

Turkey on the Brink

“Who lost Turkey?” A complacent West could be forced to confront this previously unthinkable question within the next few years. This risk has little to do with Turkey’s alleged Islamic turn. On the contrary, the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party (known by the Turkish acronym AKP) has done much more than previous Turkish governments to improve the country’s chances of joining the European Union. Today, the problem Turkey faces is not Islamization but rather a growing nationalist frustration with the United States and Europe. A majority of Turks still want to see their country firmly anchored in the West, but because of what they perceive as European double standards and the United States’ neglect of Turkish national security interests, their patience is wearing thin.

The United States and Europe should be paying close attention to what is going on in Turkey today. Turkey’s relationship with the United States is under great strain. Turks deeply resent the effect that the war in Iraq has had on their own Kurdish separatism problem. Turkey’s long-standing fear that independence-minded Kurdish nationalists would dominate northern Iraq, thereby setting a dangerous precedent for Kurds in Turkey, has since become reality. The Kurdish population of Turkey is about 15 million, 3 to 4 times more than Iraq’s Kurdish minority. Despite U.S. government protestations to the contrary, most Turks believe that a civil war in Iraq will be followed by the creation of a *de facto* if not *de jure* independent Kurdistan. In that sense, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ensuing disorder in the country threaten 50 years of U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership.

The situation is only slightly better on the European front. Turkey’s hopes to join the EU, although boosted by Brussels’s October 3, 2005, decision to

Philip Gordon is a senior fellow in foreign policy studies and director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. Omer Taspinar is a research fellow and director of the Turkey program at Brookings.

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begin accession negotiations, remain distant and uncertain. Such pessimism is justified on many counts, perhaps most significantly as a result of the EU's enlargement fatigue following the addition of 10 new members in 2004. In the aftermath of the French and Dutch rejection of the EU constitution, it is now much more difficult for European politicians to ignore public opinion,

Turkish public opinion may end up reconsidering long-standing geopolitical alignments.

particularly when critical decisions about Europe's future are at stake. France last year even went so far as to change its constitution to require that a referendum be held to approve all future EU enlargements. Other countries may also require putting Turkish membership to a public vote. This is clearly bad news for Turkey. Already struggling with problems such as unemployment, immigration, Islamic terrorism, and Muslim integration within

their current borders, Europeans are in no mood to embrace 70 million more Muslims.

Even if Turkey continues to develop its democracy and economy, major obstacles still threaten to thwart its European integration. Ankara's hopes of membership could easily be dashed by anything ranging from a crisis over Cyprus to a national veto from one of the 25 EU countries. Equally troubling for Ankara are French and German proposals for a "privileged partnership" instead of full membership. Fueling Turkish concern about second-class membership are EU guidelines for accession negotiations that already spell out the possibility of permanent safeguards against Turkey on issues ranging from freedom of movement to regional aid. Similarly, the fact that the EU has described the accession process as not only open ended but also conditional on the EU's absorption capacity was not lost on the many Turks who believe Brussels will always find reasons to say no to Turkey.

Such dynamics do not bode well for the future of Turkey's relations with the West. In the past, Ankara could always rely on its strategic partnership with Washington in case things went wrong with Europe. Such an alternative may now no longer exist. For the first time in its history, Turkey has a strained relationship with the United States and the EU at the same time. Combined with issues such as Turkish resentment over the West's failure to deliver on its promises to do more to ease Turkish Cypriots' isolation following their approval of a settlement plan that the Greek side rejected, the revival of violence and terrorist attacks by the separatist Kurdish Workers' Party (known by the Kurdish acronym PKK) now partly based in northern Iraq, and Western pressure for the recognition of the Armenian "genocide," all the ingredients for a Turkish nationalist backlash are in place.

