

## Turkey and European Union: Objectives and Obstacles

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### Abstract

Turkey submitted its application for formal membership into the European Union in April 14, 1987. Until the present time, Turkey is still exerting its efforts to achieve that membership. With the arrival of the Justice and Development Party to power in 2002, the new Turkish leadership's concern with joining the European Union increased. Such membership is considered a strategic objective lying within the external challenges ahead of the Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmad Dawood Oglu, considers joining the European Union a strategic priority that cannot be renounced. However, the obstacles that stand against achieving such a Turkish dream are many. Some of such obstacles relate to the Turkish cultural identity, some others concern human and minority rights and yet others pertain to economy which presents a real fear for the European Union. However, the Muslim Turkish cultural identity which is of a large population is the genuine obstacle for Turkey to join the Union. There are strong reservations for some countries in the Union about Turkey's membership as the latter would not harmonize with the identity of the Union and the culture of the peoples constituting it.

**Keywords:** Turkey; European Union; membership; experience;

### 1. Introduction

Turkey's membership issue is an old one as Turkey signed mutual partnerships with the European countries in 1963 by which Turkey was granted the possibility of joining the Union with some conditions. As such, Turkey and Greece were the first countries to sign mutual partnerships with the European Union. However, while Greece joined the European Union in 1981, Turkey is still trying to achieve that membership (Maqlad, 2010).

With the arrival of the Justice and Development Party to power, there has been a new form of Turkish relationship where the foreign policy became multi-relational (Oglu, 2010). Despite heading strongly toward the East, Turkey still eager to join the European Union. Therefore, the European membership issue of Turkey is resumed anew with much Turkish effort in trying to satisfy the required membership conditions. The Turkish government has conducted much reform and change that could help it join the European Union, some of which relates to the human rights file where the government cancelled the trial of civilians in military courts, nullified the opinion crimes, abrogating state security courts and granting minority groups the right to use their languages in learning (Maqlad, 2010). Such and other reforms and changes were in conformity with the conditions of the European Union and got received by the Turkish public with much satisfaction. The government has announced that its reform program will continue until all objectives are achieved, especially that which concerns democracy and human rights.

### 2. What the Membership Means for Turkey

The Turkish membership to the European Union is a big dream at the official and public levels alike. The Turks think that their joining the European Union is a strategic step as it is significant in the long run. Such a membership would grant

Turkey a progressive status at the international level. It would make it more influential inside the Union. Due to the big population of Turkey (exceeding 75 million), Turkey would be considered the second big member after Germany. This status would increase the representation of the Turks in the European Parliament and would very much influence its policies and decisions.

Further, there are many positive effects for the membership, especially in the economic field. The new Turkish leadership finds the membership a priority and a significant factor for the economic development process. Ahmad Dawood Oglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, considers the membership of the European Union a strategic priority that cannot be renounced.

Therefore, joining the European Union is a very strategic step for the Turkish political leadership. The significance of such a step is evident in many fields whether political, economic or military. The Turkish leadership has various and comprehensive objectives behind joining the European Union whose membership Turkey considers powerful to it internationally. Such a membership would make Turkey a state of a more influential role in political issues worldwide. Its joining the Union would make its relations with Europe stronger. It would enhance Turkey's ability to negotiate about the issue of Cyprus that Greece constantly raises (Al-Azzawi, 2012).

That European Union membership objective has been one of the wagers and political challenges that the Justice and Development Party strives to achieve. Turkey was formally nominated to gain the Union membership in April 1987. And in 1998, the European Commission accepted a document known by the European Union Strategy for Turkey's Accession Process in which the membership procedures of Ankara have been determined. The document urges Turkey to harmonize its legal laws with those of the Union. Turkey had already joined the Council of Europe, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the NATO. Further, the Turks have a strong desire to acquire the scientific and technological legacy of the western civilization and to get incorporated in the European system. This represents the most important political objective adopted by the Justice and Development Party since its arrival to power in 2002 (Bobosh, 2011).

