

# Turkish-Hamas Relations: Between Strategic Calculations and Ideological Affinity

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## Introduction

While the deterioration in Israel-Turkey relations over the past decade is rooted in many factors, perhaps what exemplifies this deterioration most is the closeness forged between the Justice and Development Party-led government and Hamas. The *Mavi Marmara* incident of May 2010, which sparked the deep crisis in Israel-Turkey relations that has persisted since, should be seen against the backdrop of this relationship. Hence, understanding the dynamics underlying Turkey-Hamas relations and the strengths and weaknesses of this relationship is extremely important from an Israeli perspective.

Since the fall of Mohamed Morsi's government in Egypt in July 2013 and the cooled relations between Hamas and Iran in context of the Syrian civil war, Turkey, joined by Qatar, has been heralded as a primary funder of Hamas. While there is some debate over the exact sums, it seems as though Turkey has at least pledged to provide Hamas between \$250-300 million annually.<sup>1</sup> Still, the unity deal between Hamas and Fatah from April 2014, and the attempts by Hamas to lure back Iran<sup>2</sup> have shown that Turkey and Qatar are not strong enough partners from the perspective of Hamas and cannot by themselves help Hamas grapple with the difficult conditions it faces. In order to assess the future prospects of Turkish-Hamas relations, the article first explores the developments in recent years in Turkey-Hamas relations and then analyzes what were the main causes that drove Turkey to strengthen its relations with Hamas.

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## Historical Overview

Despite the fact that it was already Necmettin Erbakan from the Islamist Welfare party, who served as Turkish Prime Minister from 1996 to 1997, who called for increased ties with Hamas, it was not until the rise of the Justice and Development party (AKP) in the 2000s that this vision materialized. During the period until 2009 in which Ahmet Davutoglu served as chief foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister, and from 2009 when he was appointed Foreign Minister, Turkey grew more sympathetic toward Hamas.

In the 2006 Palestinian national elections Hamas received 44 percent of the votes (over Fatah's 41 percent), which meant it won 74 seats in the 132-seat Palestinian parliament.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of these elections, a unity government with Fatah was formed, but in 2007, in light of the difficulties encountered by the unity government and after a violent struggle, Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip. Following these developments Turkey tightened its links to Hamas and launched direct contacts with the organization.<sup>4</sup> In these meetings Hamas was represented primarily by Khaled Mashal, the leader of the Hamas Political Bureau, along with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, both of whom visited Turkey in 2012. Many of these meetings were hosted by the highest level in Turkey, i.e., Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu. The main issues raised in these meetings were Turkish economic aid and the recognition of a Palestinian state by the United Nations, along with Turkey's assistance to Hamas in its efforts to be removed from the lists of terrorist organizations in the United States and Europe. As a result of these meetings, Turkey sent aid to Gaza through the Turkish Business and Coordination Agency (TIKA),<sup>5</sup> assistance that included aid for construction of a hospital in Gaza and equipment for water purification.

Following Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, the Turkish criticism of Israel, especially by Prime Minister Erdogan, grew particularly virulent. During the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2009, Erdogan angrily walked out of a joint panel with Israeli President Shimon Peres, after charging that Gaza is an "open air prison" and indicting Peres with, "When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill."<sup>6</sup> While there is some debate to what degree the AKP supported and assisted the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in May 2010,<sup>7</sup> in the aftermath of this incident, the Palestinian question came to be referred to as simply "Gaza" in much of the public opinion discourse in Turkey. In a speech in parliament in July 2011, Erdogan made it clear that his three conditions for normalization

with Israel include an Israeli apology, compensation, and a “lift of the embargo on Gaza.”<sup>8</sup> Whereas Erdogan hasn’t yet fulfilled his promise to visit the Gaza Strip following the *Mavi Marmara* incident, Davutoglu and Erodgan’s son Bilal visited Gaza while joining an Arab League delegation of Foreign Ministers in November 2012 in the wake of the Israeli operation Pillar of Defense.<sup>9</sup>

### Turkey’s Strategic Ambitions and Novel Ways to Achieve Them

Contrary to its policy during the Cold War, when it sought to distance itself from Middle East politics, in recent years Turkey has attempted to gain more influence in the Middle East. There are several reasons for this shift. First, Turkey is no longer satisfied with the status quo, but rather seeks to have a greater standing in the region. Second, Turkey’s neo-Ottoman inclinations reflect its desire to reassert its influence in the territories that used to be part of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Third, Turkey’s growing economy and mounting energy needs can be at least partially fulfilled through stronger trade relations with Middle East countries. Fourth, as Turkey’s EU accession process seems to be going nowhere, it is tempted to look for alternatives. In this context, resistance to Israel was considered an easy way to gain popularity in the Arab world, and was part of Turkey’s growing emphasis on employing soft power measures to increase its influence in the regional and international system.<sup>11</sup> As Turkey currently puts more emphasis on value-driven policies, standing against Israel’s alleged human rights violations, specifically with regard to the situation in Gaza, is seen as a way to present Turkey as a moral actor.

