

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



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# Chapter Seven

*The Palestine Issue and the  
Muslim World*



# The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

## *Introduction*

The official pan-Islamic political level still lags behind the aspirations of Muslim peoples with regard to the liberation of Palestine and the restoration of Palestinian rights, land, and holy sites. The approach of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Muslim countries remains slow and outdated, often not exceeding verbal or moral support, at a time when the Trump deal presents dangerous dimensions, led by the Judaization of Jerusalem. The Muslim peoples still yearn for Jerusalem, reject the normalization of Israel, and continue to carry out solidarity activities with Palestine and its issue, within their limited capabilities.

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 methods of interaction.

## *First: OIC*

Throughout 2018–2019, the OIC continued to pursue its policy regarding the Palestine issue, with the Jerusalem issue attracting more of its attention due to the increased US targeting of the holy city, when Washington recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved its embassy there; in addition to Israeli continued attacks on the city in general, and *al-Aqsa* Mosque in particular.

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

Despite fifty years passing since the founding of the OIC, the organization has not lived up to its task for which it was established, namely the protection of the holy sites and city of Jerusalem. Throughout 2018–2019, its activities continued along the same the commemorative lines. For example, in February 2018 a conference was held in the city of Ramallah declaring “Al-Quds, Islamic Youth Capital,” as part of the work to defend the city, amid continued attempts to remold the city into the capital of Israel.



In the same context, the OIC reiterated its rejection of the transfer of foreign embassies to Jerusalem. In March 2018, the OIC condemned Guatemala's decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem in mid-May, viewing it as an illegal step and a violation of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 487, and UN General Assembly resolutions on Jerusalem, which reject any actions that might prejudice the historical and legal status of the occupied city of Jerusalem. In early January 2018, the OIC secretary general sent a letter to the Foreign Minister of Guatemala affirming the OIC's rejection of this decision, which contributed to entrenching the Israeli occupation of the city.<sup>1</sup>

In May 2018, the OIC convened an extraordinary summit upon the invitation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to respond to the actions of the US administration that had moved its embassy to Jerusalem on 1/5/2018. The summit rejected of the US decision and affirmed that it would “take the necessary measures to apply the economic restriction to countries, officials, parliaments, companies or individuals who recognize the annexation of Al-Quds by Israel, the occupying Power,... or deal with any measures related to the consecration of Israeli colonization of the occupied Palestinian territories.”<sup>2</sup>

OIC involvement in the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019 followed with its previous pace, with denunciations of Israeli measures under the political ceiling the OIC had committed itself to, namely, the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by the late Saudi King ‘Abdullah during the Beirut Arab League summit in 2002. In its statements during 2018 and 2019, the OIC reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestine issue and Jerusalem to the Muslim nation and affirmed the organization's determination to continue to work in accordance with international law. The OIC emphasized its unwavering commitment to a two-state solution, as it is (according to the organization's view) the only acceptable international solution in the context of self-determination, international law and current UN resolutions, and in accordance with international references and the Arab Peace Initiative.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the Israeli attacks on Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, the OIC continued to issue strongly worded statements condemning these attacks, settlement building, and repeated massacres against the Palestinian people in GS, as well as condemning racist laws against the Palestinian people in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948.

Consequently, we are unlikely to see OIC positions that reach the aspirations of Muslim peoples in 2020 and 2021, and to unite energies and positions to defend the rights of Muslim peoples, especially the protection of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

## ***Second: Turkey***

The Syrian issue continued to dominate Turkish foreign policy in 2018–2019, including the priority of the fight against the separatist project of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*—PYD) and its military arms. The past two years saw two Turkish military operations in northern Syria in collaboration with Syrian opposition groups, namely, Operation Olive Branch in early 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. Turkey's domestic agenda was also busy, particularly over the two years, with the country holding two major elections—presidential and legislative elections in June 2018, and municipal elections in March 2019. In addition, Turkey continued its domestic crackdown on the group affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*—PKK).

Despite all this, it can be said that the Palestine issue remained present in Turkish foreign policy, in word and deed, that is, in the official statements of Turkish officials and in Turkish diplomatic work. This was further enabled by Turkey's periodic presidency of the OIC, with the escalating developments in Palestine, especially concerning the Marches of Return and the transfer US embassy to Jerusalem, encouraging Turkey to advance joint Islamic action countering this decision within the OIC.

### **The Turkish Scene**

2018 and 2019 were similar to previous years in terms of Turkey's busy domestic and foreign policy agendas, with the country witnessing radical changes led by the transition from the parliamentary to the presidential system, following the legislative-presidential elections of 2018. This has affected domestic politics, albeit less so on foreign policy.

As had been expected, President Erdoğan won presidential elections in the first round, but his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP)

lost the majority of seats in parliament with a small margin, although it managed to maintain a majority by forming an alliance, the “People’s Alliance,” with the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*—MHP).<sup>4</sup> However, the relative decline of the AKP continued in the March 2019 municipal elections, in which it lost a number of local councils led by Istanbul and Ankara, despite retaining a comfortable lead against other parties.<sup>5</sup>

The municipal elections, notably in Istanbul, gave a strong warning to the AKP through the landslide victory achieved by the opposition candidate. Those elections, as well as other factors, brought strong criticism of the AKP’s policies by former leaders, mainly former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and former Economy Minister Ali Babacan. Eventually both men resigned from the AKP, and the former established the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*—GP), while the second is expected to announce a new party in 2020.

Over the past two years, relations with the US continued their turbulent streak caused by tensions and distrust. US-Turkish relations were severely jolted by Ankara’s buying of Russian S-400 missile defense systems, despite Washington’s reservations and threats of sanctions.

All of the above formed Turkey’s priorities, internally and externally, which somewhat reduced its interest in other issues. Nevertheless, the Palestine issue received noticeable Turkish attention during the two years in question, due to developments in Palestine on the one hand and Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC on the other.

### **Tension and Management of Interests with Israel**

Despite their strong trade relations, Turkish-Israeli relations in the past two years were cold and tense. This was fuelled by the hostility shown by Israel towards Turkey, and their recent regional conflict of interests, despite the restoration of their bilateral relations after the 2016 agreement.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Ankara saw that Tel Aviv had played a role in US support of the separatist militias opposed to Turkey in Syria,<sup>7</sup> and in the efforts to eliminate Turkey from the natural gas equation in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Turkey viewed Israel’s regional alliances as being against Ankara, sometimes militarily.<sup>9</sup> It considered Israel to have had a role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016,<sup>10</sup> not to mention that Israel has supported the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, opposed by Ankara in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

Adding insult to injury, the past two years saw important events regarding the Palestine issue that contributed to raising the ceiling of the Turkish position against Israel, foremost of which was the brutal Israeli response to the Marches of Return, along with the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem.

### **Turkish Interest in the Palestine Issue**

During the period in question, Turkish interest in the Palestine issue increased, thanks to the aforementioned reasons, foremost among which were the developments of the Jerusalem issue and the Marches of Return, as well as Turkey's periodic presidency of the OIC.

The last two years were characterized by a broad Turkish openness to the PA owing to several considerations. It increased its support to the PA, invited the Palestinian president who was well received, and provided facilities to the Palestinian Foreign Ministry, including logistical support, training of cadres, and received the meetings of Palestinian ambassadors.<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the Hamas movement, over the past two years, there have been no official Turkish meetings with its leaders, except for during the final few months, when the Turkish president met a Hamas delegation, led by Hamas ex-politburo chief Khalid Mish'al in November 2019.<sup>13</sup> A meeting was also held between the president and the current chief of Hamas's politburo Isma'il Haniyyah, during the latter's first foreign visit after his election. According to the Turkish presidency, the two sides discussed a number of issues, the most important of which were Jerusalem, the threats to *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the planned Palestinian elections, the difficult humanitarian conditions in GS, and the Turkish role in supporting the Palestine issue.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the Turkish president spoke thereafter of Hamas as a resistance movement fighting "the occupiers," and not only as a political movement elected by the Palestinian people, as had been customary.<sup>15</sup>

Ankara hardened its tone against Palestinian ex-Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, deeming him a threat to Turkish national security, having previously arrested two individuals suspected of carrying out espionage upon his orders.<sup>16</sup> The Turkish authorities issued a "red notice" for Dahlan's arrest over his alleged role in supporting and funding the failed coup attempt in 2016, offering rewards for tipoffs about him.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, this escalation took place after the Palestinian president, addressing the UN, said he intended to call for elections in the Palestinian

Territories, and after the remarks of the Turkish foreign minister saying there was a plan by regional regimes to install Dahlan as head of the PA.<sup>18</sup> This means that this step could lead to further rapprochement between Ramallah and Ankara, if the PA accepts the move and cooperates.

