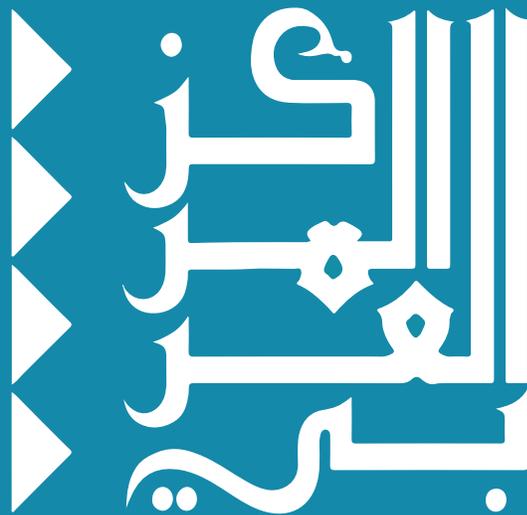


Turkey-Europe Tensions: Where are they headed?

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The escalation of tensions between Turkish and Dutch authorities seems to have played well in domestic political calculations in Turkey and the Netherlands. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has ignited passion for his referendum campaign in the face of rising challenges by Turkish nationalist politicians. The Netherlands' Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, on the other hand, secured his victory in the latest elections by not losing nationalist votes to the anti-immigrant far-right leader Geert Wilders—the so-called Dutch Trump.

Lately, President Erdoğan has extended his accusations to the European Union countries at large, claiming that they pursue a “crusade” against Muslims. He gave the example of a recent European Court of Justice ruling that allows employers to ban workers from wearing visible religious symbols, including Muslim headscarves, in certain circumstances. The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also declared that there is “no difference” between Rutte and Wilders from Turkey's point of view, adding that “soon religious wars will begin in Europe.”

Although the spat may be interpreted as a calculated political play in the wake of critical Turkish and European elections, two major deep-rooted factors pose challenges to Turkey's relations with the European Union in the near future, namely (1) the growing divergence of interests and bilateral perceptions, and (2) the precarious nature of the recent EU-Turkey refugee deal.

Beneath the Spat: Growing Divergence of Interests and Perceptions

For President Erdoğan, the upcoming Turkish referendum on April 16 holds utmost importance. A “yes” vote would mean sweeping constitutional changes that grant him unprecedented executive powers. As the polls indicate, the Turkish public appears to be divided evenly: around 40 percent support, 40 percent disagree, and 20 percent are undecided. Erdoğan perceives the votes of 2.3 million Turkish voters abroad as crucial. Germany is key, with 1.5 million voters, followed by France with 320,000, and the Netherlands with 245,000. Erdoğan was offended when European authorities—primarily Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands—did not allow him to organize campaign rallies. The Dutch authorities, in particular, asked the Turkish government not to organize a major rally ahead of the March 15 elections, which Wilders's anti-Muslim party could have exploited. Erdoğan's threatening remarks in return, however, have provoked a staunch European resistance and thus further deepened the tensions.

European authorities pointed to security concerns in declining the Turkish government's campaign requests. For most Turks, it was not a convincing argument. Evidence of Turkish state spying efforts in the European migrant community, including of school children, which peaked especially after Turkey's botched coup in July 2016, has jangled the nerves of local authorities. While Europeans believed that Erdoğan's divisive rhetoric—which often targets Kurds, Alevis, and opposition groups—may potentially cause mayhem in their lands, Turks viewed the European reactions as an

infringement on free speech and as blatant forms of racism. Such a gap in perceptions increased as the Turkish minority in Europe is largely regarded as Muslim first; Erdoğan's systematic employment of religious language further perpetuates the common stereotypes. Thus, it is useful to analyze how Europeans view Erdoğan's Turkey and vice versa.