The harsher criticism vis-à-vis Israel can also be seen as a way to reflect a more independent stance in international politics.<sup>12</sup> While Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and overall has been a loyal member of the alliance since then, there has always been concern on the Turkish side about whether the alliance will truly stand by it in its hour of need. Turkey thus wants to reduce its dependence on the West, both in the economic and military realm. Confronting the West and specifically the US on its policies toward Israel can be seen as way to use this growing independence as a warning to its current allies (“don’t take us for granted”) and as a way to develop new partnerships

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with other actors that are trying to confront the West (Russia, China, Iran). While Turkish positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not necessarily that distant from those of certain European states, the fact that it highlights Hamas as a legitimate political actor (and not as a terrorist organization) and its more provocative style in recent times (the “one minute” episode in Davos; the *Mavi Marmara*) can be utilized to project its more independent stance and demonstrate that it does not shy away from challenging the US on certain issues.

From a regional point of view, while it would perhaps be an overstatement to claim that Turkey cooperates with Hamas as a direct challenge to Iran or Egypt over regional influence, it can be claimed that certain power struggles are at play. Thus, while the Turkish criticism vis-à-vis Israel regarding the situation in Gaza was by far more vocal, during the Mubarak era and following the overthrow of Morsi the Turks from time to time also voiced criticism of the restrictions Egypt put on the movement to and from Gaza, and specifically the repeated closures of the Rafah border crossing.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Erdogan did not visit Gaza during Morsi’s tenure is perhaps also an indication of the tensions between Turkey and Egypt on the issue of Gaza.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Turkey’s claim that it can encourage moderation of Hamas is a tacit criticism of the direction in which Iran is trying to pull Hamas.

### Ideological Reasons

With both Hamas and the Justice and Development Party seen as linked to the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, there also seems to be an ideological affinity between the two. Some leading Muslim Brotherhood figures question whether the Justice and Development Party can indeed be seen as a “true” follower of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, because it does not altogether reject the notion of laicism and in fact prefers to portray itself as a conservative democratic party rather than an Islamist party.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that the AKP shows more sympathy toward Islamist parties in other countries than did most previous governments in Turkey. Also, contrary to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, it does not seem that Hamas questions the Islamist dimension of the Justice and Development Party. Recently, it appeared as if Hamas even viewed the AKP victories in the Turkish local elections as a boost and a counter-trend after “losing” Egypt with the fall of Morsi.<sup>16</sup> The Justice and Development Party may well find it more desirable to have interactions with Hamas rather than Fatah, because it has difficulty with the more secular tradition of Fatah.

Moreover, Erdogan may have drawn some similarity between the fact that Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Elections was not accepted as legitimate and the fact that the AKP's victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections was in some respects also contested in the early years after it came to power. In an interview to the *Washington Post* in January 2009, Erdogan explained this position by saying, "Hamas entered the elections as a political party. If the whole world had given them the chance of becoming a political player, maybe they would not be in a situation like this after the elections that they won. *The world has not respected the political will of the Palestinian people.*"<sup>17</sup> As such, Turkey has taken upon itself the role of facilitating meetings between representatives of Hamas and Western states in order to upset the policy of no formal contacts with Hamas because of its involvement in terrorist acts.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, in recent years Turkey has stressed the fact that it sees itself as the representative of the Muslim civilization, and as such should not be silent in the face of Israel's violent actions against the Gaza population during events such as Operations Cast Lead (2008-9) and Pillar of Defense (2012). In this respect, during a speech at Cairo University in 2012, Erdogan stated:

Just as Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Damascus, Diyarbakir, Istanbul, Ankara are each other's brothers, so, let the world know and understand that Ramallah, Nablus, Jericho, Rafah, Gaza and Jerusalem are these cities' brothers and our brothers. Each drop of blood spilled in these cities is the same blood that flows in our veins...Each tear is our own tear... Let everyone know that sooner or later, the innocent children massacred in Gaza with inhumane methods shall be accounted for.<sup>19</sup>

