

# TURKEY

## Will membership in the European Union cause Turkey to play a more active role in the Middle East?



**Viewpoint:** Yes. Turkey will be able to act as an agent of stability and to facilitate cooperation between the Middle East, Central Asia, and the West.

**Viewpoint:** No. Unless the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and Central Asia become more open to political liberalization, a democratic Turkey with close ties to the European Union will have little impact on regional affairs.

Modern Turkey is not the area from which the Turkish peoples originated, but rather it is where some of them settled. Possibly the most significant historical trend between the ninth and sixteenth centuries was the migration of the Turco-Mongolian peoples westward across the Eurasian landmass from East Asia and Central Asia. Following the Seljuk Turkish defeat of the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert (Malazgird, 1071), Anatolia (geographical Turkey) was opened up to Turkish migration, slowly but surely transforming it from a bastion of Greek culture and language to that of Turkish and Islam. One particular family within this movement eventually carved out of this area the Ottoman Empire. After ensconcing themselves in western Anatolia in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Ottomans established a foothold in the Balkans by the middle of the fourteenth century, and in 1453 they extinguished what was left of the Byzantine Empire by taking the city of Constantinople (Istanbul) and then advancing into central Europe as far as the gates of Vienna on two separate occasions.

Historians have variously described the Ottoman Empire as European and/or Asian, a task that became even more complicated with the Ottoman advance into the heartland of the Middle East by the year 1517. Following the formal end of the Ottoman Empire soon after World War I (1914–1918), and building on the Ottoman reform efforts throughout much of the nineteenth century, the individual considered to be the father of the modern Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, abruptly accelerated the modernization, secularization, and westernization of Turkey, firmly breaking away from its Ottoman past.

After World War II (1939–1945), Turkey began to play an increasingly important role in Western defense and strategic schemes as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, highlighted by Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. With the Persian Gulf War in 1990–1991 (which required extensive use of Turkish airbases by the U.S.-led coalition) and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 (resulting in the emergence of several independent Turkish-dominated Central Asian states), Turkey's strategic importance to the West with regard to Central Asia, the Caucasus region, and the Middle East was enhanced that much more. As one of the few countries that can authentically claim itself to be a crossroads of history, Turkey's orientation as a Middle Eastern/Islamic nation and/or a European state has become the subject of much debate, especially revolving around the question of its possible accession into the European Union (EU), its developing military relationship with Israel, and the strategic role it continues to play with regard to U.S. policy toward Iraq.



### **Viewpoint:**

## **Yes. Turkey will be able to act as an agent of stability and to facilitate cooperation between the Middle East, Central Asia, and the West.**

A careful analysis of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States reveals that stability in the world in general, and in the Middle East in particular, will depend heavily on the stability of Central Asia. Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization, which claimed responsibility for the death of thousands of people that day, has taken shelter and refuge in various places in the Central Asia. The Taliban regime of Afghanistan provided terrorists the most comprehensive support for most of the 1990s. The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001 deposed the Taliban. However, the reach of the new Afghan regime and that of the leadership throughout the countryside is limited because of the existence of war lords. These groups are still fighting each other outside the capital city, Kabul, which is being patrolled by armed forces of countries friendly to the post-Taliban regime. Turkey, being one of them, assumed command in mid 2002 of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), with thousands of its troops sent to the region. The Turkish brigade undertook a vital role within the framework of nation-building efforts in war-weary Afghanistan. A Dutch-German joint brigade is expected to take over the responsibility in early 2003, which, in the next phase, will hand over the command to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops that will be composed of armed forces from countries in the alliance.

During the Cold War, Turkey had to bear the political, economic, and military consequences of neighboring the Soviet Union. Thanks to the nuclear deterrence of NATO, Turkish policymakers were able to provide security to their citizens. With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, followed by the break up of the Soviet Union, rogue states as well as non-state actors became influential players on the world's political and military stage throughout the 1990s. Their appearance has threatened international peace.

The break up of the fifteen republics that constituted the Soviet Union has turned out to be problematic, encompassing difficulties in the political, military, and sociological arenas to the cultural and religious spheres in the newly independent states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Also worth considering is the abolition of strict Soviet control over military installations, be they weapons-production facilities or research laboratories. Several states, as well as non-state entities, have long been known to be in search of ways to

acquire and/or develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Often cited among these countries are Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea, which are on record for offering former Soviet scientists money to sell their knowledge to develop indigenous WMD capabilities.

