

Turkish Court's Refusal to Release Greek Soldiers Signals Row Ahead

Worries that they could be used as a bargaining chips



Abdullah Ayasun • March 5, 2018 4 minutes read



Turkey arrested two Greek soldiers amid worries that they could be used as a bargaining chip against Athens.

A Turkish court in the western border province of Edirne on Monday refused to release two Greek soldiers who were **remanded** in custody after inadvertently straying into the Turkish territory last

week.

The court ruling is likely to set the stage for a diplomatic standoff between the two countries. The relations are already strained over the Greek refusal to extradite eight Turkish military officers who fled Turkey after a botched coup attempt in 2016 summer and have since been kept in Greek custody.

The Greek authorities initially said the two soldiers were on a routine border patrol when they mistakenly [strayed](#) into the Turkish territory, blaming the poor weather for the incident. Athens also expected their swift return. But that expectation failed to materialize.

On Friday, a court in Edirne decided to keep the soldiers in pre-trial detention on charges of military espionage and entering a prohibited military zone.

Lawyers representing the soldiers demanded their immediate release at a court hearing on Monday. The request was dismissed.

Greece has urged the Turkish government to comply with international law.

“Turkey is obliged to implement what is prescribed under international law ... and not turn an everyday procedure into a major political, legal issue,” [Reuters](#) quoted Greek Foreign Minister Kokoz Kotzias as saying.

The incident immediately triggered a new round of debate in Turkey about the possibility that the two

soldiers might be used as a tool to press Athens for a prisoner swap with the coup-plotting soldiers.

Greek government spokesman **Dimitris Tzanakopoulos** previously said the return of the two soldiers is “pure formality” since they crossed the border accidentally.

“We are in communication with Turkish authorities to swiftly settle the issue,” Mr. Tzanakopoulos said on Friday.

He was dismissive of the scenarios broached by the media about whether Ankara could use the Greek servicemen as a bargaining tool to secure the extradition of eight Turkish soldiers.

“I have heard various scenarios since this morning about possible negotiations the Greek government could enter with Turkey on possible exchanges. These are spy and conspiracy scenarios that do not merit comment,” he said, [according to](#) Associated Press.

Still, the issue is clouded by the fog of controversy that pervaded the extradition riddle about the Turkish soldiers. Greek Supreme Court refused to send Turkish military officers back to Turkey on the ground that they would not get a fair trial. The rampant reports of torture in prison was also another factor that drove the legal argument in Athens in the decision.

“The Greek government is in a very difficult position. It’s spokesperson announced to a

worrisome public Friday that the issue is rather “formal”, that the two soldiers crossed over by accident and that the issue would be soon resolved,” said **Dimitris Tsarouhas**, Associate Professor at Bilkent University Department of International Relations and Secretary of the Greek Politics Specialist Group of the PSA.

“The decision by Turkish authorities which led to the two remaining in custody has led to confusion among the Greek public,” he told **Globe Post Turkey**.

Media and Public Opinion Risk Escalation

The media uproar risks escalation of the tension and would create additional hazards for a swift resolution of the dispute.

Mr. Tsarouhas noted that some Greek media outlets already accuse the Greek government of incompetence and opposition parties follow a similar line.

Deteriorating bilateral relations, he argued, also don't help and the scenario that the two soldiers could be used as a bargaining chip is gaining ground among the Greek public opinion.

“Bottom line: no one yet knows when and how the issue will be resolved.”

Turkey's relations with Greece face a tough trial over a number of unresolved thorny issues. The two NATO allies are at loggerheads in the Aegean Sea

over a number of uninhabited small islets, the continental shelf dispute and contested sovereignty over some of the islands.

The existence of the risk of an unwitting confrontation between two allies is a no small matter. Just recently, Turkish and Greek patrol boats collided on two occasions over the past one month. Dogfights between fighter jets of the countries have again become a daily routine.

Turkey's hardening stance against gas exploration drills by international firms on behalf of Greek Cyprus in East Mediterranean has added a new layer of friction to the relations.

“Now, the media have initially been projecting bad scenarios, focusing on the general tense situation between Ankara and Athens,” **Anthony Derisiotis**, Lecturer at the Department of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies, University of Athens, told **Globe Post Turkey**.

He noted that headlines that blow things out of proportion are ill-advised but the Imia incident and the events in the Cypriot EEZ have been at the top of the daily news for the past few weeks. Therefore, he emphasized, the Greek public is feeling uneasy.

“Statements from the Turkish President's [**Recep Tayyip Erdogan**] senior advisor **Yigit Bulut**, on Turkish military strikes within the Cypriot EEZ and on breaking the limbs of the Greek government officials if they step on Imia [Kardak], are inflammatory,” Mr. Derisiotis said. He added: “The

Greek public does not trust Erdogan and his foreign policy.”

There is another dimension that keeps relations between Turkey and Greece on edge. Athens has found itself at the heart of a sprawling migrant crisis over the past three years when hundreds of thousands of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees landed in the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea en route to the European countries.

A deal between Turkey and the E.U. in March 2016 significantly stemmed the flow of migrants and reduced the burden of Greece. But after the botched coup, Turkish opponents of President Erdogan who have become victims of a sweeping purge in Turkey and who have been deprived of basic livelihoods have now joined Syrians in their migration to Europe.

Evros, Maritsa or Meric river has become a new route for desperate Turkish citizens to flee the persecution and crackdown in Turkey. Only two weeks ago, a Turkish family was drowned in Evros river when they attempted to cross the border.

The case of soldiers appears to be complicating the already strained ties. During his visit to Athens in December, President Erdogan pressed for the extradition of coup-plotting soldiers, to no avail.

“I do not believe that the situation will deteriorate any further, but it is essential for the two soldiers incident to end soon,” Mr. Derisiotis said.

When there is prolonged tension, he added, chances for accidents that will escalate the situation are increasing. This especially is the case “when there are politicians and media on both sides that systematically blow things out of proportion, in order to serve their political aims.”

In such cases, the public is reacting positively to their propaganda and it restricts the government’s flexibility to solve the issue, he said in conclusion.