

Awaiting a New Constitution

by *Marta Ottaviani*

Turkey's role in the Mediterranean and Middle East has been helped by its active role in Libya and now in strife-torn Syria. More than ever, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seen as a key player in the region. But despite Turkey's significant advances, the European Union continues to hedge its bets, awaiting the wording of the country's new constitution.



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Turkey is the leading player of the new Mediterranean. Led by charismatic Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the country, a European Union candidate, since 2005, has established itself as a point of reference among the countries involved in the so-called Arab Spring. Ahead for Erdogan's moderate Muslim executive are a number of critical domestic tests, some of them tinged with tension.

Seen from the outside Turkey has a great deal to offer. Its political situation is stable, with Erdogan's Party for Justice and Development (AK) garnering 49.9 percent of the vote in recent national elections, earning a parliamentary majority. It still lacks the absolute majority necessary to rewrite and pass the country's new constitution, expected to see the light of day by the end of 2012. The document is expected to raise the bar on the country's democratic standards in line with demands made by Brussels.

Economically, the country is faring better than many eurozone states. Growth in the third quarter of 2011 confirmed positive trends established earlier in the. In the first six months of 2011, Turkey grew an average of 9.6 percent. This year, experts predict a four percent "phys-

A young Turkish woman with a Syrian flag painted on her forehead protesting against President Bashar Assad in front of the Syrian consulate in Istanbul.

TURKEY	
AREA	783,526 km ²
POPULATION	78,785,548
MEAN AGE	28.5 years
RELIGION	Muslim, (Sunni) 99,8%
FORM OF GOVERNMENT	Parliamentary Republic
SUFFRAGE	Universal (age 18)
HEAD OF STATE	Abdullah Gul (August 2007)
HEAD OF GOVERNMENT	Recep Tayyip Erdogan (March 2003)
GDP	(nominal) \$ 746 billion
INFLATION	6%

iological” drop-off, which still places the country on far more secure footing than many European economies.

Erdogan is aware of his country’s potential and has worked to exploit, particularly in foreign policy terms. Thanks to the three-year-long efforts of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Ankara has maintained strong political and economic relations with most of its regional neighbors. Working from a theoretical doctrine known as “Neo-Ottomanism,” Turkey has forged a number of bold ties intended to fortify its political and economic influence in the region.

The policy has its critics. Some Turkish and international observers have scorned Ankara’s willingness to deal with Iran, which in turn has produced instability in relations with Israel, historical ally for decades.

The radically changed that swept through North Africa and the Middle East last winter served as a catalyst for Ankara in its efforts to strengthen its regional role. Turkey’s moderate Islamic government played a significant role in the Libyan crisis and has become involved in the ongoing Syrian crisis. It has long boasted preferential relationships with countries.

In the case of Libyan, Turkey went from mediator to silent partner in NATO’s efforts to support the anti-Qaddafi insurgency, performing mostly patrol and rescue support. The Syrian situation has developed differently.

Erdogan spend months trying to rein in the crisis, urging Syrian President Bashar Assad to not only promote but also follow through with democratic reforms, ending a pattern of military repression. When that approach failed, Erdogan changed his tune and Turkey, once a key Assad ally, transformed itself into a leading opponent of the regime.

While the policy choice cost Ankara millions in lost investments and contracts, putting a crimp in its booming economy, its vastly widened Turkey’s Mediterranean Muslim sphere of influence. When Erdogan visited Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in September, he was welcomed as guiding light for the whole region. Though a Muslim, he seemed to symbolize the value and effectiveness of secular government.

If Turkey’s star is on the rise abroad, Turkish, so much as to overshadow EU entry negotiations, smoldering tensions and unresolved issues remain under intense scrutiny by observers in Brussels.

The Kurdish question is the most delicate of these outstanding internal dilemmas. Recent months have seen a

revival of violent attacks by the PKK, a terrorist organization founded in 1984 by imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan. The organization seeks the creation of an independent Kurdish state and is unconvinced by Erdogan’s tactics so far. Though the new constitution is expected to give the country’s 15-million strong Kurdish minority greater rights, many Kurds have their doubts regarding a change in attitude. A parliamentary commission that included all national parties, including Kurdish representatives, is already working on the first draft of the document.