Beside these "states of concern," some non-state actors such as al-Qaida and the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo are also identified as being involved in this illicit trafficking network for developing WMD capabilities. All in all, non-state actors have steadily evolved in terms of organizational structures and have increased their sophistication in operational capabilities. They do not always have headquarters, military bases, or standing armies against which a country can launch retaliatory strikes. Unlike in the past when terrorist groups badly needed sponsoring states to provide them with shelter, logistical assistance, and financial support, developments in technology and science will soon, if they have not done so already, eliminate the need for such patronage. Someone with adequate knowledge in a certain scientific field and a sufficient level of technological equipment may well initiate terrorist actions that cause massive casualties and material damage.

An analysis of worldwide reactions to the events of 11 September shows that, especially in the Muslim countries, al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden are viewed as fighting against Christians and Jews in order to protect the rights of oppressed Muslims. They, therefore, do not consider these events as terrorism. Because of its Muslim character, plus its evolving strategic relations with Israel, Turkey can play a significant role in bridging the gap between not only Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions but also between cultures in the fight against terrorism.

Because of the nature of the threat and of the actors involved, intelligence turns out to be the most vital instrument in the fight against terror. Only timely intelligence can prevent and/or preempt terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, cooperation between states is most difficult in the field of intelligence. Institutional frameworks have to be created so as to collect and share worthwhile intelligence. The flow of intelligence concerning terrorist activities in Central Asia can be achieved through such mechanisms as Partnership for Peace (PfP) program within the NATO framework. The PfP program, in which Turkey is active as a NATO member, includes most of the former Central Asian Soviet republics of Turkic origin.

Turkey can also act as a model for the peoples of Central Asia, where hostility toward Jews and Christians is growing. The merger of Islam and democracy in Turkey has not been painless, but, as Turkey turns more to the West, its democracy is strengthened, and the interpretation and practice of Islam by extremist/radical groups has become



## WE ARE EAGER

*In May 2003 Turkish official Abdullah Gül spoke about his country's possible membership in the European Union (EU):*

My country has been and will continue to be part of Europe historically, geographically, politically and economically. We share the same value system with the Union. Turkish society is already an integral part of the modern world and a contributor to its values and functioning.

We are eager to prove and confirm that a Muslim society can achieve to be democratic, open, transparent, pluralistic and contemporary, that is "European," while preserving its identity.

Turkey's EU membership will prevent new dividing lines in Europe before they would be redrawn. It will deeply anchor Turkish democracy in the norms of Europe.

With Turkey's membership, the EU would gain indispensable strategic benefits in terms of its security architecture and economic reach. It will be better equipped to promote peace, security and stability, whether in the still fragile Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean or in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkey's multi-regional and multi-dimensional foreign and security policy will be able to contribute to the global role of the EU. Trans-atlantic relations will thus be enforced. . . .

My government is fully aware of its responsibilities, obligations, challenges and opportunities in this regard. We welcome this task.

We are determined to comply with the Copenhagen political criteria by the end of 2003. We enjoy the full support of our parliament including the opposition parties and the vast majority of our people in this process.

Political reforms continue to remain high on our agenda. The priority of our government is to extend and deepen democracy in Turkey. We aim to achieve two main objectives in this regard. The first is to provide full and proper implementation of the existing legal arrangements. The second objective is to undertake additional measures to ensure full alignment with the Copenhagen political criteria.

The constitutional and other legislative amendments, the new Turkish civil code and subsequent harmonization packages were all

milestones in our political reform process. In this context:

–We have enhanced fundamental rights and freedoms. We have abolished the death penalty;

–We have lifted legal restrictions on the learning of and broadcasting in different languages and dialects used by Turkish citizens in their daily lives;

–We have declared to implement a policy of "zero tolerance" against torture and ill treatment;

–We have simplified procedures for the acquisition and disposal of immovable property by non-Muslim community foundations;

– and, We have introduced extensive education and training programmes for effective implementation. . . .

We have also undertaken significant structural reforms in the economic area. Although the Copenhagen economic criteria do not constitute a pre-requisite for the opening of accession negotiations, our government is resolved to implement the economic reform program fully.

