



# Turkey and the Palestinian problem

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attributes great importance to the Palestinian issue, portraying himself as the defender of the Palestinians and of the holy Islamic sites in Jerusalem. One should consider his infatuation with the Palestinian cause, and especially Turkey's very robust relations with Hamas, the Palestinian radical Islamist movement, in the larger context of Erdogan's and his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), ideological and strategic goals. The Palestinian issue is also an important card on the Turkish internal arena, a rallying populist flag for the Islamist masses.<sup>2</sup>

Former Turkish ambassador Faruk Loğoğlu described the paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy as "an extension and manifestation of the internal dynamics set in motion by the current rulers of Turkey... a vehicle for domestic political posturing." AKP leadership's worldview is shaped by deep religious conviction, "a weltanschauung defined by Islam." In Loğoğlu's evaluation this paradigm shift is an ongoing process and most likely it will produce "puzzling moves in Turkey's foreign relations" away from the West toward other directions.<sup>3</sup>

According to Turkish journalist Kadri Gursel, the AKP's foreign policy in the Middle East "has been infected with the viruses of Islamist ideology, populism, and emotionalism" and therefore cannot lead a Realpolitik policy. Although Neo-Ottomanism helps present Turkey as a leader of the Sunni world, Turkey developed a multidimensional foreign policy. "I'm neither a Shiite nor a Sunni; I'm a

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<sup>1</sup> See at <https://docimg.immanens.com/phxaf/getcover/logistic-code/PVN1/l-pub-id/648/l-doc-id/3314001/doc-version/3/profile/cover-large.jpg>

<sup>2</sup> The historical part of this article is based on an older paper by Ely Karmon and Michael Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 12, Issue 2 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Osman Faruk Loğoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy: Is There a Paradigm Shift?" Minutes of the presentation at the Conference *Israel-Turkey Relations and Turkey's Strategic Regional Position*, Netanya Academic College, May 6, 2010.

Muslim”, declared Erdogan during his July 2008 visit to Iraq. Turkey’s popularity, after the 2009 Gaza war and the crisis of the Turkish *Mavy Marmara* ship bound to Gaza, not only grew in the Sunni street but also in the Shiite communities. In 2010, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah declared Erdogan “a Muslim hero.”<sup>4</sup>

In its second term the AKP, the self-styled "conservative" Islamist party, has retreated significantly from its "moderate" image and accelerated its internal anti-secularism agenda. One of the signs of this Islamization process has been the manifest anti-Israeli policy of the Erdogan government. Following “Operation Cast Lead” in Gaza, Erdogan’s criticism of Israel grew particularly virulent. During the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2009, Erdogan angrily walked out of a joint panel with Israeli President Shimon Peres, after charging that Gaza is an “open air prison” and indicting Peres with, “When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill.”<sup>5</sup> Erdogan and his government did not utter a word against the rocket attacks of Hamas on Israeli territory before and during the operation.

Erdoğan, as leader of the AKP, invited in March 2006 a high-level Hamas delegation to visit Turkey, immediately after its success at the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. He justified the visit by arguing that it created an opportunity for the Turkish authorities to "sincerely convey the expectations of the whole humanity to the Hamas delegation."<sup>6</sup> The AKP government called on Western countries to "recognize Hamas as the legitimate government of the Palestinian people," while labeling Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as "head of an illegitimate government, thus raising Abbas' suspicions and anger concerning the real goals of Turkey "<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Yeghig Tashjian, “From Conceptualization to Implementation and Revaluation: Turkey’s ‘Strategic Depth’ in the MENA region,” *Strategic Outlook*, October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Katrin Bennhod, “Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> *Anatolia News Agency*. 21 February 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Is Turkey Leaving the West?" *Foreign Affairs*, October 26, 2009.

