Between Two Worlds: Turkey in the Spotlight

HOST: Ralph Begleiter

GUESTS: Dr. Jerry Leach, president of the World Affairs Councils of America, Turkey expert
Omer Taspinar, director of the Turkey program of the Brookings Institution

>> Begleiter: Located at the strategic crossroads between Europe and Asia, Turkey has historically sought to balance its relationships between East and West. Now, after decades of lobbying, it has begun membership discussions with the European Union, a process that has brought Turkey under an international microscope. How far will Turkey bend to meet the demands of the EU? And is the politically fractured union ready to accept a Muslim country into its ranks? Between Two Worlds: Turkey in the Spotlight coming up next on Great Decisions 2006.

>> Female announcer: Join us as Great Decisions Television celebrates 20 years of inspiring Americans to learn more about the world. Great Decisions is produced by the Foreign Policy Association. Funding for Great Decisions is provided by The Starr Foundation, The Morse Family Foundation, The William and Karen Tell Foundation and U.S. Trust. And now, from our studio at New York University, here is Ralph Begleiter.

>> Begleiter: Since its formation in 1923, the Turkish Republic has been the Muslim country most closely aligned with the Western world. Modern Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, left behind two clear legacies: an almost ideological passion for secularism and a strong role for Turkey's military. Ataturk also turned the country from East to West, adopting Europeans norms and values as the law of the land. Turkey has long been a key player on the world stage. A founding member of the United Nations in 1952, Turkey became the first and only Muslim country to join NATO. Since then, Ankara's bid to join the European Union has been shunted aside. Turkey and the EU are exploring membership just as Europe itself is questioning its own future. France and Holland rejected the European constitution last year, and skeptical Europeans--53%, according to the latest poll--oppose Turkey's entry. Meanwhile, Turkey is in the midst of an identity crisis of its own. The mildly Islamist government of Tayyip Erdogan has gradually allowed religion back into the public square. His government itself exists, some say, on the principle that more democracy means a greater role for Islam. Even while introducing a number of sweeping reforms to meet tough EU standards on human rights and religious freedom, Turkey has increasingly asserted its own national interest on the
world stage. Ankara refused to allow its longtime NATO ally the United States to use Turkey as a staging ground for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. And Erdogan has threatened to walk away from EU talks if anything less than full membership is offered. Strong economic policies and a growth rate three times that of the EU have bolstered domestic support for Erdogan's agenda. Supporters of Turkey's entry to the European Union, including the U.S. and Britain, argue that integrating the only democracy in the Muslim world is critical for security reasons and that accession offers incentives for further reforms in Turkey. Still, some actions by the government reinforce the argument that Turkey's DNA is just incompatible with contemporary European values-- for example, a recent ban on even discussing Turkey's role in what Ataturk himself acknowledged was the massacre of millions of Armenians during World War I. Turkey's Kurdish insurgency, which has long been suppressed with a heavy military hand, also complicates talks with Europe, as does Ankara's refusal to recognize Cyprus, an EU member country where historic animosity between Greece and Turkey still plays out. All sides agree, however, Turkey will be a major force if it joins the EU. With its population of 71 million, Turkey would soon surpass Germany as the largest nation in the union. Economically, it's already the EU's seventh largest trading partner, and full integration could bring mutual benefits. But is an increasingly protectionist Europe, skeptical of immigration and global Islamists trends, ready to welcome Turkey? Joining me now to discuss these issues are Dr. Jerry Leach, president of the World Affairs Councils of America and an expert on Turkey; and Omer Taspinar, director of the Turkey program of the Brookings Institution. Welcome to both of you.

>> Pleasure. >> Begleiter: The prime minister of Turkey has called the European Union a "Christian club" from time to time. Is that a fair description? Is that really what the problem is, that Europe wants to remain Christian, Omer?

>> In many ways, that's the perception in Turkey, especially coming from Prime Minister Erdogan, who has an Islamist past. He doesn't call himself an Islamist anymore; he is a conservative Muslim. Yet the tendency in Turkey is to see Europe, which has said no to Turkey for about 40 years, as a Christian club. And although many Turks-- in fact, most of the Turks-- want to be part of the European Union, I think most of them also believe that they will never be able to join because Europe is a Christian club.

