

EU-Turkey conference reaches deal at refugees' expense

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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European Union (EU) heads of government and state agreed a shameful deal with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu at the EU-Turkey conference on Sunday in Brussels. Turkey has pledged to prevent refugees from entering the EU and in exchange will receive €3 billion in financing and a commitment to speed up negotiations for EU membership and visa-free travel.

As was the case with the EU's treatment of Greece, the deal struck between the EU and Turkey underlines the EU's brutal and inhumane character. For years the European powers, the United States and Turkey have bombed targets in Syria, while financing Islamist proxy forces to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. They have created a living hell for the Syrian people, forcing 3.5 million Syrians to flee the country. Around 8 million people are displaced within Syria's borders.

Now the European powers are responding to this humanitarian crisis by sealing the borders, establishing camps, and ruthlessly deporting refugees back to war zones. The government in Turkey is being paid to act as the EU's border guard and do its dirty work against refugees.

EU foreign policy spokeswoman Federica Mogherini claimed, "the money is not for Turkey, but for the refugees. We have to support the cities and communities there, otherwise there will be a social collapse."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The funds will only be paid out in small sums, on condition that the Turkish border remain closed to refugees and that Ankara accept refugees deported from Europe. It is nothing other than a bribe for compliance with a politically criminal deal.

An estimated 2.2 million Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey, along with 300,000 from Iraq.

However, only 250,000 live in camps which the EU now intends to support. Moreover, only refugees seeking protection from Europe are recognised as refugees.

For everyone else, a temporary protection order applies which permits no social welfare support and only very restricted access to jobs, health care and education. A large majority of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Turkey are thus compelled to live in the open air or squat in empty houses, while working as day labourers, at the mercy of exploitative employers.

While a high level of education predominated in Syria before the war, 400,000 of the 700,000 Syrian child refugees cannot go to school. In order for the families to make ends meet, children often have to beg, sell water or handkerchiefs on the street, or clean car windows.

On the basis of the temporary protection regulations, Turkish security agencies can remove refugees' right to protection if they are deemed a threat to national security, public order or public security. Such persons can be detained without any judicial ruling. According to refugee organisation ProAsyl, the Osmanyie refugee camp near the Syrian border serves almost exclusively as a detention centre; even unaccompanied minors are confined there.

Syrian refugees are already not being allowed into the country, even though rejecting refugees at the border is illegal under international law. Turkish border police regularly hunt down Syrian refugees who are trying to enter Turkey illegally. Severe abuse, detentions and illegal deportations are daily occurrences, according to a Human Rights Watch report.

Against this background, EU ministers decided to intensify cooperation with Turkey. They agreed "to step up their cooperation for support of Syrians under

temporary protection and migration management,” because “results must be achieved in particular in stemming the influx of irregular migrants.” In particular, they agreed on “swiftly returning migrants who are not in need of international protection to their countries of origin.”

European governments’ press statements leave no doubt that despite blatant violations of asylum seekers’ human rights in Turkey, they will grant Turkish authorities the right to take any measure deemed necessary to keep refugees from entering Europe. Moreover, they will ruthlessly deport those who make it to Europe back to Turkey.

British Prime Minister David Cameron stated, “Britain will continue to play our role, which is about supporting Syrian refugees in the refugee camps and in Turkey.”

Dutch Prime Minister Marc Rutte said, “In the end it’s always less expensive than having people here and it’s easier for them to return to Syria from Turkey.” He added, “As soon as the €3 billion deal is wrapped up, refugees will begin to be deported to the Turkish camps.”

French President François Hollande said, “As Turkey is making an effort to take in refugees—who will not come to Europe—it’s reasonable that Turkey receive help from Europe to accommodate those refugees.”

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, while calling for more “humane” treatment of refugees, stated: “We have to be sure the Turkish authorities do what they have to do, because no one can afford these amazing flows [of people].”

To speed up deportations, the EU is acting with contempt for international agreements. It intends to declare Turkey a “secure third country,” which cannot be done legally unless Turkey ratifies the Geneva Convention on Refugees and offers all asylum seekers protection regardless of their origin. Nonetheless, moves to do so are proceeding, as rapid deportations on EU borders will only be possible once Turkey receives “secure third country” status.

The EU-Turkey deal takes place at a point where the Erdogan government is assuming ever more openly dictatorial features. In the course of the civil war it has restarted with Kurdish groups, it has curbed the rights of press freedom and freedom of speech. The willingness of the EU leaders to use Turkey under these

conditions to perfect its own policy of sealing borders to refugees speaks volumes about the true character of the EU.

The summit itself made clear, however, how tensions are rising through the EU. Prior to the meeting, Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem raised the prospect of a “mini-Schengen” in case “no solution is reached for sharing the enormous burden of the influx of asylum seekers.” Last week German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that the Schengen treaty was in danger if other European countries did not accept the policy laid down by Berlin.

On Sunday, eight EU states negotiated separately with Davutoglu the removal of refugees from Turkey if Ankara fully implements outstanding agreements. The discussion included representatives from Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Greece and the Benelux countries.

This initiative was sharply criticised by the so-called Visegrad Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo said, “I can’t imagine that decisions will be taken in such a format [Merkel’s mini-summit] and then imposed on other member states.” Europe minister Konrad Szymaski added, “We don’t want these tensions inside the EU to be used as a pretext for suspending or restricting the Schengen area.”

EU Council President Donald Tusk sought subsequently to paper over the cracks by downplaying the significance of the talks with Turkey. He said, “Let us not be naive. Turkey is not the only key to solving the migration crisis. ... I will repeat this again: without control on our external borders, Schengen will become history.”

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