

The Palestinian Question in Turkish Foreign Policy from 1990s to 2010s

Türk Dış Politikası'nda Filistin Sorunu 1990'lardan 2010'lara

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Abstract

For several reasons the Question of Palestine has been closely followed by Turkey especially after the establishment of State of Israel. Turkey's engagement with Palestinian territories is beyond her historical ties with it. At first, until 1990s, Palestinian issue served Turkish foreign policy to manage its relationship with the Arab World starting from 1960s. The other side of the coin was Turkey's strained relations with Israel. The Oslo Peace Process between Israel and Palestinians enabled Turkey to boost its relations with Israel, reaching level of military partnership. After 2000s, Turkey's balanced Palestinian policy has been dramatically changed and Turkey apparently became the leading advocate of "the Palestinian cause." This article focuses on the evaluation of Turkey's Palestinian policy and the logic behind it.

Key Words: Turkey, Palestinian policy, Israel, Turkish Foreign Policy, Middle East

Öz

Filistin Sorunu özellikle İsrail Devleti'nin kuruluşundan itibaren çeşitli nedenlerden dolayı Türkiye tarafından yakından izlenmektedir. Türkiye'nin Filistin toprakları ile bağı bu coğrafya ile tarihi bağlarından öte anlamlar içermektedir. 1960'lardan 1990'lara kadar Filistin Sorunu Türk dış politikasında Arap dünyası ile ilişkileri düzenlemekte bir araç olarak öne çıkmıştır. Filistin sorunu Türkiye'nin İsrail ile sorunlu ilişkilerinin de sebepleri arasındadır, Türkiye'nin Batı ile ilişkileri açısından referans olmuştur. 1990'lardaki İsrail ile Filistinliler arasındaki Oslo Barış Süreci Türkiye'nin İsrail ile ilişkilerinin gelişmesini ve askeri ortaklığa kadar ilerlemesini sağlamıştır. 2000'li yıllardan itibaren İkinci İntifada ile birlikte Türkiye'nin yürüttüğü denge politikası kökten değişmiş ve Türkiye "Filistin Davası'nın" önde gelen savunucularından biri haline gelmiştir. Bu makale Türkiye'nin Filistin politikasındaki değişimi ve bunun arkasındaki düşünceleri açıklamaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Filistin politikası, İsrail, Türk Dış Politikası, Ortadoğu

Introduction

For several reasons, Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an important foreign policy file for most countries. Its connection with world's widest religious groups, its impact on regional and global strategic rivalry and its social and humanitarian dimension have made it one of the key international issues. This is no different for Turkey, a country which has historical ties with the land and the people. Especially after 2000's Palestinian problem became one of the leading issues defining Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

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Turkey's policy towards Israeli Palestinian question changed dramatically from 1990's to 2000's. Part of this change can be explained with the developments in the relations between Israel and Palestinians. The other part is about the changes in Turkish domestic policy and developments in the Middle East region.

Turkey as a Muslim nation and as a country which once upon a time ruled Palestinian territories for centuries has always paid interest to the developments in Palestinian territories and Israel. The city of Jerusalem was a *mutasarrıflık* (an administrative unit) in Ottoman Empire, and ruled from Istanbul until its occupation by the British army on December 9, 1917. The fate of the land and the people was a matter of concern in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Since Jerusalem is the third holiest place for Muslims, Turkish people closely follow developments in and around the city and in the Holy Mosque compound which is known as Haram Al Shareef. Turkey still keep registry of land ownership in the region and has historical, social and religious ties with Palestine.

During the heydays of its strong secularism, Turkey took important steps despite domestic constraints for the problems in Palestine. Turkey's involvement to the Israeli-Palestinian question was much more related to its relations with the West and with the Arab world. For consecutive Turkish governments, the Palestinian issue was more a humanitarian problem for a highly secularized state during the Cold War years. Throughout 1960's Turkey refrained from doing anything that could in any way be interpreted as a deviation from its secularism and pro-Western foreign policy, in the Middle East.¹ And its policy about Palestinian question and its bilateral relations were shaped accordingly. Turkey intended to improve its relations with the Arab world, but it also tried to preserve a balance with Israel, thus the West. For this reason Turkey did not openly favor Palestinian independence in 1960s while supporting the UN Resolution 242, which called all the sides to return pre-war positions.

This policy started to change in late 1960s. In 1969 Turkey attended the Islamic Conference meetings due to the fire in Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem despite its highly secularized administration on the grounds of political crisis². Also because of the oil crisis of 1973, disturbed by American arms embargo following the Cyprus operation in 1974, Turkey became more active in supporting Arab cause in the Middle East to get their support. Ankara started to support Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in international forums, sided with Arab nations in many cases. In July 1980, when Israel decided to move its capi-

1 Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Palestinian Question in Turkish Foreign Policy from the 1950s to the 1990s", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (Feb., 1993), pp. 91-110, p.95-96

2 *Ibid.*, p. 95

tal from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, diplomatic representatives of fifteen Muslim countries and the PLO representative visited Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and requested him to break off all relations with Israel. After the military coup in September, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, downgraded Turkey's diplomatic mission in Israel to Second Secretary.³ On 15 November 1988, when the PLO declared an independent state in exile accepting all the UN resolutions mentioning Israel's right to exist, Turkey was the fifth country in the world and the first NATO member nation to recognize it.⁴ This declaration was in tandem with Turkey's balanced policy.

Palestinian problem played important role in Turkey's managing its relations with the Arab and Muslim world, as well as its bilateral relations with Israel and consequently with the United States. Yet Turkey was still very cautious not to harm her relations with the West and tried to keep some kind of balanced approach and refrained from using harsh words while criticising Israeli actions. During 1990's Turkey was able to continue this approach and this started to change as the two sides slid into a conflict.

In this article, I tried to explain the logic of Turkey's Palestine policy by giving examples of its actions taken at important turning points. In the first part the situation of the Middle East after the end of the Cold War and the impact of this great political change on region is explained. Turkey's general concerns, the threats she faced and the reasoning of military partnership with Israel revealed. First hand accounts of Turkish, Israeli diplomats and Palestinian leadership added insight to the article.

The change in the nature of Israeli-Palestinian relationship from partnership to hostility had a huge impact on Turkish attitude and change in Turkish government accelerated this trend. In 2010's Turkey became the leading country supporting Palestinian cause. The issue is not only historic, religious or sentimental issue for Turkey. It is also source of legitimacy and it is instrumental in managing Turkey's relationship with the Arab world, with Israel and the West.

1990s: The Middle East Peace Process and Turkey

At the beginning of 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, Palestinian problem was not a priority for Turkish foreign policy decision makers. But the Oslo Peace Process helped Turkey to flourish its relationship with Israel and Arabs simultaneously.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey abandoned its low profile policy in the Middle East. The problems arising from the Gulf War and the

3 Ibid., p.101

4 Şule Kut, Filistin Sorunu ve Türkiye, Haluk Ülman, in *Ortadoğu Sorunları ve Türkiye* (5-35), TÜSES: İstanbul, 1991, s.26

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military action led by the US against neighbouring Iraq, the flow of refugees and the implementation of the No-Fly-Zone in Northern Iraq, the water sharing problem with Syria and Iraq due to the Turkish plans of building several dams over Euphrates and Tigris rivers were the main concerns for Turkey in the Middle East. Also fighting against the Kurdish PKK -described as terrorist not only by Ankara, but also by U.S., UN and the EU- which were directed by Abdullah Ocalan from Damascus, keeping the unity of Iraq and prevention of the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, occupied Turkey's foreign policy agenda. The Peace Process initiated by the United States between Arabs and Israelis, following the Gulf War, the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, started dialogue between Israel and Arabs. The new political environment, this dialogue enabled Turkey to approach Israel closely, to meet its growing security demands. Turkish Foreign Minister of the time, Hikmet Çetin and his team seized the moment and engaged Israel.

