



# Will the German Election Outcome Change Berlin's Turkey Policy?

By Magdalena Kirchner

The deep bilateral crisis between Ankara and Berlin will not vanish after Germany's parliamentary election. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will stay in campaign mode until 2019,<sup>1</sup> when Turkey will have both presidential and parliamentary elections that will kick into effect the constitutional changes approved in a referendum in April. Hence, more anti-EU and particularly anti-German rhetoric can be expected. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), declared by Erdoğan as an "enemy of Turkey,"<sup>2</sup> has again emerged as the largest parliamentary bloc. As she failed to gain an absolute majority, Merkel will have to form a coalition government in the coming weeks. After months of diplomatic spats, will Germany's future Turkey policy be shaped by reset or resolve?

In short, the answer is neither/nor. The elections delivered sufficient support for the CDU to repeat the incumbent "grand coalition" with the Social Democrats (SPD), but that coalition lost more than ten percent in the vote and the SPD announced that it will not enter another CDU-led cabinet. Hence, the most viable alternative would be to form a so-called "Jamaica" coalition with the Liberals (FDP) and the Green Party.<sup>3</sup>

1 Sinan Ekim, "Eyeing Elections, Erdoğan Doubles Down on Critics: Will the Strategy Backfire?" *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, September 16, 2017, <http://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/eyeing-elections-erdogan-doubles-down-critics-will-strategy-backfire>.

2 BBC News, "Turkey's Erdogan says German leaders are enemies," August 18, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40973197>.

3 Derek Scally, "Words Don't Come Easy: GroKo, Jamaika, & Co.," *Berlin Policy Journal*, September 21, 2017, <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/words-dont-come-easy-groko-jamaika-co/>.

Whatever the governing coalition, all the parties coming into the 19<sup>th</sup> Bundestag have called for a tougher stance toward Ankara. This also includes the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has steamrolled into parliament with more than 12 percent of the vote, on a mostly anti-immigration platform. And indeed, talking tough to Turkey found vast support among the public. Only three weeks before the election, 77 percent of Germans voiced support for unilateral sanctions, while the number of those who opposed Turkey's membership in the EU has increased from 68 percent in April 2016 to 84 percent in September 2017.<sup>4</sup>

The election campaign itself has revealed the German political elite's deep frustration with the limits of the EU's transformative power in the neighborhood and especially Turkey. Merkel's anti-membership stance will no longer be challenged by a traditionally pro-accession SPD or the FDP<sup>5</sup>, which seemed open to membership during the CDU-FDP coalition (2009-2013). Now, both are calling for immediately ending accession talks. The Greens, more moderately, oppose an end to talks but support their current standstill.

4 *Zeit Online*, "Mehrheit der Deutschen lehnt Flüchtlingspakt ab," April 7, 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-04/eu-tuerkei-abkommen-fluechtlinge-umfrage-deutschlandtrend>; *Zeit Online*, "Mehrheit befürwortet Wirtschaftssanktionen gegen Türkei," September 7, 2017, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-09/ard-deutschlandtrend-tuerkei-sanktionen-eu-betritt>.

5 Florian Harms, "'Dann haben wir im Reichstag echte Nazis'" *T-Online*, September 11, 2017, [http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/bundestagswahl/id\\_82127344/sigmar-gabriel-im-interview-wir-muessen-endlich-umsteuern-.html](http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/bundestagswahl/id_82127344/sigmar-gabriel-im-interview-wir-muessen-endlich-umsteuern-.html). Freie Demokraten, "EU-Beitrittsverhandlungen mit der Türkei beenden," in "Denken wir neu. Unser Programm zur Bundestagswahl," <https://www.fdp.de/wp-modul/btw17-wp-a-134>.