On the humanitarian and relief level, Ankara provided \$10 million aid to the PA to implement various projects,<sup>19</sup> in addition to \$10 million to UNRWA after Erdoğan met Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbüh in Ankara.<sup>20</sup> The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*—TİKA) continued to be the most prominent Turkish development instrument in implementing humanitarian and development projects in the territories of the PA,<sup>21</sup> a role that angered Israel, which developed a detailed plan to limit Turkey’s activities in the Palestinian territories, especially Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Marches of Return**

Turkey has taken a strong position against Israeli attacks on Palestinian Marches of Return launched in GS on 30/3/2018, especially those held on the anniversary of the *Nakbah* on 15/5/2018, when Israel killed 60 Palestinians in one day and wounded 1,300. The Turkish response unfolded on multiple political levels, led by the Turkish presidency, whose spokesman Ibrahim Kalin strongly condemned the massacre, calling on the UN to assume its responsibilities to protect the Palestinians.<sup>23</sup>

In turn, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned Israel’s “disproportionate” use of force against the Palestinians.<sup>24</sup> A spokesman of the ruling AKP party, Mahir Ünal, said that what had happened on that day amounted to a crime against humanity, deeming the international silence vis-à-vis Israel’s actions another crime against humanity.<sup>25</sup> The Turkish government announced three days of mourning in solidarity with the Palestinian people after the “Israeli massacre,”<sup>26</sup> and sought to transfer Palestinian wounded to Turkish hospitals for treatment. However, its attempt failed, and Turkey accused Israel and Egypt of obstructing its efforts.<sup>27</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in turn, condemned the Israeli massacre, stressing that Israel would be punished for what it did, calling it a “terrorist state.”<sup>28</sup> Erdoğan also held the US responsible for the Palestinian blood shed because of its support for Israel’s actions.<sup>29</sup>



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called on the Arab League and the OIC to issue a collective stance against the massacre in GS, saying condemnations alone would not be enough as there was need for “joint practical steps as soon as possible.”<sup>30</sup>

These successive events triggered a media and political war of words between Ankara and Tel Aviv. On Twitter, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused the Turkish president of occupying Cyprus. Erdoğan responded by saying Netanyahu had no right to criticize Turkey, as he was the leader of a “terrorist state,” and the voice of “oppressors,” unlike Erdoğan, who “represents the voice of the oppressed.”<sup>31</sup> Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu responded to Netanyahu in turn, calling him a “cold-blooded killer” responsible for killing thousands of Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

It was remarkable that the Turkish president defended not only the Palestinian people in general, but the resistance movement Hamas specifically, rejecting Netanyahu’s accusation of “terrorism.” Erdoğan said Hamas was not a terrorist organization, but a resistance movement fighting occupation, an advanced position given traditional Turkish official discourse that has dealt with Hamas as an elected Palestinian faction rather than a resistance movement.<sup>33</sup>

## Jerusalem

At the end of 2017, the US president recognized Jerusalem as the undivided and eternal capital of Israel, saying that he intends to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This coincided with Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC, in 2016–2019, allowing it to lead the Islamic and Arab official response to the decision, under the slogan of “Jerusalem is our red line.”<sup>34</sup> In May 2018, on the anniversary of the *Nakbah*, Washington announced it would move its embassy to Jerusalem during an official ceremony.<sup>35</sup> This coincided with the massacre committed by the Israeli forces against the Marches of Return.

The Turkish responses again came from various official levels, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Parliament, AKP and the presidency spokesperson, but the important positions came from the Turkish president himself. Erdoğan stressed that his country would not allow the usurpation of Jerusalem by Israel,<sup>36</sup> and that it would maintain its support for the Palestinians, especially with regard to Jerusalem, even if the whole world abandoned them.<sup>37</sup>

Ankara took a series of diplomatic measures in response, summoning its ambassador to Tel Aviv for further consultations. Then, it summoned the Israeli ambassador to Ankara to the Foreign Ministry and handed him a letter protesting events in GS,<sup>38</sup> asking him and the Israeli consul to leave the country. At the airport, the police deliberately searched the Israeli ambassador, forcing him to take off his shoes in front of journalists, as part of the mutual tit-for-tat diplomatic steps between the two sides.<sup>39</sup>

Officially, the Turkish president accused Israel of engaging in systematic terrorism as part of its state policy,<sup>40</sup> holding the US partially responsible since it has continuously supported Tel Aviv and based on its decision to transfer its embassy to Jerusalem. Turkey then summoned its ambassador to Washington for consultation. The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, while praising his country's consistent defense of Jerusalem, warned that several Muslim and Arab countries had clearly retreated from their positions regarding the holy city.<sup>41</sup>

Turkey, as the head of the 13th Islamic Summit of the OIC, hosted an extraordinary summit of the organization in Istanbul focusing on Jerusalem and developments there. At the opening ceremony, Erdoğan said that his country had warned the US that its decision to transfer its embassy to Jerusalem would ignite the region and lead to sharp escalations.<sup>42</sup> The Turkish president criticized Israel's "banditry" and "brutality," and compared its actions to the atrocity faced by the Jewish people in Europe, pledging his country would seek, through the UN, to punish Israel for what it had done.<sup>43</sup>

In July 2018, the Turkish president responded to Israel's passing of the Jewish Nation-State Law, by calling Israel the most "Zionist, fascist and racist state in the world."<sup>44</sup> In a speech to his party's parliamentary bloc, he said, "The Israeli administration's view to identify those ancient lands as belonging to Jews alone is no different from Hitler's obsession with the Aryan race." "I call on the Islamic world, Christian world, all democratic and liberal states, non-governmental organizations, and members of the media to move against Israel," he added.<sup>45</sup>

In December 2018, Istanbul hosted the second conference of "Parliamentarians for Al Quds," two years after its first session, held under the aegis and with the participation of President Erdoğan, and attended by around 600 lawmakers from 74 countries. The final communique stressed the rejection of the Deal of the Century and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, renewing the call on

the OIC, al-Quds committee and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to defend the heritage of Jerusalem, *al-Aqsa*, and the Palestinian Territories.<sup>46</sup>

In his opening speech, the Turkish president stressed the importance of Jerusalem being a red line for the Muslim world and said that targeting children in GS was no different from the crime of the Holocaust against the Jews in Europe. He thanked the heroes fighting for Jerusalem and human dignity, and defending the dignity of the Muslim nation against the occupiers.<sup>47</sup> The Turkish MP and head of “Parliamentarians for Al Quds,” in Turkey, Nurettin Nebati, called for restarting resistance and steadfastness for the sake of Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup>

In June 2019, the Turkish president spoke clearly for the first time about the US peace plan in the Middle East, aka the Deal of the Century, considering it a new project to destabilize the Middle East, and a new project for the division, fragmentation, and the swallowing up of the region, stressing that his country would not allow it.<sup>49</sup>

Erdoğan’s speech at the UN General Assembly in 2019 included a lengthy segment on the Palestine issue, during which he urged the UN to implement its resolutions against Israel, and questioned the motives of the international organization in failing to do so.<sup>50</sup> Erdoğan presented several maps, showing the Israeli incursion into the Palestinian territories since before the declaration of the state of Israel through the present day. He said that in 1947 there was no such thing as Israel, and the whole region was called Palestine, and then compared it to the current situation in which Palestine is barely present, for “the entire region has become Israel.” Erdoğan wondered about the boundaries of Israel, and its objectives and future, questioning the motives behind the Deal of the Century, which he said aims to eliminate the Palestinian people and their issue.<sup>51</sup>

### **Operation “Peace Spring”**

On 9/10/2019, the Turkish Armed Forces, in cooperation with the Syrian National Army, launched a third military operation in northern Syria—dubbed Operation Peace Spring—against the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*—YPG). Turkey identified two main goals for the offensive: repelling the protection units’ militants to a depth of more than 30 km away from the Turkish-Syrian border, and establishing a safe zone in northern Syria to return one million Syrians in the first stage, and then raise their number later to three million.<sup>52</sup>

Because the Turkish process did not enjoy wide international support, with the reactions varying between denunciation, condemnation, reservations and warning, with the exception of a few countries that supported it, Ankara issued admonitions to many countries for not supporting its “war on terror,”<sup>53</sup> which led to a popular reaction reflected on social media.