>> Begleiter: Jerry, do you think Europeans see themselves that way?

>> Well, there's a disconnect in the European Union. The government-- the European Commission, the European Council-- operate on a definition of what the European Union is. It's essentially a set of common values, such as adhering to the rule of law, having stable democracy, et cetera. The people, however, of the European Union-- 25, or 15 earlier-- don't actually view the European Union that way. They view it as a group of countries with a common history and common culture. They don't normally articulate that as Christianity, if you like, but, in fact, it does imply that they are a set of Christian countries. So there's really a disconnect between public opinion and governmental views in Europe, and the Europeans are going to have to deal with that and overcome that disconnect.
>> Begleiter: Is that why a majority of Europeans actually repeatedly express their opposition to Turkey joining?

>> Exactly. The majority of public opinion in virtually every country in Europe is opposed to Turkish membership largely because the Turks would be viewed as alien. They would be viewed as Muslim. They would be viewed as hard to incorporate; a backward country in the eyes of many Europeans; and, indeed, a former enemy, if you like, in some cases; in a few countries, a place where that enemyness, that opposition still resonates and has strong feelings expressed on the street.

>> Begleiter: Omer, that's got to be hard to hear. Why does Turkey want so badly to be part of a European union, especially one that feels that way?

>> Well, for Europe, in many ways, Turkey has been the enemy, but for the Ottoman Empire, Europe was also part of a club that it felt part of. The Ottoman Empire was, after all, the sick man of Europe. It was not the sick man of Asia or the Middle East or the Arab world. So for a very long tradition, for about 200 years, Turkey has been going westward. And with Ataturk, with the reforms in the 1920s and '30s, which basically unleashed a great process of Westernization in Turkey, Europe has become a foreign policy goal. For Turkey, joining the European Union amounts to a civilizational project. Turkey does not feel part of the Islamic world, in many ways, despite the fact that we have a prime minister who comes from an Islamic background. He's not as home when he's with the Arab world, with the Middle East. He sees Turkey as part of basically a European world which grows, hopefully, more multicultural in time with the inclusion of Turkey. >> Begleiter: But Turkey is a majority Muslim nation.

>> 99% of Turkey's Muslim.

>> Begleiter: And yet not part of the Muslim world.

>> In many ways, this is because Turkey is a sui generis, peculiar country. We have a secular system. It's probably the most secular country in the Islamic world. And Turks, of course, feel Muslim, but they don't feel nationally and ethnically close to the Arab world. In many ways, this may be politically incorrect, but they feel superior to the Arab world, because the Ottoman Empire was a great empire, and it was in the great power game up until the late 19th century. In that sense, Turkey feels part of Europe, feels part of the first league of nations, so to speak.

>> Begleiter: You know, both of you know that Turkey and the Europeans have been dancing around this issue for many decades now. I don't think both sides would be dancing around this issue unless both sides saw benefits of some kind to having Turkey in the European Union. What do the Europeans see that would be good about Turkey joining the European Union? And then we'll talk about the other side as well.
Well, in terms of Europeans seeing benefits of Turkish membership, the first and foremost thing, I think, is September the 11th. The hostility expressed to the Western world, to the United States, to Europe, et cetera, caused the Europeans to sit up and think, "Is this going to be a long-term state of affairs? Is it going to be permanent? Can we do something about it?" And then, all of a sudden, this new view of Turkey emerged—that is, Turkey as a stable democracy, as a secular country in a Muslim world, and as a country making progress up the ladder of the standard of living, GDP, if you like. So September the 11th was a turning point in this discussion. Europeans also see Turkey as a very strong military power. Lots of Europeans are having difficulty with backing the integration of Europe with the kind of military power that at least we in the United States are accustomed to. Turkey has the largest military in Europe and has a strategic location. In addition to that, there's the question looming over the future—and the Europeans have taken a long-term view of European Union membership—that, essentially, they don't want to create a permanent barrier, a hard barrier, between the Christian world and the Islamic world, that that would be very deleterious and damaging for the future. A way to dissolve that barrier is to begin by bringing Turkey into the European Union.

