

Turkey and the Gaza Strip

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Turkey welcomed Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and the anticipated implementation of the plan was the background to the one and only visit to Israel in May 2005 by then-Turkish Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan also supported the idea of the Ankara Forum, a framework for cooperation between Turkish, Palestinian, and Israeli representatives for rebuilding the industrial zone at the Erez Crossing between Gaza and Israel.¹ While to this day there are differing reports about who signed agreements in this framework and who was to have provided the security services to promote the venture, it is clear that with the final takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas in 2007, the idea was abandoned; instead, efforts were made to promote similar industrial zones in the West Bank.²

As early as 2006, Turkey was the first country to host Khaled Mashal, who was then head of the Hamas political bureau. Since then Mashal has been a frequent guest in Ankara, where he has been received by high level officials. Both the Davos incident during Operation Cast Lead in January 2009 and the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla (May 2010) put Turkey at the head of the countries criticizing Israel's policy on Gaza, and Erdogan alleged frequently that Israel policy had made the Gaza Strip into an "open air prison."³ The tension between the two countries on the issue of Gaza was one of the main factors in the deterioration of relations between Israel and Turkey since Operation Cast Lead – leading to the downgrading of diplomatic representation between them in September 2011 (after the Palmer Report investigation of the flotilla incident was leaked to the press), before the ambassadors returned to their posts in late 2016. Turkey regards Hamas as a political organization, and refuses to treat it as a terrorist group.

For many years, Turkish support for Hamas has caused tension behind the scenes between Turkey and the Palestinian Authority (PA). At the same time, however, Ankara supported major international PA campaigns, such as the campaign for international recognition of Palestine as a state. In addition, Turkey attempted to mediate between Israel and Hamas (including regarding a ceasefire during Operation Cast Lead, and in the context of the Shalit deal), and supported efforts to achieve reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Nevertheless, during Operation Protective Edge, the poor state of relations between Israel and Turkey, Egypt and Hamas, and Egypt and Turkey led to attempts by Israel and Egypt to push aside the joint efforts at mediation by Qatar and Turkey. The conflict with Egypt also hinders the expansion of Turkish influence in the Gaza Strip.

The normalization agreement signed between Turkey and Israel in June 2016 counters to some extent the rhetoric used repeatedly by Ankara in recent years about the importance of a determined Turkish stance on Israeli policy toward Gaza. In July 2011, Erdogan added the condition of “removal of the blockade” as one of the basic conditions for normalization with Israel, together with an apology and compensation over the flotilla incident.⁴ Over the years, it was unclear whether this condition referred to the removal of the restrictions on the passage of goods to the Gaza Strip by land, or whether it also included removal of the naval blockade against Gaza, which Turkey charged was illegal (the fact that the Palmer Committee reached the opposite conclusion⁵ was one of the reasons that Ankara had difficulty in accepting the Committee’s report). With the signing of the normalization agreement in 2016, Turkey ultimately did not insist on this provision.

At least one senior Hamas official, Saleh al-Aroui, resided in Turkey until his expulsion in 2015, following Israel and American protests. Furthermore, the kidnapping of the teenagers in Gush Etzion in 2014 was allegedly planned from Hamas’s military headquarters in Turkey. Ostensibly, then, the existence of a Hamas military headquarters in Istanbul could have potentially served as some sort of Turkish leverage over Hamas. In the framework of the negotiations for the normalization agreement, however, Israel demanded that the headquarters be closed down. Since then, it appears that the Turkish security services have made it more difficult for local Hamas operatives to raise money for the activities of the Hamas military wing, nor are they permitting the organization of military activities from Turkish territory.⁶

Still, Israeli spy organizations uncovered a network of money laundering that funneled funds from Gaza to Hebron via Turkey.⁷ For their part, senior Hamas officials were conflicted about the Turkish agreement with Israel: some were critical, while others said that it was useful in relieving the siege.⁸

Turkish Aid to the Gaza Strip

In cooperation with researchers from the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) is promoting a plan for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip on the basis of the \$5 billion that the donor countries pledged to transfer to Gaza. A key element in this reconstruction plan is a port for the Gaza Strip, and the Turkish side hopes that Turkish construction companies will play a major role in this project.⁹ In the context of this plan, TEPAV managing director Guven Sak wrote, “Gaza needs a new vision.”¹⁰

