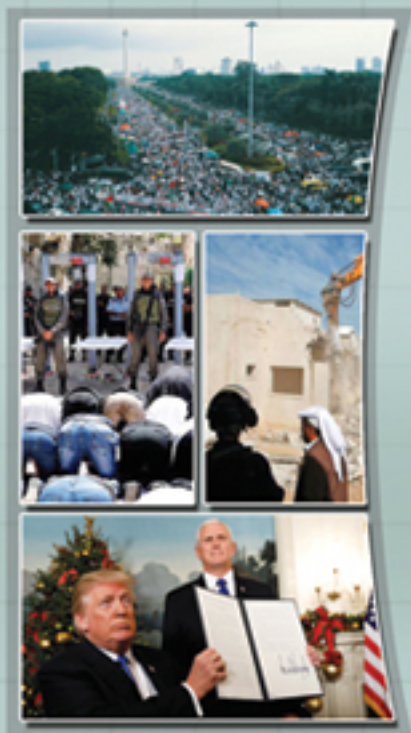


The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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Chapter Seven

The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

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Introduction

The Muslim world's interaction with the Palestine issue in 2016–2017 did not break with tradition and played out as expected. Despite the preoccupation of Muslim peoples with domestic concerns and despite their far distance, for many of them, from Palestine, the latter—along with Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque—remain what the Muslim nation unite and convene for. These populations are still more interested in, and interactive with, the Palestine issue than their governments, despite the lack of media coverage and mobilization around events on it.

This chapter summarizes the general Muslim world situation concerning this issue, with particular focus on two regional players: Turkey and Iran; countries that are active on Palestine, but with clear differences in their interaction methods.

First: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

Throughout 2016–2017, the OIC continued to pursue its policy regarding the Palestine issue, with the Jerusalem issue attracting more of its attention due to the increased Israeli targeting of the city in general and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in particular.

In addition to advocating the cause of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons, OIC supported the efforts to end the internal Palestinian division and conclude the reconciliation between the Fatah and Hamas movements.

However, the crises in the Arab region continued to overshadow the Palestine issue, as the fluid situation in “Arab Spring” countries continued to demote it from the agenda of the regional and international community.

In tracing OIC's interaction with the Palestine issue, there is no detectable change in 2016–2017; nothing different from what it had previously done during its long lifespan. Denunciation and condemnation are still the most prominent features of its responses to Israeli violations against the Palestinian people, or against Islamic and Christian holy sites in Palestine. OIC's political ceiling remains as high as

that of its sponsors, i.e., the Arab Peace Initiative put forward by Prince ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz at the Beirut Summit in 2002. At its summit held in Istanbul in April 2016, the OIC “emphasized the centrality of the cause of Palestine and Al Quds Sharif for the Muslim Ummah,” and

the need for the early convening of an International Peace Conference to set mechanisms to provide international protection for the Palestinian people and to end the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967 including East Jerusalem, in implementation of the relevant UN Resolutions and the Arab peace initiative.¹

In the same context, the Secretary-General of the OIC, Yousef bin Ahmad al-Othaimeen, in his address at the Paris Conference (Conférence de Paris Pour la Paix au Proche-Orient), held on 15/1/2017, stated that the Arab Peace Initiative represented a historic, serious, and realistic opportunity, and that it was a brave step towards peace, stability, and security in the Middle East. Al-Othaimeen also stressed that East Jerusalem remains an integral part of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and is the capital of the State of Palestine.²

In light of the Israeli measures targeting *al-Aqsa* Mosque through the installation of metal detectors, the organization called for an emergency meeting at the level of foreign ministers of the OIC member states in 1/8/2017. OIC condemned Israel’s provocative actions, including the closure of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and the banning of Palestinian Muslims and Christians from exercising their natural right to worship at holy sites inside Jerusalem. They stressed their rejection of the actions taken by the occupying forces and warned that any similar steps in the future would be unacceptable and unlawful and should be confronted by the organization. They also categorically rejected the unlawful settlement practices and measures in the holy city of Jerusalem, including the building of illegal settlements.³

OIC Secretary-General al-Othaimeen revealed the financial statements of the organization’s Islamic Solidarity Fund in support of the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. They amounted to about \$27 million, starting from the fund’s foundation in 1974 until 2017.⁴ As for the Islamic Development Bank, in 2016 it financed a project through UNRWA to reconstruct 260 houses destroyed during the 2014 GS war. The project’s budget amounted to \$10 million, in addition to \$2.5 million to provide hospitals, municipalities, water stations, and sewage plants with fuel.⁵

Similarly, in July 2017, the organization held an international conference in partnership with the United Nations Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. The conference addressed the role of the international system in the provision of political and economic support for Jerusalem. The organization called on the international community to assume its responsibilities to stop settlement activities and end the occupation of Palestinian lands occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, as well as finding a solution to the refugee problem under Resolution 194, leading to a two-state solution, considering that the only way to establish a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.⁶

In summary, OIC in 2016–2017 continued its usual course of action towards the Palestine issue, under the policies of sponsoring states. Denunciation, condemnation, and welcoming statements were its policies of choice, doing nothing to change the deteriorating political and humanitarian conditions suffered by the Palestinian people for nearly seven decades. This is the role that Muslim people have come to expect from the OIC towards their central cause of the ongoing OIC role takes place in the context of the split within the Arab and Islamic systems that bring the States of the region together, as well as due to the ever-widening gap between the ruling regimes and their peoples.

Second: Turkey

In 2014–2015, internal and external changes in Turkey resulted in a temporary decline of Turkish interest in the Palestine issue. Also, diplomatic ruptures with both Tel Aviv and Cairo limited the Turkish role in the cause. Frequent Turkish-Israeli meetings were held to restore relations. In the Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015, we predicted the restoration of relations between the two sides, in a manner which would “ease” the GS siege, and not “lift” it (as stipulated by the three publicised Turkish conditions for normalization). We also predicted the non-return of the “alliance” between the two sides that prevailed in the 1990s.⁷

The Turkish domestic agenda was tight in 2016–2017, at the top of which were the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016, the fight against the Parallel State Structure within state institutions, the military confrontation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*—PKK), and Turkish Foreign Policy’s overall accelerated path towards ironing out issues with a number of

States. This period also witnessed the most important event with regard to the Palestine issue: normalizing relations with Israel in June 2016.

Turkish foreign policy is determined by three factors; the internal situation in Turkey; regional and international changes; and the developments of the case being dealt with. Therefore, it is important to analyze the variables of Turkey's foreign policy, its causes and repercussions, before going into the different stages of the Turkish approach to the Palestine issue during the previous two years.

Foreign Policy Variables

Starting 2015, Turkey witnessed heated debate over its foreign policy and the need to correct its course and return back to normal; discussions were not limited to researchers and media professionals; rather, officials from the ruling party and the government participated in them. The debate reached its peak with the resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu's government, with Binali Yıldırım succeeding him as Prime Minister. The latter announced the framework for his government's foreign policy, "We'll increase the number of our friends and we'll decrease the number of our enemies."⁸

The main reasons for the revisions made to Turkish foreign policy, and for its variables, were:

First: Turkey's failure to make significant breakthroughs in foreign policy, particularly in Syria, especially after the change in the international position on the Assad regime, moving from its delegitimization, with a view to overthrowing it, to implicitly accepting cooperation with it to eliminate "terrorism."

Second: Turkey has paid the price of its positions in support of Arab revolutionary forces, whether politically, economically, socially, or at times at the expense of its security, including footing the bill for hosting more than three million Syrian refugees, facing incitement by some Arab countries, concealment of trade agreements such as the Ro-Ro maritime agreement with Egypt,⁹ suspension of the Turkey-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) High Level Strategic Dialogue, and becoming a target of terrorist and suicide operations.

Third: The regional isolation suffered by Ankara after the break or decline of relations with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and later Russia.

Fourth: Turkey's domestic agenda being fraught with serious consecutive successive events, weakening Turkey's ability to focus on external matters, most notably the Gezi Park events in June 2013,¹⁰ followed by the "judicial coup" at

the end of the same year.¹¹ Then came the PKK's resumption of their military operations in cities and towns south-east of the country in July 2015, in addition to several electoral battles, whose results and repercussions have influenced the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP).

Fifth: Western pressure on Turkey, in an attempt to re-incorporate it into the Western system, having shown a tendency towards a margin of independence in its foreign policy.

Sixth: The Turkish-Russian crisis against the backdrop of the downing of a Russian jet fighter in November 2015, which resulted in two strategic losses for Turkey: The first was a field-military one, taking place in the Syrian arena; and the second was political-strategic one, having to approach the Western position once again,¹² and then the obligations associated with rapprochement with Russia, with respect to the Syrian issue in particular.

Seventh: The failed coup attempt in July 2016, with all its military, security, political, and economic repercussions. The imposition of the state of emergency that is ongoing at the time of writing this report, the fight against the Parallel State Structure at home and abroad as a priority for the Turkish government; the increasing tension in Turkish-Western relations; and the pressure resulting from the coup attempt which signalled a message sent from abroad to Turkey's decision makers despite the failure of the attempt.

The strategic variables in the Turkish foreign policy have crystallized in three main contexts:

First: Searching for new partnerships in the region, as was the case with Qatar, then the attempt with KSA, and recently reaching understandings with Russia and Iran.

Second: The gradual shift from total reliance on “soft power” in foreign policy to what can be seen as an atypical situation with the use of brutal force, or what might be called “relative brutal force.” Examples include the development of the military industry, establishment of military bases abroad in both Qatar and Somalia, and cross-border military operations such as the Bashiqa camp, Operation Euphrates Shield, the Idlib operation.

