

**Fadi Hakura**

# Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and the European Union

## Report

**Original citation:**

Hakura, Fadi (2011) Turkey's global strategy: Turkey and the European Union. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR007. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43496/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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## Turkey and the European Union

Fadi Hakura

**T**urkey has enjoyed challenging and intricate relations with the European Union (EU) for over half a century. Official ties began in 1963 when Turkey and the then-European Economic Community concluded an Association Agreement that ushered in freer trade and closer political cooperation. Bilateral ties leapt forward with the establishment of a customs union in 1996. Nineteen years later, the EU launched accession negotiations with Turkey in October 2005.

Ever since the EU promised Turkey prospects of accession in 1963, the EU became synonymous with Turkey's westernisation. Europe was hesitant and tentative toward Turkish entreaties from the start. A turnaround of sorts took place under the leadership of German Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder and Foreign Minister Joshka Fischer. Their backing was crucial to initiating the negotiating process.

However, the replacement of Shroeder by Angela Merkel helped reduce accession to a snail's pace. Germany and France never cease to frustrate the ambitions of this Muslim-majority country. Jean-David Levitte, foreign policy advisor to French President Sarkozy admitted so much according to a Wikileaks cable, in which he confirmed that Paris wants Turks to realise that 'their role is best played as a bridge between the two worlds of Europe and Asia, rather than anchored in Europe itself.'

Turkey has commenced negotiations on thirteen of the 33 'chapters' or policy areas that it needs to adopt ahead of accession. Of these 33 chapters, only one is closed, seventeen are blocked and a mere three chapters are eligible for opening. In response to Turkey's refusal to grant port access to Greek Cypriot vessels and planes, the EU has suspended eight chapters. More broadly, the lack of tangible progress in the ongoing Cyprus reunification talks means that accession is heading to an assured stalemate, if not breakdown.

Turkey shares equal blame with Europe for the rapid deterioration of bilateral relations, since Turkey's reform agenda ground to a near halt once the EU agreed to accession negotiations, and Turkish enthusiasm abruptly dissipated. Accession was thereafter used tactically in power plays between the government and its domestic opponents. Turkey, in essence, was not fully committed to Europe.

### **EUROPEAN SCEPTICISM OF TURKEY**

Hrant Dink, an internationally-renowned Turkish-Armenian intellectual murdered in 2006, noted astutely that Turkey and Europe are bound by fear rather than solidarity. Both parties are pushed by geographical realities to deal tepidly with each other, not out of a desire for intimate neighbourly relations. Sandwiched between Europe and Asia, Turkey can ill-afford to totally ignore Europe and vice versa.

Turkey is quite unpopular among Europeans. In a 2006 survey by US-based 'Transatlantic Trends' in 9 EU countries, respondents disliked Turkey more than Israel, China and Russia and slightly less than Palestine and Iran. Turkey's image is similarly problematic. Simon Anholt, an independent government advisor, regularly conducts surveys of 'nation brands'. He asks people in 50 countries on what they think of other nations in terms of their exports, people, government, culture and so on. Turkey tends to fare poorly, ranked 36 in the 2008 index behind Russia and Egypt.

Turkey's Muslim identity lies at the heart of European hostility. In a 2009 Bosphorus University opinion poll conducted in France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom, 39% of respondents agreed that Turkey is 'a Muslim country [...] incompatible with the common Christian roots' of Europe. Only 20% of respondents cited culture and religion as a prerequisite for EU accession when Turkey's name was omitted.

Cultural differences are also intensifying European doubts of Turkey's democratic credentials. TEPAV, a Turkish think-tank, found in a 2007 poll that around 50% of Europeans prioritised liberties and democracy as conditions for further enlargement. Mentioning Turkey's name raised that level to 85%.

EU leaders and their publics seem convinced that Turkey's Islamic background is incompatible with European norms. Just 31% of Europeans and 62% of political elites accept that Europe and Turkey share common values, a 2011 Transatlantic Trends survey reveals. It also found that a mere 21% and 51% respectively are enthusiastic about Turkey joining the EU.