We were closely watching the talks between Israelis and Arabs. We knew that without a settlement in Israeli-Palestinian track there would be no peace in the region. When the talks started in Madrid we at the Ministry decided to support this process and increased our diplomatic representation in Israel and also opened our Consulate in Jerusalem to deal with the Palestinians. The Turkish Consulate in Jerusalem would directly report to the Foreign Ministry. We also took a decision before the signing of the Washington Treaty [13 September 1993] to pay an official visit to Israel. I became the first Turkish Foreign Minister visiting Israel in November 1993.⁵

In 1990's Turkey's major problem was its struggle against the PKK and main motive in approaching Israel was to find an arms supplier. Turkey's idea was that developing relations with Israel would also contribute to the peace talks between Israel and Palestinians. Çetin stated that;

We had problems in our fight against terror. With Germany for example. We could not get the military materials we paid for. For instance we made a deal with Netherlands, but they could not deliver the materials because the equipment was originally American made, and the Congress did not allow Netherlands to deliver them to a third country. Israel was exempt from these regulations. So when Turkey made a military modernization deal or an arms deal with Israel, there was no need to get the consent of the United States. So we decided to develop our military cooperation with Israel. During my trip to Israel we laid the foundation of our intelligence sharing too. Their priority was Hezbollah and ours was the PKK. Hamas at the time had not started operations yet. But I should remind that before going to Israel I set up a condition that I would meet with the Palestinians too. So when I was in Jerusalem Palestinians came to pick me from the King David Hotel, with a convoy carrying Palestinian flags. Israelis did not like the show but did not complain.⁶

5 Interview with Hikmet Çetin, Former Turkish Foreign Minister(1991-1994), Deputy Prime Minister(1995) and Parliament Spokesman(1997-1999), 29 August 2012, Ankara

6 Çetin, interview (2012)

Despite the developing relations with Israel, during the seven years of talks Turkey always supported Palestinians' legitimate rights and their struggle over Jerusalem according to related international decisions, United Nations Resolutions. With the easing of relations between Israel and Arabs, Turkey did not hesitate to develop its relations with Israel at official level. Mutual visits became common. Israeli Shimon Peres attended the funeral of Turkish President Turgut Özal in April 1993 and met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin. Çetin, as stated above visited Israel same year and spare time for visiting The Orient House in Jerusalem meeting with Faisal Huseini and Saeb Erekat. Çetin signed Principles of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation Memorandum with his Israeli counterpart.⁷ On January 25, 1994 Ezer Weizmann paid first presidential trip to Turkey from Israel. Tansu Çiller became the first Turkish Prime Minister visiting Israel in November same year. Turkey and Israel signed military cooperation agreements in the process, Israel accepted to modernize F-4, F-5 planes, M60 tanks for Turkey. Turkey opened its military bases to Israeli pilots education, and the two countries agreed on launching joint military exercises. Another subject of cooperation was intelligence sharing. Turkey, in return for intelligence on PKK, whose leader Abdullah Ocalan was in Damascus and Turkey was looking for eliminating him, Turkey provided Israel information about Hezbollah, Iran, Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq⁸. This close partnership in security in a way was a coalition against a common enemy, Syria. Syria's support to separatist PKK organization against Turkey, and to Hezbollah and other Palestinian groups like Hamas and Peoples Front for Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad brought Turkey and Israel together against Damascus. While Turkey with the two and a half war doctrine⁹; against Syria, Greece and the PKK saw Israel as an important partner in the region she still tried not to provoke an Arab reaction to this close relationship and President Demirel underlined the fact that this was not a military pact and it was not against a third country.¹⁰

Opponents of the Oslo Peace Process, extremists from both sides tried to derail talks by violent actions. Baruch Goldstein's massacre of Palestinians in the Ibrahim Mosque(Tomb of Patriarchs) in Hebron on 25 February 1994, wave of suicide attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorizing Israel, targeting civilians, assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin were the main examples of attacks in this kind.¹¹ When there was violence in the region Turkey took position of condemning the violence and always called both sides to return to the peace talks. Suffering from terrorist attacks and a separatist

7 Gencer Özcan, *Türkiye İsrail İlişkilerinde Dönüşüm*, TESEV, İstanbul, 2005, s.49

8 Ibid. p. 52-62

9 Şükrü Elekdağ, "İki buçuk savaş stratejisi" *Milliyet*, 27 November 1994, s.19

10 Uğur Sönmez, Şam'a Ağır suçlama, *Milliyet* 23 September 1996

11 Alan Dowty, *Israel/Palestine*, Cambridge:Polity, 2007, p.145

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movement at domestic level, Turkey tried not to be seen as conflicting with itself. Accordingly, Turkey's support of the Palestinian aspirations was limited with their legitimate actions.

Following the killing of Prime Minister Rabin by a Jewish extremist in 1995, right wing Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu who was campaigning against the peace talks, was elected as the head of the government. This political change slowed down the process. Palestinian issue came to the Turkish agenda when there was a big terrorist attack or any other kind of violence in Palestinian territories. Netanyahu's decision to open new settlements in Har Homa, or excavations under the Haram al Sharif(Temple Mount) attracted Turkish attention. Turkish media covered these incidents closely, criticised Israeli attitude against Palestinians. But despite problems from time to time Turkey cared about its relations with Israel and President Suleyman Demirel paid the first visit by a Turkish head of state to Israel in March 1996. Israeli President Ezer Weizman hosted Demirel at his residence in Jerusalem. Demirel expressed condolences for the murder of Rabin and denounced the suicide bomb attacks by extremist Palestinian groups during this visit.¹²But when it came to the issue of Jerusalem, there was a special sensitivity in Ankara. Alon Liel, the head of the Israeli mission in Turkey (1981-1983), stated that;

Even in times of strong secularism in Turkey, if there was violence or an issue relating to the holy places of Muslims, Ankara was very sensitive. They always came us with suggestions. But during the Oslo Process, we were directly talking with the Palestinian leadership. We did not need a mediator. We were talking to Arafat, to Abu Mazen. But in terms of economic support Turkey was important. You know there was an economic side of Oslo. The first Middle East and North Africa (MENA) economic conference took place in 1994 in Casablanca. For the first time we saw Saudis and Kuwaitis physically in the same room. They were not talking to us but the Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller was there. Turks existence in the room was very important and helpful to us. Tansu Çiller also came to the funeral of Rabin. Turkey's ambassador in Washington Nüzhet Kandemir was visiting synagogues in the United States. This also changed the image of Turkey there. Because until that moment Turkey's image was "Midnight Express." Turkey was suffering from terrorist attacks. So they stayed away from these kind of incidents. The base of the relations were military and intelligence. Mossad and MIT(Turkish intelligence) were working in coordination. Our close relations were strategic not political.¹³

In 1990s Turkey's domestic politics was dominated by fragile coalition governments, and instable political environment. In the second half of the 1990s, Turkey's developing relations with Israel was part of Turkish domes-

12 "Turkish President visits Israel", 11 March 1996, UPI, (Accessed 25 March 2018) <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/03/11/Turkish-president-visits-Israel/6052403801629/>

13 Interview with Alon Liel, the head of the Israeli mission in Turkey (1981-1983); Foreign Policy Advisor to Ehud Barak (1997-1999), Director General of the Foreign Ministry (2000-2001), 14.09.2012, Istanbul

tic struggle between secular bureaucracy and Islamist politicians. Especially strong military leaders after pro-Islamic Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan's rise to power as Prime Minister in June 1996, secular establishment tried to use relations with Israel as an anchor for protecting Turkey's secular system.¹⁴ Chieives of Staff of the two countries exchanged visits frequently and signed military cooperation agreements. In Turkey, seven political figures from different political leanings served as Turkish foreign ministers in 35 months from July 27, 1994 to June 20, 1997. This political fragility, problems in Northern Iraq and Kurdish issue dominated the agenda and Turkey did not focus on Palestinian problem. The question of Palestine was a side story in Turkey and the ongoing peace process did not force Turkey to engage the issue. But stil Turkey took part in Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) peace monitoring mission in 1997 together with Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweeden and Switzerland.¹⁵

