

ARGUMENT

# Turkey and the West — Getting Results From Crisis

The partnership between Turkey, the United States, and NATO in the fight against the Islamic State is a critical opportunity to bring Ankara back into the European orbit.

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The Turkish government's dramatic decision to engage militarily in Syria against the Islamic State, its agreement to allow the United States to use its air base in Incirlik to strike Islamic State targets, and its request for consultations with NATO last week no doubt can be helpful to the West. Turkey's change of heart came after an attack, attributed to the Islamic State, near the Syrian border on July 20 which killed over 30 Turkish citizens and wounded scores more. In the days that followed, the Turkish government implored NATO to help it combat the terrorist threats it faces from both the Islamic State and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as the PKK, the latter sworn enemies of Ankara. These security developments should also be a wake-up call for the European Union, the United States, and Turkey to comprehensively reinvigorate a relationship that has fallen into disrepair.

Ankara's dramatic military actions have created an opening which the European Union and United States should seize to help Turkey regain the political, economic, and security footing lost because of its own shortsighted

actions. In recent years, the Turkish government has too often chosen to repress rather than address the views and frustrations of its people. The economy continues to deteriorate as a result of poor economic and political policies. In no small measure, these bad policy choices are what cost President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, its 13-year majority in the June parliamentary elections.

The Islamic State's advances, coupled with terrorist attacks by both the militant group and the PKK inside of Turkey, provoked Erdogan's weakened AKP government to reverse course and strike inside Syria. Now, Turkey is at a greater risk of violent attacks by both entities. In recent days, Turkey's government has arrested thousands and again cracked down on social media and press freedoms. Meanwhile, the United States, NATO, and Europe are struggling to head off an escalation of violence and military action in Turkey and to keep other regional players from escalating as well.

This crisis might have been avoided had Europe and the United States not backed away years ago from intensive engagement with Turkey — which had been a key factor in the country's economic and political reform successes. Washington and Brussels have been shortsighted, too, where Ankara is concerned. For at least 10 years, since the 2004 EU acceptance of members of the "A10" Eastern bloc countries — the largest single expansion of the EU — Europe has had "enlargement fatigue." Engagement with Turkey suffered, and EU accession conditions toughened, enabling Turkey to stray from its once-bold reform agenda.

It is now vital to reset and revitalize the relationship between Turkey and the West in all areas, including but not limited to closer cooperation in combating the Islamic State in Syria.

Turkish citizens and political leaders have not all forgotten, nor should we, that Turkey has a positive foundation with the West upon which a reset could now be built. In fact, Turkey's modernization in tandem with the West goes back decades. Turkey joined the Council of Europe in 1949; was a founding member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1961; became a NATO ally in 1952; an associate member of the European Economic Community in 1963; and applied for EU accession nearly 30 years ago, in 1987 — the EU's longest-standing application.

Turkey's relations with Europe hit a high-water mark, with strong U.S. support, during the Clinton administration. The 1996 EU-Turkey Customs Union, in which Washington played a lead role (along with Turkey's then-ambassador to the EU, Cem Duna, and Turkey's then-speaker of parliament, Mustafa Kalemli), significantly strengthened economic relations. The path-breaking Customs Union was being implemented in 1999 just as Turkey was formally designated as an EU accession candidate. Turkey's economic liberalization had its roots in the 1980s under Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, but its political, economic, and social policies got a substantial boost in the first decade of the 21st century when an active accession process made it seem likely that Turkey would become an EU member.

These changes did wonders for Turkey's economic progress. Turkish exports grew during the first decade of the 21st century by 15.3 percent annually and inward foreign direct investment quadrupled, according to World Bank and International Monetary Fund [data](#) and [analysis](#). Even now, three-quarters of Turkey's foreign direct investment comes from the EU, and the country is currently the union's sixth-largest trading partner. Some 55 percent of European economic legislation is reflected in corresponding Turkish law. And at least 150,000 Turkish entrepreneurs employing 600,000 workers now operate inside the EU. Meanwhile, Turkey's middle class has doubled since the mid-1990s, as the economy shifted towards industry and services, and productivity rose quickly. And the annual growth rate often exceeded 5 percent after the reforms of the 1980s, and reached as high as 13 percent before global recession hit in 2007.

But Turkey's EU accession process stalled after 2004, both because Turkey fell short on democratic governance and economic reform, but also because of foot-dragging by the European Commission, under pressure from some member states to keep Turkey out. This convinced the AKP government, already turning away from secular governance, that Turkey would never be accepted into the EU. Ankara began to put far less energy into economic and governance reforms, and tensions with the West grew — not least of which was Turkey's refusal to help in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria.

