

The Question of Palestine and Asian Public Opinion: Turkish Experience (1980-1987)

Yılmaz Altuğ*

On November 1947 UN General Assembly decided partition of Palestine in two states, one Jewish, one Arab with 33 votes for, 13 against and 10 abstentions. Turkey voted against. This negative vote was unanimously approved by all Turkish political parties, Turkish universities, Turkish trade-unions. So Turkish public opinion unanimously disapproved the partition of Palestine.

Since then all Turkish statemen condemned this decision. In this paper I want to point out several statemens by Turkish President of Republic Kenan Evren, Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Vahit Halefoğlu.

Turkey is not only bound to Middle East for its geographical position but also by cultural and moral values brought out by a common past. Turkey is cherishing her relations and cooperation with all Islamic countries. This policy was again announced by the President of Turkish Republic Kenan Evren during four day official visit of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the invitation of President Evren in May 15, 1985. In his wellcoming speech President Evren stressed that one of the main aims of Turkish foreign policy is to develop relations with Islamic countries in every field. Turkey is an inseparable member of the Middle East as she is of the Western world, he indicated, adding that the existence of a strong and stable Turkey is important from the viewpoint of regional peace and stability as well as the unity and solidarity of the Western Alliance. On the Middle Eastern Question President Evren noted the same day that the dragging on of the Palestinian problem was the main cause of the current unrest in the region. "A solution to the problem will be possible only by recognition of the Palestinians' legitimate rights and rightful expectations, and Israel's withdrawal from the territories she has occupied." he stressed. President Evren on several other occasions also supported Palestine's Arabes cause. On June 11, 1985 President Evren in a official visit to Rumania in Bucuresti at the dinner offered to him by President Nicolae Ceausescu gave a speech. In that speech Evren said that the Palestinian problem constitutes a source of sorrow for Turks for a long time. The solution of this problem is only possible with the withdrawal of Israel from lands occupied by her. He said that as in many occasions he referred to Palestinian problem there will be no lasting peace and stability without finding an answer to legal rights of Palestinians. We must always remem-

* Professor at the University of Istanbul, Faculty of Political Sciences.

ber that at the basis of Middle East crises lies Palestinian problem.

On July 15, 1985 Turkish Foreign Minister V. Halefoğlu at the dinner offered to Mr. Leo Tindemans, Prime Minister of Belgium visiting Turkey said exactly the following: "par là, je voudrais aborder brièvement la situation critique du Moyen - Orient qui, du point de vue du maintien de la paix et de la sécurité dans le monde, nous préoccupe tous de très près.

Face à cette situation qui risque de se détériorer chaque jour davantage, la nécessité urgente de rétablir la prééminence du droit et de la justice s'impose. Pour ça nous persistons à penser plus que jamais, qu'il faut commencer par la reconnaissance et le respect des droits légitimes et les aspirations justes du peuple palestinien. Nous ne croyons pas que les conditions de paix et de stabilité puissent être créées dans l'ensemble de cette région, sans qu'une solution juste et équitable soit au paravant trouvée au problème palestinien. Nous estimons que tous les moyens qui peuvent mener à une telle solution, méritent d'être essayés et encouragés. C'est dans cet esprit que nous avons accueilli favorablement l'accord intervenu récemment entre la Jordanie et l'OLP.

Nous souhaitons vivement que les possibilités offertes par cet accord, qui a renimé l'idée de la paix négociée, oubliée depuis quelque temps, soient pleinement utilisées."

In the UN General Assembly of 1985 Minister of Foreign Affairs Halefoğlu said the following: "The tragic situation in the Middle East, which constitutes a serious threat to world peace, requires our utmost attention. We believe that a lasting solution cannot be found unless the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people are recognised. The common approach reached between Jordan and the PLO may provide an opportunity for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. We should like to hope that all the directly concerned parties will not fail to seize the opportunities this initiative has created, with reciprocal goodwill and political vision.

We are aware, however, that the peace in the Middle-East is indivisible and that a just and lasting comprehensive settlement in the Middle East that must satisfy the legitimate rights and concerns of all parties involved, will continue to elude us until Israel withdraws from Arab territories under its occupation since 1967, including Jerusalem.

