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Chapter Four

The Palestinian Issue and the Muslim World

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Introduction

The support of the Muslim states to the Palestinian issue remained during the year 2008 basically the same as in previous years. Though the tone of the moral support to the Palestinians had become louder within official and popular Muslim circles, particularly on the verge of the Israeli aggression on Gaza towards the end of the year, the Muslim states had once more failed to secure the means that would effectively stop the aggression or break the suffocating siege on the Strip, or even end the internal Palestinian schism.

This chapter addresses in some details the positions of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkey, and Iran towards the Palestinian issue during this year. It also surveys the positions of Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia towards the issue.

First: The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)

The OIC had essentially maintained during the year 2008 its previous position towards the Palestinian problems and concerns. The year had witnessed further deterioration in the already dangerous humanitarian conditions in Gaza, and by the end of the year Israel launched a total war on the Strip's civilians that engendered unprecedented catastrophic conditions. The OIC declared its customary "total support" to the inhabitants of Gaza, and, as in previous years, the Organization brought to the forefront the issues of the ongoing Israeli settlements in the Palestinian occupied lands, the Israeli provocation of the Palestinian people in the areas surroundings *al-Aqsa* Mosque and their excavations there that exposed the holy site to the danger of collapse. The OIC had also repeated its previous demand to hold Israel accountable before the international court of justice for its crimes against the Palestinian people, and it accused the western media of double standards when addressing the Palestinian crisis.

Ekmelleddin Ihsanoğlu, the secretary-general of the OIC, initialed the year by calling for a press conference on 8/1/2008 in which he condemned what he called “the Israeli inhuman attacks on the civilians in Gaza.” On 24/1/2008, the state-members of the OIC demanded in Geneva that the council for human rights inspects the humanitarian conditions in the occupied Palestinian lands. Meanwhile, in one of his press releases, the secretary-general of the organization drew attention to the problem of the closure of the frontier gates in Gaza, which caused great hardship to the inhabitants of the Strip, and called upon the United Nations to interfere to stop the Israeli attacks, and to lift the oppressive Israeli siege on Gaza. On 3/2/2008, the executive committee of the OIC held an emergency meeting at the level of the ministers of foreign affairs to discuss the latest developments in Palestine, especially the imposed siege on GS. In fact, throughout the year 2008 the OIC kept reminding the international community of its responsibilities towards the people of Gaza. The secretary-general called upon “the Quartet, the Security Council, the secretary-general of the United Nations and the European Union to immediately stop the Israeli attacks and to take the suitable and necessary steps to protect the Palestinian people.”¹

In an earlier declaration, on 20/1/2008, Ihsanoğlu commended the efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to bridge the gap between the Palestinian factions, particularly Hamas and the PA. In response to a question, the secretary-general maintained that efforts are ongoing to resolve the conflict between the two sides on the basis of Mecca Agreement that had been patronized by the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ihsanoğlu had also casually commended the efforts of the Egyptian president in this respect. However, the OIC had apparently refrained from publicly discussing the issue of the failure of Mecca Agreement concluded between Hamas and the PA, and the reasons for the failure of the international community to recognize it and make it a platform for the incorporation of Hamas in the political process. In other words, the OIC did not conduct an internal investigation to explore the reasons for the failure of this agreement to achieve any meaningful progress on the Palestinian issue.

Nonetheless, the OIC continued its verbal condemnations of all the Israeli violations of the rights of the Palestinian people and the international law. In the above declaration, Ihsanoğlu condemned the Israeli measures of collective punishment against the Palestinian people. In another press release, he accused Israel of fabricating obstacles to obstruct the peace process with the Palestinians

through the construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and the division of the Palestinian lands into small and isolated islands, which would lead to the acquisition by Israel of more Palestinian lands, and the destruction of the geographical unity of historical Palestine. Ihsanoğlu had also indicated the importance of documenting all these Israeli criminal acts, and to submit reports on them to the concerned international institutions and organizations. He specifically mentioned the Israeli plans to build 121 settlement units in Jabal Abu Ghunaym and 763 others in the region of Pisgat Ze'ev east of Jerusalem. Oğlu also called international organizations, like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to shoulder their responsibilities in maintaining and preserving the historical sites in the region.

Ihsanoğlu cautioned against the dangers that *al-Aqsa* Mosque is experiencing due to the Israeli excavations beneath its foundations, which had actually led on 15/2/2008 to a collapse near to Qaytbay's fountain (*Sabil Qaytbay*) in the courtyards of the Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Qudsi*).² He also drew attention to the Israeli attempts to build a synagogue on the lands of an Islamic endowment (*Waqf*),³ and, at the same time, condemned the infiltration and closure of the *Aqsa* foundation by the Israeli authorities on 24/8/2008, when they confiscated all its properties and contents, including documents, maps and cash. In another development, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) of the OIC deplored the Israeli action of destroying the historical al-'Umari Mosque in Um Tuba village -situated south east of Jerusalem- which was built 700 years ago. Furthermore, UNESCO called the international community to press Israel to retract its decision in compliance with the Geneva convention and the decision of the UNESCO's heritage committee. In another declaration, the secretary-general of the OIC strongly condemned the Israeli decision to obliterate Ma'man Allah cemetery in Jerusalem, which was built on an Islamic endowment piece of land.

Throughout the year, the OIC had persistently expressed its frustration towards the catastrophic humanitarian conditions in GS, and it kept sending aid to the Strip via the representative of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In collaboration with organizations such as the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the Islamic Fund, the Red Crescent societies and its member-states, the OIC organized at least trice a year caravans of trucks loaded with basic necessities, such as food and medicine, to the inhabitants of

Gaza. But the Organization did not seem to have asked itself whether this aid was enough for the 1.5 million persons in Gaza.

In a meeting between the relevant officials of the OIC and their counterparts of UNRWA, dated 22/4/2008, the former told the latter of their project to rebuild Nahr al-Bared camp in Lebanon. The Organization's official journal reported that the Lebanese government, the World Bank and UNRWA had organized on 23/6/2008 in Geneva a conference of the states' donors to rebuild Nahr al-Bared's Palestinian refugee camp.⁴

In an interview in March 2008 with *Annahar* newspaper, the secretary-general of the OIC accused western media of being biased against the Palestinian people. To support his argument, he gave the example of the operation against the Talmud school in Jerusalem, the western media usually do not report the inhuman and deliberate acts of killings that the Israeli military forces commit against the civilians, be them children, women or the elderly. He demanded that Israel be held responsible and tried for the crimes that it committed against the Palestinians. Oğlu took this opportunity to remind everybody that Islam rejects targeting civilians and children.

Additionally, the weekly bulletin of the OIC reported in its issue of 14/4/2008 that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia donated during the Third Extraordinary Summit of the OIC, held in Mecca, a 40 thousand meters' piece of land in Jeddah to build the headquarters of the Organization. It is worth mentioning that it was originally suggested during the founding meeting of the OIC in 1969 that the Organization's headquarter be in Jerusalem, but since the sacred town has been under occupation it was temporarily shifted to Jeddah.

On 14/5/2008, and during the 60th anniversary of the 1948 Catastrophe (*Nakba*), the secretary-general of the OIC issued a declaration that expressed the Organization's total support to the Palestinian people, and reminded the Muslims and others that the "state of Israel" had forcefully proclaimed its "independence" through the expulsion of hundreds of thousands Palestinians from their lands and those of their ancestors. Oğlu had, moreover, mentioned the refugees' right of return to their homes, and to build a sovereign state with Jerusalem as its capital. Furthermore, the OIC reminded the international community of its obligations towards this issue, which are spelled out in international law and in the resolutions of the United Nations.

On the 39th anniversary of *al-Aqsa*'s arson, which was the direct factor for the foundation of the OIC, Oğlu issued on 21/8/2008 another statement that condemned Israel's indifference to international law and the United Nation's resolutions on the Palestinian issue. He emphasized the Israeli continuous violations of the Palestinian rights through their excavations in the neighboring districts of the sacred mosque, the ongoing construction of the separation wall, the erection of barricades and checkpoints that separate communities from each other and the imposition of restrictions on the entry of the Muslim worshipers to Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

During its two-day summit, held in the Senegalese capital Dhaka during the period 13-14/3/2008, the OIC issued resolutions that reiterated its traditional support to the Palestinian people. One of these resolutions concentrated on the alarming deterioration of the humanitarian conditions in Gaza, and called for a permanent settlement to this tragedy through the implementation of the provisions of the Arab initiative that was articulated in the Beirut summit of 2002, and which called for the establishment of a secured Palestinian state on the pre-1967 territories. The resolution reminded that this initiative was once more endorsed in the Riad summit of March 2007, which also called for the implementation of the United Nation's resolutions on this issue. The final communiqué of the above OIC summit extended profuse thanks to the Moroccan King Muhammad VI for "his support to the Palestinian issue via his portfolio as the chairperson of Jerusalem committee," and to his Jordanian counterpart King Abdullah II for his success in "including the Palestinian issue in the agenda of international bodies." The communiqué also supported the call of the Egyptian President Husni Mubarak "to the Palestinian factions to settle their differences once and for all." But it dismissed the Palestinian-Lebanese group, known as "Fatah al-Islam", as a terrorist organization, and expressed "support to the efforts of the Lebanese government to rebuild the camp of Nahr al-Bared and to encourage the return of the inhabitants to it."⁵ The two-day Kampala meeting, 18-20/6/2008, of the foreign ministers of the OIC members repeated the Organization's same recommendations on the Palestinian issue.

