

The Gezi Protests: An Outburst at Turkey's Shatter-Zone¹

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this paper is to examine the social and political causes of the Gezi protests, and their long- and short-term impact on Turkey's domestic landscape. As part of our endeavor to enrich the conversation over the protests, this paper puts in context both the meaning and media coverage of the Gezi protests. This in turn will explain how on the one hand a protest over a particular environmental dispute escalated into vulgar anti-Erdoğan slogans and wild Tahrir comparisons, but on the other hand faded away without leaving a mark on Turkey's national political map. Following our analysis of the Gezi Park phenomenon, we will offer our view of its implications.*

Taksim Square, where Gezi Park is located, is Turkish society's shatter-zone, par excellence. By shatter-zone in socio-political terms, we mean an area where different lifestyles meet and coexist; a space likened to the fissures of society where people take refuge to resist homogenizing processes. Indeed, Taksim is the main shatter-zone of Istanbul, where diverse lifestyles have taken refuge and have resisted against hegemonic ideologies. It is made up of artists, writers, actors, and others who pursue bohemian lifestyles and subscribe to unorthodox ideas. The many bars and cafes, and the people they attract, mark Taksim as the epicenter of anti-establishment gatherings. Keeping in mind the nature of Taksim's constant social role in Turkey's public sphere, it is important to note that the events, which took place between May 27 and June 12 in and around Taksim, were not of a political movement, and therefore not to be associated with a political ideology of any kind. Rather, the events were the materialization of Taksim's long enduring social attitudes. In other words, the fissures engendered an outburst – insofar as it was a sudden, unrestrained, and violent expression of emotion – and series of disjointed social effects. Indeed, the Gezi events were explosions of indignation by those

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who had long felt excluded and marginalized, almost as a way of life. While the opposition parties felt a flare of delight from the demonstrations, the truth remains that the Taksim mentality has constantly been that of a shatter-zone, regardless of the political identity of the “establishment.” Therefore, the outburst failed to create a sustainable movement or establish an alternative political platform.

On May 27, the protest started as a sit-in by a group of environmentalist youths to oppose a development project that involved the uprooting of trees in order to build a replica of a 19th century Ottoman era artillery barrack, *Topcu*

Taksim is the main shatter-zone of Istanbul, where diverse lifestyles have taken refuge and have resisted against hegemonic ideologies

Kışlası, that would house a hotel and a small shopping mall, along with several small meeting rooms.² The next day, the police used pepper-spray to disperse the protesters. The demonstrators reacted by vandalizing property in the area, including shop-windows and cars.

On May 29, a larger crowd came to establish a camp in the park. The significant difference in attitude and behavior between the campers and the demonstrators was noticeable, as only the latter were involved in confrontations with the police.

As the media started to romanticize all protesters, be they campers or demonstrators, more young people joined them. In addition, a series of misinformation about the project began to dominate the social media, including the claim that Bülent Arınç’s son was partner to the project.³ It was presented as the government’s attempt to “destroy the green space and the park to build another shopping mall, known as AVM in Turkish (*Alış-Veriş Merkezi*), and a hotel.” Police were unable to dislodge the campers, and as their numbers grew, the police, under the direct order of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, organized a massive down operation and dispersed the protesters. The government held several meetings with the campers and demonstrators, and promised to wait for the court decision before continuing with plans for the park. On May 30, when they refused to empty the park, police intervened and dispersed the demonstrators and campers. The protesters used social media to share images of police brutality, which provoked anger among other anti-AK Party sectors of the population. Anti-government channels, such as Ulusal TV and Halk TV, provided live coverage.

On June 1, the government decided to pull the police force from the site. The following day, all opposition groups poured into Taksim Square with a single slogan: “Erdoğan resign!” Protests in other locations were relatively small and concentrated in major squares, among the cities of Ankara, Izmir, Eskişehir,

Adana and Istanbul. However, these failed to generate over 2,000 participants and hardly interrupted daily life. Erdoğan remained strong-armed, calling the protesters *capulcu* (marauder or bum). The protesters actually embraced the title, and within a day *capulcu* became a household name. There are now a *capulcu* teahouse, a *capulcu* library, and *capulcu* summer-camps to bring the protesters together to discuss the situation in the country. *Capulcu* has even transformed into a name for anyone who dislikes Erdoğan. For instance, Cem Boyner, one of the leading industrialists, and Ergun Özen, the CEO of Garanti Bank, claim that they “are also *capulcu*.”⁴

The events were embellished by a symbiosis between the media and the demonstrators. Both sought each other, and the interaction itself facilitated international comparisons of Taksim with Tahrir Square.⁵ The perpetuation of newsworthiness then became a goal for both the demonstrators who were looking to generate news, and the media looking to convey drama.

