

# An asset but not a model: Turkey, the EU and the wider Middle East

## 1. A success story for EU foreign policy, but what next?

Many politicians and commentators tend to disparage the EU's nascent foreign policy. They should travel to Turkey. It is true that the EU has a poor record in making its mark on global crises. But its ability to exert influence in countries wishing to join the EU has been nothing short of revolutionary. In recent years, successive Turkish governments, and especially the new AKP government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have passed rafts of reform packages. These reforms have brought Turkey into line with the EU's exacting Copenhagen membership criteria on democracy and human rights. The prospect of EU accession has made issues that had been political taboos for decades, such as the role of the army in Turkish politics, suddenly ripe for reform. This form of 'regime change' EU-style is cheap, voluntary and hence long-lasting. If enlargement is by far the EU's most successful foreign policy tool, then Turkey could be the EU's biggest success in foreign affairs.

At the December European Council, the heads of state and government will have to decide whether and when to open accession talks with Turkey. EU leaders are rightly mindful of public opposition and the effects that Turkey's membership could have on the Union's cohesion and capacity to act. But the best way for the EU to consolidate and anchor Turkey's democratisation process is by giving Turkey the green light to start accession negotiations. Moreover, EU leaders should make that choice in a spirit of self-confidence and optimism, not resignation and dejection. It would be a triumph of EU foreign policy to welcome a successful Turkey, which has laid to rest the ghosts of military authoritarianism and chronic economic instability. Europeans should say, loudly and repeatedly, that no

one else has managed to transform, in a peaceful and deliberate manner, the political system of a country as large and complex as Turkey.

From its inception, the EU's international approach has contrasted sharply with that of the US. The preferred US method for dealing with foreign countries is direct, initially awe-inspiring and heavily military in nature. The downside of this type of engagement is that it is also mostly short-term, superficial and expensive. The EU's approach is the opposite: indirect, underwhelming and economic-legal in nature. But the benefits are that EU foreign policy is long-term, structural and comparatively cheap. As Mark Leonard, the Director of the Foreign Policy Centre, has rightly pointed out: "upon entering the EU's sphere of influence, countries are changed for ever".<sup>1</sup> The EU's track record in dealing with the instability and insecurity in its backyard is markedly more impressive than that of the US. Just compare the success that the EU has had in securing the transitions in central and eastern Europe – and in goading Turkey to go down that path as well – with the failure of US policies to achieve lasting stability in Colombia or Peru.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Leonard, 'The road to a cool Europa', *New Statesman*, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2003.

Hence, European leaders and citizens should be proud that Turkey is becoming the latest and most impressive example of the EU wielding 'soft power', the ability to shape international events by attraction rather than coercion. The EU has successfully changed critical aspects of Turkey's political and legal systems in a way that the US, despite having a long and intimate relationship with Ankara, has never managed to do. It is a great pity that so few Europeans are willing to describe and sell the EU-Turkey relationship as a geo-strategic success story for the EU, and a vindication of its distinctive foreign policy style.

Instead, the debate has concentrated on whether Turkey is 'really' European, whether it is ready to start accession talks and what would be the consequences for the EU's institutions, budget and policies. This narrow debate on the merits and costs of Turkey's eventual membership is necessary. But many larger questions loom, such as: what kind of club should the EU be and where are the borders of Europe? If Turkey moves towards membership should Ukraine, Belarus and others have a chance to join too? And if all these countries join, would an inner core of countries committed to deeper integration be necessary and desirable?

<sup>2</sup> Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci, 'Integrating EU and Turkish Foreign Policy', CEPS, *Turkey in Europe Monitor*, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2004.

There are also questions relating to Turkey's impact on EU policies towards the wider Middle East. Do the member-states and Turkey have similar, or at least compatible, interests and objectives in the region? How would Turkey's

complex ties with the Arab Middle East, Iran and Israel affect EU policies and influence? Is Turkey really a bridge between East and West, and what does that mean in concrete terms? Would EU membership for Turkey "emphatically repudiate the spectre of a clash of civilisations", as Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci of CEPS – and many others with them – have suggested?<sup>2</sup> And what about the claims that Turkey, a democratising country with a Muslim population and a moderate but pro-Islamic government, is an inspiring 'model' for the progressive democratisation of the wider Middle East? Graham Fuller, a US academic, has

<sup>3</sup> Graham Fuller, 'Turkey's Strategic Model: Myths and Realities', *The Washington Quarterly*, 2004.

expressed the view of many, especially Americans, when he argued that "today's Turkey has truly become a model for the Muslim world".<sup>3</sup>

This essay will look at these two sets of broader questions, first analysing the consequences of Turkey's accession for EU policies in the wider Middle East and then probing the 'Turkey as a bridge' or 'model' arguments. It will argue that Turkey is an asset for the EU, but not a model for the democratisation of the wider Middle East. It will conclude with recommendations for policy-makers in Turkey and the rest of Europe.

