

The Right to the City Movement and the Turkish Summer

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by Jay Cassano

As I write this, Istanbul is under siege. The might of Istanbul's entire police force—the largest city police force in Europe—is violently cracking down on peaceful occupiers in Gezi Park.

The protest, which began on 27 May, is ostensibly over a planned shopping center to be built over a park in Istanbul's central Taksim Square. Nevertheless, massive popular movements like this do not emerge out of nowhere. Typically, they are the result of the tireless groundwork of activists over the course of an extended period. And then, something happens: a spark sets off the lighter fluid accumulating unnoticed at everyone's feet.



[A protestor and police in Gezi Park. 31 May 2013. From Yücel Tunca via Nar Photos.]

The protests began with approximately seventy Right to the City protesters in Gezi Park on 27 May when demolition of the park was set to begin. These activists successfully stopped demolition and a little more than a dozen activists spent that night in the park. They erected two large tents, brought guitars, and made their opinions known to passersby. These activists were comprised of members of Taksim Solidarity and the Taksim Gezi Park Protection and Beautification Association as well as some unaffiliated but concerned individuals.

On 28 May, a coalition of Right to the City associations presented a petition to Istanbul's Council to Protect Culture Heritage calling on it protect the park. At 1:30 in the afternoon on 28 May, bulldozers returned a second time. The protesters resisted and police used tear gas to clear the park. One activist climbed a tree and was unable to be dislodged, further stalling demolition. Demolition resumed and continued until pro-Kurdish rights Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and secularist opposition Republican People's Party Members of Parliament [Sirri Süreyya Önder and Gülseren Onaç blockaded bulldozers](#). This yet again stopped demolition and a protest was called for 7pm that night. Protesters slept in the park again.

The day of 29 May was more low-key as a [few hundred people came out](#) for protests in the park and created a festival-like atmosphere with films and concerts. Throughout the day, activists planted seedlings in the park as a token of resistance. Numbers swelled and 150 people slept in the park that night as the state regrouped.

On 30 May Turkish police, unwilling to allow a major tourist hub to be blighted in this

fashion, gave the occupiers a five in the morning wake-up call in the form of tear gas. In case the message was not clear enough, they also [set fire to occupiers' tents](#). With the park cleared and the state clear that it meant business, demolition resumed until at 7:50 in the morning, [Önder yet again blockaded the bulldozers with his own body](#). After news broke on social media of the early-morning raid and concomitant police violence, [people accumulated throughout the day](#) and slept over in the park en masse.

[The police tried the same tactics on the morning of 31 May](#), this time with several hundred people sleeping over in the park. The raid was more vicious than the day before and media was banned from the park. After this, Taksim Square officially became contested territory as police violence escalated and protesters clashed with police throughout the day.

In the ensuing mayhem, famed freelance Turkish journalist, Ahmet Şık was hospitalized after being struck in the head by a teargas canister. Onlookers claimed that Şık, who in 2011 penned a book about police corruption in Turkey that was banned from publication, [was fired on intentionally](#) from a distance of about ten yards. Önder himself was hospitalized after also being hit by a [tear gas](#) canister.

What likely would have blown over with no lasting impact suddenly ignited into one of the biggest mobilizations in recent Turkish history. Estimates during the day of 31 May put the number of protesters between five thousand and ten thousand, and police have attempted mass arrests of anyone occupying the park. Police forces have been making liberal use of teargas, resulting in a flood of [instantly iconic images](#) that capture the spirit of dissent. There are in fact reports that the police have used so much tear gas that [Istanbul's police force has had to ship in more from the nearby city of Bursa](#). On Friday, [#DirenGeziParki](#) [Resist Gezi Park] was, for most of the day, the number one worldwide trending hashtag on Twitter.

Late in the night on 31 May, the police barricaded the park and closed all of the roads and public transportation leading to Taksim Square. This completed the square's transformation into a battleground as protesters attempted—and in some instance succeeded—to break the barricades. With news spreading that Taksim was barricaded, and growing outrage at the media blackout, residents of Istanbul began organizing in their own neighborhoods and marching together to Taksim. Unverified [reports on Twitter](#) estimated 40,000 people were on foot heading to Taksim, including thousands crossing the Bosphorus Bridge that connects the European and Asian sides of the city, which is normally closed to pedestrians.

Solidarity protests have spread organically to other cities, mostly as an expression of anger at police brutality. Protesters have taken to the streets in the cities of Ankara, Izmir, Izmit, Eskişehir, Kayseri, Antalya, Kutahya, and no doubt others. [Radikal reports](#) that protesters were tear gassed in Izmit and Eskişehir and dozens were detained in other cities. At the time of writing, it appears that numbers are only going to continue to grow and demonstrations will continue to escalate.

The police violence has been nothing short of excessive. According to the Turkish alternative news site Bianet, [at least one hundred protesters have been injured](#). But this was reported during the day on 31 May and so seems like a conservative estimate at this point, especially given the level of violence and the use of tear gas, which is widely considered a chemical weapon. The Turkish Radikal daily has [a series of videos](#) available putting police violence on display. According to a [live blog on the leftist website Sendika.org](#), police have in multiple

instances [blocked ambulances from accessing the injured](#).

The reaction of the police prompted Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher at Human Rights Watch, to declare Friday that “the display of extreme police violence yet again against peaceful demonstrators in the Taksim Park spells the government and local authorities’ deep intolerance of the right to assembly and non-violent protest in Turkey today.”

The Origins of the Uprising

The fact that the protests were not sponsored by a political party or related to the Kurdish conflict has led to comparisons with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) or even the Seattle World Trade Organization protests of 1999. OWS protesters in the United States, once inspired by tactics of the Arab uprisings, are now expressing solidarity with Turkish activists. Right now no party or group can claim ownership of the movement and the only sign of coalition is the information hub, [DirenGeziParki.com](#).

