



ISLAMOFOBIA AND MAMMA GLI TURCHI!
**AN ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN PUBLIC AND
ELITE OPINION ON TURKEY**

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Abstract

The contested nature of Islam and democracy in Europe among the public and political circles inextricably relates to the EU membership of Turkey – predominantly Muslim but a secular state founded on democratic values and principles. This paper examines the debate over Turkey and its accession to the EU within the context of religion, democracy and the question of the compatibility of these two from mass and political elite opinion level in Italy. The debate over Turkish accession to the EU not only does the preferences of the decision making elite but also opinions of their electorates – mass public – play an indispensable role. This paper surges into public and political elite perspectives on Islam along the lines with whether it is considered compatible with democratic values. This paper questions Islam, democracy, Turkey and EU also with reference to the degree which religious fundamentalism is a threat to Italian elite and public, and on what grounds judgments on Turkey’s EU membership are articulated. The core questions addressed in the paper read: “How do European publics and political elite view whether Muslim Turkey is compatible with membership of the EU and its ‘democracy’?” and “What implications shall we draw out of this analysis for the state of Islam and democratic compatibility?” It provides an empirical investigation into temporal (2004 through 2006) changes and the public-elite cleavage in Italy presenting a quantitative discussion of the data from the Italian Elite Survey (IES) (2004), European Elite Survey (EES) (2006) and Transatlantic Trends Surveys (TTS) (2004 and 2006). In conclusion, this paper generates implications for Italians attitudes towards Islam and Islam’s compatibility with democracy in particular, and bridging the cultural-religious divide between the ‘other’ Muslim and Turk in Italy and Italians approaches to cultural-religious diversity in general.

Keywords

Islam, democracy, Italy, elite and public opinion, Turkey, European Union

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*“So strong the Turks have grown to be
they hold the ocean not alone,
The Danube too is now their own.
They make their roads when they will,
Bishoprics, churches suffer ill.
Now they attack Apulia,
Tomorrow e’en Sicilia
And next to its Italy,
wherefore a victim Rome may be
And Lombardy and Romance land,
we have the arch foe close at hand...”*

-Brandt¹

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship suggests that a new form of religion-based cleavage has emerged in the Europe in the post 9/11 era as in the form of tensions between Christian majorities and Muslim minorities. The contested nature of Islam and democracy in Europe among the public and political circles inextricably relates to the EU membership of Turkey – predominantly Muslim but a secular state founded on democratic values and principles. This paper examines the debate over Turkey and its accession to the EU within religion and democracy context. As in the debate over Turkish accession to the EU not only the decision making elite but also opinion and will of their electorates – mass public – play an indispensable role, this paper surges into whether from public and political elite perspectives Islam is considered compatible with democratic European values, and thus, Turkey’s EU membership receives approval of Italian public and elite. Concentrating on the connection

¹ Quoted from Schwoebel (1967: 217).

between religion and foreign policy attitudes towards Turkey and its EU membership voyage this paper aims at providing a rigorous empirical investigation into temporal (2004 through 2006) changes and the public-elite cleavage on Turkey's EU membership. This paper assumes that the impact of Islam has a growing negative image and this accelerates with a faster pace among mass public than does among the political elite. This paper tackles the question of Islam, Turkey and EU also with reference to the degree which religious fundamentalism is a threat to Italians and how it articulates their judgments on Turkey's EU membership.

Besides that Islam and Turkey are very topical issues on the EU and member states' agendas, several reasons inspired this research. Firstly, various studies demonstrated the importance and relevance of a systematic comparison of elite orientation and public attitudes in democratic systems. Not only is the question of Turkey's membership of the EU in relation with Islam and its compatibility with European democracy is highly relevant, but also it has not been addressed before in the literature on Italian foreign policy and public opinion.

Secondly, it is also particularly highly relevant, as it has become a publicly and politically debated issue in particular after the partial freeze in talks in the aftermath of the Accession Report released by the European Commission regarding Turkey's progress on EU membership.² While the issues over policy and progress set out in the Copenhagen Criteria occupy mostly the agenda of political elite and decision makers, popular concerns rest more on cultural religious grounds.³ These concerns – the position of religion in relation to state and society in Turkey, which is not one of the political Copenhagen criteria, relate to Turkey's different cultural-religious history from that of EU and hence its incompatible value system and cultural religious divide between Turkey and Europe.