Third: The attempts to restore relations, or iron out issues, and reduce tension with some States such as Russia, the UAE and Israel, following the principle “We'll increase the number of our friends and we'll decrease the number of our enemies.”¹³

Relations with the Palestinian Sides

Given the previous two years, which witnessed the return of diplomatic relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv, the failed coup attempt, and other important changes in Turkey's foreign policy, it is important to address Turkish-Palestinian relations. Within this, two long-established elements must be taken into account: the PA and Hamas, and a new, third element: former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan.

At the official level, Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas made multiple visits to Turkey; in April 2016, he met with President Erdoğan in Turkey on the side-lines of the 13th OIC summit.¹⁴ He repeated the visit in October 2016, during which he met with President Erdoğan, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and Parliament Speaker İsmail Kahraman.¹⁵ The most important visit was in August 2017, with internal Palestinian reconciliation at the top of its agenda, along with bilateral relations, and the latest developments in occupied Palestine, especially with regard to Jerusalem, the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the "peace" process with Israel, according to a statement by the Turkish presidency.¹⁶

It seems that what helped 'Abbas to repeat these visits and to ask Ankara to play a role in the Palestinian reconciliation was his desire to balance Turkish relations with Hamas. He wanted to take advantage of the variables resulting from the normalization of relations, and to influence the rapprochement between Hamas and Dahlan, seeking to alleviate Arab pressure on him.

After Turkey and Israel restored their relations, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said that the PA welcomed the agreement, stressing that any Turkish efforts in GS should be through the Palestinian government.¹⁷ The Minister also contacted his Turkish counterpart on behalf of President 'Abbas following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, congratulating Turkey "on the victory of democracy and defeat of the coupists."¹⁸ Evidence for the improved relations between the two sides was Ankara's decision to directly transfer \$10 million to the PA Treasury for the first time, after having implemented projects in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 through the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*—TİKA), according to Palestinian Ambassador to Ankara Faed Mustafa. This decision was taken after Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah met with the Turkish president on the side-lines of the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs.¹⁹

Regarding relations with Hamas, meetings continued between Hamas' leadership and Turkish officials, including then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's meeting with former Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Khalid Mish'al in Doha in April 2016.²⁰ However, the progress of negotiations between Ankara and Tel Aviv regarding restoration of relations, has put relations between Turkey and Hamas under scrutiny. Several reports revealed that Israel laid down the condition that Turkey must sever its relations with Hamas before the agreement could be implemented,²¹ which was rejected by the Turkish side.²² The Turkish foreign minister denied the existence of such a condition and stressed that meetings with the movement continued with the aim of achieving unity between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, and to contribute to the peace process in the Middle East, adding that Israel today also recognizes that there can be no lasting peace without Hamas.²³

The Turkish side was keen to highlight the endorsement of the two most important Palestinian parties (Fatah/ the PA and Hamas) of the agreement, as Erdoğan hosted Mish'al two days before the agreement was announced,²⁴ and later pointed out that 'Abbas and Mish'al both assessed the situation positively.²⁵ Hamas' comment on the agreement was by a statement that avoided direct support, while it thanked the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and official and popular Turkish efforts to help the GS population and to ease the siege.²⁶ Ankara, in return, upheld its relations with Hamas despite Israeli complaints.²⁷ In addition, Erdoğan, in an interview on Israeli Channel 2, rejected the labelling of Hamas as a terrorist movement, but rather a political body established out of national considerations.²⁸

After the agreement with Turkey was signed in Tel Aviv, Turkish official public meetings with Hamas stopped; a development later augmented to a certain extent by the change in Hamas' leadership, which moved into GS. However, unannounced meetings continued and a number of Hamas leaders participated in activities carried out by Turkish civil society organizations. In addition, communication via official statements and telephone calls continued to take place, for example Hamas' statement following the failed coup congratulating the Turkish people and Turkish leadership, led by President Erdoğan, on the failure of the military coup against their democratic choice.²⁹ The Turkish foreign minister, in a phone call, congratulated Isma'il Haniyyah on his new post as the Head of the Hamas Political

Bureau.³⁰ However, several Turkish statements established some distance from Hamas, for example the statement by the ambassador to Israel, Kemal Ökem, that “Turkey supported its people but not Hamas,”³¹ while Turkish leaders commended Hamas’ political document,³² and the reconciliation agreement with the Fatah Movement.³³

The third side of the Palestinian triangle, Muhammad Dahlan, represented the negative side of Turkish-Palestinian relations during 2016–2017. Turkish media started to warn of his role in an imminent coup in Turkey,³⁴ and some reports said that he was planning to accuse Turkey of supporting ISIS using fabricated confessions made by his accomplices.³⁵ Following the failed coup attempt, Dahlan made the headlines in the Turkish press and media as the middleman through which the UAE orchestrated the coup d’état,³⁶ and even as the one responsible for previous riots such as the Gezi Park events in 2013. These reports were corroborated when the Dahlan-linked Alghad TV channel hosted Fethullah Gülen, the prime suspect in the failed coup attempt.³⁷ The pro-AKP *Yeni Şafak* newspaper warned that the UAE would continue to target Turkey via Dahlan, and that the Gulf crisis and siege of Qatar were a new phase in this targeting, although it was economic this time,³⁸ warning that Dahlan had established a military camp in Sinai, Egypt, to train thousands of fighters to carry out operations against Turkey, Sudan, and Qatar.³⁹

This very dark image of Dahlan with regard to the Turkish context was one of the reasons for Ankara’s “friendly reproach” of Hamas for meeting with him in Cairo in June 2017. Some observers concluded that Ankara’s hosting of ‘Abbas afterwards was a clear message of dissatisfaction with this path.⁴⁰

Turkish-Israeli Relations

Since the diplomatic rupture following the Israeli assault on the Mavi Marmara, when 10 Turkish people were killed, Turkey insisted on three conditions for the normalization of its relations with Israel. These were: The issuing of an apology for what happened, payment of compensation to the victims’ families and lifting the GS siege. Meetings were frequent between the two sides, but with little effect until March 2013, when Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan under pressure from US President Barack Obama.⁴¹ In 2014 Israel agreed to pay the victims’ families \$20 million in compensation but did not follow through with the payments.⁴²

Since the second half of 2015, media campaigns between the two sides began to abate as a result of meetings that seemed to bring them close to signing the agreement, to the extent that the alleged Israeli role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016 took little part in the discussion.⁴³ This was even despite the openness of some Israeli officials about their desire for the coup against Erdoğan and the Turkish government to succeed.⁴⁴

On 27/6/2016, the Turkish prime minister officially announced that they had reached an understanding that would restore diplomatic relations with Israel. He stressed that it would significantly contribute to the lifting of the GS blockade, noting that the normalization of relations covered all areas, and that economic relations and cooperation on issues related to the region were among the priorities of the two parties.⁴⁵

Next day, Turkish President Erdoğan talked about the agreement, explaining that he discussed the matter with ‘Abbas and Mish‘al, and that the Palestinian officials had assessed the situation positively, stressing that Turkey has thus far rejected any conditions or pressure that would violate the rights of Palestinians. He added that a Turkish ship would travel, within days, to GS, loaded with an unprecedented 10 thousand tons (about 10 million kg) of humanitarian aid.⁴⁶

In response to Israeli reports stating that the terms of the agreement included a Turkish commitment on Hamas’ military action against Israel,⁴⁷ the Anadolu News Agency quoted a senior Turkish official that the agreement did not include any clause related to Hamas.⁴⁸ Erdoğan also stressed during his interview on Channel 2 that Hamas was not a terrorist organization, but a political party that arose out of national considerations.⁴⁹

Turkish officials were keen to emphasise that the agreement to normalise relations with Israel does not mean that Ankara would remain silent about Israeli violations, according to Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.⁵⁰ It did not involve a fundamental change in the Turkish position on the Palestine issue, as stated by the Spokesperson for the Turkish President, İbrahim Kalın.⁵¹

The terms of the agreement included the restoration of diplomatic ties between the two states, provided that Israel paid the victims’ families \$20 million in compensation. In exchange, “Israeli soldiers will be exempt from legal and criminal responsibility and individual Israeli nationals also would not be held criminally or financially liable for the incident.”⁵²

Yildirim summed up the proposed next steps as follows:

First: Mutual assignment of ambassadors once the two sides ratify the agreement.

Second: The Turkish parliament and the Israeli cabinet to ratify the agreement.

Third: TOKİ, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey, to complete its projects in Gaza.