On the Israeli aggression on Gaza towards the end of 2008, the OIC had once more expressed its support to the Palestinian people in general and the Gazans in particular. It also held on 31/12/2008 a meeting on the ambassadorial level in Gaza to prepare for an emergency meeting of the Organization's extended executive committee, scheduled on 3/1/2009. However, apart from this verbal support, the

OIC had on the whole failed throughout the year 2008 to extend any meaningful or tangible support to the Palestinian people, whose conditions had, in fact, continued to deteriorate in comparison to previous years. Ironically, the resolutions of the OIC reiterated profound thanks to its member-states for their “appreciated services to the Palestinians” at a time when the Organization had failed to even include in the agenda of the meeting of the foreign ministers of its member-states the demand of the Muslim masses that the Egyptian government opens Rafah gate in order to ease the suffocating Israeli siege on Gaza. According to many experts, the extreme hardship that the Palestinian people suffered was not only due to the siege but also because of the closure of Rafah, which led to the anger and fury of the Muslim masses all over the world. This position demonstrated that the OIC was more of an official organization that was concerned with the sensitivities of the governing regimes than a popular body that reflects the aspirations of the people that it represented. Moreover, it was a reflection of the profound weakness and flaccidness of the ruling regimes in the Muslim world.

Second: Turkey

Turkey’s relations with both Palestine and Israel were during the year 2008 rather different from those of the proceeding two years, i.e. 2006 and 2007. While Turkish-Palestinian relations were rather cool by the beginning 2008, they had become much warmer by the end of the year. Conversely, the Turkish-Israeli relations were much warmer in early 2008 than previously, but had been severely strained by early 2009 largely because of the Israeli aggression on Gaza towards the end of 2008.

1. The Palestinian Track

After a long siege of Gaza, Israel launched by the beginning of the first quarter of 2008 a ferocious attack on the Strip that was characterized by violent aerial and land attacks, which caused many casualties, both dead and wounded.

In continuation of its previous support to the cause of the Palestinians, Turkey took a very firm stand against this Israeli aggression. The Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the conditions in Gaza as a “humanitarian crisis” by saying:

We are confronting a human tragedy, and I find it difficult to understand what is going on there, as there would be no justification whatsoever for a collective punishment of two million persons under the guise of stopping rocket attacks. Our friends in Israel should understand that by their siege and indiscriminate punishment of all the people they serve the cause of the marginal-extremist elements.⁶

Erdoğan's position provoked bitter Israeli criticism. The head of the Turkish Department in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the Turkish ambassador Namik Tan to the Ministry, where he protested against what he called Erdoğan's bad declarations that caused a lot of apathy, particularly so because they were voiced at a time when Israel was trying to block in the United States the law of the Armenian genocide. He added, "We were expecting Turkey that fights terrorism to support Israel against terrorism."⁷

Moreover, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a proclamation in which it expressed its deep concern for the siege imposed on Gaza, which serves nobody but the extremist elements, and called for its immediate lifting. Meanwhile, *Haartz* newspaper minuted that the Israeli-Turkish relations were seriously strained during "the last two days".⁸

During Davos Forum (World Economic Forum), the Turkish minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Babacan met the Israeli premier Shimon Perez on 26/1/2008, where he told him that the continuation of the siege on Gaza and the division of Palestine into two parts, i.e. GS and the WB, threatens the peace process that was agreed upon in Annapolis conference.

On 23/1/2008, the Turkish Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People (MAZLUMDER) organized a demonstration in front of the Israeli embassy in Ankara in protest of the siege. The demonstrators expressed their fury through extensive blowing of whistles, and by speeches that described Israel as the "largest terrorist organization in the world." They also criticized the Egyptian government that "imposes a siege on Gaza exactly like Israel," and called for 2008 to be the year of supporting the Palestinian people.

The strong Turkish official and public reaction against the Israeli siege of Gaza, which had seriously strained the relations between the two countries, was a primary factor for postponing a visit to Ankara that Ehud Barak, the Israeli minister of Defense, had scheduled on 11/2/2008 to promote military cooperation between the two countries.

On the renewal of the siege on Gaza, Erdoğan contacted on 2/3/2008 the president of the PA, Mahmud ‘Abbas, demanding that he resumes “the peace dialogue today and before tomorrow.” In the next day, Erdoğan contacted the Israeli premier Olmert to protest against the totally unacceptable siege, and to call upon him to resume the peace process.

On 4/3/2008, several trade unions and humanitarian organizations assembled in front of the Israeli embassy in Ankara to express their dismay against the Israeli operations in Gaza. The president of the Government Employees’ Trade Union, Ahmed Akso, described the developments in Gaza as genocide and an oppression committed by Israel, with the active support of the USA and Europe, against the Palestinian people. Akso called for the trial of Perez and Olmert as war criminals, and demanded the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador from Israel. Moreover, the demonstrators raised banners of condemnation to Israel, and pictures of the Palestinian dead.

On 5/3/2008, a group of youngsters affiliated to a professional trade union organized a protest assembly in front of the Israeli consulate in the Levent district of Istanbul. Speeches delivered on this occasion dismissed Israel as a terrorist state that practices genocide against the inhabitants of Gaza, called for the boycott of the Israeli products and investments and placed black rosemary on the gate of the consulate. Another protest movement against Israel was organized in Sapanca district of Sakarya province. Moreover, following the Friday prayer of 7/3/2008, the worshipers organized a demonstration in Kayseri city that condemned the Israeli aggression against Gaza, and the inability of the Muslim world to confront it, and prayed a prayer for the deceased in absence (*al-Gha’ib*) for the souls of the dead of Gaza. A similar demonstration was organized after a Friday prayer in Ulu Mosque of Diyar-Bekr in south east Turkey. Concurrently, four trucks loaded with Turkish donations of food and medicine to the value of half a million dollars reached Gaza, and the Turkish Red Crescent managed to deliver aid in the warehouses of its Palestinian counterpart in Tal al-Hawa.

The Israeli siege and massacres in Gaza by the beginning of 2008 culminated towards the end of the year in a widespread aggression that started with the massacre of 27/12/2008. The initial raids lead to the death of not less than 200 Palestinians, whose numbers increased to several hundreds in the subsequent few days because of the aerial bombardment.

Turkey angrily reacted to this aggression, both on the official and popular levels. The infuriated premier Erdoğan saw in this aggression “lack of respect to Turkey” and in the whole military operation against Gaza a blow to international peace. He furiously added, “The killing of helpless innocents, women and children, the destruction of houses and the use of extensive power are all totally unacceptable.”

Moreover, Erdoğan reiterated his fury by saying, “By mediating between Syria and Israel, Turkey volunteered to remove the predicaments that faced the negotiations between the two sides,” and bitterly added, “Three or four days ago, the Israeli premier Ehud Olmert came to Turkey to explore the possibility of a fifth round of negotiations. Nonetheless, this operation against Gaza followed, which clearly demonstrates lack of respect to Turkey. I am compelled to say this. This is a long term operation, the death and destruction is a serious humanitarian crime.”

Besides reminding of the declaration issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on this serious development, Erdoğan added, “As a state that has important contribution in the peace process, we will convey our justified reaction to the whole world.”

Meanwhile, in a contact with Ban Ki-Moon, Erdoğan reminded the United Nations’ secretary-general of the crucial necessity of quick intervention to stop the aggression, and added:

The entire humankind should know the dimension of this tragic situation... It should be known that this kind of operation does not serve the cause of peace... These operations, which came at a time when we were concentrating our efforts for peace, to open new avenues for negotiations and to have a common peace strategy, had, no doubt, serious repercussions on the peace efforts.

He continued to say that these operations, which had provoked widespread anger in the Muslim world, can never resolve the problems of the region. He minuted, “I wish that the non-Muslim world approach this problem in a more sensitive manner. We should not forget that violence breeds violence.”

Erdoğan called upon Israel to correct this mistake by stopping its aerial operations immediately. He said that Turkey “will firmly continue extending assistance to our Palestinian brothers,” and demanded that the international community end its apathy towards this humanitarian tragedy. Moreover, he begged God’s mercy to the Palestinian dead and quick recovery to the wounded and expressed Turkey’s readiness to treat the wounded in its hospitals.