How did the International Media Cover the Story?

In its hyper coverage of the Gezi events, international media demonstrated a commitment to political and commercial interests, rather than understanding the ins and outs of Turkish society. Although the demonstrators never reached more than 2,000, the international media nonetheless portrayed them as mass protests, even as acts of rebellion, against the government. The gap between the actual events and their presentation was troubling, as if the media, rather than covering the events, *covered up* the true reality of what was taking place. Orientalist and Islamophobic images and idioms were evoked in the “coverage.” For instance, the media looked away from what percentage supported the government’s position, and rather highlighted that “49 percent did *not* vote for Erdoğan.” Moreover, there was a tendency or desire to portray these events as the Turkish version of the “Arab Spring.” The protesters did indeed call for Erdoğan’s resignation, as did people for Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Moammar Gadhafi in Libya. However, they failed to recognize the many reasons why Turkey is not Egypt, Libya or Tunis. Furthermore, aside from differences in governance, it is important to point out that the protesters were Turks, not Tunisians, Egyptians or Libyans. A proper coverage of the international media’s own work would have given much reason to suspect that major European powers supported the demonstrations and were looking to suggest the emergence of a political crisis in Turkey. There seemed to be clear incentives for European powers to tarnish Turkey’s international standing in consideration of the ongoing competition over goods in Russia, Asia and the Middle East. Although on the rise, Turkey has been openly excluded from the EU process due to its cultural identity. The concern over the successful blend of Islam and democracy is not only European, but shared by

the oil-rich Arab monarchies of the Gulf. It may be that under rising Turkish success, certain media outlets seek to highlight its failures. In order to understand the European media coverage of the Gezi park incidents, one must consider references to old Orientalist images and the dehumanization of the Muslim-Turks.⁶

The misrepresentation of Erdoğan's standing in Turkish society was an inherent theme throughout media coverage, which failed to mention that Erdoğan is still the most powerful and respected leader with a strong majority support. Erdoğan maintains popularity among 50% of Turks with respect to economic development and stability. Moreover, Erdoğan expanded his power base during each election, due to his sustained economic growth, the rising standard of living in every part of the country (especially in the most impoverished eastern Anatolia), the deepening Turkish democracy by directing the military into its barracks, and introducing a new reform project to address Turkey's chronic Kurdish problem, which has claimed thousands of lives and large economic resources. Erdoğan has been successful in building roads, ports, a new railroad system, updating the healthcare system, and continuing to expand the infrastructure of the education system. In response, more and more people have cemented his legitimacy by voting for him. He has transformed the Turkish economy and connected small towns with the global community by building cyber infrastructure and establishing community college-like universities in every provincial capital. As part of Turkey's growing global ties under Erdoğan, visa requirements for Turks have been removed in more than 57 countries.

In some manner, Erdoğan became the casualty of this phenomenal economic growth in the country. The government has been successful in the destruction of the "old Turkey" and its "power base." However, the same government, according to some critics, must increase its efforts to build a new inclusive political language to bring diverse groups together. The government urgently needs to develop a new language that reflects Turkey's current economic development and democratization. It has decorated the urban landscape with shopping malls (AVM), big buildings, and up-to-date installations with socializing spaces and stores. Yet, neither the AK Party nor the new Anatolian bourgeoisie, along with the cultural networks of this rising business class, have much visibility in the cultural landscape. The cultural sphere of creative writings and thinking is more dominated by liberal and left wing intellectuals and activists. Thus, the AK Party dominates business, constructs tall buildings and controls political and legal institutions, but has very little presence in the cultural domain. Intellectual activity is outside its reach. Even if we were blind to anti-Turkish sentiments in international media and malice in the coverage of the Gezi protests, we would still be hesitant to consider foreign journalists as adequate sources of a nuanced picture of Turkish society. Foreign press has


consistently stopped short of conveying the depth of the bond between the Turkish majority and its increasingly popular leading party.