The economic reform program that we run in cooperation with the IMF and the World Bank responds to the main requirements of these criteria. In both tracks the emphasis is on restructuring the financial sector, improving public transparency, strengthening public finances, and increasing competitiveness and efficiency in the economy.

Despite certain chronic problems that we have started to tackle, the Turkish economy has firm foundations. The latest economic indicators testify to this fact. nonetheless, we need financial and political support for our reform efforts. This will reinforce confidence of foreign investors and international financial institutions in our country. We attach importance to increasing domestic and foreign investments, channeling resources to productive investments and going further ahead with privatization.

*Source: "Address by HE Mr Abdullah Gül, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, on 'Turkey's Way to the EU Membership' to the Meeting Organized by The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Brussels, Cercle Royal Gaulois, Rue De La Loi 5, 15 May 2003, Thursday, 19.30 Hrs.)," Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, website, <<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ai/meetingorganize.htm>> -(,aBÑ*

even more moderate. The November 2002 elections elevated the Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to power in the government by winning two-thirds of the seats in the Grand National Assembly. Notwithstanding the refusal of its members, the AKP is still regarded by many in the public domain as adhering to the political Islamist tradition in Turkey where radical political parties have been closed down by the Constitutional Court three times. However, AKP altered its approach by staunchly endorsing Turkey's bid to European Union (EU) membership, and it sent out messages to its Middle Eastern neighbors, including the Arab countries, Iran, and Israel in an attempt to improve relations. This new tact is therefore an indication that Turkey's secular model of democracy can moderate radical Islamist approaches.

Radical groups that are religiously motivated constitute the greatest challenge to regional stability in the Middle East. Rational thinking based on simple cost/benefit analysis does not apply to the calculations of such groups for whom the cost is nothing even if one of their supporters dies carrying out a suicidal attack, whereas the benefit is invaluable, namely a place in Heaven. Recent developments have shown unequivocally that Central Asia has become for the leaders, as well as members of such radical/extremist groups, a sanctuary from where they direct and conduct their attacks on selected targets. So long as these countries are unable to control the activities of these groups, the intensity of attacks will not diminish—nor will there be a possibility to bring stability to the region. Turkey may therefore assume a historic role by facilitating fruitful cooperation between the Turkic republics of Central Asia and Israel as well as the United States.

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**Viewpoint:**  
**No. Unless the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and Central Asia become more open to political liberalization, a democratic Turkey with close ties to the European Union will have little impact on regional affairs.**

During the Cold War era, Turkey was an important country for the Western alliance, as a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partner in the eastern Mediterranean, acting as a barrier to Soviet expansionism toward

the south. In contrast, Turkey's geostrategic significance appears to have declined somewhat in the immediate post-Cold War era. One ought to emphasize from the outset that European and American conceptions of Turkey's importance for Western security differed markedly. Turkey continued to have a more important role for American policymakers as a dependable ally in a highly unstable region extending from the Middle East to the former Soviet Central Asia, but it was also a critical region from a Western point of view given the depth of regional energy resources. From a largely inward-oriented European perspective, Turkey, as a potential full member of the European Union (EU), appeared to be more of a security liability than an asset in the context of the 1990s. Indeed, Western powers failed to attach much significance to Turkish involvement during the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States marked a new turning point. Turkey has become once again important for the West for an entirely new set of reasons extending beyond narrowly defined security considerations.

A central question in this context is the extent to which Turkey has the capacity to act as a benign regional power and play a constructive role in the Middle East and Muslim Central Asia during the next decade and whether the tragic events of 11 September constitute a critical opening in this respect. A country that aims to act as a benign regional power ought to display the following characteristics: it interacts with its surrounding region by developing a network of economic and political relations involving both state and non-state actors; it tries to set itself as a model of economic development and democracy; and it adopts a balanced approach to bilateral conflicts and seeks to contribute to the resolution of such conflicts through diplomatic pressures. A benign regional power may be distinguished from a coercive regional power in the sense that the latter is much more willing to use force to impose its presence in its surrounding region, its approach often being dictated by the principles of hard-line realism. Coercive regional powers can become a source of instability and insecurity, a process that is aggravated further by the tendency to take sides in bilateral conflicts.

