

Playing politics with the plight of refugees. How the EU went into Erdogan's political receivership

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Executive summary

At the peak of the 'refugee crisis' in late 2015-early 2016, the EU reached an agreement with the Turkish government, known as the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. It has served as a bone of contention between the EU and Turkey ever since its implementation. As anticipated by many experts, critical voices and NGOs in Turkey and Europe, the Facility has provided the Erdogan regime with a strategic tool to blackmail the EU without caring for the humanitarian needs.

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The Objectives of the Facility

By focusing on humanitarian assistance, education, migration management, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support, the Facility was designed to ensure that “the needs of refugees and host communities in Turkey can be

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[addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner](#)". It further stipulated that visa restrictions for Turkish citizens should be eased and the process of Turkey's EU candidacy be revived. To prevent ever-increasing flows of refugees from Syria into Europe, the Facility specified that a total of €6 billion, one of the most significant sums of money administered by the European Commission, should be provided in two tranches for a joint coordination mechanism. Accordingly, EU countries would return newly arrived refugees to Turkey, and Turkey would stop refugee flows to Europe in return for aid money and political concessions. Things, however, did not go that way and the implementation of the agreement continues to cause problems. Central among them are the lack of transparency, misappropriation of the funding and political instrumentalization.

Misappropriation of the funding

First of all, the EU's financial support raised doubts about how the aid has been used for refugees. For example, in a 2018 report conducted by the [European Court of Auditors](#) (ECA), responsible for auditing the European Union, "the Turkish authorities' refusal to grant access to beneficiary data for the two cash-assistance projects" was identified as a major problem. It concluded that "neither the Commission nor the ECA was able to track the project beneficiaries from their registration to the payment". The ECA warned that the refusal of data sharing by the Turkish authorities raises suspicions that the aid is not being appropriately used. In the same vein, Bettina Jakobsen, a Member of the ECA, has warned that [there is a risk that not all of the money given goes to the refugees](#).

Most tellingly, the former Deputy Prime Minister in 2018, Mr Recep Akdağ, was quoted as saying that his government does not provide cash to the Syrian refugees but that it goes instead into building highways in the interest of all, including Syrian refugees. Interestingly enough, government representatives and ministers mention the different amount of money that the Turkish government has spent on Syrian refugees.



Contradictory information and confusion among Turkish government representatives are indicative of a lack of transparency which has raised further questions about their intentions and reliability. Whereas Erdogan speaks in boastful and exaggerated numbers that his government has spent \$30 billion on refugees, the leader of Turkey's main opposition [Republican People Party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu](#) [and Syrian refugees](#) raise similar questions about how that money has been spent for refugees. Kılıçdaroğlu goes further by stating that government representatives' claim of spending on Syrian refugees is "a [lie](#)". While accusing the EU of untimely and unconditionally providing the contracted funding, the Erdogan government had at the same time exerted disgraceful, yet successful, leverage over the EU by threatening to open "the gates to Europe". This leads us to the political consequences of the agreement under review.

The political use of the Facility

With every intensification of refugee flows into Turkey, not least as a result of its own politics, the Erdogan regime has started to weaponize refugees for two principal reasons: first, to get significant financial support as part of the EU humanitarian flagship programmes, and second, to prevent any criticism from Europe of his expansionist and militarist policies abroad, as well as his authoritarian and arbitrary policies and practices in Turkey.

At a crucial juncture in Turkey's recent history, in which the country was faced with fateful choices between democracy, peace and prosperity, on the one hand, and authoritarianism, war, expansionism on the other, the Facility has at best reduced the role of the EU to the status of a bystander. From Turkey's purchase of a Russian S-400 missile defence system to its confrontational policy towards Greece and Cyprus, the military interventions in and occupation of the Kurdish territories of Syria, the dispute over the oil and gas drillings in the Mediterranean Sea, and ongoing verbal attacks on EU and European leaders, the EU felt its hands were tied and was unable to take any preventive action or shape a proactive policy in the interest

of the democratic peace, stability and democracy both in Turkey and in the Middle East.

For the sake of the Facility, the EU has closed its eyes and ears to Turkey's ongoing undemocratic policies and practices, resulting in unspoken political concessions. As journalists, academics, and elected Kurdish mayors such as [Gülten Kışanak](#) and [Dr Adnan Selçuk Mızraklı](#), both of whom had successively served as metropolitan mayors of the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, MPs and thousands of activists have been detained and imprisoned, the EU, however, was primarily concerned with its deal.

Despite multiple efforts to end the misuse of the Facility, the Erdogan regime continues to misappropriate the aims of the agreement, which causes controversies, doubts and mistrust across Europe. In a desperate attempt to get things moving in the right direction, EU leaders sought certain clarification about Turkey's future relations with NATO and the EU and Erdogan commitment to a “refuge deal”. As late as December 2020, during the turbulent relationship between the EU and Turkey, the final contracts were signed.

