

# The AKP's Hamas Policy:

## Transformation of Turk Foreign Policy and the Turk view of the West

by Dr. Soner Cagaptay

Turkey 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 thousand of Turks, and the country is witnessing drastic changes in popular attitudes towards 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 towards the West is also changing, with Turkey becoming friendlier with Hamas, Sudan and Iran.

Why are Turks turning anti-Western? Why do they view themselves in contrast to the West – meaning the U.S. around the world and Israel within its own neighborhood? Examining the development of Turkish policies towards Israel and Hamas over the past seven years, since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, can provide many lessons.

### **When the Palestinian Issue becomes a Domestic Dynamic...**

In the 1960s and later, 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's 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 towards Israel are heating up significantly, where 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.

### **Enter the AKP and September 11 Attacks**

For a long time, the primary goal of the attacks of September 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 preexisting 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 as having a violent confrontation with the West. This appears to have been the primary goal of the 11 Sep attacks. By creating and sustaining this view, al Qaeda can 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 October 11<sup>th</sup>, 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 towards 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 towards 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. UN reports documenting al-Bashir's atrocities notwithstanding, Erdogan even said that 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)

### **Making of the "Us Muslims with Hamas" versus "the Others" Mindset**

Internally, the AKP has promoted the Islamist mindset of "us Muslims" in conflict with "the bad others" through the media and also by spreading Hamas' views throughout Turkey, whether through official Hamas visits to Turkey or in AKP -supported conferences and fundraisers.

**Through the Media:** Recent changes in media ownership in Turkey under the AKP are closely related to the spread of anti-Western sentiments in the country. Turkey is a country with free media. Media independence in Turkey, however, is increasingly under threat. Turkish media remains free (in that it is not illegal to produce journalism), but the AKP is trying

to curb media freedoms by transforming media ownership through legal loopholes. Such happened in Dec 2005 when the AKP took over the Sabah-ATV conglomerate, which represents around 20% of the Turkish media market, selling this conglomerate to a media company of which Turkish Prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak is the CEO. The AKP has also brought a \$3.2 billion tax fine against Dogan Yayin, a conglomerate that owns around 50% of the Turkish media. This excessive fine exceeds Dogan's total net worth—is political, because Dogan's news outlets promote secular, liberal and nationalist views that often criticize of the AKP.

The transformation of the Turkish media is not an esoteric issue, for it affects the future of Turkish democracy and also has a bearing on Turkish views of the world. Where there is no independent media—as in Russia—there is simply no viable opposition to government. Whenever Turkey goes through a political spasm, analysts warn of the collapse of Turkey's democracy. Despite this, Turkey has survived numerous crises in the past thanks to the balancing power of its fourth pillar.

As Turkish media becomes less free, there is a higher likelihood that it will become a tool for the government with which to shape an anti-Western public opinion. What is bad for secular liberal western Turks is bad for the West. Turkey's free media needs to remain free because if it is all either state-owned or owned by pro-AKP businesses, anti-Western and anti-Israeli viewpoints will spread through the media as we have witnessed since 2002.

A recent show on Turkey's publicly-funded Turkish Radio Television (TRT) network is a perfect example. The debut of the series, entitled "Ayrilik" (Separation), came on the heels of Turkey's cancellation of Israeli participation in the Anatolian Eagle exercises. The TRT, whose head is appointed by the AKP, and which is entirely funded by Turkish taxpayer money, ran "Ayrilik," a show with an anti-Israeli stance, including one which depicts an imagined situation in the Palestinian territories where a newborn baby is intentionally killed by Israeli soldiers.

How do 18-year-old Turks view Israel now? They hate it, and they will do so because of images depicted in shows like "Ayrilik". These are the images they have been seeing for the last seven years and this is what they'll continue seeing. A Turk who has come of age under the AKP is now more likely than not to hate Israel and the West after seven years of

such propaganda. Unlike Turks now in their forties or older who came of political age in a different Turkey, younger Turks have more radical and negative views of the West as a result government-controlled media and media owned by pro-government businesses.

**Through Conferences:** While government-controlled media promotes an evil image of the Israelis, international Hamas conferences in Turkey build legitimacy for Hamas and other extensions of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement. Before the AKP came to power, Turkey had never hosted a Hamas conference. Now, such conferences render the Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood agenda more accessible to Turks, making Hamas' violent struggle against Israel a part of daily political debate.

In the last three years there have been seven Hamas conferences and fundraisers in Istanbul. The first one, held in July 2006 and attended by one of the spiritual leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, was given the title, "Muslims in Europe." Qaradawi's visit was funded by the British Foreign Office, and Hamas and the MB came to talk about Muslims in Europe, exposing Turk and European Muslims to Hamas and its ideology.

