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Turkey-Hamas-Hezbollah: A New Trinity?

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Turkey's friendly relations with Hamas and Hezbollah constitute an indisputable reality in the Middle East the last six years. The AKP government has brought Turkey closer to the two radical Islamist organisations, to the detriment of the country's long existing relations with Israel and the West, and despite the harsh internal reactions by the Kemalist establishment. Dynamics have started to change in the region. It remains to be seen what these changes will bring about for all Middle Eastern countries.

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The Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah have many things in common; a radical Islamist agenda, an anti-Israeli rhetoric and stance, a warfare system, and links to Iran and Syria; moreover they both enjoy a political status and at the same time are designated as terrorist organisations.¹ The last years Turkish support –or to put it more correctly the governing Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) support, can be added to the afore mentioned similarities of the two organisations. Relations between Turkey and the two radical Islamist groups have attracted a special interest, especially after 2006, a year that marked the history of Hamas with the coming to power in the Palestinian territories, and the history of Hezbollah with the war with Israel in Lebanon. However, when one tries to analyse the relations between two entities in the Middle East they have always to keep in mind the multi-dimensional character of the relations in question and the existing balance of power and dynamics in the region.

On 25 January 2006 Hamas, “the new shining star of the Palestinian politics”² overwhelmingly won the 2006 Legislative Elections ending more than 40 years of domination by Fatah. This victory was condemned by the US, the EU and Israel. Turkey, on the other hand, was among the countries who welcomed the result, and the incumbent ruling party, a (moderate) Islamist party invited the leader of Hamas’ political wing, Khaled Mashaal, to Turkey, providing Hamas with legitimacy and international recognition and provoking international reactions. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan justified his decision based on the fact that Hamas was by then democratically elected by the Palestinian people and not solely a radical Islamist or terrorist group any more.

The visit, as one would expect, was not approved by all political entities of the country, and especially the Kemalists reacted harshly to the government’s move claiming that such a connection with Hamas would jeopardise the country’s relations with the US and Israel, relations that for the Kemalist establishment, represented by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the military circles, have always been of great importance. The then leader of CHP, Deniz Baykal, lashed out the visit accusing the governing party of rendering Turkey a country dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict,³ while CHP’s parliamentary group deputy chairman Haluk Koç argued that “Turkey cannot have relations with an organisation that aims to the construction of an Islamic Republic in Palestine.”⁴ Contrary to AKP’s clear support towards Hamas, the former President of the Turkish Republic, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a staunch Kemalist, dur-

ing a visit in Palestine in 2006 turned down the Prime Minister's, Ismail Haniya, request for a meeting and decided not to meet him or any members of the newly founded Hamas government.⁵ Within the context of a foreign policy along Kemalist lines, that dictates that Turkey should pursue pacifism, abstain from conflicts in the region and prioritise the country's Western alliances, CHP has several times expressed its reservations and disagreement when it comes to Turkey's relations with Hamas. The then party's vice chairman Onur Öymen remarked that "Turkey cannot support a group, the political ideology of which is jihad and has as its main purpose the obliteration of Israel from the map."⁶ The current CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has stated that Turkey should stay away from Iran and Hamas, since contact with Hamas can offer nothing positive to his country.⁷ However, lately the Kemalist opposition party adopted a more moderate attitude towards the Palestinian organisation and conducted a warm meeting with Ismail Haniya during his last visit to Turkey at the beginning of 2012. The Turkish leader of the opposition has probably started to view Hamas as an integral part of the unity process in the Palestinian territories, especially after the 2007 Gaza takeover and in view of a prospective cooperation between Hamas and Fatah.

After the 2008-2009 Gaza War, it was Turkey that reacted most harshly to Israel. "Although many Arab and Muslim countries reacted to the disproportionate power that Israel used, almost none of them reached the level of Turkey's criticism."⁸ The Gaza operation, followed by the public spat between Israeli President Shimon Peres and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at Davos in 2009 after the latter accused the former of state terrorism, and more recently the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident during which 9 Turkish civilians were killed by Israeli soldiers poisoned Turkish-Israeli relations. And it goes without saying that the more AKP distances itself from Israel the closer it comes to Hamas. Besides, Erdoğan has publicly rejected the "terrorist" label for Hamas, defending the Islamist group as "Palestinians in resistance, fighting for their own land."⁹ Turkey's relation with Hamas has also taken the form of Hamas' voice facilitating the communication with the West and Israel; after the 2008 Gaza operation Turkey played an active role in the negotiation procedures as it carried messages between the US, European countries and Hamas in order to help negotiate a ceasefire agreement.¹⁰ Thus Turkish government was successful in garnering Hamas' support for a ceasefire agreement and striking a side deal with it.¹¹

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Hamas fundraisers and gatherings¹², as well as through its support for aid vessels to Palestinians in Gaza. Turkish public opinion has been supportive of such moves, since pro-Hamas feelings combined with anti-Israeli opinions seem to have replaced the traditional sympathy for the Palestinians. The feelings are mutual from the Gaza side –both from Hamas and the people in Gaza. Besides, which internationally marginalised group would reject the support from a powerful country like Turkey? Gaza Strip's Prime Minister has stated: "Our people have never forgotten Mr. Prime Minister's [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's] stance in Davos, and we should not forget that he conditioned normalization of relations with Israel on lifting of blockade on Gaza."¹³ The latest developments in the Turkey-Hamas front is that at the beginning of 2012 Ismail Haniya, who, as Ahmet Davutoğlu said, is always welcome in Turkey,¹⁴ visited the country and conducted meetings with the whole spectrum of the political parties. Haniya's last visit seems to have been something more than a confirmation of the friendly ties between Turkey and Hamas; Erdoğan and Haniya have re-established their relations on a different basis as Turkey allegedly undertook to provide the Gaza administration with \$300 million annually.¹⁵

