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Turkey and the ‘Maghrebization’ of the European economic community: the 1978 suspension of the association agreement

Arda Ozansoy

Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Many scholars blame Turkish politicians for the country’s suspension of its Association Agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1978. Some have argued that rising Turkish anti-Westernism caused the agreement to fail; others maintain that Prime Minister Ecevit’s protectionist government derailed it. Such perspectives overlook the role played by concrete economic issues. The ‘Maghrebization’ of the Association, agricultural affairs, and the situation of Turkish workers in Europe decreased the economic desirability of the Association for Turkey. EEC correspondence, which has not yet been used by other scholars, demonstrates that the EEC was cognizant of the worsening terms of the Association but decided not to revise the conditions despite repeated protests from Turkey. This article argues that the 1978 suspension of the EEC-Turkey Association Agreement was not the result of the initiative of a purportedly anti-Western or erratic Ecevit government. Instead, the article highlights the declining economic benefits of the Association for Turkey.

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Introduction

On a 1978 visit to Brussels, Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit pointed out that the relations of the European Economic Community (EEC) with a number of countries, particularly Mediterranean ones, ‘devalued’ relations with his country. The EEC had signed bilateral cooperation and association agreements with various Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in 1976; Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria in 1977.¹ These agreements, Ecevit claimed, rendered the Association Agreement between Turkey and the EEC less valuable. Ecevit’s argument about
devaluation, which was referred to as the ‘Maghrebization’ of the EEC, points to issues that were at the heart of the Ecevit government’s decision to suspend the Turkey-EEC Association Agreement in 1978. Some claimed that this decision caused the integration of Turkey with the EEC and subsequently the European Union (EU) to be significantly delayed. In response, Ecevit himself reflected on the necessity of this decision twenty-five years later when Turkey’s accession process with the European Union EU gained momentum in the 2000s. The story of the 1978 suspension of Turkey’s association agreement with the EEC is a valuable reminder that what have frequently been viewed as the whims of Turkish politicians were often responses to very real and changing economic concerns.

This article does not speculate about whether the 1978 decision to suspend the Association Agreement was a missed opportunity in Turkey’s path to membership in the European community. It examines formal correspondence from within the EEC to study a particular episode in Turkey-EEC relations. Turkey’s deteriorating economic condition, coupled with the EEC’s Mediterranean policy and the decision not to honor several promises towards Turkey, led to a consistent worsening of Turkey-EEC relations. Tellingly, the Ecevit government’s decision to suspend the association in 1978 was preceded by a softer but similar decision by the Demirel government in 1976. Two very different Turkish governments’ suspension of the Association Agreement with the EEC in 1976 and 1978 point to the importance of economic issues that lay beneath the ideological conflict in Turkey’s relations with the West.

Mehmet Döşemeci rightly argues that debates about Turkey-EU relations too often focus on recent events, with ‘the rich history of Turkey-EU relations before the end of the Cold War’ consigned to the role of a ‘prelude.’ With regards to economic negotiations between Turkey and the EEC, the few references that make it into this prelude repeat a refrain of Turkish responsibility for the failure of the Association, without meaningfully engaging with the EEC’s role in the process. Examining this often-neglected historical episode provides an occasion to question both the presentism of the broader understanding of Turkey-EU relations as well as the tendency to place undue responsibility on Turkey for relations with the EEC. Drawing lessons from this period could provide important insights on building a robust relationship between Turkey and the EU.

Road to suspension: two narratives

The tacit consensus in the literature suggests that Turkey’s politics, economics, and culture were in conflict with the objectives of the Association. On the one hand, some authors emphasize the instability in Turkey between 1960 and 1980 to argue that Turkey could not determine a sound
policy towards the EEC. Others focus on ideological debates about the EEC, which included heated discussions in the Turkish Parliament, media, and the general public. However, the extant literature largely agrees that the negative fate of the Association was largely determined by Turkey on political, economic, and cultural grounds. This has produced a narrative of Turkish responsibility and absolved the EEC.

The existing approaches to the Turkey-EEC relationship have merit, but they miss the critical role of the EEC in the disagreements over the Association. While instability and ideological divisions certainly plagued Turkey between 1960 and 1980, Turkey alone did not seal the fate of the Association. In this regard, the EEC’s role in the eventual collapse of the Association merits a closer look. The portrayal of the EEC as a neutral and stable actor in the Association not only creates a biased historical picture but also omits the role of changing economic circumstances. The 1970s were a decade of economic crisis and also the formative decade in Turkey’s relations with what was to become the EU. The Association’s failure in the 1970s thus provides a valuable occasion for drawing lessons about building a robust relationship. To that end, it is worth re-examining this neglected but important historical episode to better comprehend how both sides contributed to the demise of the Association.

