

Title:

Tony Blair - Turkey, EU And Cyprus

Word Count:

1081

Summary:

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Keywords:

tony blair,turkey,eu,cyprus

Article Body:

The stalling of US and UK ambitions for Turkey to become a member of the EU during December 2006 has presented a challenge for Tony Blair during his sunset period as British Prime Minister.

Turkey is a longstanding member of NATO, and was actively supported by successive US administrations during the Cold War with the USSR, due to its strategic location. After the collapse of communism, Turkey assumed a new importance as a model for a secular and democratic Muslim state. In addition, its boundaries with Syria, Iraq and Iran place it adjacent to several 'axis of evil' states.

It is well known that the US wished to use Turkey as a launch pad for invading Northern Iraq, but this request was refused. However, the Incirlik airbase in south east Turkey remains in US use, although this receives little publicity. What is less well known is that the US has made several overtures for Turkey to join the coalition forces currently occupying Iraq. Following the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld, the Bush administration has signalled a new strategy for Iraq and the inclusion of Turks in the multinational force would be a major achievement. Although this is unlikely to happen, the proposal has been seriously considered in Ankara as it would allow Turkish troops to enter and probably administer Northern Iraq. This would enable them to neutralise the

ongoing terrorist threat from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) who are based in North Iraq.

An integral part of the close relations between the US/UK and Turkey has been consistent support of Turkey's application for EU membership, and also endorsement of the UN initiative for the reunification of Cyprus, the 'Annan Plan'. The UN initiative would have ended the isolation of North Cyprus, which is governed by a Turkish backed administration.

During the autumn of 2006, there were ominous signs that the progress of talks concerning Turkey were running into serious difficulties in Brussels. There was strident opposition to Turkey's membership from France, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. In addition, the Greek Republic of Cyprus, which joined the EU in 2004, had made repeated complaints that Turkey had failed to open ports in North Cyprus to Greek Cypriot ships. This latter point provided a legal justification for the thwarting of accession negotiations.

However, there are more important considerations. Turkey has a population of some 70 million, most of whom are Muslims. The EU is a predominantly Christian, or post Christian union. Several EU states have already significant Turkish enclaves and there is widespread unease at the prospect of free movement of 70 million Turks across the EU.

Tony Blair initially used terms such as 'celebrating cultural diversity' in reference to Turkey's potential contribution to EU identity. In the wake of atrocities by home grown terrorists in the UK, this rhetoric has been dropped. Instead, the emphasis is now on facilitating an understanding of democracy and moderation by a predominantly Muslim state and the promotion of this model to neighbouring states that remain part of the 'axis of evil'.

This new approach does have merit. The impetus to what is now the EU was the aim of ensuring that France and Germany would never engage in hostilities again. This aim has been successful. The enlargement of the EU to include most of Western Europe also provided a bulwark against communism and the expansionist aims of the USSR. As the USSR is no longer in existence, and indeed, several former communist states are now members of the EU, the question does arise as to the purpose of the EU and its future role and direction. The expansion of the EU in 2004 to include 10 Eastern bloc states and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2007 does call for a strategic review. The current size of the EU and the accession of economically undeveloped member states will necessitate increased budget contributions from the richer members, primarily Germany and the UK. It will also mean that the less developed regions of the UK, currently in receipt of EU structural funds, will lose this status. It may even

stimulate the overhaul of the Common Agricultural Policy and the privileged protection of French agriculture, but perhaps this is too much to expect.

One could argue that we stand at an historical crossroads at which the post Christian west is facing a resurgence of Islam. This resurgence is religious and political. Unfortunately for the west, militant Islam is threatening those middle east states which produce most of the planet's oil supplies. Against this backcloth, the early accession of Turkey into the EU could have significant benefits. Firstly, it would assist the west in its understanding of Islam, secondly, it would demonstrate that a Muslim state could co-exist and prosper within a Christian club, namely the EU, and thirdly, it would promote a model of a democratic and secular Muslim state to neighbours who are in the grip of the 'axis of evil'.

During December 2006, the EU suspended discussions on 8 of the 35 chapters relevant to Turkey's EU accession. As in many EU negotiations, there was an element of chaos and comedy. It was rumoured that Turkey had made an offer to open a North Cyprus port to Greek shipping, but for some inexplicable reason, this was never confirmed in writing. However, it has now been confirmed by the Turkish Prime Minister during the visit to Turkey of Tony Blair around 16 December. Tony Blair apparently launched a last minute diplomatic initiative to save the momentum of the EU Turkey talks and he has gained support from Spain, Sweden and Italy.

The offer to open a North Cyprus port to Greek Cypriot shipping is a major concession by Turkey. The euphoria surrounding the 2004 Annan Plan, the majority vote of Turkish Cypriots in favour of the plan and the dishonoured promises of the EU to end the isolation of North Cyprus have led to cynicism in North Cyprus. During November it was proposed that the UN should be invited to administer the port of Famagusta in North Cyprus, and open the port to Greek Cypriot ships. This met with an outcry of protest from North Cyprus.

It would appear that Tony Blair has achieved a significant diplomatic success in the Turkey EU arena. If he could cement this progress, and possibly even address the Cyprus problem, it would bestow on him the aura of a successful international statesman, and undoubtedly further his aspirations for a future role other than that of British Prime Minister.