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# BEHIND *DÖNER* DIPLOMACY: THE TURKISH DIASPORA'S EXAGGERATED PUBLIC AGENDA-SHAPING POWER IN GERMANY

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## Executive Summary

This analysis argues that German policy circles have exaggerated the public agenda-shaping potential of the Turkish diaspora. Although Turkey has established strong influence over the conservative segment of its diaspora in Germany since 2002, and most voters in Germany cast their ballot for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, they have not become political agenda-setters. Yet, German policy circles bring in the diaspora as one of the main reasons to keep Turkey close despite democratic backsliding and differences on foreign policy themes. This is because Berlin needs Ankara to halt migration and thereby mitigate the surge of the far-right in Germany. However, human rights advocates have criticized both Germany and the EU for extra-territorializing human rights violations, specifically through the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. This makes it difficult for the incumbent German coalition government, which promised a value-based foreign policy, to continue engaging Turkey. Thus, exaggerating the Turkish diaspora's role in bilateral relations is a way of justifying to foreign policy partners and to the primarily pro-immigration, liberal German public that Berlin needs to keep Turkey close.



During his visit to Turkey from April 22–24, 2024, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier made a symbolic gesture by including individuals of Turkish heritage in his delegation. However, the decision to include a German chef and invite Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and others for an informal dinner of *döner* kebab sparked widespread public outrage in Turkey and its diaspora in Germany.<sup>1</sup> This exchange, perceived as reducing the multifaceted contributions of German Turks to mere clichés,<sup>2</sup> reignited discussions around the diasporic dimension of Turkey-Germany relations, bringing issues surrounding the Turkish diaspora in Germany back to the forefront of public attention.

The focus on the diaspora is not a coincidence. During his visit Steinmeier emphasized Germany's expectation that Turkey delivers on rule of law and human rights issues,<sup>3</sup> which are recurring themes in the day-to-day business of German diplomats and Turkish state authorities.<sup>4</sup> While German diplomats argue that Berlin follows a value-oriented foreign policy, it continuously gives face time to the very leaders it criticizes, which boosts their confidence: Turkey is not an exception. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Steinmeier jointly hosted Erdogan in Berlin on November 17, 2023,<sup>5</sup> followed by the German president's recent three-day visit to Turkey merely five months later. German diplomats<sup>6</sup> frequently mention the Turkish diaspora as a reason to maintain close ties with Turkey despite differences in values such as the rule of law and foreign policy. They argue that the presence of the Turkish diaspora in Germany has intertwined foreign policy with domestic politics in Berlin. Thus, the Turkish diaspora in Germany is an asset through which Germany keeps Turkey on its agenda.

Within this context, this analysis goes beyond discussing the consideration that Turkey uses its own diaspora to become influential in Germany's politics.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I argue that Germany blows Turkey's ability to mobilize its diaspora in Germany out of proportion. Diplomats emphasize the diaspora because it is an avenue to continue to negotiate with Turkey despite its democratic backsliding and differences on foreign policy themes such as the Israel-Hamas war. This may seem contradictory because Germany's governing coalition had promised a values-based foreign policy and a harsher tone against authoritarian governments.<sup>8</sup> Yet, such a policy comes with benefits for the incumbent. Through keeping an open channel with Turkey, the German government aims to mitigate the surge of the far-right, anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD) party,<sup>9</sup> among others, by keeping Erdoğan close. Turkey hosts over three million migrants, many of whom would go to Germany if allowed by Ankara.

This analysis first explores why Germany keeps Turkey on its agenda through overemphasizing the diaspora's role in bilateral relations. Second, it investigates why German policymakers perceive the Turkish diaspora in Germany as a threat. Third, it unpacks whether the Turkish diaspora's political mobilization by the AKP is indeed a threat to Germany.

## Turkey as a Difficult Partner for Germany

Since the early 2010s, Turkey-Germany relations have suffered considerable backlash in Germany. Subsequently, it has become uncomfortable for German politicians to maintain good relations with Turkey. During the 2013 Gezi protests,<sup>10</sup>



a major opposition movement that the police crushed through the heavy use of force, thousands were injured and eight people died. The Freedom House special report on the state of democracy in Turkey from 2013 argued that serious democratic backsliding took place in the aftermath of the protests.<sup>11</sup> The 2016 coup attempt—when a group of army officers, widely assumed to be members of the Gülen movement,<sup>12</sup> attempted to overthrow the AKP government—further deteriorated this situation. Turkey’s rules-based, enlargement-oriented relationship with the European Union (EU), including the opening of chapters in accession negotiations, came to a standstill in 2018.<sup>13</sup> The generally Turkey-skeptic public in the EU expressed even stronger hostility against Turkey joining the EU after the coup attempt.<sup>14</sup> In a 2016 poll of the European public, 86% of respondents in Germany expressed that they were against Turkey’s accession to the EU. This number was 83% in Finland; in Denmark, 82%; in France, 74%; and in Sweden, 73%.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the public’s critical stance on Turkey’s EU accession in Germany and the rule of law deficiencies in Ankara, German policymakers have been willing to engage Turkey. One major reason for this is that Turkey can help mitigate the surge of the far-right AfD.<sup>16</sup> Policy experts in Berlin, under anonymity, shared that while the German public is harshly against maintaining close ties with Turkey, the government’s politicians see Ankara as the key to stopping migration.<sup>17</sup> President Steinmeier expressed this diplomatically during the press briefing held together with President Erdoğan when he said, “We need each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Turkey is the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, with 3.4 million people seeking protection there.<sup>19</sup> Since 2016, German politicians,

