

# The Palestinian Strategic Report 2007



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# Chapter Four

## *The Palestinian Issue and the Muslim World*



# The Palestinian Issue and the Muslim World

## *Introduction*

As was the case in previous years, the Muslim world had on the whole interacted with the Palestinian issue during the year 2007. Nonetheless, due to some compelling reasons related to developments within the Muslim countries, they were not instrumental in effecting any significant changes in this respect throughout 2007. The schism and deterioration within the Palestinian front had, moreover, weakened the drive for Muslim official and popular support to the Palestinian struggle.

Due to limited space, it will be difficult to study the positions of each and every Muslim state towards the Palestinian issue. Hence, the methodology of “case study” is adopted in this discourse whereby the positions of Turkey and Iran will be elaborately addressed while those of Pakistan, Indonesia and the Organization of Islamic Countries will be briefly surveyed.

## *First: The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)*

Since the very foundation of the OIC was a direct reaction to the attempt to burn *al-Aqsa* Mosque on 21/8/1969, it was natural that the Palestinian issue and its developments be a consistent and pivotal concern of the organization.

The charter of the OIC included an important article that provided for “support of the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights,” which reflected the importance of the Palestinian issue to the organization, at least theoretically.

As was the case previously, the support of the OIC to the Palestinian struggle during the year 2007 did not go beyond condemnation of the Israeli practices against the Palestinian people. Moreover, the organization had failed to put the Palestinian house in order, which plunged the country on the verge of civil war.

However, the OIC made some attempts for reconciliation. Early in 2007, the Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu paid a visit to Damascus, Ramallah and

Gaza in which he urged the Palestinians to avoid intra-fight, respect the sacredness of the Palestinian blood, resume the negotiations to form a government of national unity and implement an agreement patronized by the OIC on 19/12/2006 to stop internal strife.<sup>1</sup> He, furthermore, emphasized the necessity of uniting the Palestinian front and to concentrate all the efforts to lift the international blockade and establish an independent state in the land of Palestine.<sup>2</sup> In continuation of this visit, the OIC sent in mid January 2007 a delegation presided by ambassador Mahdi Fathallah that conducted a series of meetings in Damascus, Ramallah and Gaza that tried to narrow the gap between the two conflicting parties. For this purpose, the ambassador met with Khalid Mish'al the head of Hamas Political Bureau, Rawhi Fattouh, the representative of the Palestinian presidency and Isma'il Haniyyah, the prime minister.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, after the success of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the guest state of the OIC, in concluding Mecca Agreement of 8/2/2007 between Fatah and Hamas, secretary-general Ihsanoğlu issued a declaration welcoming the agreement, and expressing his confidence that it would:

consolidate the Palestinian national unity, help in lifting the unjust siege imposed on the Palestinian people and enable them to safe guard their national achievements and protect their holy places, and to proceed to win their solid rights in freedom and independence, and to establish their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.<sup>4</sup>

The OIC exhibited its support to the government of national unity through the attendance of its secretary-general to the oath taking ceremony in GS, on 17/3/2007. After the conference, he summoned a press conference in which he expressed the OIC's support to the new government of national unity.<sup>5</sup>

However, the formation of the government of national unity with Arab-Islamic blessing and support did not ease the Palestinian political and security tension. On the contrary, security problems had become so frequent and tense that Ihsanoğlu offered to return to Ramallah and Gaza to settle the differences between Fatah and Hamas.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the internal Palestinian fighting continued until Hamas had decisively settled the matter militarily through its control of the GS in mid June 2007.

The reaction of the OIC to the bloody events in the GS was very much inline with the official Arab position and that of the PA. In a meeting held on 20/6/2007, under the Presidency of Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, the Committee on Palestine of the OIC condemned what it described as “all the criminal acts” that had been undertaken in the GS, and demanded the return to the status quo ante these events, which indicated its prejudice particularly when it ignored what had been going on in the WB. Besides, the OIC reiterated its “respect to the Palestinian legitimacy under the leadership of President ‘Abbas, and to the institutions of PLO,”<sup>7</sup> while it ignored the officially elected and internationally recognized PLC that was part and parcel of the Palestinian political system. This inconsistency was probably behind Ihsanoğlu’s subsequent explanation to the effect that the organization condemns “all the acts of violence in the WB and GS,” and added, “We are against all criminal acts, been committed by Hamas or Fatah, as the former did not commit these acts alone, but they are some persons from the latter and other factions who did likewise.”<sup>8</sup>

On the other side, the Israeli decision that considered the GS after its control by Hamas as a “hostile entity” was dismissed by the OIC as “collective punishment.” In this respect, secretary-general Ihsanoğlu said, “This is an oppressive decision, and its consequential measures constitute violation of the international law, a collective punishment and an insistence on aggression against the Palestinian people.” Moreover, he warned against the consequences of this decision, and urged the Palestinian forces “to resume the national dialogue and to unite themselves to confront this decision and the on-going Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people.”<sup>9</sup>

While the OIC and its member states had not taken any practical steps to lift the Israeli blockade on the Palestinians, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), an offshoot of the OIC, extended to the emergency government of Salam Fayyad immediately after its formation on 9/8/2007 a grant of \$30 million.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the OIC participated in Annapolis peace conference of 27/11/2007, where it declared its support to the Palestinian position as represented by the President of the PA Mahmud ‘Abbas. This means that the organization had, in one way or another, swam with the general tide of its member states that supported President ‘Abbas authority and boycotted the government of Haniyyah in the GS.

The OIC position vis a vis the Israeli violations of the sanctity of the holy places and the policy of Judaization that Israel had pursued throughout the year 2007 was basically similar to the general political stand of the Arab and Muslim countries that did not go beyond condemnation and protest. Moreover, the reaction of the OIC to the Israeli destruction of the historical the Mughrabi Gate in February 2007 was not at the level of this grave event. For all the declarations of the organization on the subject were limited to warnings against the violation of the sanctity of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and to the threat of ending or freezing relations with Israel. The OIC had also called for a united, but “non-violent,” Muslim stand against these Israeli measures.<sup>11</sup> In the concluding declaration of an emergency meeting of the foreign ministers of the OIC, held on 22/2/2007, the Security Council was asked to interfere forthwith, take measures to protect *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and to oblige Israel to implement the resolutions of the international community on Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

Economically, Turkey was at the top of the list of the Islamic countries that maintained commercial relations with Israel. The volume of trade between the two countries sharply increased during the course of the year 2007, as the Israeli exports to Turkey jumped to about \$1.22 billion compared to \$821.2 million in 2006, and the Israeli’s imports from Turkey reached to about \$1.61 billion compared to about \$1.27 billion in 2006. Nigeria was another country that recorded an increase in the value of Israeli exports, from \$78 million in 2006 to about \$206.9 million in 2007. However, the volume of trade between Israel and each of Indonesia and Malaysia in 2007 had slightly increased.

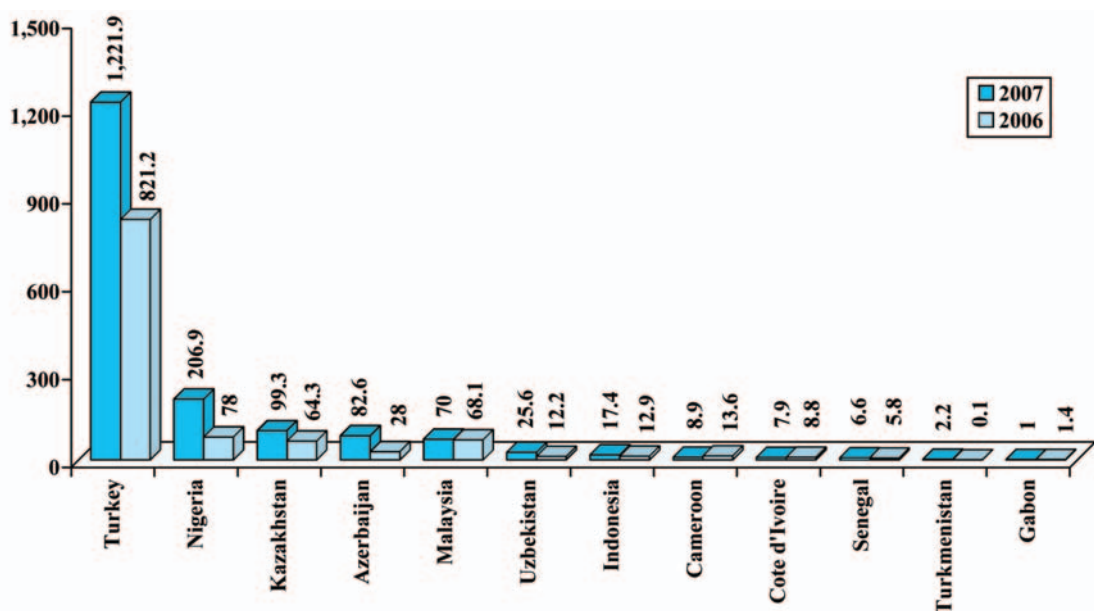
The same pattern was maintained with regard to other Muslim countries that established commercial ties with Israel, as seen from the following table, which, depending on Israeli sources, shows the volume of trade between Israel and some non-Arab Muslim countries.



