

Viewpoints
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Merkel Will Continue to Be Tested by German- Turkish Ties in 2017

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German-Turkish bilateral relations faced several obstacles in 2016 that increased tensions between the two nations. Berlin and Ankara's ties will likely be challenged in 2017 by ongoing issues related to rule of law and press freedoms and pressure from German national parliamentary elections.

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The rocky path for German Chancellor Angela Merkel and German-Turkish relations will continue into 2017 after a year of increasing tension. Despite a positive start to the beginning of 2016, ties were tested severely throughout the year. The worsening refugee crisis in the fall of 2015 reenergized bilateral relations as Merkel saw Turkey as a necessary partner to stem the flow of refugees seeking to reach Europe. To encourage Ankara's cooperation, Merkel supported an October 2015 EU plan to move Turkey's stalled EU membership negotiations forward and provide economic support for Turkish assistance to over 2.2 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey at the time ([over 2.7 million by November 2016](#)).

Merkel played a key role in gaining Turkish government backing for the EU plan. In October 2015, [she met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Istanbul](#) to encourage Ankara to work with the EU on the crisis. The visit came two weeks before Turkey's national parliamentary elections. Merkel faced domestic criticism that her trip would benefit Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), but she likely felt that slowing the migration crisis outweighed those concerns.

EU and Turkish leaders announced [the commencement of the joint action plan](#) on November 29, 2015. The plan offered commitments to advance negotiations for Turkish visa-free travel in the EU Schengen zone, led the way for the December 2015 [opening of Chapter 17: Economic and Monetary Policy](#) in Turkey's EU accession process, and [pledged an initial 3 billion euros](#) (\$3.2 billion) in aid for Turkey's refugee assistance efforts.

Berlin maintained its leading role in negotiating with Ankara over the refugee crisis in 2016. As some European governments grew frustrated with limited Turkish efforts to curb illegal migration, [Merkel used the January 2016 German-Turkish intergovernmental consultations](#) to press Turkey [to reaffirm its commitment](#) to the action plan. She visited Turkey in February seeking commitments from Turkish leaders to actively assist in managing the crisis. In March, Merkel sidelined European Council President Donald Tusk's effort to craft an agreement with Turkey by working directly with Davutoglu and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to complete an EU-Turkey migration deal. Despite member states' frustration over being excluded from proposal negotiations, EU members agreed to the deal that expanded on the joint action plan. Merkel, who faced heavy criticism in Germany and in Europe over her refugee policy, needed the agreement to cut the arrival of migrants and show she could manage the crisis.

Just as Germany and Turkey were making progress on dealing with the migrant issue, press freedom issues were again testing bilateral relations. German government, media, and public concerns over Turkey's press policies deepened with Ankara's early March seizure of the oppositionist newspaper *Zaman*, its refusal to renew the press credentials of a *Der Spiegel* correspondent, and its request for the removal from the Internet of a [German television program's parody music video criticizing Erdogan](#). Developments that led German media and some German politicians to criticize Merkel's willingness to support potentially accelerating visa-free travel for Turks and reenergizing the accession process in return for Turkey's help with the migration crisis.

In an admitted attempt to test the boundaries of Germany's free speech laws and in reaction to Ankara's attitudes on press freedom, [German comedian Jan Boehmermann read on air](#) a sexually explicit satirical poem about the Turkish President that infuriated Erdogan and other Turkish officials. Under an antiquated German law, Turkey formally requested that the German government authorize the prosecution of Boehmermann for insulting a foreign head of state. [Merkel decided to allow the case to move forward](#) and said it was up to the judicial system, not the federal government, to determine if laws were broken. German opposition officials criticized her, claiming Merkel kowtowed to Erdogan's demands to protect the EU-Turkey deal and undermined press freedoms. Her decision appeared to placate Ankara for the time being.