A number of Turkish NGOs are operating in the Gaza Strip. These include the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, most famous for being one of the organizers of the Gaza flotilla in May 2010, having also purchased three ships for the flotilla (including the *Mavi Marmara*). The presence of its operatives on the *Mavi Marmara* was one of the causes of the deadly clash with Israel. While the extent of the Turkish government’s consent to how the IHH acted in this context is disputed,¹¹ the event itself led to some change in Israeli policy toward Gaza, with many of the restrictions on goods reaching Gaza lifted.¹² Even before the flotilla, the IHH supported aid convoys to Gaza on land via Egypt, and the organization continued to transfer aid to Gaza after the flotilla. For example, in December 2010, the organization dedicated a residential building it had rebuilt in Jabalia that was destroyed during Operation Cast Lead,¹³ and the organization claimed that it had transferred \$8 million in aid to residents of the Gaza Strip during Operation Protective Edge.¹⁴

Another Turkish organization that has given aid to the Gaza Strip is Kimse Yok Mu (Is Anybody There), the aid organization of the Gulen movement, which was closed following the conflict between the movement and the Turkish government and the unsuccessful coup d’état in Turkey in July 2016. A third non-governmental Turkish organization that has given aid to the Gaza Strip is Yardim Eli (Helpful Hand).¹⁵ The Turkish Red Crescent, in coordination with Israel, transferred 20,000 tons of aid during Operation

Protective Edge,¹⁶ and continues to distribute aid packages in Gaza, including money transferred to homeless residents of the Shujaiya neighborhood.¹⁷

In recent years, it is clear that more substantial aid for the Gaza Strip is transferred through Turkish governmental organizations: the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD), and the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet). In addition to its office in Ramallah, TIKA has a liaison office in Gaza involved in hundreds of (primarily small) projects. Its main project is a hospital under construction since 2011, slated to begin operating in 2017, which with 150 beds will be the largest hospital in the Gaza Strip. The cost of this hospital is estimated at \$40 million.¹⁸ As confidence building measures for the normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey, Israel removed some of the restrictions on the transfer of building materials for construction of the hospital. Other projects involve rebuilding water wells and water purification, and the rebuilding of 1,000 housing units destroyed during Operation Protective Edge. In February 2017, Israeli security forces arrested the Palestinian coordinator of TIKA in Gaza at the Erez border crossing, over the charges of mishandling funds and funneling money and assistance to Hamas military activities. Israel, however, asserted that the Turkish authorities had no knowledge of this mishandling.¹⁹

In the framework of the normalization agreement with Israel, there were also negotiations about Turkish involvement in the future construction of a power station (in cooperation with Germany) and desalinization facilities in the Gaza Strip.²⁰ The negotiations for construction of a power station took place after the idea was raised that Turkey would send a ship to serve as a source of electricity.²¹ Israel rejected this idea, claiming that the Gaza Strip lacked adequate infrastructure for connecting the supply of electricity from the ship to the residential areas.²² In the most recent crisis regarding electricity supply in the Gaza Strip, Turkey undertook to transfer 15,000 tons of diesel fuel to the Gaza Strip, an amount sufficient to operate the power station in the Gaza Strip for three months.²³

AFAD was responsible for sending three ships with aid for Gaza following the signing of the normalization agreement, with reportedly 11,000 tons of aid on the first ship, the *Lady Leila*.²⁴ Diyanet is rebuilding nine mosques destroyed in Operation Protective Edge, a project with an estimated cost of \$4.5 million.²⁵

The Interests behind Turkish Involvement in the Gaza Strip

One significant interest underlying Turkish policy on the Gaza Strip is achieving a more dominant status in the region and in the Muslim world.²⁶ Before becoming Prime Minister, when he was first chief foreign policy advisor to then-Prime Minister Erdogan and then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu tried to promote a neo-Ottoman foreign policy that would expand Turkey's influence in the Middle East. The conflict with Israel, particularly the question of Gaza, was allegedly used by Erdogan to enhance Turkey's status. Indeed, until the early years of the Arab Awakening, Arab public opinion regarded Turkey's role in the region as a constructive one, and Erdogan was the most highly regarded world leader among those questioned in a number of Arab countries.²⁷ In recent years, together with criticism of Israel in the context of events in the Gaza Strip, Ankara has also stepped up its criticism of Israeli policy on Jerusalem, in particular with allegations about violation of the status quo on the Temple Mount. From the perspective of attaining influence in the Muslim world, it is unclear whether the emphasis on Jerusalem is preferable to an emphasis on Gaza, although it is clear that behind the scenes this has already brought Turkey into conflict with Jordan.²⁸

