

# Is Turkey Coming in from the Cold in Europe?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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## Ankara may have scaled back its grand ambitions in the Middle East, but is the EU ready to hold its nose in dealing with Erdogan's authoritarian administration?

**T**urkey is facing the largest wave of terror attacks in its history -- in the past six months alone, the country has been hit by five deadly attacks. The Islamic State has targeted Istanbul twice and Ankara once since October 2015, killing at least 120 people, and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has hit the capital twice, killing at least 65 people.

How Europe responds to the crisis facing Turkey could be crucial to the country's future -- as well as Europe's. The only silver lining for Turkey at the moment is the reopening of the country's European Union (EU) accession talks. Although Turkey and the EU entered into membership negotiations in 2005, the country's membership process came to a halt soon after.

Recently, though, Turkish-EU ties have taken on new life. In December 2015, Ankara and Brussels opened a new chapter in accession talks covering monetary policy, and earlier this month the two reached a deal on a plan for handling refugees.

This is because Brussels realizes that it needs Turkey's help with the refugee crisis threatening to break the EU at its seams. Turkey is a frontline state in the refugee crisis, and the EU needs Turkish cooperation. Accordingly, talks have restarted, and the EU is ready to hold its nose in dealing with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarian administration.

## BENEFITS TO BOTH

**T**urkey has its own reasons to get back on track with the EU. In 2005, soon after membership talks commenced, Erdogan's government put EU accession on the backburner, declaring 2005 the "Year of Africa" in foreign policy in a clear snub to Brussels, and then pivoting Turkish foreign policy to the Middle East.

As Turkey turned away from Europe and towards Erdogan's foreign policy dream of marching into the Middle East to become a regional star in the last decade, the public pivoted away from Europe with him. Opinion polls conducted by the German Marshall Fund (GMF) show that whereas 73% of Turks were in favor of joining the EU in 2004, in 2010 this number had dropped to 38. And then the Arab Spring took root at Turkey's doorstep and emboldened Ankara to throw its support behind anti-Assad rebels in Syria to oust the Assad regime on its own.

## LATE TO THE MIDDLE EAST TABLE

**S**adly for Erdogan, in the Middle East mere soft power does not make a country a regional power. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war has been challenged by Iran and Russia, two countries with significant hard power assets including proxies and weapons, which Turkey sorely lacks.

Unfortunately for Turkey, the Erdogan administration has not recalibrated their view of Middle East involvement. But the Turkish public has certainly done so: in 2011 GMF polls showed that support for EU accession increased to 48%, reaching 53% in 2014. The Turks are telling their government to pivot to Europe.

Erdogan is taking a more positive view of the EU as well, contractual as it might be. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) has won successive elections since 2002 on a platform of economic growth.

## FRESH HOPE

**F**aced with multiple crises, the EU is not ready to fully embrace Turkey. Nevertheless, a recently signed deal will breathe more life into Turkey's EU accession process -- new accession talk chapters will be opened up during the Dutch presidency of the EU in 2016.

Subsequent to Erdogan's relentless crackdown on democratic checks and balances in Turkey, targeting everything from the media to the courts, EU membership is the last anchor of liberal democracy in the country. The good news is that the EU once again has soft power in Turkey. The EU should reach out to Turkey's civil society, building bridges with them while also working with Erdogan to maintain a recently agreed deal to prevent further refugee flows from Syria via Turkey.

Abandoning Turkey now would be a historic mistake for the EU as this would pave the way for the death of Turkish democracy. An undemocratic Turkey would export instability and more Syrian refugees to Europe.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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