## 2. The macro impact of Turkey's accession

No one can say for certain how, once inside the EU, Turkey will influence EU policy on the Middle East. EU accession is probably ten years away, if not longer. In that period EU and Turkish foreign policy, as well as the Middle East itself, are bound to change in unpredictable ways. Therefore, the debate should focus on Turkey's influence on EU Middle East policy in the pre-accession phase.

With its large population and strategic location Turkey can expect to exert some influence over EU policies towards the Middle East. But its influence

will be limited. Already 25 member-states (soon 27 or 28), plus the Brussels-based institutions, have their say in shaping EU policies. EU foreign policy is a bit like an oil tanker – hard to change course quickly even if the crew wants to. Moreover, in the decade ahead, Turkey will remain in a position of being a 'demandeur', with its membership aspirations crowding out whatever other EU policy objectives it may have.

Nonetheless, the prospect of Turkey's accession is already forcing the EU to devote more resources and develop more coherent policies towards the Middle East. Turkey's accession will increase the salience of the Middle East, and accelerate the Union's already deepening involvement in the region. The Middle East matters greatly because of the many threats to European interests that emanate from the area. As a result, the EU's relations with the Arab Middle East, Iran and Israel – and Turkish views on these issues – will become a more central topic on the Union's agenda in the years ahead. From their side, leaders in the Middle East are already becoming frequent visitors to Brussels. In future, more may pass through Ankara on their way to Brussels for consultations.

By the same token, representatives from civil society in the Middle East will expand their contacts with both Turkey and the EU. Arab NGOs are sceptical about overall US intentions and object to the growing conditions attached to US funding. For instance, as a result of the 2002 Patriot Act, US-linked organisations can only commit funds to any NGO if all people associated with the project are cleared of having links with terrorist groups and have never been imprisoned for terrorist offences. These conditions are resented by many Arabs and make it extremely hard for US donors to do work involving Palestinians. The pro-EU orientation of Arab civil society is also having a positive influence on their views about Turkey.

At the macro level, the biggest impact of future Turkish membership will be on the mind maps of EU officials and politicians. The process of European integration has its historical origins in the Rhine-delta, the areas which once formed the Carolingian empire. It was conceived and driven by post-war leaders such as Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide de Gasperi, many of whom were steeped in Catholic, Christian-Democratic philosophy. Their dream was a cohesive and federal union of west European states. But the EU has come a long way since the early 1950s, as its membership and policy remit have expanded over the years. Turkey's accession will confirm and accentuate this shift whereby the EU has become a continent-wide, heterogeneous Union with a religiously diverse population and a political outlook that is increasingly externally oriented. The EU and Turkey alike should acknowledge this trend and maximise the potential benefits.

### 3. The EU's Middle East policies

Over the years, the EU has built up a dense web of relations with the countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. At a multilateral level the EU has the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), also known as the Barcelona Process, which ties 12 countries from the Middle East and North Africa to the EU. Through MEDA, the financial arm of the EMP, the EU is spending around €1 billion annually on economic and political reform projects in the region. At a bilateral level the EU has concluded 'Association Agreements' (AA) or 'Trade and Co-operation Agreements' (TCA) with most countries in the region. Important exceptions are Syria and Iran. Negotiations with Damascus on an AA are underway but progressing slowly while the EU has frozen TCA negotiations with Tehran, due to concerns over Iran's nuclear activities.

In March 2003, the EU sought to inject new momentum into the EMP and announced an 'EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East'. The principal innovations compared to the 'old' Barcelona Process were a greater degree of differentiation, allowing those countries willing and able to develop deeper ties with the EU to do so; and greater emphasis on promoting good governance and human rights. And in May 2004, the EU launched its new 'European neighbourhood policy' with the aim of creating a 'ring of friends' around the EU. The plan is to make EU policies more flexible and action-oriented, without offering the prospect of membership. While it is still unclear whether the substance of this neighbourhood policy will be sufficient to make a real difference, most Mediterranean and Middle Eastern partners are eligible to take part.

