

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



Edited By

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

Chapter Seven

The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

E-mail: info@alzaytouna.net

Website: www.alzaytouna.net

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The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

Introduction

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) includes 57 countries, which makes it difficult to cover each of these countries in confines of one chapter. Therefore, we will cover the positions and activities of the organization as a whole and explore two models, Turkey and Iran, while addressing the most prominent positions of some other important countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, as well as examining popular interaction and normalization with Israel.

First: OIC

Since its inception in 1969, shortly after Zionists burned *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the OIC has been part of the ruling system in the Arab and Muslim region, which means that its policies can be viewed as a reflection of the policies of the individual countries sponsoring it. Thus, the OIC did not change its approach to the Palestine issue throughout 2020–2021, remaining within the political limits of the Arab countries. The OIC continued to adopt the “Arab Peace Initiative,” the two-state solution and recognized that Jerusalem is a part of the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories.¹

The OIC General Secretariat has consistently reiterated that “the establishment of normal relations between the member states of the Organization and Israel would not be achieved until after ending the Israeli occupation of the Arab and Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem.”² Yet, this did not prevent some Muslim countries from normalizing relations with Israel, their cooperation seemingly moving quickly to incorporate all fields, including security and intelligence. The signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 between the UAE and Bahrain on the one side, and Israel on the other, clearly displayed the difference between OIC stances and OIC realities.

Apparently, Israel is aware of the OIC’s stark contradictions; thus, it proceeded with its aggression against Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and



continued imposing new realities on the ground, part of its strategic project to annex the largest area of the WB despite the OIC's continuous rejection and denunciation of this. Israeli forces even attempted to storm the house of the Director of the OIC's Representation Office in Palestine, Ahmad al-Ruwaidi, located in Silwan in occupied Jerusalem, which al-Ruwaidi considered "a political message through which the Israeli occupation and its government sought to undermine work in Jerusalem and prevent coverage of the developments in the holy city."³

The years 2020 and 2021 were bad ones for the Palestine issue. Despite the change of the US administration with the defeat of President Donald Trump, the sponsor of normalization, in the electoral race, this did not prevent Kosovo from opening its embassy in Jerusalem (most are in Tel Aviv) in March 2021, which prompted the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send a letter to the OIC General Secretariat requesting member states boycott Kosovo.⁴ The OIC also condemned Honduras's opening of its embassy in Jerusalem in June 2021.⁵

On 16/5/2021, the OIC held an emergency meeting to discuss ways to stop Israel's aggression against *al-Aqsa* Mosque and GS, when dozens of Palestinians were killed and thousands wounded, in addition to the destruction and damage of infrastructure and thousands of housing units in the Strip. OIC Secretary General Yousef al-Othaimeen said that in light of the dire Palestinian circumstances, and since the Palestine issue was at the top of the OIC's concerns, the meeting was to exchange opinions, advice and debate the measures to be taken to confront the Israeli attacks on the Palestinian territories, especially Jerusalem, and Israel's hostile actions in the vicinity of *al-Aqsa* Mosque against the holy sites, in addition to the forced displacement of Palestinians, which remains a provocation to the feelings of all Muslims around the world and a flagrant violation of international law. He added that the OIC affirms its support and solidarity for the Palestinian people.⁶

As part of the OIC's endeavor to support the Palestinian people, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) launched a package of projects, while giving priority to Jerusalem.⁷

The OIC continued to interact with the Palestine issue, including the matter of Israeli abuse of prisoners in Israeli prisons. Nonetheless, this interaction worked within the constraints set by member states, noting the discrepancy between these limits from one country to another, and taking into account the rush by some of these countries to establish strong relations with Israel, while simultaneously

showing hostility to the Palestinian resistance. This might be reflected in the future performance of the OIC, especially if the countries that either normalize relations or support normalization are effective in determining the Organization's policies.

Second: Turkey

The priorities of Turkish foreign policy in 2020 and 2021 focused on the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, and the US, then on the path of dialogue and rapprochement with the KSA-UAE-Egypt axis in 2021. The internal agenda was also significantly preoccupied with the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Turkish lira plunging to a record low value, after a series of interest rate cuts.

The aforementioned priorities, along with other factors, led to a relative decline in Turkish concern with the Palestine issue. However, this did not prevent Turkish interaction, on official and popular levels, with some important events, such as the issue of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and the Sword of Jerusalem Battle (dubbed by Israel Operation Guardian of the Walls), demonstrating full support for the Palestinians and serious criticisms of Israel.

In parallel, there were repeated official Turkish statements expressing Ankara's desire to redevelop its relations with Israel, where even the name of a Turkish ambassador to Israel was proposed, although procedures were not completed. Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan concluded 2021 by re-emphasizing his country's aspiration for strong steps forward with Egypt and Israel like the progress made in relations with the UAE.

Foreign Policy: Priorities and Transformations

The priorities of Turkish foreign policy changed according to regional and internal developments. In 2020 and 2021, the conflict in Libya and the issue of the Eastern Mediterranean topped these priorities, along with Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential elections and its impact on Turkish-US relations, along with several other issues of importance to Ankara.

In November 2019, Turkey signed two agreements with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA); the first on maritime boundaries and the designation of an exclusive economic zone, and the second concerning security and military cooperation between the two countries.⁸



With the GNA submitting an official request to Turkey to send its forces to Libya, on 2/1/2021 the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) approved the dispatching of Turkish forces to Libya,⁹ which took place quickly. Ankara provided the GNA with training and logistical support, and helped coordination between military groups affiliated with this government. As a result, the siege of Tripoli was lifted,¹⁰ the forces of retired General Khalifa Haftar were defeated and expelled from western Libya,¹¹ then these GNA forces reached the Sirte region, where they were halted by a direct Russian military intervention.¹² Remarkably, Turkish drones played a pivotal role in all these stages.

Thus, the Turkish involvement in the Libyan crisis played a direct role in reducing the chances of a military solution, and accelerated the political process which proceeded with the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and then the elections of the Presidential Council, with several international and regional parties opening to the GNA at the time.¹³

Ankara remained almost the only regional power supporting the GNA and the Government of National Unity (GNU) which succeeded it. Ankara sought to perpetuate its role and cooperation with the Libyan government, which was its only partner in the Eastern Mediterranean gas issue, as well as one of its partners in the geopolitical competition between the axes of the region.