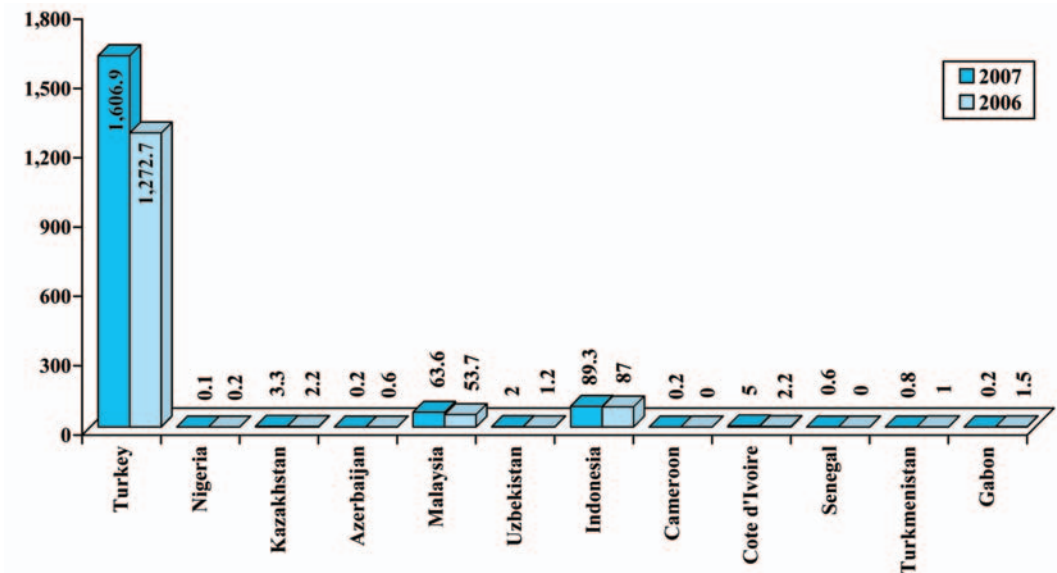
**Table 1/4: The Israeli Trade with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries  
2004–2007 (\$ million)<sup>13</sup>**

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2007	2006	2005	2004	2007	2006	2005	2004
Turkey	1,221.9	821.2	903.2	813.5	1,606.9	1,272.7	1,221.1	1,166.9
Nigeria	206.9	78	47.4	43	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.8
Kazakhstan	99.3	64.3	47.9	38.5	3.3	2.2	3.6	0.5
Azerbaijan	82.6	28	5.4	5.3	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.1
Malaysia	70	68.1	130.7	203.7	63.6	53.7	41	32.6
Uzbekistan	25.6	12.2	6.2	9.9	2	1.2	1.3	1.2
Indonesia	17.4	12.9	14.1	11.3	89.3	87	43.6	27.4
Cameroon	8.9	13.6	5.7	4	0.2	0	0	0
Cote d'Ivoire	7.9	8.8	9	10.5	5	2.2	5.5	4.1
Senegal	6.6	5.8	4.5	4.5	0.6	0	0.1	0
Turkmenistan	2.2	0.1	2.6	9	0.8	1	1.7	1.6
Gabon	1	1.4	0.8	0	0.2	1.5	1.4	1.8

**Israeli Exports to a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2006–2007  
(\$ million)**



### Israeli Imports from a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2006–2007 (\$ million)



### *Second: Turkey*

For Turkey, the year 2006 was the year of Hamas. For the country was subjected to unduly strong pressure and blackmail from the USA and Israel in order to change its policy that was based on supporting the Palestinian rights, recognizing the Palestinian legitimacy and calling for the unity of the internal Palestinian Front.

During the year 2007 Turkey was preoccupied with some domestic concerns, namely the presidential and parliamentary elections that were crucial for the future of the project of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*—AKP). Besides, there were the increasing military operations of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*—PKK) against the Turkish army. Squeezed between this external challenge and the internal pressure of the secularists, the AKP, which controlled the government and Parliament, and subsequently the presidency, tried to sail through with the least possible damage.

Hence, in the year 2007 Turkey resumed “normal” relations with Israel, coordinated with the American administration to remedy its relations with the USA, which had its repercussions on Ankara's position towards some of its other

concerns, including the Palestinian issue. This shift had been facilitated by the Palestinian schism that continued throughout the year 2007, but particularly after Gaza events of mid June.

### **1. Olmert's Visit to Ankara**

Early in the year 2007, the Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert paid a two-day visit to Turkey, 14–15/2/2007, during which he met some top Turkish officials. Two developments had given this visit special importance, namely it took place one week before the conclusion of Mecca Agreement and several weeks after the Israeli excavations beneath *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

The visit gave the Turkish premier an opportunity to call upon his Israeli counter-part to recognize the Palestinian government of national unity that was formed after Mecca Agreement. He argued that dealing with Mahmud 'Abbas and his authority was a wrong move that would not solve the problem, as the Palestinian elections had lead to new realities on the ground. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had even declared his intention to invite the new Palestinian government of national unity to visit Ankara. On his part, Olmert declared that Israel will not negotiate with Hamas unless and until it recognizes Israel and discard violence.

The most crucial issue of the bilateral negotiations was *al-Aqsa's* excavations. Being doubtful of the credibility of the pictures that Israel exhibited of those excavations and of Olmert's assurances that they do not touch the Islamic sites and archaeological remains, Erdoğan suggested that his country sends a fact finding technical committee to the mosque. Olmert agreed as, in his words, he had nothing to conceal.

Abdullah Gül, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, was particularly concerned during this visit by the drive of the Jewish lobby in the USA to persuade the Congress to endorse the project of the Armenian genocide. He told Olmert that this was a crucial issue for his country, and that he expects from Israel to demonstrate its friendship via concrete steps. In response, Olmert told his host that Turkey need not to worry, and that he will do what is necessary to block the project.

Olmert expressed his over Gül's visit, saying: 10 years ago, it would not have been at all possible to establish close relations between the leader of a Turkish Islamic party and the leader of an ultra-rightist Jewish party because of the then

many and deep differences between them. He described Turkey as the “coordinator” of the Middle East, and maintained that it will continue its efforts to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

After meeting Erdoğan, Olmert explicitly expressed the desire of his country that Turkey mediates between Israel and Muslim countries with whom it had no relations. He added that Turkey can play a major role to change the positions of the radical forces in the region, an implicit reference to Hamas and Syria.

An interesting event during this visit was a sarcastic smile that Erdoğan gave to Olmert’s reference to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, to mean that Turkey objects to this claim, and recognizes Tel Aviv only as the capital of Israel.

Notwithstanding Olmert’s claim of the continuous Israel–Turkish cooperation against PKK, the differences between the two countries over Iraq and Iran were glaring.

On the economic level, Olmert expressed his desire to increase the commercial trade volume between the two countries, which had then totaled \$2.83 billion. He added that 152 Israeli companies conduct business in Turkey, and that they inject in Turkey’s gross national product billions of dollars. He, moreover, called for the increase of Turkish tourists to Israel.

All in all, Olmert’s declarations during this visit revealed the immense Israeli interest in gaining the cordiality and hearts of both top Turkish officials and the public at large. This was particularly so when Olmert said that he shared the same experiences and interest with his host in two respects, namely being former presidents of municipalities, Jerusalem and Istanbul, respectively, and football players!<sup>14</sup>

## **2. *Al-Aqsa*’s Excavations and the Turkish Committee**

Olmert’s agreement that a Turkish fact finding mission be sent to examine the nature and extent of the Israeli excavations of February 2007 beneath *al-Aqsa* Mosque facing the Mughrabi Gate, which were undertaken under the guise of constructing a new tunnel to *al-Aqsa* Mosque to replace the existing tottering one, was viewed as a victory to Turkey, and had triggered criticism in Israel. Silvan Shalom described it as an arrogant step, even the Arab Member of Knesset (MK), Talib al-Sani‘, had disapprovingly questioned Turkey’s relevance to the issue.

