

Turkey and the European Union:

One More Try

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Dec 9, 1999

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

Spuried two years ago, a wary Turkey again hopes to be designated a candidate for membership in the European Union (EU) when the EU summit meets in Helsinki December 10-11. That this prospect is on the brink of realization is a tribute to many factors, but perhaps most of all to tireless U.S. campaigning on Turkey's behalf.

U.S. officials have warned that a Turkey rejected by the EU would be a strategic loss for the West; they have urged the EU not to exclude Turkey for religious or cultural reasons. But once Turkey becomes a candidate, they say, Washington's work is done. In fact, however, U.S. diplomacy will be crucial for managing the many problems that remain and will inevitably arise in EU-Turkish and EU-Greek-Turkish relations.

Outlook. Fourteen of the fifteen EU states have indicated support for Turkish candidacy, but EU decisions require unanimity, so the result is far from certain. Only Greece is equivocating. Athens has endorsed Turkish candidacy in principle, but the Greek government, possibly heading to elections in the spring, seeks a political boost from the EU. Athens hopes the EU will pledge that the Greek Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus will be allowed to enter the EU even if its dispute with Turkish Cypriots remains unresolved and its claimed territory divided. Less desirable for Greece, but nevertheless of value, would be firm EU backing for Greek positions on its Aegean Sea disputes with Turkey. If the EU goes too far in meeting Greek goals, however, it will neutralize any Turkish goodwill that might result from a designation of candidacy.

Future Turkish-EU Relations. Receiving a candidacy designation unencumbered by objectionable Cyprus language would please Turks, who feel generally mistreated by the EU. Turks still smart from their exclusion from an eleven-state candidacy list agreed to at the 1997 Luxembourg summit. By designating Turkey a candidate, the EU would confirm to Turks and to the world that it now accepts Turkey as a member of the European family of nations.

Candidacy designation may soothe--but probably will not heal--Turkey's breach with Europe. First of all, many Turks will see a decision on candidacy as a result more of U.S. pressure than European change of heart. In Greece, President Bill Clinton recently dubbed himself "probably the strongest supporter in the West of Turkey's membership in the EU." Second, Turks understand that the designation "candidate," whatever its psychological and

symbolic impact, is only the first step in a very uncertain membership process. Actual negotiations for membership, which would take years, would not begin any time soon, at least not before Turkey meets difficult human rights standards, including protection of "minority rights" for the Kurds. For now, Turkish officials usually deny that the term "minority" even applies to Kurds. Meanwhile, the eleven nations designated candidates two years ago--including all the former Warsaw Pact states, as well as the Greek Cypriot-controlled government--all will have begun negotiations by the first half of 2000. Thus, the many Turks who feel their Cold War-era NATO contribution merits Turkey special EU consideration, and at the least a status above that of "former enemies," will remain disappointed. Third, Turks will be resentful if the trade-off for their candidacy is a great diplomatic gain for the Greeks or Greek Cypriots. Fourth, even if objectionable Cyprus language is avoided this time, Greece almost certainly will continue to use its leverage within the EU to press Turkey on Cyprus and Aegean issues, provoking popular Turkish resentment. Fifth, no matter what the verdict on candidacy, the Turks will remain unhappy about another ongoing EU project: European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI), the EU's effort to develop a defense capacity that is autonomous of NATO. Ankara worries that ESDI will marginalize Turkey's role in European defense in the future. Sixth, none of the issues that displease the EU about Turkey--its human rights policies, its disputes with Greece, the Cyprus problem--will be resolved easily or soon. Moreover, Europeans uneasy about Turkey's "cultural differences" likely will become even more vocal if Turkish membership begins to appear a realistic prospect.

Implications. Aside from strengthening Turkey's links to the West, candidacy designation would mark a significant breakthrough for the EU. Given Turkey's economic and human rights problems, nobody expects its full membership to become a serious prospect for a decade or more. Nevertheless, by accepting Turkey into the circle of candidate, the EU would acknowledge that a Turkey that meets all the political and economic criteria has a right to be a full member. That is a significant statement, given the deep misgivings many Europeans harbor about letting in a nation of 65 million Muslims with a population growing faster than any EU state. Turkey has condemned this attitude as "racist," and the United States, preaching the value of "diversity," has said the same in so many words. Turkey's foreign minister recently acknowledged that Turkish membership would involve "cultural compromise" for the EU. Designation of candidacy would show the EU has agreed to adopt the diversity approach--that the EU will not be merely "a Christian club"--at least in principle.

If Turkey is denied candidacy, particularly if the veto comes from Greece, the negative consequences would be many: a heavy blow to recently improved Greek-Turkish relations, an end to recently renewed Cyprus diplomacy, deeper Turkish alienation from Europe, and a near-shattering of the notion that the EU should serve as Turkey's anchor to the West. All of those results would represent a setback for U.S. interests. Turkey would remain a regional power and a close ally of the United States-- indeed, a Turkey spurned by the EU is all the more dependent on U.S. friendship. For the near-term at least, it would also remain tied to Europe in certain fundamental ways: trade patterns, the customs union agreement, its obligations to the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights, and NATO. But the notion that Ankara's future does not lie fully in Europe would gain currency in domestic Turkish circles, boosting the country's unpredictable forces of nationalist and political-religious extremism.

U.S. Engagement Needed. No matter what the outcome in Helsinki, U.S. policymakers will have to remain involved in EU-Turkish relations. President Clinton's top policy adviser on European affairs recently said that Turkey should be granted candidate status on a "no conditions" basis. If Turkey is spurned again, it is a near-certainty that Washington will continue to lobby EU states for a better outcome next time.

U.S. officials say that, if Turkey is granted candidate status, they will step back, their work completed, and let Ankara and the EU alone worry about just how Turkey proceeds to membership in an organization of which the United States is not a member. That would be to the great relief of most officials in EU states, who are irked by U.S. preaching about Turkey's importance. But it is doubtful U.S. officials will have that luxury. Still deeply mistrustful of

the EU, Turkey will inevitably perceive unfair treatment and ask Washington to intercede on its behalf. Even more compelling for the United States, EU-Turkish relations are now inextricably enmeshed in Greek-Turkish relations, and the latter will remain an important concern for any U.S. administration because of its domestic political importance and its strategic influence on NATO. Barring an unanticipated settlement of the Cyprus problem in the next few years, an EU-Greek-Turkish crisis over EU membership for the Greek Cypriot-controlled Republic of Cyprus is virtually inevitable. The stakes will be high, and Washington will be called in to put out the fires. If it hopes to avert that crisis, however, the United States probably will have to get involved much sooner.

Alan Makovsky is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Policy #427

RECOMMENDED



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)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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