After three years of stall in peace negotiations during Netanyahu era, with the initiative of the President of The United States, Bill Clinton, Palestinians and Israelis started final talks at Camp David on July 11, 2000. During the 15 days of talks, Israelis and Palestinians could not agree on a peace plan. Palestinians were not happy with the offer of a state which would not have an army with heavy weapons, would not make alliances with other countries without Israeli approval and would not allow introduction of foreign forces in west of the Jordan River. They did not accept Israel to deploy troops in the Jordan Valley, Israeli control of Palestinian airspace and Israelis installation of early warning stations on the mountains overlooking the Jordan valley and other areas. The question of Palestinians' right to return was not agreed either. Israel declared that she would not accept any legal or civilian responsibility for their displacement. Israel would allow the return of around 100,000 refugees under "humanitarian" grounds in the form of family reunions and considered such a step as compliance with UN Resolution 194. The Palestinian State would limit the number of refugees it could absorb to a certain extent. The status of Jerusalem was the main subject of dispute, which led the failure of the Camp David Summit. Palestinians were offered to have sovereignty over suburbs in the north and the south of Jerusalem that would be annexed to the West Bank. The Jewish settlements close to Jerusalem would be annexed by Israel. There was no agreement over the sovereignty over the Haram al Sharif.¹⁶ During

14 Ali Balcı, "Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası ve İsrail: 1990'lar ve 2000'lere ilişkin bir karşılaştırma", *Ortadoğu etütleri*, Cilt 2, Sayı 2, Jan 2011, pp.117-136, p. 120

15 Turkish Foreign Ministry Official Website, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/orta-dogu-baris-sureci.tr.mfa>

16 The Israeli Camp David II Proposals", mideastweb.org, <http://www.mideastweb.org/campdavid2.htm> (accessed 20.10.2013); For further information Clayton E. Swisher, *The Truth About the Camp David*, New York: Nation Books, 2004; Ahron Bregman, *Elusive Peace*, London: Penguin, 2005, p.120-121 Interview with PA Chairman Yaser Arafat, Ramallah, 9.12.2001

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the Camp David talks Turkey monitored negotiations carefully. Before the Palestinian territories slid into violence in September, Israeli and Palestinian leaders visited Ankara, briefed Turkish leaders and tried to get support for the continuation of the talks.

2000s: Palestinian Intifada and Turkey

After the Camp David talks ended without a deal, Palestinian leader Yaser Arafat received hero welcome for not handing over Jerusalem at home, while Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak became target of heavy criticisms from Israeli right wing parties, especially from Likud leader Ariel Sharon. Barak was accused of conceding Israeli rights over Jerusalem. Under these circumstances, Barak government fell and Israel plunged into early elections.¹⁷ Lost hopes and destroyed images as peace makers, Israeli and Palestinian leaderships turned to save their political future and tended to pursue more nationalist policies. Mutual accusations discredited both leaders in the eyes of rival public, and people lost trust in the other side and in the peace process.

Under these tense conditions the visit of Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon accompanied by Israeli police to Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 28 September 2000, triggered the Palestinian uprising known as the Al Aqsa intifada. Palestinians resisted the visit and skirmishes took place. Next day, following the Friday pray, Palestinians launched big protests around the Mosque and four Palestinians were killed by the Israeli police. This riots spread all over the West Bank and Gaza. Protests became daily and deadly. Every day there were new funerals of Palestinians angering the people, fueling the uprising. This Palestinian uprising put an end the Oslo Peace process and forced Ankara to take a new position in terms of its relations with Israel and the Palestinians. Because Turkey's balanced policy towards Israel and Palestinians was based on the ongoing peace talks. As the violence dominated the region keeping that balance became harder for Turkey. Sensivity of Jerusalem for Muslims limited Turkey's options and Turkey had to side with Palestinians.

Alon Liel stated that *"When there was a problem related to Jerusalem, Turkey was furious, even it is Demirel or Ecevit or somebody else. When there was a massacre in Jenin in 2002, Ecevit called it a "genocide". When a friend like Turkey makes a statement like this it has a lot of impact. Turkey never ignored this kind of incidents. We had good relations with Turkey we were always in good terms. But because of Jerusalem things started to change. First warning was in October 2000, Faruk Loğoğlu was Turkey's undersecretary and I was Israeli Foreign Ministry undersecretary. He called me and invited to Ankara after two or three weeks of violence. Loğolu was waiting with his delegation and I was accompanied with Israeli ambassador in Ankara. He said "Look it cannot continue like this." I said "what do you mean?" He*

17 "Barak quits to force early poll", *BBC*, 10.12.2000, (accessed: 16.10.2011) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1063495.stm

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*replied "This violence is terrible. We cannot continue good relations with Israel. Everybody has television and they cannot see killing of Palestinians all the time. We cannot stay friends as we are with this level of violence." So I think it is in Turkish instinct inside the DNA. When Muslims are being killed in somewhere Turkey is boiling, burning."*¹⁸

After the collapse of the Oslo Peace Process Israel implemented policy of unilateralism. The idea was "in the absence of a peace partner Israel had to go it alone" in providing security to its citizens.¹⁹ Israel's unilateralism had two components: One was determining secure borders for Israel by changing the facts on the ground by building the wall around the West Bank and Gaza. Second was pursuing low intensity conflict policy to keep the military balance at a certain level, weakening Hamas and other armed groups when they threatened Israeli border cities and towns with military operations.

Ariel Sharon, a hate figure for the most Palestinians due to his controversial decision in 1982. For Palestinians Sharon's visit to Holy Mosque meant that, Israel would not accept a negotiated settlement over Jerusalem and elsewhere, this was a unilateral step to determine the status of Jerusalem. As soon as Sharon became Prime Minister following the 2001 February elections, he started to "correct the mistakes" of the Oslo Peace Process by eliminating institutions established by the agreements. Palestinian security forces were targeted by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), buildings of Palestinian Authority were demolished, its leader Yaser Arafat was discredited and later labelled as "terrorist." Israeli army started to set new security check-points, built physical barriers along the 1967 lines, sometimes breaching it in an attempt to determine the borders unilaterally. The Palestinian uprising and Israel's attempt to suppress it caused a bloody encounter in the West Bank and Gaza, and death of 3,315 Palestinians²⁰. In return Palestinian organizations like Hamas, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and People's Liberation Front of Palestine launched suicide attacks in Israel, killing 745 civilians. This was the Al Aqsa intifada.

Just before the peace talks collapsed and Al Aqsa Intifada erupted, Turkey was able to force Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan who later was imprisoned in Turkey. De-escalation of PKK threat, the Adana Accord with Syria enabled Turkey to decrease tension with her neighbours. Turkish Foreign Minister İsmail Cem (1997-2002) tried to replace Turkey's security oriented Middle East policy with a more "regional focused" understanding, and

18 Alon Liel, 2012

19 Patrick Seale, "Fight terror with less force and more flexibility", *Daily Star*, September 10, 2004, (Accessed 25 October 2013) <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2004/Sep-10/94324-fight-terror-with-less-force-and-more-flexibility.ashx#ixzz2kY0m1UQn>

20 The Al Aqsa Intifada", *Ynetnews*, (Accessed 25.10. 2013) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3689276,00.html>

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approached countries like Syria and Iran for a more friendly relationship thus, shaking the pillars of Turkish-Israeli cooperation. In July 2002, much to US's annoyance, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Iran where he received a warm welcome. Sezer became the first Turkish President to visit the Azeri regions of Iran.²¹When the Al Aqsa intifada started Turkey's need for not as vital as it did before. From Turkish point of view Israeli policy against Palestinians were too hard and Ankara believed that if Israel is constrained both sides could turn to the negotiations. Turkey heavily criticized Israeli attitude towards Jerusalem and defended Palestinians right to have a state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Turkey blamed right wing Likud leader Ariel Sharon for the escalation.

