

Turkey and the hypocrisies of Europe

By Fred Halliday,
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The European Union is attempting to create common European institutions and policy: a worthy and desirable project, if a pale reflection of the original, liberal-internationalist aims of the 1950s. It has agreed two momentous decisions in 2004: the inclusion of ten new member-states, and the foundation of its legal identity embodied in a new constitution [0]. Now, at a summit in Brussels on 16-17 December 2004 [1], it faces a third: whether to open negotiations with Turkey that will lead to that country's membership of the European Union.

There are, however, few sights so undignified as that of European states in a condition of moral indignation, and the unseemly debate over this major strategic issue has not just divided but shamed many Europeans. While some [2] states – led by the United Kingdom and Spain – wish to proceed with serious negotiations with Turkey, and others take a more ambiguous or even hostile stance, the argument reveals more about the European “community” than about the Turkey it has been preparing to judge.

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Europe's moral foundations

A rhetorical device favoured by opponents of Turkish entry is to affirm the “Christian” (or “Judaeo-Christian”) foundations of Europe. The former French president, Giscard d'Estaing; the current Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi; the European Union commissioner for the internal market, Fritz Bolkestein [3]; leaders of the opposition CDU in Germany, Angela Merkel [4] and Edmund Stoiber - are just some of those who invoke this alleged religious-historic identity.

The argument ignores three basic realities. First, the cultural, political and linguistic origins of European lie in Greece and Rome, and long predate Christianity (the word “democracy” is found nowhere in the Bible). Moreover, Christianity and Judaism are in their origin not European at all, but - itself a testament to 2,000 years of interaction - religions that originated and have long flourished in the middle east.

Second, Muslim empires - and in particular the Ottoman [5], precursor of the Turks – have a record of historic tolerance of Jews and other minorities that (while open to considerable criticism) is far superior to that of Christian Europe. Indeed, the permanent Jewish population of around 50,000 in modern Turkey, descendants of those expelled by Christian Spain in 1492, is testimony [6] to one of the best records of toleration of Jews of any country.

Third, the contemporary culture of Europe is not in any meaningful sense Christian; it is, rather, secular in tone and content if not actually hostile to religion.

The prominent European political figures cited above may concede these points, but then shift the argument to the defence of certain basic European principles like equality between men and women. Yet here, no one examining the record of the Vatican, for example – from its 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* to the letter [7] to Catholic bishops on 1 August 2004 and its catastrophic policy on contraception and Aids - can believe that this variant of Christianity is compatible with core modern, human, values.

History's shadow

Many opponents of Turkish entry to the European Union question whether Turkey (or Islam) is part [7] of Europe. The truth is that in terms of its cultural and religious presence Islam has been integral to Europe for over 1,000 years – including 800 years in Spain and at least 600 years in the Balkans and Russia.

What is true of religion is equally so for power politics: the Ottoman empire was a component of the European great-power system, variously allied with Britain and France (against Russia in the Crimean war of 1853-56 [8]) and with Germany (against Britain and France in the first world war).

Even more important, in the past century [9] Europe has been unable to insulate itself from the process of politics in Turkey itself. Turkey played the key role in detonating the explosion of 1914 – one that destroyed the old European order and led to the European civil war of 1914-1991 from which we are just emerging. Its precedent lay in a fundamental event of modern European and middle-eastern history, the Young Turk revolution of 1908 [10]. This event led to the Balkan wars of 1911-1913, from which emerged the radical Serbian nationalism that killed Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914.

This is a reminder that the modern politics of Europe are inextricably shaped not by the fantasies of Brussels - capital of a country that has pioneered a radical form of ethnic-political separatism – but by the condition of the middle east. There are many illustrations of the point: the impact of the Algerian war on France in the late 1950s, of Afghanistan on the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and of Morocco on Spain in the 1920s and again on 11 March 2003 [10]. Whether or not the EU opens the way to Turkish membership, intimate bonds [11] tie Europe to events in its neighbouring region.

Does Turkey qualify?

The discussion of Turkish membership [12] of the European Union is dominated by the legal and constitutional requirements Turkey is expected to meet in order to qualify. Where these reflect progress in implementing the rule of law, ending torture, ensuring the rights of women, and creating a reasonable federal solution to the Kurdish question, then – as the Turkish writer Soli Özel [13] has written – many Turks welcome the changes.

