

The Tale of a Turkish Summer: Is there a Link between “Occupy Gezi” and the IMF?

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Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's fall from grace has manifested itself in Istanbul's Taksim Square. Taksim Square now resembles Egypt's Tahrir Square. What is interesting to note is that the timing of the massive protests comes a month after Turkey paid its debts off to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Taksim Gezi Park (or simply Gezi Park) was once part of Istanbul's Armenian cemetery. Today, it is essentially the last green space inside Istanbul. The park is situated within Taksim Square, which itself is considered the heart of Istanbul, Turkey's business centre and largest, most populous city.

As a gathering place, Taksim is the equivalent of London's Trafalgar Square, the Place de la Bastille in Paris, Kiev's Nezalezhnosti (Independence) Square, Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, and Cairo's Tahrir Square. It serves a similar function as London's Hyde Park and New York City's Central Park for the residents of Istanbul. Aside from its ecological value and aesthetics, it has historically been an important and indispensable spot for political and social rallies and protests of all stripes and colours. Traditionally, Turkey's largest May Day rallies take place in Taksim and it is an important gathering place for Turkish trade unionists and activists.

There should be little wonder as to why the plans to cut all the trees down in Gezi Park and build a brand new shopping mall for tourists—complete with an Ottoman theme—in its place have been bitterly opposed by many of the inhabitants of Istanbul. One of the last open spaces for public assembly and demonstrations in the city would be taken away with the destruction of Gezi Park. Angry residents of the city have actually been protesting the commercial gentrification and re-development of Istanbul for some time before the protests in Gezi Park erupted. One large protest was against the demolition of the Emek Cinema, a cultural heritage landmark with a mixed baroque and rococo design.

The cinema was finally destroyed in 2013 to build another shopping mall. Other protests have been against the destruction of the city's disappearing green spaces. These events have led to the development of an eclectic urbanite movement united under what can be conceptualized and described as the banner of Henri Lefebvre's “the right to the city.” Istanbul's Right to the City Movement is actually part of a global phenomenon where urban dwellers are demanding the right to democratically and collectively control the development and resources in their cities. Yet, there is much more to the protests in Taksim. The demonstrations are no longer about the trees and development contracts, but about Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP.

Re-development plans have ignored the opinions of local residents in favour of the business

interests that the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) protects. Over the years there have been many evictions of people in poor and working areas. The residents of the working class and lower income neighbourhoods of Istanbul have actually been increasingly marginalized and put under pressure by urban projects.

It should come as no surprise that this type of development is increasingly a site of political contestation in Turkey and around the world. It is worth digressing to refer to the work of the Urban Studies Research Cluster at the University of California in Santa Cruz to put this into context. The Urban Studies Research Cluster points out that “social divisions are experienced increasingly in spatial terms—through gentrified housing markets and polarized job markets; unequal access to green space and unequal exposure to environmental risk; new modes of segregation and policing public space.”

“Saving Gezi Park” turns into “Saving Turkey from Erdogan”

Occupy Gezi, the protest in Gezi Park, is the spark that ignited a fire across Istanbul and Turkey that has exposed Turkish society’s internal divisions and the growing discontent with Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP government. It all started with the activists that began camping in Gezi Park to prevent its destruction. The Turkish police tried to use heavy handed methods to disperse the activists. Tear gas canisters were used to disperse the crowd and the situation began to escalate. The methods of the Turkish police, fully supported by Erdogan and Turkey’s AKP government, backfired and unleashed a political tremor.

More people began arriving to Gezi Park. Two Turkish Members of Parliament (MPs) also joined the ranks of the activists: Sırrı Süreyya Önder from the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party and Gülseren Onanç from the Republican People’s Party. The Turkish Communist Party and other groups would throw their weight behind Occupy Gezi. Even though Erdogan’s AKP government enforced a media blackout and tried to prevent journalist from going to Gezi Park, word about the police siege against the activists began to spread as residents became increasingly upset by the liberal use of tear gas. The police would even resort to burning the tents of the protesters and attacking the activists with tear gas while they were sleeping. Water cannons would later be brought to Gezi Park and other protest sites in Turkey, including Ankara. Ahmet Sık, a Turkish journalist and author, would be hurt and rushed to the hospital with injuries.

