

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

Statement for the Record

Kadir Ustun, Ph.D.
Research Director
SETA Foundation at Washington DC

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this hearing on the implications of Turkey's Gezi Park protests for democracy in the region.

Today, what we see in Turkey is the "growing pains" of democracy. The crux of the issue is somewhat paradoxical. We have the most successful and reformist political party in power for more than a decade. However, there are certain segments of the society who are frustrated with some policies but cannot express their discontent through the regular channels of formal politics due to the absence of a viable opposition. The challenge will be to accommodate the legitimate demands and aspirations of many Turkish youths. If it succeeds, Turkish democracy will be even stronger in the years ahead. Turkey's ability to serve as a democratic inspiration for the broader region will strengthen in the future.

The AK Party Decade

The AK Party came to power under very difficult conditions, as the Turkish economy was in shambles in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis. Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) leader Öcalan's capture in 1999 led to a relatively calm period until 2004 but there was no resolution of the Kurdish question in sight. There was political disarray among political parties as a result of ineffective coalition governments under the military's domination of the political scene. The human rights situation and democratic metrics were dismal, noted by many governmental and non-governmental reports published in the US and the EU.

The AK Party defined itself as a conservative democratic party similar to Christian Democrats in Europe. The government set out to reenergize the country's EU bid, which resulted in Turkey's formal candidacy 50 years after its first application to be part of the Union. EU funds flowed into the country and the negotiation process resulted in structural changes with implications for the civil-military balance, economic stability, education and social reforms among others. Many taboo subjects from the Kurdish question to minority rights started to be discussed openly. Lifting of marshal law in eastern part of Turkey and virtual elimination of torture are only some of the improvements on the human rights front.

Economic achievements have made Turkey the 16th largest economy and a G20 member. The Turkish economy's growth rates have been second only to China on average over the past 10 years. Turkey has increased its business ties with most of its trading partners through visa liberalization and easy export policies. Turkey recently paid off its debt to the IMF, which had bailed out Turkey in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis. The current account deficit remains a challenge but the country continues to make substantial investments in its economy, while trying to take advantage of its young yet steadily aging population.

Political and economic achievements were accompanied by an increasingly pro-active, self-confident, and engagement-oriented foreign policy. Turkish foreign policy had traditionally viewed its neighbors with suspicion, trying to undermine Turkey's unity by manipulating the PKK. Instead of "turning its back," the AK Party sought to engage all its neighbors, including Greece and more recently Armenia with varying degrees of success. Turkey's high-level engagement with Syria was put to good use in Turkey's previous efforts to broker a peace deal between Israel and Syria. However, the Cast Lead operation by Israel on Gaza resulted in Turkey's reaction and condemnation. Whenever Turkey interpreted Israel's actions as heavy-handed and destabilizing for the regional peace and security, it condemned them under various governments prior to and including under the AK Party rule.

Political relations between Turkey and Israel gradually deteriorated. When Hamas won the elections in 2005 in Palestine, it was not allowed to participate in formal politics. The Turkish government saw this as unfair treatment of a democratically elected political movement. Turkey's souring relations with Israel culminated in the infamous flotilla (*Mavi Marmara*) incident, where the Israeli commandoes intercepted and raided an international aid flotilla destined for Gaza, resulting in the deaths of 8 Turkish and 1 Turkish-American citizens. Israel refused to deliver Turkey's demand for an apology but President Obama's recent efforts produced an Israeli apology. One of the significant consequences of the weakening of Turkish-Israeli relations is that the US-Turkey relations are much less dependent on the course of Turkish-Israeli relations. Today, both Turkey and the US compartmentalize their relations with Israel.

2010 was a critical year in US-Turkey relations because of the flotilla incident and Turkey's "no" vote on Iran sanctions at the UN Security Council. Turkey, along with Brazil, had just brokered the Tehran Declaration with President Obama's previous encouragement but the US argued that the deal was flawed. Both the flotilla incident and the Iran sanctions vote were damaging to the US-Turkey relations. However, there was an important change in 2011 when Turkey's decision to host the radar as part of NATO's missile defense system convinced many that Turkey's western vocation was solid. Moreover, Turkey's clear stance on the side of the Arab populations rising against authoritarian rulers since early 2012 was critical in its broadly positive reception in the Arab world. Turkey was perceived as a democratic Muslim-majority country with a strong economy, democratic institutions, and soft power. The US policymakers came to value Turkey's positive role in the regional earthquake that was dubbed the "Arab Spring."

