

# Turkey's EU Accession: Train Wreck or Red Light?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Mark Parris was United States ambassador to Turkey from 1997 to 2000. He has also served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Israel and political counselor at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. During the Clinton administration, he was special assistant to the president and senior director

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## Brief Analysis

On November 15, 2006, Jonathan Davidson, Soner Cagaptay, and Mark Parris addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Jonathan Davidson is senior advisor for political and academic affairs at the European Community Delegation in Washington, D.C. Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute. Mark Parris, former ambassador to Turkey, is senior foreign policy advisor for the Washington law firm of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, and Caldwell. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### JONATHAN DAVIDSON

There has been much talk of an impending train wreck of interests surrounding Turkey's possible accession to the European Union (EU), but this is not the correct metaphor. Both the EU and Turkey are committed to accession talks, and Turkey's accession is in the best interests of the EU. The stability that would come from Turkey's economic and political reform is very important for the EU. Turkey also provides significant energy security for the region, and, from a strategic standpoint, Turkey is in a pivotal position, affording access to the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Additionally, the benefit of having a large, secular, predominantly Muslim democracy as a member of the union would signal to the world that such a country can share the EU's fundamental values.

Despite the mutual benefits of Turkey's accession, the process can only move forward if Turkey continues to take positive steps, particularly on the issue of Cyprus. In October 2005, as a stated condition of beginning membership talks, Turkey signed the Additional Protocol, extending its existing custom union with the EU to the Republic of Cyprus. However, this extension has yet to be enacted. The EU's stand on this issue is very clear, and, if action is not taken, there will have to be consequences.

In addition to Cyprus, reforming Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code is a source of particular concern, since one of

the bedrock principles of the union is freedom of expression. Despite criticisms, the November 8 EU progress report on accession talks with Turkey expressed optimism about Turkey's ability to reform.

Accession talks with Turkey are taking place against a backdrop of enlargement. The EU must maintain its commitment to Turkey in order to keep the talks alive, but this commitment is an open-ended one. The EU is taking into account its ability to absorb new members. The recent accessions were very beneficial to the EU, and the union's strategic interests in Turkey remain; however, doubts persist among EU members. Despite these doubts, there is an enormous amount of work being done. The EU of fifteen years from now will be totally different from the present one. It may be more receptive toward receiving Turkey, or Turkey itself may be very different. It is important not to write off the possibility of an EU accession, but to continue to work for a stable EU that encompasses a qualified Turkey.

SONER CAGAPTAY

Turkish accession to the EU is not a train wreck, but the slowest-moving train in the world, grinding along at an imperceptible rate. The make-or-break issue, at least in the immediate future, is Cyprus. Will this issue cause a rupture in accession talks? Probably not, since the Greek Cypriots who control this issue in the EU have the most to lose if accession talks collapse. If Turkey left the bargaining table, the island would be divided forever and Greek Cypriots would lose any hope of uniting the whole island under their rule. Thus, the Greek Cypriots have a vested interest in keeping talks alive even though they will push Turkey to the brink while doing this in order to get a maximum number of concessions.

Additionally, most large European countries believe that if Turkey left the table, it would not be as easy to bring Ankara back as it might have been in the 1990s. Turkey has changed much in the last decade and desires to be treated with respect by the Europeans. If it perceives that it is not so treated, it will look elsewhere, such as to Russia or China.

Even though talks will continue at a slow pace, future ruptures remain possible. Two key EU documents, the Enlargement Strategy Paper and the commission's progress report on Turkey, show that the EU is still acting as a gatekeeper in talks with Ankara. The style of the accession talks shows that these are not the generic talks had with other potential members, but Turkey-specific talks. For instance, in a novel way, the Enlargement Strategy Paper suggests "feeding political criteria into the entire negotiation process." Hence, when Turkey sits at the table to negotiate fisheries with the EU, Brussels might well be making demands on Ankara's policy toward the Kurds. The EU expects Turkey to perform better than other candidate countries—or even EU member states. For example, the progress report criticizes Turkey for its limited broadcasting policy for Kurds, while some EU member states, such as France and Greece, have broadcasting policies more limited than Turkey's.

Also, the report lacks context. One example is the EU notion that the Kurds are a minority in Turkey. In Turkey, the definition of a minority is based on religion, not language. Hence, most people (including most Kurds) do not consider the Kurds, who are Muslims, a minority. This is not a legal definition that can be changed with EU pressure, but a socially ingrained perception rooted in 600 years of Ottoman history, as well as in institutions such as the millet system.

So long as the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) continues to enjoy safe haven inside the EU, any EU demands on the Kurdistan issue will look insincere to the Turks. Unless the EU shuts down the PKK infrastructure inside the union entirely, Brussels's demands on the Kurdish issue will be as useless as the words of a wife-beater invited to speak at a conference on domestic abuse.

The bleak nature of Turkish-EU relations adds to the "perfect storm" Turkey is experiencing, which includes (1) fraying relations with the United States, and (2) public opinion that is increasingly identifying with Muslim causes in

the Middle East. At a time when one of the two anchors that has tied Turkey to the West is damaged, should the EU anchor also be broken, that rupture would not bode well for Turkey's Western orientation.

A rupture would also be bad for the EU. Europe, especially France, has large populations of unassimilated, angry Muslims who are following Turkish accession very closely. To these people, Turkish accession is a test of whether or not they are European. If there is a rupture with Turkey, this will mean the further alienation of European Muslims. Social cohesion in the EU will decline and, ironically, France—the country most opposed to Turkey's accession—will suffer most from the domestic repercussions of an EU rupture with Turkey.

MARK PARRIS

Turkey has carried out major reforms as a result of its accession talks with the EU because the Turks believed they had a partner on the other side of the table. Lately, that perception has changed radically on the Turkish side, from the public up to the political leadership. In general, people do not believe that the EU is serious about Turkey's accession, and it is unlikely that Turkey will continue reforms in the absence of commitment from the other side.

On the European side, the EU is struggling with substantive questions, such as self-identity and the place of Muslims in the union. Until the Europeans have worked out who they are and who they want to be, it will be a while before Turkey joins.

As an outside actor, Washington has a genuine commitment to Turkey's accession. The problem that Washington faces is determining how much to be involved, and, at each stage, how much pressure to apply.

In the short run, it is unlikely that there will be significant compromises from Turkey on EU issues without significant EU finesse. The question thus becomes how to keep the process alive over the next few months. If talks fall through another time, the fatigue of making the same moves over and over again may be too much, and there may not be another chance.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Institute research assistant Zeynep Eroglu. ❖

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