

## OTHER NATIONS

## Tenuous Turkey

**THE SOURCE:** "Turkey on the Brink" by Philip Gordon and Omer Taspinar, in *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2006.

TURKEY IS OFTEN HELD UP BY THE United States as an example of the kind of democratic, secular, and Muslim nation it hopes to bring about in Iraq and elsewhere throughout the Middle East. Yet there are increasing signs that Turkey, a longtime strategic partner in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) once seemingly assured membership in the European Union, is becoming disgruntled with Europe and the United States. Although the country has officially begun the process to join the EU, France recently altered its constitution to require a referendum vote on future EU "enlargements," and officials in both Germany and the Netherlands have expressed hesitation about admitting what would instantly become the Union's second-largest nation in terms of population.

In the past, say Philip Gordon and Omer Taspinar—senior fellow and research fellow, respectively, at the Brookings Institution—Turkey relied on its strong ties to the United States whenever European relations soured. The American-led invasion of Iraq, however, has undercut that option. The Turks fear that the chaos in Iraq will lead to "the creation of a de facto . . . independent Kurdistan" in northern Iraq, reigniting separatist sentiments among Turkey's 15 million Kurds. Those fears are bolstered by "the revival of violence and terrorist attacks by the separatist Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) now partly

based in northern Iraq." Incidents such as one in July 2003, when U.S. forces in northern Iraq arrested a dozen Turkish special forces troops and detained them, hooded, for 24 hours, have only heightened tensions.

Turkey's ties with the West once seemed unbreakable. The secularist reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—abolishing many Islamic institutions, emancipating women, and changing the dress code—set the country on course for eventually joining Europe. It joined NATO during the Cold War. But military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 damaged its standing in European eyes, and its bloody campaign against the PKK in the 1990s was a black mark.

"Enlargement fatigue" brought on by the addition of 10 new central and eastern European members in 2004, as well as the recent upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiment, further dimmed Europe's never-high enthusiasm. Today, say Gordon and Taspinar,

"only 14 percent of Turks actually think that Turkey will ever be admitted to the EU." Other stumbling blocks to Western rapprochement with Turkey include a long-simmering dispute concerning Turks living on the Greek-dominated island of Cyprus (an EU member).

We could soon be asking "Who lost Turkey?," warn the authors. They raise several troubling scenarios, including unilateral Turkish action to block the emergence of an independent Kurdistan in Iraq, resulting in "confrontation with the United States and . . . probably ending Turkey's hope of joining the EU." Or Turkey might "opt for closer strategic relations with countries such as Russia, Iran, China, and India." One hopeful sign is that political power now resides with the AKP, a moderately Islamic party that has vigorously pursued reforms in order to win EU membership. Helping Turkey achieve that dream, the authors assert, would go a long way toward preserving an alliance that the West can ill afford to lose.



Kurdish separatists gather in April in the southeastern Turkish city of Sanliurfa to mark the birthday of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, at one of a series of demonstrations that left 16 dead.