

Snubbed by Europe / 'The Subtext is Fear'

Turks See Prejudice in EU's Closed Door

By Stephen Kinzer
New York Times Service

ISTANBUL — Nowhere in the world is the divide between Europe and Asia as palpable as in this majestic city. Only here can one sit in a European café and gaze across a narrow waterway to Asia.

Behind are Vienna, Berlin and Paris; on the other side lies a vast, unbroken expanse that stretches to Baghdad, Tashkent and Beijing.

This geography has bequeathed to Turks an identity crisis. For centuries they have been asking themselves where they truly belong.

The question is more urgent than ever. Turkey is demanding entry into the European Union but cannot pry the door open. Turks are beginning to feel that Europe does not want them and to wonder if they should look for friends elsewhere.

European leaders insist that before Turkey can be considered for membership, it must improve its human rights record, end its war against Kurdish rebels and resolve its disputes with Greece. Many Turks consider these to be hypocritical arguments behind which Europeans hide their prejudice against Muslims.

"At every turn, Turkey is being snubbed by Europe," said Baran Tunçer, an economist and former World Bank official. "Countries like Bulgaria are being considered for membership ahead of us, countries which over the years have had no relation whatsoever with European political or economic values. The subtext is fear of what we represent religiously and culturally. People here are beginning to resent this attitude quite strongly, and anti-Western politicians are exploiting the resentment and fueling it."

Membership in the Union promises a host of benefits for Turkey, mostly economic but also psychological, holding out the prospect of steady progress toward greater democracy and prosperity here.

Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, modern Turkey's first Islamist leader, says he is as committed to EU membership as any of his predecessors. But some militants in his Welfare Party would, in the words of one government adviser, "love an excuse to throw up their hands, say 'Europe doesn't want us' and turn in another direction."

This impulse was on display in December, when Mr. Erbakan refused



Burhan Ozbilgin/The Associated Press

Prime Minister Erbakan has said he is committed to joining the EU.

to travel to a EU summit meeting in Dublin. He said the Union was insulting Turkey because the dinner to which he was invited was scheduled after the meeting's official end, when not all heads of government would be present.

Many Turks applauded the prime minister's gesture, but European leaders took it as a signal that Ankara was not really serious about joining the Union or did not know how to press its case.

As further evidence that the government does not understand the ground rules of diplomacy, Europeans have pointed to the threat by Turkey, a NATO member, to veto expanding the alliance if it does not receive better treatment from the European Union.

European ambivalence toward Turkey is hardly a new phenomenon. It dates back hundreds of years to an era when "the Turk" was a European archetype, a symbol of "the other" and even the Anti-Christ.

Ottoman armies nearly took Vienna in 1683, and for a time the central question of Europe was whether the Ottomans would sweep into France and Germany, turning the continent into a vassal of the sultan.

Europe's treatment of Turkey is a sensitive subject not only here but also in the broad band of Turkic nations that stretches across the Caucasus and Central Asia. The success or failure of

Turkish efforts would probably affect perceptions of Europe across this region.

IN January 1996, Ankara entered into a customs union with the EU under which both sides dropped most tariffs and other trade restrictions. But rather than bringing the two sides closer, the agreement has been a source of new discord.

"The customs union created misconceptions on both sides," said Michael Lake, the EU envoy in Ankara. "The European side felt that Turkey would be preoccupied with making it work and not press for full membership for some time. Turkey had the misperception that the customs union was a stepping-stone toward full membership in the next year or two. This led to a drifting apart, which both sides are now determined to reverse."

"I do not feel that if the membership of Turkey arises naturally in the fullness of time, the EU can sustain a veto on the basis of religion or culture," Mr. Lake continued. "That would undermine the importance we place on democracy. Turkey is the only fully democratic Muslim country in the world. To keep Turkey out on this basis would send the wrong signal to the whole Mediterranean basin and the world at large."

Not every European official is so sure. In an unusually frank statement

this month, Hans van Mierlo, foreign minister of the Netherlands, said it was "time for us in Europe to be honest" about the religious aspect of the issue.

"There is a problem of a large Muslim state," he told a committee of the European Parliament. "Do we want that in Europe? It is an unspoken question."

Other obstacles to Turkey's membership are clearer. Certainly the most emotional is human rights. A host of reports by groups that have investigated conditions here say that torture is regularly practiced in Turkish jails. In addition, laws restrict freedom of expression, and dozens of writers and journalists are in prison. Army tactics in the war against Kurdish separatists often seem at least as brutal as those used by the separatists themselves.

