



Turkey and Germany: A Worsening Crisis

by Yaniv Avrahm

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 594, September 24, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The harsh measures taken by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since the failed coup attempt last year have led to a deepening crisis with a host of Western states, first and foremost with Germany. Since the coup attempt, relations between Ankara and Berlin have been at an unprecedented low. However, in light of their history of close relations, the volume of stable economic trade over the years, and Turkey's ability to stabilize the waves of immigration to Europe, the countries may yet find a channel of communication in order to contain the crisis.

In the wake of the failed coup attempt against him last year, Turkish President Erdoğan has sought to consolidate his status and convey a message of unity under the banner of democracy against "Turkey's enemies at home and abroad." In practice, however, Turkey is experiencing profound internal upheaval. With the object of tightening the regime's grip on power, the authorities are persecuting public figures and members of the media.

The coup attempt and its failure constitute a political turning point for Turkey. Erdoğan's oppressive measures have contributed to the strengthening of Islamic and anti-Western circles inside Turkey and exacerbated Ankara's friction with the West, which strongly opposes the regime's trampling of individual rights. In addition, geopolitical fluctuations and Washington's enduring weakness in the Middle East have prompted Ankara to warm its relations with countries such as Russia, Iran, and Qatar, a shift that can have a great impact on Turkey's energy ambitions and economic needs.

Turkey's relations with Germany have been fragile for months. The tension marks a stark contrast to normal times, before the coup attempt and its

aftermath, when Berlin adopted a pragmatic line towards Ankara in relation to the EU and maintained deep political ties with it.

The tensions that have arisen between the two nations have been conspicuously manifesting themselves. Turkish security forces arrested German activists and journalists suspected of incitement to terrorism against Turkish targets. They also stopped German parliamentarians from visiting German forces stationed in Turkey as part of NATO's activities against ISIS. The German authorities responded by preventing senior Turkish officials from holding rallies in Germany prior to Turkey's April referendum.

Germany will be holding elections this month, and strains with Turkey appear to be getting worse. Erdoğan recently claimed that a German travel warning to Turkey was a cynical attempt to exploit the crisis between the two countries for political gain.

Erdoğan appears to have decided that Berlin is part of a Western conspiracy to weaken Turkey. To bolster this accusation, Turkish law enforcement agencies disseminated false intelligence indicating that German finance companies are involved with the movement of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish expatriate believed by the regime to have orchestrated the abortive coup attempt.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is seeking economic sanctions to restrain Erdoğan. There have even been voices in Germany calling on the EU to freeze the customs union with Turkey, which, if realized, could pose a serious problem for Ankara. Germany is Turkey's main trading partner. Ankara has not yet recovered from the sanctions imposed on it by Moscow following the downing of the Russian plane in Syria in late 2015, and new sanctions would be far from welcome.

Investment companies on both sides recognize the economic damage that can be caused by crises like this, and hope the hostility between the countries will pass immediately after the German elections. Erdoğan recently summoned 19 representatives of German companies to a meeting in Ankara to deflect their fears and assure them that their status in the Turkish economy will not be harmed.

The tenor of relations between Ankara and Berlin could have broader effects on Turkey's relationship with the West, particularly Washington. Ankara is at odds with the US, its main NATO partner, over the latter's tactical cooperation with Kurdish forces in Syria – forces the Turkish government sees as an operational arm of the PKK and a threat to Turkey's national security. Ankara's tension with Berlin could worsen the strained Washington relationship.

An interesting rapprochement, meanwhile, has been forged between Turkey and Iran, which was expressed in the Iranian chief-of-staff's recent extraordinary visit to Ankara. During his visit, he spoke with senior Turkish officials, headed by Erdoğan, about the possibility of establishing a cooperation mechanism against terrorist organizations in northern Iraq. Turkey's concern about Kurdish national aspirations in the region serves the Iranians, who want to tighten their hold on the area between Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is not clear what benefit Erdoğan sees from this rapprochement, because strengthening Iran and cozying up to Russia at the West's expense might harm Turkey's ability to influence Syria's political future.

It is safe to assume that relations between Turkey and Germany are not going to improve anytime soon, and will be influenced by internal fluctuations. However, in view of the countries' historically strong relations, they will likely contain the crisis to mitigate its economic impact. Ankara's ability to influence the Turkish diaspora living in Germany, its cooperation in the fight against ISIS, and its capacity to assist Europe on the refugee crisis and other political issues like the conflict in Cyprus could lead to a channel of dialogue.

Yaniv Avraham is a former researcher on Turkey at the Center for Political Research of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is a freelance expert on modern Turkey.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family