As the police became more brutal, the protest attracted more and more people and began to take on a new set of meanings. This transformed Occupy Gezi into a demonstration against Erdogan’s arrogance, authoritarianism, and abuse of Turkish democracy in favour of crony capitalism. Soon more than a dozen other Turkish cities, from Ankara and Adana to Iskenderun (Alexandretta) and Trabzon, were ablaze with protests against the AKP government.

Occupy Wall Street activists would stage a rally in New York City in support of Occupy Gezi and demonstrations would appear in front of Turkish embassies across the world. The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DISK), one of Turkey’s four major unions, would put its support behind the protests. Another major Turkish union, the Confederation of Public Workers Unions (KESK) would follow suit with strikes. Eventually DISK, KESK, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), and the Turkish Dentists Union (TDHB) would all hold strikes.

The Turkish police have systematically fired tear gas canisters at the heads of demonstrators. This has led to many injuries including fractured skulls and the loss of eyes. The Turkish Medical Association, which has condemned Prime Minister Erdogan for the violence, has said that thousands of Turkish citizens have been injured by the police. The president of the TTB, Dr. Ozbemir Aktan, has also complained that five doctors and three nurses had gone missing because they treated injured protesters.

Two young Turks, Mehmet Ayvalıtaş and Abdullah Cömert, would be killed in the early days of the protest. Ayvalıtaş, a member of the Socialist Solidarity Platform (SODAP), was run down by a car while he was demonstrating in Istanbul. The group Redhack has implied that his death was the “intentional work of a fascist” supporting the AKP government. In Antakya, which is located near the Syrian border, Abdullah Cömert would die next. Most of the Turkish media reported that Cömert died of injuries sustained after being shot by “unidentified” gunmen, though many protesters used social media to deny the claim by blaming the police for his death. An autopsy of Cömert, a member of the youth branch of the opposition Republican People’s Party, revealed that he died when a police tear gas canister hit him. By the start of the summer at least four demonstrators were killed and thousands of more people injured across Turkey. The Turkish police would eventually use rubber bullets at different protest sites and even begin to run out of pepper spray.

In Erdogan’s own words, “there are two Turkeys.” As the police became more brutal in their treatment of protesters, Turkey’s entire political spectrum, from left to right and from liberal to conservative, have condemned Erdogan and the AKP. Turkey’s second largest political party and main opposition party by way of parliamentary standing, the Republican People’s Party, has used the opportunity to denounce the AKP, rally its supporters, and to capitalize politically. The Republican People’s Party has used Occupy Gezi to portray the protests as a clash of cultural values, and its supporters have linked the protests to the issue of secularism and the AKP’s fresh restrictions on alcohol sales—which foreign media have picked up on—but this is not the real basis for the divisions in Turkey. The Nationalist Movement Party, Turkey’s third largest political party, has condemned the AKP government. The National Movement’s leader would go as far to say that the AKP was using such large quantities of tear gas—courtesy of the same American crowd-control industry that has been helping dictators around the world—that the AKP had “established gas chambers similar to the Nazis.” The Peace and Democracy Party, Turkish Labour Party, Turkish Communist Party, and Felicity Party all also denounced Erdogan for his reckless policies and autocratic behaviour.

Initially, Prime Minister Erdogan spoke in conspiratorial terms and called the protesters unruly extremists working to create sedition in Turkey. He promised that the project to build the shopping mall would not halt for “some old trees” and even tried to glorify the project by saying it was a tribute to Turkey’s imperial past during the Ottoman era. In thuggish language, the AKP mayor of Ankara on the other hand threatened that the AKP could crush demonstrators. The AKP and Prime Minister Erdogan, however, were forced to back down as the many misgivings of Turkey’s people undeniably surfaced. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc was forced to make an apology for the violent police treatment of the protesters and the AKP government began backpedalling while Erdogan went on a tour of North Africa. The Turkish protesters have rejected the AKP government’s apology for using brute force as another insincere gesture by a dishonest government. Moreover, they have refused the appeal by Erdogan’s government to end the demonstrations.