According to some Israeli press reports, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's advisor and a close associate of Hamas, was designated for the presidency of the committee. But the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs refuted the news, and said that it would be invested on Namik Tan, the Turkish ambassador to Israel.<sup>15</sup>

The Turkish committee started its work late March 2007, and by November it issued its report, that had been circulated on a limited scale, viz, among the participants of a conference on Jerusalem held by the end of November in Istanbul. And it was handed also, according to Erdoğan's advisor, to the concerned parties in Israel, the United Nations, the OIC and others. However, parts of the report that were leaked in some Palestinian websites, as noted by many observers, directed severe criticism to Israel. Nonetheless, in the interest of preserving its improved relations with Israel, Ankara was keen to avoid any publicity stunt around this report.

From the published resume of this report, it is clear that the Israeli excavations were not in line with the accepted legal and scientific standards, and that their aims were far beyond scientific curiosity. Even if there were no actual excavations in the direction of the the Mughrabi Gate of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the report maintained that there were clear indications that it was only a matter of time for the Israeli institution to undertake excavations beneath the mosque.

The Turkish report expressed conviction that the Israeli excavations in the direction of the Mughrabi Gate would affect the Umayyad's, Ayyubid's, Mamluk's and Ottoman's archaeological remains, and demanded that they stop forthwith. The report maintained that the excavations, tunneling and the large amount of soil extraction (along the Western Wall of *al-Aqsa* Mosque) give the impression that there were huge and profound interventions that had nothing to do with scientific interest even though there had been no excavations in the direction of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. It added that these activities were part of a pre-arranged and systematic effort on the part of the Israeli institutions to destroy the archaeological remains of the Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

The report also criticized the Israeli misleading media campaign that claimed that what had been removed was just gravel and sand, and insisted that what had been destroyed by the excavations included some archaeological remains that constituted the last of what remained of Islamic history in *al-Buraq* Yard (Wailing Yard) of *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

The report also noted that some Hebrew signboards, like the one that read “Nearest point to the Holy of Holies,” were placed in the tunneling and the excavations sites along the Western Wall of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, which gives the impression that it was only a matter of time before excavations would be conducted beneath *al-Aqsa* Mosque in the direction of the Mughrabi Gate. This, the report minuted, was of great concern to all Islamic countries, particularly to the Palestinians.

The report also gave extensive information about the domed structure that was found by an Israeli archaeologist beneath a ramp which connects to the Mughrabi Gate. It added that the archaeological characteristics of these rooms and arches indicate that they were the remains of the two-storey Afdaliyyah Madrasah which was built in 1196. Interestingly, to the north of the pathway, just near the Western Wall is where the *mihrab niche* of the classroom masjid of Afdaliyyah Madrasah still stands today. Cracks have formed on the flanking walls of the *Mihrab* (prayer niche), and the floor of the *Mihrab* has been made hollow in parts and left unpreserved. In its concluding remarks the report said the surviving parts of the Afdaliyyah Madrasah must be consolidated and preserved.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. The Israeli Raid on Syria**

The Israeli air raid, on 6/9/2007, on a Syrian building in Dayr al-Zur had almost wrecked the improved relations between Turkey and Israel. This was particularly so as the objective of the raid was unclear, and the function of the installation was not ascertained, said to be either the nucleus of a Syrian nuclear facility or a fertilizers’ factory.

Many questions were raised on the role of Turkey in this operation, as the Israeli planes on their way to and from their target had flown over Turkish skies and refueled in Turkish lands. The virtual complete silence of Turkey officials on the incident had aggravated this suspicion, as all that was said was a press release from the office of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül, who had been elected to the post a few days before the raid, to the effect that it was “a big mistake.” Subsequently, after an Israeli apology for violating the Turkish air space, Gül declared on 6/10/2007 that the matter was “over,” and that his government had no prior information of the Israeli night raid. However, this operation had once more questioned the nature and extent of the military cooperation between Turkey and Israel, particularly so as the two parties had from time to time conducted joint land and air maneuvers

over Anatolia, which would facilitate an Israeli air aggression via Turkish lands on Syria, as was the case of 6/9/2007.

#### 4. Peres Visit to Ankara

The three-day, 11–13/11/2007, visit of the Israeli President Shimon Peres to Ankara, and his trio meeting with Abdullah Gül and the President of the PA Mahmud ‘Abbas represented the peak of the developing Turkish–Israeli relations, which, in a way, were swinging back to their earlier era of friendship and coordination.

Prior to his arrival, Peres commended Turkey’s “very important” role in the peace process,<sup>17</sup> and added that it is a model in the Muslim world and the region. He also described it as a huge economic and military power, and a model for the harmonious blend between Islam and modernity. It is a model that combines belief in God and the usage of the computer!

Being first a military, then a political and economic power, Turkey, in Peres words, had since the early 1990s an impact on the balance of power in the region. He, furthermore, refused the claim that the Turkish–Israeli relations retracted during the era of the AKP, by saying, “The government had changed in Turkey, but not the bilateral relations and their fundamentals. This demonstrated the strength in the relations between us.”

Peres praised the vision of the late Turkish President Turgut Özal, who, in response to a question by some journalists on his great interest in Middle Eastern issues, sarcastically said, “We should know this issue very well. If invited to a luncheon party, shall we be among the guests to the occasion or the menu of the food.”

Peres launched an attack on the “extreme” forces in the region like Hizbullah, Hamas and Iran, and described his trio meeting with Gül and ‘Abbas as an opportunity for peace in the Middle East.

After his meeting with Gül and ‘Abbas, Peres highly commended Turkey by describing it as “a falcon who steadily moves forward with one wing, and balances with the other wing. This is splendid.”<sup>18</sup> He added that Israel has specifically demanded the participation of Turkey in Annapolis conference, which was confirmed on 15/11/2007 by the Islamic newspaper *Today’s Zaman* that reported that Shimon Peres and Ehud Olmert were the ones who opened the door for Turkey’s participation in Annapolis.

On the other hand, Abdullah Gül told Israeli newspapers that the comparison between Turkey's operations in northern Iraq and those of Israel against Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in the GS is wrong. "We do not occupy others' land, but this does not mean that we support violent operations or attacks against Israel, including the launching of al-Qassam's missiles. Every state has the right to defend itself, but within the limits of international law."

The peak of Peres visit to Anqara was his meeting with 'Abbas under the patronage of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül. It was a duplicat image to the minute details of holding hands, a replica of the earlier meeting between Menachem Begin and Anwar al-Sadat under the patronage of Jimmy Carter in Camp David in 1978.

The meeting was followed, on 13/11/2007, by consecutive addresses by Peres and 'Abbas in the Turkish parliament, and in a unique scene that the Turkish press described as a "historic meeting." This was the first time in which a top Israeli official delivers a speech in a parliament of a Muslim country!

This gave Peres a golden opportunity to exhibit before the Turkish public opinion and the world a peaceful and gentle face, at a time when he, like Sharon who was dismissed by the Turkish media as "the butcher of Sabra and Shatila," was famous in Turkey as the children killer in Qana. Interestingly, in his speech before the Turkish parliament, Peres quoted verses from the late Turkish poet Cahit Sitki Taranci on love, peace and the homeland!<sup>19</sup>

There was a general consensus in the Turkish press that their government's initiative to hold the trio meeting on its own soil had consolidated its position as a country needed by all partners and a major player in the Middle East, which aspires to be the fourth side of the Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian triangle of moderation. Along these lines, Taha Akyol said to *Milliyet* newspaper that the effective role of Turkey in the Middle East would strengthen its security and brighten its future. Turkey, he added, was transferred into a rendezvous between the West and East, and that the meeting of Peres and Abu Mazin is the all important model for this accelerating role. However, Turkey's invitation to Annapolis conference was not enough, as the country's undeclared agenda was to be the fourth side added to the Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian triangle of moderation. In tandem with this drive was the ultra splendid reception of the Saudi King who reached Ankara two days



only before Peres's arrival. Contrary to diplomatic tradition, Gül received him at the airport, and participated in a meeting that the King had with Erdoğan in his residence at the hotel, and not in an official presidential headquarter.

