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Turkey and/in the EU: The Security Dimension

27 September 2004, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris

The Conference was organised with the explicit intention of plugging in the broader European debate - in the run-up to the reports to be delivered by the Commission on 6 October and with a view to the European Council decision on 17 December – but also of evaluating the potential implications of Turkish membership (or non-membership) for the Union's security policy. Several Turkish officials and experts were invited to attend and give papers in order to engage in a common assessment of bilateral relations – present and future.

I. Overview. After a cursory review of the main arguments (for and against) raised in the current debate over Turkey's future EU membership, the Conference started with a broad overview of the current state of affairs. First of all, the fact that Ankara's bid is generating 'existential problems' among EU members - it was said - should not be seen by Turkey as a delaying device: it has happened with each and every enlargement, although Turkey is definitely a very special candidate in its own right. Moreover, it is not because of their foreign policy that candidates are (or are not) taken in, although Turkey has a record of alignment with the CFSP *acquis* that is not as good as that of other candidates. Ankara's deficit, in this respect, concerns mainly those EU positions that are seen as touching its regional interests; also, it has sometimes refrained from giving relevant information as requested by the Commission in the process. Both aspects are of some importance because Turkish foreign policy is strongly focused on its neighbourhood (Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Caucasus), which after accession is bound to become part of a common EU – no longer a bilateral – policy.

Relations with Syria have improved recently, especially since Damascus broke up with the PKK. Ankara has been very constructive over Iraq and also on the Middle East in general. It still has difficult relations with Russia, but common commercial interests play a role too. Relations with Armenia have to be harmonised before accession. And Turkish military forces are engaged alongside European and American ones in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. All this said, opening the Union to Turkey is a very different enlargement indeed. Its potential impact on foreign policy proper presents 'advantages and challenges': it can have a stabilising effect on the neighbourhood but also a destabilising effect on internal decision-making, especially under the unanimity rule.

Turkey, it was added, is an unknown quantity and is regarded on the EU side with a combination of reluctance and acquiescence. Yet if/when negotiations start, such a perception will be quickly overtaken by events: Turkey will feel more confident and, at any rate, there will be a concrete agenda to pursue. As for the geo-strategic position, it is both a blessing and a curse: however, after the polarisations of the past (East vs. West, 'separatism' vs.

centralism, secularism vs. fundamentalism), Turkey should now be considered more as an asset than a liability, bringing as it does ‘new horizons’ onto the EU doorstep.

The rest of the discussion in the first session dwelt upon:

- a) the continuing presence of Turkish troops on the island and the Cyprus question in general - another issue, it was said, that has to be solved not only before Turkey’s accession but as quickly as possible;
- b) the possible impact of a ‘No’ to Turkey’s bid (it would send shockwaves across capital markets and disintegrate the ruling party AKP);
- c) Turkish irked reactions to the term ‘federalism’ as applied to Iraq (it will oppose it only if based on ‘ethnic’ lines), and the possible contours and implications of a major crisis in Northern Iraq (if Turkish forces entered the Kurdish areas, it was asked, would the EU suspend the accession negotiations?);
- d) the extent to which also the Turkish military may need reform and ‘transformation’ proper (the country has a very large army but only three brigades, plus rotation, are being made available to NATO’s Response Force); and
- e) the paradox whereby Ankara is now adopting a more liberal visa policy towards its neighbours but would have to scrap it before adhering to the EU (also, it was considered unlikely that Ankara enter Schengen shortly after accession).

II. *The second session was entirely devoted to Turkey’s foreign relations.* Ankara, it was said, seems to have realised that its key strategic interests lies with working with the EU, which contributes to explain why the new government managed to play a constructive role – even against its own hardliners - in the Cyprus question. The crisis with the US over the Iraq war and the increased security cooperation with Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iran further underline this point. Turkey is seriously concerned about Iraq’s future: a break-up of the country is certainly not in its interest and could have a negative influence on Ankara’s recently improved treatment of its own Kurdish population. The overall situation in neighbouring Iraq has already had a negative impact on Turkey’s economy, especially in the Southeast, although the main worry is about instability and fragmentation beyond the common border, including a potential rise in criminal and terrorist activities. Relations with Israel have not been free of embarrassment lately but remain stable and are likely to survive all differences and tensions. Turkey, whose position is somehow closer to the EU, could also play a constructive role in the Arab/Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

In the Caucasus, relations with Armenia are no longer affected by Azeri security and foreign policy priorities and could evolve in a positive direction. Yet Turkish participants quoted repeatedly the role of Armenian exile communities – especially in the US and France – as an impediment to Turkish-Armenian normalization. Azeri-Turkish relations are now less influenced by early enthusiasm and more tuned to achieving regional stability. A similar development has occurred in Ankara’s relations with the Turkic Central Asian republics. Only recently has Georgia become a Turkish foreign policy priority, mainly thanks to converging interests with the West regarding the safety of energy supply lines. Energy issues also affect and influence Turkish-Russian relations: intensified cooperation on gas, however, is still balanced by Russian suspicions regarding Chechnya and, to a lesser extent, Turkish engagement on regional cooperation in the Black Sea area.

