

Protecting Taksim Park

Taksim Park is one of the few remaining green spaces in Istanbul. When authorities began destroying the park to build a shopping mall, people objected and the government responded with heavy handed tactics. Seven people lost their lives and thousands were injured. ELAW partner Gonca Yilmaz provided legal support to citizens swept up in the protests.

Gonca co-founded the Denge Ecological Life Foundation, based in Istanbul. She has practiced law for ten years and works on problems related to hydropower and coal plants. She is in Portland this year, pursuing a masters degree in environmental and natural resources law at Lewis and Clark Law School.



Q & A with Gonca Yilmaz



Q: Why is Taksim Park important?

A: Our local and central government have gradually opened up all the free spaces to construction projects. This is urbanization. Taksim Park is a small park, located in very center of Istanbul, in Taksim Square. If we lose Taksim Park, there will be no green area left in the city center.

Taksim Square has historical and symbolic meaning for the people of Turkey. It is a center of culture, history, and civil rights movements. When individuals, groups, or non-governmental organizations want to make their voices heard about a loss of civil rights, they gather in Taksim Square. You could call Taksim our Central Park or Hyde Park, though it's much smaller.

Q: Why is the park threatened?

A: Two years ago, the Istanbul Chamber of Architects alerted us to government plans to alter the zoning of Taksim Park to allow construction of a shopping mall. A public meeting with NGOs was held and the attendance was enormous. We held weekly meetings for two years, a campaign was organized,

and lawyers discussed legal avenues for protecting the park. We filed three cases on behalf of different groups of plaintiffs. I filed the citizen suit. The cases are still pending.

The central government's decision to build the shopping mall was framed around a project to "renew the historical Ottoman Barrack," but in a later speech the Prime Minister claimed that, if he wanted to, he would build a shopping mall too.

Q: Were you involved in Occupy Taksim?

A: Yes, thousands, if not millions of people were in the streets. It was impossible to stay away from the protests. These were mostly educated people — professors, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and famous actors. We all participated in the demonstrations. The protests spread, with everyone simply claiming their fundamental human rights to free speech and to live in a healthy environment.

Q: Was the campaign a success?

A: Partly. Construction in the park has been put on hold, but we lost seven people and 16 others lost their eyes, and thousands were wounded. Hundreds ended up in jail due to irrational accusations. I believe the price should not be that high.

Q: What is the future of the park?

A: Nobody is sure. The government may change its mind and go ahead with the project. Citizens will need to watch because the process is not always democratic.