

Not A Turkish Spring – eyewitness analysis of the protests with pix

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This article is by Esra Dogramaci – a journalist and LSE graduate student who has been in Turkey during the protests. It's a long read but it gives you a detailed first hand narrative of the protests and some analysis of its significance and context from a Turkish point of view. More to follow. She is on Twitter as @Esrad

When the uprisings in the Arab world started in early 2011 much of the world scrambled to make sense of a region that has often been vilified by way of Hollywood and media stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. Weren't these countries autocratic, or token democratic with their leaders cushy friends with the West? With the status quo changing so rapidly, commentators flew in their reporters to see what the fuss was about. Much of the background needed to make sense was absent – who can process the intricacies of a foreign land and culture when its easier to link it with something novel and simple: a Twitter or Facebook revolution? And now, eyes are on Turkey, the West's buddy in the 'East.' The democratic model of the region, the secular nation with religious undercurrents where all people manage to harmoniously get along. Or so it seemed.



Turkish Spring?

Social media opportunists and even some media commentators and others caught up in the excitement of 'change' were quick to suggest this was a 'Turkish Spring'. But this is false. The only thing that the Arab Spring and these protests have in common is that they start as the sun is going down. This isn't a revolution nor is it just a riot. What started out as a peaceful movement against the removal of trees to make way for planned development morphed into a show of opposition against police force and then into anti government demonstrations. It has now changed into a movement seeking recognition for citizen opposition beyond the ballot box.

Police Protest

On Friday 31 May when large crowds assembled at Taksim – the familiar protest focal point of Istanbul and indeed Turkey – my first response besides dealing with the effects of tear gas – was that this had no momentum and that those Turkish Spring speakers need to hold their horses.

First, the 'resistance' started with a few thousand protestors against the removal of trees due to planned construction in Taksim. When police used force to disperse the crowds, much larger ones gathered. Protests chants quickly turned to anti-government, and especially anti-Prime Minister Erdogan reflecting resistance and opposition to recent government decisions such as stricter alcohol limits and the police became a focal point of the anger but resistance was directed against the use of force by the police.



Carnival Crowd

By Saturday afternoon, crowds were celebrating in Taksim, as police had withdrawn. It was in activist terms a “protestival” the protest had become a carnival, people playing music, picnicking and having a generally jovial time. The tension however was shifting down the hill to the European shore of the Bosphorus – to Besiktas, more on this later.

Police withdrawing from Taksim shouldn't be heralded as a victory, just in the same way as police stepping down in other places shouldn't be a “win” for the demonstrators. The police's role in this was to disperse the crowds. Unfortunately (even with government acknowledged excessive use of force), the police became the focus of protestors anger. Protestors built barricades against the police, many still up. In my opinion, protestors were on balance, ‘losing’.



Not A Victory

People assembling, being sprayed with water cannons and tear gas, growing in numbers, then police retreating isn't a victory. The planned construction will likely go ahead, trees will be removed (other trees will be planted but unlikely to make a green visual difference in the concrete dominated urban Istanbul hubs) so what is there to celebrate? The police withdrawal wasn't a response to protest, it was strategic and requested by President Abdullah Gul.

Two things can then happen: everyone goes home or things get violent.

Peace is a prospect because it takes away a target, protestors have no one to direct their protest or anger towards, or with some organisation, efforts can be recast. Down the hill at Besiktas, that's what happened. Besiktas is home to the Prime Minister's Istanbul office and became the new focal point. For hours the scene of protestors mobilising and walking towards police then running back after tear gas was fired. This repeated well into the early hours of Sunday and has continued since.

Police didn't discriminate who was protesting or not – passengers coming off ferries were targeted as well as bystanders – shopkeepers, tourists, local residents. I know because I witnessed it. Tear gas was shot right above me as I was trying to make my way home. I ran into the first open door I found while others previously suffering the same to dab the lemon on my face to take the sting away until I could properly see again. Many storekeepers in heated areas also had water bottles and slices of lemon available as well as surgical masks to guard, though not very effectively against tear gas.



Vandalism And Destruction

I didn't make it home that night. After waiting for hours for things to settle, they simply picked up again. This crowd was very different though. It was mainly young men, hurtling stones at police, causing vandalism and destruction. Police responded to force, with force while streets of Istanbul were broken. Sidewalks had stones and concrete slabs removed to be used as projectiles, street dividers broken off, street signs knocked over, trash cans and large potted plants assembled as barricades.

Further into the week protestors were identifying and disassociating with the provocateurs who were throwing stones, breaking windows and generally causing vandalism. The protesters are overwhelmingly peaceful, out to make a stand that they have grievances against the government and its decision, and that voting is not the only way to demonstrate political dissent.

Spreading Solidarity

Protests have also spread to other major Turkish cities, including the capital Ankara. At the time of writing (6.6.2013) writing, police had stopped using tear gas and water cannons during the day in Istanbul but this was in full force in Ankara, starting from around noon. The Ankara crowd, at first was much different. Made of mainly high school and university students, it seemed they were along for the ride, to be part of a demonstration opposing...something if at least solidarity with the police force on demonstrators in Istanbul.



Something Bigger

But when the major unions went on strike on Wednesday 4 June, it was turning into something bigger. The familiar advance and regroup according to tear gas disbursement continued throughout the days, and crowds growing along with it. Much of the early reporting and organisation was taking place on social media, namely Facebook and Twitter. Subsequent marches, hours of noise, were all communicated primarily via these two platforms. What was also communicated was the large absence of media coverage, especially on that first Friday night.

It's important to remember that although demonstrations have cropped up around Turkey, this is far from a revolution, riot or uprising. For that to happen, efforts need to be sustained in the tens of thousands, with a clear goal in mind. Calling for the Prime Ministers resignation is not useful. It won't happen. He's a democratically elected leader on ever increasing majority votes. Protest areas in Istanbul and Ankara are confined to a few select streets and neighbourhoods, thus the focal point or points is dispersed.



You can [read more from Esra](#) – including her analysis of the role of the mainstream and social media [here](#)

This article by Esra Dogramaci – a journalist and LSE graduate student

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All pictures by Esra Dogramaci

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