The Party has strongly defended its desire to gain the European Union membership. It managed to achieve a number of objectives. It emphasizes that its predecessors sought to achieve the Union membership, therefore no one can blame the Party to fall short of attempt to gain that significant historical objective. The Party has also managed to gain the political legality in the eyes of the Turkish secular state which still controls many things in the country. Further, the Party managed to gain the support of the pragmatic groups, businessmen, intellectuals and liberals (Saber, 2012).

In its attempt to join the European Union, the Party seeks to use the European card in two significant ways: the first is to establish internal political and cultural reform in such a way that this allows more rights for the minority groups so as for the Party to encounter the opposition powers. The second is to make radical political and democratic reforms regardless of the political cover the government belongs to, especially in the government's sought to increase its activities in the various surroundings areas within which the European Union membership lies. The Party also seeks to play a central role at the level of the Middle East, thus good relations with Europe make Turkey more attractive for trade relations with the East. All this leads to strong political relations with the European countries. In this regard, establishing relations with other countries of the world cannot be considered contradictory (Abdulqader, 2012).

In addition, among the objectives to be achieved by Turkey is that which concerns defense; that is, enhancing Turkish chances of defending and securing itself in Europe. This is so because Turkey is the main base for the three organizations: NATO, West Asian Federation and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Turkey is aware of the conceptions of the surrounding enemies that seek to deconstruct and divide Turkey. Such awareness pushes Turkey strongly toward Europe so as to secure itself and its capacity of defense (Al-Azzawi, 2012).

Those have been some of the challenges that encountered the Turkish foreign policy which sought to achieve as much stability in the region as possible so as to protect the Turkish security. Thus, the Turkish foreign policy has been based on five main principles as follows. The first is to compromise between freedom and security. For the political reform does not mean neglecting the security aspect. This balance between political reform and maintaining security makes Turkey a model to follow. The second principle is to gradually end the problems between Turkey and its neighbors. This means making Turkey free of problems and having good relations with all. This, in turn, increases Turkish foreign policy's ability to maneuver. The third principle is to follow a multi-dimensional policy. Turkey's new endeavor toward the East does not mean discontinuing attempts to join the European Union membership and satisfying all required conditions for it. In other words, that does not mean that one option is an alternative for another nor is dealing with all options contradictory. The fourth is to develop the diplomatic style and redefine the Turkish role in the international arena. And the fifth principle is to move away from the political stagnancy in diplomacy to contact with all the important countries of the world (Noraddin, 2010).

In addition, joining the European Union would have much impact on the Turkish internal situation. Granting Turkey

the Union membership would enhance the reforms and the democratic process. The European Union membership is a strong card in the hand of the Justice and Development Party to encounter the influence of the military officers who still have some control over the state. The Party has managed to restrict the authorities of the army through many constitutional amendments. Such policy toward the army has much public support, for it comes along with the reforms required to join the European Union. Some Turkish jurists and human rights activists consider the European Union as an incentive to foster democracy in Turkey, for democracy in Turkey may deteriorate without the pressure and influence of the European Union (Naji, 2012).

Economically speaking, there is a big interest in joining the European Union due to the critical economic situation that Turkey underwent. As a result of that economic situation, Turkey has experienced increase in employment rates and poverty as well as increase in debt level. Therefore, it has endeavored with all its power to join the European Union (Khammash, 2010). Joining the European Union would revive the Turkish economy and goods would be tax-free, something that would allow the producers to focus on the fields that Turkey excels at such as textiles, clothing, business and transport services and agricultural products which represents more than 50% of Turkey's exports. In its propaganda to its attempt to join the Union, the government of the Justice and Development Party tries to perform a number of projects and establish more economically active institutions. Getting the full membership would lead to consolidating all those economic reforms, and no Turkish government would be able to retreat in furthering those reforms under any circumstances.