Turkish sources attributed Erdoğan's anger with Israel to a visit that its premier Olmert paid to Turkey on 18/12/2008, just nine days before the aggression on Gaza, where he assured both the Premier and the President -respectively Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül- that Gaza will not experience a humanitarian catastrophe. This flat lie and violation of Olmert's undertaking was viewed by the Turks as deceit and humiliation to them, and a belittlement to their country's role as an intermediary between Syria and Israel. Moreover, it placed Turkey in the awkward position of allegedly knowing the aggression in advance, even agreeing to it. To demonstrate his fury and disappointment with Israel, Erdoğan suspended all contacts with Olmert.

Another official Turkish move in the direction of their support to the Palestinians was a declaration by the Turkish National Security Council, issued on 30/12/2008, which called for the immediate cessation of the Israeli military operations against Gaza, and urged the Palestinians, both Fatah and Hamas, to unite.

As a result of the Turkish firm opposition to the Israeli operation, the Egyptian minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Abu al-Ghayt, arrived at Ankara on 29/12/2008 to explore the possibility of Turkish mediation in the current crisis. Hence, it was decided that Erdoğan visits Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, starting from 31/12/2008.

Some observers viewed Abu al-Ghait's visit to Ankara as a diplomatic move to find an exist from the Arab fiasco, particularly so as Egypt was unable to play the role of an intermediary after its stand against Hamas and refusal to open Rafah Crossing, which had in effect tightened the Israeli siege on the Gazan people. Thus, Egypt had presumably hoped that the Turkish mediation would provide a viable alternative. However, some Turkish sources had, on the other side, claimed that Egypt tried through its minister's visit to persuade Turkey not to go too far in its criticism of Israel and support to Hamas, as this would embarrass the Arabs who, directly or indirectly, support the Israeli position.

In a drive to secure an immediate cease fire, open the crossings and send humanitarian assistance to Gaza, Erdoğan started at the end of 2008 an Arab tour to Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where he also met Mahmud 'Abbas in Jordan and Khalid Mish'al in Syria. But he failed, and on his return to Turkey on 4/1/2009 issued bitter criticism of Israel's barbaric operation of 3/1/2009. In a public speech in Anatolia in Southern Turkey, Erdoğan said that the sufferings

of the Gazan people will not be forgotten, and that “he will always be on the side of the oppressed.” He added, “Israel caused through its excessive use of force a humanitarian tragedy... The tears of children and helpless women and mothers will not be forfeited, the oppressors will drown in these tears.”⁹ In a subsequent statement, Erdoğan viewed Israel’s massacres as a stigma for Israel, and that the Israelis will never escape from the trial and conviction of history.

On his part, the Turkish President Abdullah Gül condemned the Israeli aggression, which he described as “oppression personified,” and added that it hurts the heart of every human being. However, he, on the other side, made it clear to the leaders of Hamas that he opposes the launching of rockets.

The position of the Turkish minister of Justice Mehmet Ali Şahin, voiced on 3/1/2009, is worth of special attention, as he described Israel as “the number one instigator of international terrorism,” and added, “As long as this instigation prevails, the battle against terrorism is doomed to fail.” He added that the word “massacres” is an understatement of what is really going on the ground, that Turkey should bear its historical responsibility, and that Erdoğan (Premier Recep Tayyip) should rush from one place to another to find a solution to this crisis.¹⁰ Since Turkey had been by early 2009 a non-permanent member of the Security Council for two successive years, Erdoğan undertook this opportunity to convey to the Council the position and views of Hamas.

The Turkish position versus the aggression on Gaza may be summarized in the following:

- Immediate cessation of fire by both Israel and Hamas.
- Opening of all the gates to Gaza.
- To send humanitarian aid into the Strip.

On the popular level, all kinds of protests, e.g. demonstrations and sit-ins, dominated all Turkish towns, which asked for the stoppage of the aggression and the massacre. The biggest of all these protest movements was a one-million demonstration on 4/1/2009 in Çağlayan Square of Istanbul that was organized by Necmettin Erbakan’s Party, the Turkish Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*), and more than 150 non-governmental organizations. The angry protesters repeated the slogans of death to Israel and America, and demanded that the Turkish army defend Gaza. They raised pictures of Bush and Olmert, which they stormed with shoes in imitation of the bold act of the Iraqi journalist Muntazir al-Zaydi, who threw his

shoes on the American President George Bush during his visit to Baghdad towards the end of 2008. Moreover, prayers for the deceased in absence (*al-Gha'ib*) were held for the souls of the dead of Gaza, and writers and journalists urged their government to abolish all bilateral treaties with Israel, and to prohibit Israeli planes from flying over the skies of Anatolia for training. And one of the most prominent repercussions of the aggression was the dissolution of the Turkish-Israeli Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group, from which all member-MPs resigned.

Besides, a group of Turkish women, under the name “assembled women”, issued a declaration that had asked the Turkish president to specifically do his utmost best to urge Egypt to end the sufferings of the Gazan people, and to stop turning the Strip into another Auschwitz camp (in reference to a Nazi concentration camp of Jewish detainees in Poland during the second world war), or a new Srebrenica Massacre (in reference to a major massacre of Muslims in Bosnia). This open letter to the President, which was pioneered by some Turkish women professors, researchers, journalists and writers, minuted the following:

Gaza, which has completely been isolated from the outside world for 17 months, is drifting step by step towards a new genocide because of power cut that has been in place for a month. The bakeries are out of service and the people of Gaza have no bread or medicine because of the siege. Gaza is virtually isolated, it reached its limit, and it is living in front of the world once again in a big Auschwitz. We are calling the conscience of all the silent people of the world or their representatives to be a witness to this catastrophe. What crime did the people of Gaza commit to be killed, left alone hungry, subjected to torture and deprived of the bare minimum for their livelihood?.

We do not want a new Srebrenica or Auschwitz.

Besides, this is a catastrophe that is not resulting from what happened in five or ten days, but from months of misery. For the nation to avoid guilty conscious and to stop being ashamed of itself, we call upon you to gallantly defend Gaza. Honourable President, we the signatories ask you to initiate a quick diplomatic move to save the Gazan people from this barbaric attack, and to approach the Egyptian government to open the frontiers with Gaza to secure supply of clean water, medicine and other necessities.¹¹

Several opinion polls revealed the negative image of Israel in the eyes of the Turkish populace. The outcome of an opinion poll conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), published on 1/4/2008, revealed that 78% of the Turkish people do not like Israel, and only 11% do so.

Another opinion poll conducted in September 2008 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States showed that the Palestinians are the most loved people by the Turks (44%), while the Israelis came at the bottom of the list (only 8%).¹²

One of the symptoms of the fury of the Turks with Israel was an unprecedented event in the history of the Turkish-Israeli relations, whereby the president of Istanbul University, Mesut Parlak, had virtually expelled from his office the Israeli Ambassador and Consul General, respectively Gabby Levy and Mordechai Amichai. Mesut Parlak had, in fact, ended a meeting with the Israeli diplomats, scheduled at 3:30 p.m. on 22/11/2008, before it started.

According to a report on the incident in the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet*, the details given by Parlak were as follow:

They came, and I stood up to meet them at the door of my office. I and the Israeli ambassador sat down, but I realized the presence in the office of two tall men. When I asked who they were, the ambassador said that they are his bodyguard. I asked them to leave the room, but one of them hurriedly rushed in. Hence, I said to the ambassador: You are the one who asked for the appointment, but, under these circumstances, the meeting is over, and I thank you for coming. Then I saw them off to the stairs, saying, if you are that frightened why did you visit in the first place? And added, excuse me this is not a colony. This is the Republic of Turkey. Here is Istanbul University.

This incident was extensively reported in the Israeli press. Under the title “Senior Israeli diplomats expelled from Istanbul University,” *Haartez* newspaper wrote in the following day of the incident that the Israeli diplomats did not abide by the customary rules in universities where security inside universities is the responsibility of the Turks, and claimed that the university president told the diplomats that his university is not occupied territories for them to behave as they wished.

The newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported that the Israeli Foreign Ministry confirmed the incident. It added that the previous week was a bad omen for Israel, as this incident was preceded by “Oxford incident”, where the students there shouted in the face of the Israeli president that he is a war criminal.

Generally, it may be said that Turkey had adhered during the year 2008 to the crux of its previous support to the Palestinians, both on the official and popular levels. Nonetheless, it may be noted that the government of Turkey did not undertake during the year any new economical projects in the Bank or the Strip,

nor did it present any fresh and serious initiative to mediate between the Authority of 'Abbas and Hamas. Perhaps this retraction was due to the preoccupation of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*-AKP) throughout the first half of 2008 with the case against it in the constitutional court, in addition to Turkey's military conflict with the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*-PKK) that was resumed on a wide scale during the course of 2008.

2. The Israeli Track

The most prominent aspect of the Turkish involvement in the Middle East was on the Israeli track, specifically indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel via a Turkish intermediary. Turkey's good relations with both Israel and Syria qualified it for this role.