What were the Causes of the New Urban Outburst?

Because the Gezi protests took place in the midst of these social and economic developments, the reasoning behind and explanation thereof merits discussion. It is important first to identify who the protesters were, before examining their demands. The Gezi protestors were usually between 18 and 25 years old, educated, and well connected to the expanding global cyber space. They were all raised during Turkey's major economic development, and therefore unlikely remember the economic and political problems of previous decades. This new generation, concerned more with lifestyle and less with the country's problems, seems to have a very limited sense of moral responsibility toward other ways of life. Ironically, it was Erdoğan's economic policies that nurtured the growth of this overconfident and globally connected youth. In other words, Erdoğan's successful policies helped to create the consumer-oriented, individualistic citizen who then voices disapproval while riding on the successes of Erdoğan's administration.

Those who participated in the protests, confronted the police force and got "washed by the water of the TOMA (Intervention Vehicle for Social Events)," were changed people by the time they returned to their homes.⁷ Their participation highlighted their political consciousness and distanced them further from the government and state authorities. During our interviews in Istanbul with the campers who initiated the sit-ins and the demonstrators who joined the protests after May 31, it was clear that there was a distinction between the two kinds of protesters, in terms of their aims and their modus operandi. The campers typically stressed the importance of the environment and the destructive nature of urban projects for Istanbul's cultural identity. They were motivated by concerns for their surroundings in the city and sought to preserve spaces reserved for public squares and parks. However, the demonstrators who hijacked the sit-ins and transformed the matter into mass anti-Erdoğan demonstrations had very different motives and actually trashed their surroundings, giving the appearance of creating anti-establishment trends.

In essence, four main complaints could be identified: some resented "the authoritarian style of the prime minister"; some begrudged "wide spread cor-



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Protestors set up an impromptu roadblock in İstanbul, Turkey.

EPA



ruption in municipalities,” specifically regarding urban planning in Istanbul and how loopholes thereof allowed kickbacks for bureaucrats and party supporters; others argued that “there [were] no more checks and balances in the political system and that Turkey [was] becoming a Sultanistic regime”; and most expressed general concerns that their “lifestyle [was] threatened.” However, given that these are complaints that have appeared in the international media’s depiction of Turkey before the Gezi park protests, one must question whether it is the demonstrators or the media leading the discourse. A closer analysis of the evolving language used by the demonstrators indicates that they were borrowing their language from the media. For instance, when *The Economist*, in the spirit of Orientalism, presented an image of Erdoğan as the Ottoman Sultan on its cover, the protesters were supplied with another symbol to use against the government.⁸

Typical complaints heard during the Gezi protests did not just traverse across many directions, but in certain instances did so in opposing directions. On one hand, some of the protesters opposing the government developed a deep sense of caution concerning Turkey’s identity, namely that it is *not* and *should not* become “an Arab country,” given Turkey’s place in Europe rather than the Middle East. On the other hand, a group of militant youths –members of a Doğu Perinçek-led group – were violently anti-American and anti-EU. As such, it’s apparent that there were several competing political discourses that failed to produce a unified, positive political platform.

The only unifying factor was a resentment toward Erdoğan and his style of governance. In the eyes of the demonstrators, he was the primary target, perhaps as a symbol of the new, evolving socioeconomic structure that has empowered the historically excluded and marginalized sector of the population. By the time the protests reached their peak, protesters consisted of leftists, nationalists, feminists, anarchists, socialist-oriented Islamic groups, Alevi, environmentalists, gays and lesbians, and a small group of Kurds. This diversity and lack of integrating value became the protesters’ central weakness. Thus, the Gezi demonstrations will not provide a new opposition or a political party, but it has offered a glimpse of what is possible: it taught the people that they could

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work together despite ideological differences, and it especially sharpened the intra-party polarization within the AK Party by providing an opportunity for anti-Erdoğan groups to become more critical.⁹

The Gezi outburst gradually lost the sympathy of Turkish society as it became more destructive toward public and private properties and degenerated into violent and angry protests. The protestors' violence alienated the large sector of the population from the demonstrators, and the conservative sector regarded the outburst as the ploy of foreign governments to undermine Turkey's stability and economic growth. As a result, the protests surrendered legitimacy in the eyes of the ordinary and conservative members of the society, and these individuals began to rally around Erdoğan. Thus, the Gezi protests, which began spontaneously by a group of people who looked to preserve their social, secular-liberal lifestyle, were then co-opted by "old" media establishment in order to weaken the government or force Erdoğan to fulfil their demands. The non-political protests were given a political coloring by the media, in keeping with its own political inclinations. However, due to its fragmented message and violence, the protests could not travel through larger Turkish society.

