

Turkey-EU and Islam: Is Islam a Factor of Negotiations?

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The issue of Islam and the European Union is one of the hot topics that have been discussed for the past two decades. The increasing number of Islamic population is one of the factors that bring the issue into discussion. Yet, the real question of whether Islam is a challenging factor of membership came into debate especially in the late 80's when Turkey's full-membership to EU started to be discussed. This paper will focus on the triangular relationship among Turkey, EU and Islam, and try to analyze, whether or not Islam is an aspect in negotiations for full-membership. There will be three main parts for analysis. First, there will be a brief summary of Turkish-EU relations and the situation as it is now. Secondly, this paper will try to answer the question of how religion became a concern of EU. And thirdly, there will be an analysis of the concept of secularism in both EU context and Turkish context.

Turkish-EU relations, is a process that has been going on for 46 years. Turkey applied to European Community in 1959 and signed its Association Agreement in 1963, which is known as the Ankara Agreement. According to the agreement, there were three stages that Turkey had to fulfill to be part of the Community: Preparatory Stage, Transitional Stage and The Final Stage. Every stage was composed of mutual duties. Furthermore, passing from one stage to another was not automatic and necessitated a new agreement between the parties. Turkey passed from Preparatory stage to Transitional one in 1970 with an Additional Protocol, which laid down the basic objectives of relations and with Customs Union in 1995 Turkey finalized the phases that needed to be passed. In fact, for Customs Union to operate smoothly, "Turkey had to adopt a large part of the *acquis* before it entered into force."(Europa 2005) This meant that Turkey would start to adopt itself into *acquis* before it actually became a candidate for negotiations.

Even though on paper everything seems easy, Turkish-EU relations have never been on easy ground. There have been many challenges along the way: 1960 and

1980 military coups that took place in Turkey and conflicts between Turkish government and EC demands, which even led to freezing of the relations (ex: Ecevit 1970's) are some of these that we can easily identify. However, rather than going deeper into Turkish-EU relations, it is more important to look at this relation with the focus over Islam.

Islam became an issue for Turkey's membership to European Community in the late 1980's. Özal government, the first civil government after the 1980 military coup, wanted to warm up the frozen relations with EC and applied for full-membership in 1987. Yet, this demand was only to be rejected in 1989. It is interesting to note that, it took two years for EC to reject the application. Furthermore, this was actually the first time that cultural and religious differences of Turkey were stated to be obstacles for full-membership.

Nevertheless, the relations between EU and Turkey continued along the lines of Ankara Agreement. After getting into Customs Union in 1995, Turkey's hopes to access EU increased dramatically, both in the government circles and the society. Yet, 1997 Luxembourg Summit came as a great shock for everyone. In the Summit EU declared its new Enlargement package, "Agenda 2000", which included most of the x-communist Eastern European countries but not Turkey. Turkey and EU continued its discussions about Turkish candidacy and in 1999 Helsinki Summit after long hours of negotiations, Turkish candidacy for full-membership was accepted. Yet, membership negotiations would not start unless Turkey fulfilled the political criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)¹.

In October 2004, the European Commission decided that Turkey had sufficiently fulfilled Copenhagen Criteria and was ready to open accession negotiations. Yet, there were still certain conditions that were set ahead for opening negotiations. Commission suggested a strategy based on three pillars.

"The first pillar concerns cooperation to reinforce and support the reform process in Turkey, in particular in relation to the continued fulfillment of the political reforms closely...If there is a serious and persistent breach of the principles of liberty, democracy and respect for

¹ Copenhagen Criteria: Criteria that was put forward in 1993 is especially known for its great emphasis on political criteria and human rights. "Political criteria. The applicant country must have achieved stability as its institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities." (Nieuwenhuis 2003)

human rights and fundamental freedoms or the rule of law on which the Union is founded. If such a recommendation is made, the Council may by a qualified majority, decide to suspend the negotiations.

The second pillar concerns the specific way in which accession negotiations with Turkey are to be approached.(...)

The third pillar entails enhanced political and cultural dialogue between the people of the EU Member States and Turkey. This includes a dialogue on cultural differences, religion, migration issues and concerns about minority rights and terrorism. Civil society should play the most important role in this dialogue, which the EU will facilitate.” (COM 2004)

EU accepted Turkey as a candidate and due to Turkey’s success in applying the Copenhagen Criteria, Turkey is qualified for accession negotiations. Yet, it is quite interesting to see that, in the Commission report religion is stated as a factor that should definitely be considered and worked upon. Then a question comes to mind: after 46 years of relationship, why did religion become a subject that can not be left aside only in the last 20 years?

In answering the question of when did religion (Islam) become a concern of the European Union, this paper will argue that, in the context of Turkey’s relations with EU, there were two main factors which influenced the issue of Islam as an aspect of membership: The End of the Cold War and Ideas on European Identity.