Turkey, during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, dictated by security considerations in the context of its armed conflict against the Kurdish separatist organization, *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK), displayed elements of a coercive regional power. The frequent operations of the Turkish army in northern Iraq and Syria—and the strong ties that developed with Israel in this context, with an emphasis on military cooperation—con-

stitute elements that are certainly closer to the definition of a coercive rather than a benign regional power. In the past few years, however, a striking shift has been observed in Turkey's shift from a coercive to a benign or constructive regional power. Arguably, 1999 represents a watershed in this transition process.

In retrospect, two events exercised a crucial role in the changing nature of Turkish foreign policy toward its neighbors. The first event was the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999. This event effectively marked the end of a fifteen-year intense military conflict with the PKK. It also paved the way for a more balanced approach—based on civilian initiatives and the extension of cultural rights within the territorial limits of the Turkish state—toward the Kurdish population. This policy change was followed by yet another critical turn. The Helsinki summit of the EU in December 1999, in which Turkey was recognized as a potential candidate for full-membership, had important ramifications for Turkish domestic politics. The Helsinki decision has clearly accelerated the process of democratic consolidation in Turkey; several crucial reforms both in the economic and political realms have been implemented by the end of 2002. It is also striking that the deep economic crisis that Turkey experienced from November 2000 to February 2001 also helped to increase the pace of reforms on the economic and democratization fronts. A majority of the Turkish population is in favor of EU membership. Not surprisingly, the attractiveness of the material benefits associated with full membership became even more pronounced in the midst of a deep economic crisis. The process of democratization, however, is far from complete, with the privileged position of the army in Turkey's domestic politics being a case of major concern from the EU perspective. Moreover, the Greco-Turkish dispute over the control of Cyprus continues to constitute a formidable barrier to Turkish membership, in spite of the fact that the recent United Nations (UN) proposals present a remarkable opportunity to break the deadlock in this context. Nevertheless, most observers would agree that the pace of reforms designed to satisfy the basic Copenhagen criteria (1993) would have been unimaginable only a few years ago.

Turkey's ability to play the role of a benign regional power clearly depends on its ability to transform its economy and its democratic regime. During the course of the 1990s Turkey's ability to play a constructive role in the region was seriously hampered by the major crises that the country faced in both the economic and the political spheres. Although Turkey had a long-standing relationship with the EU (or the European Community in its early stages), dating

back to the early 1960s, the relationship failed to display the smooth pattern that was certainly the case in Greece's accession to full membership in 1981 and the path followed by key former Communist states such as Poland and Hungary in the post-1999 era. Clearly, both the deficiencies of Turkey's domestic politics as well as deep questions concerning Turkey's alleged European identity have contributed to this uneasy relationship. What is important is that membership of a Customs Union with the EU, which came into effect at the end of 1995, falling significantly short of full-membership, failed to provide the sufficient mix of conditions and incentives that would induce a deep transformation in the nature of Turkish economy and politics. In this sense, the Helsinki decision was crucial. For the first time Turkey faced a balanced set of conditions and incentives to undertake radical reforms, notably in the democratization arena.

Closer relations with the EU in the post-1999 era and the associated process of economic and political reforms have also altered Turkey's foreign policy behavior. Certainly, Turkey has become less assertive and more balanced over the past few years. There has been a certain rapprochement with Syria following the end of armed conflict with the PKK. Similarly, the close relationship with Israel, although a bit more subdued of late, still remains strong. The pendulum is clearly swinging toward a more balanced approach toward Israel and the Arab world, particularly in relation to the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

Turkey, as a potential EU member, will have the additional advantage of playing a constructive role through established EU initiatives in regional economic cooperation and the promotion of democracy. Indeed, from this point onward, Turkey could play a much more active role in the "Barcelona Process," a project that aims to develop a dense network of economic and political ties with the Middle East and North African countries located around the Mediterranean Sea. Hitherto, Turkey has been reluctant to play an active role in the Barcelona Process based on the fear, largely mistaken, that such an active role would be synonymous with accepting a subordinate status within the EU prior to the realization of full-membership.

Clearly, an alternative scenario involving Turkey's isolation from Europe, arising from a possible failure to graduate to full-membership status, will result in over-dependence on the United States and the bilateral relationship with Israel as well as a process of repolarization in its domestic politics, which would likely operate against Turkey's interests as well as its ability to play the role of a benign regional power. An isolation of Turkey from Europe would likely have

major negative ramifications for both its economy and democracy. Consequently, its ability to play the role model and act as a source of stability for the surrounding region would be severely hampered. Is the EU willing to transform itself at this juncture from an inward-oriented entity to the status of a truly global actor? Clearly, an EU decision to incorporate Turkey as a full member and to extend its boundaries to the conflict zone of the Middle East would involve a radical rethinking of its own role as an active global player and enhance its leverage in Middle East policymaking.

