

The Role of Islam in Turkey's Accession to the European Union
By Harriet White

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When European Parliament members met on March 28 at a plenary session on Turkey's enlargement, there was tension brimming in the air. This was not the obvious tension exchanged over debates about docketed issues such as the freedom of Turkey's press or Northern Cyprus but one that was boiling underneath the surface about Turkey's predominant religion: Islam.

"The [Party for Freedom] wants to resist Islam in Europe," said Barry Madlener, a Dutch member of parliament, at the session. "We don't want there to be further Islamization of Europe. There is already enough Islam in Europe."

Other members such as Peter Van Dalen, Andreas Molzer and Cristiano Magdi Allam also expressed concerns over Islamization in the candidate country, discussing how Turkey has now become an "Islamic regime" under Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the Justice and Development party (AKP).

However, these religious arguments aren't novel in the debate on Turkey's accession. Despite the candidate country's secular status since 1924, Turkey's 99.8 percent Muslim population has been the source of serious scrutiny since before accession talks began in 2004, digging deep at the core of what it means to be a European. But with no mention of religion anywhere in the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), the question remains whether Islam should be a point of discussion in Turkey's eventual membership.

For some traditionalists, this question of religion continues to be a critical issue in preserving the sanctity of European culture. In the spirit of recent enlargements, some Europeans are questioning their identity and whether Turkey's largely Muslim population threatens the idea of Europe as a "Christian Club."

“Turkish candidacy highlights unfinished business in the social fabric of the core EU members, including what it means to be secular and how religion including but not limited to Islam relates to European Identity,” wrote Elizabeth Shakman Hurd in the Insight Turkey article “What is Driving the European Debate about Turkey?”

Beyond this identity crisis, many individual European citizens are hesitant over Turkey’s membership due to their own experiences with Turkish migrants, said Jonathan Davidson, senior advisor for Political and Academic Affairs at the European Commission Delegation to the U.S. at a Pew Forum panel on the topic. Prompted by right-wing politicians such as Angela Merkel who said in 2010 that multiculturalism had “utterly failed” in Germany, they fear how roughly 79 million Muslims will successfully integrate into the European framework.

“A number of member states have had difficulties with their Muslim communities,” said Amanda Paul, a policy analyst at the European Policy Centre. “Quite often these problems are exacerbated by politicians of the country in a dangerous way. People then begin to view Islam as something to be afraid of.”

But fear is a key word in this debate about Turkey’s Muslim identity. This post-9/11 age has created a culture of fear where Islam and the term “Islamic” have been put into a negative connotation, said Berna Pasin, a Turkish citizen living in Brussels. After such terrorist events, some European citizens have started to associate Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism, becoming more skeptical of enlargement, Paul said.

Yet, not all Europeans view Turkey’s Muslim population as a threat to the European Union’s identity or security. Some note, despite the current conservative government, that secularism runs deep in the Turkish identity, Paul said.

“Turkey is not an Islamic regime, but a country made up of Muslims,” said Merih

Pasin, a Turkish citizen living in Brussels. “We try not to mix an Islamic tone in our government life.”

Other arguments say that Turkey’s membership is an opportunity to contribute to multiculturalism in Europe, strengthening the current European Muslim population of roughly 44 million people.

“(Turkey’s membership) would be a dramatic step forward in the history of European multiculturalism and in the more urgent efforts, post-9/11, to find ways of ensuring Muslims and non-Muslims can live side by side,” wrote Stephen Twigg, previous director of The Foreign Policy Centre, in the pamphlet “Turks in Europe: Why are we afraid?”

According to Luis Logo in the Pew Forum panel “Does ‘Muslim’ Turkey Belong in ‘Christian’ Europe?,” Turkish accession would make “Europe a model for the world,” bridging the gap between East and West. The candidate country’s membership would send a powerful message globally about the coexistence of Islam and democracy.

“Turkey is a role model for Islam because it is a country that is democratic and increasingly modern, which has a predominately Muslim population, and there is no other country like this in the entire world,” Paul said.

But despite these varying remarks about how Turkey’s Muslim identity could contribute to or threaten the EU, many wonder whether accessing Turkey on its religion is appropriate for a union that is based on values of tolerance and plurality.

“When you look at EU legislation of accession requirements, they don’t have any religious considerations,” Merih Pasin said. “Using religion as a factor of discussion is almost illegal.”

With a union of roughly 44 million Muslims and Muslim-populated countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania acceding before Turkey, some say that the argument of religion serves as a mask for other fears, such as the size of Turkey and the influence it will have in the European Parliament, Paul said. Using this mask, some politicians are creating a cultural divide between Turkey and the EU.

“The idea of the Christian Club causes a ‘us against them’ scenario,” Merih Pasin said. “It doesn’t create synergy, which Europe needs right now”

Yes, Turkey is an emerging country, working toward more secularization, more democracy and better human rights. But according to Bahadir Kaleağasi, a Brussels representative of the Turkish Industry & Business Association, it is in the EU’s interests to help Turkey accomplish these goals rather than use “irrational” arguments such as religion to keep the country out. With Turkey as a member, the EU will not only be a model for bridging cultures but a more competitive player in the globe

“Europe should be more explicit in criticizing Turkey in a constructive way to lead Turkey to where it is today to where it should be,” Kaleağasi said. “The EU should be a part of the solution, not the problem.”

According to Paul, the EU should take on a more positive agenda with Turkey. “Rather than having these tiresome and pointless debates over Islam and why Turkey shouldn’t be allowed to join the EU because it is a Muslim country, Turkey and the EU should work together,” She said. “These arguments are completely counterproductive.”

But more importantly, Paul notes the world’s eyes are on the EU to see how they will treat a predominately Muslim country such as Turkey.

“If Turkey membership is rejected because it isn’t treated as other candidate countries have been before, then the world will see this as a direct link between the religion of the Turkish people and the EU’s rejection,” Paul said.

With negotiations almost at a standstill, the EU sits at an identity crossroads. The question remains whether the EU will choose to stay an exclusive union proud of its Christian heritage or a dynamic, global union grounded in plurality and tolerance.

“[The] EU is claiming to be the most democratic group in the globe, even better than the U.S.,” Merih Pasin said. “But if you are claiming that, you have to think big.”