Ankara meetings triggered many comments and observations in Turkey. According to Fikret Bila, Turkey's main message to the world was that it is capable of getting together the adversaries of the most complicated conflict in the world in the interest of the stability and welfare of the Middle East of which it is an integral part. He added that the first benefit that the country reaped from this move was its invitation to participate in Annapolis meeting.

The Turkish commentator Sami Kohen saw in Ankara's meeting a resounding victory to Turkish diplomacy. It was clear, he added, that Turkey supported 'Abbas politically and economically, and established the industrial region in the WB, not in Gaza. He pointed to the "delicate balance" of Erdoğan's government that had previously invited Khalid Mish'al to Ankara.

However, Janqiz Chandar warned that the excessive joy over Ankara's "part," should not conceal the viable possibility that Annapolis might fail and the crisis be resumed, exactly as was the case after Camp David negotiations of 2000 between Yasir 'Arafat and Ehud Barak that were followed by the eruption of the second *Intifadah (al-Aqsa)*. Similarly, tension was resumed after the latest Mecca Agreement between Hamas and Fatah, which had erupted primarily because of Abu Mazin's inability to control Gaza. Chander wondered whether Turkey would mediate behind the scenes between Fatah and Hamas.

In *Yeni Şafak* newspaper, Ibrahim Karagül maintained that it is unfair to keep Turkey stuck to its conflict with the PKK, and that the latest developments demonstrated that no plan could be implemented in the region without Turkey's agreement and participation. This is a message directed in particular to the USA and Israel.

During Peres's visit to Ankara, another important event took place. On the initiative of "Ankara Forum" patronized by the Turkish business chambers and stock markets that had previously been behind Gaza's industrial region that had been destroyed by Israeli forces in June 2006 in revenge of Hamas' arrest of Gilad Shalit, the Turkish government signed a deal to finance another industrial area in the WB, a project that was encouraged by President Gül himself.



The president of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), Rifat Hisarciklioğlu, mentioned that “Ankara Forum” had initially decided to establish the industrial area in Tarqumia, but later shifted to Jenin, and that it looks for international financial support to this project. Gül said that the project was part of Turkey’s economic support to the Palestinian people, and efforts to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It is worth noting that the project, which was established under the slogan of “Industry for Peace Initiative” employed six thousand Palestinian workers, and its exports were exempted from customs.

### **5. Annapolis Conference**

Besides 40 participant countries, Turkey was represented in Annapolis conference of 27/11/2007 by its Foreign Minister Ali Babacan. If this participation was a byproduct of the trio meeting, Turkish writers questioned the Jubilation in their country over this representation, particularly that of Babacan. On his part, the latter maintained that this was an opportune opportunity that Turkey had to grasp, and that the conference was a “good start” to settle the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, which would hopefully achieve concrete results. He added that had it not been for Turkey’s drive, Syria’s participation would not have materialized. Conversely, the Turkish press had on the whole viewed the conference as a publicity stunt, and an attempt to brighten the image of Israel and Turkey, particularly so as it had no concrete agenda or objectives, as recorded by Ceyda Karan in the *Radikal* newspaper. However, in view of the lady writer, the most dangerous aspect of the conference was to consider Israel as a Jewish state. Hence, from now on we will have such titles as the “Christian state of the USA,” the “Catholic state of Poland” or the “Islamic State of Pakistan.”

The writer Hassan Jamal opined in *Milliyet* newspaper that the last minute participation of Syria was designed to intensify Iran’s isolation, and wondered whether the whole scenario was a cover up on the part of Bush to strike Iran.

Jamal called for realism rather than optimism, and reminded everybody that the leaders of Israel and Palestine were weak, though he admitted that there was no way except to indulge in an attempt to solve the problem. He added that Annapolis should be viewed as a success if the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were resumed, and that it is futile to repeat that Turkey’s security and economic interests would be negatively affected if it failed.

Meanwhile, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, İltis Türkmen, did not expect anything from Annapolis, even there would be no development whatsoever after the conference. He felt that an aspect of Annapolis' fiasco would be Israel's insistence on the "Jewishness of the Hebrew state" which would block the return of the Palestinian refugees. Moreover, both Israel and Palestine suffer from substantial domestic divisions. While reviewing the previous abortive peace attempts, Türkmen felt that the only positive aspect of Annapolis was Syria's participation in the conference through Turkish efforts. Since no peace can be concluded without Syrian involvement, its participation in Annapolis, in his view, may help to develop a favorable psychological environment to exert efforts for peace after the conference.

For Hakan Albayrak, Annapolis, as he wrote in *Yeni Şafak* newspaper, was a "comedy," for who wants peace would not inject the Israeli virus, burn Iraq, starve Palestine and destabilize Lebanon. He sarcastically added:

As for the great Turkey it was jubilant beyond any limits simply because it was invited to attend the conference. For God's sake what will Turkey do there, why is Babacan joyful, what would Israel offer at a time when half or more than the Palestinian people are not represented in the conference? It is a comedy that will end in the dust bin of history. We wish Babacan happy entertainment.

In the above newspaper, Akif Emre maintained that there was no viable reason for optimism. For the USA wanted to improve its deteriorating image in Iraq via a conference on Palestine, and the Arab regimes aspired to use the occasion to remedy their relations with the American administration while what they should do is to patch up their relations with their own peoples. The underlying objective behind the conference was to prolong the crisis to give Israel sufficient time to complete its project of Judaization of the WB and Jerusalem. As for the participation of Syria, the American aim behind it was to end the Syrian–Iranian alliance; hence Annapolis was another step to prepare the ground for a military strike against Iran.

The former MP Resul Tosun summed up the conference as an attempt to support Bush and Olmert. He felt that Turkey's participation would, for the first time in a century, revive its role as a key player in the Middle East. But he maintained that the mere participation of 40 states in this conference and its issuance of a document was a blatant victory to Israel. Moreover, the demand that Israel be

an exclusive state for the Jews constituted a dangerous threat to the rights of the Palestinians. If endorsed by the conference, this provision would, in Tosun's view, end the relationship of the Palestinian refugees with their mother land.

Sami Kohen opined in *Milliyet* newspaper that the conference was “a mere hope” and nothing much should be expected from it, as it was solely concerned with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and to prepare the grounds for the initiation of new negotiations. However, the invitation and participation of Syria in the conference was signaled an important change in the American position, while Syria on its part had registered a different stand from that of the radical forces like Iran and Hamas.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, on the periphery of the conference Babacan expressed his displeasure for excluding Hamas from the quest for a peace settlement. He added that there is one Palestine, and a divided Palestine between Hamas and Fatah will never serve the cause of peace. Hence, this division should come to an end. Besides, he disclosed a Turkish project to establish on the borders between Israel and the WB a university for both Israeli and Palestinian students, to which, he claimed, Israel had agreed, and the implementation is being under consideration.<sup>21</sup>

Following the trio meeting and its subsequent participation in Annapolis conference, Turkey had become actively involved in the Paris Donors Conference of 17/12/2007 where it offered \$50 million to the Palestinian people, though this conference was viewed as another step to support the authority of Mahmud ‘Abbas and to weaken Hamas.

The elaborate meeting between Erdoğan and the American President George W. Bush, held on 5/11/2007 under the declared banner of securing intelligence cooperation between the two countries against the PKK in northern Iraq, was decisive in repairing Turkish–American relations.