### **Domestic Considerations and Lobby Groups**

From a domestic perspective, the Justice and Development Party's close relationship with Hamas reflects the affinity that a majority of the voters for the party feel for some of the Islamic-Arab actors as a result of their religious conservative views. Among the general public is the fact that as one of the last standing territories of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine has much significance for them. One can find sympathy for the Palestinian issue across the Turkish political spectrum, including the least religiously identified (such as the leftist groups).<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Turkish public's sympathy toward Palestinians requires the political actors to follow closely and react to developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Another reason why Turkey formed a close relationship with Hamas is the influence of Turkish Islamist non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and more specifically the IHH, which plays an active role in Turkish politics. This organization, founded in 1992 in the context of the Bosnian war and formally registered in Turkey in 1995, now sends humanitarian aid to more than 120 countries. It is a Turkish-centered NGO with strong Islamic ideological tendencies. Israel claims that IHH is part of the Hamas fundraising network, and since July 2010 Germany has also banned the organization's Frankfurt affiliate because of its links to Hamas.<sup>21</sup> Beyond the religious-ideological roots shared between the AKP and IHH, many senior IHH figures were appointed to high ranking positions in the AKP.<sup>22</sup> For example, Zeyid Aslan, who was one of the founders of IHH, was later an AKP parliamentary representative from the city of Tokat. During the time he served in parliament, Aslan was elected president of the Turkish-Palestine Inter-parliamentary Friendship Group and was the very person who criticized Israel most harshly. While the government stopped AKP parliamentarians and officials from boarding the *Mavi Marmara* before it left the port in May 2010, AKP deputies did join the third Viva Palestina land convoy (in which IHH was also involved) to bring aid to Gaza through Egypt in December 2009-January 2010.

While not downplaying AKP-IHH close contacts, IHH is also linked to the more conservative Felicity party that splintered off from the Virtue party after it was banned by the Turkish constitutional court in 2001 (the more reformist members of the Virtue party formed the AKP).<sup>23</sup> Regarding certain current and possible future tensions between the AKP-led government and IHH, representatives of the government have tried to pressure the families of the *Mavi Marmara* victims to drop their civil lawsuits (a legal battle that is orchestrated by IHH) against high ranking former IDF officers, but still to no avail.<sup>24</sup> A question arises what will happen if Erdogan decides to intervene in this issue, and how that will affect AKP-IHH relations. There were also accusations of IHH personnel cooperating with al-Qaeda (including a police raid on a local IHH office in Kilis in January 2014).<sup>25</sup>

The influence of the IHH on Turkey's foreign policy is described as follows in an interview in *Anlayış* Magazine on February 11, 2010 with Bulent Yildirim, the president of the IHH:

Turkish foreign practices were based on only ethnic considerations for a while. Right now there are multi-faceted practices and everyone concurs that we have much influence on this....

Also, it is very evident that recently Turkish foreign practices have had a positive influence on our work as well. *Because in a lot of the topics, we have similar views and we act in a similar fashion.* There are a lot of issues where we act together in the field. While formal and semi-formal organizations have to pay attention for the balances between various things, NGOs are able to move fast...*In short, as much as the NGOs are more active, the countries where the NGOs are based will become more powerful in the world.*<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

As Turkey gave its support to Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza,<sup>27</sup> the fact that its ties with Hamas have intensified should also be seen in the context of the negative consequences and the mistakes made in handling this withdrawal. As the withdrawal was not coordinated with the Palestinian Authority, it strengthened Hamas, and following the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, the many restrictions put by Israel on the movement of people and supplies in and out of Gaza sparked criticism abroad in general and in Turkey in particular. Moreover, Israel has failed to convince Turkey under Erdogan that Hamas is a terror organization, and it is Turkey that is putting a lot of effort in convincing Western leaders that Hamas is a legitimate political actor.

As Hamas is now at a low point, it is quite clear that Turkish support cannot serve as compensation for the loss of support by the Morsi regime in Egypt, nor can it replace Iran as a bulwark for Hamas.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Turkish-Hamas relations also point to the limits of Turkey's influence in the Middle East. This is both a result of the fact that some of the Arab/Muslim states are trying to curb Turkey's attempts to gain more influence, and the fact that Turkey is not willing to "go all the way" in its relations with Hamas because the price to its relations with the Western bloc might be too high. Thus Turkish emphasis on "independence" in its foreign policy in fact leads it to contradictory policies that at times are unsustainable in the long run. Still, the *Mavi Marmara* incident and its aftermath have to a large degree cemented the Turkey-Hamas relationship, and it will be extremely difficult for Israel to try and pressure Turkey to change paths in this respect.