But it should be noted right from the beginning that Turkey was not the initiator of these negotiations, rather the idea was originally thrown by the Israeli Premier Olmert early in 2007, and amongst calls in Israel for his trial because of the failure in the July 2006 war on Lebanon, which led to the formation of the Winograd Commission. By his proposal of negotiations with Syria, Olmert may have thus hoped to counter his excessively deteriorating prestige and image inside Israel by a probable spectacular achievement in the Syrian front; or he may have felt that it is impossible to achieve victory against the resistance forces in Lebanon or the region at large, specifically Hizbullah, without distancing Syria from Iran and Hizbullah through a deal that allows the Syrian regime to resume sovereignty over the whole of the Golan Heights.

However, these negotiations could not have possibly started without an Israeli undertaking of total withdrawal from the Golan that was communicated to Syria early in 2008 via Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Turkish mediator and advisor of the prime minister. With this presumed concession, Syria agreed to start in April 2008 indirect negotiations with Israel under Turkish patronage. In fact, up to the summer of 2008, four rounds of these negotiations were conducted, but hence they were not resumed because of the resignation of the head of the Israeli negotiation delegation.

Besides being not the initiator of this complex intermission, Turkey did not offer any ideas during the rounds of negotiations, but, as emphasized by both the Turkish mediator and Riad Daoudi, the head of the Syrian negotiation delegation, it was simply satisfied by communicating the ideas of each delegation to the other. Turkey seemed to have been justifiably worried that these negotiations may

collapse. By the end of May 2008, the Turkish premier had vividly said that the real danger for these negotiations comes from the deteriorating position of Olmert within his own cabinet, which proved to be true as Olmert was forced to submit his resignation towards the end of the summer of 2008, and early parliamentary elections were scheduled on 10/2/2009. Nonetheless, Turkey had surprisingly renewed its effort to activate these negotiations by receiving on 22/12/2008 the resigning Olmert at that very delicate time when there was no official and stable government in Israel.

The Israeli aggression on Gaza on 27/12/2008 had infuriated Erdoğan against Israel in general and Olmert in particular because the latter had just deceitfully assured the Turkish government that Gaza will not be attacked and negotiations would be resumed with Syria. That's why Erdoğan's conviction came firm considering the attack on Gaza an insult to Turkey, and that it would have serious and alarming repercussions on the Turkish mediation. Few days later, the Turkish minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Babacan, said that under these conditions the resumption of the peace process between Syria and Israel is virtually impossible.

Notwithstanding Turkish enthusiasm to this intermission, which would certainly give it more influence and prestige in the region, all Turks were convinced that these negotiations were doomed to failure. For Israel was not ready for peace, but had agreed to the negotiations for tactical reasons only, and The Syrian President Bashar al-Asad had himself said that he wanted direct American patronage to these negotiations on the termination of the administration of George Bush. Moreover, Turkey was unable to impose any ideas, had no leverage on the negotiators, and could not guarantee the implementation of any agreement that the two sides may conclude. Thus, these negotiations were in effect time consuming and transitory in nature, awaiting political changes that may result from the presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively in the USA and Israel. However, there was no logistic or geographic harm in continuing the Turkish intermission at that time when neither the USA nor the European Union were in a position to do so, be that in relation to Israel, Iran or around some controversial issues with the west.

Meanwhile, military cooperation between Turkey and Israel continued in various ways and manners: exchange of visits of military experts at the levels of ministers of Defense or commanders of the naval and air forces, joint air and naval military maneuvers in which the USA participated, and intelligence cooperation between the two countries on the Kurdish and other issues.

Turkey had also striven to purchase from Israel the Heron pilotless planes. Many rounds of negotiations were conducted to test their practical feasibility, though we know that one had crashed in Turkey in December 2008 during a trial test. However, it is not known whether or not Turkey would pursue purchasing these planes.

The “Century’s Project”

The Israeli minister of Infrastructure Benyamin Ben Eliezer and the Turkish minister of Energy Hilmi Güler had formulated in Turkey on 16/8/2008 a comprehensive plan for the so-called “Century’s Project”. Being the most important joint economic project, which had political implications for the relations between the two countries for the year 2008, this enterprise plans to construct a pipeline from the Turkish port Ceyhan in the Mediterranean Sea to the Israeli port Ashkelon in order to secure the flow of petrol, gas, electricity and water to Israel. More importantly, it will connect with the current pipeline between Ashkelon and Eilat, and then transporting these products via naval trucks to India and the countries of East Asia. The plan is to secure the necessary funds, and hence complete the construction of the pipeline within three years.

The proposed pipeline is practically an extension of the present one between Samsun on the Black Sea and Ceyhan, and it will in essence transport petrol and natural gas from both Samsun-Ceyhan and Baku-Ceyhan pipelines. This requires that Israel concludes treaties with each of Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkestan to transport petrol and gas via Ceyhan-Ashkelon pipeline.

Minister Güler mentioned that:

This proposed pipeline is not just an economic enterprise but a contribution towards stability and peace in the region. The products that it carries are needed in the region. If we succeed in this enterprise, then we and Israel would substantially contribute in the development, stability and happiness in the region. This is not a bilateral project with Israel, but a multiple one.

Güler added that the preliminary preparations for this pipeline will take ten months, and it will be completed within three years. The annual capacity of the pipeline is about 40 million tons of petrol and the cost of its construction is \$6 billion. On his part Eliezer said “This is a major success,” by which Turkey and Israel will contribute in the peace process in the region.

While accompanying the Turkish prime minister in a visit to India in the Autumn of 2008, Güler said that India will be a partner in this project that will be of use to it. He added that it will reduce the pressure of oil tankers on the Straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelle, and transport petrol to India in 19 instead of 46 days, the latter figure been the duration of the journey from Gibraltar to the Cape of Good Hope. The minister continued to say that the pipeline will be a turning point in the Indian-Turkish relations, and, if completed, it will be a major factor in strengthening the Turkish-Israeli relations, consolidate the presence of Israel in the Middle East, and strengthen its relations with the world, including India, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkestan and some of the South Eastern countries.

In another vein, and within the Turkish privatization drive of 2008, Israeli quarters and companies purchased some Turkish institutions. The volume of trade between Turkey and Israel increased in 2008 compared to the previous year 2007. For Turkish exports to Israel increased from \$1.61 billion to \$1.83 billion, respectively in 2007 to 2008, i.e. an increase of 13.6%, while Turkish imports from Israel shot from \$1.2 billion to 1.62 billion in the same years, i.e. a substantial increase of 35.1% (see table 1/4).¹³

Factors for Cooperation with Israel

Some factors were instrumental in strengthening the relations between Turkey and Israel during the course of the year 2008, of which the most prominent was the violent eruption of the military confrontation between the Turkish forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Hence, Turkey felt the need for some important Israeli weapons, such as pilotless planes and night periscopes, as well as intelligence information to detect the movements of the Kurdish fighters. The more acute the Turkish-Kurdish conflict becomes the louder would be the demands of the Turkish generals, but not necessarily the political authority, for closer contacts between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

The Turkish mediation between Syria and Israel may have been another factor for controlling the reaction of Turkey towards the policies of Israel, and also for strengthening its relations with it for the sake of success to this mediation. But the Israeli aggression on Gaza towards the end of 2008 had severely shaken the Turkish hopes in the Israeli desire to continue the peace process, and thus to achieve a major Turkish regional, even global, success in this direction.

Being convinced that its relations with Israel constitutes a key element for pressure on the White House, Turkey felt the need for the Jewish lobby in America to dismiss US congress resolution on Armenian genocide, which had gained momentum by the end of 2007 and during 2008.

Another important factor that engendered the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP*) to have better relations with Israel was the domestic difficulties that the party experienced during the year 2008, particularly the case that was filed against it in the constitutional court. This dangerous issue, coupled with the government's extensive drive to rally international support, particularly in Britain and the USA, made the party keen not to expose its relations with the West, and therefore Israel too, to any kind of strain in order not to further weaken its already weak internal position.

Thus, despite the considerable strain in the relations between Turkey and Israel towards the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, these relations are expected to be good in future due to their complexity and the need of each side to the support of the other in some inherited issues. Particularly so with regard to Israel which can not afford to loose such a big Muslim country like Turkey irrespective of the negative positions that the Turkish government might take against it. Similarly, Turkey needs Israel as a source for some necessities that it does not have, and or to help it in addressing some complicated issues such as the Kurdish and Armenian questions, armament or entry to the European Union.

As for the Palestinian arena, the official Turkish position would remain emotionally and practically supportive to the Palestinian people as long as the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP*) remains in power. Turkey will never hesitate to be part of any solution or settlement to the crisis in Gaza and Palestine in general, particularly so as such a role will not be opposed by both the Palestinians and Israel. But Turkey's aspiration to have a pioneering role in the efforts of reconciliation between the PA and Hamas on one side, or in a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians on the other side may not materialize in the current status of disarray in the Arab world, and where the Israeli settlement project and rejection of a just peace settlement continues to be in place. But Turkey would, no doubt, continues to be needed by all, be it the Palestinians, or along the Israeli-Palestinian or the Israeli-Syrian tracks, at least on the logistic side.