The limited scholarship on the Ecevit government’s 1978 suspension decision contains two narratives. The first attributes responsibility to Ecevit, the second transfers responsibility to Turkish society as a whole – particularly to new parties that adopted vocal anti-EEC criticism. The first narrative depicts Ecevit’s suspension decision as one of the key factors that derailed Turkey’s integration into Europe, highlighted by contrast with Greece. This perspective isolates the Ecevit government from its predecessors and contemporaries, and portrays the suspension decision as a contingent rupture in Turkey-EEC relations. The second narrative sees Ecevit as part of a larger Turkish context but emphasizes the ideological conflict between Turkey and the West. Neither sufficiently deals with the economic differences that divided Turkey and the EEC. Both narratives treat the suspension decision as a product of Turkish politics, which has created the common refrain about Turkey’s responsibility for the trajectory of the Association.

The ‘rupture’ narrative is particularly problematic. Firstly, the issue of revision of the Association Agreement was a topic raised by different actors during the 1970s, and the motivation for revising the agreements varied among the actors. For example, the Justice Party’s reasons for revision were more economic in nature, while the Nationalist Movement Party and the National Order Party advanced cultural arguments for revision. Therefore, it is hard to accept the idea that revision can be solely attributed to Ecevit or his government.
The second narrative, which attributes responsibility to Turkish society as a whole, emphasizes continuity in the policies of Turkey regarding the EEC. This narrative, elaborated by Yeşim Pekiner, regards anti-Westernism as the primary reason for the suspension decision. She considers the rising anti-Westernism in Turkey as a structural feature of Turkish society. She refers to economic and foreign policy developments such as the Cyprus intervention and the US arms embargo as contextual factors. In this framework, the structural feature, namely rising anti-Westernism of Turkey is combined with the contextual factors to explain the suspension decision. This narrative places the Ecevit government in relation to its predecessors, instead of isolating it.

In a similar vein, Döşemeci prioritizes ideological factors when analyzing the Association. He introduces the concepts of civilizational and nationalist logics. The former emphasizes Turkey’s alignment with Western civilization. The latter, on the other hand, focuses on Turkey’s unique nationalist features and differences with the West. Döşemeci argues that the civilizational logic established by the Republican elite steered the relationship with Europe particularly during the birth of the Turkey-EEC relationship. Epitomized by Atatürk’s vision to raise Turkey to the level of contemporary civilization, this logic treated the Association as a realization of Turkey’s civilizational project. Nationalist logic, on the other hand, emphasized the antagonistic relationship between Turkey and the West by relying on an essentialist reading of Turkish and European identities. Nationalist logic increased in popularity, especially in the last years of the 1970s due to the rise of radical right-wing and leftist movements in the Turkish domestic scene. While Döşemeci’s approach clearly delineates the ideational differences within the Turkish society in respect to the EEC, it treats the Association as if its trajectory is solely determined by the Turkish society. It is striking that his book rarely touches upon the economic components of the Association or the negotiations over the future of the Association. While there are large sections to explain the background of prominent intellectuals and opinion leaders across the political spectrum, the critical place of agricultural products in the negotiations is only referred to once. While Döşemeci does not explicitly examine the suspension decision, it could be inferred that rising nationalist logic rather than differences over agricultural exports determined the suspension decision.

Although the continuity narrative helps to situate Ecevit in relation to his predecessors, the account also has shortcomings. Firstly, if there was a resolute anti-Westernism in Turkey, how was it possible that the governments in the 1970s, including but not limited to Ecevit’s, attempted to negotiate with the EEC? Secondly, the same challenge faced by the anti-Westernist argument also applies to the claim that the economic outlook endorsed by Turkey and the EEC fundamentally differed. If there was such a profound
difference between the economic models of both actors, how was it possible that the integration between Turkey and the EEC was promoted by various actors, albeit to varying degrees in the 1970s?

The Ecevit government’s suspension decision does represent continuity in Turkish policies towards the EEC. Yet this continuity did not stem from anti-Westernism or the incompatibility of economic outlooks, but from structural challenges faced by Turkey and the EEC. This article contends that the erosion of economic benefits to the Turkish side led to the suspension decision. The examination of primary evidence obtained from the formal correspondence of the EEC demonstrates that economic affairs, and in particular agricultural issues, were the most important topic between Turkey and the EEC.