The eastern Mediterranean was a priority for Turkey in terms of wealth, geopolitics, and competition with Greece with which it has a traditional rivalry. Therefore, Ankara continued its gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the disputed areas with Greece and Greek Cyprus,¹⁴ despite frictions with these two which almost led to a military clash.¹⁵ Turkey's activities also created tensions with the US and subjected it to EU sanctions,¹⁶ which are still in place.¹⁷ However, tension in the eastern Mediterranean receded with the Turkish-Greek dialogue rounds in early 2021.¹⁸

Biden's election to the US presidency was an additional challenge for Turkey due to the importance of Turkish-US relations, the many contentious files between the two sides and the negative positions Biden adopted towards Turkey and Erdoğan, specifically during his election campaign,¹⁹ as well as after his election, including the imposition of sanctions on Ankara and its official removal from the F-35 joint strike fighter program.²⁰

This prompted Turkey to assume several internal measures, including the postponement of the activation of the Russian S-400 missile system, presenting alternatives regarding the system, and in-depth dialogue with Washington regarding controversial files.²¹

The second half of 2021 witnessed a turning point in Turkish foreign policy, represented by new openness to the KSA-UAE-Egypt axis which had opposed Turkey in all regional issues. Ankara and Cairo held several rounds of dialogue, and relations between them saw relative progress.²² Turkey also received Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed, and the two countries signed several memoranda of understanding that included UAE's investment of \$10 billion in Turkey.²³ Simultaneously, Bahrain's Foreign Minister visited Turkey and met with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu,²⁴ while Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay met with the Saudi Trade Minister in Istanbul.²⁵ Erdoğan summarized his country's course by saying: "Whatever kind of step was taken with the UAE, we will also take similar ones with the others [Egypt and Israel]."²⁶

This remarkable transformation, which included several countries in the region in addition to Turkey, came about due to several contributing factors, including:

1. Local reasons, mainly related to the negative repercussions of the emerging COVID-19 pandemic and other factors on the economies of the region, the approaching Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections, and the desire of all countries for a state of calm conducive to investment and revival of economies.
2. Regional reasons, mainly related to the exhaustion of options for all parties regarding different regional issues and conflicts, where no party was able to satisfactorily conclude them in their favor. Other reasons included the penetrations Turkey achieved in 2020 into Libya and the Caucasus, the stability of the situation in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean as tensions with the EU in this context declined. Moreover, Ankara considered the Eastern Mediterranean issue a priority, seeking to break its isolation in this file, and attempting to disrupt the axis supporting Greece, by concluding understandings and demarcating maritime borders with Egypt and/or Israel.
3. International reasons, mainly related to the new US administration's orientations causing concern for its regional allies, specifically the continuation of its policy of declining interest in the Middle East region, and its eagerness to conclude



a new agreement with Iran, which may represent a concern for the Arab Gulf states in particular.

Palestinian Milestones

In general, Turkey continued rejecting the Deal of the Century and the attempts to end the Palestine issue; a policy initiated in 2018 in which Turkey has been leading the diplomatic efforts of Muslim countries to confront these policies.²⁷ Turkey also maintained its official discourse rejecting Israeli violations of Palestinian rights.

In the last weeks of Donald Trump's presidency and before Biden entered the Oval Office, the Turkish Foreign Ministry renewed its rejection of the Deal of the Century.²⁸ The GNAT Speaker Mustafa Şentop also reiterated his country's slogan "Jerusalem is a red line,"²⁹ while the Turkish president stated that his country rejected the US plan aiming to "legitimize the Israeli occupation," stressing that it did not serve peace and would not bring a solution.³⁰

Turkish positions repeatedly condemned Israeli policies against the Palestinians, especially the decisions to annex WB land, calling on the international community to stand against illegal and unilateral Israeli initiatives, which undermined international law.³¹ The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the ICC ruling that it has jurisdiction over the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, adding that the decision "is a meaningful step towards holding Israel accountable for its crimes in the Palestinian territories and identifying those who are responsible for these crimes."³²

It is also possible to monitor Turkish positions on the Palestine issue in 2020 and 2021 regarding three significant developments, namely the Palestinian elections, the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood issue and the Sword of Jerusalem Battle.

Concerning Palestinian reconciliation, Ankara welcomed President 'Abbas's issue of a decree for parliamentary and presidential elections. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that it was ready to provide all necessary support for the success of the elections.³³ The Ministry also issued a statement calling "upon the Israeli Government to end its obstructive policies...so that the Palestinian elections will be conducted," including in Jerusalem.³⁴ Remarkably, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs held Israel responsible for the Palestinian president's 29/4/2021 decision on to postpone the elections, stating "Turkey urges Israel not to impede Palestinian elections."³⁵ Turkey repeatedly reiterated its support for

internal Palestinian reconciliation, as asserted by Erdoğan during a meeting with his Palestinian counterpart in Istanbul in July 2021.³⁶

Regarding the Israeli attempt to confiscate Palestinian homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem, Ankara condemned the “illegal measures” of the occupation authorities in the neighborhood and throughout Jerusalem, calling on the international community to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians against Israel’s expansionist policies, which represented the latest example of Israeli violations of international law.³⁷

With the Israeli occupation forces storming *al-Aqsa* Mosque, then the outbreak of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle in May 2021, the Turkish position developed both at the official government level and in the population, including demonstrations in several governorates, despite the COVID-19 ban on crowds, dedicating the Friday and Eid sermons to Palestine. Also, different parties, state institutions and civil society organizations condemned the Israeli aggression and expressed solidarity with the Palestinians.³⁸

On the official level, Erdoğan described Israel as a “cruel terrorist state,” and he called the occupation forces’ attack on worshipers in Jerusalem “an attack on all Muslims,” stressing that “protecting the honor of Jerusalem is a duty for every Muslim.”³⁹ During the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, the Turkish president criticized countries that expressed their support for Israel, such as the US and Austria, saying that they “would go down in history as being complicit in child murder and crimes against humanity.”⁴⁰ Against the backdrop of Israeli attacks on Jerusalem and Gaza, Turkey withdrew its invitation to the Israeli Energy Minister to participate in the “Antalya Diplomacy Forum.”⁴¹

As part of Turkish diplomatic efforts, Erdoğan contacted Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas, and the head of Hamas political bureau Isma‘il Haniyyah, in addition to the heads and leaders of a number of countries regarding the Israeli attacks on the Palestinians.⁴² He demanded international and regional organizations such as the UN, UN Security Council and OIC, to act against the oppression of Palestinians as well as to take a firm stance on the issue of Jerusalem,⁴³ saying that the international community should teach Israel a strong lesson, because of its aggressions, and he pledged his country’s support for these efforts.⁴⁴ Among the initiatives Erdoğan presented during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle was sending international forces to the Palestinian territories to protect the Palestinians,⁴⁵ and



a commission with Jewish, Muslim and Christian representatives to administer Jerusalem.⁴⁶

Such proposals and his call to “give Israel a strong and deterrent lesson” over its conduct towards the Palestinians,⁴⁷ earned him a US accusation of “anti-Semitism,” an accusation dismissed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP) as “a lie.”⁴⁸

GNAT Speaker Mustafa Şentop accused Israel of practicing “state terrorism,”⁴⁹ and he organized a special session of the Parliament “to show solidarity with the Palestinians and condemn the crimes of the occupation.”⁵⁰ A statement was issued at the end of the session condemning the Israeli attacks which was signed, in rare consensus, by all parties of the Parliament.⁵¹

The political parties also issued statements of solidarity with the Palestinians and condemnation of Israeli policies. Ömer Çelik, the AKP spokesperson, described the Israeli practices as “brutal” and a blatant violation of international law and norms, and he called for stopping the aggression.⁵² The opposition leader and head of the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*—CHP) Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu confirmed his party’s continued support for the Palestinians and described the Israeli attacks as a “massacre.”⁵³

