

With Turkey, Europe May Thwart al-Qaeda

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Articles & Testimony

In the aftermath of the recent bombings in London, Turkey's European Union accession, lately thrown into doubt, has become an issue of cosmic importance for Europe. Here is why.

The appalling crimes in London and the subsequent revelation that the bombers were a cell of British Muslims of Pakistani origin indicate that what happened in Madrid on March 3, 2004, was not an isolated incident. Rather, there is a pattern emerging whereby al-Qaeda is using terror acts by radical Muslims in Europe to create resentment against the larger Muslim community in the EU--the second largest and fastest growing religious group inside the union. Moreover, the firebombing of mosques and harassment of British Muslims in the aftermath of the London attacks--episodes also witnessed after the slaying of Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh by North African Islamists--indicate that Europeans are prone to extracting justice from local Muslims in response to al-Qaeda's crimes.

With every additional al-Qaeda attack, Europeans will only become angrier and will continue seeking vengeance. This will further alienate Muslims living in the EU--already a poorly integrated and marginalized community in most European countries. Therefore, what looms on the horizon for Europe is a home-grown Islamist insurgency compounded by acts of violence against local Muslims.

Unless Europe takes the right steps, it risks having a population crystallized along Christian-Muslim lines. This would be an al-Qaeda victory. Fighting terror effectively is one way of preventing this scenario. Making those Muslims living in EU countries, especially those committed to European values, feel welcome on the continent is another. Here is where Turkey comes in. If the EU treats Turkey's EU accession with fairness, European Muslims will feel that they are indeed welcome.

That attitude has not been the case lately. Even though the EU recently invited Turkey to accession negotiations, and despite the fact that all previous accession talks have resulted in EU membership offers, upcoming European leaders from Angela Merkel in Germany to Nicholas Sarkozy in France are saying Turkey will never become an EU member.

These attitudes are raising the membership bar higher for Turkey than for other applicant states despite the fact that Ankara has already done at least as much as some of the EU's new Eastern European members to qualify for accession. Recently, the EU said that Ankara will have to go through separate rounds of negotiations for each of the 35 "chapters" to be addressed in the accession talks, while other candidate countries have addressed all chapters in a single round of talks.

How will Turkey's skewed accession process affect EU-Muslim relations? Once Ankara begins negotiations, a new discipline of "comparative accession talks" will emerge in Turkey, leading to a perception that the EU is treating Turkey unfairly due to its religion.

This feeling will drive a wedge between the EU and Ankara. In the post-September 11 world, Turkey sits precariously on a fence between the West and the Muslim countries. The Iraq war in particular has created feelings of solidarity between Ankara and its Muslim neighbors. If Turkey receives a cold shoulder from Europe at a time when US-Turkish relations are in the doldrums, the Turks may well turn toward the East.

Even worse, if Muslims in Europe perceive the European Union as discriminating against Turkey, they will conclude that there is no place for them on the continent, regardless of how European they become.

It will take years for a majority of Europeans to wake up to the wisdom of letting Ankara into the Union and see that Turkey provides Europe with an opportunity to bridge the chasm that al-Qaeda wants to expand. Until then, populist politicians will try to squash Ankara's membership prospects in hopes of cashing in on public resistance to the idea of a Muslim EU country. In doing so they will miss the point that Turks are the "western Muslims" best suited for EU membership, having two centuries of westernization, 80 years of secular government, six decades of multi-party democracy, a tradition of tolerant Islam, and Ataturk's legacy of equality between men and women solidly under their belt.

Europe faces a serious decision on Turkey. It can either thwart al-Qaeda's tactics by moving ahead with Turkish accession, or it can help al-Qaeda accomplish its goal of dividing Europe. Turkey's EU accession is not a mere technical issue--it is a political choice that the EU must make. For Europe's sake, better sooner than later.

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