No outsider should expect quick results in the Middle East, given the exceptional levels of instability, political tensions and economic deprivation. But even EU officials admit that the EU is underperforming in the Middle East. Institutional incoherence, poor political discipline, risk aversion and insufficient emphasis on promoting good governance and democracy have all taken their toll.<sup>4</sup> While the EU has set itself the right objectives and developed a dazzling array of policies, partnerships and programmes, it lacks credibility and clout. Turkey, as a Muslim country straddling Europe and the Middle East, could be of help here, making EU policies perhaps more

<sup>4</sup> Steven Everts, 'The EU and the Middle East: a call for action', CER, January 2003.

acceptable to countries in the region, especially in the pre-accession phase before it becomes an EU member.

### 4. Turkey's international strategy

The principle challenge of Turkish foreign policy has been the need to balance the fact that the country borders on the Middle East (as well as the Caspian region and the Caucasus) with its Western vocation and orientation. Sean Yom of Harvard University has aptly captured Turkey's dilemma: how to embrace the

West without turning its back on the East.<sup>5</sup> Turkey's elite has mostly stuck to three core tenets: conservative nationalism, strict secularism and a strategic alliance with Washington. For decades, Ankara's relationship with the US was the lodestar of its foreign policy. This US-centric orientation chimed with, and was reinforced by, the huge influence of the military establishment on Turkish foreign policy. Relations with the rest of Europe and the EU mattered, but were always of secondary importance. The deep ambivalence on the west European side about Turkey's membership aspirations fed this circle of mutual suspicion.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Yom, 'Turkey and the Middle East: Challenges, Choices and Consequences', *Insight Turkey*, January-March 2004.

The strong alliance with Washington (and the Pentagon in particular) has meant that, in their overall outlook, the Turkish elite is more 'Hobbesian' than 'Kantian'. Turks have mostly seen the world as consisting of threats; they have tended to distrust other countries' motives and actions; and they have been great believers in the effectiveness of hard power tools. Put differently, in the now-familiar terminology of Robert Kagan, most Turks have been like Americans, from Mars, while Europeans are from Venus.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1990s, and many times before, Turkey embarked on some confrontational, hard-line strategies, with solid US backing. Notable examples include the frequent incursions in northern Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish militants, and the threat of force against Syria in 1998 over Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and for sheltering its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Until recently, many Turkish diplomats were better at lecturing west Europeans on their double standards and their failure to take the threat of terrorism seriously, than at convincing them that Turkey is a European country, committed to pooling sovereignty inside the EU.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kagan, 'Of Paradise and Power. America and Europe in the New World Order', *Atlantic Books, London*, 2003.

In the past few years, however, Turkish foreign policy has changed profoundly. Turkey has made its EU membership aspirations the central tenet in its foreign policy. Its pro-US stance remains solid, but is less automatic. In March 2003 the Turkish parliament dared to say 'no' to Washington's request to let its troops pass through Turkey to open a second front against Iraq. But the prospect of EU membership has also affected Turkey's regional strategy. For example, Ankara has moderated its position on the touchstone issue of Cyprus. Perhaps because it feels less like an 'abandoned' country that must guarantee its own survival in an anarchic world, Turkey's behaviour has become more balanced and sophisticated. Turkish officials and leaders are still keen defenders of their perceived national interests, as they should be. But they have started to moderate their inclination to think mainly in zero-sum terms, acknowledging the possibility of win-win solutions.

With respect to the Middle East, Turkey has concentrated heavily on bilateral relations, in contrast

to the EU's regional approach. The legacy of the Ottoman Empire means that ancient political ties and trading patterns persist to this day – but also resentment and memories of oppression on the non-Turkish side. After all, the rise of Arab nationalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was fuelled by a desire to throw off the 'Ottoman yoke'. In diplomatic terms, Ankara has had reasonably good relations with countries like Jordan, Egypt and, since the early 1990s, Israel; but mostly poor relations with Syria and Iran. The Kurdish question – i.e. the fight against Kurdish separatist groups and the need to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan – has always loomed large in Turkish policy for the region.

