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“Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the
Region”**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to testify on the recent protests in Turkey and their implications for democracy in Turkey and its neighborhood. The following is a summary of my prepared remarks.

Turkey, a NATO member state, is an important country for the United States. Situated between the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Europe, Turkey is vital to U.S. interests across these regions. Take for instance, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Turkey is the only country that borders these three nations, and is vital for U.S. policy towards these countries.

According to some analysts, the recent protests that rocked Istanbul and other Turkish cities pose the greatest challenge the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has faced in over a decade in power. What do the protests mean for stability and democracy in Turkey, and for democracy in the Middle East?

Since coming to power in 2002, *the AKP has implemented sound economic policies, which have grown Turkey’s economy and facilitated its membership in the Group of 20. And unlike many other emerging market growth stories, Turkish growth has actually reduced economic inequality and transformed the country into a majority middle-class society for the first time in its history. Yet, the recent protests show that the AKP has, perhaps, become a victim of its own success.*

The middle class which has grown as a result of the party’s economic policies is committed to individual freedoms -- and it is now challenging the AKP’s style of governance and its attempts at political domination.

All this suggests that modernization theory -- the idea that economic development leads to more democracy -- is being validated in Turkey. As countries become middle class, they tend to become irreversibly diverse, developing the bedrock for democratic governance, including consensual politics and respect for individual and minority rights.

The developments in Turkey do not constitute an episode of the “Arab Spring.” Turkey did not experience a proverbial political winter. The country is and remains a democracy.

Nor do the protests suggest a significant weakening of the AKP. By most measures, about 50 percent of Turks continue to support the party. Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has organized a number of rallies to bring his own supporters into the streets as a counterweight to the Gezi protests. These pro-government demonstrations have produced a turnout comparable to the anti-government marches across Istanbul.

Nor are the demonstrations yet another manifestation of the secularist-Islamist cleavage that has defined many of Turkey's political battles in recent years. Although most of the protestors are secular, their rallies are not about secularism per se, but rather about the quality of Turkish democracy and a demand for liberal values.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that these demonstrations present a new dynamic in Turkish politics. Members of the protest movement, roughly representing one half of the country that does not support the governing AKP, have discovered that they have strength in numbers. They have also found out that they can sustain their demonstrations, largely thanks to social media technologies. Indeed, the protests represent Turkey's first massive, grassroots political movement. In the past, grassroots movements never reached a massive scale. Conversely, while Turkey has witnessed several large anti-government protests, such as the rallies of 2007, these demonstrations were organized in a top-down fashion and were linked to the military.

This new form of grassroots and liberal opposition politics could complicate Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's political agenda. Should he, for instance, decide to proceed with transforming the country's parliamentary democracy into a presidential system, he may face a highly effective backlash. Meanwhile, Turkish President Abdullah Gul has already positioned himself as a nonpartisan figure, supporting the protestors' right to assemble and stating that "democracy is not just winning elections."

The new opposition is also likely to shape Turkey's Syria policy. Although most Turks do not support Bashar al-Assad, they are unnerved by Ankara's policy toward the regime, which they believe has exposed Turkey to increased risks and costs. On May 11, 2013 the Turkish border town of Reyhanli suffered a devastating terror attack which claimed the lives of 51 people. This attack followed months of periodic cross-border shelling from Syria and worries about terrorist infiltration into Turkey's urban centers. Accordingly, facing a new and persistent opposition on the streets, Ankara will move toward a more measured position of leading from behind in Syria.

In contrast, Turkey's relationship with the United States is unlikely to suffer much from the unrest. Ankara values its relationship with Washington and the strong rapport that Prime Minister Erdogan shares with President Obama will help resolve any wrinkles that arise from U.S. criticism of Ankara's conduct.

Still, the issue remains, Mr. Chairman, Turkey is divided almost evenly between supporters and opponents of the governing AKP. Recent protests may have deepened this chasm further.

The secular, middle class and liberal voters are demanding respect for freedom of the press, expression, association, and assembly, as well as a voice on environmental policy and urban space. In this regard, the Turkish leadership should take comfort in the fact that, notwithstanding

marginal violent groups that have penetrated some of the protests, *the demonstrations are not directly against the AKP, but rather for individual rights and better democracy.* The Turkish leadership should also avoid giving credit to widespread conspiracy theories which allege that the demonstrations are driven by “outside forces”. Over a million Turks have demonstrated in over 78 Turkish cities over the course of the past month. This is clearly an indigenous Turkish movement, and the country’s government would be better served to listen to it, embracing democracy. In this regard, Brazil is a case in point.

Mr. Chairman, Turkey’s way forward at this juncture overlaps with U.S. interests in the Middle East. Having become an economic motor and soft power nation in the region, Turkey sees itself as a Middle East leader. And Ankara wants Washington to treat it as such. As far as U.S. policymakers are concerned, *Turkey can become a leader in the Middle East only if it shines as an example of liberal democracy.*

To this end, the Turkish government and people would do well to embrace broad individual liberties, including freedoms of assembly, association, media, and expression. At the moment, Turkey is attempting to draft its first civilian-made constitution. This presents Ankara with a unique opportunity to recognize these liberties, and do so without restrictions.

It would be in the interests of all Turks if the new constitution also addressed Turkey’s political fault lines, providing for constitutionally-mandated gender equality, as well as freedom of religion *and* freedom from religion, so that religious, conservative, secular and liberal Turks alike can feel welcome in the new Turkey.

Commitment to liberal democracy would also provide Turkey with much needed stability. Turkey grows because it attracts investment, and international investors are drawn to the Istanbul *Borsa* (stock market) because Turkey is seen as a rare island of stability surrounded by unstable countries. Ankara cannot afford to lose this critical advantage.

What is good for Turkey is also good for the Middle East and for the United States. Turkey can overcome its political tensions by adopting a constitution that respects individual freedoms and recognizes its diversity. This would also mark an important milestone on the path to becoming a source of inspiration for other countries in the Middle East. If Turkey seizes this opportunity, it can become the partner Washington can be proud to have in the region.

Mr. Chairman, the takeaway of today’s conversation, and our message to our ally Turkey, to the country’s citizens and its neighbors should be the following: *democracy is not just about the right to be equal; it is also about protecting the right to be different.*