However, what was exciting was the disclosed Turkish–Israeli cooperation to hunt the fighters of the PKK, particularly through the Israeli–made surveillance drones Heron unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

But the Turkish–Israeli cooperation had been extended in the year 2007 to new vital fields, such as the energy sector. After several–month negotiations, the Turkish Minister of Energy Hilmi Güler signed with the Israeli Minister of Infrastructure

Binyamin Ben-Eliezer a treaty in Israel, on 23/10/2007, on cooperation in the field of energy between the two countries, which included the extension of a pipeline from the Ceyhan Port in Iskenderun to the Israeli port of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean, and from there abroad via Ashkelon–Eilat pipeline. This was a crucial pipeline for both parties as gas and petrol go across it to the Far East and from there to Japan. The Israeli Minister said that relations with Turkey were very important not only in the political field but also in such important joint projects that might mushroom into three pipelines for petrol, gas and water that were expected to be completed within three years. He added that this project will be useful for Jordan and Palestine that suffer from shortage of water. Furthermore, it will be constructed under the sea from Ceyhan to Ashkelon for a distance of 610 km, and will be completed around 2011.<sup>22</sup>

Though some had seen in the conference a beginning of a new peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians, the former declared immediately after the conference that it will expand its settlements and build hundreds of housing units in East Jerusalem. But this decision triggered a Turkish protest. After a meeting with the Jordanian King ‘Abdullah on 11/12/2007, Abdullah Gül described it as shocking and counterproductive, besides being against the resolutions of Annapolis.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the Turkish premier Erdoğan denounced the siege that Israel imposed in early 2008 on the GS. He said that Palestine is already a prison with open skies, the people of Gaza are facing a humanitarian catastrophe, and that they, in Turkey, find great difficulty in understanding the rational of these calamities.<sup>24</sup> On a separate occasion, Erdoğan said before a group of MPs of the AKP that Israel is penalizing through excessive bombing of the GS all people in order to penalize a specific group. He protested that it is unacceptable to commit this excessive violence under the guise of the launched missiles, and added:

Whenever we ask the Israeli about this bombardment to which the Palestinian people are exposed to, from time to time, they say that there are missiles launched from the Palestinian side. But when we ask about the extent of the damage resulting from this bombardment on the Palestinian side and the number of casualties on the Israeli side, we get no answer.<sup>25</sup>

## Summary

While maintaining during the year 2006 a “balanced policy,” so to speak, even leaning towards the Palestinian side with all its trends, the Turkish attitude in the year 2007 was rather tilted as it took in consideration external developments related to Turkish interests abroad, and some internal sensitive issues. Hence, the following could be observed:

1. The official and popular Turkish positions remained sympathetic with the cause of The Palestinian people, irrespective of the internal Palestinian conflicts.

2. Turkey strongly supported the Palestinian government of national unity that was formed after Mecca Agreement. The Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer had even said that it will open the way to address the paramount problems of the Palestinian people.

3. Gaza events that had culminated in Hamas’ unilateral control of the GS had immensely embarrassed the government of the AKP, which refrained from any contacts with the dismissed government of Isma‘il Haniyyah.

4. Conversely, Ankara continued contacts with the President of the PA Mahmud ‘Abbas.

5. Though the government of the AKP had in the past moved quickly to mitigate the isolation imposed on Hamas by the USA and Israel, it had apparently been influenced by the negative attitude of some Arab states towards the movement. Therefore, it opted for the maintenance of its increasingly cordial relations with those states at the expense of its contacts with Hamas.

6. The government of the AKP was seemingly anxious to avoid American and Israeli anger similar to the one that had erupted after its invitation to Khalid Mish‘al in February 2006. Hence it did not go a long way in the efforts of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

7. In an unprecedented move, President Abdullah Gül had personally patronized a trio meeting between himself, the Israeli premier and the President of the PA in Ankara in mid November 2007. He, moreover, invited them to address the Turkish parliament; hence the Israeli premier was the first top Israeli official to address the legislature of a Muslim country. Obviously, this step was closely related to the following:

- a. Ankara's need for the help of the American administration to face the intensified and embarrassing activities and operations of the PKK, which gave the Turkish military enough force to increase its pressure on the government. Hence, as mentioned above, following Ankara's trio meeting, which created a more conducive environment for the success of Annapolis conference, on which Washington and Israel had largely betted to finalize their policies in the Middle East, Turkish–American intelligence and military cooperation gained grounds, and Turkish air raids on the bases of Kurdistan began.
- b. Ankara's need for Israeli and American support to block a draft resolution in the Congress that considered the 1915 massacres against the Armenians genocide. The draft resolution, that was scheduled to be endorsed a few days after Ankara's meeting, had actually been blocked, thanks to the pressure of the American administration.
- c. The ability of the AKP party to successfully pursue a number of domestic issues, including parliamentary elections and election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency, which had all been strongly supported by the western powers that were in favor of the moderate experiment of the AKP.

Notwithstanding the shifts in the political landscape during the year 2007, including the shifts in Turkish foreign policy towards the Palestinian issue, we may argue that Turkey will continue to stick to its principles of calling for the end of Israeli occupation of the 1967 Palestinian lands and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the WB and the GS. Turkey is also expected to continue the recognition of the PA as represented by Mahmud 'Abbas, but resumption of contacts with Hamas would largely depend on the turn of inter-Palestinian relations. Though the government of the AKP may try to make use of any opportune opportunity to put the Palestinian house in order, it is unlikely that it would pioneer any initiative to address the deteriorating domestic Palestinian situation. For this would negatively affect Turkey's vital national security interests, including coordination with the USA on several issues, its intelligence–military cooperation with Israel, specially in confronting the PKK, and the relative harmony with the policies of certain Arab states that have considerable investments in Turkey.

However, on the popular level, the Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media and the press would certainly continue their unlimited support for the Palestinian people, irrespective of the internal Palestinian conflicts and the nature of the ruling elite in Ankara. This would require the consolidation of contacts on the popular level between the Palestinian and Turkish peoples.

### *Third: Iran*

Like other regional powers, Iran interacted with the major events related to the Palestinian issue during the year 2007, i.e., Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas, the formation of the government of national unity, the collapse of Mecca Agreement, Hamas' control of Gaza, and, finally, Annapolis conference held in late 2007 under the patronage of the USA, and in which all Arab countries participated.

Naturally, Iran's position towards these events and their repercussions was in harmony with its previous policies towards the resistance movements, notably Hamas, and the peace process in the Middle East that it had consistently rejected, and refused what may result from it.

As expected, Iran's position towards these events was so fundamentally different from many Arab countries. Some of these countries held Hamas responsible for the failure of Mecca Agreement and for the turn of events in Gaza. They all participated in Annapolis conference, which Iran rejected, condemned and forecasted its failure. That's because the conference had no specific agenda and a time frame for implementing whatever may be agreed upon. In addition, Israel did not commit itself to withdraw to the 1967 borders as stipulated in the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which had been viewed by the Arabs as a basis for any satisfactory settlement with Israel.

#### **1. Mecca Agreement**

Like all Arab countries, Iran supported Mecca Agreement between Fatah (the PA) and Hamas, which was patronized by Saudi Arabia, and the consequential government of national unity. Mohammad Ali Hussaini, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed his country's relief by this agreement, which he described as a constructive step, which will contribute to end the internal crisis.<sup>26</sup>



Being worried by the skirmishes that threatened to abort Mecca Agreement and their repercussions, the Iranian Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) Ali Khamenei warned, during a reception of the Secretary-General of PIJ, Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, of a turmoil that will radically change the nature of the Palestinian dispute from a Palestinian–Israeli conflict into an inter-Palestinian bloody fight. Khamenei expressed his deep regret for the loss of life among Palestinians from whatever group they may be, and cautioned against the American–Israeli conspiracy to sow the seeds of sedition and discord in the Muslim world. He added that it is essential to foil the conspiracy that induces sedition through alertness, Jihad and resistance to the enemy’s threats and ambitions.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly so as the Americans and the Israelis were annoyed by the agreement, as recorded, for example, in *TIME* magazine they wrote that the agreement and the formation of a national unity government lead to an impasse between the Israelis and the Palestinians.<sup>28</sup>

The Iranian officials continued to call for unity and the end of the fighting. The former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani called upon the conflicting Palestinian factions “to aim their weapons against Israel.”<sup>29</sup>

Being worried of the possible dangers of the developments in Gaza, Iran went beyond condemnation and denunciation to call the regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt, for consultation. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the Palestinian factions to unite, fight the Israeli enemy, and respect the outcome of the democratic elections. He accused some quarters of working behind the scenes to aggravate tension in the region through refusal to cooperate with the government of national unity, rejection of the Palestinian demands and imposition of economic sanctions.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Decisiveness in Gaza

Once the shifting and sporadic skirmishes had turned into a wide scale military operation that ended with the Hamas’ control of the GS, Iran supported Hamas. Unlike the case with some Arab governments, none of the Iranian officials held Hamas responsible for what happened, but they repeatedly spoke of the necessity of unity to confront the “Zionist enemy.” In an attempt to contain the repercussions of the crisis through dialogue, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab–African Affairs and a former Ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Reza Baqeri, came to Damascus where he held a series of meetings with the leaders of Palestinian organizations, including Hamas, PFLP, DFLP, PFLP–the General Command (GC) and Fatah

which was represented by its representative in Beirut, ‘Abbas Zaki.<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Nasr, a member of Hamas Political Bureau, said that Baqeri understood “the stand of the movement,” and that the crisis reached to this level because of “the consistent refusal to the outcome of elections and the imposition of the siege on the Palestinian people.” During this get together, Baqeri made it clear that “Tehran supports national unity and solidarity to confront the occupation .... His country supports the just struggle of the Palestinian people.”<sup>32</sup>