Ideological and international political factors were certainly among the factors that led to the questioning of the Association in Turkey. Rising anti-Westernism as well as the negative responses of European countries after the Cyprus intervention increased the negative attitude of a large section of Turkish society towards the Association. This negative approach was further compounded by the deterioration of the economic advantages offered by the EEC. In this context, it is impossible to discern the ‘real cause’ behind the suspension decision, since a combination of all these factors engendered the decision. However, based on the formal correspondence between Turkey and the EEC, it could be asserted that the economic factors were most probably the leading issue that determined the fate of the Association.

The economic crisis of the 1970s set the stage for Turkey’s contentious relationship with its European partners. The EEC’s outreach to Turkey and the Mediterranean had emerged in the 1960s, under pressure from the United States to make concessions to key Cold War countries. Elena Calandri states that the EEC actions in Mediterranean derived from Cold War concerns. For example, the EEC’s close relationship with Turkey in the form of an Association was regarded as a ‘boost to Turkish allegiance to the West.’ Turkey’s reappraisal of its foreign policy in response to the ’Johnson Letter’ also underlined the need to achieve such a ‘boost’ vis-à-vis Turkey. While the 1960s were marked with various concerns originating from the Cold War, the developments in the 1970s would shift the focus to the economic crisis and the transformation of the EEC.

For the EEC, the 1970s was a decade of confronting economic challenges as well as carrying out institutional transformation and expansion. The EEC expanded from six to nine member states, as well as broadening its relationship with third countries, particularly in the Mediterranean. The inclusion of Great Britain brought in another key member that had reservations about a common tariff policy, and France and Italy worried that more agricultural imports from the Mediterranean would threaten their economies. The
EEC would find it harder to make trade concessions to agricultural exporters. Turkey in the 1970s, on the other hand, suffered from deepening political and economic instability. The Turkish governments faced a repeated balance of payments problems and political violence on the streets.

The relationship between Turkey and the EEC in the 1970s cannot be divorced from the momentous changes in global politics and economics in that decade. The 1970s witnessed the breakdown of the post-war international monetary system – the Bretton Woods system. U.S. President Richard Nixon’s decision to abandon dollar-gold parity in 1971 was followed by another shock, the OPEC oil crisis. These two events led to the demise of what some historians referred to as the ‘Thirty Glorious Years’ or the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism’. The ensuing period has been called Eurosclerosis, a moment during which the EEC tried to address the economic challenges confronting Member States. The term Eurosclerosis depicts the EEC in a state of disintegration, but in fact this decade also involved a rethinking of the core EEC community’s relations among its member states and with neighbors. The institutional reforms of the 1970s paved the way for the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, a major step towards European integration. The establishment of the European Council, the empowerment of the European Parliament, and the founding of the European Monetary System all demonstrated the institutional resilience of the European project.

As part of this institutional restructuring, the EEC expanded. The most obvious case was the enlargement of the EEC in 1973 to include three new members: Denmark, Ireland, and the UK. Alongside this, however, the renewal of the Yaounde Convention in 1969, the Arusha Agreement that same year, and the Lome Agreement of 1975 provided a new framework for trade relations between predominantly African former European colonies and the EEC. The member countries of the EEC reconciled their differences and established a common trade regime with 46 countries. According to Petter Coffey, these agreements demonstrated that the EEC ‘could present a common personality’. More significantly for Turkey, the negotiations between Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and the EEC led to the conclusion of cooperation agreements in 1976. This ‘Maghrebization’ was an expansion of the EEC’s association agreements that threatened Turkey’s hopes for a special relationship with the EEC. Turkey’s own Association Agreement in 1964 followed shortly after Greece’s in 1962. Greece was the first country to sign an association agreement, and was followed by Turkey, then Malta in 1971 and Cyprus in 1973.

Tariffs were at the heart of Turkey-EEC negotiations. The fundamental legal instrument that formed the basis of the EEC-Turkey association was the Ankara Agreement, which entered into force in 1964. This agreement stipulated that the association was three-staged: preparation; transition; and final. The final stage of the agreement was the establishment of a Customs
Union between the parties.\textsuperscript{19} The preparation stage ended and the transition phase began with an Additional Protocol, which entered into force on 1 January 1973. This Protocol envisaged a 12-year period for completing the transition. A crucial component of this transition was the reduction of customs duties by Turkey to reach harmonization with the Common Customs Tariff in 1985. For certain goods, however, and for the standardization of legislation, the transition process was to last until 1995.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore, there were two lists regarding the reduction of tariffs: a 12-year list and 22-year list. In the coming years, these timetables would be the objects of frequent Turkish criticism.

