

## Turkey and the EU: A Changed Context

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In 2005 the European Union (EU) began formally to negotiate Turkey's application to become a full member. Today, the EU is a very different organization, Turkey has also experienced major changes, and the Arab Spring has dramatically impacted the Middle East. In sum, there is a changed context for the evolving relationship between Turkey and the EU. This article explains that context and concludes that, for the foreseeable future, Turkey is unlikely to become a full EU member, although close ties with respect to economic matters and immigration will persist.

### **Turkey and Europe**

Any history of the Turkey–Europe relationship must include the long, frequently desperate struggles of the early states of Europe against the advances of the Ottoman Empire. European history books, for example, still celebrate the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, when the Holy League of southern European Catholic sea powers defeated the Ottoman fleet in the Mediterranean. Another story, of course, has it that whenever we eat a crescent-shaped croissant, we share in the Austrian bakers' tribute to the success of Christian forces in turning back the Ottomans' second siege of Vienna in 1683. Current European citizens may only vaguely recall such distant events, but they do linger in a sort of 'collective consciousness.'

A more modern historical survey might begin with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the creation of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk's military government was determined to westernize, secularize, and industrialize Turkey, and it succeeded in these goals to a remarkable degree. Turkey joined the Allied cause late in the Second World War, received some support from the Marshall Plan, joined the Council of Europe in 1949 and NATO in 1952, and remained a staunch ally of the West throughout the Cold War.

In a series of agreements from 1963–1970, Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC) looked to the eventual establishment of a customs union, which finally came effect in 1995, the same year as Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU.

Turkey submitted its application for full EU membership in 1987. Noteworthy is the fact that Morocco also applied for full membership in 1987, but was almost immediately

denied because the country was judged not to be sufficiently European. Indeed, it was not until 1999 that the Helsinki European Council recognized Turkey as a candidate with the same priority as other applicant states. Accession negotiations with Turkey were officially begun on October 3, 2005. Eight Central and Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and two Mediterranean countries (Malta and Cyprus) entered the EU on 1 May 2004. Switzerland and Norway decided to remain outside. Romania and Bulgaria were admitted on 1 January 2007, although their citizens were not guaranteed full working rights in EU member countries for seven years. Croatia's application to join in mid-2013 has encountered last-minute difficulties.

Despite what had been a generally expansionist mood within the EU, Turkey's application quickly ran into major roadblocks. EU accession requires the agreement of all current member states. At the outset, Austria's People's Party and Germany's CDU under Chancellor Angela Merkel urged Turkey to accept some sort of 'privileged partnership' rather than full membership in the EU. France's former President Nicolas Sarkozy was similarly opposed to full membership. Both Austria and France indicated they would have to hold some form of national referendum on the issue. Current French President François Hollande has been expected to be more flexible about Turkey's admission than his predecessor, but that remains to be demonstrated.

There were and are a host of specific issues confronting Turkey's accession to the EU; not least is the one that defeated Morocco's application, whether Turkey's history and predominately Muslim culture are sufficiently European. Turkey's population of 74 million (2011) would make their EU Parliament representation the second largest, after Germany, and in several years (given Turkey's higher birth rate) probably the largest. The other side of the history and culture coin is whether Europe is already sufficiently – or even too – Turkish. Most estimates are that there are today about 9 million Turks in Europe, with large concentrations (relative to national populations) in a number of countries, including Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, and the UK.

Turks migrated mainly to Southeastern Europe in large numbers during Ottoman times. In the twentieth century, Turks from Cyprus came after the island became a British Crown Colony in 1914 and then again during the Second World War years and decades of civil conflict before and after independence (1961) and partition (1974). Meskhetian Turks came to various countries of Eastern Europe when they were expelled from Georgia during the Second World War. In the 1960s, under a special agreement, Turkish 'guest workers' were initially welcomed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, France, and Sweden. Many such guests never went home. There has also been increased Turkish migration to Western Europe from Bulgaria, Romania, and Western Thrace. Recent news reports have highlighted growing concern about a so-called 'back door to Europe,' the 126-mile relatively porous border between Turkey and Greece, through which not only Turks but also would-be immigrants and refugees from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa enter.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, it is a fact that the countries of Europe, with their aging populations, continue to need more workers even in recessionary times; on the other hand, many European politicians and especially the strident right-wing parties that have sprung up in

most countries profess alarm about the Muslim challenge to traditional Western values and even civil order. In truth, assimilation has been far from complete, and under-employment and poverty in ethnic urban ghettos invites outbreaks of violence. In fairness to Turkish communities, however, they tend to be a more established and often better-educated minority; violence is much more likely to emanate from – for instance, in France – unemployed youths from that country's former North African provinces.