Some nationalists, especially some leaders of the İYİ Party (opposition), took advantage of this popular sentiment to rail against a condemnation statement by the Arab League, attacking the Palestinians in particular, saying Turkey was wrong to support them despite their failure to support Ankara in its most important battle against “terrorism.” This was exacerbated by statements issued by Palestinian factions opposing Turkey’s operation, with the exception of Hamas, which said it understood Turkey’s right to defend itself.<sup>54</sup> A campaign was therefore triggered by some Turkish writers and activists on social media against the Palestinian position rejecting the operation, whereas in response some Turkish writers believed that the Turkish position on the Palestine issue was principled and not based on expecting something in return.

However, the most prominent reaction came from Turkish officials, where President Erdoğan and his foreign minister defended the official Palestinian position, believing that the LAS position did not represent that of the Palestinians, whose representative—and not their foreign minister—had participated for the first time in the League meeting.<sup>55</sup> The Anadolu News Agency was also keen to carry a denial from Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki’s of having issued a condemnation of the operation,<sup>56</sup> while various Turkish media reported the position supportive of Hamas.

### **Economic Relations**

Trade between Turkey and Israel continued to rise in the period covered by the report (2016–2019). Trade volume rose from \$4.34 billions in 2016 to \$4.91 billion in 2017, and kept rising to \$5.61 billions in 2018, and \$6.1 billions in 2019 (see table 1/7).

According to the data of the Turkish Ministry of Finance, cars, iron and steel products, and jewelry topped Turkish exports to Israel, while Turkey’s imports were led by oils, propylene, and hydrocarbons.

**Table 1/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and Israel According to Turkish and Israeli Statistics 2016–2019 (\$ million)<sup>57</sup>**

Year	Turkish exports to Israel		Turkish imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics
2019	4,359.4	3,174.4	1,743.1	1,761.8	6,102.5	4,936.2
2018	3,894.5	2,885.5	1,714.4	1,912.4	5,608.9	4,797.9
2017	3,407.4	2,895.9	1,505.1	1,428.1	4,912.5	4,324
2016	2,955.5	2,601.7	1,385.6	1,297.7	4,341.1	3,899.4

In contrast, Turkish exports to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 decreased significantly in the 2016–2019 period, as follows: Exports decreased 7.3% in 2017, 11.4% in 2018, and 14.3% in 2019, reaching about \$66.5 million in 2019 compared to \$94.4 million in 2016. Turkish imports from the Palestinian Territories over the same period increased by 47.9% in 2017, 33.9% in 2018, and 26.5% in 2019, reaching about \$8.4 million in 2019 compared to \$3.4 million in 2016 (see table 2/7).

**Table 2/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and the PA According to Turkish Statistics 2016–2019 (\$ thousand)<sup>58</sup>**

Year	Turkish exports to PA territories	Turkish imports from PA territories	Trade volume
2019	66,472.9	8,426.1	74,899
2018	77,525.7	6,660	84,185.7
2017	87,459.8	4,974.7	92,434.5
2016	94,372.1	3,363.9	97,736

## Evaluation and Outlook

The years 2018 and 2019 were similar to previous years in terms of the Turkish occupation with its domestic agenda, full of electoral cycles, economic crises, and “anti-terror” campaigns, while Turkish foreign policy remained preoccupied with the priorities of the Syrian issue and tensions with other powers, led by the US.



Nevertheless, the Palestine issue held an advanced position on the Turkish foreign policy agenda in the two years in question, statements and diplomatic measures wise. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Turkey led the official pan-Islamic action at this level, especially regarding the issue of Jerusalem and the transfer of the US embassy.

In addition to this major evaluation of the Turkish position during the past two years, the following points can be observed:

1. There has been no fundamental change in the Turkish position on the Palestine issue, its view of how to achieve a resolution, and its management of its other international relations regarding Palestine, despite the high ceiling and sharp tone of its statements regarding Israel.
2. Turkish foreign policy has once again demonstrated the importance of Jerusalem to Ankara, for known religious, historical and political reasons, and for what it considers “its historical responsibility,” given that the Ottoman state was the last sovereign state ruling the city before its occupation. In addition, Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC provided an opportunity to support Jerusalem, since it was originally established to defend it and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.
3. Turkish support of the Palestinians continued to focus on the political, media and humanitarian-relief aspects, while officially dealing with the PA.
4. There was no prominent Turkish effort concerning the internal Palestinian scene and the reconciliation process, except for urging both parties to end the division and unify efforts.

Therefore, it is not expected that the Turkish position on the Palestine issue will radically or rapidly change in the coming period. This position can be summarized as: supporting a political settlement on the basis of the two-state solution, amid persistent tensions with Tel Aviv, despite the continuation of trade relations; strengthening the relationship with the Palestinians through the PA; maintaining good relations with other Palestinian components, foremost among them Hamas; and focusing Turkish support on the political, media and relief fields, giving special importance to the issues of Jerusalem and the GS siege.

Among the most important factors behind the continuation of the Turkish position is that the crisis with Israel is not a fleeting one, but one that has turned into a semi-permanent policy. This is due to the roles Israel has played against strategic Turkish interests, from supporting Kurdish militias to regional alliances

related to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas resources and the consistent incitement against Erdoğan and Turkey.

Against the backdrop of this general strategic line, the Turkish interest in the Palestine issue is likely to rise tactically in some issues, affected by several factors, the most important of which are:

1. The relative calm of the internal Turkish agenda, especially at the level of elections, for the country is not expected to witness any electoral cycle until the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023.
2. Slower developments on the Syrian scene in relation to Turkey after Operation Peace Spring, with Turkey achieving most of its objectives, pushing back YPG fighters from its borders, which relieved the external pressure on Turkey from the Syrian side.
3. The consolidation of Turkish understandings with Russia regarding the Syrian issue, and more generally, regarding broader Turkish-Russian relations. The continuation of a crisis of confidence with the US, thus reducing Ankara's need to fulfill some commitments vis-à-vis Washington, which could even encourage it to do more for the Palestine issue, while stepping up its criticisms of Israeli practices.
4. Ankara's interest in the outcomes of the Palestinian elections, which it estimates are approaching either out of choice or necessity. It wants to minimize the chances of former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, whom it sees as a part of the hostile regional alliance that has worked against Turkey. Therefore, Turkish interest in Palestinian internal affairs in the next stage will most likely increase.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, there has been a solid, consistent Turkish policy concerning the Palestine issue, with its role witnessing a notable but gradual evolution. Studying the internal and regional factors influencing Turkish decision-making indicates a possibility that the Turkish position on Palestine may escalate in the near future. Perhaps one of the most important factor is the growing balance in Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the West and the East, which means the US influence over Ankara has declined in favor of more independence in Turkish foreign policy. This would reflect positively on its role in the Palestine issue and on its position concerning various Palestinian parties.

This places important responsibilities on the Palestinians, of all backgrounds, to avoid losing the support of a powerful friendly regional power. The Palestinians must work to strengthen cooperation with Turkey, help it shape its position on the Palestine issue, and prevent this position from regressing, especially after Turkey hands over the presidency of the OIC, a plausible scenario in all cases.

With the continuation of Ankara's position vis-à-vis the Palestinians and their issues in the next two years, it is still possible for the Palestinians to support and develop Ankara's role through several tracks, the most important of which are:

1. Strengthening Turkish-Palestinian relations by focusing on their common interests, especially strategic ones, and not only on the basis of Turkish support to the Palestinians, as this would be more effective and more sustainable.
2. Arranging Palestinian priorities in dealing with Turkey, and the areas and issues that should be a priority for the Turkish decision-makers regarding supporting the Palestinian people's resilience and political rights.
3. Despite the gradual escalation of the Turkish position, it is important to consider Ankara's sensitive position, in light of the complex US-NATO-European relations. Palestinians must avoid causing any recriminations against Palestinians living in Turkey or a decline in the role Turkey plays in general.
4. Institutionalizing relations with Turkey, cooperating with various Turkish political parties, and not limiting relations with the government and the ruling party or their leader, in order to achieve wider support and a deeper Turkish understanding of the issue, and avoid any harmful shifts.
5. Engaging Turkish civil society institutions by presenting a Palestinian vision of various relief, humanitarian, and development issues based on Palestinian necessities and priorities, to avoid redundancy, overlap and chaos.
6. Engaging the Turkish community, with a view to nudging Turkish people from support based on abstract emotion, to support based on the facts of history and data, and shifting the Palestine issue from the purely humanitarian dimension to its wider political and rights dimensions. Indeed, popular awareness is the real and strategic foundation of any issue, in addition, it would support the official position, and in the future, may serve to correct it, too.