The text will be shaped by all the partners in Turkey’s civil society, including its religious minorities, or so says the government. Brussels is watching this process take shape with considerable interest. The last EU report on Turkey acknowledged that it had progressed enormously in recent years, but still underscored inconsistencies and limitations in terms of freedom of expression and media freedoms as well as noting that religions minorities still faced discrimination.

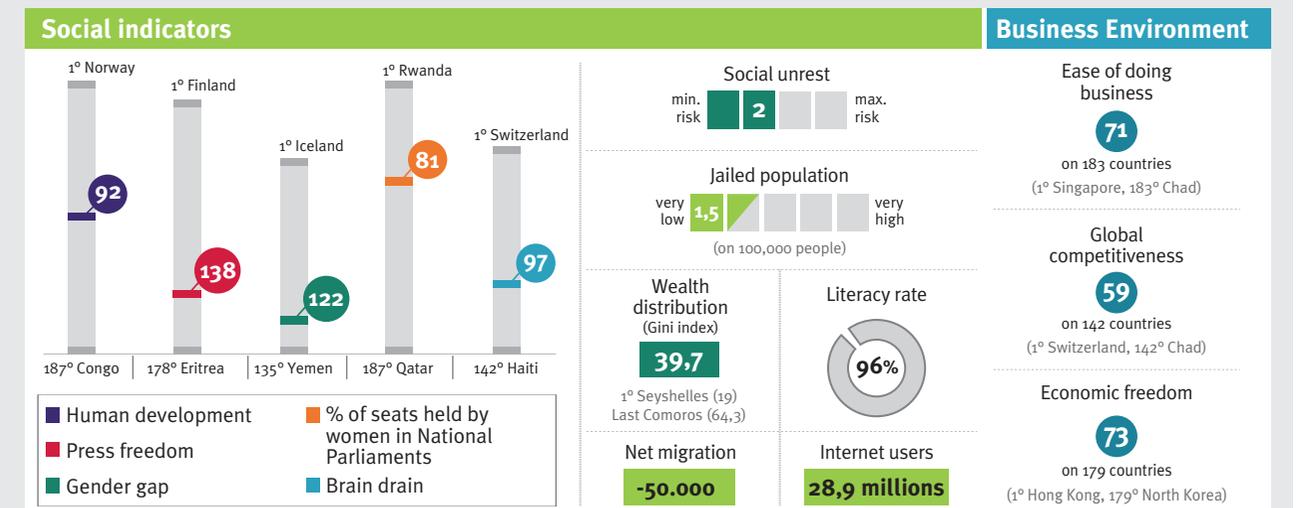
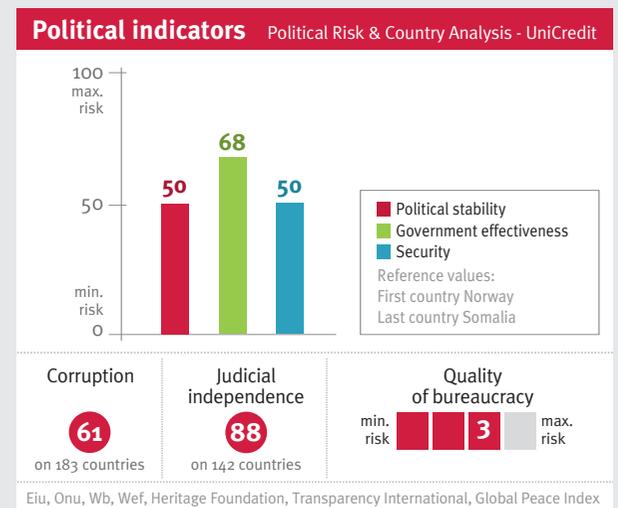
What most troubled the EU was Turkey’s mass arrest of members of the secret organization known as Ergenekon, which has been accused by the government of seeking to

destabilize the country, in particularly the ruling executive. The group is said to number dissident journalists, military, judiciary and intelligence figures. In recent years, some 300 people have been arrested for allegedly belonging to the group.