Begleiter: And, Omer, you've talked about the history of Turkey's desire to be associated with Europe. But there must be some fairly concrete benefits Turkey would experience if it were granted full membership.

Sure, when you look at the history of poorer members of the EU which have joined in the '60s, '70s, '80s—like Italy was poor when it entered. Spain was much poorer than it is now. Greece, Portugal. And now you have Eastern Europe. All these countries are getting major subsidies for their agriculture. They're getting, basically, structural aid programs. And the EU is trying to balance living standards within the European Union. In many ways, the expectation is that you would get financial benefits. And more importantly, perhaps, you would get the kind of stamp which would say, "This country's politically stable. This country's a democratic country. It's politically stable. It has good institutions." Therefore, the most important contribution comes in the form of foreign direct investment. Private-sector money starts to flock in. And that's what the Turkish stock exchange has been expecting.

Begleiter: I've got to ask you about the point Jerry made, though, too, which is the idea that Europeans see welcoming Turkey as a kind of bridge to the Islamic world, as maybe something that would mitigate the sort of hatreds that generated into 9/11. You think that's a red herring? Is that a real—

That's very real, I think. Look, 9/11 turned Professor Huntington's clash of civilizations into a self-fulfilling prophesy. No one was taking the clash-of-civilization talk very seriously. But 9/11 proved that there is such a thing. There is a political Islam, and there is a perception now in the Islamic world that the West is a Christian club and that the United States is engaged in a crusade against the Islamic world. These are the stuff that you hear on Al Jazeera in the Arab world. If Europe opens its doors to Turkey, now, this will not be changing the perception of Europe immediately in the Arab world,
but at least it would prove that Europe is less racist than what the Arab world believes. In many ways, this has become a civilizational issue for Europe itself.

>> Begleiter: We've got to tackle some of the tough reasons why Europeans have been reluctant, to put it diplomatically, to allow Turkey to enter the European Union. Jerry, you talked about it being a bridge and opening a relationship with the Muslim world, but there are many Europeans who also see the possibility of Turkey's entry as being something that's just going to bring in more terrorists and is going to bring in more Muslims into Europe. And many Europeans aren't so happy about that. Why are they so reluctant about that? Is there grounds for that fear?

>> There was an earlier opening when the economies of Europe, especially that of Germany, needed workers. And they courted people from southern Europe and courted Turks. It had no reference to the membership of the European Union, but it was intended to bring workers in for the factories of the Ruhr and the like, and it did so.

>> Begleiter: It's the largest minority, I think.

>> The largest minority in Germany. There are now about 3 million Turks, of which 2 million are still citizens of Turkey, and about another million have gone on to become citizens of Germany, if you like. That era in German industrial history is really over with. They don't really need and don't want workers for the factories any longer. If anything, the manufacturing base of Germany--and, indeed, of many parts of the center of Europe--are declining. So they're looking now at the immigrants they brought in and saying, "There's no way to get them back out. We've got them forever. And if we allow Turkey into the European Union, these 3 million in Germany or 4 million Europe overall are going to become like magnets. They'll just draw others in behind them. They'll bring in people from their villages from the southeast, et cetera." It's worth making the point that the earlier immigration was essentially an immigration of the uneducated from Turkey, the peasants, if you like, the people who didn't have a modern education, et cetera. And that's the way Germans and most of Europeans view the Turks. They view them as that group they brought in earlier. They don't see them as an educated population, and, increasingly, Turkey is educated.

>> Yet the irony is that Germany has also, like the rest of Europe, an aging population. Soon there will be the kind of demographics in Europe where they will need more labor, more people to keep alive their welfare states. These are very generous welfare state-based systems, and they don't have enough young people working for them. The irony, of course, is that they also have unemployment. So there are major structural problems in Europe. However, the long-term trend is that these aging countries will need fresh labor. Even Eastern Europe, even Poland will not be in a position to provide, because they have their own shrinking problem of demographics. So Turkey, in the long run, will bring many positive things to the European Union not only in terms of bringing a dynamic market of 70 million people. Turkey's an emerging market. It's not that poor when you look at the rest of the world. And it will also bring fresh labor if, of course, Europe is willing to open the gates.
>> Begleiter: If Turkey joins the European Union, would it be the largest nation in terms of population?

