

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Where is Turkey Headed? Gezi Park, Taksim Square and the Future of the Turkish Model

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Good afternoon Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Johnson and members of the committee. It is an honor to testify at this critical moment in Turkish-American relations.

In 2001, I joined with Congresswoman Kay Granger and Congressman Ed Whitfield to establish the Congressional Caucus on Turkey because we recognized the need for a deeper strategic alliance with Turkey. More than a decade later, our increased engagement with Turkey has proved indispensable in advancing American interests across the globe.

While the recent protests in Turkey reflect a schism within Turkish society, there is no reasonable comparison between these protests and the Arab Spring. Prime Minister Erdogan has won three fair and free elections in the past decade, each by increasing margins. The protesters' frustration with the prime minister's administration both in terms of style and substance bears no relation to the uprisings against authoritarian dictators elsewhere in the region. That there was never even a possibility of the military intervening is a testament to just how far Turkey's democracy has come.

Still, the United States must encourage Prime Minister Erdogan to choose the wisest path. Rather than restricting the freedom of the press and attempting to sideline its critics, the government should point to its impressive record. In a decade, Prime Minister Erdogan's administration has fundamentally strengthened Turkish democracy. Perhaps most significantly, Prime Minister Erdogan established civilian authority over a military that previously exerted its influence in all facets of society.

Turkey's recent economic progress is remarkable – last month, a World Bank report described Turkey's development over the past decade as “one of the success stories of the global economy.” The prime minister's ambition for Turkey to become one of the world's ten largest economies by 2023 is a laudable goal. Per capita income has tripled and poverty has decreased from 28 percent in 2003 to 18 percent in 2013. And in May, Turkey finally paid off its last loan to the IMF, which prevented a near-catastrophe a decade ago.

Additionally, Prime Minister Erdogan has taken dramatic steps towards enlarging Turkey's pluralistic democracy. After years of bloodshed, the prime minister has courageously signaled his intent to engage in a peace process with Turkey's Kurdish community in an open and democratic manner.

Considering these accomplishments, the prime minister should communicate confidence in his vision for the country. But the government's recent statements, casting the protests in

terms of international conspiracies, “interest rate lobbies” and unfortunate anti-Semitic references do not reflect a Turkey commensurate with its substantial achievements and aspirations of joining the European Union. Rather than attempting to delegitimize voices of dissent, the leadership should embrace responsible calls for reform and take pride in the depth of Turkey’s personal liberties and democratic institutions.

In dealing with Turkey, it is critical to appreciate that the country is rife with conflicting truths. Attempts to label segments of society will inevitably lead to misperceptions of the political landscape. A so-called Islamist in Turkey is markedly different from an Islamist elsewhere in the region. In my own experience, members of the prime minister’s Justice and Development Party are often more pro-American, market-driven and international than the so-called secular parties. Even during the recent diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Israel, the commercial ties between the countries increased.

Senators Murphy and Johnson, thank you for holding this hearing. Recent developments in the Middle East demand that the United States work with Turkey towards a more stable, peaceful and democratic region. In Syria, Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan and Iraq, our national interests are better served through close cooperation with Turkey. And, as we restart direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, it is essential that Turkey and Israel restore normal relations so that Turkey can effectively engage both sides.

Prime Minister Erdogan holds the potential to be the most consequential Turkish leader since Ataturk. If he can, in fact, harness the protests to broaden Turkey’s democratic tent, he will fortify Turkey’s standing with both the United States and Europe, and permanently cement his legacy.