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A period of thaw: Scholz visits Turkey

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On 19 October, during his official visit to Turkey, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Istanbul. During a press conference, the two leaders outlined key areas of cooperation, including issues related to maintaining stability in the Middle East, achieving a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip, and preventing the escalation of the refugee crisis. Germany and Turkey announced their readiness to resume regular intergovernmental consultations and to enhance economic cooperation. The Chancellor also confirmed the lifting of restrictions on arms supplies to Turkey, as well as Berlin's approval of Ankara's purchase of Eurofighter Typhoon multirole fighter jets.

The two sides differed in their views on issues such as the responsibility for the war in Gaza and the conflict in Ukraine. Turkey has openly blamed Israel, accusing it of committing genocide and deliberately escalating the conflict. When Scholz raised the issue of supporting Kyiv during the press conference, Erdoğan remained silent.

The visit marks a significant improvement in bilateral relations. Aside from the shared priority of maintaining regional stability, the two sides achieved other provisional agreements during the talks. Turkey has improved its prospects for modernising its armed forces by regaining access to the German armaments market, while Germany anticipates launching cooperation with Ankara on migration policy.

Commentary

- **The relationship between Germany and Turkey remains strained due to Turkey's domestic and foreign policies.** This was largely a result of political repression initiated by Ankara following the failed coup in 2016 and Turkish military operations in northern Syria, which, among other consequences, led to Germany reducing its arms exports to Turkey in 2019. Since the beginning of 2024, Berlin has attempted to improve its relations with Ankara. One such attempt was the German president's visit to Turkey in April to commemorate the centenary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Turkey's unique role as a potential mediator in the war between Russia and Ukraine, along with the recent improvement in Ankara's relations with Washington and the EU, particularly over the last year, has facilitated these initiatives. Berlin's growing recognition that there is no alternative to Erdoğan's leadership and that cooperation with Turkey in addressing migration-related challenges is essential, should also be regarded as a favourable factor.
- **The visit confirmed that opportunities for cooperation in the defence industry have re-opened in German-Turkish relations.** It is believed that in recent months, Berlin agreed to the export of weapons worth €103 mn. However, according to media reports citing

official government documents, this figure may be as high as €336 mn, and the exports may include materials used in the modernisation of submarines, as well as other materiel. For Turkey, obtaining Germany's consent to purchase the most advanced version of the Eurofighter multirole fighters, which are manufactured in cooperation with the UK, France, Italy, and Spain, is crucial. This purchase could enable it to diversify its air force, which is currently dominated by US-made F-16 fighters (compounded even more by the lack of US consent for the sale of F-35 jets). Regaining access to Germany's armaments sector is also important for Turkey, given its planned increase in defence spending on the development and modernisation of its armed forces over the next year (from $40 bn in 2024 to $47 bn in 2025).

- **For Berlin, its cooperation with Turkey in curbing illegal migration to Germany from the Middle East was the most important topic of the visit.** Germany expects Ankara to consistently fulfil the commitments arising from the EU-Turkey migration deal signed in 2016, particularly its agreement to accept its citizens staying illegally in Germany and to curb illegal migration from Turkey. According to German statistics, Turkish citizens form the third largest group, after Syrian and Afghan nationals, applying for asylum in Germany, having submitted 24,400 asylum applications since the beginning of 2024. Moreover, around 14,500 Turkish nationals are residing in Germany without a valid residence permit. The SPD could leverage a potential agreement with Ankara on this issue in its campaign ahead of the 2025 Bundestag elections, presenting it as a success in managing the migration crisis.
- **For Germany, its partnership with Turkey is important in the context of potential efforts to manage both the Middle East crisis and the war in Ukraine.** With regards to the former, according to Berlin, Ankara plays a significant role in containing the escalation of Israel's conflict with Hezbollah and Iran. Scholz is concerned that this escalation could trigger a new wave of refugees from the Middle East heading to Germany. Regarding the war in Ukraine, the German government believes that, due to its policy of balancing relations with Moscow and the West, Turkey could serve as an intermediary to persuade Russia to engage in peace negotiations. Although no specific declarations were made during the visit, it is believed that the topic of ending the war was discussed during talks between the two leaders. In German domestic politics, Scholz's attempts to emphasise this issue are intended to lend credibility to his efforts to bring an end to the conflict through peace talks.