



Is Erdoğan Holding Europe Hostage?

By Behlül Özkan May 24, 2016

In many ways, Turkey is the most important actor shaping the refugee crisis that is currently shaking Europe to its core. Accordingly, predicting the outcome of the drama requires a close study of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's underlying motives and goals. At present, there are nearly 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, which shares a 60-mile border with parts of Syria controlled by the Islamic State, or IS.¹ For both the Syrian refugees and IS, Turkey is the door to the West, and President Erdoğan is the final arbiter of Turkish refugee and border security policy. The Turkish president is well aware of the power he derives from this position. An examination of his public statements and negotiating positions makes clear that Erdoğan seeks to use this leverage to compel the international community to set up safe zones in Syria and to force the European Union to widen access to Turkey while abandoning attempts to hold Turkey to EU standards on democracy and human rights.

Erdoğan's EU leverage

In 2013, President Erdoğan's image suffered a double blow in the eyes of Europe. During the Gezi Park protests in June of that year, the government violently cracked down on millions of Turkish citizens who were protesting the increasingly overbearing rule of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, or AKP.² Then, in December, Prime Minister Erdoğan, his family, close associates, and four cabinet ministers were implicated in allegations of corruption on a massive scale. The accusations centered on alleged payoffs connected to property deals and a multibillion-dollar illicit trade in gold—set up to evade the international sanctions on Iran—which were orchestrated by a dual Iranian-Turkish citizen, Reza Zarrab, and four of Erdoğan's ministers.³ Though the ministers were acquitted by a party-line vote in the Turkish parliament, Zarrab was recently arrested in the United States on charges of violating the embargo on Iran, bank fraud, and money laundering.⁴ In short, in the span of six months, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan became personally associated with corruption and the violent repression of dissent, and Europe's leaders took care to keep him at arm's length whenever possible.⁵

Since Erdoğan became Turkey's first popularly elected president, however, he has had a remarkable resurgence, confirming his power and the support of voters while turning the tables on his European critics by using the refugee crisis as his primary tool. This refugee influx is the largest Europe has faced since World War II. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, more than 1 million refugees have migrated from Syria to Europe since 2011, most of them by way of Turkey.⁶ The past year has seen their numbers skyrocket, due in part to Erdoğan's strategy of using the refugees to obtain what he wants from the European Union.⁷ Recently, President Erdoğan has started to aggressively use the humanitarian catastrophe to pursue his long-standing goals of visa liberalization with Europe and the rejuvenation of Turkey's EU accession talks, which have stalled in the face of European hostility and Turkish democratic backsliding. The leaked minutes of an October 2015 meeting between President Erdoğan, President of the European Council Donald Tusk, and President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker demonstrated Erdoğan's hard-edged tactics: At the meeting, he threatened that if the European Union failed to meet his demands, "We can open the doors to Greece and Bulgaria anytime and we can put the refugees on buses."⁸

The political sensitivity of the refugee issue in Europe has made clear Erdoğan's political leverage over the European Union—a dynamic visible in his dealings with senior European leaders. In October 2015, German President Angela Merkel, leader of the European Union's most powerful country, visited Turkey just two weeks before its November parliamentary elections to begin negotiating a deal to stem the flow of refugees through Turkey to the European Union.⁹ It was a striking departure from recent diplomatic precedent. Normally, October sees the release of the European Union's annual progress report on Turkey's EU candidacy, which generally includes criticisms of Turkey's persistent problems with human rights, democratization, and the rule of law. This time, however, the progress report—which again contained pointed criticism of Turkey's crackdown on individual and press freedoms—was postponed for a month until after the Turkish elections, and Merkel's visit, to minimize controversy with Erdoğan and the AKP as they faced a highly sensitive and polarized election.¹⁰

Erdoğan has pressed his advantage: Facing massive political pressure at home to stop the influx, Merkel has now met with President Erdoğan and former Prime Minister Davutoğlu no less than seven times in as many months.¹¹ Following a March 2016 summit between Turkey and the 28 EU member states in Brussels, negotiations about the refugees have now been incorporated into a formal agreement. According to the deal, Turkey will do more to prevent refugees from traveling to Europe via its territory and will take back all migrants and refugees who manage to cross into Europe from Turkey, beginning March 20, 2016. In return, the European Union has doubled the financial aid it promised Turkey from 3 billion to 6 billion euros, has agreed to take in more Syrian refugees from Turkey, and will move to provide visa-free travel to Turks and reopen EU accession talks.¹²

But critics argue that the arrangement contravenes international treaties regarding the treatment of refugees. Turkey is not the refugees' country of origin and has called the millions of Syrians residing within its borders "guests" rather than officially granting them refugee status.¹³ Human rights groups have documented cases of refugees being mistreated and forcibly returned from Turkey to their countries of origin—including war-torn Syria—causing many, including the UNHCR, to argue that Turkey is not a "safe country" to which to return refugees from Europe. This would constitute a violation of international law, specifically the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Turkey is a signatory.¹⁴ Voicing these objections, the UNHCR announced that it would not be a part of the agreement reached between Ankara and Brussels and would play no role in its implementation.¹⁵

But while the agreement may alleviate the short-term political pressures on the European Union, it raises important long-term questions about European values and relations with Turkey. Why, one might ask, is the European Union making concessions on its democratic principles and values? European leaders are being shortsighted by compromising their values in the face of public pressure to stop the refugee flow coming from Turkey. German Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière, for example, said regarding the crisis, "We are not a referee regarding human rights."¹⁶ Can the European Union really win if it plays the game by President Erdoğan's rules? As long as 3 million refugees reside in Turkey, Erdoğan can threaten the European Union with sending more refugees to its member states whenever he wants concessions on other fronts.