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu al-Ghait accused Iran of being directly responsible for the turn of events in Gaza, which “threatens Egypt national security” as Gaza is the backyard of Egypt.<sup>33</sup> In a meeting with the Palestinian factions in Damascus, Baqeri refused this allegation, and subsequently Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mohammed Ali Hosseini, did likewise, by saying “since the beginning, Iran had called for negotiations between the Palestinian groups, i.e., Hamas and Fatah, and supported Mecca Agreement and the government of national unity in Palestine.”<sup>34</sup>

Through several messages, Iran confirmed its firm support to the government of Isma‘il Haniyyah. At one time it expressed its respect to the outcome of the democratic elections and refused domestic fighting that “harms the Palestinian revolutionary objectives,”<sup>35</sup> and, at another occasion, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Mostafavi, declared, “the formation of an emergency government is against the principles of democracy, and it sharply increases political tension in occupied Palestine.”<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad dismissed the emergency government as being “mortgaged,” and the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) maintained that “the major powers sacked the government chosen by the Palestinian people and replaced it by this mortgaged government,” and added, “the time of terrorizing and humiliating states had gone. Do not assume that you can meet in one place and pass a resolution that rules that the Palestinian issue is over.”<sup>37</sup> However, despite its support to Hamas and dismissal of the emergency government, Iran never gave up its call for dialogue in Tehran to put an end to the internal Palestinian feud. This call was emphasized by head of the Iranian Shura Council Gholam Ali Haddad-‘Adel, who had, at the same time, reiterated that “the main yardstick should be the votes of the Palestinian people who chose Hamas that leads the legitimate government in the Palestinian lands.”<sup>38</sup>

The Iranian reformists had also registered their opinion on the turn of events in Gaza and on the proposed solution. The former President Mohammad Khatami, the head of International Institute for Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations, sent two separate messages to President Mahmud ‘Abbas and the dismissed Premier Isma‘il Haniyyah in which he called “to settle the problems via dialogue and understanding.”<sup>39</sup> Being “anxious to discard schism and adhere to Palestinian unity,” Khatami offered “to personally mediate between the Palestinian factions to remove the obstacles in the way of dialogue.” This offer was after a meeting in Teheran with the Palestinian Ambassador Salah al-Zawawi and the representative of Hamas Osama Abdelmo‘ti.

In his bilateral and collective meetings with leaders of the Palestinian factions, the Iranian President Ahmadinejad urged the avoidance of difference and the denunciation of conflict, and “the importance of settling the problems through dialogue... as the only beneficiary is the enemy.” The president was also reported to have said, “The defense of the Palestinian resistance is obligatory to Iran..., the sedition between Hamas and Fatah is engineered by Israel.”<sup>40</sup>

Based on the Iranian sympathy with Hamas, and irrespective of the repeated calls for dialogue that the Palestinian president had in particular repeatedly refused before the return to the status quo ante in Gaza, the Iranian representative to the United Nations, Mansour al-Sadeghi, demanded, in a speech delivered in a meeting of the Security Council on the Middle Eastern issues, to confront the crimes of the Israeli occupation, emphasizing, “It is impossible to discard Hamas from the political scene, even all the attempts that target it are doomed to failure.”<sup>41</sup>

In a significant shift in its foreign policy, Iran did not confine itself to repeated calls for dialogue between the Palestinians, but the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Manouchehr Mottaki, strove for the participation of the Arab side in the attempts to settle the crisis. He approached the Secretary-General of the Arab League ‘Amr Musa to “initiate a move in this respect.” In response Musa informed the Minister that he is “in contact with the two factions, Fatah and Hamas, to urge them to engage in dialogue.”<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Mottaki denied the involvement of his country in these events, and told Musa of “the importance of conveying this message to the member states of the Arab League.”<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, the Iranian president Ahmadinejad took all opportunities to launch attacks against Israel, “the custodian of aggression and occupation, the

Satan that is on its way to collapse and extermination”<sup>44</sup> and that it “will not possibly continue to exist.”<sup>45</sup> He undertook “to continue the struggle until the complete liberation of Palestine, and to repeatedly question the myth of the Jewish holocaust.”<sup>46</sup> Ahmadinejad called upon the United Nations to confront the crimes of Israel against the Palestinians, to find unconditional solutions for the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homeland, and to conduct free elections for all Palestinians—Muslims, Christians and Jews—to determine the destiny and political future of their country.<sup>47</sup> Ahmadinejad also asked the Israelis to “look for an alternative place other than the Palestinian lands.”<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, Iran was accused of offering in 2003, during the rule of the reformists, to stop its support to Hizbullah and Hamas. In the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television report, Iran was said to have offered, in a secret message to the American administration via its Swiss representative in Tehran, to accept the Arab peace initiative and to convince Hamas and Hizbullah to stop their operations against Israeli civilians in return for an American undertaken to lift all sanctions against Iran, to unconditionally recognize its right to have peaceful biological, chemical and nuclear technology, to respect all its legitimate rights in the region and to stop all attempts to overthrow the Iranian regime. The details of this “grand deal” so-called by American sources, were aired by the American Frontline television program towards the end of December 2007, which had also claimed that the hawks in the American administration, specially Dick Cheney, refused the Iranian offer.<sup>49</sup>

In response to these accusations, an Iranian official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted that his country had at no time “offered to stop its cooperation with Hizbullah and Hamas.” Moreover, Mohammad Tajik, a member of the Iranian Parliamentary Defense Committee, maintained that the BBC report “is not void of illusions, because we will not surrender our values and fundamentals... Iran does not have ulterior interests behind the aid and support that it extends to these movements, except that of Islam.”<sup>50</sup>

### **3. Annapolis Peace Conference**

Since Iran refused to recognize Israel, and its president had, since his assumption of power, recorded his conviction that it will ultimately disappear, it was natural that it refused Annapolis conference, held in the USA towards the end of 2007, and in which the Arabs sat at the same table with the Israelis, and, before that, to reject

the “Arab peace initiative” because “it recognizes Israel and call for normalization with it.” Hence more than one Iranian official and in different places and on different occasions, issued declarations against this conference which “support the Zionist occupiers,” is of “no use to the Palestinians,” and is “doomed to fail.”

While in a visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2007, President Ahmadinejad was compelled to direct the relevant Iranian quarters to refute the news reported by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) that he supported the Arab peace initiative “because it stipulates normalization of relations with Israel quid pro quo its withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian lands.” On the same vein, the former President Hashemi Rafsanjani asked the USA to be even-handed and discard its absolute support for Israel if it wanted the realization of stability in the region and the resolution of all its crises. He, moreover, considered the failure to establish a Palestinian state and to secure the return of the refugees the primary danger to peace in the region.<sup>51</sup> In pursuit of his consistent campaign against Annapolis, President Ahmadinejad maintained that its aim is “to connect all Arab regimes with the Zionist entity,” but, he added “the union of Muslim states in the region is capable of aborting all these plans.”<sup>52</sup> In a telephone call to the Saudi King ‘Abdullah, President Ahmadinejad said that “he would have loved that Saudi Arabia had not been registered as a participant in Annapolis conference” and added that “the Arab states should be alerted to the conspiracy and the Zionist deceit.”<sup>53</sup> The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported that Ahmadinejad said, “Since the true representatives of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian factions were absent and the least of their rights were not conceded, this meeting, and hundreds others of its like, are futile.”

The Iranian president called for a plebiscite for all the people of the participant Arab countries “to know whether they support or reject the conference.”<sup>54</sup>

While forecasting the failure of the conference, the Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) of the Islamic Republic Ali Khamenei assured that “the alertness of the Palestinian people, which is connected with that of the Muslim Nation, particularly the Iranian people, would abort the American objectives behind this conference.”<sup>55</sup>

Hence, the Iranian officials had unanimously denounced the convention of the conference, expected its failure, and rejected its objectives that would achieve nothing to the Palestinians, and would just lead to the Arab recognition of Israel without getting anything from it except the “resumption of negotiations.”

