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Political Relations between Turkey and Germany

MUSTAFA YENEROĞLU*

ABSTRACT *Turkish-German relations go back to the 16th century and have since then been sustained in different realms, such as the military, diplomacy and economy. Naturally, different historical incidents have had different impacts on those relations and have shaped them each in a specific manner. This essay intends first of all to delineate the different stages which Turkish-German relations have undergone through history. Secondly, it will try to reflect on the qualitative changes in Turkish-German relations which have occurred as a result of historical developments. Touching upon issues like Turkey's possible EU membership, the PKK problem, the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the NSU case, it will try to elaborate on both the burdens and possibilities which presently underlie those relations.*

Firstly, it is important to note that reducing the political relations between “Turkey” and “Germany” solely to today’s images of these two nations will provide us a limited historical reality. There have been several moments in history which prove that Turkish-German relations did not start with the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. The occupation of Konya, the then capital city of the Anatolian Seljuk State, by the German King and the Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa (I) in 1190, the 16th and 17th century “Turkish Wars” (*Türkenkriege*) or “Turkish trophies” (*Beutetürken*) are still considered strong cultural factors in Germany’s historical perception of

Turks. Beside the war encounters one important stage, with regard to over 200 years of Turkish-German political relations, is the year 1790. The Prussian-Ottoman alliance of this year has an important significance for it is the first agreement the German state signed with the Turks and also the first military alliance agreement the Ottomans signed with a European-Christian state.

The main reason for the tangible rapprochement between Prussia and the Ottomans at the end of the 18th century was the common perception of threat by Russia’s advance towards the West and South as well as the notion that unlike England and France,

* The Grand National Assembly of Turkey



Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu pose for a family picture with ministers of both countries during a meeting in Berlin on January 22, 2016.

AFP PHOTO / TOBIAS SCHWARZ

Prussia/Germany did not have a colonial past that directly affected the Ottoman State. Interestingly, at a time when the German Empire was founded (1871) while the Ottoman State was losing power and land, the economic relations between the two blossomed. A profound cultural interaction started between the two states in 1880, after Bismarck sent his civil and military advisors to Istanbul and after Wilhelm II's visit in 1898, the Turkish image began to take a positive shape among German intellectuals. Thus, German foreign affairs began to deepen its cultural initiatives towards the Turkish public, leading to the appointment of at least one German officer to key positions in almost all the Ottoman state ministries after 1913.

After World War I

At the outset of World War I, the German-Ottoman alliance, which was determined by the ruthless competition and cross balance policies within 19th century Europe, reached such a high level that German military offi-

cers gradually gained authority over some divisions of the Ottoman army. However, with the Armistice of Mudros the Ottomans had to terminate military relations with Germany. As a consequence, all German citizens were deported and Germans were no longer permitted to enter the Ottoman state. Hence, the defeat in World War I brought with it radical political changes in both the Ottoman and the German state. After the Treaty of Lausanne and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the official diplomatic relations rekindled and on 3 March 1924 the German-Turkish Non-Aggression Pact was signed. In the later years the economic relations regained momentum with Turkey utilising the German industry for its economic progress and over time even becoming dependent on Germany.

After World War II, the western part of divided Germany began –for its economic development and with America's support– to meet its manpower need by recruiting workers from Turkey. For the sake of its own economic potential Turkey, having

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chosen to be part of the Western Block against Soviet Russia, itself tried to benefit from the currency and export capacity of the developing German economy. However, with the Russian threat gone and the ideological Cold War over, Turkey's strategic importance for Germany decreased. None the less, the large size of the Turkish-Muslim population in Germany began to be problematized in the light of NATO's religion/civilisation-focused new Cold War declaration.

The European Union: Ally Germany Excluding Turkey from the "Community of Values"

As the European Union –once an economic community– evolved into a political one and into a community of values, Germany played a key role in the debates over the Muslim nature of Turkish society and therefore its distinctness from European values. On the road to becoming the European Union, of which Germany was one of the founding countries, the Union reassessed its initial goal to establish an economic commu-

nity and changed its self-perception into being a value-based community aiming at a common constitution. During this process, accepting Turkey as an EU member became more an issue of cultural rather than economic differences. In this debate Europe is seen as a result of a succession of values, from Judaism, Hellenistic Greece and Ancient Rome to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the modern scientific mentality. Thus a Turkey, that even geographically is challenging Europe's boundaries, has no place within the framework of this civilizational association. Turkey, on its part, feels discontent about these allegations of not being "European/Western" enough or not being able to adapt to European values. Naturally, this discontent shapes its bilateral relations with the countries that do not want it in the EU.