Turkey has sometimes tried to assert some form of regional leadership role. For example, in 1996 when the Welfare Party formed the country's first pro-Islamic government, it called for a political opening towards the rest of the Islamic world. The first foreign visit of the then Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, was not to Washington but a tour of the Middle East. However, this tour also highlighted the practical difficulties of, and domestic opposition to, an 'Islamic' foreign policy as well as the deep ambivalence in Arab countries towards Turkey. Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi used Erbakan's visit to praise the PKK, while Egyptian President Mubarak was contemptuous of Erbakan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic political group that opposes Western and secular forms of politics. Undeterred, Erbakan called for an Islamic common market and declared that "we shall never become the lackeys of the Christians". But soon afterwards, Erbakan was forced to accept the co-operation agreements with Israel which the Turkish military had wanted and negotiated. With his credibility in ruins, Erbakan was forced to resign in 1997 under pressure from the powerful National Security Council (NSC) which, until recently, gave the Turkish army the final say on key aspects of Turkey's international strategy and domestic policy. Many on the NSC and elsewhere considered the Erbakan experiment a threat to the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Erbakan's ill-fated adventure was a formative experience. The current leaders of the AKP have concluded from Erbakan's failure that Turkey's interests – in terms of domestic stability and international credibility – require that nothing jeopardises the country's pro-Western orientation or the secular nature of its state structure. Thus, any initiative towards the Middle East region should complement and build upon, but not rival, Turkey's alliance with the US and the EU.

Europeans with high hopes of what Turkey may contribute to EU policies should realise that, most of the time, Turkey has played a low-key role in the region. Turkey's non-Arab status, coupled with the Ottoman legacy and Turkey's pro-Western orientation have meant that in Turkish-Arab relations, ambivalence and ambiguity are always present. Some

Arabs and Iranians have accused Turkey of betraying its Islamic identity. At times they have blasted the Turks for being a stooge of US imperialism and of having an unacceptably close relationship with Israel. For instance, the 1997 summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) in Tehran adopted a resolution which criticised Islamic countries for having military co-operation agreements with Israel. This resolution was deeply embarrassing for Turkey, forcing the then Turkish President Demirel to leave the summit early.

In the past few years, Turkey has sought and achieved a rapprochement with neighbours such as Syria and Greece with which it had fraught relations. Kemal Kirişçi of Bogaziçi University has rightly remarked that there has been a striking process of 'Europeanisation' in Turkish foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> At a basic level, Turkey has adjusted its stance on various international issues in line with the EU mainstream, for instance on the International Criminal Court (ICC). But more importantly, Turkey has started to adopt the EU's distinct foreign policy 'style' of promoting security through multilateral mechanisms and institutional integration. For instance, the Turkish government has started to embrace the idea that a solution to the Cyprus question can only be found in the context of EU and UN involvement. Even before Turkey joins the EU, this socialisation process should continue. Both the EU and Turkey should nurture this development and make sure it becomes more deeply embedded in Turkey's political class and the wider national debate.

<sup>7</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, 'Turkey, the EU and the Middle East: can Turkey help with the democratisation in the Middle East?', Paper for a workshop on Turkish foreign policy, University of Otago, New Zealand, August 2004.

In turn, Turkey has quite a lot to offer to the EU. It can contribute expertise and knowledge of the Middle East region. While Turkey has fewer Arabic speakers than one might expect, the country's network of contacts, combined with the political capital of the AKP government and the burgeoning economic ties, will be assets for the EU. But the biggest effect of Turkey's pre-accession status will be at the level of political symbolism. The EU may have a much better image in the Middle East than the US. But for many Arabs and Iranians, the EU is a white, Christian club with dubious colonial legacies. There is a deep sense that the 'West', of which Europe is a constituent part, is a hostile force to Muslims worldwide. If the EU took in Turkey, it would send an immensely powerful signal to the contrary. Public statements by Egyptian and Iranian leaders from the region make it clear that they support Turkey's membership bid – and regard it as a litmus test for the EU's reputation in the Muslim world. The unusual move by the Israeli Defence Ministry, to warn Ankara privately that EU membership would harm Turkish-Israeli relations, underlines the same point, while highlighting the ambivalence of EU-Israeli relations.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ha'aretz*, July 5<sup>th</sup> 2004.



Apart from these general effects, what would be the impact of Turkey on EU policies towards specific countries in the pre-accession phase? It is worth looking at a few concrete cases.

### Israel-Palestine

Turkey's relations with Israel have been close, especially for a country with a Muslim population. While solidarity among ordinary Turks with the Palestinian cause has been great, at the level of the government and military establishment, the relationship with Israel has been exceptionally strong. The two countries share certain characteristics: both are non-Arab democracies, market economies and strategic allies of the US. Both countries also have an acute sense of vulnerability in the face of a serious terrorist threat. So it is not surprising that Turkey and Israel feel they are like-minded countries, bridgeheads of the West in a hostile region. Bilateral relations experienced a genuine upswing in the 1990s. Co-operation at the military and defence industrial level intensified after a set of bilateral agreements in 1996, while trade flows between the two countries benefited from a 1997 free trade agreement.

