

Turkey is using Syrian refugees as bargaining chips as it moves against the Kurds



Kurdish protestors against the Turkish operation in Afrin outside the EU building in Lebanon on January 28. Wael Hamzeh/EPA

When Turkish ground troops rolled into Afrin, a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria, in January, the regime was making a considered political calculation. The campaign, which Ankara called Operation Olive Branch, involves Turkish Army Forces and Free Syrian Army troops supported by an air campaign, and aims to oust fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from Afrin.

One of the reasons the Turkish presidency gave for the operation was so that it could start sending some of the 3.5m Syrian refugees living in Turkey, back to a safe zone in Syria. It was doing this in the name of "European security".

This marks a return of rhetoric in which Turkey presents itself as useful to Europe's security. Such rhetoric dominated Turkey's security culture during the

Cold War, when it was aligned with the West against the Soviet Union, but was abandoned in the 1990s and 2000s as it developed relations with Russia and Middle Eastern states.

Once again, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, argues that the country can help fight terrorism in Europe by stopping onward irregular migration. Today, Turkey's message to Europe is clear: we are dealing with your threats, so you should help and allow us to address ours.

This new operation is not the first time Erdoğan's regime has strategically used Syrian refugees in its dealings with Europe. After the collapse of the peace negotiations between the government of Turkey and the Kurdish movement in 2015-16, the Turkish Armed Forces launched military operations in south-east Turkey against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is linked to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 2,000 civilians were killed and 355,000 people were displaced during these operations. Several towns were wiped off the map, including the historical city of Sur.

The regime played the Syrian refugees card to quieten criticism from Europe. The result was the March 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal, in which irregular migrants arriving in the EU from Turkey were to be returned - with €6 billion pledged to Turkey by the EU. The deal was negotiated as journalists and academics, critical of the the military operations against the Kurds, were being targeted by Turkish authorities.

Linking refugees to Europe's security

Erdoğan played the refugee card once again in November 2016 when the European Parliament voted to freeze negotiations on Turkey joining the EU. Realising how important it was to Europe that Syrian refugees were kept in Turkey rather than attempting the dangerous sea crossing to Greece, he said "if you go any further, these border gates will be opened". In July 2017, the European Parliament called for the suspension of Turkey's accession process. The issue of Turkish accession became a heated issue during Germany's election in September 2017, when the chancellor, Angela Merkel, said she would seek to end membership talks.

With Operation Olive Branch, Syrian refugees are being used to further Turkey's strategic interests beyond its borders - with an explicit reference made at the same time to "securing" Europe.

In the initial days of the operation, Turkey's official presidential Twitter account explained that one of the operation's objectives was "to ensure the safe return of displaced Syrians to their homes" and that it would "curb the flow of terrorist elements and undocumented migrants into Europe". The logic was that once the operation was concluded, it would allow "500,000 refugees to return to Afrin".

Reflecting on this on January 30, the Brussels representative for the ruling Justice and Development party said: "The operation will lead to the return of Syrian refugees in Turkey. The fewer refugees in Turkey, the less migrant flow to Europe."

Reviving Cold War rhetoric

It's unclear whether the EU and its member states' relative silence on the operation in Afrin is related to Turkey's strategic use of refugees. Yet, given the Erdoğan regime's practices in recent years, it appears Turkey has revived the mentality that dominated Turkey's security culture during the Cold War: securing Turkey means securing Europe, and by extension, NATO.

The EU recognises that its security is under threat from "illegal migrants" and terrorism. Turkey's military operation in Syria against the Kurdish autonomous region - which is a threat to Turkey itself - will also help Europe address its own threat. The news outlet of a pro-regime thinktank, SETA, recently put this in plain terms: "If Europe and the EU want to protect their own values, then they should support Turkey's operation."

By broadly linking undocumented migration and terrorism, Erdoğan is reflecting an issue that has captured the EU's security mentality in the post-9/11 era. Turkey has clearly learned that linking an issue with migration offers advantages in its dealings with the EU. It is a transit country for undocumented migrants and is likely to ask the EU to launch new mechanisms and financial aid in the area of counter-terrorism cooperation in return for preventing future irregular migration.

Turkey needs to position itself as Europe's security provider in order to pursue its own strategic interests of weakening the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and replacing it with a pro-Turkey or neutral "safe zone". And to do so without invoking disturbing noises from Europe.

Turkey has embraced its position as the EU's border guard. The regime realises that migrants contained in Turkey will be useful to further its interests both domestically and internationally. And Europe appears content, for now, to play Turkey's neo-Cold War game.

Source: <http://theconversation.com/turkey-is-using-syrian-refugees-as-bargaining-chips-as-it-moves-against-the-kurds-90904>

[Disclaimer]