In response to the arrest of several German citizens in Turkey and on the initiative of the SPD, the outgoing coalition had started to review guarantees for German business investments in July, yet refrained from taking concrete steps in order not to harm the interests of about 6,800 German companies operating in Turkey and jeopardize €37 billion in bilateral trade.<sup>6</sup> The Green Party has pledged to increase pressure on the CDU to implement financial sanctions and an official travel warning should they join the government.<sup>7</sup> Though traditionally more business-oriented, FDP officials have also suggested freezing guarantees and targeted sanctioning of Turkish cabinet members.<sup>8</sup> In coalition negotiations, Merkel could be pressured into a revision of her current use of sanctions primarily to deter Turkey from further escalation.

German doubts about Turkey's reliability as a security ally persist across party lines, but military cooperation between Germany and Turkey is unlikely to end. Ankara's plans to acquire the Russian S-400 surface to air missile system have already spurred debates in Germany about arms exports. In the past months, on the initiative of the SPD, Berlin increasingly scrutinized arms sales to its NATO ally. Merkel announced that the government would decide on Turkish sales requests on a case-by-case basis.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, although many of these sales were merely put "on hold," several CDU politicians voiced criticism of any restrictions. The government still approved of exports worth €25 million in the first half of 2017. A further deterioration of the bilateral situation could strengthen calls by the Green Party for an immediate end of all arms sales to Turkey. The CDU's pro-sales position is unlikely to be challenged by a business-oriented FDP.

With regard to German-Turkish cooperation in the coalition against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, defense experts in Berlin have been more cautious in their criticism of Turkey and reaffirmed that cooperation on the operational level continues smoothly. Public outcry over Ankara's denial of parliamentary visiting rights gave Berlin no other

choice than to relocate the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) deployments from the Turkish Incirlik airbase to Jordan. However, Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen successfully negotiated a face-saving agreement that allowed parliamentarians to visit soldiers and German AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft at the NATO-run Konya air base.<sup>10</sup> In the past, the Green Party had not supported the AWACS mission and has accused Turkey of using data gathered by German reconnaissance flights over Syria and Iraq for operations not directed against ISIS.<sup>11</sup> Whether Green concerns can be mitigated within the coalition when the parliamentary mandate for the mission has to be extended at the end of this year, or whether they will be overruled with the votes of an opposition SPD, remains to be seen.

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Preventing terrorist attacks in Germany through enhanced international police and intelligence cooperation had been made a priority on platforms across party lines. Addressing the question of foreign terrorist fighters, EU-Turkish coordination had improved significantly in the past years. In August 2017, for instance, Turkish officials reported to have detained and deported over 5,000 foreign fighters from

6 APR/DPA, "Bundesregierung bürgt noch immer für Türkei-Geschäfte," September 20, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/hermes-buergschaften-fuer-die-tuerkei-bundesregierung-gibt-noch-exportgarantien-a-1168821.html>.

7 Reuters, "Özdemir - Mit Grünen wird es Reisewarnung für Türkei geben," September 17, 2017, <https://de.reuters.com/article/deutschland-wahl-gr-ne11-idDEKCN1BS0HC>.

8 Portal Liberal, "KUBICKI-Interview: Mit Habeck in Berlin wird Jamaika wahrscheinlicher," September 14, 2017, <https://www.liberale.de/content/kubicki-interview-mit-habeck-berlin-wird-jamaika-wahrscheinlicher>.

9 Ben Blanchard and Hyonhee Shin, "Korean peninsula draws range of military drills in show of force against North Korea," Reuters, September 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles/korean-peninsula-draws-range-of-military-drills-in-show-of-force-against-north-korea-idUSKCN1BT0CK>.

10 Deutsche Welle, "German MPs visit Konya NATO base in Turkey," September 8, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/german-mps-visit-konya-nato-base-in-turkey/a-40410034>.

11 Deutscher Bundestag - 18. Wahlperiode - 199. Sitzung, November 10, 2016, p. 19845, <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/18/18199.pdf#P.19845>.

