



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

A Deal between Turkey and the European Union: Selling Syrian Refugees Short

Policy Analysis Unit | Apr 2016

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Introduction

An agreement between the European Union (EU) and Turkey reached on March 18, 2016, which envisages a joint mechanism for the reduction of refugee flows into Europe via Turkey, came into effect on April 4. At present, Turkey hosts 2.2 million Syrian refugees, in addition to 200,000 Iraqi refugees and some tens of thousands of unregistered refugees and migrants from Iran, Afghanistan and various African countries.

Terms of the Agreement

The new deal, signed in Brussels by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, was unanimously approved by European heads of state. Providing for legally recognized resettlement for up to 72,000 Syrian refugees in a number of European countries, the most important terms of the deal include¹:

- As of March 20, all “irregular” migrants crossing from Turkey onto Greek islands will be returned to Turkish territory. Given that Turkey fulfills the criteria of a safe haven (“first safe port of call” for refugees fleeing a war zone), this absolves Greece from any legal liability related to returning refugees to unsafe countries. With the assistance of the UN High Commission for Refugees, Turkey and Greece will cooperate in implementing the safe return of Syrian refugees to Turkey. This includes the stationing of Turkish officials on Greek islands and of Greek officials in Turkish territory. The EU undertakes to finance the effort to return “irregular” migrants to Turkey.
- For each Syrian refugee returned to Turkish territory, one other Syrian refugee residing in Turkey will be allowed to resettle in an EU member state, with priority given to those Syrians who have not previously attempted to enter Europe. The agreement caps the total number of Syrian refugees eligible for entry to Europe

¹ Read the full text of the agreement here: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2016/3/40802210113_en_635939208600000000.pdf

through this mechanism at 72,000, including 18,000 left over from a previous commitment (July 2015) to absorb Syrian refugees within Europe.

The EU is offering a number of incentives to Turkey in return for its assistance in these efforts, including:

- An expediting of the roadmap which would grant the right of visa-free travel for Turkish nationals to the EU, to be implemented no later than June 2016. The implementation of this is contingent on Turkey meeting a total of 72 benchmarks, covering areas such as “document security”; the management of migration; public order and security; fundamental rights; and the readmission of “irregular migrants”². In other words, the present agreement is more a declaration of goodwill than a binding treaty.
- The EU has undertaken to expedite the payment of a promised 3 billion euros (USD 3.4 billion) in grants aimed at improving the living conditions of refugees living in Turkey. The European countries also pledged a further 3 billion euros to be delivered by the end of 2018, provided that Turkey respects a number of preconditions relating to how these funds are spent.
- The EU agrees to begin proceedings within the Chapter 33 of the ascension proceedings for Turkish membership of the EU during the Netherlands’ presidency (that is to say, before June 30, 2016). The declaration’s wording also makes clear that “preparatory work for the opening of other Chapters will continue at an accelerated pace without prejudice to Member States’ positions in accordance with the existing rules”, an allusion to possible protests by Cyprus over the ascension of Turkey.

Beyond resolving the pressing concern of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey, this new declaration has broken new ground in the long strained Turkey-EU relationship.

² For a fuller description of the planned liberalization of the visa regime for Turkish nationals entering Europe, see: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-582_en.htm

The determination of both sides to overcome any contentious issues which stand in the way of their bilateral cooperation on the question of irregular migration is notable.

Russia's direct military intervention in Syria, and a consequent agreement between Moscow and Washington to initiate Syrian peace talks, had already forced Ankara to freeze its plans for a buffer zone along its borders with Syria which could be used to resettle Syrian refugees. With no end in sight to the flow of Syrian refugees over the border, and the resulting, growing security, political and economic challenges, Turkey acquiesced to cooperating with the EU in exchange for a number of practical incentives. For its part, the EU has been under considerable strain as the influx of refugees tested the willingness of various member states to accept large numbers of migrants. With the flow of refugees intensifying following the Russian bombardment of opposition areas, the EU was left with no choice but to entice Turkey into coordinating with the flow of "irregular migrants".

