

Hamas' Benefactors: A Network of Terror

Prepared statement by

Steven A. Cook

Hasib J. Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies

Council on Foreign Relations

Before the

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittees on the Middle East and
North Africa and Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

United States House of Representatives

2nd Session, 113th Congress

Madam Chairperson and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you to discuss the important issue, "Hamas' Benefactors: A Network of Terror." The 50 day war between Israel and Hamas, which killed 2,174 people including an estimated 1,466 civilians, the vast majority of whom were Palestinians, cost billions of dollars and traumatized two populations, has focused attention once again on the Islamic Resistance Movement (known universally by the group's Arabic acronym, Hamas), its worldview, capabilities, and its patrons. It is my privilege to testify before you today about this last issue, specifically the relationship between Hamas and the governments of the Republic of Turkey and the State of Qatar.

The ties between these American allies and Hamas—a terrorist organization—contribute to instability and violence. Under political, financial, and military pressure from Israel, the United States, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, Hamas has found relief in support from Qatar and Turkey. This has helped instill Hamas with confidence to defy the formidable group of powers that opposes the group, though there is no direct evidence that either government counseled Hamas to reject Egyptian ceasefire proposals during the recent conflict. As disturbing as the robust bilateral ties that Hamas maintains with Doha and Ankara it will be difficult for the United States to undermine these relations. There is a logic to the Qatar-Hamas and Turkey-Hamas relationship that benefits Qatari and Turkish regional interests. In the latter case, there is what can only be described as a strange affinity for Hamas within Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party. There is a lot to dislike about Hamas' relations with the Qataris and the Turks, but we should recognize that the conduct of foreign policy is a complicated and often messy affair. Keeping that in

mind, there is a potential benefit to these relationships: American officials might find it useful to leverage these ties to communicate with Hamas during times of crisis. There are, of course, problems with this approach (discussed in detail below), but these channels may be the least costly way—in terms of human lives—to stop or prevent rockets from falling on Israel and the inevitable Israeli response.

I will focus my testimony on the underlying political and philosophical reasons why Hamas enjoys support from Qatar and Turkey, the two cases I know best.

Qatar

Since the mid-1990s, the Qatari leadership has sought to use the vast natural resources at its disposal to advance Doha's influence well beyond both its modest physical size and small population. A year after Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani deposed his father and installed himself as Emir in a bloodless palace coup, Qatar launched al Jazeera. The network quickly captured the attention of the Arab world with its mission to tell the news through Arab eyes. The decidedly populist bent and thinly-veiled Islamist sympathies of the network's commentary combined with an unsparing view of politics and society throughout the Middle East—with the notable exception of Qatar—proved wildly popular in the region much to the dismay of Arab leaders. A staple of al Jazeera's programming, especially the talk shows that were modeled after those on American cable news networks, was criticism of the United States, its support for Israel, and its overall approach to the region. It is important to note that al Jazeera also broke a regional barrier when it included Israelis, notably government officials, in its reporting on regional issues. At the same time, Doha sought to develop closer links with Washington, constructing al Udeid air base in 1996 to host American forces that were forced to depart from Saudi Arabia. It was from this base that the United States Central Command prosecuted the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and from where American commanders will manage any future conflict in the Persian Gulf. However contradictory these policies may seem to be, they were critical to achieving the Qatari leadership's goal of transforming the country from a sleepy backwater to an independent, regional player.

Qatar's support for Hamas is consistent with its populist approach to the region, which is part of Doha's broader effort to establish and reinforce its policy independent from its larger and more powerful neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia. This has become the *sine qua non* of Qatar's foreign policy. It is in this context that the Qataris has provided Hamas political, diplomatic, and financial support. In 2012, when Hamas began to distance itself from Damascus and Tehran over the conflict in Syria, the Qataris took advantage of this opening, offering \$400 million in assistance to Gaza. This was similar in ways to the \$8 billion that Qatar provided to Egypt in the period between the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and that of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, and Doha's support for the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change, whose leader played a role in the military campaign against Muammar al-Qaddafi. Taken together these investments represent Qatar's effort to leverage its vast wealth to purchase influence around the Middle East. The fact that the Qataris have tended to use their resources to support Islamist groups does not necessarily indicate that the country's leaders share a worldview with these groups.

