

German government escalates confrontation with Turkey

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Over the past few days, tensions between Germany and Turkey have markedly increased. Berlin, in particular, has adopted a more aggressive posture.

Last week, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, a Social Democrat, announced a realignment in the government's policy towards Turkey. "It cannot go on like this," he said. "We cannot continue as before. We will now have to look at how we adapt our policy towards Turkey in light of the aggravated situation."

The German government immediately placed a question mark over state guarantees for German business investments in Turkey. "No one can be advised to invest in a country if there is no longer any legal certainty and even totally respectable companies are maligned as having links with terrorists," said Gabriel. He added that did not see "how we, as a federal government, can continue to guarantee German corporate investments in Turkey."

The foreign minister went on to question European Union aid to Turkey's bid to enter the EU, as well as negotiations to extend the customs union. This follows the announcement of an official travel warning. The foreign ministry website features a notice saying: "People who travel to Turkey for private or business reasons are advised to be more cautious and it is recommended that they register on the Crisis Prevention List at consulates and the embassy, even for short-term stays."

Gabriel justified the measures by citing "conspicuous developments in Turkey." He said, "Whoever sacks hundreds of thousands of civil servants, soldiers and judges; throws tens of thousands in jail, including parliamentary deputies, journalists and human rights activists; expropriates the possessions of thousands; closes down hundreds of press outlets; whoever sweepingly accuses dozens of German businesses of providing aid to terrorists" clearly wants "to turn back the wheel of history and remove the foundations of the rule of law so successfully established in recent years."

Whom is Gabriel seeking to impress with his human rights propaganda? It is obvious that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his conservative AKP (Justice and

Development Party) government are in the process of establishing an authoritarian regime in Turkey. But the German government is in no position to lecture Ankara on the "rule of law and democracy." Gabriel has no problem calling butchers such as Egypt's military dictator Abdel Fatah al-Sisi an "impressive president." The German government, moreover, has no scruples when it comes to abrogating fundamental rights and using brutal force against journalists and demonstrators, as demonstrated by the police crackdown against protesters at the recent G20 summit in Hamburg.

If someone is seeking to "turn back the wheel of history," it is the ruling class of Germany. At the Munich Security Conference in 2014, then-German President Joachim Gauck and the federal government announced that despite its crimes in two world wars, Germany would again have to develop an aggressive foreign policy and pursue great power politics. This agenda was implemented in the Middle East with the delivery of arms to the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq and Germany's entry into the Syrian war.

The wars carried out by the imperialist powers have not only transformed the Middle East into a powder keg, they have also undermined relations with Europe's traditional ally in the region. Ankara is a party to the war in Syria, but it pursues its own interests there. Tensions with the Western governments have been building for some time, above all on the Kurdish question and Turkey's foreign policy approach to Russia and China.

Already before the failed Turkish coup in July 2016, which had the silent support of sections of the ruling class in the US and Germany, German-Turkish relations had entered into crisis. In June 2016, the Bundestag (German federal parliament) adopted a resolution describing as "genocide" the mass murder during World War I of up to 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan had warned beforehand that the adoption of such a resolution would cause "damage to diplomatic, economic, political and military relations between the two countries."

This year, the conflict has sharpened. Prior to the Turkish

constitutional referendum in April, the German authorities imposed a ban on Turkish government members traveling to several German cities. In June, the Bundestag decided, by a large majority, to move Bundeswehr (army) units from the Turkish Air Force base at Incirlik to the Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan. This came after Ankara banned members of the Bundestag from visiting German soldiers in Turkey.

The Turkish government justified its position by accusing Germany of sheltering “terrorists” from the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the Islamist Gülenist movement. Ankara accused the latter of playing a central role in the failed coup of July 2016.

In all, more than 400 Turkish soldiers, diplomats and high-ranking government officials who are suspected by the Turkish government of supporting the coup attempt are applying for asylum in Germany. According to the Turkish media, these include officers from a “renowned military academy in Ankara” who are among the “leading conspirators in the failed putsch of 15 July.” Germans imprisoned in Turkey, including the journalist Deniz Yücel and the human rights activist Peter Steudtner, are accused by the Turkish judiciary of “terrorism” and “espionage.”

Gabriel’s provocative outburst has triggered a violent reaction. In a speech in Istanbul, Erdogan called the statements “unfounded” and “malicious” and said Germany had to “pull itself together.” Beyond Turkey, Gabriel’s statements are exacerbating tensions within the EU and NATO.

In an interview with broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk*, Austrian social-democratic politician Hannes Swoboda accused the German government of having failed to seek agreement on its position with the European Commission and the European Parliament. It was necessary to “take into account that many countries have a very different relationship with Turkey,” he said. He was thinking of “Italy, Spain and some Nordic countries” that see this “quite differently.” Germany had to “take care that it represents a common European position” to avoid being “left standing in the rain.”

In an interview, former German Defence Minister Volker Rühe, a member of the Christian Democratic Union, criticized NATO and called for the military alliance to show “somewhat more hardness” towards the Turkish government. “If the largest and most important NATO nations—the Germans, the English, the French, in Europe, and the Americans—act together here, then I am sure that one can achieve something with Mr. Erdogan.” This must, however, begin with “the NATO secretary general, who is much too defensive.”

While the German government is aggressively pushing its new Turkey policy, it is also trying to avoid a complete

break with Ankara. At the end of his press conference, Gabriel stated that “his relations with Turkey were very close to his heart.” The German government was “interested in continuing good and trusting relations with the Turkish government.” He added, “We want Turkey to remain a part of the West. But ‘It takes two to tango!’”

For several reasons, Turkey, as a central bridge between Europe and the resource-rich regions of the Middle East, is of great importance for German imperialism. A current strategy paper from the German Society for Foreign Affairs (DGAP) states: “Despite the many points at issue between Germany and Turkey, the country remains an important partner for Germany and the EU.”

On the topic of “security policy,” the paper warns against “a further distancing of Turkey from the EU.” This would “pose the danger of NATO being weakened and Turkey moving closer to Russia in security policy and becoming increasingly active against German and European interests.” In addition, in the sealing of Europe’s borders against refugees from the war zones in the Middle East and Afghanistan, “Turkey, as a transit country on the EU’s external border, is of crucial importance.”

Another “core interest of Germany,” according to the DGAP paper, is economic cooperation with Turkey. Last year, the volume of bilateral trade amounted to 37.3 billion euros, of which 21.9 billion was attributable to German exports to Turkey. Germany is the second largest investor in Turkey within the European Union. “In addition, Turkey is important as a transit country for European energy supplies from the Middle East and the Caspian region.”



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