Third: Iran

The year 2008 was undoubtedly the year of Gaza, in which Arab, Islamic and international solidarity with Palestine against the Israeli aggression. The year started with a political, economic and trade embargo on Gaza, its people and political forces, particularly Hamas that controlled the Strip since 2007; and ended by a brutal war in which hundreds killed, mostly children and women.

In line with its anti-Israel policy and support to Hamas in particular and the resistance in general, Iran had, naturally and since the beginning of the siege, condemned Israel and its policies. In response to the Israeli warnings that it will assassinate the Palestinian premier Isma'il Haniyyah, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad accused the Israeli regime of practicing terrorism, and condemned the western powers, the so-called human right activists and claimants of freedom for their "shameless silence versus these threats against a democratically elected leader."¹⁴ In most of the occasions in which President Ahmadinejad spoke on Israel and the Palestinian issue, he never hesitated to reiterate and emphasize his position that the "Zionist entity lost the philosophy of its existence," that "support to the Palestinians is a religious obligation," and that the "Zionists will earn nothing out of their criminal acts and had no way but to eventually submit to the will of the Palestinians," whom he urged "to be patient and trust in the support of Allah."¹⁵ What the Iranian president meant by criminal acts was the siege on one side and the continuous bombardments and assassinations in Gaza on the other side. The siege had, in fact, provided an opportunity for the Iranian leaders to reiterate their position versus the Israel. Hence President Ahmadinejad called upon the west "to accept the end of the Zionist ideology sooner or later," and advised western states to forgo the Israel, which had "virtually ended," and added, "Those who support the criminal Zionists should know that the days of the occupiers are numbered."¹⁶

The Iranian news agency reported that Manouchehr Mohammadi, deputy foreign minister for Education and Research, emphasized: "There are no two states in Palestine, the international community has no option but the continuation of the crimes of the Zionist entity or to accept the plebiscite." He, furthermore, described, "The developments and Zionist violations in Palestine as the most important event in the Middle East and for the Islamic Ummah and the world."¹⁷ In the same vein, the Iranian minister of Defense, Brigadier General Mustafa Najjar,

emphasized, “The crimes that Israel commits in Gaza, with American support and total international indifference, are a vivid evidence of the double standard of the international community.”¹⁸

With the continuation of the suffocating siege and the aggravation of the human tragedy in Gaza, the Iranian position developed from concentration on the Israeli massacres of the Palestinian people to calls for the eradication of Israel and for a plebiscite to determine the status of Palestine and the Palestinian people. The Iranian verbal protest against the siege developed into a call to break it, and the direct accusation of the USA of implicit cooperation with Israel to kill the Palestinians. Iran had initially urged Egypt to cooperate in extending aid to the Palestinians, but subsequently accused it of supporting the Israeli siege on Gaza. This led to a considerable tension in the Iranian-Egyptian relations to such an extent that diplomatic representation between the two countries has been suspended till today, unlike the case with all other Arab states. The two countries exchanged harsh words -even accusations- over the events in Gaza, the reasons for the siege and the position towards Hamas and the Israeli aggression on Gaza. The events in Gaza had engendered the following Iranian positions:

1. The call for an urgent Islamic meeting to discuss the crimes of Israel. The Iranian minister of Foreign Affairs, Manouchehr Mottaki demanded that the secretary - general of OIC Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu calls for an urgent meeting of the foreign ministers of the member states of the OIC “to study the crimes against humanity committed by the Zionist entity in GS.” And Muttaki considered that one of the reasons for his call for an urgent meeting is to seek solutions that are “appropriate and quick to curtail the crimes against humanity committed by the barbaric Israel.”¹⁹ In a comment on the continuous attacks on Gaza, the spokesman of the Iranian government Golam Hossein Elham said, “Israel strives to transfer Gaza into another Holocaust,”²⁰ while the Iranian president announced that “Israel will be uprooted, and its leaders will be prosecuted,” and added in a programme in the Iranian television, “I had previously said that the real Holocaust is taking place in Palestine... For every child killed in the Palestinian land, there will be a judicial action taken to uncover those responsible for this act, they should know that they will be haunted one after the other.” Moreover, Ahmadinejad emphasized that Gaza is just the beginning, and “Israel is facing defeat and

it will be eradicated.”²¹ Within the campaign of incitement against Israel, some Iranian organizations allocated a huge prize to whoever penalizes three Israeli leaders earmarked for being behind the genocide operations against the Palestinian people: Ehud Barak, Meir Dagan, the director of the Mossad, and Amos Yedlin, Military Intelligence Chief.²²

What attracts attention in the Iranian positions and declarations is their emphasis on the weakness of the Israel, and its being in the phase of retraction, weakness and laxity, and that it is doomed to vanish. Some Iranian military and political officials repeated such phrases as “final countdown”, “vanishing of Israel”, “abolition of Israel”, “eradication of Israel”, “defeat of Israel”, “the termination of the Zionist entity”, “the filthy germ”, “the wild animal”, and “the artificial entity”.

2. The accusation of the United States of being a collaborator with Israel in assassinating the leaders of Hamas. The former head of the Iranian Shura Council Gholam Ali Haddad ‘Adel said on 21/2/2008, “America co-organized with Israel terrorist operations to assassinate the Palestinian leaders.”
3. The demand for breaking the siege. This started with a demand that Muslim states help Egypt to do so, with an emphasis on the option of resistance “to rescue the Palestinian people.” The Iranian Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) Ali Khamenei called upon the Muslim states to break the siege of Gaza, and to help Egypt, people and government, in this respect in the light of their huge historical responsibility on the subject. Moreover, Khamenei warned the Muslim governments from being instruments used against the Palestinians in Gaza, as was the case with some quarters. He added that the resistance is the only option to rescue the Palestinian people, whom he urged “to maintain their unity and to support their elected government.”²³ Ahmed Khatami, a member of Assembly of Experts, had also expected a strong response from the religious warriors (*mujahideen*) against the siege of Gaza, saying that one of the repercussions of Winograd’s earthquake was the brutal attack on the Strip. “In response to the siege and the repeated brutal attacks on the Strip,” he added, “Israel should expect a strong reprisal from the Palestinian religious warriors.”²⁴
4. Rejection of the assertion that Hamas is a satellite of Iran in the region through the emphasis on the independence of the movement. In response

to the declarations of King Abdullah II that the leaders of Hamas are under the thumb of Iran, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said, “Hamas decisions are not dictated by any state. It is regrettable that some Arab countries in the region are sometimes influenced by the American and the Israeli policies”, and added that “they turn a blind eye to the interests of the Palestinians. This kind of orientation is considered as a brand of the policy of blaming the others, and it is incompatible with the realities in the Palestinian scene.”²⁵

5. The call for a comprehensive plebiscite in the Palestinian territories to resolve the Palestinian issue and Israel. Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, a senior adviser of the Iranian President, said, “Iran is of the opinion that the Palestinian issue and Israel should be resolved by a plebiscite in which the Palestinian people in the occupied territories, be them Muslims, Jews or Christians, and those in the diaspora worldwide, particularly in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, should participate.” And added that the “international community should accept any outcome of this exercise.”²⁶ Nateq Nouri, the advisor of the Iranian Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) Ali Khamenei, repeated the same view, arguing that general elections in Palestine are the only means to resolve the Palestinian issue, and accused the Americans of opposing such elections.²⁷ It is known that this idea, which has become popular in Iranian official circles, was a legal exist that distances them from the charge of anti-semitism, which the west revert to whenever there is a call to abolish or destroy Israel.
6. Support to Hamas and emphasis on the legitimacy and continuity of the resistance. During the reception in Tehran of Khalid Mish'al, the head of Hamas Political Bureau, Saeed Jalili, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said, “the resistance and the total and enlightened steadfastness of the resistance of the Palestinian people are worth respect, and the secret behind the success of Hamas is its serious commitment to maintain the rights of the Palestinian people.” On the same occasion, the Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) said that Israel has become unable to confront the Palestinian people, and urged the continuation of the resistance. Khamenei described the positions and measures undertaken by Hamas leadership and premier Isma'il Haniyyah as courageous, and that they inspire hope and happiness. He condemned the inhuman siege imposed on

Gaza, and the operations of killings to which children were daily exposed. In an interesting declaration, the Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) declared direct support to Hamas and Iran's determination to stand firmly with it, which was virtually a response to the other forces, Arab and non-Arab, which besieged the organization and strove to end its rule in the Strip. In the prayer of The Festival of Breaking the Fast (*Eid al-Fitr*) 2/10/2008, the Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) emphasized that the Israelis are on their way to weakness and collapse, and added, "Iran will stand by Hamas government in Gaza," and he described premier Haniyyah as the religious warrior (*mujahid*), and called "to coordinate all the efforts and rally all Muslims to secure victory for the Palestinian people."²⁸ On the same occasion, he warned against all kinds of sectarianism and dissension among the Muslims, as the enemy does not distinguish between them, and called upon the Muslim world "to work together in one front for the victory of the Palestinian people." President Ahmadinejad reiterated the same position, but with noticeable clarity, by saying that his country "will continue to support the resistance movement Hamas until the collapse of Israel," and that Iran "considers its support for the Palestinians a national and religious duty, and that we will stand with the Palestinians until the festival of the greatest victory, i.e. the collapse of the Zionist regime."