Challenges Ahead for Turkish Democracy

Political and economic achievements under the AK Party resulted in a much better democracy overall, especially when compared to the 1990s. There are, however, challenges Turkey needs to tackle especially if it wants to become a regional player.

Turkey has an ambitious goal to become one of the top ten economies of the world by 2023, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic. Turkey's aspiration to become a regional player is closely tied to its economic rise similar to other emerging nations such as the BRIC countries. The Turkish economy has a lot of experience and quality standards due to its long-standing trade ties with Europe. It is a sufficiently diverse economy highly dependent (Turkey imports around 75 percent of its energy) on foreign oil and gas resources. Sustaining economic growth, reducing energy dependency, weathering the global economic crisis, and managing its current account deficit are some of the economic challenges Turkey faces.

On the political front, the most pressing issue is the resolution of the Kurdish question. The government is engaged in a "settlement process" to end the more than 30 years of conflict with the PKK, which has claimed more than 40,000 lives. The "settlement process" is the continuation of the 2009 "democratic opening" when the Turkish government set out to tackle the Kurdish question. Following a series of reforms allowing the expression and use of the Kurdish language, the government convinced the military establishment that the problem could not be resolved through military means only. This is a policy endorsed by the US administration.

The Turkish government adopted a two-pronged approach: it would continue to respond to the PKK militarily but it would also negotiate with the parliamentarians of the Kurdish political party. In early 2013, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced that the "relevant branches" of the government (Turkish intelligence) were conducting talks with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. In his Kurdish new year's message (Newroz), Öcalan declared the end of the armed struggle and the beginning of the political struggle only.

Once the PKK militants withdraw from Turkey, the government will move to address Kurdish demands (dubbed "normalization"). The government initiated the so-called "People of Wisdom" initiative (group of intellectuals, journalists, and activists have been visiting all cities in Turkey) to reach out to the public and listen to their perspectives on the resolution of the Kurdish question. The reports produced at the end of this public diplomacy campaign will help guide government actions on the issue. So far, the "settlement process" has gone relatively smoothly despite provocations, such as the assassination of a high-level PKK leader in Europe, to halt it. If the government is able to end the conflict, this will have a tremendous impact on Turkey's democratization and regional stabilization.

However, the current anti-democratic laws, such as the Anti-Terror Law, constitute a true impediment to the enlargement of political and personal freedoms. For example, "praising" a terrorist organization has been a crime under the Anti-Terror Law. With the

recent passage of the 4th reform package recently, praising or propagating for terrorist organizations will no longer be considered a crime unless it constitutes an imminent threat or incites violence.

The AK Party government has worked to increase religious rights and freedoms for the minorities at unprecedented levels. Through several “openings,” the AK Party government has sought to engage religious minorities such as Christians and sectarian minorities such as Alevi citizens. Religious minority issues have traditionally been couched in a narrowly nationalistic discourse, which meant that religious minorities were seen as outside the national identity and at times even as agents of outside influences.

By adopting a language of rights and freedoms for everyone, including religious people in general, the AK Party government has sought to support the inclusion of religious minorities by the broader society. The return of previously confiscated property and the reopening of various churches for worship (such as the opening of the restored Akhtamar Church in Van) are among some of the policies the government pursued to reach out to Turkey’s religious minorities. It will be crucially important for the government to continue such efforts and accommodate the demands of these groups for the sake of religious pluralism and democratic consolidation.

Alevis in Turkey have historically been a disadvantaged group largely due to misunderstandings and ignorance about their culture. As members of a sect within Islam, Alevis differ from other sects not on the basis of theology but mostly in cultural terms. The government has made gestures to the Alevi community (for example, the Prime Minister’s apology for the Dersim massacre in 1937 and 1938) but it will need to engage them more consistently and directly to incorporate their legitimate demands in the new system. Currently, the most pressing issue for the Alevi community is the status of their houses of gathering (*Cemevis*) and recognition of their cultural identity. Alevi leaders regularly express frustration with the People’s Republican Party’s (CHP) unwillingness to address removal of articles from the constitution that ban dervish lodges and shrines.

