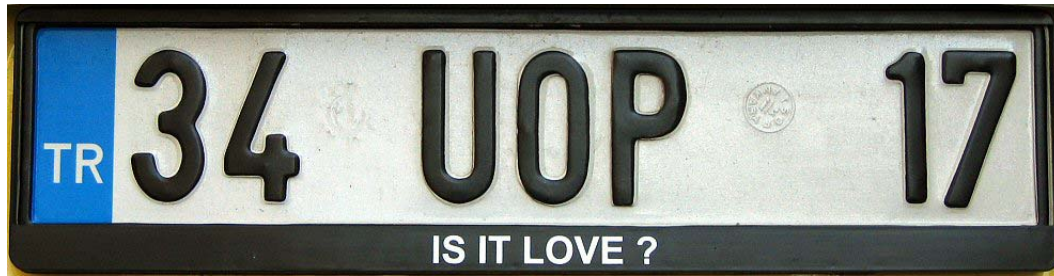


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The photo above is a Turkish license plate. If you've traveled to Europe, you may recognize the classic European features such as the proportions of an elongated rectangle, the blue stripe along the left end and the country code in the lower left corner. This license plate is like the rest of urban Turkey's road signs, retail brands, shopping centers, autos, trucks, offices, furniture, apartment blocks, stationary, clothing, shoes and eyeglasses in being 100% European, except for one missing element. While the rest of Turkey, especially the Western regions, is unmistakably and thoroughly European, recent travelers to Europe will notice that this license plate has an empty upper left corner, which in Europe is filled with the circle of golden stars signifying membership in the European Union (EU).

Little known to Americans, Turkey has been diligently working to attain membership in the EU for decades. Time after time, its membership has been delayed, deferred or postponed until Turkey met yet another requirement often bypassed or ignored by other applicants or current members. The reasons cited by Europeans for Turkey's non-membership are as numerous as the current member countries, the most common being Turkey's economic performance versus the requirements defined by the EU.

But according to Istanbul based Bloomberg reporter Ben Holland who I discussed this issue with, Turkey's finances are in significantly better shape than Greece's were when they entered the EU, and better than at least two of the 10 countries who recently joined the alliance. Mr. Holland also repeated the oft cited fact that France and Germany, historically the two dominant forces controlling EU policy and membership, have both been out of compliance with EU financial requirements for over three years. Mr. Holland said, "It is ironic that if France and Germany tried to join the EU today, they would not qualify economically for the exclusive club they have so far controlled."

The Turks see their long struggle to officially join the EU and stand on equal footing with the countries they have long modeled their society after in a somewhat different light. In the scores of interviews and conversations I conducted with a wide cross section of Turkish society a consistent theme was repeated on the subject of the EU voting to accept Turkey as a member: Islam.

The Empty Corner

The Turks have long been the odd man out in both the Islamic and European worlds. The Islamic Arab countries have no love lost for Turkey. The Turks, via the Ottoman Empire, ruled the entire Islamic world for over 600 years. In a region where hatred still boils over disputes thousands of years old, resentment of Turkish rule is still red-hot. Then, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed after WWI and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his associates created the modern state of Turkey, they turned their back on the traditions of the Islamic Arab world and built a nation state modeled on Europe. From the civil, penal and criminal codes adopted wholesale from European nation-states to the forced adoption of Western clothing, the Young Turks in power turned Turkey Westward, never to look back. To the Islamic world, the modern state of Turkey, with its developed economy, robust infrastructure, humming industries and prosperous middle class, is a daily reminder of their own failed states, moribund economies and societies bifurcated between the elite super-rich and the teeming, uneducated, and devastatingly economically deprived masses. In the Islamic Arab world the level of resentment for Turkey remains high. Turkey is viewed as a country that is 99% Muslim that became successful with a Western model, with their backs decidedly turned on their Islamic Arab brothers.

To the European world, Turkey has never fit in. With only 5% of its land mass in Europe, Turkey has been viewed as qualifying as European only via a technicality. With a Muslim population speaking a language that has little commonality with any of its own, Turkey has been viewed by Europe as a low cost vacation destination, a source of cheap labor and manufacturing, a semi-exotic location to own a vacation home, and little else. Historically treated as a pawn in the Great Game of European geopolitics, Turkey has been used by all the European Great Powers as a useful strategic ally in time of need and an unwanted stepchild otherwise. Having one of the world's most strategically important locations in controlling Russia's potential power through the gateway to the Black Sea, Turkey's value on the Great Game playing board has historically waxed and waned along with Russia's, their geopolitical importance bound together in a strange symbiosis of mutual distrust and mutual value.

