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Istituto Affari Internazionali

## Making Sense of Rising German-Turkish Tensions

by Adrian Eppel

In a recently published open letter, German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, stressed that fellow citizens of Turkish descent are part of the German community and rising political tensions between Berlin and Ankara would not affect the deep friendship between the German and Turkish people.<sup>1</sup>

Published in July 2017, the letter came on the heels of 16 months of bilateral tensions between Germany and Turkey, with relations hitting rock bottom following the detention of German human rights activist Peter Steudtner in Istanbul on 5 July.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> German Foreign Ministry, *Brief von Außenminister Sigmar Gabriel an die türkeistämmigen Menschen in Deutschland*, 22 July 2017, [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2017/170722\\_Brief\\_BM\\_an\\_türkeistämmige\\_Menschen\\_in\\_DEU.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2017/170722_Brief_BM_an_türkeistämmige_Menschen_in_DEU.html).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Eddy, "Turkey's Arrest of German Activist Heightens Nations' Tensions", in *The New York Times*, 20 July 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2tjOKSN>.

Such tensions are driven by international challenges of a security and value-based nature. These are embedded in much broader issues such as controlling migration, fighting terrorism, adherence to the rule of law and disagreements over Turkey's long-stalled EU accession process. At a deeper level however, such tensions are also a manifestation of the way domestic politics and key electoral appointments – in both Turkey and Germany – are influencing the political rhetoric and foreign policy orientation of the two countries. These spillovers are creating a combustible mix that if managed incorrectly could well spiral into something more dangerous, not only for the countries involved but also the wider Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole.

There are currently around three million people of Turkish origin living in Germany. This is by far the largest minority in Germany and the largest

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Turkish community living abroad. Due to their legal status, many Turkish-German citizens are crucial to Turkish politics, as they have the right to vote in Turkish national elections and referenda.

Germany is Turkey's most important trading partner and both countries are also highly dependent on each other politically. This became apparent during negotiations for the EU-Turkey migration Statement announced on 18 March 2016. As the EU-Turkey deal was being concluded, a satirical German TV show compiled a music video mocking the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The video used a pun to refer to his name as "Erdowahn" – loosely translated into "Erdo-madness" – and the lyrics went on to mock the president's treatment of minorities and journalists, leading the Turkish President to demand that it be removed from the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

This reaction sparked a strong backlash from a different German show. The host, Jan Böhmermann, took to the air to defend his colleagues, explaining that the video was covered by the German laws of artistic freedom and freedom of expression. He then read out a highly offensive "poem" insulting Erdoğan while ironically acknowledging that what he was doing was in fact illegal, given that German law prevents offensive and degrading language applied to foreign leaders.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Extra 3, "Song: Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdogan", in *Das Erste*, 17 March 2016, <http://daserste.ndr.de/extra3/sendungen/Song-Erdowie-Erdowo-Erdogan,extra11036.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Neo Magazin Royale mit Jan Böhmermann, 31 March 2016, <https://vimeo.com/161645485#t=10m50s>.

The incident soon became a matter of discussion between Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Turkish counterpart. Merkel publicly declared that the text was "intentionally offensive"<sup>5</sup> and allowed legal prosecution, possibly to appease the Turkish government and to show that such cases are dealt with by German courts and not politicians. Six months later, the charges were dropped and the German government subsequently abolished the law that made insult of foreign leaders a criminal offence.

As German courts reviewed the case against Böhmermann, tensions increased following a decision by the German Ambassador to Turkey, Martin Erdmann, to attend the controversial trial against investigative journalists at Turkey's oldest daily, *Cumhuriyet*. The diplomat took a stand in support of freedom of the press; a decision that led the Turkish government to shun the ambassador, refusing repeated requests for appointments at the foreign ministry.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, on 2 June 2016, the German parliament approved a resolution recognizing the Armenian genocide, furthering bilateral tensions.<sup>7</sup> That summer, following the failed coup attempt in Turkey, Erdoğan

[com/161645485#t=10m50s](https://vimeo.com/161645485#t=10m50s).