For his part, Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*—MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli asserted that “Israeli terror is impossible to be digested,” and urged the ICC to prosecute Netanyahu.⁵⁴ Similar positions were also issued by İYİ Party leader Meral Akşener, Vice President Fuat Oktay, Presidential Spokesman Ibrahim Kalin, Presidency’s Director of Communications Fahrettin Altun, a number of ministers and the Head of Diyanet, Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş.⁵⁵ Former Prime Minister and the Head of the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*—GP) Ahmet Davutoğlu called on the Turkish parties to unite for Jerusalem, and the government to take practical steps to support the Palestinians.⁵⁶

On the popular level, the Israeli aggression on Jerusalem and Gaza topped the headlines of Turkish news bulletins, as well as social media, while various media outlets devoted hours to extensive coverage of events.⁵⁷ Various Turkish cities also witnessed mass demonstrations to denounce Israeli aggression, and the demonstrations were organized despite the complete COVID-19 lockdown, which implied an official facilitation. The demonstrations mainly took place in Ankara and Istanbul in front of Israel’s embassy and consulate.⁵⁸

Along with the stances of many civil society institutions, the presidency of religious affairs dedicated the Eid and Friday sermons to Palestine, including supplications for the Palestinians and the collection of donations for them.⁵⁹

On the Palestinian side, the Sword of Jerusalem Battle was considered different from previous battles in terms of motives, processes and results in addition to the belief that the stage following this battle would be markedly different to the preceding phase. It appears that the role played by Turkey during the battle was believed to be “good but not sufficient.” When Isma‘il Haniyyah, the head of Hamas political bureau, thanked several countries and parties for their role and support in a post-battle speech, Turkey was not among them.⁶⁰ It was also demonstrated in remarks to Anadolu Agency by Hamas chief in the GS Yahya al-Sinwar.⁶¹

In June 2021, Ankara announced the dispatching of humanitarian aid to GS in coordination with Cairo,⁶² and in an interview with a Turkish TV channel, Haniyyah thanked Turkey and showed interest in the Turkish president’s proposals regarding Jerusalem and the protection of the Palestinians.⁶³ Furthermore, a high-ranking Hamas delegation participated in the Republic Day celebrations in the Turkish Embassy in Doha.⁶⁴ However, the aforementioned activities did not completely dispel the impression that things were not rosy between the two sides, especially since, after the end of the battle, and until the time of writing this report, no other contact or official and public meeting of the Turkish president with Hamas leadership has been announced.

Turkish communication and meetings with the PA continued, as Erdoğan received Mahmud ‘Abbas in July 2021,⁶⁵ and Ankara ratified a security agreement signed with the PA in 2018, including security cooperation, training and details related to maritime and coastal security.⁶⁶

Finally, Turkey condemned the normalization of some Arab countries’ relations with Israel, as well as the move of some countries’ embassies to Jerusalem, after the US relocated its embassy in May 2018. Ankara said the UAE when it normalized ties with Israel, had “betrayed the Palestinian cause for its interests,” adding that history would never forgive this “hypocritical behavior.” Turkey announced that it was considering closing its embassy in Abu Dhabi and suspending diplomatic ties with UAE.⁶⁷ It also condemned the Bahrain’s normalization with Israel, viewing it as “a blow to the efforts to defend the Palestinian people,”⁶⁸ and demanded Morocco not pursue normalization with Israel “at the expense of the Palestine



issue.”⁶⁹ Turkey condemned Kosovo’s pledge to open an embassy in Jerusalem,⁷⁰ the Czech Republic’s opening of an embassy office in the city⁷¹ and Honduras’s relocation of its embassy.⁷²

Turkey and Israel

No new developments were witnessed in relations between Turkey and Israel in 2020–2021. Their relationship cooled when Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv in 2018, against the background of Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, and Israel’s assault on the Marches of Return in Gaza.⁷³

However, fluctuations can be observed throughout the last two years. In 2020, Turkey announced its desire to restore relations with Tel Aviv and appoint an ambassador to Israel, and it concluded 2021 by repeating the same desire, which had not materialized at the time of writing this report. The two years also witnessed contention between the two countries.

The year 2020 began with news of imminent developments in relations between Turkey and Israel,⁷⁴ and Israel resumed air cargo flights to Turkey after a 10-year hiatus.⁷⁵ Some news reports circulated the name of the supposed Turkish ambassador in Tel Aviv,⁷⁶ but the process was not completed for several reasons, including a lack of Israeli enthusiasm and continued Turkish criticism of occupation policies against the Palestinians,⁷⁷ in addition to the technical requirements of both sides to develop relations.

Israel informed Turkey that it would not normalize relations until “it shuts the activities of Hamas’ military wing in Istanbul—which includes directing terrorist activities in the West Bank, recruiting Palestinians for terrorist activities, financing terrorist activities” in WB and “transferring funds to Hamas’ military infrastructure.”⁷⁸ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated five conditions for his country to have good relations with Israel, including stopping Israeli attacks on Palestinians, undoing steps that corrode the two-state solution, returning to peace talks, stopping illegal settlement construction and halting measures aimed at changing the status quo in Jerusalem.⁷⁹

The years 2020 and 2021 witnessed some tension between the two sides, foremost of which, as previously mentioned, was Ankara’s sharp opposition to Arab normalization with Israel, which can be partially explained by Turkish disputes with the UAE.⁸⁰ Also, the Eastern Mediterranean issue and the gas agreements

between Israel and Greece caused additional tension between Tel Aviv and Ankara, as the latter considered the underwater power cable agreement between Israel, Greece and Cyprus a violation of its continental shelf,⁸¹ knowing that the Israeli government had announced that it had contacted Turkey regarding the gas in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸²

In October 2021, Turkey announced that its authorities had arrested five Israeli spy networks including 15 Arabs, on charges of spying on Turkey, Arab students and Palestinian institutions operating on its territory.⁸³ In November 2021, the Turkish authorities arrested two Israeli tourists on charges of photographing the Turkish president's home in Istanbul,⁸⁴ before releasing them days later.⁸⁵ Israeli President Isaac Herzog called the Turkish president to thank him for releasing the two, and Erdoğan said during the call that his country's relations with Israel were important for the stability of the Middle East.⁸⁶ Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett also called Erdoğan thanking him and his government for their cooperation.⁸⁷

Following Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed's visit to Turkey and his signing of memoranda of cooperation with the Turkish side, President Erdoğan said that "similar steps" would be taken with Egypt and Israel.⁸⁸ When asked about the possibility of exchanging ambassadors with Israel in an interview with journalists, Erdoğan said, "Israel needs to be more sensitive concerning its Palestinian policy. It needs to be sensitive about Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque," adding, "As soon as we detect the sensitivities, we will do our best and take steps [for better ties]."⁸⁹ A Turkish journalist suggested that the formalization of improved Turkey-Israel relations would happen in the first half of 2022 or shortly after.⁹⁰

It is noteworthy that news stories exposing Israeli spy networks were circulated with great pride,⁹¹ while the official talk regarding the desire to develop relations with Israel was not discussed widely and did not trigger great controversy or tangible opposition in Turkey, perhaps because practical steps had not been crystallized. However, in early 2022, it was announced that Israel's President Herzog would visit Turkey.⁹²

On the economic level, the crisis of 2018, including the withdrawal of the two ambassadors and the decline in diplomatic relations, did not have a significant impact on trade between Turkey and Israel. Rather, it grew steadily, both in terms of exports and imports, except for Turkey's imports from Israel in 2020, which



saw temporary decline that can be attributed to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trade volume rose from about \$6 billion in 2018 to about \$6.1 billion in 2019 and to about \$6.2 billion in 2020 and kept rising to about \$8.4 billion in 2021 (see table 1/7).

