

In Brief: Relations between Turkey and the EU have never been easy. Since the opening of accession negotiations in 2005, the EU has lost much of its leverage with Turkey as the EU itself has been consumed by numerous challenges from constitutional referendums and the integration of newly joined members to the eurozone crisis. Given the lack of EU enthusiasm and dramatic changes in Turkey's political atmosphere, the democratization process has largely halted. Turkey-EU relations are now in a stalemate. However, the refugee crisis in Europe has given Turkey-EU relations a more complicated and strategic dimension. This challenge may yet provide an important opportunity to reinvigorate the accession negotiations.

The EU-Turkey Action Plan is Imperfect, But Also Pragmatic, And Maybe Even Strategic

by Başak Kale

The civil war in Syria has displaced nearly half of that country's population creating more than 5 million refugees and 7.5 million internally displaced persons. In the summer of 2015, Europe was overwhelmed with these mass population movements. According to the EU's border agency, FRONTEX, just under 900,000 refugees and irregular migrants crossed the EU's sea borders via the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2015.¹ The result in the EU has been panic, disorder, and the disruption of the free movement of people in the Schengen area. Turkey, meanwhile, has had an "open door" policy toward Syrian migrants since 2011, hosting more than 2.7 million refugees with limited international support. As more refugees have started making their way to Europe, Turkey has been criticized for not managing its borders effectively and becoming a "highway" for the transit of refugees and irregular migrants. However, Turkey is less a highway than a "dam" that is being overtopped and is now flooding toward the EU. And with the recent Russian bombings in Aleppo, the refugee crisis is only getting worse.

¹ FRONTEX estimates that 885,386 people entered the EU via the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2015, <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/eastern-mediterranean-route/>. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, 897,645 Syrians applied for asylum in EU member states <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php>.

The magnitude of the refugee crisis has opened the door to new cooperation between Turkey and the EU, most notably in the form of an Action Plan presented during German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Turkey in October 2015. Although the EU-Turkey Action Plan has been roundly criticized, it deserves a second look. The plan is more pragmatic than aspirational, but it could still be a positive step in reviving Turkey's European hopes.

The magnitude of the refugee crisis has opened the door to new cooperation between Turkey and the EU.

The EU-Turkey Action Plan

The plan offered financial support to Turkey's efforts to limit irregular border crossings and also to implement a readmission agreement with the EU in exchange for visa liberalization for Turks. The plan also promises to open the blocked accession negotiation chapters. It proposed a €3 billion contribution to assist Turkey in providing services to refugees, which was approved in February after a long delay. €1 billion will be provided from the EU budget, with the rest being proportionately distributed by member states. Ankara is now considering ways to use this "seed fund" for greater impact for both refugees and Turkish citizens.

Immediately after the plan was proposed, it was criticized for being too pragmatic, unethical,² reactive,³ and overly strategic. It is crucial that the deal is put

2 Aydın-Düzgüt, S. (2015), "Academic Aydın-Düzgüt: Turkey-EU Agreement not ethical, a step backward in relations," *Today's Zaman*, Interview by Yonca Poyraz Doğan, http://www.todayszaman.com/monday-talk_academic-aydin-duzgit-turkey-eu-agreement-not-ethical-a-step-backward-in-relations_406256.html

3 Insel, A. (2016), "EU's promises that cannot be realized," *Cumhuriyet*, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/475159/AB_nin_yerine_getiremeyecegi_vaatleri.html

into practice with a "genuine spirit of cooperation whereby the welfare of the refugees comes first."⁴ Further, there must be effective mechanisms to ensure that burdens are not shirked and passed between parties,⁵ leaving refugees to suffer the consequences.⁶ The Action Plan calls for the coordination of responses with "solidarity, togetherness, and efficiency." It is critical that its application does not undermine the current status of Turkey-EU relations, changing it into a strategic partnership or simply making Turkey a migrant buffer zone or border guard of the EU. The collaboration must foster ties⁷ while also providing high protection standards for refugees. This can only be done with an enhanced burden-sharing mechanism that requires countries to address the root causes of the refugees' flight, offers financial and technical assistance to those countries who are hosting the refugees, provides effective and efficient distribution of humanitarian aid, shares the responsibilities of resettling refugees, and addresses the causes of insecurity, such as the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State group, while supporting durable solutions.

