



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

Turkey's Erdoğan took a page from US presidents and boosted reelection campaign by claiming to have killed a terrorist

Klein, G.R.E.; Boddery, S.

Citation

Klein, G. R. E., & Boddery, S. (2023). Turkey's Erdoğan took a page from US presidents and boosted reelection campaign by claiming to have killed a terrorist. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212953>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212953>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Man on track: Turkish President Erdoğan, center, did better in his reelection campaign than predicted. Emin Sansar/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Turkey's Erdoğan took a page from US presidents and boosted reelection campaign by claiming to have killed a terrorist

Published: May 24, 2023 2.18pm CEST

Graig Klein

Assistant Professor of Terrorism & Political Violence, Leiden University

Scott Boddery

Associate Professor of Political Science and Public Law, Gettysburg College

When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed credit on April 30, 2023, for killing Islamic State group leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi in Syria, it may not have been simply a straightforward announcement of victory over the leader of a terrorist group.

History suggests the operation against al-Qurashi could have been an effort to boost Erdoğan's reelection campaign.

When the results from Turkey's presidential election on May 14, 2023, came in, they showed no clear winner. Neither long-serving President Erdoğan nor the main challenger, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, won 50% of the votes. But Erdoğan came close and did better than predicted. Polls leading up to the election had shown Kılıçdaroğlu consistently leading by 5 to 10 percentage points. A runoff is scheduled for May 28.

So what changed and how did Erdoğan make up so much ground so quickly?

One answer is Erdoğan's political use of counterterrorism.

Tough conditions for reelection

Leading up to the election, Turkey's domestic economy was in decline. Erdoğan's tenure appeared uncertain because of a series of political missteps. It was a difficult path to reelection.

Adding to these hurdles, Erdoğan had to demonstrate he was healthy enough to continue in office. He had fallen ill when he was on TV on April 27 and suspended his campaign for three days.

As political scientists who study foreign policy decision-making, we know that, faced with such scenarios, elected leaders are often motivated to gamble for resurrection by demonstrating strength, resolve and capability. They do this through a kind of aggressive foreign policy known in our field as political use of force, or diversionary use of force.



The building in Syria where Turkey claims it killed the so-called leader of the Daesh/ISIS terrorist organization, al-Qurashi, in an operation carried out by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization. Bekir Kasim/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Ultimate diversion

Leaders who undertake this kind of action hope a successful military endeavor will divert the public's attention from the administration's domestic shortcomings.

Such shortcomings come in a variety of forms – high unemployment, high inflation, a stalled legislative agenda or even political scandal. These leaders have little power to rectify the problems alone, and the incentive to use military force is heightened further by the uncertainty of an approaching election.

This is not only a theoretical argument. In the U.S., presidents are more likely to break covert mission protocol and claim credit from successful drone strikes when they have political incentives to distract the public from a weak economy or negative domestic debates.

Historically – and routinely – national leaders have attempted to garner political support through the use of military force that predictably boosts domestic sentiments of nationalism and patriotism. For example, President George H.W. Bush's 1989 invasion of Panama aimed to “cure his political image problems at home,” as political scientist Jane Kellett Cramer wrote.

At the height of his impeachment scandal in 1998, President Bill Clinton ordered counterterrorism airstrikes against al-Qaida. The 2011 U.S. airstrikes on Libya were ordered by President Barack Obama in the depths of economic turmoil – high unemployment and a negative economic growth rate.

This phenomenon extends beyond the U.S. In May 1978, Belgium faced an economic crisis. Uniformed soldiers were protesting on the streets. Government was gridlocked. Prime Minister Leo Tindermans tried to overcome those problems by deploying soldiers to evacuate Europeans threatened by fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo, then called Zaire.

In 1982, Argentina's military junta was facing escalating public disorder and declining support. President Leopoldo Galtieri announced the country's invasion of the Falkland Islands and crowds cheered on the streets.

But the junta overlooked British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's own domestic political turmoil. The British military quickly responded and retook the islands. Thatcher flaunted the successful operation, rallying the British public behind her government.

A new frontier

Studying political use of force is notoriously difficult for a variety of reasons. Not all presidents have the opportunity to use force abroad. And when political leaders are under pressure and most likely to seek a diversion with an attack, potential targets often de-escalate to avoid confrontation.

But counterterrorism efforts have created a unique scenario in which there is always opportunity to strike. Successful operations against terrorist targets produce a comparatively pronounced increase in public support.

Our research investigates modern-day counterterrorism tactics, which we find can generate a larger bump in approval than traditional military operations.

In an experiment, we asked a sample of Americans to evaluate their support for a president in office during a declining economy and increasing unemployment. The approval ratings were predictably quite low.

Approval ratings increased under those same domestic conditions when respondents were also informed that a successful counterterrorism operation had just occurred. And when the counterterrorism operation involved a drone strike, and thus little risk to service members, support was at its highest and changed from disapproval to approval of the president's performance.

 A huge crowd, with many carrying red flags.

Supporters wave flags and chant slogans while waiting for CHP Party presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to arrive at a campaign rally on April 30, 2023, in Izmir, Turkey. Burak Kara/Getty Images

For Erdoğan, favorable timing and conditions

Erdoğan's claim of the targeted killing of the Islamic State's al-Qurashi fits the profile of political use of counterterrorism in two important ways: Turkey's domestic economic and political conditions and the strike's timing.

In the lead-up to the 2023 presidential election, with the domestic economy in decline, his physical health questioned and a credible challenger, Erdoğan was faced with an extraordinarily tough reelection environment.

Erdoğan was first elected in 2014. Since then, Turkey has seesawed between economic expansion and decline. Erdoğan championed Turkish nationalism and religious identity and escalated ethnic tensions with the Kurdish minority – including conflict with and counterterrorism against the Kurdish groups known as PKK. Erdoğan has sometimes played an oversize role in international politics and at others times has been a political pariah, particularly after his response to the 2016 coup attempt.

Since May 2022, currency devaluation has created a significant cost-of-living problem in Turkey. The Turkish lira has declined by nearly 27% against the euro and slightly over 22% against the U.S. dollar. The weak economy and socioeconomic struggles were exacerbated by earthquakes in February 2023 that caused extraordinary human and physical destruction.

Erdoğan is the face of government corruption and inadequate oversight and regulation of construction contracts blamed for the devastation.

And the government is criticized for slow and insufficient disaster response and relief operations.

While Erdoğan is criticized and lauded for many domestic and international policies, the domestic issues are potentially insurmountable and are difficult to solve through standard policymaking.

The targeted killing of al-Qurashi was announced three days after Erdoğan fell sick on national TV and the same day he returned to the campaign trail. The counterterrorism strike created an opportunity for Erdoğan to focus domestic attention on his national security credentials, his role in the anti-Islamic State coalition, and his abilities to be an authoritative and strong leader.

Counterterrorism has long played a pivotal role in Turkish politics. An analysis of Turkey-PKK conflict data from 2004 to 2018 shows that when the Turkish government was challenged by domestic economic decline and needed to generate political support, the number of Turkish Armed Forces operations against the PKK increased.

Turkey's rapid proliferation and use of weaponized drone technology could usher in more political uses of counterterrorism. Indeed, al-Qurashi's targeted killing in the midst of a looming, uncertain election fits this model perfectly. Erdoğan's gambit could very well secure his reelection. And the May 14 election suggests it almost worked.