

# Decoupling Turkey from Islam

Tuesday 19 August 2008, by [Barçin Yinanç](#)

**Various stories narrating the “Islamization” of society have been circulating among the conservative urban bourgeoisie in Europe, according to an observer living in Austria. One of them narrates the story of Muslim migrant boys playing football in the vicinity of a church. When the ball hits against the door of the church, the priest suddenly comes out of the church and asks the boys to be more cautious and respectful, whereupon one of the boys says, “Calm down. In a couple of years this church will be turned into a mosque anyway.”**

This anecdote alone demonstrates the kind of atmosphere Europe is in, and the difficult task the Turkish and Italian NGOs have undertaken to communicate Turkey better.

Istituto Euromediterraneo, Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Turkish Economic and Political Research Foundation have initiated a workshop to design communication strategies based on the analysis of eight EU countries' outlook on Turkish accession.

The early findings of country analyses show that the negative public opinion prevailing throughout Europe against Turkish accession stems not only from enlargement fatigue, but also from Islam phobia, fueled by the 9/11 attacks.

It seems that the reforms undertaken by Ankara have proved insufficient to change the views of those who believe that “Muslim Turkey is incompatible with Christian Europe.”

“For some, Turkish society and state, however secular on paper, are deeply imbued with Islamic culture and thus Turkey cannot become part of Europe, because the latter is Christian,” said one expert attending the workshop, which held its first meeting in Turin last week.

The integration problems of Turkish migrants have further strengthened the conviction that the cultural gap between Turkey and Europe cannot be bridged. The rise in immigration and the fear since 9/11 of the infiltration of potential “Islamic terrorists,” have deepened the prejudice of Turkey = Islam = terrorism.

In view of this picture, designing a communication strategy will require a very careful and serious thinking. A strategy based on emphasizing the so called “moderate Islam model” might backfire since a) the public is allergic to the term and lacks the sophistication to make such a distinction, and b) for those more sophisticated the existence of “moderate Islam,” leads to the fact that there is indeed “radical Islam,” and thus opening the door to the assumption that “moderate Islam can turn radical,” indeed.

In this respect may be we should decouple Turkey from “Islam” to demonstrate that Turkey is not just a country of “70 million Muslims.” It is more than that and actually Islam is just one (not necessarily the most dominant) element of the larger picture. We might then opt for strategies based on simple steps with modest aims. As one of the participants was recounting how the interaction of three Turkish students with their Danish peers made a difference, may be what we need more is as put by the famous German philosopher Habermas who was in Istanbul recently, more contacts at “eye level.”

## **French business community sets an example**

As to the more ambitious aim of communicating the benefits of having Turkey in the EU, a cost / benefit analysis might prove more effective. In this sense the studies point out that Turkey's best ally throughout Europe is the business community. Even in a country like Denmark where business with Turkey is still

quite modest, the business community favors Turkish accession. However they remain “hidden supporters” of Turkey, since they are not very vocal about it. There are several reasons behind this attitude. In certain countries like France, the business community is said to have not much of an influence over the government. Another reason is probably their unwillingness to go public on such an unpopular issue. But the most striking reason for explaining their inaction is the fact that business goes unaffected by the negative developments in Turkish accession.

France is obviously an exception. But France’s stance on Armenians’ claims of genocide also counts as an important factor behind the economic sanctions against the French firms.

The Austrian and the German business communities for instance are unaffected by their governments negative stance toward Turkish membership. The Turkish side should certainly do more to convince the business community in Europe to get mobilized on Turkey’s behalf. If they don’t want to go public, they can go low profile and lend their financial support to various projects. The French business community which until today was criticized by the Turkish side to remain inactive, are now setting a good example. French companies are one of the most important sponsors of the “Turkish season in France,” a series of cultural and economic events that will certainly help improve Turkey’s negative image in France.

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## **Sources**

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