

Turkey: Europe-Bound?

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Brief Analysis

The European Unions (EU) naming of Turkey as a full-fledged candidate for membership is of historic significance. The first-ever Muslim-majority candidate, Turkey differs significantly from current EU member-states not only in religion, but also in culture, history, and the wide range of regional security threats it faces. U.S. diplomacy was crucial to the process of Turkey's achieving candidate status, and Washington is likely to remain an important factor in helping to develop EU-Turkish ties.

What the Declaration Means: In declaring last week in Helsinki that Turkey "is destined to join the [EU] on the basis of the same criteria as applied to the other candidate States," the union has formally forsworn the application of religious or cultural criteria to Turkey's admission. No doubt many Europeans will continue to oppose Turkey's membership on cultural/religious grounds--indeed, such opposition may intensify if Turkish membership becomes a more imminent reality. But application of such criteria is now officially against the rules of the game and cannot be used overtly against Turkey. Departing from traditional Turkish diplomacy, pro-EU Turkish foreign minister Ismail Cem this week even took a "viva la difference!" approach, emphasizing that Turkey has "a different identity and a very different historical experience from the other candidates." Earlier, he had acknowledged that Turkish membership would require the EU to make a "cultural compromise." The EU has now officially endorsed that "compromise"; by meeting the membership criteria, Turkey has a chance to test the sincerity of that proposition.

What It Does Not Mean: Turkey is not going to become a member of the EU any time soon. Most observers expect the process to take a decade or more. Turkey trails far behind EU member states economically and even further politically. In addition to widening the bounds of free expression, it will probably have to alter some of **Q** its fundamental principles of governance, including the policy and political role played by the military, limits on linguistic and cultural rights for Kurds and other minorities, and possibly even government controls on religion. These changes probably will not come quickly or easily, if at all. In addition, Turkey and the EU would have to come to agreement regarding agricultural support funds and freedom of movement for Turkish workers.

Why the Change? Two years ago, at its Luxembourg summit, the EU glaringly omitted Turkey from a newly minted list of eleven candidates. Many EU member states favored Turkey's candidacy, perhaps a majority, but EU decisions

require unanimity. In 1997, the leading opponents of Turkish candidacy were Germany and Greece. Therefore, two European developments were crucial in paving the way for this years EU reversal: the 1998 emergence of a new German government favorable to Turkish candidacy, and the 1999 appointment of a new Greek foreign minister, George Papandreou, who effectively capitalized on Greek popular sympathy for Turkish earthquake victims to promote his belief in rapprochement with Turkey.

It is doubtful that the EU would have acted, however, had not Washington vigorously lobbied for Turkey's candidacy. The United States used three main arguments to persuade--and, to some extent, to shame--the Europeans into including Turkey: the strategic importance of anchoring Turkey to the West, the boost that EU candidacy would give to the professed EU goal of democratization in Turkey, and the important role the EU has in promoting values of tolerance and diversity toward the Muslim world. Whether persuaded or shamed, the EU came around.

Other factors, their effect harder to document, were also important: a change in the attitude of human rights groups and even Kurdish nationalist groups--which opposed Turkish candidacy in 1997 but this time strongly favored it--apparently convinced that EU candidacy offered the best hope for Turkish reform; the goodwill many Europeans--particularly those on the left who now dominate EU governments--feel toward Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit, who is a social democrat, a pioneer of labor rights in Turkey, and a poet; the Ecevit governments anti-torture reforms; earthquake-related sympathy for Turkey throughout Europe; and Turkey's ongoing anger over the 1997 decision, which demonstrated to many Europeans that the EU may indeed be pushing a strategically significant Turkey away from the West.

Turkish Compromise? Some Turks, along with Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş, are wringing their hands over alleged compromises Turkey was forced to accept concerning Cyprus and Greek-Turkish relations, but that attitude represents a narrowly textual interpretation of the Helsinki communiqué, unleavened by political analysis. The passages concerning Cyprus and the Aegean disputes are sufficiently vague and equivocal that the political dynamics of the issue are left largely unaltered. Greece's membership in the EU indisputably gives it some considerable leverage against Turkey on these issues, but the communiqué itself does little to enhance this. Rejecting the EU's candidacy offer--reportedly considered by Turkey until the very last minute--would also have done little to limit Greek leverage. Turkey appears to have lost nothing substantive in the terms of the communiqué.

Near-Term Significance: Candidacy is a powerful incentive for internal reform as Turkey strives to meet EU-membership criteria. Foreign Minister Cem created a stir Monday by seeming to endorse the idea of Kurdish-language television. Perhaps just as significantly, he also acknowledged that the legal ban on Kurdish-language broadcasts is the sort of obstacle to "democracy and human rights" Turkey must remove for the sake of pursuing EU membership. Cem's statement encourages those who seek rapid reform.

Candidacy also strengthens the hand of groups advocating reforms by tightening their links with EU-based groups and, more importantly, gives them a powerful institutional ally in the EU itself. Feeling empowered, advocates of human rights will likely push the envelope of the Turkish legal system in the days ahead, testing to see if Turkish prosecutors, perhaps now mindful of EU reaction, will pursue cases involving limits on freedom of speech.

In foreign affairs, candidacy strengthens Turkey's links to the West, helping to assure that Turkey's primary orientation remains Westward--a longstanding goal of both the Turkish secular elite and the U.S. government. It also boosts Turkey's regional prestige and enhances prospects for continued Greek-Turkish rapprochement.

Most interestingly, candidacy will fuel a debate in Turkey, just now underway, as to whether EU membership is ultimately desirable or not. The result is not certain. Until recently, most Turks viewed EU membership simplistically as a badge of "Western-ness," a sort of award for good, Western-like behavior. But with membership now a more realistic, if distant, prospect, many Turks will raise concerns about potential loss of national sovereignty

to Brussels; about fundamental changes in the nature of the state; and about EU involvement in the Cyprus and Aegean disputes. Among the most interested parties will be the highly influential Turkish military. Even some among Turkey's ardently pro-West political forces may decide that EU candidacy, the EU customs union, NATO membership, and close relations with the United States together form a sufficiently strong anchor for Turkey's so-called "Western vocation" and that the project need not be carried as far as actual EU membership.

Most likely, a great majority of Turks will favor actual EU membership and will be willing to undertake the difficult reforms. But, if the EU membership process does go forward, the ride will be bumpy and fraught with Turkish suspicions that the EU is merely stringing it along to wrest changes and concessions from the Turks without the sincere intent of offering membership; Turkish claims that Greece is using its position as an EU member as unfair leverage on the Cyprus and Aegean issues; and Turkish worries that closer ties with the EU may inadvertently weaken ties with Washington. Given its interests in a strong and Western-oriented Turkey, close U.S.-Turkish relations, and stable Greek-Turkish relations, Washington will have little choice but to remain an active participant in EU-Turkish relations.

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