7. Criticism of the Egyptian government for its closure of Rafah Crossing, which lead to the resumption of acute tension between the two countries as reflected in reciprocal accusations and harsh declarations. Iran had furthermore criticized some Arab regimes that had participated or turned a blind eye to the siege of Gaza. Hashemi Rafsanjani, Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council of Iran, held the Egyptian government responsible for the closure of the crossing and the destruction of the tunnels that the "oppressed" people of Gaza used to transport people and commodities.

The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) quoted him saying the following in a speech that he gave on the occasion of the prayer of The Islamic Festival of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*): "I wonder how the Egyptians who have great Islamic and civilizational past would close their borders in the face of their brothers." He, furthermore, described the situation in Gaza as catastrophic,

and emphasized that the bitterness and fury of the Muslims “will exasperate to such a magnitude that will destroy the Zionists, and that stigma would be for Muslim countries that declined to support their Palestinian brothers.” Likewise, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, the secretary-general of International Conference in Support of the Palestinian *Intifadah*, said, “The Egyptian President Husni Mubarak is squarely responsible for the aggression,” as he “knew of the attack on Gaza in advance,” and demanded “the trial of some Arab leaders, President Bush and the Israeli leaders.”

The Egyptian-Iranian differences had further intensified because the angry Iranian demonstrators attacked the office of the Egyptian interest section in Tehran, and were about to destroy the building had not the police blocked them. Demonstrations and sit-ins had, in fact, taken place in front of more than 25 Arab and foreign embassies whose countries took part in a conference on dialogue between religions, organized by Saudi Arabia in New York towards the end of November, 2008. The Iranian students claimed that the Egyptian government “prevented the entry of humanitarian aid and caravans to Gaza,” and they accused it of “cooperating with Israel in imposing the siege and committing the massacres against Palestinian children and women.” Egyptian diplomacy quickly responded, and Egyptian official media directly and bluntly attacked Iran and its policies in the region. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the head of the Office of the Iranian interests section in Cairo, and conveyed to him Egypt’s protest and extreme disgust by “the demonstrations orchestrated by some Iranian quarters in front of the headquarters of the diplomatic mission in Tehran.” Some Egyptian writers and journalists, including Muhammed Ali Ibrahim, the editor in chief of the *al-Gomhuria* newspaper, dismissed what the Iranian students had done as “rude and vile”, and added, “Since the time when Iran initiated a dialogue with Hamas and paid huge salaries to its leaders, the Arab-Israeli conflict has become increasingly complicated.” He also said that “The Palestinian state was about to be declared had it not been to the Israeli stubbornness, and the internal Palestinian schism which was masterminded, financed and encouraged by Tehran.”²⁹

As expected, Egypt rejected the criticism of Iranian officials, and the spokesman of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in this respect, “Egypt does not

accept any outbidding from any party on the Palestinian issue, as its history in supporting this cause is known to all, and does not need confirmation from any source.” In the same vein, Muhammad Bassiouni, the head of the Shura Council’s Foreign Relations and National Security Committee, said, “Iran is keen that the pivotal role of Egypt in the region, which strives to achieve stability and development, be discontinued.” However, these developments did not prohibit the continuation of contacts with the Iranian side to convene a meeting of the Islamic Parliaments Union “to discuss the Israeli siege on the Palestinian GS.” For this purpose, ‘Ali Larijani, the speaker of Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran (The Iranian Parliament), had already contacted his Egyptian counterpart Ahmad Fathi Sorour, and the Iranian minister of Foreign Affairs Manouchehr Mottaki requested that Iranian aid be sent to Gaza via Rafah Crossing. Nonetheless, Larijani had also severely criticized Egypt for receiving Tzipi Livni, the Israeli minister of Foreign Affairs, saying that “his country had all alone confronted America, while the countries facing the Gulf were supporting Washington, and others kept silent.” He added, “We are proud that we support Hamas and Hizbullah. Those who assume that they can force a people to surrender through a siege should be ashamed of themselves.”³⁰

On the Israeli aggression on Gaza late in 2008, the tone of Iran’s criticism to Arab countries and its call upon Islamic countries to work for the end of the aggression had substantially intensified. Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader (*Murshid*) of the revolution, said, “The conspicuous silence and encouragement of some Arab regimes, which claim to be Muslim, to the Israeli crimes is the greatest catastrophe.” He called upon the scholars of the Azhar to “publicly reveal the truth, and to alert the Muslims to the danger that threatens Islam,” Khamenei urged “the Muslims to support the Palestinian people,” and demanded that the Organization of Islamic Conference perform its historical duty in confronting Israel, and to try and punish its criminal leaders.³¹ He added, “It is the duty of the Palestinian religious warriors and the believers in the Muslim world to defend the unarmed women and children in Gaza, and they will be martyrs if killed.”³² Besides its effort to send humanitarian and medical aid to the besieged Strip,³³ Iran strongly condemned the war on Gaza and the silence of the international community. Hassan Qashqavi, Foreign Ministry Spokesman, demanded that “the international community, particularly the Security Council and the Organization of Islamic Conference, to

take action immediately to prevent the Zionist entity from continuing to commit its barbaric crimes against the Palestinians.”³⁴ Many angry demonstrations against the aggression were organized in Tehran and other Iranian cities, in which some top Iranian leaders and senior officers in the army and the revolutionary guard participated.³⁵ Some religious leaders opened the door for volunteers to fight the Israeli regime “in the military, financial or the propaganda fields.”³⁶ Similar steps were taken by more than one Iranian leader, from Rafsanjani to the Iranian minister of Foreign Affairs Manouchehr Mottaki. Moreover, the Iranian mission to the United Nations sent an urgent message to the president of the Security Council demanding for immediate steps to be taken “to face the crimes of the Zionist entity in Gaza, and to terminate the killing of the children of the Palestinian people.”³⁷

However, The year-long siege of Gaza did not undermine the importance of the indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations, and their expected impact on the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance movements, particularly so as Israel had publicly declared that it aimed by these negotiations to distant Syria from Iran, Hamas and Hizbullah in such a way that peace on this front would lead to the end of the conflict in the Middle East. This is the same idea that Richard Haass and Martin Indyk had advocated in the book *Restoring The Balance: A Middle East Strategy For The Next President*, which was published by Saban Center and Council on Foreign Relations. The two writers called upon the new American administration “to promote peace agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, in particular Syria, on the assumption that the potential for a strategic realignment would benefit the effort to weaken Iran’s influence in the sensitive core of the region, reduce external support for both Hezbollah and Hamas and improve prospects for stability.” The writers concluded that:

some initiatives will take considerable time to ripen and bear fruit... whereas it may be possible to realize others relatively early on (assembling a new diplomatic offer to Iran backed by the threat of harsher sanctions... promoting Israeli-Syrian peace). At minimum President Obama will need to remain conscious of the interrelated nature of regional dynamics and try to synchronize the various branches of his Middle Eastern strategy.

But the outbreak of the war on Gaza impelled Syria to unilaterally freeze these negotiations. It worth noting that Iran did not publicly attack these indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations either because it was convinced that Syria will not forgo its alliance with the Islamic Republic and the resistance movements, or because it did

not expect that these negotiations would achieve any tangible progress, as was the case in the previous rounds. Thus, the Iranian government seemed to have felt that it would be unwise to publicly reveal its different outlook with its strategic ally (Syria) over these negotiations, as their continuity and outcome were doubtful, even not guaranteed, as subsequently demonstrated on the outbreak of the war on Gaza.

Despite the preoccupation of the region and the international community with the war on Gaza, tension and mutual threats between Iran and Israel never stopped during the year 2008. Some analysts maintained that Israel will take advantage of the transitional period before Obama's assumption of power to launch a quick strike to destroy, or delay for many years, the Iranian nuclear program. The Israeli President Shimon Peres had, in fact, accused Iran of playing a central role in terrorism and fanaticism, and that it "had divided Lebanon through its support to Hizbullah, and led to chaos and schism among the Palestinians via its support to the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which imposed its authority over Gaza in June 2007."³⁸ Moreover, the United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice maintained that Hamas was fighting on behalf of Iran, which strives to have the nuclear bomb to destroy Israel, and cause instability in the Middle East; and added that the United States will continue its effort to isolate Hamas.³⁹ In response, several Iranian officials uttered declarations that defended their country's position on these issues. The Iranian President Ahmadinejad held "the Zionist killers responsible for all the crises,"⁴⁰ while other Iranian leaders implicitly spoke of a deadly response if Israel dares to attack Iran, though several Israeli leaders had actually repeatedly maintained that their country is ready to launch such a strike to paralyze Iran's nuclear threat.

