

Would Turkish Troops in Lebanon Be Neutral?

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Read ([templateC11.php?CID=430](#)) more about Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer's opposition to Turkish participation in the Lebanon peacekeeping mission.

With relative quiet prevailing in Lebanon, the question now is which countries will send peacekeepers to enforce order in the country. International media and policy pundits alike have proposed Turkish peacekeepers as an ideal contributor for such a mission. The argument is that as a Muslim yet Western-oriented nation, Turkey is best positioned to act as a buffer between Israel and Hizbullah.

Whereas a few years ago, Turkish peacekeepers to Lebanon would have been a great idea, today, it is a dangerous one.

Until the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government took office in November 2002, Turkey maintained a balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Earning trust from both sides, Ankara positioned itself as an ideal partner for confidence-building operations such as peacekeeping. Hence, both Israelis and Palestinians rejoiced when Turkish peacekeepers were deployed to Hebron in February 1997.

That was yesteryear. Since the AKP's rise to power, Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, and with that, Turkish public sentiments toward the region, have changed beyond recognition. The AKP has been ignoring the wedges between Turkey and the West, while building bridges between Turkey and the Muslim Middle East.

For starters, four years of harsh criticism of American foreign policy in the Middle East—the US incursions into Fallujah, for example, were labeled “genocide” by AKP officials—has created what could be a permanent dent in Turkish public attitudes toward the US. Whereas in the pre-AKP period typically more than half of the Turks expressed favorable opinions of the US, a Pew Center survey last month showed that only 12 percent of Turks view America positively.

THE AKP has also been alienating Israel. A good example came earlier this year when AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan invited the Damascus-based leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal, to Ankara for meetings, despite criticism from the West and pro-Western Turks.

The AKP continues to defend this visit and has kept in contact with Mashaal, while generally opposing Western efforts to isolate Hamas. The AKP has a passionate, yet bizarre, interest in all “Muslim causes.”

At the beginning of the conflict in Lebanon, Erdogan gave a speech during which he lambasted Israel for trying to “wipe out the Palestinians” in Lebanon.

Erdogan’s speech has created ripple effects. The media has run virulently anti-Semitic articles—a shocking development for a country that has prided itself on saving Jews, whether it be those fleeing the Inquisition or Hitler. The AKP’s new alternative foreign policy is solidarity with all “Muslim causes.”

Analysts have credibly suggested that the AKP is linked to the Islamist Ikhwan—or Muslim Brotherhood—movement in the Arab world. Whereas Egypt and Jordan, who consider the Ikhwan a serious internal threat, would not touch the new Hamas government with a 10-foot pole, the AKP actively courts the Palestinian extension of the Ikhwan.

Not only does the AKP support all Muslim causes, but it also believes that Muslims are generally incapable of wrongdoing. In July, news broke in Turkey that Sheikh Yassin Abdullah Kadi, a Saudi businessman blacklisted by the UN for funding terrorism, was an acquaintance and business partner of Erdogan and other AKP leaders. Erdogan defended Kadi, saying he trusted “Yassin Bey” (using a Turkish honorific denoting utmost respect and seniority for Kadi) as much as he trusted himself.

Four years of AKP rule in Turkey have transformed the country’s ties to the Middle East and drastically affected Turkish public opinion toward the region. For instance, a recent public demonstration in Istanbul against Israel drew around 100,000 people—an amazing phenomenon considering that in the pre-AKP period anti-Israeli demonstrations would have consisted of a few hundred diehard jihadists.

So, what happens if Turkish peacekeepers are deployed in Lebanon? Clearly, the Turkish military is as secular as ever. As its excellent track record in peacekeeping operations indicates—Turkey is the only country that has successfully led the international force in Afghanistan twice, for instance—the Turkish military would go to Lebanon to do a good job.

Yet at this point, if deployed in Lebanon, the hands of the Turkish military would be tied by the Islamists in Turkey. What would happen, for instance, if the Lebanese conflict reignited, and millions of Islamists took to the streets of Istanbul, demanding that the Turkish military protect Hizbullah and Muslims?

The Turkish military would be hard pressed to refuse such a powerful demand, as doing so would cause them to lose credibility at home.

Far from acting as a peacekeeping force, if deployed in Lebanon, the Turkish military risks being caught in the middle of the machinations of Turkey’s ongoing AKP-led transformation and Lebanese politics. Such a situation would be dangerous for Lebanon, for Turkey, and for Israel.

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