

# French Connection

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## Articles & Testimony

In order to force French government to lift objections to EU membership, Turkey must tackle a misperception among French citizens. The French equate Turkey to the Maghreb. There is anxiety among the French that bringing Turkey into the EU would be akin to bringing the Maghreb, a poor area rife with violent Islamism, into communion with France.

Turkey's European Union accession has hit a snag. France vehemently objects to Turkey's entry into the union. So far, 22 countries have negotiated for EU membership, and all were ultimately offered accession.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy wants to treat Turkey differently. Sarkozy is against Turkey's membership regardless of the current accession talks with the EU.

The French public opposes Turkey's EU entry and backs Sarkozy. The French veto is not a symbolic snag. Together with Germany, France is an "engine country" of the EU, pulling the union ahead, and Paris' stance has frozen Turkey's EU accession process. Turkey can break this impasse by implementing a multi-pronged strategy, reforming aggressively toward European norms and embarrassing Sarkozy to lift his objections to Turkey, and launching a public relations campaign to influence the French public. Here is what Ankara ought to do to make the French connection.

One part of the problem is in Ankara: In 2005 Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, lost interest in EU accession precisely as Turkey-EU accession talks began -- the AKP declared that year to be the year of Africa, symbolically demonstrating its withering appetite for Europe. This was surprising as the AKP had pursued EU accession aggressively after coming to power in 2002 and had cast itself as a much loved pro-European party. However, just as accession talks started, the party's populist instincts led it to conclude that the social and political reforms necessary to join would erode its popularity. In due course, the AKP dropped the reform process.

This only helped Sarkozy, France's then new president, say no to Turkey. That, in return, led to an impasse in Turkey's EU accession process. Turkey's failure to reform assists Sarkozy in his stance against Turkey's accession on grounds that Turkey is failing to become European.

And the more Sarkozy vetoes Turkey's membership, the more Turks turn against the EU, thinking that the union will never grant it membership.

The AKP can break this impasse. The party should be interested in renewing its image of a pro-European party, and achieving a historic goal by making Turkey European. In this regard, the AKP has an ally in Washington: U.S. President Barack Obama unequivocally supports Turkey's EU membership.

The AKP can help Mr. Obama by reforming aggressively and demonstrating that Turkey's march toward liberal democratic European values is, once again, on. Sarkozy would indeed look bad to the point of being cast as racist if Ankara were to improve its record to qualify for the EU and he were to continue to say that Turkey does not belong in the EU.

Turkey cannot change France's attitude, however, just by changing Sarkozy's mind. Ankara faces objections to its European membership not only from Sarkozy, but also from French foreign policy bureaucrats and common citizens.

French foreign policy thinkers identify Turkey as a potential German ally and hence a counter-weight to France in the EU. Turkey has close ties with Germany, but not the kind the Quai d'Orsay imagines. French policymakers view Turkish-German ties to be similar to the relationship between France and the Arab Maghreb countries. No analogy could be farther from the truth.

France-Maghreb ties are shaped by the colonial legacy, while the Turkish-German relationship is one between historic equals. This fact is not apparent to French policymakers who fear that if Turkey were to enter the EU, it would join France and Germany as the union's big three and that a Turco-German axis would alienate France. Ankara ought to change this image by demonstrating its independent stance on foreign policy issues, as well as closeness to France on crucial matters. This effort would require sustained exchanges and meetings between Turkish and French policymakers.

The halls of the Turkish Foreign Ministry in Ankara better ring with the sound of French over the coming years.

Turkey must also tackle the misperception among French citizens. Like their Quai d'Orsay counterparts, the French equate Turkey to the Maghreb, France's reference point for all Muslim issues.

There is anxiety among the French that bringing Turkey into the EU would be akin to bringing the Maghreb, a poor area rife with violent Islamism, into communion with France. Turkey's aggressive public relations campaign must get the across the following message: Turkey is not a Maghreb country but is rather politically akin to France. When the founders of modern Turkey established the country in the 1920s, they looked to Europe, and especially France, for inspiration, creating modern Turkey in the image of secular, centralized and nationalist France. This fact, unknown to the French, has to be driven home by a public relations campaign.

As part of its public relations campaign, Turkey should take its Cannes Film Festival and Nobel Prize winners to France, together with its cello players and intellectuals, bringing to the French a relatively lesser-known face of Turkish society. Turkey's traditional business card in Europe are the Gastarbeiter, poor mostly illiterate Anatolian Turks who migrated to Western Europe in the 1960s in search of economic opportunities.

Turkey has to show France that not only are the Gastarbeiter a phenomenon of the past, but also that they do not represent the richness of Turkish society.

If Turkey is to enter the EU, this will take a multi-year, multi-pronged campaign targeting France. The French connection will either prevent Turkey from joining Europe or make it an EU member.

Soner Cagaptay, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is director of its Turkish Research Program. He is the author of [Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?](#)

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