

## The AKP's Hamas Policy I: How Turkey Turned

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkey has not traditionally boasted strong popular support for Hamas, or any other groups with a violent Islamist agenda. Turks generally have had an attitude of benign indifference towards their country's ties with Israel. Lately though, this is changing. Whereas anti-Israeli demonstrations would have typically attracted only a few thousand people in the past, today pro-Hamas and anti-Israeli demonstrations attract hundreds of thousands of people in Turkey, and the country is witnessing drastic changes in popular attitudes toward Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian issue.

These changes are rooted in the transformation of Turkish views of the world and the accompanying transformation of Turkish foreign policy: the Turks' view of the world is changing, with the Turks taking a negative view of the West: today, few in Turkey care for the West, most people oppose EU accession, many Turks hate America, and almost no one likes Israel. At the same time, Turkey's foreign policy toward the West is also changing, with Turkey becoming friendlier with Hamas, Sudan and Iran.

Why are the Turks turning anti-Western? Why are Turks viewing themselves in contrast to the West -- meaning the United States across the world -- Israel in the Middle East and Europe within Turkey's immediate neighborhood? Examining the development of Turkish policies towards Israel and Hamas over the past seven years since the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power in 2002 can provide many lessons.

In the 1960s and afterwards, various Arab regimes initiated policies that turned the Israeli-Palestinian dispute into a domestic issue. In this regard, the Arab regimes invited radical Palestinian groups to visit their capitals, and provided them publicity and the ability to build networks, allowing the radical Palestinian rhetoric and agenda to penetrate the minds of common Arabs, where it stays. Now, Turkey is going through a similar process under the leadership of the AKP government, except this radical Islamist rhetoric is penetrating the minds of Turks. Since the AKP took office in November 2002, the party's pro-Hamas rhetoric and conduct -- including successive visits to Turkey by Hamas officials, as well as government-sponsored Hamas fundraisers and gatherings -- have for the first time brought Hamas' rhetoric to Turkey.

Consequently, pro-Hamas websites are proliferating in Turkey, traditional Turkish sympathy for the Palestinians is turning into sympathy for Hamas. Additionally Turkish attitudes toward Israel are heating up significantly; according to a BBC World Service poll, only 2 percent of Turks today have a favorable view of Israel while 23 percent view Israel as a threat.

For a long time, the primary goal of the attacks of Sept. 11 appeared to be that al-Qaeda wanted to hurt America. Now, this does not necessarily seem to be the case. The attacks took aim at America, but perhaps, that was not their primary goal. Rather, the primary goal of the attacks seems to have been to rally Muslims around the world to unite under the concept of a "Muslim world" in a perpetual conflict with the West -- meaning Israel in the Middle East and the United States elsewhere in the world.

The attacks, of course, did not create the idea of Muslims; nor did they create the "Muslim world." There is a pre-existing cultural view among the world's Muslims, as in all religions, that believers are unified. The attacks have not created this view; rather they have introduced a Manichean political layer to it, calling on all Muslims to join the new and politically-charged "Muslim world" that al-Qaeda defines having a violent confrontation with the West. This appears to be the primary goal of the Sept. 11 attacks. By creating and sustaining this view, al-Qaeda can hope to attack and hurt America and West many times over.

Enter the AKP in Turkey in 2002. As al-Qaeda was calling on all Muslims everywhere to unite around this new and politically-charged "Muslim world" to oppose the West and attack it whenever possible. The AKP, a party with an Islamist pedigree came to power in Turkey, promoting its vision of a political "Muslim world" and suggesting that Turkey and the Turks belong to this singular religio-political world. It is the power of this Manichean trajectory which explains the Turks' changing foreign policy and their new relationship with Israel and Hamas.

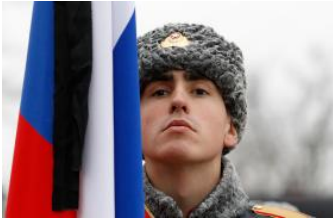
Indeed, on Oct. 11, Turkey cancelled Israeli participation in the Anatolian Eagle air force drill, a military exercise that has been going on for 15 years. The AKP asked the Israelis not to participate in the exercise citing Israeli behavior toward Hamas-controlled Gaza. This was a shock because the exercise is symbolic of close military cooperation between Turkey and Israel. The AKP's cancellation of military exercises with Israel is the beginning of the end of Turkish-Israeli ties. What is more, the AKP's cancellation of Israeli participation in the Anatolian Eagle exercise because of its evaluation of Israel's behavior toward Hamas demonstrates that the AKP sees Turkey as responsible for defending Hamas' agenda as opposed to Israelis.

After chiding Israel for months for "committing atrocities and genocide," Turkish Prime Minister and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan defended Sudanese leader Omar Hassan al-Bashir. United Nations reports documenting al-Bashir's atrocities notwithstanding, Erdogan even said al-Bashir "could not have committed genocide in Darfur, because he is a Muslim and Muslims do not commit genocide."

Turkey and Israel have a long history based on mutual respect and cooperation within the region and have viewed the relationship through the prism of Turks and Israelis; the AKP's behavior towards Israel and Sudan shows that the party views Israel through a new, Islamist prism: Muslims (who are always right even when they kill their own kind) vs. non-Muslims (who are always wrong when they confront Muslims even when acting in self-defense).

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. ❖

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