As I mentioned above Turkey's relations with Hamas are inversely proportional to its relations with Israel. It could be said that this is the case with Hezbollah too, although in the case of Hezbollah Turkey has showed -at least until the present time- its support less blatantly, especially as far as Lebanese internal politics is concerned; it basically aimed and aims at mediating between rival factions in the Eastern Mediterranean country. On the other hand, as far as the Hezbollah-Israeli conflict is concerned, after the 2006 Lebanon War AKP clearly sided Hezbollah; the Parliament Speaker Bülent Arınç characterised Israel's assaults as unacceptable,¹⁶ while in view of Turkey's sending troops to Lebanon under the UN umbrella the Turkish Prime Minister defended the involvement, clarifying that Hezbollah is a sovereignty problem of Lebanon and that the UN peacekeeping force would not proceed into any task that involves its disarmament. In 2008 it was Turkey together with Qatar that mediated an agreement between the US-backed ruling coalition and the Hezbollah-led opposition alliance in Lebanon's presidential election process and helped broker the Doha Agreement, which lead to the temporary resolution of the political crisis in the country.¹⁷

Turkey has never refrained from expressing some kind of affiliation to Hezbollah. This can be linked to Iran's and Syria's connections to the Islamist organisation, which enjoys the two countries' multifaceted support. The driving

force behind Turkey's moves is competition with Iran; Turkey sees the current upheaval in the Middle East and Iran's deteriorating relations with the West as the ideal opportunity to contain its power and take the leading role in the region, in general and in the Lebanese political scene, in particular. Therefore, Turkey is looking for leverage in the country, and is trying to change the existing dynamics.¹⁸ And although Iran's domination in the Lebanese platform dates back to the past and has strong foundations because of the common Shiite religious identity with Hezbollah, Turkey's advantage which seems more attractive to Hezbollah is the fact that it maintains all channels of communication open and mediates with all groups; it is the Middle Eastern country that has the best relations with the West, thus providing Hezbollah with a stable and reliable foreign alternative –or additional- option, with international acceptance and legitimacy. Such legitimacy might be beneficial to Hezbollah, as the image of being an Iranian “extension” may not serve them in the long run.

One could say that Hezbollah's contact with AKP has intensified after the former's withdrawal from the national unity government in Lebanon in January 2011, anticipating being indicted for the Hariri's assassination in 2005 and therefore, causing the collapse of the government. AKP hustled to emphasise Hezbollah's role and place in the Lebanese political platform. Davutoğlu stated that, “As a political party and a group with very strong support within Lebanese society, Hezbollah is one of the most essential elements of this process –[for the resolution of the crisis].”¹⁹ Within the framework of a new Qatari-Turkish joint attempt to create stability in Lebanon, the Turkish Foreign Minister met with his Qatari counterpart, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, and Hezbollah's leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.²⁰ The meeting, which was initially kept secret, was first announced by Hezbollah and provoked once again negative reactions in the Kemalist circles in Turkey, who criticised the government's engagement in favour of Hezbollah. Referring to the meeting in question the CHP vice chairman Osman Korutürk, mentioned, representing the party's views on Hezbollah, that their reservations lay mostly on the radical group's contact with Iran arguing that one cannot overlook Hezbollah's relations with the pariah state.²¹

According to a 2010 report in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* Turkey has cooperated with Iran in order to facilitate arms transfers to Hezbollah.²² Whether these allegations are true or not, Turkish or AKP's stance towards Hezbollah implies at least a spiritual support to the organisation while the continuing contact with them and the most recent meeting between the Turkish Foreign Minister and

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Hezbollah Member of Parliament, Mohammad Raad, in January 2012²³ suggest that Hezbollah-Turkish relations and cooperation are on a positive track.

Previous Turkish governments, the Turkish state and the Turkish people have not traditionally demonstrated strong support for any groups with a radical Islamist agenda. At the same time the country's good relations with Israel were more something like an axiomatically accepted reality, as no government in the past attempted to move to a different direction. It seems that recently this reality has been disputed both by the AKP's government and from the Turkish people. We could say that Turkish people's feelings are to a great extent motivated by a religious affiliation to people in Gaza and Lebanon and by the disagreement with the Israeli state practices. Respectively, public opinion in Palestine and Lebanon seems to welcome Turkey's initiatives, attributing to Erdoğan the qualities of a hero, and providing the Turkish foreign policy with a greater confidence to continue the activist involvement in the region. It would be naive to believe that AKP favours engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah exclusively because they share the same Islamist values; a more plausible explanation could be that their mutual approach is mostly driven by strategic, political and economic pragmatism. For Turkey greater activism may lead to greater power and influence. For Hamas and Hezbollah AKP could easily function as a model and as a powerful foreign partner, with an Islamic identity, with a legitimate status in the West, and worsened but still existing relations with Israel. Hamas is getting closer and closer to Turkey, and Hezbollah does the same. It is still premature to draw conclusions about whether Turkey has become a part of the "Iran-Syria-Hamas-Hezbollah axis" or not. The sure thing is that Turkey is moving closer to the East, and that its relations with Hamas and Hezbollah will continue to hold an important place in any analysis of the politics of the region.

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