Prime Minister Erdogan is now being equated with a fascist by the demonstrators. Referring to the deaths of two young protesters, one of the main Turkish unions turned Erdogan's own words—which he used against Bashar Al-Assad—against the Turkish leader, asking him to resign: “A leader who kills his own people has lost his legitimacy.” In Istanbul angry crowds of five thousand people surrounded Erdogan's Istanbul office and hurled stones at it. The crowds have demanded that he promptly resign, chanting “Tayyip resign” and “shoulder to shoulder against fascism.” In Taksim Square over 100,000 people have gathered to demand Erdogan resign. A showdown between the demonstrators and Turkish security forces began, after Erdogan returned from North Africa. He began to call the demonstrators “terrorists” and in a threatening tone promised that they would all be individually targeted as police began to make house arrests throughout Turkey.

A Turkish Democratic Model for the Arabs?!

The tables have turned on Prime Minister Erdogan. The irony of the situation is that he is acting like an autocrat, which is exactly what he portrayed himself as opposing during the Arab Spring. Erdogan himself now resembles President Husni Mubarak, Egypt's former dictator. He has even insisted that the protests are part of a foreign agenda and include foreign “mercenaries.” None of this has been lost on the Syrians either who have taken the opportunity to give Erdogan a taste of his own medicine. The Syrian government has issued several statements about the domestic situation in Turkey and the Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi has demanded that Erdogan resign, accusing him of “terrorizing” the Turkish people.

The Iraqi government has also taken the opportunity to make statements about the volatile situation in Turkey. Erdogan and the Turkish government have been officially accused by Baghdad of interfering in Iraqi internal affairs and seeking the division of Iraq, ethnically between Arabs and Kurds, and denominationally between Muslims. Under Erdogan the AKP has been busy trying to carve a sphere of influence in Iraqi Kurdistan and has even played with the internal legal status of Iraq's Kirkuk by lobbying the local Turkoman population in the disputed city not to oppose the Kurdistan Regional Government's jurisdiction claims. Refusing to recognize the Iraqi federal government's sovereignty in Iraqi Kurdistan when it comes to foreign trade agreements and diplomatic relations, Erdogan even made a secretive deal with the Kurdistan Regional Government on oil and gas exports. It is in this context that the Iraqi government has taken the opportunity to tell Erdogan to show restraint against his own citizens. In reality, this is diplomatic tit for tat or payback for Erdogan's confrontational public cries that have undermined the authority of the Iraqi government and essentially encouraged its toppling.

The flawed state of democracy that exists in Turkey has now come into view too. There have been attempts to enforce a media blackout in Turkey and the internet has been cut off in certain places. The Turkish mainstream media, which is tied to large business interests that support the AKP, has been embarrassingly caught collaborating with the AKP government in this regard. House arrests are being made and thousands of activists have been rounded up. Several people in the city of Izmir, a political stronghold of the Republican People's Party, were arrested by Turkish police for the tweets they wrote on Twitter about the protests. In his anger Erdogan has condemned Twitter and all social media in general, stating: “To me, social media is the worst menace to society.”

The violations of civil liberties and media freedoms in Turkey have actually been ongoing. Turkish anti-war protesters that have been opposing Erdogan's belligerent Syrian policy and

Turkish involvement with NATO's projects have been harassed and detained in large numbers. In 2012, the AKP moved forward with legislation restricting media freedoms. Turkey is actually the country with the most journalists imprisoned in the world according to the Committee to Protect Journalist. Journalists that have questioned official government narratives have been accused of treason and arrested. Artists that have created political art critical of Turkish officials have been arrested and charged with "insulting the dignity of a state official." This was the "democratic model" that was being pushed on Arab societies after the so-called Arab Spring began.

Like their phony public gestures of support for the Palestinians, Erdogan and the AKP have never been interested in Arab democracy. They merely supported the toppling of Arab dictators to promote Turkish strategic and economic interests—essentially to fill their own pockets under the system of crony capitalism that dominates Turkey. It is precisely on the basis of these business interests that Erdogan and the AKP have kept silent about the democracy movements and protests against the Saudi and Bahraini regimes, which are close Turkish allies and partners.