² European Commission in its recommendation released in October 2004 had found that Turkey sufficiently fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria. On 11 December 2006, the Council adopted the Commission's communication dated 29 November 2006, which stated that Turkey failed to fulfil the commitments in the Additional Protocol to the Ankara agreement, and declared that negotiations would not be opened on eight chapters. These chapters are on free movement of goods, freedom to provide services, financial services, agricultural and rural development, fisheries, transport policy, customs union and external relations.

³ The EU was founded on the basis of a 'system of democracy', with democratic values, fundamental liberties and freedom (freedom of speech, expression, thought, conscience), human rights and the rule of law. This system also bases itself on the principle of 'respect to cultural and religious diversity'

Cultural-religious divide has sharpened in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The post-September 11 era has witnessed an increased tension in Western world in terms of concerns over Islam and Muslims in West. Madrid (March 2004) and London (July 2005) bombings have contributed to growing concerns over the question of Islam, Islamic fundamentalism and very closely Turkey's EU accession, which would automatically translate into almost 70 million Muslim European citizens. These incidents have dramatically changed the social and political environment in Europe. As one of the most-immigrated EU countries mostly from backward Muslim countries have sharpened the tension in Italy. Over time, Muslim minorities showed a very slow track of integration into the European societies and the second generation Muslims have had difficulties within the societies they lived in European countries. The post-September 11 concerns over international terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and antagonism towards these minorities have accelerated. The fear of Islam has become an important concern in the European states. Corollary to this, the question of whether Turkey's Islamic character is compatible with western democratic values has become an indispensable issue in the European public domain and political circles. Headscarf controversy, the cartoons about Prophet Mohammed in the Netherlands and controversial speeches of Pope Benedetto in Germany (2004) have raised political and public manifestations against Islam, Muslims, and Islamic fundamentalism (Rosenthal 2006). In the end, Islam and Muslims in the Western world, linked to this Turks, have found themselves in a controversial position.

To illustrate, Italian public opinion is very favourable of the idea of the EU enlargement, however, on cultural and religious grounds they put Turkish membership of the EU under critical lenses. Italians are the most welcoming of the idea of enlargement considering it "a good way to reunite European continent" (68%), "a good way to communicate the EU solidarity to potential candidates" (64%), a mean that "will strengthen the EU" (64 %) and that "consolidates European interests and values" (64%).⁴ For 66 % of Italians enlargement is an instrument that also "ensures

⁴ See Special Eurobarometer 255 Report on Attitudes towards European Union Enlargement", which is available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_255_en.pdf.

peace and stability in Europe”, “strengthens the role of EU on the international scene” (67 %), “promotes democracy in Europe” (67%), “increases the protection of human rights and minorities (66%), “reinforces the power of the EU to fight criminality and terrorism” (61%), “enriches Europe’s cultural diversity (68%)⁵, “facilitates mobility of people within Europe” (72%)⁶, and “ensures better integration of populations from future member states in the EU” (60%). Yet, as regards Turkey’s accession to the EU, European public opinion is sceptical to the Turkish membership into the EU, with only 39 % approving of its accession. Moreover, compared to the EU average (30%), 24 % of Italians consider “democracy” as the main challenge for Turkish (and Western Balkan countries) accession to the EU. Overall, in Italy Turkey’s accession generates even more disapproval with only the 36 % of the public approving of EU enlargement with Turkey.

On the other side, the Italian political elite – the Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament, are far more favourable on Turkish membership in comparison with Italian public.⁷ Their position brings into mind the question of ‘why is there a ‘divide’?’ Though the Eurobarometer data provide a detailed account into Italian public opinion on EU enlargement, this paper resorts to the Italian Elite Survey (2004) and European Elite Survey (2006) on Italian elite that provides a comprehensive tool to carry out comparative analyses of elite-mass attitudes in Italy on the question of Turkey, Turkish Islam and the EU membership. These surveys contain the identical measures asked in the Transatlantic Trends Surveys.

⁵ Italians are among the third strongest opponents of the idea that the enlargement “makes cultural identities and traditions disappear” (57%).

⁶ Thirty-nine percent of Italians disagree with the assumption that enlargement increases illegal immigration in Europe.

