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Anger mounts in Turkey at Israel's onslaught against Gaza

As Israel's ongoing onslaught on Palestinians in East Jerusalem and Gaza provokes mass anger in Turkey, it is also exposing the hypocrisy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan over the plight of the Palestinian people. The Turkish government and other venal bourgeois regimes in the Middle East are all complicit in the Israeli government's assault on the Palestinians.



A protest in front of the Israeli consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on May 11, 2021. (Photo: IHH via AP)

Over the past week, thousands of people in many cities of Turkey have protested against Israel's attacks on the Al-Aqsa mosque in East Jerusalem and subsequent air strikes in Gaza. Mass demonstrations took place in front of the Israeli Consulate and Taksim Square in Istanbul, despite the curfew imposed amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

President Erdoğan called Israel a "terror state" last Saturday, after Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa mosque, and urged all Muslim countries and the "international community" to take "effective" measures against Tel Aviv.

The major establishment parties in parliament—the ruling AKP and its fascistic ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), as well as the bourgeois opposition, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), far-right Good Party and Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)—condemned Israel in a rare joint statement on Monday.

"We declare that we will always continue to react to Israel's aggressive actions aimed at eroding the status of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, and [Israel's] attempts to usurp the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people," it said, before claiming, "We strongly declare that we will continue to defend the Palestinian cause and [support] the struggle of the brotherly Palestinian people for freedom, justice and independence."

On Wednesday, after US State Department spokesman Ned Price said, "Israel does have a right to defend itself," Erdoğan's communications director Fahrettin Altun criticized Washington's support for Israel, asking, "Does the US have not any reaction to these massacres and terrorist acts?" Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also called Israel's actions "crimes against humanity" and urged Tel Aviv to stop its ongoing attacks.

Though its president calls Israel a "terror state," Turkey, the first country in the Muslim world to recognize Israel in 1949, maintains diplomatic, trade, economic and military ties with Tel Aviv as part of its broader military-strategic alliance with US imperialism.

However, the statements from top Turkish political and military officials are accompanied by intense diplomacy activity. According to Turkey's state-owned Anadolu Agency, Erdoğan has recently called the leaders of Russia, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, Algeria, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries. He again described the Israeli attacks as "terrorism."

He also spoke with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and İsmail Haniyeh, a leader of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls Gaza, promising support for “the cause of Palestine.”

During talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, Erdoğan said that the “international community” needed to “teach a deterrent lesson” to Israel, before proposing that to discuss the “idea of sending an international protection force to the region in order to protect Palestinian civilians.” According to the statement made by the Kremlin, Putin had “called on the parties to deescalate tensions and peacefully resolve the emerging issues.”

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also condemned Israel “in the strongest terms the repeated attacks by the Israeli occupation authorities against the Palestinian people.”

This pro forma condemnation comes from an organization consisting of reactionary Arab regimes that have recently normalized relations with Israel.

As Israeli strikes on Gaza escalate, killing more than 100 mostly civilian victims, and as Israel prepares a more comprehensive military onslaught, the Turkish Foreign Ministry yesterday again called on “the international community to act swiftly to stop these attacks, which will cause further loss of civilian lives.” It added: “We have learned with concern that Israel has started firing tanks and artillery against Gaza this time.”

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also called his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry to discuss Palestine after visiting Saudi Arabia. The meeting came amid Ankara’s ongoing efforts to reestablish relations with the Egyptian military dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. After Sisi’s bloody 2013 coup against elected Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood, Erdoğan denounced the Sisi regime, and the ties between the two countries collapsed.

On May 6, there was a direct diplomatic meeting of Turkish and Egyptian delegations for the first time in years. Turkish Trade Minister Mehmet Muş said Turkey wants to improve its economic relations with Egypt while trying to restore diplomatic ties.

The Erdoğan government's regional initiatives came as part of a broader diplomatic campaign launched by Ankara, particularly after Joe Biden was elected US president last year. The Turkish government recently declared that it wants to improve relations with all countries in the region. This entails moving as far away from Iran and Russia as possible, while also developing better relations with Egypt and Israel.

After former US President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, Tel Aviv violently suppressed Palestinian protests, killing dozens. Ankara then recalled its ambassador to Israel. Although diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel have been reduced to the level of chargé d'affaires since 2018, Turkish President Erdoğan declared last December that "Turkey wants to improve its relations with Israel. Our intelligence cooperation with Israel is ongoing."

Moreover, *Israel Hayom* cited an anonymous senior Turkish official in March that Turkey "is ready to dispatch an ambassador to Tel Aviv once the Israeli government commits to simultaneously reciprocating the measure." The paper claimed: "The main point of contention between the two former allies remains the presence of senior Hamas officials on Turkish soil." Given the relations developed simultaneously with the military regime in Egypt, this is not an insurmountable obstacle.

One of the most critical points in Ankara's approach to the Palestine question is the competition over the division of oil and gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean. An EastMed Gas Forum was formally established led by European imperialist powers, France and Italy. While it also involves Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Jordan and Palestine, Turkey protested its exclusion from the forum. Although Palestine is a member of the forum, Israel is blocking it from accessing the Gaza gas field.

Moreover, there are strong economic ties between the two countries. In 2017, Israel's Transportation and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz said that "Erdoğan is acting as a frenemy. ... He attacks us a lot, and we respond, but this does not prevent him from channeling 25 percent of Turkey's exports to the Gulf through Haifa's port."

Turkish Transport and Infrastructure Minister Adil Karaismailoğlu has called on his Israeli counterpart to allow a leading Turkish firm to bid in a recent tender for the privatization of the Haifa Port, according to a report made by the *Israel Hayom* in April.

At the end of April, the daily *Cumhuriyet* newspaper reported that Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz was invited to an official Diplomacy Forum in Turkey to be held on June 18-20. In March, he announced his government's readiness to cooperate with Turkey on natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean.

This hypocritical Palestinian policy of the Turkish government, based entirely on the interests of the ruling class and its ties with imperialism, makes one thing very clear. The allies of the Palestinian people against the military onslaught they face are not this or that reactionary bourgeois regime in the region, but the working class in Israel, Turkey, Iran and all over the world.

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