Germany's exclusionist perspective of Turkey's EU membership is an important factor in the Turkish-German political relations. The right wing groups' construction of a "European identity" which alienates Turkey in particular and Islam in general contradicts their claims of living in a multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic geography. Within this framework, although there was an intense debate on Turkey in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, this debate was not so much about Turkey's EU membership but rather its deficiencies with regard to human rights and democracy.

One of the most visible examples of the unfair treatment of Turkey in the

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EU was the 1997 Luxembourg Summit. There the attitude of the Kohl government, which can be characterised as an “asymmetric collaboration policy,” was mostly reflected in Turkey’s position within the Customs Union. On 1 January 1996 the EU for the first time formed a Customs Union with a non-EU country, i.e. Turkey. With this Turkey was liable to Europe’s economic law, yet was put in an unjust position as it had no rights in the formulation of the law in Brussels.

**From Schröder to Merkel:
From Symmetry to Asymmetry**

The change of German government in 1998 brought with it an active encouragement of Turkey’s EU membership, and thus the period between 1999 and 2005 came to be considered as the golden age of Europe-Turkey relations. One of the main reasons for this encouragement was chancellor Schröder’s envision of a

“postmodern cosmopolitan Europe,” which was supported by his coalition partner the Green Party and differed fundamentally from his predecessor Kohl’s notion of a “Christian and civilised Europe.” Also the changes in the security policies that came about with the Kosovo War and September 11 played a major role. Germany’s support for Turkey’s EU membership paved the way for Turkey’s democratisation of its internal affairs, modernisation of its economy and demilitarisation of its foreign policies and therefore functioned as a catalyst in those areas. Schröder’s “symmetric membership policies,” so to speak, also had a positive impact on the bilateral relations between the two countries. Due to Turkey’s increasing economic wealth, its economic growth, and its establishment of higher democratic standards, the power asymmetry between Germany and Turkey turned more and more into symmetry. This again was reflected in its foreign policy.

Apparently, this approach changed with chancellor Merkel after 2005. During Merkel’s era Germany has tried to use the power asymmetry against Turkey to its own advantage. The rising tensions caused by controversial developments within the EU and the economic incompatibilities with new member states affected Germany’s approach to Turkey’s EU membership. Besides, the EU’s reluctance with regard to enlargement stemming from the constitutional and financial crises, the emergence of Islamophobic and right-wing populist groups across Europe as well as polit-

ical factors caused German-Turkish relations to focus merely on Turkey's EU membership. Along with this, it can be considered as the necessity of *realpolitik* when on the one hand Merkel stated on February 2014 that articles must be worked on for Turkey's membership, while on the other hand she also emphasized that she was against Turkey's EU membership.

During Merkel's era the psychology of being excluded left Turkey feeling suspicious towards Europe on a public and political level. Schröder who supports Turkey's membership in the EU, criticised Merkel's Turkey policy in an article for *Cicero Magazine* in April 2013. As a result of these policies, the EU fell into a deep crisis regarding its cooperation with potential partners and moreover lost one of its strongest allies, i.e. Turkey. According to Schröder the EU needs another strong member country in order to survive and thus the integration of Turkey's fast growing economy will be an asset to the EU. This approach, which evaluates the EU within a more geostrategic and economic framework, considers Turkey as a benefit and opportunity for the EU due to its location in the Middle East.

A Realm of Opportunity for Permanent Partnership: The Turkish Population in Germany

While the political relations between Turkey and Germany have been in a tidal wave of symmetry and asymmetry, especially in terms of the EU, the

labour force agreement signed on 30 October 1961 that led to the emergence of a Turkish population in Germany, added a new dimension to the relations between the two countries. When we take into account the bilateral economic relations the role of this population becomes even clearer. In 2015, for example, there was a \$35 billion trade between Germany and Turkey. The volume of Turkish investment in Germany amounts to \$2 billion whereas German investment in Turkey adds up to \$8.4 billion. Nearly 100,000 Turkish businesses in Germany yield a total revenue of \$50 billion each year. While Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres based in Berlin and Cologne are active in the cultural arena, the 263 weekly flight services provided by Turkish Airlines are an important factor with regard to the mobilisation of large numbers of people between the countries.