Meanwhile, it was reported that Iran will convene a parallel conference for all the Palestinian forces that reject the peace settlement project, and that “the leaders of the factions will come to Tehran as well as all the Palestinian parties that struggle to liberate their land.”<sup>56</sup> However, what happened afterwards was a conference in Damascus, not Tehran, on 23/1/2008, which was attended by all Palestinian factions except Fatah and the representative of the PA. The conferees condemned the peace project and ascertained the option of resistance.

Apart from rejecting the conference as a matter of principle as it would mean nothing but normalization with Israel, Iran was concerned that it will go beyond “peace in the region” to threaten its very existence. *The New York Times* had, in fact, maintained that the real objective of Annapolis was “to check the increasing influence of Iran and Islamic extremism in the region.” Though doubting the ability of the Palestinians and Israelis to conclude a final peace settlement, many quarters in the Arab participant countries in the conference were relieved that the USA had been once more involved in “the major and most important battle of winning the minds and hearts of the Muslims.” In the same vein, the magazine reported that an advisor of the Palestinian negotiating team said, “the Arabs did not come to Annapolis because they love the Jews or even the Palestinians, they came because they need a strategic alliance with the USA against Iran.” The same magazine spoke of “the clouds of profound anxiety over the skies of Annapolis, lest that Shiite and non-Arab Iran, which was equipped with a nuclear program and victorious allies in southern Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian lands, would supersede and assume a dominant role.”<sup>57</sup>

On his part, the Israeli President Shimon Peres maintained that the underlying factor behind the big participation of the Arab countries in Annapolis was the Iranian threat in the region. He emphasized, “Iran, with its extremist policy that provokes fear and threat, is the reason for this.”<sup>58</sup>

However, Iran was not surprised by the attempts to transfer Annapolis conference into an Arab–American alliance against it. For, during their visits to the region, the American envoys concentrated on the priority of the “Iranian threat” instead of the Israeli danger.

However, at the same time, the conference strove to start normalization of the Arab–Israeli relations; hence Iran would loose impetus for its extremist policy towards the Palestinian issue. For this reason, Karim Sadjadpour criticized in the

*International Herald Tribune* newspaper of 3/8/2007 the USA announcement that it sold what's worth \$20 billion to its Arab allies "to fight Iranian hegemony in the Middle East." For Iran's accelerating influence was not due to its military strength or military expenditure (Saudi military expenditure is four times that of Iran), but because of its employment of the militia forces across the region to weaken and destroy the hugely superior power of the USA and Israel... particularly so as the excellent performance in the elections of Hamas in Palestine, Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Shiite in Iraq... made Iran feel that its "Islamist friends had won the battle of gaining the minds and hearts in the region."<sup>59</sup>

Hence, the objectives of the organizers of Annapolis were compatible, in the sense that they all wanted to simultaneously isolate Hamas and Iran in order to achieve progress in the Palestinian-Israeli track and comfort in the Arab states that their alliance with the United States against the "Iranian threat" was strong and solid. This was reiterated by International Crisis Group (ICG) which wrote on 20/11/2007, "The isolation of Hamas is the primary objective behind Annapolis. The USA, Israel and Fatah are convinced that progress in the Israeli-Palestinian question should go side by side with the marginalization of the Islamists."<sup>60</sup> As for the weakening of Hamas and its marginalization, Washington felt that it could be achieved through a strong coalition of Israel and the so-called moderate Arab states. The Group's report mentions that a senior American official said to the Crises Group, "We need to propagate an Israeli-Palestinian political path as Hamas would not be defeated militarily but only politically." The subsequent, in early 2008, tight siege of the GS, which Hamas controls, ascertains the plan of isolation and marginalization of the movement, and to hold it, as well as its fellow "extremist" Iran, squarely responsible for the starvation of the Palestinian people and their deprivation of fuel in a severe winter.

## Summary

While supporting Hamas and refusing to accept responsibility for the turn of events in Gaza, Iran continued to persistently call for dialogue to diffuse the crisis between the Palestinians. Nonetheless, it firmly rejected Annapolis conference, which aimed at normalization, isolation of Hamas and to pose Iran, not Israel, as the imminent danger in the region. Notwithstanding its engagement in defending its "peaceful nuclear program" and refuting at the highest level the illusion of the "Iranian danger," notably by the participation of its president in the summit of the

Gulf Cooperative Council, held few days after Annapolis, Iran never stopped its calls to support “the true representatives of the Palestinian people,” as Israel, in the words of Ahmadinejad, “will not survive.”

The events of 2007 revealed that the USA and Israel will continue their drive to isolate and weaken both Hamas and Iran. Any American–Israeli progress in any of the two fronts will, no doubt, have its impacts on the other. However, the reports of the U.S. intelligence, issued late 2007, that refuted Iran’s involvement in a secret nuclear–military program<sup>61</sup> made the presumed American military strikes against it farfetched, at least in principle. This would somehow relax the pressure and threat of sanctions on Iran, which means the intensification of pressure on Hamas. The siege and the subsequent military strikes demonstrated that the objective was to weaken Hamas, especially after the failure to clip the wings of Hizbullah in 2006. Thus, Washington hoped to resume before the end of Bush’s presidency its initiative in the Middle East, and to present to its allies what it has failed to do during the previous years (i.e., weakening the resistance and opposition movements). But the angry popular reaction to the siege of Gaza, the infiltration of Rafah crossing, and the heroic military confrontation of early 2008 demonstrate that the siege project is not as effective as some had expected and other wished.

Meanwhile, according to some Israeli analysts, the furious Palestinian, Arab and even international reactions against the siege of Gaza had triggered Israel to retreat from its defiance and threats.

#### *Fourth: Pakistan*

The Pakistani public opinion had always been antagonistic to Israel and supportive to the Palestinians and the Arabs. But the government and the official intelligence agencies had engaged in approaching Israel for a number of reasons: to cool down the increasing Israeli–Indian relations, to make inroads with the American–Israeli lobby as a means to win the USA to the Pakistani side and to guarantee the continuation of the American aid.

In return, Israel sent messages via the USA to Pakistan that it has no intention of attacking its nuclear installations, particularly as Pakistan assured Israel that it need not to be anxious by their existence and that it will not pass nuclear technology



to other countries.<sup>62</sup> However, according to some observers, Pakistan's strong alliance with the USA will deter any possible Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities. In August 2007, the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* maintained that Israel views nuclear Pakistan to be more dangerous than nuclear Iran, as the Pakistani weapon may fall in the hands of extremist groups.<sup>63</sup>

The Pakistani–Israeli relations are not limited to political meetings, but extended to joint security coordination. The Palestinian newspaper *al-Manar* had disclosed in January 2007 a meeting in the Chinese capital between the Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert and a Pakistani security official, which, the newspaper maintained, was within the existing security cooperation and coordination between Israel and Pakistan.<sup>64</sup>

The internal political developments in Pakistan had seemingly reflected on the country's relations with Israel. The heated competition between the Pakistani political leaders had been exploited in developing the relationship with Israel. Successive Pakistani leaders, like the late Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and General Pervez Musharraf, had all expressed their willingness to recognize Israel and establish diplomatic relations with it. But the furious and tense street reaction after any declaration of this kind had prevented the translation of these verbal utterances into concrete actions.