### ***Third: Iran:***

In 2018 and 2019, the Palestine issue saw rapid strategic developments, most notably the decision by US President Trump to transfer his country's embassy to Jerusalem, and the subsequent Palestinian people's response through the Marches of Return. This was followed by the Deal of the Century project, which seeks through financial and development promises to liquidate the question of Palestine. Those developments coincided with a public drive for normalizing ties with Israel in some Arab Gulf states, which called for signing a "non-aggression" treaty, and eliminating mutual hostilities with Israel based on having Iran as a "shared foe."

The normalization drive and political deals seeking to liquidate the Palestine issue were accompanied by heavy pressures on Iran, which in the past two years came in the form of unprecedented US economic, financial, and oil sanctions, following the US withdrawal from the treaty signed with Iran regarding its nuclear program. Iran also faced Israeli threats and attacks on Iranian positions in Syria. The linkage between the escalation against Iran and normalization projects, as well as the Deal of the Century, sought to deflect Arab hostility away from Israel and towards Iran, while normalizing economic, political, and media ties with Israel.

These economic and political pressures did not prevent Iranian officials from condemning the Deal of the Century or the normalization with Israel. Iran also continued to assert its fixed positions regarding the illegitimacy of Israel, declaring its support to resistance movements in Palestine, strengthening and developing its relationship with them.

#### **Iran's Position on the US Embassy Move to Jerusalem**

An extraordinary Islamic summit of the OIC was held in Istanbul to discuss Trump's announcement of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. At this summit, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, called on Islamic states to focus their efforts on de-nuclearizing the Middle East region, and to pressure Israel to dismantle its nuclear arsenal, saying, "The nuclear arsenal of the Zionist entity is a serious threat to peace and security, especially in West Asia. Eliminating nuclear weapons from this region, which has been repeatedly proposed by Iran, must be a top priority in the agenda of Islamic countries."

Rouhani added:

In order to assist the Palestinian nation and counter the destructive decision by Trump, we call on Muslim governments and freedom-seeking nations in the world to revise their political, economic and commercial ties with the US administration, and also cut all their relations with the occupying Zionist regime and boycott the products and companies of the Zionists.<sup>59</sup>

In a speech during the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in New York, President Rouhani said, “The most pressing crisis in the Middle East, however, is the question of Palestine. The passage of time cannot—and must not—justify occupation... Israel, equipped with a nuclear arsenal and blatantly threatening others with nuclear annihilation, presents the most daunting threat to regional and global peace and stability.” Rouhani also said, “The abhorrent US decision to transfer its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and the recent enactment of the racist Jewish State law are violations of international law and norms, and unmistakable manifestations of apartheid.”<sup>60</sup> Rouhani described the unilateral measures of the Trump administration against the Palestinians as an affront to all peace loving peoples. Rouhani’s words highlighted again that Jerusalem, recognized by the US as the capital of Israel, is not important just to Palestinians, but also the adherents of the three monotheistic religions, including more than 1.5 billion Muslims.<sup>61</sup>

For his part, the Speaker of Iran’s Parliament Ali Larijani said that the US decision to transfer their embassy to Jerusalem was part of its policy to undermine international institutions, similar to its decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran, and the Paris climate agreement. Speaking before the parliament, Larijani said that these indicated that the US intends to undercut international institutions wherever possible, pushing the international landscape towards a kind of security chaos.<sup>62</sup>

### **Iran’s Position on the “Deal of the Century”**

The US President’s decision to move the embassy paved the way for the promotion of the Deal of the Century, considered a new attempt to liquidate the Palestine issue and impose the Israeli will, conditions and perceptions. The US promotion of this deal was linked with drive for normalization of relations between Gulf countries (KSA, UAE and Bahrain) and Israel, in exchange for an alliance between these countries against Iran and supposed “extremism.”<sup>63</sup>



Iran viewed the US plan as a “crime against humanity,” as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had put it, calling on everyone to work to foil it. In a message addressed to the pilgrims on the day of ‘*Arafah*, Khamenei said, “The stratagem of the ‘Deal of the Century’ prepared by the oppressive US, and its treasonous cohorts, is a crime against the society of humankind, and not just the Palestinian nation. We are inviting everyone to active participation in overcoming this stratagem by the enemy,” adding that the deal was “doomed to failure.”<sup>64</sup>

Khamenei’s website also quoted him as saying, “This dangerous conspiracy aims to destroy the Palestinian identity among the Palestinian public and youth, and it must be confronted precisely on this point, so that they are not allowed to destroy the Palestinian identity by use of money.”<sup>65</sup>

President Rouhani also said the Deal of the Century was doomed to fail, stressing that his country would prevent the execution of Washington’s schemes in the region. In a speech Rouhani delivered during a government meeting, he said “If the US thinks that they can eradicate the people of Palestine and the history will forget the Palestinian refugees, if they think that by strengthening the Zionist Regime they can bring the people of Gaza to their knees, they are making another grave mistake.”<sup>66</sup>

Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani also stressed that Iran would resist Trump’s plan for “peace” between Israel and the Palestinians. Larijani said the Deal of the Century was a conspiracy led by Israel, Iran’s arch enemy, and the US, to secure Israeli domination of the Middle East. During an annual conference on Islamic unity, he said that Iran would stand up to the Israeli regime and not allow the plan to be realized in the region, and if the Americans were imposing sanctions on Iran today and pressuring it, the reason was that Iran was standing up to Israel. Larijani explained that to achieve their goal, Iran was trying to establish new political arrangements in the region. Then he warned the countries of the region, namely KSA and the UAE, against normalizing ties with Israel, saying that they must learn that they will not benefit at all from allowing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to enter their territories, adding that people in all countries in the region consider Israel a cancerous tumor.<sup>67</sup>

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also asserted that the Palestinian people would foil the Deal of the Century, and called on the countries of the region who were supportive of the deal to return to their senses. Zarif,

in an interview special with Al-Alam TV, said that the deal would become the “bankruptcy of the century” through the resistance of the Palestinians. He added that it was unfortunate that a number of countries of the Gulf region were collaborating to impose the deal, hoping that the US would protect them in exchange for their betrayal of the Muslim world, but that this perception was false. He said that it was not necessary to sell Jerusalem to the Zionists, or the Golan to the Zionists. “Return to the regional fold, and our hands are ready to hold your hands, on condition that the demands of Palestine and the demands of the peoples of the region are your demands, and not what Netanyahu demands,” he added.<sup>68</sup>

### **Alliances Against Iran**

The US-Israeli strategy seeking to liquidate the Palestine issue and the resistance movements came in conjunction with a strategy targeting Iran through economic strangulation, and a bid to build an Arab-Israeli alliance to confront Iran as a “shared foe,” such as the US-proposed “Arab NATO” and the “non-aggression pact” between the Gulf countries and Israel. US and Israeli officials spoke directly about this linkage between normalizing Arab-Israeli ties and encircling Iran and containing its influence and ties with resistance movements.

#### **1. Arab NATO (Warsaw Conference)**

On 14/2/2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a new era of cooperation in the Middle East. Pompeo, addressing foreign ministers and officials from more than 60 countries attending the Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East (aka Warsaw conference), said that no country could be isolated from regional challenges, including Iran, Syria, Yemen, and the “peace” between the Israelis and the Palestinians. According to some reports, the goal of the Warsaw conference was to channel US pressure on its Arab allies to establish the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), dubbed by some as an Arab NATO. The Trump administration sought to create an alliance of eight Arab countries in addition to the United States, which included the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, and Jordan in order to confront Iran and promote a future of peace and security in the Middle East, according to a statement by the White House.<sup>69</sup>

Although the proposed alliance did little beyond convening the conference in Warsaw, and did not turn into an actual MESA, it managed to secure a public

meeting between Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and several Arab leaders. As such, the conference achieved a major milestone in public Arab normalization with Israel's leaders and political symbols.

