



**Testimony before the
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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?

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Respected members of the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats:

I thank you for the opportunity to share my observations and thoughts on the meaning of the protest movement that started as a reaction to a police action on May 31 against civil society activists who were camping out to protest the cutting down of trees in Gezi Park in Istanbul's Taksim district. The protests throughout Turkey. I will be addressing the impact of these protests on today's Turkey, and their future possible effects.

My observations go a bit beyond those of a veteran journalist. They are also personal as I live very close to the epicenter of the protests at Taksim Square. I myself suffered from the gas that police used so generously on the demonstrators.

The first question that must be answered here is what actually happened in Istanbul on May 31 and June 1, and how to explain it.

The shortest way to define it would be that it was a "social eruption" or "social explosion."

The excessively harsh police intervention against a few hundred protesters in the early hours of May 31 was the final move that led to this explosion. As soon the police assault was reported over social media, tens of thousands of people converged on the park, in Taksim Square, and the surrounding Beyoglu district of Istanbul. When the ensuing clashes between the people and the police could not be contained on June 1, the police were ordered to withdraw from Taksim Square.

How did the events swell and reach the point of an explosion?

Here is a short list of factors that contributed to the eruption:

- The inability of the mainstream media — which was under stiff government pressure — to carry out its basic mission of informing the public and keeping tabs on the

government. Its replacement of basic news reporting instincts with *unabashed* self-censorship has led a significant segment of the public to think that its right to be informed has been sidelined.

I should add here a quick note that Al-Monitor.com, where I am a contributing writer, has been a leader in independent digital media in Turkey, providing Turkish writers of different perspectives a forum to share their views in both Turkish and English.

- Instead of getting the separation of powers we were hoping for after the 2010 referendum, there has been a consolidation of power never before seen during periods of civilian rule in Turkey. The independence of the judiciary has been discarded. Most of the public feels the judiciary has been politicized and that access to justice has been blocked.
- Arbitrary and prolonged political detentions further decreased confidence in the justice system.
- The role of religion in basic education has greatly increased, particularly in the last year, alienating many of Turkey's Alevi and secular citizens.
- Over the last few months, authorities became intolerant of even minor protests and resorted to police violence to disperse them.
- The discrimination and marginalization applied to Alevis became systematic. Alevis, Turkish Alawites, an offshoot of Shia Islam, are believed to constitute 10 to 15 percent of Turkey's population.
- Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's advice to women, at every opportunity, it seems, on how many children they should have and how they should give birth has fostered the perception of interference in personal lives.
- Finally, although Turkey doesn't have a social problem called alcoholism, the government — acting as if there were such a problem — imposed alcohol bans in May under the label of "regulating alcohol," causing a sizable part of society to feel that the government was intervening in their lifestyles and freedoms.

To keep this short list, we must also add the prime minister's habit of using offensive language to denigrate the cultures and lifestyles of those who are not counted as his constituents.

It was Prime Minister Erdogan's policies and the pressure he brought to bear on the public with his narratives that led to this social explosion.

The inability of the political establishment and parliamentary opposition to offer hope to admonished and oppressed segments of society also helped facilitate this social eruption.

How then to analyze the sociopolitical chemistry of this explosion?

The uprising was a spontaneous popular movement without an organization and leadership. The lead actor in this movement is the well-educated, urbanized young generation labeled by the Turkish media as “the ’90s generation.” Most of these young people place themselves outside of established politics. According to polls, they cite restrictions on their freedoms, Erdogan’s authoritarianism, and police brutality as the main reasons behind their taking to streets. What they demand most is their freedoms and ending the violations of their rights.

The difference between them and earlier rebellious generations is that this time, their parents are behind them. They are for peaceful demonstrations, humor and nonviolence. They keep themselves informed and communicate by social media, led by Twitter.

One of their common denominators is a preference for political secularism and their rejection of political conservatism. No valid findings could be unearthed to show that their understanding of secularism resembles the authoritarian secularism of Kemalist Turkey.

Some minor leftist organizations, which have a tradition of resistance and militancy, gave support to this social movement and were able to mobilize in the streets because of their organizational faculties. But none of them had the power, the political culture or the ideology to take this civilian social movement hostage and manipulate it.

In sum, the social movement that began at Gezi Park — in the 15 days of the protesters’ tent camp until they were dispersed by the police — discussed finding ways to defend their freedoms politically. This discussion is continuing in various formats today.

Since June 17, activists have been engaged in stand-still protests in acts of passive disobedience. Every evening they organize synchronized forums in various Istanbul parks where free debate takes place.

This enrichment of the culture of democracy and spreading it to the masses where it will take root is a priceless and never-before-seen civil society movement. For civil society to take its due place as a key actor in the struggle for democracy is a sign of maturity and a healthy society.

Naturally, as I tried to explain at the beginning, this civil-social movement is a reaction to the anger and resentment of the Erdogan government’s Islamic conservatism, its policies that — however you look at them — are sidestepping hard-earned democratic freedoms in Turkey.

This social explosion makes it imperative for us to examine why it happened and what it means for the Turkey of today — and tomorrow.

Prime Minister Erdogan's policies of societal polarization did not cost anything until May 31. But from now on, the government will pay something for its policies of dividing the society on Islamist/secular and Sunni/Alevi fault lines. That price will be instability.

The social explosion in Turkey and government pressures that followed simply washed out the paradigm of the "Turkey model" based on the rule of the Justice and Development Party, also known as the AKP. This was advocated as a model for the Middle East and was accompanied by the term "Muslim democracy," even though it was not applicable.

AKP rule now has two roads to choose from. It has come to a junction.

It can — with or without Erdogan — finally take the steps needed for Turkey to become a real libertarian, pluralist, participatory and secular democracy and as such redefine the "Turkey model" (but correctly this time), or it can continue to drag Turkey toward an Islamic, authoritarian and oppressive regime. If AKP officials opt for the latter, they can't advance their cause without suppressing civil society. A more oppressive and more authoritarian regime cannot maintain stability in Turkey.

One of the prerequisites of stability is the sound management of the peace process with the Kurds. If Turkey abandons democracy, that won't be possible.

It is impossible to give an unequivocal answer to a question frequently asked nowadays: whether a military coup is among the risks to be faced should Turkey destabilize even further. With the purges of 2010-2012, the ability of the military to stage coups has been made extraordinarily difficult. The military has been totally excluded from politics.

The progress of the Turkish economy has to be observed closely. 2014 and 2015 are election years, bringing to mind the possibility that this authoritarian leader may be stiffly challenged at the ballot box should he persist with his decisions and choices that are taking Turkey on a non-democratic path.

Thank you for your attentions and for this opportunity.