⁷ Members of the Parliament (MPs) are an important subgroup of political elites in Italian political system. Their foreign policy attitudes in the Parliament contribute to the creation of a sense of parliamentary stance and to the construction of Italian foreign policy towards the EU and further EU enlargement. The MPs hold also an important instrumental importance as they represent the demands, perceived interests and preferences of Italian public. As they are the top Italian officials of political elites, they also have a crucial role in Italian foreign policy and European enlargement. They exert also influence on the new political attitudes emerging progressively in the EP. The Member of European Parliament (MEPs) is equivalent of a country’s national legislator – in this case MP - at the European parliament at the European level. MEPs are members of ‘cross-nationality’ political group, which is determined according to his/her political commitment. These have recently become more important political actors because they may propose questions to the Council on CFSP issues, which coordinates the foreign policies of EU member states. More importantly, as the EP gives its assent to the accession of new EU Member States, MEPs have more voice on EU’s enlargement agenda, hence on Turkish membership. These two camps of parliamentarians both the national and European level allows to detect the cleavages emerge at the elite level, as well as a single political elite group *vis-à-vis* mass public.

To recap, Turkey and its EU membership lie at the heart of any EU member state's popular and foreign policy agenda. For this reason, this paper pays close heed to analyse Italian mass and elite attitudes towards Turkish membership within the framework of Islam-democracy-Islamic fundamentalism. The main question this paper poses is "How do Italian people and political elite view whether Islamic Turkey is compatible with membership of the EU and democracy?" This paper also explores related questions: Would a Muslim country as Turkey fit into the European Union? Is Turkish Islam compatible with democracy? Does Turkish Islam have characteristics that stand in the way of the country's accession? Does the fact that the majority of Turkey's population is Muslim form a reason for Italians develop negative/positive attitudes towards Turkey's EU membership? This paper presents an objective discussion as the data come from four opinion surveys – Transatlantic Trends Survey (2004 and 2006), Italian Elite Survey (2004) and European Elite Survey (2006). Eventually, this paper aims to generate implications for European attitudes towards Islam and Islam's compatibility with democracy in particular, and bridging the cultural-religious divide between the 'other' Muslim and Turk in Europe and Europeans approaches to cultural-religious diversity in general.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT

This paper is a comparative study in terms of temporal comparisons of mass vs. elite and inter-elite group. Data come from four opinion surveys: the Italian Elite Survey (IES) (2004), European Elite Survey (EES) (2006) and Transatlantic Trends Surveys (TTS) (2004 and 2006).⁸ The IES was conducted with the participation of the 93 Italian parliamentarians from the Chamber of Deputies and Senate (MP) and the EES was carried out with participation of 43 Italian Members of European Parliament (MEP). The TTS (2004-2006) included questions asked at the public opinion level (each

⁸ The IES and EES were financed by Compagnia di San Paolo and prepared by Center for the Study of Political Change (CIRCaP) – University of Siena. TTS studies were sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the US and Compagnia di San Paolo. Data are available at: www.transatlantictrends.org and www.compagnia.torino.it. Data and Key Findings Reports are available at: www.transatlantictrends.org and www.compagnia.torino.it for TTS (2004 and 2006); and <http://www.gips.unisi.it/circap/> for IES and EES.

year around 1000 people). Taking a comprehensive view of survey data, the main determinants of mass-elite cleavage on “Turkey’s EU membership”, “the compatibility of Turkey’s Islamic values as the majority religion in Turkey and Turkey’s democratic credentials and their compatibility with democratic values of the EU” are scrutinized.

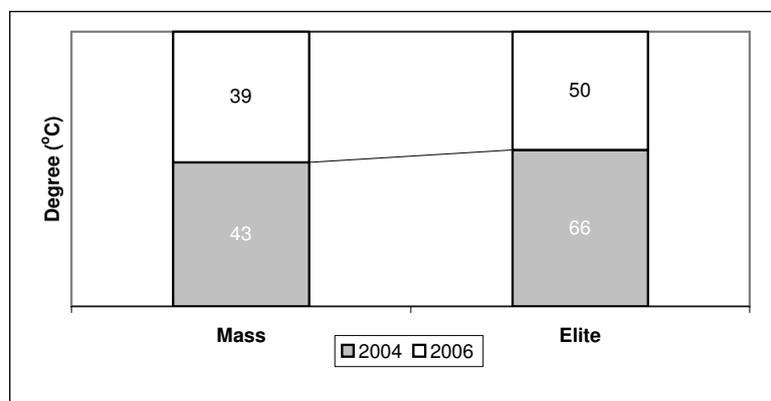
The dependent variable “opinion on Turkey’s membership of the EU” is measured through the question “Do you think Turkey’s membership is good or bad?” that has been asked by TTS, the IES and EES questionnaires. This is an ordinal variable with three Likert scaled-response categories: “A good thing/ neither good nor bad/ a bad thing”. There are two independent variables the impact of which this paper surged into on Turkey’s membership of the EU: “Threat of Islamic fundamentalism” and “Islam’s compatibility with democracy”. The question of perception of “Islamic / religious fundamentalism” as a threat reads: “I am going to read you a list of possible international threats to Europe in the next 10 years. Please tell me if you think each one on the list is an extremely important threat, an important threat, or not an important threat at all...Islamic fundamentalism (the more radical stream of Islam).” Moreover, a new variable “Islam’s compatibility with democracy” was incorporated in the 2006 TTS and EES questionnaires to analyse whether the issue about Islam was its democratic credentials. The question is worded as “Do you feel that the values of Islam are compatible with the values of [country]’s democracy?” Lastly, a number of studies suggest that the effect of socio-demographic variables such as age and education on foreign policy attitudes is not direct but is instead exerted indirectly through the influence of other political orientations (Layman 2003). Thus, our analyses include a set of four socio-demographic control variables, namely, the ‘ideological self-placement’, ‘age’, ‘gender’ and ‘level of education’.⁹ By this means, this paper examines the micro dynamics of opinion patterns.