Background and broader geopolitical context to the refugee crisis in Turkey

Today about 3.5 million refugees are living in Turkey. While the existence of pressing problems arising from an ever-growing presence of millions of refugees from Syria cannot be denied, it should not be forgotten that Turkey's opportunistic strategy, and aggressive-militaristic policies and practices are also most responsible for this outcome. As early as 2012, Erdogan felt bound to “[go there in the shortest possible time](#),” to “pray in the Umayyad Mosque” in Damascus, believing that the Assad regime was on the cusp of its immediate collapse. However, things did not go as assumed or as he had wished for. Assad brutally suppressed opponent groups and managed to remain in power through extensive military, political and diplomatic support provided by Russia and Iran. In an effort to



survive, millions of Syrian citizens left their homes, fleeing to the neighbouring countries, including Turkey. Whereas the ambitions over praying in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus turned out to be wishful thinking, Turkey became a country that hosted the largest refugee population in the world.

Bolstered by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of the Arab Spring across the Middle East, the Syrian Civil War was perceived by the AKP government as further evidence and a golden opportunity to develop an expansionist foreign policy towards neighbouring Syria. Turkish authorities have recruited, trained and armed Jihadi groups of various kinds both in Turkey and in Syria, partly supported by its western allies, to overthrow the authoritarian Assad regime.

The politics of using migration as a bargaining chip was accompanied by an expansionist and aggressive foreign policy that has caused tens of thousands of refugees as well as both internal and external displacement on a massive scale. Emboldened by the EU's appeasement politics and lack of international reaction, the Turkish military has attacked Kurds in Rojava (Northern Syria) in order to create its "buffer zone" in the Autonomous Kurdish Region in Syria, thereby displacing over 160,000 Kurds and other peoples in Afrin in 2018 and over 300,000 people from the cities of Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) and Gre-Spi (Tel Abyad) in 2019.

Condemned to inaction through the Facility deal, the EU has been absent from undertaking any effective policy, as the Turkish Armed Forces involved in expansionist activities in Nagorno-Karabakh, extended their military presence to Libya, intervened in and invaded the Kurdish territories in Syria and Iraq almost on a daily basis, as well as escalating a hydro-carbon crisis with Greece and Cyprus.

Concluding remarks

In order to keep refugees away from Europe, the EU has entered into a problematic deal with an undemocratic regime governed by Erdogan in an authoritarian power-sharing with the far-right

extremist Nationalist Action Party. The irony with the Facility is that its officially endorsed purpose has been widely neglected. In contrast, unintended outcomes have turned into the very rationale from which the EU apparently sought to escape.

Far from fulfilling its key aims, it has put a very crucial leverage into the hands of the Erdogan regime, effectively forcing the EU into silence and inaction. Thus, the deal provides a textbook case for “coercive engineered migration” (Greenhill 2010). It refers to “those cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states”. In this sense, it denotes a very particular non-military method of applying coercive pressure—the use of migration and refugee crises as instruments of eliciting political concessions.

While welcoming every effort to provide humanitarian support to address the needs of about 4 million refugees in Turkey, we maintain that the Facility has not primarily served to improve the miserable living conditions of refugees in Turkey. Rather, it has been used as an effective instrument of recruitment of loyal Jihadist groups for the purpose of aggression and invasion in the very country from which millions of refugees were fleeing. The Facility at issue has thus not only [jeopardized refugee rights in Turkey](#), but it has also created conditions under which the democratic rights and liberties of Turkey’s citizens and freedom of the press are easily curtailed. For Example, [Can Dündar](#), editor of the daily Cumhuriyet in 2015 and journalist Erdem Gül were arrested and detained in connection with an article, a video and photos published in May 2015, indicating that Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization had been delivering arms to jihadi groups in Syria.

The more recent evidence of this trend is the continuation of unlawful imprisonment [Selahattin Demirtas](#), the former co-leader of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), and rights defender Osman Kavala despite the unequivocally clear ruling of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECtHR).



While recognizing the moral and political necessity for comprehensive support of migrants and refugees and welcoming every step towards addressing their needs, it should be emphasized that there is an urgent need to reject the political instrumentalization of the refugees and to avoid misappropriation of the funding.

The EU needs to create complete transparency on the use and allocation of money, to stop the misuse of funds and ensure that money goes to the people concerned. One way of achieving this would be through the effective participation of international and national NGOs working in the field of humanitarian aid and refugee protection. The EU would be well advised to stop charting a problematic political course under the imperatives of controlling and containing refugees. Instead, it is imperative to take a clear position on the dismantling of democracy and the rule of law, to support democratic forces in Turkey and solve the Kurdish question peacefully and democratically. Since appeasement and inaction cannot be an option, the only way to deal with the 'refugee crisis' is to pursue a comprehensive policy towards peaceful and democratic resolution of the conflicts in Turkey and Syria.