Starting from European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and continuing with European Economic Community (1957), the aim of the European Community was based on economic considerations. In the bipolar environment of the Cold War, Community was never expected to be a super power in any terms but was mostly concerned with the well-being and economic development of the Europe that was in ruins after the Second World War. Even though the Community was part of the Western block with its democratic outlook and liberal views, its aim was more over economic integration.

In the Cold War environment, boundaries of Europe were somewhat defined due to the bi-polar character of the international order. Yet, it should not be

underestimated that, both deepening and widening processes of the Community continued through out the years as many of the Western European countries became members of the Community along the way. As time passed EC evolved drastically, yet at the same time world has also changed.

Starting with the Single European Act of 1986, EC speeded up its deepening process. Single European Act, mentioned new issues that were some what related yet beyond pure economic cooperation such as; environmental policy, cooperation over foreign policy, regional development, increasing role of the European Parliament; in the name of democratic accountability and visibility.²

While EC was moving in its full speed for greater integration, the World was changing as well, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 made it visible for many that, the boundaries that were set by the Cold War were about to come down radically. Ironically, change was such that, an environment was starting to form in which EC would have to take a greater role, a role that it was not ready to cope with. In 1991, when Soviet Union dissolved, it was obvious that everything would never be the same again. EC tried to adapt to the changing World as it tried to reorganize and develop a greater integration process within. In 1992 with Maastricht Treaty, which is known as the Treaty of European Union, European Community became European Union with its 12 member states. The difference between the Community and Union is that, the Community became a pillar of the Union, so now there was going to be more cooperation over more issues, and even though the methods and the amount of integration varied from one pillar to the other still, the structure was reorganized in a way that the cooperation was beyond economics.

The Global actor role, which was not the case before came into question when the Balkan Wars broke out. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, even though showed the limits of EU as an international actor with the indecisiveness of its members in involving with the situation. Furthermore, wars in Yugoslavia became an evidence for the harm that might arise for Europe due to the instabilities in the Central and Eastern Europe.

² Desmond Dinan, "How did we get here?" in *The European Union: How Does it Work?*, ed. Elizabeth Bomberg and Alexander Stubb, 33-35 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

EU was having trouble in responding to the changing international context because the European integration had been an uneven process, even though economically it had gone through a metamorphoses, politically it was not adequate to cope with the demands of the international environment. Still, the greatest token of EU for peace, stability and democracy in the region is membership³.

EU has adapted itself to the changing world by deepening its integration as well as by creating criteria to membership, Maastricht Criteria of 1992 became the bases of economic criteria and Copenhagen Criteria of 1993 became the bases for political criteria. This meant that, to be a member of the club, you should have certain ways of understanding governance as well as a certain level of economic development.

Criteria's were part of the newly formed Union, which aimed stability, peace and prosperity for its members. At the same time it became a Union that increased its expectations from new members due to the increasing demands for membership. X-Communist Countries, after the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, to adapt themselves to the new world, wanted to be part of the Union. This new phase of increasing number of countries wanting to become members raised the expectations of the Union, maybe unfairly when compared with the accessions before, yet understandable due to the changing environment. In other words, market ruled; increasing demand raised the price to be paid.

When the bond of the Cold War came to an end and everyone wanted to be part of the Union, differences started to become more apparent. This is how the ideas on European Identity started to be discussed more frequently.

Argument has two factors to keep in mind, first Europe as a political entity and secondly, Europe as an entity that consists of people; European people in this respect. There are many views over how to identify European Union and its scope. According to Smith's "global culture"⁴ argument, EU is fundamentally different from something that is part of a national culture. It is part of global culture

³ Karen E. Smith, *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World*.
(Cambridge: Polity Pres, 2004)

⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Towards a Global Culture?*
(London: Sage, 1990).

therefore it is “affectively neutral”⁵. That is to say, it has very little emotional or national power and even less ethnic culture. If that is the case still, it is very hard to make distinction between the two factors. Even if loyalty and sense of belonging may not be essential and necessary for EU’s scope of action, however a consensus and liking of people is an essential part of identity itself. That leads us to a vicious circle, is it ever possible to create an upper identity that is in some way part of you but not exactly you, but you still feel attached to it?

Attachment of citizens to their national identity is quite a strong feeling in Europe. European countries are inevitably divided by their history. According to Robyn: “countries have remained separated precisely because there existed fundamental differences in thinking and feeling between them.”⁶ Therefore, the lack of people’s belonging to EU makes it a “lifeless life”⁷ and this lack of a bound would inevitably lead to chaos. Yet, according to others such as Hofstede, this is only a question of “mental programming”⁸, as Charles Pentland very nicely states: “European integration will require a transformation of the way the average European thinks and acts.”⁹ In this view, identity of the European Union is something beyond national characters of people; it is an overwhelming sense of belonging to an even greater unity where, you keep your uniqueness yet still be part of it. Yet the real question arises at this point, where does EU want to see itself?