Table 1/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and Israel According to Turkish and Israeli Statistics 2018–2021 (\$ million)⁹³

Year	Turkish exports to Israel		Turkish imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics
2021	6,357.6	4,764.2	2,047.1	1,902.2	8,404.7	6,666.4
2020	4,704.1	3,498	1,496.3	1,430.8	6,200.4	4,928.8
2019	4,463.8	3,208	1,600.8	1,757.6	6,064.6	4,965.6
2018	4,022.9	2,885.5	2,001.2	1,912.4	6,024.1	4,797.9

Turkish exports to the PA decreased by 14.4% in 2019, then rose by 28.8% in 2020, and by 14.4% in 2021 to reach about \$99.6 million, compared to about \$79 million in 2018. Turkish imports from the PA significantly increased by 298% in 2020, to reach about \$36 million compared to about \$9 million in 2019, and then declined by 68% in 2021 (see table 2/7).

Table 2/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and the PA According to Turkish Statistics 2018–2021 (\$ thousand)⁹⁴

Year	Turkish exports to the PA	Turkish imports from the PA	Trade volume
2021	99,596	11,536	111,132
2020	87,070	35,993	123,063
2019	67,595	9,034	76,629
2018	78,987	7,057	86,044

Summary and Outlook

Based on the above factors, the following general trends can be observed regarding Turkey's possible approach to the Palestine issue and relations with Israel throughout 2020–2021:

1. The Turkish desire to develop relations with Israel is real and evidenced, and it is consistent with improving Ankara's relations with several Arab countries. It is also a quest to improve relations with Israel specifically because Ankara believes such relations would have a positive impact on its tense relations with the new US administration on the one hand, and the priority of the eastern Mediterranean file on the other hand. Noteworthy in this latter file are official Israeli statements about the possibility for Ankara joining the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF),⁹⁵ and Israel's absence from statements condemning Turkey's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean,⁹⁶ considering the Turkish strategic goal of disrupting the alliance led by Greece.

2. Economic relations and trade were only slightly affected by the decline in the political and diplomatic relations between the two sides, and they even assumed an upward and continuous growth. This trend is likely to continue considering global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as because of the new challenges faced by the Turkish economy, particularly the lira's weakness.

3. There are many impediments to the restoration of bilateral relations, including Israel's suspicion of Turkey's intentions and the requirements of the two parties, but none of them is an obstacle capable of preventing complete rapprochement.

4. Of the developments that may help convergence are the recent advancement of relations with the UAE, which has warm relations with Israel after the normalization between them, and the fall of the Netanyahu government which Ankara had long blamed for the deterioration of relations.

5. Relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv are not expected to return to the state of strategic alliance of the 1990s, nor will the improvement of relations between them lead to a change in the Turkish discourse regarding the Palestine issue, in general, and Jerusalem, in particular. Rather, matters, especially in the first stage, will be closer to pacification and reducing their differences. It is important to note that the assessments in Israel regarding Turkey at the present time are not positive, and that several Israeli reports have classified Turkey as a "challenge and threat" to Israel.⁹⁷



6. The issue of eastern Mediterranean gas plays a pivotal role in Turkey's perception of its relations with Israel, but it is a role that has two sides, and its outcome is not predetermined. Ankara wants to disrupt the alliance opposing it and is looking for partners to demarcate the maritime borders according to its vision rather than that of Greece. In this sense, Israel is a potential partner for Turkey and a competitor/adversary at the same time. Therefore, Israel's position towards Turkey regarding the gas issue on the one hand, and the development of Turkish-Egyptian relations including reaching an agreement, on the other hand, will be main determinants of Turkey-Israel relations. If Turkey reaches an agreement with Egypt, it could see less need to conclude an agreement with Israel.

7. The rapprochement between Turkey and Israel is expected to have a negative impact on Ankara's relations with the Palestinians, especially the resistance movements, whose relations with Turkey fall within Israeli-set conditions. One of the initial indications in this respect was that no official and public meeting took place between the Turkish presidency and Hamas leadership during or after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle.

8. Turkey's rapprochement with the aforementioned Arab countries, and a fortiori with Israel, is not inevitable or definitive, nor is it defined in its stages or results. Rather, it is a path driven by the above reasons and motives. Therefore, there are many possibilities, including retraction by one or both sides, or maintaining the rapprochement at some level in the event of important changes or if radical internal developments in Turkey or Israel occur, especially regarding the Palestine issue.

In conclusion, 2021 ended with the prospects for the return of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel greater than ever, as the path of calm and rapprochement was broad and included various parties in the region. Therefore, we could soon witness the exchange of ambassadors between the two sides.

In contrast, it is not expected that there will be a retreat or a radical change in Ankara's approach to the Palestine issue, especially regarding the legal status of Jerusalem, the Israeli attacks on the Palestinians, and any aggression on GS.

But the general strategic repositioning in the region in general, including Turkey's rapprochement with a number of its traditional opponents, could bring change, even if relatively, partially, or gradually—in some relations and positions, especially as other parties will be required to change. Some regional strategic changes have already been observed.

Third: Iran

In 2020, the Palestine issue faced the strategic threat of the “Deal of the Century,” which US President Donald Trump announced in January 2020, along with the threat carried by direct normalization agreements, the Abraham Accords, which were signed between some Arab countries (UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco) and Israel. However, these threats were soon met in May 2021 with the Palestinians’ own strategic imperative with the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, dubbed by Israel as “Operation Guardian of the Walls,” 10–21/5/2021, which established an equation stipulating that the resistance in GS will act to defend Jerusalem and protect all Palestinian territories.

Iran had direct stances on these threats and transformations, whether in rejecting the Deal of the Century, condemning direct normalization with Israel, or praising the resistance in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. Iran also reiterated its position on the Palestine issue, the resistance and Israel, while developments on the ground revealed the evolution of relations between Iran and the resistance movements in Palestine.

As for Iran, in 2020 and 2021 it faced severe challenges. First, the assassination of the IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, to which Iran responded by bombing the US forces at the ‘Ain al-Asad airbase in Iraq. Second, the assassination of one of Iran’s most important nuclear scientists, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in November 2020, which led to tensions and threats of military confrontation after Iran accused Israeli agents of carrying out this assassination. The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS) 2020 forecast asserted that if Iran intensified its uranium enrichment in the latter half of 2020, there would be high probability of confrontation with Israel.⁹⁸ Jacob Nagel, a former national security adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu, said that Israel and its allies must work with the US and maintain a military threat against the Iranian nuclear program.⁹⁹

The US-Western economic and financial blockade of Iran also continued, while negotiations in 2020 and 2021 did not produce a result regarding restoring the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the US, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which President Trump had withdrawn in 2018.



