

Turkish-German Relations

From Conjunctural Cooperation to the Solution of Structural Issues

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- What does normalization in Turkish-German relations mean?
- What are the opportunities and limits of the future Turkish-German relations?
- What does Turkey expect from Turkish-German relations in this new period?

INTRODUCTION

To the contrary of its relatively “new” relations with the United States of America, Turkey’s relations with the West have been established and continued via Europe since the period of the Ottoman Empire.¹ The military alliance and cooperation initiated between Turkey and Germany in the late 19th century have gained a human dimension in the frame of the “Turkish Labor Force Agreement” signed upon the settlement of Turkish workers in Germany in the 20th century. Bilateral relations have been maintained without interruption despite occasional fluctuations in the intensity of these relations. Recently, the two countries have maintained closer ties as they both are affected by the U.S. sanctions and “trade wars.”

The current *Perspective* discusses the meaning of the normalization in Turkish-German relations, opportunities and limits of the cooperation between the two countries, and Turkey’s expectations from this new period of bilateral relations.

1. Kemal İnat, “ABD ve Avrupa arasındaki rekabetin Türkiye için anlamı”, *Türkiye*, August 29, 2018.

THE NEW ERA OF TURKISH-GERMAN RELATIONS

It is comprehensible that relations between Turkey and Germany have not broken up considering the Turkish presence in Germany, the economic cooperation between the two countries, the refugee issue, and Turkey’s membership bid to the European Union (EU). The main topic of discussion in Turkish-German relations is not whether or not bilateral relations suffer a break up, but the management and the course of these long-standing strategic, economic, and human relations in the new period. Turkish-German relations have recently suffered certain crises and faced problems.

Turkish-German relations almost suffered a collapse because of certain structural issues, such as racism and anti-Turkey lobbies; the approval of the so-called Armenian Genocide bill in the German Bundestag; the bans on Turkish statesmen during the presidential referendum process in Turkey; the Incirlik Base issue; the investigations and detentions of several German citizens by Turkey; the black propaganda in German mainstream media against the President of the Repub-

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lic of Turkey; the right of asylum Germany granted to several members affiliated with the Fetullah Gülen Terror Organization (FETO); certain conjunctural issues; the fact that Turkey has been left alone in its fight against terrorism; and that the EU membership negotiations have almost come to a halt.

However, it is understood that bilateral relations survived even at the darkest moments in 2016. The clearest signal of the normalizing of the relations between the two countries was that President of Germany Frank Walter Steinmeir telephoned the newly elected incumbent President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and congratulated him on his victory in the presidential elections held on June 24, 2018. Furthermore, Steinmeir invited Erdoğan for an official visit to Germany. As a matter of fact, way before this clear signal, the German side, realizing that the tension is unsustainable, took a few steps towards the Turkish side and lifted the restrictions over the Hermes investment credit for German investors in Turkey. In addition, Germany has recently adopted more severe measures against the outlawed terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) organizations and raided several branches of the NAV-DEM sponsoring the PKK in Germany.

Lastly, a planned demonstration by *Kurdische Gemeinde* (Kurdish Society) in Berlin to sabotage President Erdoğan's visit to Germany has been canceled for security reasons. On the Turkish side, as well, there have been a number of developments to revitalize the bilateral relations. For instance, during the June 24 presidential referendum campaign, President Erdoğan chose not to go to Germany but rather to Bosnia-Herzegovina to meet with ex-pat Turks. Erdoğan did not wish to cause any more tension in bilateral relations after Germany turned the discriminations into law against Turkish statesmen and officials during the April 16 referendum and banned their entry to the country for campaign trips. Despite the strain, Turkey has constantly called for common sense, restated its membership bid to the EU, and emphasized common areas of cooperation with Germany.