Fuat Keyman gives a very interesting analysis on two paths that EU might follow up. According to him, EU can choose between “New Europe” and “Cultural Europe”. New Europe is an enlarged Europe with political identity that is defined in terms of universal norms of democracy and modernity. In this path, Copenhagen Criteria is the most essential part of political entity. In this view, EU plays a greater role in the global structure as promoter of democracy. On the other hand, Cultural Europe is an entity in which there are boundaries and borders of Europe that are

⁵ Smith, 177.

⁶ R. Robyn, *National vs Supranational Identity in Europe?* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁷ Robyn, 15.

⁸ Geert. H. Hofstede, *Culture’s consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and organisations Across Nations*. (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ C. Pentland, *International Theory and European Integration*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1973).

specifically drawn according to cultural and geographic concerns. In this path, Copenhagen Criteria is a factor, which is necessary, yet not sufficient to be part of the entity.¹⁰ That is to say that, fulfilling Copenhagen Criteria is not enough for countries that have different cultural and geographic identities. This choice of path is essential for Turkey's accession to EU.

None of the paths is better than the other, it is only a question of choice, and this choice is actually the essential issue in defining Turkish-EU relations. That is why; in concerns of identity, actually the question is not exactly whether Turkey's identity is compatible with EU's, it is a question of what EU prefers itself to be.

European identity and how Europe defines itself is one of the issues that lack the relations between EU and Turkey. Also the concept of secularism is key to understand the Turkish state and their stand towards Islam while examining the triangular relationship between Islam-EU and Turkey.

Saeculum in Christian Latin means "the temporal world" and with this respect secularism in its wordy meaning means "worldliness". On the other hand laicism means the distinction between the laity from the clergy, in other words separation of religion from the state. As Niyazi Berkes explains, both words have been used in connection with the problem of duality, opposition or separation of church and state. Before reformation, the church represented the highest authority over the spiritual sphere and the state, the highest authority over temporal matters.¹¹ In this respect secularization or laicization meant the transformation of authority from spiritual character into a worldly position. However, this transformation has not been easy in Christianity. Church, being above or subordinate to state is a peculiarity of Christianity. The Reformation of the Christian Church is a key event that started secularization/laicization, as the universal supremacy of the church was denied.

However, in Islam, there are no concepts of church and state as specifically religious and political institutions. Religion and state are believed to be fused to each other. This has given rise to the opinion that the concepts of secularism or

¹⁰ E. Fuat Keyman, "The Principle of Fairness in Turkey- EU Relations.," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3 (2004): 83-85.

¹¹ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*. (New York: Routledge, 1998).

secularization are irrelevant to the study of Muslim societies. In Christianity state and church stayed side by side while in Islam one stood inside the other. “In either case, the church or state or amalgam of the two found it hard to co-exist with the political, economic and scientific, cultural institutions produced by a secular society.”¹² In other words, secularism was a hard concept to accept for both religions. Even though it might seem that Christianity had gone through reform and secularized, still the power of Christian Church is visible in many societies and with respective governments. The problem with Islam is that, it has not institutionally gone through such a reformation period. Yet it would be exaggerated to state that, Islam is a way of governance. It can be used as a way of governance, yet at the same time; it is a religion that can be individualized. The conflict between religion and state is a concern of all the religions, yet according to Niyazi Berkes, “conflict is not necessarily between religion and the world-the conflict is between the forces of tradition, which tend to promote the domination of religion and sacred law and the forces of change.”¹³

Ottoman Legacy and the caliphate were the main issues that created an Islamic outlook for the newly formed Turkish state. In the formation of the republic, the aim was to adapt the political model to the new world of democracies; therefore, even from the start, in governance and law, Islamic rules were not applied. Yet, this change was a big step also for the society; this radical change might even be stated as a reform movement for an Islamic society. In Turkey, the society was and even still is highly populated with Muslims, yet the question is, does this make the government Islamic?

Kemalist reforms and the formation of the republic are based upon concepts of six arrows: Republicanism, Nationalism, Revolutionism, Populism, Statism and most importantly Secularism. Secularism is a key concept because, Kemalist reforms aimed to change a whole society, which lived under a system where the highest authority of the state was also the Caliphate of the entire Islamic world.

The first big step that Kemalist republic took in the name of secularism was the abolishment of the sultanate. By doing so, the political authority, the sultan, was

¹² Berkes, 12.

¹³ Berkes, 15.

departed from the religious authority, the Caliphate. The Sultanate was abolished because the governance was changing to become a democracy rather than a monarchy. The Caliphate position continued for a while because in the minds of the people, this on going wave of change-abolishment of the caliphate-position would be hard to swallow. Even in the first Constitution that was written in 1921, the religion of the state was defined as Islam.

