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DIIS Brief

Turkey's Future: EU Member or "Islamist Rogue State"?

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Abstract

The EU's decision to grant Turkey the status of a candidate for full-membership triggered an intense and polarized debate about the principle eligibility of Turkey as an EU member-state. In this debate, religion has become an openly discussed issue with regard to the European dimension of Turkey. In posing three interrelated questions on Turkey's EU reform process, this brief argues that the country has engaged in a genuine reform process toward a pluralist democracy in whose course the relationship between religion and state in the country has been transformed. In order to support this process further, however, the Europeans need to avoid historical prejudices and they have to acknowledge the strong European dimension of this predominantly Muslim country.

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(Dietrich Jung)*

Since the Ankara Agreement (1963) to the beginning of membership negotiations between the EU and Ankara in October 2005 and beyond, Turkey has been travelling a particularly arduous and often bumpy road toward European integration. Moreover, along the way the country has been passed by a number of competitors who now themselves have the right to council over Turkey's EU accession. The reasons for the long and strenuous nature of this process are manifold, and one does not have to be a soothsayer to predict further disappointments and set-backs to come. One continuing bone of contention is Turkey's rejection to open its ports and airports for traffic from Cyprus as long as Turkish Northern Cyprus remains economically isolated. This break with Turkey's legal obligations vis-à-vis an EU member-state led to the suspension of negotiation talks between Brussels and Ankara in eight out of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* in December 2006. More criticism came with the most recent Progress Report of the EU which concluded that the reform efforts in Turkey had slowed down in 2006 and that there remain clear political deficits in areas such as the freedom of speech and expression, minority rights, and the country's civil-military relationship.

There is no doubt that these problems reflect reasonable arguments in the controversial debate about Turkey's envisaged EU membership, but the contribution of historically deep rooted stereotypes to making the country's accession an uphill struggle cannot be denied. The public debate in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit of the EU in December 2004 made it clear that Ankara's sense of having to struggle not only with political and economic standards, but also against deeply entrenched cultural prejudices

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was not entirely wrong. In this respect, the timing of the protest against Turkey's potential membership was revealing. The European opposition against Turkish membership raised its voice precisely at the same time as the new Turkish government launched significant reforms to meet the Copenhagen criteria.

Significant Reforms and the European Discourse on Turkey's Cultural 'Otherness'

In November 2002, the Turkish electorate voted the feeble and querulous coalition government of veteran politician Bülent Ecevit out of office and furnished the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a comfortable majority in parliament. Although its roots lie in Turkey's Islamist political wing, the AKP's election campaign was openly pro-EU and was able to attract votes from a broad societal spectrum. In government, the AKP has undertaken drastic reform measures in order to meet the formal EU standards. In short, the Turkish electorate showed political maturity and the new government its willingness to democratic reforms. At the same time, European observers again discovered in Turkey the "Other". In a voice resembling Orientalist travel accounts of the eighteenth century, they began to grumble over Turkey's cultural Otherness and the huge cultural gap that allegedly separates this Muslim state from Christian Europe. The subsequent debate has revolved around this notion of difference, more or less explicitly shaping the argumentation of both critics and supporters of Turkish membership. While the former oppose Turkey's membership because of its religiously defined Otherness, the latter are afraid the country could turn into an Islamist rogue state if Brussels said No. Against this background, this brief will look at three interrelated questions central to this ongoing debate: the character of Turkey's reform process; the consequences of a failure of Turkey's accession negotiations; and the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Is the Turkish Reform Process a Genuine Expression of Democratic Reform?

Many European observers have expressed serious doubts regarding the intention behind Turkey's EU membership bid. They often interpret the various obstacles on the country's

reform path within the theoretical framework that Samuel Huntington provided in his *Clash of Civilizations*. There, Huntington described Turkey as a “torn country” in which the authoritarian state elite tries to anchor the country in the West against the will of the absolute majority of its population. However, the view from inside Turkey attests that Huntington’s picture is a mere caricature of Turkey’s political realities. Certainly, there is – as in all EU member-states – a broad coalition of EU sceptics. Currently, in this camp of Turkish EU sceptics authoritarian-minded secularists and Islamists appear alongside left- and right-wing nationalists as strange bedfellows. In particular since the AKP government began with significant democratic reforms, this heterogeneous coalition of authoritarian minded political forces has raised its voice.

Yet these representatives of authoritarian politics are increasingly outnumbered by a rising class of well-educated Turks who, regardless of their secularist or religious leanings, have embraced democratic values. Only a democratic Turkey, based on a functioning market economy and on the rule of law, will be able to provide this new democratically minded generation with the future they desire. They hold a genuine interest in the reform process and in the long run will determine Turkey’s political future. It is therefore reasonable to predict that this generation will try to follow the road of comprehensive reform, regardless of the obstacles which domestic and European opposition to Turkey’s EU membership might create. To be sure, this internal struggle between democratic and authoritarian political forces is not yet decided and in the current situation the EU negotiation process provides a crucial straight-jacket for the country’s state elite to maintain the path of political and economic reform. Yet there is reason to be confident that eventually the democratic and pluralistic forces in Turkey will prevail.

What Happens If the EU Says No?

Given the above-mentioned undercurrent of religiously and culturally flavoured resistance against Turkey’s EU membership among parts of Europe’s population and their respective political elites, it is definitely appropriate to ask this question. The future might bring a number of instances in which voices calling for a stop in the negotiations will be raised. In

the forthcoming presidential elections in France, for instance, Turkey's EU accession process certainly will again become a hostage of a national electoral campaign. This is guaranteed by the nomination of the presidential candidate of France conservative wing, Nicolas Sarkozy, who is well-known as a staunch opponent of Turkey's full-membership in the EU.