Turkey Seen through European Lenses

European authorities often unanimously recognize Turkey's strategic significance as an early NATO member. Strong economic ties remain key to both parties in this strategic partnership. In January 2017, almost half of Turkey's exports, 47 percent, were to European Union countries. Turkey's EU membership prospects and Erdoğan's quest for visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, however, have divided Europeans. While most liberal European politicians see the issue as a matter of principle in the path toward democratization, many others view it through the prism of identity politics. Although members of the former camp were traditionally supportive of Turkey's membership, their mood has shifted in recent years due to growing concern about Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies as well as the poor record of human rights in Turkey. Perceptions of Turkish minorities in European countries have fueled the debate, often in favor of the latter camp.

In this regard, the Turkish-Dutch row is the latest manifestation of a much deeper problem. Consider the success story of Mark Rutte, a liberal politician who was never a player in Dutch nationalist discourse until the recent election campaign. The rise of Geert Wilders's anti-immigrant party, the Party for Freedom

(PVV), has led to dramatic changes in Rutte's communication tone—most noticeably in his Twitter account—to appeal to nationalist voters. Rutte, for example, said, in a vulgar way, that Turkish migrants who disagree with Dutch values “should get out” and “go back to Turkey.”

Regardless of the election results, such a sea change in leaning toward the right-wing discourse indicates how Wilders—whose Twitter header is “STOP ISLAM”—and white nationalists will remain influential in depicting Erdoğan as a poster boy, the “other” of the European “we” identity. Racialization of Muslims is the new face of anti-immigration movements indeed, and Turks are no exception. European ethnicities that were traditionally perceived as distinct—such as Turks in Germany, Arabs and Berbers in France, or Pakistanis in Great Britain—have increasingly become subjects of the “Muslim question” in the public imagination.

Turkey's Perspective

When Turkey's EU accession talks began in 1999, most Turks regarded the EU membership reforms as a way out from the financial collapse of the Turkish economy. After 2002, the rise of Erdoğan and his conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) helped the swift implementation of EU reforms. Erdoğan's approach to the EU was dramatically different from his earlier mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, an Islamist politician who called the organization a “Christian club.” Erdoğan effectively curbed the Turkish secularist military through EU reforms, granting rights to Kurds and minorities. Such reformist attitudes were largely appreciated by Turkey's liberal circles as well as by European authorities.

A major frustration among Turks during the past decade was realizing that Europeans were increasingly skeptical about including Turkey as a member in the EU, despite Turkey's major reforms. Moreover, financial crises in Europe and an economic boom in Turkish finances until 2012 led to a mood change among Turks, reflected in public opinion polls. Such a shift in perspective may explain why Erdoğan's opponents also found the Dutch police's actions deeply offensive and simply the latest expression of a European double-standard toward Turkey.

Nonetheless, it is most likely that reverting back to the democracy track in the post-Erdoğan era will mean trying to repair relations with the EU. But the daunting question is, will it be the same EU at that time? Thus, the level of engagement will be highly dependent on the changing circumstances and how the European politicians perceive the special relationship with Great Britain.

The Major Issue at Stake: The Refugee Deal

As the elephant in the room, the EU-Turkey refugee deal needs particular attention. The deal was signed on March 18, 2016 after more than a million refugees from Syria, Iraq, and other war-torn countries reached European shores in 2015, leading to the most severe migrant crisis since the Second World War. Under the deal, undocumented refugees crossing into Greece are deported to Turkey, which in return receives monetary aid of 3 billion Euros (\$3.2 billion) for refugee protection. The deal also holds the prospect of EU visa privileges for Turkish citizens—depending on the Turkish

government's compliance with democratization norms.

One full year later, both European and Turkish authorities find that the deal works well at the technical level. The refugee flow to Greece dramatically declined, from an average of 2,300 to 86 crossings per day, not only because of better security control of coastal areas but also because potential refugees realized that most crossers are now stranded on the Greek islands and not able to move toward northern Europe. By February 2017, the Turkish government had already allocated 2.2 billion of the 3 billion Euro package. The bulk of the aid goes to humanitarian assistance, primarily food, shelter, and clothing. The rest is allocated to educational facilities for children and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that support better integration of Syrians into Turkish society. According to a recent report, 37 NGO projects worth 1.45 billion Euros have been contracted and half of the amount, 748 million, has already been spent on these projects. As part of the deal, the EU also accepted more legal resettlement from Turkey: 3,565 Syrian refugees received help to migrate to a dozen EU countries in the past year.