From the Deal of the Century to Direct Normalization

With the beginning of 2020, US President Donald Trump announced the Deal of the Century in which he pledged that Jerusalem would remain the “undivided” capital of Israel. In a press conference at the White House, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing at his side, Trump said that his plan “could be the last opportunity” the Palestinians will ever have.¹⁰⁰

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Abbas Mousavi described the Deal of the Century as a “satanic deal” and a plan put by a group of “criminals and fraudsters.”¹⁰¹ Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei emphasized that the Deal of the Century would not be achieved, tweeting that: “Against the will of US officials, with Allah’s help, the US satanic and malicious plan the Deal of the Century will never be realized,” and “the Americans are committing reckless foolishness with their efforts to Judaize Jerusalem.”¹⁰² Khamenei also tweeted, “The American plot of the ‘Deal of the Century’ will die before Trump dies.”¹⁰³

The Islamic Parliament of Iran unanimously approved an “urgent” bill against the Israeli occupation. The bill affirmed the right of the original Palestinians to the land of historic Palestine and obliged Iran to treat Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Palestine. Also, a vote was taken to open a virtual embassy for Iran in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁴

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif described the Deal of the Century as “a nightmare for the region and the world.” He tweeted, “The so-called ‘Vision for Peace’ is simply the dream project of a bankruptcy-ridden real estate developer” hoping for it to be “a wake-up call for all the Muslims who have been barking up the wrong tree,” and calling for unity for Palestine.¹⁰⁵

IRGC Deputy Commander for Political Affairs Brigadier General Yadollah Javani said that the Deal of the Century marked a new chapter for the resistance of Palestinian factions, and that the plan was one-sided and did not include another party to enable it to be productive. Javani added that, through this plan, Trump revealed the defeat of the deal of the biggest betrayal of the century describing the Deal of the Century as a strategic mistake.¹⁰⁶

Yet, the Deal of the Century did not achieve what its architects hoped it would, as it was rejected by all Palestinian leaders, including the PA leadership, and many Arab and foreign countries were not enthusiastic about it. The Deal did not even realize what had been stipulated under previous international initiatives for “peace”

such as the two-state solution. Despite the huge financial incentives offered by Trump in return for accepting the deal, the Palestinian side refused; as a result, the deal could not be implemented and consequently, regional and international interest in it declined. Yet, with the looming presidential elections, amidst expectations of a close race with Democratic candidate Joseph Biden, Trump wanted to make a breakthrough in the Middle East which he could invest in the elections. As the Deal of the Century failed to meet its aims and faced many difficulties and complications, Trump opted for direct normalization between Israel and some Gulf states (UAE and Bahrain), in addition to Sudan and Morocco.

This public normalization by Arab states was met by the Palestinian resistance factions and the Palestinian people with sharp criticism, and those involved in it were accused of treason. Iran, for its part, deemed this step, besides its Palestinian ramifications, a threat to security in the region. President Hassan Rouhani warned both the UAE and Bahrain of the “consequences” of normalization with Israel. Rouhani said in a cabinet meeting that Israel is committing more crimes in Palestine every day, and he asked, “How can you reach out to Israel, and then grant it bases in the region?” He warned the normalizing countries that they will be responsible for all the dire consequences, and that were committing an illegal act against the security of the region.¹⁰⁷ Khamenei was quoted saying that the alliance between the UAE and Israel would not last long, because it constitutes an alliance of persons not of peoples. He stressed that what happened was a “disgrace” that will haunt the rulers of the UAE.¹⁰⁸

On 14/8/2020, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement strongly condemning the establishment of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel, describing the step as “strategic stupidity.” The statement stressed that the Palestinian people and all free nations of the world “will never forgive the normalization of ties with the usurping and criminal regime.” The Ministry expressed its confidence that “history will show how the strategic mistake made by the Zionist regime and the move by the UAE to unfairly stab the Palestinian people and the whole Muslims in the back would backfire, strengthen the axis of resistance, and maximize unity and solidarity against the Zionist regime and the regional reactionaries.”¹⁰⁹

In another statement issued on 12/9/2020, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said, “From now on, the Bahraini rulers will be an accomplice in the crimes committed



by the Zionist regime as the constant source of threat to security in the region and the Muslim world.” The Ministry considered the agreement “a shameful and ignominious measure by Bahrain that would sacrifice the cause of Palestine, decades of struggles, and the Palestinian people’s fortitude against miseries and suffering for the sake of the US election.”¹¹⁰ As for normalization between Morocco and Israel, Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign relations adviser to Iran’s Supreme Leader, said that in this deal, the US officially recognized Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco’s betrayal of Islam and the principles of Palestine.¹¹¹

IRGC Deputy Commander Ali Fadavi said that his country would not allow the gates of the region to be opened for Israel, stressing that the countries that cooperate with Israel would not be safe from the repercussions of normalization, that the glass palaces of its rulers would not protect them in the face of the revolution’s power, and will not withstand the stones of the children of Palestine.¹¹² Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said that the decision of normalization imposed by the US administration on some Arab countries would lead to destabilization of security in the region.¹¹³ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the then assistant speaker of the parliament, said, “The more severe the ban on us, the more we support the resistance in the region.”¹¹⁴

Hamid Shahriari, the Secretary-General of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, described the normalization of relations with Israel as “a betrayal of the Holy Qur’an and a turning away from the Messenger of Allah (PBUH)” asserting that this normalization “will bring nothing but humiliation and disgrace to the rulers of the Emirates among the Arabs.”¹¹⁵

The Iranian rejection of normalization with Israel was clear and consistent with Iran’s fundamental stances regarding Israel’s illegitimacy. This rejection was reiterated at various political, leadership and military levels. Iran also linked this normalization to sacrificing the Palestine issue and conspiring against the Palestinian people on the one hand, and threatening security in the region on the other, especially since the most important justifications and pretexts for normalization from the Israeli and Gulf sides concerned confronting Iran, the “common enemy,” and establishing joint security, military and intelligence systems to spy on Iran, its activities and relations. This is what Iranian statements warned against, indicating that normalization would lead to “destabilization of security in the region,” and

that the countries cooperating with Israel would not be safe from the repercussions of normalization, in addition to perceiving the step as an attempt to besiege Iran through the Gulf states.

According to the Arabic Post website, with the Trump administration intensifying its campaign of pressure on Tehran, Netanyahu seized the opportunity in recent years to encircle the Iranian presence in the Middle East. “While in recent years Tehran has had a strong presence of friendly forces in the vicinity of Israel, now it is Tel Aviv that is encircling Iran more than ever,” according to a report by Responsible Statecraft website.”¹¹⁶

When some Gulf countries rushed to normalize, they were in a hurry to do Trump a favor before the US presidential elections, but Trump failed to reward their support, and these countries lost their gamble on his reelection. At the same time, normalization helped Netanyahu in facing his internal crisis and political difficulties. However, Netanyahu failed to reassume his premiership, and these countries also lost their bets on his return. Nonetheless, normalization did not stop, and the gamble on it continued. The objective was to please Israel which did not want the US administration to return to the nuclear agreement with Iran, as announced by President Biden.