However, in recent years, Turkish-Israeli relations have become more strained, as the peace process has stalled and Palestinian hardship has increased. In 2002, the then Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit openly criticised Israeli incursions in territories administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA). The AKP government has gone somewhat further. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül has stated that the AKP does not just want to use Turkey's good relations with both parties to promote a settlement, which has been the default Turkish position on the conflict, but also that any solution must do justice to the Palestinians' rights. In January 2004 Prime Minister Erdoğan accused Israel of 'state terrorism'. And in April that year Turkey joined the EU in condemning Israel's assassination of the leader of Hamas' political wing, Abdül Aziz al-Rantissi.

Sympathy for the Palestinians is not an empty slogan for the new government. Erdoğan is reported to have called for a reduction in military co-operation. And he declined to meet the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert when he visited Turkey in July 2004. Throughout 2003 and 2004, Israeli-Turkish relations also suffered because of alleged Israeli support for Kurdish groups in northern Iraq. In short, the relationship has lost some of its shine and strength. But there has been no abrupt break in Israeli-Turkish relations, and none is likely to occur in the near future since both countries benefit from a close partnership.

Turkey's relatively constructive relationship with Israel could benefit the EU. The Union is Israel's biggest trading partner, but politically relations are troubled. The Europeans are critical of Israeli actions, for instance on the security wall/barrier or the constant expansion of illegal settlements. Israel in turn accuses the EU of having a pro-Palestinian bias and it resists an

EU role in the peace process. The EU is trying to improve its relations with Israel but it rightly insists that this will also depend on changes in Israeli behaviour, especially towards the Palestinians.

With the Palestinians the EU has a long-standing relationship: it remains by far their most important international donor. Politically, the EU has stuck to the line that a negotiated settlement is the only acceptable outcome to the conflict, giving the Palestinians the state they deserve and the Israelis the security they crave. The Union's refusal, in contrast to the US, to accept 'facts on the ground' as a proper basis for a final settlement, has created the – false – impression among Israelis that the EU is blindly taking the Palestinians' side. In reality, senior EU diplomats acknowledge that the Palestinian state might not include some parts of the West Bank but that there would then have to be land swaps, giving the Palestinians land of equivalent size and quality. They also add that, while the Palestinians may have to recognise limits on how refugees exercise their rights – for example by settling in Palestine rather than Israel – it is for them to negotiate that in final status talks with Israel. In recent years, the EU has also increased its insistence on internal reform of the Palestinian Authority and on the need to crackdown on violent groups. Through training and assistance, the EU is helping the Palestinian police forces so that they are better able to tackle militant groups.

The EU and Turkey could work together fruitfully on Israel-Palestine, trying to break the deadlock in the peace process. The objectives of both sides are the same, while the respective starting positions and relative diplomatic strengths complement each other well. Peacemaking in the Middle East is an intensely frustrating business. And any settlement will depend on the choices the parties themselves make. But outsiders such as the EU and Turkey can play a useful, supporting role. Concretely, the EU and Turkey should help the Palestinians prepare for the day when Israel will withdraw from Gaza, so that Hamas does not take over. They should also try to use Israel's disengagement from Gaza to push for further withdrawals from the West Bank. In practical terms, EU-Turkey co-operation could focus on reforming political institutions, organising elections, training police forces and even drawing up plans for a third-party security force. Significantly, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Olmert has said that Israel would not object to Turkish troops helping to provide security in the context of an agreed political framework.

### Iran

Ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Ankara's relations with Tehran have been tense. Turkey has systematically opposed Iranian attempts to export its brand of Islamic radicalism. Ankara has also clashed repeatedly with Tehran over Iran's support for Kurdish separatist groups. But more recently relations have thawed. For the first time in years,

senior Iranian ministers visited Turkey in 2003, while Erdoğan travelled to Tehran in July 2004. The completion of the Tabriz-Erzurum gas pipeline confirmed that both countries are looking at ways of co-operating economically. This pipeline is, of course, also of great interest to Europe as it should allow Iranian gas – and that of other countries in the Caspian sea – to reach European markets at a competitive price. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran doubled from \$1.2 billion in 2002 to \$2.4 billion in 2003. This was an unexpectedly large increase, even if Iran still only provides three per cent of Turkish imports.