The need for a fully civilian constitution has been the most agreed upon item in Turkish politics over the past several decades. However, successive efforts have failed and governments had to settle for minor amendments. The most consequential changes to the constitution happened with the constitutional referendum of 2010, which abolished articles that protected coup stagers. The changes paved the way for the prosecution of military personnel involved in coups to be tried in civilian courts instead of military courts only. The referendum (passed by 58 percent favorable and 42 percent unfavorable votes) also entailed reform of the judiciary (civilian involvement in high court appointments through the parliament), afforded economic and social rights (collective bargaining rights for government employees), and strengthened individual freedoms (the establishment of the ombudsman). Forging a truly civilian constitution will be critical to consolidation of democracy in Turkey.

The ensuing plethora of court cases against military personnel suspected of coup plotting received a lot of international attention due to long trial proceedings among other

problems. In fact, the prime minister himself complained about the shortage of high-level military personnel due to ongoing trials. The long trials and outdated judicial processes meant delays in the speedy delivery of justice. Turkey has introduced several judicial reform bills but there is still much to improve in the judicial system.

The current government is also trying to reenergize its EU bid, which remains crucial for democratic consolidation. Yesterday's news on opening a new chapter on regional cooperation is welcome news. Many EU chapters remain closed due to Europe's economic problems and "cold feet" about Turkey's membership. However, various Turkish ministries continue to implement structural adjustments to be ready when the chapters are opened in the future. Both the President Gül and the government officials repeatedly call on European leaders to revitalize Turkey's accession talks, as they continue to see it as a strategic goal despite the increasingly diminishing public support for membership.

Gezi Park Protests

Gezi Park protests can be likened to "Occupy Wall Street" movement rather than the Arab revolutions. The disproportionate use of force by the police against a small group of protestors occupying the Gezi Park quickly snowballed into much larger protests against the government. Mostly young groups frustrated with some government policies joined in the protests. Protests are much more akin to those in Spain, Greece, Britain, France, and the US.

Three major groups have participated in the protests. The biggest group has been composed of middle and upper middle class urbanites angry not only about Gezi Park redevelopment project but also about certain policies adopted by the government, such as the regulations on the sale of alcohol (similar regulations exist in the US and Europe). Some of these policies resulted in divisive controversies similar to those over stem-cell research, abortion, and gun control debate in the US and Europe.

The second most significant group has been from among young CHP supporters and the ultranationalist wing of the party. The youths are increasingly disenchanted by the political system, as they see no hope of challenging the dominant ruling party in the absence of a strong leadership. CHP is split on how to approach the government's initiative to resolve the Kurdish question. Discontent created by the lack of representation and the Kurdish "settlement process" is a major motivator for this group of demonstrators.

The last group is composed of some marginal leftist groups, some of which are illegal organizations implicated in various terrorist attacks (DHKP-C members were indicted to have attacked the US embassy in Ankara). The government tried to make a distinction between these three groups, promising to listen to the legitimate demands about Gezi Park. The prime minister's harshest words were directed against the third group, which engaged in violence and vandalism (rocks, knives, Molotov cocktails, fireworks, and guns were used by some protestors), but the distinction and the nuance was lost in translation.

Having met the protestors in person in a 4.5 hour long meeting, the Prime Minister announced that the government would respect the current court injunction blocking the redevelopment project. If the court decided to remove the injunction, the government promised that it would hold a plebiscite. Protestors, in return, announced that they would continue to occupy the park and hold demonstrations, which resulted in further police action to clear the park and Taksim Square. The prime minister's rhetoric has sharpened after the protestors' refusal to end the protests.

The government perceives the continuation of protests, despite its efforts to reach out to them and a government apology to the peaceful protestors, as ill intentioned. Thus, the AK Party decided to hold rallies around the country under the theme, "Respect for the Democratic Will," reportedly attracting more than a million AK Party supporters in Istanbul alone. The government argues that the marginal groups and CHP members are orchestrating a campaign to undermine the democratically elected government by taking to the streets, hence the government's repeated references to the "ballot box" as the ultimate jury. High attendance at nationwide AK Party meetings demonstrate that the government may emerge out of this episode with an even stronger victory in the local elections scheduled for March 2014.

The Gezi Park protests have resulted in a lively debate throughout the political spectrum about basic rights and freedoms as well as what an advanced democracy should look like. The basic dynamics of the protests are fundamentally different from the Arab revolutions where there was no meaningful representation of the popular will. Political representation is actually very high in the current makeup of the Turkish parliament (96 percent of the votes are represented) but the absence of a viable opposition frustrates disenchanted youths.