Protestors instead produced their own Balkanized image of society by stressing "us" versus "them," or "our concerns" versus "theirs." The divisive language that was then recited by the protestors may explain why so many people shied away from attributing any national political meaning to the events, and eventually rallied around the government in a visible fashion. The protesters hardly tried to develop an inclusive language, and though the demonstrations began as a small coherent group with a clear agenda, but it evolved into a "crowd" that could not state a positive goal. The protests actually found more support in Los Angeles, Paris, Cologne, and Milan than in Konya, Kars, or Edirne, as their concerns and sensibilities focused on protecting secular lifestyles that are closely identified with the West. In essence, they gained the sympathies of Europeans more than that of their own people, the acts of this unstructured crowd scared the larger society within Turkey. Nilüfer Göle, a leading Turkish sociologist, also romanticized the outburst as belonging to "the public" as whole, as if the entire country, or far majority, were participants of the outburst.¹⁰ The question remains, then, whether the actors in the outburst were a "crowd" or the "public".

Göle's portrayal of "the Gezi movement," saying that it "marked a new threshold for democracy," ignores the fact that Gezi neither created a new actor nor presented a new language. Rather than being a sustainable movement, Gezi shows every indication to have been a sudden and short-lived outburst. Göle is aptly right to claim that the Gezi experience was not a protest solely against government plans to eliminate a park, but it would be undue to describe it as a fight against the government's policies to intervene in the "secular ways of life." In other words, at its core, it was a protest against inconsiderate ways of decision-making, especially in consideration of Taksim's location and population. The constructive outcome was the realization of the government to consult and consider the local people and civil society prior to making a decision on re-modelling a major public space. However, a grander theme of defending democracy and secularism was added by those who found media support, before flocking to the protests themselves.

Foreign press has consistently stopped short of conveying the depth of the bond between the Turkish majority and its increasingly popular leading party

Although the Republican People's Party (CHP) tried to use the protests to stress that the government was seeking to "Islamicize the society and destroy the alternative domains of lifestyle," the message was not welcomed by many of the protesters or by the larger sector of society.¹¹ In fact, five primary, unrelated groups unsuccessfully attempted to build a more unified political front. These groups included: those who worried for their liberal lifestyle; the marginal-

ized sector of the Alevis; a well-organized and militant, anti-Semitic and anti-Western nationalistic (ulusalci) youth; a group of social democrats seeking more government involvement in educational and economic life; members of a new generation whose families gained wealth during the economic take-off and identified with post-industrial values and sentiments; and a small group of Kurds who wanted to use the protest to portray a violent image of Turkey (the majority of Kurds, meanwhile, supported Erdoğan). In addition, a group of pseudo-historians and their international supporters in the Armenian diaspora tried to benefit from the protests by arguing that the actual site of Gezi Park was a former Armenian cemetery. They, in turn, mobilized some Armenian diaspora publications, particularly the pro-Dashnak *Armenian Weekly*, to "mourn for the events of 1915," which they label as a genocide. These publications covered the events to reactivate the image of the "terrible Turk," never to find peace without accepting the Armenian genocide claims.¹²

The Gezi demonstrations also had a "carnavalesque" atmosphere about them, insofar as they provided a space for those with diverse lifestyle ideologies to come together for greater concerns, including transparency, human dignity, and the rule of law.¹³ Nevertheless, this carnivalesque environment does not

necessarily indicate that participants represented the “public” as a whole. Public protests are usually the result of effective political platforms or organization, and thereby become a platform for networking and communication that may enhance associational life as an essential component of democracy. The Taksim outburst, however, was different. It started with an environmental concern but transformed after different groups used the protests to push for their own anti-Erdoğan agendas. However, by burning cars, throwing Molotov cocktails, and destroying public buses, they undermined their legitimacy before a large Turkish public that was sympathetic to the original motivation.

