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**The European Union's Turkish Neighbor: Can't Live with It, and Can't
Live without It**

Shimon Stein and Oded Eran

For years European Union heads of state have debated what policy the EU should adopt vis-à-vis Turkey. The dilemma has intensified in recent years due to the aggressive external policy and authoritarian internal policy pursued by Erdogan. Relations with Turkey have deteriorated substantially, from its being a candidate for EU membership to being an object of threatened European sanctions. These complex relations, and the attempt on both sides to contain the rift, also have implications for Israel. The lack of a comprehensive solution to these disputes will leave Turkey undermining stability in Israel's strategic environment and threaten to harm Israeli interests, especially with regard to the exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean and the transport of natural gas. Therefore, Israel has an interest in Turkey and the EU settling their relations, although not to the point of full Turkish membership in the Union.

Turkey's challenge to the European Union is multidimensional – cultural, demographic, political, economic, and security – and a solution to this complex challenge is not in sight. An expression of the deep disagreements between the EU and Turkey is reflected in a report submitted to the European Council in March 2021. In the political context, the report notes the ongoing deterioration in relations in recent years, mainly due to Turkey's activity in the Eastern Mediterranean – the Cyprus crisis, the ongoing conflict with Greece over the issue of territorial and economic waters and gas drilling – along with threatening steps and belligerent rhetoric. This joins Ankara's assertiveness in other crisis areas: Syria, Libya, Russia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. There is also the continuing deterioration in Turkey's domestic political affairs – including the deteriorating rule of law and protection of human rights; the violation of the independence of the judicial system; the violation of the freedom of speech; and the continued concentration of power by President Erdogan. This conduct is perceived by the EU as harming its interests, and as long as there is no change in Turkey's position it will therefore diminish the EU's willingness to move forward on a long list of bilateral issues on the agenda.

A key to the first steps in changing relations lies in progress toward a solution to Turkey's ongoing conflict with Greece and Cyprus, both of which are members of the European

Union and are on the same side of the conflict. In November 2019, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Ankara and the Libyan National Consensus Government, whereby Libya and Turkey have demarcated areas in the Mediterranean where they enjoy exclusive economic rights – Exclusive Economic Zones – while ignoring the rights of Greece and Cyprus. EU leaders also accuse Turkey of halting talks with Greece in 2016 over maritime disputes (In January 2021, exploratory talks were renewed on this topic). In August 2020, Turkey's natural gas exploration vessel was deployed off the Greek island of Kastellorizo, a few kilometers off the Turkish coast (the ship was removed after warning signals from France). And in the background, Turkey regularly threatens to use force to exercise its economic rights, as it interprets them, in the maritime area south of Turkey's coast in the Mediterranean. EU leaders recommend that the issue be addressed in the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and if necessary, in the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This recommendation indirectly concerns Israel, as Israel is likely to reject outright an attempt to refer to the ICJ its land and maritime border disputes with its neighbors (a discussion on Turkey's disputes with its neighbors at the ICJ, for example, may encourage Lebanon to turn to this institution, in an attempt to reach a decision in its favor in the dispute with Israel regarding the demarcation of the maritime border. Israel's principled position is that its disputes with its neighbors, including those related to shared borders, should be resolved in bilateral discussions – a position based in part on Israel's extensive negative experience in international bodies, especially judicial bodies).

In November 2020, Erdogan visited the Turkish part of Cyprus to express support for the opening of the beach in the abandoned Greek quarter of Varosha in the city of Famagusta, which was occupied by the Turkish army in the 1974 invasion. The European Parliament has called on Turkey to cease such moves and called on the European Union to impose sanctions on Turkey. The European Council reiterated this call, demanding that Turkey agree to resolve the conflict in Cyprus on a bi-community and bi-regional federal basis. Talks on the future of the island are scheduled to resume on April 27-29. For the EU, balancing the desire to improve relations with Turkey and defending the interests of Cyprus and Greece is particularly difficult, as Turkey is not the only side responsible for the stalemate and lack of progress toward resolution of the Cyprus conflict. Turkey's entry into the EU will be blocked as long as Union members Greece and the Greek part of the island do not agree to a solution, and they are also expected to try and reduce the expansion of cooperation between Turkey and the EU in alternative frameworks to full membership.

