Adding to these complexities, the diaspora in Saudi Arabia—where the largest Turkish expat community in the GCC resides—has its own dynamics. For instance, Turks in the

Kingdom did not join compatriots in other Gulf Arab states in voting against the constitutional reforms in the 2017 referendum. The reforms—proposed by the ruling party—included the abolishing of the premiership and the establishment of an executive presidency. In the 2018 presidential elections, Turks in Saudi Arabia also deviated from other expat communities in the GCC, who voted in favor of opposition candidate Muharrem İnce rather than Erdogan. There are additional dimensions to consider with reference to Turks in Saudi Arabia. Expats in the Kingdom may cast their votes at either the consulate in Jeddah or the embassy in Riyadh. In all previous elections, the ruling AKP came out victorious in Jeddah while the main opposition CHP won most votes cast at the Riyadh embassy. The reasons for this discrepancy are complex and pertain to the general profiles of the expats living in the two cities. According to a Turkish expatriate born and raised in Saudi Arabia and who cast his vote at the Jeddah consulate in each of the five elections, this difference was due to that fact that the Turkish expatriates who live in

conservative cities of Madinah and Mecca—two cities located close to Jeddah where they cast their votes—tend to be more religious and vote for the AKP in elections. However, expatriates living in Riyadh are predominantly secular and tend to vote for the CHP (Phone interview, 25.02.2022).

The presidential election of 2014 was not only crucial because the president was elected by direct votes of citizens instead of being elected by deputies, but it was also important that expatriates, unlike in the past, showed greater willingness to practice their voting rights. In the 2014 presidential elections, three candidates nominated by parties contested the presidency: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, nominated by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]), Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu jointly nominated by the main opposition Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* [CHP]) and Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* [MHP]), and Selahattin Demirtaş who was nominated by the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi* [HDP]) (Resul, 2015).

Table 2
Number and percentage of votes cast in the 2014 Presidential Election

	Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu CHP + MHP		Recep Tayyip Erdoğan AKP		Selahattin Demirtaş HDP	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
UAE	483	75,4	120	%18,7	37	5,78
Bahrain	46	71,8	16	%25,0	2	3,12
Qatar	189	61,7	75	%24,5	42	13,7
Kuwait	155	66,8	73	%31,4	4	1,72
Oman	172	69,3	72	%29,0	4	1,61
Saudi Arabia	342	18,3	1499	%80,5	20	10,7

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (YSK, n.d.).

As a result of the 2015 Turkish parliamentary elections, held first in June and then again in November, led to a significant realignment of the political landscape in the country. The ruling party, whose electoral campaign focused on a constitutional amendment to adopt a presidential system that gives wide-ranging

powers to the president (Cop, 2016), failed to obtain a parliamentary majority to amend the constitution. For the first time since 2002 elections the AKP lost its parliamentary majority. Subsequently, the AKP called for new elections to be held in November 2015.

Table 3
Number and percentage of votes cast in the 2015 June Elections

	CHP		AKP	
	Number of votes	Percent of votes	Number of votes	Percent of votes
UAE	1016	60,7	211	12,6
Bahrain	82	55,7	33	22,4
Qatar	365	53,4	90	13,2
Kuwait	219	57,3	89	23,3
Oman	251	54,2	115	24,8
Saudi Arabia	JED: 879 RYD: 687	JED: 26,5 RYD: 43,4	JED: 2.056 RYD: 570	JED: 62,1 RYD: 36,1

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (YSK, n.d.)

Table 4
Number and percentage of votes cast in the 2015 November Elections

	CHP		AKP	
	Number of votes	Percent of votes	Number of votes	Percent of votes
UAE	1477	62,8	398	16,9
Bahrain	94	55,6	31	18,
Qatar	577	59,3	188	18,6
Kuwait	307	61,1	111	22,1
Oman	335	50,3	204	30,6
Saudi Arabia	JED: 971 RYD: 942	JED: 23,5 RYD: 47,2	JED: 2788 RYD: 802	JED: 67,7 RYD: 40,2

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (YSK, n.d.).

