

Crisis and Conciliation: A Year of Rapprochement between Greece and Turkey

JAMES KER-LINDSAY

I.B. Tauris (London and New York, 2007), 168 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-84511-504-3

In *Crisis and Conciliation*, James Ker-Lindsay offers us a very detailed and eloquent account of the developments in Greek-Turkish relations during the critical year of 1999, when “[the] relations ... went from the brink of conflict to an unprecedented outpouring of friendship and solidarity” (p. 2). This detailed account of the critical year is preceded by a comprehensive summary of bilateral relations, starting with the Greek rebellion for independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821. It is followed by an epilogue, where the author follows developments in Greek-Turkish relations until roughly the end of 2005.

The transformation of Greek-Turkish relations is of high interest to academics working in the areas of conflict resolution, the impact of European Union on its periphery, the international relations of Southeastern Europe, and Cyprus conflict, as well as to the numerous intellectuals, activists, artists, business associations, civil society organisations and journalists, who have pursued and contributed in various ways to Greek-Turkish friendship over the years. Through its accessible style and meticulous coverage, *Crisis and Conciliation* is likely to capture a broad audience among specialists and the general public alike. Due to its focus on a very important historical period, it will remain as a valuable reference source for many years.

Many academics, including myself, casually identify 1999 as the turning point in Greek-Turkish relations, and focus on the periods before and after. In this respect, Ker-Lindsay’s book is a forceful reminder that turning points are not simply ‘points’. Change happens through a painful process that involves progress as well as set-backs, courage as well as hesitation and frustration.

One key argument advanced by Ker-Lindsay is that Greece, rather than Turkey, has been the main driver of the rapprochement process. After Turkish Foreign Minister İsmail Cem initiated the process with the letter he sent to the Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreu, “Greece took the more active role”. “Indeed, all things considered, Turkey did very little in substantive terms to push the process forward” (p. 115). The main evidence that Ker-Lindsay puts forward is that Turkey refused to provide a gesture, such as the opening of the Halki Seminary, as also suggested by the US President Bill Clinton during his visit to Turkey in October 1999, in return for Greece’s lifting of its veto on Turkish candidacy at the Helsinki European Council. This led Greece to search for a gesture from its EU partners, in the form of linking the resolution of Greek-Turkish disputes to Turkey’s EU membership path.

While the media reporting of the times may have spurred expectations of a gesture in Greece (and fears of a concession in Turkey), I believe that the absence of a Turkish gesture in 1999 loses its significance in retrospect. A better characterisation of the Turkish approach to the rapprochement process, in my opinion, would be as 'reactive' rather than 'inactive'. The change in Greek foreign policy towards Turkey, as epitomised in the lifting of its veto against Turkey's EU candidacy, was grounded in a fundamental rethinking of Greek security, as better served not through the exclusion but through the Europeanisation of Turkey. In that sense, it needs to be underscored that the linkage of Greek-Turkish disputes to Turkey's EU membership path was essential, not a second-best alternative for the revised Greek foreign policy. In contrast, the Turkish approach to the rapprochement process in the initial years lacked such an ideational basis. The rethinking of Turkish foreign policy priorities came about only in 2004 in the form of giving its full backing to the Annan plan and the reunification of Cyprus. It would be fair to conclude that Turkey played a more active role in relation to the Cyprus conflict in this period than Greece.

As of summer 2009, one can sense a certain level of disappointment in Greece regarding the fruits of the rapprochement process. In this respect, it is puzzling why the Karamanlis government chose not to insist on the referral of the Aegean disputes to the International Court of Justice before the EU gave the green light to the start of accession negotiations with Turkey at the end of 2004. With neither side insisting on legal resolution, the disputes are put to sleep. I would submit that this is not such a bad outcome for the rapprochement process if we take into account how the Aegean disputes remained 'undiscovered' prior to the outbreak of the Cyprus conflict. By way of an example, one can debate why Turkey did not object to the extension of Greek airspace to 10 n.m. in 1931, and did not dispute the limits of Greek airspace until 1975.

In conclusion, Ker-Lindsay makes the powerful observation that "in situations where an EU member is in conflict with a state that desires membership the EU is not simply a tool of leverage. Instead, if the example provided by Greece is anything to go by, it would appear that EU membership has the potential to change the way in which a member state approaches conflict ... Obvious examples of where this finding could have relevance in the future include Cyprus ..." (p. 116). I, too, agree that this is a key lesson to be extracted from the course of Greek-Turkish relations. But, before jumping to optimistic conclusions, it is worthwhile to explore the conditions under which EU membership produces this result. In this context, the counterfactual scenario necessary to entertain is what would have transpired had the other EU member states not supported Turkish candidacy in 1999. The complexity of EU-Turkey relations is certainly beyond the scope of Ker-Lindsay's book, but it is necessary to note that neither before 1999 or afterwards, has Greek foreign policy been the only factor affecting EU-Turkey relations. It would be more correct to assert that EU membership can change the way a member state approaches conflict when the EU adopts an inclusive approach towards the other conflict party. This point is especially pertinent to keep in mind in the context of the lukewarm relations between EU and Turkey since 2006.

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