The over 3 million Turkish population in Germany not only constitutes an important aspect of Turkish-German political relations but, provided that it is properly appreciated, also bears the potential of turning those relations into a permanent alliance. Yet, Germany takes the stance that Turks in Germany will necessarily lose their ties to Turkey once they have become German citizens. Nevertheless, the increasing number of people who consider both countries as their homes and have thus formed a transnational identity will enhance bilateral opportunities.

Instead of implementing a German national integration policy which

Germany's attitude towards Islamic organisations contradicts its foreign policy agenda on the freedom of religion

aims at assimilating the Turkish population, considering both multilingualism and multiculturalism to be a richness and taking steps within this framework will foster mutual trust in the bilateral relations. Preserving the language and cultural presence of autochthonous as well as allochthonous minorities, such as the Turks who migrated to Germany later on, is a vital necessity. However, if this necessity is politicised within debates over “adaptation,” Turkey’s meeting its responsibilities towards its own citizens in Germany will also be problematized and inevitably raise the tensions between the two countries. This became obvious during the Turkish presidential elections in 2014, when Turkish citizens voted from Germany and thereby caused a “crisis of belonging.”

Yet, many opportunities for collaboration between Turkey and Germany can be accomplished via the Turkish population in Germany. Revising the Cultural Partnership Agreement signed by Turkey and Germany in 1958, for example, will contemporize the cultural relations between the two countries, taking into account the huge populations in each of the countries as well as the new circumstances. The revision could intensify

cooperation in the educational and cultural spheres. It could address impediments to further cooperation, such as visa and tax regulations or processes of institutionalisation. Treaties over educational and cultural cooperation that Germany signed with France, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan could serve as a model.

Problematic Aspects of the Bilateral Relations: Islamophobia and Institutional Racism

As a result of racist political parties becoming the strongest or second-strongest force in European elections a value crisis emerged in Europe. Rallies against Muslims, attacks on mosques, racist parties passing the electoral thresholds and so obtaining seats in regional parliaments have been noted with suspicion by the Turkish public. The expectations of the Turkish population in Germany, with regard to Turkey taking a more active role, are thus quite understandable.

Currently homophobic and anti-Semitic acts of crime are documented in Germany in order to create public awareness and make the government accountable. However, although it has been demanded for quite a long time, the documentation of Islamophobic acts of crime until recently was not addressed by the Federal Government at all. In 2015, 82 attacks on mosques alone were recorded by NGOs. Those who are most affected by racist attacks are the members of the Turkish minority in Germany.



Guido Westerwelle and Ahmet Davutoğlu, then Foreign Ministers of Germany and Turkey respectively, chat in front of the Grand Mecidiye Mosque during their boat trip in Istanbul, on July 28, 2010.

AFP PHOTO / KERİM ÖKTEN

When looking at the historical trajectory, the continuity between the alienation of Turks as “the absolute Other” by some groups today and the Turkish Wars of the 16th century, joined by German lords, becomes obvious. Not only does the Federal Government not adequately combat hostility towards Islam and foreigners, but also by openly sympathizing with the extreme right’s baseless “fears” it even encourages right-wing populist positions within mainstream society. This, of course, puts the Turks in Germany in an even more defenceless position, *vis-à-vis* hate crimes.

On the other hand, Germany’s attitude towards Islamic organisations contradicts its foreign policy agenda on the freedom of religion. Although the larger Islamic organisations in Germany fulfil all legal requirements, the full implementation of their in-

stitutional rights is constantly postponed under political pretexts. Ultimately, they are denied public rights which are granted to other religious communities.

The murders of eight Turks in Germany committed by the NSU terror organisation between 2000 and 2007 remain a still unexplained and shameful stain, caused by the flaws of the intelligence services. The NSU managed to commit atrocities and shed blood all over the country without being discovered by the police or the intelligence services for over sixteen years. The main reason for this was that the country’s security forces, despite many strong indications, categorically excluded racist motives behind the crimes. Most of the recommendations of the Federal Parliament’s NSU enquiry commission on combating racism that were yielded to the judicial, security and intelligence units of the country are still not being taken into account. A report delivered to the United Nation’s commission on racism by the lawyers of the NSU case, some German NGOs and academics also pointed to the deficits with regard to institutional racism. All in all, those incidents have shown that the issue of institutional racism and above all of Islamophobia is not tackled by Germany in a proper manner.