Jeffrey C. Dixon, a sociologist, attributes the strength of opposition to the perceived threat that Turkey poses to the group position and identity of 'Europeans'. Turkey's identity is seen by a wide cross-section of European populations as apposite to secular lifestyles and attitudes. Germans, Austrians and the French are loathe to see more Turks living in their

neighbourhoods. Not even robust EU guarantees to permanently restrict Turkish migration was enough to assuage concerns.

In turn, Turkish Prime Recep Tayyip Erdogan ratchets up anxieties with muscular criticisms of German policies to integrate its large Turkish community. He told a German newspaper that those policies failed to consider the needs and expectations of this community. Addressing the government's campaign to encourage more Turks to speak German, he added: 'Any policy which seeks to revoke the language and culture of migrants violates international law.' These kind of comments reinforce European perceptions that Turks are culturally distinct.

#### **TURKISH SCEPTICISM OF EUROPE**

Naturally, the faltering EU process is coinciding with growing Turkish antipathy for accession. Popular support stands at only 40% compared to a high of 75% six years ago. Turkey's rambunctious prime minister criticises the EU's lukewarm attitude to Turkey's accession with increasing frequency. He recently thundered that Turkey is 'no more a country that would wait at the EU's doors like a docile supplicant.'

Not only is the political chasm widening, but the same seems to be happening culturally. Turks are increasingly focussing on the alleged cultural divide between Turkey and Europe. In particular, they feel that Europe rejects Turkey on the basis of religion. Undoubtedly, this an inevitable consequence of the slowdown of Turkey's journey to Europe .

#### **TURKEY LOOKING EAST**

Domestically, the EU barely registers in political and intellectual debates, and Turkish politicians pay lip service to the accession issue at best. Far more attention is devoted to rebuilding Turkey's diplomatic and economic outreach to the Middle East and North

Africa, and Eurasia. Europe no longer assumes a pride of place in Turkey's foreign policy calculations. Gone are the days when Turkey subordinated its national interest to Western strategic considerations.

Nowadays, the decline of accession is accelerating a more independent, less pro-European Turkish foreign policy. Turkey is fostering closer ties with Iran, the Arab world and Russia. This is particularly evident in economic and trade relations. While Turkey's trade volume with Europe remains static at around 45% of its overall trade, the share with the Middle East is climbing fast from a very low base to around 20%. Turkey is lifting visa restrictions on neighbouring countries. Europe, in contrast, refuses steadfastly to engage in 'visa diplomacy' with Turkey.

Policy independence, as opposed to interdependence, will increasingly define the nature of EU-Turkey relations. Thus far, Turkey's dealings with the EU have been mostly multi-lateral, a natural outcome of the accession negotiations. Driven by prospects of accession, Turkey has contributed peace-keeping forces to EU operations in the Ivory Coast and the Balkans, and supported at least 90% of EU's foreign policy positions. Cooperation will be patchier, *ad hoc* and less systematic in the future as Turkey's multiplicity of interests with the neighbouring Middle East and Eurasia may collide with European strategic concerns.

Three recent cases illustrate the mutual divergences vividly. First among them is the rift on Iranian nuclear ambitions. Turkey opposes the EU line of tough economic sanctions on Tehran. Instead, Ankara has argued vigorously for intensified diplomatic engagement with Tehran. Turkey surprised European partners by voting against the last round of sanctions at the UN Security Council. In addition, Turkey partnered with Brazil to secure Iran's agreement to swap 1,200 kilogrammes of low-enriched uranium for fuel rods on Turkish soil. Europe was prompt in dismissing this deal as too little, too late.

Energy security is another arena for dampening aspirations. Turkey and the EU have trumpeted the advantages of the Nabucco pipeline to diversify

energy supplies away from Russia. If built, it would transport 31 billion metres of natural gas from the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia to European consumers. Yet, the weak accession process has diluted interest for Nabucco and other ambitious joint projects.