Despite these achievements, there is growing criticism inside the EU of Angela Merkel, the architect of the refugee deal. Critics have focused on two major problems. First, the camps for the stranded 14,000 asylum seekers on five Greek islands raise the question of human rights violations. A number of humanitarian NGOs have documented that some refugees, including children, attempt suicide as anxiety and depression increase in the camps, noting that mental health is "rapidly

deteriorating due to the conditions created as a result of this deal.”

Second, Merkel’s critics claim that Erdoğan’s mounting repression of journalists and academics is repeatedly downplayed among European officials for fear that he may “open the gates.” In fact, Erdoğan and Turkish officials habitually warn of canceling the deal if Europe does not deliver on the promise of visa-free travel for Turkish citizens. Most recently, following the diplomatic crisis with the Netherlands, Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu threatened that Turkey could readily send 15,000 refugees “to shock the Europeans.” Moreover, Erdoğan’s frequent disparaging remarks, including accusing German authorities “of using Nazi measures,” unnerve most Germans, who find Merkel saying that she does not want “to trade provocations” with Turkey in response. The influential German weekly *Der Spiegel*’s editorial message on March 6 summarizes the troubled feelings of many Europeans: “The fear that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan might cancel the refugee deal and allow masses of migrants to make their way to Germany has shackled Angela Merkel’s policies toward the autocratic leader. It is time to come up with a European solution that decreases our dependence on Turkey.”

A Look at the Future

The upcoming September elections in Germany may be a game changer for the future of the refugee deal. Angela Merkel’s main competitor, Martin Schulz, the former European parliament president and outspoken EU critic, leads the race for Germany’s next leader, according to some polls. Merkel admits that the September elections “will be the hardest ever” since she

came to power in 2005. In competition with Schulz—who is very critical of the refugee deal with Turkey and President Erdoğan’s authoritarian turn—Merkel might consider changing her tone to be more critical of Turkey in order to appeal to German conservative nationalist votes.

Critics of Merkel and the refugee deal find Turkish warnings of “opening the gates” mostly rhetorical. As most borders are tightly controlled across Europe and relatively fewer refugees are willing to take high risks, the situation is far more different than it was two years ago. In addition, Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon can no longer fly to Istanbul without a visa because of Turkey’s stricter visa regulations, which were put in place to block infiltration by Islamic State fighters.

Moreover, as most of the financial aid to Turkey is now contracted and a large amount is spent already, Merkel may find it difficult to convince European leaders that another round of 3 billion Euros is needed—which was mentioned as a possibility in the original deal. The visa liberalization that Turkey requests seems quite unlikely to be realized as the country looks like it is “further away from EU membership than ever,” in the words of the German foreign minister. Without financial benefits or visa prospects, Turkey may indeed retreat from the deal.

A referendum victory by President Erdoğan in April could introduce additional controversy as well. Erdoğan stated that he looks forward to reinstating the death penalty “without hesitation” after the referendum, calling the Turkish parliament into action. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker

was swift to respond that any return of the death penalty would be a "red line" for Turkey's EU membership bid. On the other hand, if Erdoğan loses in the April referendum, he remains as the president of Turkey in an unchanged parliamentary system. Thus, Turkey's tensions with the European Union appear to be not simply a transient rift but a potential divide at a crossroads.

Erdoğan's degraded relations with the EU may lead him to seek better relations with Moscow and Washington. The Trump Administration made it clear that Turkey's human rights violations are not of critical importance; instead, the question is whether the all-powerful Erdoğan will be committed to security cooperation with the United States.

Nonetheless, it may be difficult to separate the future of Turkish democracy and the Ankara-Washington strategic partnership. Turkey's relations with the Kurds—which pose a strategic challenge to US policy in Syria—for example, constitute a multidimensional issue that has strong links to democratization reforms in Turkey. Moreover, Erdoğan's authoritarian measures, if they persist, may cause further instability in Turkey, which will not be in Washington's best interest.

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