## **2. The “Non-Aggression” Pact**

After the stalling of the Deal of the Century and the failure of the Arab NATO, Israel offered the Gulf countries a “historic” pact to normalize relations. Israel's Channel 12 revealed efforts underway by Tel Aviv to sign a “non-aggression” pact with Gulf countries, with the goal of jointly countering the Iranian threat, and contain Iran's influence in the Middle East, according to the Israeli i24 news website. The Israeli channel said that Israel was also seeking to normalize relations with the Gulf countries in counter-terrorism and economic cooperation, as it was impossible to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The idea behind the pact was the assumption that there was an opportunity that should be seized with common interests existing between Arab states and Israel against Iran, along with Trump's desire to secure a political achievement during his first term, with a view to signing the pact in the White House's garden.<sup>70</sup>

Yisrael Katz, then-Israeli foreign minister, confirmed this on Twitter, saying, “Recently I have been promoting, with the backing of the prime minister, a diplomatic initiative to sign ‘non-aggression agreements’ with the Arab Gulf states.” He added, “It's a historic move that will end the conflict and enable civilian cooperation until the signing of peace agreements.” The putative agreement, according to the Israeli channel, included four themes, namely; developing friendly ties and cooperation between the two sides in accordance with the UN Charter and international law; taking necessary and effective steps to prevent hostile activities or threats, plots, conspiracies, violence, or incitement against the other party, from being developed or funded on the soil of the other party; refraining from joining, supporting, or assisting an alliance, organization, or coalition of a military or security nature with a third party; and solving any differences arising from the agreement through consultations.<sup>71</sup>

The Arab NATO project and the non-aggression pact, however, continued to be vague attempts, that by the end of 2019 had not led to any changes to the existing alliances. However, these projects managed to push forward public Arab-Israeli

normalization and incitement against Iran, as a shared foe of both Israel and the Arabs, allegedly “threatening peace and stability in the Middle East.”

In speech delivered at the UN, Yisrael Katz said, “The main problem threatening stability and security in the Middle East is Iran, which threatens to destroy Israel, and works against the regimes of many countries in the region.” He added, “I call on the international community to unite in order to stop Iran. The world cannot allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and the world must stop Iran from supporting terror organizations in the region.”<sup>72</sup>

Israel’s Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi, in an interview with Israel Hayom, said that a large-scale military confrontation between Iran and Israel was very likely, and that the possibility of war against Iran or its proxies in the coming two years was greater than the possibility of no-war, saying war was a question of when not if. He also said that for Iran, “occupying Syria” had paved the way for it to encircle Israel on three fronts, with the help of the PIJ in GS and Hizbullah in Lebanon, adding that Israel could not afford the cost of doing nothing as it would mean giving the Iranians a green light to entrench themselves in Syria. “Otherwise, we would get a kingdom of terrorism along the border, much more powerful than Hizbullah and Hamas.”<sup>73</sup>

Despite the linkage between normalizing Arab relations with Israel and incitement against Iran, Tehran did not stop affirming its fixed positions on Palestine, resistance, the illegitimacy of Israel, and also worked to further expand its ties with resistance movements in Palestine.

### **Iran’s Fundamentals Regarding the Palestine Issue**

While receiving the guests at the Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran, Ali Khamenei said, “The people of Palestine, including the Muslims, Christians and Jews who are the original owners of that land, should be able to choose their government themselves. They should oust the foreigners and ruffians, like Netanyahu.” Khamenei pointed out “the enemies’ efforts at distorting the meaning of Imam Khomeini’s and the Islamic government officials’ repeated insistence on the abolishment of Israel.” He said, “We support Palestine and its independence and liberation. The abolishment of Israel does not mean the abolishment of the Jewish people. We have nothing to do with them. Furthermore, there is a Jewish population living in our country in safety.” He added, “Today, the greatest

tragedy in the Muslim world is the Palestinian issue,” and “we have maintained our position without making any other considerations, and have helped Palestine and the Palestinians. And, we will continue to do so. We believe this to be the responsibility of the whole Muslim world.”<sup>74</sup>

Supreme Leader Khamenei, according to his official website, said that Jerusalem remains the capital of Palestine and would be liberated from its enemies, and he urged Muslim countries to take a position against “these crimes.” Khamenei also stressed that the US and Israel would submit to the will of Muslims.<sup>75</sup>

Then in a press conference held in New York, Rouhani said, “The Zionist occupation, which is more than 70 years old, is one of the leading causes of violence and frustration in the Middle East... imagine if there had been no Zionist entity in our region, how would things be now?” He added that Iran would continue to support the disadvantaged and the oppressed, including the Palestinians, and asserted that Iran had consistently defended the rights of the Palestinian people and would continue to do so, and that it would stand against the aggressors and oppressors. The Iranian president then expressed his confidence that Israeli crimes will further strengthen the determination of the Palestinian people to resist to restore their legitimate rights.<sup>76</sup>

General Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), addressed the Israelis, saying, “We know you well, you are a great risk, you have no depth and no center. You are besieged everywhere in the occupied territories.” He said that Israel was living in the snake’s mouth, and that the resistance was stronger than ever before, warning the Israelis not to miscalculate. He said that in the event of war, “be certain that it will lead to your erasure. You are a very small target.”<sup>77</sup>

For his part, the commander of Iran’s Air Forces said his country was waiting impatiently to fight and erase Israel. The website of the Young Journalists Club News Agency, under the supervision of official television, quoted Brigadier-General Aziz Nasirzadeh as saying that the air force were fully prepared and waiting impatiently to fight Israel and “wipe it off the face of the earth.”<sup>78</sup>

Hossein Salami also threatened to wipe Israel from the political geography of the world. He added, “It seems that this will come soon because of the actions of this reckless entity that will be the end of its existence.” He threatened, “If the

Zionist entity makes any move that could lead to a new war this war will lead to its demise and the liberation of the occupied territories, and the Israelis will not find graves in Palestine to bury their bodies in them.”<sup>79</sup>

Ali Akbar Velayati, senior advisor to the Supreme Leader, affirmed that Iran would continue supporting Hizbullah and Palestinian factions, despite US pressure seeking to reduce Iran’s influence in the Middle East.<sup>80</sup>

Bahram Qasemi, spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, called for prosecuting Israeli officials as “war criminals,” for “perpetrating barbaric and unparalleled massacres,” after dozens of Palestinians were killed in bloody confrontations near the GS border. He said that the murder of children, women and innocent Palestinians, and the occupation of their land had been a main strategy of Israel, over 70 years of occupation. Qasemi called on the international community to act immediately, condemn Israeli crimes and submitting Israel to an international tribunal for war crimes.<sup>81</sup>

For his part, Abbas Mousavi, another spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, strongly condemned what he called a “terrorist Israeli assault” on GS, stressing the need to prosecute the leaders of the Israeli occupation in international courts as war criminals, and noting the legitimate struggle of the Palestinian people and their resistance. Mousavi stressed that unity and resistance were the only option open to this people when confronting the occupation, pointing out that “the silence of international organizations regarding the attacks and terrorist acts carried out by the Israeli entity” and the continued support of the West emboldened Israel to persist in its crimes against the Palestinian people and the region.

The general secretariat of the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada condemned Israeli aggression on GS, stressing that the Palestinian people challenged the occupation militarily and politically through resistance and steadfastness. It called on all parliaments of Muslim countries and international organizations that support the Palestinian people, to condemn the crimes of the occupation that violate the Human Rights Charter and International Law, and to take the necessary measures to prosecute Israeli leaders in international courts.<sup>82</sup>

Iran did not content itself with just reaffirming its fixed positions on the Palestine issue and the developments and threats that faced this issue, such as the US embassy move to Jerusalem, the Deal of the Century, normalization, and the repeated Israeli attacks on GS and the Palestinian people. Rather, Iran worked

at the same time to step up its support of the resistance in Palestine, with which the relationship evolved remarkably, especially with Hamas during the years 2018–2019.

### **The Development of Iran's Relations with Hamas**

The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed a notable evolution of relations between Iran and Hamas, with visits exchanged and joint positions issued on regional issues, and with Iran affirming its support of resistance in Palestine. These relations regained their vitality in these two years, after deteriorating over the previous years. Perhaps it was the seriousness of the plots hatched to liquidate the issue of Palestine—transfer of US embassy to Jerusalem, accelerating normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, US recognition of the legitimacy of settlements on Palestinian land, and the linkage of these developments with the campaign to encircle and contain Iran—that pushed the leaders of the two sides to step up their cooperation, joints positions supporting the resistance, and positions on addressing the threats and challenges facing both Palestine and Iran.