Turkey’s initial motivation to apply for an associate relationship to the EEC in 1959 was closely linked to Greece’s application. At that point, a political rationale seemed to trump economic considerations. Foreign Minister Fatih Rüştü Zorlu epitomized this approach by stating that ‘Greece should not be left alone, if Greece throws itself into an empty pool, you should not hesitate to throw yourself too [before applying to the EEC].’\textsuperscript{21} In this framework, it was of the utmost importance that Greece and Turkey were on the same footing vis-à-vis the EEC. As the relationship developed, its economic nature and repercussions started to draw much more attention. While some Turkish political figures argued that the EEC was culturally alien to Turkey, others criticized the association relationship based on economic arguments. It was vocally claimed that if Turkish businesses and industry were open to European competition, they were going to be wiped out.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, Turkey’s model of import-substitution was at odds with the Association Agreement.

The Turkish military’s intervention in politics in 1971 and the ensuing instability were coupled with an economic deterioration particularly after 1973. The total volume of exports increased from $1.3 billion to $1.7 billion, while imports rose from $1.3 billion to $5.7 billion between the years 1973 and 1977. During the Second National Front government, the trade deficit of Turkey rose to $4 billion while external debt was nearly $10 billion dollars.\textsuperscript{23} Under the Ecevit government, which was in power between 5 January 1978 and 12 November 1979, Turkey’s rate of inflation was near 52 percent and there were shortages of oil, salt, lamps, and cigarettes. The Ecevit government was in search of external financial support to address this difficulty. A stand-by agreement was signed between the International Monetary Fund and Turkey in July 1979. As a result of this agreement, the dollar was devalued to 47 Turkish Liras (TL), after it had already been devalued to 25 TL in January 1978.

The EEC’s response to the political and economic turmoil in Turkey was limited. Turkey’s repeated attempts to revise the Association Agreement, particularly in the field of agriculture, did not elicit a positive answer from the Community. On the one hand, the UK, France, and Italy wanted to
protect their economies from an influx of cheap agricultural products from Turkey. On the other hand, West Germany did not want to improve the social and economic rights of Turkish workers, despite the promise made in the Additional Protocol. Furthermore, EEC’s offer of similar concessions to other third countries also led to a devaluation of the economic benefits of the Association for Turkey. All these factors culminated in the Demirel government’s limited suspension decision in 1976 and the Ecevit government’s major suspension decision in 1978.

**Süleyman Demirel and the first suspension of the association**

While the Demirel government’s suspension decision was minor when compared to the Ecevit government’s, it demonstrated that even the pro-Western and liberal Demirel Government was of the opinion that the Association Agreement was not functioning smoothly for Turkey. Negotiations over the 1973 Additional Protocol had coalesced around three key issues: Turkey’s desire to postpone the removal of tariffs on its imports from the EEC member states; Turkey’s attempt to ensure the right of Turkish workers to freely circulate in the EEC; and Turkey’s demand for fiscal compensation to cover losses due to the association process. Although both sides had negotiated a temporary resolution in 1973, by 1975 tensions were rising again. That year, the UK’s decision to impose first a restriction of 4000 and then 2500 tons on cotton imports from Turkey cast doubts over the benefits of the Association Agreement. Due to rising unemployment, West Germany stalled on measures related to the status of Turkish workers. In 1975, these negative developments were compounded with Greece’s application for full membership to the EEC.

It was in this context that Turkish diplomats latched onto the idea of Maghrebization as a way to explain their frustrations with the EEC. On 3 October 1975, the Turkish Ambassador to the EEC, Tevfik Saraçoğlu, had a lengthy meeting with top EEC officials. Saraçoğlu emphasized that it was hard to explain in Ankara why Turkey did not receive preferential treatment compared to Maghreb countries in the field of agricultural products. The response of the EEC officials was to emphasize that agricultural concessions were a delicate topic in the EEC. A telephone exchange between Saraçoğlu and Walter Wallerstein, President of the EEC Commission on 10 December 1975 indicated that Turkey was not going to receive further concessions in the agricultural field. Wallerstein stated that the Commission could open the reexamination of further concessions to Turkey without guaranteeing the results of such an examination. In an additional note to his colleagues, Wallerstein acknowledged that concessions made to Mediterranean countries were going to be difficult to explain to Turkey:
I think the presentation [dossier to COREPER] should include concessions for certain products which Turkey does not export or nearly does not export. Regarding concessions which were offered to Mediterranean countries, but not to Turkey, it is necessary to … explain specific historical or other justifications of that particular treatment.²⁷ [translation and emphasis mine]