It is most unfortunate that Israel, instead of adopting a conciliatory attitude that would contribute to ennobling changes for a negotiated settlement, continues to further aggravate the situation. The recent act of aggression by Israel against the sovereignty of a peace loving country, Tunisia, should also be condemned as a flagrant violation of International law and the basic principles of the Charter. Throughout the year, we have followed with growing concern and much anguish the developments that have tragically obscured the hopes for the restoration of calm and order in Lebanon."

International Solidarity Day with the People of Palestine was celebrated November 1985. In his message to the Chairman of UN Palestine Committee on the occasion of the eight anniversary of International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People Mr. Özal, the Prime Minister

stated that there were growing interest and support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and that the efforts of the UN Committee for the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People were appreciated. Mr. Özal pointed out that the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East could not be realized unless all the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including self-determination, were recognized and Israel withdrew from the Arab territories occupied since 1967. Stating that they supported all peace initiatives to this end Mr. Özal said that, in this context, they welcomed Jordan-PLO Accord of February as an important step, and added that they appreciate the constructive role played by the PLO under the able leadership of Yasser Arafat in reaching this accord. Mr. Özal said that he was confident that with increasing understanding and support of the international community the Palestinian People would achieve their legitimate aspirations.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Halefoğlu in a speech delivered during the Islamic Conference Foreign Ministers Meeting in Fez, Morocco between January 6-9, 1986 having explained Turkey's views and attitudes as regards the situation in the Middle East, the Palestinian problem, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and apartheid in South Africa, said that the recognition of legitimate rights of the Palestinians and Israel's withdrawal from the territories she has been occupying were the prerequisites for a just and lasting peace. Halefoğlu termed as "an act contrary to international law" the Israeli attack on the PLO headquarters in Tunisia and called on the Islamic countries to severely denounce it.

He indicated the need for urgent cooperation in the international sphere to prevent terrorism.

Palestine Liberation Organisation Leader Yasser Arafat paid a two-day visit to Ankara as the official guest of the Turkish Government on 26-27 February 1986. During his stay Arafat was received by President Kenan Evren.

The PLO leader was met at Esenboğa airport by Prime Minister Turgut Özal, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vahit Halefoğlu and the Ambassadors of a number of Middle East countries.

Arafat visited Atatürk's Mausoleum and paid homage before furnishing Prime Minister Özal with information on the latest developments concerning the Middle East problem. He noted that they were committed to the Understanding reached with King Hussein on 11 February 1985 for a Jordanian-Palestinian federation which had enjoyed large-scale international approval.

Various formulae had been proposed to solve the problem and among these, the PLO had accepted the one that would allow the Palestinians to exercise their right to self-determination in the framework of a federation to be formed with Jordan he said adding that they had also accepted all UN resolutions. They had always kept the doors open to negotiations and peace, he stressed.

The situation in Lebanon continued to cause concern and they expected no change in the near future. Referring to the Gulf War, between Iran and Irak he said that in the latest clashes both sides had suffered high cas-

ualties. When the latest Iranian drive came to a halt, promising developments towards peace might be expected he added.

Prime Minister Özal explained Turkey's attitude towards the Palestinian problem and stressed that the country favoured peace and negotiations in the region. Turkey supported the Understanding King Hussein and Mr. Arafat had reached on 11 February 1985 and regarded it as an opportunity that should not be missed, he stressed.

In a speech at a luncheon in Mr. Arafat's honour, Prime Minister Özal said the visit came at a time when important developments were taking place in the region and that with Arafat, they had had useful talks on the Palestinian problem as well as other topics concerning the region and expressed satisfaction over the strengthening of the ties between the Turks and the Palestinians.

Stressing that the Palestinian problem was the essence of the Middle East problem, Prime Minister Özal continued:

"Turkey is convinced that a just and lasting peace in the region can be established, before anything else, by recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians including their right to self determination and by Israel withdrawing from Arab territory, including Al Quds, it has been occupying since 1967. Turkey also believes that all countries in the region should live within recognised and secure borders so that peace can be continuous. From the beginning, Turkey has supported all efforts aimed at establishing such peace and reiterated on every occasion that along with the other parties concerned, the PLO should take part in these peace efforts."