There have been rumors that the former Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would explain his sympathies for Hamas. These stories should be handled with great caution, however. They surfaced after the July 2013 coup d'état in Egypt and can be traced back to stories in the Egyptian press most of which is overtly hostile to Qatar. Without ruling out an ideological affinity between the Qataris and Hamas, it is more likely the Qataris miscalculated the effect and extent of political changes in the region. Like observers in the United States, Europe, Turkey, and in the Arab world, Doha drew the erroneous conclusion that the popular movements that wrought changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and that

threatened regimes in Syria and Bahrain had paved the way for the emergence of a new Islamist political order in the region.

Believing that Islamist political groups would dominate regional politics as a result of the Arab uprisings is qualitatively different from support for Hamas, however. Doha maintains without irony that the sanctuary it provides for Khaled Meshaal is a “humanitarian issue” and that Qatar plays an important role as a facilitator of communication between the Hamas leadership and other regional interlocutors, presumably the United States, Israel, Egypt and other Arab actors. The latter claim would be more compelling if the Qataris demonstrated that they could actually influence Hamas leaders. Despite the widely held belief in Washington, Jerusalem, and Cairo that the Qataris scuttled Egyptian cease-fire proposals, the evidence for this claim currently remains rather thin. It is based on a single, unnamed source in the London-based daily, *al Hayat*, which was subsequently picked up by *Haaretz*, the *Jerusalem Post*, *Times of Israel*, and the Egyptian newspaper, *al Ahram*.

It is likely that the relationship between Qatar and Hamas is more complicated than has been portrayed. Over its more than three decades of existence, Hamas has demonstrated that it is an independent actor, capable of calculating its own interests and pursuing its own goals regardless of its patrons’ wishes. The organization’s rejection of the Egyptian sponsored cease-fire likely had more to do with the quality of those proposals and the way Hamas leaders defined their political and military objectives than diktats from Qatari officials. This is not to excuse Qatar’s behavior. It is hard not to notice the cynicism of Qataris who have used Khaled Meshaal’s presence in Doha and the overall relationship with Hamas as part of its regional competition with the Saudis, Emiratis, and Egyptians. Although there is a certain propaganda value to giving Meshaal so much airtime on al Jazeera and holding Qatar out as a defender of Arab and Islamic rights in Palestine in contrast to other regional powers that implicitly supported the Israeli war effort, Palestinians and Israelis suffer in the process.

Turkey

Turkey seems like an unlikely patron for Hamas. It has been a NATO member since 1952, an aspirant for membership in the European Union, and maintains an officially secular political system that is designed in part to prevent the emergence of the kind of Islamist group that Hamas represents. Turkey recognized Israel in 1949, though did not upgrade to ambassadorial level until decades later. Despite the presently tense relations between Jerusalem and Ankara, the two countries enjoy well-developed economic relations. Traditionally, the Turks have positioned themselves as a neutral party in the Arab-Israeli conflict, using good relations with all the parties to advance peace.

This was a role that Ankara took up with considerable vigor after 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. The Turkish government remained largely faithful to this neutrality until early 2006. It was in February of that year when Khaled Meshaal visited Ankara. There then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, other senior foreign ministry officials, and party leaders hosted the Hamas leader at the AKP’s headquarters. At the time, the Turks maintained that the visit was consistent with their effort to forge peace between Israelis and Palestinians and argued that they counseled Meshaal to recognize Israel’s right to exist.

After Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009, Turkey’s position has shifted from that of an interested, but neutral party to a patron of Hamas. Then-Prime Minister Erdogan was outraged over both the loss of Palestinian lives during the invasion and then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s failure to warn the Turkish leader of the coming hostilities during an official visit to Ankara just days before they began. This was deeply embarrassing for Erdogan who was made to look either complicit with the Israeli incursion or too weak to stop it. Yet the reasons for Turkey’s shift are deeper than Erdogan’s pique over a particular Israeli military operation and into five broad categories:

- There is broad public support for the Palestinian cause among the Turkish public. This does not mean that Turks are necessarily predisposed toward Hamas and its worldview, though some clearly do share its worldview. Rather, the Turks have generally demonstrated sympathy and support for Palestinian efforts to achieve statehood. This genuine and sincere support has nevertheless made it possible for the AKP to elide support for legitimate Palestinian rights with support for Hamas.
- President Erdogan, the AKP leadership, and the party's rank-and-file are anti-Zionists. The outlook of the *Milli Gorus* (National View) movement from which the AKP emerged has long harbored hostility to Israel. When the Justice and Development Party came to power it jettisoned the anti-Western shibboleths of Turkey's Islamist old guard from whom Erdogan and Abdullah Gul broke when they formed the AKP in August 2001. There was also some hope that as a reformist, modernizing party it would reject anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism as well. To Erdogan's credit, after the November 15, 2003 Istanbul bombings that targeted the Beth Israel and Neve Shalom synagogues, the Turkish government responded forcefully denouncing the bombings, reiterating the importance of Turkey's Jewish community to Turkish society, and apprehending the perpetrators. In 2005, both Erdogan and Abdullah Gul separately visited Israel. Erdogan visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, confirmed 17 new joint military projects, and invited Ariel Sharon to visit Ankara.

In the almost decade since his visit to Jerusalem, however, Erdogan has remained true to the political and philosophical traditions that have guided the AKP and its predecessor parties. The Turkish leader declared that Zionism is a "crime against humanity" in February 2013. The tense relationship between Turkey and Israel is not solely Erdogan's responsibility, however. Ehud Olmert miscalculated in not appealing to Erdogan for Turkey's assistance with Hamas and Gazan rocket fire prior to launching Operation Cast Lead. Moreover, the May 2010 Mavi Marmara incident was an egregious violation of international law, which left 8 Turks and a Turkish-American dead.

- The Justice and Development Party has long harbored what can only be described as a peculiar soft spot for Hamas. Party leaders and activists are quite open about the fact that they see themselves and the history of their party reflected in Hamas. They have built a narrative linking the Turkish Islamist movement's struggle against a repressive state and elite with Hamas and its conflict with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The very fact that Hamas won a free and fair election in 2006, the results of which the United States, Israel, and the EU refused to recognize reinforces this "we-were-once-like-Hamas" account of the party's history. As a result, the AKP leadership regards itself as uniquely qualified to mentor and moderate Hamas.

What makes the party's effort to link its own history with that of Hamas particularly strange is how at variance it is with the Justice and Development Party's rise to power and its own professed worldview. Turkish Islamists were routinely repressed from the time of the Republic of Turkey's founding through four coups d'état between 1960 and 1997 and countless other efforts on the part of state elites to ensure the security of Turkey's secular political system. Yet even with the significant pressure of the state, from the time of the founding of the modern Turkish Islamist movement in 1969, its political parties have participated in politics, joining coalition governments in the 1970s and leading a short-lived government in the mid-1990s. After each round of repression that in the Turkish context meant banning political parties and certain politicians, Islamist parties quickly returned to the political arena under new names and after a period of time their leaders were often also allowed to return. Turkish Islamists never took up arms against the state. This stands in sharp contrast to Hamas, which places a premium on violence in the effort to achieve Palestinian rights.

- Turkey’s foreign policy activism under the Justice and Development Party has placed an emphasis on Muslim solidarity. As a result, Turkish diplomacy is active in traditional areas like the Balkans and the Middle East, but also Africa, where there are large Muslim populations. From the Turkish perspective, Hamas and its conflict with Israel falls into the category of “Muslim cause” and is thus deserving of Turkey’s support.
- The strategic vision of Turkey’s new prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who previously served as foreign minister and foreign policy advisor to the prime minister requires support for Islamist movements, including Hamas. As the Turkish academic, Behlul Ozkan, make clear in an influential article in the journal *Survival*, Davutoglu’s vision of a strong, powerful Turkey, leading the Muslim world is essentially an Islamist one.¹ Davutoglu believes that a state system based on nationalism and political institutions that trace their lineage to the West is fundamentally unsustainable in Muslim societies. If Turkey is going to lead the region, Ankara must do so as a Muslim power in cooperation with Islamist groups.