Most illustrative is the lack of effective cooperation between NATO and the EU. Turkey (in NATO but not the EU) objects to Cyprus (in the EU but not in NATO) participation in EU-NATO meetings. In retaliation, Cyprus vetoes tighter defence cooperation between the EU and Turkey. In addition, Turkey does not facilitate European access to NATO military assets for peace-keeping operations unless obstacles to the accession process are neutralised. As insecurity spreads across Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the regional order implodes in the Middle East and North Africa, the persistence of EU-NATO acrimony is untimely and indefensible.

## A LOST OPPORTUNITY

Proponents of Turkish accession have long argued that a secular European Turkey would magnify European influence in the Middle East. In a region bereft of democratic governance, Europe lost the opportunity to showcase the compatibility of secular democracy and Islam. According to a 2010 TESEV poll, Turkey enjoys an overall favourability rating of 75% in the Middle East. A similar percentage of Arabs endorsed Turkey's quest to join the EU as a shining example to the region.

Stressing the tangible fears of Turkish accession has sidelined the intangible benefits. Proper assessments of Turkey's place in Europe have fallen by the wayside. Europe has relied on bankrolling singular leaderships in the Arab world. Only a few lonely European voices forewarned that Turkey will be a key ally to influence events in its immediate neighbourhood. Now the futility and short-sightedness of that policy has been laid bare by the unexpected challenges to traditional Arab regimes.

Fortress Europe, however fortified the walls may be, will find it more difficult to combat its impending challenges without Turkey. Whether it is illegal migration or insecure energy sources, Turkey's contribution is incalculable. After all, Turkey is a key transit point for illegal migration and is proximate to three-quarters of global energy resources. As has been starkly demonstrated in recent months, Europe cannot take for granted the permanence of Arab leaderships. Arab public opinion, once safely ignored, is certain to play a bigger role in the developing contours of the new Middle East as more representative governments replace singular leaderships in the region. European attempts to impact regional changes without Turkey at the core will be more complicated.

#### **THE FUTURE OF EU-TURKEY RELATIONS**

Turkey's historical dream of EU membership looks at present a remote possibility. In light of the non-accession process, the mutual relationship is comatose. Neither side wants to terminate the accession drive nor galvanise progress. Both are satisfied with the current state of deep freeze. Prime Minister Erdogan is content to harangue the EU as a 'Christian club' for domestic consumption. Europe, on the other hand, procrastinates. To rephrase an old Russian proverb, Turkey pretends to desire accession, Europe pretends to want Turkish entry. Commitment is seriously lacking.

Meanwhile, the EU-Turkey relationship is losing momentum in the midst of global paradigm shifts and uncertainty sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. Unfortunately, the real prize of accession was missed: embracing a Muslim-majority society into the European fold. Such a development could have led to a prosperous, secular and democratic Turkey anchored in European norms. Instead, cultural differences are thriving.

Europe is rapidly losing weight in the international arena. Its response to the financial crisis, the emerging multi-polar world, new security challenges, questions

of European identity and human rights has come under scrutiny. Europe is not seen as taking the lead in handling the evolving situation on its southern shores; the US is. Europe did not coordinate actions with Turkey; the US had to step in.

Recent events indicate that bilateral relations will be lukewarm. Turkey may wish to renegotiate the terms of the partnership at some point, such as reducing the EU-Turkey customs union to a free trade area. It will be less tempted to show flexibility on the Cyprus conflict and territorial disputes with Greece. Turkey will probably interact with individual EU countries rather than multilaterally.

Eventually, however, the EU and Turkey will be forced into a new modus operandi beyond accession. Too many common interests will prevent a complete severance or rupture. They cannot defy the dictates of geography nor afford a collapse in relations. After all, several million Turks live in Europe; half of Turkey's trade is with the EU. Sadly, the lowest level of cooperation will be the outcome, a far cry from the exciting vision of a Turkey rooted in Europe. ■

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