As the violence ruled territories there were international efforts to keep the peace process alive. Between 2000 and 2004 the Mitchell Commission, the Road Map, the Arab initiative can be counted among these international efforts. Turkey actively tried to take part in these efforts to save the process to protect her relations with Israel and Palestinians. Palestinian leadership saw Turkey as an actor who could force Israel to review its position. Arafat from time to time visited Ankara, met with Turkish leaders, informed them about the course of the events and looked for political support. On 14 of February, during a surprise visit to Ankara Arafat said "We want Turkey who has the trust of both Palestinians and Israelis should remain in the course and contribute to the process". While İsmail Cem stated that Turkey denounces any kind of violence. We are working to end the violence. Turkey's hope is that without retreating from the point reached in negotiations, contacts which will bring peace be started".²² Israel on the other hand hoped Turkey put pressure on Arafat to make him come to the terms with Israel. On 8 August 2001, Sharon visited Turkey, met with Prime Minister Ecevit and seeked his support.²³ However former Turkish President Süleyman Demirel (1993-2000) joined the international fact finding committee which was established by the Middle East Peace Summit at Sharm el-Sheikh on 17 October 2000.²⁴ The committee, published a report known as The Mitchell Report, on 30 April 2001. The report which evaluated the causes and consequences of the Palestinian intifada, recommended the halt of the violence and immediate rebuild of confidence and resume negotiations. The Mitchell Report urged The Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to work together to establish a meaningful "cooling

- 21 Gencer Ozcan, "Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours", *Yearbook Med.* 2012, p.60 (Accessed 25.10.2013) http://www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Ozcan_en.pdf-en
- 22 Arafat'ın sürpriz Ankara ziyareti, NTV, 14 February 2001, <http://arsiv.ntv.com.tr/news/64003.asp>
- 23 Alon Liel-Can Yirik, *Turkish Israeli Relations 1949-2010*, GPOT, Istanbul:2010, p.164
- 24 "Report of The Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee", April 30, 2000, *The United Nations official website*, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/6E61D52EAACB860285256D2800734E9A#sthash.WKWYC1Tf.M6Zpx8QV.dpuf>

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off period” and implement additional confidence building measures saying that “The PA and GOI should resume their efforts to identify, condemn and discourage incitement in all its forms.” The report also called the PA to prevent terrorist operations and to punish perpetrators while asked Israel to freeze all settlement activity, including the “natural growth” of existing settlements.²⁵

Turkey’s efforts apart from paying or hosting visits to or from both Israelis and Palestinians, focused on bringing international organizations together in order to stop the violence. After the release of the Mitchell Report, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Faruk Loğoğlu(2000-2001) visited Arafat and Sharon in June. He urged sides to implement the confidence building measures that the report proposed. On 13 February 2002, Turkey hosted an international summit between the Islamic Conference Organization and the European Union. 89 countries came together in Istanbul under the shadow of 9/11 attacks, the Afghan war and the American threats of invading Iraq. At the end of the OIC-EU Joint Forum, with the initiative of Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem, nations called for a peaceful two state solution in the Middle East based on the UN Security Council Resolutions.²⁶

However, the violence continued and Israeli government increased pressure on Arafat. He was under house arrest after a series of terror attacks in Jerusalem since December 2001. Turkey was among the countries, which were calling for his immediate release. Nevertheless, after the 9/11 attacks in New York, Sharon was able to convince the US government that the problem in Palestinian territories was mainly terrorism. Washington was busy in building an international coalition to strike Afghanistan, and then focused on attacking Iraq’s Saddam Hussein. This international environment also provided a free hand to Israel under the title of “fighting against terrorism” and Prime Minister Sharon applied his unilateralism in Palestinian territories. The rhetoric used by Israeli officials against the Palestinian Authority was similar to American rhetoric against the Al Qaeda. The suicide attacks against Israeli civilians by Palestinian groups strengthened Israeli position. Israeli army’s “targeted killings”, demolishing of Palestinian houses, confiscation of Palestinian fields, building walls, construction of new settlements were not questioned by the international community as Palestinians expected.

In 2002, there was another international attempt in order to bring the sides back to the negotiating table by Saudi crown Prince Abdullah. In February, he floated idea of full normalization of relations with Israel in return for

25 Ibid

26 “AB-İKÖ Forumu, Ortadoğu’ya barış çağrısıyla sona erdi” *Radikal*, 13.02.2002, (Accessed 21.10.2013) http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/ab_iko_forumu_ortadoguya_baris_cagrisiyla_sona_erdi-624097

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withdrawal to 1967 borders.²⁷ This idea was accepted by the Arab League on 27 March 2002 in Beirut summit. In the Beirut Declaration the League requested Israel to reconsider its policies and called

1. Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.
2. Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194.
3. The acceptance of the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied since June 4, 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.²⁸

Had Israel accepted these conditions the Arab countries would “consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states in the region.” They would also “establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.”²⁹ Because at the same day of the summit a suicide attack by Hamas, in Israeli city of Netanya was enough to deny the offer. During Passover celebrations in Park Hotel dozens of Jewish civilians were killed. Israeli government was quick to declare Arafat as the responsible person, although the Palestinian leader condemned the attack. Israeli Government spokesman David Baker said: “Arafat is to blame for the violence that emanates from the territories under his control.”³⁰ On 29 March, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, and surrounded Arafat’s headquarter known as Mukataa by tanks and armed vehicles, putting Palestinian leader’s life in danger.

This incident hardened Turkey’s stand against Israel and increased its efforts to stop the violence and put things on back track again. Turkey was among the countries, which were calling for Arafat’s immediate release. However, Sharon was able to convince the US government that Arafat was directing terrorist attacks. Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit warned Israel that the conflict between Israel and Palestinians were threatening a regional conflict and that Israel must withdraw from Palestinian territories. Turkey also called US to warn Israel seriously. Turkish Prime Minister talked to Arafat who was under siege

27 Thomas L. Friedman, “An Intriguing Signal From the Saudi Crown Prince”, *The New York Times*, 17.02.2002 (Accessed 17.10.2013) <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/17/opinion/an-intriguing-signal-from-the-saudi-crown-prince.html>

28 Beirut Declaration on Saudi Peace Initiative, 28.03.2002, *Official site of Israel Foreign Ministry*, (Accessed 21.10.2013) <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Peace/Guide/Pages/Beirut%20Declaration%20on%20Saudi%20Peace%20Initiative%20-%2028-.aspx>

29 Ibid.

30 “Deadly suicide bomb hits Israeli hotel”, *BBC*, 28.03.2002, (Accessed 21.10.2013) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1897522.stm

without enough water, electricity and food.³¹ Turkish Foreign Ministry undersecretary Uğur Ziyal called American Ambassador Robert Pearson and said "If Arafat is eliminated it will have serious consequences. All the countries attitude will be affected, including that of Turkey." Turkish Foreign Minister İsmail Cem conveyed similar message to his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres.³²

On 25 April, after four weeks of siege Turkish Foreign Minister Cem, together with his Greek counterpart Yorgo Papandreu, went to Arafat's besieged compound in Ramallah, visited him, then met with Ariel Sharon and tried to mediate between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.³³ Turkey wanted to host a Middle East Peace Conference, which was brought to agenda by American State Department officials.³⁴ Turkey never stopped talking to Israelis as former Israeli diplomat Alon Liel revealed: "Turkey continued visits. I talked to Ugur Ziyal. İsmail Cem visited Israel many times and Turkey wanted to mediate. Warnings were coming from Ankara to Israel to change our Palestinian policy. There was nothing bilateral. Turkish position changed because of the Palestinian issue. Things further changed after the elections in Turkey. On 6 November 2002 after the elections in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Israel a 'terror state'."³⁵

Justice and Development (Akp) and New Approach

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP or Ak Party) took over in Turkey. The United States was preparing for an invasion to Iraq and did not want the Palestinian question to be a burden. As soon as the Israeli Operation Defensive Shield ended the U.S. President George W. Bush made a Palestinian policy speech. On 24 June 2002 for the first time an American president publicly supported the two state idea, while he was calling for a leadership change;

"My vision is two states, living side by side, in peace and security. There is simply no way to achieve that peace until all parties fight terror.