Security Issues: PKK, DHKP-C, ISIL

The fact that Berlin is not very effective in fighting against the terrorist organisation PKK is proven with data from the reports of the German

A symmetric relation can only be possible by addressing all the issues and opportunities in detail at the Intergovernmental Consultation and Strategic Dialogue Mechanism

Federal and State Offices for the Protection of the Constitution. The relativization of terrorist attacks against Turkey and of organisations that are an open threat to Turkey's internal security, such as the PKK, and not taking a determined stance against terror affairs are all factors that cause tensions in the bilateral relations.

Although the PKK is forbidden by law in Germany, it is *de facto* treated like a legal organisation. The substitute organisations of the PKK, whose names and structural characteristics are noted in the above-mentioned intelligence reports, thus need to be examined by the German jurisdiction and banned through official channels. However, the contrary is the case. The PKK can easily hold protests in front of the Federal Parliament building, spread its propaganda even via daily newspapers, collect large donations and tributes and continue its military training in Germany. Many from Europe –and Germany in particular– joined Kandil in order to support terrorist activities. This of course has a negative impact on how the Turkish public views Germany. Another factor that harms the trust in bilateral

relations is the close ties of the German Left Party to the PKK as well as the Green Party's open and unconditional support for the HDP.

New Opportunities in Light of the Refugee Crisis

Following issues such as Turkey's EU membership, Turks living in Germany and security policies, as mentioned above, German-Turkish relations have entered a new phase with the current refugee crisis. The demands to secure national borders in order to keep refugees out of the EU have caused a serious threat to the EU's most substantial feature, i.e. a common market without borders, and therefore to the future of the EU itself. This drew the EU not only to a crisis but also to new searches. It is at this point of the refugee crisis that Turkish-German relations facilitate new opportunities.

As over one million –mostly Muslim– refugees entered the country in 2015, Germany now has serious concerns regarding the disruption of its social structure and the alteration of its demographic balance. On the other hand, it is foreseen that the resurrection of EU borders could decrease Germany's economic growth within the next ten years and cost Germany up to €235 billion. Yet, it is important to note Merkel's frequent visits to Turkey over the past months. It needs to be acknowledged that Germany is the European country to admit the most refugees and that it continues its relatively humane policies despite the

risk of racist parties gaining electoral victories.

As a matter of fact, the rising popularity of right-wing populist groups as well as openly racist political parties does not only lead Europe's own liberal democratic claims *ad absurdum*. Given the mutual and profound resentments between Europe and the Islamic world it is also against Turkey's interests. Indeed, Turkey places a very high value on a liberal and pluralistic Europe.

This being said, there are certain areas where Turkish-German relations can be deepened as a consequence of the refugee crisis. The search for national solutions in light of this crisis could lead the two countries to focus more on issues such as strengthening the geostrategic position of the EU, protecting Schengen, stabilising the Middle East or addressing the Russian crisis which would include Crimea and Syria. In addition to this, the new opportunities that come with the refugee crisis will ease the negotiations regarding Turkey's EU membership. With the lifting of the visa requirement in particular Turkey's relations to Germany with respect to the EU will enter a fundamentally different phase. In a way the privileged partnership will have been realised.

Finally: The Future of the Political Relations

Turkish-German relations had turned into a community of fate before World War I. They were reshaped in the Turkish Republican era, continued on asymmetric grounds within the framework of the European Community during the Cold War, became revitalised thanks to Schröder's positive approach and stalled under the Merkel governments. Today, facing the refugee crisis, they stand on the threshold of new opportunities. Nevertheless, current political relations should not be limited to this crisis. Deferring the solution of the problems of the Turkish population in Germany or not properly tackling the threat of terrorism –an equally great risk for Germany– may help find solutions for some of the acute problems, but will not bring sustainability. A symmetric relation can only be possible by addressing all the issues and opportunities in detail at the Intergovernmental Consultation and Strategic Dialogue Mechanism, recently formed in order to establish comprehensive and permanent relations. Maybe conducting the very unique relations between Turkey and Germany along these lines will not only generate regional but also global effects. ■