

Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats Hearing on “Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region?”
Ranking Member Keating, Opening Statement
June 26, 2013, 2 pm, 2172

- Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this timely hearing.
- Turkey has been a US ally in an incredibly rough neighborhood for many decades now.
- For this reason, the political stability and economic strength of Turkey is a matter of importance to many American policymakers, analysts and businesses.
- The membership of Turkey in the Group of 20 along with its growing trade partnerships throughout the region are positive developments not only for Turkey, but also for U.S. national interests.
- Further, the recent news of enhanced prospects for normalization of relations between Israel and Turkey as well as for a long overdue peace accord with the Kurds is welcomed.
- However, it is domestic politics that have now taken center stage in Turkey.
- The electoral dominance of Prime Minister Erdogan’s AK Party for more than a decade has led to the emergence of a seemingly one party system. Other parties have little-to-no ability to influence decision-making, and that has left many Turks feeling frustrated and powerless.
- These feelings are exacerbated by the prime minister’s self-acknowledged “majoritarian” philosophy, namely, that a government elected with a parliamentary majority has no post-election obligation to consult the governed.
- However what most caught the eye of this subcommittee -- and of the world -- has been the prime minister’s seeming sanctioning of brute force by the police against peaceful protesters.
- In the last few weeks, 5 people have died. Some 4,900-plus protesters have been detained and 4000 people were injured.

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- There are countless reports of arrests of doctors treating injured bystanders, young adults using social media to express their frustrations and lawyers attempting to defend the fragile rule of law.
- Further, the rhetoric of the Turkish government has inflamed the situation, as the Prime Minister publicly praises the police and repeatedly distinguishes between those that support him and those that do not.
- For this reason, I am pleased that President Obama, Vice President Biden and Secretary Kerry have made responsible statements calling the Turkish government to account, and I commend them for it. I will speak for myself when I say that, following years of mostly astute governance in Turkey, the Turkish government’s response to the recent protests came not only as a disappointment but as a surprise.
- As we sit here today, the protests continue on, with the Turkish Interior Ministry reporting at least 2.5 million protesters over the past 3-plus weeks.
- In fact, these numbers and the sheer diversity of the protesters represent hope for the emergence of a vibrant, politically engaged generation of Turks that embrace pluralism. If so, the energy of these demonstrations could well become the basis for a re-invigorated, dynamic democracy. That is not a development Mr. Erdogan should fear but rather one he should welcome.
- I look forward to hearing our witnesses’ perspectives on this developing situation and thank especially those that have traveled from Turkey to share their views here today.
- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back my time.