

The Case for Turkey's EU Membership

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Turkey is poised to become the most pivotal country of the Middle East. Turkey's position as the geographical, historical, religious and cultural bridge between Europe and Asia leaves it uniquely situated in the region. It is also a close regional ally of Israel and the major Arab powers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Moreover, it is the Sunni country closest to Iran. Consequently, Turkey could play a fundamental role in the fight against ISIS, as well as the mediation process between Shiite and Sunni groups.

Turkey is the only actor that could realistically mediate the rising conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, due to its closeness to Saudi Arabia and many shared cultural, political, and even religious similarities with Iran. These include similarly long democratic traditions and a shared religious connection due to Turkey's substantial Shiite minority, which makes up 30 percent of the country's population, although most are Alevi Shiites rather than Iran's predominately twelver Shiites. Turkey and Iran also have a developing economic relationship driven by Turkey's external dependency for its natural gas consumption. And notwithstanding their different positions on Syria, Turkey had demonstrated its diplomatic success by reaching a nuclear deal with Iran in 2010, five years before the P5+1 agreement.

In addition to Turkey's unique regional position, the country also has the potential to become the richest Muslim country in the world, another element in the rising regional power's favor. As evidenced by the recent dip in oil prices, oil will be less profitable for Gulf States, especially given the fracking revolution in the United States. A recent report by a US-based intelligence firm, Stratfor Global Intelligence, estimates that Turkey will become the region's economic leader as early as this year.

Yet it is unclear whether Turkey can be legitimized and empowered to play such a role unless it is integrated not only into NATO but also the European political system. Without such support, Turkey risks drifting towards a more authoritarian political regime. The government's recent attack on academic freedom, including the imprisonment of professors for a petition to stop government intervention in the Kurdish region, highlights the need for a greater integration of Turkey rather than increased exclusion from the European Union (EU). In other words, Europe and the West should employ a policy of "carrots and sticks" towards Turkey, which the United States has successfully demonstrated through its work with Cuba and Iran.

Many oppose Turkey's entrance into the EU on geographical, cultural, religious, or economic grounds. But with EU

membership, Turkey could expand its regional influence. And by inviting Turkey into the EU, the EU could become a true supranational political organism, ready to open itself to the Mediterranean and Eurasian communities in a way long envisioned by many of its members. EU membership would also help Turkey to strengthen its democracy and especially shape its treatment of minorities, encouraging it to become a more inclusive country and begin a process of decentralization and autonomy for the Kurdish region. Yet now, Turkey's application for entry into the EU is proceeding at a glacial pace. Even if the crucial chapter 17—"Economic & Monetary Policy"—that previously delayed membership opened last December, many others chapters have been frozen since 2006, when Turkey refused to open its ports and airports to traffic from Cyprus. Despite current obstacles, a shift in the organization's political will could shorten the path toward membership acceptance to just a couple of years, were only the EU to desire it. The recent migration crisis and widespread turmoil in the Middle East could speed up this process, but the shift must be psychological as well as political in order to reach common ground.

First of all, Turkey must overcome the 'Sevres syndrome' that guides its foreign policy and discard the notion that Western states ally with in-country minorities or other internal forces, such as the Gulen movement, in order to control, weaken, or even dismember Turkey. This 'siege paranoia' is evident among the elites and manifests itself in many of President Erdogan's comments. It also displays itself in the fears of the population, in particular nationalist voters. Recently, during a lecture I gave at Istanbul's Maltepe University on the need for greater Kurdish autonomy in Turkey to help deescalate tensions, I was interrupted and harshly challenged for my stereotypical 'Orientalism' and supposedly colonialist representation. In the eyes of many audience members, my lecture was an attempt to limit the self-determination and freedom of Turkish people. This oversensitive nationalism represents one of the major obstacles to the peaceful solution of the Kurdish issue, to Turkish acceptance of past errors from Armenia to Cyprus, and to Turkey's role in a modern, liberal and fully democratic world – including its membership to the EU.

Concurrently, the EU must overcome its outdated fears of an Ottoman invasion. France should accept that different but equally dignified approaches to religion, state, and social life exist. Germany should understand that a legitimate regional competitor is not necessarily a rival and can even become a regional ally as a leader of southeastern Europe. Ottoman times have ended; there is no such thing as the new 'Sultan' Erdogan, even if he must reduce his authoritarian attitude and temper his ambitions for a presidential system in order for Turkey to participate in the EU. Both sides stand to benefit: there is a country in search of a greater regional role that can recuperate its past prestige and would benefit from European guidance on human rights and democratic issues. And there is a European continent facing crises in many sectors that should again embrace the southeastern Mediterranean as a key historical and contemporary member of the region.

The city of the Golden Horn today can again be a source of inspiration. The beautiful Istanbul, traditionally the bridge between East and West, can again unite Christianity and Islam and redirect Europe away from a clash of civilizations and toward a new renaissance of the 'united in diversity' ideal in Europe and the entire world. The recent attacks in both Europe and Turkey only drive home the necessity of cooperation needed to reestablish stability in the Middle East and, to an increasing extent, Europe.

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