

European Recalcitrance toward Turkey: An Agenda for U.S.-Turkish Ties in Summer 2005

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Jun 29, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Today, the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union (EU), issued its Framework for Negotiations with Turkey, a document outlining a strategy for accession talks with Ankara. In December 2004, the EU indicated that Ankara had satisfied its membership criteria “sufficiently enough” to begin talks on October 3, 2005. Yet, the Framework states that the negotiations with Turkey will be “an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed”—this despite the fact that all previous accession talks with candidate countries resulted in membership offers. With Europe having difficulty keeping its promises to Turkey and, accordingly, Turkish euphoria for the EU winding down, Washington stands at a strategic juncture in its relationship with Ankara.

Diminishing Turkish Enthusiasm for the EU

When the EU indicated in December 1999 that it would treat Turkey fairly as an accession candidate, Turks saw this as a sign that Europe was taking them seriously. In return, Ankara decided to take Europe seriously, implementing significant political reforms in order to qualify for membership and taking EU concerns into account when formulating foreign policy (e.g., in the run-up to the Iraq war). The EU’s stance toward Turkey seems to have changed, however. Rising politicians in two major EU powers—Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Angela Merkel in Germany—are opposed to Turkish accession, suggesting instead “privileged membership” or “special status” (see [PolicyWatch no. 1007 \(templateC05.php?CID=2333\)](#)). On June 27, Sarkozy suggested freezing EU expansion for Turkey (but not for Bulgaria and Romania, which are also candidate countries).

Moreover, the EU’s take on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) worries Turks. On May 12, 2005, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) held that the trial of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan had not been fair because he had not been properly informed of the charges against him when he appeared in court, even though he is the leader of an internationally known terrorist group. This technical verdict has not resonated well with Turks, who are concerned by a recent spike in PKK attacks—last year, the group killed more than 100 Turks. In fact, according to a June 19 poll, 65 percent of Turks believe that the verdict supports terror. Even if the ECHR leaves it up to the Council of Europe to decide what to do with its decision, the June 14 EU Ambassadors’ criticism of Turkey’s fight against the PKK has

already stoked Turkish resentment. Indeed, the EU's tendency to view the Kurds as a minority community—which will become more pronounced as the union makes political demands on Ankara during accession talks—will only exacerbate Turkish bitterness.

The return of fluctuating Turkish-EU relations, a pattern seen throughout the 1990s, does not appear to be short term. The negotiations scheduled for October will no doubt increase Turkish skepticism toward Europe. Accession talks are usually marked by hard bargaining, with the EU forcing candidate countries to make unpopular compromises in order to adapt to its requirements. Moreover, the union's accession rules for Turkey effectively dictate separate rounds of negotiations for each of the thirty-five "chapters" to be addressed. Other candidate countries have addressed all chapters in a single round of talks.

The Cyprus issue will also continue to pose problems. Prior to the April 2004 UN referendum to unify the island, the EU had promised that it would reward the Turkish Cypriots if they supported the plan, easing their humanitarian and economic isolation. Turkish Cypriots did in fact support the UN plan (which failed once the Greek Cypriots rejected it), but Brussels has not taken any steps to help them, further dampening Turkish faith in the EU's sincerity.

Recent Developments in U.S.-Turkish Relations

Steps in Cyprus. Even as Turkish faith in the EU dwindles, recent American steps have helped improve Turkish public opinion toward the United States. In particular, the May 31 visit by U.S. congressmen to Northern Cyprus was such a successful public diplomacy move that even Turkey's Islamist/conservative press praised Washington. That a symbolic visit could achieve so much shows the potential benefits if the United States decides to act further on its commitment to the Turkish Cypriots. Prior to the April 2004 referendum, Washington declared that it would help end their isolation. Measures toward this goal could include establishing direct flights, facilitating trade and cultural ties, and initiating political contacts with Turkish Cyprus.

The PKK threat. On May 19, in reference to the ECHR verdict, a State Department spokesman said, "Abdullah Ocalan is a terrorist who belongs in prison." More recently, a Treasury Department team visited Ankara last week to discuss financial measures against the PKK. Nevertheless, U.S. aid to Turkey's fight against the PKK has been slow in coming. PKK operations out of northern Iraq pose a threat to both Turkish and American interests. According to Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, commander of the Turkish Land Forces, the PKK is using new techniques (e.g., remote-controlled improvised explosive devices) that seem to be borrowed from the Iraqi insurgency. Moreover, on June 15, the PKK sabotaged the only pipeline carrying oil from the vast fields around the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk to the Mediterranean Sea, effectively helping Iraqi insurgents and harming Turkish as well as U.S. interests.

Meanwhile, Damascus and Tehran have abandoned their 1990s policy of "war by proxy" against Turkey via support for the PKK, instead fighting the group in a bid to win Turkey's heart. On June 21, for example, Syria—which provided the PKK and Ocalan with safe haven for decades and therefore bears at least indirect responsibility for the deaths of more than 30,000 Turkish citizens—declared that it had sentenced some PKK members to thirty months in prison. Tehran has adopted a similar policy, attacking PKK bases in Iran that it had previously tolerated. These actions have resonated well in Turkey.

The U.S.-Turkish relationship would face an even greater challenge if the PKK expanded its attacks into western Turkey—an area containing all of Turkey's large cities, almost all its tourism infrastructure, and a major share of its economic assets. If this happened—and especially if the attackers originated from U.S.-controlled northern Iraq—the Turkish public and elite could place much of the blame on the United States. Accordingly, immediate and enhanced bilateral collaboration to prevent such attacks (also involving Iraqi Kurds, since the PKK enjoys safe haven in areas under their control), is vital for the future of U.S.-Turkish relations.

Ankara's Role

Recent remarks by two senior Turkish officials—Chief of Staff Gen. Hilmi Ozkok at an April 20 press conference in Ankara, and Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Ilker Basbug in a June 6 speech in Washington—helped Turks understand the value of good relations with the United States. Their remarks also showed that the Turkish military—which, according to polls, is the most respected institution in the country—is willing to take proud ownership of the U.S.-Turkish relationship in the public eye, even after the fallout over the Iraq war. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a similarly strong case for the bilateral relationship in an April 28 speech and on several other occasions.

Why Act Now?

Since Turks have traditionally felt comfortable with the status quo in the Middle East, the Iraq war and the region's current transformation have made them anxious about U.S. foreign policy motives. Moreover, the war has produced new feelings of solidarity between Turks and their Muslim neighbors. Given the growing strains between Ankara and the EU, if U.S.-Turkish relations suffer a new setback in the near future, it would mark the first time in modern history that Turkey had weak relations with both America and Europe. This grave scenario of Turkish alienation from the entire Western world should be prevented. Doing so requires mutual steps. Washington might consider building confidence with Ankara by taking action on Cyprus and the PKK. The two countries should also follow up on recent Turkish diplomatic visits to Washington by developing a solid bilateral agenda like that seen in the 1990s. This would help ensure that the relationship is able to handle any future crisis. Finally, as Turkey's negotiations with the EU evolve, both the American and Turkish policy elite should emphasize the shared values between Turks, Americans, and the wider Western world, highlighting Turkey's unique status as a secular democracy with strong ties to the West.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #1009

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)