In 2016, the ruling party and the MHP came to an agreement on constitutional change and approved a constitutional referendum to take place in 2017. While the AKP and the MHP campaigned for the ‘Yes’ vote, the CHP and the HDP campaigned for the ‘No’ vote. With the country at a crossroads of a potentially historic transition, the Turkish people went to the polls on 16 April 2017 to vote on a package of constitutional amendments passed by the Turkish Parliament in January 2017 that proposed to change the current parliamentary form of government into a presidential one (Quamar, 2017). With 51.41 percent of the voters in favor, the bill was approved by the public (Çakmak & Çelikbaş, 2017). Until the 2017 constitutional referendum, Turkey was governed by a parliamentary system with multiple political parties. Yet, as a result of the referendum, a new presidential system was introduced for the 2018 election, in which the number of Turkish expatriate voters was about 3 million (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). Although this constituted a change in the system of government, changes to the electoral system were relatively minor (Sevi *et al.*, 2020).

Table 5
Voting Preferences in the 2017
Referendum

	Percent of NO votes	Percent of YES votes
UAE	86,69	13,31
Bahrain	86,44	13,56
Qatar	81,11	18,89
Kuwait	76,62	23,38
Oman	75,96	24,04
Saudi Arabia	JED: 32,6 RYD: 65,8	JED: 67,4 RYD: 34,2

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (YSK, n.d.).

In 2018, snap presidential and parliamentary elections was held in June. This was the second direct presidential election, and the first to be held simultaneously with parliamentary elections after the 2017 referendum. Most importantly, this election was also the first-time electoral alliances were allowed since the 1950s. Two alliances were formed: The People’s Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) made up of the AKP and the MHP, and the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) which consisted of the CHP, Good Party (*IYI Parti* [IYI]), and the smaller Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi* [SP]) (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). The People’s Alliance received 53.7 percent of the vote, while the Nation Alliance won 33.9 percent. The HDP, which was part of neither alliance, passed the 10 percent election threshold by receiving 11.7 percent of the vote to send its representatives to Parliament (Sarıbay, 2018).

Table 6
Number and percentage of votes
cast in 2018 Elections

2018 Elections	People’s Alliance AKP + MHP		Nation Alliance CHP + IYI Parti + SP	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
UAE	443	14.10	2.396	76,40
Bahrain	123	17.96	507	74,01
Qatar	417	29,00	858	59,67
Kuwait	406	41,05	492	49,75
Oman	105	23,60	308	69,21
Saudi Arabia	JED:	JED:	JED:	JED:
	2647	68.19	1054	27.15
	RYD:	RYD:	RYD:	RYD:
	711	29.89	1576	66.25

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (YSK, n.d.).

FACTORS SHAPING VOTING BEHAVIOR OF TURKISH EXPATRIATES IN THE GCC STATES

Election results indicate that Turkish expatriates living in the Gulf states more often support the main opposition party, CHP, unlike Turks in Europe who tend to vote for the ruling party, AKP. Thus, the political preferences of Turkish voters living in the Gulf and the Europe differ considerably. The divergences in voting behavior of Turks residing in the Gulf states and Europe could be explained briefly by the different profiles of the Turkish migrant population in the Gulf and Europe related to the reason and period of emigration, length of stay abroad, socio-economic and educational profile, region of origin, and the differences in immigration policies of the host states. According to studies, there are two main types of Turkish emigrants: economic and political, and the majority of Turkish immigrants in the Gulf region belong to the first group (Sevi *et al.*, 2020).

Turkish migration to Europe started almost five decades ago from traditionally conservative and nationalist parts of rural Anatolia with Turks from lower income backgrounds (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). The majority of Turkish immigrants in Europe were conservative first-generation Turks who emigrated in the 1960s and were largely low-skilled, or blue-collar workers, with limited formal education (Arkılıç, 2021). The AKP is more popular among religious Turks, which makes sense as most of these migrants were originally from conservative parts of Turkey (Bilecen, 2015). Furthermore, some Turks in Europe tend to be more nationalist due to two reasons. Firstly,

being away from home, and secondly failing to fully integrate to the host country's social, economic, and political environment. Here, nationalist sentiments and the feeling of being 'foreign' feed the voting tendency. Particularly after seeing that Turks in their countries vote for 'yes' in the referendum, several European politicians raised the issue of revoking dual citizenship rights, and some even called to deport Turks. Therefore, these Turks see Erdoğan as a 'savior' particularly at a time when xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe is on the rise. Studies suggest Turks who face discrimination at a higher rate in the states they reside in are more likely to be motivated by populist and nationalist discourse emanating from the homeland (Arkılıç, 2021). In recent years, the Turkish government has placed heavy emphasis on ethno-nationalism and religion in its diaspora policy, while addressing European host states and their leaders as 'the other' that have turned their back on Turkish expatriates (Arkılıç, 2021).