The Rationale in Ankara: a Return to Multilateral Relations

In Turkey, a number of other factors beyond simple self-interest helped to make the agreement with the EU possible. Since the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, Turkey has followed a policy which its one-time foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu described as "no problems with neighbors". This is driven by a "multi-dimensional" approach that aims to see Turkey increasingly open up to as many regional markets as possible, bolstering the country's export base. The uprisings of the Arab Spring presented a considerable challenge to this policy, and in particular, Turkey quickly found itself to be the biggest loser in the Syrian conflict. This was only made worse by the increased activity of armed Kurdish groups along Turkey's southern border, which the United States decided to back in an effort to help crush ISIL. Additionally, Russia now aims to cut Turkey off from Syria, a country which was previously Ankara's gateway to the Arab countries, who together account for 25 percent of Turkish exports.

With the failure of its policies in the Middle East and the Caucasus, Turkey is now using cooperation with the EU over irregular migrants as a means to address wider issues, such as its membership of the trans-national organization. Visa-free entry for Turkish nationals into the EU was one of the main demands which Ankara brought to the table in the latest round of the ascension talks that began on November 29, 2015. With five million Turkish nationals already living within the EU, visa-free movement across the

continent could finally allow Ankara to free itself of the economic repercussions of the deterioration of its relations with Russia.

In terms of domestic politics, the AKP-led government can use these improved relations with the EU to refute accusations from the more avowedly secularist opposition parties in Turkey that it was neglecting relations with the West and Europe in favor of an allegedly “ideologically-rooted” foreign policy bringing Turkey closer to Middle Eastern countries. On a regional and global level, Turkey can use the agreement with the EU to highlight its position as an indispensable partner for the resolution of the myriad crises facing the region.

The View from Brussels: Mutual Dependency in Security Affairs

Relations between the EU and Turkey are complex and multifaceted, with Ankara increasingly viewed as a vital partner to Europe in a number of security domains. The very idea of “European security” becomes meaningless without some reference to Turkey, which is also the second largest military force in NATO. These realities have driven a number of European countries to promote the idea of outsourcing the protection of Europe’s borders to Turkey, itself an important staging point for refugees arriving on Greek shores. Turkey has made itself a valuable partner to the Europeans on a number of security related issues, given the latter’s relatively low levels of economic growth and limited defense budgets, including ISIL, the Syrian conflict, and the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Economic relations between the EU and Turkey are equally important. From January to August 2015, Europe exported 53.5 billion euros (USD 61 billion) worth of goods and services to Turkey, which in turn exported 40 billion euros (USD 46 billion) of goods the other way during the same period, making Turkey Europe’s fifth largest trading partner³.

The Agreement and the Way Forward

The recent deal between the EU and Turkey may serve to fulfill a number of domestic political interests across various European countries. It could also prove an economic

³ See a *Turk Press* report (in Arabic), highlighting official European Union statistics, October 17, 2015: <http://www.turkpress.co/node/13902>

and political boon for Turkey, which seeks to reactivate negotiations towards EU membership. For the refugees, however, the repercussions of the deal will be unwelcome and significant, earning the opprobrium of human rights and migrants' rights activists. Across Europe, the agreement's apparent incompatibility with a number of human rights accords to which the EU is a signatory will be a cause for worry going forward.

One possible outcome of the constraining of the Turkish route to Europe could be that increasing numbers of migrants seek to enter Europe by crossing the Mediterranean from Libya. The fate that awaits them in Turkey is little better, with the camps in which most Syrian refugees in Turkey reside lacking in basic utilities and services, and concentrated in poor, overcrowded regions, plagued by the same economic, security and educational crises as their surroundings. These conditions serve to both prevent the integration of those Syrian refugees into broader Turkish society and simultaneously bar them from the support and assistance they would receive as refugees in Europe. Looking at the bigger picture, this agreement is, at best, a very limited stop gap measure, allowing the resettlement of 72,000 Syrian refugees from an estimated 5 million presently scattered around neighboring countries. In return for 6 billion euros (USD 6.8 billion) in assistance, and some tentative promises which can always be withdrawn, Europe has washed its hands of millions of Syrian refugees, leaving them out in the cold.