Another major issue impeding Turkish EU entry has been the Cyprus question. When, in 1974, supporters of a union of Greece and Cyprus staged a coup, Turkey intervened and occupied a third of the island, which in 1983 declared itself to be the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Successive plans for reunification have failed, the EU instituted various measures to isolate break-away Turkish Cyprus both diplomatically and economically, and, in 2004, Cyprus was admitted to the EU despite criticism from some members. Turkey recognizes Turkish Cyprus but not the other Cyprus and continues to refuse to allow ships and planes from Cyprus to enter Turkey's ports or airspace – which is a clear violation of the 1995 customs union agreement with the EU. A further complication arose in July 2012 when Cyprus assumed the EU presidency. Turkey announced that none of its ministries or official organizations would attend any meeting chaired by Cyprus.

Yet another barrier to EU accession has been the issue of political freedom and human rights within Turkey. The moderately Islamist Justice and Development (AKP) party – led by Turkey's current and broadly popular Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his close associate, President Abdullah Gul – won national elections in 2002. Erdogan was initially banned from office because he had read a vaguely religious poem at a political rally, and Gul became the first AKP Prime Minister; however, when the ban was lifted, Gul switched offices with Erdogan. Erdogan easily won a third term after the AKP swept the June 2011 elections. Fears of a radical tilt towards Islam did not materialize, and Erdogan's government forced several important opposing generals to retire, initiated reforms targeting corruption and improving the legal rights of women and the Kurdish minority, and helped usher in a remarkable period of economic growth and foreign investment.

However, EU and other outside observers were worried about the continuing violent suppression of the separatist Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK)'s long insurgency – labeled 'terrorism' by Ankara. There was also uneven implementation of human rights legislation and, in particular, the troubling existence of Article 301, a Turkish law that made it a crime to insult the Turkish nation, State, or Grand National Assembly. An especially egregious case was the September 2005 trial of novelist (2006 Nobel Prize winner) Orhan Pamuk because of his statements spotlighting the deaths of tens of thousands of Kurds and more than a million Armenians at the hands of Turkish authorities. The government soon dropped the Pamuk case, and Article 301 was re-written to address 'only' insults to the Turkish nation, to carry 'only' a maximum 2-year sentence, and to give the Justice Minister sole responsibility for starting a trial.

Be that as it may, in December 2006 – just a little over a year after they began – the EU halted negotiations with regard to 8 of the 35 chapters of EU law that would have to be resolved before Turkey could enter the EU as a full member. EU officials cited, in

part, what they still regarded as inadequate political freedom and human rights in Turkey as well as the persistent impasse over Cyprus. Nonetheless, Turkey continued to find European export markets and enjoy increased investment from Europe under the existing customs union.

In May 2012, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement visited Turkey with the express purpose of restarting negotiations regarding Turkey's admission.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish government welcomed this new beginning. As a gesture, the EU announced the following month that visa restrictions on Turkish citizens, which had already been easing, might be further eased or even negotiated out of existence. It is worth emphasizing that – with respect to matters such as the customs union and visas – an important degree of international cooperation and integration between the EU and Turkey can move forward, short of full membership

Dramatic changes have thus occurred between the onset of accession talks in 2005 and 2012. In the EU, of course, the primary change has been the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent lingering crisis of the Euro. At the time of writing, the single currency is being propped up by EU governments' promises of limited bailouts, the European Central Bank's pledge to buy huge amounts of sovereign debt, and the drafting of regulations designed to limit future misbehavior on the part of banks and other players. But the present situation is plainly desperate in bankrupt Greece, only a little less so in Spain (where, for example, youth unemployment rate is circa 50% and Catalonia threatens secession) and Portugal, and anything but healthy in Italy and France. Opposition to continued bailouts appears to be growing among European publics, even in Germany where continued financial support of the single currency will be crucial. Frankly, given these circumstances and gloomy forecasts for much of the European region and global economy, it will be more than a minor miracle if the Euro survives – at least in its present form – and without the Euro, the EU as we and Turkey have come to know it. Next we turn to developments in Turkey and the Middle East.