From migrant deal to safe zone?

The agreement has succeeded in reducing short-term pressure on Merkel and other European politicians and seems to have solved Europe's refugee crisis for the time being, albeit by passing it on to Turkey. But European leaders should be wary of Erdoğan's real intentions regarding Europe and Syria, which are revealed in the last clause of the agreement: "The EU and its Member States will work with Turkey in any joint endeavor to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria, in particular in certain areas near the Turkish border which would allow for the local population and refugees to live in areas which will be more safe."¹⁷

Since 2012, in the early days of the Syrian civil war, Erdoğan's goal has been to set up a safe haven and no-fly zone in northern Syria.¹⁸ In his vision, the millions of Syrians who have fled the war would be resettled in this area, which would be under Turkish and Syrian rebel control. The safe area—protected from Assad's aerial assaults, in Erdoğan's vision, by a Western-enforced no-fly zone—would enhance Turkey's influence in the region. Turkey could then step up military aid to rebels in the safe haven, which would offer a base of operations safe from Assad's bombing and would pave the way for efforts to recapture Aleppo, Syria's largest city, from the regime. At present, President Erdoğan

wishes to carry out his plan with the help of the European Union, whose back is against the wall due to the refugee crisis. Erdoğan made his intentions known in a speech this past March, in which he stated, “Let us found a city in the north of Syria, a city of about 4,500 square kilometers. Let us share all the costs—everything from its infrastructure to its superstructure—with the international community.”¹⁹ In this way, Erdoğan seeks to kill several birds with one stone: Syrian refugees in Turkey could be sent to this rebel-controlled region in northern Syria; the Turkish construction industry would be responsible for building up the region—home to 3 million people—at the cost of billions of dollars, most of which would be obtained from the international community; and finally, Turkey could expand its geopolitical influence over its southern neighbor. This scheme could be the answer to all of Erdoğan’s problems.

Of course, it is a fantasy utterly divorced from the realities of the Syrian tragedy. The language in the last clause of the Turkey-EU agreement—watered down to the point of incoherence—betrays the fact that the Europeans will not be drawn into the Syrian conflict by Turkey. Any intervention, with or without the European Union, would require a U.N. resolution subject to Russia’s near-certain veto. Even if Erdoğan’s safe haven proposals were implemented, it would only make Syria’s woes more intractable. After five years of civil war, Syria’s rebels have increasingly come under the control of radical fundamentalist groups. Turkey has had no problem forging close ties to groups such as the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch, which the United States, the European Union, Russia, and even Turkey define as a terrorist organization. Nor has Turkey given up its support of radical groups that give the United States and the Europeans pause. And the rebels are fragmented; just this March, for example, Turkey held a meeting in Ankara at which it sought to unite 106 Syrian anti-Assad armed groups.²⁰ These divided—and often radical—groups would be relied upon to protect and police any safe zone carved out in northern Syria, setting the stage for strong influence by these groups in a future Syria. This prospect, along with steps that Turkey might take to spark further European engagement in Syria, should give EU leaders pause.

The European Union should also be concerned by President Erdoğan’s tendency to view himself as the representative of Muslims living in the West. In 2006, Erdoğan described the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union in particularly telling language: “The Islamic world of 1.5 billion people, or Islamic civilization, will be represented there [in Europe].”²¹ That the European Union believes it has solved the refugee crisis through its agreement with President Erdoğan further reinforces Erdoğan’s tendency to see Turkey—and therefore, himself—as the leader of the Middle East, the representative of the Islamic world, and the guarantor of Muslims living in Europe. It is ironic that Turkey is itself one of the main parties contributing to the bloody conflict in Syria—and thus, by extension, to the refugee crisis to which it has led the response—having armed the Syrian rebels, with Western support, in order to overthrow Assad and, as skeptics contend, to set up an Islamist regime in Syria sympathetic to itself.²²

Conclusion

By agreeing to play by President Erdoğan's rules, the European Union has become his willing hostage. Erdoğan will continue to use the nearly 3 million refugees in Turkey as pawns to pursue his plans for Syria. And yet, should it wish to resist Erdoğan's bullying tactics, the European Union has powerful tools at its disposal. With a foreign trade volume of 128 billion euros, the European Union is Turkey's biggest trading partner. Over the past five years, 75 percent of foreign direct investment in Turkey has come from the European Union, and more than 6,000 German firms have offices in Turkey.²³ Instead of putting itself in the hands of an increasingly reckless and authoritarian Turkish president, the European Union should use its economic clout to steer Turkey toward democracy and motivate it to be part of an international solution that brings peace to the region.

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