However, Turks in the Gulf states are quite different from those in Europe. The first divergent factor is related to the socio-economic and educational profile. Unlike the Turkish workforce in Europe, Turkish expatriates in the Gulf include both blue-collar workers and highly qualified professionals, including businessmen and investors, working for either local or Turkish companies. Although contributors to Turkish brain drain are mostly spread out through the Western world (Güngör & Tansel, 2008), there is a significant number of Turkish expatriates in the Gulf who are highly educated and qualified professionals with urban backgrounds. The Gulf states attracted more

skilled professionals from Turkey because of their immigration regulations. With the increasing business ties between Turkey and the Gulf states over the past decade, the workforce in the Gulf has changed. Today, there are also a number of Turkish academics who work in Gulf universities, which is a new phenomenon. Some studies indicate that better educated Turks from the upper and middle classes tend to vote for the CHP and that their political view is an important predictor of their voting preference (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). However, the AKP, which introduced new-Islamist politics into the Turkish electorate (Hope, 2018), represents the conservative, nationalist, lower or lower-middle classes (Mügge *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, class and education are important factors that influence voting behaviors.

Secondly, studies confirm that the region from which citizens emigrated has a determining role in their political choices, influencing political cleavages that exist among the diaspora. In the Gulf states, there is a significant presence of Turkish citizens that come from Turkey's southern provinces of *Adana*, *Mersin*, and *Hatay* who are generally Arab Alawites (in Turkish *Arap Alevileri*). Because of the common language and geographical proximity, many Arab-origin Alevis from Turkey travel to the oil-rich Gulf states for work. Despite the limited scholarship over Turkish immigration to the Gulf states, there are some studies that examine the immigration to the Gulf from Turkish provinces which have predominant Arab Alevi population. Cengiz (2012) underlines that the majority of the immigration from the *Hatay's Samandağı* district was to Saudi Arabia, which holds the largest Turk-

ish population when compared to other Gulf states. The same study suggests that 95 percent of the migrants from *Hatay* were Arab Alevi, speak Arabic, and have a limited educational background. Arab Alevis, who generally hold a secular outlook and vote for leftist parties in Turkey's elections, tend to be more critical of the ruling party in Turkey. Thus, ethnic and secular-religious factors are also the important correlates of Turks' voting behavior. Likewise, in an interview with a female Turkish citizen, born and raised in Kuwait and who casted her vote in elections, she stated that the votes of Turkish expatriates in Kuwait favored the CHP due to the presence of two groups. First, the Arab Alevis from *Adana*, *Hatay*, and *Mersin*; and second, qualified professionals who come from urban secular background. "Professionals, including engineers, accountants, and technicians working at project-based companies support the CHP. These professionals are mostly graduating from universities that are often critical of the government, such as ODTU [Middle East Technical University]" she added (Phone interview, 28.02.2022).

The third factor is that foreign policy choices of the Turkish government play a role in voting preferences. When the Syrian war erupted, the residents of *Hatay*, a city bordering Syria and home to most of the country's Alevis, were critical of the government's role in the conflict in neighbouring Syria (Cassel, 2012). In an interview with *Al Jazeera*, 31-year-old Kemal, who was on a brief break from work as a barber in Saudi Arabia said, "When something is happening in Syria we feel it. We have Turkish citizenship, but our origins are Arab." (Cassel, 2012). Cassel underlines that

Kemal's views largely reflect those held by the larger Alevi community in Turkey as the effects of the Syrian conflict spill across its northern border into *Hatay*. The rise of Islamist-populist nationalism in Turkey, which has direct implications for the Turkish community, seems to not be welcomed by the Turks living in the Gulf states, who support CHP's foreign policy vision instead. We can see that foreign policy does in fact influence voting behavior in several ways. Most importantly, it tells voters how a party (re-) imagines national identity and thus what the party stands for politically (Kirdiş, 2015). In this context, foreign policy also constructs the state's identity by defining the insiders and the outsiders (Campbell, 1992), and thereby defines who is part of a society and who is not (Balci, 2011). Politicians are in constant competition with each other over votes, and they construct and politicize public opinion on foreign policy issues as a political strategy to consolidate and/or to construct their politics (Kirdiş, 2015). Thus, political parties utilize foreign policy to restructure domestic politics and their position, and vice versa. Within this context, foreign policy can be used by the dominant party to consolidate its own power while marginalizing its opposition in politics (Kirdiş, 2015). The ruling party's Syria policy, which has been criticized by the CHP, is a good example that indicates the link between the perception of the Turkish expatriates in the Gulf states. In the case of the AKP's unconditional support for the Syrian opposition, the CHP argued that religious ideology was guiding the AKP's foreign policy (The Economist, 2012b), and claimed that the AKP was trying to build "a Sunni block to