Emile Noel, then Secretary-General of the Commission of the EEC, had a meeting with the Turkish Ambassador Saraçoğlu on 27 October 1975.²⁸ In this meeting, Saraçoğlu emphasized that the Turkish demands in the agricultural sector carried importance to the extent that Turkey could cancel the measures taken in the context of the Association Agreement if a sufficient response from the EEC was not received. Noel argued that Saraçoğlu’s remarks ought to be taken seriously. Saraçoğlu also stated that the EEC should be open to dialogue instead of an outright rejecting debate on the topic of the rights of Turkish workers in the EEC member states. According to him, if such a stance was not adopted by the EEC, current tensions could worsen.

After the Association Council Meeting in December 1976, there was a meeting between the Turkish Foreign Ministry and the EEC Bureau of Information in Ankara. In this meeting, Turkish diplomats argued that the conditions of the Turkish economy after 1973 had forced demands for a revision of the relationship between the EEC and Turkey. According to the Turkish side, this revision should include concessions in agriculture and industry, the strengthening of measures related to the protection of some sectors of the Turkish economy, and the reinforcement of the current cooperation between the EEC and Turkey. In this regard, some Turkish officials argued that it was not possible to realize the timetable set in the additional protocol and hence Turkey should focus on economic development without fulfilling its obligations stemming from the additional protocol and aim at becoming a member of the Customs Union in 1995.²⁹ This meeting suggests that the notion of a revision and a suspension was present and formally transmitted to the EEC already in 1976. The idea of revision was justified on economic grounds, by the inability of the EEC to make concessions on the agricultural and labor issues that Turkey faced as a result of the 1970s economic crisis.

The issue of discrimination in the field of agriculture was raised again repeatedly by the Turkish Ambassador. On 6 January 1976, Saraçoğlu argued that discrimination against Turkey had become a political issue in Turkey and should be treated politically. According to Phillipe de Margerie, a member of the Cabinet of the President, Saraçoğlu stated, ‘It is absolutely necessary to do something serious about the discrimination of which Turkey was a victim.’ Saraçoğlu also underlined that the association between Turkey and the EEC cannot proceed without the resolution of the ‘agricultural affair (l’affair agricole).’ He also suggested that the final regime for the agricultural products should be put in place before the accession of Greece to the
Community. In a similar vein, in an urgent telegram, the head of the EEC’s Information Bureau in Ankara, Gian Paola Papa, argued that the application of safeguard clauses to the export of cotton to Turkey from Europe could have a detrimental impact on the relationship between the EEC and Turkey. Despite being informed by the Ankara bureau of the negative impact of safeguard clauses, the EEC proceeded to put these safeguard clauses in place because of pressure from the UK.

On 25 December 1976, Turkey unilaterally suspended its obligations stemming from the additional protocol, mainly through delaying the ten percent reductions in 12-year lists and harmonization with EEC’s Common Customs Tariff for one year as of 1 January 1977. This decision was announced five days after an Association Council Meeting between Turkey and the EEC at which the EEC offered minor concessions on 33 agricultural products, proposed a guarantee that the conditions of Turkish workers in Europe would not deteriorate, and offered $380 million worth of credit. The suspension decision indicated that these modest concessions to Turkey did not match the needs and expectations of Turkey from the EEC.

The correspondence of the Commission during this period demonstrates that Turkey’s main grievance regarding the Association Agreement was its inability to derive trading benefits. While issues related to Cyprus and Greece were raised, they were not the key topics during the negotiations. The Turkish side deemed the ‘agricultural affair’ critical, while the EEC did not address the demands of Turkey in a satisfactory manner. The British decision to impose restrictions on Turkish cotton in addition to the deals concluded with the Mediterranean countries were reasons for the Turkish side to question the association relationship. In response to this deadlock, the Demirel government adopted the first suspension decision. It is noteworthy that the Demirel government was known to support the association process and was not regarded as anti-Western. Nevertheless, they adopted a suspension decision to address the issues in the association relationship. This situation demonstrated that the Demirel government, despite its pro-Western and liberal economic credentials, regarded the suspension as a means to addressing the imbalance in the association relationship. The rationale behind the suspension decision was also going to be present behind Ecevit’s suspension decision. While there was a notable difference between the extent of the suspension decisions of the Demirel and Ecevit governments, they approached the EEC in a similar fashion.