⁹ A number of studies - Page and Jones (1979); Markus and Converse (1979) - demonstrate that attitudes exert a strong influence on partisanship and ideological self-placement. ‘Ideological self-placement’ is measured through a 7-point scale ranging from extreme left to extreme right. Education is measured by using the self-report of completed level of education with 5 levels: ‘elementary school or less’, ‘Some high school’, ‘graduation from high school’, ‘graduation from university’, ‘post-graduate degree (Masters, PhD)’.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

Italian public and elite opinion on Turkish membership of the European Union is analysed with reference to the question of Islam from two aspects: 1) Is Islamic fundamentalism is a threat for Europe? If yes, how would this influence Turkey's membership of the EU, a country that is predominantly Muslim? 2) Is Islam compatible with democracy? If no, how would this influence Islamic (though democratic) Turkey's membership of the EU? Two related hypotheses are developed: (1) 'Threat Hypothesis': "If Islamic fundamentalism were perceived as an important threat to Europe, then this would cause negative feelings towards Turkey accession to the European Union". (2) 'Compatibility Hypothesis': "If Islamic values were believed to be incompatible with democracy, this causes negative feelings towards Turkey – a predominantly Muslim country. So, this would create opposition towards Turkey's accession o the EU." These hypotheses were testes using crosstabulatory as analytical technique.

Figure 1. Feelings thermometer about "Turkey"



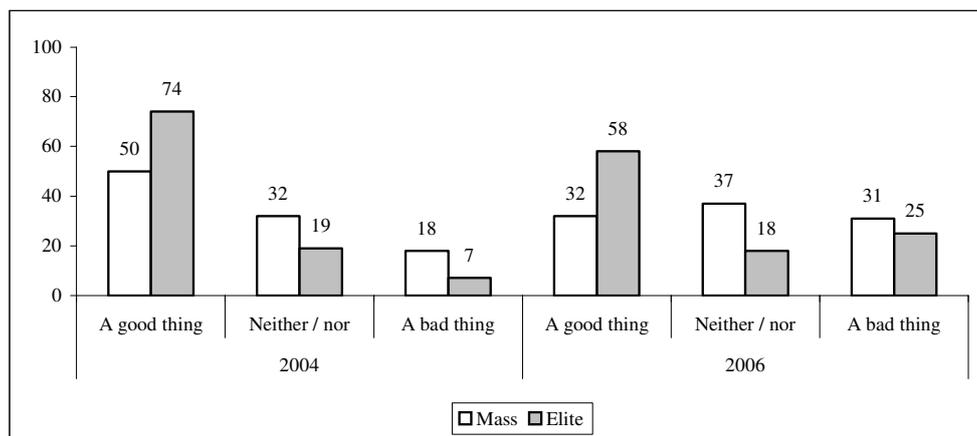
Source: TTS 2004, TTS 2006, IES 2004 and EES 2006.

Question wording: "Next I'd like to rate your feelings toward some countries, institutions, and people, with 100 meaning a very warm, favourable feeling, 0 meaning a very cold, unfavourable feeling, and 50 meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from 0 to 100. If you have no opinion or have never heard of that country or institution, please say so: - Turkey"
EU average in 2006: 42-degree.

The descriptives showed from 2004 to 2006 a decreasing pattern of warmth of feelings towards Turkey - be it at the public or elite level.¹⁰ The erosion of warm feelings of Italian elites between 2004 and 2006 towards Turkey was more dramatic (16 degrees of loss) *vis-à-vis* popular feelings (Figure 1).

