

PolicyWatch 1081

Hamas Visits Ankara: The AKP Shifts Turkey's Role in the Middle East

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Khalid Mishal, a Hamas leader currently residing in Damascus, visited Ankara today. Despite fierce debate in the Turkish press and objections from the secular-minded foreign policy elite, Mishal's visit went ahead with backing from Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. From the American perspective, the visit is important for three reasons. First, it could potentially hurt Turkey's longstanding role as an honest broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Second, it serves as yet another foreign policy breach between Turkey and the West. Third, the visit is a telltale sign of the AKP's policy of "strategic depth" toward the Middle East, a policy that Washington needs to understand given U.S. objectives in Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

The AKP Breaks with Turkey's Honest-Broker Role

Ankara recognized Israel in 1949; until Egypt's recognition of Israel at Camp David in 1978, Turkey was the only Muslim state to have diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. For decades, Ankara maintained good relations with Israel and with the Palestinians. For example, Turkey signed many cooperation agreements with Israel and enhanced bilateral political ties (see [PolicyWatch no. 987](#)); and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) opened an office in Ankara in October 1979, though only after the group had been given observer status at the United Nations in 1974 and recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people. In the balancing act between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Ankara established itself as an honest broker. Taking a nonideological approach to the conflict, Ankara promoted a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In due course, both the Israelis and the Palestinians came to respect Turkey's position.

The balance in Turkish-Israeli-Palestinian relations was upset after the AKP came to power in November 2002. Turkey abandoned its policy of equidistance to both sides and signaled broader support for the Palestinians, especially Hamas. Under the AKP government, Ankara took a very critical view of Israeli actions against Hamas and its leadership; in 2004 Erdogan labeled Israel's targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Abdul Aziz Rantisi as "state terror."

Similar negative commentary from AKP leaders toward Israel put a chill in the relationship. The problems were partly alleviated after Erdogan and Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul visited Israel and the Palestinian territories in early 2005, assuring both sides of Turkey's continued desire to act as an honest broker between them.

A Visit despite All Odds

On January 27, just a day after Hamas's victory in Palestinian legislative elections was announced, Erdogan maintained that the international community must respect the decision of the Palestinian people. Alluding to Turkey's experience with Islamist parties coming to power through elections, as his own party had done, Erdogan said, "The choice of the people must be respected, whether one likes it or not." In placing Hamas in the context of the AKP's model of the path to power, however, Erdogan overlooked a significant difference between Hamas and Turkey's Islamist parties -- Hamas specifically advocates violence to achieve its strategic aims, while Turkish parties operate solely within democratic politics. When the Turkish Foreign Ministry declined to extend an invitation to Mishal, the AKP government decided to receive the Hamas leader itself.

At this stage, with Turkey having already called on Hamas to be reasonable -- on February 14, Gul called on Hamas to "act in a democratic way" -- there is nothing that Mishal will hear in Ankara that he has not heard already from Turkey. What is more, on the same day that Gul urged Hamas to reason, Mishal said, "Hamas will never recognize Israel." He went on to declare, "Resistance will remain Hamas's strategic option." Thus the visit serves only to offer legitimacy to Mishal and terrorism without producing any progress toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or promoting Turkey's role as a regional mediator.

Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

The Mishal invitation is an important milestone for Turkish foreign policy, signaling that, after a brief freeze, the AKP is lending sympathetic support to Hamas. From the Israeli perspective, the trip will be a blow to Turkey's

credibility as a trusted partner for Israel and Muslim countries. If the AKP government follows this visit with other, similar steps, it risks unraveling Turkey's longstanding policy of good relations with both Israel and the Muslim countries of the Middle East.

A second and perhaps more alarming foreign policy implication of the visit is that it serves as another indicator of Turkey's changing attitudes toward the Middle East. Mishaal is visiting Ankara at a time when the West is unanimously calling on Hamas to renounce violence as a precondition to contacts with the terrorist group. Mishaal's visit is a telltale sign of the AKP's policy of "strategic depth," which suggests that Turkey ought to make full use of its neighborhood and develop as good ties with its Muslim neighbors as it does with the West. Accordingly, in what has been dubbed the "good neighborhood" policy, the AKP has significantly enhanced Turkey's ties with both Damascus and Tehran.

While the policy of "strategic depth" makes sense in theory, it fails in the real world by assuming reciprocal goodwill on the part of Syria and Iran. On the contrary, both Damascus and Tehran have acted with consistent ill intent toward Ankara, supporting terrorist groups -- the PKK in the case of Syria, and the PKK and Islamist cells in the case of Iran -- to undermine Turkey's secular democratic system and deter its pro-Western foreign policy orientation.

Yet both countries have lately taken advantage of the AKP's "strategic depth" policy to approach Ankara. Neither has changed its mind about Turkey's secular democratic regime, but both see a reason to win Ankara to their side. Syria, which is surrounded by U.S.-occupied Iraq, U.S.-friendly Jordan, and Israel, sees Turkey as the only neighbor that can ease its isolation. Iran likewise faces U.S. military presences in Iraq to the west, Afghanistan to the east, Azerbaijan and the south Caucasus to the north, and the Persian Gulf to the south, and hopes that a sympathetic regime in Turkey can help it circumvent America's grip. In other words, what is "strategic depth" for Ankara is "strategic opportunity" for Damascus and Tehran.

So Mishaal's visit will bolster Hamas, providing the terrorist group with a strategic link and a high-profile endorsement at a time when no Western country or Middle Eastern state on friendly terms with the West will deal with Hamas. As useful as Ankara's endorsement will be for Hamas, it is also a stark sign of divergence in Middle East policy between Turkey and the West. Further, the AKP government has invited the leader of a terrorist group to Ankara at a time when Turkey needs all the help it can get from the West to defeat the PKK's relentless terror campaign. Mishaal's visit indicates that far from taking Turkey's strategic interests into account, the AKP's Middle East policy is guided by a cultural desire to help other Muslim governments and even Islamist terrorist groups, regardless of the nature of these governments and groups and irrespective of how their interests may be at odds with Turkey's. This impetus should be seen as the primary leitmotiv of the AKP's Middle East policy and should be studied with great care by American policymakers contemplating their next steps concerning Hamas, Iran, and Syria.

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