

Is Turkey Blackmailing Europe?

At the moment the people and politicians of Britain are involved in the complicated, controversial debate over the advantages and disadvantages of remaining in or exiting from the European Union. The decision has now become even more complicated as a result of proposals made by Turkey that are being considered by the EU on the stemming of illegal immigration into the EU countries.

Everyone in the EU agrees that bold moves to solve the migrant problem are necessary and urgent. The flow of irregular migrants along the Western Balkans route has not ended, but has only been reduced by the tightening of their borders by Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and of course Macedonia that has completely closed its border to illegal migrants.

Curiously, the European Commission is urging countries to remove their internal border controls as soon as possible with a target of November 2016 so that the passport free Schengen zone arrangements can be saved. Already, eight countries have imposed fences and border checks in order to stem the wave of migrants, and also the entry of possible terrorists. The EU considers the Schengen zone, one of free movement from Iceland to Greece, but excludes the UK and Ireland, as one of the "Union's crowning achievements."

The flow of migrants from Turkey to Greece remains too high and needs to be reduced. In January and February 2016 more than 131, 000 people, of whom 122,000 landed in Greece, crossed the Mediterranean. Illegal migration must be discouraged, human smuggling routes must be ended, and legal immigration should occur in a disciplined fashion. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council and former Polish Prime Minister, in Athens on March 3, 2016 urged potential

migrants not to come to Europe, not to risk their lives and money.

On March 7, 2016 at a meeting in Brussels, the Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, proposed a plan to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Dutch Prime Minister for his country to take back all irregular migrants not in need of international protection who entered Europe from Turkey. In response, the EU would accept one Syrian refugee going from Turkey into the EU.

What is Turkey up to and what are its real motives? The country is confronted with and involved in a host of problems: with Russia, with the Syrian regime of President Assad, with the increasingly assertive Kurds in its territory, and with ISIS. It is subject to criticism for its abysmal human rights record, for refusing to recognize the state of Cyprus and the Greek-Cypriot government in Cyprus, one third of which is occupied by Turkey.

Perhaps Turkey is seeking a comfort zone by conversations with Israel about restoring full diplomatic ties. After many years of friendship and military co-operation between the two countries, relations deteriorated following the Operation Cast Lead war in Gaza of 2008-9 and then especially after the Mavi Marmara incident on May 31, 2010. As recently as July 20, 2014 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan 2014 accused Israel of "barbarism that surpassed even Hitler's," and supported Hamas that has an office in Istanbul.

With the seemingly potential large wave of potential migrants into Europe the EU needs Turkey to help control the tide. But the Turkish draft plan, a tentative deal, of March 7, 2016 comes at an economic and political price for the EU, and mixes two separate issues, one is the dire humanitarian problem of millions of would be migrants and refugees, and the other is the specific benefits that Turkey will gain, above all membership of EU. A fair question is whether the price is

worth paying or whether Turkey is engaging in economic and above all political blackmail.

At the deal agreed on November 29, 2015 the EU agreed to provide 3 billion euros in return for Turkey agreeing to host the 2.6 million Syrian refugees currently in its country. It also agreed that if Turkey would prevent migrants going into Europe the EU would revive consideration of Turkey's stalled application for membership of the EU. In March 2016, Turkey is demanding the funding it should obtain be doubled to 6 billion euros.

Turkey has confronted the EU with a double and interrelated problem because of the Turkish demand for EU membership and also for visa free access that would allow access to the Schengen passport free zone for its 77 million citizens in the EU. European countries, troubled by Islamist terrorism in recent years, are aware that almost all of the 77 million are Muslims and are wary of possible infiltration of terrorists from Turkey. Almost certainly, an agreement on membership will increase support for right wing political parties in most of the European countries.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is particularly aware of political difficulties. In 2015 she called in a phrase, *Wir Schaffen das* (yes, we can) for an open door policy to allow an influx of 1.1million into Germany in 2015. A year later, in March 2016, faced with opponents in the elections for regional parliaments in three states, she acknowledges this policy was mistaken. This was a necessary political admission because the election has become a litmus test on her disputed policy since the refugee crisis has become the main issue on the agenda, though in effect it is only indirectly related to regional state problems.

Since April 1987 Turkey has been applying for membership, first of the EEC (European Economic Community) and then the EU. It was officially recognized as a candidate for membership

in December 1999 and negotiations were begun in October 2005. European countries have always been divided on its membership.

It is not simply the problem of the large number of Muslims. After all, Europe has been open to the Islamic world, and million of Muslims are now living in European countries. Turkey is not a European country, precisely 97 per cent of its area is in Asia. It would have the largest population of any of the EU countries. With its violations of human rights and censorship of press and public opinion, it cannot be considered a democratic country. Its president, Erdogan, has become increasingly authoritarian.

Moreover, Turkey wants to achieve EU membership by a number of accession agreements. The problem for it is that Cyprus and other countries are not prepared to negotiate unless Turkey recognizes the Cyprus government in Nicosia.

It is difficult for the EU to deal with the tidal wave that is expected to increase during the spring and summer of 2016. It is proposing to provide 700 million euros over the next three years to help refugees in the Western Balkans.

It has to change in rules concerning asylum. The present "Dublin system" means asylum seekers have to lodge their claim in the first country they enter. The proposed reform is to relocate refugees around the EU in relation to wealth and size.

NATO entered the picture on February 11, 2016 as a fleet of 5 ships began trying to help coast guard officials deter the smuggling boats. NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg announced on March 6, 2016 a new deal for ships to go beyond international waters into Aegean Greek and Turkish waters to support efforts to locate and deter migrant boats.

The EU, while relying on its own efforts to deal with the crisis, should examine carefully the proposed arrangement with Turkey, and consider whether it will help alleviate the

migrant crisis or simply benefit Turkey. Britain in particular must now evaluate the new proposal in its decision on relations with the EU.