On Wednesday 19 June, PASSIA hosted a roundtable discussion led by Dr. Mehran Kamrava, Professor at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar and Director of its Center for International and Regional Studies, on the subject "Taksim Square: Between Arab Politics and the Turkish Model”. Dr. Kamrava is an expert on regional politics of the Middle East, and in addition to a number of journal articles, he is the author of nine books and the editor or co-editor of eight books. As an Iranian, working in Qatar, with American citizenship and a Turkish wife, Dr. Kamrava is not only an expert on the subject of Middle Eastern politics, but also someone whose many layers of identity allow him to indentify personally with events within the region. The following is a short summary of the seminar led by Dr. Kamrava. This summary will begin by exploring the context in which the events of Taksim happened. Following this, it will end with a discussion of the consequences of what has happened nationally and regionally in the Middle East and the Arab world. The full seminar can be listened to [here](http://chirb.it/fg0GBb).

**Developments leading to Taksim**

We can identify three separate developments that happened to converge at a particular moment in Turkish history which, together, led to the recent events of Taksim Square and around Turkey. These developments converged in a specific national and regional context. Firstly, there has been an increasing chasm in Turkish culture and identity. Since its establishment the Turkish republic has been very proud of its secular identity and legacy which has for a good few decades been a national narrative articulated by the Turkish political elite. However, increasing democratization has allowed for the rise of a counter-elite who have articulated a counter narrative, a different idea of Turkish identity. Erdogan and his AK party have been a formidable force in articulating these new ideas about Turkish identity. AK won numerous elections by mobilizing public popular support, going door to door knocking and getting out the vote, articulating a very popular and populist message talking about culture, authenticity and what it means to be Turkish. This challenge to the historic Turkish narrative has of course met with resistance resulting in a culture war of sorts, between those who subscribe to the dominant narrative and those who contest it or provide a counter-narrative, resulting in increased political and social tension.

The second development is the rise of democratization and increasing liberalization of Turkey. Prior to recent reforms, Turkey had a rather illiberal democracy with certain red lines that could not be crossed - the Kurdish question was beyond reproach, Ataturk’s legacy was beyond reproach, the military was the fourth estate and there was an incredibly tight system. Under AK these lines are becoming increasingly blurred and Turkey is becoming increasing democratic. The Turkish military, which 1997 instigated the ‘silent coup’ to oust Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan whom they perceived to be pursuing policies counter to Ataturk’s legacy, has been largely defanged by Prime Minister Erdogan, especially in the wake of the failed 2003 ‘Sledgehammer’ coup plan, which resulted in the very public trial and conviction of more than 320 retired and serving officers. The de-politicization of the military and increased democratization creates a space within which both expectations of the government are increased and dissent can be more freely expressed, allowing those who are supportive of the government and those who are not to clash. Increased economic liberalization has additionally led to a new class of entrepreneurs with increasing autonomy and wealth, further distancing power from the government.

A third development regards the personality of the Prime Minister. After winning three elections Erdogan has become incredibly self confident to the point of being dismissive. As such, AK and Erdogan have begun talking about legislating social issues which for many people is a red line – by telling people not to kiss in public and increasingly intruding into the private lives of Turkish citizens Erdogan has begun to alienate a large portion of the Turkish public. This intrusion coupled with Erdogan’s dismissing of criticism is arguably a prominent factor in the feelings of disenfranchisement articulated by the protestors in Turkey.

These three elements –the social chasm, democratization, a particularly dismissive Prime Minister - all are ingredients for instability. The three coming together in a particularly volatile regional context has resulted in the recent events witnessed in Istanbul and around Turkey.

**The domestic and regional consequences of Taksim**

The opposition to the AK party in parliament has up until now been incredibly timid, with the opposition divided over how to present a viable challenge to the populist Prime Minister. However, post-Taksim the opposition is likely to be emboldened. While it is likely that Erdogan can ride out any vote of no confidence, the opposition has been strengthened and can begin to talk of a popular mandate. As a result we are likely to see increased political polarization and the increased involvement of parties which were not so important before. But more so than that we have a polarization of the poles within Turkish culture – the religious, the Ataturk-secular, the European and the military. We can see the effects of this polarization in the street, evident in both the widespread and energetic protests against Erdogan and the pro-Erdogan forces being rallied by the government and holding supportive demonstrations.

With this in mind, what are some of the regional consequences of the developments in Turkey? Turkey’s culture has a lot of soft power, and the appeal of Turkish culture is likely to reignite the young in the region. The Arab Spring resulted in a widespread idea of popular empowerment in the Middle East, and with the Turks taking to the street to demand change the young in Cairo will be watching and feeling the same sense of empowerment again - if the Turks can do it, those in Egypt can do it again, and perhaps the Sunnis in Baghdad and the youth of Iran can do it also. The contagion of popular empowerment is likely to spread again, and to be more prevalent than before due to Turkey’s soft power. It may be a difficult concept for political scientists to grasp, but we should not underestimate the importance of Turkish soft power in this regard.

We also know that the Turkish model is something that every aspiring intellectual in the Middle East talks about. Because of this what is happening in Turkey is likely to be emulated elsewhere – while Erdogan currently remains dismissive going forward he is far more likely to moderate his personality, to be more willing to engage in dialogue, and then this will become one of the aspects of the Turkish model for the ‘new’ democracies in Middle East to emulate. This ‘hiccup’ is likely to have positive consequences for the rest of the region.