The Israelis believed that normalization would allow the formation of an Israeli-Gulf front or axis against Iran, the “common enemy.” Israeli Army Minister Benny Gantz said that “normalization agreements [between Israel and Arab countries] strengthen the fight against Iran.” He added, “We have shared interests. We all share the battle against the Iranian aggression and its nuclear development which jeopardizes the region and the world, and we will establish a united front against it.”¹¹⁷

Therefore, from the Israeli perspective, the US had to reach a new agreement that included Iran’s ballistic missile program, all other missiles and Tehran’s strategic options in the Middle East; and it was the duty of the White House to preserve the pro-Western, anti-Iranian camp that was taking shape in the Middle East after the signing of the Abraham Accords. The west had established a potential infrastructure for broad cooperation against Iran.¹¹⁸

The US ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, confirmed that direct military cooperation between the UAE and Israel was intended to counter Iran’s “threats,” and that “more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates’ lead and normalize relations with Israel.” At the UN Security Council’s regular



session on the Middle East, Craft said, “Direct military cooperation will benefit the entire region by countering the threat posed by Iran’s destabilizing activities in the Middle East and beyond.”¹¹⁹

Jared Kushner, US President Donald Trump’s senior adviser, said, “If you think about the people who don’t want Saudi Arabia and Israel to make a peace agreement, the number one proponent of that is going to be Iran. And [...] that just shows that it’s probably the right thing to do.”¹²⁰

The normalization that made Iran the “common enemy” of Israel and the Arabs aimed to promote new awareness and a culture different from that which had prevailed over preceding decades; deeming Israel as the main enemy and Palestine as the central issue for Arabs and Muslims. Israel wanted to shift this hostility towards Iran, presenting itself as a “peace” seeking country that, unlike Iran, did not pose a threat to any Arab country, the Gulf countries specifically. It was remarkable and strange in this context that several Gulf commentators in the media and social media in some Gulf countries justified the Israeli occupation of Palestine, claiming that the Jews were the historically rightful owners of Palestine. Some media, political and academic figures blamed the Palestinian people for the *Nakbah*, and for the displacement of the Palestinians from their land, while the silence of their governments regarding these claims can be viewed as implicit encouragement to establish a pro-normalization environment with negative stances towards the Palestinians. Yet, all these efforts suffered a major setback with the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, fought by the resistance forces in GS in defense of Palestine.

The Sword of Jerusalem Battle

A few months after the election of US President Biden, in early May 2021, Israeli forces attacked *al-Aqsa* Mosque and attempted to displace the residents of Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem. The Israeli leadership did not expect the resistance forces in GS to retaliate with a confrontation or to execute their threats and attack deep in the occupied Palestinian territories, in what the resistance called the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. The confrontation caused a major shakeup in Israel’s security theory, which had been based on deterrence, preemptive war, decisive speed, and the prevention of threats to the home front. Israeli leaders and most military and political analysts admitted their failure in this confrontation and their underestimation of the capabilities of the resistance, including the

Palestinians' missile capabilities. The most important thing in this confrontation, in which the resistance's missile bombardment continued for 11 days, was not only that the resistance took the initiatives of starting the confrontation and deciding to implement the ceasefire, but also that there was popular Palestinian action across historic Palestine, in support of the resistance. Hence, it could be said that the Sword of Jerusalem Battle ended the notion that the Palestinian people had been divided between regions, and that the objectives of those in GS, WB and the 1948 occupied territories, were different.

The noticeable accomplishment of the resistance in this confrontation did not receive any commendation from any Arab or Muslim official except for Khamenei, who addressed the Palestinian people and the "resistance and political factions" in a letter, congratulating them on the victory of the Palestinian resistance in its 11-day war against Israel. Khamenei stressed that the cooperation between the Palestinians in Jerusalem, WB, GS, the 1948 territories and the refugee camps, "has shown the future solution to the Palestinians." In his letter, Khamenei stressed that "The time to begin and to end the clashes depend on the discernment of the great Jihadi and political leaders of Palestine. But being prepared and maintaining a powerful presence in the field cannot be stopped." Addressing the Islamic world, Khamenei said, "The entire world of Islam has responsibilities and religious obligations with respect to the Palestinian cause." He added, "Muslim governments should earnestly enter the field to support the Palestinian nation in both military and financial areas—which is needed more than the past—and to help in the rebuilding of infrastructures and the ruins in Gaza."¹²¹

The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had condemned the continuous Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in GS and Jerusalem, calling on the international community as well as on Arab and Muslim countries to carry out their duties and responsibilities to stop the Israeli massacres. The Ministry said in a statement that the Palestinian people, who are struggling to regain all their rights, have the natural right to defend themselves, and legitimate resistance is the only way to confront the aggression and the occupation.¹²²

In July 2021, the elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi confirmed, in a phone call with the head of Hamas political bureau Isma'il Haniyyah and the PIJ Secretary-General Ziad Nakhleh, that Iran would continue to defend Palestine and to support its people until the liberation of Jerusalem.¹²³ When receiving



Haniyyah on 6/8/2021, Raisi stressed that the theory of resistance in Palestine has always borne fruit, and what determines the future of Palestine and the region is the struggle of resistance fighters and the resistance of the jihadists.¹²⁴

For his part, IRGC Quds Force Commander, Esmail Qaani, sent a message to Muhammad Deif, Commander of Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas), and Akram al-'Ajouri, Commander of al-Quds Brigades (PIJ) in which he said: "This war has caused a new stage in the battle," stressing that "Your resistance is written with blood and fire; an equation that says the enemy cannot isolate al-Quds without receiving a tough response, and Imam Khamenei, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, has emphasized that the countdown to the destruction of the enemy has begun and will never stop." He added, "The enemy knows that Palestine is not alone and the axis of resistance stands by it and its circle is constantly expanding and its power is increasing, and al-Quds is the compass of the axis of resistance and the Qiblah of jihad," and "Until the destruction of the usurper regime and the liberation of the whole land, we will not be at ease and we will not be at peace."¹²⁵

After this battle, and perhaps for the first time, Israeli media circles and political and security institutions began discussing the future of Israel, for the confrontation revealed the extent of the settlers' fears of losing security and stability and possibly their stay in Israel. This was because resistance missiles had reached all towns and cities, and it was revealed that there was coordination between the GS resistance and the resistance in Lebanon. The head of Hamas in GS, Yahya al-Sinwar, confirmed that "What happened was just a maneuver for what would happen in a regional war and an open confrontation," pointing out that "the missiles launched from Lebanon were in full coordination with the Lebanese resistance."¹²⁶

It is known that Israel fears the outbreak of a confrontation on more than one front, which would render it unable to protect its settlers or implement its combative doctrine regarding decisive speed, superior weapons and the guarantee of a short war. Therefore, following this confrontation and after the emergence of this regional resistance threat, the Israelis fear for the future of Israel has become more apparent.

Evolution of the Relationship with the Resistance

The Sword of Jerusalem Battle was preceded by several meetings, stances and statements that revealed the extent to which Iran's relations with Hamas and other

resistance factions had developed. Iran received the head of the Hamas political bureau, Isma‘il Haniyyah, at the funeral ceremony of Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the US using drones in Baghdad. At the ceremony, Haniyyah said:

We came from Palestine to offer our condolences to His Eminence the Leader Ali Khamenei, and to the Islamic Republic of Iran, its leadership, government and people, on the martyrdom of Commander Qassem Soleimani, [...] We express our sincere feelings toward a dear brother and martyr leader who has immensely supported Palestine and its resistance.

