

Sarkozy's Policy on Turkey's EU Accession: Bad for France?

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Anti-Muslim sentiment is on the rise in France. Largely unassimilated and disgruntled, thousands of rioting French Muslims cut a path of destruction throughout the country in 2005, sending shock waves through Paris. France responded to the recent Muslim violence and the alarming rise in Islamic radicalism by electing a harder-line government in May 2007. To be sure, tougher policies are needed. But France may have an easier way to restore balance between indigenous Frenchmen and the Muslim population: Turkish accession to the European Union.

The French Resistance

France is home to the largest Muslim community in the E.U., with five million Muslims, most of whom are Arabs. This amounts to a little less than 10 percent of France's population of 62 million. France has also met the most severe problems regarding integration of its Muslim population. The aforementioned riots of November 2005 continue, in fits and starts, particularly in the poor suburbs of Paris, but also in other large French cities.

There is, without a doubt, a group of French Muslims who won't be placated. They will have to be dealt with appropriately. Still, many French Muslims view Turkey's E.U. accession as an indication of their future in France. Indeed, many French Muslims maintain a deep and abiding interest in Turkey's long-standing bid to become a member state in the European Union because they see Turkey's entry as the ultimate litmus test of their "European-ness."

Newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy's pro-American tilt on foreign policy is a reflection of his strong grasp of international relations. He has also initiated good policies at home to integrate the French Muslims by, for example, appointing Rachida Dati, an Algerian-Moroccan immigrant woman, to the powerful position of Minister of Justice. But, Sarkozy's Turkey policies are sorely lacking. He has yet to fathom the extent to which Turkey's entry to the E.U. could help him.

Sarkozy fiercely opposes Turkey's E.U. entry, putting a premium on traditional European boundaries, and ignoring Turkey's European political and economic credentials, including a long-standing membership in NATO. On September 26, 2007, Sarkozy stated, "I do not think that Turkey has a place in Europe," claiming instead that Turkey's place was in "Asia Minor."

In essence, Sarkozy is telling France's five million Muslims that they have a place in French society if they adopt France's Western values and participate in its secular democratic institutions. By rejecting Turkey -- a secular democracy with a pro-Western orientation -- Sarkozy is sending the French Muslims another message: regardless of how secular, democratic, and Western you become, there is no official place for you in Europe.

Surely, there are legitimate concerns in France, as there are throughout the world, over Turkey's Islamist orientation under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Since the AKP's rise to power in 2002, the Turks' powerful identification with the West has, to some extent, eroded. Yet, the basic secular tenets of Kemalism continue to guide the republic, and the Turkish military remains ever loyal to NATO. Thus, while Turkey is currently led by the AKP, a party with an Islamist pedigree, the country remains a devoutly secular state and society. In the last Turkish elections on July 22, 2007, a majority of Turks voted for parties other than the AKP. Consequently, turning Turkey away from the gates of Europe is a long-term mistake. Just as it would alienate the French Muslims, telling them that they do not belong in Europe, the French rejection of Turkey would embolden a growing minority view in Turkey that Europe believes Turkey does not belong in the continent.

How, then, can Sarkozy be persuaded that integrating Turkey into the E.U. is the best way to defeat the Islamists in Turkey as well as those in France and the E.U.? Moreover, how can he be convinced that once in the E.U., the Turks will be worthy citizens? The French president should look no further than neighboring Germany.

Talking Turkey in Germany

Over three-quarters of the 5.5 million Turks in the E.U. live in Germany. The Turks in Germany have never had it easy. Despite the fact that they arrived in Germany in the early 1960s to provide manual labor for the resurging German economy, they hardly received benefits befitting their hard work. Indeed, German citizenship laws, until 2001, stipulated that one needed to have "German blood" to obtain German citizenship. Hence, the millions of Turks who were born, and in some cases, those whose grandparents were born in Germany, had no political rights, despite being legal resident taxpayers in Germany for decades.

Undeterred, the Turks of Germany remained peaceful, and hardworking. They built businesses, bought homes, and contributed in no small part to the re-creation of post-war Germany. Finally, when Germany changed its citizenship laws in 2001, approximately one million of the qualified Turks were granted German citizenship, and each year, many more apply for and are granted German citizenship. What's more, since 2001 the Turks have elected five members to the Bundestag, Germany's parliament. Ethnic Turks now constitute around one percent of the deputies in the German Bundestag. This is roughly equivalent to the actual percentage of the country's citizens of Turkish origin.

In short, the Turks of Germany, through two generations of hard work, have proven their commitment to European values. Though most of them dwell at the bottom of the German and Turkish social pyramid (after all, those who migrated to Germany usually did not qualify for jobs in Istanbul), the Turks in Germany are committed to democratic processes. The reason is simple; these people come from a democratic country. Turkey, which President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk forged into a secular republic in the 1920s, has been a practicing multi-party democracy since 1946. Over time, not surprisingly, this political environment has helped to create a democratic culture, producing citizens who are committed to Western values. In other words, Sarkozy has nothing to fear from the Turks. When frustrated, the Turks do not burn cars; rather they choose to vote and participate in the democratic process.

Sarko's Choice

The case of the German Turks notwithstanding, many analysts argue that Turkey is not quite ready for E.U. membership. This is likely true. Turkey has catching up to do with Europe. Turkey must also reject the growth of Islamism, if it expects to be welcomed with open arms in Europe. But then, nobody is suggesting that Turkey become an E.U. member immediately. In the past, accession talks with large countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom -- both comparable to Turkey in size -- have taken up to a decade. Even if the accession talks with Turkey continue at a normal pace (that is, if France does not impede the process), Turkey would not join the E.U. until 2015.

While Turkey labors to prove itself ready for integration, Sarkozy must come to the eventual realization that the Turks of Europe are decidedly different from the minority of rioting Arabs of France. He must also realize that attempts to integrate Muslims into French society will likely fail if he does not begin to view Turkey's E.U. accession as the tool with which to promote that integration. The new French president will waste a golden opportunity if he does not leverage Turkey's E.U. accession to send the right message to the French Muslims, as well as those throughout the E.U.: Be secular and democratic, respect Western values, and eschew violence, and you are welcome.

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