Turkey responded positively to efforts by Hamas and Fatah in the spring of 2014 to form an interim unity government. The Turkish Foreign Minister congratulated the sides on once again reaching a reconciliation agreement and offered humanitarian aid,<sup>29</sup> and a subsequent press statement by the

Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the elections expected in the forthcoming period will strengthen the “democratic legitimacy in Palestine.”<sup>30</sup> Already in previous years, Turkish leaders stressed the importance of reaching a unity deal,<sup>31</sup> and have tried to mediate in this direction.<sup>32</sup> While it does not seem that Turkey was actively involved in the current negotiations, Turkey has in the past emphasized to its Western allies that it has a moderating role vis-à-vis Hamas and that it is trying to push Hamas to accept a two-state solution. Turkey has also emphasized in the past that in such a unity deal, Fatah must adopt a tougher stance toward Israel.<sup>33</sup> Thus Turkey can claim it has an indirect role in the present Fatah-Hamas reconciliation process, which has occurred in the context of the suspension of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

If the current reconciliation attempts fail there is fear that the situation in Gaza will continue to deteriorate, and hence will also continue to serve as a major point of contention between Turkey and Israel. Added to this is the suspension of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, which can also be seen as a serious cause of concern regarding Turkish-Israeli relations in general, after these only recently began to somewhat improve. Thus, it can be argued that the divide among the Palestinians is not only poisonous to the ability to reach a comprehensive peace agreement with them, but also to some of Israel’s external relations.

## Notes

- 1 Zvi Barel, “Turkey May Provide Hamas with \$300 Million in Annual Aid,” *Haaretz*, January 28, 2012; see also Jonathan Schanzer, “Terrorism Finance in Turkey: A Growing Concern,” FDD (Foundation for Defence of Democracies) Report, February 2014, p. 14, [http://www.defenddemocracy.org/stuff/uploads/documents/Schanzer\\_Turkey\\_Final\\_Report\\_3\\_smaller.pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/stuff/uploads/documents/Schanzer_Turkey_Final_Report_3_smaller.pdf).
- 2 Jack Khoury, “Hamas, Iran Meet for First Time in Three Years as Unity Deal Nears,” *Haaretz*, May 24, 2014.
- 3 Furkan Toprak, “Türkiye’nin Hamas Politikası Bir Ezberi Bozdu Mu?” [Did Turkey’s Hamas Policy Challenge an Early Understanding?], *Yakın Dou Haber*, January 29, 2009.
- 4 However, it should be emphasized that before 2008 and Operation Cast Lead, Turkey tried to downplay the state-level relations and mostly encouraged Turkish NGOs to engage in direct dialogue with Hamas. See Zeynep Atalay, “Civil Society as Soft Power: Islamic NGOs and Turkish Foreign Policy,” in *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization*, ed. Riva Kastoryano (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 181. See also