The Long Road to Europe

Turkey's quest to become part of Europe predates the EU and even the establishment of modern Turkey. In the nineteenth century, as Ottoman splendor faded, the imperial elite sought salvation in one of the earliest projects of Westernization in history. Ottoman reforms in the military, legal, and political arenas were pragmatically modeled after Europe. A more radical version of Westernization came only during the first half of the twentieth century, however, first under the Young Turks and later with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder of the modern Turkish Republic. Atatürk was firmly convinced that his country needed to become part of contemporary civilization. Under his leadership, the fledgling Turkish Republic decreed radical cultural reforms that abolished Islamic institutions, established secularism, emancipated women, changed the dress code, and imposed the Latin alphabet.

Having set a course toward the West, Turkey became an integral part of the Western alliance, a member of NATO, and a frontline state against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Turkish economy also gravitated toward Europe. Turkish trade and economic interests became anchored to the European Community, which continued to add new members. Turkey's impulse to belong to Europe gained further momentum with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ankara increasingly felt that its place in the modern world was in the progressive and democratic institutions that Europe represented. In many ways, joining the EU became the goal that would symbolize the achievement of Atatürk's vision.

Yet, all was not well with Turkey's journey toward Europe, largely because of its domestic political instability. Although Ankara applied for membership as early as 1963, a series of military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 seriously undermined its chances. The situation went from bad to worse as the end of the Cold War approached and Turkey's strategic value for Europe diminished. By 1987, Ankara's official application for EU membership was viewed with increasing European skepticism. The emergence and prioritization of central and eastern European countries as EU candidates further diminished Turkey's odds.

On the domestic front, war against Kurdish separatists and polarization between the secular establishment and political Islam moved Turkey away from liberalism and democracy. During the 1990s, Turkey still remained strategically important for the United States thanks to cooperation in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the containment of Iraq, but Ankara's relations with the EU turned increasingly problematic. The most important challenge was the Kurdish question. Between 1984 and 1999, Ankara had to confront

a violent Kurdish insurrection in southeast Anatolia. The separatist challenge posed by the PKK, a terrorist guerrilla movement with considerable regional support, proved extremely costly in political, economic, and foreign policy terms. In addition to a death toll of 35,000, the conflict cost up to \$150 billion in military expenditures.

Political Islam emerged as a second internal threat after the electoral victories of the Islamic Welfare Party in 1995 and 1996. Because they were

Turkey feels a sense of betrayal over the Cyprus issue.

in essence major challenges to the foundations of the republic, these dynamics exacerbated Turkey's sense of insecurity. The same threats that came close to disrupting Ataturk's nationalist and secular reforms in the 1930s were now reemerging in the post-Cold War era, just when Turkey needed to demonstrate its democratic credentials to a skeptical EU. Compromise with the Kurdish and Islamist

enemies of the republic was not an option for Turkey, and the result was military confrontation, political polarization, authoritarianism, and economic crisis during the "lost decade" of the 1990s.

Turkey's relations with the EU reflected these problems. To Ankara's dismay, the EU saw the Kurdish conflict as the rebellion of an ethnic group whose cultural and national rights were long suppressed by an authoritarian system. Ankara and Brussels still managed to sign a Customs Union Treaty in 1995, but at the Luxembourg summit in December 1997, Turkey was not even acknowledged as an official candidate for EU membership. Instead, it was placed in a special category, behind 12 other aspiring states from central and eastern Europe. Shortly after this summit, an increasingly frustrated Ankara decided to put an end to its political relations with the EU.

Given such a major setback, it is all the more remarkable that it took only two years for Turkish-EU relations to be put back on track, by the Helsinki summit of December 1999. This was made possible largely thanks to a series of positive domestic and external developments. By 1998, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was behind bars and his separatist movement largely defeated. Fifteen years of intense guerrilla warfare came to an apparent end with a great sense of victory. On the political Islam front, the military had already forced the Islamic Welfare Party out of power in 1997. Most remarkably, this was done without a blatant takeover of political power. Some called the ousting of then-Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan a "soft coup." With political Islam subdued and Kurdish separatism defeated, the domestic sense of siege that characterized the 1990s came to an end.