Turkey shares US and EU concerns regarding Iran's behaviour in southern Iraq and its nuclear ambitions. Iran's decision in September 2004 to end its suspension of uranium enrichment has deeply unnerved Turkish diplomats. For years, Turkey's close defence relationship with the US was in part driven by its worries over Iranian ambitions. But in terms of diplomatic strategy, Turkey's thinking is more in line with the EU's policy of conditional engagement than the US, which believes that the best way to deal with Iran is through isolation, pressure and punishment.<sup>9</sup> Like most Europeans, the Turks see a complex domestic political picture in Iran, not

<sup>9</sup> Steven Everts, *'Engaging Iran: a test case for EU foreign policy'*, CER, March 2004.

a monolithic, hostile force. Turks and Europeans agree that many aspects of Iranian behaviour are unacceptable, but they do not believe Tehran's choices are irrational or impossible to change.

Turkey's growing political ties with Iran are an asset for the EU as it seeks to expand its influence and salvage the deal it forged in October 2003 on Iran's nuclear programme. The access of AKP leaders to Iranian leaders, coupled with the visa-free travel conditions, strengthen the argument that, especially in the pre-accession phase, Turkey could be a useful bridge between the West and Iran. As the international stand-off over Iran's nuclear programme moves to a crisis point, Turkey and the EU have a shared interest in seeking a diplomatic yet effective solution. Both Turkey and the EU have some leverage over Iran, and both will want to forestall a US military attack. Together, they should try to persuade the Iranians that national greatness does not depend on having a nuclear bomb, and that their interests are best served by staying non-nuclear. Together, they must underline that if Iran continues to defy the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), targeted economic sanctions will follow. Together, they should also explain to the US and Israel that plans for 'surgical strikes' against Iranian nuclear installations will be counterproductive by triggering a nationalist backlash. While air strikes may delay a nuclear Iran, they will not succeed in eliminating the two key ingredients of a military nuclear programme: technological know-how and a keen desire to acquire a nuclear deterrent.

## Syria

Turkey and Syria have had frosty relations for decades, with tensions peaking in 1998 when Turkey threatened military action. Political disagreements abounded: over Syrian support for the PKK, over access to water from the Euphrates – exacerbated by the building of the Atatürk dam – and over Syria's close ties with Iranian and Palestinian militant groups. Economic ties have also been weak, reflecting these fraught political relations.

But after the Syrians expelled Öcalan in 1998, bilateral relations have started to improve. A first step came when Ahmet Necdet Sezer, then Turkey's President, attended the funeral of Hafez al-Assad, Syria's long-standing leader. When Bashar al-Assad became the new Syrian President in 2000, this rapprochement gathered pace. However, a genuine improvement in relations only occurred after the Turkish elections in November 2002 when the AKP took office. In the run up to the Iraq war, both countries intensified political consultations in an attempt to avoid military action. A truly transformative moment in recent Turkish-Syrian relations came in January 2004, when Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian President to visit Turkey. During his trip, the Turkish media showered Assad with praise. On the vexed question of Syrian support for the PKK, Assad denied that the PKK had any bases in Syria, while his hosts praised Syria for its co-operation in fighting terrorists.

These improvements in the Turkey-Syria relationship took place while the EU was trying to persuade Damascus that closer links with the EU would be possible – provided Syria was willing to meet EU concerns. At present, the EU is negotiating an Association Agreement with Syria. After the Iraq war, and with Washington adopting a hardening line towards Dasmacus, the Syrians showed great interest in getting closer to the EU. As a result, negotiations on the Association Agreement, which had long been stalled, suddenly picked up speed. But in early 2004 they hit a snag when certain member-states (principally the UK, Germany and the Netherlands) wanted to ensure that the clauses in the agreement relating to non-proliferation issues were sufficiently robust. They argued that Syria was a test case for the EU's new non-proliferation policy, which it adopted at the end of 2003.

This tough EU stance required that all newly concluded agreements with third countries must contain exacting 'WMD clauses', requiring countries for example to sign and ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention. But the Syrians objected to the EU's attempt to insert a tougher WMD clause in their Association Agreement than the one that the EU had already negotiated with other Mediterranean countries, including Israel. The hardliners on the European side replied that it was important that the EU's shiny new WMD strategy would not fall at the first hurdle – and that third countries realised that any delay in forging closer ties with the EU would not

necessarily work in their favour. At the time of writing, negotiations between Brussels and Damascus continue, with the expectation that they will finish before the end of 2004. If so, this agreement could be a success for EU foreign policy, provided the Europeans remain united in forcing through the implementation of the entire agreement.