Yet at this critical moment, if all parties will break with the past and set out on a new path, we can overcome the darkness with the light of hope.

Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership, so that a Palestinian state can be born. I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror."³⁶

31 "Ecevit'ten İsrail'e sert uyarı", *NTV*, 30.03.2002 (Accessed 21.10.2013) <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/143835.asp>

32 Fikret Bila, "Ankara'nın Arafat uyarısı", *Milliyet*, 1.04.2002, (Accessed 21.10.2013) <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2002/04/01/yazar/bila.html>

33 "Cem-Papandreu'dan barış girişimi", *NTV*, 25.04.2002, (Accessed 21.10.2013), <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/148415.asp>

34 Utku Çakırözler, "Barış konferansının adresi İstanbul", *Milliyet*, 5.05.2002, p.15

35 Liel interview, (2012)

36 "President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership", The Rose Garden Speech, *White Ho-*

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Not only Turkey but also whole international community focused on stopping the violence between Israel and Palestinians. The Quartet (the United States, the European Union, Russia Federation, and the United Nations) came up with a Road Map, proposing the end of violence without any peace ideas. Described as a “performance-based and goal-driven roadmap”, the Roadmap was built on goals without going into details. It may be summarized as: End the violence; halt settlement activity; reform Palestinian institutions; accept Israel’s right to exist; establish a viable, sovereign Palestinian state; and reach a final settlement on all issues by 2005.³⁷

The Road Map of 2002, was “weak in terms of its content but strong in terms of political support behind it” as Shimon Peres told the author during an interview in Istanbul.³⁸ The road map which referred to earlier documents like the Mitchell Report, the Tenet Work Plan, the Saudi-Arab League Initiative, and the Bertini Report, was presented to the Israeli government and to the Palestinian Authority on 30 April 2003. Israel accepted the Road Map with 14 reservations, a move that was not accepted by the Palestinians. But acceptance was enough to get Turkey’s support.³⁹

The new government under Justice and Development (AKP or Ak Party) Party tried to implement a new foreign policy, which was conceptualized by Prime Minister’s advisor Ahmet Davutoglu in 2002. Five principles were determined to shape Turkey’s new foreign policy. “First, if there is not a balance between security and democracy in a country, it may not have a chance to establish an area of influence in its environs. Second, a ‘zero problem policy toward Turkey’s neighbors’. Third is to develop relations with the neighboring regions and beyond. The fourth principle is adherence to a multi-dimensional foreign policy. Turkey’s relations with other global actors aim to be complementary, not in competition. The fifth principle in this framework is rhythmic diplomacy.”⁴⁰ These principles would guide Turkish foreign policy in the next decade.

Israel’s unilateral moves in Palestine started to deteriorate Turkish-Israeli relationship. For the new Turkish government establishing better political and economic relations with Arab neighbours and Iran was a priority. Israel’s security walls, establishment of new check points and road blocks, new

use Archives (Accessed:25.10.2013) <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html>

37 “Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East: Israeli/Palestinian Reciprocal Action, Quartet Support Bureau of Public Affairs” Washington, July 16, 2003 (Accessed 21.10.2013) <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/22520.htm>

38 Interview with Shimon Peres, 13.02.2004

39 “Quartet-Yol Haritasının İsrail Hükümeti Tarafından Kabul Edilmesi” Turkish Foreign Ministry statement No:92, 27.05.2003

40 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10/No.1 2008, p. 79-82

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settlements around Jerusalem were regarded as unilateral steps to change the facts on the ground. Gaza disengagement plan was welcome by Turkey but prior to it Israeli assassination of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmad Yassin on 22 March 2004, then his successor Abdulaziz Rantisi on 17 April 2004⁴¹ escalated tension between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Sharon even floated the idea of killing Arafat or sending him to exile.⁴² In the absence of a 'partner for peace', Ariel Sharon was literally given a free rein to unilaterally determine his own two-state solution project and impose it on the Palestinian 'non-partner'. Palestinian attempts to reduce or cease violence against Israel, such as the 2003 *hudna*, went unreciprocated by Israel.

While Israel was pursuing these unilateral policies in the Palestinian territories, Turkey was busy with diminishing the role of the military at the domestic level with the help of European Union membership process under Justice and Development Party. Turkish Foreign Ministry focused on resolving the Cyprus issue at that time with Annan Plan (2004) and security concerns were high because of the American invasion to Iraq. Turkey's main security problem, the Kurdish separatism was back. Sectarian violence in Iraq, emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran, a weak, fragmented Lebanon dominated by radical groups with close ties to Iran and Syria were other tough issues and new Turkish Foreign policy required engagement to these issues. Turkey's new approach was slowly pulling Turkey away from Israel.

Davutoğlu's 'Strategic Depth' concept emphasised the importance of Turkey's Ottoman past and its historical and cultural ties with the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia. These ties are accepted as important assets that enhance Turkey's ability to become a regional power. The doctrine also suggested that Turkey should counterbalance its ties with the West by establishing multiple alliances. This would enable Ankara to enhance its freedom of action and increase its leverage, both regionally and globally. Turkey could not remain indifferent to happenings in Jerusalem as a former ruler of the region. Turkey, while keeping the diplomatic channels open with Tel Aviv, was sending tough messages to Israel via media. High-level visits continued but Prime Minister Erdogan was very critical against Ariel Sharon's policies. After the killing of the Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin, Erdogan defined the attack as "murder", "terror" and found it unacceptable:

This incident harmed the Middle East Peace seriously. There is no Road Map anymore. First of all I don't find this assassination humane. You are liquidating a person with rockets, a man you freed because two thirds of his body

41 James Bennet, "Leader of Hamas killed by missile in Israeli Strike" *The New York Times*, 22.03.2004 (Accessed 21.10.2013) <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/22/world/leader-of-hamas-killed-by-missile-in-israeli-strike.html>

42 Chris McGreal, "Sharon hints that Arafat may be killed", *The Guardian*, 15.09.2004 (Accessed 24.10.2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/15/israel>

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is paralyzed. We have to determine which kind of terror act is this. If we want peace in the Middle East, Israel must change this mindset and this sort of actions. This incident overshadowed the peace efforts.⁴³

As Israeli left wing paper Haaretz put it, the assassination of Sheikh Yassin was a turning point for Erdogan. A visit by the Turkish Foreign Minister to Israel was postponed, and the visit of the Prime Minister that was planned in its wake was cancelled. Israel saw Erdogan's visit to Iran in June as a gesture confirming that the Turkish-Iranian relationship was targeting Israel.⁴⁴ The improvement of relations with Iran and Syria has been accompanied by a sharp deterioration of Turkey's relations with Israel. Turkey pursued a much more open pro-Palestinian policy than previous Turkish governments and has been sharply critical of many aspects of Israeli policy.⁴⁵ But Turkey still believed that it could contribute to the peace efforts.

