Turkey's EU Membership and EU-Middle Eastern Affairs

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With the end of the Cold War, the threat of Soviet expansion no longer held, but security and stability have continued to be central requisites for the EU project to survive (Servaty, 2011). In particular, the EU has been showing a growing interest in promoting democracy and stimulating stability in the Middle East (Kirisci, 2011). In the words of former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, "When we talk of our security as Europeans, we are talking about the future of our neighbors, the Middle East" (Deutsche Welle, 2004, August 29). The troubled realities of the Middle East in the form of terrorism, political tensions, illegal migration and regional disputes appear increasingly threatening to the EU (Kumcuoglu, 2010). In between these two regions stands Turkey, forming the boundary of the divide (Asmus, Diamond, Lennard & Mcfaul, 2005). Turkey's geo-strategic position, together with the country's historical and cultural ties both with Europe and the Middle East may lead Turkey to function as a bridge between East and West (Pinto, 2010). Turkey's potential for providing stability is considerably enhanced in recent years as it is improving its relations with countries in the Middle East while at the same time it is becoming economically and politically more similar to the member-states of the EU (Öniş, 2011). In this essay it is argued that Turkey should become a member of the EU within the next ten years. The argument is twofold. First, turkey's membership would grant the EU political influence in the Middle East. Second, *not* accepting Turkey as a member within the next ten years will lead to a loss of the EU's grip on the situation in the Middle East.

It is first explained how Turkey's membership could contribute to the EU's diplomatic and normative power in the Middle East, and why this political influence has become increasingly important for the EU's security in recent years. Second, it is discussed why Turkey's membership process is a matter to be finalized within the next ten years. Finally, it is considered whether the issue of Turkey's membership bringing the EU closer to the unstable Middle East is a reason strong enough to abstain from allowing Turkey to join.

Turkey as the bridge between East and West

Turkey's favorable position for conducting foreign affairs in the Middle East combined with the positive light Turkey's membership would shed on both the EU and Turkey itself indicates the promising impact Turkey's membership can have on the strength of EU political influence in the Middle East (Everts, 2004). Although the EU has a commitment to the various countries in this region, Turkey's historical and cultural ties with the Islamic world allow it to have a deeper understanding of the Middle East (Fotiou & Triantaphyllou, 2010). Turkey's potential as a stabilizing force in the region is viewed positively in the Arab world itself. In a survey on the perception of Turkey in the Middle East conducted in 2009 by an independent think-tank, 77% of respondents throughout the Arab world supported Turkey to play a greater role in the Middle East (Akgun, Percinoglu & Gundogar, 2009). In recent years, Turkey has increasingly been taking a proactive and constructive stance by easing political tensions in Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Iraq (Aras & Polat, 2008; Pinto, 2010). Turkey is in a rather unique position in the sense that it is a democratic, secular state, headed by an Islamist political party, and experienced with handling foreign affairs through Western institutions. With this distinctive set of characteristics, Turkey appears very well suited to take the lead in the EU's policy of promoting democracy and advancing stability in the Middle East (Pinto, 2010).

Furthermore, the EU's reputation can be considerably enhanced by accepting Turkey as a member of the EU.

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Especially in the post-9/11 world, there is a profound sense that all those who belong to the West are deeply opposed to Muslims all around the globe (Everts, 2004). The accession of Turkey would counter the idea that the EU is fundamentally against Islam. Indeed, public statements made by Iranian and Egyptian leaders not only revealed their support for Turkey's bid to become a member of the EU, but also demonstrated that they see it as 'a litmus test for the EU's reputation in the Muslim world' (Everts, 2004, p. 4). Further, the EU's acceptance of Turkey as a member would allow for an important step in advancing democracy and human development in the Islamic world, and thereby the EU's standing in the region can be further improved (Asmus, Diamond, Lennard & Mcfaul, 2005). Countries in the Middle East have found it difficult to understand why the EU has promoted democracy and political liberalization in many regions around the world but largely abstained from this activity in the Middle East. Middle Eastern countries have suspected that the EU's reluctance originates from the fear of facilitating the establishment of anti-Western regimes (Oguzlu, 2007). Finally, Turkey's membership would reinforce the EU's commitment to values of freedom of religion and a tolerance for cultural differences, whereby the international popularity of the EU can be enhanced (Akgun, Percinoglu & Gundogar, 2009).

In turn, paradoxically, the more Turkey becomes integrated into the EU, the more positive Turkey's foreign policy is perceived in the Arab world and the better its potential as mediator can be sustained. Turkey's accession process to the EU has accelerated the democratic transformation and stimulated a more balanced approach towards neighboring countries (Fotiou & Triantaphyllou, 2010). In the same study as mentioned above on the perception of Turkey in the Middle East it has been demonstrated that the start of accession negotiations has contributed to a more positive view of Turkey in the Arab world (Akgun, Percinoglu & Gundogar, 2009). The Europeanization process has increasingly led Arab countries to view Turkey as a model to follow for modernizing themselves and combining Islam with democracy (Oguzlu, 2007). Turkish membership seems to be more efficient and credible than a mere partnership with the EU. Indeed, as Jung (2005) stated: 'In the light of Turkey's EU accession process, the image of the country among its Arab neighbors could change from it being seen as an "instrument" of western interests to it being recognized as a respected partner in EU-Middle East relations' (p. 13). In addition, Turkey's membership is likely to take away the fears among countries in the Middle East of Turkey becoming a regional hegemon, so that Turkey's constructive foreign policy can be more easily embraced by the different states (Öniş, 2011).