An Economic Conspiracy Against Turkey?

Internationally, it ominously seems that a lot of Erdogan's traditional supporters are turning their back on him, just as they did with Mubarak. The European Union and the US government have criticized Erdogan. The mainstream media in the US and Western Europe have not been reporting in favour of the AKP. Erdogan has slammed the foreign media for showing a distorted picture of Turkey and criticized the governments of some of Turkey's allies for having double standards when it comes to Turkey.

The protests started after Turkey made its last loan repayment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in May 2013. There could be a link between the Turkish protests. Some may even accuse speculators of getting ready to siphon Turkey's wealth, while others may suggest that soft regime change is being attempted with the intention of replacing the AKP possibly with a government by the equally corrupt Republican People's Party. The Turkish government itself has mentioned that international banks are involved and Erdogan himself has said that the protests were tied to the planning of foreign circles that served the "interest rate lobby."

Despite the fact that Erdogan has been praised for turning Turkey into an "economic miracle" and bringing the purchasing power of the average consumer up in Turkey, many families in Turkish society are heavily indebted. Under him crony profiteering has thrived with neoliberal economic policies that have supported corporations. Despite the fact that Turkey no longer has IMF debts, it has extremely high private sector debt, which is headed in an unsustainable direction if things do not change. Critics have accused Erdogan of hiding Turkey's national debt by transferring it onto the shoulders of the average Turkish citizen. After the US economy, the Turkish one has one of the largest current account deficits. This says a lot, because a current account deficit happens when a country's total imports of goods, services, and transfers is greater than its total export of goods, services, and transfers. This situation makes Turkey a net debtor.

The above factors and the anti-government protests in Turkey could have disastrous consequences for the Turkish economy. Already the demonstrations have now paralyzed large areas of Istanbul, Ankara, and other major Turkish cities. Erdogan has threatened to bring out the military. Tourism has been crippled and the Turkish economy has taken a dive.

Turkish stocks and bonds have depreciated in value. In addition, the exchange rate of the Turkish Lira has dropped.

The country's economy had already been starting to stagger before the protests due to the economic crisis in the European Union and the crisis in Syria that Erdogan has helped fuel with the US, UK, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The Turkish-supported NATO war in Libya also hurt Turkish trade with Libya. Aside from the bad relations with Armenia, Prime Minister Erdogan has managed to alienate Turkey and hurt trade with its three most important neighbours. Trade and ties with Syria, Iraq, and Iran have been affected negatively by his neo-Ottomanism.

The Turkish People Reject AKP Crony Capitalism and Neo-Ottomanism

The recent events in Turkey epitomize everything that Prime Minister Erdogan stands for. The battle over the future of Gezi Park exposes Erdogan's championing of commercial interests and crony capitalism, which has always come at the expense of the interests of Turkish society. Even Turkey's "Zero Problems with Neighbours" foreign policy was about supporting crony capitalism by promoting Turkish business and trade regionally.

The fact that a replica Ottoman barrack was going to be incorporated with the shopping mall project in Taksim Square represents the failed neo-Ottoman policy of Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Erdogan would ridiculously scold the Turkish protesters and say that they knew nothing about the history of the Ottoman Empire; otherwise the demonstrators would support the destruction of Gezi Park and the construction of the shopping mall. The protests in Taksim Square represents a rejection of Erdogan's stillborn neo-Ottoman regional policy—which at its core serves the crony business interests that Erdogan and the AKP represent—by the Turkish people.

The anti-government demonstrations have yet again shown how much of a hypocrite Prime Minister Erdogan is in his deeds. He has been exposed acting in the same fashion that he took the personal opportunity to blast and vilify Arab leaders with during the Arab Spring. The Turkish leader now faces an Arab Spring of his own—actually a "Turkish Summer." Yet, the world will still have to wait and see what direction the protest movement in Turkey takes and what its outcome(s) will be and if Erdogan is right about a foreign conspiracy involving the "interest rate lobby." Whatever happens, the Middle East is need of a healthy and interactive Turkey that will have good relations with all its neighbours.

The Centre for Research on Globalization's Research Associate Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya was in Istanbul in mid-June 2013 and is currently working out of Lebanon.

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