U.S. Policy

The Qatari and Turkish relationships with Hamas pose a policy problem for American policymakers on a number of levels. First, both Doha and Ankara are important to the United States in other arenas. As noted above, Qatar’s al Udeid air base is critical to supporting U.S. military operations in the region, which given the threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria may be ramping up again. Second, Turkey is also critical to managing the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and, as a member of NATO with the second largest military in the alliance, will surely play an important role in confronting Russia over Ukraine. Finally, there is an undeniable logic, which Secretary of State John Kerry clearly recognizes, of exploiting the ties between Hamas and Qatar as well as between Hamas and Turkey as means to communicate with the organization. As noted above, in the abstract this is the least costly way of stopping or preventing further bloodshed, but there are practical problems with this approach. Neither the Qataris nor the Turks have proved that they can decisively influence Hamas.

Policymakers must also ask themselves what is it that the United States wants when it comes to Hamas? There is not an easy answer to this question. Of course, Americans would like for it to renounce violence and commit itself to peaceful coexistence with Israel, but this is altogether unlikely in the short time horizons in which policymakers exist. The best answer is that the United States wants to put itself in the best position to apply pressure on Hamas to cease rocket fire into Israel and abide by post-cease-fire “rules of the road.” If that is what Washington wants then the way in which the Qataris and the Turks conduct their relations with Hamas is manifestly unhelpful, relieving pressure on the group rather than maximizing it.

As a result, broader strategic considerations should not preclude Washington from registering its disapproval with Doha and Ankara. Cooperation with Qatar and Turkey in other realms does not require quiescence when it comes to Hamas. Unfortunately, Washington does not have as much leverage with either Qatar or Turkey on this issue unless policymakers want to take the drastic step of designating both allies supporters of terrorism. It is unwise to take because it would hurt U.S. interests.

Recommendations

1. Recognizing what little recourse they have, American policymakers can still register their disapproval. The administration has been overly solicitous of both allies, in particular Turkey. The President and/or

¹ Behlul Ozkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan Islamism,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:4, 119-140.

the Secretary of State must make clear publicly Washington's disapproval of the ties Doha and Ankara maintain with Hamas. This should not be left to spokespeople from the Department of State or the National Security Council. Although these dedicated professionals communicate the U.S. government's positions and policies, I am afraid that public censure will only register with the leaderships of the countries if they are done at the highest levels. There is not much else that can be done regarding Qatar, which is in a position of relative strength given the importance of al Udeid to the United States military.

2. Congress has been silent on both countries' relations with Hamas. The United States may have little leverage with the Qataris, but that does not mean that Congress should refrain from making its views known. During the fighting in Gaza, the co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on U.S.-Turkish Relations and Turkish Americans conveyed a sharply worded letter to then-Prime Minister Erdogan for "remarks...widely viewed as anti-Semitic and are most definitely anti-Israel," but there has been no Congressional statement or any other action related to Turkey's robust relationship with Hamas. Absent the Obama administration's willingness to hold Ankara accountable on this issue, there is clearly an opportunity and need for the Congress to do so.
3. Specifically regarding Turkey, there is interest across U.S. government agencies, notably the State Department, Defense Department, and Commerce Department, in engaging with the new Davutoglu government in Turkey. One notable example is the planned late September visit to Turkey by the President's Export Council. The Secretary of Commerce is slated to lead that delegation with other senior officials from her department. This visit and other visits should be canceled to register Washington's disapproval of Turkey's relationship with Hamas. Although the AKP (and virtually every other political party in Turkey) traffics in anti-Americanism, these visits are valuable to the Turkish leadership, which regards them as a sign of U.S. approval of the policies of both the government and the party. The Obama administration regards these trips as an opportunity to engage Turkey's new prime minister. Yet Davutoglu's vision is in part the intellectual framework for Turkey's overall problematic approach to the Middle East, which includes good ties with Hamas.

Policymakers should be realistic. Registering American disapproval over the relationship between Qatar and Hamas and Turkey and Hamas is unlikely to alter policies in Doha or Ankara. These ties serve both Qatari and Turkish regional interests. Unfortunately, Washington does not have the ability—primarily because the United States needs Qatar and Turkey on other policy issues—to make these relations costly for Doha and Ankara. More than likely the United States will have to accept this reality and try to use the ability of these government to communicate with Hamas in an effort to establish a stable, less violent relationship between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