In view of the suspension of the peace process during the duration of the government of national unity, President Musharraf expressed his readiness to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians. He said, "If accepted by all parties as an impartial intermediary, I will certainly be able to play a major role." He also indicated his willingness to visit Israel and meet the Israeli leaders. In response, Mark Regev, the spokesman of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said, "We believe that moderate Islamic states, like Pakistan, may play an important role in consolidating peace in the Middle East."<sup>65</sup> With a possible invitation of Musharraf to act as an intermediary between Israel and the Palestinians in the background, a meeting was held between Israeli and Pakistani ambassadors to the United Nations.<sup>66</sup>

But this suggestion was not accepted by both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. The Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert turned down the offer of mediation, while Hamas and PIJ rejected Musharraf's initiative, on the grounds that it will not serve the Palestinian cause but leads to its further regression.<sup>67</sup>

On another vein, the former Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in Rawalpindi, on 27/11/2007, returned to Pakistan after she assured the USA and Israel that it would establish diplomatic relations with Israel once she assumes power.<sup>68</sup> After her demise, the Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert said that she would have been “a bridge between Israel and the Muslim world,”<sup>69</sup> while the Israeli President Shimon Peres commented that he had several opportunities to meet Bhutto, where she expressed her interest in what happens in Israel. He added that she expressed her desire to visit Israel when she assumes power in Pakistan, and that she was a courageous woman who never concealed her views, she did not know fear, and courageously served her people.<sup>70</sup>

On the Pakistani–Palestinian relations, Pakistan continued to call for collective effort to unite the Palestinian people. The Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Gaza events of June 2007, which had deepened the gulf between Fatah and Hamas, and triggered President Mahmud ‘Abbas to declare the state of emergency.<sup>71</sup>

### *Fifth: Other Muslim States*

Since the initiation of the peace project in the last decade of the twentieth century, Israel has been striving to build bridges with many Muslim countries. The Southeastern region is a particular target of Israel. Yitzhak Rabin was the first Israeli Premier to visit the most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, in December 1993.<sup>72</sup> Hence, he started a process of exchanged visits between Israel and Indonesia. The former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, visited Israel in 1994, after which he was appointed a member in the executive board of The Peres Center for Peace. In September 2000 Shimon Peres paid a secret visit to Indonesia in which he met successively the Minister of Foreign Affairs Alwi Shihab and President Wahid. Interestingly, this visit took place just one day before a scheduled visit of the late Palestinian President Yasir ‘Arafat to the country, at a time when Indonesia had patronized the Israeli position on what was shelved of the issue of Jerusalem in the then negotiations.<sup>73</sup>

The year 2007 witnessed a new round of Israeli visits to Indonesia, though not on the official level, but not less important than their predecessors. In April 2007, a Knesset delegate was invited to participate in the meeting of the International

Union of Parliaments, held in Indonesia. However, the spokesman of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kristiarto Legowo, justified this visit under the guise that, in line with the accepted practice, “the delegate was invited by the Union and not the Indonesian government.”<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, this visit provoked a chain of popular protest movements organized by Indonesian religious organizations and political parties. The Speaker of Indonesia People’s Consultative Assembly, Hidayat Nur Wahid, protested in the following strong words, “The invitation of a Knesset delegation to visit Indonesia, even though by an international organization and not an Indonesian side, is a flagrant insult to the sensibilities of millions of the Indonesians who adamantly refuse any form of relations with the Zionist entity.” In the same vein, deputy speaker of the House of Representatives, Dr. Sutarjo Suryoguritno, called for an international embargo on the members of the Knesset in protest of the aggressive Israeli actions against the Palestinians, amongst which was the arrest of the Speaker of the PLC, Dr. ‘Aziz Dweik and his colleagues.<sup>75</sup> Faced with this spiral of protest, the Knesset cancelled the participation of the delegate in the conference under the pretext of the huge expenses needed to protect the members of the delegation.<sup>76</sup>

In partial response to a 2006 conference funded by Iran which casted doubts on the Jewish Holocaust, the Indonesian island Bali hosted in mid June 2007 a conference of religious leaders, including some who had escaped the Holocaust, that was organized by the USA based Lib For All Foundation and the Museum of Tolerance (MOT) of Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC). During this conference, the former Indonesian President Wahid, who was also the patron of LibForAll Foundation, contested President Ahmadinejad’s insistence that “the holocaust was a myth,” by saying that this is “forgery of history,” and added, “I had personally visited Auschwitz Holocaust Museum, and saw many of the shoes of the killed in Auschwitz. Hence, I believe that the Holocaust did take place.”<sup>77</sup>

In December 2007, Simon Wiesenthal Center organized a visit to a delegation of Indonesian Islamic scholars to participate in the Jewish Lights Festival. The delegation also visited Sderot, Keryat Shmona settlements and *al-Buraq* Wall (the Western Wall/ Wailing Wall). In his speech, the director of the Center referred to the delegates as Muslims, but not extremists, and added, “We should not assume that all Muslim religious leaders are followers of Hamas.”<sup>78</sup>

On the Palestinian side, Indonesia planned early in 2007 to convene an international conference in which Hamas was scheduled to participate in order

to soften its position towards the international conditions. For this purpose, the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hassan Wirajuda, met on 4/2/2007 Khalid Mish'al, the head of Hamas Political Bureau, in Damascus and communicated to him the willingness of Indonesia to host a conference to settle the conflict between Fatah and Hamas. The minister also expressed his country's support to the government of national unity, respect to the outcome of the Palestinian elections, rejection to the siege and support to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.<sup>79</sup>

However, with the formation of the government of national unity in March 2007, Indonesia declared the postponement of the conference, which it had hoped to be "a bridge between Hamas on one side and the European Union and the USA on the other side that would stimulate a better understanding of Hamas in the West." Just after the formation of the government of national unity, the Minister of Foreign Affairs said in a press conference, "It is a reality that Hamas won a democratic, peaceful and fair elections, which demonstrate that nobody could underestimate the movement."<sup>80</sup> With regard to the political crisis that erupted after Hamas' decisive action in the GS and its aftermath, namely declaration of the state of emergency and the formation of an emergency government, Indonesia asserted the importance of a Palestinian reconciliation to overcome the crisis, and noting that the Palestinian parliament did not endorse the emergency government.<sup>81</sup>

The position of Malaysia towards the Palestinian issue remained consistent. The Malaysian government supported the formation of the Palestinian national government. During a visit by the president of Hamas' Political Bureau to Malaysia on 4/3/2007, Premier Abdullah Badawi openly called the international community to support the Palestinian government, and to lift the political and financial embargo on it.<sup>82</sup> Syed Hamid Albar, the Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, maintained that Israel has no right to impose conditions for dealing with this government, which, he added, it should respect.<sup>83</sup> Malaysia had also warned that the bloody fighting of June 2007 between Fatah and Hamas would weaken the Palestinian state itself. In this respect, Abdullah Badawi sadly noted, "While we were hoping to see a solid and united Palestinian people, they are fighting each other." Without such a unity, Badawi asserted, the Palestinians will remain weak and unable to confront the enemy.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

While being optimistic after Mecca Agreement, the Muslim world had plunged into a state of apathy and alienation because of the security chaos, the disintegration of the Palestinian front and Gaza events. The attitude of the Muslim world towards the Palestinian issue during the year 2007 remained basically the same as before. The political, economic and media interaction with the issue was less than the required, and the Palestinian schism had been instrumental in the regression of the official and popular support.

The Turkish government of the AKP had dealt with the Palestinian question during the course of the year 2007 with considerable caution for the sake of bypassing some domestic complexities, chiefly parliamentary and presidential elections. Moreover, it was keen to neutralize possible American–Israeli pressure on it through promoting relations with these two countries, or, at least, not to provoke them. This opened the way for the Israeli side to develop its political, economic and military relations with Turkey. The visits of Olmert and Peres to Turkey constituted landmarks in the year 2007, especially when the Israeli president was given the platform to address the Turkish parliament. However, Turkey tried to be even handed, though on a limited scale, through its unofficial hosting of Jerusalem conference, and the Turkish committee that investigated the Israeli violations at the footsteps of the the Mughrabi Gate of *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

Iran continued its policy of supporting Hamas and the government of national unity, and its understanding of the rationale of Hamas' military decisiveness in the GS. However, Iran had maintained its diplomatic contacts with the Palestinian presidency, and called for settling the differences through dialogue. At the same time, Iran rejected Annapolis peace conference and viewed it as part of the chain of conspiracy on the Palestinian issue. By this, Iran was in harmony with itself and the main directions of its foreign policy. Meanwhile, it tried to cautiously and efficiently face the complexities of its nuclear project and regional role, especially in Iraq, the Gulf and Lebanon.

During the year 2007, Pakistan was less engaged in the Palestinian affair and rather cool in its official enthusiasm to promote relations with Israel, largely because of its immerse preoccupation with the complexities and chaotic domestic affairs, particularly the elections and the rearrangement of the Pakistani political

map. Meanwhile, under immense spiral of enthusiasm for the Palestinian rights at the popular level, thanks to the growing influence of the Islamic movement, the Indonesian government took a number, but rather reserved political steps to interact with the Palestinian issue. This was probably behind the attempt of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to settle the schism between Fatah and Hamas, and its abortive attempts to convene an international conference in which Hamas would participate.

Israel did not succeed to achieve any meaningful breakthroughs in the Muslim world. However, equally, the Palestinians were not able to change the realities on the ground, or to lift the tight siege imposed on the people. The first step towards a Palestinian success is to put their house in order, and to unite themselves and their efforts in a national program of action that would effectively deal with the huge strategic reservoir that the Muslim world represents.

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