The Turkish state's deficiencies over human rights and the rule of law explain its civil society's enthusiasm about Europe. This civil society wants to accelerate a democratic process in the country. Europe should help it - but Europe (witness Berlusconi's great escape [14] from corruption charges and the illegalities of party funding in France) has little moral authority to lecture the world about political standards.

Indeed, it could be said that in key respects Turkey is too European, in that it shares with France a rigid and (for human rights) lamentable concept of state secularism. The French proclaim themselves defenders of secularism as if their 1905 [14] legislation had patented the idea, but forget that clothing bans (as in the country's new law forbidding [14] the wearing of religious apparel in schools) are valid under international law only if they relate directly to national security - certainly not the case over the *hijab*. There is only one consistent, universalist and secular position on the wearing of religious headwear - for Muslims, Catholic nuns, or Orthodox Jewish *haredim* alike: to be against it, but to defend the right to wear it.

The argument over whether Turkey qualifies for the European Union often spills over into other important areas: Cyprus and the Armenian genocide.

The Cyprus [15] question remains unresolved but to hold Turkey of all countries responsible for the current impasse is grotesque. Turkey is certainly responsible for abuses in the years after the island's independence in 1960, but its main agonies lie in the conflict and partition of 1974, when Greek Cypriot nationalists helped by Athens organised an illegal coup that provoked a Turkish invasion. It is that intransigent and manipulative Greek nationalism which in early 2004 blocked a reasonable settlement proposed [15], after lengthy negotiations, by Kofi Annan. The Turks are right to say that the United Nations, not the European Union, must find a solution to Cyprus.

The issue of the Armenian genocide [16] is one that Turkish nationalism has refused to acknowledge. The best way to proceed in resolving it is not through inter-state confrontation but to work [17] with those Turkish historians [18] and writers who are prepared to recognise what happened on developing a common, and documented, account of the events of 1915.

A focus on the genocide serves, moreover, to absolve Europe (including Russia and Turkey itself) from a comparably grave injury to the Armenians – their confinement in the aftermath of 1918 to a landlocked mini-state around Yerevan. In any case, Europe cannot easily make official recognition of the Armenian genocide a condition [19] of Turkish entry without exposing its own hypocrisy: Germany's record in Namibia in 1904 [20] and Europe in the 1940s, Italy's in Libya after 1911, Belgium's in the Congo in the 1900s, Spain's in the Americas and Portugal's in Africa after 1500, are sufficient evidence.

A modicum of post-imperial self-criticism - including the Turks as inheritors of the Ottoman empire - is in order here. This would encompass two further issues that are currently less discussed than Cyprus or Armenia: Kurdish rights in Turkey, and Turkey's role in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

A question of culture

All sides in the debate over Turkey and the European Union seem to want to invoke a fixed - "essential" or "true" - version of European culture to which Turks, and Muslim immigrants in general, should adhere. Proponents of Turkish entry see this culture as open and cosmopolitan; opponents see it (or its *Leitkultur* ("leading culture [21]"), as espoused by the CDU) as incompatible with Islam.

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The argument that every society and political system needs a *Leitkultur* is not in itself invalid, and most people in Turkey would agree with its presupposition. What is in question is how this *Leitkultur* is defined. European culture is no more frozen in time than are Europe's external frontiers; rather, it is a set of possibilities that modern society and politics can define. All cultures (including Muslim ones) can be open or closed, and all can and do change.

European arrogance over Turkey is a definite barrier to the deeper opening that the 17 December decision should register. This is evident too in the comprehensive ignorance of Turkey among many of Europe's politicians, commentators and intellectuals. How many pontificating voices know the basic facts of Ottoman and Turkish history, including repeated violations inflicted by the country's Christian neighbours over the last three centuries, culminating in the attempted subjugation of the country by Britain, France and Italy after the first world war? How many know the tiles of [Iznik](#) [22], the films of Yilmaz Güney and [Handan Ipekci](#) [23], the poems of Nazim Hikmet and [Orhan Veli Kanik](#) [23], the novels of Yasar Kemal and [Orhan Pamuk](#) [24] - or even the joys of [Imam Bayildi](#) [25]? Such historical and cultural knowledge might teach a lot about politics also.

In short, Europe's decision over Turkey, and the wider issues of coexistence, [multiculturalism](#) [25] and different values it signifies, is a moment not for Turkish citizens and Turkish immigrants to learn German or English (which they or their children will anyway) but for Europeans to start learning Turkish – and perhaps eat *köfte* at least once a week. The more Turks and Europeans mix and mingle, the more the truths of their shared past, present, and future will emerge.

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