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Subcommittee Hearing: “Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region?”

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs

Wednesday, June 26, 2013 2 pm - 4 pm

2172 House Rayburn Office Building Washington, DC

On Wednesday, June 26, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing titled “Turkey at a Crossroads: What do the Gezi Park Protests Mean for Democracy in the Region?” Dr. **Hillel Fradkin**, director at the Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World at the Hudson Institute, Dr. **Soner Cagaptay**, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mr. **Kadri Gursel**, contributing writer to Al-Monitor, Ambassador **James F. Jeffrey**, former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Dr. **Kadir Ustun**, research director at the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), testified. The committee’s chairman, Rep. **Dana Rohrabacher** (R-CA), presided.

In his opening statement, Chairman Rohrabacher stated that Turkey is a NATO ally whose strategic geography is as important as ever. Over the past decade, he argued, the orientation of Turkish foreign policy under Prime Minister **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** has been troubling. He explained, for example, that Erdogan embraces Hamas’s leadership in Gaza, as well as the Iran’s right to a nuclear program. He claimed, however, that the Syrian Civil War has caused Erdogan to move back towards the West in the face of a “menacing” Iranian-Hezbollah intervention. Rohrabacher argued that the U.S. must work with Turkey in handling the Syrian crisis but must figure out who Turkey is supporting, and if they are allied with the West. **Up until now, he claimed, “I have seen Turkey as an example of moderate Islam in a changing world,” but mass protests have shaken the Erdogan administration, which has resorted to a harsh crackdown on dissent.** Worse, he argued, Erdogan loyalists have resorted to wild conspiracy theories blaming “the Jewish lobby” and the American Enterprise Institute for plotting the demonstrations. Such tactics call into question the ruling parties of Turkey, Rohrabacher stated, and added that the hearing was being held in order to assuage some of the fears or to reconfirm them. He concluded his opening statement saying the hearing “will look at whether Turkey can meet the challenges that face it at home and abroad” and what the potential impacts are on U.S. interests and values.

Ranking member Rep. **Bill Keating** (D-MA) began his opening remarks saying Turkey has been a U.S. ally in an “incredibly rough neighborhood.” For this reason, he added, the political stability and economic strength of Turkey is a matter of importance to many U.S. policymakers, analyst and businesses. **Domestic politics have now taken center stage in Turkey, he said, arguing that the electoral dominance of Prime Minister Erdogan’s AK party for more than a decade has led to the emergence of a seemingly one-party system, leaving many Turks feeling frustrated and powerless.** He claimed, however, that what most caught the eye of this subcommittee -- and of the world --has been the prime minister’s sanctioning of brute force by the police against peaceful protesters. In the last few weeks, 5 people have died, some 4,900-plus protesters have been detained and 4,000 people were injured.

Rep. **Jeff Duncan**'s (R-SC) opening statement briefly stated that he had observed the Turkish parliamentary elections in June 2011 and is therefore interested in the political dynamics going on in Turkey right now.

Dr. Cagaptay began his opening remarks saying, Turkey, a NATO member state, is an important country to the United States. Geographically, he argued, Turkey is the only country that borders Iran, Iraq and Syria and is vital for U.S. policy towards these countries. He then commented on the AKP, claiming that since it came to power in 2002, it has implemented "sound economic policies, which have grown Turkey's economy and facilitated its membership in the Group of 20." He argued, however, that the recent protests show that **the AKP has "become a victim of its own success,"** adding that the middle class, which has also grown, is now committed to individual freedoms and is challenging the AKP's style of governance and its attempts at political domination. Dr. Cagaptay further claimed that the developments in Turkey should not be likened to the "Arab Spring;" Turkey is and remains a democracy, he said. The protests also do not signify a weakening of the AKP, he claimed, adding that about 50 percent of Turks continue to support the party, nor is it another manifestation of the secularist-Islamist cleavage that has defined Turkey's politics for years. Instead, he argued, **the rallies are about the quality of Turkish democracy and a demand for liberal values.** He concluded by saying that U.S.-Turkey relations are unlikely to suffer much from the unrest because Ankara values its relationship with Washington. However, **it is in the best interest of the Turkish government "to embrace broad individual liberties, including freedoms of assembly, association, media, and expression."**

Ambassador Jeffrey began by saying the demonstrations that broke out in Istanbul represent the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Erdogan. He echoed Dr. Cagaptay's analysis claiming the demonstrations do not indicate a grave erosion of support for Erdogan and his party, and stated **"it is highly unlikely that the demonstrations will lead to the toppling of the AK government, or early elections."** What the demonstrations do represent, he argued, is a polarization of society. **Any government has the right to restore order, he claimed, but what is troubling is the "seemingly indiscriminate force used against peaceful demonstrators."** He further argued that the language used against the demonstrators, and both the police as well as legal actions directed against them, call into question the government's commitment to free speech and assembly. He expressed optimism, however, in that, **as long as Turkey remains a democracy, we can have faith that the Turkish people and the government can work its way through this apparent dichotomy between majority power and minority rights.** In regards to the U.S. response, Ambassador Jeffrey argued that publicly condemning Erdogan would be strongly counter-productive; it will not push the government to tailor its response, he argued. He made the argument that the U.S. does not have a strong standing with the Turkish population, only has limited leverage with Turkey and that we need good relations with Turkey to deal with the dangers in the region: Syria, Iraq and Iran. He concluded by saying that instead, **the U.S. should counsel the Turkish government behind closed doors, without threat, and as a friend.**

Dr. Ustun followed with opening remarks stating that there are segments of the society who are frustrated with some policies but cannot express their discontent through regular channels of formal politics due to the absence of a viable opposition. He added that the challenge will be to accommodate the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Turkish youths. Dr. Ustun explained that there are three major groups that have participated in the protests: (1) the middle and upper middle class urbanities who are disenchanted over certain policies adopted by the government, (2) CHP supporters and the ultranationalist wing of the party, who see no hope in challenging the dominant ruling party, and (3) the marginal leftist groups, some of which are illegal organizations implicated in various terrorist attacks. He said that, despite Erdogan's talks with the opposition, the protests have continued, which the government deems to be ill intentioned. Dr. Ustun claimed, **"The Gezi Park protests have resulted in**

a lively debate throughout the political spectrum about basic rights and freedoms as well as what an advanced democracy should look like.” He concluded by saying that “Turkey has proven time and again that it is a dynamic democracy with a vibrant civil society despite its flaws and imperfections.”