### **Turkey's Rise and Role in a Post-Arab-Spring Middle East**

#### *Politics*

In Turkey, single-party AKP rule seems secure, although there are problems drafting a new democratic constitution and what some see as continued and even increasing authoritarianism. Current speculation is that Erdogan will get his AKP to produce its own constitutional draft that will have to be submitted to a national referendum, and this constitution will allow him to be elected President by popular vote (rather than as, at present, by Parliament) when his term as Prime Minister (and the term of President Gul) expires in 2014. The new document would presumably give the President expanded powers. Yet some polls indicate that Gul is more popular than Erdogan, and a few pundits suggest that-Gul might not be willing to step down or that the two might again just swap offices.<sup>3</sup>

The infamous Article 301 was softened in 2008. Another encouraging sign was the arrest that same year of Kemal Kerinçinz, an ultra-nationalist lawyer. Kerinçinz was associated with many of the notorious 301 trials and was also accused of other grave

crimes, including attacks on the Turkish Council of State and an opposition newspaper as well as assassinations of Christian missionaries and an Armenian journalist.

Of rising concern has been Erdogan's relationship with the elderly and charismatic imam Fetullah Gulen. Gulen currently lives in the United States, but he heads one of the most important Islamic sects in the world, with millions of followers and schools in 140 countries. Gulen supported Erdogan and his party from the outset, and the imam preaches a message of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. But Gulen's influence in Turkey is seemingly a much more conservative and sinister one, permeating the courts and police and intelligence services, and encouraging them to persecute government opponents. For example, Ahmet Sik, an author who was briefly jailed on false charges of being part of a plot to overthrow the government, commented: 'Whether you are a journalist, an intellectual or a human rights activist, if you dare to criticize [the Gulenists] you are accused of being a drug dealer or terrorist.'<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that Erdogan's critics are finding the political atmosphere increasingly oppressive. Numerous journalists have lost their jobs because media tycoons fear loss of government revenue. According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, as of October 2012, some 76 journalists were in jail, most of them Kurds who are routinely charged with having links to the PKK.<sup>5</sup> The European Commission recently noted that 'the European Court of Human Rights received a large number of applications concerning violations of human rights in Turkey,' that many 'writers, academics and journalists' as well as 'scholars and researchers working on the Kurdish issue' have been charged, and that over '2800 students are in detention, mostly on terrorism-related charges.'<sup>6</sup> Erdogan has also broken off secret talks with the PKK, and violent incidents – partly because of connections with the Syrian civil war – have escalated in recent months.

Thus, there are legitimate reasons still to be concerned about human rights in Turkey. I would not today wish to be a journalist or public intellectual in Turkey who is openly and persistently critical of the AKP regime. Moreover, some secularists – perhaps unduly alarmist – detect signs of a drift towards more conservative Islam in government policy. Erdogan has talked about restricting abortions and has reintroduced middle schools for training clerics as well as a general curriculum that includes optional Koran and Arabic-language classes.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, 70% of Turks are Sunni Muslim and most are far from fundamentalists, and government policy has been fairly cautious to date regarding religion. A minority of Turks are affiliated with the Shi'a Alevi branch and other factions and faiths.

### *Economy*

Without question, Turkey under Erdogan and the AKP has made astonishing economic progress. Turkey's 2011 GDP was about \$1087 trillion, the 17th largest in the world.<sup>8</sup> There was a virtual economic collapse in 2001, the year before the AKP came to power. Turkey implemented economic reforms that reduced state involvement in industry, banking, transport, and communication and encouraged middle-class entrepreneurship in areas outside traditional specializations in textiles and clothing. Agriculture still occupies about 25.5% of the labor force, but there has been a major boom in construction, automotive, and electronic industries, supported by rising domestic consumption and

growing exports. Industry's current share of the labor force is 26.2%, and services 48.4%.<sup>8</sup> Turkey's 2011 trade with the EU27 was 46.2% of its total exports of \$143.5 billion and 37.8% of imports of \$232.9 billion.<sup>9</sup> Partly reflecting Ankara's diplomatic offensive, trade with Islamic countries in the Near and Middle East has grown to 20% (compared with 12% a decade earlier), while that with recession-bound Europe has been on a slightly downward curve.<sup>10</sup>

