

# Hands tied up with the next Greek government

Wednesday 3 October 2007, by [Barçin Yinanç](#)

**As it became evident that Greece will be unable to cope with the fires ravaging the country last week, some well-off Western countries precipitated to offer assistance. Few among them were considering asking for money for the assistance, as one of them contacted other countries offering assistances on whether they were asking for money or not.**

“The idea would not even cross our minds,” told me an official from Turkey, which sent a firefighting plane to Greece. “The same for the Greeks. They would never think of asking money for the help they provide. This does not exist in our culture.”

The common characteristics of Turkey and Greece, however, have so far proven insufficient to solve ossified political problems, such as the Aegean issues that have in the past brought the two countries to the brink of war. The present state of Turkish-Greek relations is obviously incomparable to what it was 10 years ago.

The government of Kostas Karamanlis has unfortunately not done much in capitalizing on the Turkish-Greek rapprochement initiated by its predecessor. The New Democracy Party's leader Karamanlis simply sat on the legacy left by former Prime Minister Simitis rather than exploiting the benefits.

The architects of rapprochement, Simitis and his Foreign Minister Yorgo Papandreu, of PASOK (Pan Hellenic Socialist Movement,) have not only contributed to the improvement of the political climate, they have also initiated the mechanisms aimed at exploring ways to solve the long standing bilateral political problems. Until then, Athens was refusing to talk bilaterally about the air and maritime delimitations in the Aegean, asking Turkey to refer, “its claims,” to international mechanisms. The Greek government has dropped this stance and gave its consent to start the so-called exploratory talks. The designated diplomats from the two countries met periodically to explore an overall “give and take” approach for a comprehensive settlement of all problems. Exploratory talks continued under the Karamanlis administration, though the Turkish side complains that the Greek side is dragging its feet.

Some could argue that had PASOK remained in the government, it would have done the same. This is a valid assumption. Let's accept the fact that Karamanlis did not want to tackle complicated political issues. But what has stopped him from further contributing to the climate between the two countries?

## **Poisoning the political climate**

On the contrary, some of his policy decisions have poisoned the political climate. In international forums, for example, Greek representatives have often refrained from siding with the Turks. Karamanlis, not hesitating to come to Turkey to attend the wedding of Turkish prime minister's son, would not dare to acquire the title of being the first Greek prime minister to hold an official visit to Ankara since 1959. He came to Turkey for the NATO summit or the Black Sea Economic Summit, but the Turkish side hoped in vain to see him in an official visit to Ankara.

Then the question comes: Why does the Turkish side still emphasize the rosy side of the picture, ignoring the rather more unpleasant characteristics of the bilateral relationship.

In the short run, the Turkish side believes that the rapprochement is still beneficial in certain aspects of the relations. On the economic side for instance, the Turkish side is quite happy with the progress that took place in the last few years. Turkey is Greece's fifth trade partner. Trade volume has reached \$3 billion and exports to Greece doubled in the first half of 2007. The contribution of Greek tourists to

Turkey's tourism revenues increases day by day. Greek customers are flocking the markets of Turkish coastal cities in the Aegean.

In the long run, there is the hope that, a tension free political climate will be instrumental in curbing anti-Turkish sentiments, which are still deeply rooted within the Greek people.

In Ankara, there is a strong government to take bold steps without fearing any public reactions. However, it is rather unrealistic to expect a strong government that will equally be fearless of public reactions to come to power in Athens. This is especially true for the elections set for Sept. 17. Opinion polls give the New Democracy Party a one or two percent lead over PASOK, but Greeks are also turning to smaller parties. The People's Orthodox Alarm (Alarm), an ultra-nationalist party known for its anti-Turkish stance, will be the fifth party to enter parliament. Its candidate for Athens is Antonis Natsakis, known in the Turkish public as the retired soldier who has conducted talks with the PKK for the Greek intelligence agency.

If Karamanlis wins with a narrow margin, the best result one can expect will be for political problems to remain frozen. Faced with a strong opposition, the Karamanlis government may even feel the need to become hawkish, which might spark some tension

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## **Sources**

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