Afterwards, Dr. Fradkin gave his opening remarks claiming that the events surrounding Gezi Park are discouraging, particularly the behavior of the Turkish government. Fradkin argued that Prime Minister Erdogan believed that he was acting democratically, repeatedly referring to his own popular support as that of 51 percent of the public. He added that Erdogan seems to have little concern that nearly as many people do not support him or his party. Fradkin argued that Erdogan’s democracy is not a liberal democracy and that some of his opponents are objecting to his efforts to stifle such a democracy. **“More and more over the years Erdogan seems to act as if the law is what he says it is,” Fradkin argued.** The broader regional implications, Fradkin claimed, are that Turkey may no longer be able to serve as a model of consensual democratic politics and some argue that Erdogan’s use of force has weakened his moral authority. **In regards to U.S.-Turkey relations, Fradkin expressed a similar view in that the U.S. still has a good deal of credit with Erdogan and he may be open to some friendly advice.**

Lastly, Mr. Gursel gave an opening statement in which he claimed that **“the excessively harsh police intervention against a few hundred protesters in the early hours of May 31 was the final move that led to this explosion.”** Gursel went on to list some of the contributing factors leading up to the “social eruption:” the inability of the mainstream media to report on the events, the consolidation of power, arbitrary and prolonged political detentions, the increasing role of religion in basic education, the intolerance of authorities over even minor protests, the discrimination and marginalization of Alevis, Prime Minister Erdogan’s advice to women regarding how many children they should have, and the imposition of alcohol regulations despite Turkey’s low rate of alcohol consumption as a whole. Gursel claimed that the unrest is “a reaction to the anger and resentment of the Erdogan government’s Islamic conservatism, its policies that...are sidestepping hard-earned democratic freedoms.” **He concluded by saying that Prime Minister Erdogan’s policies of societal polarization will ultimately pay the price of instability.**

Rep. Rohrabacher began the question and answer portion by inquiring whether the alcohol restriction or any others were “over-the-line?” **Ambassador Jeffrey responded by saying, even in the U.S., alcohol restrictions have been put in place, adding that democracy is complicated and often “rubs up against” people’s personal freedoms.** Rohrabacher followed up with the question inquiring whether the regime has violated people’s freedom of speech. Mr. Ustun answered claiming that there were no laws passed restricting the freedom of speech in Turkey. Mr. Gursel argued instead that, since 2008, he doesn’t recall having read any news stories covering corruption in the government, which does exist. He added that Turkish media censorship was proven when the Gezi Park incidents in Istanbul erupted but instead, Turkish news outlets broadcasted other things. Rohrabacher then asked whether there were journalists in jail right now in Turkey. **Mr. Gursel claimed that there are more than 60 journalists in jail in Turkey and they are mostly pro-Kurdish journalists.** Mr. Ustun added that there is an unfortunate anti-terrorism law in Turkey. He argued that this law makes it difficult to promote democratization. If you are praising the PKK, you can be subjected to jail time, for example, he said. He claimed, however, that there is a reform law that has been passed in the parliament, which will help this problem. Ambassador Jeffrey added briefly that many of these restrictions have dated back to before the AKP.

Ranking member Keating then asked the witnesses to comment on the inconsistent government response to the incidents and whether there was a miscommunication or indeed a difference in opinions within the party, and what the implications of that are. Ambassador Jeffrey responded by saying that there is a back

and forth within the government, which he finds encouraging because it shows that they are trying to figure out how to deal with a large minority who disagrees. Mr. Ustun further added that the first couple days there was a “crisis management” attitude, but after organized illegal groups attempted to storm the Prime Minister’s office, the administration changed to a hard-lined approach. Rep. **Alan Lowenthal** (D-CA) asked about the dynamic between secularism and Islam in Turkey, to which Mr. Cagaptay responded, the regulation of the consumption of alcohol blurs the line between the government and religion in a Muslim majority country. Mr. Ustun claimed, however, that the alcohol restrictions were based on World Health Organization suggestions and in line with E.U. health guidelines, which makes it less restrictive than even some laws in the U.S. Mr. Gursel retorted by claiming that Turkey is the last-place country in the OECD in terms of alcohol consumption and that these measures are “over-stretching.” He added that these measures call into question the advancement of an Islamic agenda, particularly considering the Prime Minister defended the alcoholic restriction by referencing Islam.

Rep. **Gerry Connolly** (D-VA) asked what a country can do with such dissent, does it make it stronger or force it to fall back on autocratic tendencies, he asked. Dr. Fradkin argued that progress in Turkey’s “democratic life” will result from this “explosion.” Dr. Cagaptay echoed this, claiming it is a sign of Turkey moving forward. He added that **the protests represent the emergence of a strong middle class that protects and defends the rights of individual freedoms.**

In his closing remarks, Chairman Rohrabacher stated that he hopes Turkey will use this turmoil as a vehicle to move closer towards democracy instead of farther away, adding that we need the Turkish people beside us as friends.