under the EU umbrella, have developed a transactional relationship with Turkey regarding the regulation of migration. Turkey receives financial assistance in exchange for not allowing refugees to travel further toward Germany, and Berlin wishes to continue this cooperation.<sup>20</sup> The continuation of this scheme is crucial to slow down the increasing electoral popularity of the far-right AfD. However, human rights advocates have criticized the EU and Germany for shrugging off its humanitarian obligations and de facto filling up Turkey with refugees.<sup>21</sup> Thus, stressing the diaspora’s agenda-setting role<sup>22</sup> as a justification for engaging Erdoğan’s Turkey is more justifiable to liberal segments of the mostly Turkey-critical German public<sup>23</sup> than merely referring to migration. If German diplomats were only speaking to a far-right audience, they would not need to complicate their argument, because most of them likely would not mind Germany or the EU engaging in a migration deal that may lead to human rights violations. But since they are talking<sup>24</sup> to a largely pro-migration liberal public<sup>25</sup> in Germany when trying to explain their values-based foreign policy, bringing in the Turkish diaspora as a reason to engage Turkey helps tone down criticism.

## The AKP’s Grip over the Turkish Diaspora in Germany

In the past two decades, Turkey’s diaspora in Germany has become more centralized than ever before. Since 2002, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has sought to consolidate its power via mobilizing support in diasporic spaces using state and state-linked civic organizations.<sup>26</sup> Over the past two decades, Erdoğan has organized more rallies in Germany than in any other country outside of Turkey.



The Turkish government sees German Turks, with their 2.8 million-strong base,<sup>27</sup> as an asset to shape the agenda of public policy in Germany.

The AKP has engaged in creating an AKP-friendly diaspora through a variety of institutions. As a key institution in this regard, Turkey established the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB) in 2010. The YTB's aim is to bring together the services for Turkey's diasporas that were previously provided by several ministries under one roof.<sup>28</sup> Another institution crucial in this regard is Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a state institution that was established in 1924 and is responsible for the organization of Islamic religious life in Turkey. Although it was established long before the current ruling party came to power, its budget, role in spreading the ruling party's ideas about Turkishness and religion, and its outreach to Turkey's diaspora increased significantly under the AKP's tenure.<sup>29</sup>

In Germany, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), the Diyanet's German arm, has been active since 1984. Before the AKP came to power, DITIB's task was to provide Turkish state-defined Islam to Turkish communities and to counter the influence of locally established conservative organizations, which had a different interpretation and practice of religion than the Diyanet's doctrine. Before the above institutions were established or strengthened under the AKP, the organization of diaspora life in Germany had been fragmented among several institutions. Although DITIB had good relations with the German state due to its moderate ideas of Islam,<sup>30</sup> diaspora members preferred other organizations, such as the National View (*Millî Görüş*).<sup>31</sup> The National View entered Turkish politics in the late 1960s and

started organizing among Turkish emigrants in the 1970s. The organization has always been seen suspiciously by German authorities despite its later reforms. Since it was much more politically involved, many diaspora members preferred it over DITIB. Today, however, it has only 340 branches and 30,000 followers,<sup>32</sup> while the AKP government-linked DITIB controls 960 of the total 2,500 mosque associations in Germany.<sup>33</sup>

DITIB's expansion is related to the AKP's attempts to unify the Turkish diaspora and increase the Diyanet's role both in Turkey and at home. Since 2003, Turkish diplomatic personnel have been extremely active among Turkish diaspora communities in Europe. In 2004, the AKP facilitated the creation of the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), which was renamed the Union of Turkish Democrats (UID) in 2018. The organization has organic ties to the AKP and applies the party's nationalist framework to the diaspora.<sup>34</sup> Since the early 2000s, Turkish bureaucrats and politicians have often travelled to Germany, and with the help of the UID, they have managed to achieve rapprochement between conservative organizations within the diaspora.<sup>35</sup>

The Diyanet has 13 religious service attachés at diplomatic offices in Germany, which is around one-third of the total number they deploy abroad. The around 1,000 imams in DITIB mosques in Germany are trained in Turkey and receive their salaries from there—although this system is being phased out in 2024. They are employed as state officials, and similar to their colleagues in Turkey, they are pressured to support the politics of the AKP government.<sup>36</sup> Beyond all this, the UID and the YTB have been engaged in a public awareness campaign to boost German Turks' participation in elections since 2014,



among whom 55–68% usually vote for the AKP.<sup>37</sup> In addition, until 2017, Erdogan was allowed to organize rallies in Germany, which were crucial in mobilizing voters before elections. In short, the AKP has managed to centralize and politically influence the conservative segment of Turkey's diaspora through state institutions, which has the potential to shape the public agenda in Germany.