The Gaza disengagement softened Turkey's position vis a vis Israel. After Sharon revealed his intentions to withdraw from Gaza at the end of 2004, Turkey welcomed the idea and softened its stance against Israel. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul visited Israel in January 2005, and when asked about Erdogan's statements against Israel like "terrorist state" he said "those days are over. We should look forward."⁴⁶ Following the Sharon-Abbas summit on 8 February 2005 in Egypt, Ankara Forum for Economic Cooperation between Palestine, Israel and Turkey" was established to serve as a permanent tri-partite dialogue mechanism between business people from Turkey, Palestine and Israel. During the first meeting of the Ankara Forum on April 27-28, 2005 business leaders launched the idea of jointly revitalizing the Erez industrial estate in Gaza. Turkey's Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), an organization representing all 1.2 million Turkish firms proposed idea of using Turkey's economic experience and industrial know-how to make factories and business work again. The project aimed at producing 10 thousands jobs for Palestinians. Opening Gaza airport to flights and building of a new Gaza Sea port were also part of the plan.⁴⁷

In May 2005, Turkish-Israeli relations reached its highest level after a long-lasting row over Palestine, when Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited

43 Turan YILMAZ, "Erdoğan: İsrail'in de terör", *Hürriyet*, 25.03.2004 (Accessed 25.10.2013) <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=212444>

44 Hanoch Marmari, "The revenge of Sheikh Yassin", *Haaretz* 4.06. 2004, (Accessed 25.10.2013) <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/the-revenge-of-sheikh-yassin-1.124320>

45 Larrabee, (2010), 164

46 "İsrail Gül'e umut vermedi", *Milliyet*, 5.01.2005

47 Serkan Demirtaş, Erez'de Türk sanayi bölgesi, *Radikal*, 01.01.2006, (Accessed: 30.10.2013) http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/erezde_turk_sanayi_bolgesi-767700

Ankara Forum for Economic Cooperation between Palestine, Israel and Turkey Meeting Held, *TEPAV*, 27.04.2005, <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/1900>

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Israel. Erdogan shook hands with his Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon. Erdogan-Sharon meeting produced a redline telephone deal between the two prime ministers. Two leaders also signed a research and development agreement. In this period, Turkey were still making military deals with Israel. Turkey ordered 10 unmanned aerial vehicles, worth 180 million USD to two Israeli companies.⁴⁸ Once again Turkey revealed its intentions to play a role for the peace between Israel and Palestinians during Erdogan's visit. Turkey also urged Israel to negotiate with Syrians. Erdogan said "They(Syrians) supported PKK for years. We lost 40 thousand people. But now we opened a new chapter." Turkey opened a channel of communication between Syria and Israel. Turkish ambassador in Israel Feridun Sinirlioğlu conveyed Syrian President Assad's intentions to negotiate to Alon Liel who brought the message to Sharon. This channel produced real negotiations a few years later.

Just for a short period, Turkey was able to pursue a balanced policy between Israel and Palestinians when things got quiet, when there is a room for negotiations. However, this balanced policy came to an end in 2006, after Hamas' election win.

Hamas Election Win and Change in Turkish Policy

On 25 of January 2006 following the death of PA Chairman Arafat, Palestinians went to the polls after ten years. Palestinians who lost their faith in the peace talks voted for the Islamist Hamas movement, which was against the negotiations from the beginning. The Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas which never recognized the State of Israel is listed as a terrorist organization by the US and Israel got the 44 % of the votes and gained majority in the Palestinian National Parliament. Hamas won 74 seats in 132-member parliament while secularist Fatah claimed 45 seats.⁴⁹

Israel, US and European Union decided to isolate Hamas, The Quartet demanded Hamas to recognize Israel, halt violence and adhere to the terms of previously signed agreements. Hamas refusal to these demands were met by embargo on Gaza. Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who succeeded Ariel Sharon after he had a serious stroke on January 4th, labelled the Palestinian Authority as a "terrorist authority" and ruled out any contact with a Hamas-led government.⁵⁰ Israel applied sanctions like withholding tax payments to the Palestinian Authority, stepping up border crossing checks, restricting Hamas members' movements, banning transfer of equipment to Palestinian

48 Utku Çakırözer, "Bombalı kuşları İsrail'den alıyoruz", Milliyet, 03.05.2005, (Accessed 01.11.2013), <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/bombali-kuslari-israil-den-aliyoruz/siyaset/haberde-tayarsiv/03.05.2005/114369/default.htm>

49 Bora Bayraktar, *Hamas*, Karakutu Yayınları, İstanbul:2007, p.33

50 "Israel to impose Hamas sanctions", *BBC*, 19.02.2006, (Accessed 30.10.2013) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4729000.stm>

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security forces. About 70% of Gaza's workforce became unemployed or without pay and about 80% of its residents were forced to live in poverty.

While Israel was trying to delegitimize the Palestinian Authority under Hamas in international arena, Turkey and Russia were the leading countries which wanted to break this isolation and invited Hamas leaders to their capitals, endorsing the democratic choice of the Palestinians. Turkey hosted Khaled Meshal in Ankara on 16 February 2006. The visit was a radical change in Turkish attitude and caused controversy. For long, Turkey was very cautious not to appear as supporting any kind of organizations which use violence, because of its own PKK problem. When the visit became public, Turkish Foreign Ministry denied that Hamas was invited by the ruling Justice and Development Party, and that the meeting was taking place upon Hamas' demand. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul met with Meshal with his capacity as a party official. The visit was not an "official" visit according to Turkey.⁵¹ While Israel protested this visit, it opened doors of Arab street to Turkey's new government. In Western capitals Turkey's stand came under focus, the media started to publish articles on Turkey's changing policy. The popular question was "is Turkey leaving the Western Camp?" or "Is there an axis shift in Turkish Foreign Policy?"

Turkish foreign policy makers used Palestinian issue to make their new policy clear. According to Davutoğlu, "Turkey should guarantee its own security and stability by taking on a more active, constructive role to provide order, stability and security in its environs⁵²". Visit of Meshal to Ankara was an important example of this policy. Nevertheless, Turkey was still trying to keep Israeli-Palestinian balance, after the elections in March in Israel, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni paid his first trip to Ankara. In June 7, Ahmet Necdet Sezer became the second Turkish President to speak at the Israeli Parliament.⁵³

Situation in Palestinian became graver in the summer of 2006. Kidnaping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in the Gaza Strip provoked Israeli response. Israel launched Operation Summer Rains on 28 June 2006 and jets bombarded buildings of Palestinian Authority ministries, the Palestinian National Council and other targets. This Israeli operation was retaliated by Hezbollah in Lebanon which led the starting of July War between Israel and Lebanon, further escalating anti-Western, anti-American and anti-Israeli feeling in the region, including in Turkey. Israeli soldiers entered Erez Industrial Zone in Gaza, which was a Turkish investment to support Palestinian economy, with tanks and armed vehicles. This caused reaction in Turkey.⁵⁴

51 Bayraktar, (2007), p.194-199

52 Davutoğlu, (2008), p.79

53 <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/activity/pages/plenumVisitors.aspx>

54 <http://www.gazetevatan.com/erdogan-in-gozbebegi-yagmalandi-81407-dunya/>

Escalation in Lebanon and Palestinian territories, together with the grave situation in Iraq forced the Bush administration to launch a new peace effort to promote calm in the Middle East, including halting the violence and revival of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The internal strife, and Fatah's ouster from Gaza delayed the American initiative. 26 November 2007 was fixed for an "international meeting" in Annapolis for the Israeli-Palestinian question. American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, tried to close the gap between the Israeli and Palestinian positions. But the the gap between Israel and the Palestinians was wide.⁵⁵ Ahead of the summit Turkey wanted to play a constructive role between Israel and Palestinians. Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority Leader Mahmoud Abbas were invited to Turkey for a meeting to establish a Turkish-sponsored industrial park in the West Bank. Peres and Abbas addressed Turkish parliament and advocated a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The address by Peres was the first by an Israeli president before the legislature of a Muslim country.⁵⁶ In 2007, Turkey was still in position of a bridge between Israel and the Muslim world, despite all the bilateral problems with Tel Aviv due to Ankara's improving relations with Iran, Syria and Hamas.