- Herb Keinon, "Turkish PM Erdogan Hosts Increasingly Isolated Hamas Leader Mashaal in Ankara," *Jerusalem Post*, October 8, 2013.
- 5 Turkey formed what is now known as TIKA in 1992. At first, it was part of the foreign office and its aid was directly mostly toward Central Asia and Caucasian states that had formerly been part of the Soviet Union. In 1999 TIKA was moved to the Prime Minister's office. Its operations have expanded substantially (it claims to have orchestrated activities in more than 100 states), and it also is the national coordinator of official and non-governmental aid. Of its 33 local offices, one is located in Ramallah. See Saban Kardas, "Turkey's Development Assistance Policy: How to Make Sense of the New Guy on the Block," *GMF Analysis*, February 4, 2013; "TIKA's Fields of Activity," <http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/fields-of-activity/2>.
  - 6 Katrin Bennhod, "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel," *New York Times*, January 29, 2009.
  - 7 Yaakov Katz, "Erdogan and Turkish Government Supported IHH," *Jerusalem Post*, January 24, 2011; but see also "Israel 'Hit Flotilla Harder than Turkey Expected,' Former Turkish Diplomat Says," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 26, 2014.
  - 8 "Turkey PM: Israel Must Still Apologize for Last Year's Gaza Flotilla Raid," *Haaretz*, July 8, 2011.
  - 9 Roi Kais, "Turkish Foreign Minister Sheds Tear in Gaza," *ynet*, November 21, 2012.
  - 10 Omer Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism," *Carnegie Papers* no. 10 (September 2008): 14-15.
  - 11 Ibrahim Kalin, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey," *Perceptions* 16, no. 3 (2011): 8-11.
  - 12 Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Israel: A Micro Component of a Turkish Macro Foreign Policy," *Tel Aviv Notes* 7, no. 20 (October 2013).
  - 13 In this respect, see Abigail Hauslohner, "In the Siege of Gaza, Egypt Walks a Delicate Line," *Time*, January 11, 2010; Tally Helfont, "Egypt's Wall with Gaza & the Emergence of a New Middle East Alignment," *Orbis* 54, no. 3 (2010): 437.
  - 14 Ivan Watson, "Turkish Prime Minister to Visit Egypt as Regional Tension Widens," *CNN Security Blog* September 12, 2011.
  - 15 Mustafa Akyol, "AKP is Not Islamist but Somewhat Muslimist," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August, 12, 2009; See also, Senem Aydin and Rusen Cakir, "Political Islam in Turkey," *Centre for European Policy Studies Working Paper* no. 265 (April 2007): 1-2.
  - 16 Hazem Balousha, " Hamas Celebrates AKP Win in Turkish Elections," *al-Monitor*, April 4, 2014.
  - 17 "Palestine Today is an Open-Air Prison," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2009 (emphasis added).
  - 18 Balousha, " Hamas Celebrates AKP Win in Turkish Elections."
  - 19 Burhanettin Duran, "Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and its Limitations," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 1 (2013): 94-95.

- 20 Barcin Yinanc, "End of the Crisis Period in Turkish-Israeli Relations?" *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 27, 2014.
- 21 Melis Tusiray and Michael Werz, "What is the IHH?" *Center for American Progress Brief*, July 26, 2010.
- 22 In this respect, see the *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center Brief*, January 24, 2011, [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/data/pdf/PDF\\_10\\_268\\_2.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/data/pdf/PDF_10_268_2.pdf).
- 23 Atalay, "Civil Society as Soft Power," p. 182.
- 24 "Families of Mavi Marmara Victims Meet Davutoglu Ahead of Compensation Talks," *Today's Zaman*, April 3, 2013.
- 25 "Turkish Police Detain 28 in Anti-al Qaeda op, Raid on IHH Office," *Today's Zaman*, January 14, 2014.
- 26 "Bulent Yildirim: 'Gazze'de Sistematik bir Soykırım Yasaniyor'" [Experiencing Systematic Genocide in Gaza], *Anlayis*, February 11, 2010, translation by authors (emphasis added).
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- 28 Yoram Schweitzer, Benedetta Berti, and Shlomo Brom, "The Erosion of the Israel-Hamas Ceasefire in Gaza," *INSS Insight* No. 537, April 6, 2014.
- 29 "Qatar, Turkey back Palestinian Unity Deal," *Ma'an News Agency*, April 24, 2014.
- 30 Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, June 2, 2014, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-183\\_-2-june-2014\\_-press-release-regarding-the-establishment-of-the-national-unity-government-in-palestine.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-183_-2-june-2014_-press-release-regarding-the-establishment-of-the-national-unity-government-in-palestine.en.mfa).
- 31 Ron Friedman, "Erdogan: Fatah Must Cooperate with Hamas for Mideast Peace," *Times of Israel*, May 17, 2013.
- 32 Jack Khoury, "Turkey Pushing for Palestinian Unity, on Heels of Reconciliation with Israel," *Haaretz*, March 28, 2013.
- 33 Such criticism of Fatah appeared, for example, in a speech delivered by Davutoglu in 2012: "And in this national conciliation, the critical term is both sides accepted peaceful resistance. This is a clear indication that Hamas is now adopting a peaceful method of politics, but at the same time, *Mahmoud Abbas is accepting a resistance*. If a country is – if a people is under occupation for so many decades, it is their right to defend themselves, to resist, but in a peaceful manner and until a peace being achieved." Taken from: Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkish Foreign Policy Objectives in a Changing World." See speech delivered in the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), February 12, 2012 (emphasis added), <http://csis.org/files/attachments/Event%20Transcript%20Statesmen's%20Forum%20Turkish%20FM.pdf>.