It is obvious that there are many advantages that Turkey would gain in case it joins the European Union. In its turn, the European Union would gain many significant strategic advantages from Turkey. This means that the interests are mutual between the two sides. For instance, Europe would gain geopolitical benefits as Turkey would be the Muslim country through which the Union would extend bridges with the Islamic World. Thus, the European Union would be an international player in the region and the world. Economically, Turkey owns a wide and active market as it has a big population and thus a big market for the Turkish products where the market value reaches 200 billion dollars. Further, Turkey would be a focus point for foreign investment and foreign capital. Turkey is capable to host a foreign annual capital that ranges from three to four billion dollars that develops agriculture, industry, services and infrastructure. This characteristic would be an economic advantage to the Union alongside its market to the Middle East (Maqlad, 2010). Also, joining Turkey to the Union would militarily strengthen the Union as the latter would get the sufficient number of forces required to be sent for peace keeping in many various areas of the world. As such, Europe would be active in those areas and play a role in those areas in time of crises. This is so at a time when the Turkish army is the biggest one in the NATO after the American army. The relations between the two sides may develop further at the security and military levels to an extent that could reach the strategic partnership and the basic organic union in the Union military and civil operations conducted by the Union in conflict areas such as the Caucasus, the Balkan and the Middle East. The Turkish membership in the Union would enhance the security of power sources in the fields of oil and gas because of the Turkey's closeness of such sources. It would also lead to resolving the basic problems that encounter the Union such as the illegal immigration and terror (Maqlad, 2010).

However, the matter of the Turkey's membership to the European Union is not problem-free for Turkey as the latter would encounter big problems in its foreign policies. The Turkish foreign Minister, Ahmad Dawood Oglu, thinks that the most dangerous problems that would face Turkey in its diplomatic political relations with the European Union would be balancing between the regional options of the Turkish mutual foreign policy with the Union and the regional politics that Turkey adopts. Weakness in such relations is expected to occur due to the differences between the two sides. It is up to Turkey's capacity and diplomatic skills to overcome such weakness. Big problems would also occur with regard to the regions that are close to Turkey such as the Middle East, the Balkan and the Caucasus. Further, problems are expected to arise in the compromise between the Turkey's policies adopted toward the three just mentioned regions and those of the US in the same regions. Such problems are also expected between the Turkey's stances on the one hand and the US as well as European Union's stances on the other in their international, continental and regional options (Oglu, 2010).

### **3. Main Obstacles Impeding Turkey's Membership to the European Union**

The attempt of Ankara joining the European Union has encountered big obstacles. Some of such obstacles were in form of conditions imposed by the Union, especially with regard to human and minority rights. The Economic file is also a genuine obstacle before the Turks, for some of the European countries fear the flow of the Turkish cheap products compared with those of the European ones. Further, granting the membership to Turkey may lead to the migration of the Turkish labor to Europe in search of work and employment. Furthermore, the European investors would head toward Turkey as a European country with a big consuming market to establish huge economic investments. The European

stance toward joining of Turkey to the Union is expressed by two perspectives. The first perspective expresses its support to widen the Union membership and the necessity of resolving Turkish membership to the Union while the other perspective refuses the Turkish membership request for purposes of protecting the European cultural and religious identity. The supporters of this latter perspective are active in employing the European public opinion to turn down the membership request (Al-Azzawi, 2012).

The most prominent obstacles to the Turkish request to join the European Union are as follows:

### *3.1 The Turkish cultural identity*

The Turkish Islamic cultural identity is considered one of the prominent obstacles to Turkey to join the European Union. Such an identity is faced with much reservation in some European countries. For example, the former British Foreign Minister, Jack Straw, emphasized that the biggest obstacle before Turkey to join the Union is Islam and that the Union has no desire to accept a country whose population is mostly Muslim. Also, the former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, considers that Europe is a Christian castle, that there has no desire to accept Turkey as a member in that castle and that the European Union's reluctance to accept Turkey is due to Islam. Further, in 1977, the German astute politician Welfare Marantz, the member of the German Christian Democratic Party, stated that the European Union is in a state of civilization process in which there is no space for Turkey. In this regard, the conservative Christian Social Union Party declared that accepting a country that has no similar religion or mutual values with the European Union is unimaginable (Al-Bursan, 2010). The conservative Germans, lead by the Chancellor Angela Merkel, strongly opposes joining Turkey to the Union. During an election campaign for the Christian Democratic Party, the German Foreign Minister stated that Turkey should not be accepted into the European Union because it is not a part of Europe, emphasizing the strong opposition of Germany to joining Turkey to the Union.