June brought the next crisis in relations, when the German parliament (the Bundestag) voted to support a non-binding resolution that recognized the Ottoman Empire's killing of ethnic Armenians in 1915 as genocide. The resolution also highlighted Germany's complicity in the events as an ally of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish government, which denies the events were genocide, angrily condemned the decision and [recalled its ambassador from Berlin](#). Erdogan lashed out [at German Bundestag members with Turkish heritage](#), calling for them to have "blood tests" to see "what kind of Turks they are." [Turkey refused to permit German members of the Bundestag to visit Incirlik Air Base](#) in July to see German troops based there, which German officials viewed as retaliation for the June vote. Some German politicians suggested redeploying German forces to another support base in the Middle East, if Ankara continued to refuse access. The genocide resolution further tested the ability of Merkel's government to balance the need for Turkish support for the migration deal and German public and political frustration with Turkey's harsh reaction.

German officials worked behind the scenes [to find a way mollify Ankara](#) and gain approval for the visit. Merkel's spokesperson Steffen Seibert would [stress the resolution was not legally binding](#), in a gesture to assuage Turkish concerns. *Spiegel Online* reported on the plan and [claimed the German government planned to distance itself from the resolution](#), which drew complaints from German opposition members. Seibert stated that Berlin had no intention of distancing itself from the decision. However, Seibert, Merkel, and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier all reiterated that the resolution was non-binding. These statements likely cleared the way for Turkey's approval for Bundestag members' Incirlik visit in October and prevented the members of the Bundestag from pressing to move German forces out of Turkey.

The July 15 attempted coup against the Turkish government has compounded tensions between the two allies. Ankara's crackdown in response to the coup attempt and Erdogan's comments about potentially reinstating the death penalty prompted Merkel and other EU leaders to caution Turkey to protect human rights and warn that reversing the ban on the death penalty is incompatible with EU membership. Erdogan has criticized Germany, and the rest of Europe, [for showing more concern about the rule of law in Turkey than the coup attempt](#).

In November, Merkel and Steinmeier's public statements of concern over Turkey's detention of several senior staff members of the major opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* and arrest of leaders of the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) led to recrimination from senior Turkish officials. Erdogan said Germany had become a refuge for terrorists and accused it of not taking action against Fethullah Gulen followers. The new Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, reiterated those remarks, claiming Germany allowed the outlawed Kurdistan

Workers' Party (PKK), the far-leftist DHKP-C, and Gulenists to operate on German soil with impunity. [He also confirmed that he had not responded to two phone calls from his German counterpart](#) and said he was busy and would respond when convenient. German opposition leaders and media criticized Merkel's government for not taking a tougher stance against Ankara's actions.

It is difficult to envision a decrease in German-Turkish tensions in 2017. The Turkish government is likely to continue its crackdown on the opposition and press freedoms, which will lead to added domestic pressure for Merkel to do more to defend European values. Economic and societal ties have long played a major role in maintaining bilateral ties despite strains; however, even parties that historically have been supportive of Turkey are suggesting the need for a tougher stance. More Turks will probably seek asylum in Germany, adding to conflicts between the governments over extradition requests that Ankara will link to Gulenists and the coup. Over 4,400 Turkish citizens applied for asylum in Germany between January and October 2016, which is 2.5 times more applications than 2015, according to Funke Media Group.

The potential for visa liberalization appears almost impossible in the present conditions and the discussion of freezing or ending Turkey's EU accession will persist among EU members. Ankara will likely reiterate threats to cancel the EU-Turkey migrant deal, blaming the EU for not upholding its end of the bargain. As the key proponent of the deal, Merkel will work to keep it alive, but her struggle for balance will be even more difficult as Germany heads to national parliamentary elections that will be held no later than October 22, 2017.

Gains by the right-wing, populist, and Euroskeptic Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party in several state elections in 2016 have put Merkel on the defensive. The public's dissatisfaction over Merkel's refugee policy and concerns that Berlin is kowtowing to Turkey could weaken support for Merkel and the Christian Democrats, which is unlikely to unseat her but could complicate building a coalition government. Besides Turkey reinstating the death penalty, it remains unclear what might push Merkel to pursue a tougher stance on Turkey. She will need to walk a fine line to keep the migration deal from collapsing while not appearing to abandon support for democratic values. The prickly Turkish President and his mounting undemocratic policies will not make that walk easier.

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