

European Union chiefs determined to reach deal with Turkey to deter refugees

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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Negotiations between the heads of 28 European Union (EU) governments and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu over a deal to stop the flow of refugees from the Middle East to Europe began on Thursday and will continue today. While it remains unclear if a deal will be finalised, since several EU states have announced reservations, the goal is absolutely clear: the EU is prepared to pay any price to hermetically seal itself off from the suffering refugees.

This was explicitly stated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in her statement made before the German parliament on Wednesday. In her speech, she called for a European solution to the refugee issue, aimed at “reducing the number of refugees not only for some, but for all of us, and to do so sustainably and permanently.”

The sealing off of Europe has nothing to do with the “welcoming culture,” attributed to Merkel after she allowed thousands of refugees who were stuck in catastrophic conditions in Hungary last September to travel on to Germany. Merkel was much more concerned that the reintroduction of borders within the Schengen zone (free travel area comprising 26 European states) would have adverse consequences for the continued existence of the EU and Germany’s economic interests.

Merkel noted once again in her official statement that she was striving for a European solution because “precisely Germany, as a country in the heart of Europe, has profited from freedom of movement like no other. That also goes for our industry.”

The fate of the now more than 40,000 refugees confined to inhumane temporary camps in Greece is of no interest to Merkel. The chancellor remained unmoved by the disturbing images from the refugee camp at Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border, where the refugees are struggling to survive as the camp sinks in the mud. The only emergency care available at Idomeni is being offered by unpaid volunteers from across Europe.

With incredible cynicism Merkel stated, “Together with the other 27 EU member states and the UN high commission for refugees (UNHCR), Greece intends to resolve the crisis

in a humanitarian manner.” She continued, “Of course many refugees are disappointed if they cannot travel to where they want to, but we are all agreed in Europe that there is no right to asylum in a particular country.”

A pact between the EU and Turkey will only serve to worsen the situation for refugees in Greece.

The talks prior to the summit culminated in the first draft of a six-point plan. This was a response to the criticisms—made by human rights organisations and the United Nations (UN)—of the initial proposal to deport refugees who make it across the Aegean Sea immediately back to Turkey.

An “Asylum-lite” procedure has now been proposed, where refugees can apply for asylum in Greece, but the application will be considered within 48 hours. Objections to a deportation would be reviewed by the Greek judicial system within a week. This is aimed at complying with international legal norms, which require the opportunity for an individual to file an asylum application and forbid the immediate deportation of refugees from the border.

However, the entire plan is a fraud. The document states “Migrants not applying for asylum or whose application has been found unfounded or inadmissible in accordance with the said directive will be returned to Turkey.” This means that refugees will get the opportunity in principle to submit an asylum application, but these will be routinely rejected on the basis that Greece has declared Turkey to be a “safe third country,” and, because at the stroke of a pen, Turkey is considered a “safe country for asylum.” Vice President of the EU Commission, Frans Timmermans, cynically declared that “morally and legally” they were obliged to carry out the asylum procedure.

In fact, international law is being completely violated. Turkey is to become a “safe third country” even though it has failed to fully ratify the Geneva Convention on Refugees, on the basis that “in principle,” Turkish officials will act as if the convention was in full force. In addition, the EU argues that no “serious danger,” like death or torture, will confront refugees in Turkey.

Quite apart from the fact that human rights organisations

have documented numerous serious abuses of refugees by Turkish security forces, including obviously deliberate killings on the Turkish-Syrian border, Prime Minister Davutoglu has already made clear that after their deportation from Greece, the refugees will be confined to camps and deported.

Those seeking protection in Greece will not fare much better. Refugees arriving there, according to the prescriptions of the EU bureaucrats, must be registered in “hot spots” and then accommodated and provided for until the asylum procedure is complete. The country, which is on the verge of economic and social collapse, is already overwhelmed with the 40,000 refugees currently stranded in Greece. Moreover, between 1,500 and 2,000 are crossing the Aegean to the Greek islands every day, meaning that huge internment camps need to be constructed to confine them against their will.

The deportation of thousands of desperate people will now be carried out under the threat of violence. The EU is intent on maintaining the closure of the Balkan route to prevent refugees from reaching Central Europe under their own power.

The “one for one” principle agreed upon at the last summit will impact a much smaller number of refugees than was previously thought. The 72,000 Syrian refugees that the EU will voluntarily distribute across the continent is ridiculously low given the 2.7 million people stranded in Turkey.

It is clear masses of people seeking protection, and who—in their desperation to secure a better future for their children—left disastrous conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and relied upon smugglers to make it to the EU, will be deported and given no further chance to be accepted into the resettlement programme. This was confirmed by Timmermanns, who told German news programme Tagesschau, “If you use a smuggler, you have a right to protection, but in Turkey, not in Greece or the EU. If you are prepared to wait until you can legally come to Europe, you can get protection in Europe.”

The EU maintains that the resettlement programme will only be in place for a short time. Its communiqué stated, “This is a temporary and extraordinary measure which is necessary to end human suffering and reestablish public order.” This “order” means nothing other than the complete halt of the flow of refugees. To this end, NATO’s mission in the Aegean is to be further expanded, as Merkel noted in her statement. Warships will continue their ludicrously disproportionate activities along a stretch of coast against small smugglers’ boats packed full of unarmed people, which are at risk of capsizing at any moment.

However, there is considerable opposition in the EU to the

agreement with Turkey. Cyprus intends to block the opening of a new round of negotiations with Turkey about its joining the EU until the government in Nicosia has been fully recognised by Ankara. The Turkish demand for visa-free travel for its citizens within the EU has provoked opposition, led above all by France and Austria. According to a report by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, there are grumblings in France about the agreement with Turkey being a betrayal by the German chancellor.

In Spain, an all-party coalition has emerged at the head of a protest movement opposed in principle to the EU-Turkey deal. More than 5,000 people rallied in Madrid against the EU’s refugee policy on Wednesday night chanting “Shame, shame.” The foreign minister of the conservative government, which was recently voted out of office but still holds power, José Manuel García-Margallo, said his country would only agree to a compromise which was in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1951.

This merely reflects the hypocrisy and deceit of the European governments, who claim to be in favour of “European values” and “humanitarianism,” but move brutally against refugees and workers’ rights. It was the Spanish government which, in its enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, took ruthless action against refugees to prevent them from reaching European soil. In addition, the Spanish government has negotiated a repatriation agreement with the Moroccan ruling family that closely parallels the current agreement being sought with Turkey. Spain has also surrounded its enclaves with razor wire, which—despite causing severe injuries to refugees—is a technique that has been exported to Hungary.

The EU-Turkey summit marks another grim chapter in the establishment of “Fortress Europe.” EU foreign policy spokeswoman Federica Mogherini stated that the EU would not stop there. “A year ago, we concentrated on the route across the central Mediterranean Sea. A year from now, it could be an entirely different route,” she told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, adding that in addition to Turkey, other countries of origin and transit had to be negotiated with. The outsourcing of asylum for refugees is thus only beginning, while mass deaths on the refugee routes to Europe will continue.

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