In addition to these positive developments on the domestic front, external factors also benefited Turkey. In 1998 a change of government in Germany put an end to 16 years of Christian Democratic rule. With the SPD-Green coalition, Germany became much more open to the possibility of Turkey eventually joining the EU. Largely because of Athens's realization that a resentful and excluded neighbor was not in its national interest, another positive change occurred in Turkey's relations with Greece. Finally, Washington lobbied heavily in favor of Turkey during 1998 and 1999, giving the Europeans an added incentive to overturn their previous policy. All these factors significantly improved the atmospherics in Turkey and Europe leading up to the Helsinki summit, when the EU finally confirmed Turkey's candidacy for membership.

Stimulated in large part by a desire to qualify for membership once its candidacy was secured, Ankara began implementing a series of economic and political reforms. The country also faced a severe financial crisis in 2001, which brought an end to the corrupt and ineffective political parties that governed during the 1990s. Quick and effective action taken under new finance minister Kemal Dervis and backed by the International Monetary Fund restored economic stability. Yet, the political field was wide open in the general elections of November 2002 for the emergence of a new political party.

The impact of improved relations between Turkey and the EU became most evident during these elections. For the first time in Turkish history, the AKP, a political party with Islamic roots whose moderation was born at least in part to lessons learned from the Welfare Party's ousting, won the national elections in a landslide. More importantly, the AKP won by adopting an aggressively pro-EU political platform. By declaring Turkey's EU membership as its top priority, Turkey's reformed Islamic movement managed to achieve two crucial objectives. First, it gained a sense of political legitimacy in the eyes of Turkey's secular state tradition. Second, it gained the support of Turkey's pragmatic middle class, business community, and liberal intellectuals.

The AKP owes its political legitimacy in part to its support for Turkey's European vocation and the outcome of the Helsinki summit, which revived Turkey's hopes of EU membership. After its victory in November 2002, the AKP leadership strongly committed itself to a democratic reform process guided by the EU Copenhagen criteria for membership qualification. This moderate, Islamic government passed an impressive series of reforms aimed at harmonizing Turkey's judicial system, civil-military relations, and human rights practices with European norms.

The recovery and growth of the Turkish economy was equally impressive. By 2003 the Turkish economy had stabilized, and inflation was reduced to

levels that allowed the authorities to lop off six zeros from the currency. Because of lower inflation and interest rates, the Turkish economy began benefiting from domestic and foreign investment and grew by an average of 7 percent in the last three years. Such growth brought income levels to approximately \$4,600 per capita, higher than that of some recent EU accession countries, while its debt to gross national product ratio fell from 91 percent in 2001 to 65 percent in 2004, less than the Eurozone average. By December 2004, the EU concluded that Turkey had fulfilled the criteria necessary to begin accession talks, and the long-standing Turkish dream of joining the West seemed closer to fruition than ever.

The Road Ahead

Can this progress be sustained? Several recent developments have tempered the sense of optimism that characterized the last few years. The AKP government and a diminishing majority of Turks still seem committed to the idea of EU membership. Yet, unless the West pays closer attention, Turkish public opinion may end up reconsidering long-standing geopolitical alignments. There are many causes for concern.

EU HESITATION

The French and Dutch rejections of the proposed EU constitution in the summer of 2005, in part a result of public concerns about EU enlargement, have led to widespread questioning of the entire enlargement process and of Turkey's place in it in particular. The French referendum requirement poses an enormous obstacle. Moreover, German chancellor Angela Merkel and France's Gaullist party leader, Nicolas Sarkozy, who could well be the next French president, have both expressed skepticism about Turkish membership, which does not bode well for Turkey's eventual chances.

As a result, recent polls show that only 14 percent of Turks actually think that Turkey will ever be admitted to the EU, leading to resentment in Turkey, where support for EU membership has in the past two years fallen from 85 percent to 63 percent.¹ With many painful domestic reforms having been sold to the Turkish public as necessary sacrifices for EU accession, the conclusion that the process has been a sham could have serious consequences for Turkey's reform process.