To start with the distribution of data on dependent variable - “Turkish membership of the EU”, Italian public (in 2004 and 2006) welcomed the Turkish membership of the EU at a lesser level than Italian elite. With respect to the Italian MPs, who were strongly positive (74%) on Turkish membership in 2004, the Italian MEPs in Brussels approached to the issue more sceptically (25%) – albeit always more willing to see Turkey as EU member compared to public (Figure 2). In terms of micro dynamics, gender had only a significant impact on people’s opinion on Turkey’s membership of the EU ($p < 0.05$). Elite opinion was rather significantly dependent on the political ideology ($p > 0.01$). While centre-right Italian elite considered Turkish accession a “good thing” almost 20 % more than does the centre-right public; leftist elite were more indifferent towards the issue. To recap, gender of public and political ideological identification of elite determined significantly their attitudes towards Turkey.

Figure 2. Turkish membership of the EU “good”, “neither/nor” or “bad”



Note: (2004) $N_{\text{mass}} = 903$, $N_{\text{elite}} = 54$. (2006) $N_{\text{mass}} = 932$, $N_{\text{elite}} = 40$.

¹⁰ *Thermometer* question measures “feelings about Turkey” and tells us how warm public and elite feels on a scale from 0 to 100 degrees towards Turkey – regardless of its EU candidacy or other aspects.

To elaborate more the reasons for positive and negative public and elite opinion on Turkish membership of the EU, the TTS (2004) and IES (2004) surveys contained two filter questions: “What is the main reason why you think Turkey’s membership of the EU would be a (a) good thing? (b) bad thing?” The major reason of why Italian public opinion was for the Turkish membership was that “it would help the EU promote peace and stability in the Middle East” (38%) (Table 1). Whereas, the Italian elite considered that Turkish membership had a good prospect for “strengthening moderate Islam as a model in the Muslim world” (49%).

Table 1. Turkish membership is “a good thing” because... (%)

	<i>Mass</i>	<i>Elite</i>
It would help the EU promote peace and stability in the Middle East	38	41
It would have a positive effect on Muslim communities in other European countries	25	10
Turkey’s membership would be good in economic terms for the EU	11	--
Turkey’s membership will strengthen moderate Islam as a model in the Muslim world	26	49
Total	100	100

Source: TTS 2004 and IES 2004.

Yet, under what circumstances Turkey’s membership was a ‘bad’ thing delivered two challenging responses: “Turkey’s ‘problematic’ democracy” (34%) and “Turkey’s predominantly Muslim population” (32%) (Table 2).¹¹ These reasons why Italians see Turkish membership to the EU a “bad thing” conveyed to two main domains of discussion: concerns about ‘Islam’ and ‘Turkey’s record with democracy’. These support the standpoints posed at the outset concerns over Turkish membership have largely to do with: (1) Islam, with respect to religious fundamentalism as a ‘threat’ (b) and Islam with respect to its compatibility with democracy. So, this made it possible to focus on Turkish membership with reference to these two concerns.

Table 2. Turkish membership is “a bad thing” because... (%)

	<i>Mass</i>	<i>Elite</i>
As a predominantly Muslim country, Turkey does not belong in the EU	32	--
It would drag the EU in the Middle East conflict	16	--
Turkey is [too poor or too populous] to be digested in a growing EU	5	--
It would make the running of the European institutions more complicated	13	--
Turkey’s democracy is still problematic	34	--
Total	100	--

Source: TTS 2004 and IES 2004.

¹¹ The IES study found no valid result on this question; Italian elite gave the answer “Don’t know” to this question.

Islamic fundamentalist threat and a ‘Muslim’ Turkey in the EU

The priority given to different threats on the international scene leads to spot opinion patterns on the issue of perception of international problems in the present international system. Transatlantic Trends Surveys have been taking the pulse of public opinion on several items of threat perception since 2002. According to the TTS 2004, after threat of a global spread of an epidemic and international terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism – the more radical stream of Islam – ranked the third most important threat for Europe for Italian elite (46%). Islamic fundamentalism for Italian MPs surpassed the importance of such issues as illegal immigration into Europe, a terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction, or an economic crisis. Just like the political elites, Italian public perceived it a bigger threat (54%) than did the elite. By 2006, threat of Islamic fundamentalism was even a more serious threat for the masses, while the elite perception of Islamic fundamentalism as an “extremely important” threat shrunk at a 2-percentage level with respect to the figures in 2004.