Turkey views itself as a transportation hub and a power in the field of energy. The Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline opened in 2006, with the capacity of carrying 1 million barrels of petroleum a day from the Caspian area. Several other gas pipeline projects are in progress that it is hoped will eventually supply 97% of domestic consumption.<sup>11</sup> However, one major project that was the EU's flagship initiative, the Nabucco gas pipeline, has run into political and economic difficulties and now appears doomed. Nabucco began in 2002 as an inter-governmental agreement among Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Austria and involved a consortium of six major companies. Now more likely to be built is Nabucco West, which would exclude the Turkish section of the pipeline and travel via Bulgaria and Romania to Austria. There are at least two other projects designed ultimately to bring gas from the Caspian and Middle East to Europe: the South East Europe Pipeline (SEEP), which would run via Bulgaria and Romania to Hungary, and a Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) via Greece to Italy. In June 2012, Turkey announced a plan with Azerbaijan to build a 2000 km gas €5.6 billion pipeline (TANAP) linking the expanded Southern Caucasus pipeline corridor through Georgia to Europe.<sup>12</sup> Turkey has made further plans with the semi-autonomous Kurdish section of Iraq to transport 1 million barrels of petroleum a day to Turkey directly, bypassing Baghdad, to the outrage of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki.<sup>13</sup>

After the 2001 collapse, Turkey's growth rate averaged 6% annually through 2008. There was a decline in 2009 attributable to the global financial crisis, but the country's financial and banking sector rallied and the GDP climbed to 9.2% in 2010 and was 8.5% in 2011. Inflation of 6.5% in 2011 was significant but manageable. The public debt to GDP ratio in 2011 was 39.8%.<sup>14</sup> The current account deficit declined in August 2012 to \$1.2 billion, the lowest since 2009, prompting speculation that Turkey's credit rating might be upgraded.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, as the *Financial Times* put it, the Turkish economy has recently gone from 'go-go' to 'gold.' Over the past decade the GNP has tripled. 'Domestic consumption had become the motor of the economy while construction was the industry that symbolized and stoked the country's dynamism.' However, in the second quarter of 2012, annual growth had slowed to 2.9%, domestic consumption declined by 0.5%, private sector expenditures dropped by 8%, and construction grew by only 0.4% compared with 11% for all of 2011. What really grew in that quarter was exports, at an annual rate of 19.8%, while imports declined 3.6%. Oddly, the exports upsurge was mainly because of a flood of Turkish gold sales to Iran.<sup>16</sup>

### *Foreign Policy*

Erdogan's AKP government initially pledged to continue to westernize in appropriate ways while respecting Turkey's Islamic heritage, to pursue EU membership vigorously,

and to honor traditional defense commitments to NATO. Turkey has long been a member of NATO and, in fact, its army is second in size only to that of the United States in the alliance. Turkey contributed troops to NATO's campaign in Afghanistan and in September 2011 agreed to join NATO's American-designed missile shield. Romania allowed 24 interceptor missiles to be based in its country, and Turkey agreed to accept a sophisticated radar system on its territory. The circumstances under which Turkey did so are revealing. Although it is widely believed that Turkey is worried about Iran's growing missile capability, Turkey announced that it was confident (wink, wink) the missile defense system was not specifically aimed at Iran and also trusted (wink, wink) that the US would not share any information gathered by the system with Israel (Washington, of course, denied it had made any such promise). In another context, Turkey has stated that it would not participate in any NATO meeting in which Israel was even an observer.

These latter frictions highlight another objective of Turkey's foreign policy, a revival of Ottoman influence in the Near and Middle East.<sup>17</sup> For obvious reasons, the Turkish government is reluctant to characterize this policy as resurgent imperialism. Nonetheless, Turkey opened 33 new diplomatic missions over the last decade and, significantly, 18 of them are in Muslim and Arabic countries. In sum, there has been a distinct shift – if not away from a EU/US focus – to a more balanced foreign policy. Sometimes the balance is achieved by adopting positions that are counter and deeply irritating to Turkey's Western partners; at other times, as with regard to the missile shield, there is at least rhetorical balance built into acceptance of Western positions.