Most of the country sees the case against Ergenekon as a turning point for the country in its efforts to certify its democratic reputation to the outside world. But some international observers see the singling out of Ergenekon as smokescreen that allows the government to randomly mute potential adversaries and strident critics. More than 70 journalists are have been imprisoned on charges of belonging to Ergenekon. Many are well-known opponents of the Ergodan government, raising obvious questions.

As a result, the year 2012, while a potential turning point, won’t lack for controversy. In June, the European Union presidency will be taken up Cyprus. The island is still divided as a result of the Turkish military intervention in 1974, yielding two states. The Greek majority portion of the island is a EU member but not recognized by Turkey; the Turkish majority state is recognized by Ankara but not internationally.

EU analysts say it’s highly unlikely that Turkey would walk away from EU entry negotiations. At the same time, the appeal of EU involvement has lost a great deal of the luster it held six years ago.



Turkey should not serve as a national role model for other states, but instead as a source of inspiration, an example of a country that has successfully undertaken social and political change in a way that would have been considered unthinkable even a decade ago. This is the view of Genç Siviller (“Youth Civil Society”), among the most active NGOs in the new Turkey. Istanbul-born Merve Alici, 25, one of the movement’s leaders and a University of the Bosphorus sociology graduate, spoke to “east” about the ties between Turkey and the Middle East, Europe, and the future of the country, which his organization wants to see continue along the path toward major internal reform.

Turkey is becoming a model state among nations involved with the so-called Arab Spring. Does Genç Siviller, as a movement, see Turkey in the same way?

We’re not fond of the expression “Turkey as a model.” A model is something anchored. Using the word shows lack of respect for the many people involved in the Arab Spring. It means looking at yourself as something superior. But Turkey can be a source of inspiration, yes.

What are the main differences between Turkey and the Arab Spring countries?

Since the Ottoman Empire, we’ve never had a power vacuum, if you exclude the years up to 1950. Political life here has always seen the presence of a number of parties. Moreover, Turks and Arabs belong to different races. We share a land with these countries, which unites us and makes up a part of our history. The reforms introduced by the Ottoman Empire, for example, were inspired by those introduced in Egypt. There’s always been a dialogue between us, which Genç Siviller seeks to rebuild.

Why this propensity?

Until a few years ago, when the old political order ruled, the Middle East seemed to us something foreign, which we weren’t even trained to consider. Now, Turkey is rebuilding ties with the Middle East with a more precise political scope, namely creating ties with ordinary people.

Let’s talk about Turkey today. In 2012, a new constitution will be introduced. It could represent a real turning point for the democratization of the country. What do you foresee?

As Genç Siviller, we see the country as having changed dramatically in the last eight to 10 years. We would never have thought of being able to speak aloud about the Armenian genocide, to see a Kurdish language channel on national TV, to discuss minority issues or to express suspicions regarding the country’s military establishment. Our goal is to democratize the country. This means defending not only our rights but also those of people who are different from us, including women who wear veils, Kurds, and minorities in general. We’re all human and we want to live in this country together.



What’s happened in Turkey over the last decade?

I think Turkish youth found the courage to tell the army, “You are not our rulers.” We choose those who govern us. Whether it does it well or less well matters less than the fact that it is chosen democratically, by the people.

Turkey seems headed for a stable future. At the same time, public opinion is skeptical as a result of the arrest of militants close to the Kurdish nationalist party and the arrest of journalist on charges of belonging to a terrorist organization. How do you evaluate these incidents?

When we look at these arrests we get the sense of something slipping out of hand. We believe it’s the responsibility of civil society to ensure that voices heard in both government and within the police, so that they step back from the brink. We believe that the new constitution that political forces are working on now will represent the point of no return for the democratization of the country.

Do you believe that Turkey will enter Europe?

What have been Brussels’ biggest mistakes?

We think that Brussels has failed to evaluate the overall situation with the necessary clarity. Turks are losing the certainty of ever entering the European Union and are turning instead toward developing their own national potential.

We think the [entry] process should be speeded up. If not, you risk Turks not even being interested in the EU when the time comes to deal with the issue. ●