>> We're talking about Turkey joining in 2015, most optimistically. By 2015, demographically, Turkey's projected to be 80 million, 80 to 85 million. And Germany's supposed to shrink a little bit, so it's-- probably, Turkey will be the largest country with the greatest representation in the EU institutions.

>> Well, I just wanted to add a point to what Omer has said. There's a very nice fit between the structure of the Turkish population and what's happening in many parts of Europe, especially Germany-- namely, about 50% of the Turkish population is currently under 25 years old. So it's a young population compared with the aging populations of Europe. So there's a very, very good fit there.

>> Begleiter: Devil's advocate would say, though, that you open Turkey into the European Union, and you're opening a door to Syria, to Iraq, to Iran, to other countries through which large numbers of even younger populations might be able to flow into Europe perhaps as part of the work force, perhaps for more nefarious reasons. Is that part of the problem?

>> That's part of the problem. Absolutely. At the level of public opinion but also at the governmental level in Europe, the flow-on effect from breaking the barrier, if you like, from setting the precedent is that there's going to be a very immediate application on the part of Morocco, probably very quickly followed by Tunisia. There's Macedonia, a Muslim country. Albania is sitting there as well. And then the French fear Algeria as a potential applicant at some point. It becomes hard to keep on going, even for those who are very strongly in support of Turkey joining the European Union. The flow-on effects are pretty hard to handle.

>> Where does the border end? I mean, that's the big question that Europeans are asking. If Turkey is in, who will say no to Ukraine? 50 million people in Ukraine. Who will say no to Georgia? Georgia wants to become a member. These new colored revolutions in the Caucasus and in Ukraine means that these countries will become more democratic. Ukraine will, sooner or later, join NATO, like Georgia, and they will apply for EU membership. So when the European elites are reluctant to say yes to Turkey, it's because they don't know whether the future of the European Union will be feasible or not, whether this project, this great project of establishing nation-states into a large confederation will explode because it's overstretched. And let alone the North African countries, et cetera, which will also apply. But what differs Turkey is that you don't have many countries in the Islamic world which are democratic, secular, pro-Western, a NATO member, and which started this journey with the EU in 1963. Turkey has been waiting for longer than 40, 50 years. In that sense, saying no to Turkey has a major cost, especially in this framework of clash of civilizations.
Begleiter: Let's talk about a couple of things that are not so pleasant to talk about, but I think we've got to put them on the table here. Some Europeans argue Turkey simply is not ready to be part of the same kind of society with its judicial system, with its reputation and record of how it's treated the Kurdish minority in the southeast, with transparency in its economic and financial systems and so on. How does Turkey answer that? It has, in fact, treated the Kurdish minority with a pretty heavy military hand.

That's true, especially in the 1980s, when the military intervened. Between 1980 and '83, Turkey had military rule, and that's when most of the human rights abuses against the Kurds occurred, which fueled Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and which fueled a Kurdish insurrection, which turned into a terrorist organization leading, basically, a civil war. Yes, but the good news is that in the last four, five years, Turkey first accepted Kurdish cultural rights, and now Kurdish is a language that Kurds can enjoy and learn in their own schools, and there is Kurdish-language TV programs in Turkish national TV.

That was never allowed before.

That was never allowed. And all this is happening because the EU sent the signal that it may one day consider Turkey's inclusion. So the carrots that the EU provided to Turkey was so important for Turkey doing the right thing. Now if the EU slams the door, I think most of these reforms will be blocked in Turkey. Turkey has been doing the right thing for the last four or five years. It's improving its human rights records. And the EU will not start these negotiations in a vacuum. There is this Copenhagen criteria, which stipulates that the countries which start negotiating with the EU need to abide with human rights, minority rights. They have to have democratic institutions. For the last four years, Turkey has been reforming its judicial system. It's basically--the role of the military in politics has been changed. Freedom of speech has been improved. All these dynamics are in the right direction. In that sense, things are going well in Turkey, much better than how they were just ten years ago.

