

## Analysis

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**Summary:** The “New Turkey” that AKP has built has significant weaknesses, and the region it aspires to lead is being rapidly reconfigured. At the heart of Turkey’s challenge is the interplay between mounting pressures from the outside and longstanding domestic problems. Two issues will be critical tests for which way the country will go: the constitutional reform process and EU engagement.

## Turkey’s Transformation and Its Future Influence: A Critical Link

by *Emiliano Alessandri and Nora Fisher Onar*

### Introduction

Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, received a hero’s reception at the fourth Congress of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in September. Delivering an epic speech replete with excerpts from poetry that Turkey’s largely displaced secularist-military establishment had once incarcerated him for reciting, he basked in the adoration of the audience. Outside, journalists from five opposition newspapers chaffed at being denied accreditation.

The taint on press freedom notwithstanding, there was much for Turkey’s leaders to be proud of. Erdoğan and his party are rightfully credited for spearheading Turkey’s transformation over the past decade from a dysfunctional economy to a G20 powerhouse, from a misfit in multiple regions to an aspiring leader in the Middle East. Attesting to the degree Turkey’s story has become an AKP story was Erdoğan’s embrace of the slogan “toward 2023” — a reference to the centennial of the Republic, which until recently symbolized for many within AKP a rupture with an Ottoman-Islamic tradition seen as the true source of Turkey’s identity. In the

build up to 2023, however, that perception was changing or rather there was a growing sense that AKP-led Turkey was coming full circle, positioning an ever more confident society to become again a center of gravity in the former Ottoman world.

Yet both the images of a strong Turkey and a Turkey-centered neighborhood are deceiving. The “New Turkey” that AKP has built has significant weaknesses, and the region it aspires to lead is being rapidly reconfigured. At the heart of Turkey’s challenge is the interplay between mounting pressures from the outside and longstanding domestic problems. Arab uprisings have toppled long-ruling regimes, disrupting the fragile regional order by unleashing pent-up demands from groups with rival ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities. Newly elected governments are struggling to contain inter-communal conflict. Furthermore, and much to Turkey’s chagrin, besieged bastions of the old order like the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus and its allies in Tehran are deploying every weapon to keep the lid on the Pandora’s Box at home while seeking to open it in neighboring countries. This has fueled internecine clashes



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in Lebanon and the rekindling of Kurdish separatism in Turkey.

Regional upheaval threatens the economic backbone of the AKP project. It was growth in trade, investment, and energy relations with countries like Iran and Syria — with whom relations have soured — that helped Turkey weather the global economic downturn. Regional instability and fear of spillover may also dampen Turkey's attractiveness to Western investors. The fact that the AKP has yet to implement a crucial wave of reforms in areas like taxation after the IMF- and EU-oriented waves of the early and mid-2000s does little to enliven economic prospects at a time when growth is slowing even in the emerging economies. Under such conditions, to pretend that Turkey can smoothly continue its ascent and directly shape outcomes in the Middle East is wishful thinking.

### Strong Institutions, Not Strong Leaders

The ever important link between Turkey's domestic development and its international influence has become critical in this new context. At its core is the imperative of making domestic institutions responsive to the reality of Turkey's political and ethnic diversity.

Turkey's ability to do so, however, is dogged by an intriguing if disturbing idea, namely that a Turkey led by charismatic leaders could afford remaining less than fully democratic while exerting strong influence on regimes in the Arab world. After all, many transition countries are ready to democratize only to an extent, and new regimes may find attractive the powerful mix of populism and majoritarianism that increasingly characterizes Turkey and that was on display at the AKP Congress.

But a Turkey that took that path would expose its trajectory as a polity and regional player to great danger. In today's troubled times, it must eschew the temptation to hide behind strong leaders leaving institutions to languish. This is precisely what landed the authoritarian leadership of Egypt and Syria in such trouble in 2011: they had held their countries hostage to their personal fates, increasingly seeing themselves as indispensable for the nation's future. Yet, as they learned all too well, the demands of a diverse population did not disappear when silenced; they simmered.

Turkey must not squander its comparative advantage as a Muslim society in the region with an institutional basis for consolidating pluralistic democracy in the name of partisan interests.

Yet, Turkey's leaders, who had been bold and open-minded when they took office, now seem trapped in webs of vested interests. Recent bids to retrench political and cultural hegemony hardly do justice to their achievements of the past decade when, rather than leading a drive towards "Islamization," they reinterpret Islam in a way that dovetails with modernity embodied in projects like the opening to the global economy and European integration.

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A Turkey that arrives at the historic and symbolic crossroads of its centennial as a country dominated by leaders, instead of one built on strong, inclusive, legitimate institutions, would be on a pathway reminiscent of others, such as Russia, which have not yet lived up to hopes for true political development. It is crucial for the well-being of the country they have so long served that its biography transcend that of its top leaders. It is modern and accountable political and economic institutions and a widely shared democratic culture — and only those — that can keep Turkey a dynamic actor and a regional powerhouse in the long run.