Fourth: The launching of major projects in the West Bank including the Jenin industrial zone.⁵³

The Turkish parliament approved a draft law on the normalization of relations with Israel on 20 August,⁵⁴ which was approved by the President on 1/9/2016.⁵⁵

When evaluating the agreement and its implications, positive measures to support the Palestinians are apparent, such as measures to ease the siege (which Israel would later go back on), or the potential for Turkey to apply pressure on Israel, or adjust its positions to pressure Israel at later dates. However, these supposed “positives” are hardly worth anything next to the strategic losses associated with the rapprochement of a Muslim State the size of Turkey with Israel. Intelligence and military coordination between the two parties resumed, and Israel made efforts to break the psychological barrier built by the Turkish people over the years. The two cooperated in international institutions, and that started before the conclusion of the agreement, Turkey dropped its “veto” on the participation of the Israel in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercises, and it did not object to the western European and others groups’ selection of an Israeli candidate to head the Legal Committee at the United Nations, which took place on 13/6/2016.⁵⁶

The two sides accelerated their cooperation, with Israel appointing an ambassador to Ankara, and Turkey appointing an ambassador to Tel Aviv in November 2016.⁵⁷ A Turkish court dropped the lawsuits filed against the four Israeli officers who had been tried in absentia in the case of the attack on the Mavi Marmara ship in December of the same year.⁵⁸ In the same month, the two sides announced that they had started negotiations to build a gas pipeline to transfer natural gas from Israel to Europe.⁵⁹

As expected, relations between the two sides did not return to their pre-AKP state, specifically their golden period in the 1990s. Rhetorical escalation by the two sides continued and was witnessed on several occasions. In May 2017, the Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein said that “Erdogan was, and remains, an enemy.”⁶⁰

In addition, a dispute between the foreign ministers of the two states erupted after Erdoğan demanded Tel Aviv to remove metal detectors from *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017; The Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hüseyin Müftüoğlu described the remarks made by his Israeli counterpart Emmanuel Nahshon, in which he attacked the Turkish President, as “presumptuous.”⁶¹

Various official Turkish institutions condemned Israel’s actions; the Turkish Foreign Ministry called for the immediate lifting of the ban on the entry into *al-Aqsa* Mosque,⁶² and the Turkish government Spokesperson Numan Kurtulmuş, stated that Israel’s closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque was a painful and unacceptable decision.⁶³ The Turkish President also had a phone call with his Israeli counterpart, in which he urged that restrictions on Muslims should be removed.⁶⁴

As part of a series of Turkish statements on Jerusalem, the Turkish President said, “We will not allow *adhan* to be silenced in al-Quds,” commenting on a draft Israeli law calling for that. He considered that “debates on moving the U.S. embassy to al-Quds are extremely wrong.” He described that “‘ Hamas’ recently declared policy document as an important step for the Palestinian cause, and also for the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah.”⁶⁵ This was part of his speech at the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs. A series of activities and events held in Turkey in support of the Palestine issue, such as the first conference of Parliamentarians for Al-Quds, launched under the auspices the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the Speaker of the Parliament, and with the participation of Erdoğan, the Prime Minister, and a large number of ministers and AKP representatives at the end of 2016.⁶⁶ Another example was the participation of Turkish officials in the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad held in February 2017 in Istanbul.⁶⁷ Ankara also commended the Cairo agreement between Fatah and Hamas under Egyptian auspices, which was signed on 12/10/2017, stating, “We will continue our support to all our Palestinian brothers to successfully advance Palestinian national reconciliation process, which we see essential for regional peace and security.”⁶⁸

Economic Relations Between Turkey and Israel

Turkey has made several steps towards the normalization of relations with Israel, and one of the most important terms of the Israeli-Turkish agreement in the second half of 2016 was that Israel and Turkey would start negotiations to build a gas pipeline extending from Israeli natural gas fields to Turkey.⁶⁹ According to

a statement by Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources Shaul Meridor in an interview with Bloomberg in December 2016, “Israel and Turkey are developing a framework for the export of Israeli natural gas to Turkey that would protect contracts between companies in lieu of diplomatic breakdowns,” and “that with such protections in place, it is possible for gas to begin flowing as early as 2019.”⁷⁰ On 27/6/2016, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim explained that the normalization of relations covered all areas, and that economic relations and cooperation on issues related to the region were among the priorities of the two parties.⁷¹

On the economic level, several visits were made between the two sides after normalization. Turkish Minister of Culture and Tourism Nabi Avcı arrived on 6/2/2017 with the Head of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies, Başaran Ulusoy; Head of the Federation of Turkish Hotel Owners, Osman Ayık; and Head of the Association of Turkish Tourism Investors Ali Murat Ersoy to Tel Aviv, as the first formal visit by a Turkish official since 2010. The delegation participated in the opening ceremony of the East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition (Emitt), met with Turkish and Israeli owners of tourism firms, and visited a photography exhibition of Turkish-Israeli relations organized by Anadolu Agency.⁷² Avcı expressed hope that his country’s relations with Israel would contribute to ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He pointed out, “Over the past year, approximately 260,000 Israeli tourists have visited Turkey, and we want to see 600,000 Israeli tourists over the next.” The Turkish minister pointed out that the number of Turkish tourists who visited Israel during the past year reached 30 thousand, adding that he hoped this number would increase.⁷³

Delegates from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Turkey and Israel held talks concerning economic issues in Ankara, on 26/4/2017. The head of the Israeli delegation, Head of the Economic Affairs Division and Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Yaffa Ben-Ari, told Israeli public radio, Kol Israel-Reshet Bet, that they discussed consolidating and stimulating economic cooperation, which was a continuation of the political dialogue between the directors of the Israeli and Turkish foreign ministries.⁷⁴

A Turkish economic delegation, which included more than 120 entrepreneurs and executives, including exporters and general managers of major Turkish companies operating in the fields of energy, construction, aviation, food, and

agriculture, arrived in Israel in May 2017. The head of the Turkish delegation, Mehmet Buyukeksi, who is the chairman of the Turkish Exporters Assembly, “expressed his confidence that Israeli-Turkish trade volume could grow from today’s \$3.9 billion figure to \$10 billion, within five years time,” adding, “We believe that we have a huge potential together, and we also believe that international relations are optimized by means of business.”⁷⁵

The Freedom Flotilla and Mavi Marmara incidents did not have a negative impact on trade relations between the two countries, as was anticipated. On the contrary, trade flourished; in March 2017, Eitan Na’eh, Israel’s ambassador to Turkey, affirmed that “bilateral trade can and should be doubled in the next few years to \$8 billion from \$4 billion.”⁷⁶

Economic Relations Between Turkey and the Palestinians

Turkish state and private donations to the Palestinians continued; in March 2016, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) started the implementation of a project aimed at the construction of 320 housing units in GS. The \$13-million project will include construction of 20 buildings, according to the Director of the Palestine Office at TİKA, Bülent Korkmaz.⁷⁷

In May 2016, Turkey announced \$1.5 million support for Gaza hospitals aiming to meet the emergency needs in the GS health sector, in addition to the provision of fuel for 13 hospitals in GS for six months, and the provision of several types of medicines necessary for patient care under the supervision of the World Health Organization (WHO), and in coordination with the Ministry of Health and UNRWA.⁷⁸

On 19/6/2016, the Turkish Association for the Protection and Restoration of Ottoman Heritage in Jerusalem and its Environs (Mirasimiz) renovated 45 historic mosques and more than 70 old houses in the city of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, according to Halis Mutlu, an official at the association. Mutlu stated that there were four thousand old houses that needed maintenance in the Old City of Jerusalem, pointing out that the owners of these houses refused to sell them despite receiving high offers, adding that Israel wants to cleanse Jerusalem of Muslims.⁷⁹

On 7/7/2016, 36 trucks carrying Turkish aid entered GS via the Kerm Abu Salem crossing, south of GS; the trucks were loaded with food, as well as industrial diesel for the power plant.⁸⁰

In July 2016, a delegation from the Turkish Ministry of Energy, headed by Consul General of Turkey in Jerusalem, in Gaza, Ambassador Mustafa Sarnıç, arrived in GS via the Beit Hanoun (Erez) Crossing to study possible ways to solve the electricity crisis that had been worsening for 10 years. The Turkish delegation held several meetings with officials at the Hamas-run Energy Authority in GS to find optimal solutions to the electricity crisis. The delegation of the Turkish Ministry of Energy also held a meeting with officials at the Palestinian Energy Authority in Ramallah, to learn about their vision and position on ways to solve the electricity crisis; the delegation met with Israeli officials for the same purpose.⁸¹

On 10/6/2017, the Minister of Education and Higher Education Sabri Sidem announced that the Turkish Parliament had ratified the agreement on cooperation in education between Palestine and Turkey. Sidem said that all those who spoke at the Turkish parliament session stressed the importance of supporting Palestine and the Palestinian education sector. He pointed out that the agreement signed between the two sides included the promotion of academic cooperation in all fields of education, in addition to the introduction of Turkish tablet computer technology to Palestinian schools within the FATIH project (Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology), and in line with the Palestinian government's decision to "digitize" education.⁸²

During the period 21–23/6/2017, 19 Turkish trucks arrived in GS via the Kerm Abu Salem crossing, carrying clothes, stationery, toys for children, food parcels, bicycles, and wheelchairs.⁸³ In September 2017, the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH) distributed *udhiyah* (sacrificial animal) meat to about six thousand poor families in GS. According to reports by international agencies, 80% of the GS population had become dependent on international assistance for a living due to poverty and unemployment, while 40% still lived below the poverty line.⁸⁴

As for the trade volume between the two sides, it fell from \$5.83 billion in 2014 to \$4.4 billion in 2015, then dropped further to \$4.34 billion in 2016. It rose again in 2017 to \$4.91 billion (see table 1/7).

Chemical materials and their derivatives used in manufacturing, especially generators, and electrical transformers, top the list of Turkish exports to Israel, while cars, iron, and steel top Turkey's list of imports from Israel.⁸⁵

Table 1/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and Israel According to Turkish and Israeli Statistics 2014–2017 (\$ millions)⁸⁶

Year	Turkish exports to Israel		Turkish imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics
2017	3,409.5	2,895.9	1,505.1	1,414.2	4,914.6	4,310.1
2016	2,955.5	2,601.7	1,385.6	1,297.7	4,341.1	3,899.4
2015	2,698.1	2,446	1,672.5	1,701.1	4,370.6	4,147.1
2014	2,950.9	2,683.6	2,881.3	2,755.6	5,832.2	5,439.2

In contrast, Turkish imports from the PA territories decreased from \$2.5 million in 2014 to \$2.3 million in 2015, then rose to \$3.4 million in 2016 and \$5 million in 2017. Turkish exports to the PA fluctuated considerably, falling from \$90.9 million in 2014 to \$82.2 million in 2015, then going up to \$94.4 million in 2016, and dropping to \$87.5 million in 2017⁸⁷ (see table 2/7).