To recall, our first hypothesis - the threat hypothesis – was “If Islamic fundamentalism were perceived as an important threat to Europe, then this would cause negative feelings towards Turkey accession to the European Union”. As shown in Table 3, in 2006, Italian public opinion was significantly driven by the idea that Islamic fundamentalism was a global threat; and it formed the Turkish membership as a detested topic.¹² However, the Italian MEPs, even if they perceived Islamic fundamentalism as an important threat to Europe in ten years (72%), believed that Turkish membership would be “a good thing”. A vast majority of Italian MPs who perceived Islamic fundamentalism as an “extremely important threat” favoured Turkish membership even more strongly (86%), in 2004. This analysis spotted that 2004 to 2006 Italian public opinion on the question of Turkish membership of the EU became more agnostic towards Turkish membership as much as they perceived Islamic fundamentalism as important threat (Table 3). These results could

¹² However, there was no significant correlation between threat perception and opinion on Turkish membership in terms of public attitudes. Yet, as regards Italian elite, such a relation did not occur. Those who found Islamic fundamentalism as an important threat (74%) and not an important threat (74%) were both in concordance with the idea that Turkish membership was a “good thing”.

be condensed as: (a) If Italian public felt more threatened by Islamic fundamentalism, it became less in favour of Turkey – though the difference between those who are in favour and not in favour of Turkey was only 2 %. (b) Even if Italian elite in Brussels was threatened by Islamic fundamentalism, they were still overwhelmingly in favour of Turkey (with a 44% difference of those in favour and not in favour of Turkey).

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of “Turkish membership” by “Islamic fundamentalism a threat” (%)

		“Islamic fundamentalism a threat”			
		Mass		Elite	
		Yes ^b	No	Very important ^c	Important
2004	<i>Turkish membership is...</i> ^a				
	A good thing	74	74	86	95
	A bad thing	26	26	14	5
	Total (N)	571	42	21	21
	Chi-square (χ^2)	0, 001		1,105	
	df	1		1	
2006	<i>Turkish membership is...</i> ^a	Yes	No	Yes	No
	A good thing	49	78	72	50
	A bad thing	51	22	28	50
	Total (N)	532	40	29	4
	Chi-square (χ^2)	12,200 *		0, 836	
	df	1		1	

Source: TTS and IES (2004), TTS and EES (2006) Surveys

^a See “Data and Measurement” section for question wording. “Neither good nor bad” category is excluded from the analysis.

^b The question of “Islamic fundamentalism as a threat” is recoded into two categories as (1) [Yes = extremely important + very important threat] and (0) [No = not an important threat at all]. DK’s are not included into the analysis (missing values).

^c MPs – DK’s excluded – in the IES (2004) found Islamic fundamentalism either a very important or an important threat. That’s why I show here the distribution across these two categories.

* p < 0.05

Despite demographic variances, in general Italian public disapproved of Turkish membership of the EU since public perceived serious threat from Islamic fundamentalism. The impacts of socio-demographic factors are the following: (a) Ideological cleavages: “The more the public leftist (though Islam is a more important threat), the better the Turkish membership of the EU”. (b) Gender: Male Italians thought that Turkish membership is good even if Islamic fundamentalism was a threat. On the other hand, according to females Islamic fundamentalism was a very important threat but they disagree with Turkish membership. If they did not consider Islamic fundamentalism a threat at all, they would be more favourable of Turkish membership than the men. So, a strongly

significant gender difference emerges ($p < 0.05$). (c) Age: “The older one gets, the less s/he perceives threat from Islamic fundamentalism, and the more sceptical s/he becomes about Turkey.” (d) Level of education: “The more educated the public, the higher the threat perceived of Islamic fundamentalism, but the better the membership of Turkey.”

As far as the demographic dynamics of elites and their impacts on their opinion on Turkey in relation with threat perception was concerned, competing results were obtained: (a) Ideological cleavages: “The more the elite leftist (though Islam was a more important threat), the better the Turkish membership of the EU”. On the contrary, “the less the elite rightist, since Islam was a less important threat, the less good the Turkish membership of the EU”. (b) Gender: Data did not make it possible to make a comparison because of the absence of the position of female Italian elite on this question. However, male Italian elite thinks that Turkish membership is good even if Islamic fundamentalism is a threat (68%) – 15 % more than does the male Italian public. On the other hand, those men who think that Islamic fundamentalism is not a threat at all is indifferent about whether Turkish membership is good or bad (50-50%). So, gender of the elite has no impact on this question ($p > 0.05$). This appears as a contradiction with mass opinion on this matter. (c) Age: “The older one gets, the more threat s/he perceives from Islamic fundamentalism, but the more pro-Turkish membership s/he becomes.” This is also a contradiction with mass opinion. (d) Level of education: “The more educated the elite, the higher the threat perceived of Islamic fundamentalism, but the better the membership of Turkey. Thus, controlling for the level of education of elite, no significant relation occurred.

