

Turkey's Dangerous Lebanon Intentions

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Articles & Testimony

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

With quiet prevailing in Lebanon, the question now is which countries will send international peacekeepers to enforce a permanent cease-fire in the country. Media and policy pundits alike have proposed Turkish soldiers as ideal actors in 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. Here is why.

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 then. Since the AKP's rise to power, Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, and with that concomitant Turkish public sentiment toward the region, has 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 policy in the Middle East—the American takeover of Fallujah, for example, was labeled “genocide” by AKP officials—has created what could be a permanent dent in Turkish public attitudes toward the United States. In the pre-AKP period typically more than half of Turks expressed favorable opinions of the US, however a Pew Center survey last month showed that only 12 percent of Turks viewed 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 Hamas official Khaled Meshaal, 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 Meshaal, 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 in a country that has prided itself on saving Jews, whether those fleeing the Inquisition or Hitler.

Analysts have credibly suggested that the AKP is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the Arab world. Whereas Egypt and Jordan, who consider the Brotherhood a domestic threat, kept their distance from the Hamas government, the AKP actively courts the movement, which also happens to be the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch.

Not only does the AKP support Muslim causes, it has an ambiguous relationship with individuals suspected of wrongdoing. In July, news broke out in Turkey that Sheikh Yassin Abdullah Qadi, a Saudi businessman blacklisted by

the United Nations for funding terrorism, was an acquaintance and business partner of Erdogan and other AKP leaders. Erdogan defended Qadi, saying he trusted “Yassin Bey” (using a Turkish honorific denoting utmost respect) 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 views 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 only have gathered a few hundred diehard jihadists.

So, what happens if Turkish peacekeepers are deployed to 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, once there, the hands of the military could well be tied by Islamists in Turkey. What would happen, for instance, if the Lebanese conflict reignited and Islamists took to the streets of Istanbul demanding that the Turkish military protect Hezbollah and Muslims? The Turkish military would be hard pressed to refuse such a demand, as doing so would cause it to lose credibility at home.

Turkish peacekeepers in Lebanon could make Turkey a partner in regional politics on the side of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. A sign of this development came on August 22 in Damascus, when visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul received a green light from the Syrian regime to send peacekeepers to Lebanon. It is an ominous sign that so far Syria has approved only the deployment of Turkish soldiers to Lebanon.

Far from acting as a peacekeeping force, if deployed to Lebanon, a Turkish contingent risks being caught in the machinations of Turkey’s AKP-led transformation, Lebanese politics, and Middle East dynamics. Such a situation would be dangerous both for Lebanon and for Turkey.

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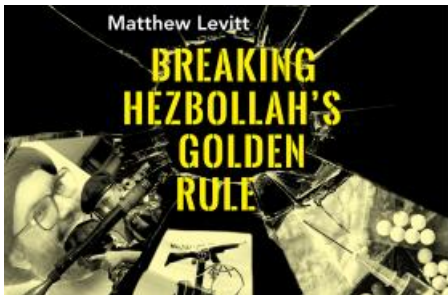
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