In essence, the single local cause for the Gezi protests was manipulated into appearing greater and more severe, due to a variety of causes extraneous to Gezi Park. The original claim by the campers was drowned out by demonstrators who wanted to question everything, and yet managed nothing on a national political scale.

Media: Instrument of Deception?

Social media has become an important platform for citizens and protesters. In Turkey, there are 36 million Internet users and 32 million have Facebook accounts. Moreover, in recent years the youth – or “twitter generation” – tends to read more satirical tabloids than publications or newspapers, with little patience to read longer essays, articles, and books in favour of single-sentence statements or sound-bite explanations. The most ferocious criticisms of politicians or the government take place in satirical tabloids, such as *Leman* or *Penguen*. Erdoğan has been the main figure featured on these tabloids, and he has regularly sued them. The AK Party has yet to produce an answer to the power of social media, and has hardly developed any language to appeal to the youth.

Technological progress and growing consumption of online information also mean that international media sources have easier access to local minds. The international coverage of the Gezi events presented many moments in which the media displayed its desire to strengthen the cause of the demonstrators. While the Turkish media was presented internationally as disregarding the events, there has been little discussion on the intention of foreign media to disrupt the flow of governance in Turkey. This is not to say that the Gezi protest was an international plot, nor that the Turkish government should divert self-reflection, but rather that Turkish society, as its direct and unfiltered exposure to international information increases, must learn to perceive global media as an establishment itself, with its own interests and methods of manipulation. For instance, while the language of the Gezi protesters was disjointed and eventually supplemented with violent remarks, the media concealed the lack of

civic engagement in the protests. Rather than focusing on the uncivil language of the protesters – specifically slogans targeted against Erdoğan and his family – the media sought to romanticize the protesters as if they were educated groups with clever tactics who embodied the future of the Turkish democracy. This was the common representation by the international, and to some extent the national, media, while there was no single investigative reporting about the demands of these demonstrators.

Indeed, what took place in Gezi Park was an outburst that activated diverse, small groups who wanted to play the role projected by the media. As a demonstrator told us:

What we are doing here is just like what is happening in other countries. This is a revolution! We need to get rid of the government, and the media eventually provides the proper coverage. Within two days these demonstrations are going to spread into all of Turkey, and Erdoğan will seek to run away!

In other words, it was not the demonstrators but rather media coverage that led the “revolution,” while the protesters played their parts as constructed by the media. In essence, it turned into a media-led phenomenon. The shifting role from the demonstrators to the media was quite a shocking experience, in which onlookers witnessed a commotion fuelled by media-coverage and lubricated by statements from European capitals, especially Brussels (the de facto capital of the EU) and Berlin.

Eventually, after the protestors’ demands became delegitimized and international support for the Gezi protests waned, Erdoğan and his government became more empowered. However, not enough has been done to dispel the technological naiveté of the new-generation Turk, and many continue to be drawn to online sources because they are government-free, without realizing their indirect association with entities that rival Turkish national interests. For instance, one of the major criticisms against the government has been its grip on the media:

Look at the media! It is controlled and manipulated by Erdoğan. I do not read major newspapers but rather read online blogs, since I can add my criticism or support on the blog debates.

Such claims are not uncommon. Online blogs are now perceived as a type of new media that keeps the traditional media in check, listing the names of journalists who were fired and challenging the government’s agenda. However, some media outlets and journalists manipulate the public by claiming that they would have liked to be more critical, if they hadn’t received a warning from the government.



A protestor uses stones as slingshot ammunition during clashes with the police.

AFP

Thus far, a discussion of the real causes of the disengagement between the media and the majority of Turkish citizens has been overlooked. Faced with a changing national identity that is detached from the old media's stale perspective, journalists have found it more convenient to claim that the government does not allow them to perform their jobs, and have sought to enjoy international sympathy and accolades for their 'professional' commitment. As a result, Yalçın Akdoğan, Prime Minister Erdoğan's political advisor, has come under fire for supposedly calling newspaper directors and attempting to regulate media coverage.¹⁴ This line of argument demonstrates how the government is kept in the forefront while the ill doings of the media go unnoticed.

