

# Turkey Rising? (Part 1)

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## If Turkey can avoid the authoritarianism of single-party dominance or the chaos of coalition governments, it will have a chance to rise as a regional or even global power.

**T**urkey has come a long way in the past decade, but it still has a long way to go. Over the short term, the country's destiny will be contingent on two interrelated dynamics: the Syrian conflict, and Turkey's economic momentum.

Phenomenal economic growth has elevated Turkey to the ranks of the G-20, and the country has set its sights on becoming one of the ten largest global economies by the time the republic celebrates its centennial in 2023. Turkey is now the largest and wealthiest Muslim country in the world, and for the first time since the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks have incomes on a par with European incomes.

In addition, Turkey has amassed significant soft power in the past decade in its Muslim neighborhood.

To name just one example, "Nur," a classic rags-to-riches soap opera, has enthralled more than 85 million viewers across Arab countries. Turkish businesses are rising as well: Turkish Airlines, the country's official flag carrier, has been voted for two consecutive years the best airline in Europe, and has become the premier carrier for the Middle East, the Balkans, and the former Soviet republics.

In terms of hard power, Turkey boasts the most powerful Muslim conventional military force. And, perhaps most importantly, Turkey has an asset unique among Muslim majority countries: a Western overlay that includes constitutional democracy, membership to the NATO alliance, and strong ties to the European Union and United States.

Rising astride these accomplishments, is Turkey destined to become a regional, and even a global power? It all depends on how Ankara plays its hand on a number of issues, while leveraging its Western credentials in its region.

The first and the most pressing challenge is managing the Syria conflict. Ankara became an active party to the Syrian uprising when it began supporting and hosting the opposition to the al-Assad regime in late 2011. A war against al-Assad could damage Turkey's most important asset -- its image as a stable country in an otherwise unstable region. Surrounded by southern European countries mired in economic meltdown and Arab countries that are politically imploding, Turkey has enjoyed a reputation as a bastion of relative normalcy. Turkey keeps growing because it attracts investment, and Turkey attracts investment because it is deemed an island of stability in a turbulent region. This recipe has delivered the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) three electoral victories since 2002.

But if conflict in Syria aggravates Turkey's own internal cleavages and presents opportunities for violent groups to wage war against Turkey, its reputation as a bastion of stability may begin to erode.

This makes minimizing the spillover from the Syrian conflict essential for Turkey's continued economic ascent, and for the AKP to win the 2014 elections. Turkey's decades-old conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) tops the list of internal problems that the Syrian conflict is poised to exacerbate, and Turkey's leadership has responded by defying convention and announcing negotiations with the imprisoned PKK-leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in an attempt to defuse PKK violence.

The Turkish Prime Minister and AKP leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, also has personal reasons for wanting to solve the Kurdish problem without delay. If Ankara can broker a deal with the PKK, Erdogan will have effectively eliminated the last hurdle to achieving his goal of getting elected as the country's next president in 2014 and rewriting Turkey's current Constitution, which was drafted under military tutelage.

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP government has eliminated many of the checks and balances on its power, subjecting the courts and the media to its virtual control. An AKP victory in the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections would most likely usher in a period of AKP consolidation, in which Turkey would effectively become a single party democracy. If, on the other hand, Erdogan fails in the 2014 elections, this could precipitate a fracturing of the AKP alliance, and Turkey could go back to a period of rule by coalition governments. Historically, the Turkish political system has slipped into chaos when coalition governments have been in charge, as was the case in the 1990s and the 1970s. Neither path after 2014 looks too bright for Turkey. However, if the country can avoid the authoritarianism of single party dominance, or the chaos of coalition governments, it will have a chance to rise as a regional and potentially a global power, a lofty ambition indeed.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. His latest project is the forthcoming book Turkey Rising: The 21st Century's First Muslim Power .* ❖

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