counter Iran's influence, and that this explains Turkish support for Assad's Sunni opponents and especially for the Muslim Brotherhood, [. . . and] for Iraq's Sunnis." (The Economist, 2012a). In response, Erdoğan, referring to CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Alevi roots, suggested that "Kılıçdaroğlu opposes intervention in Syria out of a sense of kinship with Assad, who belongs to the Alawite sect" (The Economist, 2012b) – a suggestion that caused serious worries amongst the Turkish Alevis (Kirdiş, 2015).

The fourth factor is related to Turkish expatriates' integration to their host states' society. As stated above, in the European context, despite the fact that some Turks hold dual citizenship with their host states, the failure to fully integrate to the host country's social, economic and political fabric fuels nationalist sentiments, feeding voting tendencies towards nationalist-populist parties. However, the integration of migrants living in the Gulf states are almost superficial because almost all of them are considered to be 'temporary' residents of the country (Shah & Al-Qudsi, 1989), unlike the Western European context. In the Gulf states, the laws do not grant citizenship to those who reside or were born within their territories, unlike in the European context. As they don't hold citizenship, and most of them reside for temporary period of time, Turkish migrants to the Gulf don't face the integration problems in the cosmopolite nature of the individual states. Thus, the ruling party's nationalist rhetoric does not appeal to Turks in the Gulf states due to host country's expat-dominated environment. Furthermore, the religious rhetoric of the ruling party holds

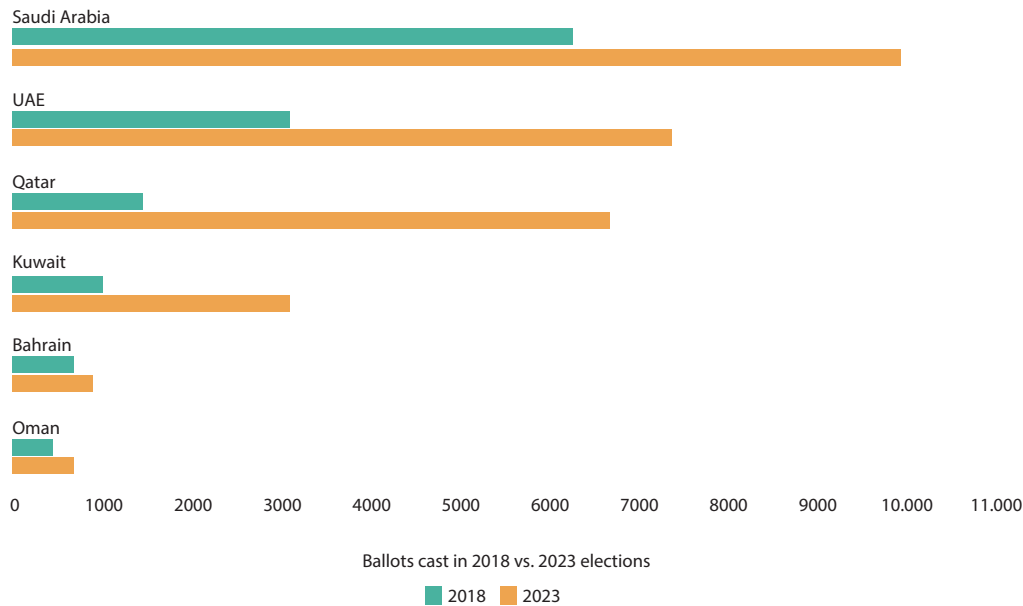
little influence with Turkish voters in the Gulf, whose support for the opposition seems to be more dominant, due to their religio-ethnic backgrounds.