The analysis herein had previously found out that Italian people were more negative towards Turkish membership in so far as they perceived more threatened of Islamic fundamentalism. Socio-demographic variation in mass public in Italy engendered variations also in public opinion on the question of Islamic fundamentalist threat and Turkish membership. On the contrary, apart from the ideological cleavages’ significant impact on Italian elites’ position on Turkey within the framework of Islamic fundamentalist threat, the three micro determinants – gender, age and education – failed

to have significant impacts. Regardless of gender, age, and level of education, the elite considered Turkish membership 'a good thing', in spite of the fact that Islamic fundamentalism was a serious threat. Only their ideological position would change their opinion structure.

The dialectic of Islam and Western democracy

Cold War period was driven by competing clash of ideologies but the post-Cold War era has been driven by the clash of civilizations. As suggested by Huntington (1993), if a clash was to occur it was most likely to happen between the occidental and oriental civilisations. This argument is reinforced with the assumption that Islamic culture – belief and practices – is not compatible with democratic Western values. Several authors, such as Al-Azmeh (1996), Al-Azmeh and Fokas (2006), and Kibble (1998) have disagreed with Huntington. Kibble (1998) argued that fundamentalist activism is a “transitory phase” in the Islamic world, which is experiencing its evolutionary phase in a highly conflict process of democratisation. Mazrui (1997: 118), on the other hand, argued “Westerners tend to think of Islamic societies as backward-looking, oppressed by religion and inhumanely governed comparing them to their own enlightened, secular democracies”. Given that Islam is a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another and that Turkey as the only democratic Muslim country, which is a candidate to EU membership, it has provided an interesting case for the debate of “clash of civilisations”, from elite and public perspectives.

In 2006, the question “Do you feel that the values of Islam are compatible with the values of [country]’s democracy?” delivered an interesting gap of belief structure between elite and public. Accordingly, the elite believed that Islamic values and democracy were compatible and this figure doubled up that of Italian public position (68% and 32 %, respectively, conviction about the existence of compatibility between two values). As for the line of reasoning of both public and elite, those who saw these two value systems as incompatible linked their argument to a problem of ‘Islam in general’ (51% of mass versus 33 % of elite consensus). On the other hand, Italian elite

was more concerned about the problem of particular Islamic groups (67 % versus 49 % mass opinion that particular Islamic groups were the problem) that generated a problem with Islam and democracy.

The issue of “Islam and its compatibility with democracy” presented a source of polarisation according to the demographic differences of Italian society. Ideological self-placement, level of education, gender and age differences altered significantly the Italian public stance on ‘compatibility of democracy and Islam’ (very high Pearson χ^2 values with $p < 0.01$ for each demographic variable). Italians with centre right ideological tendencies argued that the problem was more with “Islam in general”, while the proponents of left-wing ideology based their reasoning on that the problem for incompatibility erupted from particular Islamic groups. Education also determined significantly the way of thinking of Italian mass attitudes on this question: people with lower levels of education believed that the reason of incompatibility was embodied in Islam. Contrariwise, none of these variables had a statistically significant explanatory power on elite attitudes towards the ‘compatibility’ argument (low Pearson χ^2 values with $p > 0.05$). On the question of Islam and its *incompatibility* with democracy and association of this incompatibility with their view of Islam in general, demographic variations were strong reflections only on Italian public opinion. Yet, Italian elite, let alone finding Islam and democracy ‘compatible’ *vis-à-vis* public, remained unaffected by demographic differences.

When the question of Islam-democracy compatibility was correlated with assessment of Turkey’s membership of the EU, majorities of Italian elite and public supported the idea that Turkish membership was “a good thing” in so far as they believed that Islam was compatible with western democracy (Table 4). Moreover, the Italian elite (82%) was much significantly ($p < 0.05$) more in favour of this belief (Table 4). Thus, the null hypothesis could be rejected as that the question of ‘compatibility’ had no impact on ‘Turkish membership’.¹³

¹³ In order to establish a relation between two variables, I hypothesise that independent variable has an impact on the dependent variable. Through statistical χ^2 test I try to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) that the independent variable has no impact on the dependent variable, thus I can conclude that the true hypothesis (H_1) holds true. If the χ^2 value is statistically significant, that is to say if it is significant at the 0.05 level, I reject the null hypothesis.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of “Turkish membership” by “Islam-democracy compatibility” (%)

	“Islam compatible with democracy”			
	Mass		Elite	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>Turkish membership is...</i> ^a				
A good thing	71	40	82	38
A bad thing	29	60	18	63
Total (N)	170	369	22	8
Chi-square (χ^2)	44,154 **		5,487*	
df	1		1	

Source: TTS and EES (2006) Surveys

^a See footnote to Table 4.

