Second Image (Reversed), Framing Effects, and Turkey's Gezi Park Demonstrations

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EDWARD WEBB, JUL 1 2013

Turkish Demonstrations and International Relations

Starting in late May, policing of demonstrators in Istanbul's Gezi Park and neighboring Taksim Square spiraled out of control. Excessive use of tear gas and brute force, along with arrests of doctors and lawyers helping demonstrators, produced sympathetic protests in many of Turkey's major cities. Peaceful demonstrations against runaway commercial development became a broader movement, mainly of young people, organized via word of mouth and social media, and fueled by the government's abrasive responses. Among the aspects most reported internationally, much of it has been the provocative populist rhetoric from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and others close to him, and Turkish media's weak or absent coverage of the demonstrations and crackdowns. On a more positive note, there have been celebrations of the creativity of the protesters as they find ways to spread their messages, to subvert the rhetoric directed at them, and to circumvent police violence.

These events are of interest and consequence for students of International Relations in several ways. This article discusses two: possible effects on Turkey's foreign relations and international factors that have contributed to the unrest.

"Second Image" Effects: How Turkish Domestic Politics Can Affect International Relations

Turkey's domestic politics can influence its foreign policy, and Turkey's foreign policy matters.

First, geopolitically, Turkey has a strategically sensitive location, straddling the mouth of the Black Sea and bordering among others Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey is home to key military bases, oil and gas transit pipelines, and smuggling routes through which most Afghan heroin reaches Europe. Turkey's strength and stability have implications for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which it is a member since 1952. Turkey is also the second largest contributor of military forces to NATO. It is further bound to European security by membership in the Council of Europe and ties with the European Union (EU) from its 1963 Association Agreement to its more recent application for full membership.

Second, constructivists might note its equally pivotal role in the frontier zone between what was historically known as Christendom and the *Dar al Islam*—the Muslim-majority world of which the Middle East is the historic center. As the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, as much a European as a Middle Eastern power, Turkey's incorporation into NATO and aspirations to join the European Union are reasonable. On the other hand, the Islamist orientation of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has led Turkey recently to explore and revive its historic ties to the Islamic world.

The foreign policy it pursued under the AKP, built on "zero problems with neighbors" and a self-conscious mediation between western powers and Middle Eastern states, looked for several years to be productive and successful. More recently, as Turkey's traditionally cooperative relations with Israel soured and as the Arab uprisings roiled the region, it became harder for the government to sustain its "zero problems" approach.

Nevertheless, the uprisings offered Turkey a new opportunity, to be a regional "model." With Islamists in power in Tunisia and Egypt and strengthening their clout in many parts of the region, the AKP's credentials as democratic Islamists who had overseen economic growth made them welcome guests in many Arab capitals. Western states fostered the idea of Turkey as a model. There are critics of this notion, but it has helped Turkey sustain its influence in North Africa, even as it has lost it in government-held areas of Syria, where previously warming relations were destroyed by Turkey's decision to back the uprising and the Free Syrian Army.

The heavy-handed policing of the Gezi protests and provocative populist rhetoric from Erdoğan and others have drawn strong concern from the US, which sees Turkey as essential in managing Syria. It has also given ammunition to those in the EU who wish to slow down or block Turkey's accession. As Human Rights Watch's Kenneth Roth commented, the "crackdown makes [Germany's Chancellor] Merkel's desire to block Turkey's EU membership easy". The EU has agreed to postpone formal talks on the next policy area in the accession negotiations, but both sides seem to be working to avoid the protests becoming a full-blown crisis in Turkey-EU relations.

"Second Image Reversed": How International Factors Affect Turkish Domestic Politics [i]

A perhaps less obvious intersection of International Relations with the protests and the government's reaction is in a term coined by Peter Gourevitch in 1978: "second image reversed" (revisited recently by Stephen Krasner [PDF]). Erdoğan's populist response to the demonstrations can appear baffling from the outside, as he blames foreign conspiracies, points to journalists as foreign agents, and alludes to a so-called "interest lobby" who are unhappy that Turkey has paid down a lot of debt. But these messages clearly resonate with his party's base, who have turned out for large rallies. Rather than reaching for a reductive cultural explanation or look to the comparative youth of democracy in Turkey (a multi-party system punctuated by coups since the mid-1940s), we can understand the struggles over domestic structures of power and authority that make these tactics acceptable and even effective as at least partly driven by international factors.

Two aspects stand out here: a paranoid strain of nationalism, teetering on (occasionally over) the edge of xenophobia; and targeting of powerful transnational institutions such as banks and media organizations. Framing the protests as a threat by linking them to foreign plots and organizations is resonant largely due to Turkish history.[ii] Several social scientists have argued that Turkey's politics are consistently influenced by so-called "Sèvres syndrome": the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres which divided what was left of the Ottoman Empire into independent states for many of the Empire's minority populations, leaving a relatively small part of Anatolia for Turks, is taken as a pattern for the desires of foreign powers toward Turkey ever since. That Sèvres was replaced by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne after the War of Liberation led by Mustafa Kemal (later called Ataturk) is the Republic's foundation myth, and at the core of national identity. This leads to fierce attachment to the Republic's territorial integrity and an unfortunate suspicion toward Armenians, Kurds and others. This is not a matter of interest to historians only, but is woven into the education system and popular culture, as evidenced by the runaway success of the 2004 political thriller *Metal* Fırtına,[iii] in which US forces invade Turkey to seize its natural resources and divide its territory among minorities and neighboring states. The US plan is called "Operation Sèvres."