**Bülent Ecevit and the second suspension of the association agreement**

The Ecevit government, established in January 1978, immediately declared that the relationship with the EEC was impeding Turkey’s development
and industrialization. Ecevit announced that the relationship was making it difficult for Turkey to pursue a foreign trade policy in line with its interests. More importantly, Ecevit underlined that Turkey was not going to be crushed in this relationship. These policy principles were also reflected in the 4th Five-Year Development Plan. This plan listed in concrete terms why the Association Agreement was not beneficial for Turkey. Firstly, Turkey decreased its custom tariffs against the EEC in 1976 in the context of a serious balance of payments crisis. Turkey could not align with the Common Customs Tariff and fulfill other obligations stemming from the additional protocol due to this crisis in 1977 and 1978. On the other hand, the EEC made it difficult for Turkey to export agricultural products through adopting protectionist measures. Moreover, the EEC did not honor its obligations regarding Turkish workers. Last but not least, and here there was an allusion to Maghrebization, the EEC offered similar concessions to other countries, rendering the benefits of association meaningless. The Plan concluded that Turkey had lost its privileged position in the EEC market, while the EEC reinforced its position in the Turkish market. The Ecevit government’s stance was composed of both an ideological desire to realize the statism of the 4th five-year Development Plan as well as an economic desire to reinforce the Turkish position in the EEC. It was this stance that Ecevit transmitted to the EEC during his visit to Brussels in May 1978.

The Commission regarded Ecevit Government’s position as legitimate and expected proposals to address the issues he raised. On 24 May 1978, Noel stated that the commission president should attempt to make two general points during Ecevit’s visit. The first one was of a political nature and the president was recommended to state that the EEC was ‘not prepared for Greece to bring her dispute with Turkey into the Community.’ The second general point pertained to the economic relation between Turkey and the EEC. In this context, the president was advised to emphasize that new life should be given to the Association Agreement. In explaining the general political remark, it was noted that there was a general concern that Turkey was drifting away from the West since Turkey’s ‘grudges against’ the EEC in the fields of migrant workers, textiles, and processed agriculture were not being met with concessions from the EEC.

The briefing prepared by the EEC Secretariat on Ecevit’s visit states that the relationship between Turkey and the EEC was undergoing a crisis for two years due to agricultural issues that had worsened due to the 1973 economic crisis and a rather restrictive attitude concerning imports from Turkey. Furthermore, the free circulation of Turkish workers, which was envisaged to take place on 1 December 1976, according to the additional protocol had not been realized. The strengthening relationship between the Mediterranean and the EEC was also causing the Association Agreement
to lose its comparative advantages in the region. The low amount of financial assistance promised to Turkey was a factor in the deterioration of the relationship. Finally, Greece’s full membership in the EEC was complicating the already fragile relation between Turkey and the EEC. These statements by the Commission Secretariat demonstrate no sign that the EEC thought they faced ideological challenges in Turkey or with Ecevit’s government in particular. The secretariat acknowledged the concerns of the Turkish Government and would like to learn the proposals of Turkey for normalization of the relationship. The visit of Ecevit was going to provide an occasion for ‘explorative contacts’ to that end.37

In the meeting between Ecevit and Roy Jenkins, President of the European Commission, Ecevit drew attention to the gravity of the economic crisis in Turkey. According to Ecevit, Turkey’s orientation could change if there was a swift economic deterioration. Therefore, he requested that Turkey’s Western friends should do more to address the economic hardship of Turkey. Regarding the relationship with the EEC, Ecevit pointed out that the relations of the EEC with non-associated countries, particularly the Mediterranean ones, could ‘devalue’ the existing relationship. Moreover, the failure of the Community to fulfill some of its commitments to Turkey such as free circulation of migrant workers was compounded by a policy to restrict Turkish imports to the Community. Ecevit’s proposals for addressing these issues were to receive compensation for the EEC’s outstanding obligations. The Commission president asked what Turkey’s proposals for the revision of the Association Agreement were and Ecevit stated that such a package of proposals could be prepared by the end of September, as the officials working on the development plan were the ones who were going to prepare the package. President Jenkins concluded that ‘it was up to the Turks to make the next move.’38

