

Europe's opportunity in Turkey

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Next month the European Union will take the first step towards a decision that could prompt a more significant transformation of the Islamic world than the invasion and reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. Specifically, the EU will decide whether Turkey has made sufficient political, legal and economic reforms to allow a timetable to be set for its entry into the Union. This decision will have historic consequences that will help determine whether the only democratic, secular Muslim country in the Near East continues on its path towards adoption of western norms or drifts in a more insular direction, undercutting its pro-European civilian and military leadership.

A year ago Turkish voters, dis-encharmed with the traditional secular parties, provided a strong majority to the Justice and Development party (AKP), a group with Muslim roots. A recent visit has convinced us that the prospect of EU accession is accelerating reform and keeping the AKP on a secular line, despite widespread concerns within Turkey's secular elite about the party's long-term agenda.

The AKP-led Turkish parliament is racing to demonstrate that it is taking the steps necessary for EU membership. It has adhered to a secular course and adopted important reforms, including banning torture, eliminating the death penalty, allowing broadcasts in Kurdish and other languages and reducing the role of the military-dominated National Security Council. An affirmative EU decision to launch membership negotiations will provide the greatest incentive for Turkey to take further steps to modernise and deepen democratic institutions, enhance human rights and civil liberties, resolve the Cyprus dispute with Greece and maintain a secular state.

If the EU once again gives Turkey the cold shoulder, it will diminish support for further reforms and there may be a significant anti-western backlash with important implications for the US, Turkey's closest friend. Such a decision would reinforce the conviction that the EU will always find some excuse to deny Turkey membership.

Opponents of EU accession argue that Turkey is principally an Asian country, with 95 per cent of its land mass and population in Asia; its democracy is too fragile and dominated by the military; its values diverge too much from Europe's; and its population is too poor. But at the core of the opposition is the strong fear, particularly in Germany and France, that job-seeking Turkish immigrants would flood western Europe if Turkey joined and the free movement of people were allowed. Already, large north African and Turkish communities are changing Europe's social and political landscape, in several instances catalysing popular support for rightwing, anti-immigrant parties. Valery Giscard d'Estaing, author of the draft EU constitution, has gone so far as to suggest that the admission of a Muslim country such as Turkey "would be the end of Europe".

Sceptics are correct in saying Turkey still has a long way to go before it is ready to join. Its record was sharply criticised in the US State Department's latest annual human rights report. Its relations with Greece remain tense, particularly over Cyprus. These issues must be resolved. But they should not be impediments to setting a timetable for starting negotiations. If the EU wants to shape the Muslim world in a more secular, democratic way, this is the best path. Giving Turkey concrete hope of eventual accession does not mean that membership is imminent. It took Spain and Portugal, formerly dominated by dictatorships, eight years from the start of negotiations to their admission to the EU in 1986. Even after signing an accession agreement with Turkey, the EU could insist on reasonable transition periods to tackle concerns over the free flow of labour.

The EU and Turkey could begin with economic, trade and political integration and conclude later with a complete opening of borders. Elimination of restrictions on the movement of people could be delayed for a decade or more. The Turkish public will be patient, as long as there is a specific timetable for full accession.

The Bush administration, too, has an important role to play. It has successfully persuaded Turkey to send troops to Iraq, lubricated by an Dollars 8.5bn (Pounds 5bn) loan and a large International Monetary Fund package. But the administration should also use its position as Turkey's close military ally to encourage the country to implement the important reforms it has adopted on paper.

It is fine to make Iraq a model of a secular, democratic nation in the region. But Turkey already has a foundation on which to build. If a moderate Islamic party can lead Turkey on the path to EU membership, it will serve as a beacon of light and help transform the entire Muslim world.

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