Thus, the year 2008 ended as it started i.e. Gaza had been the focus of attention, and subsequently the theatre of war. Moreover, what happened in Gaza shaped Arab and Islamic responses, from condemnation of the siege to that of the condemnation of the war, from silence on the siege to silence on the war. In both cases of the siege and the war, Iran had forthwith and immediately declared solidarity and support to lift the siege on GS, and to openly stick to and support the continuation of the resistance against the occupation, particularly to Hamas who fights the Israeli aggression. Iran will continue its anti-Israeli policies, which will expose it to a flood of accusations and threats; and what had happened in Gaza will inevitably be the

prime reason for the inevitable resumption of tension between the Islamic Republic and many Arab regimes. However, the Israeli desire of a pre-emptive strike against Iran before Obama's assumption of power did not materialize. Hence, was the war on Gaza, as Israel felt that the destruction of Hamas and the Palestinian resistance will on one side keep the Palestinian issue under control, and, on the other side, encourage the new American president to focus on the Iranian nuclear program, which Israel views with great concern and as a threat to its security and existence.

Fourth: Pakistan

Al-Hayat newspaper reported in its issue of 29/1/2008 a meeting in a hotel in Paris between the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Ehud Barak, the Israeli minister of Defense. Though the president and the minister had allegedly "accidentally" met in the hotel's lobby, the two had agreed to meet the next day to discuss the issue of Pakistan's nuclear armament, the escalation of fundamentalism in Pakistan and the Iranian nuclear armament!! Some governmental sources in Pakistan and the Israeli press confirmed that the meeting had actually taken place, though the latter did not elaborate. Nonetheless, it is legitimate to wonder why should the president of Pakistan "accidentally" discuss such issues with the Israeli minister of Defense instead of talking about the tragedy of the Palestinian people? And what is the relationship between the Iranian and Pakistani nuclear capabilities and the Palestinian people tragedy? Did the Israeli minister try to exercise pressure on the Pakistani president, and if so, on what grounds could he dare to do so? Had the Pakistani president been motivated by a desire to secure help to the inhabitants of Kashmir or to get an Israeli financial subsidy to support his country's fragile economy? In any case, the meeting was not helping Pakistani traditional support to the Palestinian issue.

Earlier, the Bahraini newspaper *al-Ayam* reported on 4/1/2008 that the Pakistani government released four Palestinians from Adiala jail in Rawalpindi, who were convicted for life because of their hijacking in 1986 a Pan American plane. Quoting a local Pakistani television station, the newspaper's report added that the four convicts were flown to Palestine in a plane of the Qatari airways. In the same

vein, *al-Hayat al-Jadidah* newspaper reported that some columnists in Israeli newspapers viewed the resignation of President Pervez Musharraf as a serious loss of a genuine friend of Israel in the Muslim world. On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the demise of the Palestinian President Yasir ‘Arafat, on 11/11/2008, the Pakistani newspaper *The Dawn* published an article on his catastrophic legacy, in which it held Fatah squarely responsible for the Palestinian schism. According to this newspaper, the Pakistani government repeated its earlier call of the immediate implementation of the United Nations resolutions on the Palestinian issue. Moreover, *al-Khaleej* newspaper reported on 30/12/2008 that the new president of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari strongly condemned the Israeli invasion of Gaza, and urged the international community to find a just solution to the Palestinian issue.

Fifth: Indonesia

Throughout the year 2008, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, had continuously and consistently expressed support to the Palestinians. During the period 14-15/5/2008, the University of Indonesia organized a conference, entitled “Freedom and the Right of Return: Palestine and 60 Years of Ethnic Cleansing.” Based on an article of the Indonesian constitution, which stipulates: “With independence being the right of every nation, colonialism must be eliminated from the face of the earth as it is contrary to the dictates of human nature and justice”.⁴¹ The conference expressed their total support to the Palestinians and the Palestinian issue. Experts on the subject from 20 countries worldwide presented papers in this conference, including some American and British Jewish rabbis who placed tags saying “Jewish but not Zionist.” In another development, the Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono opened an Afro-Asian conference on Palestine, which was attended by the Palestinian premier Salam Fayad, and in which the president urged all countries to extend support to the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel.⁴²

Some Indonesian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, reported that they had sent via the Indonesian Red Crescent humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. According to *al-Khaleej* newspaper, by the end of the year

2008 and on the outbreak of the Israeli war on the people of Gaza, the Indonesian government strongly condemned Israel.⁴³ On the same vein, Reuters news agency reported that the Islamic Defender Front, an Indonesian non-governmental organization (NGO) planned to recruit and train one thousand volunteers to fight in Gaza.⁴⁴ Though this attempt had failed because of the International Law, the incident revealed the strong adherence and support of the Indonesian Muslims to the Palestinian just issue.

Sixth: Malaysia

The Malaysian government demonstrated its strong support to the Palestinian people through sending humanitarian aid to the Palestinians, particularly to the Gazans, and by supporting the efforts of reconciliation between the Palestinian factions. In its issue of 31/1/2008 *al-Khaleej* newspaper reported that the Malaysian minister of Foreign Affairs, Syed Hamid Albar, offered to intercede between Fatah and Hamas for the sake of concluding a political settlement between the two sides. But apparently this offer was blocked at the level of OIC.

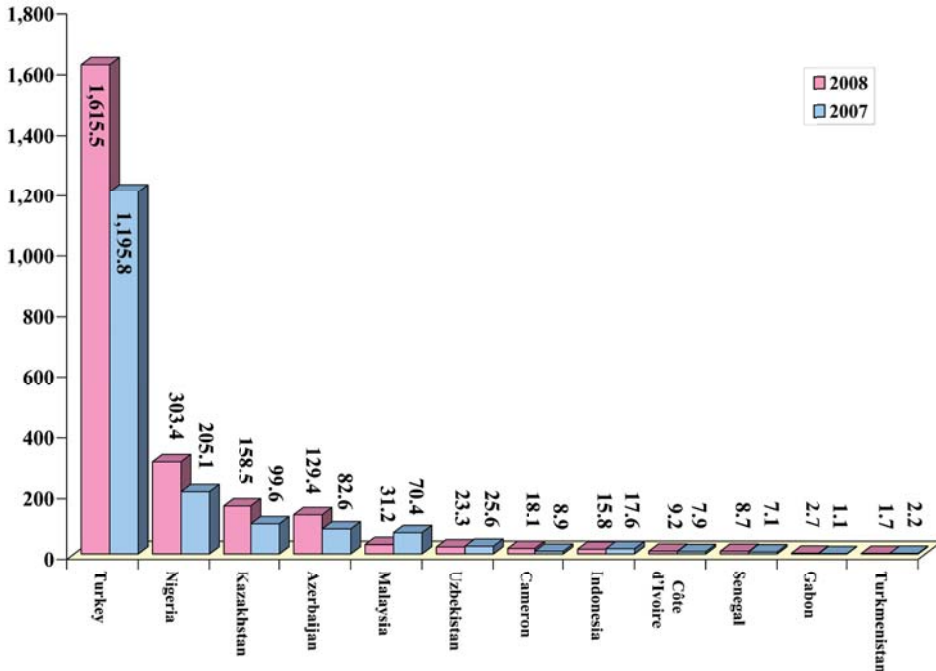
On 10/5/2008 two Malaysian non-governmental organizations, Aman Malaysia and the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), organized on the anniversary of the Catastrophe of 1948 (*Nakba*) a public forum at the Sin Chew Hall in Petaling Jaya, under the title: “Palestine: 60 Years of Struggle - *Al Nakba* Remembered”. During the sessions of the forum, some politicians and academics highlighted the problem of the Palestinian refugees since 1948, and the failure of the international community to support their just cause. The forum initiated a donation campaign for the cultivation of olive trees in Palestine.⁴⁵

As mentioned by the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), on the Israeli aggression on Gaza in late 2008, the Malaysian premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called upon the international community to organize joint effort to secure the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people. Badawi also commended the courage of the Palestinians in confronting Israel, and declared Malaysia’s support to the Palestinians.⁴⁶