However, Turkey's reaction to a break-down of the accession process is predicated by a number of historical contingencies. In particular, it depends on the stage at which this No from Brussels would come. Under the conditions of continuing reforms, the point of no return for Turkey's authoritarian forces might soon be reached. In this case, it even could be possible that a democratically reformed Turkey would reject full-membership at a point in time at which the EU straight-jacket for reform is no longer necessary. Indeed, many Turkish intellectuals are toying with the idea that in the end a thoroughly reformed, pluralistic Turkey could pay Europe back for previous humiliations by turning its back on Brussels. For the time being, however, a relapse into structures of restricted democracy or phases of outright authoritarianism seems more likely. Yet keeping Turkey's republican history with three direct and one indirect military interventions (1960; 1971, 1980, 1997) in mind, this break-down of the reforms would most probably be orchestrated by the country's secular but conservative Kemalist establishment. Rather than turning into an Islamist rogue state, derailing the EU negotiation process could lead to the re-emergence of state-centred nationalist governments under the tutelage of the "enlightened absolutism" of Turkey's secularist military-bureaucratic elite.

Is Islam Compatible with Secular Democracy?

It is conventional wisdom in Europe that Turkey is the one and only purely secular state in the Muslim world. Therefore the coming-to-power of the AKP with its Prime Minister Erdogan raised concerns that the current government might be playing the EU membership-card in order to promote a hidden agenda for the Islamisation of the country. Intrinsically, these concerns build on the predominantly negative attitude of modern Europe towards religion in general and, as a derivate of this, towards Islam in particular.

According to the stereotypical conceptualisation of European secularist modernity, religion and modernity are nested in a zero-sum game. Consequently, modernisation necessarily implies secularisation in the sense of a linear decline of religious values and institutions in society. The increasing visibility of Islam in Turkey's public sphere has therefore been interpreted as a deviation from the country's modernisation process. For many observers, the previous bastion of secularism in the Muslim world seems to be endangered.

A closer look at the history of Turkish secularism, however, provides a different interpretation. From its inception in the 1920s, Turkish secularism has not expressed the separation of religious and political spheres. Instead, the secular principle has served as a means of state control over the religious field. It developed into an ideological core element of the Kemalist state doctrine, subsequently legitimising the undemocratic roles of the single-party rule of the Republican Peoples Party (1923-1946) and later the political autonomy of the Turkish Armed Forces. Ironically, the staunchly secular Kemalist state elite have also instrumentalised religion according to their needs. Whether in defining the Turkish nation, in constructing a Turkish national culture, or in combating leftist and Kurdish nationalist ideologies in the 1970s and 1980s, state-defined Sunni Islam has continuously performed a function in Turkish politics. Against this background, the "re-emergence" of Islam in Turkey's public sphere does not come as a surprise. Rather, the increasing visibility and autonomy of religious symbols in Turkey is at least partly a consequence of the current reform process. In applying the pluralistic norms of the Copenhagen Criteria to Turkish society, in particular the crucial right of the freedoms of expression and religion, the state necessarily will gradually lose its monopoly over the religious field. In this way, the Europeanisation and democratisation of Turkey might indeed be accompanied by its "re-Islamisation". Consequently, the "Islamisation" and democratization of Turkish society are not necessarily mutually exclusive processes.

Conclusions and Future Perspectives

In the years to come, Turkey's challenge is to turn the formal reforms of its political and juridical institutions into social practices. In December 2005, the court case against the Turkish Novelist Orhan Pamuk, meanwhile bearer of the Literature Nobel Prize 2006, clearly indicated that this is a difficult process. So far, the right of freedom of expression and the state-centred nationalism of the Turkish state apparatus have clashed on various instances. These instances indicate that there is still a long way to go before a consolidated democratic Turkey will be able to join the EU. We have to realise that the implementation of reforms is in fact a fierce internal power struggle in which more political dramas such as the Pamuk case are likely to unfold. In the course of the reform process individuals and institutions gradually will lose their privileged status in Turkish society. The remaining problems with respect to the civil-military relationship and the frequent obstruction of government policies by the judiciary are two telling examples for these current battles about status, resources, and inherited privileges that have accompanied the reform of Turkey's political and social institutions.

If the EU really has a vision for a common political future with Turkey, Brussels has to not only supervise this reform process carefully, but also support it by demonstrating the necessary solidarity and understanding. Europeans ought also to be aware that it is not only Turkey that has to transform itself. While the Turks must overcome the historical legacy of decades of authoritarian and state-centred rule, the Europeans should remove historically grounded prejudices according to which Turkey still represents a threat rather than a partner. Turkey is not the Anti-Christ knocking at the EU's door, but a Muslim country for which EU membership lies within the historical logic of its own modernisation process. If the EU members are not able or willing to acknowledge this European dimension of Turkey, indeed, the whole accession process might eventually become meaningless.

Box 1: The institutional affiliations of Turkey with Europe since 1945

1948 – Turkey was a founding member of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC; since 1961 OECD)

1949 – Turkey became a member of the Council of Europe

1952 – Turkey became a member of NATO

1959 – Turkey applied for associate membership of the European Economic Community (EEC)

1963 – The Association Agreement with the EEC was signed in Ankara

1987 – Turkey applied for full membership in the EEC (rejected)

1995 – Turkey and the EU sign the customs union which has been effected since 1996

1997 – Turkey applied again for full-membership in the EU

1999 – Turkey became an official EU candidate at the Helsinki summit

2004 – The Copenhagen summit decides to take up membership negotiations with Turkey

2005 – Turkey and the EU officially open the accession negotiations