Strains in Turkish-German Relations (June 26, 2017)

Abstract

At a time when Turkish membership in the European Union appeared to be off the table, German-Turkish relations were also at a critical point. This article chronicles key developments that led to their deterioration.

Source

Forget it then

The withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Incirlik marks another low in relations with the NATO partner.

At the beginning of June, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation was able to present a surprising survey: the image of Germany among young Turks is by no means as negative as one might assume given the statements by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Like his Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavusoglu, he had accused Chancellor Merkel (CDU) of using "Nazi methods," because not all fellow members of the AKP who wanted to do so were able to campaign in Germany for the constitutional referendum in Turkey.

Evidently this rhetoric does not necessarily stick – at least not among the young people polled in Turkey: for them, on matters of trust, Germany ranks ahead of the U.S., Russia, China, and Turkey's neighboring states. Asked where they would like to live, 22% indicated the U.S., followed by Germany in second place with 11%. Young Turks thus have a quite sympathetic view of Germany, either because they know it from their own experience, or because they have relatives who live there, or simply because they permit themselves to see a more differentiated picture than the Turkish president has often painted in recent months. Given the complications in German-Turkish relations, which Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) sees as being "in very difficult waters," this message is not entirely unimportant because it provides a reason for optimism.

Looking for a starting point to the deterioration in the official Turkish-German relations, one has to go back to June 2016: When a majority of members of the Bundestag resolved that the mass murder of up to 1.5 million Armenians and other Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire beginning in 1915 constituted genocide – not without pointing to the complicity and thus the shared responsibility of the German Reich government at the time – Turkey abruptly recalled its ambassador from Berlin, and President Erdogan threatened consequences. One such consequence was that Ankara now began to refuse German MPs permission to visit soldiers of the Bundeswehr in Incirlik, who were stationed there as members of the international anti-IS coalition involved in the "Operation Inherent Resolve."

Attempted coup: the relationship took another turn for the worse when a segment of the Turkish military attempted a coup against the AKP government in July 2016 but quickly failed, in part because the Turkish population supported the government: at the time, the Turkish side complained that there had been no immediate and resolute stance against the putschists in the European capitals, including Berlin. And some in the AKP camp may have insinuated that there was even a furtive glee within EU Europe that the almighty-acting President Erdogan would now be put into his place by the military. From the German side, conversely, there soon was criticism that Erdogan could use the state of emergency to abolish parliamentarism and secure the long-term dominance of the AKP. The Turkish government dismissed tens of thousands of civil servants – judges, officers, teachers, professors – in several waves. Tens of

thousands were jailed – selectively on charges that they sympathized with the Kurdish PKK, which is considered in Turkey, but also in Europe, an underground terrorist movement. Or because they were in league with the Gülen movement, which is accused by the AKP government of being behind the coup. And the waves of purges reached even further, into the political landscape and into the Turkish parliament: the leadership of the pro-Kurdish HDP party was jailed, a verdict against one member of parliament of the social democratic CHP party caused outrage. Erdogan recently threatened the chairman of the party that he should not be surprised if the judicial system came knocking on his door soon.

One thing that was and is seen as particularly sensitive in relations between Berlin and Ankara are the cases of those Turkish soldiers and civil servants who, in the spring of 2017, received a positive decision on their applications for asylum: Ankara took that as proof that German officials would be holding a protective hand over putschists and "terrorists." After the Turkish side had allowed a visit from a Bundestag delegation to Incirlik in October 2016, now it shut the door again – which, in the final analysis, led to the decision by the Bundestag to withdraw the soldiers stationed there and move them to Jordan.

In recent months, the opposition parties in the Bundestag have often found it quite easy to keep the federal government on its toes when it comes to Turkey: Chancellor Merkel, it was said, allowed Erdogan to drag her through the international arena "by a nose ring," so as not to endanger the refugee agreement with Turkey. Moreover, MPs from the Left and the Greens repeatedly criticized that the federal government was providing one-sided support for the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq in the fight against the IS, while on the other hand it was creating, with the deployment in Incirlik, aerial images which its NATO partner Turkey could use for air strikes against Kurdish forces in Syria. In addition, the case of the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel, who has been in custody in Turkey since February on what the German side considers flimsy grounds, a charge of terrorist propaganda, was and is causing an outcry.

The German government, meanwhile, tried a difficult balancing act for months: on the one hand, it was important not to inflict irreversible damage on relations with the geopolitically indispensable partner in the NATO alliance; on the other hand, Merkel and her Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (SPD, in office until January 2017) and after him Sigmar Gabriel could not allow themselves to be shown up diplomatically. They were also under an obligation to the Bundestag and the German public: anyone who takes the notion of a parliamentary army seriously cannot simply look away when Turkey denies members of the Bundestag permission to visit soldiers of the Bundeswehr.

In May, the parliamentary groups of the Left and the Greens urged immediate withdrawal while the coalition groups of the CDU/CSU and the SPD initially still played down the issue: from the CDU/CSU came the argument that one could not underestimate the risk that Turkey, "the south-eastern flank of NATO," could turn toward Russia and Iran; moreover, a possible move of the Bundeswehr to Jordan had to carefully studied and prepared. The SPD parliamentary group, meanwhile, wanted to give "its" Foreign Minister another last opportunity for negotiations with Ankara, before deciding by a decision of the group at the end of May on the demand for withdrawal. Finally, at the beginning of June, the federal cabinet also decided that way.

The plan now is to station tanker aircraft, the Tornado surveillance planes, and the analysis technology in Al Azraq, Jordan. The air base lies about 100 kilometers east of Amman and 50 kilometers south of the Syrian-Jordan border. According to plans by the Ministry of Defense, the Tornado aircraft are supposed to take off again for regular flights from there beginning in October, at the latest.

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Source: Alexander Heinrich, “Dann eben nicht,” *Das Parlament*, 26 June 2017, No. 26, p. 3.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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