<sup>5</sup> "Merkel nennt Böhmermanns Erdoğan-Gedicht 'bewusst verletzend'", in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 April 2016, <http://sz.de/1.2933877>. "Inside Merkel's Comedy Conundrum", in *Spiegel Online*, 15 April 2016, <http://spon.de/aeI3B>.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Szymanski, "Ankara stellt den deutschen Botschafter kalt" in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 July 2016, <http://sz.de/1.3097669>.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Oltermann and Constanze Letsch, "Turkey Recalls Ambassador after German MPs' Armenian Genocide Vote", in *The Guardian*, 2 June 2016, <https://gu.com/p/4k5ad>.

expressed regret that international actors and key allies had not provided sufficient support to Turkey's elected representatives. While Germany condemned the coup attempt and expressed support for democracy in Turkey, such declarations were quickly overshadowed by Europe's strong criticism of the government's post-coup crackdown. Germany also approved asylum for two high-ranking Turkish generals wanted by Turkey for alleged involvement in the coup attempt, a decision that stirred further recriminations in Ankara.<sup>8</sup>

The next bone of contention arose in February 2017, when the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel was arrested in Turkey for alleged terrorist involvement. Public calls to free the journalist, including by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, have been of little avail.

Yet, tensions between Ankara and Berlin were taken to a new level in the run-up to the Turkish constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017. Initially, some campaign rallies by Turkish officials in Germany were allowed. As the referendum date neared however, German authorities – like their Dutch counterparts – moved to ban these rallies, initially citing health and safety concerns as a justification. Turkey's reaction further accentuated the crisis, with Erdoğan accusing Germany of "Nazi practices" and inhibiting freedom of speech.<sup>9</sup> Still, the German

government did not respond in kind, simply stating that such comparisons were unacceptable.

In the weeks and months that followed, Turkish authorities denied access to German parliamentarians wishing to visit the military airbase in Incirlik, close to the Syrian border, where German troops are providing assistance in the fight against ISIS. Since the German armed forces are under parliamentary control, MPs generally expect host countries, particularly if NATO allies, to grant access. In response to the Turkish decision, the German Bundestag announced that it was pulling its troops out of Turkey, moving its anti-ISIS operations to Jordan.<sup>10</sup>

With tensions simmering, the straw that broke the camel's back came 5 July 2017, when Turkish authorities arrested German human rights activist Peter Steudtner together with five other activists, including the local director of Amnesty International in Turkey.

This time, the German reaction was more direct. Germany announced a reassessment of investments in Turkey, while the foreign ministry modified its official travel advice for German tourists. Furthermore, the German government announced its support for reviewing pre-accession funds offered to Turkey as a EU candidate country.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Müller, "Turkish Officers Seek Asylum in Germany", in *Spiegel Online*, 2 February 2017, <http://spon.de/aeUSK>.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Oltermann, "Erdoğan Accuses Germany of 'Nazi Practices' Over Blocked Political Rallies"

in *The Guardian*, 5 March 2017, <https://gu.com/p/63edx>; Andrew Rettmann, "Erdoğan: German 'Nazis' Also Back 'Terrorists'", in *EUobserver*, 14 March 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137230>.

<sup>10</sup> "Germany Starts to Withdraw Troops from Turkish Incirlik Base", in *Deutsche Welle*, 10 July 2017, <http://p.dw.com/p/2gEtw>.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Oltermann, "Berlin to Change Policy

One might wonder why the German government waited so long to take concrete action. The decision was certainly motivated by a combination of foreign and domestic factors. In the first instance, this is an example of Germany seeking to polish its credentials and credibility as a strong supporter of human rights and press freedoms. It is also a means to protect German citizens in Turkey. Travel warnings can be extremely damaging to the Turkish tourist industry, which is why Ankara is now likely to be more cautious when criticising the German government or arresting its citizens.

Secondly, the fact that Germany is holding national elections in September 2017 has certainly played a role in recent decisions. President Erdoğan and domestic developments in Turkey have emerged as important news stories in Germany over the past year. Thus, the decision to implement retaliatory measures against Turkey can also be framed as driven by domestic politics. Governing coalition parties can now portray themselves as determined to protect German citizens and uphold human rights, ultimately positioning themselves to gain votes, while reinforcing the image of Germany as the last major bastion of liberal values on the continent.

Ironically, similar motivations can also explain the Turkish government's increasingly confrontational rhetoric in the run-up to the April referendum. Therefore, on both sides we can see how short-term domestic political

calculations have led to mounting bilateral tensions. Not only does this overshadow the many long-term challenges the two countries share, it is making finding shared solutions to these challenges an even more arduous task.

4 August 2017

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Towards Turkey as German Citizen Is Held", in *The Guardian*, 20 July 2017, <https://gu.com/p/6pnx3>.

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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