

German chancellor boosts anti-refugee deal in visit to Turkey

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“The inhumane treatment of refugees,” we wrote on the *World Socialist Web Site* in early March, “is a signal of what workers and youth throughout Europe can expect in the future.” This was confirmed by the visit of German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Turkey last Monday.

Merkel sought to save the refugee deal that the European Union agreed with Ankara under pressure from Germany. In exchange, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President, with whom she met for a one-hour meeting in Istanbul, is now demanding that the EU accept the creation of an authoritarian presidential regime which he is energetically pursuing.

According to the official record of the talks, Erdogan threatened that the Turkish parliament would not ratify the agreement if the EU continued to insist on the weakening of Ankara’s controversial anti-terrorism law as a condition for visa freedom for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU.

Erdogan is using the anti-terrorism law to eliminate oppositional politicians and journalists critical of the Turkish army’s actions against the Kurds and his politics in Syria. Even a mere expression of opinion can result in arrest and a years-long prison sentence.

Just last week, at the insistence of the ruling AKP, the Turkish parliament agreed to lift the immunity of a quarter of its deputies, overwhelmingly members of the pro-Kurdish HDP. They can now be brought before the courts and lose their mandate if convicted. In this way, Erdogan could establish the two-thirds majority he requires to anchor the presidential dictatorship, which is already functioning in practice, in the constitution.

Prior to the talks, Merkel went a long way toward meeting Erdogan’s demands. Although she expressed her concern about “some developments in Turkey” in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

Sonntagszeitung, she insisted that the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) was a terrorist organization. There were “of course mutual dependencies” and the “necessity to balance interests,” said the chancellor. It was her role to “identify differences and arrive at compromises.” Thus far, Turkey had been reliable with its promises.

The refugee deal with Turkey is the heart of Merkel’s so-called European solution of the refugee crisis. Fearing that the closure of Europe’s internal borders—as Hungary, Austria and other countries unilaterally decided to implement—would mean multi-billion-euro losses for German big business and the break-up of the EU, Merkel pressed for the sealing off of Europe’s external borders.

Within the EU, the right to asylum was thus practically abolished. Refugees are being treated like criminals, arrested at the borders, confined to detention camps and deported. However, the EU is relying to a large extent on Turkey taking back refugees and deporting some of them to their countries of origin.

Merkel is not only under pressure from other European governments over her refugee policy, but also from within Germany. In this, the opposition comes overwhelmingly from the right.

Horst Seehofer, the chairman of the Christian Social Union, the Christian Democratic Union’s sister party in Bavaria, attacked Merkel on Sunday on the public broadcaster ARD, stating, “One should never allow oneself to become dependent upon such systems or be blackmailed.” In the face of the lifting of immunity for Turkish parliamentary deputies “the whole world must raise its voice,” blustered Seehofer. But there had not been much criticism, “because the deal obviously can’t be put at risk.”

Seehofer, who is among the hardliners against refugees and maintains close ties to autocrats like

Hungarian President Victor Orban and Russian President Vladimir Putin, is pursuing two main goals with his critique of Merkel.

Domestically, he aims to halt the rise of the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) by adopting its nationalist and Islamophobic line, which is also directed against Turkish immigrants. He is continuously repeating the maxim of the former CSU leader Franz Josef Strauß that no legitimate democratic party can be allowed to the right of the Union parties. Merkel has publicly contradicted him.

Secondly, Seehofer, along with other sections of the foreign policy elite, fears that too close of a reliance on Turkey could limit German options in the Middle East, where it is acting with increased aggressiveness.

A century ago, German imperialism pursued its aims in the Orient in alliance with the Ottoman Empire, but was left empty-handed after it was divided up by France and Britain following the defeat in the First World War. Now, with a renewed division of the Middle East taking place, Germany wants to retain the option of playing the Iranian, Egyptian or Kurdish card.

It is therefore no coincidence that the German parliament is due to pass a resolution on June 2 condemning the persecution of Armenians a hundred years ago (in which German military officers were heavily involved) as “genocide.” This move will increase tensions with Ankara.

In Berlin, Erdogan’s authoritarian strivings are accepted or tolerated with verbal protests, but they are seen as a sign of weakness. The German ruling elite does not wish to tie its foreign policy too closely to a regime which could soon be rocked by social conflict.

Throughout its history, the Turkish bourgeoisie has repeatedly responded to domestic and external crises with dictatorial measures. During the last sixty years alone, the military has launched three coups and enforced one change in power. This same course is taken by Erdogan in the face of mounting social tensions and foreign policy crises.

The rise of his AKP was closely bound up with an influx of international capital and high economic growth rates which made possible some social concessions and a growth of the middle class. But now the economy is stagnating, unemployment and inflation stand at 10 percent, and the Turkish lira is in free fall. At the same time, Turkey is deeply implicated in the

Syrian war and, after expanding its economic ties with much of the Arab world and former states of the Soviet Union, finds itself in disputes with virtually all of its neighbors, as well as Russia.



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