Turkey and Europe's Problem with Radical Islam

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

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Brief Analysis

Turkey opened accession talks with the European Union (EU) on October 3. In the aftermath of the March 2004 Madrid bombings, the November 2004 murder of film director Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, and the July 2005 London bombings, all committed by radical Islamists, some people in Europe wonder whether Islam is compatible with European values and, accordingly, whether letting the predominantly Muslim Turkey join the EU is a good idea. Will Turkey's EU accession compound Europe's problem with radical Islam, or is Turkey's version of Islam a panacea for Europe's Islamist problem?

Does Europe Have a Muslim Problem?

Even if Muslims constitute only 4 percent of the overall EU population, Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe, and most European countries already have visible Muslim communities. According to the Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2004, France, with an estimated five million Muslims, is 8 percent Muslim. Muslims constitute 6 percent of the population in the Netherlands and 4 percent in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Austria. Muslims comprise 10-25 percent of the population in Paris, London, Rotterdam, Copenhagen, Malmo, Marseilles, Birmingham, and Brussels.

But not all Muslims in Europe are turning to radical ideologies. On the one hand, Spain, with a predominantly Moroccan Muslim community, and Britain, home to mostly Pakistani Muslims, have been targets of Islamist attacks. France and Belgium, home to predominantly North African Muslims, are also witnessing radicalization. On the other hand, Germany and Austria, with predominantly Turkish Muslim communities, are not experiencing similar developments. Europe's problem seems to be not with Islam but with specific groups on the continent. The Netherlands, whose Muslim community is dominated by two national elements, Turks and Moroccans, demonstrates this argument best. Of the 880,000 Muslims in the Netherlands, 34 percent are Moroccans and 40 percent are Turks, with the remainder being smaller communities of Muslims from Suriname, Indonesia, and elsewhere. While the Turks are yet to integrate fully into the Dutch society, they are standing away from the wave of Islamic radicalization that is sweeping Europe. The Hofstad Group to which van Gogh's murderer Mohammed Bouyeri belonged had thirteen members of Moroccan origin (and two Dutch Antillean converts), but no Turks in its ranks.

Van Gogh Murder Exposes a Fault Line

Developments in the Netherlands since the van Gogh murder shed further light on this phenomenon. After the killing, the Turkish Aya Sofya Mosque in Amsterdam took the initiative of drafting a Protocol to Prevent Extremism and Radicalization in Mosques. The protocol, which the Mosque signed with Amsterdam city government in September 2005, aims to prevent radicalization in Mosques. The protocol stipulates, "Mosques will closely monitor extremist behavior from its early beginning. . . . The management, the Imam, and the visitors carry responsibility to avoid radicalization in Mosques."

Two other Mosques -- one, Ghousia Mashid, primarily serving Muslims of Pakistani origin and another, Nour Mosque, serving Moroccan Muslims -- were also involved in the protocol when it was launched. But, later, both mosques rejected it. Ahmed Marcouch, the spokesman for the umbrella association of Moroccan mosques that includes the Nour Mosque, said on September 8, "We oppose the police-spirit woven in the document. It will backfire. If we sign this, these boys will refuse to come here. What good will that do? Our base has to trust that we will respect their privacy. This does not mean we support terrorism."

In response to the Moroccan refusal to sign the protocol, Haci Karacaer, chairman of the Dutch Turkish umbrella organization under which the Aya Sofya Mosque operates, said, "The Moroccans refused to sign because they want to be neutral. No one has an obligation to be neutral in the face of terror." Karacaer said Turkish mosques are not afraid to cooperate with the police, and urged the 450 mosques in Holland to send a strategic message by signing the protocol.

Turkish Secularism: Lessons for Europe

Turks come from a secular state that follows the French sense of laÃ¯citÃ©, with a clear separation of religion and the state, and are therefore able to function in secular Europe. Although all Muslims in Europe face significant social barriers to integration, Turks come from a democracy and turn to political participation, not violence, to express themselves. For instance, although Turks obtained citizenship rights in Germany only in 2001, they have already elected five deputies to the German legislature; the North Africans who constitute more than 5 percent of France's population and have had French citizenship for decades have no representation in that country's parliament.

One reason why the Turks in Europe do not mind cooperating with the authorities against radicals is that they come from a tradition of "state Islam," in which the government regulates religious affairs. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which is attached to the prime minister's office, is the organizing body for state Islam in Turkey. The Diyanet coordinates the building of mosques as well as the training and appointment of imams. Together with the Ministry of Education, Diyanet educates imams, who serve in mosques and teach children and adults in Quran schools. (Imams receive higher education at theological colleges attached to a number of public universities. Diyanet also provides the imams with topics for their weekly Friday sermons.)

In other Muslim countries, governments finance, certify, and supervise mosques. However, unlike in these other countries where underground radical mosques, Quran schools, and imams successfully compete with government establishments, in Turkey, state Islam enjoys a near monopoly as the legitimate form of the Muslim faith; it is a respected tradition with roots in both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish republic.

When asked whether the Turkish system is effective in preventing radicalization, the imam of the Ãœlkealan Mosque in Ankara, Mustafa Matur, said, "Certainly! Diyanet does a great job of inspecting the mosques and the imams, and they always urge the imams to adopt a positive tone when they are giving their sermons."

Implications for Europe

Turkey offers the EU two remedies for alleviating the twin problems of the demographic demise of its native population and growing radicalism among young immigrant Muslims.

* With 72 million Muslims who share the European values of democracy, the rule of law, secularism, and women's rights (the October 2005 study, Turkey and the EU: Differences, Similarities, and Impact, quantifies the similarity between Turkish and European attitudes on those issues), Turkey is Europe's ideal partner for growth, especially since the populations of other candidates or prospective candidates for EU membership, such as Bulgaria and Ukraine, are shrinking more quickly than the current EU average.

* As a secular country, Turkey provides Europe with lessons for how to deal with -- and perhaps even modernize -- Islam. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, drew inspiration from nineteenth century European thinking in establishing the republic. Just as Turkey learned from Europe in the past, the EU can now turn to Turkey for lessons on dealing with Islam. There has already been some progress in this regard: in February, for instance, the Dutch Ministry of Education approved a plan for the Free University in Amsterdam to offer a master's degree program for training imams. And the rising French politician Nicolas Sarkozy, who opposes Turkey's EU membership, has suggested government funding for the construction of mosques.

With even Sarkozy turning to Turkey for lessons, it would help to distinguish between a "Muslim problem" and an "Islamic radicalization problem" in Europe. Were it to do so, the EU would find out that it has much to learn and little to fear from Turkey.

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