



MIGRATION BINDS: TURKEY'S AND GERMANY'S LEADERS MEET DESPITE DEEP DIFFERENCES ON THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

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Since the May 2023 elections, Turkey has sought to mend fences with liberal democracies in the West, among them Germany. Yet, Germany's and Turkey's differing official views of the Israel-Hamas war¹—where Turkey has shown solidarity with Hamas and Germany has sided with Israel—have complicated the reconciliation. This difference in views could have been a well-argued reason for Germany to postpone an already agreed meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Chancellor Olaf Scholz. However, the two leaders met in Berlin on November 17, largely to discuss the two countries' interdependence on one major issue: migration.

Germany's Governing Coalition Is In Need of Curbing Migration

In Germany, migration is back on the agenda. Compared to the same period last year, the number of asylum applications increased by 67.5 percent, to 286,638, as of October 2023.² So far this year, 46,237 Turkish citizens have applied for asylum, which is the second highest number of applications from any country following Syria. In a recent opinion poll,³ more than 70% of the German population expressed dismay over the government's handling of immigration. This has boosted the popularity of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party,⁴ which threatens the Social Democratic (SPD)-led governing coal-

tion. In response to popular sentiment, the chancellor has announced stricter measures for asylum seekers, cutting their social benefits.⁵

Following years of cooperation on this issue, Germany is once again looking to Turkey as a partner in tackling migration. Since its implementation in 2016, the framework provided by the EU-Turkey statement has lowered migration from Turkey to the EU, including Germany.⁶ According to the statement, Turkey is responsible for preventing irregular border crossings to Greece. All irregular migrants who arrive on the Greek islands face being forcibly returned to Turkey. For every Syrian that is returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian is to be resettled from Turkey to the EU. The returns are conditioned under the EU-Turkey Agreement on Readmission.⁷ In exchange for its cooperation, Turkey has so far received EUR 6 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey for concrete projects related to migration.⁸

Yet, the agreement has proven to be less effective in the past three years. In 2020, the Turkish government attempted to blackmail the EU by threatening to send a flood of refugees over the border unless Turkey received more funds for the care of refugees.⁹ The 2023 EU Progress Report noted that the return of migrants from the Greek islands was effectively suspended in 2020, which has increased pressure on EU countries.¹⁰ Additionally, Germany has only accepted 14% of all Turkish asylum applications—in

contrast to the 87% acceptance rate for Syrian and 76.8% for Afghan nationals.¹¹ Furthermore, there is no functioning mechanism for the return of rejected Turkish asylum applicants, which is a point of contention between the two governments.¹²

Thus, for Germany, the November 17 meeting was crucial to facilitate returns and make steps toward the revitalization of the EU-Turkey migration deal. During the meeting the parties discussed the establishment of a German-Turkish bilateral working group on the organized return of rejected Turkish asylum applicants.¹³ In addition, the German government expressed that it is prioritizing the continuation of the EU-Turkey migration deal.¹⁴ Although the details were not disclosed, Scholz stressed the mutual importance of the agreement during the press briefing.

The Price of Cooperation: Easing of Visa Restrictions and Further Financial Assistance

Solving migration-related headaches does not come without a price for the German governing coalition. First, Germany gave the floor to Erdoğan to spread his views¹⁵ on the Israel-Hamas war despite demands from local stakeholders to cancel the visit.¹⁶ Not uninviting him was risky in Germany's political culture, which is loaded with pro-Israel sentiments. Second, Germany is expected to deliver on Turkey's concrete demands related to the EU-Turkey migration deal and visa liberalization, the latter being a particularly challenging issue to present to the EU.

The continuation of the EU-Turkey migration deal is in the interest of Ankara, too. Although Erdoğan promised the repatriation of one million Syrian refugees before the May 2023 elections,¹⁷ it is likely they will continue to stay in Turkey for a long time. The project-tied aid provided by the EU for refugees thus eases the pressure on the Turkish government,¹⁸ which is fighting skyrocketing inflation,¹⁹ post-earthquake reconstruction,²⁰ and preparing for the March 2024 local elections. In addition, the bleak prospects of arriving from Turkey to the EU may make Turkey a less attractive destination for migrants. This seems to be beneficial for the incumbent, considering the increasing anti-refugee sentiments in Turkish society.²¹

Not least, the long-awaited visa liberalization for Turkish citizens was also on the meeting agenda. Turkish politicians and businesses have lamented the increased rejection rate of Turkish visa applications in Germany this year.²² Germany's almost 3 million residents with Turkish immigration background and the around 80,000 Turkish-German businesses operating in Germany are in need of eased travel restrictions.²³ Yet, the increasing number of asylum applications from Turkey complicate the situation. During the meeting Erdoğan and Scholz discussed the visa liberalization process. Although the Turkish president had hoped to declare a victory by gaining a simplified procedure for students and businesses, Scholz did not deliver. During the press briefing, the German chancellor referred indirectly to this theme by bringing up the mutual need for unhindered connection between the citizens of the two countries, but no concrete steps were announced.

Implications for EU-Turkey and Germany-Turkey Relations

The meeting between Scholz and Erdoğan showcases the interdependence between Germany and Turkey on migration. This linkage has forced Berlin to give the stage to the Turkish leader even in times of deep disagreements. Despite their differences on the Middle East and the dire rule of law situation in Turkey,²⁴ Germany is reliant on Turkey because of migration. Nonetheless, Berlin has leverage over Ankara. Turkey needs Germany's influence in Brussels on the visa liberalization process, and the same goes for the EU-Turkey migration deal, which can mitigate Ankara's thirst for financial assistance.

Even if Turkey disappoints Germany on value-driven themes, such as the rule of law situation or views on the Middle East, Ankara remains a major partner in the field of migration. Although Turkey often presents unsatisfiable demands, such as full visa liberalization and EU membership, it can always win enough concessions that can be sold in Turkey as a victory. In this case the meeting's realization was a victory in itself for Erdoğan. Yet, with this transactional conduct of foreign policy, Turkey remains a semi-external partner to the EU, a candidate country but without realistic prospects for accession in the near future.

Endnotes

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