Turkey, paying attention to keeping the dialogue channels between the two countries open, arranged one-on-one talks, now and again, with prominent German figures, such as Gerhard Schröder. Turkey, in general, chose to react on the diplomatic level by taking pains not to escalate the crises with Germany. In this period, the release of a number of German citizens for whom judicial processes were completed in Turkey, had a positive effect on improving the relations. Even at times when problems occurred in bilateral relations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel complimented Turkey for its responsibility in taking on the refugee issue, and urged the EU to keep its promises towards Turkey. Economy and the issue of refugees have continuously come to the fore as a positive agenda topic in bilateral relations.

It is not possible to understand the recent changes in Turkish-German relations by ignoring the changes in the international system on international, regional, and local levels. In this new period questioned by international institutions and traditional blocks of alliances; rather than a common sense of enemy and security, it is seen that a period in which the actors set their own security priorities is ushered in. The weakening of central authorities in the Middle East and the strengthening of the hands of non-state actors and terrorist organizations made it necessary for Turkey to take active and military measures in the field against the threat of terrorism at its borders. Military achievements within the framework of the Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch strengthened Turkey's hand, and paved the way for it to take more political initiatives. In fact, as a result of the agreement reached with Russia, diplomatic gains have been added to military gains by preventing the emergence of a human disaster in Idlib. Berlin's support of Turkey's attitude in Idlib has added a new area of alliance to the ones that already exist between the two countries.

Turkey and Germany, as the two countries affected by the "trade wars" and the United States' isolation policy, should obviously take a common stance and act in concert on both issues just as they did on the

refugee crisis. This may be considered a good opportunity to mend and revise the relations that have been strained for some time. In addition to these changes which occurred at macro and regional levels, it has become possible for Turkey to conduct a foreign policy whose priorities are determined by a consolidated political power and will. It is seen that not only Turkey but also many other states seek new rational partnerships to solve their problems in the short and middle runs. In this context, the tension Germany experiences with the USA and Merkel's remark, "We are on our own" after meeting with the U.S. President Donald Trump show that Germany will not be content with its old allies but needs to seek new partners.²

Turkey's activism in foreign policy have been misinterpreted by the German public opinion since 2010, which has led to the misperception that Turkey is suffering an "shift of axis" and breaking its ties with the West. Apparently, the misperception still remains valid. Turkey, a NATO member, has been left on its own by the U.S. and its other allies in the West in its fight against the PKK and the PYD, the PKK's offshoot in Syria. Ankara had to resolve its security issue by allying with Russia. These two issues have increased Germany's concerns that Turkey is drifting away from the Western bloc. Although it is expected of Berlin not only to normalize the relations but also pull Turkey towards Germany and towards the West in general, considering that Turkey has performed a multipartnered foreign policy for a long time, it is clear that it is reluctant to have a one-way-street foreign policy and dependency on the West.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas³ states that Germany, just as Turkey, as a result of the U.S.-Germany crisis, which is not limited to the White House, needs new political alliances and support in this period. Although Germany has strong economic stability, political crises (e.g. the crack in the coalition govern-

ment and the domestic rise of the extreme right, the isolation from the U.S., and the rifts in the EU) put this economic stability in jeopardy. Obviously, Germany should make new political expansions in the near future, while at this point, it needs more than ever its historic partner - Turkey.

With this background, when we talk about a rapprochement and normalization in Turkish-German relations, we need to understand that it is not a return to the old status quo, but the re-establishment of bilateral relations on new grounds based on rational and mutual interests, the principle of equality, and mutual respect. It is necessary to thoroughly analyze the grounds on which the new relationship will be established and what the priorities will be.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

It may be stated that if potential areas of interest and cooperation in Turkish-German relations are not governed well, they may swiftly turn into areas of crisis. Bilateral relations concentrate on energy, security, and the Turkish diaspora. For this reason, whether these common areas are the areas of cooperation or of risk will be determined by the two countries' intentions and the will of reconciliation.

