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## Turkey and the Palestinian Question

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## ABSTRACT

The Palestinian question is a central issue at both the state and society level in Turkey. Thousands of Turkish people protested the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians in Gaza this month in different parts of Turkey. Turkish PM Erdoğan responded to the Israeli action by labeling it an act of disrespect to Turkey and suspended Turkey's facilitating role for indirect talks between Israel and Syria. Erdoğan also initiated an intensive diplomatic campaign at the regional and international levels, utilizing Turkey's seat in the United Nations Security Council. Turkey calls for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and urges a compromise between rival Palestinian groups. Finally, the war on Gaza will have far-reaching consequences for the future of the region as well as for Turkish-Israeli relations.



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## TURKEY AND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

The Israeli administration could not have committed a worse mistake than attacking Gaza to block hopes for peace in the Middle East. Like many, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan blamed Israel for the human tragedy in Gaza. This response may not seem extraordinary if one remembers that he criticized Israel in the same way in response to former Israeli aggressions in the occupied territories. This time, however, Erdoğan stated that the attack on Gaza, which began four days after the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Ankara, "is an act of disrespect toward Turkey." The major issue on the meeting agenda for Olmert's visit was the Turkish-led, indirect talks between Israel and Syria. In response to the latest Israeli attack, Erdoğan suspended the talks, and paid visits to Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to search for a solution to the Gaza situation. He also talked to the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmud Abbas. Erdoğan's response to Israel, his suspension of talks, and his increase of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East indicates the high level of Turkish involvement in the Palestinian question.

The new attitude of Turkish policy makers is to consider the Palestinian question an area of responsibility and opportunity wherein to claim a constructive Turkish role in the Middle East.

Over the past few years, Turkish foreign policy makers have gained self-confidence and political will to pursue peace attempts in Turkey's neighboring regions. Turkey hosts Middle Eastern, Eurasian, and African leaders as well as high-level politicians and officials from Western countries, and facilitates platforms for the solution of conflicts in various geographies. Turkish policy makers try to overcome differences between countries in conflict through confidence-building measures and by positioning Turkey as a mediator and facilitator in the search for solutions to chronic regional problems. Turkish policy makers work to initiate regional dynamics for peace-making and mobilize regional actors to create a new awareness of peace in a wide geography extending from the Middle East to the steppes of Eurasia. Their vision and policy style are exemplary and one may discern the emergence of a peace-maker role for Turkey in the periphery of the international system. Turkey's involvement in the Palestinian question is a crucial part of a broader peace vision, bearing with it the additional dimensions of a rich historical-cultural background and a high degree of Turkish societal interest in the issue.

### **Turkish Involvement**

The Palestinian question occupies a central place in Turkish policy toward the Middle East; the recently adopted Turkish attitude exemplifies Turkey's new policy line in the region. Still, Turkey's sensitivity to the Palestinian question is not a new development. For example, the commencement of the construction of Jewish housing units in East Jerusalem in 1967, the 1969 fire in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the declaration of Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel under the Basic Law of 1980 have all received harsh responses from Turkish foreign policy makers; bilateral relations with Israel were nearly severed on various occasions. However, the new attitude of Turkish policy makers is to consider the Palestinian question an area of responsibility and opportunity wherein to claim a constructive Turkish role in the Middle East. Turkish administrators define their position as a critical policy line that seeks to deter Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and to condemn Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets, while pursuing good relations with both Israel and the legitimate Palestinian government.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey's new geographic imagination has led to a more confident role for Turkey in the Middle East, which has found its expression in the statements of policy makers. Former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit defined the Jenin operation in 2002 as "genocide"<sup>2</sup> and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan criticized the assassination of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin

1. Prime Minister's Speech, 28 February 2006, [www.basbakanlik.gov.tr](http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr).

2. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1911609.stm>.

in 2004 and the heavy civilian casualties in the Rafah refugee camp as “state terror.”<sup>3</sup> As an example of Turkey’s serious attention to the Palestinian question, Turkey established the Palestine Economic and Social Collaboration coordination office, which is headed by veteran politician and former minister Vehbi Dinçerler. Turkey’s attention to Palestine also intensified with the establishment of the West Bank branch of TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency).