In their attempts to prevent the joining of Turkey to the Union, some European countries suggested some other alternatives so as to keep Turkey away from the Union membership. For instance, France, with support from Germany and Austria, promotes the idea that Turkey should be given a special status instead of a complete membership, something that Turkey utterly refuses because that would lead to taking the best out of Turkey without the Union granting it anything of value in return (Midat 2010: 6). In its relations with Turkey, the Christian Europe has still been loaded with the legacy of the Ottoman-Europe conflict since 1452. Therefore, Europe sees no place for Turkey in the European civilization project because the latter is different in terms of civilization (Litim, 2013). To them, the European countries have mutual examples, values and civilization patterns that Turkey does not share. 95% of Turkish land lies outside Europe and 98% of its population is Muslim. Therefore, European doubts and fears increase from having 15 to 20 million Muslims in Europe at a time when there are serious reactions against Muslims (Saber, 2012).

### *3.2 Demographic obstacles*

This obstacle concerns the big number of the Turkish population, for it makes Turkey the biggest member after Germany in the European Union in case of becoming a member. In the long run, Turkey may become the member number one in the Union due to the big rate of Muslim births. This means that the Turkey's voice would be the highest in the European Union. It would also grant Turkey the biggest number of representatives in the Union, for the European constitution determines the number of seats based on the number of population. Therefore, Turkey would have more seats in the Union than Spain, Portugal or France. The Turkish language would become an official language in the meetings and documents of the European Union (Al-Sammak, 2014). This big number of Turkish population may lead to religious and cultural disharmony with the rest of the Union countries. Thus, the European powers see no place for Turkey as a member in the Union for two reasons. The first is that Turkey would not succeed in its role as a civilization mediator between Europe and the Islamic World unless Turkey returns to its eastern identity. However, this probability contrasts with its potential membership in the European Union. The second reason for refusing the Turkish membership in the Union is that the Union membership would grant Turkey some political and economic power that the latter would employ to achieve its interests in the Islamic World. In this case, Europe has gained nothing from that membership, rather it may lose some characteristics that it enjoys now for the sake of the Turkish growing influence (Bobosh, 2011).

The Turkish growing population raises many political fears in the Union countries, for they fear that the Islamic issues in Turkey would become European ones due to the fact that the Turkish official religion is Islam. There are also fears related to migration to the European countries, for the population density and the low personal income compared with Europe would motivate millions of Turks to migrate to the other European countries. This migration would overwhelm those countries with consequent waves of migrants who are culturally, socially and religiously different. This is so

especially when the industrial European countries are in need for workforce in industry and agriculture (Al-Sammak, 2014).

### 3.3 Economic Obstacles

Due to the economic advancement in Europe as well as the high incomes in general, Europe would be an attracting point for the Turks in search of employment. This would lead to lowering the wages in the European countries as well as increasing the unemployment rates, for the Turkish workforce is cheap in general. Also, the cheap Turkish products would be more widespread than those in the European markets, thus the European local products and their quality would be affected. The Turkish membership in the European Union would also encourage the European investors to invest in Turkey which would be considered one of the big European markets. The fear is also from the Turkish good location that links the East with the West, for Turkey would be an attracting point for the European investments at the expense of the East European countries that suffer from their own circumstances. This would not lead to a parallel European development and thus distorts the European Economy (Bakir, 2004). In this regard, many opposing European powers strongly emphasize that the Union membership requires economic conditions that Ankara cannot satisfy. It is so because the national income of Turkey whose population reaches 73 million people is less than that of Denmark whose population does not exceed 4.5 million people. As for the personal annual income, it is \$2800 in Turkey while it is \$25000 in Germany. Thus, there is fear from burdening the European tax payers in the light of the support and financial aids required to raise the level of the Turkish economic performance so as to come closer to the levels of the economies of the Union's countries. The main economic reason behind the refusal or the reservations to join Turkey to the Union is the difficulty faced by the Union due to the recent join of the ten countries from East Europe and the Mediterranean to the Union (Al-Azzawi, 2012).

