



Turkey's Two-Level Game in the Refugee Dispute with the EU

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The decision in February by Turkey's government not to prevent refugees from crossing into Greece shocked many in Europe. Thousands of migrants rushing to the border reminded many of the massive wave of 2015, which shook the political and social order in many Western and Central European states, feeding into the populist and radical-right agendas. That wave was controlled through the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, which saw the EU give assistance and incentives to Turkey to keep migrants and refugees in the country.

The motivations behind the recent decision by Turkey's leadership can be understood as part of a “two-level game”—a situation in which negotiations take place simultaneously at the international level with the EU and its member states and at the national level between societal and political actors. The government is likely to have calculated the negative reaction it would generate from European capitals and the EU institutions but placed greater importance on domestic considerations. To understand its decision, one has to understand the refugee situation in Turkey and the domestic debate around it.

Refugees in Turkey

Turkey faces refugee and migrant pressure on a very large scale from a wide range of origins, including Africa. There are also hundreds of thousands of individuals other than Syrians stranded in the country. It was particularly those who rushed to the border in February for possible passage to Europe. However, most of the press coverage in Europe presented the thousands at the border as Syrians, ignoring the reality.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Turkey is home to the world's largest refugee population, with almost 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection as well as close to 330,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities. Over the past decade Turkey has also become an increasingly attractive destination for irregular migrants who aim to cross into Europe from the country.

Turkey ratified the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees with a geographical limitation and thus gives refugee status to citizens of member states of the Council of Europe only. Citizens from non-European countries who fit the criteria for refugees according to the convention but cannot remain due to this limitation are resettled in third countries. Syrians who are granted temporary protection status due to their arrival in mass

influx and the other approximately 330,000 refugees and asylum-seekers do hope for such a resettlement. However, resettlement rates are very low.

According to official Turkish data, 114,537 and 56,417 individuals applied for international protection (in addition to the Syrians under temporary protection) in the country in 2018 and 2019 respectively. This made Turkey the country in Europe with the third-highest number of applications received in 2018, following Germany and France. That year, UNCHR Turkey submitted 4,070 non-Syrians to third countries that accept refugees for resettlement, but only 580 of them were resettled. Since the start of the Syrian crisis to September 2018, UNHCR Turkey has submitted 56,702 Syrians for resettlement processing of which 27,478 Syrians have departed to the resettlement country.

The official data also shows there were 454,662 irregular migrants apprehended in Turkey in 2019 (almost 45 percent of whom were from Afghanistan). In addition to those from Middle Eastern and Asian countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, 90,613 were from other countries, the majority being from Africa. As argued in an International Organization for Migration report, as a result of the agreement with the EU, Turkey's greater border controls increased the number of stranded migrants and refugees in the country exponentially.

Domestic Politics

The vast number of refugees and irregular migrants in Turkey naturally has an impact on domestic politics. Society is politically polarized and deeply divided on practically every issue. However, public opinion surveys show that the issue of Syrians in the country is the object of a very strong and sizeable island of agreement for Turkish public. Anti-Syrian attitudes are clear across supporters of all parties, across all regions, and across all economic groups and education clusters. This is one issue that unites public opinion.

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This has consequences for the Justice and Development (AK) Party government and for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan has tried over the past years to avoid anti-Syrian rhetoric and to keep the focus on the concept of ensar (helpers) with a religious reference to Islamic history. However, anti-Syrian attitudes have kept growing, especially with the economy shrinking and unemployment figures constantly rising. The resources spent on Syrian refugees has become a major issue, with the public questioning whether Turkey can afford to spend such amounts when its citizens are facing increasing economic challenges. As an example, 86 percent of respondents in one 2019 poll stated that they would not hire a Syrian refugee.

In the 2019 local elections, several mayoral candidates promised to cut municipal funding and aid programs for Syrians. The AK Party suffered significant symbolic losses, including losing Ankara and Istanbul after ruling these metropolises for over two decades. Anti-Syrian attitudes were taken as the reason, and there has been tremendous pressure on the government from the AK Party top brass to show that the situation is under control and that refugees will eventually be returned to Syria. Erdoğan had to strengthen the narrative that the Syrians will leave and that Turkey's operations in Syria aimed to create safety and security for their return. Following the local elections, policies toward refugees became harder, as demonstrated in the decision

of the governorate of Istanbul to move out refugees who are not registered at all or live in Istanbul although they are registered in other provinces. Government officials and ministers also started to talk repeatedly about the refugee situation as well as to criticize the EU for trying to externalize the issue and use Turkey as a cheap buffer. Erdoğan said on several occasions that Turkey would open the border for Syrian refugees to flood the EU, including in his speech on the second day of the offensive in northeastern Syria last October.