From a historical perspective, Turkish-German relations developed as asymmetrical relations since they were established during a period in which the Ottoman Empire was weak and about to disintegrate. However, with the commencement of a Turkish foreign policy determined and planned based solely on Turkey's priorities, after 2010 in particular, the span of Turkey's partnerships has widened. Asymmetrical relations were creating structural problems between the two countries. However, the change in the form of the asymmetrical bilateral relations and Germany's reaction to Turkey's new foreign policy are reflected on different areas of the bilateral relations.

The asymmetrical relation between the two countries, which is a central issue in Turkish politics, is the most important factor limiting bilateral relations in

2. "Wir Europäer müssen unser Schicksal in unsere eigene Hand nehmen", *Handelsblatt*, May 28, 2017, (Access date: September 24, 2018).

3. Heiko Maas, Twitter, September 24, 2018, <https://twitter.com/HeikoMaas>, (Access date: September 25, 2018).

all areas. However, the tension experienced between the U.S. and Europe has caused Germany to defer its years-long policy to intervene in Turkey's internal relations and pressure Turkey politically and economically – a reflection of the aforementioned asymmetrical relation. That may be considered to have mellowed the bilateral relations, at least in the medium term.

Although Merkel stresses “a strong Europe” versus the United States, some of the recent developments show that the EU does not act together as a bloc – particularly on the refugee issue and economic issues. Last week's energy talks between Poland and the U.S. infer that the EU member countries act independently from the European Union when it comes to their national interests in regards to the issues of security, energy, and refugees despite Germany's emphasis of a “strong Europe” vis-à-vis the U.S.

As the Western bloc splits because of a crack in the relations between the U.S. and the EU, the EU bloc seems to have been scattered and fragmented as each member tries to protect its national interests through bilateral relations and agreements rather than acting in unison with other member states. Thus, it is necessary to rise above the expectations for single bloc-oriented definitions and cooperation, multiply interest-oriented areas and project collaborations, and establish robust bilateral relations based on them. Turkey and Germany remain strategic partners via their membership in NATO and Turkey's bid for EU accession.

However, Turkey seems ready to cooperate with all kinds of actors who support its efforts to maintain border security and fight against terrorism, both of which are Turkey's red lines. Turkey has not only contributed to its own security but also to the security of its European partners by preventing a new refugee crisis and a possible human tragedy in Idlib, Syria. Ankara, thanks to its multipartnered foreign policy, plays a balancing role in the relations of big powers, such as the U.S., Europe, and Russia.

Conjunctural changes create an area of opportunity for the elimination of the imbalance between Germany's economic power, and political-military

influence and power, but they also accompany some risks. In this case, it may be considered that Germany may not respond as quickly as Turkey to rapid changes in the international arena. Germany's stable economic structure may create reluctance towards a new political and, perhaps, military scenario; at this point, Germany may need the support of actors such as Turkey. Within this scope, it should not be forgotten that French President Emmanuel Macron and Merkel, at the Munich Security Conference held in February 2018, expressed their will for the formation of an independent military power in Europe in response to Trump's isolationist policy and increasing security threats.

The economic cooperation still remains to be one of the strongest areas in bilateral relations. In fact, there are over 7,000 German companies in Turkey and more than 80,000 Turkish enterprises with a \$50 billion turnover in Germany. As of November 2017, the trade volume between Germany and Turkey stands at \$32,933 billion.⁴ Even during the crisis period, German companies did not pay attention to the propaganda against Turkey and continued their pragmatist and interest-oriented relations with Turkey.⁵ The Turkish side attached a great deal of importance to trust building by seeking ways of dialogue with German firms maintaining economic cooperation with Turkey even when all political channels were deadlocked. This was the case during the meeting then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım held with German companies.

It is expected that economic cooperation between the two countries will continue to increase in the new period. German Minister of Economy and Energy Peter Altmaier stressed, during the visit of Turkish Minister of Treasury and Finance Berat Albayrak, that Turkey's economy is strong and stable. This is criti-

4. Enes Bayraktı, Kazım Keskin, Zeliha Eliaçık, “Asimetriden Eşit Ortaklığa Türk-Alman İlişkileri, Seta Analiz, Issue: 218, September 2017, pp. 27-29.

