

**The Refugee Crisis:
A Geopolitical Blessing in Disguise for Turkey**

May 2016

Joe Hammoura

Turkey Office

Europe is experiencing an unprecedented flow of refugees. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), around 850.000 migrants and refugees arrived by sea into Greece, in 2015 alone, the vast majority of which crossed from Turkey. This crisis has activated the European Union's panic mode, exposed its vulnerability, and proved to be an albatross around the neck of its Schengen system of free movement, within its borders. This epidemic has driven a wedge into Brussels's unity, forced member states to retreat to their national cocoons and design disparate unilateral policies, thus rendering enacting coherent and overarching policy reactions almost impossible.

Member states have started to sense the dissatisfaction caused by the rise of xenophobic anti-immigration right wing and populist parties, such as the *Alternative für Deutschland Party* in Germany which ranked 3rd in a recent local council election in the central German region, France's *National Front* which garnered 28% of the vote in the first round of regional elections, carried out after the Paris terror attack in November 2015, not to mention the rising of the *Law and Justice Party* in Poland and the *Democrats Party* in Sweden. Elsewhere, anti-immigrant parties are at or near the top of the polls in the Netherlands, and governing or sharing power in Denmark and Hungary.¹

The refugee crisis has utterly discombobulated the European Union and forced it to look for desperate measures to stem it. After months of intense negotiation, the EU, led by Germany largely because it has carried much of the crisis's burden, struck what it called a "breakthrough"

¹ The Economist (2015), The March of Europe's Little Trumps, retrieved from: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21679855-xenophobic-parties-have-long-been-ostracised-mainstream-politicians-may-no-longer-be>

bargain with Turkey on the 18th of March 2016.² The deal, which the EU hopes will send “a very clear message that the days of irregular migration to Europe is over”, effectively proposes outsourcing the refugee’s problem back to Turkey. According to the named agreement, on top of the commitment it made in November 2015 to open its labor market to Syrians temporarily, to introduce, concomitantly, a more stringent visa requirement for Syrians and other nationalities who constitute the bulk of the refugees heading to Europe, in addition to strengthening its anti-illegal immigration police and coast guard forces. Turkey has consented to “accept the rapid return of all migrants not in need of international protection crossing from Turkey into Greece and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters.”³ In addition, both parties agreed to: 1) all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as of 20th of March 2016 will be sent back to Turkey and the costs of the return operations of irregular migrants will be covered by the EU; 2) for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria.⁴

The refugee deal clearly puts the thousands of migrants, who are fleeing war and destruction in their homes, between the devil and the deep blue sea. For this reason it has already attracted scathing criticism from rights group, the UN and the United States. The deal also contradicts the image that Turkey has been trying to project as a champion of beleaguered fellow Muslims. At least those who are directly affected by the deal won’t consider Turkey’s move as a particularly benign act. Considering Turkish officials has touted the deal as victory which comes about after

² Aljazeera (2016), Refugee Crisis: EU and Turkey reach a ‘breakthrough’ deal, retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/refugee-crisis-eu-turkey-agree-proposal-160308021149403.html>

³ Council of European Union (2016), EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016, retrieved from: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/>

⁴ Ibid.

what Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu calls ‘Kayseri-Style bargaining’⁵—a local locution implying cunning and acumen— it begs the question: what is the significance of the deal in terms of Turkey’s geopolitical goals? To put it differently, what are the geopolitical targets Turkey is trying to achieve using refugees as a potent arsenal?

Turkey has forced the hand of the European Union to make concessions on multiple areas of their relations. The refugee deal, among other things, stipulates that the 3 billion euros agreed upon in November of last year will be swiftly disbursed to Turkey. The EU, has also pledged an additional 3 billion euros up to the end of 2018 when the first instalment is fully used. The money will be spent in the fields of health, education, infrastructure and other living costs for the refugees. On top of this financial bonanza, the deal promises the acceleration of the visa liberalization process with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016, instead of October as originally pledged.⁶ Despite the 72 criteria that Turkey must fulfil before June and the skepticism of some members of the EU about the wisdom of the decision, the loosening of the visa restrictions for 75 million Turks to move within Europe’s 26-member border-free Schengen zone will ameliorate one of the main causes of tension and frustration between the two parties. Applications for obtaining visa to Europe have been described by Turks as costly and frustrating⁷, redolent with nuisances related to historical hangover, identity and cultural misunderstanding that have been long characterized as the love-hate relationship between Turkey and Europe. PM Ahmet Davutoglu’s described the deal in

⁵ Barchard, D (2016), Turkey’s bid for visa-free travel for its citizens to Europe could backfire, Middle East Eye, retrieved from: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/will-turkey-succeed-winning-visa-free-travel-europe-its-citizens-522482569>

⁶ Council of European Union (2016), op. cit.

⁷ Deutsche Welle (2016), The pros and cons of visa-free travel for Turkey, retrieved from: <http://www.dw.com/en/the-pros-and-cons-of-visa-free-travel-for-turkey/a-19128262>

relation to the Visa liberalization as “a dream the Turkish people have cherished for the past 50 to 60 years”⁸, signaling a clear indication how the issue is of significant important for Turkey.

Furthermore, the EU-Turkey refugee deal promises to “re-energize the accession process as set out in their joint statement of 29 November 2015. They welcomed the opening of Chapter 17 on 14 December 2015 and decided, as a next step, to open Chapter 33 during the Netherlands presidency.”⁹ In the jargon of European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, chapters 17 and 33 represent policy areas concerning economic and monetary rules requiring the independence of central banks of member states, prohibiting direct financing of the public sector by the central banks and prohibiting privileged access of the public sector to financial institutions; these rules concerning financial resources necessary for the funding of EU budgets respectively. After finalizing agreements on aforementioned chapters, negotiations on Chapters 23 (Judiciary & Fundamental Rights), Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom & Security), Chapter 30 (External Relations), Chapter 15 (Energy) and Chapter 26 (Education and Culture) will commence.¹⁰

Despite its frustrations due to vehement resistance of some member states to its accession to the EU and its recent increasing drift to Middle Eastern politics under the Turkish ruling party, the issue of joining the Union is one of Turkey’s most enduring geostrategic goals. The Turkish foreign ministry’s official website, for example, describes, Europe as “our common home” and identifies Turkey “as part and parcel of the European family” the accession of which constitutes

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Council of European Union (2016), op. cit.

¹⁰ European Commission, Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, retrieved from: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/conditions-membership/chapters-of-the-acquis/index_en.htm.

Chapters are policy areas about which a candidate country enters in negotiation with the European Union with a view to implement them and bring its standards in par with the latter. Since applying for full membership to the then European Economic Community in 1987, Turkey has managed to close only one chapter (science and research) out of 35.

“a strategic choice.”¹¹ Even though the suspicion towards and treatment of Turkey as an outsider by some European states will not automatically go out of the window, its willingness to see a peaceful solution to the Cyprus problem seems to convince Cyprus not to cast a veto against the opening of negotiation for accession as stipulated in the refugee deal. In one or another, a rapprochement between the two parties becomes all the more urgent in light of Moscow’s recent aggressive assertion and muscle flexing.

For a long time, Turkey was not endowed with a powerful bargaining chip in its dealings with the European Union, especially in regard to its application for accession. But now the desperate refugees have provided it with a card which it can play with aplomb and dictate the terms, tone and pace of its relationship with the EU.

¹¹ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Official Website, retrieved from: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-european-union.en.mfa>