The trade balance between the two countries was tipped significantly in favour of Turkey. While fresh and dried fruits such as figs, pineapples, avocados, guavas, and mangoes topped the list of Turkish exports to the PA territories, the latter exports baked goods such as bread, cookies and biscuits, in addition to rose water, etc., to Turkey.⁸⁸

Table 2/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and PA According to Turkish Statistics 2014–2017 (\$ thousands)⁸⁹

Year	Turkish exports to PA territories	Turkish imports from PA territories	Trade volume
2017	87,492.5	4,974.7	92,467.2
2016	94,372.1	3,363.9	97,736
2015	82,224.2	2,343	84,567.2
2014	90,944.5	2,502.3	93,446.8

Turkish Role Prospects and Determinants

Despite its willingness, and despite enjoying good relations with the two sides of the internal Palestinian equation, Turkey still does not play a prominent role in the Palestine issue when it comes to the internal reconciliation process, and that is due to Egypt's almost complete monopoly of this issue.

On the Palestinian-Israeli level, concerning the peace process, the exchange of prisoners and soldiers between Israel and Hamas, or efforts to lift the GS siege, the chances of Turkey playing a role, albeit weak, still exist. They rely heavily on balancing the enabling factors, as well as disabling factors that obstruct Turkey from playing an active role on this issue.

Among the most important incentives for Turkey to play a major role, whether now or in the future, are:

First: Turkey's own desire to play an active role, being aware of the importance of the Palestine issue.

Second: Restored relations between Turkey and Israel may theoretically open the door for the former to activate its role, which was not possible during the rupture between them. Ankara has emphasized that it is in the Palestinians' interest.

Third: Recent progress in the "Palestinian reconciliation" could contribute to the acceleration of the peace process.

Fourth: Turkey's desire to be a mediator in the exchange of prisoners between Hamas and Israel.⁹⁰

Fifth: Gaps left by the decline of the Egyptian role in the region may help Ankara to increase its activity.

However, there are real obstacles and challenges to any effective and influential Turkish role, namely:

First: Israel's denial of the two-state solution, considering it a thing of the past.

Second: The confidence gap between Ankara and Tel Aviv—despite the restoration of diplomatic ties—and their mutual alienation, fuelled by the long period of rupture, are difficult to erase or overcome quickly.

Third: The stalemate of the Palestine issue's various paths, making intervention difficult for a state like Turkey. For in recent years, it has approached this issue only during times of escalation and serious incidents, such as the assaults on GS.

Fourth: Pressing internal issues in Turkey, distracting it from playing important roles in the region in general and in the Palestine issue in particular.

Fifth: Heated regional issues, which are exhausting Turkey's efforts, particularly the Syrian and Iraqi issues.

Sixth: Tel Aviv's activity against Turkish interests in the region, including cooperation with Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus in the natural gas field, its alleged role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016,⁹¹ and its support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, which Ankara opposes.⁹²

By comparing enabling and disabling factors, Turkey's chances of playing an active role in the Palestine issue currently appear weak, particularly in the next two years, 2018 and 2019. These years will be a time of preparation for the important upcoming elections in Turkey, namely the municipal elections in March 2019, and the concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections in November of the same year. Radical or rapid changes in the aforementioned factors are unlikely to take place.

In the long term, however, current and future variables could lead to new developments with regard to Turkey's role in the Palestine issue, including:

First: The Crisis in Turkey-US Relations: Relations between the two sides have recently undergone multiple and successive crises, with the US support for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*—PYD) and its military role in Syria, and Washington's delay in the extradition of Fethullah Gülen being the major outstanding issues between the two sides.⁹³

There is no doubt that this conflict of interests between the US and Turkey, on the one hand, and the rapprochement between the latter and Russia, on the other, opened up new prospects and possibilities in terms of its policies in the region for Ankara that had not been previously available. Relations with Israel and the approach to the Palestine issue remain among the most important foundations of US policy in the region, and relations with Ankara could be subject to further deterioration and might perhaps become a crisis. Therefore, it is logical to anticipate a change in Turkish attitudes towards the Palestine issue, seeking to become more involved, while relations with Washington remain in decline.

Second: Tension with the EU: The accession of Turkey to EU membership appears at an impasse at the time of writing, and there have been calls at the

EU to cancel the entire accession process following the European Parliament's recommendation to freeze negotiations.⁹⁴ This, on the whole, gives Ankara some freedom from potential European “custody” of its foreign policy.

Third: Rapprochement with Iran: Tension reached its peak between the two sides in 2015, when Turkey condemned Iran's sectarian policies, and Iran responded with the implicit threat of turning Syria into a graveyard for Turkish soldiers.⁹⁵ After that peak, things started to ease and a language of coordination and understanding developed, reaching a high level of coordination and cooperation, given the common risks and threats faced by both countries, in particular the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, the strained relations between Turkey and the West, and the harsh US rhetoric towards Iran.⁹⁶

There is no doubt that rapprochement between the two regional capitals, which is likely to continue in the short term, will widen the confidence gap between Ankara and Tel Aviv. It remains a determining factor in the Turkish role in the Palestine issue. Other dramatic developments may occur in the region, such as a possible confrontation on any level between KSA and Iran, the activation of Gulf-Arab normalization with Israel, with all its consequences, or additional US sanctions against Tehran or others.

Fourth: Heading East: Since 2002, Turkey, under AKP, has been keen to pursue, albeit gradually, a multidimensional or multi-pronged policy, with the aim of developing balance and flexibility, attempting to detach itself from the Western domination experienced during the Cold War.⁹⁷ The most notable effort in this regard has been its request to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and its acquisition of a “dialogue partner” status in 2013.⁹⁸

Turkey had planned to sign a \$3.4 billion contract to buy an air defense system from China in 2013, but two years later it dismissed this option, saying that it would focus on developing a domestic system.⁹⁹ Turkey then signed a deal in September 2017 to purchase the S-400 missile system from Russia.¹⁰⁰

This move suffered a setback in 2015 because of the crisis which followed the downing of the Russian jet fighter; however, relations between the two sides were restored very quickly, resulting in large-scale understandings over the Syrian crisis, including reaching a tripartite framework composed of the two countries besides Iran.

Undoubtedly, this steadily developing trend will allow Turkey to enjoy more room to manoeuvre, broadening its scope of action and influence, away from US and Western pressure, including with regard to the Palestine issue, especially if we take into account the strained Turkey-US and Turkey-Europe relations, which seem unlikely to see major breakthroughs soon.

Fifth: Presidential System Implementation: The AKP trusts that the introduction of presidential system in November 2019 will enable Turkey to make quicker, stronger, and more vital foreign policy decisions. It would subjugate other decision-making circles and institutions to the elected political leadership, including the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which have played an important role in the overall foreign policy, particularly in Israeli-Turkish relations. This might indicate that the presidential system—with the likely success of an AKP candidate, whoever he/ she might be—will be in the Palestine issue's favour.

Sixth: Solution of Syrian Crisis: The solution in Syria has started with the participation of various parties, including Turkey. Therefore, it is self-evident to say that despite its difficulties, obstacles, and long duration, the solution will ease Turkey's exhaustion of resources and will allow it to develop a more active and influential foreign policy, including its policy towards the Palestine issue.

Seventh: Breakthrough in Turkey-Egypt Relations: Such a breakthrough is not anticipated to occur in the near future, but, in principle, it is not rejected by either of them. Both sides have already taken several initial steps in this direction; for example, examples of economic delegations during the reporting period.¹⁰¹ If a breakthrough of this kind happens, it will be possible for Ankara to play a role on the political level, as well as in the context of dealing with the GS siege. A quick comparison between Turkey's achievements during the 2012 GS war, when relations with Cairo were good, and that of the 2014 war, when relations were suspended, indicates how a breakthrough in bilateral relations could unlock the potential of a Turkish role in the Palestine issue.¹⁰²

Conclusion

Turkey faces many obstacles to playing an active and positive role in the Palestine issue, due to its relations with the various parties, and because of local and regional crises affecting its foreign policy decision-making. Nevertheless, several variables anticipated in the medium and long terms can, if they occur and interact,

open up new prospects for Turkey to perform an active role in this regard. There is the potential for the Palestinians take advantage of these variables, accelerate and stabilize them, as well as using them as a foundation to build on.

Third: Iran

Iran has not been detached from the regional transformations, nor was it detached from the “raging crises” and their regional and international interactions, and their impact on its national security and internal concerns. Iran, has too its own priorities, concerns, and vision for the future of the region. However, concerning Iran’s policy toward the Palestine issue, two points are important:

First: The principles of this policy are inseparable from the Palestinian action itself, which imposes itself as a priority not only on Iran’s policies but on the policies of other Islamic states. This means that the stronger and more active this action is, for example the “Stabbing *Intifadah*,” Gaza’s resistance, or any political or diplomatic action, Iran’s attitudes will necessarily be more active and more visible towards the Palestine issue.

Second: Iran always expresses its commitment to the Palestine issue, not concerning the human rights of the Palestinian people, the two-state solution, peace, or other formalities agreed upon by most other countries, rather by concerning its firm commitment to resistance against Israel. All the positions and statements of Iran’s political and military leaders assert this commitment. Thus, Iran differs from the other Islamic states, which declare and affirm their commitment to peaceful initiatives, or even go beyond that to reach direct normalization, even when a peaceful settlement is not achieved. Iranian positions during 2016–2017 were consistent with its commitment to resistance, evidenced by the statements of Iran’s political and military leaders.

