



Where is Turkey Headed? Gezi Park, Taksim Square, and the Future of the Turkish Model

**Testimony by Ambassador James F. Jeffrey
Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
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When Barack Obama made his 2009 trip to Turkey, his first bilateral visit as president, he did not single out Turkey as a model per se. Rather, he made the point that Turkey “is not where East and West divide— this is where they come together.” Along with this, he stressed America’s willingness to work with Turkey and, above all, paid homage to Turkey’s status as a successful democracy. Today, many inside and outside Turkey question whether it will remain the same successful democracy, open economy, and reliable security partner we have seen in recent decades. There is cause for concern, but there is also time for the Turks, and it is in the first instance their job to sort out the issues behind the Gezi Park demonstrations and tailor their political process as they see fit.

The demonstrations that broke out in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in Istanbul in late May represent the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Erdogan’s AK Party rule in the eleven years the party has been in power. The government has survived the turmoil and is now on the offensive with a campaign of rhetorical abuse—and judicial action—against those participating in or supporting the demonstrations. I see no risk of the government falling over its handling of this whole issue. But the government, particularly Erdogan, will now face serious opposition if he attempts to put in place his ambitious program to consolidate Turkey’s presidential system through constitutional change and to have himself elected the first president under this new system. While that outcome is still possible, such an ambitious reordering of the Turkish political landscape, which would be the most momentous since Ataturk and Inonu, looks less and less certain given the supermajorities Erdogan is looking for in the 2014 presidential elections and constitutional referendum.

Turkey, and Erdogan—were he to find a way to reverse his commitment not to run for another term as prime minister—can survive without problem within the current constitutional political framework. But what was shown by the demonstrations and the government’s reaction to them is that Turkey is increasingly split into two quite different political groupings and that the government itself is contributing to further polarization of the society. This is the situation of greatest concern to those of us who follow Turkey closely. What in particular has troubled observers, including me, and the U.S. government, is the attitude of some, but not all, of the government leaders. These leaders, including the prime minister, have generally demonized all of the demonstrators and are increasingly criminalizing peaceful protest and even free speech if supportive of the demonstrators. This calls into question the government’s commitment to free speech and assembly, to the principle of proportionality, and, at bottom, to the democratic principle that minorities cannot simply be ignored. This “majoritarian” approach to democratic rule, which we have alas seen elsewhere in the region, ignores a key component of democracy: that it cannot encompass just the rule of the majority, but must mobilize at least the willingness of the minority to accept that rule and to feel itself part of the larger political society. That feeling, and willingness, are in play now, and as long as that is so, Turkey’s stability and chances for further political, economic, and social progress are at risk.

Impact on the United States

How does this affect U.S. interests? Turkey cannot, any more than the United States globally, or China in East Asia, be instrumentalized as a “model” for other societies to follow. With few unique exceptions—such as the United States immediately after World War II—international relations usually does not work in so direct a fashion. . Nevertheless, Turkey has demonstrated that a Muslim-majority country anchored in part in the broader Middle East could adopt Western political, economic, and security systems, prosper under all of them, and become a partner to the United States and European Union. Turkey’s relative success or failure in this regard does have some effect on the populations of other countries in the region.

But, more directly, a Turkey confident of its internal situation and economic progress is more likely to play an active and positive role in the region, to the extent feasible in close coordination with the United States. Although such U.S.-Turkish coordination has been particularly close in the Obama administration, continued social unrest and resulting questions about the nature of Turkish democracy will make this coordination more difficult. A distracted Turkish government could well ally itself further with anti-Western elements that support its hardline policies. The United States would then be obliged to speak out on violations of democratic principles, rendering cooperation and coordination even more problematic. Nonetheless, assuming that Turkey remains reasonably stable under a democratic system, continued partnership will be possible. Under the chaotic circumstances that reign in the region, this partnership will, in fact, remain essential in dealing with Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Israel’s role in the region.

But here, another caution. Many analysts not only overstress the ‘model’ concept but also project a Turkey that is little more than a faithful follower of Western, especially U.S., values and specific interests. Thus, when Turkey inevitably deviates in some way from our “expectations,” incomprehension, indignation, and even anger arise on our part. This all flows from a misunderstanding of Turkey’s role in the world, and with us. In my view, Turkey is not in the same category as the EU states, Japan, South Korea, and a number of other close allies. In these countries, eternal bonds with, and security subordination to, the United States are political givens for the leaderships and populations. But this is not the case with Turkey: it is an independent international operator, similar to India or Brazil, but with extraordinarily high popular skepticism of the United States and the EU. Likewise, it generally shares the same political and economic values as the West and is integrated into various Western institutions. Unlike India or Brazil, however, Turkey has a longstanding security relationship with us, shared security interests, and strong institutional security arrangements—from NATO membership to massive U.S. arms purchases—that are central to its security and its regional role. This produces a strong tendency to consider and if possible go along with U.S. initiatives, as seen in Afghanistan. But Turkey will act independently, particularly in its ‘near abroad,’ and expect us to back it, rather than Turkey automatically backing us. This was true before the Erdogan government, and remains true today. In this regard, we need to remember that with its huge burden of Syrian refugees and the actions of the PKK-offshoot PYD along the Turkish border, Turkey’s regional security is at stake in a way that ours is not,

What Should We Do?

The United States, though speaking out repeatedly about Turkey’s actions and statements being at variance from our view of democratic norms, has nonetheless been restrained in its reaction. That is a wise decision. First, if we are faithful to the concept of democracy, then we recognize that only the people of a given state, not outsiders, have the right to pass judgment on the government and the demonstrators. Second, publicly condemnation of Turkey and Erdogan would be strongly counterproductive. It would not push the Turkish government to tailor its response, but, as I have seen repeatedly in the past, would make us the central problem, lessening any chance of a more compromising government position.

Our goal thus should be to do whatever is in our power, mainly privately and without antagonizing, to ensure that a complete and honest debate takes place in Turkey and to encourage the Turks to resolve the serious splits in their society in a democratic, peaceful manner. This is not only an end in itself for a more successful, more stable Turkey, but is also essential if we want to continue to work effectively with Turkey on the huge range of problems we face together in the broader Middle East and more widely in Eurasia. These problems are the most serious we have encountered in the Middle East in three decades, and regional stability, the survival of regimes, the security of the oil trade, and even the overall structure of U.S.-led international security are all at risk. We need Turkey by our side, and Turkey needs us. But from America to Anatolia, we all need a stable, democratic Turkey.