

Turkish police launch brutal crackdown on Taksim Square protests

Alex Lantier
12 June 2013

Turkish riot police brutally attacked protesters to clear Taksim Square yesterday afternoon in Istanbul, arresting hundreds of protesters, while Washington signaled continuing support for the Islamist regime of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

This was the first time police returned to Taksim Square since June 1, when mounting protests over the brutal police repression of the occupation of nearby Gezi Park forced Turkish authorities to withdraw police from the area. This movement has become the focus of rising discontent with Erdogan, a key ally of Washington and the European powers in the Middle East, notably in the ongoing proxy war in neighboring Syria.

In the early morning, police began attacking thousands of protesters who remained on the square. “The security forces are shooting pepper spray cartridges at everything that moves,” said Özlem Gezer, an editor for Germany’s *Der Spiegel* magazine reporting from the square. She added that dozens of protesters had suffered head wounds from police fire.

Around 2 p.m., with water cannon and volleys of tear gas on Taksim Square, police advanced in armored vehicles. After clashes with protesters left the square covered in thick clouds of tear gas, the police pushed protesters into nearby Gezi Park. Police then tore up tents and stands that protesters had erected in the square.

“There were regular announcements over the loudspeaker that no harm was intended to the protesters: ‘Dear Gezi friends, we are unhappy about this situation. We do not want to attack. We do not want to injure anyone. Please retreat.’ ... Then, however, the security forces would fire tear gas and water cannon into the crowd,” *Der Spiegel* reported.

After negotiations with protesters in Gezi Park, police

initially did not attack protesters there or dismantle tents set up in the park. However, police attacked protesters in Gezi Park later in the day.

Clashes broke out in several other areas of Istanbul, as police attacked protesters and barricades. Riot police attacked a delegation of lawyers protesting police brutality at Istanbul’s main Çaglayan Courthouse, beating them and detaining 49 of them.

The detained lawyers were released in the evening, after lawyers mounted new protests outside the courthouse. However, a new group of 45 lawyers was arrested later in the evening.

Protesters returned for a peaceful assembly on Taksim Square in the early evening. They were again attacked by riot police, who reportedly fired tear gas and launched new attacks on the square around 8:20 p.m. Clashes continued late into the night.

At least 15 protesters were hospitalized after the clashes, including one man with a serious brain injury, amid unconfirmed reports that one protester had died after being shot in the head with a tear gas canister. According to Turkey’s Medical Association, some 4,947 people have sought medical treatment for injuries suffered during the protests.

There were widespread rumors that police provocateurs were being sent into the crowd in Taksim Square and being featured prominently on Turkish TV coverage of protesters clashing with police, in an attempt to turn public opinion against the protests. Protesters showed pictures of older men among the protesters, carrying police-issue equipment such as walkie-talkies while clashing with police, as proof.

The Erdogan government promised to aggressively escalate the crackdown and crush the protests outright. Announcing an “end to tolerance,” Erdogan bluntly dismissed criticisms of his government’s brutal

crackdown on the protests: “If you call this roughness, I’m sorry, but this Tayyip Erdogan will not change.”

Erdogan continued, “For those who want to continue with the incidents, I say: ‘It’s over.’ As of now, we have no tolerance for them. Not only will we end the actions, we will be at the necks of the provocateurs and terrorists and no one will get away with it. I am sorry, but Gezi Park is for taking promenades, not for occupation.”

In another right-wing move, Turkey’s Islamist President Abdullah Gül approved yesterday a law banning the sale of alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., as well as advertisements for alcoholic beverages.

The Obama administration tacitly backed Erdogan’s crackdown yesterday, releasing no official comment—a policy reflecting Washington’s reliance on Turkey for its Middle East policy, above all the ongoing war in Syria, where opposition forces are largely armed and supplied via Turkey.

Bulent Aliriza, a Turkey analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, commented: “This is always the quandary for the US government. When you get that close to an ally, you become very careful about criticizing them.”

Continuing US support for Erdogan underscores the hypocrisy of the US-led proxy war for regime change in Syria. The Obama administration and its allies moved to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad under the pretext that they were defending the Syrian people’s democratic rights against a state crackdown on US-backed protests. When protests develop against a regime supported by the NATO powers, however, Washington supports their bloody repression.

Erdogan is betting that the middle class protesters—led by discredited forces such as the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and its pseudo-left supporters—are both unwilling and unable to rally broader support against his Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP).

This has provoked some concern in imperialist circles. They fear that continuing repression across Turkey could discredit Erdogan and trigger a far more dangerous movement against the AKP, based in the working class—as the Tahrir Square protests did in Egypt in 2011, provoking mass strikes that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

In an article titled “Erdogan’s risky gamble in

Turkey,” the French daily *Libération* warned that Erdogan risked undermining his government: “The escalation of tensions could rapidly become uncontrollable.”

It wrote, “The other Turkey which is in the streets is effectively in the minority. Consisting of Kemalist elites, the Westernized middle classes, youth who do not want the state to interfere in their private lives, Alevis—believers in a progressive Shiite branch [of Islam] who account for 15-20 percent of the population—it accounts for roughly one-third of the electorate. This is a lot of people, but it is not enough to win at the ballot box. In the spring of 2007, the AKP overwhelmingly won elections despite protests against rampant Islamization of institutions that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people. This is Erdogan’s gamble, which this time could be a losing one.”

There are signs of nervousness in the financial markets over Erdogan’s policy. Turkey’s currency is falling from 1.85 lira towards 2 lira per US dollar. Yesterday Turkey’s central bank intervened, selling US\$50 million to buy up lira and prop up that currency’s value on financial markets.



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