

# Turkey and the European Union: An Israeli Perspective

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The issue of Turkey's membership in the European Union is no longer in the headlines. With the tacit agreement of the negotiating parties, the accession negotiations have been aimlessly set adrift. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicholas Sarkozy, known for their strong opposition to Turkey's membership, allow negotiations on only the marginal "chapters" among the thirty-five that are to be completed by every new candidate member. But that consent cannot belie their continued rejection, even if in recent months Chancellor Merkel has toned down her public statements on the issue. The Turkish public, which in the past overwhelmingly supported the country's joining the EU, seems to have lost interest in this issue. It would appear that the Turkish government has done likewise.

We now face a more dangerous prospect, namely that this low-key approach will lead many to believe that the curtain has peacefully fallen on the accession idea with no far-reaching consequences. Whatever the outcome of Turkey's bid for membership in the EU, the political-strategic map of the Middle East, as well as the economics of the region, will be greatly affected. That is why the virtual absence of any serious debate, public or otherwise, in the relevant Israeli institutions is so surprising. The importance of nurturing the Turkish-Israeli bilateral relationship is recognized by the government of Israel and the ministries involved. Yet, the issue of Turkey's relations with Europe is rarely discussed. Admittedly, Jerusalem's ability to influence Europe's approach to Turkey's EU membership is marginal at best. Given the magnitude of the problems involved, the cost and the risks facing the EU in the event of Turkish accession, Israeli considerations will be utterly dwarfed. Obviously, even Chancellor Merkel's and President Sarkozy's favorable attitude toward Israel cannot overcome their fundamental opposition to Turkish membership, a stance strongly supported by their own respective constituencies. Still, ambivalence in European public opinion over Turkey's bid should not have removed the subject from the strategic Israel-EU dialogue. Quite the contrary—it should become an integral part of it, that is, once Israel coherently identifies its own interests and views on the subject.

At first glance, the case seems clear. Israel should back Turkey's quest for membership in the EU. Anchoring Turkey in Europe would strengthen the process of secularization, thereby decreasing the potentially negative influence of extreme religious elements on the Turkish state and society. It would improve the standard of living, reducing the radical Islamic influence on the weakest economic sectors. A Turkey associated with the EU (as well as NATO) would contribute to the Eastern Mediterranean economic and political stability and security, counterbalancing Iran.

The willingness of a country with a predominantly Muslim society to espouse a "Western" system of values, and especially a system of governance based on democracy, the rule of law and peaceful dialogue with its neighbors and partners, constitutes a positive model for other states in the region (though EU membership is certainly not an option for these states). As such, Turkey could prove that it is possible to combine a Muslim (at least a Sunni and moderate Muslim) society with membership in a "Western" organization. Such a partnership and the consequences arising from it should be, from Israel's point of view, a most welcome development.

But the Israeli balance of interests is more complex, and it is less than obvious what better serves its interest. Turkey's membership in the EU could create certain difficulties. The defense establishments of the two countries have played a major role in fostering Turkish-Israeli dialogue. For different reasons, they have both viewed their neighbors with a high degree of suspicion. Facing the same neighbors and the problems of terror facilitated cooperation between Jerusalem and Ankara, including the sharing of intelligence, upgrading of weapons and the carrying out of joint military exercises. But paradoxically, the process of Turkey's accession will reduce, if not eliminate, the Turkish military's influence in Turkish politics and indirectly remove the most central instrument in Turkish-Israeli relations. The EU insistence on democracy, the rule of law and transparency has been weakening the role of the Turkish armed forces as "the defender of Turkish democracy." However, in the past, it was the Turkish military that stopped attempts by extreme Turkish parties to abuse the democratic process. Since the involvement of an army in politics contradicts the Western concept of democracy, if the process of accession continues, the military will lose its central role in Turkish politics—and as a bridge between Israel and Turkey. Energy, telecommunications and tourism projects may, in the long run, replace security cooperation, but this will take time.

The aspects of Turkey's membership in the EU which so intimidate Europe may equally affect Israel. When, and if, it joins, a hundred-million-strong Turkey will have a great impact on EU policies on many crucial issues relevant to Israel.

Turkish membership in the EU will extend the borders of the pan-European organization to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Azerbaijan and bring it closer to Muslim states in Central Asia. This proximity may introduce a new set of foreign policy and security considerations into the EU's strategic thinking—not necessarily positive ones from Israel's point of view. It took Israel and the EU almost three decades to overcome the negative residue of the French abandonment of Israel in the 1967 war, Britain's in 1973 and the Venice Declaration of 1980. Only then were they finally able to engage in civilized political dialogue. This trend may be reversed if Turkey, as a member state, seeks to divert the EU to a certain, more pro-Arab, orientation. Whether such a shift will be sought by Turkey is a matter of speculation. What is not in doubt, however, is that in a Europe that includes Turkey, the European-Jewish burden of history will be greatly lightened. Turkey has no reason to feel morally indebted to the European Jewish community and to those who survived the serial pogroms, expulsions and, finally, the Holocaust. On the contrary, traditionally Turkey was a sanctuary for Jews fleeing persecution. Free of the burden of history, Turkey will also be free of the burden of combating antisemitism in its latent guise. To be sure, most of the crimes of an antisemitic nature perpetrated by Muslims in Europe are committed by Arabs rather than by Turks.