Prime Minister Özal recalled that Turkey was an active participant in the efforts of the UN Committee for the Implementation of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People established in 1975.

Arafat said they were following with satisfaction Turkey's efforts to develop relations with Arab and Islamic countries. The Turkish and Palestinian people had a 400 - year common history and Atatürk defended the rights of the Palestinians in a speech in the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1934, he added.

Mr. Arafat held a press conference before leaving Turkey on 25 February.

Syrian Prime Minister Abdel Raouf Al Qassem visited Turkey between 2-6 March 1986 at the invitation of Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal. At a dinner for Mr. Al Qassem Prime Minister Özal said, that no positive developments conducive to peace and cooperation could be seen either in the sensitive region where the two countries are situated or on the international plane in general. He said that the Arab-Israeli conflict lay at the base of the uneasiness that had reached increasingly more serious dimensions in the Middle East, and continued: "Turkey believes that the Palestinian problem lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict which threatens regional and World peace and constitutes a serious source of concern for our countries. Turkey is convinced that a just and lasting peace can be established in the region by first of all, recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians including Al Quds, it has been occupying since 1967. Turkey also believes that for the peace to be continuous all

countries in the region should live within recognised and secure borders.

"Turkey has been supporting the just cause of Arab brothers and all peaceful efforts aimed at establishing peace and tranquillity in the region. Turkey believes that the long-desired climate of peace and stability can be achieved in this sensitive region, where the seeds of suspicion and hostility are widespread and differences extremely sharp, only through a realistic approach with the parties involved undertaking their share of responsibility in a constructive and serious manner."

The meeting entitled "The Palestinian Problem," organized by the UN Committee for the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People started in İstanbul on 7 April 1986.

Foreign Minister Vahit Halefoğlu, in his opening speech, stated that time was passing in the Middle East in favour of those who did not want an atmosphere of peace and stability in the region.

Stating that a just and lasting solution for the Middle East problem would only be possible if all the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including selfdetermination were recognized and Israel withdrew from the occupied Arab territories, he stressed the importance of a peaceful life for all the countries in the region.

Mr. Halefoğlu stated that all the parties concerned should join in peaceful efforts towards solution of the problem and that international organisations should approach the subject with more understanding.

The Chairman of the Committee, George Agius reiterated his call for an international conference for solution of the problem.

Yasser Arafat, the Leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in a message sent to the meeting, criticised the activities of Israel in the occupied Arab territories and added that the USA supported this oppression of the Muslims in the region.

In his message, Prime Minister Turgut Özal indicated that the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people should be recognized and that Turkey believed that no just and lasting solution would be found unless those rights were recognized.

Mr. Özal also said that since the foundation of the UN Committee for the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People Turkey had supported all the efforts of the Palestinians.

The meeting ended on 11 April.

The delegates who attended the meeting submitted a message to Yasser Arafat, which was:

"We are met here to discuss ways to bring peace to the Middle East and find a solution to the Palestine problem. We support the Palestinians who are living under Israeli occupation or scattered throughout World in their fight to have their rights recognized."

Prime Minister Turgut Özal visited Soviet Union on 28 July 1986 on the same day at a dinner given by his host Soviet Minister Nicolai Ryzkov Özal said the following on the Palestinian Problem:

"The Middle East situation remained a serious problem which had gained dimensions that threatened world peace, and a just and lasting solution could only be found by Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab

land and full restitution of Palestinian rights." On the war between Iran and Iraq, he said that Turkey was determined to make every effort possible to secure a just and honourable solution. "The only way to secure a just and lasting peace in the Middle East was to recognise the Palestinian people's rights, Prime Minister Turgut Özal said in a message to Ambassador Massambe Sarre, Chairman of the UN Committee for the Protection of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, on the ninth anniversary of "The Day for International Solidarity with the Palestinian People."