**SHIFTING OF VOTES IN 2023
ELECTIONS: ROLE OF TURKISH FOREIGN
POLICY TOWARDS THE GULF**

One of the reasons behind the increase in the number of votes cast for Turkey’s ruling party and its leader compared to the previous elections could be related to the considerable rise in the number of Turkish citizens in the GCC countries. Of further note, Turkey’s election watchdog has also announced a three-point

increase in voter turnout abroad compared to 2018 (Hurriyet Daily News, 2023). Available data suggests that the number of voters in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia this year has almost doubled compared to five years ago. For instance, 10,054 votes were cast in Saudi Arabia this year, while just 6,332 ballots were recorded in 2018 (Daily Sabah, 2023a). The same pattern can be seen in other GCC countries as well. The increase has been most eye-catching in Qatar, where the number of votes has more than quadrupled (Daily Sabah, 2023b). The high turnout is due to the gradual rise in the number of Turkish citizens in the GCC, which has involved a change in the demographic makeup of expats.

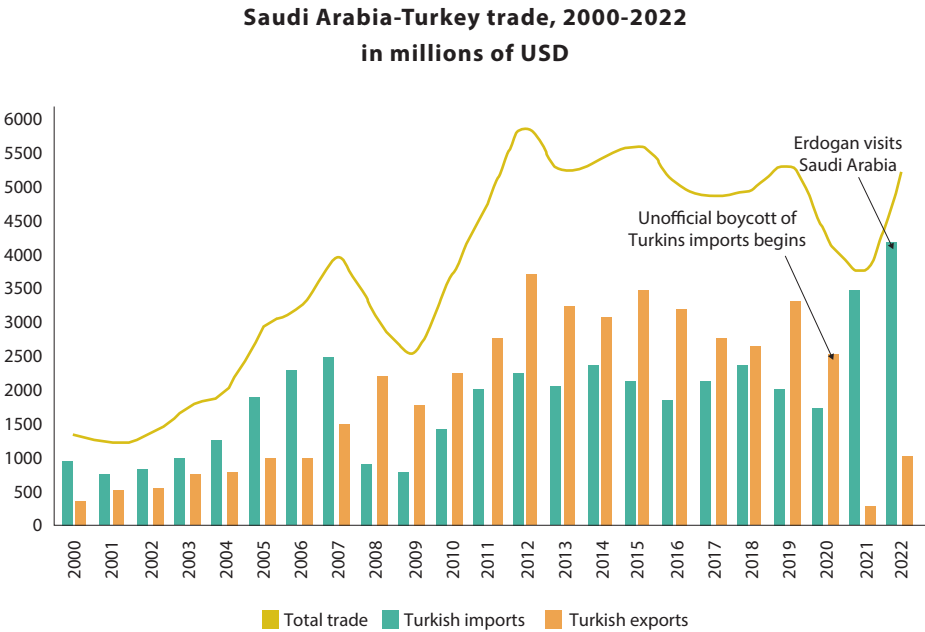
Voter turnout among Turks in GCC states



Source: Amwaj.media (2023).

A second factor that could be affecting the voting motivations of expats in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia might be the state of Turkey’s relations with the respective host countries. Turkey enjoys close relations with Kuwait and Qatar, while it has recently mended ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The previously tense relations between Ankara and Riyadh had led to the closure of Turkish schools (Anadolu Agency, 2021) and an unofficial trade embargo (Middle East Eye, 2022b) that adversely affected Turkish expatriates living and working in the Kingdom. The closure of schools also had an adverse impact on the employment contracts of employees in Turkish schools, forcing some to return to Turkey.

Thus, the political tensions have cost some Turks working in the GCC states, in particular those within Saudi Arabia, both socially and economically. According to a Turkish expatriate, born and raised in Saudi Arabia, expats owning businesses in Saudi Arabia might have voted for Erdogan and his alliance out of concern that bilateral relations might deteriorate if Erdogan’s opponents win (Phone interview, 16.05.2023). While such anecdotal data cannot replace solid surveying, which is lacking, it should be kept in mind that the opposition alliance was skeptical of the ruling party’s attempt to restore ties with GCC states (Middle East Eye, 2022a).



Source: Amwaj.media (2023).

In this vein, a Palestinian residing in Qatar who acquired Turkish citizenship along with her parents through real estate purchase in Istanbul, and cast ballots for the first time in the 2023 elections, said in an interview that one of the potential reasons for the support garnered by Turkey's ruling coalition could be the opposition alliance's anti-Arab or anti-refugee rhetoric (The New Arab, 2023). In 2018, Turkey began to allow foreign citizens to acquire Turkish citizenship through investment and real estate purchases. This policy was highly criticized by the opposition, which vowed to abolish the "citizenship by investment" program if they won the elections. According to reports, some 210,000 Syrians have been granted Turkish citizenship, while tens of thousands of others from different nations have also become Turkish nationals through years of working in the country, making investments, or marrying Turkish citizens (Politics Today, 2023). While anecdotal data is insufficient to draw broader conclusions about voting preferences and reasons behind their choices, it is likely that these "new Turks" voted for the ruling alliance due to concerns emanating from the opposition's rhetoric (Glinski, 2023). During the election period, there was a campaign of disinformation regarding the "Arab Gulf citizens", who were criticized for obtaining citizenship. However, it is important to note that the GCC states do not permit their

citizens to hold dual citizenship and therefore, the individuals who acquired Turkish citizenship and voted in the 2023 elections were originally nationals of other Arab countries but resided in the GCC states. This distinction is crucial to clarify.