When US President Donald Trump raised the level of threat against Iran after taking office at the White House, stating that all options were available to deal with it, he not only linked these threats to Iran’s ballistic missile tests, but also what he saw as “Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism.” What is meant by this “terrorism” is Iran’s known support for the resistance.

In this context, semi-official Iranian websites revealed the EU's conditions for restoration of relations with Tehran following the nuclear deal, describing them as "shameless," because they contained 10 points, including, "support for hostile armed groups in the region, including the military wing of Hezbollah."¹⁰³

The Iranian Threat to Israel

Iran has never ceased to threaten Israel, nor has it ceased its calls to resist it, and to work to end its existence; for example:

- Commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh stated that Iranian missiles are available to the peoples of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, as well as all the oppressed in the world. He said that Israel is cornered by Islamic countries, will not last long and will collapse at war even before launching these missiles. He added that the evil actions of Israel are perfectly clear, and that Iranian missiles had been designed with a two-thousand km range with the aim of facing Israel from a distance.¹⁰⁴
- During missile tests, the IRGC launched missiles which bore the catchphrase of the late Ayatollah Khomeini about wiping Israel from existence. A correspondent of the Fars News Agency dispatched to the exercise area stated that, on the second day of the final phase of the IRGC's missile tests, two Qadr/ Ghadr H missiles were launched from the eastern Alborz heights (north-east of Iran) towards targets on the Makran coast (southern Iran), covering a distance of 1,400 km. The missiles bore the Hebrew phrase, "Israel must be wiped out" (לעמ קחמיהל הכירצ לארשי).¹⁰⁵
- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei predicted that Israel will cease to exist within 25 years. Khamenei said, "Despite the constant creation of various crises by the supporters of the Zionist regime with the purpose of consigning the issue of Palestine to oblivion, this holy land will be liberated in the shade of the resistance and jihad of the Palestinian people and groups."¹⁰⁶
- General Ahmad Karimpour, a senior military adviser to Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, announced "All targets in Israel have been defined and our long-range missiles will destroy them within 7 minutes and 30 seconds, in case Iran was subjected to any attack." He stressed that Tehran was ready to respond in a resolute and destructive manner

to any military attack, explaining that when the Leader of the Revolution (Ali Khamenei) says that Iran will reduce Tel Aviv and Haifa to dust within 7 minutes if necessary, it is no joke; all Iranian cities are prepared for these operations. Then, he added, let “Zionist the entity and its allies” know that.¹⁰⁷ The same attitude was reiterated regarding the demise of Israel by the newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army, Abdul Rahim al-Musawi.¹⁰⁸

These positions, echoed by the Iranian political and military leadership regarding the very existence of the Israel, prompted Major General Yoav Galant, a minister and member of the cabinet, to emphasise that Iran is the biggest threat facing Israel:

Iran is working against us in five areas: in Gaza, by supporting Hamas and [other] terrorist organizations, mainly the Islamic Jihad; through Hizbullah and building Hizbullah up; in Judea and Samaria, by attempts to operate terrorist cells; through ongoing attempts to enlist Israeli Arabs who will take action against the nation; and through terrorist attacks abroad, which are carried out by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hizbullah against Israeli and Jewish targets.¹⁰⁹

Supporting the Question of Palestine

Iran is committed to its positions, based on the following fundamental commitments:

- The centrality of the Palestine issue.
- Defending the Palestinian people.
- Supporting the Palestinian resistance.

Therefore, Iran’s leaders emphasize these fundamentals in Friday *Khutbahs* (sermons), at Jerusalem Day rallies, and at the international conferences held in Tehran to support the *Intifadah*.

At the opening of the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada in the Iranian capital Tehran, the Supreme Leader said, “An intelligent quest in history shows that no people in any era of history have ever been subject to such pain, suffering and cruelty,” adding, “The intifada that has begun for the third time in the occupied lands, is subject to more suppression than the previous two,” He described the Palestinians as “the great people of Palestine, who shoulder the heavy burden of confronting global Zionism and its bullying supporters.” He

asserted, “Our position on the Resistance is a fundamental position, one which has nothing to do with any particular group,” describing the Palestinian people as “the true leaders of fighting and of the Resistance.”¹¹⁰

Chairman of the Assembly of Experts of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ahmad Jannati emphasized that the Iranian people would remain in the arena until the “entire Zionist entity” was removed from the land of Palestine. At the International Jerusalem Day rally in Qom Province south of Tehran, he stated that the fasting Iranian people, who were participating in the International Jerusalem Day rally, had sent a message to the US and Israel that they will defend the Palestinian principles, driven by Islamic and moral teachings, as well as the principles of brotherhood.

The rallies set off under the slogan “Unity of the Muslim Ummah, Support for the Palestine Intifadah, and Renunciation of the Zionist Entity and Takfiri Terrorism.”

In a statement on the side-lines of the rallies, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that the message of the Iranian Muslim people throughout the country was that the Palestinian people are not alone, and that the Iranians will remain on the side of the Palestinian people and the oppressed across the world. He affirmed that victory would be achieved through continued steadfastness and resistance. President Rouhani described Israel as a base for arrogance, led by the United States, in the region.¹¹¹

The Jerusalem Day rallies took place again in 2017 on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, and millions of Iranians took part in mass demonstrations in all Iranian provinces. Demonstrators carried banners and pictures condemning Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people and Israeli actions in Jerusalem and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, confirming their support for the Palestinian people, the Palestine issue. Iranian officials, led by President Hassan Rouhani and Ali Larijani, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, as well as military commanders of IRGC and the military, took part in the demonstrations in Tehran.¹¹²

The Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who met a PIJ delegation, headed by its Secretary General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shalah on 1/5/2016, emphasized the priority of the Palestine issue, and the belief that the goal of the Muslim world and the Palestinian groups should focus on warding off the “risk of the Zionist entity.” He added that any action aimed at undermining the Palestine issue as the primary issue of the Muslim world, or aimed at underestimating the danger of Israel, is

unacceptable, and stressed the need for unity among the Palestinian factions.¹¹³ Zarif pointed out that one of the new Iranian foreign policy objectives was to draw the attention of the Muslim world back once again to the most important common issue of the Muslim world, the Palestine issue.¹¹⁴

Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani also stressed the need for unity among Muslim countries in support of the Palestinian people, indicating that defending Palestine remains a central issue for his country. In meeting Palestinian factions in Tehran, on 13/2/2016, Larijani said that Iran considers defending the Palestinian people a religious duty. He declared Iran's readiness to support the families of the "Jerusalem *Intifadah*'s martyrs," and to reconstruct homes destroyed by Israel, adding that the policy of incitement to sectarian strife in the region aims to divert attention from Palestine.¹¹⁵

The Iranian Foreign Ministry welcomed the UN resolution on the illegality of the construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Bahram Qasemi, Speaker for the Foreign Ministry, said that this move was "a sign of the global community's resolve to end the Zionist regime's occupation and restore the rights of the Palestinian people." Qasemi added, "The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes any move which will guarantee materialization of the true demands of Palestinians and promotion of the international status of Palestine in line with opposition against the occupation of the Zionist regime and its expansionist policies." He said, "Evidently, the policies and measures of the Zionist regime to expand settlements in Palestinian territories is in full contradiction with International Law and regulations, repeatedly emphasized by the Islamic Republic of Iran."¹¹⁶

Larijani denounced the fact that some Muslim States had established relations with Israel, saying that the strategy would backfire.¹¹⁷

Iran denounced the Israeli closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque before Muslim worshippers in the summer of 2017. Foreign Ministry Speaker Bahram Qasemi said, "The Israeli regime's move to shut down *al-Aqsa* Mosque and to cancel Friday prayers is against fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law," adding, "in addition to all crimes, aggressions, and violations of the Palestinians' basic rights, the Israeli regime has targeted the religious freedom and rights of the Palestinian Muslims, which will bring about dangerous consequences." While highlighting the importance of the re-opening of *al-Aqsa* Mosque as soon as possible,

Qasemi called on all independent countries and the international community to put pressure on Israel so that the basic rights of people in the occupied territories would be observed.¹¹⁸ Thousands of Iranians also took part in a rally in the capital Tehran in support of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, condemning Israeli violations in it.¹¹⁹

Relations with Hamas and Palestinian Resistance Factions

Iran continued to support the Palestinian resistance factions in both 2016 and 2017. Relations with Hamas, which had deteriorated in previous years, mainly due to differences over the Syrian crisis, saw remarkable progress during these two years, as evidenced by in bilateral meetings, changed attitudes, and statements. Hamas leader Usama Hamdan, who was part of a Hamas delegation that visited Tehran on 10–17/2/2016, confirmed that the delegation found support for the resistance and the *Intifadah* in Palestine. Hamdan hoped that the visit would be a prelude to a new chapter of cooperation between Hamas and Iran. He said that their visit came at the invitation to participate in the 37th anniversary celebrations of the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran.¹²⁰ On another Iran visit by a Hamas delegation, on 20/10/2017, Hamdan stressed that Hamas' relations with Iran dated back over more than 25 years, and that over the decades, Iranian support for the Palestinian people and the Palestine issue had not ceased, and that it was normal that relations pass through some stages where a divergence of views occurs. He stressed that relations with Iran "are going through a new stage, and I can say with confidence that they are more stable than ever before."¹²¹

Hamas' Political Affairs Officer Musa Abu Marzuq had stressed that no Arab or Muslim State provided real support for the Palestinian resistance like Iran did, emphasising the importance of relations with the latter and its continued support for the resistance in the face of Israeli aggression.¹²²

'Abbas Zaki, member of Fatah's Central Committee and a member of the Palestinian delegation to Tehran, said that it was in the Palestinians' interest that Iran be a strong country, calling on partners to be good neighbours to it. Zaki added that any sectarian division in the region was "damaged goods," which only corrupt individuals would resort to, stressing that there should be no battles other than that of Palestine, and that the Palestinians count on their brothers in Iran due to Tehran's growing role.¹²³

Hamas Political Bureau member Sami Abu Zuhri affirmed that the movement had contacted Iran to strengthen bilateral relations, and that Hamas was keen to

build balanced and close relations with all Arab and Muslim parties.¹²⁴ Hamas representative to Tehran, Khalid Qaddumi, also stressed that bilateral relations were improving by the day. He said in an exclusive statement to the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), that Palestine was the joint link between Iran and Hamas, and that Palestine remained the most important common issue between the two sides. He added that there was no disagreement on the question of Palestine, adding that the two sides were convinced that they cannot operate independently of each other, because the main common ground between both sides is the confrontation with Israel.¹²⁵

Hamas leader in GS Mahmud al-Zahhar, also confirmed these relations by saying that the resistance in GS could not counter any Israeli aggression without Iranian military support. “which alone is not enough.”¹²⁶

The importance of this support is its sustainability on the one hand, and its military and armament dimension on the other, which is an indispensable requirement of the resistance in GS. Whereas the support provided by some states to GS is limited to civil, health, and social assistance. For many reasons, these States do not go beyond this kind of support towards any military support. Even their financial support for the Strip often goes through the PA. Such support is at risk of stopping at any moment due to regional pressures.

