

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

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## Turkey and the EU: Norwegian or British model?

by  
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*The ardent debate on the axis shift in Turkish foreign policy, which focused on the ideological nature of Turkey's growing integration with its eastern neighborhood, has overshadowed another critical point: the operational compatibility of new commitments with the ongoing EU harmonization process. Some concerns arise as these seem to be mutually exclusive... Really?*

Every year the European Commission publishes its Progress Report on Turkey, which assesses the country's capacity to assume the obligations of future membership.

In fact, to join the club means to accept the rules of the game, in which the sovereign exercise of national interests obeys, in a number of areas, the interests of the supra-national association.

Yet Turkey is progressively developing its new integration policy in the East. Started with the "zero problems with neighbors" approach, this policy goes presumably beyond it, towards "maximum cooperation and regional integration." In a short time, the process has led to the signing of dozens of strategic agreements with Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and others, promising the transformation of the Middle East "into a common economic area, with a common political dialogue and security mechanism." However, one result among all these developments has struck public opinion in Turkey. The mutual elimination of visa requirements in the region has provoked public excitement. Some are already comparing this to the processes that once led to European unification.



Besides these developments in the Arab neighborhood, Ankara is building another vector of integration. The rapprochement with the sister nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia resulted recently in the establishment of the Turkic Council. The positive nature of the developments notwithstanding, these commitments inevitably bring the question of their compatibility with full EU integration, which "is and will remain the priority."

### Schengen vs. Shamgen [1]

Indeed, integration succeeds when it touches ordinary people. The Europeans realized that they live in a common house when border controls were abolished with the Schengen agreement. Similarly, even if Ankara's policy to improve relations with the region started a few years ago, it was when visas were eliminated that the public realized its effects. Is it a coincidence that the intense "axis shift" debate broke out following this sudden awareness?

Observers are divided on the beneficial character of these commitments. The triumphant enthusiasm of the "Easternists" contrasts with the concern of the "Westernists" that these

agreements would conflict with the obligations towards Brussels and imperil the negotiation process, because the more Turkey progresses in adopting the European *acquis*, among which the Schengen agreement rules, the more tightly it will have to close its eastern doors, meant to become the EU's impermeable external frontier. One can imagine the damage this would cause to Turkey's regional penetration. New EU member states have already experienced this situation, once they aligned their visa rules with the common policy. The consequences of the Schengen agreement can virtually wall off neighbors and disrupt bilateral relationships.

Turkey's baggage of multifaceted regional connections is far more substantial than any of the new EU member-states. A carbon-copy way of accession can turn into a politically double-edged sword for Turkey, if tomorrow it is compelled to close its doors to Syrians or Jordanians, Kazakhs or Azeris. Considering Turkey's expanding opening towards Asia and Africa, one can reasonably foresee that in 20XY, when supposedly it will be admitted into the EU, the quality and quantity of its external commitments will be even higher. This calls the debate on whether Schengen or Shamgen is the direction to take.

### **Opting for flexible Europe**

A new idea voiced in 2009 by Turkish President Abdullah Gül seemed to offer a conceptual way out of the impasse. Speaking on France's opposition to Turkey's EU bid, he suggested that after concluding the negotiations, his country might not wish to join the EU, just like Norway. The idea may have relieved Turkey's opponents in Paris and Berlin, but it isn't in the interests of either Turkey or the EU. Suppose that one day Ankara fulfils all the criteria; would it be in its interests to give up the prize after such a historically significant race? And vice versa -- would it be in the interests of Brussels, dreaming for a global role, to lose the Turkey of that time?

The "Norwegian way" is obviously not an option. But how could Turkey conciliate EU integration and the emerging "Shamgen *acquis*"? The British experience gives inspiring ideas. The history of European construction offers examples of when nations preferred gradual or partial integration, for the sake of safeguarding their pre-existing obligations with third countries. The so-called system of negotiated "opt outs" is the key to such flexibility. Thus, to preserve the Nordic Passport Union, Denmark applied the Schengen agreement fully only when the non-EU countries such as Norway and Iceland were also allowed to join it. On the other hand, the United Kingdom opted out from implementing the visa aspects of the Schengen agreement. Subsequently, Ireland also followed it in order to preserve its Common Travel Area with the UK. Thanks to this derogation, these countries can keep their own visa policies, so that for example, Belizeans, Maldivians or Taiwanese can travel freely to the UK and Ireland, although they are not allowed into the Schengen area.

Opt outs don't only concern visa issues. Different countries have at times obtained derogations in various fields, such as opt outs from the Monetary Union, the Security and Defense Policy and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. These exceptions are naturally subject to the negotiating capacity of the requesting country.

The British example is interesting not only for its "creative" integration with the European system. It is an unusual story of political "engineering" when a country joins a supra-national structure while keeping its privileged ties with its former dominions through the Commonwealth of Nations. Remember that Queen Elizabeth II is the ruling monarch of 16 nations around the world.

## Multi-connected Turkey

It is in the interests of Turkey to accede to the EU, while retaining its liberal visa policy towards neighbors and pursuing its efforts for rapprochement with the countries with which it shares a common history. Turkey can adhere to the supra-national EU while remaining connected with the East through international mechanisms and structures. Like Brits, Turks will travel freely within Europe, while their guests from Syria and Kyrgyzstan won't be allowed beyond the Turkish western border. Thus, Turkey's own visa-free space won't imperil border-free Schengenland.

From a political point of view, the Turkic Council will strengthen cultural and ethnic connections, just like the International Organization of La Francophonie does for France. On the other side, the creation of a commonwealth-like structure to reinvigorate relations with former Ottoman lands and beyond could offer a new framework for the ongoing integration.

The European Union would also win from such a formula, as having Turkey in the club will contribute to its global significance. Moreover, Turkey's penetration in the East will offer an additional channel for the impact of "soft power." The influence of the UK through the Commonwealth, of France in the French-speaking world or of Spain in Latin America contributes to Europe's cumulative hold on the world. So will Turkey.

[1] Lexicalized from "Sham," the Arabic name for Syria, with which the process started.

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Op-Ed

<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-201739-109-centerturkey-and-the-eu-norwegian-or-british-modelbr-i-by-i-brmurat-daoudovcenter.html>