The list continues: other Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood conferences in Turkey include a November, 2007 conference called "Jerusalem Day," co-organized by an NGO, Turkiye Gonullu Tesekkuller Vakfi--Association of Turkish Volunteer Organizations, (TGTV), close to the AKP and Islam Dunyasi Sivil Toplum Kuruluslari Birligi-- Association of Muslim World Non-Governmental Organizations (IDSB). This conference entitled, "Jerusalem Day," called for "liberating Jerusalem through jihad from the Zionists."

Other conferences followed in February 2009, April 2009, May 2009, and July 2009. What is interesting is that the frequency of these conferences has been steadily increasing, with four such meetings alone held in 2009. Moreover, these meetings have started to espouse a violent agenda. For instance, at the February 2009 conference, Hamas members called for a jihad centered on Gaza. The April 2009 meeting was a "Masjid al-Aqsa symposium" which called to "liberate Masjid al-Aqsa" and it was organized by the "Istanbul Baris Platformu--Istanbul Peace Platform", which includes a number of NGOs close to the AKP. The symposium called on all Muslims to liberate al-Aqsa through violence, if necessary, and also claimed that Israel has plans to demolish it. The "Palestine Collaboration Conference" in May 2009

called for "continued resistance to liberate Palestine." Conference participants included former Sudanese President Mushir Sivar Ez-Zeheb, President of the International Union of Muslim Scholars Yousef al-Qaradawi, and Hamas Representative and Spokesman in Lebanon Usame Hamdan. In his speech at this conference, AKP deputy Zeyd Aslan said that Israel "commits genocide in Palestine."

On the other hand, the "Environment Conference" in July 2009 was organized by the Earth Centre of Dialogue Partners in cooperation with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the city of Istanbul, and the Fatih University in Istanbul. The conference, attended by al-Qaradawi, concluded with the declaration of a seven-year-action plan on climate change. The conference also served as platform to bring Hamas and MB members to Istanbul.

These conferences are organized by NGOs close to the AKP government. Although they appear to be civil society initiatives, the meetings are held in city halls of Istanbul or convention centers under the control of the AKP city government, which in essence means that taxpayer funds helps pay for these events.

For Turks today, after seven years of propaganda, Hamas appears to be a good organization as it has been a guest in Istanbul seven times and has had multiple contacts with the government. It even has fundraisers in Turkey. Therefore, one should not expect today that the Turks would oppose Hamas' vision or policies. This would be the case especially with young people in their teens or twenties who have come of age under the AKP.

Various Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood meetings in Istanbul show the efforts of the AKP government and its supporters to cultivate a virtual network, usually funded by government money. These meetings held for any occasion, from a call to jihad to a call to save the environment; act as platforms to bring Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood members to Turkey. The meetings fulfill two additional purposes. They expose Turks to a worldview of "good Hamas versus evil Israel," while whitewashing Hamas' violent actions. Secondly, the meetings bring Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood members from across the world and connect them with the Turks, promoting the notion that these people and groups all belong to the new, politically-defined "Muslim world" whose charge is to fight Israel and oppose its policies and presence in the Middle East.

## What to do?

One could look at the rise of pro-Hamas and anti-Israeli sentiments in Turkey and dismiss them as a problem pertaining to Israel, and not to the United States. Others might even add that anti-Semitism in Turkey is not an American problem. Both of these approaches are short-sighted. Islamist thinking, as well as anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments are all closely linked. The Islamist thinking goes along the following lines: “The Jews are evil, therefore Israel is evil. The Jews control America, and therefore America is evil.”

This thinking is the background to the post-September 11 call that all Muslims should unite around the new and politically-charged Muslim world to oppose Israel and the United States. The problem in Turkey is not that the country’s foreign policy towards the West is changing, for such changes can be reversed under a new government, but rather that under the AKP, Turkish attitudes towards Jews and Americans, and Israel and America are changing. In the Manichean post-September 11 world, once the Turks cross the line from the West to the “Muslim world” such changes may prove to be irreversible.

One suggestion for countering the transformation of Turkish public attitudes is a zero tolerance policy by the United States and Israel on the related anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric and meetings sponsored, funded and nurtured by the government. Just as the United States and Israel do not put Turks in a negative light in publicly-funded shows or international meetings, the Turkish government should not be doing the same about the United States or Israel. This is really not asking a lot. It’s basically

saying: “Do as we do, and not as wouldn’t.”

A second suggestion would be calling out on American Muslims, European Muslims, and Muslims elsewhere to recognize that the spread of anti-Western, anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments is a manufactured and politically-masterminded process.

If Muslims do not recognize this problem now, then down the road as more and more people adopt these sentiments, eventually others (including those in the West) will forget that the spread of such attitudes is a politically-manipulated process. The danger here is that some of these people might then actually turn and blame all this on Islam’s reputation. People who deny that radicalization is a politically-manufactured process are actually helping give Islam a bad reputation.

## About the Author ...

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