As reform movements gained a momentum, first the Caliphate was abolished. Actually, the abolishment of the caliphate had a greater meaning than just secularizing Turkey. The Caliph was the leader of the entire Islamic world. When, the Caliphate was abolished in Turkey, ironically the entire system of Islamic world changed. The leading figure was taken out of the system, in other words the hierarchy of the Islamic model was manipulated. Later, the article about the religion of the state was taken out of the constitution and in 1937 Secularism was added as a principle of the Constitution.

Even though the events show the path of change, in essence it is the Kemalist secularism mentality that has to be explained. There are two views over the way the Kemalist principles adapted secularism. First, this Kemalist model is taken from French laicism, which is the direct separation of state and religion. Although, religion and state has been separated, yet with some institutions religion was kept under control of the state. In other words, there was a separation when compared with the situation in the Ottoman times, but this time rather than religion controlling the state, the state had a greater position in controlling religion. According to the Second view, what Kemalist secularism did was a policy of irreligion, aimed at systematic liquidation of Islam. In this view, it is thought that Kemalist principles aimed at totally destroying the Islamic side of the society. However, what really happened was somewhat in between. There was an institutionalized state control over the religion and the religion was not exterminated but individualized. As Niyazi Berkes explains, “Kemalist regime was finding an outlook and founding an organization within which religion would not be destroyed as a result of having been extricated from its old shell.”¹⁴ In other words, what

¹⁴ Berkes, 40.

Kemalist principles did were actually reforming Islam and a drive for an enlightened and humanized version of Islam. In this version, Islam was not more than a religion that was individualized and not necessarily part of governance. Islam was corrupted by the “play actors of religion”¹⁵ and needed to be enlightened. Now, Turkey is a country that has been ruled by democracy since 1923, and has 90% Muslim population. Even though, there was a rise of radical Islam in Turkey since late 1980’s rather than fundamentalism it has turned into being liberal Islam, as it is in the AKP government. Therefore, it would be harsh and exaggerated to state that Turkey is an Islamic state. The Turkish Republic is a unique example of a secular and democratic state with a high percentage of Muslim population.

If Turkey is not an Islamic state, then why is Islam, when the question comes to Turkey, stated as such a big concern for EU? Is EU a Christian Community? In spite of the long tradition of the Reform in European societies, still the Vatican and the Pope, have a greater influence over European people. In governance it is more of a feeling of acceptance rather than a high authority influence. Yet, the feeling of appreciation of Vatican is a factor that cannot be easily denied, especially for countries such as Italy, Spain...etc. For Niyazi Berkes, EU is somewhat a “metamorphoses of holly roman empire”¹⁶. Yet, now the holiness is the question in tact. Cultures have evolved through times in this land and ages have past with brutal wars, which in the end brought tolerance. People, even if not the governments try to identify themselves with their uniqueness and at the same time be part of a group that they share a common value, yet should this common value be religion? Is Christianity the concept that European people should feel belonging to?

It is obvious that for Turkey, the issue of Islam is a concept that became an issue in the late 1980’s, yet the relations go back till 1960’s. On the other hand, even if Islam is an issue when Turkey is concerned, it cannot be an issue of governance, it is more of an issue of culture. In this respect, the most important element that EU has to keep in mind is the “fairness factor”¹⁷. If EU is going to accept Turkey, then it has to be fair and just in its actions, as Verheugen has suggested EU should “use

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Berkes, 42.

¹⁷ J. Dempsey, “EU Appeals for Fairness Over Turkish Talks.”
Financial Times. (28 May 2004).

the same methodology and benchmarks, the same criteria and the same rules” EU should not have “higher or lower standards for Turkey”¹⁸ As Fuat Keyman explains, EU has to be “universal and impartial”¹⁹, if EU is going to accept Turkey as a candidate for full-membership. Yet, this brings us back to where we started, this is not really the problem of Turkey, the burden on Turkey is limited with the Criteria that are put forward; the problem is Where does EU want to stand? The end of the Cold War has brought an opportunity for EU to act as a global actor, as promoter of democracy and liberalism. Yet, this burden of being a global actor is now clashing with their respective societies that have not evolved as quickly as their political entities. As mentioned before, it is a choice of a path, Europe may choose between “New Europe”²⁰ and “Cultural Europe”²¹, their choice will affect the outcome of what they want to become, either a fair, global actor as promoter of democracy or a more conservative actor that sets itself into the cultural and geographical boundaries of Europe.

¹⁸ European Council, Conclusion of the Presidency.
SN180/1/193 REV1. 1993.

¹⁹ Keyman, 85.

²⁰ Keyman, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*

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