He also called Soleimani the martyr of Jerusalem.¹²⁷ Haniyyah was accompanied by a high-level Hamas delegation, they met Iranian leaders and the IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani.¹²⁸

Palestinian factions in GS set up a mourning site for Soleimani at the Unknown Soldier square, in the center of Gaza City, according to the German Press Agency. In a statement, Hamas held the US “responsible for the bloodshed in the Arab region,” noting that Soleimani “had a prominent role in supporting the Palestinian resistance in various fields.”¹²⁹ Israeli media reported that Israel conveyed warning messages to Hamas and the PIJ through Egypt against participating in any retaliation for Soleimani’s assassination from GS.¹³⁰

The deputy head of Hamas in GS, Khalil al-Hayya, said, “Our relationship with Iran has not changed for more than twenty years, and we will not sever it at any cost.”¹³¹ In the same context, al-Qassam Brigades commented that Soleimani “had dedicated a lot of his efforts towards working on the demise of Israel and sweeping it from the land of Palestine, and he worked to provide all forms of support for the resistance to confront the Zionist enemy.”¹³² Al-Quds Brigades spokesperson Abu Hamzah said that they bid farewell to a resistance leader who was feared by the “US and the Zionist entity.” He also asserted that Soleimani had overseen, for two decades, direct support to Palestine and the transfer of military and security expertise to its resistance fighters.¹³³

Hamas was criticized by some Arab political and media forces over Haniyyah’s visit to Tehran and participation in Soleimani’s funeral, while such voices did not criticize or object to the normalization (Abraham Accords) that took place between some Arab countries and Israel. Yet, Haniyyah’s visit was not surprising and was not outside the context of the development of relations between Hamas and Iran. It also made sense in the context of the siege imposed on Hamas by Arab countries



that had put it on their “terror” lists and were normalizing their relations with Israel.

In response to the critics of Hamas’s condolences for Soleimani’s assassination or Haniyyah’s participation in his funeral, Isma‘il Radwan, a Hamas leader, said that “Hamas is loyal to its allies, and Hamas, with its political and military wings, enjoyed the support of Soleimani, who was keen to provide the Movement with necessary support, and stood with it.” Thus, he added, “our solidarity with Iran is part of our loyalty to it and to reject the American crime, as well as to coordinate the positions of the resistance axis for the next phase, and to confirm the continuation of support to the resistance despite Soleimani’s assassination.”¹³⁴

Iran and Hamas After the Sword of Jerusalem Battle

The Sword of Jerusalem Battle had an impact different from those of previous confrontations between Hamas and Israel. For the first time, the public positions and statements of Hamas confirmed the direct relationship between Iran’s support and the achievements of the resistance. After reviewing the results of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle with the IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami, Haniyyah expressed his deep appreciation of Iran’s stance in standing by the Palestinian people and their resistance, and its steadfastness concerning the rights of the Palestinian people in various political, economic and social issues.

Major General Salami praised the “achievement made by the Palestinian resistance” and said that this battle had repercussions at various levels. He reiterated Iran’s readiness to provide all forms of assistance to the Palestinian people and their resistance in various fields, vowing that “Iran will not lag behind in this context.”¹³⁵

This was preceded by Haniyyah thanking Iran in his first appearance after declaring a ceasefire on 21/5/2021. He thanked Iran for supporting Hamas with “money, weapons and techniques,” and he stressed the readiness of Hamas for the aftermath of the recent military confrontation with Israel.¹³⁶ In a phone conversation with Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi, to congratulate him on his victory in the presidential elections, Haniyyah confirmed the strength of the relationship between Hamas and Iran, describing it as “strong, well-established and stable.” According to a statement by the Movement, Haniyyah praised Tehran’s support for Palestine.¹³⁷ In a phone conversation with Haniyyah, and the PIJ Secretary-General Ziad Nakhleh, the new Iranian president said that the battle had opened a new page for the resistance in facing the occupation, and proved the resistance

remained the primary strategic choice for resolving the Palestine issue. Raisi also condemned the ongoing siege on GS, stressing that it contradicts international law, and that it must end.¹³⁸

In an interview on al-Alam TV, Haniyyah confirmed that:

The resistance in Palestine is part of the broad resistance movement in the region, and we are in a strategic relationship with our brothers in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with our brothers in Hizbullah and with many parties in the region. It's not a secret when I say that the Islamic Republic has had a very important role in building this force that appeared during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. Also, this intelligence exchange with the "Axis" had a role in this battle [...] We battle with the enemy on the basis of a united front towards a central issue and towards Jerusalem.

Haniyyah said that the presence of leaders and representatives of the Palestinian resistance in the front row of the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi was a tribute to the resistance, and a message from the Islamic Republic that the resistance is supported, enjoys political legitimacy, and is under the dome of the Islamic Parliament of Iran participating in one of the most important events of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Haniyyah asserted that Soleimani's role was pivotal in supporting the resistance in Palestine and in building its capacities. He added that this role began clearly to take shape on the eve of the first GS war in 2008–2009, then Soleimani proceeded with the strategy of accumulating power and developing plans, in addition to providing financial and logistical support for the resistance.¹³⁹

Abu Hamzah, al-Quds Brigades military spokesperson, also praised the role of the Iran and all the forces of the axis of resistance which "provided our resistance with weapons and expertise, and proved to be a real supporter in strengthening the resistance's material and technical capabilities," and added, "We tell them that you are the partners of our victory, and we shall enter *al-Aqsa* together."¹⁴⁰

Most of those who participated in the preparation of the Deal of the Century or the normalization process in 2020 and 2021 would not have expected that a confrontation on the scale of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle would erupt, or that the battle would bring the issue of Palestine and Jerusalem back to the forefront of Arab and Islamic popular consciousness. It can be said that all the plans to eliminate the resistance in Palestine and marginalize the Palestine issue or replace



it with other priorities, whether through the cooperation and normalization with Israel or by being hostile to Iran, have failed. The promotion of these plans has diminished in the media of the normalizing countries, for they were embarrassed upon witnessing the confrontations between Israel and the resistance, on one hand, and the popular action throughout Palestine, on the other hand, which even the Western media could not ignore.

New equations were formed on the ground following the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, after the resistance in Gaza dealt a strong blow to the Deal of the Century and to normalization projects, and after the extent of cooperation and coordination between the Palestinian resistance, on one hand, and Iran and the resistance axis, on the other hand, became clear.

It is now expected, with these new equations, and with the emphasis on regional interdependence among the axis of resistance parties in any future battle with Israel, that Hamas and the resistance factions whose achievements in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle extended to all of Palestine, will face more attempts at containment, siege and restriction, and more schemes to make the reconstruction of GS conditional upon joining the western political process and recognizing Israel. Meanwhile, the Biden administration will continue the quest for more Arab normalization with Israel, and to further promote the option of settlement and the priority of reconstruction over the priority of resistance. Nevertheless, all previous experiences confirm that Israel will always prepare for future military escalation and other attempts to eliminate the resistance. This means that the resistance factions will continue to accumulate qualitative capabilities, arming and training, along with developing the relationship with the resistance forces.