Criticizing Mash'al's visit columnist Emin Colasan argued that the great importance the AKP administration attached to Hamas was due to the organization's plan to "establish an Islamic state...That suits the AKP very much," he wrote.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey's operative support to Hamas materialized when *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish ship carrying a sizeable team from the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a Turkish Islamist NGO leading an international flotilla, tried to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip in May 2010. The Turkish leaders preferred to support the provocative aid flotilla which terminated in an Israeli military attack and the death of nine Turkish militants of the IHH. The former head of the French judiciary's counterterrorism unit Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere, testified that the IHH played important logistical roles in the facilitation of bogus passports and other counterfeited documents, the trafficking of weapons, recruitment of fighters, and the infiltration of *mujahideen* into various war zones.<sup>9</sup>

The Turkish government was interested to achieve at all costs the end of the Gaza blockade and Hamas' international isolation in its bid for the leadership in the Palestinian issue, growing influence in the Arab world and strategic rapprochement with Syria and Iran. Following the events of the May 2010 Gaza flotilla, Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhawi, the spiritual leader of Hamas, praised Turkey for its contribution: "All the *shahids* are from among our Turkish brothers – scions of Muhammad the Conqueror and his mighty brothers."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Sabah*, 21 February 2006.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of IHH's role in the flotilla incident see A.E. Stahl and Sheena Reiss "The IHH: Humanitarianism, Terrorism, and Policy Ambiguities," *ICT website*, December 30, 2010, at <http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/883/currentpage/1/Default.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> "Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhawi Calls for Jihad of Self-Sacrifice and for Rejecting the Political Process," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No. 3093, July 13, 2010.

Interestingly, in March 2013, Turkey asked Hamas to recognize as a "victory" the reconciliation with Israel. Hamas applauded Erdoğan for having won the apology from Israel for the *Mavi Marmara* incident and informing that Netanyahu promised to "lift the siege on the Palestinian people".<sup>11</sup>

The events in Egypt have also influenced the practical relations with Hamas. Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led in July 2013 a coalition to remove the President of Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, from power. In October 2013, the new Egyptian rulers banned than Prime Minister Erdoğan's long-planned visit to the Hamas ruled Gaza Strip.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the military coup in Egypt was seen in Ankara as a direct threat to the Justice and Development Party's and Erdoğan's rule, as an example which could be imitated by the Turkish military.

By exploiting the Palestinian issue, Erdogan tries to present Turkey to the Arab public as a leading power in the Middle East, to gain Islamic legitimacy, and to build an economic infrastructure in the region. Speaking in September 2014 in New York at the Foreign Relations Council (CFR), one of the leading think tanks of the United States, Erdogan declared: "The Palestinian issue is an important issue that has an impact not just on the Palestinians, but on all the Muslims and everyone who has a conscience in the world. And in fact, the Palestinian issue lies in the heart of many of the issues in the region."<sup>13</sup>

In September 2017, he declared at the United Nations General Assembly in New York: "I call on the international community to support our Palestinian brothers and sisters in Eastern Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in their struggle for an independent and geographically unified Palestinian State".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nathan Shachar, "The Gaza-Ankara-Jerusalem Triangle: How Israel and Turkey Made Up on Gaza Above the Heads of Palestinians and Egyptians," *Turkey Analyst*, July 8, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ely Karmon, "Hamas in Dire Straits," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 7, No 5 (2013).

<sup>13</sup> "Türkiye, Merkezinde Bulunduğu Coğrafyayı En İyi Taniyan, Anlayan ve Analiz Edebilen Ülkedir", Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, ("Turkey who knows, analyzes and understands the best is a state that located in the center") April 23, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> "Statement by His Excellency Recep Tayyip Erdogan President of The Republic of Turkey at the 72nd Session of The General Assembly," New York, 19 September 2017; URL: [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/tr\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/tr_en.pdf)