Assuring the return of close bilateral relations, an IRGC statement denied any statements attributed to them against Hamas, saying:

Hamas... is at the forefront of the Palestinian nation's anti-Zionist resistance and struggle... the Palestinian nation's experience in the battle against the Israeli regime demonstrates that 'negotiation and compromise' would only encourage the Zionist enemy in its policy of continued occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

The statement also referred to resistance as “the only strategy that can help Palestine achieve its goals, hailing Hamas and other genuine Palestinian fighters for pursuing that strategy in recent years.”¹²⁷

In the same regard, Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force Qassem Soleimani congratulated Isma'il Haniyyah on his election as head of the Hamas Political Bureau in May 2017, saying, “We are hopeful about your efforts on institutionalizing resistance along the Hamas' jihadi line,” and “We await strengthening of unity with Hamas, the ally of resistance axis, to raise the issue of Palestine again.” Soleimani

underlined “the evil plots of Zionism and global Arrogance who seek weakening the Islamic Ummah; ‘they are trying to distract Ummah’s jihad from its Islamic path and are seeking seizure of the Holy Qudas while the supporters of the city lack the will to save it.’” He stressed the need for everyone’s devotion to serve Palestine, and that “we should not allow its cause to be a victim of others’ interests or strife.” He expressed his aspiration for a wise administration that promises a brighter future, where internal crises are addressed sensibly.¹²⁸

Emphasizing the priority of the Palestine issue, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif welcomed the visit of the Hamas delegation to the Islamic Republic of Iran, stressing the importance of the Palestine issue in Iranian foreign policy and the need for establishing relations with the Palestinian resistance factions, led by Hamas. Zarif said that Iran was ready to put aside all differences for the sake of supporting Palestine, the Palestinian people, and unity of the Muslim *Ummah*.¹²⁹

As a reflection of this positive shift in relations between Hamas and Tehran, Secretary General of International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, made a televised speech at a ceremony held in GS, on 22/6/2017. He said, “I repeat the warning about the dangerous move made by some states in the region seeking to assert normalization of relations with the Zionist entity,” indicating that “this step will not promote the interests of Palestine and the regional countries.” He added that “efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia—in addition to other states—and the Zionist entity are a betrayal of the ideals of Islam. Palestinian refugees must return to their ancestral land, and history will show us that this will happen.” This was the first time an Iranian official had taken part in a ceremony in Gaza in such a manner, according to officials of the Palestinian factions.¹³⁰

A delegation of Hamas leaders took part in the inauguration ceremony of President Hassan Rouhani, headed by Political Bureau member and Hamas’ Arab and Islamic Relations Officer ‘Izzat al-Rishq, in addition to Usama Hamdan, Saleh al-‘Aruri, and Zaher Jabarin also meeting Iranian officials. Al-Rishq thanked Iran’s support of the Palestinian people and their resistance, stressing that the movement wants to communicate with the Muslim *Ummah* (nation), hence Hamas’ relations with Iran, in order to serve the Palestine issue, which is considered the central cause of this *Ummah*. Al-Rishq said that Hamas believed that Muslim world unity

is necessary, and that differences must be put aside, and energies focused on the common enemy: the occupation. Both sides stressed that they had started a new chapter in bilateral relations, aiming to confront the common enemy, and to support Palestine, the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and the resistance.¹³¹

In October 2017, following the declaration of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, there was a remarkable development in strengthening Hamas' relations with Iran. A high-level delegation from Hamas, headed by Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Saleh al-'Aruri, visited Iran on the first foreign tour after signing a reconciliation agreement with Fatah in Cairo, "to strengthen relations with Iran at the highest possible level." At the same time, Hamas Chairman in the Gaza Strip Yahya al-Sinwar emphasized that "Iran is the largest provider of weapons, funds, and training for the Al-Qassam Brigades," adding, "Whoever thinks we will sever our ties with Iran is delusional."

Hamas sources told the *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper that the movement had responded to Israel in two ways: The first was the announcement by al-Sinwar that "disarming Hamas is a snowball's chance in hell," and the second was the presence of a high-level delegation from the movement in Tehran. The sources added, "Israel does not make decisions for Hamas. Israel is the enemy, and our relations with Fatah, Iran, or any other party is an internal affair." Hamas official Taher al-Nunu said, "We want strong relations with Iran, and we will not abandon our friends and allies in the region. We have come a long way to re-strengthen strategic relations with Tehran."¹³²

Thus, in 2016 and 2017, the most important development with regard to Iran's relations with the Palestinian factions was the evolution of its relations with Hamas. If 2016 was a prelude to the restoration of relations between the two sides, 2017 was the time to set aside the differences of the preceding period, and to reaffirm the persistence of these relations to confront their common challenges.

Conclusion

It is expected that relations will strengthen between Hamas and the other resistance forces on the one hand and Iran on the other in the coming stage, especially with the increasing political, economic, and security pressure facing the resistance forces and the Islamic movements in the region, and with the escalation of Israeli extremism and US pressure.

Western powers and their allies in the region will try to play the card of sectarian strife and divert attention towards a conflict with Iran rather than Israel. This will push the Palestinian resistance forces, especially the Islamic ones, into greater coordination and cooperation with Iran regarding the Palestine issue; regardless of their disagreement with Iran's regional policies, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Fourth: Other Muslim States

1. Malaysia

Malaysia's policy towards the Palestine issue did not witness any major changes in 2016–2017 and its official and public support continued. In January 2016, an Israeli delegation that was supposed to take part in the Youth Sailing World Championship withdrew after the Malaysian authorities set certain conditions for the delegation's visas, including refraining from raising the Israeli flag, or wearing any symbol on their attire and surfboards that showed their country of origin.¹³³

Malaysia has relinquished its right to host the 2017 International Football Federation (Fifa) Congress because of Israel's participation in it. In this regard, Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi stressed, "Malaysia was unable to provide visas to Israeli officials because it did not have diplomatic ties and could rile up local sensitivities."¹³⁴

The Malaysian role emerged at the end of 2016 when it participated in the adoption of a draft resolution submitted to the UN Security Council condemning Israeli settlement building; the draft had been previously pulled back by Egypt under Israeli pressure. The resolution was passed by a majority of 14 votes (out of 15), with the US abstaining from voting. The administration of President Barack Obama did not respond to Israeli pressure to veto the resolution.¹³⁵

The Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs ordered police to ban the "Jerusalem Jubilee," which a Chinese association had been working on. Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs Zahid Hamidi said that, "When the sentiments of Muslims are affected, and their feelings offended... I as Home Minister order the police to ban the meeting." Hamidi stressed that celebrating Israel's occupation of Palestine

offended Malaysians. Organizers were also summoned for interrogation after more than 32 police reports were lodged against the event.¹³⁶

On a different note, Hamidi called on the Muslim *Ummah* to thwart efforts to transfer the so-called “capital of Israel” from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In a speech on the side-lines of the International Conference of Ulama, Hamidi said that Palestine must be recognized as an independent state, and Palestinians must be allowed to determine the course that their government would take. He pointed out that “despite the existence of different doctrines in Islam, we must work together to defend Islam,” condemning the atrocities committed by Israel against the Palestinians in Jerusalem.¹³⁷

It is noteworthy that the Malaysian authorities are still open to all Palestinian parties, including Hamas, and Malaysia refused to submit to any external pressure to prevent the reception of Hamas leaders. Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakr stated in a press conference, “If they come in peace and don’t create any problems, then what is the issue? We don’t have a problem. This is a free country...we will accept whoever that does not cause trouble.”¹³⁸ In this regard, a delegation from Hamas participated in the 62nd annual conference of the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*—PAS), which was held in 2016. Another delegation visited Malaysia in 2017 and met with Malaysian leaders.

2. Indonesia

Israel’s attempts to establish relations with the Muslim world continue at an ever-increasing pace, working hard towards achieving concrete breakthroughs, similar to those achieved with other states that had long been supportive of the Palestine issue. However, these normalization attempts are yet to yield results with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan. The Palestine issue continues to receive the attention of the Indonesian people. In March 2016, the Indonesian capital hosted an OIC extraordinary summit on Palestine and Jerusalem. Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, said, “We also cannot let the situation in the Islamic world and the threats of terrorism and extremism, divert our attention from the issue of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif,” adding, “The Declaration provides a clear message that the OIC Member States are united and committed to lend its support for Palestine.”¹³⁹

Later in 2016, the Israeli authorities prevented the Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs from reaching Ramallah to hold a meeting with President ‘Abbas

and to attend the opening of an Indonesian honorary consulate in Ramallah.¹⁴⁰ In response, in February 2017, the Indonesian authorities prevented an Israeli aircraft transporting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from Singapore to Australia from passing through Indonesian airspace, forcing it to change course.