5. “Axel Springer sagt Anzeigenaktion mit deutschen Konzernen ab”, *Die Welt*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article168841683/Axel-Springer-sagt-Anzeigenaktion-mit-deutschen-Konzernen-ab.html>, (Access date: September 25, 2018).

cal in terms of reassuring the international markets.⁶ Nonetheless, it is extremely critical not to use economic cooperation as a means of threat in the times of political disputes. As a matter of fact, Germany lifted the restrictions on the Hermes export credit guarantees shortly after they were introduced, and supported the investments of German companies in Turkey.

Owing to its close proximity to energy-producing countries, energy reserves reach the European market through Turkey. Thus, Turkey is crucially important for the opening of these energy reserves to the European market and for the ever-increasing energy needs of Germany and Europe. Along with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC), Turkey plays a role in the transfer of natural gas reserves from the East Mediterranean to world markets; therefore, it has the potential to balance out the EU's energy dependency on Russia. Besides, German firms, working with Turkish companies in energy projects and investments, seem to enjoy rapid access and adaptation to the market.⁷

Turkey also remains in cooperation with Europe to settle the issue of refugees as part of the refugee agreement. At this point, the support Chancellor Merkel, as the EU's dominant power, provided to enhance the living conditions of over 3.9 million refugees in Turkey is certainly important. As a matter of fact, Merkel, in her speech thanking Turkey for the country's refugee politics, stressed that the entry of refugees into Europe has decreased by 97 percent after the refugee agreement and invited the EU to deliver promises once given to Turkey.⁸ The fulfillment of promises to facilitate visa liberalization as part of the readmission agreement and the enlargement of the Customs Union

are the other points that will strengthen Turkey's relations with the EU and Germany.

The Turkish presence in Germany is one the guarantees for the sustainability of Turkish-German relations. The European Turks will not be the reason for tension but the restoring factor in the relations as long as Berlin takes preventive measures against institutional discrimination targeting Turks in Europe, and develops equal and fair relations with Turkish immigrants within the frame of constitutional rights. The far right is on the rise both in Germany and in entire Europe. If the arguments of the far right dominate the mainstream media and political discourse in Germany, the far right circles that pursue introverted politics and act as the enemy of Turkey together with the anti-Turkey lobbies will cause a great deal of harm to bilateral relations. For this reason, the fight against the far right and racism is important not only for Germany's internal peace but also for Turkish-German relations.

At this point, the sensitivity of the German public to the NSU cases and their reaction against discrimination by organizing anti-racist protests are highly appreciated. In accord with this social sensitivity, the struggle of the German state mind against institutional racism and Islamophobia will bring the relations of the two countries to another level. It is of great importance not to radicalize and not to otherize the institutional figures of Turkish NGOs. While the NGOs sponsoring the banned terrorist organization PKK are comfortably able to continue their activities by exploiting the democratic ground of the German state, otherizing the DITIB and other similar Turkish institutions will hurt ex-pat Turks' feelings of belonging in Germany and harm the relations of the two countries. Negotiations should be sought for the revision of relations with these institutions, which prevent the radicalization of Turkish immigrants; this should not be dealt with in a prohibitive mindset.

The fight against terrorism serves as both an area of structural conflict and of cooperation. In its fight against all terrorist organizations, including DAESH, PKK, FETO, etc., Turkey does not receive sufficient

6. "Almanya Ekonomi ve Enerji Bakanı Altmaier: Türkiye ekonomik açıdan sağlıklı bir ülkedir." <https://www.aksam.com.tr/dunya/almanya-ekonomi-ve-enerji-bakani-altmaier-turkiye-ekonomik-acidan-saglikli-bir-ulkedir/haber-775941>, *Akşam Gazetesi*, September 21, 2018, (Access date: September 25, 2018).

7. Yunus Furuncu, Büşra Zeynep Özdemir, "AB Enerji Güvenliği Perspektifinden Türkiye-Almanya Enerji İlişkileri", SETA Analysis, Issue: 257, September 2018, pp. 22-25.

