

# The Gezi Park Protests: Time for a New U.S. Approach to Turkey

by **Howard Eissenstat**

## SUMMARY

The durability and passion of the Gezi Park protests should serve as a wake-up call not only to the Turkish government, but also to the United States.

The protests have become a catalyst for millions of Turkish citizens who believe the usual levers of democratic governance have simply stopped being responsive.

Though he has reason to feel confident, Prime Minister Erdoğan's response to the protests has demonstrated remarkably little flexibility, exacerbated by his tough, brusque demeanor.

The U.S. response since the onset of the crisis has been consistent and strong, but it is important that this rare frankness become a regular feature of Turkish-American relations.

The U.S. should continue to publicly address human rights abuses, while insisting on the right to peaceful protest: real reform is most likely to occur if abuses are followed with public criticism of Turkey's human rights record.

Amidst ongoing protests in Turkey, the media has focused its attention on both the causes of the crisis and the Turkish government's response. Despite this focus, there have been noticeably few assessments of potential outcomes, or recommendations for a broader U.S. response. This brief attempts to help fill that gap, with a view towards informing U.S. policy.

The wave of protests and police violence that have shaken Turkey since May 28 were predictable, even if no one actually predicted them. Just as a traffic accident precipitated the first Intifada in 1987, the police operation against the protestors in Gezi Park served as a catalyst for the ignition of deep, long-standing tensions.

The durability and passion of these protests should serve as a wake-up call not only to the Turkish government, but also to the United States. For the Turkish government, the protests demonstrate that it must broaden its understanding of a democratic society. For Turkey to remain successful, the Erdoğan government must demonstrate that it is responsive not only to its political base, but also to the sensitivities and concerns of the approximately fifty percent of the population that does not vote for the AKP. For the United States, these protests highlight both Erdoğan's limitations as a political leader and the weakness of "quiet diplomacy" in addressing Turkey's human rights abuses.

## CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

In many ways, the Gezi Park crackdown is nothing out of the ordinary. Efforts to stifle dissent and peaceful protests with heavy-handed police tactics have been used with increasing regularity and intensity over the past several years. It was precisely the trivial nature of the protest and the excessive force used against it that made "Occupy Gezi" a rallying cry for so many different frustrations. The park protest has become a catalyst for millions of Turkish citizens who believe that their values and needs are ignored as the world around them is transformed through revolutionary state reforms. For these citizens, the usual levers of democratic governance have simply stopped being responsive.

This frustration is borne of the ruling AKP's own remarkable success. The AKP is, by any standard, a remarkable political machine that has delivered

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measurable benefits to the country. Two problems emerge from this. First, quirks of the Turkish parliamentary system, combined by the incompetence of the opposition, have rewarded the party with an overwhelming majority in Parliament. Second, the AKP has leveraged its control of the government to assert even greater control of the bureaucracy. Now, after more than a decade in power, the interweaving of government and bureaucracy is so entrenched that Turkey is, effectively, a democratically elected single party state.

These successes are exacerbated by Prime Minister Erdoğan himself. In many ways, Erdoğan is an attractive personality. His tough, brusque charisma is well received in a society that values strong-willed, patriarchal figures. Yet, he can be intolerant and disdainful of criticism and he seems to take unseemly pleasure in demonstrating the weakness of the opposition. Recent actions, including new limitations on alcohol, a campaign against public displays of affection, and the destruction of major cultural landmarks are not simply unpopular, they seem to be specifically aimed at antagonizing broad sections of society that did not vote for him.

One important example indicative of the AKP’s authoritarian tendencies is the party’s treatment of Turkey’s Alevi population. Many Alevis have been anxious over their perception of Turkish society’s creeping “Sunnification” under the AKP. The Alevi, long marginalized in Turkey, have sensed an open antagonism in AKP statements and policies. This has been particularly true since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. For many Alevi, the AKP’s decision to name a new bridge across the Bosphorus after Selim I, an Ottoman sultan who massacred tens of thousands of Alevi subjects, was viewed as a conscious and gratuitous slap in the face: yet another example of the ways in which the AKP was disdainful of them and their concerns. Not surprisingly, Anatolian towns with large Alevi populations, like Antakya (Hatay) and Tunceli (Dersim), and urban neighborhoods like Istanbul’s Gazi Mahallesi, have been the focus of tensions these past two weeks.