There also seems to be an unchallenged ownership of ethics among journalists, and especially columnists, who exalt themselves as barons of intellectual life. Turkey's "native alien" intellectuals – who prefer to be columnists rather than scholars – misread events and misinform the public. For instance, Cengiz Aktar, who regularly contributes to the daily newspaper *Taraf* and gained notoriety as a result of sweeping generalizations, told a reporter with respect to the protests that "the movement will continue in one way or another – it will transform into a kind of civil disobedience."¹⁵ Aktar, who teaches at Bahçeşehir University, wrote several columns on the Gezi Park events, displaying a limited understanding of the cultural codes at play in the Gezi outburst, and ultimately failing to predict its outcome. Aktar's flippancy and rashness is representative of the writings of other Turkish journalist-scholars who rushed to interpret the Gezi events as new awakening of the excluded and marginalized, and the starting point for civil society's rebellion against the government. These intel-

lectuals have a loose grasp of their own society's normative order, and therefore remain permanent "native aliens." As long as they flout the sentiments of the larger sectors of the population, their lack of sociological curiosity will be a discredit to their function in Turkish media, and the majority of Turks will remain skeptical of their integrity. As a result, the media stands as the least trusted institution in the country.

It should come as no surprise that Turkish mainstream media is traditionally owned by major conglomerates with interests in national politics. For instance, the Doğan Media Corporation, the largest media group in Turkey – controlling *Hürriyet*, the *Turkish Daily News*, CNN-Türk, and a number of other media outlets – dominated the media until 2005. Andrew Finkel, a leading expert of the Turkish media, argues that:

As Turkey's press baron extraordinaire, [Doğan] openly promoted his allies and intimidated his foes to carve out a world favorable to himself. He confessed as much in an interview I once did for TIME magazine in which he defended his papers' support for a press law which actually restricted freedoms of expression but which allowed his media holding to be more aggressive in expanding his share of the television market. Why, he asked me, should he cut off his nose to spite his face?

Mr. Doğan was used to cultivating governments, and in the days of weak coalitions, his support mattered. Many regard the 1995 general election in Turkey as a proxy fight between the Doğan Group and Sabah rather than the parties on the ballot paper. Before entering a (failed) coalition with Tansu Çiller, Mesut Yılmaz went to consult with Doğan and the two remained allies. This in itself was not a crime (Tony Blair paid similar sorts of homage to Rupert Murdoch). However, the Doğan Group was persistently criticized for rendering paper thin the firewall between editorial independence and financial self-interest. Ertuğrul Özkök, the editor of the flagship *Hürriyet* newspaper, proudly wore two hats -- that of a journalist and that of a member of the board who could happily negotiate incentives from the government for factories his parent company was trying to build.¹⁶

Indeed, media owners have used the media to obtain state bids and employed a number of tactics to intimidate politicians to acquire them. The media was a powerful tool in the hands of Turkey's corrupt elite to silence the public and play the role of kingmaker. However, the media was hardly fair or free before the AK Party came to power, and it has only been during the AK Party government that ownership has been diversified and its intimidation tactics checked. With the AK Party government, media ownership gradually shifted to more pro-government companies. The journalists who were fired by new owners were the lackeys of the old establishment, who did not adhere to principled positions when basic human rights were threatened, particularly during the coups. Still, not much has changed. Major complaints about media freedom


in Turkey have to do with shifts in ownership identity, but not the nature of ownership itself. The Turkish media is as corrupt as it has been. What Turkey needs is to prevent media owners from competing over state bids. Currently, the media uses each crisis to get more bids from the government or exclude competing companies. Thus, the media remains one of the most corrupt institutions in Turkey, and most of its columnists have been enabling these crimes for several decades.

What are the Implications of the Gezi Outburst?

Domestic Politics: The initial goal of the protest was confined to the concerns over Gezi Park. However, with the help of the media it morphed into an urban set of protests against the ways in which Prime Minister Erdoğan governs the country. The protests were not organized by any singular ideological body, and as a result failed to translate into a “movement” or a political platform, and was short-lived. Its impact is nevertheless profound on both Turkish society and the government. Due to the suddenness of the protests, the government has become increasingly worried about the unpredictability of demonstrations and the power of social media. The fear has forced the government to take measures to control and discipline football games by preventing supporters from chanting anti-government slogans, especially against the prime minister. Most importantly, the government has already taken several measures to control the youth in the universities by replacing private security forces with the national police force, in the fear that universities could become a refuge for protestors. Thus, the “spirit of Gezi” continues to haunt the public sphere and cast a shadow over government policies.