Third, the growing political polarization of the Turkish political scene was also reflected in the political behavior of the voters. In this context, the diaspora became recently politicized, what is particularly noticeable in time of electoral campaigns when political parties, especially the AKP, appeal to Turks abroad in their political statements and visit European cities to garner their votes. Due to the growing number of Turkish expatriates, their electoral participation continues to dominate the political agenda, turning it into a serious political issue (Sevi *et al.*, 2020). For instance, a Turkish expat in Kuwait suggested that many of those who voted for the opposition in past elections decided not to cast a vote in the 2023 elections due to the divisions within the opposition alliance, which consists of six parties with diverse political and ideological views (Phone interview, 16.05.2023).¹

Lastly, the 'reset' mood in Turkey's foreign policy might also played a role in shaping voting preferences among the expatriates in Gulf Arab states. There is a significant number of expats in the GCC states who hail from southern Turkey, with relatives in Syria across

¹ Also check: Turkey's opposition alliance fractures, fails to agree on challenger to Erdogan, Al Monitor, March 3, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/turkeys-opposition-alliance-fractures-fails-agree-challenger-erdogan#ixzz88a761ZUM>

the border. The ruling party's changing Syria policy is seemingly one significant factor determining attitudes. Against this backdrop, Turkey's recent normalization efforts with the Syrian government, as well as with other states in the region, might be one of the factors that has shifted votes to the ruling alliance in the 2023 elections.

CONCLUSION

The voting behavior of Turkish expatriates worldwide has started to occupy a notable place in academic research, policy circles, and the wider public agenda. Yet, the diversity among Turkish expatriates and the variations in their voting preferences indicate that we cannot talk about a monolithic and unified entity. Studies on electoral participation of citizens who vote from abroad show that the level of participation, as well as voting behavior, depend on several variables. This article aimed to shed light on an understudied dimension of Turkey's expatriates living in the Gulf states. Yet this study acknowledges the political behavior of Turkish expatriates in the Gulf region cannot be captured simply. Transnational political behavior is complex and differs across the key components of interest in politics and party choice.

The analysis of the political preferences of Turks living in the Gulf states show that they overwhelmingly vote for left-wing parties, namely the main opposition CHP, unlike Turks residing in the European states, who tend to support religious-nationalist parties, mainly the AKP. This was the case until the 2023 elections, in which the votes were divided

between both ruling alliance and the opposition alliance.

The study reveals that various factors, including the political environment in the country of origin as well as the host country on the one hand, and the characteristics of voters, on the other, determine electoral participation and voting preferences. The first characteristic of this divergence can largely be explained by the voters' socio-economic backgrounds and class. Secondly, secular-religious dimensions are an important factor in voting behavior in the Gulf. Due to both their political and religious tendencies, Turks in the Gulf states tend to be more critical of the ruling AKP's policies, and in particular foreign policy choices of Turkish government play important role in their voting preferences. However, the results of the 2023 elections – which came amid the normalization of Turkish foreign policy towards regional neighbors and in particular the Gulf states – suggest that Turks living in the GCC states shifted their votes according to their perception of the government's foreign policy record as well as their own business and personal connections in the host countries in the Gulf. Besides economic consequences, social effects of the tension between Turkey and the Gulf countries were felt among the Turkish citizens residing and working in the GCC states. The closure of Turkish schools and the unofficial economic embargo on Turkish products were some of the examples of social and economic implications of the Turkey-Gulf rift. Anecdotal data suggests that both the increasing number of Turkish citizens in the GCC states in the past few years, as well as a move towards normalization between Ankara

and the Gulf capitals have played a significant role in the shifting of votes towards to ruling party in some of the GCC states, namely Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Yet, Turkish citizens living in the UAE, Oman and Bahrain continue to hold their support to the opposition, even in the 2023 elections.

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