

Turkey Rising? (Part 2)

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Mar 5, 2013

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In the best scenario, Turkey will write a liberal constitution, end PKK violence by answering calls for enhanced Kurdish rights, and leverage its Western traits regionally.

Will Turkey rise as a regional power? And just what does this mean for its Western allies? Turkey's future seems contingent on two interrelated dynamics: the Syrian conflict, and Turkey's economic momentum. Depending on how these two factors play out, we can imagine four alternative futures for Turkey in the 21st century.

The best of times for both Turkey and the West would look something like this: Turkey skirts the Syrian crisis with minimal fallout, and the Turkish economic miracle plows ahead. With plenty of goodwill to go around, Turkey's liberals make a push for compromise, helped by a gentle nudge from the United States. As a result, Erdogan and his not-so-secret challenger, President Abdullah Gul, agree on a power-sharing Constitution that checks authoritarian tendencies and promotes responsible governance. A consensus-based Constitution would also answer Kurdish calls for rights and freedoms, promoting social cohesion and marginalizing the PKK. This would land Turkey on a trajectory toward greater liberalism, a core component of which would be the emergence of a religion-blind state. This might be embodied by, for example, Turkey appointing a citizen of Armenian origin as its ambassador to Washington, as the Ottomans did in the 19th century, and a Turkish Jew being posted in Israel as Turkey's ambassador to the Jewish state, as part of Ankara's decision to make amends with Israel.

But a buoyant economy could also catalyze a totally different trajectory for the AKP. Emboldened by Turkey's economic ascent against the backdrop of continued economic problems in Europe and an inward-looking U.S., Erdogan might get cocky. Having won the 2014 elections with a resounding victory, he could expand his political capital to push a rigid vision of conservatism and nationalism. This means no liberal Constitution and no meaningful rights for the Kurds -- hence more PKK violence. These moves at home would coalesce with a foreign policy outreach to Muslim Brotherhood elements taking over in Syria and elsewhere in the region, including Egypt. Foreign Minister Davutoglu would repackage a 2.0 version of his "strategic depth" doctrine, straying from the pivot towards

Washington. This could also include a practical arrangement with Iran, especially if Tehran sees its chance to pry Turkey away from the U.S. by cooperating with Ankara against the PKK.

But what if the Syrian conflict and the Turkish economy go awry?

The fairytale of the AKP may not end happily ever after. If Ankara faces an interrelated security and economic crisis, it will have to decide between two disparate paths: first, the AKP could opt to move even closer to the U.S. to contain the Syria spillover and shore up confidence in its stability. Such a move would secure NATO protection, but it might not win the battle in Turkey's domestic political arena, as most Turks would blame the U.S. for the Syria mess. And Turkey's ties with the U.S. would look all the more imprudent if they provoked retaliation from Iran in the form of support for PKK violence against Turkey. Under these conditions, the AKP could lose its majority in 2014 elections and be forced to join a coalition government. Such a weak and vulnerable government would hardly stand a chance of accomplishing transformative reforms, such as a replacement of Turkey's military-made Constitution and a resolution to the Kurdish issue. The outcome would be a Turkey that bears some resemblance to the Turkey of the 1990s -- internally fractured, unable to move forward, inwardly focused, and reliant on the U.S.

Finally, Ankara could also answer the crisis by lashing out against the West. A coalition government in Turkey could come under the dominance of hardliners in the AKP and voices on the far right. This fractured coalition would send governance into a state of disarray, and Turkey would drift further from its formula for growth and progress, even as rightist elements resort to draconian measures to restore stability and security. Constitutional reform and political dialogue on Turkey's Kurdish problem would become impossible in this environment, and armed conflict would once again become the language of political bargaining on the Kurdish question. The single area where we can be sure that Turkey's hardliners in government will show creativity and resourcefulness is in finding ways to pin the blame for this nightmare on the U.S. and the West. These conditions would be ripe for Iran to step in with an offer to trade cooperation against the PKK for Turkish defiance against the West and NATO.

The lesson here is that, whatever the circumstance, Turkey can finally rise to become a regional power, and perhaps a global power if the Turks play their hand right, writing a liberal Constitution, ending PKK violence, and leveraging their Western overlay regionally as well as for the international markets. The sultans are waiting for Erdogan to do the right thing.

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