Turkey and the EU should work together closely in drawing Syria into a wider web of international co-operation and reciprocal obligations. The EU can offer trade, technology, know-how and investment, all of which the Syrian economy desperately needs. In political terms, Damascus also needs more friends in the region and beyond. If it wants better relations with Europe, Syria will have to heed precise European concerns and demands, especially in the area of WMD proliferation, its control over Lebanese politics and its support for Palestinian militant groups. Turkey's budding relationship with Syria may offer an additional means of influencing the choices that the Syrian regime will make. As the dominant land route for Syrian exports, Turkey stands to gain considerably from an intensification of EU-Syrian trade relations. Together, the EU and Turkey have an interest in demonstrating that a deft political strategy can achieve better results than America's penchant for issuing threats and isolating countries.

### 5. Why Turkey is not a 'model' for democratising the wider Middle East

Traditionally, Turkish political leaders shied away from speaking about the need for greater accountability, wider political participation and more respect for human rights in the Muslim world. They recognised that these are ultra-sensitive issues; that Turkey has an ambivalent relationship with most Muslim countries; and that its own democratisation process is still incomplete. But after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, when relations between the West and the Muslim world shot to the top of the international agenda, many commentators and politicians started to view and describe Turkey as a 'strategic case'. Americans, especially, have grown fond of describing Turkey as an inspiring example of a democratic, Muslim country where 'moderate Islam' has been remarkably successful. Most Turks, however, have long felt uncomfortable with being labelled as a 'model' or 'beacon' for countries in the Muslim Middle East, lest such talk annoy the neighbours, detract from the shortcomings in Turkey's political system, or worse, make Turkey's EU membership aspirations seem less credible. Nigar Göksel of the ARI movement, a Turkish NGO, has rightly pointed to the problems of Americans and Europeans seeing and describing Turkey in this way. Reform-minded Turks want to get closer to Europe, and fear that loose talk of Turkey as a 'model', pulls it back into the Middle East. Göksel

<sup>10</sup> Nigar Göksel, 'Thematic priorities as the NATO summit nears', ARI position paper, May 2004.

argues: "The more Turkey is defined as a model or mentor of the Middle East, the less Turkey appears to the EU as a European country facing European concerns".<sup>10</sup>

Recently, however, Turkish politicians, including from the AKP, have started to call for a gradual democratisation of Islamic countries, implying along the way that Turkey could play some form of leadership role in this area. For example, at the OIC meeting in May 2003 in Tehran, Foreign Minister Gül declared that: "Turkey is in a position to be an intermediary that can promote universal values shared with the West, such as democracy, human rights, the supremacy of the law and a market economy in the region." Both the location and the occasion for that speech prove that Gül was not simply saying what a Western audience might want to hear.

In many respects this was a pivotal event for Turkey. According to Kemal Kirişçi, Gül's speech "...may well be the first occasion when Turkey has openly attempted to live up to the frequent calls of becoming a model for other Muslim countries with some credibility". In June 2004, a Turk, Ekmeleddin İhsanoglu, became the first-ever elected Secretary-General of the OIC, partly on a platform of promoting political and democratic reforms. This election was important symbolically, highlighting Turkey's growing self-confidence in taking on the role of trustworthy advocate of democratic practices in the Islamic world. Thus, advocates of Turkey's European aspirations are right to stress that one reason why Turkey deserves a 'yes' in December is the country's potential contribution to the promotion of more democratic forms of governance in the Muslim world.

However, Turkey cannot be a 'model' for the progressive democratisation of the wider Middle East. Turkey is a unique case. Its successful, if incomplete, democratisation process cannot be transplanted to other countries in the region for at least three reasons. The first is the most straightforward: unlike any other country in the region, Turkey has a long-standing relationship with the West: institutionally through NATO, and bilaterally with Washington and capitals in Europe. No other country in the region has the same, or even a comparable, starting position. Nor was any other country in the region born out of an empire, which gives Turks greater political self-confidence than countries in the region that started off as colonies.

Second, ever since the beginning of the Turkish republic, the strict secular nature of its political system has put Turkey in a distinct international category. Turkey's secular state structure makes it akin to France – see for instance the similarity in policies on women's headscarves – but very different from Arab states, never mind Iran.