Four months after Annapolis Israeli Defence Forces launched Operation Hot Winter, in response to missile attacks from Gaza in March, 2008. 112 Palestinians were killed according to local medical sources.⁵⁷ After the ceasefire sponsored by Egypt on June 18, Israel proposed a peace plan in August. In the end the Palestinians rejected Olmert's plan saying the state envisioned in it would have lacked both territorial continuity and Jerusalem as its capital.

Turkey's Palestinian Policy After Gaza War of 2008

The rejection of Olmert Plan and the collapse of the ceasefire led to the Gaza War on 27 December 2008. Israel once again wanted to crack down the "radical elements" and launched Operation Cast Lead. The aim was "to stop Hamas rocket attacks on southern Israel and cut arms smuggling into Gaza." Israel Defence Forces bombarded Hamas bases, police stations and buildings, headquarters and offices. But many homes, schools, hospitals and mosques were also destroyed. According to Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), 1,284 Gazans were killed and 4,336 wounded, the majority was civilians.⁵⁸

55 "Cinderella at Annapolis", *The Economist*, 22.11.2007, (Accessed 30.10.2013) <http://www.economist.com/node/10177066>

56 "Abbas and Peres call for peace", *Al Jazeera*, 14.11.2007, (Accessed:30.10.2013) <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2007/11/200852512207473242.html>

57 "Israeli Gaza operation 'not over'", *BBC*, 03.03.2008, (Accessed:30.10.2013) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7274929.stm

58 "Rights Group Puts Gaza Death Toll At 1,284", *CBS*, (Accessed 30.10.2013) http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/22/world/main4746224.shtml?source=RSSattr=World_4746224

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Death of civilians caused outrage in the world, especially in Arab and Moslem contries. Turkey was one of the leading fierce critics of Israel. While Israel claimed that large majority of those killed were terrorists⁵⁹ Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan systematically used very harsh rhetoric against his Israeli counterpart and accused Israel of killing civilians. Gaza War became a turning point in recent Turkish-Israeli relations.

After the war Turkey changed its policy of balancing Israel and the Palestinians, increased its efforts to legitimize Hamas as a political force and integrate it into international politics; to delegitimize and expose Israel's excessive use of force against Palestinian civilians and criticise one sided security arrangements determining the status of Jerusalem, borders and denial of right to return; and increase efforts to end the Gaza blockade. Turkey also started working to bring two Palestinian political groups, Fatah and Hamas together, in order to form a united front against Israel.

The reason of this sharp move was Erdoğan's anger with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. The Gaza attack came as a surprise for Ankara and Prime Minister Erdogan felt his Israeli counterpart Ehud Olmert betrayed him. Because a week before Gaza operation Turkey was mediating between Israel, Syria, and Olmert held indirect phone call with Syrian President Bashar Assad through Erdogan. The conversation lasted more than four hours. But a few days later, while Turkey was waiting Olmert's approval for the joint statement, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in Gaza without informing Turkey. When Erdogan heard of the attack, he said that Olmert had stabbed him in the back and that Israel must pay for it, one of his aides said.⁶⁰

The tension turned into a drama when Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan burst of Israeli president's words in a panel in Davos Economic Forum in 2009. "One minute crisis" as popularly known in Turkey, was the first big event, notifying what was coming. Before walking off the stage Erdogan told Peres, "When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill" and accused Israel of killing innocent civilians. This was the worst encounter between a Turkish leader and ad Israeli president in public in history. Still, Peres called Erdogan five minutes later to apologize for any misunderstanding, saying that his words had not been directed at the prime minister personally. In a news conference immediately after the panel discussion, Erdogan said he was particularly upset with Mr. Ignatius, who he said had failed to direct a balanced and impartial panel.⁶¹

59 Yaakov Lappin, "IDF releases Cast Lead casualty numbers", *Jerusalem Post*, 26.03.2009, (Accessed 30.10.2013) <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/IDF-releases-Cast-Lead-casualty-numbers>

60 Zvi Bar'el, "Week before Gaza op, Israel and Syria were ready for direct talks", *Haaretz*, 13.02.2009, (Accessed 05.11.2013) <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/week-before-gaza-op-israel-and-syria-were-ready-for-direct-talks-1.270062>

61 Katrin Bennhold, "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel", *The New York Times*, 30.01.2009, (Accessed 05.11.2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html?_r=0

Despite the efforts of collecting the broken pieces, the Davos quarrel between the two leaders was transcending a mental barrier between the two countries. The incident also showed not only Erdogan's attitude towards Israel but also the public support behind him about the Palestinian issue. 'One minute' soon became one of the most watched items on youtube, and boosted Turkey's image in the Arab world. For the first time an Israeli leader was accused by his friends in public of killing Palestinians.

After Davos incident, Erdogan stepped up its criticisms against the Jewish state in public, which triggered a nationalist reaction in Israel. In January 2010, when hosting Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Erdoğan said "We can never remain silent in the face of Israel's attitude. ... It has disproportionate power and it is using that at will, while refusing to abide by U.N. resolutions." Israel responded by insisting it had "the full right" to protect itself against Islamic Hamas militants in Gaza, which had bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets for years before the offensive, and against Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas who struck Israel with 4,000 rockets during their 2006 war. "The Turks should be the last to preach morality," Israel's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Turkish media also increased the level of coverage about Israeli cruelty in Palestinian territories.

Turkish television dramas depicted Israeli security forces as kidnapping children and shooting old men. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon summoned the Turkish ambassador Oğuz Çelikkol to protest the Turkish television. He invited journalists and cameras, without informing the ambassador. Ayalon refused to shake Mr. Çelikkol's hand and made him sit on a lower seat at the meeting. He also noted there was no Turkish flag on display and that Israeli officials were not smiling.⁶² This incident deepened the crisis between the two nations, although later Ayalon apologized for this behaviour.

Ending the Gaza blockade became a popular issue in Turkey's foreign policy in 2010. Turkey supported humanitarian groups' efforts to breach the blockade and deliver aid to Gaza.

In January 2010, a Palestinian aid convoy called Viva Palestina, tried to go the Gaza Strip via Egypt where Egyptian officials stopped them in the northern Sinai city of El Arish. The group, including Americans, British and Jordanians scuffled with Egyptian security.⁶³ During the incident Hamas and Turkish flags were visible and symbolic. Chairman of Turkish Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee Murat Mercan, parliamentarians Mehmet Hıdır Nil,

62 "Israel snubs Turkish ambassador in public", *NBC*, 12.01.2010, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/34825873/#.UpW2PNIW2So>

63 Ethan Bronner, "Gunfire at Gaza Protest Near Egypt", *The New York Times*, 06.01.2010, (Accessed 06.11.2013) http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/07/world/middleeast/07gaza.html?_r=0

Seracettin Karayağız, Cemal Yılmazdemir and Hüsnu Tuna were also in the convoy and they met with Hamas leader in Gaza Ismail Haniyye.