It is by default, rather than by design, that Israel has remained silent on Turkey's membership in the EU, though the quick analysis above may mistakenly imply that this is the best possible course of action. When weighing the pros and cons, Israel evidently has a strategic interest in Turkey, which has distanced itself from militant Islam and associates itself with moderate political forces within and beyond the Middle East. Expanding the area of European influence in the Eastern-Mediterranean region, on the whole, should be seen as a positive development, though one not devoid of problems from Israel's point of view. Recent deployment of European units on Israel's borders, in the case of Lebanon (at Israel's request), is evidence of a partial change of mind in Israel regarding Europe and its political role in the Middle East.

One aspect of the Turkish-European dialogue which is rarely discussed are the implications of the nuclear race in the Middle East. If Iran succeeds in its quest to obtain nuclear weapons, domestic pressure may mount on the Turkish government to follow a similar course of action. If membership in the EU is a valid, realistic and attainable goal at that junction, Turkey will have to make a choice. Only full membership could convince Turkey to abandon a nuclear option. Preventing a nuclear race in the region is clearly an Israeli interest worth pursuing.

But Israel's political influence in Europe is minimal and Israeli-related considerations, important as they may be, cannot balance the costs and risks

to be borne by Europe if Turkey's membership is approved. It is unlikely that even Turkey's rattling the nuclear option will convince Europe to become more amenable to Ankara's bid for membership. It is unlikely that Chancellor Merkel, President Sarkozy or their successors will be influenced by Israel's concerns to the extent that they would be willing to change their minds.

The more promising line of action for Israel is to pursue the alternative offered to Turkey by Merkel—the "privileged partnership." At this point, that status has not been explained by Merkel or anyone else. Israel itself received a similar promise by a former German chancellor, Helmut Kohl. During Germany's EU presidency, the heads of member states made the 1994 December Essen Declaration, which stated that "Israel should enjoy a special status in its relations with the EU." To this day, it is unclear to Israel and the EU what this special status really means. Israel's current status with the EU does not differ from Morocco's or Egypt's, except for Israel's full participation in the EU's research and development program.

Both Israel and Turkey have an interest in persuading the EU to give concrete meaning to these promises, which may have a common motivation—the desire of European leaders to offer an alternative to full membership. Both promises stem from the recognition by different European leaders that, separately, Turkey and Israel are viable candidates, but for reasons not always under Turkey's or Israel's control, they cannot realistically expect admission. Currently, neither Turkey nor Israel has been offered any serious alternative (Turkey to its bid for membership and Israel to its desire to upgrade relations with the EU). In both cases, the alternative should be "membership minus."

The EU has been wrestling with the issue of relations with non-EU membership candidates ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the convening of the Madrid Middle East Conference in 1991. In the case of most of the ex-Soviet satellites, the process ended in full membership. That is not likely to be the result for any Middle Eastern country. Turkey, however, is in a totally different category and although it is in the process of negotiations for membership, it may find itself in a similar situation—unable to attain entry into the exclusive club. Given the rapid decline in Turkish public interest in membership, the Turkish government may even opt out voluntarily. The EU and Turkey should then be ready to negotiate the option that will offer Ankara maximum benefits without both Turkey and the EU having to pay the costs associated with full membership.

For the time being, the EU is unwilling to develop the concepts of "privileged partnership" or "special status." In the case of Turkey, this may be explained by the assessment that it is premature—that Turkey might negatively react to such a proposal and that only an initiative proposed by Turkey may give such an

alternative prospects for success. Even if this assessment is correct, floating ideas about the content of an alternative to full membership may lead to a constructive public discourse in Turkey, which will provide Ankara with the public support for the change in strategy.

The “membership minus” model should transcend the European maxim adopted in the corridors of the EU — “everything but institutions.” Holding to this maxim will not be perceived as a genuine, generous and satisfactory alternative. For different reasons, Turkey and Israel deserve more than just a mere dialogue with the EU — more than participation in certain programs and projects, which is all that the EU presently offers its neighbors, regardless of how “privileged” they are considered.