Begleiter: I'm going to raise another issue. I want to come back to something that you just said, but I want to raise another issue right now. One of the things that people really don't talk about very much publicly is the way the Turkish government and the Turkish people have treated the 1915 events in which, you know, many, many Armenians were killed. Ataturk himself referred to it as a kind of pogrom. But today's Turks don't like to acknowledge that. Europeans use that as an argument against Turkey. Has there been any progress on that score?

There has been a major progress just recently. I think it was just a few weeks ago. A major conference was held in Turkey which discussed these events and used the term "genocide" for it openly. This is the first time, as far as I know, that Turks used the G word for it. And this has been a major, major taboo in Turkey. The fact that we're coming to terms with these darkest chapters of our history shows that Turkey's gaining democratic maturity. And, again, this is happening because of the European Union. Because of the European Union, Turkey realized that it has to improve its human rights standards and its freedom of speech. Without the EU, I don't think we could be today
discussing in Turkey what happened to the Armenians in 1915. There is still a lot of reluctance, of course, to talk about this. And I think the Turkish line is that something happened. These were massacres. But what about the Turks who died in this war? What about all the Ottoman Empire lands, all the Muslims which perished under Russian invasion in the Balkans, et cetera? So it's a dark chapter, but things are again improving on that front too.

>> Begleiter: Episodes like the ones Omer is just talking about. The treatment of the Kurds. The handling of the Armenian genocide. Do those things allow Europeans to be able to draw a line where the border is in Europe and to be able to admit Turkey without necessarily having to turn around and immediately admit Ukraine or Georgia or a number of other countries?

>> Well, the border issue is an important one. It's not, I think, exactly that--it's not framed exactly that way. Particularly if you talk to ministries of defense around Europe, they are skittish about having a European Union border which is common with Iran and Iraq, particularly if you play out the scenarios. And there is a civil war emerging in Iraq. Or Syria. They really don't want to have to defend those borders, and they don't want to be sucked into the kind of conflict that can occur when you have a nuclear-armed state, which Iran will presumably someday shortly be, et cetera. So that's the big border issue. The big border issue is having borders with countries where there is likely to be impending and continuing conflict and getting drawn into that. Now, concerning the other issues, the Armenian issue, I'd like to just mention when I taught in Turkey and visited it over many years, the fact is that most of the Turks were absolutely blind to the Armenian issue. It had not been a part of taught Turkish history. And people had been educated in the modern school system, and this was not a part of it. So modern Turkey is having to come to grips with something that it didn't know anything about, really. And it's coming to grips now by trying to get out the facts of what happened, et cetera. When the facts, I think, are finally laid out on a table for everybody to understand, there will have been very serious events that occurred in April of 1915, May of 1915, et cetera, that lead to the death, deportation, marching down into the desert of many, many Armenians. There's also going to be another side to that story, and that is the Armenian collaboration with the Russians, who were attacking the Ottoman Empire on the eastern front and basically the beginning of an incursion into Ottoman territory. So it's going to be a two-sided outcome. It's not going to be a black-and-white denouement. It's not going to be a situation where the world is just going to accept the fact that there was an Armenian genocide or whatever term is used. It's going to be more gray. The darker gray may turn out to be on the Turkish side than on the Armenian side, but there's going to be two shades of gray there.

>> Begleiter: Omer?

>> On the Armenian question, one thing which is happening in Turkey is that a lot of people now are getting very angry with the European Union for opening these boxes of history, basically, this old closet. And if, one day, something bad happens with the EU
and the door is shut to Turkey, I think there will be such a nationalist backlash in Turkey against the EU that everything will be lost. The gains of the last five years may be lost.

>> Begleiter: There's a lot to talk about here. I'm afraid we're out of time. Omer Taspinar, thank you very much for being with us on Great Decisions. And Jerry Leach, as well, the president of the World Affairs Councils of America. Thank you. And thank you all, as well, for joining us on Great Decisions 2006. I'm Ralph Begleiter.

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