During Sharon government’s withdrawal from Gaza, Turkey offered to mediate between the Israelis and Palestinians. Sharon refused Turkey’s mediation offer. Erdoğan said at that time that “Turkey has the capacity to help the Palestinians after the redeployment in the economic field.”<sup>4</sup> This capacity is best exemplified by the initiative of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) with respect to managing an industrial zone on the border of Israel and the Gaza Strip.<sup>5</sup> The “Industry for Peace Initiative in Palestine” is an example of the new self confidence among Turkish foreign policy elites and business leaders under the impact of the new geographic imagination that celebrates trade as the basis for sustainable peace in the region. This initiative could create a concrete basis of cooperation between Palestine, Israel, and Turkey. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also defined the Erez project as “the initiative which would contribute to the regional peace.”<sup>6</sup> Although the site on which the TOBB intended to build an industrial complex was destroyed during the escalation of the Gaza conflict in August 2006, TOBB president Rifat Hisarcıkloğlu announced the Organization’s determination to invest 100 million US dollars to restore the project and employ six thousand Palestinians after maintaining stability in the region. The TOBB convened the fourth meeting of the Ankara Forum on January 15, 2007 in Tel Aviv to discuss the further steps in the Revival Project for the Erez Industrial Region. Hisarcıkloğlu underlined that the project is the only concrete proposal on the table in economic terms, and reiterated that Turkey is as crucial a shareholder in the project as the Palestinians and Israelis. As stated in the Joint Declaration of the Fourth Meeting of the Ankara Forum: “The project is now coming to the stage of implementation in early 2007.”<sup>7</sup> The then Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres underlined his support for the project by saying that “there is no time to waste any time. The Erez industrial zone will be beneficial to all related parties.”<sup>8</sup> Although there have been delays due to security situation in Gaza, TOBB keeps its promise and has preparations to continue with this project after normalization in Gaza.

Different segments of Turkish society, ranging from political parties to student unions, have joined their hands and hearts for extending support to the Palestinians

3. See [http://rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/06/2dcae3ab-d364-452a-85f5-428c2f757fa9.html?napage\\_3](http://rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/06/2dcae3ab-d364-452a-85f5-428c2f757fa9.html?napage_3).

4. See <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8395C7CE-AEAC-4CF9-8319-B7F5C6AD0DCF.htm>>

5. TOBB-BİS, *Baris İcin Sanayi Girisimi: Kavramsal Cerceve*, (Ankara: TEPAV, 2006).

6. See [http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno\\_191398](http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno_191398)>.

7. See [http://www.tepav.org.tr/engyeni/admin/dosyabul/upload/Joint\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.tepav.org.tr/engyeni/admin/dosyabul/upload/Joint_Declaration.pdf).

8. For more information, see [www.tobb.org.tr/haber\\_arsiv2.php?haberid\\_1170](http://www.tobb.org.tr/haber_arsiv2.php?haberid_1170).

Turkey interpreted the Hamas victory in a different way and favored diplomatic engagement with Hamas to preempt possible problems.

The subsequent Hamas victories in the local elections of 2005 and in the Parliamentary Legislative Elections opened a new era in the Palestinian question. Hamas' denial of Israel was the main concern of the international community, and the US and the EU started to discuss possible measures to force Hamas to recognize Israel. Turkey interpreted the Hamas victory in a different way and favored diplomatic engagement with Hamas to preempt possible problems. The Turkish position, as expressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that all related parties should respect the result of democratically conducted elections and that it would be against democratic principles if outside actors attempted to weaken the newly elected order by imposing economic measures against the Palestinian administration.<sup>9</sup> According to Turkish policy makers, Hamas was in search of allies in the Middle East to put an end to the economic and political blockade it was facing from the international system. In such an environment, without Turkey's intervention, the only possible entry for Hamas was the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis.<sup>10</sup>