8. "Türkiye'ye Sözümlü Turalım", *Hürriyet*, June 28, 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/avrupa/merkel-turkiyeye-sozumuzu-turalim-40880023>, (Access date: September 24, 2018).

support from Germany. Turkey fights an uphill battle against the PKK and the FETO-affiliated terrorists who had infiltrated the state, and tried to seize power by brute force and overthrow the democratically elected government. Although it is claimed that in the fight against these terrorist groups, from time to time there are some problems in relation to freedoms, it is clear that when more progress is made in the fight against terrorism, more of these problems will be solved.

Germany, as a state of law, should bring to a halt the activities of the NGO-like, sophisticated organizations whose connections with the PKK are clearly revealed in the intelligence reports and the court minutes. In fact, these groups appear on the stage when efforts are made to construct the Turkey-Germany cooperation and they create misperceptions about Turkey by misinforming the public opinion. It is obvious that small anti-Turkey lobbying groups of Turkish origin sometimes use different means to manipulate German politics on Turkey.

It is unacceptable that these circles try to negotiate with the German state over Turkey by claiming that they represent certain ethnic and religious groups. Turkish public opinion does not understand how these groups with small and militant grassroots overshadow the broad-based Turkish diaspora and leave an impression on the German public opinion. The real representatives of the Turkish diaspora, in a generally conservative Germany, do not find a place in the German media and politics. That makes it difficult for them to adapt to Germany since it leaves them with a sense of injustice and exclusion from society.

Obviously, the UN Security Council needs restructuring in today's political conjuncture, where international institutions have become questionable. In spite of the agreement reached in 2005 to reform the Security Council, no concrete steps have been taken in this regard. In an open message by Chancellor Merkel with representatives of Japan, India and Brazil at the G4 summit in 2015, the chancellor stressed the necessity of integrating other member states to the body and expanding the council, emphasizing the unfair na-

ture of the Security Council. In her future statements, Merkel's demands for structural changes in the Security Council overlap with President Erdoğan's emphasis on the disparity and inadequacy of the UN in terms of political representation.

Although the probability of rapprochement and cooperation between Turkey and Germany has the risk of "dependency" on Europe for Turkey, Turkey follows a policy of balance among its partners in the international arena and never engages in any relation with either Germany or other international actors in a way that questions its independence and hegemony.

TURKEY'S EXPECTATIONS IN THE NEW PERIOD

In the new period, Turkey primarily demands structural changes in the bilateral relations. As the security threat against Germany comes to the fore on the international platform, it is unsustainable for Germany to conduct a normative foreign policy. In the context of a "win-win" relation based on rationale, the two countries should prioritize a model relation in which the interests of both should be looked after. To foster an equal political relation for Turkey means no intervention in its internal affairs and the construction of a partnership model with which the two countries concentrate on international problems, and common threats and interests in bilateral relations. This interest-oriented rational politics which Germany successfully manages with some regional countries should be enabled for Turkey as well. Anti-Turkey lobbies should not be allowed to interfere in Turkey's internal affairs through ethnicity and beliefs, and, therefore, exercise their politics of influence and pressure over the country.

Ankara also expects Berlin to seriously take into account Turkey's security concerns as the country was subject to many coup attempts in its short history as a republic. With the increasing radicalization and terrorist threats in Europe and Germany, a period of security politics and stability has been entered. In this context, Germany should fight against the PKK terrorist orga-

nization and the civilian-faceted NGO structures that seem to be affiliated with this group, and ban the activities of such bodies which are illegally financed, for instance by smuggling, usurpation, kidnapping, racketeering, narcotics, and human trafficking.

