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Pope Backs Turkey's Bid to Join European Union

By [IAN FISHER](#) and [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ANKARA, Turkey, Nov. 28 — [Pope Benedict XVI](#) arrived in Turkey on Tuesday armed with a surprise gesture of good will aimed at blunting Muslim anger toward him: he backed Turkey's long-stalled desire to join the [European Union](#), reversing a statement he made two years ago.

Turkey's prime minister, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), told reporters after a brief meeting with Benedict at the airport here that he had asked the pope to support Turkey in its attempt to become a member of the European Union.

"He said, 'You know we don't have a political role, but we wish for Turkey's entry into the E.U.,'" Mr. Erdogan said the pope told him. "His wish is a positive recommendation for us."

Although the [Vatican](#) does not play a formal role in the European Union, or delve publicly into domestic matters of other states, the pope's gesture was nonetheless a piece of political stagecraft at a delicate time both in relations between Muslims and the West and in Benedict's own damaged reputation among Muslims.

Long before he angered the Muslim world two months ago with a speech criticized as equating Islam with violence, Benedict was disliked here because of comments he made, as a cardinal in 2004, opposing [Turkish](#) membership in Europe. As the successor to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey had always stood, he said at the time, "in permanent contrast to Europe."

But the 79-year-old pope's concession on Tuesday, at the start of a four-day trip here, seemed to make good on his pledge to heal the wounds between East and West. It may also have the practical effect of tamping down anger here. Security for the pope's visit was extensive, with helicopters hovering at the airport, commandos guarding the pope's plane and sharpshooters on the roofs of buildings.

It is unclear what effect the pope's reversal will have on the fraught debate in Europe over Turkey's membership, especially among conservatives who share the views he expressed as a cardinal two years ago. Much of that opposition is rooted in the increased tension between the West and Islam, including fears of more terrorist attacks in Europe and the already difficult integration of millions of Muslims there.

Some of the tension, though, is tied to the difficulty Turkey has had in meeting Europe's specific

demands — and the pope's visit comes at a particularly delicate time in Turkey's talks with European negotiators.

Admission talks, which officially began this year, have hit a snag over the European Union's insistence that Turkey open its ports and harbors to vessels from Greek Cyprus, an internationally recognized state opposed by Turkey. But Turkish officials say they cannot act until an international embargo that has been in place on the Turkish part of the island for more than 20 years is lifted.

Because Benedict did not announce his new position himself on Tuesday, the shift appeared to some degree to be a concession won by Mr. Erdogan — a deft act of diplomacy by the pope that critics said his speech two months ago lacked.

Although Mr. Erdogan's government is rooted in moderate political Islam, he had said until Monday that he would not be able to meet the pope under pressure from his conservative constituency. As the leader of the only Muslim country in [NATO](#), he left immediately afterward to attend a meeting of the Western military alliance in Latvia.

Hours later, the pope's spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, released a brief statement repeating that the Vatican has “neither the power nor the specific political task” of getting Turkey admitted to the European Union.

But Father Lombardi said the Vatican “views positively and encourages the road of dialogue and of moving toward integration of Turkey in Europe on the basis of common values and principles.”

It remains to be seen whether the pope's gesture will have a warming effect in Turkey, or in the broader Muslim world.

In Ankara, residents expressed doubts about the pope's sincerity. “It's not support, it's a lie,” said Hakan Ozgunaydin, a 29-year-old co-owner of a shoe shop in downtown Ankara. “I would expect him to say, ‘those bloody Turks,’ when he leaves this country.”

Merve Celikkol, a 21-year-old physics student, was just as blunt, calling the pope a hypocrite: “How is it possible that he changed so much?”

“This can be his way of confessing his sins for the wrong he has done to the Muslim world,” said Ismail Aytac, a 51-year-old sitting in a luxury watch shop. “After all, he's human, and humans make mistakes.”

A number of those interviewed did say they thought that the new support was a decisive achievement for Mr. Erdogan, who has led the push for entry into Europe, at no small political cost to himself.

Benedict's trip here is his fifth outside Italy since he was elected pope last year, and his first outside

the European Union and to a predominantly Muslim country. His main aim is to visit leaders of the Orthodox patriarchy here, as part of his goal to mend the 1,000-year rift between the Roman Catholic Church and the 220 million members of the Orthodox Church.

But Christians make up less than half a percent of Turkey's 72 million people, and it was clear that this trip would be far different from those to Christian countries, even before Benedict quoted a Byzantine emperor as referring to Islam as "evil and inhuman" in a speech in Germany in September. The trip to Turkey, though a modern and secular democracy, was loaded with symbolism: here, Christian and Muslim warriors battled for centuries, as the Byzantine Empire, founded by Rome's first Christian emperor, gave way to Muslim Ottoman Turks who established their own empire and pushed deep into Europe.

After his plane touched down, the pope, wearing white robes, was met at the airport with a red carpet and a small honor guard, but with none of the fanfare of his other trips. Rather, small demonstrations protesting Benedict's visit were held here and in Istanbul, which the pope will visit on Wednesday.

In brief comments on his plane, Benedict made clear that one of his chief aims was to stimulate a "dialogue" to bring Christians and Muslims, and West and East, closer.

"The scope of this visit is dialogue, brotherhood, a commitment to understanding between cultures, between religions, for reconciliation," he told reporters before his plane took off from Rome.

Mr. Erdogan, who unexpectedly greeted the pope at his plane, spoke too of the need for greater understanding.

"We are going through a tough period when the culture of violence has been expanding and our world faces disaster scenarios like the clashes of civilizations and polarizations in various directions," Mr. Erdogan told reporters after his 20-minute meeting with the pope. "Therefore, we need mutual understanding among different beliefs and civilizations more than any time in history."

Over the weekend, the Vatican began signaling that it was warming to the idea of Turkey's membership in the European Union. The Vatican has never issued a formal position on Turkish membership. In 2004, when the pope was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he said it would be a "grave error," both he and other church officials described the remarks as his personal opinion.

The stalemate over Turkey's bid to join the European Union has frustrated Turkish officials, who are smoothing their negotiating positions ahead of meetings with union members in December.

"Everything is just stuck," said Namik Tan, spokesman for Turkey's Foreign Ministry, said in an interview on Monday. "How can an elected government with all these restrictions over the Turkish Cypriots open its ports without any restrictions? This government has a public here."

On Tuesday night, officials from the European Union met to set conditions for the future of the talks.

“Look, they said there would be a train crash,” Mr. Erdogan said at the news conference. “Now they say there is no train crash, but the train slowed down.”

After his meeting with Mr. Erdogan, Benedict visited the grave of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the secular Turkish state after World War I.

He met later with the nation's chief Muslim religious figure, Ali Bardakoglu, who was among the fiercest critics of the pope's speech two months ago, and Turkey's president, Ahmed Necdet Sezer. Later in the evening, he met with members of the world's diplomatic corps. At every stop, he stressed the need for greater joint efforts to end terrorism, war and misunderstanding.

“I appreciate the efforts of numerous countries currently engaged in rebuilding peace in Lebanon, Turkey among them,” he told the diplomats. “In your presence, ambassadors, I appeal once more to the vigilance of the international community, that it not abandon its responsibilities, but make every effort to promote peace and dialogue.”

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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