Erdoğan’s response to the protests has demonstrated remarkably little flexibility. Erdoğan has showed disdain towards the protests, calling participants “bandits” and “hooligans.” He has termed twitter “a social disease” for its role in helping protestors organize and chronicle abuses. He has called international critics “ill-informed” and hypocritical, while suggesting that financiers and unnamed “foreign powers” were behind the protests. He has already started to crack down on critics. Criminal proceedings have started against not only protestors, but also individuals who voiced support of the protests on social media. Most troublingly, Erdoğan has hinted that his supporters could take to the streets if the protests continue. Already, in his family’s hometown of Rize, a crowd of counter-protesters chased a small group of protesters from the streets.

## **THE DANGERS TO TURKEY**

Prime Minister Erdoğan has reason to feel confident. Like the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, “Occupy Gezi” is a weak coalition unable to organize

a clear, alternative political vision for the country. Fractures within it are already becoming evident. Moreover, Erdoğan remains the most popular politician in Turkey and there is no evidence to suggest the events of the past two weeks have undermined his standing with his electoral base. Even if early elections were called, it is not clear whether the AKP would lose a significant number of votes. With rigid control of the bureaucracy and security services, Erdoğan has no need to mobilize his supporters, though he undoubtedly could do so.

Erdoğan may not need to negotiate, but he should. The current crisis holds real risks for him, Turkey, and the international community. On an individual level, Erdoğan should worry about the repercussions of these protests for his own long-term political success. The crisis puts at risk his ambition to engineer a new presidential system that would allow him to continue to dominate Turkish politics for years to come. Opinion polls suggest that the Turkish public is still wary of this change. Perhaps more importantly, Erdoğan would likely face rivals within his own party, most notably from the faction associated with the powerful Gülen Movement. The movement has long been uneasy about Erdoğan's aggressive style, even if it shares his long-term vision for Turkey's future. It is noteworthy that Turkish President Abdullah Gül, who is close to the movement, has taken a markedly more liberal approach than Erdoğan in his response to the crisis.

More important than Mr. Erdoğan's personal ambitions, however, are the potential costs of this crisis to the country as a whole. At a very basic level, the crisis has damaged Turkey's economy and weakened Turkey's international standing. Turkey has leveraged its position as a "Muslim democracy" with considerable success. Its much-discussed "soft power," however, has been fundamentally undermined over the past two weeks. Both Western allies and Middle Eastern neighbors will look at Turkey in a new light moving forward. It is hardly surprising that the Syrian regime has watched the crisis in Turkey with undisguised glee, but the reality is that few will be speaking of the "Turkish model for the Middle East" in the near future.

More significantly, there is a danger that this crisis could undermine the peace process with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The response of Kurdish leadership to the crisis has been muddled. On one hand, imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has sent a message of support to the protesters. On the other, a member of the Kurdish negotiating team, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, was apparently removed from his position because his leading role in the Gezi protests was seen as a provocation to the AKP. Maintaining a unified Kurdish position in the negotiations was already a challenge. If a broad government crackdown on dissent ensues, it will become impossible for democratic elements of the Kurdish coalition to continue negotiating with the AKP-led government.

While the current crisis poses no immediate threat to the government's control over state institutions, the situation has the potential to spiral out of control. Politicized street violence was a consistent feature of Turkish politics through much of the twentieth century, though absent in recent years. The current crisis has demonstrated the potential for violence still exists.

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The AKP has good reason to be confident in its ability to win elections. Millions of Turks still support the party and its vision for Turkey’s future. It still boasts some of the most impressive personalities in Turkey’s recent political history. But without a serious effort to reach out to the opposition and a willingness to acknowledge and value Turkey’s diversity, Turkey faces a grim future. Erdoğan has the strength of character and charisma to engineer a change of course. The question is whether he has the imagination.