## Turkey as basis for Hamas terrorism against Israel

Since the 2011 agreement between Israel and Hamas to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners and the expulsion of 10 former operatives to Turkey, which has become a “second home” for Hamas militants and terrorists. There they invest efforts to recruit members, build financial resources and cooperate with other actors against Israel. According to the Turkish media, once they arrived in Turkey the Hamas militants were supposed to be under surveillance of Turkish intelligence and not permitted to circulate unaccompanied. However, Turkey did not require them to remain in the country or forbid them to go to another country if they so desired.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2014, Turkey was host to Salah al-Arouri, a senior Hamas political bureau member and the major operative commander responsible for establishing, funding and strengthening Hamas’ terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, operating from Istanbul. Between May and August 2014, the Israeli security forces detained 94 Hamas members of cells in Nablus, Bethlehem, the Yatir region, Jerusalem and Tulkarm preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel. Riyadh Nasser, the network’s leader, was recruited and his network’s activity directed by Saleh al-Arouri from Istanbul.<sup>16</sup> One of the network’s objectives, still in its first stages, was to overthrow Mahmoud Abbas’ rule in the Palestinian Authority.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey, joined by Qatar, has been heralded as a primary funder of Hamas. While there is some debate over the exact sums, it seems Turkey has pledged to provide Hamas between \$250-300 million annually.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hürriyet.com.tr, October 20, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> “Saleh al-Arouri, Turkey-based senior Hamas operative who handles military-terrorist networks in Judea and Samaria, admitted that Hamas was behind the abduction and murder of the three Jewish youths from Gush Etzion,” *The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC)*, August 20, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Yoni Ben Menachem, “Turkey Embraces Hamas,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Hot Topics, February 22, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Gallia Lindenstrauss and Süfyan Kadir Kivam, “Turkish-Hamas Relations: Between Strategic Calculations and Ideological Affinity,” *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 2, July 2014.

Ankara not only provides material backing to Hamas, but it has also granted citizenship to its members, although there are credible reports that the Gazan terrorist organization has plotted attacks on Israeli targets within Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

### **Erdogan Builds His Own Islamist Guards. Palestine Major Target?**

Turkish support to jihadists is not merely a tactic aimed at removing Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria but rather a strategic decision by the Turkish regime to influence Middle Eastern affairs through non-state actors, much as Iran has been doing since the Khomeinist revolution. Turkey's support of jihadists transiting into Syria and its establishment of close ties with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are joint aspects of this strategy.<sup>20</sup>

This trend has accelerated since the attempted military coup of 15 July 2016. In spite of the 2018 agreement between Erdogan and the Russian President Putin, Turkey has expanded its use of jihadist groups and elements as part of the neo-Ottoman strategy in Idlib, Syria, in Libya and lately in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh.

It is in this context that were formed several paramilitary organizations in the service of President Erdogan personally, like IHH—Human Rights and Freedoms Humanity Aid Charity, Ottoman Hearths, IBDA—C Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front, KKT—Stay Brothers Turkey and others.

The most important is SADAT A.S. International Defense Consulting, the first and the only company in Turkey that internationally provides consultancy and military training services at the international defense and interior security sector, founded by Brigadier General (ret.) Adnan Tanriverdi in February 2012. SADAT Inc. “aims at establishing the cooperation among the Islamic Countries in the sense of military and defense industries, in order to assist the Islamic World to take the rank it deserves among the Super Global Powers as a self-sufficient military power, by submitting them the

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<sup>19</sup> “Turkey's Erdogan holds talks with senior Hamas representatives in Ankara,” *i24NEWS*, August 23, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Emrullah Uslu, “Jihadist Highway to Jihadist Haven: Turkey's Jihadi Policies and Western Security,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 39, 2016 – Issue. 9, pp. 781-802.

services regarding the organization of Armed Forces, defense consultancy, military training, and ordnance”.<sup>21</sup>

SADAT can be compared with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which may provide the potential trajectories for its involvement in Turkish politics. With the support of Turkish Intelligence (MIT), SADAT serves as an agent for foreign missions, which is similar to the Quds Force’s role in the IRGC.