A Path Back to the EU Accession

The EU has been criticized in the last decade for losing its leverage toward Turkey with respect to its normative power on encouraging democratic reforms. In the current deal, the EU has acted both strategically, in terms of its security considerations, and pragmatically, with respect to its expectations in outcome-oriented solutions. In turn, Turkey has utilized a critical bargaining chip of "managing irregular migration" for

4 Kirişçi, K. (2015), "How the EU and Turkey can work together on refugees," <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/12/03-turkey-eu-deal-on-syrian-refugees-kirischi>

5 Kale, B. (2016), "Responsibility Shifting from EU to Turkey and NATO," <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/ab-den-turkiye-ve-nato-ya-sorumluluk-devri-103820.html>

6 Tokyay, M. (2015), "Refugees to pay high price for the Turkey-EU deal," *Al Arabiya*, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2015/12/03/EU-Turkey-migrant-deal-brings-somedoubts.html>

7 Arısan Eralp, N. (2015), "Refugee crisis could revitalize EU ties but not accession talks," *Hürriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=91175&NewsCatID=510>

leverage over the EU, gaining visa liberalization for its citizens, guaranteeing financial support or technical assistance for refugees, and opening accession negotiation chapters. The EU has always been criticized for not thinking strategically enough in its foreign and security policies.⁸ The exception has been its enlargement policy, which has so far been a successful foreign policy tool. Turkey's accession process, part of the EU's enlargement policy, is now strategically serving the EU's foreign policy.

Turkey's accession process, part of the EU's enlargement policy, is now strategically serving the EU's foreign policy.

Visiting Turkey for the second time in three months, Merkel clearly affirmed Europe's need for Turkey's collaboration in the refugee crisis. Under the deal she brought, for the time being, the long-term normative transformative power of Europeanization is clearly limited, but not totally absent. The EU will monitor the distribution and utilization of the financial support mechanisms. More than €3 billion is on the table; if managed skillfully, this can support a major public policy campaign both within and outside Turkey. In addition, through this plan, the EU accepts Turkey as an important partner and collaborator. Turkey has been waiting for this opportunity for several years, probably since the Convention for the Future of Europe in 2003.

This plan is not perfect, but it provides an opportunity to revitalize relations on various platforms including the fight against terrorism, security cooperation, and

strengthening border controls. If accepted within a restricted agenda, the titles included within the framework of the Action Plan can represent a realistic security-oriented perspective on the EU-Turkey relationship.⁹ However, the plan does not need to be implemented within a limited security-oriented framework. Merkel's call for NATO to help with patrolling the Aegean Sea for human smugglers shows that a security-oriented approach can create problems in the EU's collaboration with Turkey. If there is an operation by NATO to deploy ships in the Aegean Sea, Turkey has threatened to open its borders and send refugees to Europe.¹⁰ Interestingly, the plan includes various headings for creating sustainable livelihoods for refugees, supporting the needs of host communities; the focus has to be kept on refugee protection while strengthening border controls. With this plan, the EU hopes to establish a "refugee facility" to coordinate mechanisms that will assist Turkey in addressing immediate humanitarian and development needs.¹¹ This proposed facility will also include a governance and conditionality framework.¹² During the plan's implementation, the EU's normative aspirations should not be overlooked and the criteria set in the accession conditionality must be maintained, as the Commission will report annually to the Parliament and Council, and reporting for the implementation in the member states will be done in 2019.¹³

9 Şenyuva, Ö. and Ç. Üstün (2015), "A New Episode in EU-Turkey Relations: Why so much bitterness?," *On Turkey*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/new-episode-eu-turkish-relations-why-so-much-bitterness>

10 *The Guardian*, "Turkish President threatens to send millions of Syrian refugees to the EU," December 2, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/turkish-president-threatens-to-send-millions-of-syrian-refugees-to-eu>

11 European Commission (2016), Article 1 "Establishment of the Refugee Facility for Turkey," Commission Decision, 24.11.2015, C(2015) 9500 Final, http://ec.europa.eu/news/2015/docs/c-2015-9500-final-complet_en.pdf

12 Council of the European Union (2016), Press Release, March 12, 2016, "Refugee Facility for Turkey: Member States agree on details of funding," <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/03-refugee-facility-for-turkey/>

13 European Commission (2016), Article 8 "Information, monitoring and evaluation," *op. cit.*

8 Biscop, S. (2013), "The European Security Strategy: Towards A Grand Strategy?" in S. Biscop and R. G. Whitman (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of European Security*, Routledge: London.

The current Turkish political situation is raising concerns regarding increasing suppression of the press, prosecution of academics, and limited freedom of expression. In addition, recent bombings in Ankara and Istanbul and PKK terrorism in the country's southeast further complicate the internal dynamics. These all demonstrate the vulnerabilities of Turkey's democratization process and security framework. In this context, a European anchor is more critical than ever for Turkish democratic transformation as well as its security. By thinking strategically and acting pragmatically, both sides, intentionally or unintentionally, are serving to enhance cooperation and collaboration. This can keep the accession process alive and dynamic.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Author

Dr. Başak Kale is an associate professor in the Department of International Relations and a research fellow of the Jean Monnet Center for Excellence (JMCE) Center for European Studies, Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara. She works extensively on Turkey-EU relations, Europeanization, refugees, and international migration. She received her postgraduate degrees from LSE, METU, and the University of Oxford.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and U.S. writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org