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'The Damocles sword of deportation hangs over them'

Henrik Meyer on what the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan means for Turkey and the future of the EU-Turkey migration pact

How do Turkish politicians and the media view and discuss the current political developments in Afghanistan?

Across party lines, Turkish politicians are looking to Afghanistan with great concern. Turkish troops have been an important part of the ISAF mission and the successor missions there for years, and Turkish soldiers were still stationed in the country until last week to guarantee that Kabul airport could continue to operate. The failure of the military mission – and it is perceived as such in Turkey as well – therefore also falls back on Turkey.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference compared to the Western allies in assessing the political situation after the withdrawal of the coalition forces. At no time has Turkey spoken of breaking off contact with the Taliban government. On the contrary, Turkey wants to play an important role in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

For example, the Turkish government has repeatedly offered to guarantee control of Kabul airport even after the troop withdrawal and is currently negotiating this with the Taliban. Ankara also seems to want to keep the Turkish embassy in Kabul open – with an ambassador present in the country. The hope is that its favourable cultural and geostrategic position will enable Turkey to play a diplomatic role and keep channels of communication open. This would strengthen Turkey's foreign policy and go hand in hand with economic advantages in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Taliban have recently sent repeated signals to Ankara that such a role for Turkey is definitely desirable.

Much more worrying than the political upheaval in Afghanistan, from the point of view of those in power in Turkey, is the development of refugee and migration movements.

Turkey is the largest host country in the world. According to the UNHCR, 4.1 million refugees and asylum seekers live there, including over 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees and 330,000 people of other nationalities seeking protection, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. How would you describe the living conditions of these people, in particular the Afghan refugees?

Here we have to differentiate. The Syrian refugees enjoy subsidiary protection in Turkey, have access to the education and health system and, within limits, also to the regular labour market. They receive aid payments from the UNHCR and are a definite part of the refugee agreement between Turkey and the EU. Compared to the other groups you mentioned, Syrian refugees are therefore still well off, although civil society organisations repeatedly point towards the precarious situation in the areas where particularly many Syrian refugees live. And of course, the lives of all Syrian refugees are fundamentally marked by uncertainty, as no one knows whether their protection status will be lifted one day.

However, this is no comparison to the situation of Afghan refugees. This already starts with the statistics. Some organisations dealing with issues of flight and migration estimate that there are up to one million people from Afghanistan staying in Turkey. Since they do not have UNHCR refugee status, they are largely undocumented and not covered by the statistics. Unlike Syrian refugees, they have no access to the education and health system and work exclusively in the informal economy. The overwhelming majority of male refugees mostly work for meagre wages in the construction and catering industries and do all kinds of unskilled work as day labourers, for example in agriculture.

Nevertheless, experience shows that a relevant proportion of Afghan refugees see their future permanently in Turkey and do not want to move back to Afghanistan or further to Europe. This also has to do with ethnicity and cultural identity. The vast majority of Afghan refugees in Turkey belong to the ethnic groups of Uzbeks and Turkmen. These are so-called Turkic peoples, which makes linguistic and social integration in Turkey much easier. This minimum sense of belonging should not be underestimated when assessing Turkish policy towards Afghans seeking protection.

In reality, the Turkish authorities have so far often looked the other way and refrained from detaining and deporting undocumented Afghan refugees. But of course, the Damocles sword of deportation always hangs over them.

For months now, the number of Afghan refugees arriving in Turkey via Iran has been rising. The Turkish government is therefore building

a wall that should make access much more difficult. The borders with Iraq and Syria are already largely fortified with walls and barbed wire. Yet Turkey has been very open to refugees for many years. What motivates this 'walling in'?

This is mainly because of domestic political reasons. Seen from the outside, it has been almost astonishing to see how Turkish society has accepted more than four million refugees in the past ten years, seemingly without any problems. However, it should come as little surprise that this was only an outward appearance. Under the surface, things have been boiling for a long time.

The acceptance of Syrian refugees since 2011 must be seen in the context of the Turkish government's clear partisanship for the Syrian opposition and against the Assad regime in Damascus. In the course of the escalation of the Syrian civil war, the then Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan felt compelled to take in Syrians fleeing from the regime in Turkey, not least to preserve his political credibility. To his supporters, he declared this to be a duty of solidarity. Any criticism of this policy was effectively suppressed.

The grumbling of his supporters, however, is becoming louder and louder, especially in times of severe economic crisis, which has had the country in its grip for two years. The refugees are perceived as competition on the labour market, especially by people with basic education, who form the backbone of the AKP electorate. In recent months, there have been repeated xenophobic riots. The opposition, which sees a chance of a change of power in the next elections in 2023, regards the refugee issue as Erdoğan's Achilles' heel and ruthlessly exploits its potential for mobilisation. The tone of the social debate is intensifying.

For domestic political and electoral reasons, Erdoğan cannot afford a further influx of refugees. The construction of the border wall is only symbolic, similar to the wall that former US President Donald Trump wanted to build on the border with Mexico. The past has shown: Regulating refugee migration is a question of political will and is also possible without a wall. With the wall, however, Erdoğan is proving to his supporters that Turkey is no longer willing to accept people seeking protection.

Germany and the EU want to support the countries directly bordering Afghanistan so that people fleeing Afghanistan stay in the neighbouring countries. If this does not work and Turkey once again becomes a transit country for people fleeing Afghanistan towards the EU, how could this affect EU-Turkey relations?

Despite the policy of isolation just described, it is hard to imagine that

Turkey will *not* be drawn into the complex issue of how the European Union deals with Afghan refugees in one way or another. The idea of Germany and the EU supporting Afghanistan's immediate neighbours in accommodating the refugees is likely to be difficult simply because the most important country in this context is Iran. At least in the short and medium term, direct support for Iran by the European Union is unrealistic considering the geopolitical situation.

At the same time, the domestic political situation described above makes it almost impossible for the Turkish government to agree to a reopening or an extension of the EU-Turkey agreement to include Afghan people seeking protection. President Erdoğan will not be able to explain to his supporters why Turkey is becoming even more of a 'reception camp' for refugees. The opposition under the leadership of the CHP is vehemently opposed to this in any case – and knows that a large part of the Turkish population has its back.

The price that the EU would have to pay for a new, extended agreement will therefore be high – probably too high from the European point of view to be able to go along with it. The only sufficiently valuable bargaining chip the EU still holds is a general visa liberalisation – a visa waiver for all Turks wishing to travel to the EU. This concession, on the other hand, is unlikely to be negotiable in the EU countries for domestic political reasons. We are therefore heading for a dead end. The victims here will be those Afghans seeking protection.

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