Turkey formally transmitted a request for suspension of the Association Agreement to the EEC on 9 October 1978. The suspension would start on 1 January 1979 and last for five years. The objectives of the suspension were to realize the 4th 5-year Development Plan of Turkey and examine the effect of the EEC’s enlargement on Turkey-EEC relations. This suspension could result in delaying of the 12 and 22 years as foreseen by the additional protocol. Regarding the difficulties on the ratification of Protocol Complementary and the 3rd Financial Protocol, the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the government was faced with political and psychological challenges against the ratification of Complementary Protocol while the Financial Protocol did not face such challenges.39

The draft declaration prepared in response to the suspension argued that the demand of Turkey for $8.1 billon is massive, but that the Commission would exert every effort to make the case for Turkey’s demands to member states.40 On 12 February 1979, the Commission recommended
the acceptance of the suspension of Turkey’s obligations for five years, as requested by the Turkish government. To that end, the Commission asked the Council to grant authorization for the negotiation of a suspension agreement.\footnote{In the social field, however, the Commission assessed that it was not possible to respond positively to the requests of the Turkish government. The Commission suggested that various programs could be developed for supporting Turkish migrants who were returning back to Turkey. The Commission was in favor of the establishment of a mixed group that would examine the labor shortages in the Turkish economy. Regarding the Turkish migrants in the Community area, the Commission recommended that member states remove discriminations against Turkish workers and their families and provide language and vocational courses.\footnote{Regarding the financial requests of Turkey, which was nearly $15 billion for the coming five years, the Commission stated that the requests exceeded the possibilities of the Community. The Commission emphasized that 3rd and 4th Financial Protocols could be utilized and a special fund could be established as soon as possible.}'}

The correspondence demonstrates that the suspension decision of the Ecevit government was not greeted with surprise in the Commission. Commission officials expected a revision of the association relationship and hence it did not constitute a rupture with the previous policies of Turkey. Furthermore, the core of this suspension decision was based on economic considerations. As seen from the proposal of the Ecevit government, it did not foresee a total breakdown of the relationship with the EEC or a clash over the most appropriate economic model to be followed. Therefore, these correspondences support the idea that Ecevit was working within an established framework and in many ways represented continuity in the Turkish position. The correspondence, however, also demonstrates that the reasons for the suspension decisions were not predominantly anti-Westernism, but the suspension decision was based on the concrete economic challenges faced by Turkey and the EEC.

According to a note prepared on 26 February 1979 for the Director General of the External Relations of the Commission stated that the EEC was in fact far from meeting the demands of Turkey.\footnote{According to this document, ‘Turkey’s demands [in agriculture] cannot be accepted due to the re-examination of the relations with Mediterranean countries this year [1979] and concerns pertaining to the enlargement. [translation mine]’ In the social chapter, which mainly pertains to the rights of Turkish workers, the concessions to Turkey were not possible due to the internal situation of the Community. Regarding the financial chapter, it was not possible to deliver 15 billion dollars of aid to Turkey. This note also explicitly underlines Turkey’s ‘Maghrebization’ critique of the Association Agreement. In the words of the Pierre Duchateau, Director of Relations with northern, central and southern European countries,}
Turkey has criticized for a few years (and not without reason) the ‘Maghrebization’ of its Association, that is to say an approach contrary to that of the Ankara agreement. The Commission therefore looked for ways to highlight the specificity of this association... [translation mine]

Ecevit stated that the final aim of Turkey was to become a full member of the EEC in the newspaper Hürriyet on 26 March 1979. He also asserted, however, that the realization of this final aim was not solely dependent on the efforts of Turkey, but also on the efforts of the member states. Ecevit argued that some Member States succumbed to ‘petty calculations’ which prevented the normalization of the relationship between Turkey and the EEC. In this interview, Ecevit underlined that Turkey seemed to be punished by the EEC, since it was an associate member. Ecevit also argued that EEC raised obstacles when Turkey tried to export to the EEC or fails to honor its obligations towards Turkish workers in the EEC. This speech demonstrates that Ecevit did not adopt a fundamentally anti-Western approach to the EEC. He was openly declaring that the EEC full membership was a prospect for Turkey. However, he drew attention to the responsibility of the EEC in the trajectory of the Association.