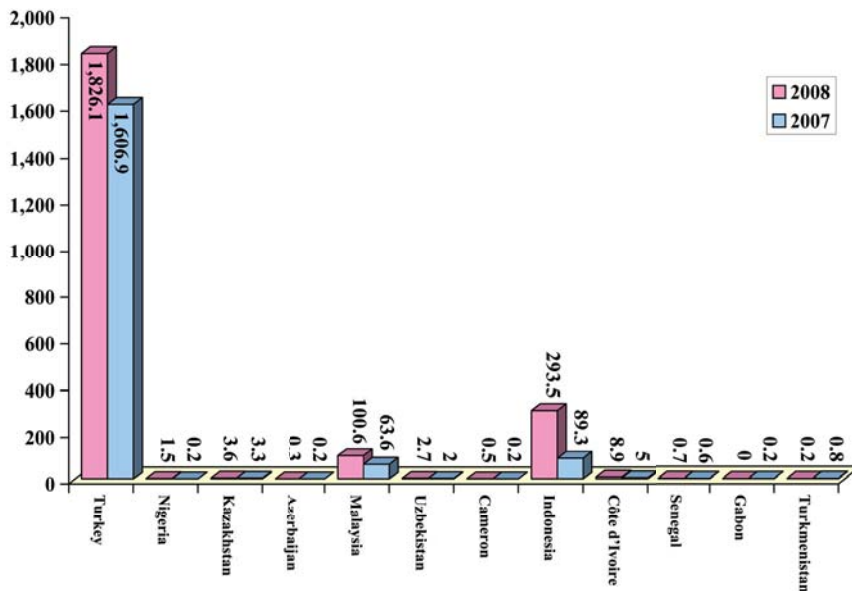
**Table 1/4: Israeli Trade with a Number of Islamic Countries (Non-Arab)
2005-2008 (\$ million)⁴⁷**

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2008	2007	2006	2005	2008	2007	2006	2005
Turkey	1,615.5	1,195.8	821.2	903.2	1,826.1	1,606.9	1,272.7	1,221.1
Nigeria	303.4	205.1	78	47.4	1.5	0.2	0.2	0.7
Kazakhstan	158.5	99.6	64.3	47.9	3.6	3.3	2.2	3.6
Azerbaijan	129.4	82.6	28	5.4	0.3	0.2	0.6	0.4
Malaysia	31.2	70.4	68.1	130.7	100.6	63.6	53.7	41
Uzbekistan	23.3	25.6	12.2	6.2	2.7	2	1.2	1.3
Cameron	18.1	8.9	13.6	5.7	0.5	0.2	0	0
Indonesia	15.8	17.6	12.9	14.1	293.5	89.3	87	43.6
Côte d'Ivoire	9.2	7.9	8.8	9	8.9	5	2.2	5.5
Senegal	8.7	7.1	5.8	4.5	0.7	0.6	0	0.1
Gabon	2.7	1.1	1.4	0.8	0	0.2	1.5	1.4
Turkmenistan	1.7	2.2	0.1	2.6	0.2	0.8	1	1.7

**Israeli Exports to a Number of Islamic Countries (Non-Arab)
2007-2008 (\$ million)**



Israeli Imports from a Number of Islamic Countries (Non-Arab) 2007-2008 (\$ million)



Conclusion

The attitude of the Muslim world towards the Palestinian issue during the course of 2008 was basically similar to that of previous years. The customary positions and declarations that sympathized with the Palestinian people and rejected the Israeli violations had continued at the same rate and by the same tone. But the political and economic reactions to the issue remained less than the required.

Though the OIC had repeatedly expressed its concern towards the humanitarian conditions in GS and condemned all the Israeli violations, not a single concrete achievement could be recorded to its credit in this respect throughout the year 2008, particularly with regard to the lifting of the siege on Gaza and the opening of Rafah Crossing. Besides, the OIC did not conduct an internal investigation on the reasons behind its continuous failure to achieve any tangible progress on the Palestinian issue.

As for Turkey, it maintained, both on the official and popular levels, the main lines of its support to the Palestinian people, which had, in fact, become

more assertive after the late 2008 Israeli aggression on Gaza. This engendered considerable tension in the Turkish-Israeli relations, and extremely angry Turkish reactions against the Israeli actions.

Nonetheless, the Turkish-Israeli relations are expected to be generally good in future because of the common security, economic and political interests between the two parties. Having said this, we should note that under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP*), Turkey is inclined towards more independence, to gradually forgo its relations with Israel and to develop relations eastward with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Iran did continue its position of support to Hamas, emphasis on the legitimacy and continuity of the resistance, and demand for lifting the siege on Gaza. Hence, it criticized the insistence of the Egyptian government to close Rafah Crossing, which had led to the resumption of strained relations between the two countries. The Iranian criticism extended to include some Arab states that “participate” or turn a blind eye to the siege of Gaza, particularly so after the Israeli war on Gaza towards the end of 2008.

As for Pakistan, no basic changes took place with regard to its position on the Palestinian issue. The country had been fully engaged in its chaotic and unstable internal affairs, of which the most significant was the resignation of Pervez Musharraf, which was viewed by some Israeli newspapers columnists as an Israeli loss of a true friend in the Muslim world. On their part, Indonesia and Malaysia continued their support to the Palestinians, but without significant developments during the year.

Israel did not succeed during the course of the year 2008 to achieve any breakthroughs in the Muslim world. The Israeli aggression on GS had demonstrated the huge interaction of the Muslim people with the Palestinian issue. The flood of demonstrations, sit-ins and donation campaigns are but a few indicators of the massive centrality of the issue to the Muslims worldwide. They also reveal the great potentials in the Muslim world, which the Palestinians had not thus far made use of to support their cause and gain their rights. But this goal appears to be closely affected by the internal Palestinian schism. Its realization requires that the Palestinians put their house in order and unite around a common national program and a comprehensive vision that gives the Islamic dimension its due weight and importance.

Endnotes

- ¹ This report is based on the weekly newsletter published by the (OIC), see *OIC Newsletter*, 19/11/2008, in: www.oic-oic.org
- ² OIC, 16/2/2008, see: http://www.oic-oic.org/topic_detail.asp?t_id=836&x_key=%CD%DD%D1%ED%C7%CA
- ³ *OIC Newsletter*, 15/10/2008.
- ⁴ *The OIC Journal*, July/September 2008.
- ⁵ OIC Resolution 1/11-PAL(IS) and OIC/SUMMIT-11/2008/FC/Final.
- ⁶ *Hürriyet* newspaper, Turkey, 25/1/2008.
- ⁷ *Hürriyet*, 25/1/2008.
- ⁸ *Haaretz*, 22/1/2008.
- ⁹ See: http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_print.php?id=34375
- ¹⁰ See *Assafir*, 5/1/2009.
- ¹¹ See *Assafir*, 11/12/2008.
- ¹² German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, *Transatlantic Trends 2008 Partners*, 2008, see: http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/2008_English_Key.pdf
- ¹³ See Helen Brusilovsky, *Summary of Israel's Foreign Trade by Country-2008*.
- ¹⁴ *Al-Khaleej*, 3/1/2008.
- ¹⁵ *Albayan*, 18/1/2008.
- ¹⁶ *Al-Watan*, Saudi Arabia, 31/1/2008.
- ¹⁷ Ma'an News Agency, 29/1/2008.
- ¹⁸ *Al-Khaleej*, 9/1/2008.
- ¹⁹ *Al-Khaleej*, 21/1/2008.
- ²⁰ *Al-Sharq*, Doha, 2/3/2008.
- ²¹ *Al-Khaleej*, 3/3/2008.
- ²² *Al-Khaleej*, 10/3/2008.
- ²³ *Al-Khaleej*, 9/2/2008.
- ²⁴ *Al-Khaleej*, 9/2/2008.
- ²⁵ *Al-Watan*, Saudi Arabia, 13/2/2008.
- ²⁶ *Al-Khaleej*, 2/2/2008.
- ²⁷ *Al-Akhbar*, Beirut, 27/9/2008.
- ²⁸ *Asharq Alawsat*, 2/10/2008.
- ²⁹ Moheet.com, 13/12/2008.
- ³⁰ *Assafir*, 27/12/2008.
- ³¹ *Al-Akhbar*, Beirut, 29/12/2008.
- ³² *Albayan*, 29/12/2008.
- ³³ *Alhayat*, 27/12/2008.
- ³⁴ *Al-Khaleej*, 28/12/2008.
- ³⁵ *Aljazeera.net*, 29/12/2008.
- ³⁶ *Addustour*, 30/12/2008.
- ³⁷ *Al-Khaleej*, 30/12/2008.
- ³⁸ *Aljazeera.net*, 25/9/2008.
- ³⁹ *Al-Khaleej*, 1/5/2008.
- ⁴⁰ *Aljazeera.net*, 25/9/2008.
- ⁴¹ See: <http://voiceofpalestine.net>
- ⁴² *Al-Watan*, Saudi Arabia, 15/7/2008.
- ⁴³ *Al-Khaleej*, 30/12/2008.

⁴⁴ Reuters, 29/12/2008.

⁴⁵ See: <http://www.just-international.org/events.cfm>

⁴⁶ *Felesteen* newspaper, 29/11/2008.

⁴⁷ See Helen Brusilovsky, Summary of Israel's Foreign Trade by Country-2008.