Germany should acknowledge that the FETO terrorist organization was behind the failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016 as proven by the confessions of FETO members and court minutes. Germany should not be allowed to become the new headquarters of this group. It should not be forgotten that this organization relies on the method of deception and that the image of a peaceful and democratic structure in favor of dialogue is just an illusion; the group keeps its dark and clandestine body out of sight in order to gain sympathy in the German public. Also, German society should bear in mind the criticisms over the non-transparent structure of this organization. It should be remembered that FETO, in Turkey, infiltrated institutions, and blacklisted and discriminated personnel based on their ethnicity and beliefs including Alevites.⁹

For its EU membership process, Turkey could not receive Germany's support to the extent that it expected. For this reason, by supporting its integration with the EU, Europe can contribute to Turkey's long-term stability in proportion to Turkey's contribution to the security and internal peace of Europe where the far right remains on the rise. With Germany's support for broadening the Customs Union Agreement, the rapprochement between the two countries will become more concrete and will have a positive impact on bilateral relations.

Lastly, Turkey wishes for Germany to exercise the model of fair relations, which means having equal relations with ex-pat Turks living in Germany. The ties of affection that the ex-pat Turks have with their homeland do not set an obstacle before their adaptation in Germany, but a factor that strengthens their identities.

9. Kemal İnat, Enes Bayraklı, Kazım Keskin, Ömer Yılmaz, Halil İbrahim Doğan, Serra Can, Zeliha Eliaçık, "Almanya'da FETÖ Yapılanması", *SETA Rapor*, 2018, p. 71.

Pace-setting cultural debates implying a cultural hubris should be abandoned, and a new model of integration should be given a chance to emphasize social and economic cohesion rather than cultural cohesion. Similarly, in the case of immigrants, no Jacobin impositions should be made on Turks, who have become a part of Germany, about how they exercise their religious beliefs. Such a decision should be left to them.

CONCLUSION

Turkey has switched from foreign policy that was only West-oriented to a multilateral foreign policy based on mutual interests and a "win-win" relation, the priorities of which are solely determined by it. Turkey, for a long time, has had good relations with the EU countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Great Britain within the frame of its interests and areas of cooperation in security and economy. While doing so, Turkey has adopted a model of fair relation based on mutual interests. Now, Turkey wishes to use the same model, only on stronger terms, with its NATO ally, Germany.

Despite the understanding of the new multilateral foreign policy, Turkey has not abandoned its membership bid to the EU. However, Turkey seeks ways of integration with Europe through projects such as broadening the Customs Union - at least until it becomes an EU member.

President Erdoğan's visit to Germany means opening a new page for new partnerships in the areas of economy, and security. This conjunctural momentum experienced in bilateral relations should be valued as an opportunity to solve the structural problems in Turkish-German relations. Long-term and sound relationships can be established if the relations of the two countries are simply based on trust on new, stable grounds.

Steps mutually taken by the two countries for better relations are welcomed by all segments in Turkey as Germany suffers the severe reactions of the German public opinion as a result of an anti-Turkey campaign that has been conducted over a long time. The latter indicates Germany has more to do for the normalization.

That is, Germany should manage the image created by the mainstream media and politics against Turkey and President Erdoğan, and elucidate to the German public the cooperation channels to be opened.

Lastly, Turkey expects Germany to take concrete steps in the fight against terrorist organizations, such as the PKK and FETO. Despite a large part of the Turkish public supporting the government in the fight against the PKK and FETO, Germany turned a deaf ear to the sensitivities of Turkey, and that disappoints the Turkish public opinion. It may be said that, without letting marginal lobbies of Turkish origin capture the Turkish-German relations, Germany's support for Turkey's fight against terrorism will bring bilateral relations into a totally different plane.

Areas of opportunities in the long-established Turkish-German relations should not be transformed into crises, and areas of cooperation should be widened by adopting a common stance against terrorism and trade wars. There should not be any doubt that Turkish-German relations will continue firmly in the future as they did in the past. The real issue here is how the relations will be conducted and whether or not the relations will be maintained on the basis of mutual interests on a rational ground.

In this context, Turkey will obviously not accept any interference in its internal affairs or the model of asymmetrical relations as a country that will have, in the near future, a stable political system, maintain full border security, and resume its economic development.