## From Potential to Policy: The Limited Agenda-Setting Power of the Turkish Diaspora

When Turkey's democratic backsliding achieved a critical turn with the 2013 Gezi protests, the diasporic space also became an arena of pro-government activism, which posed a challenge to German authorities. A German diplomat described this phenomenon as follows:

Unfortunately, we cannot choose our foreign policy partners. However, if our partners have diasporas in Germany, it is in our natural interest that we talk to them. Yet, their diasporas have to respect our value system and constitution. There is a danger that Turkey can instrumentalize its diaspora through DITIB for its own politics, and that must be limited.<sup>38</sup>

The UID organized a 25,000-strong counter-demonstration against the Gezi protests in 2013, and similar protests were organized after the 2016 coup attempt.<sup>39</sup> After the coup attempt, the religious administration was purged of 3,090 personnel, which amounted to 2.7% of its staff.<sup>40</sup> Since then, the AKP has further instrumentalized the Diyanet's narrative power and resources to make it a tool of its political power abroad—more specifically to brand all followers of the Gülen movement as traitors

and conduct surveillance on related individuals. According to media reports and German counter-intelligence, in Germany, imams appointed by the Diyanet reported to intelligence officers at the Turkish consulates and embassies about the whereabouts of followers of the Gülen movement who fled to Western Europe.<sup>41</sup> In this environment, the diaspora's majority voting tendencies for Erdogan ruffled feathers in the German public, as these individuals were considered to lack commitment to democratic values and norms.<sup>42</sup>

However, the diaspora's influence on German politics is limited beyond the conservative segment through which the Erdoğan regime has attempted to crack down on the AKP's political opposition. While the majority of the voters in the diaspora were pro-AKP in the second round of the 2023 presidential elections, only 760,000 of the eligible 1.5 million citizens voted. Though 67.22% of them chose Erdoğan, this is only around half a million people or one-third of the total population of eligible voters in Germany.<sup>43</sup> While there have been many attempts to politically organize the Turkish diaspora with the AKP's formal or informal support,<sup>44</sup> these endeavors have not yet successfully materialized.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond insufficient mobilization, there is some resentment of pro-AKP diaspora institutions in Germany, too. For instance, DITIB board members who are otherwise sympathetic to the AKP's narratives resigned in 2018 in Lower Saxony because of the Turkish state's interference in their religious affairs.<sup>46</sup> Although this is an isolated example, this resistance is significant and worthy of consideration, because it comes from inside the pro-AKP camp. This indicates some sense of dissatisfaction and shows that despite the strong grip of the Turkish



state over the conservative segment of the Turkish diaspora in Germany, there are limits to Ankara's influence.

Beyond opposition to the AKP within the diaspora, the German state has also made steps to limit Turkey's agenda-setting power. In 2017, Germany cancelled UID-sponsored events and banned Erdoğan from hosting rallies in Germany before the constitutional referendum on the transition to a presidential system.<sup>47</sup> That year, the German counter-intelligence organization described the UID as a "pro-government organization of the AKP that, in the spirit of its parent organization, lobbies for the interests of the AKP at a political and social level" in its annual report.<sup>48</sup> As a further consequence of Turkey's extra-legal activism in Germany, DITIB's civil servants from Turkey will be gradually replaced with Germany-educated imams in 2024, who will serve permanently in Germany and will no longer be employees of the Diyanet.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkey has established a strong grip over the conservative segment of its diaspora in Germany since the AKP came to power in 2002. This gives the impression that the Turkish diaspora is a potential agenda-setter in Germany. However, German policymakers have partially exaggerated this danger to German democracy. On the one hand, the Turkish state's attempts to control its citizens abroad are a threat to the sovereignty of Germany, which Berlin has taken measures to counteract. Yet, on the other, the often-mentioned large-scale political mobilization of the diaspora has yet to be achieved. Although the majority of the Turkish diaspora in Germany prefer Erdoğan, this support has not translated into political activism inside Germany: for

instance, mass support behind a German party serving the AKP's agenda.

Nevertheless, referring to the diaspora as a potential threat comes with benefits for both German and Turkish policymakers. On the one hand, for Germany, this implies that there is a justifiable reason why Chancellor Scholz and President Steinmeier need to engage President Erdoğan amid heavy anti-Turkey sentiment in German society and rule of law deficiencies in Turkey. This is not to argue that Germany should not engage Turkey but to shed light on the fact that, among other reasons, the German government uses the Turkish diaspora to justify why it does not adhere to its values-oriented foreign policy principles. On the other hand, for Turkey, the engagement provides gradually narrowing access to its diaspora and allows German policymakers to exchange views in other fields, such as migration and EU integration.



## Notes

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## About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/ German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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