

Today's Zaman.com (Turkey) : " Hamas forced to warm up to Iran amid regional developments " by Hanife Sevde Köse

Hamas forced to warm up to Iran amid regional developments

4 August 2013 / **HANİFE SEVDE KÖSE**, ANKARA

Hamas, whose relations with Iran have cooled over the Syrian crisis, may now re-enter Tehran's orbit after recent developments started to shift the equation in the region.

Hamas -- the Palestinian group ruling the Gaza enclave and an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood -- has taken a blow with the ouster of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, by military coup. Analysts note that the lack of Egyptian support for Hamas may push the Palestinian group toward Iran, which provides financial aid to Hamas, although the fund has dwindled in recent months.

Egypt is a key country for Hamas in terms of easing hardship in the Palestinian territory by bringing in goods through the Gaza tunnels and the Rafah border crossing. Yet, with the ouster of Morsi, Hamas now faces a somewhat hostile administration in Cairo. The new interim leadership in the country has sealed the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt and is allowing only restricted access at the Rafah border crossing.

According to Birol Akgün, a specialist at the Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE), organizations like Hamas can only survive by leaning on strong countries. Because Hamas felt it could count on Morsi's support, it was able to turn its back on Iran, he said in remarks to Sunday's Zaman, adding that Hamas doesn't trust the new administration in Egypt, which came to power by ousting the Brotherhood.

Obviously, Egypt's new administration doesn't trust the Palestinian group. Cairo has stepped up pressure on the group by flying their helicopters over Gaza airspace, probably in a show of force. The Egyptian move came after media reports claimed that in Sinai, members of Hamas were cooperating with other groups in the region that are attacking Egyptian military and police posts.

"Losing the Brotherhood will compel Hamas to seek alternatives, most notably, already tested and trusted ones like Iran, to compensate for the loss," Hisham Ahmed, a professor of politics at Saint Mary's College of California, told Sunday's Zaman.

According to media reports, Hamas members and Iranian officials met last month in Beirut to mend ties. Officials told media outlets that Iranian support for the Palestinian group was one of the issues on the table during those talks.

Relations with Iran ruptured after Hamas refused to back the forces of the Syrian regime, which has been waging a war against its civilians for more than two years. Last year, Hamas closed its office in Syria, a country that had long provided refuge to the Palestinian group. By turning against Iran in the Syrian crisis, Hamas sided with countries like Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Hamas' stance on the Syrian crisis cost the group much, as the aid provided by Iran to the Palestinian group has dwindled over the last few months. "I can say it is not like [it was in] the past. I cannot give you the exact amount. For supporting the Syrian revolution, we lost very much," Ghazi Hamad, Hamas' deputy foreign minister, told the British newspaper The Telegraph.

Tense relations with Iran also seem to have affected Hamas representatives in Lebanon, who have come under pressure from Hezbollah, which is increasingly involved in the Syrian crisis and has joined the regime's ranks in the fight.

Although reports point to a warming of relations between Hamas and Iran, some observers are skeptical given a move by Iran that bypassed Hamas in Gaza. Recently, Iran delivered food aid to Gazans through Palestinian group Islamic Jihad -- a rival of Hamas.

Turkey should keep supporting Hamas to neutralize Iran's influence

A Qatar-Egypt-Turkey alliance in the regional equation -- to which Hamas stayed very close -- was damaged after Morsi was deposed and Qatar backed the military coup in Egypt.

According to Ahmed, although Turkey has had good relations with Hamas, this new move toward Iran might redefine the nature of regional alliances.

"Turkey does have the leverage to maintain leadership if it so chooses by further strengthening its ties with Hamas, in order to neutralize Iran's effect," says Ahmed. He adds, however, that some competition among regional powers will certainly arise and that we will see some "reshuffling of the pieces on the chessboard."

Akgün says that Turkey should keep up its efforts to integrate Hamas into the international arena as a normal actor. "Turkey should not leave Hamas to Iran's initiative and find ways to keep the Palestinian group within the international system."

In 2006, Turkey advised Hamas to stay within the democratic framework after the group won a huge victory in parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza.

Experts agree that Turkey, just like it did in 2006, shouldn't leave Hamas under Iran's influence, but keep its ties with the group close.

http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action;jsessionid=D72EC4CD561669EC86C21D5D7E595713?newsId=322568&columnistId=0