During the protests, Erdoğan became gradually more decisive in his treatment of the demonstrators. One vital reason for his aggressive approach was that he sought to resolve the situation before his supporters could be tempted to take matters into their own hands and confront the Gezi demonstrators themselves. His concern was to prevent street fights between his supporters and the protesters, even at the expense of his public image.

Abdullah Gül, who hopes to remain president or to become prime minister, was not subject to the same type of pressure and was therefore able to utilize public anger to present a more moderate and level-headed alternative to Erdoğan. As a result, the Gezi outburst further deepened the rift between the supporters of Gül and of Erdoğan. Moreover, Gezi allowed an opportunity for the Gülen



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The Gezi protests indicate that there are still many social, political and economic issues that the AK Party has not yet addressed satisfactorily

movement to distance itself from the AK Party and Erdoğan. News outlets pursued very critical stances against Erdoğan and those around him, leading to increased tensions between the followers of Gülen and the pro-AK Party media.

International Relations: In government circles, the protests are viewed as the result of some sinister plot by certain European powers. It is reasonable to think that there are those in the international community who seek to damage Turkey's image and believe this can be achieved by supporting the demonstrations, weakening the government's confidence, and rushing to compare the events to those of the Arab Spring. The EU and some circles in the US have never felt comfortable with an overly stable and economically powerful Turkey.¹⁷ The old Eastern Question still guides the foreign policy of some European states, and certain lobbyists in the US also prefer to have a weaker and dependent Turkey. Media coverage of the events in Taksim also reflected the wishes of these international actors. Nevertheless, having all this in mind, the AK Party would be in a better position if, rather than blaming interferences from outside of Turkey, it looks inward and considers that there are indeed those who feel excluded, and acknowledges that there is a need for the party to dissociate itself from some opportunistic groups and individuals.

It was “enlightening” to see some European “intellectuals” who benefited from the rising power of the AK Party to be among the first to put forward simplistic accusations against the regime. International press, especially newspapers that typically take an anti-Turkish position such as *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, has tried to present Erdoğan as the personification of corruption in the Middle East. The image of the Sultan evoked by *The Economist* shows that Orientalism is utilized as a mechanism to disfavor Erdoğan's leadership. Many international journalists are motivated to present Erdoğan as an authoritarian ruler who seeks to concentrate all power and squash all opponents. They portray Turkey as a “dark place” and present the Gezi protest as the “light” that can enlighten the country. According to their portrayal of Erdoğan, he is the reincarnation of the quasi-dictators of old, and this type of anti-Turkish sentiment is rooted much deeper than the anti-Erdoğan political interests it seeks to serve.

Conclusion

Media coverage of recent events in Turkey raises a number of questions about the bias and misinformed flow of information. It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate images from realities and understand the motivations of the

people.¹⁸ What took place in Turkey's shatter-zone cannot help us to understand the desires of the country as a whole, but it does provide us with a vivid example of the power that international and social media have in shaping and polarizing domestic events.

Turkey is a growing power and its leader, Prime Minister Erdoğan, has utilized the success of the last decade to expand economic growth, deepen civil society, integrate the country in the global community, invest funds in education, and improve awareness of human rights. Certainly, there are still many social, political and economic issues that the AK Party has not yet addressed satisfactorily. This has not been due to a lack of governance in Turkey, but rather that many of these issues, which have surfaced following the Gezi outburst, have not been appropriately advanced on the national political platform. The Gezi protests suggest that the Turkish government should not consider the lack of a strong political opposition to mean that there are no sectors, especially among the new generation, that need and deserve to establish a workable and respectful language with the government. Turkey stands as the only model country where there is a successful reconciliation between Islam and democracy, between Muslim tradition and modernity. As such, it is not on social media or televised news that Turkey should showcase its coexistence of lifestyles, but under the rule of law. ■