### THE AMERICAN RESPONSE

The U.S. response since the onset of the crisis has been consistent and strong. While highlighting American friendship and the importance of Turkey to U.S. interests, the Obama Administration has made its frustration with Erdoğan’s response refreshingly clear. The Turkish government responded, predictably, with counter-accusations and a reminder from Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu that his country “is not a second-class democracy.”

However, the primary concern with U.S. policy is that this rare frankness has not yet become a regular feature of Turkish-American relations. Far too often, the U.S. has relied on quiet diplomacy with little or no effect on Turkey’s behavior. Historically, private criticism of Turkey’s human rights record has not lead to a meaningful change in Turkish policy. On human rights, it is only when criticism is made publicly that Turkey is inclined to respond.

Perhaps the best example of how public criticism has affected change is the manner in which the Turkish government moved to limit prosecutions under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which criminalizes the “denigration of Turkishness.” After a wave of international opprobrium, the government took positive steps to limit prosecutions. Although the statute remains, 301 prosecutions are now exceedingly rare. Similarly, rulings against Turkey in the European Court of Human Rights have been the primary engine for judicial reform in Turkey.

Generally, Turkish reforms have been half-hearted and minimalist, aimed at ending international criticism rather than embracing the spirit of real reform. Turkey remains an “illiberal democracy” committed to democratic institutions, but not necessarily democratic values. While AKP dominance will continue, the protests have signaled a seeming end to the status quo. The U.S. government’s openness in voicing concern over police violence in Turkey should set the tone for future engagement with Ankara. Quiet diplomacy has its place, but when it comes to curtailing Turkish human rights abuses, public statements have a far greater effect. Prime Minister Erdoğan typically responds with grand public umbrage to outside criticism, but in practice, it is precisely this risk to Turkey’s international standing that is most likely to force a change of course. A greater U.S. emphasis on Turkey’s human rights record will serve the interests of both countries in the long run.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***The U.S. should continue to publicly address and expose human rights abuses, while insisting on the right to peaceful protest.*** Real reform is most likely to occur if Turkey's allies, the foreign press, and international institutions continue to highlight the weaknesses of Turkey's human rights record.
- ***The United States must recognize that the prospect of an end to Turkey's conflict with its Kurdish population can only come about in the context of greater democratization.*** Some elements of the U.S. government have been wary of criticizing Turkey's human rights record for fear of undermining negotiations between Turkey and the PKK. In fact, however, it is only in the context of a more liberal Turkey that such a peace is possible. Should the authoritarian tendencies of AKP rule become more pronounced, the negotiations will fail.
- ***Greater attention must be given to the Alevi in U.S. assessments of Turkey's human rights record.*** In contrast to many other human rights issues in Turkey, U.S. officials have largely ignored the condition of this group, despite the marginalization and discrimination that they have witnessed. Precisely because they undermine many of the categories that the AKP uses to frame its legitimacy, the Alevi are as much a test for Turkish democracy as the Kurds have been. The patterns of protest in Turkey over the past two weeks underline this reality.
- ***More sophistication in Congress on Turkey's human rights record is needed.*** One challenge in U.S. policy towards Turkey is that few on the Hill have considered the country seriously beyond its role in regional security and trade. A useful first step might be for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to initiate hearings on Turkey's human rights record. Another option might involve encouraging the large Turkey Caucus on Capitol Hill to communicate its concerns with Turkey's human rights record in a joint statement, and in regular interactions with Turkish officials and trips to Istanbul.
- ***The U.S. must hope for the best from Erdoğan's government, but prepare for the possibility of a dramatically worsening situation in Turkey.*** Turkey has experienced periods of extreme civil unrest and violence in the past and Erdoğan remains intransigent. The potential for miscalculation is great. The United States must make clear to Turkey that democratic ideals and self-interest coincide. Turkey's stability, prestige, and economic growth will not continue if it remains an illiberal democracy, unwilling to address the concerns of millions of its citizens.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Eissenstat received his PhD in Modern Middle East History from UCLA in 2007 and was a post-doctoral fellow at Brandeis University in 2008-2009. He is currently an assistant professor of Middle East History at St. Lawrence University. Eissenstat writes on twentieth century Turkish history as well as contemporary Turkish politics and foreign policy. He has lectured at the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State and the Canadian Foreign Service Institute.

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