### Ways Forward

Some of the energies for this evolution could come from the same ranks of the ruling elite — which is more varied than often assumed. Although manifest today in a struggle for power, ongoing contests within the AKP could lead to a real debate about the options before the country as it faces challenges from a refugee crisis and civil war next door to



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a possible economic downturn. Just as competition among old and new elites in the transition to post-Kemalist Turkey created elements of a democracy through an opening of the political space, so one has to hope that the interplay of voices within AKP will leave new elements of pluralism as its legacy.

To be sure, all the initiative cannot come from within ruling cadres. Efforts by other parties — not least the secularist Republican's People Party — to present credible alternatives should be continued and stepped up. Recent signs have not been encouraging as opposition leaders took counterproductive positions on the Kurdish issue and Syria. But while responsibility for this change will continue to rest with these forces, an opposition that remains weak and irrelevant to Turkey's future ultimately is a liability not just for the anti-government front but for Turkey as a whole. Without positive competition on the question of who is more reformist, the ruling elite will — indeed has — become less dynamic.

Two issues will be critical tests for which way the country will go: the constitutional reform process and EU engagement. Overhauling the 1980 constitution dating back to military rule is widely acknowledged as a must, as the latest EU Progress Report affirmed. Yet, there is a danger that reform will lead to a new majoritarian charter designed around the ambition of the personalities that have made Turkey great in recent years by endorsing, among other things, a presidential system. What would truly move Turkey forward is instead a new impetus to democratization by reinforcing dwindling checks and balances and addressing the issues that remain outstanding, from basic freedoms to minority rights. In other words, the process will either confirm illiberal tendencies or boldly tackle the

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questions that are at the core of Turkey's transformation and its future influence: the definition of citizenship and the identification of a new, post-Kemalist but still secular institutional balance and social contract that are acceptable to new and old forces alike.

Constitution-making should also be seen as a vector of international influence. Not only will a Turkey that has built a new house for itself have stronger foundations, but it will offer an example of institutionalized pluralism with sufficient guarantees for minorities that it dissuades use of violence. This will provide a *bona fide* and a powerful model for transition countries that goes beyond the nebulous notion of Turkey as "inspiration" often cited today.

The second piece is EU engagement. The deterioration in Turkey-EU relations in recent years is lamentable. Irrespective of the accession process that remains blocked by refusal to rise to responsibilities on both sides, the relationship with Europe is unavoidable. For better or worse, Turkey has been part of the diverse community of European societies for centuries, developing multiple links with the continent, starting with deep economic ties. At a time when the EU navigates through a severe crisis, it is not surprising that some European leaders are even more reluctant to open the EU's doors to yet a new member, especially one with so many unsettled issues.

But Turkey's pride in going it alone in embittered response to European hesitations should be tempered by the recognition that its destiny is intertwined with the continent's. This is evident in the impact of the eurozone crisis on Turkish growth, and the fact that the development of strong institutions would be easier in the context of continuing Europeanization. It therefore would serve Ankara to keep a strong engagement with Europe, no matter how frustrating. An opportunity beckons in that while the European crisis may be hardening divisions between members and non-members, it also opens up the prospect for Turkey to contribute ideas and resources to the re-founding of Europe on new bases and balances without which its future can be hardly imagined. Current fluidity should be taken by a self-described ascending Turkey as a chance to display leadership and engage more with European counterparts instead of cultivating a national ambition in (not so) splendid isolation.



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If Turkey's leaders are hesitant to do so, then opposition parties and civil society should seize the opportunity to claim the EU banner by fostering the same relationship with Brussels that AKP built after their pro-EU shift in the early 2000s, which was so empowering in their struggle against the old establishment. Moreover, attentive stakeholders from the EU side — from Brussels-based institutions to the plethora of governments and economic interests that still favor Turkey's full integration into the EU — would note that even on the issue of accession, differences within the Turkish elite are greater than assumed. Frustration at the EU's double standards notwithstanding, a sizeable part of Turkish business has grown dissatisfied with the way the government has shrugged at the EU goal at a time when interdependencies between the two economies are painfully on display. Prime Minister Erdoğan's conspicuous omission of EU accession in his goals for 2023 was criticized from within his camp, and squanders a card that many in the region would snatch if they could — the ability to leverage multi-layered relationships with well-established partners for one's own internal development and international standing.

### Conclusion

The temptation for Turkey to continue to see itself on the rise remains strong, but tenuous reality is fast catching up. Turkey has long been described as poised at the crossroads: that junction today is perilous as civil war across the border threatens to fuel conflict at home. Turkey's trajectory will depend on its ability to institutionalize its achievements to date, making it more resilient to such pressures. This requires leaders to place their country before personal ambitions, and a re-engagement with Europe. Today, it seems, Ankara is determined to go the other way, but such a turn is not unavoidable. Energies in the country, if they come to recognize that Turkey's march towards prosperity, stability, and influence is at stake, could at least contain some of the prevailing tendencies, helping to correct a course that is risky to everyone's future. Even before the symbolic date of 2023, the next months — replete as they are with forks in the road — will tell us if a change of mind is beginning to take place.

### About the Authors

Emiliano Alessandri is a Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States based in Washington, DC. Marshall Fund's Washington office. Nora Fisher Onar is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bahcesehir University and a Ron Asmus Policy Entrepreneurs Fellow with the German Marshall Fund.

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