Those have been the obstacles related to the Turkish cultural identity, its religion (Islam) and the population density as a demographic problem arousing many political fears in the European Union countries. There have also been the economic fears in case Turkey joins the European Union. Further, there have been the obstacles concerning human rights and public freedoms. José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, calls Turkey to prove that it is a democratic country so that it can join the European Union through changing the laws of freedom of expression and to avoid imposing secularism by force. He says that Turkey must show Europe its interest for the membership. The Union cannot accept Turkey unless Turkey shows unanimous agreement about values and democracy. Further, Turkey should not impose religion and secularism by force (Khammash, 2010). With regard to the issue of Cyprus which began in 1974 (Mustafa 2004: 1), it constitutes one of the challenges that encounters Turkey in its relations with the Union. The Justice and Development Party has made many attempts to end the problem. It practiced some pressure on the Turkish Cyprians to accept the referendum conducted by the UN in 2004 to resolve the Cyprian crisis and to unite the Island. However, Greece has practiced pressure on the Greek Cyprians to refuse the international initiative. The Greek Cyprians state that they have at least seventy chances within the next ten years to prevent Turkey to join the European Union. Further, Greece is a member in the European Union, something that can be considered a chain over the Union if the latter attempts to interfere between the two sides. This, in turn, complicates the Cyprus problem (Saber, 2012).

Another problem that seems to be very big to the Europeans is the geographical location of Turkey. Turkey lies in Asia except the City of Istanbul. As such, Turkey is a neighbor to the Middle East countries which are considered a source of political and security tensions, especially Iran and Syria. If Turkey joins the European Union, European borders will be extended to the Middle East with all its political and security complications (Al-Sammak, 2004).

Those have been most of the obstacles that stand against Turkey having the European Union membership. Despite Turkey's attempt to satisfy a number of conditions to gain the membership of the Union, the Union puts endless obstacles before it. Further, the Union has accepted the membership of other countries despite their regimes, environments and economies which are less far than those of Turkey and which do not conform to the Union's conditions (Bobosh, 2011).

However, despite the Union's obstacles that it puts before Turkey, it does not express absolute rejection directly. There is no official expression of absolute rejection for Turkey, for that, if happens, would lead to further negative complication especially when Turkey has many cards that it could use in case of rejecting its request without justifications. Among such cards are the Turkish strategic location which links between the East and the West, its regional role and Islamic identity. Therefore, the European Union may resort to twisting ways to refuse the Turkish membership among which is giving Turkey a partial status without considering it a full partner. Some European governments, at the head of which are Germany and France, may resort to suggesting conducting public referendum to determine their opinions in rejecting or accepting the Turkish membership to the Union. They already know that the referendum would

lead to rejection for psychological and historical reasons deeply rooted in the minds of the European peoples. In this way, the governments would bear no responsibility for the rejection. In this case, Turkey cannot do much. Some studies show that most of the French refuse the Turkish request to join the Union: 56% opposes the idea of the membership in contrast to 31% who agree to that idea (Bakir, 2004).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the US strongly supports the joining of Turkey to the European Union for a number of reasons. Turkey's geopolitical location is one of the United States' priorities in the Middle East region. The joining of Turkey to the European Union would enhance the US alliance front in the European Union, especially British which supports the join of Turkey to the Union. However, the American support has not so far succeeded in changing the active countries in the European Union, especially Germany and France which are the two strong opponents to the membership (Saber, 2012).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Turkey's attempt to achieve its dream of joining the European family has never stopped. Joining the Union would have many positive effects at all levels whether political, economic, official or public. However, obstacles are many among which are the issues of democracy, human rights, Cyprus problem, minority problem or the economic file and its impact. Despite the Turkish government's declaration of continuing the reforms until it gains the European Union's membership, the Turkish cultural identity remains a genuine obstacle before Turkey to join the Union. Turkey is the only country that has a big population of Islamic background that strongly seeks to join the European Union. This arouses many political fears in the Union's countries. Some of the Union's countries have clearly and publically announced their strong reservations with regard to Turkey joining the European Union.

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