The EU has long accepted the concept of “different speeds” for its various member states. This allows, for example, some countries to remain outside the Euro area or the Schengen arrangements. The EU should apply the same principle and agree to a “two-speed neighborhood.” This policy will allow Turkey, Israel and later Ukraine to participate in certain institutions. This policy could be constructed on a modular basis, adding institutions as experience is gained. We could, for example, contemplate opening the European Investment Bank (EIB) to Turkey and Israel. The EIB is currently open to EU members only. Viewing the hundred different agencies under the authority of the European Council, it becomes clear that some could be easily opened to countries such as Turkey or Israel. The European Environment Agency (EEA) is a good case in point. It is abundantly clear that the issues the EU Mediterranean members confront on their coasts are no different from those faced by Turkey or Israel. At first, the two could become observers in the EEA, and upon completion of approximating their legislation to that of the EU, they could join as full members, if they so desired. This process could be taken one step further, and the relevant countries, upon the completion of the approximation, would be granted observer status in the council of ministries dealing with the environment.

Following this pattern in as many agencies as possible would link the EU neighbors with EU organs. In the long term, only a few institutions will remain open exclusively to full members. This list of “members only” will include the European Council, the General Affairs and External Relations Council, the College of the Commissions, the Court of Justice and the EU Parliament.

Political and economic considerations may create a situation whereby some neighbors would wish to join the Euro area. This, in the case of Turkey, would mean a profound structural and legal transformation. It will also require a change

of the Statute of the European System of Central Banks and the European Central Bank, allowing EU neighbors to become members in the ESCB.

This is a far-reaching process almost as complex as full membership. It does, however, offer the EU and willing and capable neighbors a genuine alternative to membership, taking into account the liabilities that full membership entails. In the case of Turkey, the EU will not be obliged to consider free movement of workers or to admit Turkey to the European Parliament, thus avoiding the long-term political and socioeconomic ramifications. An honorable, serious alternative to full EU membership proposed to Turkey under the right circumstances, through a discreet dialogue with Ankara, would have a chance of surviving the first wave of Turkish indignation and rejection. The package proposed by the EU will obviously lack the most coveted prize—full membership. On the other hand, given the “Via Dolorosa” that Turkey has to traverse in order to become a full member—including the likely humiliating result of referendums in some EU member states and the loss of interest in Turkey—an option for less than full membership may become appealing to the country, its population and its leadership.

Such an option can become doubly attractive, as full membership will certainly impose constraints on Turkey’s foreign defense strategies. Examples of potential friction are the conflict in Cyprus and the Kurdish issue. At present, it is not Turkey that poses obstacles to a political solution in Cyprus. However, a continuation of domestic pressure in Turkey and in the Turkish-Cypriot community may force Turkey to be less flexible. Recent Turkish incursions into northern Iraq are evidence of the primacy of its strategic priorities.

In recent months, Turkey has presented itself as a mediator in the Israeli-Syrian conflict and has been involved in the efforts to resuscitate the Palestinian economy by initiating industrial parks. A similar role may be sought by Turkey in the Balkans. Turkey may be reluctant to share this role with the EU. It may become enamored with being in this position, which may expand if crises erupt in the Turkic Central Asian republics. This may be an added incentive for Turkey to be more receptive to ideas which amount to less than full membership.

The EU and the US follow two different approaches to political changes in the Middle East. The US, especially under President George W. Bush, initiated its Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) of December 2002 with one of its missions to “strengthen democratic practices, electoral systems including political parties and parliaments.” This was viewed in some of the Arab states as an attempt to bring about a regime change and was therefore given the cold shoulder. Europe’s approach has been softer and less outspoken. Ever since the inception of the Barcelona Process in 1995, it sought to leverage the geographical proximity

and the economic ties to reach similar goals. But Europe has been timid in its use of the instruments at its disposal. The Association Agreement produced limited political results and may have encouraged certain Middle Eastern governments to refrain from adapting anti-democratic practices. But the Association Agreements were not successful in building fully democratic societies and establishing the comprehensive rule of law. The addition of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 has been a more explicit attempt by the EU to achieve similar goals to those expressed in the MEPI. But, based on the experience gained over the short time since 2004, Europe's approach has not profoundly changed and remains averse to the involvement of any non-EU members in its institutions.

If the European Union intends to submit a different formula to Turkey and eventually to other EU neighbors such as Israel, Morocco and Ukraine, it will have to break away from the "everything but institutions" concept. This concept is perceived by various neighbors as nothing more than an improved free trade agreement with political dialogue thrown in as a sweetener. The EU fails to provide these neighbors with a sense of genuine partnership and involvement. It will, therefore, achieve very limited success. It will produce little more than the MEPI has. In the case of Turkey, this failure could have dangerous implications for the stability of the southeastern flank of the Mediterranean, for Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region. Israel has a dual interest in Europe submitting a bold and attractive proposal. It may anchor Turkey in the "Western" camp, at least as far as its system of government is concerned. Secondly, the proposal, if made to Turkey, would be a positive precedent for Israel (and other EU neighbors who seek to upgrade their relations).

Having already initiated negotiations leading to membership, there is no doubt that the EU's moral and political debt to Turkey is far greater than what Brussels owes Israel. Ankara will obviously be offered a more extensive arrangement than will Jerusalem. However, at the end of the day, the Turkish model—the precedent created by Turkey's burgeoning relationship with the EU—will be one worth pursuing by Israel.