In December 2017, ahead of the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) called by Erdogan in Istanbul, SADAT proposed to form a joint “Army of Islam” by the member states of the OIC, to besiege and attack the state of Israel. According to the article, if the member states of the OIC unite militarily, they will form the world’s largest and most comprehensive army and could play a major role in the Jerusalem issue.<sup>22</sup>

In January 2018i, the Israeli Security Service arrested Turkish militant Cemil Tekeli during his visit in Jerusalem. He had been recruited by Hamas in Turkey to help finance its activities and transfer money to Gaza. During interrogation it appeared that he is a close associate of Adnan Tanriverdi. He disclosed that SADAT is helping Hamas to form a “Palestinian Army”. Does the Palestinian Army envisioned by SADAT represent the first phase in Erdogan’s battle for Jerusalem?<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to Israel, it is Erdogan who calls the shots, and he is personally responsible for the deterioration in bilateral relations. One source noted that Erdogan has strong anti-Israeli

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.sadat.com.tr/en/>

<sup>22</sup> “What if a Muslim army was established against Israel?” *Yeni Safak*, December 12, 2017; URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/what-if-a-muslim-army-was-established-against-israel-2890448>.

<sup>23</sup> Pazit Rabina, “The goal: to establish an ‘army of Palestine’ to fight Israel” (in Hebrew) Makor Rishon, February 18, 2018; URL: <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/21743/>

sentiments, based on deeply rooted religious beliefs. American diplomats, cited in Wikileaks documents, reported that sources both inside and outside the Turkish government confirmed that Erdogan simply abhors Israel.<sup>24</sup>

### **Support to European NGOs and charities connected with Hamas**

The launch of the Popular International Committee to Support the Gaza Strip was held in Istanbul, Turkey in September 2014. The leading London-based think tank International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) recently published a 100-page report, “The Islamic Movement in Britain,” that concluded Turkey is “bankrolling and supporting an interlinked network of Muslim Brotherhood organizations across Europe, including Hamas.” Turkey’s connections to the Islamic Movement in Britain lie within the broader international network that supports Hamas in Gaza, campaigning for the Palestinians’ “right to return”, and demonising Israel. Istanbul hosted at least ten international conferences of the Global Muslim Brotherhood. One of the most important of these conferences was the International Conference for the Victory of Gaza held in February 2009, organised by the Global Anti-Aggression Campaign (GAAC). The conference statement asserted that the Muslim umma was obliged to “carry on with the jihad and Resistance against the occupier until the liberation of all Palestine”. This statement came to be known as the Istanbul Declaration.<sup>25</sup>

After the decapitation of the French teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020 in a suburb near Paris, French authorities dissolved the Turkish Islamic NGO “Baraka City”. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanan said that this Islamic non-governmental organization headed by Idriss Yemou, known as, Idris Sihamedi, “encourages hatred, has ties within the extremist Islamic trend and justifies terrorist

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<sup>24</sup> Shaul Kimhi and Ely Karmon, “What Makes Erdogan Tick?” *Haaretz*, September 23, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See the paper at <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ICSR-Report-The-Islamic-Movement-in-Britain.pdf>

acts.”<sup>26</sup> BarakaCity collects money through Zakat (annual donations from Muslims) and has charities operating in Gaza. Sihamedi took to Twitter to address Turkish President Erdogan and request asylum for himself and his staff, who he said had received death threats.<sup>27</sup>

### Latest developments

Addressing the nation regarding his decree on July 10, 2020 ordering the conversion of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque after the top administrative court annulled a 1934 presidential decree that made it a museum, Erdoğan had pointed out that “the resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque.” Hamas political head Ismail Haniyeh praised Erdogan's decision to return the Hagia Sophia to its former use as a mosque.<sup>28</sup>

A month later, AKP deputy chairman Numan Kurtulmuş stated that the legacy for Jerusalem should be Turkey's next responsibility after the Hagia Sophia. “Now we have in front of us Al Quds Sharif [Jerusalem], the legacy of Caliph Umar [Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam], Saladin Ayyubid [the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty who captured Jerusalem in 1187 from Christian Crusaders] and Sultan Selim the Grim [Ottoman sultan who transferred the caliphate to the Ottoman dynasty in 1517], and it must remain in a corner of our minds.”<sup>29</sup>

After the UAE signed a normalization agreement with Israel in August 2020, Erdogan threatened to suspend diplomatic relations with the UAE, without making reference to any downgrading of its own diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv, the move was criticized by many in the Arab world as hypocrisy. The Turkish Foreign Ministry described the deal as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Israel is among Turkey's top 10 export markets.<sup>30</sup> Turkey, the first Muslim-majority nation to formally recognize the State of Israel, has had diplomatic ties with the state since 1949.

