

German chancellor strikes sordid deal with Turkish government to block refugees

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22 October 2015

Necessity knows no law. True to this motto, German Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Istanbul on Sunday to negotiate the terms of a joint plan of action between the European Union and Turkey previously agreed upon by the EU heads of state.

The aim of the plan is to ensure that refugees are stopped before they reach the gates of Fortress Europe. Turkey is to serve as a buffer zone for refugees from Syria and Iraq and assume the role of the EU's leading border guard. In return, the EU is prepared to meet Turkey's demands regarding the country's membership negotiations.

The joint plan of action stipulates that the Turkish coast guard in the Aegean Sea play a more aggressive role in intercepting refugees. So far this year, only 50,000 refugees were intercepted, while 450,000 were able to reach the coast of Greece. To put an end to this, the Turkish coast guard is to undergo technical upgrades and collaborate with the European border protection agency Frontex and the Greek coast guard.

Central to the plan is the acceleration of a readmission agreement, under which Turkey is tasked with taking back refugees who have entered Greece, Bulgaria or Romania. In addition, the EU will finance the construction of six new camps for more than 2 million refugees.

The regime in Ankara is asking in return that the EU meet its demands in five areas. Membership negotiations, stalled since 2013, are to be resumed. The Turkish head of state is to be invited to EU summits, visa requirements for Turkish businessmen are to be eased, Turkey is to be added to the list of "secure states of origin," and, finally, the government in Ankara wants €3 billion from the EU for the construction and maintenance of planned refugee internment camps.

In a joint press conference with Merkel, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared that he was ready for better cooperation, but complained that his country spent \$7.8 billion on taking in 2.2 million Syrian and 300,000 Iraqi refugees. He said, "Firstly, the sharing of the refugee burden should be fair. The amount of aid ... is secondary. What is more important is the common will to tackle this issue.

Turkey has been left alone in recent years."

Merkel offered to "support the acceleration of the visa process" as long as Turkey agreed to sign the readmission agreement. In addition, she held out the prospect of resuming membership negotiations. "Germany is ready this year to open Chapter 17, and make preparations for [Chapters] 23 and 24."

Chapter 17 refers to a shared economic and finance policy, while Chapters 23 and 24 typically relate to questions of cooperation in the area of justice, security and human rights.

The German government and the EU are clearly prepared to go a long way toward meeting Turkey's demands. In last year's progress report, the EU attested that Turkey still maintained considerable differences with European standards and "appealed for meaningful progress with regard to justice and compliance with fundamental human rights." The publication of this year's report has been postponed. A spokesperson for the European Commission explained that this was due to a need to concentrate on the refugee question. In reality, critical passages are no doubt being watered down so that Turkey's assistance in the defense against refugees is not jeopardized.

Merkel, who said just 10 days ago on the ARD television network that she opposed Turkey's membership in the EU, now says that "open-ended" membership negotiations will proceed. "We had very promising discussions," she explained.

Merkel and Davutoglu agreed that a lasting solution to the refugee crisis can only be reached if "the conflict in Syria is resolved". Davutoglu renewed the call for the establishment of a security zone in northern Syria during the discussions, saying, "a safe zone is needed in order to stop the refugee flow. The deepening conflict between Syrian government forces backed by Russian airstrikes and terrorist Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants around the Syrian city of Aleppo risks triggering a new wave of refugees."

The establishment of a security zone would bring a further escalation of the already extremely tense situation in Syria.

The plans would require a massive intervention of ground troops and would be a clear violation of international law, through which the territorial integrity of Syria would be attacked.

President Erdogan maintains that refugee camps will be constructed in the security zone. The reality is that the Turkish government wants, above all, to take action against Kurdish militants and prevent the formation of a contiguous Kurdish region in northern Syria with access to the Mediterranean.

Merkel did not address the question of a “security zone” in Syria, but the German government pledged its support in the fight against terrorism. Because President Erdogan counts among the terrorists the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and their allies in Syria, this means that Merkel has signaled to the Turkish regime that she will at least approve further actions by Ankara against the Kurds. A further military escalation in the region will have catastrophic consequences for the population there and lead to a dramatic increase in the number of refugees.

Merkel’s visit to Turkey and her far-reaching concessions amount to direct support for Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the end phase of Turkey’s parliamentary elections. The German chancellor has done this even though the Erdogan regime has intensified its brutal offensive against the Kurdish minority, incited civil war in eastern Turkey, imprisoned journalists, shut down broadcasters, and dismissed dissident judges and attorneys.

The call for Erdogan to become the doorkeeper of the EU and defend its external borders against refugees was so loud that the strengthening of the corrupt and authoritarian AKP was regarded as an acceptable price to pay.

One hundred Turkish academics protested in an open letter opposing Merkel’s visit and listed the continual violations of the AKP regime against the basic rights of the population.

“These violations have shown that [the] president and prime minister openly defy the common values of the EU,” said the letter. “We are deeply concerned, because your visit will be seen both as support of a politician who takes an active part in a campaign despite the fact that he has sworn to remain impartial, and as endorsing the violation of the most important values of the European Union.”

No criticism was heard from the official opposition parties, the Kemalist Republican People’s Party and the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, because, on the refugee question at least, they are in agreement with the Erdogan government and would sooner be rid of asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq today than tomorrow.

Merkel’s accommodative attitude toward the authoritarian regime in Ankara was also defended in Germany. Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière told ARD: “We cannot always

take the moral high ground and teach the whole world about human rights conditions.” Turkey is now the “key” to the refugee question “because so many people come from there.”

Yasmin Fahimi, the general secretary of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has rejected every criticism of Merkel’s visit to Turkey. She told the tabloid *Bild* newspaper, “Even if the conditions are extremely difficult from a foreign policy perspective and domestically in Turkey, there is no way out of collaborating with Turkey.” She added cynically, “It’s ultimately about improving the situation for refugees.”

While Turkey may play a role as Europe’s border guard in the future, the refugee crisis within European borders is intensifying. Since the Hungarian regime closed all border crossings to Croatia on Sunday, refugees must now cross over Slovenia. The government in Ljubljana has, however, announced it will register and allow passage for at most 2,500 refugees at the border per day.

At the same time, the Austrian government will admit only 1,500 refugees per day from Slovenia, while the Croatian government has temporarily closed the border with Serbia and has built a camp near the Serbian-Croatian border city of Berkasovo at which approximately 10,000 stranded refugees must hold out without shelter and basic necessities in the cold rain.

During a special overnight session, the Slovenian government also moved to mobilise the army at the border for action against refugees. “It’s about strengthening our control of the borders,” said Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar on state-owned radio.



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