



# BULLETIN

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## Turkey's Role in Hamas' Cease-fire: A Sign of Turkish Cooperation or Competition?

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*The November 2012 conflict between Israel and Hamas was concluded by a cease-fire sponsored by Egypt and with the support of the USA, Turkey and Qatar. Although the cease-fire fulfilled the four states' common objectives, Turkey's underlying motives and understanding of the conflict differed from the EU Member States and the U.S. These differences provide an early warning for future splits between the international partners on possible future cooperation in the Middle East. They highlight the need to redefine the "Turkish model" in a way that would include all elements that make today's Turkey influential, including its Europeanisation.*

**Background.** During the conflict between Israel and Hamas on 14–21 November in the Gaza Strip, Egypt emerged as the main mediator in the conclusion of a cease-fire, with Turkey, Qatar and the U.S. playing a supporting role. The declaration of an immediate cease-fire was the shared goal, and Turkey, following the American proposal to pressure Hamas, contributed to the peace negotiations by persuading the organisation to stop firing rockets and other military-style actions. Subsequently, the UN General Assembly voted to recognise Palestine on 29 November as a state with non-member observer status, with Turkey also voting in favour. Despite this apparent unity, however, as well as a Turkish commitment to the two-state solution, differences in Ankara's underlying motives may lead to further contradictions and undermine future peace-building efforts.

**Different Perceptions.** Ever since Turkey's ruling party, AKP, came to power, Turkish leaders have aimed to take on a leadership role in the Muslim world, mediating conflicts in the region. In the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Turkish role was limited due to its strained relations with Israel, but Ankara did manage to boost its popularity and credibility in the crisis. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas celebrated the "birth" of the Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly in the Turkish House in New York. He also made his first visit abroad as the "new" president of Palestine to Turkey on 11 December 2012. Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, also made his first official trip abroad, to Turkey on 2 January. As Turkey's popularity rises, its ability to pressure Hamas and to help build a viable Palestinian state will increase. These developments turn Turkey into an even more important partner for the EU and the U.S., strengthening the assets Turkey can offer to its partners in building a peaceful two-state solution.

This will only occur, though, if Turkish cooperation does not turn into the "Turkish challenge." When Hamas increased its attacks on Israel, resulting in the deaths of civilians, Israel answered with a series of attacks on Gaza. An analysis of the Turkish leaders' reactions during the conflict reveals a very specific perception of who is responsible for triggering the conflict. The U.S. justified the Israeli response as an expression of the "right to self-defence" and declared that no state can tolerate missiles falling on its territory. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a different perception: talking about Israel's right to self-defence is unfair, he said, and Israel's counter-attacks are acts of terrorism.

**The Turkish Sonderweg.** While Turkish leaders directed harsh criticism at almost all of the parties to the conflict, one actor was spared: Hamas. This was maintained in the face of various reports showing Hamas leaders' mistreatment of Palestinian civilians and their abuses of human rights. Thus, Turkey's strong stance with Hamas

contradicts its own vision of the future peace: Hamas leaders call for the destruction of Israel, yet Turkey supports a two-state solution with a Palestinian state built within the 1967 borders. The Turkish government's strong support for Hamas, and the lack of calls to respect Palestinians' rights, reinforces suspicions that Ankara regards Hamas terrorism as a legitimate means of self-defence.

Ankara's silence on Hamas' abuses of Palestinians' rights stands in contradiction to the stated values of Turkish foreign policy in a more fundamental way, too. Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu has officially aligned these values with the values of the EU. Yet, during the recent conflict, PM Erdoğan declared his mistrust of the UN, and accused the "world powers" of inaction, a term that includes Turkey's strategic partners, the EU and the U.S. He added that he views the UN Security Council as a threat to Turkey.

Herein lies the nub of the matter. The more that Turkish leaders have used anti-Israeli and anti-Western rhetoric, the more their popularity in the Arab World—as well as their influence on Palestinian leaders—has increased. Yet, the strong wording used in these accusations recalls a "clash of civilisations" and further polarises the region. Popularity gained in this way may in fact weaken the role Turkey can play as a bridge between the Arab World and the West, undermining efforts at a peaceful and lawful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the long-term.

**Conclusion.** Even though the State of Palestine now enjoys diplomatic recognition, there remains much to be done. Peace efforts will be much more efficient if the actors work in cooperation and create an environment of trust. The Turkish contribution could be useful in reconciling various political groups in Palestine, for "normalising" Hamas by integrating it into the political system, and for preparing a viable and internationally integrated Palestinian government ready to take on peace talks with Israel. Turkey is already holding talks with the Fatah and Hamas leaders, such as during the visits to Ankara by Hamas leaders Khaled Mashaal and Ismail Haniyeh and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas as they work for the creation of a Palestinian unity government.

However, the Turkish leaders' comments on the conflict and their accusations towards other parties contributing to the peace talks damages cooperation with the West. They also show that Turkish foreign policy priorities have shifted towards building popularity in the Arab world rather than playing a responsible mediation role.

One of the reasons for the shift in their preferences is Turkey's weak relations with the EU. Turkey's membership negotiation chapters have been unilaterally blocked by France and Cyprus for reasons that are independent of its progress, and thus the EU accession process has lost credibility. As a result, this has affected the Turkish leaders' foreign policy priorities at the expense of their former allies. In fact, controversially, Turkish leaders have profited from this cooperation by competing with their allies.

The Turkish attitude degrades the EU's and the U.S.'s image among citizens of the Arab World, and this may influence the strategic choices of newly-elected leaders in the region. There is an urgent need to re-animate EU-Turkey relations and increase the credibility of the prospect of EU membership, in order to develop and conform EU-Turkey involvement in the peace process. The "Turkish Model" mentioned in the initial phase of the Arab Spring, whereby the EU would use Ankara to indirectly promote its democratic norms in the region, will not be functional if Turkey's foreign policy priorities contradict the EU's aims.

Poland, as a supporter of EU enlargement policy and of Turkish membership, can play an active role in reviving this process. In addition, as an active promoter of EU values in the EU neighbourhood as a whole, Poland can include Turkey in projects aimed at strengthening civil society's interest in the EU. If the EU regains its popularity in Turkish civil society, a further shift in Turkish foreign policy can be avoided.

The shift back to a cooperative relationship is still possible, since the Turkish leaders' strong anti-Western rhetoric is not at the core of Turkish popularity in the region. Even though during the conflict, Turkey's popularity increased thanks to its anti-Western rhetoric, the real reason for Turkey's ongoing popularity in the Arab World, according to the surveys, lies in its prosperous economy and ability to accommodate democratic values and secular principles in a majority Muslim country.

Accordingly, it will be useful to reclaim the "Turkish model," which has increasingly become the AKP's model, though defined by religiously-rooted policies. The new model should emphasise the elements that initially made Turkey popular in the Arab World, not least its sound relations with powerful international partners. This redefinition will discourage Ankara from making further shifts in its foreign policy and prevent Turkey from making anti-Western rhetoric without sanction, thereby rendering the Turkish partnership more effective.