On the irritating side of the ledger have been Turkey's policies with regard to Iran and the Arab/Israel conflict. Turkey, early on, downplayed the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, voted against a series of UN resolutions aimed at containing Iran's progress in that respect, and joined Brazil in proposing a complicated swap of nuclear materials 'solution' to the Iran impasse that got nowhere. Nonetheless, Turkey has steadfastly refused to support economic sanctions against Iran. As for the Israel/Arab dispute, Turkey has actively defended the Palestinian cause and, with little success, has sought to bring the various Palestinian feuding factions together. When there was an attempt in 2010 to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza and several Turkish activists were killed after Israeli commandos boarded the vessel involved, Ankara was loud in its condemnation of Israel. Turkey was not mollified when the subsequent UN inquiry into the incident upheld the legality of the blockade but condemned Israel's 'excessive and unreasonable' use of force. Turkey has insisted that Israel issue a public apology, which Tel Aviv has thus far refused to do, and the bilateral row has only got worse. One senses that Erdogan and the AKP are rather enjoying the stand-off.

Turkey has cautiously welcomed the Arab Spring, developed fairly warm relations with the fledgling Mursi government in Egypt, and far less cordial relations with the post-occupation Shia-backed al-Maliki government in Iraq. Ankara's main headache has been its involvement in the Syrian meltdown. Turkey characteristically opposed any form of Western military intervention and attempted to help negotiate some sort of arrangement that would allow the fighting to stop and Assad to step down. Instead, the situation has steadily deteriorated and Ankara has watched with increased frustration as civil war casualties have mounted. Both the United States and the EU have praised

Turkey's efforts to achieve a settlement and its sheltering of both Syrian rebel representatives and a flood of Syrian refugees. Meanwhile, the conflict aggravated Kurdish unrest along the border with Syria, and incidents of cross-border fire led the Turks to make brief military forays into Syria. Public demonstrations in Turkey have signaled that the reaction back home to active engagement in Syria is less than unanimously enthusiastic.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

Thomas Friedman, a journalist highly knowledgeable about the Middle East, recently commented:

For many years, strategists have debated whether Turkey would be a 'bridge' or a 'gully' between predominately Christian Europe and the Arab/Muslim Middle East. ... It turns out that Turkey these days is neither ... It's ... an island of relative stability between two great geopolitical systems that are cracking apart: the euro zone ... and the Arab state system ... In Europe, *the supranational project* did not work. In the Arab world, *the national project* did not work ... So the E.U. today has many citizens, but no single supranational nation state to which everyone is ready to cede economic authority. And the Arab world has many national states, but few citizens. (Emphasis in original)<sup>19</sup>

Where, then, are we left with regard to Turkey's prospects for full membership in the EU? I have to admit that I personally doubt that this is ever going to happen and believe that, on balance, the EU will be the poorer for not have Turkey as a full member – and vice versa. A decade or so ago Turkey's accession seemed possible, but that opportunity now seems to have passed.

Nevertheless, Turkey may yet become a full EU member. As one observer remarked: 'Turkey's membership prospects [are] not so much frozen as in cryonic suspension.'<sup>3</sup> Given the momentous changes since 2005 in the EU, Turkey, and the Middle East, can anyone predict where things will stand in 10, 20, or 25 years?

In any event, it is worth reiterating that – apart from full membership – there already exist a number of major agreements, institutional links, and informal ties and relationships between the EU and Turkey. There is no reason why these should vanish or why there should not be many more, making Turkey a genuine 'privileged partner.' Significantly, a recent poll found that '[r]elatively few Americans (22%), Turks (22%), or those in the EU countries (19%) were concerned that if Turkey's membership in the EU was delayed, the country would drift away from the EU.'<sup>20</sup>

Finally, consider other relevant poll results. In 2011, 39% of EU citizens were neutral about Turkey's accession, 29% opposed, and 26% in favor. Just over half of French and German citizens were positive. Only about 39% of Europeans thought having Turkey in the EU would be beneficial economically, and French, Swedes, Germans, Spanish, and Dutch were decidedly negative on this score. Only about half of those polled believed that Turkish membership would help promote a more stable Middle East. Interestingly, a little more than half – and more in Sweden, the UK, Spain, and Germany – did not think that either Turkey's Muslim status or poverty level would be a valid reason to keep Turkey out.

As for Turkish citizens, 55% replied that membership would be good for Turkey economically. However, only 33% thought it likely that Turkey would join – and the



latest poll I have seen suggests that number may have dropped to 17%.<sup>21</sup> In sum, I believe that degree of pessimism is justified.

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