Conclusion

The relevant correspondence on the suspension decision shows that the negotiations between Turkey and the EEC were mainly about economic affairs. The negotiations contained little sign of Turkey’s shifting perception about the West or debates about the strengths and weakness of the import-substitution economic model. Instead, the suspension decision originated from concrete economic challenges faced by the Association. Therefore, there was a degree of continuity between successive Turkish governments in addressing these outstanding concrete economic challenges.

The Ecevit government’s suspension decision demonstrates that they did not foresee a rupture with the West in general or the EEC in particular. In the eyes of the Turkish authorities, Turkey would boost its economic activity by not fulfilling its obligations stemming from the Association Agreement. They envisaged a return to pre-suspension normalcy after five-years. The limited nature of the suspension decision also demonstrates that the Turkish government did not desire a total breakdown of the Association. Turkish officials and even Ecevit himself reiterated time after time that Turkey’s final aim was to become a full member of the EEC. If the origin of the suspension decision was anti-Western, the suspension decision should have been more punitive towards the association. For example, it could suggest a withdrawal of Turkey from the association relationship, rather than its suspension. While ideological and international political developments certainly played role in the downward trajectory of the Association, the disagreement
over the economic terms of the Association largely determined the suspension decision.

If Ecevit did not choose suspension from neither anti-Western nor due to a disagreement over Turkish economic import-substitute model, why did he pursue that policy option? The EEC’s negative response to Turkey’s demands of revision of the Association particularly regarding the agricultural issues constitutes the primary reason for the suspension. The Maghrebization of the Association as well as the restrictions imposed on Turkish exports to the EEC were having a detrimental effect on the viability of the Association in economic terms. If these issues were delicate for the EEC for some purposes, they were vital for Turkey due to their economic importance during a serious fiscal crisis.

The formal correspondence of the EEC demonstrates that the EEC was aware that the economic benefits of the Association were decreasing. The Mediterranean policy of the EEC, the British decision to impose restrictions on Turkey’s imports, and West Germany’s hardening stance not to honor prior commitments regarding the rights of Turkish citizens in the EEC were all well-known topics of negotiation with the EEC and Turkey. Yet Turkey’s requests regarding these topics fell on deaf ears. The EEC was neither going to open the topic of further agricultural concessions to discussion nor improve substantially the rights of Turkish workers in the EEC. The absence of a common ground between Turkey and the EEC on these critical issues led to the adoption of a suspension decision, not just once, but twice in two years by two different governments. This continuity demonstrates that the suspension decision was not the result of the initiative of a purportedly anti-Western or erratic Ecevit government, but mainly a result of erosion of economic benefits of the Association for Turkey.

This study also sheds light on the negative effects of presentist inclination in the literature. The founding decades provide important insights about the pivotal role played by the economic factors as well as the EEC in the trajectory of the Association. The presentism leaves a significant gap in the early history of Turkey-Europe relationship by neglecting this period. Similar examinations concerning this period could enable us to answer important questions such as why and how the relationship between Turkey and Europe underwent a tumultuous period before the 1980s while other countries achieved integration with the EEC and subsequently the EU.

Notes
1. Pace, “The Ugly Duckling,” 196.
2. “Bülent Ecevit’ten AB Açıklaması.”
3. Düşemeci, Debating Turkish Modernity, 16.


6. For further reading in this historical period on Turkey-EU relations, Tevfik Saraçoğlu’s book, entitled *Türkiye ile Avrupa Ekonomik Topluluğu Arasında Bir Ortaklık Yaratan Anlaşma*, is a very useful source. Economic Development Foundation’s reports during this period could also be consulted for further reading. See [https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?ust_id=70&id=208](https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?ust_id=70&id=208).

7. The main political parties in the 1970s and their ideological orientation could be summarized as follows: Justice Party/economically liberal, Republican People’s Party/social democratic, National Action Party/ultranational, National Order Party/ultraconservative.


10. Ibid., 170.


12. The letter sent by President Johnson of the US to Prime Minister İnönü of Turkey in 1964 aimed at preventing Turkey from intervening to Cyprus. The term Johnson Letter is still used today in Turkish politics to refer to a moment of humiliation of Turkey by the US, demonstrating the letter’s ongoing impact after nearly five decades.


18. Ibid., 18.


27. Ibid., 113.


36. Ibid., 11–12.

37. Ibid., 14–15.

38. Ibid., 78–81.

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Note on contributor

*Arda Ozansoy* is a PhD Candidate in the Department of International Relations of Bilkent University. He holds an MSc degree in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He completed his undergraduate studies at Koç University with a double major in International Relations and Sociology. He is interested in the relationship between Turkey and the EEC.

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