Turkey's takeoff over the past decade created a new generation of youths, who are much more educated, economically comfortable, and increasingly globalized. They have only known AK Party governments in their adult lives. Whatever aspirations, frustrations, and discontent they may have cannot adequately be expressed in the political scene through the opposition parties. One of the biggest challenges for the AK Party is to engage this segment of the protestors.

The same goes for the CHP, which is in fact at a crossroads. The struggle between the hardline ultranationalists and the moderates is pulling the party apart. CHP will have to transform itself to a center-left party and reach out to these youths or it will find itself fighting the wars of a bygone era. The ultranationalist wing is currently the strongest faction within the party and it regularly employs an anti-Western and anti-imperialist rhetoric. It continues to oppose any changes to the "unchangeable articles" of the 1980 constitution. The party also criticized the stationing of the NATO radar in Turkey and parliamentarians paid several visits to Syrian President Assad. The party backtracked on its initial support for the "settlement process" in resolving the Kurdish question. Such a posture prevents the main opposition party from breaking from its ultranationalist wing and incorporating young people who are disillusioned with the old politics.

Future of US-Turkey Relations

Turkey's relations with the United States over the last decade witnessed wild swings and shifts. Turkey's past decade under the AK Party coincided with the US invasion of Iraq, the financial meltdown in the US (which transformed into a global economic crisis) as well as a relative decline of US stature in the world. This period also overlapped with dramatic changes in the Middle East, as the ousting of longstanding authoritarian leaders led to the emergence of a generation of new leaders across the Arab world. Today, a new Turkey as a regional power is faced with a new US effort to reconsider its role in the region and around the globe.

The US-Turkey relationship is probably in the best shape it has been in recent memory. President Obama's first overseas visit was to Turkey and it was welcome news to the Turkish public and policymakers. President Obama called the US-Turkey relationship a "model partnership," signaling a new US approach to Turkey. Obama's first term witnessed serious challenges, threatening to damage this vision. However, the special personal rapport between President Obama and the Prime Minister Erdoğan helped American and Turkish policymakers overcome and respect their differences.

When the revolutions and turmoil were unleashed throughout the Middle East in early 2011, Turkey emerged once again as a stabilizing force. When the revolution spread to Syria, Turkey was confronted with the most serious challenge of the Arab Spring. Turkey spearheaded efforts to convince the Assad regime to accommodate the people's demands to avoid the violent quagmire we have witnessed ever since. Turkey's efforts proved insufficient as the Syrian regime saw it as an existential fight for its own survival. The most recent decision of the "Friends of Syria" to provide the opposition with arms is welcome yet insufficient progress from the Turkish perspective. Turkey will continue to ask the international community to help the Syrian opposition and address the humanitarian situation.

The sectarian tensions are increasing in the region as a result of the Syrian conflict. Turkey is one of the few powers that can pursue a non-sectarian policy although it is increasingly seen as a Sunni power despite its deeply entrenched secular politics. As we have seen in the recent spread of violence to Lebanon, sectarian violence continues to threaten regional stability and may define the next decade, especially if the Syrian conflict continues to burn. The US and Turkey have a common interest in reducing the sectarian implications and spillover effects of the conflict, which has already drawn Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran into a proxy war.

Turkey's "settlement process" has the potential to contribute to regional stability, as PKK activities along the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria threatened security over the past decades. Kurdish political movement seems to have given up any secessionist demands, which will push Turkey to deepen its relations with Kurds throughout the region, as it has with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq.

The current negotiations between the US and Europe on a transatlantic free trade agreement have the potential to further deepen US-Turkey ties. Turkey has been a

signatory to the Customs Union agreement with the EU without first achieving membership status. It has benefited from the agreement in increasing its competitiveness but the European businesses have been the main beneficiaries. If the US and Turkey can embark on free trade agreement talks, this will further improve relations between the two countries and strengthen the transatlantic alliance.

The US and Turkey have strong common interests. Their cooperation is important not only for bilateral relations but also for stability and peace in the broader Middle East. Turkey has critical relevance for the US foreign policy goals, including withdrawal from Afghanistan, stability in Iraq, resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, ending the Syrian conflict, and achieving peace between Israel and Palestine among others.

Turkey has proven time and again that it is a dynamic democracy with a vibrant civil society despite its flaws and imperfections. The debate today in Turkey is not on whether or not to have democracy but on how to create a better democracy that embraces all segments of the society. This in itself is a testimony to the country's commitment to democratic ideals and the rule of law.