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<sup>26</sup> Ezzeldin Essam Ezzeldin, “France Dissolves Islamic Assembly ‘Baraka City’,” *Sada Elbalad English*, October 28, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Areeb Ullah, Chloé Benoist, “France dissolves Muslim NGO BarakaCity,” *Middle East Eye*, October 28, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “Alarm as Turkey's Erdogan meets Hamas leaders in Istanbul,” *Christians United for Israel*, August 27, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> “Turkish President Erdoğan's deputy sees Jerusalem as next responsibility after Hagia Sophia,” *Nordic Monitor*, August 6, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> “Ankara burns bridges with UAE but maintains ties with Israel: Why?” *Arab News*, August 15, 2020.

As the Palestinian leaders were distressed by the wave of Arab countries normalizing relations with Israel, the so called “Abraham Agreements”, they turned to Turkey for support. In August 2020 Erdogan held talks with a senior Hamas delegation, timed to coincide with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Israel and the Middle East. Hamas and Turkey oppose the Israeli peace deal with the UAE.

The US State Dept. strongly objected to President Erdogan hosting Hamas leaders in February and now in August. Hamas is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and EU and officials hosted by President Erdogan are Specially Designated Global Terrorists. The US considers that “Erdogan’s continued outreach to this terrorist organization only serves to isolate Turkey from the international community, harms the interests of the Palestinian people, and undercuts global efforts to prevent terrorist attacks launched from Gaza.”<sup>31</sup>

Under Erdogan’s rule, Turkey-PA relations were not very close, as the Chairman Mahmud Abbas disliked the warm ties between Turkey and Hamas. However, both sides have attempted to portray an image of cooperation and solidarity. In 2014-2015 the cooperation became stronger as Turkey made efforts to support Palestine’s status as an observer at the United Nations. In January 2015, Mahmud Abbas was the first guest hosted in the new palace of Erdogan, inaugurated after the latter was elected president. The efforts made by Erdogan to reconcile between PA and Hamas were welcomed by both sides.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, the new regional strategic context has pushed Erdogan to try again to reconcile Hamas and the PA, under his tutelage. In September 2020, top Fatah leaders arrived in Turkey, as Mahmud Abbas has given green light to talks after he urged Erdogan to support Palestinian unity. The rival Palestinian factions are set to meet in Istanbul for direct talks aimed at ending the 15-year-long rift

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan Ortagus, Department Spokesperson, “President Erdogan’s Meeting with Hamas Leadership,” *Press Statement, United States Dept. of State*, August 25, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Mohsen Mohd Saleh, “The Palestinian Strategic Report: 2014-2015,” *Beirut: Dar el-Kotob (Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations)* in Arabic.

in Palestinian politics. Talks would focus on “ending the division and applying the directives of the conference of Palestinian faction heads,” referring to a recent joint meeting of senior Palestinian officials who convened in response to the United Arab Emirates’ decision to normalize ties with Israel.<sup>33</sup>

It will be interesting to follow the evolution of the strategies of Erdogan and the Palestinian leaderships after the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States.

Erdogan will probably regret the good days when he enjoyed a close relationship with President Trump.

The Palestinian Authority has already approached the new American leadership and as first step has decided to resume the security cooperation with Israel. The PA’s decision, however, has damaged efforts to achieve reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The latter is now threatening to undermine the agreements reached between the two sides in Tukey on September 24, when they announced the decision to hold legislative and presidential elections, as well as elections for the Palestinian National Council of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, within six months.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Aaron Boxerman, “Hamas, Fatah delegations in Istanbul for another attempt at reconciliation talks,” *The Times of Israel*, September 22, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad Melhem, “PA restoring ties with Israel undermines reconciliation, Hamas says,” *Al-Monitor*, November 19, 2020.

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