To the Turks, the Europeans are masters at moving back the goal line and consistently changing the requirements for entry into the EU. After years of jumping through hoops in response to the commands of Paris and Berlin, I sensed that the patience of the Turks for the charade has run out. In interview after interview I heard unmasked frustration and the edges of raw contempt. In particular, the Turks were brutal in their assessment of Europe's rationale of refusal of membership due to human rights issues associated with Turkey's Kurdish minority. The Turks label this as a classic red herring designed solely to distract attention from the real issue of Turkey's Islamic religion. They are particularly harsh in comparing Europe's record of "raping and pillaging nearly every civilization on the planet for hundreds of years only to now stand as the world's arbiter of human rights barely 50 years removed from their own colonialism" as one Turk put it. After years of "rationale du jour" as to why Turkey must be refused membership, it was clear to me that Europe has long since used up its last chance to string Turkey along.

Why should America care about this spat between these two suitors? Because Turkey is a NATO member, a long time Western ally, one of the most strategically located nations in the world, and perhaps the best example the world has of an Islamic democracy and a developed Islamic economy. And without a doubt, most importantly, we need to care because Turkey's only alternative if it is finally, officially, shunned by Europe, is moving into the arms of the Islamists.

I lost count of the number of Turkish people I discussed this issue with who presented only one outcome if (most actually said "when") Europe refuses to accept Turkey into the EU. All predicted a remarkably consistent outcome along the lines of "then we will join with the Islamic fundamentalists and create a new Islamic empire. If Europe doesn't want us, we know people who do."

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Turkey has 60 million people, a robust industrial base, a developed infrastructure and a very modern military. Every male in the country is a veteran of 15 to 26 months of compulsory military service. The current military is well versed in effective guerilla warfare, having developed unconventional warfare techniques to combat the Kurdish separatist groups trained in Syria during the long civil war with the Kurdish independence party, the PKK. The prospect of Turkey's industrial output; modern, NATO quality weapons systems; large network of training bases and experienced military human infrastructure being turned into the military arm of the Islamist movement is beyond frightful. It would decisively tip the balance of power and quickly lead to the war of civilizations between the West and the Islamic world often debated by academics and long sought by the Islamists and their financiers.

From the common-sense, pragmatic American viewpoint, one would think this would be an easy problem to solve. Simply convince the Europeans to admit Turkey into the EU and this problem, along with its potential nightmare scenarios, quickly disappear. Unfortunately, it's not quite that easy for Europe.

On the plus side, admitting Turkey would greatly help "old" Europe's demographic crisis. The developed countries of Europe are all sliding toward economic collapse due to the ageing of their populations, declining birth rates and worker's paradise socialist economic cultures. In graphical terms, "old" Europe's societies look like inverted pyramids, with more old people at the top than young workers at the bottom. Because people are living longer, the ultra generous benefits provided citizens and retirees are becoming a greater and greater economic burden on these societies. Every year there are fewer and fewer babies born and fewer and fewer workers entering the tax payer rolls. Consequently, taxes on those few workers who are paying taxes to support the system must rise. Soon, tax rates will reach crippling levels and social upheaval will take place. At current demographic rates, the economic systems of "old" Europe are unsustainable and can only be propped up through the short term measures of budget deficits, such as France's and Germany's, and longer term, but painful and difficult to implement reforms such as those Germany is attempting. The only final solution is either to form an economically integrated network of nations including high birth rate societies such as Turkey's to fund the social programs supporting the aging populations of "old" Europe or of the immigration of foreigners with higher birth rates directly into "old" Europe's countries, a prospect that sends chills through the hearts of "old" Europe's often xenophobic, nationalistic and sometimes racist populations.

America is unique among developed economies in having avoided the demographic trap of declining birth rates by sustaining a very high rate of immigration. Without the influx of immigrants that keeps America's dynamic diversity energized, the United States would share the profile of the inverted demographic pyramid haunting all other mature industrialized societies. Europe has no legacy of mass immigration and is struggling with social backlash against current immigrant populations, which are primarily Muslim.

It is against this background of anti-immigrant violence, social upheaval, demographic crisis, unfamiliar and disquieting immigrant Islamic cultures and incendiary issues such as the wearing of head scarves by Muslims in public schools that the entry of Turkey into the EU is playing out. From the perspective of Europeans, who see their social values being eroded by foreign cultures, the entry of an Islamic state into an exclusive club of Christian nations is a non-trivial matter, no matter what the stakes on the geopolitical poker table.