The EU's October 3, 2005, decision to launch accession talks with Turkey was of course a major triumph and gave a significant boost to Turkey's EU aspirations. No country that ever entered into accession talks has failed to complete them, and the willingness of EU leaders to buck skeptical public

opinion and make a strategic decision was appropriately welcomed in Turkey. Yet, the difficulties in reaching that decision, including Cyprus's efforts to require Turkey to recognize its Greek-led government as part of the accession process, Austria's determination to offer Turkey a privileged partnership as an alternative to membership, and reminders that accession talks could be open ended and that Turkey's eventual membership depends on the EU's absorption capacity, became clear irritants for Turkish public opinion.

European skepticism about welcoming a relatively underdeveloped Muslim country, which would immediately become the second-largest member of the EU (or the largest, as Turkey's population is predicted to surpass that of Germany within the next 10 years), is unlikely to change in the short term. The EU is already struggling to integrate its own 15 million Muslims, and the current backlash against Islam and multiculturalism in the aftermath of terrorism, the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, urban riots in France, and the prophet Muhammad cartoon crisis will only complicate Turkish-EU relations. Europe's structural unemployment and anti-immigration tendency also continue to pose additional problems for Turkey.

An Armenian genocide resolution would trigger a nationalistic backlash in Turkey.

THE TURKISH CYPRIOTS' PLIGHT

A move by Cyprus to leverage its own EU membership to win concessions from Turkey and Turkish Cypriots could throw Turkey's relationship with the EU into real crisis. Turkey feels a sense of betrayal over the Cyprus issue. In 2003 the AKP government took enormous domestic political risks and overturned 40 years of Turkish policy by pressing the Turkish Cypriots to accept a political compromise that would allegedly enhance Turkey's chances of joining the EU. The Turkish Cypriots complied and supported the UN-sponsored plan in an April 2004 referendum, which the Greek Cypriot side rejected. Despite U.S. and European claims that there would be negative consequences for any side that rejected the plan and rewards for those who supported it, little has been done. The Turkish Cypriots still suffer from international isolation while the Greek Cypriots now try to use Cyprus's membership in the EU to extract concessions from Turkey and to continue to isolate northern Cyprus. Meanwhile, the AKP government has to fend off charges back home that it sold out its Turkish brethren while getting little in return.

The issue could easily come to a head in the near future. As part of its bid to start accession negotiations with the EU, Turkey agreed on July 29,

2005, to extend its customs union with the EU to its newest members, including Cyprus. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made clear, however, that he is not prepared to open Turkey's ports to Greek Cypriot-flagged vessels, as required by the EU, unless the EU fulfils its promise to ease the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. Because the EU has made Turkey's implementation of the Customs Union Agreement a precondition for the accession talks, and to review that implementation in 2006, it is easy to see how, in the absence of effective international action, a Greek Cypriot challenge could cause a Turkish-EU crisis and even lead to a suspension of the talks. That scenario is only one of many that could bring the Turkish-EU process to at least a temporary halt. The Greek Cypriots claim they will have more than 70 opportunities over the next 10 years to block Turkish accession.

DEBATES OVER AN ARMENIAN 'GENOCIDE'

Yet another pressure point is the Armenian issue, specifically the momentum behind long-standing efforts by Armenia and the Armenian diaspora to win international recognition of an Ottoman "genocide" against their people in 1915. Although this issue is not new, a growing number of parliaments, most recently those of France, Canada, and the EU, have passed resolutions asserting that genocide did in fact occur. French and other European officials have also said that they did not believe Turkey could become an EU member unless and until this issue was resolved.

The U.S. Congress has so far bowed to the pressure of successive administrations to reject Armenian genocide legislation, but Turks worry that, with Turkey's perceived strategic value on the wane in Washington, votes on the issue might come out differently in the future. Because the traditionally pro-Israel lobby in Congress, which had strongly supported Turkey on a wide range of issues, was appalled by Ankara's recent openings to Hamas after its victory in the Palestinian elections, this scenario is more likely today than in the past. An Armenian genocide resolution would certainly trigger a tremendous nationalistic backlash in Turkey and a deep rift with the United States.