Apparently, the notion of belonging to the Muslim *Ummah* in the largest Muslim State, has a major role in refusing Israeli attempts to normalize relations with Indonesia. Netanyahu talked about this, saying “It’s time for there to be official relations between Indonesia and Israel.”¹⁴¹ It is clear that Israel will exploit the eagerness of some Arab regimes to normalize relations with it in order to develop its diplomatic relations with other Muslim States and the states supporting the Palestine issue. However, this might not be achieved while the populations of these countries stand by the Palestinian people and their rights.

3. Pakistan

In 2016–2017, Pakistan pursued its traditional policy of support for the Palestine issue; the permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN, Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi, said, “Pakistan, for its part, remains committed to supporting the Palestinians in their decades-long legitimate struggle for their rights and for dignity.” During her participation in a UN Security Council meeting on “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question,” in April 2016, Lodhi pointed out that:

The current Israeli leadership is fast closing the possibility for a two-state solution, formally accepted by the parties and the international community. It is doing this willfully by its policy of expanding settlements, demolitions and incitement, accompanied by the refusal to engage in a meaningful dialogue to implement the internationally agreed two state solutions.

Unless the Israeli Government agrees to resume the implementation of the two state solution, and halts and reverses its policy of expanding settlements, the UN Security Council must... adopt a concrete and legally binding plan to implement the two state solutions and take the necessary measures for its enforcement.¹⁴²

In an exceptional incident in late 2016, which almost drove the region into a new state of tension between Pakistan and Israel, Minister of Defence Khawaja Asif responded to a fake story that stated, “If Pakistan send ground troops to Syria on any pretext, we will destroy this country with a nuclear attack.” Asif replied, “Israel forgets Pakistan is a nuclear state too.”¹⁴³

President ‘Abbas paid a three-day visit to Pakistan in January 2017. The visit aimed to mobilize Pakistani support in international forums and to advance the peace process. During a joint press conference with President ‘Abbas, Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif said, “Ensuring peace in the Middle East can’t be achieved without just settlement of the Palestine-Israeli dispute.” The Prime Minister called for the implementation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions and called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied Palestinian territories.¹⁴⁴

Fifth: Responsiveness of the Muslim Public to the Palestine Issue

Events in Jerusalem in 2016–2017, especially after the closure of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017, and following Trump’s declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on 6/12/2017, and the decision to transfer the US embassy to it, have returned the Palestine issue to the center of the Muslim world’s attention. The Muslim public rejected Israeli actions against the Palestinians; huge demonstrations were held in most Muslim countries, reaching one million participants in some countries, calling for the expulsion of Israel’s ambassadors from some states, the end of all forms of normalization with Israel, and boycotting the US. Islamic parties and unions played an important role in mobilizing the public through organizing demonstrations, sit-ins, festivals, and popular events.

Turkey was one of the main countries which reacted on the popular level to every major Palestinian event. Turkish people provided financial and in-kind support to the Gazans and supported the Jerusalemites with the essentials to withstand Israeli Judaisation attempts. They were also keen to host and organize Palestinian events...

Humanitarian assistance, collected by Turkish organizations and associations and provided to the besieged in GS, frequently arrived in 2016–2017.¹⁴⁵ In Jerusalem, Turkish associations contributed to the restoration of historic mosques and old houses, as well as cleaning Ottoman relics and organizing many guided tours of the holy city. In addition, the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs was held in Istanbul for the purpose of establishing an investment endowment (waqf) for the city. The Waqf Al-Ummah in Turkey launched the “Two Steps to Jerusalem” charity

campaign to attract contributors and donors to finance Jerusalem endowments in various ways.¹⁴⁶ Turks also hosted, and contributed to the organization of, numerous conferences in support of Palestinian issues, notably: The Palestinians of Turkey Conference was held on 4/9/2016, with the participation of 25 Palestinian institutions operating in Turkey, the establishment of the International Forum for Palestinian Engineers on 5/11/2016, the Parliamentarians for Al-Quds conference on 29–30/11/2016, the third conference of the General Assembly of the Palestine Scholars Association in the Diaspora on 3/2/2017, and the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad on 25–26/2/2017. In addition, the International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS) launched a global advocacy campaign in Istanbul on 6/11/2017 in support of Sheikh Raed Salah, who was detained in Israeli jail. They also announced the “Nation’s Scholars Charter of the Resistance to Normalization with the Zionist Entity,” which was signed on 18/12/2017 in Istanbul.¹⁴⁷

Turks also took part in mass demonstrations against Israeli attacks on Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, where they organized many events in rejection of the Israeli decision to ban the *adhan* in occupied Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Several Turkish cities witnessed mass demonstrations in protest against the closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017. Trump’s embassy transfer announcement to Jerusalem triggered a wave of Turkish condemnation and concern, as well as angry popular reaction, with Turkey declaring its rejection of the announcement and demanding the US withdraw it. Demonstrations, organized and coordinated by hundreds of associations and parties, witnessed the participation of high-profile figures, in addition to Arab communities residing in Turkey, and students from Turkish schools and universities. Events denouncing Trump’s announcement were organized in most Turkish cities; for example, the number of assemblies and demonstrations reached 132 in 81 states on 8/12/2017 only. Turkish community associations and civil institutions also organized a number of activities and events, whose proceeds were donated to Jerusalem.¹⁴⁸

In Iran, International Jerusalem Day rallies took place again in 2016–2017, on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, in support of the Palestine issue, with the participation of millions of Iranians in all Iranian provinces. In July 2017, thousands of Iranians took part in rallies in support of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, condemning the Israeli closure of the mosque before worshippers, and the installation of metal detectors at its entrances. The popular mobilization was repeated following

Trump's embassy transfer announcement, as mass demonstrations were held in Tehran and most Iranian provinces condemning the move. Tehran also witnessed many events in solidarity with the Palestinian people and a number of conferences were held in support of the Palestine issue.¹⁴⁹

The Malaysian people's interaction with the Palestine issue was notable in 2016 and 2017; solidarity events were organized to condemn Israeli violations and US bias towards Israel. In addition, the boycott of Israeli goods was reactivated, and Israeli products were removed from a number of commercial centres. Malaysian popular movement in solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners' strike during the months of April and May 2017 was remarkable; many events rejecting violations by the Israel Prison Service against the prisoners were organized.¹⁵⁰ Trump's declaration on Jerusalem sparked a wave of angry Malaysian popular denunciation, Malaysian cities witnessed hundreds of protests rejecting the declaration and demanding the US withdraw it. Demonstrations were led by prominent officials, including Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and a number of ministers and parliamentarians.

In the same context, Indonesians expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people and with their just causes, declaring their rejection of Israeli attacks on the Palestinian people. They organized many events in solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners' strike in 2017, condemning the arbitrary arrests by the Israeli authorities against the Palestinians. Thousands of Indonesians also took to the streets in support of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017, led by many officials, religious figures, and politicians. Several religious figures and civil society organizations distributed circulars to all the mosques in the country stating that Friday Khutbahs (sermons) should be about supporting and defending the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and about spreading awareness of the Palestine issue.¹⁵¹

Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians protested against Trump's declaration; at the invitation of the Indonesian Scholars Council, "Majelis Ulama Indonesia," hundreds of thousands of Indonesians gathered in Merdeka Square located in the centre of the capital Jakarta to protest against Trump's decision under the slogan "Indonesia Unites for Jerusalem." Popular figures and officials, including Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly, Zulkifli Hasan, the parliament speaker and his deputy, and the governor of the capital Jakarta. The Islam-based Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*—PKS), which participated

with other parties in organizing the demonstration in Jakarta, condemned Trump's declaration, stressing that it showed enmity towards Muslims throughout the world.¹⁵²

Thousands gathered in several Pakistani cities, notably the capital Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar, to condemn Trump's declaration on Jerusalem. Chairman of the All Pakistan Ulema Council, Hafiz Muhammad Ashrafi criticised Trump's announcement about the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, saying that that was a transgression against the entire Muslim world. A number of Pakistani parties announced their rejection of the declaration, saying that it was a blatant provocation to the feelings of the Muslim *Ummah*. They called on other parties to boycott US products and stop mutual visits with the United States, calling for an international conference on the issue of Jerusalem.¹⁵³

Many Islamic organizations condemned the July 2017 Israeli closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. On 15/7/2017, the IUMS described the closure as "criminal" and "dangerous." The International Muslim Women's Union, headquartered in Khartoum, also condemned the closure. IUMS stressed that Jerusalem was a red line, and that considering it the Israeli capital was a blatant attack on Muslims, a disregard for their sanctities, and great support to extremism. IUMS Chairman Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi emphasized that cession of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque or Jerusalem was not a simple, marginal matter; "Whomever issued the decision, it cannot be permitted."¹⁵⁴

The most prominent Islamic events in solidarity with the Palestine issue were:

- The call by scholars and clerics from 14 African countries for "mass mobilization" in support of Jerusalem and Palestine, and "to counter any Israeli attempts to infiltrate" the African continent. At the closing session of the "The Second Meeting of Jerusalem" held in the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott on 13/11/2016. They stressed the need to confront "normalization with Israel," and the need to "restore solidarity among the African peoples, and unite them to support just causes, especially the Palestine issue."¹⁵⁵
- The Islamic-Christian Dialogue Conference, on 1/7/2017, called for the support of the people in Jerusalem, as well as supporting civil and official educational, cultural, economic, social, and health institutions in Jerusalem, to strengthen the steadfastness of its people and institutions.¹⁵⁶