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In addition, Germany and France are showing signs of losing control of the EU process they have heretofore exclusively controlled. The new entrant nations are showing decidedly less inclination to toe the bi-lateral Franco-German line. Having recently escaped the hegemony of the Soviet Union, they are rejecting Franco-German dominance and threatening to derail the onrushing freight train vision of a "Greater France" model of the future EU. This threatens to upset Germany and France's long term goal of creating a Federalist United States of Europe that would off-load the tax burden of "old" Europe's upside down demographic model onto the higher birth rate societies of "new" Europe. Up to now, Germany and France have been able to cloak this goal in the high moral ground of "multilateralism," but the recent EU entrants of "new" Europe have begun to throw back the veil on that deceit.

It is this "multilateralism at all costs" aspect of the current situation that is most difficult to understand for both Turkey and the United States. Both view Europe's current multilateralism dogma through the prism of their own domestic politics, but it actually has little to do with either. Europe's current rigid orthodoxy of multilateralism has very little to do with America or Turkey and everything to do with France and Germany's dire need to herd the cats of 25 ancient nation-states of deeply nationalistic societies into an EU corral that requires them to give up most of their democratic self-determination and control to a cabal of faceless French-speaking bureaucrats in Brussels. Along the way, they hope to create a tightly integrated, Franco-German dominated, European empire that would become the dominant Western society, and not coincidentally, bail out their heavily socialistic worker's paradise societies on the backs of the rapidly reproducing developing societies of "new" Europe. In this regard, it would profit both America and Turkey to recast their dim perspectives of Europe's mindless chanting of multilateralism and instead view it in the timeless wisdom of the late Tip O'Neal's insight of "all politics are local."

In the end, Turkey's potential entry into the EU will be determined by who wins the current tug-of-war for control of the EU vision end-game. France and Germany, along with newly docile and obedient Spain, are pushing for a centralized EU-power-centric Federalist model. Funded by "new" Europe's developing economies, this vision would allow "old" Europe to continue their current socialist welfare states with little to no accommodation for their declining birth rates. The United Kingdom (UK), along with the "new" Europe members, are holding out for a looser Federation model that would allow each EU member country to retain primary control of their societies, economies, militaries and cultures, leaving "old" Europe to solve their self-inflicted demographic crises on their own.

In the Franco-German centralized federalist model, all EU nation-states would need to be as alike in all respects as possible. If France, whose past president has referred to a potential Turkey entry into the EU as "the end of Europe," wins the day, then Turkey will never be a part of Europe. The social and cultural cost of admitting a Muslim state as a full member could never be tolerated in the tightly integrated fabric of like minded, like thinking, Franco-German dominated Christian subordinate states.

If the UK / "new" Europe federated model wins out, then the strategic value of Turkey would be paramount, and Turkey would be welcomed with open arms. The prospect of having the incalculably valuable Bosphorus and the land bridge between Europe and Asia as part of the EU federation would be irresistible to a group of nations eyeing the economic and geopolitical advantages available. In a federated model, Turkey's Islamic aspects would be celebrated as valuable cultural spice in the EU's global offerings.

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There are critical moments approaching in the coming months concerning Turkey's proposed membership in the EU. As soon as December, the EU may be forced into a deciding vote. If they choose to delay the decision yet again, it is likely Turkey will reject Europe outright, their patience having been tested one too many times. At the same time, it is very unlikely that the "new" vs. "old" Europe battle for the destiny of the EU will have fully played out by then. How Turkey's entry into the EU as a "can't avoid any longer" issue is resolved against the ongoing power struggle to determine the end state of the EU is anybody's guess.

The stakes are high. A rejection of Turkey, even a perceived rejection through yet another delay, is very likely to send the people and government of Turkey headlong into the arms of the Islamists. An acceptance of Turkey into the EU is likely to cause immediate, extreme and even violent societal unrest in the EU member states, a condition the fragile and nearly powerless EU government is in no position to control or mitigate. In fact, in its current tender, formative stages of development, the admission of Turkey could threaten the very existence of the EU itself.

For Europe, the question is what do we want to be, Federalist or Federated? Centralized or decentralized? Vassal states of the Franco-German axis or semi-independent nation-states?

For Turkey, the question is the same as in the license plate frame in the photo. Like a long suffering girlfriend, they are demanding a decision from their commitment-averse European suitor. Is this a casual, convenient relationship on your terms alone, or Is It Love?