But this protest is the latest manifestation of a movement that has been stirring for some time now. The shopping mall is only one component of a plan to entirely redesign Taksim Square into a more [car-friendly](#), tourist-accommodating, and [sanitized urban center](#). Mass protests have also taken place recently to [stop the closure of the landmark Emek Cinema](#), located on İstiklal Avenue off Taksim Square, which is also being converted into (no surprise) a shopping mall.

Taksim Square is the heart and soul of Istanbul. It is common sense to Istanbulites that if a revolution is to come to Turkey, it would begin in Taksim. Protests are regularly held in the square, and issues run the full gamut of concerns of Turkish citizens: LGBT equality, recognition of the Armenian Genocide, an end to the Kurdish conflict, an end to military conscription, economic justice, and more. In 2011, there was a massive one-day protest in support of a free and open internet that drew upwards of thirty thousand people.



[Protesters flood Taksim Square for the “Internetime Doukunma” (“Don’t Touch My Internet”) protest in 2011. Gezi Park can be seen in the background. Photo by Jay Cassano.]

Taksim is also home to a massive May Day protest every year, in part a response to the Taksim Square Massacre on May Day 1977. On 1 May, Istanbul police violently cracked down on protesters, using over [fourteen tons of water mixed with tear gas](#). As evidence of the link between current protests and those of May Day, the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (also known by the acronym DISK, and one of the largest union blocks in Turkey) officially called on its members to come out and support the occupation.

The new Taksim will eliminate mass pedestrian entrances from all sides in favor of car tunnels, making it an impractical site to protest and congregate. In short, it will be reduced to a photo-op for tourists who pass through for five minutes and then continue on with their tax-free shopping.

Another key launching point was the planned construction of a third bridge crossing over the Bosphorus in Istanbul. Ground broke on construction [of the third bridge](#) on the first day of the protest and was one of the main concerns expressed by protesters, even though they were occupying Gezi Park and not the bridge construction site. If built, the third bridge is [expected to complete Istanbul's deforestation](#) by subjecting the northern Belgrade Forest to development. The third bridge is another example of the AKP's development-driven, car-oriented designs for Istanbul, with complete disregard for the viability of the city in ecological and social terms. These concerns were highlighted in a recent feature-length documentary, [Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits](#), which sold out theaters in Taksim's İstiklal Avenue when it opened.

Culture Wars or Economic Unrest?

The entire plan for Taksim Square's redesign is part of an overall neoliberal turn that Prime Minister Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) are central to. Istanbul's city center has been undergoing a rapid process of gentrification, especially in the historic neighborhoods of [Sulukule](#), [Tarlabaşı](#), [Tophane](#), and [Fener-Balat](#), which housed the poor, the immigrants, the Kurds, and the Roma. The goal of this so-called "urban renewal" is to make room for more tourist attractions, or to—at minimum—"clean up" the neighborhoods, removing working class urban dwellers who might scare off tourists. The idea is that this new and improved city center will attract foreign investment in Istanbul, which is to be further developed into a financial and cultural hub at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East.

Some [outlets](#) have linked the Gezi Park protests to the AKP's [recent restrictions on the sale of alcohol](#). [Journalists doing so](#) are attempting to portray the Gezi Park occupation as a conflict between Erdoğan's Islamism and the country's secular ethos. The secularist opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has also taken this stance, and has tried to coopt the uprising by turning the movement into a symbol of culture wars between a secular youth and an older Islamist generation. Attractive as that framing may be to Western media, it could not be further from the truth. While many protesters are without a doubt staunch secularists who are motivated by opposition to the AKP's increasing social conservatism, there is no indication that this is what ultimately brought thousands of people out into the streets. In fact, when CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, came to Gezi Park to speak, protesters sang over him, preventing him from being heard. It is clear that the movement thus far is about a conflict in visions for urban space between ruling elites and the people who actually live, work, and play in the city. In this regard it is telling that #DirenGeziParkı emerged as the original hashtag on Twitter. This connects to protests held in 2009 in Istanbul against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, [which took place under the banner of "Diren Istanbul"](#)—"Resist Istanbul"—cleverly shortened in translation to "ResIstanbul."

At the same time, and as the protests appear to spread and take on a more generally anti-government tone, it is not unlikely that general dissatisfaction with Erdoğan will eventually win out as the primary message of the movement. In that case, we can expect to see a rift between the liberal secularist opposition who joined the protest on 31 May and after and the radical protesters who spawned the movement in the first place.

Throughout the Arab uprisings, Turkey remained ostensibly stable. Some commentators [proposed Turkey as a model](#) for post-uprising Arab states, most especially Egypt. The mixture of a "moderate" Islamist prime minister and a "secular" constitution made NATO-

member Turkey an attractive prototype for a new Middle East in the eyes of Western pundits. [Others](#), along with [myself](#), have pointed out that Turkey is a poor choice of role model, given its [ongoing conflict](#) with its Kurdish minority population as well as [myriad other dynamics](#).

Today, it seems as though Turkey's internal divisions are surfacing in a way not seen for some time. What we are seeing in the Gezi Park occupation is the sudden explosion of this Right to the City movement, with some general anti-government sentiment mixed in. For now, an Istanbul court [has temporarily suspended construction of the park](#), pending a hearing on the matter. As time goes on, and if this movement continues to grow, rifts are likely to occur and the meaning of the protests will become as contested as the physical space of Taksim Square. But for the time being, between the massive May Day protest and now this nationwide movement less than a month later, we may finally be in for a summer of uprising in Turkey.

Cihan Tekay contributed research to this story.

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