On 31 May 2010, there was another attempt to break the Gaza embargo. Gaza Freedom flotilla, which was composed of 8 naval vehicles, included 663 activists from 37 nations, carrying 10,000 tonnes of aid tried to reach Gaza port. The mission was organized by Free Gaza Movement and Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). After the flagship of the flotilla Mavi Marmara, refused Israeli military's request to dock at the Israeli port of Ashdod, and continued toward their destination Gaza, Israeli commandos attacked the ship. Nine Turkish activists were killed on spot five by wounds to the head at a close range.⁶⁴ This was the worst crisis between Turkey and Israel in history, for the first time Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli army, and Turkey recalled its ambassador and canceled planned military exercises with Israel as the countries' already tense relations deteriorated even further.

To protest the Israeli attack Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made a very tough speech at the United Nations Security Council, blamed Israel for "banditry, murder and piracy" at international waters. Turkey demanded an international inquiry, apology, compensation for the victims of the attack and an end to the Gaza blockade.⁶⁵ Turkey opened Gaza embargo's and Israel's policies' legitimacy in question. Prime Minister Erdogan said "This attack that took place in international waters is not within international law, it is a cause for war, but we decided to act in line with Turkey's grandeur and showed patience" to Al Jazeera television.⁶⁶ Erdogan also revealed his intention to visit the Gaza Strip.⁶⁷ Turkish foreign minister's and the prime minister's statements revealed the line of new Turkish Foreign Policy. It was full and unconditional support to Palestinians and political and diplomatic war against Israel.

In September after the United Nations Palmer Committee concluded that while Israel's naval blockade of Gaza was legal and appropriate, the way Israeli forces boarded the vessels was excessive and unreasonable. The Palmer Report said the loss of life was unacceptable and that the Israeli military's later treatment of passengers was abusive. After Israel refused to apologize, Turkey

- 64 Robert Booth, "Gaza flotilla activists were shot in head at close range", *The Guardian*, 04.06.2010, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/04/gaza-flotilla-activists-autopsy-results>
- 65 "Full text of Turkish FM Davutoğlu's speech in UN Security Council", UN Security Council 6325th Meeting, 31.5.2010, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20SPV%206325.pdf>
- 66 Erdogan says flotilla raid was 'cause for war' *Ynetnews* 09.12.2011, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4121204,00.html>
- 67 "Erdogan: Er ya da geç Gazze'ye gideceğim", *NTV*, 12.09.2011, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25249254/>

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reduced its diplomatic representation in Israel to the level of second secretary and ordered Israel's ambassador, Gabby Levy, to leave Turkey. This deepened the already crisis between the two countries. In declaring Turkey's decisions, Davutoglu said "all military agreements have been suspended" and that relations could return to normal only if Israel apologized for the killings of nine people on board the ship and lifted its embargo on Gaza.⁶⁸

Israel's military operation in Gaza in November 2012, once again increased the tension between Turkey and Israel. Turkish leaders heavily criticised Tel Aviv and The Turkish Foreign Ministry called on the international community and the United Nations to take the necessary steps to stop Israeli military operation which is described as another example of Israel's hostile policies. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu described the attack as another example of Israel's "crimes against humanity." His sentimental visit to Gaza and his standing in tears with the families of the victims of the war, internationally publicized Turkey's efforts to expose Israel as "a brutal regime killing innocent civilians." Davutoglu said in Gaza "We are not going to let Israel turn Gaza into an open air prison. We are with Gazans. We salute the souls of martyrs of Mavi Marmara." Prime Minister Erdogan continued his accusations and labeled Israel a "terrorist state that massacres innocent children."⁶⁹

Turkey's struggle with Israel in diplomatic level was instrumental in Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations. On November 29, when the United Nations General Assembly accepted Resolution 67/19 granting the Palestinian Authority, observer state status, Turkey was represented by its foreign minister Davutoglu unlike many Arab states as an expression of the highest level of support.

Palestinians welcomed Turkey's strong support and President Abbas paid a visit to Turkey just after the voting. Following the Gaza operation and the UN vote, Erdoğan further antagonized Israel. During a speech at a United Nations event on Islamophobia in March, he said Zionism was a crime against humanity: "Just like Zionism, anti-Semitism and fascism, it becomes unavoidable that Islamophobia must be regarded as a crime against humanity."⁷⁰

The escalation came to a halt with the touch of the American diplomacy. US Secretary of State John Kerry tried to build a momentum for the Israeli-

68 Şebnem Arsu and Alan Cowell, "Turkey Expels Israeli Envoy in Dispute Over Raid", *The New York Times*, 02.09.2011 (Accessed 06.11.2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/03/world/middleeast/03turkey.html?_r=1&ref=middleeast

69 "Erdoğan: İsrail bir terör devletidir", *NTV*, 19.11.2012, (Accessed 06.11.2013) <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25398951/>

70 "Turkish PM Erdogan: Islamophobia, anti-semitism same", *Hürriyet Daily*, 28.02.2013, (Accessed 08.11.2013), <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-islamophobia-anti-semitism-same.aspx?pageID=238&nID=42019&NewsCatID=338>

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Palestinian peace and the new Obama administration thought that Turkey's attitude was spoiling their efforts. On 22 March 2013, during his visit to Israel President Obama mediated between Erdogan and his Israeli counterpart, and convinced Netanyahu to apologize for the Gaza Flotilla incident. An official statement by the Israeli government said that Netanyahu expressed regret over deterioration in bilateral relations and described the incident as unintentional, regretful and according to an investigation involving "operational errors".⁷¹ The apology started dialogue between Turkey and Israel but did not change Turkey's pro-Palestinian policy.

Conclusion

Palestinian issue is not only historic, religious or sentimental issue for Turkey. It is instrumental in managing Turkey's relationship with the Arab world, with Israel and the West, and a domestic issue due to its sensitivity. As the controversy after Trump Declaration of December 6, 2017, moving US Embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem showed Turkish government reacts, and will react in the future to any kind of arrangements about Palestinian territories and will not remain indifferent to changes in Palestinian problem.

Turkish governments are strengthening their legitimacy in the eyes of Arab-Muslim populations by supporting the Palestinian cause, by defending holy places in Jerusalem and rights of Palestinians, by challenging Western Powers in the region. Palestinian question is also helping the governments to mobilize people in domestic politics and provide a source for support, especially from the right constituents. Supporting the Palestinian cause and degrading relations with Israel is also regarded as proof of "independent foreign policy" and deviation from the "old-fashioned secular establishment" and liberating itself from the tutelage of the military.

Apart from yield in domestic politics, supporting the Palestinian cause plays important role in Turkish Foreign Policy. Moving away from its alliance with Israel, Turkey sends positive message to Arab countries that they are more valuable for Ankara. With this, Turkey hopes to improve its image, its trade and tourism with the Arab world. Turkey also uses its deviation as a leverage to the United States, tries to play a role in Arab affairs. Assuming the role of guarding Palestinian rights, especially that of Hamas', Turkey also portrays itself as a pro-democracy power in the region. This message is also being used for domestic expenditure.

It can be said that Turkey will continue to use its support to the Palestinian cause. Israeli military operations in Gaza will further escalate the

71 Joel Greenberg and Scott Wilson, "Obama ends Israel visit by brokering end to dispute with Turkey", The Washington Post, 22.03.2013, (Accessed 08.11.2013) http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/obama-ends-israel-visit-by-honoring-historic-figures/2013/03/22/7a489fc4-92e9-11e2-ba5b-550c7abf6384_story.html

tension and open a field for Turkey to manouver in diplomacy. Despite the fact that Turkey is, and probably will remain as a part of Western security institutions like NATO, Turkey is looking for other options to make Turkish foreign policy more independent. Turkey's close relations with Russia, verbal bid to a membership in Shangai Cooperation Organization are examples of Turkey's search for alternatives. In this search the Middle East and the Arab world play an important role and provides alternatives in the eyes of the Justice and Development government. Therefore supporting the Palestinian cause and confronting Israel's policies will continue to be instrumental.

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