In the discussion the following points were raised:

- a) with regard to Turkey's presence in Northern Iraq, the difference between Turkish and American threat perceptions concerning what is left of the disbanded PKK (now Kongra-Gel) was stressed. It was also mentioned that Kongra-Gel recently revoked the ceasefire with Turkey and resumed fighting by using bases in Iraq for incursions on Turkish territory;
- b) Turkey is neither interested in 'exporting' its specific set of relations between State and religion as some kind of 'moderate Islam', nor does anyone really think that its alleged 'model' be applicable to other Muslim countries;
- c) The further evolution of the Turkish-American relations will be affected by Ankara's bid for EU membership: a negative turn in the latter will almost certainly force Turkey to shift its main foreign and security policy focus back again towards the US;
- d) As in any other country, domestic factors play a significant role in Turkey's foreign policy. The current government acts very pragmatically but the situation in Northern Iraq could make it easier for nationalist forces to push public opinion in a different direction.

III. *The third session dwelt more specifically upon Turkey's internal challenges.* It was recalled that the Turkish Nation-State traditionally perceived Kurdish nationalism and Islamism as key security threats. Both were occasionally overshadowed by the left-right cleavage but re-emerged as important political challenges to the Kemalist system after the Cold War. It was argued that for the Islamists it is easier to identify themselves with the Turkish nation than for the Kurdish nationalists, also because they could (and indeed did) win at the ballot box, which made the terrorist option less attractive to them. Yet it was noted that there is no central place for radical Islamism in Turkey: today's ruling AKP shows a more acceptable face of political Islam, focusing as it does on bread and butter issues.

The threat of leftist terrorism has largely faded away due to the success of domestic law enforcement: there are still roughly 40 political groupings of that kind but the most important ones have been crushed. The PKK was defeated militarily in the late 1990s although its successor the Kurdish-nationalist Kongra-Gel still has some 3–4.000 militants in Northern Iraq and an unknown number of autonomous cells inside Turkey. Communication and coordination seem to be their greatest handicaps on the operational level, while further splintering is weakening their organisational cohesion: Osman Öcalan, for instance, has set up a group of his own.

Organised crime, in turn, is almost omnipresent in Turkey, and also extremely diversified. One can distinguish between the South Eastern and the Black Sea mafias, each with a different ethnic background. Their activities cover extortion, construction and transportation business, white-collar mobbing, and narcotics proper (production and trafficking). One participant mentioned a specifically Turkish phenomenon, the so-called 'deep State', which translates into some sort of immunity from prosecution for perpetrators in return for bribes and/or political support. Such a system unites right-wing extremists and elements of the security and intelligence services, and was sometimes used against common political enemies from the left.

The most important Islamist terrorist groups - IBDA-C and the Turkish Hizbullah-Ilim - were infiltrated and eventually defeated between 1998 and 2000. Meanwhile, a new tendency has taken root in South Eastern Anatolia, whereby ad-hoc groups are founded just to strike for one mission, before being disbanded again afterwards. So far they have aimed at such targets as

synagogues and foreign banks, defined as ‘foreign elements’: in other words, they have not attacked the Turkish State proper – yet.

In the discussion the following issues have been raised:

- a) Traditional nationalism is taking a new turn: the young generation is more EU-oriented and this has already redirected and softened Turkey’s vibrant nationalism.
- b) some leading members of the ruling AKP party have their political roots in the radical Islamist mass organisation Milli Görüş/National Viewpoint, which is regularly monitored by German authorities; yet the organisation is less of a problem for Turkey now than for Germany, where most of their activists reside;
- c) almost all Turkish participants, officials or not, insisted on the Armenian issue by arguing that, while the term ‘genocide’ is a ‘non-starter’ with anyone in Ankara, speaking of ‘massacres’ would be considered more acceptable and favour normalisation with Yerevan.

IV. *The immediate future.* The final session was devoted to wrapping up and revisiting the main points raised during the previous ones, and especially looking to the immediate future. It was said, for instance, that in December the EU may come up with a ‘hypocritical yes’ to Turkey, whereby Brussels would not really mean it and wait for opportunities to soften its commitments. It was noted also that all the Central European governments that started negotiations with the EU in the late 1990s fell shortly afterwards, and that almost all Central European governments that have finalised those negotiations have either fallen or are about to. Such volatility may not be linked only to the enlargement process, but it is a phenomenon to be factored in also for Turkey – with all its possible implications.

As for the negotiations proper, it was noted that they may pick up extra speed since subsequent rotational presidencies, each willing to show concrete results at the end of the semester, may contribute to build a new dynamics. Slightly different views were expressed, instead, on whether the ultimate goal of negotiations should be full membership or, possibly, also some other option or kind of partnership. On the one hand, most participants argued that, hypocritical or not, the commitment must be full: without the explicit prospect of EU membership, the whole process would lose momentum and relevance. This would not exclude – as some participants proposed – a comprehensive review of the whole process by the Council in a few years’ time. On the other hand, in fact, it was also argued that, while a ‘No’ now would be utterly destabilising, the choice of an option other than full membership – if taken jointly, say, seven years from now – might be much more bearable for Turkey.

List of participants

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