Endnotes

1. The authors would like to thank Tal Buenos and Mustafa Mirzeler for reading and commenting on the article.
2. Murat Bardakçı, "O kışla neler gördü," *Sabah*, June 9, 2013.
3. Arınç vehemently denied the claims. For Arınç's statement, see *Hürriyet*, May 31, 2013.
4. "Yeni buluşma noktası: Gezi Parkı," *Milliyet*, June 9, 2013. Boyner and Özen's remarks can be found in *Taraf*, June 5, 2013.
5. Francis Fukuyama, "The Middle-Class Revolution," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2013.
6. For more on the construction of the "terrible Turk" image, see Paul T. Levin, "From 'Saracen Scourge' to 'Terrible Turk': Medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment Images of the 'Other' in the narrative Construction of 'Europe,'" unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 2007. For more on Islamophobia, see John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
7. TOMA is an armored vehicle that is designed to control urban social unrests by use of its powerful water cannon. These vehicles are produced in Turkey, and effectively serve their purpose. It was because of this very effectiveness that they became part of the Gezi narrative.
8. *The Economist*, June 6, 2013.
9. Idris Bal, AK Party parliamentarian, issued a report and criticized government policies. See http://www.radikal.com.tr/gezi_raporu.docx, (accessed, August 13, 2013). He claimed that a small-scale local issue turned into a major crisis – with negative implications on the democratic credentials of the AK Party government – due to Erdoğan's "misguided strategies." Bal blames Erdoğan's advisors for misinforming and misguiding the prime minister. Bal also argues that democracy is not only a ballot box, but also concerned with the protection of minority rights and different lifestyles.

10. Nilüfer Göle, "Gezi-Anatomy of a Public Square Movement," *Insight Turkey* 15:3 (2013), p. 7.
11. CHP is the oldest party and established the Republic of Turkey. However, over the years it has become the party of the status quo, and has hardly modernized its language or program since Bülent Ecevit's departure. Today, the CHP consists of older barons of Turkey's secularist political landscape who employ little imagination in painting the country's development. It is currently led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who has not shown the charisma necessary to attract massive public support, and whose leadership is regularly challenged by several ideological groups within the party.
12. Eric Nazarian, "Graves in the Park: Notes from the 'Bolis' Uprising," *The Armenian Weekly*, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2013/06/09/graves-in-the-park-notes-from-the-bolis-uprising/> (accessed, August 22, 2013). Taner Akcam, who is the Robert Aram, Marianne Kaloosdian, and Stephen and Marion Mugar Chair in Armenian Genocide Studies at Clark University (note: these titles are very jumbled – make clearer I want to emphasize the name of the chair..so this is from his cv– Robert Aram, Marianne Kaloosdian and Stephen and Marian Mugar Chair in Armenian Genocide Studies), also claim that Gezi Park used to be a part of an Armenian cemetery. See, *Armenian*, Akcam, "Akcam: Foreign Connection is 'Me,'" <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2013/06/10/akcam-the-foreign-connection-is-me/> (accessed, August 22, 2013). This claim is based on myth rather than historical research, and the campaign it inspired during the Gezi protests is most representative of a faction that was desperately looking to make political gains by taking the original protest out of context.
13. Coşkun Taştan discusses the "carnavalesque" aspect of the outburst in his paper. See "The Gezi Park Protests in Turkey: A Qualitative Research," *Insight Turkey*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 27-38.
14. Yalçın Akdoğan rejects the accusations that he has been behind the firing of the journalists (interview with Akdoğan on August 15, 2013). Moreover, he claims to have been targeted by the media for not being of the old establishment. See Mehmet Metiner, "Yalçın Akdoğan'ı kim niye hedef alıyor?" *Yeni Safak*, August 6, 2013.
15. Turkey "in uncharted waters" after the Gezi protests, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/565871/turkey-in-uncharted-waters-after-gezi-park-protests/> (accessed August 19, 2013.)
16. Andrew Finkel, "Owning Newspaper," *Today's Zaman*, September 10, 2009.
17. On July 31, the US Senate discussed the Gezi protests in a panel at the Committee on Foreign Relations. Those who spoke stressed Turkey's strategic importance for the US, and called on Turkey and the Erdoğan government not to deviate from democratic and Western values.
18. Doğan Gürpınar, "Bir Gezi var Gezi'den İçeri: Gezi Savasları," *Zaman*, August 19, 2013.