Turkey's secular state does not mean that Islam is absent from its political and cultural life. On the contrary, the main beneficiaries of Turkey's recent democratisation process have been political groupings, such as the AKP, which believe that Islam should inform the country's political choices. This is somewhat ironic, as Turkey's secularists have always seen EU membership as a way of escaping the influence of political Islam and the turmoil

of the Middle East generally. In recent years, Turkey has undoubtedly become a more mature democracy. But culturally Turkey may well become more 'Islamic' as the AKP and other groups try to expand the role of Islam in public life, while respecting the main tenets of Turkey's secular state structure. Put succinctly, in Turkey more democracy and more power for Islamic political groups have gone hand in hand. But this was only possible in the context of a firmly secular political system, which is absent in the rest of the Middle East.

The third reason why Turkey is unique is that the deepening of Turkey's democratisation took place largely because of the 'golden carrot' of EU membership. It is true, as Turkish leaders often stress, that the reforms were necessary in themselves. But the prospect of EU membership has had a transformative effect on the Turkish elite. This also means that a different Turkish government will probably persist with the current reform agenda, even if, as is likely, there will be setbacks on the road to EU membership. But apart from the countries of the Balkans, the EU is not offering a membership perspective to any other country. Thus the EU will have to influence the rest of the Middle East with only the 'silver carrot' of deeper co-operation in the context of its neighbourhood policy.

## 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Turkey deserves a 'yes' from EU leaders in December to start accession negotiations. In return, Turkey must maintain the reform momentum, accept stringent monitoring, and make greater efforts to persuade a sceptical west European public that Turkey's accession is in their interest too.

The practical and symbolic effects of Turkey's membership on the EU's policies and (self) image would be considerable, though not revolutionary. As Chris Patten, the commissioner for external relations, said in a speech in Oxford in April 2004: "The case that this is a pivotal moment in the EU's relationship with the Islamic world can be, and is, overstated. But our approach to Turkey does matter. It says a great deal about how we see ourselves, and want to be seen, in terms both of culture and of geopolitics... We cannot help but be conscious of the symbolism, at this time, of reaching out a hand to a country whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim."

Turkey has a lot to contribute to EU policies on the Middle East: credibility, political access, know-how and economic leverage. If handled deftly, the prospect of Turkey's accession could be a real boon for EU influence in the region. The reverse is also true: a rejection of Turkey would not only jeopardise the reform momentum inside the country, but also counter the pro-EU and moderating shift in its regional policy. The EU would forego Turkey's contributions. And a shunned Turkey will more likely side with the US – both in particular instances such as Iran or Israel-Palestine, and in its overall foreign policy philosophy.

Turkey and the EU should deepen their political relations well ahead of formal accession. Here are some policy recommendations for both sides to maximise the potential benefits:

### For the EU:

- ★ Use the prospect of Turkey's accession to deepen EU engagement in the Middle East. The centre of gravity in the Union's foreign policy is shifting south anyway. So leaders should make the most of Turkey's know-how and political links to strengthen EU policies for the region. Israel-Palestine, Iran and Syria provide good opportunities for early joint EU-Turkish action.
- ★ Recognise that compared to the rest of the Middle East, Turkey's case is unique in three key respects: it has long-standing ties with the West, it has a secular state structure, and the bait of EU membership has transformed its political elite. Moreover, Turkey has ambivalent relations with most of its neighbours in the region. Thus, it is best to tone down the 'Turkey as a bridge' argument and avoid the 'Turkey as a model' rhetoric altogether. Turkey is an asset for the EU but not a model for the Middle East.

### For Turkey:

- ★ Use the anchor of EU accession to step up the normalisation of relations with Iran and Arab countries such as Syria. The paradox is that the closer Turkey gets to EU membership, the more it should be able to forge closer ties with the Middle East. Both domestic and Western support for a strategy to reach out to the Islamic world will be greater once Turkey's European destination has been confirmed. And the more Turkey can champion its Middle Eastern ties in Brussels and elsewhere, the more the EU will see Turkey's accession as a help for achieving its own Middle East objectives.
- ★ Prepare for membership not just in terms of adopting the *acquis communautaire* – the body of EU rules and policies – but also by incorporating the EU's distinct foreign policy 'style' of projecting stability through political and economic integration. Turkey's leaders must ensure that the current 'Europeanisation' of Turkey's foreign policy continues, and permeates the country's political class.

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