When the Iranian religious leader, Ali Khamanei, invited Hamas leadership to Tehran, he supported this perception. In the midst of all these developments, the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs invited Khaled Mashal, the political leader of Hamas in exile, to Turkey. This unexpected visit was criticized by some circles in the US and Israel. In response, the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül stated that it was not possible for Turkey to remain a spectator to the Palestinian problem while even the land registration records of Palestine remain in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> As a response to critical comments from Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Gül explained that his team advised Hamas to disarm, become more moderate, and enter into diplomatic negotiations with Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Hamas received an invitation from a number of other countries, such as Russia, South Africa, Venezuela, and Iran, indicating that Turkey was not alone in its engagement with the newly elected government. Turkey also pursued diplomatic activities in the EU and partially influenced the EU decision to resume economic aid to the Palestinians under Hamas rule.<sup>13</sup> Turkey's Hamas diplomacy is a new development. There is no other example of Turkey's involvement at this level of complexity concerning the Palestinian question, which involved intervention in regional alliances, and diplomacy vis-à-vis the US and the EU. During the clashes between Hamas and another powerful Palestinian group, Fatah, in the Gaza Strip, Turkish policy makers continued an active policy to persuade the clashing sides to end the civil war situation in the Palestinian territories.

9. Fikret Bila, "Hamas Hamas Hamas'ın Ankara Ziyaretinin Hassas Yonleri," Milliyet, 17 February 2006.

10. Yasemin Congar, "Mesal, Esad, Bush, Erdogan," Milliyet, 3 July 2006.

11. Guneri Civaoglu, "Erken Depar," Milliyet, 21 February 2006.

12. Taha Akyol, "Hamas Hamas Hamas ve Turkiye," Milliyet, 18 February 2006.

13. Sezai Kalayci, "Ambargo Baris Getirmez," Zaman, 13 April 2006.

The Palestinian question is a sensitive issue for large segments of the Turkish society. Palestine is among the few issues that the Turkish electorate forced politicians and policy makers to take positions on in foreign policy. A poll conducted in October 2000 showed that 71 percent of Turks have an interest in Palestinian affairs and 60 percent demand a more active Turkish role on behalf of the Palestinian people. Another poll conducted in November 2000 showed that 41 percent favor delivering Jerusalem to Palestinian rule, 29 percent proposed autonomous administration, and only two percent favor Israeli rule over the city.<sup>14</sup>

Another poll, conducted in November 2003 surveying 2,183 people in different parts of Turkey, assessed the Turkish people's attitudes toward Palestinians. 66 percent support the Palestinians in their struggle. Public support for Prime Minister Erdoğan's blaming of Israel for pursuing state terror was 82 percent in another poll conducted in July 2004. Different segments of Turkish society, ranging from political parties to student unions, have joined their hands and hearts for extending support to the Palestinians.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of the most recent attack, Turkish official and civilian charity organizations rushed into Gaza with aid convoys. Turkey's Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH) stood as an outstanding charity organization for reaching out to Gaza with urgently needed foodstuff and medical equipment. İHH also made preparations to bring wounded Palestinians to Istanbul for treatment.

The core of the Palestinian question for most Turks is the status of Jerusalem (al-Quds) and who will control the sacred places in the holy city. This has long been a sensitive foreign policy issue in which Turkish society has shown the utmost interest. The widespread protests against Israeli expansion and violence in Palestinian lands in March and April 2002 indicate the societal sensitivity in Turkey. The protests against the most recent Israeli attacks on Gaza were even more widespread in different parts of Turkey after Israeli operation in Gaza. A large New Year's Eve Party in Istanbul was cancelled to show solidarity with Gaza. Tens of thousands of people gathered in Istanbul to protest Israeli aggression against Palestinians on January 4th. This demonstration was broadcast on major Arab satellite televisions, including Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia. Thousands of people continue to protest against Israel in different parts of Turkey.

Turkey also pursued diplomatic activities in the EU and partially influenced the EU decision to resume economic aid to the Palestinians under Hamas rule.

14. Bulent Aras and Salih Bicakci, "Turkey, EU and the Middle East: Is Harmonisation Possible" *East European Quarterly*, 40 (3), September 2006: 367-381

15. Ibid.

Turkey has initiated an intensive diplomatic campaign at both the regional and international level to put an end to the Gaza tragedy.