In 2019, a delegation of Hamas leaders headed by Saleh al-'Aruri, deputy head of the Political Bureau, visited Tehran. The delegation included Musa Abu Marzuq, Maher Salah, 'Izzat al-Rishq, Zaher Jabarin, Hussam Badran, Usama Hamdan, Isma'il Radwan and Khalid Qaddumi.<sup>83</sup>

The delegation met Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who emphasized, after receiving a message from the head of Hamas's political bureau Isma'il Haniyyah, that "when it comes to the Palestinian cause, the Islamic Republic of Iran does not observe any reservations or ceremonies in dealing with any country of the world," and added "We have always clearly and plainly announced our viewpoints regarding Palestine, and even on the international arena, our friends with who we do not see eye to eye on the issue of Palestine, know that the Islamic Republic is absolutely serious regarding the Palestinian cause."

Khamenei thanked "the important and welcoming positions of Mr. Ismail Haniyeh" in his letter, praising "the extraordinary grit and resistance of the Palestinian people and resistance groups including Hamas." He believed that "one of the major causes of hostility to the Islamic Republic of Iran is the question of Palestine, but these hostilities and pressures will not make Iran lose its stance on the question of Palestine," emphasizing, "that some of the followers of the US, like Saudi Arabia, ignored the question of Palestine was a stupidity."



Regarding the Deal of the Century, Khamenei pointed out that “This dangerous conspiracy aims to destroy the Palestinian identity among the Palestinian public and youth, and it must be confronted precisely on this point, so that they are not allowed to destroy the Palestinian identity by use of money.” He pointed out that “another way of opposing this conspiracy is for the Palestinian people to feel advancement, and this has happened already...not so many years ago, the Palestinians were fighting using stones. But today, instead of stones, they are equipped with precision missiles.”<sup>84</sup>

Khamenei added, “ Hamas stands at the core of the Palestinian movement, as Palestine stands at the core of the Muslim World movement,” and he stated that the defiance and resistance of the people of GS and the WB is an indication of victory and success.<sup>85</sup>

The delegation also met the head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, Kamal Kharazi, who stressed Iran’s continued support of Palestine, saying that liberating Palestine and Jerusalem remained one of the aspirations of the Islamic Republic.

In turn, Saleh al-‘Aruri, deputy head of Hamas’s political bureau, expressed gratitude for the Iranian positions on the Palestine issue, and said he hoped that the fraternal cooperation between Iran and Palestine would continue until the liberation of Jerusalem.<sup>86</sup>

Al-‘Aruri said Washington’s goal behind the Deal of the Century was to guarantee the interests of Israel and the US, adding that the regional powers, which were seeking to sacrifice Palestine and the aspirations of the peoples of the region, were implementing the deal. However, he asserted that the resistance, despite the financial, political, and military embargoes, had played its role to thwart this deal and will not allow it to pass.<sup>87</sup>

Al-‘Aruri said that Hamas was on the same path as Iran by fighting Israel and the oppressors, while having faith in the promise of the divine, “we offered thousands of martyrs for the liberation of Jerusalem,” he added. The meeting also emphasized the rejection of US aggression in the region, particularly the embargo on the Republic of Islamic Iran and the attempts to provoke it militarily.<sup>88</sup>

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, revealed that Lebanese Hizbullah and Palestinian factions in GS were now in possession of precision-guided missiles. Shamkhani said that these missiles were

ready to respond to any provocative act by Israel, stressing that the claims by Israel's prime minister regarding tunnels was propaganda to deflect attention away from the corruption in his own government. Shamkhani said that the discovery of hundreds of kilometers of tunnels under the "feet of the Zionists was a major scandal for the Zionist security establishment."<sup>89</sup>

Affirming the strong alliance between Iran and Hamas against normalization projects, the Deal of the Century, and attempts to encircle the resistance, Hamas's leader in GS Yahya al-Sinwar praised this relationship and Iran's role in supporting the resistance. He said that the resistance in any future conflict would bomb Tel Aviv many times over, stating that no one should blame his movement for its gratitude towards Iran, adding, "It is our duty to thank all those offering us help and support to fulfill the objectives of our people and our nation." In his speech delivered on the World Jerusalem Day, he added, "We wish the Arab leaders would stand in support of the steadfastness and resistance of the Palestinian people... we would be grateful to them and raise them above our shoulders if they do," and stressed that without Iran's support, the resistance would not have its formidable military capabilities. Al-Sinwar said that Iran supplied the resistance with missile technology that allowed Hamas to hit Tel Aviv. He added, "We know our friends and our enemies, and our compass is trained on Jerusalem. Anyone training their compass on Jerusalem then they are among friends."<sup>90</sup>

This major development in Hamas's relations with Iran was in response to the threats jointly facing the two sides in 2018 and 2019, including embargoes, encirclement and wars launched by the US and Israel. It is safe to say that these two years, while being marked by evolving normalization of ties with Israel by Arab states, US legitimization of settlements and occupation of Palestinian territories, were also marked by dramatic developments in relations between Hamas and Iran, counter-balancing normalization and attempts to legitimize the occupation.

Despite the stalling of the Deal of the Century plan, and attempts to replace it with other projects such as the non-aggression pact, the quest to eliminate the resistance in Palestine remains a solid strategy pursued by Israel and the US. This is confirmed by the repeated assaults on GS and the assassination of resistance commanders and figures in WB.

Overt normalization, which made great strides between some Gulf Arab countries and Israel at the political, diplomatic, media, cultural and sporting levels,

constituted a dangerous attempt to reduce Arab animosity vis-à-vis Israel. In the meantime, highlighting Iran's fundamentals on the question of Palestine and the resistance carries huge importance in terms of confirming the continuity of animosity vis-à-vis Israel. Moreover, repeated Israeli assaults on the resistance and its leaders in Palestine, the crippling blockade of GS, and normalization projects seeking to end the Palestine issue, all mean that the resistance in Palestine, more than any time before, needs the support and strategic alliance offered by Iran. The US and its allies believe that no project in the region can succeed without weakening and economically strangulating Iran, being the only state in the world supplying weapons to the Palestinian resistance and representing a real threat to US and Israeli interests in the Middle East.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, the Trump administration has linked negotiations over a new deal to other issues such as Iran's ballistic missile program, Iran's regional activities, and Iran's position on the Palestine issue and relations with Palestinian and other armed groups in the Middle East.<sup>92</sup>

Normalization will not stop soon, rather, it may expand to include new fields including culture and art. Nor will the existential siege on the resistance stop. It seems that the trend of absolute US support for Israel will not change even after the next US election, which means that the strategy of betting on resistance in Palestine and the development of its relations with Iran is the correct and necessary strategy to counter the threats seeking to end the Palestine issue.

#### ***Fourth: Other Muslim States***

##### **Malaysia**

Malaysia maintained its support of the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019. In January 2018, Malaysia hosted a conference of Muslim scholars in Putrajaya, the administrative capital of Malaysia, in support of Jerusalem and its people. In its final communique, the conference rejected the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It called on Islamic governments and peoples to sever all ties with Israel as an occupying force, and combat normalization, by preparing a blacklist of normalizers and criminalizing all those establishing relations with Israel.<sup>93</sup> The Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad assured the Palestinians that Malaysia would continue to do everything possible to resolve their issue. He added that the state terrorism practiced by Israel

had always been a source of concern to Malaysia, which would work to confront it by all means at its disposal.<sup>94</sup>

In 2018 and 2019, Malaysia also continued rejecting the entry of Israeli athletes into its territory to take part in international sporting events. On 16/1/2019, despite appeals by the International Paralympic Committee to allow Israeli athletes to enter, the Malaysian Foreign Minister emphasized Malaysia's position. Minister Saifuddin Abdullah said the Malaysian government had decided that Malaysia would not host any event in which Israel would participate or be represented. He also said that the government had made this decision to articulate its strong position towards Israel, and Malaysia's effort to "fight on behalf of the oppressed." The minister made those comments following meetings with Muslim groups that praised the ban on the entry of Israeli swimmers, and called on the Malaysian government to stick to its policy of banning Israeli passport holders from entering the country.