Another interest behind the Turkish support for Gaza involves domestic considerations. Erdogan and senior figures in his party have used public expression of anti-Israeli sentiment to bolster their popular support, particularly before elections, particularly elections they were eager to win by a substantial margin. For example, before the first direct presidential elections in Turkey, which were conducted during Operation Protective Edge, Erdogan used extremely harsh rhetoric against Israel in the context of Gaza in order to win in the first round.²⁹

There is also an ideological affinity between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Hamas. When Mohamed Morsi rose to power in Egypt and closer cooperation with Cairo was planned, Turkey regarded itself as a leader of this axis and aided the organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁰ This joins Erdogan's personal identification with Hamas's struggle for recognition, following its success in the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006. For him, the AKP experience resonates in the Hamas rise to power: when the AKP won a majority in parliament for the first time in

2002, there were doubts as to whether it would be able to remain in power, and there was concern that the Turkish army would try to overthrow it.

Conclusion

Since 2006, Turkey has demonstrated consistent support for Hamas. At least until the dramatic developments of the Arab Awakening, Ankara perceived this allegiance to contribute to Turkey's status in the Muslim world, certainly in public opinion. A significant achievement from Turkey's perspective was the change in the Israeli restrictions on goods transferred to the Gaza Strip following the *Mavi Marmara* affair, although the Turkish government claimed that it had tried to dissuade the IHH from operating the way it did. Despite this achievement, it is doubtful whether the partial removal of the restrictions has made a fundamental change in the situation in the Gaza Strip. From this perspective, the continued deterioration in the Gaza Strip constituted a focus for harsh criticism of Israeli policy toward the Gaza Strip and Hamas by Turkey. Turkey still supports the two-state solution, and to that extent, it does not want to see the Palestinian split continue. Yet despite its efforts over the years to mediate between the Palestinian factions, Turkey has not succeeded in making any substantive contribution to healing the rifts in Palestinian society.

Turkey's main ally during this period in the context of the Gaza Strip was Qatar, and this axis continues to exist, as reflected in the two countries' help in coping with the electricity crisis in the Gaza Strip in the winter of 2016-2017. Despite the growing Turkish support, it is clear that Ankara was not a sufficient substitute for Tehran's support for Hamas. Furthermore, the rise to power of President el-Sisi in Egypt, who introduced a tough Egyptian policy toward Hamas, and the deep crisis in relations between Turkey and Egypt have restricted the areas in which Turkey can influence events in the Gaza Strip. It is also clear that the question of Gaza has receded slightly in importance where Turkish interests are concerned, given the challenges facing Ankara at the present time (including the consequences of the unsuccessful coup in July 2016, the Kurdish challenge, the Turkish military presence in northern Syria, and the terrorist attacks by the Islamic State). It is also possible that the tougher policy that the Trump administration may adopt toward the Muslim Brotherhood movement and the changes in leadership in Hamas (in the past, Mashal was the central figure in ties between Turkey and Hamas) will make

Erdogan put less emphasis on his ties with the organization. At the same time, the issue of Gaza is still important to Turkey, and will almost certainly continue to constitute a focal point of friction between Turkey and Israel.