* p< 0.05; ** p<0.001

At the mass level, this paper observed a clear impact of ideological tendency on the assessment of Islam, democracy and Turkish membership. However, ideological position of the elite had no antecedent impact on this relation. Those with the rightist ideological leaning believed that because Islam was *incompatible* with democracy Turkey’s membership was not to be appreciated. Leftists were more for the idea that Islam and democracy were compatible and this had a positive impact on their support for Turkish membership. As for gender gap, male (74%) were more positive about Islam, which supported the compatibility of Islam with democracy. Hence, they considered Turkish membership a ‘good thing’, compared to Italian women (67%). Be it at the mass or at the elite level, variations in age did not yield any impact on attitudes towards the issue of Islam, democracy and Turkish membership. Public at all age cohorts found Islam a compatible value system with European democracy. For this reason, Turkey’s membership of the EU would be good. Lastly, controlling for the level of education of public and elite, this paper detected that the more the individual was educated, the more he was convinced that Islamic values would reconcile with democracy, therefore, the more positive he was towards Turkish membership. To conclude, with the exception of the antecedent impact of self-ideological tendency on public opinion, these socio-demographic factors caused no unexpected variation in opinion patterns. Furthermore, these variables resulted in significant oscillations in terms of public opinion; despite the fact that they did not generate and significant impact on elite opinion.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, Italian public and elite opinions were examined at two spots of time (2004-2006) on Turkish membership with reference to Islam. The paper focused on two aspects of Islam, which is the predominant religion in Turkey: (1) “Islamic fundamentalist threat” and “Islam-democracy compatibility”. It detected that Islam has a growing negative and threatening image, when is associated with religious fundamentalist stream. This is felt greater by ordinary public than the political elite. Furthermore, as public opinion has sceptical concerns about Islamic fundamentalism, this jeopardises the popular willingness for Turkey’s EU membership. Yet, such a correlation is not present at the elite level. This opinion gap rests on demographic dynamics of popular structure in Italy. According to ideological tendencies, gender differences, age profile, and level of education Italian public opinion varies on perception of Islamic fundamentalist threat, which they also connect Turkey’s EU membership with. Contrarily, apart from their political ideological cleavage effect, the Italian elite considers Turkish membership ‘a good thing’, in spite of the fact that Islamic fundamentalism is a serious threat to Europe; they do not associate these two issues with each other.

On the subsequent question of “Islam-democracy compatibility”, a direct relation between perception of Islam-democracy compatibility and support for Turkey’s EU membership was hypothesised. Compared to public opinion, Italian elite overwhelmingly is in harmony that these two value systems are attuned with each other. As regards correlation between Islam-democracy compatibility and assessment of Turkey’s membership of the EU, majorities of Italians - be it elite or public, supports the idea that Turkish membership is “a good thing” in so far as they believe that Islam is compatible with western democracy. Moreover, in such a correlation, socio-demographics play hardly any significant role on opinion formation.

To conclude, *Islamofobia* subsists in the severe form of ‘Islamic fundamentalist threat’ in the minds of ordinary Italians who link the political issue of Turkish membership of the EU to a cultural religious dynamics. If religious fundamentalism becomes more of a serious threat, it is

mostly likely to hear ascendant blasts of “*Mamma gli Turchi!*” with growing negative connotation. This paper concludes that while popular attention to radical Islamic terrorism creates a polarisation over Turkey’s membership of the EU, elite awareness on the independence of these two shows potential and good prospects for Turkish membership. The democratic credentials of Islam as an end to the enmity between the orient and occident provoke a cultural vicinity between Italians and Turks, hence flourishes a positive Italian approach of ‘bridging the cultural gap’ with Turkish membership of the EU. A growing majority of Italian public and elite considers Turkey’s membership “a good thing” thanks to awareness of the ‘Islam and democracy’ congruence. Actually, this conveys that a predominantly Muslim democracy may provide a bridge between the civilisations.

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