In a memorandum handed to the minister, 43 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) expressed support for the government's position, citing the crimes perpetrated by the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people, Israeli plans to alter the identity of Jerusalem and expand settlements, and Israeli violations of Malaysia's sovereignty and security.<sup>95</sup>

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad outlined his position on Israel saying that Israel did not adhere to international laws and has continued the occupation and its settlement activities in the Palestinian territories. He added, "We are not against the Jews, but we cannot recognize Israel because of (its) occupation of Palestinian land." He added, "You cannot seize others' lands, and form a state. It's like a state of robbers."<sup>96</sup>

It is noted that the Malaysian authorities are still open to all Palestinian parties, including Hamas. In the Kuala Lumpur Summit held in Malaysia on 18–21/12/2019, a high-level delegation from Hamas attended, and the issue of Palestine was highlighted in the speeches and the agenda of the conference. The summit brought together the leaders of Turkey, Malaysia, Iran, and Qatar, in addition to representatives of other countries. Leaders of Pakistan and Indonesia were scheduled to attend, but they came under immense pressure from outside countries to avoid the summit, which was seen by some as an alternative to the OIC.

## **Indonesia**

Successive developments in 2018 and 2019, led by the US embassy move to Jerusalem, forced Indonesia to slow down its normalization steps with Israel, manifested through facilities given to Israeli tourists to visit Indonesia, and reports of Indonesian officials meeting with Israeli counterparts. In the emergency ministerial meeting of the OIC in Jeddah, Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Abdurrahman Mohammad Fachir said that Israeli violations in Palestine undermined the future chances of a two-state solution, adding that Indonesia, being a member of the current Executive Board of UNESCO, called on all OIC members to help maintain the legal status of Jerusalem on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. He also stressed that the efforts to stop Israeli violations must be “consistent and have direct economic implications,” and that it is important that OIC members boycott Israeli products made in the settlements built on Palestinian lands.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of Palestinian-Indonesian relations, Indonesia called for granting Palestine full UN membership. During a monthly session of the UN Security Council on the Middle East, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said, “My presence here today is intentional. To show Indonesia’s consistent support towards the Palestinian cause...It is a natural and legal right of Palestine to be a full member of the United Nations...The Palestinian question defines the credibility of the Council.” The minister condemned Israeli provocations and sustained expansion of illegal settlements, and implicitly attacked the United States, saying that the “peace process requires legitimacy. And legitimacy comes when the process is under the guidance of a multilateral mechanism based on internationally agreed parameters. Any peace plans which fail to accommodate such parameters will not succeed.”<sup>98</sup>

## **Pakistan**

Pakistan continued supporting the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019, without exceeding the OIC position regarding the peace process. Pakistan’s permanent envoy to the UN, Maleeha Lodhi said Pakistan remains firmly committed to the two-state solution to the conflict in Palestine and rejects the shift in the US position on the issue. Lodhi said, “We are seeing shifting of US policy...Pakistan does not agree with shifts in position,” adding, “Pakistan will continue to be part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in rejecting these shifts and calling for

a just and humane settlement of Palestine issue in line with UNGA [UN General Assembly] and UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions.” Lodhi said, “We call for Two State solution based on pre-1967 borders with Jerusalem as capital of independent and contiguous Palestinian State,” and emphasized that “international consensus in favour of such a solution remains unaffected.”<sup>99</sup>

In the context of the Pakistani-Indian conflict over Kashmir, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan accused the leaders of both India and Israel of “moral bankruptcy” saying “When leaders in Israel and India show a moral bankruptcy in their readiness to annex occupied West Bank and IOK [Indian-occupied Kashmir] in defiance of int[ernational] law, UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions and their own Constitution for votes, don’t their ppl [people] feel a sense of outrage and wonder how far they will go simply to win an election?”<sup>100</sup>

Responding to the possibility of a shift in the Pakistani position vis-à-vis the Palestine issue, Malik Muhammad Ehsan Ullah Tiwana, Chairman National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs affirmed that “Pakistan’s position on Palestine is unambiguous and the government does not have much space for deviating from it because of similarities between Kashmir and Palestine disputes,” He said, “Any shift in the position, if it were to happen, would have to be debated in the Parliament and the decision would have to be taken through consensus. There is no other way for changing the stance.”<sup>101</sup>

### ***Fifth: Responsiveness of the Muslim Public to the Palestine Issue***

In the past few years, the region witnessed several crises that impacted the attention afforded to the Palestine issue in the Muslim world. However, despite the scramble by some Arab regimes to normalize relations with Israel, directly and indirectly and on multiple levels, the Palestine issue remained prominent at the grassroots level in the Muslim world, which continued to interact with the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019. Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians from all areas, parties, organizations and associations took to the streets of Jakarta, in solidarity with the issue of Jerusalem and Palestine, to reject Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, using the hashtag “#alqudsredline.”

The Indonesian Coalition Defending Baitul Maqdis considered Trump's decision a provocation to the sentiments of all humanity. In a statement, they demanded the US government to reverse its decision, and called on OIC member states to reject and denounce Trump's decision. During their protest near the US embassy, the Secretary General of the Council of Young Indonesian Intellectuals and Ulama Bachtiar Nasir said, "We raise our voices to challenge Trump on Jerusalem," adding that the protest was a message of defiance against the decision of US President Donald Trump on Jerusalem, calling on Muslim countries to unite and mobilize against the decision.<sup>102</sup>

In its fifth session held in November 2018, the International Union of Muslim Scholars called for full rejection of all forms of normalization of Israel. The sessions, which lasted six days, was attended by more than 1,500 scholars from more than 80 countries, the largest in the history of the federation.<sup>103</sup>

In Nigeria, protests were held in the state of Osun in December 2018 in solidarity with Palestine. The protesters called on the UN to recognize the state of Palestine and chanted slogans supportive of Palestine. The president of Friends of Palestine, the association organizing the protests, Sheikh Dawood Imran Mula Hasan, said such protests would continue until the Palestinian flag flew over Jerusalem, adding, "We, the Nigerians, will continue to stand with the justice-seekers in Palestine."<sup>104</sup>

On World Jerusalem Day in May 2019, several Muslim capitals saw large rallies in support of the Palestinian people and celebrating this day in 84 cities, across 30 Arab, Muslim, and Western countries.<sup>105</sup>

In 31/10–2/11/2019, the Global Coalition For al-Quds and Palestine organized its 11th annual conference in Istanbul. More than 700 important figures from 50 countries participated. The conference focused on confronting the Deal of the Century and the normalization with Israel.

Aid also continued to be provided by pro-Palestine associations active in many Muslim countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia among others.



### ***Sixth: Normalization and Israeli Relations with Muslim Countries***

In the context of normalization with Israel, the data of the Israeli Population and Immigration Authority indicated that up to 55 thousand tourists from countries with no diplomatic relations with Israel visited it in 2018. Indonesian tourists increased by 5% compared to 2017, to the tune of 37,555 Indonesian tourists.<sup>106</sup>

A delegation from the Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) organization visited Israel in mid-June 2018. The head of the delegation Yahya Cholil Staquf, member of the Indonesian President's Advisory Board, met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said he was pleased with the move by Arab and Muslim countries to forge relations with Israel. The Indonesian President Joko Widodo justified the visit by saying it was personal and in response to an invitation to deliver a speech in Israel, claiming Staquf did not represent the Advisory Board and suggesting the visit would support the Palestine issue.