95 countries and barred the entry of over 53,000 terror suspects since 2011.<sup>12</sup> With regard to non-jihadist terrorism, bilateral cooperation was hit severely by the bilateral fallout after the July 15, 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. Though both groups are designated as terrorist organizations in both countries, Ankara has repeatedly accused Berlin of turning a blind eye to Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C) activities. Despite these public spats, German authorities have recently signaled their interest in ongoing cooperation with their Turkish counterparts and willingness to take firmer action against PKK activity in Germany. In March, Berlin banned over 30 symbols associated with the group, its jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan, and its Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Moreover, authorities rejected at least one request for asylum by a Turkish citizen and former YPG fighter in late June.<sup>13</sup> Given the conservatives' clear intent to keep the homeland security portfolio in the next cabinet, the CDU-led ministry of interior's public condemnation of the display of Öcalan banners during a demonstration in Cologne last Sunday<sup>14</sup> could indicate more restrictions on the PKK in the future. This is even more likely given the lack of criticism of these measures by the CDU's possible coalition partners.

In stark contrast, German politicians across party lines are fed up with claims that they support the Gülen Movement, which Ankara has unilaterally designated as a terrorist organization. Turkey accuses the movement of being complicit in the failed coup and other attempts to bring down its government. Turkish expectations that Berlin would take a tougher stance against the movement after the elections are unlikely to be met, at least in the short term.<sup>15</sup> Politicians from all parties have voiced their distrust in the current state of the Turkish judiciary, expressing doubts that Ankara would be able to substantiate its claims against

the Gülen Movement with solid evidence. Feeling vindicated in this concern, Berlin—generally reluctant towards extensive intelligence sharing<sup>16</sup>—recently accused Ankara of trying to misuse Interpol, *inter alia*, to repress non-violent dissidents outside the country.

The unprecedented hostility in the run-up to the elections has left deep scars on bilateral relations. Assuming there remains a political will in Berlin to keep channels of dialogue with Ankara open, it has limited any future government's leeway for a reset significantly. Moreover, the conflict has put even Merkel's alternative model of a "privileged partnership"<sup>17</sup> at risk. Despite an overwhelmingly negative public opinion, when crafting a new coalition, especially the CDU but also the FDP are expected to remain overall receptive to German economic and security interests as incentives for tactical constraint. The Green Party might use coalition negotiations to push back against transactional reflexes in Germany's Turkey policy, but could end up isolated, especially if disunity on the European level persists. While it seems that much of the firmer action against Turkey suggested during the campaign might not be implemented, any normalization process will be spoiled unless there is a settlement over the imprisonment of German citizens in Turkey. Their timely release could further reduce the already limited resolve among current and future coalition partners to prevent developments within Turkey from once again being placed on the backburner of German foreign policy.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Sabah* and Anadolu Agency, "Turkey, France work closely in deporting foreign fighters," August 23, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/08/23/turkey-france-work-closely-in-deporting-foreign-fighters>.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Hoffmann, "Mir droht in der Türkei Gefängnis und Folter: Mein Leben ist in Gefahr!" *Perspektive*, July 27, 2017, <https://perspektive-online.net/2017/07/mir-droht-in-der-tuerkei-gefaengnis-und-folter-mein-leben-ist-in-gefahr/>.

<sup>14</sup> DPA, "PKK-Verbot soll konkretisiert werden," September 19, 2017, <http://www.taz.de/!5449128/>.

<sup>15</sup> Nagehan Alçi, "Keys to Germany-Turkey reconciliation," *Daily Sabah*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/nagehan-alcı/2017/09/06/keys-to-germany-turkey-reconciliation>.

<sup>16</sup> Maïa de la Baume and Giulia Paravicini, "Europe's intelligence 'black hole,'" *Politico Europe*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/europes-intelligence-black-hole-europol-fbi-cia-paris-counter-terrorism/>.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Vonberg, "Germany: Turkey may be using Interpol to hunt down political opponents," CNN, August 21, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/21/europe/germany-turkey-interpol/index.html>.

Fadi Hakura, "Partnership is No Privilege: The Alternative to EU Membership is No Turkish Delight," Chatham House, September 2005, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Europe/bpturkeyeu.pdf>.

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