"The human rights situation is a disaster," said a European ambassador in Ankara. "Turkey is far, far away from what the European Parliament will insist on."

Government officials acknowledge the problem, although they insist that it is not as serious as some outsiders say. They are considering a series of measures ranging from repeal of laws that restrict free speech to the creation of a judicial police force that would monitor conditions in detention centers.

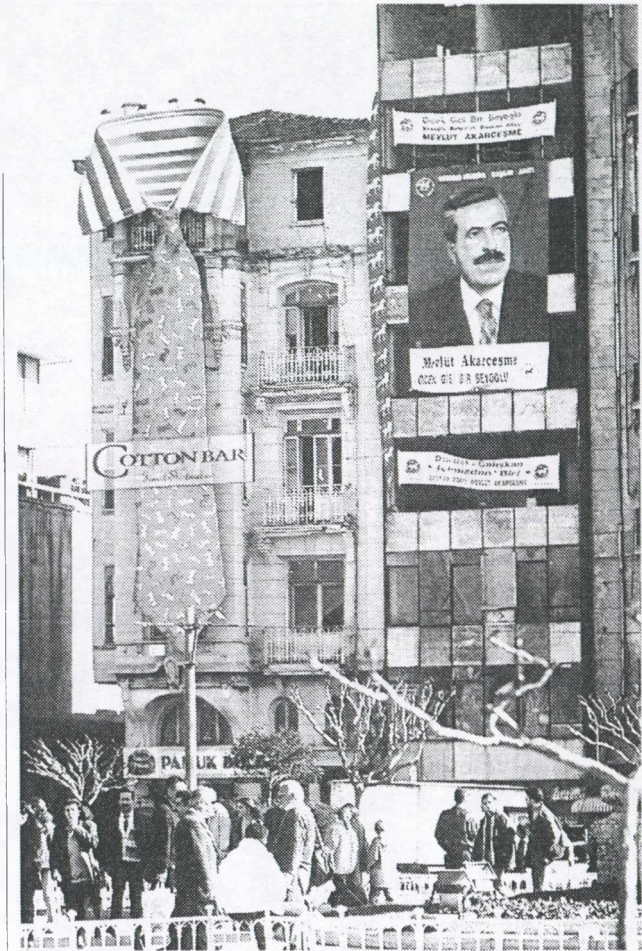
On other issues that have been raised as obstacles to membership, Turkish negotiators have in recent months shown a new flexibility that contrasts with, or complements, the more militant position taken by Mr. Erbakan.

They are offering to prevent a flood of low-wage Turkish laborers into Western Europe and to refrain from claiming the large sums of aid that would be necessary to bring rural Turkey up to European standards of development.

In recent weeks, another concern was added to the list as officials in several European countries suggested that Turkish officials were protecting heroin smugglers.

THE diplomat who is leading the Turkish bid to join the European Union, Onur Oyman, secretary-general of the Foreign Ministry, acknowledged that he faces "an uphill battle."

"If the EU presents objective criteria and says that the first countries which fulfill them will be the first to be admitted, we can accept that," he said.



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Istanbul, where the divide between Europe and Asia is palpable.

"Let talks begin with all applicants, see which ones reach the targets, and then admit them in that order. What is really unacceptable to us is if different standards, different criteria are applied to us than are applied to other countries."

"It would be a very great mistake to make the EU a religious or cultural entity," Mr. Oyman continued. "It would be against everything we have learned about European values. We do not want a cultural or religious iron curtain to replace the political iron curtain that we fought for 50 years to remove."

Many foreigners here believe that although well-organized anti-Turkish lobbies are hard at work in Europe, Ankara could do much more to counter them. They say that Turkish govern-

ments have not tried hard enough to present their country's positive side.

"Behind us are 600 years as masters of the Ottoman Empire," said Yildirim Akturk, an American-trained economist who is a member of Parliament. "We are children of the Ottoman experience. We don't believe in bending over, even if it's to pick up a big check. We want to preserve our pride."

Turkish diplomats who are waging the campaign for EU membership say they are engaged in a historic effort crucial to their country's future and cannot imagine that they will be kept out forever.

"Even in the worst of times," said Omer Akbel, chief spokesman at the Foreign Ministry, "we were the sick man of Europe, not Asia."