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Turkey's Quest to Join the European Union: Implications for American Policy

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Brief Analysis

In two long sessions recently, the Turkish parliament adopted a historic reform package. Many view the legislation as a milestone for several reasons. First, it fully liberalizes the country's political system. Second, it lifts the few remaining limits on freedom of press, association, and expression. Third, it abolishes capital punishment, except in wartime circumstances. Fourth, it redefines and narrows the powers of the police forces, while increasing the communal rights of non-Muslim minorities. Fifth, in a gesture to the country's diversity, the bill facilitates the teaching of all languages spoken in Turkey, including Kurdish; it also extends broadcasting rights in these languages.

These reforms greatly broaden the liberties of all Turkish citizens. Moreover, they harmonize the country's legal system with that of the European Union (EU), which Turkey has aspired to join since the 1980s. With this measure, Ankara hopes to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria, a set of conditions that the EU requires all thirteen of its candidate countries to meet, including Turkey. In December 2002, the EU will convene in Copenhagen to finalize the accession calendars of its aspiring members, according to their adherence to the membership criteria. This meeting will shape the EU's map for many decades to come. Currently, Turkey is the only candidate that has not been put on the accession track. Therefore, the prospects for Turkish membership remain vague. Many Turks hope that the new reform package will fulfill the Copenhagen criteria before the deadline, and that this in turn will spur Brussels to begin membership negotiations with Ankara.

Economic Obstacles

Even with the passing of this reform package, however, Turkey's quest to join the EU is far from complete. In addition to mandating wider political liberties, the Copenhagen criteria include specific economic conditions (e.g., low inflation). Currently, Turkey is suffering its worst economic crisis since World War II, and is therefore far from

meeting many of these requirements. Yet, the Turkish economy has its merits. It is one of the largest in Europe, ranking sixth after Germany, France, England, Italy, and Spain, and far above other EU candidates. For example, the 9 percent loss that the Turkish economy experienced during its 2001 slump represented approximately \$55 billion - a figure larger than the entire gross national product of Hungary, a leading EU candidate. The Turkish economy also deserves credit for its growth potential. Between 1980 and 2000, for instance, it grew at a rate of 4.5 percent annually, far above the EU countries in southern Europe, even though these countries received tens of billions of dollars from the EU.

Yet, Turkey is still relatively poor in comparison to the EU. This factor may keep the EU from granting an accession date to Ankara in December, particularly when one considers the EU's alleged cultural qualms about Turkey and its fears that many Turks will migrate into EU countries after Turkey accedes. This scenario would likely cause anti-European and anti-Western backlash in Turkey. Clearly, Washington -- an ally to both sides -- has a stake in preventing such a scenario.

Why Should America Encourage Turkey's EU Membership?

Because EU membership would strengthen Turkey, the United States should support its pivotal ally's accession. First, accession would anchor Turkey in the European continent, finalizing what many Turks consider their centuries-old quest to become European. Recent polls show that as many as 60 percent of Turks are in favor of EU membership. Their desire to join the EU is rooted as much in psychological factors as in political incentives. The Turks dominated much of southeastern Europe for centuries, but were then defeated and humiliated by European powers. Moreover, tens of millions of Turks have ancestors who were expelled from the continent at one point or another.

As a result, the Turks have a love-hate relationship with Europe. On the one hand, they would like to become part of Europe, and have striven to do so for the past two centuries. On the other hand, they would rather not feel dependent on Europe. If the EU refuses to grant Turkey an accession date this December, the latter emotions would almost certainly take precedence. The most likely beneficiaries of the subsequent anti-Western political sentiments would be Turkey's nationalist and Islamist parties. A recent example of this phenomenon was the widespread anti-European hysteria that plagued Turkey in 1997. This hysteria was sparked by the EU's Luxembourg summit, during which the union left Turkey off its list of candidate countries. From then until 1999 -- when the EU officially named Turkey a candidate -- Turkish politics adopted anti-Western attitudes with alarming alacrity.

Washington has a vested interest in preventing the reoccurrence of these conditions. Turkey is an increasingly vital U.S. ally. Moreover, the Turkish public is a beacon of support for the United States, shying away from much of the anti-Americanism that characterizes Turkey's neighbors. Thus, Turkey's membership in the EU would give Washington a strong ally in Brussels. In addition, Turkey is a secular, democratic, and market-oriented Muslim-majority country. Such a nation is greatly needed in the EU, particularly in the wake of the September 11 attacks. EU membership would bond Turkey to a family of democratic and secular nations, creating psychological benefits that could shape Ankara's future political orientation and establish Turkey as a model for the larger Islamic world.

EU membership would also have practical benefits for Turkey. First, EU funds and programs would help ameliorate Turkey's infrastructure, which would in turn induce further growth in the country. If Turkey became more prosperous, fewer Turks would emigrate to European countries out of economic need. Second, once membership becomes plausible, direct foreign capital investment into Turkey will soar, as has been the case in other EU accessions. Turkey suffers from a chronic shortage of investment capital, which has caused a series of economic crises over the past several decades. A steady infusion of foreign capital would alleviate this problem and provide much needed stability for the growing Turkish economy. This would in turn decrease Ankara's need for foreign loans, making Turkey less dependent on international monetary institutions for financial bailouts. In due course,

the Turkish economy could establish steady growth, which would strengthen its political system and institutions. Following the example of Greece, Spain, and Portugal, Turkey would eventually become a wealthier, less crisis-prone society, and a way station of prosperity, democracy, and secularism between Europe and the Middle East. For these reasons, the United States should employ all available means to convince its European allies that Turkey should be given a realistic accession calendar with a final date for membership, particularly now that Ankara has satisfied the political leg of the Copenhagen criteria. The EU should also provide Ankara with full access to all EU programs, giving Turkey enough support to harmonize its economy with that of EU countries. Once Turkey completes its ongoing economic reforms, eventual EU membership would make the country an even more powerful American ally in Europe and the Middle East.

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