

Turkey and the European Union at a Crossroads: America's Role

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

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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

According to the Financial Times, France and Germany will propose to the December 12–13 European Union (EU) summit that negotiations regarding Turkey's accession to the EU begin in July 2005, providing Ankara achieves further progress in democratic consolidation and human rights. If indeed Turkey is offered a conditional date for EU accession at the Copenhagen summit, this would represent a significant, yet incomplete, step. Turkey needs a direct date from the EU to begin negotiations for joining the union.

Background

Turkey applied to join the EU in 1963, but little progress was made toward that goal for decades thereafter. By the early 1990s, Turkey had become even more determined to join with Europe, even as the EU faced a flood of applications from Eastern European countries. In 1993, the EU decided to standardize its membership benchmarks, mandating that all candidate countries comply with its "Copenhagen Criteria":

- the economic criterion ("the existence of a functioning market economy")
- the *Acquis Communautaire* ("the ability to take on the obligations of membership")
- the political criterion ("the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the respect and protection of minorities").

Currently, the EU and Ankara agree that Turkey meets the first two of these criteria. Turkey believes that with the passage of its constitutional reform package in August 2002 -- abolishing capital punishment, widening political freedoms, and facilitating education and broadcast in languages other than Turkish -- it has satisfied the political criterion as well. Yet, an October 9 EU report argued that the August reforms are insufficient because "many of them require the adoption of regulations and other administrative measures." This view could underline the EU's response to Turkey at the upcoming summit. For its part, Turkey argues that it has acted swiftly to implement the reforms. For example, in August, Turkish death-row inmates had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, while various administrative acts made possible the teaching of Kurdish and other languages. Then, on November 21, Ankara lifted the ban on Kurdish television broadcasting.

Since assuming power on November 28, Turkey's new Justice and Development Party cabinet has declared EU accession a priority. On December 3 and 4, the government launched two initiatives for further legal reforms ahead of the Copenhagen summit. These sweeping reforms -- both aimed at fighting abuses in the police force while increasing the freedoms of all citizens -- would harmonize the Turkish political system with those of Europe.

The Copenhagen Summit

Of the thirteen candidate countries looking to join the EU, ten (ranging from Estonia on the Baltic Sea to Cyprus in the Mediterranean) will be promised a 2004 accession date at the summit, while two others (Bulgaria and Romania) will be promised a 2007 date. Yet, the issue of Turkish membership has become particularly controversial in the lead-up to the summit. The Turks seem committed to EU membership, but the real question remains whether the Europeans want the Turks. EU members have expressed concern about several issues:

Turkey's Size. The Turkish population is expanding at 1.6 percent annually, while the populations of many EU countries are shrinking, including those of the Eastern European candidates. That said, Turkey's population growth is not as rapid as that of most Middle Eastern or African countries. In fact, if Turkey became a member, the EU's overall population would simply decline at a slower rate than it otherwise would. Moreover, Europe's economy, especially its burdened social-security and pension systems, will soon require new sources of labor, which Turkish accession could provide; the only alternative may well be increased immigration from former colonies, which could be less socially acceptable to Europeans.

Turkey's Low Income. The average Turkish income is only a quarter of the median EU income. Yet, the Turkish economy has grown at an encouraging annual rate of 4.5 percent over the last two decades (even including the current slump), compared to 1.5 percent annual growth in the EU. Moreover, Turkey's growth would certainly speed up were it to join the EU. EU structural funds, which facilitate economic improvements, would help Turkey modernize its infrastructure, while accession itself would bring increased trade and foreign investment, enhancing the prospects of narrowing the gap. In any case, Turkey's income levels are well above those of some countries likely to be offered membership at the summit (e.g., Romania).

Turkey's Muslim Majority. On November 8, Giscard D'Estaing -- former president of France and current head of the European Convention, a body responsible for chartering the EU's future constitution -- said that Turkey should not be granted accession because most Turks are Muslims. In fact, it is in the EU's interests to anchor a predominantly Muslim, yet secular and democratic, nation in the continent. The notion that being Muslim is incompatible with being European would be an unfortunate message for the EU to send to the Muslim world and to its own large Muslim minorities.

Cyprus. On November 18, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan presented a draft agreement regarding Cyprus to Turkey and Greece. After years of little action, Turkey seems interested in settling the Cyprus problem using something like Annan's formula. Intriguingly, Greece is also pushing for a solution to the problem -- and even for Turkey's EU accession -- in order to avoid a scenario whereby the southern (Greek) side of Cyprus unilaterally joins the EU, Turkey annexes the (Turkish) northern half, and the island becomes permanently divided.

What Happens Now?

As late as this summer, most commentators had assumed that no date would be set at the Copenhagen summit for the start of negotiations on Turkish accession. If this decision is indeed postponed, several negative consequences could emerge for Turkey. So far, the popularity of EU accession among Turks (as seen in the November 3 elections, when parties rallying on pro-EU platforms received 85 percent of the vote) has acted as a catalyst for speedy liberalization in the country. An EU snub in Copenhagen, however, could dampen political reform and even lessen international confidence in the Turkish economy, at a time when Turkey is struggling to pull out of its worst

recession since 1943. Turkey would much prefer to start accession talks in 2004 before the admission of ten new EU members -- among them (Greek) Cyprus -- that would have veto powers over Turkish membership. A date after 2004 would dim the prospects of Turkish accession into the union. In this regard, it might help if the EU offered Ankara an immediate and direct date instead of a conditional rendezvous in 2005, as proposed by the French-German plan. (Even if Turkey were given a date now, it would become an EU member only after completion of accession talks, which could take five years.)

U.S. Support for Turkish Accession

The United States has voiced strong support for Turkey's EU membership, vigorously lobbying EU governments to set a date for accession negotiations. In a speech in London last week, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz focused on the issue, highlighting Turkey as an example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy and praising Ankara as an important ally in waging the war against terror and confronting the challenge from Iraq. Thus, if Turkey is indeed granted a date for beginning accession talks with the EU, the credit would go not only to Europe and Turkey, but also to the United States.

◆ Soner Cagaptay is a Soref fellow and head of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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