As has been demonstrated, the EU's capacity to spread its values and stabilize the Middle East can be enhanced when Turkey is allowed to join. The strength of EU foreign policy in this region is a matter that has gained growing significance for the EU's security in recent years. A number of events have made the important role of Turkey in granting the EU political influence in the Middle East increasingly clear. In the aftermath of September 11, and as the 'war on terror' has led to worldwide tensions and divisions between the East and the West, Turkey's potential as a soft power for the EU seems to have become vital for reestablishing friendly relations with the Middle East (Pinto, 2010). In the context of new security concerns, there is an ever greater need to enter into dialogue with and gain a deeper understanding of the Islamic world (Öniş, 2003). As the invasion in Iraq has reinforced the antagonism of Middle Eastern countries against the United States, the EU seems increasingly unable to rely on its American ally for stability in the international realm (Zuconni, 2009). In light of these circumstances, Turkey appears a vital asset for the EU with respect to diplomatic and normative power in the Middle East.

Turkey's membership: a pressing matter

With the rise of new threats and less protection of the United States, the EU can no longer isolate itself from the challenges of the Middle East. On top of this, the international status of the EU appears to be in decline due to the absence of clear and firm EU support during the recent uprisings in the Middle East for change toward more democratic regimes (Dorsey, 2011). These circumstances not only indicate the benefits to be gained by accepting Turkey to join the EU, but also point to the significant losses that will result if Turkey is not allowed to join in the near future as a true member-state. Not including Turkey within the next ten years is very likely to have a negative effect on the EU's political influence in the Middle East, since an abstention from granting Turkey any membership prospective in the near future would severely weaken the international credibility of the EU. In fact, a lack of action together with an aloof attitude could result in a situation in which the EU experiences a loss of power as well as more instability in its wider neighborhood (Alessandri, 2010). According to the Arab press, a rejection of Turkey's membership will strengthen nationalist sentiments and waves of religious fundamentalism in Europe and the Muslim

Turkey's EU Membership and EU-Middle Eastern Affairs
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world alike (Akgun, Percinoglu & Gundogar, 2009). Moreover, refusing to promise Turkey membership within the next ten years would not only take away much of the incentive for Turkey's reformation process, but also undermine the pro-EU and balancing stance of the Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East (Everts, 2004).

The interlinkage between an unstable Middle East and the security of the EU

Whilst it may be argued that the EU's security would be more threatened with Turkey's membership as it would bring the EU in more direct contact with the instability issues dominating the Middle East, in the long run Turkey's accession seems more likely to lead to a better protection of the EU's security interests than to an increase in threats (Oguzlu, 2007). Instead of letting Turkey move away from the EU and thereby losing grip on the situation in the Arab world, by anchoring Turkey to the EU through granting it membership Turkey can in vital ways contribute to the EU's efforts of exerting influence and promoting stability in the Middle East (Pinto, 2010). By institutionalizing Turkey within the EU, the EU can be reasonably assured Turkey does not replace its mediating role and function as a benign regional power for a more assertive and hegemonic stance by which it would no longer pay attention to the EU's demands (Oguzlu & Kibaroglu, 2009). As Europe's security and stability in the Middle East are already interlinked, it seems preferable to take a more proactive stance and include Turkey as a vital member of the EU rather than engaging in presumably futile attempts to isolate itself from the contemporary challenges of the Middle East (Dorsey, 2011). In fact, as has been mentioned, not allowing Turkey to join might even lead to greater instability in the Middle East. As Serfaty (2011) asserts: "Losing' Turkey would diminish Europe and weaken the West immeasurably, but it would also weaken a vital region' (p. 14). Turkey's potential contribution to the promotion of stability is important for the situation in the Middle East and thereby also for the security of the EU itself. Serious doubts may therefore be cast on the strength of the contention that the EU's security is more threatened when Turkey would become a member of the EU due to the increasing closeness of the unstable Middle East.

Conclusion

As relations between the West and the Islamic world have significantly deteriorated in recent years and the situation in the Middle East appears more and more threatening to the EU, the importance of Turkey's potential role as a soft power for the EU becomes increasingly clear. Through its geo-strategic position and historical and cultural ties, Turkey can help the EU to develop a constructive dialogue with the Middle East. Further, Turkey's membership could enhance the EU's international reputation while also contribute to a more positive image among Arab countries of Turkey itself. Both these consequences facilitate the implementation of the EU's foreign policy with respect to spreading democratic values and promoting stability in the Middle East. Not providing Turkey with a membership perspective of maximum ten years would not only amount to the loss of significant potential gains, but most likely also to a loss of political influence as the EU's credibility is undermined and Turkey's focus gradually moves from West to East. As the Middle East seems more volatile than ever, Turkey's membership becomes a matter of increasing importance in reinstalling stability and demonstrating how Islam and democracy can thrive together. Apart from becoming stronger as a diplomatic player in the new security realm, the EU could also become stronger as a normative force. It can use the opportunity to once again underscore its original commitment to promote democracy and contribute to the preservation of peace not only within Europe itself but also in other regions throughout the world. Both consequences of Turkey's accession would contribute to the expansion of the EU's political influence in the Middle East.

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Turkey's EU Membership and EU-Middle Eastern Affairs
Written by Mieke Molthof

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