In recent years the list of disputes between Turkey and the European Union has also included the Turkish occupation of territory in northern Syria, and the uprooting of parts of the local – mostly Kurdish – population, and Turkish attempts to relocate Syrian

refugees in Turkey to Turkish-controlled territory in Syria. EU leaders emphasize to Ankara their position that Syria's territorial integrity should be maintained. Turkey's continued activity against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) also figures in European criticism of Turkey's policy. The resumption of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September-November 2020 added to the bones of contention between Turkey and the EU, mainly due to Turkey's proposal to resolve the conflict in a forum involving Iran and Russia; for its part, the Union seeks to discuss the issue within the framework of the Minsk Group, established in 1994 as part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The issue of the Syrian refugees in Turkey and Ankara's manipulation of their tragedy is a major source of the EU concern. Following the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, with quite a few EU members suffering the consequences, the EU and Turkey have agreed on a framework for cooperation on immigration. The goals of the Union have been to prevent illegal immigration and the smuggling of refugees into its territory and the loss of human life, and to improve the living conditions of refugees in Turkey itself. To this end, the Union decided in 2016 to grant assistance to Turkey in the amount of six billion euros. Turkey is aware that Europe's fear of refugees making their way to Europe can be leveraged, and the Union, which in turn is aware of Turkey's cynical use of refugees, has no choice but to criticize Turkey while continuing to provide it with financial assistance.

Following what has been viewed since the end of 2020 as constructive conduct and as a contribution to de-escalation on Turkey's part, and with the intention of encouraging this trend, the EU has decided to adopt a "positive agenda," containing the following issues: improving immigration management – returning refugees from Greece to Turkey and the settlement of refugees in Europe, as well as examining the possibility of increasing financial assistance above six billion euros for the settlement of refugees; modernization of the customs union that covers the economic relations between the two (subject to changes in Turkey's policy regarding disputes with the EU); and renewed senior-level talks on energy, economics, and politics. To its list of demands, Turkey added the continuation of negotiations regarding its accession to the Union, which were frozen in 2019, and the liberalization of the visa requirements, delayed due to non-fulfillment of what the EU defined as required conditions.

Beyond these issues, the very central and poignant question is whether the EU is ready to take Turkey into its ranks – which would make Turkey, whose current population is 85 percent Muslim, the largest member state. In the absence of a consensus among the Union members, the chances of Turkey joining are slim, even if it meets all the requirements demanded of it. In the absence of the ability or desire to deal with the fallout if Turkey's option to join is dropped, the Union presents patchwork solutions

instead of offering Turkey a comprehensive package deal in the form of a Grand Bargain. Its main components could include: a return to a democratic regime; solution of the Cyprus conflict; demarcation of the economic areas in the Mediterranean in an arrangement that would not be based solely on Greek sovereignty over islands adjacent to the Turkish coast; a long-term legal-financial arrangement for the issue of Syrian refugees and their permanent settlement in Turkey, if necessary ; gradual departure of Turkish forces from Syria; and above all, a proposal for Turkey's limited membership in the European Union, centered on participation in the EU policy shaping process on a range of issues relevant to Turkey.

Erdogan's foreign and domestic policy in recent years can be explained as stemming from the recognition (even if not explicit) that Turkey's prospects of joining the Union are slim, and therefore Turkey should not adjust itself to EU principles and positions. In the absence of a full membership offer, whether as a sanction or an attempt to avoid dealing with the dilemmas of Turkey's membership, the regime in Ankara will continue to navigate between attaining its domestic and foreign policy goals and the principles and policies of US President Biden and Europe, through the two main relevant institutions – the European Union and NATO. Thus, due to Erdogan's controversial policies and the absence of a comprehensive response and solutions to old and new disputes, Turkey and the Union re dragged into rounds of assertive and aggressive Turkish action and endless EU attempts to walk the tightrope between a strategic but problematic neighbor that is also a fierce competitor of two of its members. Along with the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the European Union, NATO – where Turkey is an important pillar due to its geographical and demographic size and its proximity to Russia – has been harmed.

Israel has a twofold interest in how EU relations with Turkey are settled. The lack of a complete solution to the disputes described above will leave Turkey undermining stability in Israel's strategic arena. On key issues for Israel, in particular the exclusive economic zone and natural gas transport, Turkey is taking steps that could harm Israeli interests. Therefore, Israel should be interested in a European proposal to Ankara to improve relations, and a possible new model of relationship that is short of full membership but provides a role in shaping EU policies on issues of concern to Turkey.