In the same context, NU Chairman Said Aqil Siradj said the organization had no relations with any Israeli entity, saying the visit of NU Secretary General Staquf was a personal one. Staquf's first appearance in Israel was his speech at the American Jewish Committee. He made a second speech at The Harry S. Truman Research Institute at the Hebrew University, then spoke at the Israel Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>107</sup>

At the official level, Netanyahu held a secret meeting with the Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly 73rd session, according to Israeli army radio. However, based on an Indonesian request to maintain the confidentiality of the meeting, Netanyahu's office did not comment on the reports.<sup>108</sup>

Clearly, 2018 was one of the most active years for Israeli diplomacy, led by Netanyahu himself, as he sought to win the 2019 Israeli general election by scoring diplomatic coups with Islamic nations and breaking the Islamic isolation of Israel, following such gains with Arab countries. According to news reports in 2018, Israel maintained strong diplomatic ties with senior officials in Chad, and sought to normalize relations with this majority Muslim African nation, in the hope that other Muslim African nations would follow suit. A report by Israel's Channel 10 said that, according to official documents, Chad's President Idriss Deby Itno was

seeking to bequeath power to his son and saw normalized relations with Israel as helpful for this. The report said other Muslim African nations like Mali and Niger were then likely to follow suit. The report said the liaison between the two countries was an Israeli Shabak agent codenamed “Maoz,” who served as special envoy to Israel’s National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabat to the Arab and Muslim worlds.<sup>109</sup>

In November 2018, an Israeli delegation visited Chad to discuss the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two sides. In early 2019, Netanyahu announced the resumption of relations with the Muslim-majority African nation, saying, “The breakthroughs with the Arab world help us in the Muslim world,” adding, “We are making history.” He also indicated that his visit to Chad would reestablish ties with a “giant” country in Africa [referring to a possible resumption of diplomatic relations that Chad had broken in 1972]. “We are turning Israel into a rising world power. There are those who tried to prevent this, but without success”—a reference to Iranian and Palestinian efforts to stop Chad from establishing ties with Israel. The visit was the first by an Israeli prime minister to Chad, following a visit by the Chadian president to Israel in November 2018. At the time, Netanyahu and Idriss Deby Itno declined to say whether their talks included arms deals, but security sources said the Chadian army and national intelligence were procuring Israeli military equipment.<sup>110</sup>

In terms of trade between the Muslim world and Israel, according to CBS, Israeli-Turkish trade in 2019 rose slightly by 2.9% compared to 2018. In 2018, it increased by 11% compared to 2017. The value of Israeli exports to Turkey decreased by 7.9% in 2019 compared to 2018 (see table 3/7).

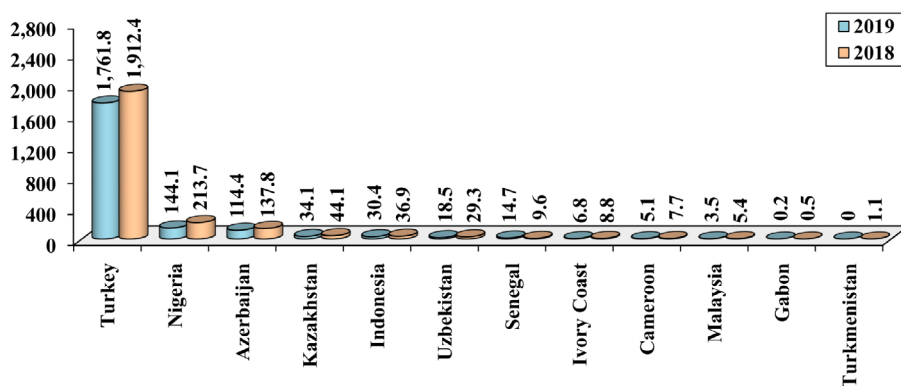
Israeli trade with Malaysia increased remarkably in 2019, by 18.6% on 2018, after it dropped in 2018 by 20% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Nigeria clearly decreased in 2019 by 30.9% compared to 2018, after it had a significant increase in 2018 by 43.1% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan decreased in 2019 by 17.5% compared to 2018, after dropping in 2018 by 31.7% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Kazakhstan increased in 2019 by 2.9% compared to 2018, after recording an increase in 2018 by 30% compared to 2017. Israeli trade exchange with Indonesia dropped in 2019 by 29.8% compared to 2018, after it had also decreased in 2018 by 20.5% compared to 2017 (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 have no official relations with Israel, and Muslim populations maintain their animosity towards Israel.

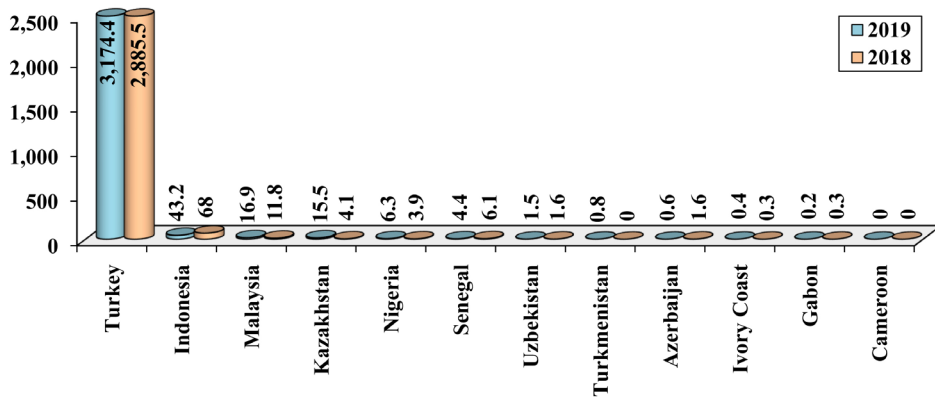
**Table 3/7: Israeli Trade Volume with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2016–2019 (\$ million)<sup>111</sup>**

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2019	2018	2017	2016	2019	2018	2017	2016
Turkey	1,761.8	1,912.4	1,428.1	1,297.7	3,174.4	2,885.5	2,895.9	2,601.7
Nigeria	144.1	213.7	148.7	81.7	6.3	3.9	3.4	3.1
Azerbaijan	114.4	137.8	199.7	260.1	0.6	1.6	4.3	6.2
Indonesia	30.4	36.9	83.5	120.9	43.2	68	48.4	43.3
Kazakhstan	34.1	44.1	31.2	46.5	15.5	4.1	5.9	2.1
Malaysia	3.5	5.4	6.8	583.3	16.9	11.8	14.6	14
Uzbekistan	18.5	29.3	17.1	13.3	1.5	1.6	2.4	0.3
Senegal	14.7	9.6	11.9	7.1	4.4	6.1	4.4	4.9
Ivory Coast	6.8	8.8	9.7	10.7	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2
Cameroon	5.1	7.7	5.8	8.8	0	0	0	0.2
Turkmenistan	0	1.1	4.5	2	0.8	0	0.1	0
Gabon	0.2	0.5	0.6	5.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.3

**Israeli Exports to a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2018–2019 (\$ million)**



### Israeli Imports from a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2018–2019 (\$ million)



### Conclusion

The Islamic grassroots interaction, defending and supporting the rights of the Palestinian people, continues to outpace official Islamic interaction. The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed many protests and activities opposed to the US decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem, showing the extent of Muslim solidarity with the Palestine issue.

As for the official Islamic level, Muslim countries maintained their usual forms of support to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019, rejecting the Deal of the Century and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem. Muslim countries also affirmed their support to the Arab Peace Initiative and the two-state solution. The Islamic Summit, organized by Malaysia and Turkey in Kuala Lumpur in December 2019, was a remarkable event proving key Muslim countries are seeking to invigorate their pan-Islamic role and support the Palestine issue.

There has also been a noteworthy, albeit gradual, evolution of the Turkish role in the Palestine issue. It can be said that the Palestine issue has remained present in Turkey’s foreign policy in both word and deed, that is in both the official statements of Turkey’s leaders and in Turkish diplomacy. This was helped by Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC, and the dramatic events in Palestine, including the Marches of Return and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, which Turkey sought

to counter by leading joint Islamic action under the OIC umbrella. It is expected that the Turkish policy would continue this support, meaning there is potential for the Palestinian side to support and develop this role through several paths and contexts in the coming years. On another note, Turkey has maintained its “tense” diplomatic relations with Israel, while their trade relations improved to about \$5 billion in 2019.

Meanwhile, Iran has continued its support of the Palestine issue, despite sanctions and a financial-economic embargo. It continued to reject any recognition of Israel and maintained support for the Palestinian resistance factions, while rejecting any projects seeking to eliminate the Palestine issue such as the Deal of the Century project.

Despite the broad-based popular rejection of normalizing ties with Israel, Israel continues to make unremitting efforts to achieve more breakthroughs in Muslim capitals, as more and more Arab countries show willingness to normalize their relations with Israel. This requires unifying Islamic grassroots efforts to confront this, through a strategy seeking to prevent Israel from becoming a normalized entity in its neighborhood, and criminalize all forms of normalization, be it political, or in the fields of sports, arts or culture.

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## This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2018–2019, the 11th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, and objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2019, along with analyses and forecasts running into 2020–2021.

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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.

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



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