

Turkey at Thanksgiving is Enough

by Michael Curtis

President M. Nixon is not generally admired as a fountain of profundity. But attention should be paid by sore political losers to his pithy remark that “You’ve got to learn to survive a defeat. That’s when you develop character.” Among those who would profit from heeding the remark are the daily protestors of the election of Donald Trump as President of the U.S., Green Party candidate Jill Stein, *The New York Times*, and now Recep Tayyip Erdogan , President of Turkey.

On November 24, 2016, the Parliament of the European Union in Strasbourg voted by 471 to 37 and 107 abstentions to halt talks concerning Turkey’s accession to membership of the EU. President Erdogan , both preemptively and after the decision of the EP, declared the vote had no value at all. At the meeting in Istanbul on November 23, 2016 of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation he first declared that “this vote has no value at all, no matter what result emerges.” Erdogan is the latest in the list of sore political losers.

The majority in the European Parliament was critical of the “disproportionate repressive measures” taken by Turkey in response to the attempted coup to overthrow the government, a coup that failed, on July 15, 2016. Erdogan’s ongoing response has been vigorous and brutal. More than 130,000 state employees have been fired, 40,000 have been jailed, 375 organizations including news outlets were shut down, and more controls were put on the media.

All people, officials and police, accused of being linked to Fethullah Gulen, supposedly the master mind behind the attempted coup, though he has lived in Saylorsburg,

Pennsylvania since 1999, were dismissed. Gulen, the 75 year old Turkish preacher and writer and founder of a supposedly moderate Muslim movement, has denied his involvement in the coup which has led to the purge of his supporters.

In somewhat provocative manner, since he knew it would be an action uncongenial to the EU, Erdogan said he would support the return of the death penalty if the Turkish parliament voted for it. He also imposed a state of emergency which is likely to be renewed.

The vote of the EP was nonbinding, but it is an indication of opinions that are likely to be exchanged at the meeting of the foreign ministers of the EU in December 2016 when the application of Turkey to become a member of EU will be debated. For fifty years Turkey has expressed such interest; it has been an official candidate since 1999 and accession negotiations were started in 2005, but have not proceeded with all deliberate speed.

The decision of the foreign ministers on EU membership will inevitably be related to the solution of the massive migration problem confronting Europe. On November 2, 2015 an agreement was reached between the two sides to stem the flow of irregular migrants and refugees to Europe over the Aegean Sea. Turkey would return migrants who are not in need of international protection. Turkey currently hosts 2.7 million refugees.

In return for Turkey's promise to control or limit the flow of migrants the EU on March 18, 2016 agreed to grant the country the initial sum of 3 billion euros in 2016 and 2017, and a further 3 billion euros in 2018, to cope with the refugees.

The agreement also dealt with the wish of Turkey to obtain visa free travel for its citizens into Europe, and called for discussion of Turkey's application to continue. Turkey agreed to an arrangement on halting the flow of migrants. This has

been partially successful; in 2016 only 171,000 crossed the sea into Greece, compared with 740,000 in 2015.

The United States as well as the EU must be concerned with the issue of Turkey in view of Turkey's membership of NATO, Turkey's unique geo-strategic position in both Europe and Asia (97% in Asia), and its relations with the Muslim world. Turkish forces are the second largest army in NATO, and thus could add to Europe's security though it contributes only 1.5 % of its GDP to defense. The Trump Administration will be particularly concerned by Turkey's threat to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which China and Russia are members.

Therefore, a number of problems, cultural, religious, and geographic, confront the EU directly and indirectly the US. Already the issue is complicated since 10 million Turks live in Europe.

The insuperable problem is that democracy in Turkey is being reduced. Instead of becoming, like Israel a democratic pluralistic society in the Middle East, it has under Erdogan become more illiberal with power centralized in the presidency, tension between military figures and Islamic fundamentalists, denial of minority rights, and inadequate provision for the rights of women. Its economy is suffering; GDP per capita is less than half the EU average.

Moreover. Erdogan has threatened to allow Muslim immigration to European safe havens, and to open its borders after the EP vote. It has also accused the West of providing a safe haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has engaged in an insurgency for 30 years.

At this point it is doubtful that conditions are in place to allow visa free travel for Turks in Europe. Even more important it is unlikely that Turkey is genuinely interested in a structured and high level dialogue concerning membership

in the EU. The Trump Administration and the EU leaders should call for major changes in Turkish political behavior before they assent to Turkish membership of the EU.