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Turkey and Europe: Why Strained Friendship Is Fraying

By Dan Bilefsky

ISTANBUL — The already reluctant partnership between Turkey and the European Union looks increasingly as if it may be headed for a messy breakup, prompting many in Europe and the United States to ask an uncomfortable question: will the large, secular Muslim country then look east instead of west?

It is a question with potentially great consequences.

“If the E.U. turns its back on Turkey, it is the West that will be the big loser,” warns Mehmet Dulger of the ruling Justice and Development Party and the chairman of the foreign affairs committee in Parliament. “The West would risk losing a vital bridge with the Islamic world at a time when having this bridge is more important than ever.”

The mutual suspicion is reaching a crisis point. On Wednesday, the European Commission is to release a report critical of the progress Turkey has made toward conforming to European standards and toward qualifying for membership.

A more important deadline looms next month at a European summit meeting, where leaders could decide to suspend talks with Turkey on a number of problems, while continuing in other areas. This is something the group never did as it was expanding to its current 25 members.

Political analysts in Turkey say such a rebuff would intensify an anti-European backlash and play into the hands of nationalists and Islamists, some of whom are already asking whether the country should reject Europe before it rejects Turkey.

“Until recently, Turkey has been able to pursue pro-Western policies because public opinion believed this was in the national interest,” said Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish research program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “But with the E.U. constantly raising the bar for Turkey, Turks are questioning this accepted wisdom.”

From Europe there are equal measures of exasperation.

“Patience with Turkey is running out,” says Joost Lagendijk, a member of the Dutch Green Party and co-chairman of a committee dealing with Turkish issues in the European Parliament. It is not only the question of Turkey’s reforming to meet European standards, but a wariness of admitting a poor, overwhelmingly Muslim country of 70 million with only 3 percent of its land geographically a part of Europe.

Those positions may harden with the European Commission report on Wednesday, which is expected to rebuke Turkey for the sluggish pace of political reforms. A draft of the

report cited Turkey's refusal to meet a deadline this year to open its ports to the Greek-speaking part of Cyprus, an issue on which Turkey refuses to move. It also complains about the treatment of minorities, and a law limiting free speech that has made "insulting Turkishness" a crime.

The enlargement commissioner of the European Union, Olli Rehn of Finland, welcomed signals this week from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that he would consider reforming Turkey's code on free speech. But European officials say Turkish intransigence over Cyprus, a member of the union, leaves them with few alternatives other than to consider a partial suspension of entry talks.

But even a partial collapse of talks would have far-reaching consequences. Bordered by Iran, Iraq and Syria, secular Turkey is a powerful symbol of how democracy, capitalism and Islam can co-exist. At a time when Europe is struggling to integrate its 12 million Muslims, rejecting Turkey would give fodder to those Muslims who argue that the West will never accept them.

Faced with a barrage of criticism, some analysts say a dejected Turkey would look to the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa as alternatives to Europe and the United States. A June poll by the Pew Research Center found that Turkish support for the United States had plummeted to 12 percent, from 23 percent last year. Support for the European Union plunged to 35 percent, half what it was two years ago.

Mr. Cagaptay argues that the Justice and Development Party, which has religious roots, has already been reorienting the country toward the Middle East and criticizing the United States. As an example he points to the American-led attack on Iraqi insurgents in Falluja, an attack that was labeled genocide by senior Turkish officials.

At the same time, he says, the European Union's continual snubbing of Turkey has played into the hands of Muslim conservatives, and all the while Prime Minister Erdogan "is preaching Muslim solidarity and consciousness," Mr. Cagaptay said.

At the beginning of the conflict in Lebanon in the summer, Mr. Erdogan criticized Israel for trying to "wipe out the Palestinians" in Lebanon. In the spring he invited top Palestinian officials to the capital, Ankara. A recent demonstration in Istanbul against Israel, which has maintained strong relations with Turkey, drew around 100,000 people; before the Erdogan era, Mr. Cagaptay said, a few hundred might have attended.

The appeal of the East was evident on a recent day at Cemberlitas Hamam, a monumental 16th-century Turkish bath, where a dozen men lay on a giant slab of steaming marble as they were pummeled by pot-bellied masseurs in an Ottoman tradition rooted in the Orient.

Kadir Uzun, 21, a Turkish engineer who lives in Germany, said the European Union's hardening stance was prompting Turks to question whether the Arab world would be more welcoming. "Many Turks feel like we are just wasting our time with the E.U.,

which will never accept a Muslim country,” he said. “We are too Western to look toward Iran, but we are also too Eastern for the E.U.”

Many Turkish analysts, officials and executives argue that looking to the East is not an option. For one thing, Turkey is viewed with deep suspicion there.

“We do not want to become overextended in the Middle East,” says Sinan Ulgen, a former Turkish diplomat in Tripoli. “At the same time, the countries that were ruled by the Ottoman empire — Egypt, Jordan, Syria — are reluctant about Turkey having a leading role in the region.”

Also, secularism is established in its Constitution, and Turkey is inextricably tied to the West, economically and strategically, by, among other things, a trade agreement with the European Union and membership in NATO. To these analysts and executives, it is less imperative to join Europe than it is to anchor Turkey to a membership process that assures political and economic reform.

But there are obvious signs that Islam is strengthening its grip on daily life. Members of Mr. Erdogan’s party have set up zones where liquor is banned in accordance with Islam, though drinking has long been accepted in Turkish society. Secularists have looked with alarm at proposals for women-only parks in Istanbul and the introduction of government-recommended textbooks with Islamic themes, including a character in a Hans Christian Andersen story who wears a head scarf.

Rather than choosing between the Middle East or the West, a wounded Turkey could turn to the emerging economic giants of Russia, India and China in search of allies. Russia has expressed keen interest in using Turkey as a distribution point for energy supplies to the Middle East and the southern Mediterranean.

But Egemen Bagis, a senior adviser to Mr. Erdogan, counters that Turkey will stay moored to Europe, with or without the European Union.

“If the talks with the E.U. fail,” he said, “we can be a prosperous, Western-looking democracy outside the E.U. Norway has done this, and so why can’t we? We are undertaking reforms not for the E.U., but for the Turkish people.”

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