In Brief: An EU exposed to Middle Eastern instability is turning to Turkey as a buffer. Yet metaphors of Turkey as a bridge or a dike are erroneous. Instead of relying on it as gatekeeper, the EU should use its leverage to build a dike against the Middle-Easternization of Turkey, a goal that will serve both Ankara and the EU.

The Fallacies of Treating Turkey as Europe’s Gatekeeper

by Emiliano Alessandri

Ongoing developments in EU-Turkey relations are as significant as they are worrying. In an exceptional summit in November, the EU committed itself to massive financial aid in exchange for Turkey bearing the brunt of a refugee crisis that has sent it over 2 million Syrians since 2011.

Despite the direct threat posed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS) after the Paris terrorist attacks, the summit’s focus was only partly on the transit of foreign terrorist fighters across the porous Turkish-Syrian border that Turkey has recently been working to block. What seems to trouble European capitals most is the influx of refugees and migrants across the Aegean Sea into the EU. The more refugees Ankara is willing and able to keep within Turkey creates a dike of sorts, the reasoning goes. This means less pressure on only loosely coordinated and already overloaded European reception systems. German Chancellor Angela Merkel supports this approach. Her much-praised “open-door policy” is increasingly seen as unsustainable and politically expensive.

Crudely put, frightened by the social, political, and potential security implications of the aggravating refugee crisis, the EU has decided to endow one of the its most problematic and vulnerable neighbors — one deeply implicated in the Syrian proxy war and beset by...
disputes with countries all around it — with the role of Europe’s “gatekeeper.”

What is more, the EU is pursuing this at a critical time for Turkey. Authoritarian tendencies are no longer limited after the resounding victory of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKParty) in November — its fifth consecutive success since 2002 — which resolved the hung parliament following the June election impasse. Among other dynamics, violations of the principles of a pluralistic society, from freedom (and safety) of the media to the protection of minorities, are reaching a new level in a polarized country in which checks and balances have been progressively dismantled and securitization has prevailed.

As pointed out by critics, this is possibly the worst time for the EU to display such coziness with Ankara. Such opportunism risks inflicting a serious blow to the EU’s self-styled “normative” approach, even more so as Turkey remains a prospective EU member, and after the last Summit is even “re-energized.”

Lost Leverage

The controversial nature of the “grand bargain” is best clarified by exposing the fallacies underpinning it. The EU should not take the blame so much for pursuing a deal that looked almost inescapable. Rather, the reasons underlying the crisis should be examined. The sad reality is that a union of over 500 million people representing around one-quarter of the world’s GDP has discovered itself so internally divided over the past years, not least by the eurocrisis, that it is straining to accommodate about as many refugees as Lebanon alone has taken in.

With the Schengen regime of free circulation under mounting pressure and xenophobic movements on the rise, any agreement with Turkey has come to be seen by modest and acrimonious EU leaders as a better outcome than its alternatives. On a more fundamental level, the EU’s indecisive approach to the raging Syrian civil war — one presented as wisely tempered by the hard-learned lessons of the ill-fated military interventions in Iraq and Libya — has left the root causes of the refugee emergency unaddressed. This has only brought instability closer to the EU.

Notwithstanding Turkey’s own responsibilities for the continuation of the Syrian conflict, all of the above has undoubtedly given Ankara unexpected leverage over Europe. In the EU’s defense, the Turkish people en masse supported the AKParty in November after signaling just months before that they would not bow to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s plans for an unbound presidency. This did not help rebalance the relationship between Ankara and Brussels.

The AK Party triumphed mainly because the opposition parties proved too weak and divided to form a coalition. But this was also the result of the fast-deteriorating security environment that Turkey plunged into soon after the country was left without clear political leadership in June. Neither the EU nor NATO were then willing or able to check Erdoğan’s nationalistic and militaristic turn by demanding a more measured and far-sighted approach to the country’s many challenges, especially the consequences of a derailed Kurdish settlement process.

If anything, Ankara intensified operations against Kurdish militant groups in exchange for air bases and a stronger commitment to combatting ISIS. For its part, the EU did not release its annual progress report on Turkey’s EU accession (which contains significant
criticism of the government) until after the November elections.

Where Do We Go Now?

In a matter of years, Turkey’s role reversal has been dramatic. Exalted as a model of democratic Islamic society and a bridge between East and West, Turkey is now no less erroneously presented as a dike that may help insulate Europe from the growing spillovers of Middle Eastern turmoil. In fact, a more lucid perspective would be to acknowledge that the disintegration of the Middle East state system has brought instability to the EU’s own borders. Thus priority should now be given to preventing a “Middle-Easternization” of Turkey itself. This calls for safeguarding the important ties that bind Europe and the West to Turkey — a NATO member and a dynamic society of over 70 million people. But this must happen realistically.

Realism should apply to Turkey’s EU bid. One of the praised aspects of the recent entente is the reinvigoration of the accession process, as shown by the opening of the important chapter on economic and monetary policy. The fact that Ankara still considers EU membership a strategic objective should not be disregarded. Nevertheless, this rediscovered love affair with the EU should not be carelessly reciprocated.

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Reviving accession talks at a time when journalists are imprisoned risks discrediting the whole process, especially with those constituencies that continue to believe in the democratizing effect of European integration. Rather, openings should be made selectively in practical and defined areas, such as by proactively engaging Turkish counterparts in the modernization and upgrading of the EU-Turkey Customs Union dating back to 1995.

Making the Customs Union deeper and more comprehensive while giving Turkey the prospect for an association to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, currently negotiated between Brussels and Washington, would achieve several results. It would show that the EU retains leverage and can seize the initiative in mutually beneficial ways, reaffirming its strategic ties with Turkey without discounting the accession process. The upgrade would also support the Turkish economy at a time when the limits of the growth model of the 2000s are becoming apparent.

Most importantly, an enhanced Customs Union would continue to add to the positive transformative effects that the removal of barriers has had over the past 20 years. It would promote European standards, strengthen the market economy, and call for the rule of law to be observed. In addition, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU could be further expedited by delinking it from the migration crisis. Far from rewarding a lax approach to issues such as readmission, this long-awaited move would remove Ankara’s excuse for inaction (since Ankara has said they want a visa waiver before they will move forward with other EU requests) and refocus attention on international responsibilities.

Realism would dictate avoiding hypocrisy about EU accession. Certainly Turkey must retain a “European perspective.” It should be clear beyond doubt, however, that currently Turkey does not qualify for EU membership. With this self-styled “New Turkey” plagued by old and new problems, clearly defined areas of cooperation and, when needed, firm red lines rather than chapters of accession should delineate the future roadmap.

The overarching priority should be to avoid the drift of Turkey into the quagmire of the Middle East even
though certain sectarian tendencies and the Kurdish question will continue to push in this direction. There should be no hesitation to fight against ISIS, and not just for ethical reasons. The longer Turkey entertains the dangerous thought it can gain from the Levant’s divisive politics, the more enmeshed in the region’s perverse logics it will become, thus turning into a gateway for instability into Europe. Instead of relying on it as a gatekeeper, the EU should use its leverage to build a dike against the Middle-Easternization of Turkey, a goal that will serve both parties in critically important ways. It will not be straightforward nor easy, but it is the only grand bargain worth pursuing.

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