## Turkish Diplomacy after the Gaza Tragedy

Turkey has initiated an intensive diplomatic campaign at both the regional and international level to put an end to the Gaza tragedy. PM Erdoğan visited major Arab countries and talked to Palestinian leader Abbas in the first days of 2009. Erdoğan addressed the international community before his visit to Egypt, saying that “the Palestinian and Gaza people, our brothers, can only be saved from their isolation when these embargoes are lifted.”<sup>16</sup> Turkey’s position is to include Hamas in the political process; Erdoğan aims to persuade Hamas to return to truce in exchange for lifting the blockade of Gaza, and Turkish policy makers have conveyed a message to Hamas to declare cease-fire and work for the political accommodation of different groups within Palestinian politics. Erdoğan’s top foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu met twice with Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas in exile, in Syria. Davutoğlu’s second visit came as a result of French president Sarkozy’s request for help from Erdoğan. In this sense, Turkey has already started to mediate between Hamas and international actors while maintaining regular contacts with Fatah, the Palestinian Authority as well as the US and European countries.

Erdoğan’s active diplomacy, aimed at preventing further tragedy in Gaza, coincides with Turkey’s resumption of a two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Erdoğan welcomed the Arab League’s call to lobby for a UN Resolution for a ceasefire and stands ready to cooperate in this initiative. Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Babacan attended the extraordinary meeting of the foreign ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on January 3rd, 2009. The Secretary-General of the OIC, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, called for immediate international action to put an end to Israeli aggression in Gaza.<sup>17</sup> The final statement of the OIC meeting condemned “the ongoing barbaric Israeli assault on the Palestinian people in Gaza.”<sup>18</sup> And before departing from Saudi Arabia, Erdoğan added: “Hamas abided by the truce. But Israel failed to lift the embargoes. In Gaza, people seem to live in an open prison. In fact, all Palestine looks like an open prison. I am calling out to the whole world: why do you not display the same sensitivity you showed in Georgia, now in Gaza? The United Nations, the United States and the EU-member states mobilized for Georgia immediately. But now, no one takes action for Gaza.”<sup>19</sup>

16. Cengiz Candar, “Erdoğan’ın Ortadoğu Turu,” Radikal, 3 December 2009.

17. Star, 28 December 2008.

18. See <http://www.oic-oci.org>, 03 January 2009.

19. “Turkish premier calls on international community to take action for Gaza,” Today’s Zaman, 4 January 2009.



Erdoğan's critical responses led to a phone conversation between President Abdullah Gül and his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres. Gül released a written statement after this conversation, expressing concern for the political and humanitarian situation in Gaza, underlining the need for supplying humanitarian aid, and calling for an immediate cease-fire.<sup>20</sup> The Turkish National Security Council (NSC) expressed deep concern over the deaths of high numbers of Palestinians in the Israeli operation in Gaza. The NSC issued its own statement calling for an immediate end to military operations, the lifting of the barriers so that humanitarian aid might be delivered to the Palestinian people in Gaza, and urging the consideration of diplomacy for a solution. The statement also added that the Palestinians should reach a compromise among themselves as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup> The NSC statement exemplifies the broad consensus on the Palestinian issue in Turkey.

Turkey has a two stage plan for dealing with the Gaza situation. The first phase is to broker a ceasefire and provide supervision by international peacekeepers, including Arab and Turkish forces. The second phase is to achieve a compromise between rival Palestinian groups to stabilize Palestinian politics and ensure a commitment to peace. Erdoğan is working to build bridges among the Arabs to create a common stance toward the Palestinian question. Fehmi Huwaydi and Muhammed Nureddin in major Arab dailies like Al-Dustur, the Daily Star, and Al-Safir, praised Turkish activities on Gaza's behalf and asked Erdoğan to remind Arab leaders that the Palestinian cause is an Arab issue.<sup>22</sup> Turkish attempts are likely to continue in the UN to bring the issue to more international attention. Turkey will also look for opportunities to discuss the issue with the US administration and EU countries.