DOMESTIC PRESSURE: THE KURDS

Turkey is also experiencing domestic political pressures, mainly in the form of rising Kurdish separatism. In part as a by-product of the war against the PKK during the 1990s, Turkey's Kurdish minority is now highly ethnically conscious. More than half of Turkey's ethnic Kurds live in Western cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Mersin, Adana, and Ankara. In addition to very poor

living standards in eastern Turkey, the Kurdish populations in western Turkey also suffer from social and economic problems, lack of education, and massive unemployment. Such dynamics provide fertile ground for the PKK.

The PKK's maintenance of military camps in northern Iraq further complicates Turkey's Kurdish predicament. Most Turks believe the United States has betrayed its promises to prevent Kurdish domination of northern Iraq and is now maintaining a double standard about fighting terrorism because it is less willing to confront terrorists who attack Turkey than terrorists who oppose the United States. These developments put the United States under an extremely negative light in the eyes of Turkish public opinion. During 2005 a colorful example of Turkey's frustration with the United States was a best-selling fictional novel depicting a Turkish-U.S. war over Kirkuk.² Moreover, Turks have not gotten over their anger concerning a July 4, 2003, incident in which U.S. forces in northern Iraq arrested a dozen Turkish special forces troops and detained them, hooded, for 24 hours. This unfortunate episode came to symbolize the United States' unwillingness to treat Turkey as a genuine partner. In early 2006, a movie opened in Turkey premised on a Turkish intelligence officer avenging this incident by killing scores of Americans in northern Iraq. The movie, which also graphically depicts U.S. atrocities in Iraq, immediately broke Turkey's box office records.

The Kurdish issue also strongly affects Turkey's perception of the EU. After all, Brussels strongly demands that Ankara accept the Kurds as a national minority with distinct cultural and linguistic rights. In that sense, Turkey's anti-Americanism often overlaps with anti-EU feelings. In fact, anxiety about Kurdish nationalism is the common denominator of Turkey's anti-EU and anti-American feelings. A July 2005 opinion poll by a Turkish nongovernmental organization, for example, found that 66 percent of Turks believed "Western countries want to disintegrate Turkey like they disintegrated the Ottoman Empire in the past."³ According to the same survey, 51 percent of Turks believe that "the reforms required by the EU are similar to those required by the treaty of Sevres which dismembered [the] Ottoman Empire in 1919."⁴

With the potential of further chaos and even civil war in Iraq, an even grimmer scenario may arise in which Turkey opts for unilateral action to stop large-scale ethnic violence between Turcoman, Kurdish, and Arab communities in northern Iraq. A unilateral Turkish intervention in northern Iraq, even if presented as a legitimate attempt to prevent further bloodshed, would present a catastrophic scenario for Turkish foreign policy. Such an intervention would amount to a potential confrontation with the United

**Kurdish
separatist
pressure is rising.**

States and, because Turkey would be perceived as invading a sovereign country, would probably end Turkey's hope of joining the EU. In Turkey, anger, isolationism, and probably economic collapse would follow. Such dreadful scenarios illustrate why it is in Turkey's strongest national interest to see a stable Iraq, where the United States and the EU can cooperate.

The Stakes

The most troubling aspect of Turkey's relations with the West is that Ankara no longer has a fallback U.S. option in case its relations with the EU sour. Turkish-U.S. relations have become a casualty of the war in Iraq. U.S. anger over the Turkish parliament's March 1, 2003, refusal to allow U.S. forces access to Turkish territory for the invasion and Turkish frustration over U.S. support for Iraqi Kurds have led to unprecedented mutual resentment between Ankara and Washington. Numerous opinion polls confirm that growing numbers of Turks perceive their NATO ally as a security problem rather than a strategic partner. A 2005 BBC poll, for example, found that 82 percent of Turks considered U.S. policies in the Middle East as a threat to peace and security.⁵ In analyzing Turkey's frustration with the United States, one needs to go beyond the Bush administration's negative global image. The German Marshall Fund's May 2005 transatlantic survey, for example, showed that although anti-Americanism is in relative decline in Europe, the trend in Turkey is in the opposite direction.⁶