Notes

- 1 According to the vision of the Ankara Forum, an international company would construct and manage the Erez industrial zone, and the goods produced in it would be exported to the world through the Ashdod Port. See Daniel Zimet, "Israel-Turkey: A Decade of an Impressive Business Balance Sheet," *Israel-Turkey Business Council and Chamber of Commerce & Industry website*, <http://www.israel-turkey.co.il/?categoryId=20196&itemId=27939>.
- 2 Mohammed Samhouri, "Gaza Economic Predicament One Year After Disengagement: What Went Wrong?" Crown Center Middle East Brief No. 12, November 2016, p. 6, note 13; "Swedes and Turks Building Erez," *Israeli Industry Portal*, August 28, 2005, <http://www.industry.co.il/Index.asp?ArticleID=344&CategoryID=110&Page=4>; Zimet, *Israel-Turkey: A Decade of an Impressive Business Balance Sheet*.
- 3 For example, see "Erdogan Blasts Israel for Treatment of 'Palestinian Brothers' in Gaza," *Times of Israel*, June 5, 2012.
- 4 Herb Keinon, "Turkish PM's Demands Delaying Diplomatic Reconciliation," *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2011.
- 5 Herb Keinon, "Palmer: Gaza Blockade Lawful, IDF Used 'Excessive' Force," *Jerusalem Post*, September 3, 2011.
- 6 Yossi Melman, "Sinai Paradox: Why Israel Cannot Act in the Peninsula as it Does in Syria," *Maariv*, February 25, 2017.
- 7 Anna Ahronheim, "Israeli Spy Agency Uncovers Gaza-Turkey-Hebron Terror Money Trail," *Jerusalem Post*, August 3, 2017.
- 8 Pinhas Inbari, "Can Turkey and Israel Reconcile?" *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs Website*, November 15, 2016, <http://jcpa.org/article/turkey-israel-reconcile/>.
- 9 Hacer Boyacioglu, "Turkish Businesses Want to Rebuild Gaza for \$5 Billion," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 5, 2016. See also Shlomi Eldar, "Is Gaza Seaport Construction on Its Way?" *al-Monitor*, December 29, 2016.
- 10 Guven Sak, "What Gaza Needs," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 23, 2016.
- 11 "Turkey's Crises over Israel and Iran," *International Crisis Group Europe Report*, No. 208, September 8, 2010, p. 6.
- 12 Cargol Migdalovitz, "Israel's Blockade of Gaza, the *Mavi Marmara* Incident and Its Aftermath," *Congressional Research Service Report*, June 23, 2010, p. 11.
- 13 "The Turkish IHH, which directed the flotilla led by the *Mavi Marmara*, continues at the forefront of an anti-Israeli hate and incitement campaign, adopting the maximalist Palestinian demands, calling for the annihilation of the 'Zionist entity' and exploiting and inflating the myth of the *Mavi Marmara* 'heroism,'" in report

- by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, December 30, 2010.
- 14 “The IHH, the jihadist Turkish organization that played a major role in the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla, currently leads an international anti-Israel coalition that announced its intention to dispatch another flotilla to the Gaza Strip in 2014,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center report, August 17, 2014, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20703>.
 - 15 Adnan Abu Amer, “Some Gazans Fear Turkish Generosity May Come at High Price,” *al-Monitor*, April 7, 2016.
 - 16 “Turkish Red Crescent Delivers Aid to 15,000 People in Gaza,” *Daily Sabah*, August 10, 2014.
 - 17 The exact amount of aid is unknown, but representatives of the Turkish Red Crescent reported that they estimated that they would distribute \$12 million to “Palestine” in 2016, “Turkish Red Crescent Chairman Arrives in Gaza, Distributes Food Parcels,” Palestinian Information Center, June 23, 2016, <https://english.palinfo.com/news/2016/6/23/Turkish-Red-Crescent-chairman-arrives-in-Gaza,-distributes-food-parcels>.
 - 18 “Turkish Hospital in Gaza to Open in 2017,” Anadolu Agency, August 13, 2016.
 - 19 “Israel-held Palestinian TIKA Employee Kept from Lawyer,” Anadolou Agency, February 23, 2017; Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Israel Arrests Head of Turkish Humanitarian Group in Gaza for Financing Hamas,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 2017.
 - 20 “Israel and Turkey Normalization Deal Signed,” *Globes*, June 28, 2016.
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 - 22 Amir Buhbut, “Israel Rejected Request to Bring Ship to Supply Electricity to Gaza,” *Walla*, December 2, 2014.
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 - 24 “Turkey to Send Second Aid Shipment to Gaza by September before Eid al-Adha,” *Daily Sabah*, July 14, 2016.
 - 25 “Turkey Rebuilds 9 Mosques in Gaza,” Anadolu Agency, November 15, 2016, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-rebuilds-9-mosques-in-gaza/685937>.
 - 26 For more elaboration on this issue, see Gallia Lindenstrauss and Sufyan Kadir Kivam, “Turkish-Hamas Relations: Between Strategic Calculations and Ideological Affinity,” *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 2 (2014): 7-16.
 - 27 Shibley Telhami, “2010 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey,” August 5, 2010, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf (Slide 64); Shibley Telhami, “The 2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll,” Brookings Report, November 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-2011-arab-public-opinion-poll/>.

- 28 Pinhas Inbari, "An Ottoman Return to Jerusalem?" Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs website, July 5, 2016, <http://jcpa.org/ottoman-return-jerusalem/>.
- 29 For example, see Serkan Demirtas, "Erdogan Revisits Anti-Western Rhetoric on Eve of Elections," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 16, 2014.
- 30 Jack Moore, "Leaked German Report Calls Turkey 'Platform' for Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian Rebel Groups," *Newsweek*, August 17, 2016.