Noting Turkish people's support for and solidarity with the Palestinians Özal praised the Committee's efforts and indicated that The Palestinian Regional Seminar, held in İstanbul in April on European soil for the first time contributed to recognition of the rights of Palestinians. Turkey was convinced that the only way to secure a just a lasting peace in the Middle East was to recognise the Palestinians people's rights, Özal said and continued: "Furthermore, we think that the problem cannot be solved unless Israel withdraws from all Arab territories occupied since 1967." All peace efforts towards these goals enjoyed Turkey's support, he noted and hoped that an acceptable formula could be found so that there could be progress in peace efforts and existing problems could be solved. The message read: "I am convinced that the Palestinian people will, under PLO leadership, gain their legitimate rights thanks to the understanding and support they enjoy on the international plane and to the unity in their ranks. I extend my best wishes to them towards this goal."

Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs gave the following speech on October 2, 1986 at Forty Second Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York:

"Since last year, despite some encouraging initiatives, the situation in the Middle East has not taken a turn for the better. It continues to pose a serious threat to the peace and security of the region and the world. Some opportunities which seemed to exist last year for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East have apparently diminished. The fundamental problem, however, is still there to be addressed with common sense and vision if the tension which plagues the region is ever to be defused.

We continue to believe that a just and lasting comprehensive settlement in the Middle East depends on recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and withdrawal by Israel from Arab territories under its occupation since 1967, including Jerusalem. We also believe that the problem will not disappear until all its interrelated elements are taken up and resolved in a manner that takes into account the legitimate rights and interests of all the parties involved.

We have followed with interest the recent efforts to reactivate the peace processe, and we certainly hope that they will be successful and that a formula acceptable to all parties concerned will finally be found."

Moroccan Foreign Minister Abdullatif Filali paid an official visit to Turkey from 9 to 11 March, 1987. At a dinner he gave for Filali on March 9 Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Halefoğlu referring to the Middle Eastern and Lebanese Problems, stressed that a just and lasting peace could only be established in the region through recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab lands.

Turkish public opinion was extremely saddened with the tragic events taken place in the Palestinian refugee Camps in Lebanon. So here is the announcement of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs published in *News Spot* of 10 April 1987. (*News Spot* is a weekly publication of the Directorate of Press and Information attached to the Office of the Prime Minister in Turkey). It has been announced that Turkey is ready to help the people faced with serious nutrition and health problems in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In a statement by the Foreign Ministry it was stressed that Turkey was upset and concerned about the deaths of innocent people from disease and starvation in the refugee camps in Lebanon and indicated that finding a solution to the problem was a humanitarian task in which the whole world should be involved.

The statement noted that situation in the camps should be dealt with the humanitarian viewpoint and a solution should be found urgently in a spirit of solidarity.

Turkey as a partial solution to the problem of nutrition and starvation has sent 30 tonnes of aid through the Turkish Red Crescent Society. Officials of the Red Crescent Society stated that they had sent 25 tonnes of food, 1500 blankets and medical equipment. Red Crescent Society officials stated that they would continue to supply aid to those in need. The goods were handed over to United Nations officials in Damascus for delivery to the people in need.

A news item shows that Turkey's relief to Palestinian refugees reached destination. The Deputy Spokesman of the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced end of April 1987 that food and medical supplies sent by Turkey through the intermediary of the Red Crescent Society arrived at the Burj El Barajne camp by lorries of the UN Agency of Public Works and Aid to Palestinian Refugees.

The Arabe-Israeli Conflict which is commonly named the Palestinian Question is the longest Conflict in the Middle East in modern times and is contributing to the instability of the region and is as dangerous as Iran-Irak war to the maintenance of international peace.

The three wars fought between Arabes and Israel brought a period of no war no peace to the era.

The PLO-Jordan Agreement on February 11, 1985 was wellcomed by Turkey and the peace lovers in the Middle East as a hopeful sign to end tensions and at the end to bring the peace. But on February 19, 1986 King Hüseyin of Jordan said that he suspended the cooperation with PLO leadership and on April 1987 at the Palestinian National Council Arafat ended this agreement which was no longer workable.

Turkey is of the opinion that all unalienable rights of the Palestinian

people who was treated very unhumanly and very unjustly must be restituted at once. Without this a lasting and just peace can not be realized, also all Arabes lands occupied by Israel in 1967 war, including Jerusalem must also be restituted. Turkey also thinks what PLO which is the legal representative of the Palestinian people must participate in equal status to all peace efforts of the Middle East.

Turkey is against the policy of Israel of using force and on every occasion Turkey has always condemns this policy.