The stakes involved in "losing Turkey" could scarcely be higher. Turkey's relations with the EU have recently gained an unprecedented "civilizational" dimension. In recent years, jihadist terrorism in the United States and western Europe turned an otherwise unlikely scenario of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Today, growing numbers of Muslims see the U.S.-led war against terrorism as a global "crusade" against Islam. Similarly, Western attitudes toward Muslims are increasingly characterized by the fear of terrorism. In this polarized global context, a large Muslim country seeking membership in a prestigious European club with a majority Christian population has gained tremendous relevance. Turkey's democratic, secular, Muslim, and pro-Western credentials would make it an important country under any circumstances. For those interested in proving the fallacy of an inevitable clash between Islam and the West, Turkey's membership in the EU becomes all the more significant.

The staunchly secularist Turkish Republic is, of course, an exception in the Islamic world, and one would normally not expect Turkey to become a symbol or model of compatibility between Islamic tradition and Western

democracy.⁷ Yet, Turkey's current experiment with moderate Islam is a promising exercise in political moderation and democratic maturity. With the right policies, Turkey could become an inspiring example for Islamists and secularists interested in peaceful coexistence. The Arab world is paying increasing attention to this Turkish experiment and the European reaction to it. The fact that a pro-Islamic party is taking Turkey closer to EU membership challenges preconceived notions both in the West and the Islamic world.

In addition to these cultural dynamics, a quick look at the map clearly illustrates the geostrategic stakes involved in keeping Turkey on a European track. It is not only the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world, but it also shares its southern borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In the Caucasus, Turkey borders Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia and thereby serves as an energy corridor through which the vast oil and gas reserves of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea pass to the West. Ultimately, a stable, Western-oriented, liberal Turkey on a clear path toward EU membership would serve as a growing market for Western goods, a much needed contributor to European labor forces, a democratic example for the rest of the Muslim world, a stabilizing influence on Iraq, a valuable actor in Afghanistan (where Turkey has already led the International Security and Assistance Force twice), and a critical ally for the United States in the war on terrorism. A resentful, unstable, nationalist Turkey would be the opposite in every case.

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What Can the West and Turkey Do?

Turkey's future is of course mostly in Turkey's hands, but the West also has an important role to play. The United States and Europe need to do what they can to ensure that Turkey continues to see its future as part of the West. Both the EU and the United States need to take Turkish national priorities seriously. They need to show that they value Turkey's partnership and its contributions to regional peace and democracy in an extremely difficult neighborhood.

One key goal should be to keep Turkey firmly on track for EU membership. Turkey's U.S. and European partners should be clearly aware that none of the recent political and economic reforms in Turkey would have been possible without the EU incentive. It is therefore crucial to keep this incentive and Turkey's European vocation alive, at least in the long term.

This will not be easy. After all, Turkey's diminishing enthusiasm for the EU is in great part fueled by Europe's evident reluctance to embrace a large, poor, Muslim country. The Dutch and French rejections of the EU constitution seemed to signal unhappiness with the enlargement to central and eastern Europe that took place in 2004. Admitting Turkey to the EU will be an even greater challenge. In that sense, the French and Dutch rejections came as a wake-up call to EU elites detached from public opinion.

Turkey now has a Eurasian strategic alternative that looks increasingly appealing.

The recent drop in Turkey's enthusiasm for the EU must be taken seriously. A majority of Turks still want to see their country as a proud member of the EU, yet an even larger majority believes the EU will never fully embrace Turkey. This perception can only change if Europe shows more sensitivity toward Turkey. The EU should avoid giving the impression that there are double standards for Turkey on issues ranging from future immigration laws to qualification for regional aid.