- Declaration of Jerusalem as the “al-Quds–OIC Youth Capital 2018,” at the conclusion of the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation (ICYF-DC) meetings in Istanbul on 25/7/2017.¹⁵⁷
- 300 Muslim scholars, on 12/12/2017, belonging to a number of institutions and unions, gathered, including: The Palestine Scholars Association in the Diaspora, Sunni Scholars League, The Syrian Islamic Council, Iraqi Fiqh Academy, The Council of Iraqi Scholars, The Association of Libyan Scholars, Sunni Scholars League in Turkey, and The Association of Muslim Scholars of Australia. They called on Muslims to enforce the boycott of US and Israeli goods, and boycott any state involved in the aggression against Jerusalem.¹⁵⁸
- Muslim scholars from several countries declared, on 18/12/2017, the adoption of the “Nation’s Scholars Charter to Resist Normalization with the Zionist Entity” at all levels: political, economic, social, and cultural. At a conference held in Istanbul, the scholars said that the launch of the charter was aimed at curbing the growing wave of normalization with Israel in the Muslim world. The charter was signed by 36 bodies and associations, and more than 300 scholars from 26 countries. It consisted of 44 articles, introducing Sharia ruling on normalization, considering it prohibited by Sharia law, and providing explanation for the evidence of its prohibition and its purposes, in addition to mentioning the consequences of “the degrading factors,” as stated in the charter.¹⁵⁹

Sixth: Normalization and Israeli Relations with Muslim Countries

Israel continues to make huge efforts to normalize relations with Muslim countries, taking advantage of weakness and fragility among Arabs and Muslims, and making use of the rise in US support of Israel, presenting relations with it as a gateway to improved and developed relations with the US. Israeli official statements reflected some progress in this process. Israeli officials have been keen to make statements and send messages to indicate the importance and symbolism of Israel being able to overcome the tactic of boycott.

In this context, Israeli Minister of Energy, Yuval Steinitz, revealed on 19/11/2017 that Israel has “ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab

countries.” When asked about the reason for concealing or denying these relations, Steinitz said, “It’s the other side that is interested in keeping the ties quiet. With us, usually, there is no problem, but we respect the other side’s wish,” adding, “ties are developing, whether it’s with Saudi Arabia or with other Arab countries or other Muslim countries, and there is much more... (but) we keep it secret.”¹⁶⁰

On 27/11/2017, Representative of Israel to the UN, Danny Danon, revealed that he was “holding covert contacts with ambassadors from 12 Islamic and Arab countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.” Danon described the contrast between the past and the present, saying that most of the ambassadors would once have done anything to avoid having any contact with Israel. Now, he said, they shake hands and their encounters are cordial and, at times warm. Danon explained, “They still do not vote with us, but I can say that we have relationships with them on a mutual basis,” adding, “We were once banned from every discussion and event held by the ambassadors of these countries, but today we cooperate with them on a weekly basis. My challenge is for these collaborations to come out of the closed rooms and go public.”¹⁶¹

Israel’s relations have remarkably developed with two Asian Muslim States, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, in Central Asia. In December 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited these two countries. Israel has economic ties with them, as Azerbaijan has been buying weapons over several years from Israel, while the latter “buys nearly 70% of its oil consumption from the two countries.”¹⁶² Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, announced, on 13/12/2016, during a meeting with Netanyahu, that Azerbaijan had signed long-term contracts for the purchase of defense equipment from Israel at a value of \$5 billion. Aliyev noted this in his speech, saying, “Trade turnover is at the good level, but mainly because of the oil supplies from Azerbaijan to Israel,” adding, “We need to work in order to diversify and increase it.” The two sides signed four economic cooperation agreements.¹⁶³

In 2016–2017, relations developed between Israel and a number of Muslim States in Africa, including: Mali, Chad, Niger, Guinea, Uganda, and Togo. Israeli Foreign Ministry Director-General Dore Gold, who took office from June 2015 until October 2016, is considered the architect of Israel’s foreign relations, especially with regard to African-Israeli relations. Gold strengthened diplomatic relations with many Muslim States in Africa, making public visits to some of them,

as well as secret visits to others. Some of these relations were kept secret, perhaps due to these states' fear of internal and external reactions.¹⁶⁴

In this context, a landmark Israeli-African summit, which “was meant to bring 54 countries on the continent to the Togolese capital of Lome,” on 23–27/10/2017, was cancelled due to internal and external pressure against this summit, which reflected the level of Israeli infiltration into Africa. At the same time, it reflected the power of the public when it opposes normalization, and its ability to embarrass many regimes that seek to do so.¹⁶⁵

In terms of trade between the Muslim world and Israel, the volume between Turkey and Israel, according to CBS, increased by almost 10.5% in 2017 compared to 2016. In 2016, there was a decline in the volume of Turkish-Israeli trade by more than –6% compared to 2015.

Israel's trade with Malaysia dropped significantly in 2017 by –96.4% compared to 2016. It also dropped in 2016 by –58.4% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Nigeria increased in 2017 by 79.2% compared to 2016. It dropped in 2016 by –27% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan dropped in 2017 by –23.4% compared to 2016. It increased in 2016 by 101.6% compared to 2015. It increased in 2016 by 101.6% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Kazakhstan dropped in 2017 by –23.9% compared to 2016. It dropped in 2016 by –20.7% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Indonesia dropped in 2017 by –19.8% compared to 2016. It increased in 2016 by 11% compared to 2015 (see table 3/7).

Israeli trade with Muslim countries remains, to a large extent, limited and marginal, except for Turkey, a country that distinguishes between its pro-Palestine political relations and its active trade with Israel. This is because most Muslim countries do not have official relations with Israel, and to the animosity of their people towards Israel. As for Malaysia, whose trade with Israel steeply declined in 2016–2017, it does not have any official relations with Israel. A considerable part of the announced Israeli trade may be due to that fact that American companies have branches in both countries, thus sending goods from Israel to Malaysia; an analysis that needs to be confirmed. Perhaps the Malaysian authorities have been aware of this in the last two years and have clamped down on this type of trade; or any direct or indirect trade to which the Israeli side is a party of.

Table 3/7: Israeli Trade Volume with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2014–2017 (\$ millions)¹⁶⁶

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2017	2016	2015	2014	2017	2016	2015	2014
Turkey	1,414.2	1,297.7	1,713.6	2,755.6	2,895.9	2,601.7	2,446	2,683.6
Malaysia	6.9	583.3	1,419.5	1,375.7	14.6	14	15.3	52
Nigeria	148.6	81.7	113.2	96.9	3.4	3.1	2.9	1.4
Azerbaijan	199.8	260.1	129.7	185	4.3	6.2	2.4	1.1
Kazakhstan	31.1	46.5	59.7	114.3	5.9	2.1	1.6	3.9
Senegal	12	7.1	14.7	14	4.4	4.9	4.7	2.9
Uzbekistan	17.2	13.3	15.3	38.2	2.4	0.3	1.2	1.2
Indonesia	83.3	120.9	95.5	27.1	48.4	43.3	52.2	68.7
Cote d'Ivoire	9.7	10.7	9.8	19.3	0.3	0.2	0.4	1.1
Cameron	5.3	8.8	8.5	6.8	0	0.2	0	0.1
Turkmenistan	4.4	2	22.7	7.8	0.1	0	0	0
Gabon	0.6	5.1	4.5	4	0.1	0.3	0	0

Conclusion

The Muslims of the world, in general, interacted and were in consensus regarding the Lion's Gate uprising (*Habbat al-Asbat*) and the protests against Trump's embassy transfer announcement to Jerusalem. All over the Muslim world, thousands rallied and protested the Trump decision. Pro-Palestine and anti-Israeli occupation sentiments were obvious and powerful, however they were emotional reactions and lacked sustainability. This was mainly due to Muslim governments not providing adequate media coverage, and the Palestine issue easily loses their political attention, hence weakening the chances of permanent interaction with Palestine.

Muslim officials continued their traditional policies in adopting the Arab Peace Initiative and the “two-state solution,” and in supporting the PLO leadership. Their official relations with Israel are still severed, despite some countries, which continued or developed their trade—though limited—with it.

Turkey, led by AKP, continued its strong pro-Palestine policy and defense of Hamas’s right to participation in political leadership, while harshly criticizing hostile Israeli conduct. However, Turkish trade with Israel was very active, significantly more than any other Muslim country, thus distinguishing between the political and economic tracks. Turkey took into consideration its NATO membership criteria, its desire for EU membership, and the wish not to further strain its relationship with Israel, which may support its political opponents at home or on the Turkish border. It seems that the Turkish behavior will continue to maintain its overall pattern over the next couple of years.

As for Iran, it continued its anti-Israel existence and pro-armed resistance policies, adopted since the 1979 Iranian revolution that ousted the Shah. Despite its stumbling and cold relations with the most prominent resistance force, Hamas, due to its regional policies, this relationship recovered substantially, especially in 2017. At the same time, Israel escalated its warnings against an increased Iranian-Hizbullah influence in Lebanon and Syria, dealing with it as a potential threat, despite its comfort with the regional internal and sectarian conflicts, which negatively affect these countries’ social fabric, economic structure and political system. Israel wants the conflict to continue, provided it does not affect its security, stability and the calm along its borders. Iran is expected to preserve its anti-Israel pro-Palestinian armed resistance policies, and tension may rise with the increased Iranian-Hizbullah influence in Lebanon and Syria.

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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