## Policy Recommendations

Turkey's dynamism at the state and societal level in response to the Gaza tragedy makes evident the consolidation of Turkey's role as a peace promoter in the Middle East. Turkish involvement in finding a solution to the Palestinian question will continue, as the democratic and societal backing of the policy makers in regard to this issue remain strong. The following points may help to expedite the results of Turkey's attempts to further the Palestinian cause.

20. "Gul Peres ile Gorustu," Sabah, 31 December 2008.

21. "30 Aralık 2008 Tarihli MGK Toplantısının Basın Bildirisi," at <http://www.mgk.gov.tr/Turkce/basinbildiri2008/30aralik2008.html>.

22. Al Dustur, 30 December 2008; Al Safir, 1 January 2009; Daily Star, 2 January 2009.

1. Turkey should search for diplomatic engagement with the US to affect a change in Washington's position regarding the Palestinian cause. President-elect Obama has raised the possibility of extending talks to a wider Palestinian group; Turkey should prepare the ground for a renewed US involvement with all Palestinian groups.
2. Turkish society's humanitarian aid to Gaza stands in need of coordination. A civil coordination committee should be established to help to reach out to Gaza with the most required materials in a more organized fashion.
3. The EU remained "Czech" to the Gaza tragedy. The EU is losing its strategic sight in the Middle East, along with hundreds of years of historical memory. The Czech Presidency reveals the lack of vision in the EU, rendering the EU neighborhood policy and other policy instruments simply meaningless. Ankara should bring the Gaza tragedy to the EU agenda with an eye toward substantial revision of the EU policy toward the Palestinian question.
4. Turkey should collaborate with France and the UK with the understanding that these countries have more historical and strategic experience with the Palestinian question. French President Sarkozy has followed Erdoğan's footsteps in Caucasia and the Middle East. Turkey may lead the other major European countries by maintaining a cooperative approach toward a solution of the Palestinian question.
5. The Turkish government should bring the Palestinian case to the agenda of the Turkish parliament. All groups in the parliament have already expressed their support for the Palestinian cause; adopting a formally united position would bear more influence in the regional and international environment.
6. The Palestinian question is a sensitive issue for the Turkish people independent of their political leanings. Turkish policy makers should address the demands of society at large, while keeping domestic tension at a controllable level.
7. Turkey's two year term in the UN Security Council should be utilized to bring the Palestinian issue to the world public agenda. Turkey's non-permanent seat also creates a chance to be closer to different UN forums and to play a more active role at the UN level. A prerequisite for influential action in the UN is to secure strong support from the Arab league and the OIC.
8. Turkish-Israeli relations will be strained in the short to medium term. Turkish policy makers were disturbed by Israel's irresponsible act at the initiatory stage of Syrian-Israeli

direct talks. There has been a loss of confidence on the part of Ankara towards Tel Aviv in regard to future negotiation efforts. For its part, the Israel administration criticizes Turkey for being unnecessarily harsh toward Israeli security measures. Ankara should make sure that Israel does not cause irreparable damage to the Turkish brokered talks in the region in the future.

9. Turkey should be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Gaza after a possible settlement. There is need for coordinated activity, including the establishment of state institutions, charity organizations, civil society, universities, research institutes, etc., to aid the recovery of the Palestinians and the rebuilding of Gaza. Turkey should invite 1,000 Palestinian students to Turkey for education to help in the post-war rehabilitation and to strengthen the ties between the Turkish people and the Palestinians.

The Palestinian question is a central issue at both the state and society level in Turkey. Thousands of Turkish people protested the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians in Gaza this month in different parts of Turkey. Turkish PM Erdoğan responded to the Israeli action by labeling it an act of disrespect to Turkey and suspended Turkey's facilitating role for indirect talks between Israel and Syria. Erdoğan also initiated an intensive diplomatic campaign at the regional and international levels, utilizing Turkey's seat in the United Nations Security Council. Turkey calls for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and urges a compromise between rival Palestinian groups. Finally, the war on Gaza will have far-reaching consequences for the future of the region as well as for Turkish-Israeli relations.

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