Turkey must do its share as well. Turkish leaders need to explain to their public that the EU will need time to digest its enlargement of central and eastern Europe. A sense of entitlement regarding EU membership as something that Europe owes to Turkey can only lead to resentment as the road to membership inevitably proves difficult. European hesitation to admit Turkey is not always based on racism but on legitimate concerns. What is important is that Turkey not be subject to double standards and remain on track to full membership as long as the reform process and the implementation of these reforms continue.

Turks will also have to gain familiarity with EU institutions, their operation, and the problems of European economies. Most Turks have only a very limited knowledge of Europe and share a one-dimensional tendency to see the EU as a Christian club. Although some European politicians do their best to strengthen this image, Turkey's own tendency to consider its European vocation in grandiose civilizational and cultural terms is part of the problem as well. A more open Turkish debate would be helpful in terms of addressing the real costs and benefits of EU membership. Such a debate would raise crucial questions about whether Turks really want to share political sovereignty with the EU, given the different nature of the internal and external threats they are facing in an extremely difficult geographic neighborhood.

Dealing with Cyprus and the Kurdish question are also of critical importance. On Cyprus, Turkey's transatlantic partners need to convince Greek Cypriots to come back to the negotiating table. This can only be done by

ending the economic and political isolation of Turkish Cypriots, who have shown their willingness to accept the reunification of the island. On the Kurdish question, Turkey needs to feel that it is a U.S. partner in northern Iraq and not an afterthought. This requires some serious diplomacy and a strategic dialogue between Ankara and Washington, not only about the PKK in northern Iraq but more importantly on the broader Kurdish question in the Middle East. The United States needs to convince Turkey, through words and actions, that it is equally determined to defeat the PKK. Over the last three years, Turkey has been doing the right thing on both fronts, through efforts for reunification in Cyprus and extending cultural rights for Kurds, without feeling rewarded. To stop a nationalist backlash in Turkey, Europe and the United States will need to do more to allay Ankara's concerns over Kurdish separatism and the isolation of northern Cyprus.

In Turkey's current political scene, the West would be hard pressed to find a better ally than the AKP government to push ahead for domestic democratic reforms and a pro-EU foreign policy. Ironically, Turkey's moderately Islamic government is also its most pro-Western in recent history. Having suffered the most under the illiberal vagaries of the Turkish political system, Turkey's Islamists now see the EU as their best hope for keeping the country on track to liberal democracy and economic prosperity. Yet, there are also clear limits to the AKP's pro-EU stance, particularly when Europe sends mixed signals and the Turkish public develops nationalist tendencies. The AKP could also end up losing the support of its more religiously oriented supporters who embrace the EU process not only for a more prosperous future but also for religious freedom in the country. A recent European Court of Human Rights decision in favor of the ban on the Islamic headscarves in Turkish universities, on the grounds that it is necessary to "preserve the secular character of educational institutions,"⁸ came as a shock to AKP's Muslim constituencies. Secular and religious nationalists are now increasingly playing up the argument that the AKP has sold out Turkish interests to please Europe.

Under such circumstances, European and U.S. policymakers would be well advised to stop taking Turkey's pro-Western orientation for granted. It is time to revisit the conventional wisdom that Turkey has no strategic options other than the West. Unlike the situation during the Cold War, Turkey now has a Eurasian strategic alternative that looks increasingly appealing to growing numbers of frustrated nationalists within the country. If Turkey's relations with the United States continue to deteriorate and its relations with Europe also take a negative turn, Ankara could very well opt for closer strategic relations with countries such as Russia, Iran, China, and India.⁹ To downplay this risk is to underestimate the nationalist resentment already

building in Turkey. No political leader is immune to populism, and Erdogan is certainly not an exception. Yet, with a little help from Washington and Brussels, Erdogan can avoid the nationalist temptation and convince his people not to give up on political reforms and the constructive foreign policy that EU membership requires.

Notes

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