Winning on the Domestic Level?

The government's February decision was a major turning point in Turkish-EU relations. The 2016 refugee agreement has to be revisited and revitalized. However, the negotiations will not be easy, as both sides have low trust towards each other. Neither seems to have learnt from the mistake of linking the refugee situation to wider Turkish-EU relations, and in particular to Turkey's bid for membership. The country and its president are extremely unpopular in EU capitals and in the eyes of European public opinion. This can only get worse with the media coverage of the border situation and the narrative of blackmailing Europe. A transactional agreement that has provided relative stability for Europe since 2016 has to be reexamined critically. The question is whether the EU and its member states have used the time since the deal was reached efficiently. As Alberto Tagliapietra rightly argues, the EU has focused more on externalizing the migration issue rather than agreeing on the establishment of a full-fledged EU asylum system and reforming of tools such as the Common European Asylum System and the Dublin Regulation.

Turkish-EU relations are in an impasse with little progress in sight. Any possibility of relaunching membership negotiations or taking concrete steps such as upgrading the Customs Union is rather unlikely. The most prized step for Turkey—visa-free travel for its citizens—is practically impossible. At the same time, polls in the country show high levels of mistrust in the EU and its institutions. In short, Turkey has very little chance of obtaining gains in its negotiations with the EU.

PULL QUOTE: The stories and pictures of refugees stripped of their clothes and their few possessions before being pushed back to Turkey were used to demonstrate the moral superiority of a country that has generously hosted 3.6 million refugees over the years, and the moral corruption of wealthier European states who refuse to help those in need.

By contrast, opening the border and allowing the media to cover the situation extensively is a very promising move for the government at the domestic level. It stokes two important issues that public opinion is sensitive about regardless of party affiliation: anti-EU and anti-Syrian attitudes. The coverage of ill-treatment of refugees by the Greek authorities, including violence by border forces, and the deployment of Greek troops to return migrants without checking their status or registering them (which is a violation of the non-refoulement principle) were used to fuel anti-EU attitudes. The stories and pictures of refugees stripped of their clothes and their few possessions before being pushed back to Turkey were used to demonstrate the moral superiority of a country that has generously hosted 3.6 million refugees over the years, and the moral corruption of wealthier European states who refuse to help those in need. The authorities have also been extremely careful to emphasize that only those migrants wishing to leave were allowed to move to the border, in order to not to damage Turkey's moral superiority.

A narrative was also constructed to argue that the criticism of Turkey from EU countries on values and human rights are hypocritical as their treatment of refugees and migrants demonstrated they are not keen on applying their values and rights to anybody who is not one of them. The narrative also held that Turkey was moving on migrants in large quantities, with the number of people leaving the country (regardless of whether they made it to Greece or not) constantly reported. For instance, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu has tweeted the numbers in detail. This has paid off well: public opinion has been very supportive of the government's decision with one recent poll showing 71 percent of respondents saying they approved it.

Conclusion

Turkey's decision to open the border for refugees and migrants to leave was a critical but not a surprising decision. The increasing number of refugees and migrants in the country and the related anti-Syrian attitudes were becoming a major challenge for the government. President Erdoğan and his ministers had been increasingly and clearly signaling that they were ready to act in this manner. They warned that radical decisions were not a matter of "if" but "when." The EU's reluctance to treat Turkey as a reliable "partner" rather than an external "contractor" paved the way for the potential use by the latter of the issue as transactional leverage. It also continues to harm wider Turkish-EU relations, which have become hostage to the issue, and creates a negative spillover in other potential areas of cooperation and dialogue. The government is aiming to secure wins at the domestic level because any progress at the European level is very unlikely at the moment. As long as the impasse with the EU over refugees remains, it is most likely that it will keep prioritizing domestic considerations.

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