Suspicion of foreign plots bridges many of Turkey's politician divisions. But for the AKP's base, a more diverse group than is sometimes credited but generally religiously conservative, decades of high-handed Kemalist repression gives them ample room to be wary of enemies within as well as without, making Erdoğan's framing of protesters as anti-religious and foreign agents doubly effective.

Similarly, the Prime Minister's attacks on the 'interest lobby' are not only a reflection of the present-day power of international financial institutions and other lenders, but also evoke the 19th century history of foreign debt problems, through which European powers were able to secure effective control of significant parts of the Ottoman economy, as well as Egypt.

AKP leaders have also repeatedly criticized international and social media, while protesters and outside observers have made much of failures of Turkey's media to give realistic coverage to the protests and the police crackdown. We can understand this to some extent with the assistance of scholarship on comparative media systems.

Globalization has tended to spread the norms of "Anglo-Saxon" media organizations, emphasizing pluralism and an ethics of the Fourth Estate, with journalists as watchdogs who must report rather than opine, but this has not been universal. Even within Europe, Hallin & Mancini identified two models beside the Anglo-Saxon one. Of these, Turkey's media most closely resembles "polarized pluralism," found in much of southern Europe. In this type of system, political parties and other interests hash out their battles in partisan outlets with no pretense of impartiality. A vibrant mediasphere, which Turkey has come to enjoy in parallel with its recent economic liberalization, does not automatically mean Anglo-Saxon-style aspirations to impartiality. Turkey's newspapers, radio and television stations are all fairly unambiguously identified with particular political tendencies.

When this phenomenon combines with Turkey's terrible track record in jailing, intimidating and otherwise impeding the work of journalists (see The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF)), it is small wonder that Turkish media did not adequately report on widespread anti-government protests, until mockery on social media more or less forced them to. This trend is unfortunate in that it undermines Turkey as a 'model' of Muslim democracy. Cowed or bought media are consonant with illiberal, majoritarian democracy, but not with the more liberal, pluralistic kind to which many of the young people of North Africa and elsewhere aspire.

On the other hand, there is *some* justification for Erdoğan's complaints against foreign media framing of the protests (although attacks like those by the mayor of Ankara against a BBC correspondent are wildly over the top and damaging). Much of the Western media have tended to frame the events in a wider narrative of regional uprisings, even though Turkey is simply not comparable to Ben Ali's Tunisia or Mubarak's Egypt, let alone Syria, in terms of repression. Wajahat Ali and Haroon Mogul found little to support the idea of this being some kind of "Turkish spring". Despite some transnational memes such as Guy Fawkes masks, these protests were and remain their own thing.

Given the polarized pluralist model of media in Turkey, one can readily understand how the dominant framing of the protests in transnational media as some kind of awakening against an authoritarian Prime Minister out of control – exemplified by *The Economist*'s cover image of Erdoğan as an Ottoman sultan – could be taken as being driven not by the imperative to have a simple and satisfying narrative to sell, but as being in the service of some political agenda.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Erdoğan is not in imminent danger of losing power and if he does, it will be via the ballot box. But the protests, his response to them, and international reactions could be consequential for Turkey's democracy and its role in international relations. A continued reactionary backlash by Erdoğan could set back many things, including investor confidence. On the other hand, conciliatory moves that emphasize pluralism will benefit Turkey's society and economy, and set a productive example for states undergoing transitions. The AKP needs a change of course after over a decade in power, in any case. As Cihan Tuğal argued in 2012, the government's economic achievements were not necessarily sustainable, built as they were on international credit and real-estate bubbles. If the AKP is to continue to impress, it must build a more thoroughly liberal polity and a more robust economy, with benefits more evenly distributed. To do that, it will need self-confidence rather than defensive populism, and a more credible and organized opposition than it currently faces.

International actors should try to understand the concerns of the government and its supporters about how the protests are interpreted. Sympathy to AKP concerns does not mean ignoring the equally legitimate concerns of demonstrators. But anything that looks like seeking to exploit the unrest to weaken Turkey's economy or security will strengthen the paranoid strain of nationalism into which the Prime Minister's rhetoric has tapped, undermining rather than encouraging pluralism. What is really needed is clearer understanding of the nuances in western conversation about these events, particularly avoiding convenient but misleading comparisons to recent Arab uprisings. [iv]

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Dr. Edward Webb *is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Dickinson College. His academic interests include Turkish and Middle-Eastern political studies as well as regional authoritarianism*

and security studies. He is also a former diplomat and his time in the region has offered him invaluable experience and understanding of the region's history, language, and politics.

[i] The term 'second image', referring to analysis of international politics on the basis of domestic political and economic forces, is a legacy of the late Kenneth Waltz' *Man, the State, and War* (Columbia University Press: 1959).

[ii] An excellent recent essay by Timur Hammond on the uses of Turkey's history in the present can be found here.

[iii] By Orkun Uçar and Burak Turna, Istanbul: Timas Yayınları.

About the author:

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