Moving beyond the Helsinki decision, two more recent critical turning points may be identified with potentially far-reaching ramifications for Turkey's emerging role in the Middle East as well as former Soviet Central Asia. From the perspective of the Western powers, a major implication of 11 September was the need to increase dialogue and mutual understanding with the Islamic world. Such a dialogue was not only important for the United States, which became the target of terrorist attacks originating from the Middle East, but it was also of critical significance for the EU, which has a significant Muslim minority within its border and is geographically much closer to the Muslim world than the United States. Clearly, the importance of Turkey as a secular and democratic country with a strong orientation toward the West has the potential to become a genuine model for the rest of the Middle East and Central Asia. During the early 1990s, Turkey had the potential to present itself as a model of multiculturalism and a secular version of Islam. Nevertheless, the country's democratic deficits, particularly as reflected in its inability to extend democratic rights for its own minorities, effectively meant that its potential as a role model could not be realized. Furthermore, a rather rigid form of secularism also effectively failed to incorporate the demands for religious freedoms on the part of more-liberal Islamist groups. Both of these aspects reduced the attractiveness of Turkey as a model of multiculturalism for the Islamic world. Yet, a more democratic Turkey, moving steadily toward full EU membership, has a much greater potential to play the kind of role model that seems so critical in the post-11 September context.

The 2002 elections in Turkey that brought into power the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are particularly important in this respect. The AKP, which emerged as an outright winner in Turkish elections for the first time since 1987, projects the image of a center-right conservative party that respects the basic principles of a secular constitutional order, in spite of its Islamist roots. Clearly, the potential success of this party will have far-reaching implications extending

beyond Turkey's own borders. The trend involving the softening of political Islam in Turkey and the progress toward full EU membership are closely related phenomena. Islamists in Turkey in recent years have conceived of the EU as a mechanism to consolidate and to protect their own position in Turkish society. However, they are also aware of the limits set by the EU, within which they need to operate given the fact that the EU is strongly opposed to any form of religious fundamentalism. Turkey's secular establishment also received the signal from the EU in terms of rethinking the boundaries of its rather rigid interpretation of secularism that limits the domain of any kind of religious freedoms. Clearly, if the current government in Turkey succeeds by staying within the boundaries of a secular order it is likely to have positive repercussions in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

One of the striking features of the new international context involves the growing assertiveness of U.S. policy and an increasing rift between the United States and Europe in terms of developing appropriate strategies to combat international terrorism. The EU appears to favor multilateralism, involving an active role for the UN, and for using diplomatic pressures. The United States, under the George W. Bush administration, informed by hard-line realist principles, is clearly in favor of unilateralism and military solutions as the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) signify.

The war in Iraq could undermine Turkey's benign regional role at least in the short-run. Under intense U.S. pressure, Turkey was pushed to provide some, though limited, logistic support to U.S. operations. Furthermore, a fragmented Iraq in the aftermath of war could emerge as a serious source of instability in itself. The emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq may jeopardize Turkish attempts to integrate the Kurdish elements of its society through an extension of cultural and language rights. In this rapidly changing global context, characterized by growing transatlantic divisions, closely aligning its policies with the EU will help Turkey to develop a more balanced relationship with the United States as well as play a more restrained but constructive role in the region.

Finally, Turkey's ability to project itself as a model and to perform the role of a constructive middle power depends on the future path of political liberalization in the Middle East and Muslim Central Asia. If these regions remain impervious to democratic currents and continue to be characterized by authoritarian regimes, an increasingly more democratic Turkey with close ties to the EU is likely to be regarded as a threat to existing regimes and its role is likely to be mar-

ginalized. Indeed, direct manifestations of such a trend seem to be evident in the context of Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan, countries with which Turkey had close economic and political ties in the early years of the post-Soviet era. Under an alternative scenario, however, based on the assumption that the Middle East and the Muslim Central Asia are set on a course of rapid political liberalization, Turkey will play a more significant role in the region.

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