

# **The Generals' Discontent**

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IN DECEMBER 1999, THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) GAVE THE GREEN light to Turkey's eventual membership in that organization. But Turkey's powerful generals, who favored nearly all possible alliances with the West, are apparently balking at the idea of taking this ultimate step in the process of Turkey's Westernization. The generals -usually known for upholding the principles of Atatürk and the rapid Westernization process he embarked on in 1923- seem to be turning their faces away from the EU. Both the civilian government and public opinion favor membership in the EU. And in the past, the military leaders, citing the country's geopolitical and geostrategic imperatives, always agreed that Turkey should eventually become a full member of every Western institution, including the EU -even if a careful reading of their declarations pertaining to membership reveal neither a spirited interest nor a high degree of optimism.

The issue had seemed moot. Judging from the opinions expressed from time to time by leading political figures in EU member countries, it seemed unlikely that the organization would ever grant candidate status, let alone full membership, to Turkey. Decisions taken at the EU summit in Luxembourg in 1997 were explicitly discriminatory toward Turkey, which confirmed the generals' misgivings. Even after the Helsinki summit in 1999, which finally elevated Turkey to candidate status, the response from the headquarters of Turkey's General Staff was not enthusiastic. The generals emphasized that it would be a long time before Turkey formally attained membership -a clear indication that they had serious reservations about the conditions the EU placed

on full membership. Those reservations were made public in November 2000, with the release of the Accession Partnership Document, or “APD.”

The APD is a “must do list” prepared by the EU Commission, listing a variety of political, economic, military, social, legal, cultural, environmental, and other issues a candidate state must act on in order to kick off formal accession negotiations. The APD is not subject to bargaining, and the listed tasks are binding on a candidate government once it has agreed to the candidate-to-membership process. Turkey’s civilian officials reacted positively to the APD, saying that it did not include any issue that Turkey could not handle. Officials said it was only a matter of how and when, not if, the various issues would be addressed. In contrast, the generals’ response was negative, particularly in their reaction to three sensitive subjects.

THE FIRST CONCERNS THE ROLE OF THE CHIEF OF THE GENERAL Staff in the government hierarchy and the role the National Security Council plays in domestic politics. Western observers have said that if Turkish democracy is to catch up with European standards, the status of the chief of staff, who now ranks directly beneath the prime minister, should be significantly lowered, and that the General Staff should be subordinated to the civilian leadership of the defense ministry. By the same token, the EU maintains that the National Security Council -chaired by the president and composed of an equal number of civilian and military representatives- should become merely a consulting mechanism, with the top brass no longer able to put pressure on politicians -the council was harshly criticized for intervening in politics in 1997, when its “28 February decisions” brought an end to the coalition government led by Islamic Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan. The generals find such criticisms unacceptable; and the suggested arrangement, they say would politicize national security issues requiring a bipartisan approach, as well as weaken the power of the army against both internal (Kurdish separatist and Islamic fundamentalist) and external threats.

The second issue on which the generals are at odds with the EU is a requirement that the Turkish government abolish all legal barriers preventing the

use by Turkish citizens of their mother tongue in education and broadcasting. Although no specific mother tongue was mentioned in the APD, it is clear that the EU commissioners had in mind Turkey's Kurdish citizens and the Kurdish language when drafting this provision. Turkish is the country's only official language in education and broadcasting. But it would be wrong to say that Turkish is the only spoken language. There are dozens of ethnic groups, small and large, living all around the country, which has been situated at the crossroads of civilizations for millennia. Defining the current situation as "*Turks v. Kurds*" is an oversimplification, although the latter group clearly makes up a considerable percentage of the overall population. The generals maintain that granting special rights to Kurds for education and broadcasting in their mother tongue would prompt a chain of similar requests by Turkish citizens whose mother tongue may be Albanian, Bosniak, Laz, Chechen, Arabic, Cherkes, or one of dozens of other languages. The generals say their aim is to save the country from a "Yugoslavia syndrome."

The third problem for the generals concerns the requirement to abolish the death penalty. Turkey has had a moratorium on capital punishment since 1984, but the generals believe the APD's requirement will result in saving the "head of terrorists" -Abdullah Ocalan, captured leader of the Kurdish separatist group, the PKK. Amnesty for Ocalan is inconceivable to the Turkish military, which has lost 7,000 men in the long-running struggle against the PKK. The generals are deeply committed to enforcing the law when it comes to making sure Öcalan gets what they believe he deserves.

DESPITE THE ARGUMENTS SET FORTH BY THE MILITARY authorities, a considerable segment of Turkey's civil government and a variety of non-governmental groups argue that Turkey's EU candidacy is a golden opportunity that should not be wasted merely because the military suffer from "dismemberment paranoia." They point out that no European state whose citizens of different ethnic origins have been granted more rights and freedom of expression has ever disintegrated during its march to EU membership. They also point out that internal stresses have actually diminished in countries like Spain

and Greece which have experienced improved standards of living as a result of the rapid economic and social development that came with EU membership. Unless Turkey fulfills the criteria set by the EU, they say, the gap between Turkey and Europe will widen in many areas, possibly paving the way for upheaval.

The release of the APD has exacerbated tension and revealed a deep fault line within the state apparatus and in the public domain. Beyond the question of the criteria for EU membership, there is another fundamental reason for the generals' attitude. Turkey is keenly aware of the dangers posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, as well as the dangers of international terrorism -threats that seems to lie on the country's immediate periphery. Those same threats do not seem as imminent in Europe. For instance, Iran is believed to have embarked on a nuclear weapons program and has openly tested ballistic missiles capable of hitting strategic targets in Turkey, but its relations with European countries like Germany, France, and Italy have been improving. Similarly, Syria, which is known to have substantial quantities of chemical and biological weapons and the ballistic missiles to deliver them, also poses a threat to Turkey while enjoying improved relations with the EU. The move to lift the sanctions imposed by the United Nations on Iraq comes primarily from France, supported by Germany.

Differences in national security perspectives between Turkey and the EU are a major cause of concern among the Turkish generals, who seriously question the validity of EU membership. Others argue that EU will provide additional security to Turkey, once joined. But when that membership will become a reality cannot be foreseen. And when membership is achieved, the generals would be required to follow policy decisions taken at Brussels, which they believe will be in line with the European countries' interests, but not necessarily with those of Turkey.

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION IN THE YEARS TO COME is likely to be determined by the security concerns of its generals. The civilian authorities are not likely to exert much counterpressure, as they are traditionally

concerned mainly with daily economic and social problems, and in any case have suffered in the public's view as the result of revelations of corruption. Initiatives from civil society and intellectuals have little impact, with few exceptions. Nor can the EU put significant pressure on Turkey's defense establishment, which does not depend on Europe either to produce military equipment or for aid. Moreover, the EU denies the Turkish army any significant role in the emerging European security and defense architecture, which only exacerbates the generals' resentments. The United States is probably the only actor that could exert pressure on the Turkish generals. But it is unlikely to do so. Even with a Democrat in the White House, the only recent efforts to influence Turkey involved the blocking of a few marginal arms sales. (In contrast, the General Staff seems to have successfully pressured the administration to help kill a pro-Armenian resolution in Congress.) As things now stand, the generals can be expected to continue to take advantage of Turkey's indispensable strategic role at the epicenter of the world's most volatile regions -the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans- and to control the pace of Turkey's march to the European Union for some time to come.

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