

Tensions between Turkey and the West increase

Dan Bilefsky

With Turkey's prospects for joining the European Union growing more elusive and the country reaching out to predominantly Muslim countries with a vigor not seen in years, a longstanding question is vexing the United States and Europe: Is this large, secular Muslim country turning East instead of West?

When President Obama visited Turkey in April — a symbolic gesture that underlined Turkey's geostrategic importance — he emphasized the country's role as a bridge between East and West, acknowledged its mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict and threw his weight solidly behind Turkey becoming a European Union member.

Now, six months later, some in Washington and Brussels are questioning Turkey's dependability as an ally, and many Turks are asking whether they should reject the European Union before the bloc rejects them.

Fears that Turkey is abandoning its bridge-building role were fanned this month when it canceled air force exercises with Israel, straining ties that frayed in January when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan castigated Israel's president, Shimon Peres, over the war in Gaza, in front of world leaders at Davos, Switzerland.

Senior Turkish officials say Mr. Erdogan, who was mediating between Israel and Syria just weeks before the conflict in Gaza broke out, felt personally betrayed by Israel's aggression and what he regarded as the needless killing of innocent Muslims.

At the same time, some Western diplomats say, Turkey has made what they consider alarming overtures toward Iran.

When the official result of Iran's disputed presidential election was announced in June, Turkey was one of the first countries to congratulate President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his re-election. On Tuesday, during a visit to Tehran, Mr. Erdogan said the West was applying a double standard in pressuring Iran over its nuclear program. "Those who are chanting for global nuclear disarmament should first start in their own countries," he said.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has vociferously opposed European Union membership for Turkey, arguing that it is not geographically part of Europe. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany has expressed similar reservations. Many Turks have interpreted the rejection to mean that their country is not welcome because of its large Muslim population.

At a meeting in Istanbul last week about Turkey's relations with its neighbors, Representative Robert Wexler, chairman of the European subcommittee in Congress, said: "You wonder why Turkey is curious about different avenues? Look at your own behavior and attitude, Europe."

Other analysts say that cultural and economic factors are also pushing Turkey in that direction.

Ersin Kalaycioglu, a political science professor at Sabanci University, noted that the global financial crisis had contracted European economies, prompting Turkey, a large exporter, to seek different markets. He and others also suggested that leaders of the governing Justice and Development Party, or A.K.P., a socially conservative party with Muslim roots, felt more at home in Riyadh, Damascus and Baghdad than in Paris, London or Rome.

Even a partial collapse of talks with the European Union would have far-reaching consequences. Turkey is an indispensable ally for the United States and Europe. Bordered by Iran, Iraq and Syria, Turkey is a powerful symbol of the compatibility of democracy, capitalism

and Islam. Located between the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, it has vital strategic importance as a transit country for gas. It also has deep influence in Afghanistan and is a regional leader in the Caucasus.

Yet the country's European Union negotiations are in a precarious state. Negotiations on a number of issues have been blocked because of its long dispute with Cyprus. For the first time in years, leading figures in the business establishment, which has always led the drive for European Union integration, are questioning the wisdom of continuing a negotiating process that appears to have no end.

"We Turks are a proud nation and we don't want to go to a house where we were invited but where the host keeps slamming the door in our face," said Hasan Arat, an executive at a top Turkish real estate development firm.

For all the country's wounded pride, Turkish officials and analysts insist that Turkey has no intention of abandoning the West. Rather than reorienting Turkish foreign policy toward the East, Egemen Bagis, Turkey's minister for European Union affairs, argued in an interview that the recent outreach to its neighbors — including the opening of its border with Syria, the signing of a historic agreement with Armenia to establish normal diplomatic relations and the engagement of Iran — was helping Turkey become a more effective interlocutor for its Western allies.

"Any bridge with one strong leg and one weak leg can't stand for long," Mr. Bagis said.

Ibrahim Kalin, chief foreign policy adviser to Mr. Erdogan, said Western critics of Turkey's new inclusive foreign policy were using a double standard. "When the U.S. makes an overture to Russia, everyone applauds this as a new era in diplomacy," he said. "But when Turkey tries to reach out to Iran, people ask if it is trying to change its axis."

Mr. Kalin said that the anti-Turkish talk emanating from key European capitals was making it harder to convince the Turkish people about the need for European Union membership.

Rather than worrying that Turkey is moving toward the East, said Cengiz Aktar, a leading expert here on the European Union, the West should fear a wounded Turkey turning to Russia. Already, Russia has been courting it as a distribution point for energy supplies, while Turkish investment in Russia is intensifying.

"This government is perfectly capable of saying 'no thanks' to Europe and instead shifting toward Russia," Mr. Aktar said.

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