It didn't have to be this way. Turkey was a strong, secular partner of the West for decades, with beneficial results for its people. It has long been an indispensable bridge between East and West. And, when the West and Turkey were more engaged on the country's economic and governance reforms, Turkey took bold steps. Once policy drift and divisions set in and engagement with the West lost steam, Turkey's government no longer prioritized domestic inclusion, freedom, and cooperation with Europe and the United States. And as the Turkish economy deteriorated and security in the region worsened, Erdogan clamped down hard, spurring domestic tensions. In 2013, Erdogan brokered a cease-fire with the Kurds and wooed foreign investors, but also sought to enhance his own power and crack down on basic freedoms.

Unfortunately, Europe's response to the AKP's shortsighted policies often had the effect of slamming the door harder on a deeper Turkey-EU partnership, which also undermined cooperation with NATO against terrorism. Meanwhile, European officials emphasized the distance Turkey needed to travel to be "good enough" for EU membership — rather than the distance it had to come. European fears over homegrown terrorism unleashed on behalf of Islamic extremism played into this dynamic, making it harder to welcome Turkey as an EU member.

Nonetheless, the German Marshall Fund [has found](#) that a growing share of Turkish citizens want stronger ties with Europe and the United States. While Turkey's governance problems are real (as the OSCE's June [report](#) on parliamentary elections and July [report](#) on press freedom remind), it would be a colossal mistake for the West to further disengage from Turkey.

Erdogan's repressive approach has backfired — and offers the West an opening. Today, Turkey faces real security threats, widespread unrest, and its peace process with the PKK is on life support. The once-admired economic progress is nowhere to be seen. If Turkish authorities respond with excessive military force or repression against its own people, things could get much worse.

Brussels and Washington must now encourage Turkey's affinity for progress and openness, without insisting that it dilute its Muslim identity or become a carbon copy of Europe and the United States. The West urgently needs a Turkey that is strong, modern, prosperous, and democratic in its own right — and Turkey badly needs the stability, economic opportunity, and security that can be found with its NATO allies. Although EU membership remains unlikely in the near term, Europe and the United States should take clear steps to reinforce Turkey's interest in promoting inclusive growth and an open, stable society anchored in a stronger partnership with the West.

The 20-year-old EU-Turkey Customs Union is outdated and incomplete. It should quickly be extended beyond manufacturing to include services and agriculture, dispute resolution, and public procurement. Turkey should be permitted to monitor Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations and, once an agreement is reached, to have the opportunity to accede. And the EU should engage Ankara on decisions that might divert trade from Turkey.

Turkey and the EU already agreed in May 2015 to renew talks on the Customs Union in early 2016 and to discuss extending it to include services, government contracting, and most agricultural goods. Both sides need to begin consulting internally and work to build confidence in its mutual benefits.

Turkey should also be invited to participate in the activities and agreements of the EU's Energy Community. EU accession negotiations should be

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reinvigorated to engage the Turkish people. Negotiations could ramp up discussions on economic policy, governance, and rule of law to build capacity and shared commitment to progress and EU accession. The West should also encourage international discussion and support for improvement in Turkey's investment climate and integration into global markets. And, on the immediate concerns of regional and domestic security, the United States, EU, and NATO must engage Turkey far more vigorously.

On May 11, members of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee [called upon](#) Turkey to do more to fight corruption, support free expression, and judicial independence and to adopt democratic principles shared by the EU. They also called upon the EU to back Turkey's efforts to build democratic institutions, ensure respect for core freedoms, human rights, and rule of law, and step up foreign-policy cooperation, including by inviting the country's foreign affairs minister to relevant EU meetings. We hope both sides heed this advice and act swiftly and meaningfully to secure this critical partnership. On July 15, Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn of Luxembourg, which currently presides over the Council of the European Union, [told](#) the European Parliament that once a new Turkish government is in place, talks over Chapter 17 (Economic and Monetary Policy) in Turkey's bid for EU membership might be opened. This would be a small but important step in deepening Turkey's economic dialogue and cooperation with the West.

Headlines about Turkey's new security agreement with the United States must not distract from the larger strategic imperative: Shared efforts against the Islamic State can be a beachhead for encouraging further cooperation on sound economic policies and democratic governance. The West must make clear to Turkey's leaders, opinion-makers, and its people our shared interest in prosperity, openness, and security. Reengagement on these fronts will be essential to promoting a vibrant, inclusive Turkish economy and society. That's a recipe for a strong, prosperous ally — one far less prone to security crises, both domestic and regional.

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