Fourth: Other Muslim States

Malaysia

The strategic shifts in the region throughout 2020–2021 did not change Malaysia's policies towards the Palestine issue. Despite US pressure to dedicate Israel as a normal "state," which coincided with the desire of some regional countries to establish a new public partnership with Israel and marketing this trend among Arab and Muslim countries, Malaysia continued to defend Palestinian rights and to reject the US plan for "peace" or the so-called the Deal of the Century.

This position was expressed by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in his speech before the Third Conference of the League of Parliamentarians for Al Quds, which was held in February 2020 in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur, as he said, “The Deal of the Century hands over the holy city of Jerusalem on a silver platter to the Israeli side; in absolute disregard for the feelings of millions of Muslims and Christians worldwide.” He added that “This deal will only bring more conflicts to the region, and will antagonize billions of people around the world.”¹⁴¹

In the context of continued support for the Palestinian people, King of Malaysia Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri‘ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah called on all Malaysians to pray “for the wellbeing of Palestinians who are oppressed by Israel,” and he reiterated his support for Malaysian efforts to continue working with the OIC “member countries and the international community who are against Israel’s plan to annex Palestinian land.”¹⁴²

It was noted that amidst the wave of Arab normalization with Israel, Malaysia received a delegation of Hamas figures led by the head of the Movement’s political bureau Isma‘il Haniyyah in January 2020. During the visit, Haniyyah held meetings with various Malaysian sides, at various official levels, including the parliament, political parties, and civil society institutions as well as Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. According to a statement issued by Hamas, “the Movement’s head focused during his meetings on the danger and rejection of the Deal of the Century and the need to unify Arab and Islamic efforts to abort this plan since it aims at corroding the Palestine issue and undermining the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, and he called to reject it and foil it.”¹⁴³

Haniyyah also reviewed the “difficult humanitarian conditions suffered by the Palestinians in various places where they live, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially in light of the suffocating siege and restrictions imposed by Israel, as well as the conditions of refugees in refugee camps, and the need to meet their humanitarian needs and implement their right of return.” Haniyyah praised “the relation with Malaysia and all its components, which reflects the depth of belonging and brotherhood he sensed during the numerous meetings he held, as part of his efforts to support the Palestine issue and the steadfastness of the Palestinian people, and to abort attempts to circumvent the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.”¹⁴⁴



In a political position that reflects the reality of the official and popular positions on the Palestine issue, the Malaysian Parliament unanimously demanded Israel's expulsion from the UN in response to its plans to annex more Palestinian lands. A parliamentary delegation representing the Malaysian political spectrum delivered a memorandum in this regard to the US and Palestinian embassies, as well as to the UN and the Association of Southeast Asia (ASEAN) offices in Kuala Lumpur. The Parliament also condemned the UAE's normalization with Israel on the grounds that it harms the Palestine issue.¹⁴⁵

In the same sense, the annual general conference of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the UAE and Bahrain's normalization with Israel and denouncing the LAS's position on normalization. The party also announced that its Ulama Council had submitted a recommendation to the party's general assembly forbidding the establishment of relations with Israel and criminalizing normalization with it.¹⁴⁶

During the ASEAN Summit in November 2020, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin emphasized his solidarity with the Palestinian people and said that “the only viable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is through the two-state solution—based on the pre-1967 borders— with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.”¹⁴⁷

Despite Israel's attempts to proclaim its ability to make a new breakthrough in normalization with the Southeast Asia countries, referring to Malaysia and Indonesia, Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Saifuddin Abdullah denied these allegations.¹⁴⁸

Regarding the Israeli aggression on the GS in May 2021, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said that the Israeli attack on the Palestinian people was “an act that violated international law, human rights law, international humanitarian law and the Charter of the United Nations.” He demanded the UN and the US take decisive action against Israel and said he was “disappointed by the inability of the international community, especially the UN Security Council, to immediately halt Israel's escalation of violence against the Palestinians,” only because of US opposition after 139 Palestinians were killed and hundreds were wounded.¹⁴⁹

Indonesia

The importance of Indonesia's support of the Palestine issue is in its status as the largest Muslim country in the world. This might be the reason for the Israel's strong attempts to normalize relations with Indonesia, with Israel stating that there was a possibility of signing normalization agreements with Southeast Asian countries in recent years.¹⁵⁰

Despite the temptations and pressures of the Trump administration, Indonesia did not sign a normalization agreement with Israel. Adam Boehler, the Chief Executive Officer of the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), said that his organization "could more than double its current \$1 billion portfolio if Indonesia develops ties with Israel," and he added, "We're talking to them about it. If they're ready, they're ready and if they are then we'll be happy to even support more financially than what we do."¹⁵¹

President Mahmud 'Abbas thanked Indonesian President Joko Widodo for the Indonesian stance decrying normalization. Widodo stated that "Despite the rapid changes in the Middle East, Indonesia will not take any steps to normalize with Israel until a permanent and comprehensive peace is achieved between the Palestinians and the Israelis."¹⁵²

In the same context, the Chairperson of the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Committee in the Indonesian Parliament, Fadli Zon, asserted that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel was impossible. This came days after talking about US pressure on Indonesia to normalize relations with Israel, with Zon saying that Israel was a colonial state, and normalization with it would be against the Indonesian constitution. He explained that normalization agreements encouraged Israel to continue its violations against the Palestinian people, and increased the pace of settlement construction in WB and occupied Jerusalem.¹⁵³

In the context of the Israeli aggression against the GS in May 2021, Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi called on the EU to play a greater role in efforts to resolve the Palestine issue. Marsudi said in a joint press conference with the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, "We exchanged ideas over Palestinian issues. Our stance is that Indonesia welcomes the cease-fire and we hope all parties are committed to maintain the conducive situation." The Indonesian minister emphasized the importance of



efforts to prevent the recurrence of Israeli violations against the Palestinians adding that “We must increase our efforts to resolve the core problem, which is Israeli occupation, through credible negotiations based on a two-state solution.”¹⁵⁴

It seems that the Israeli efforts to expand the range of normalizing countries within the Abraham Accords did not stop. In October 2021, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that the Abraham Accords were “a great process in the region and outside the region, and we are hopeful that we can expand this to other countries as well,” adding, “As it was before, I wouldn’t name names because this will harm the process.” Lapid said the US, as well as Bahrain, Morocco and the UAE were helping Israel in those efforts.¹⁵⁵

The then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated at the end of 2020, that “many, many more countries” would be signing normalization agreements with Israel “a lot sooner than people expect,”¹⁵⁶ amidst speculation that Indonesia or Oman might normalize relations with Israel.

The *Jerusalem Post* claimed that the then former Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen “pointed to several countries that could be close to establishing ties with Israel, in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Gulf.” He also hoped that “seeing how well ties with Israel are going for other countries will create the momentum for Indonesia, Chad, Niger, Mauritania and others to normalize relations.”¹⁵⁷

Pakistan

Pakistan is connected to the Palestine issue in many ways. Primarily, the relationship is based on the religious status of Palestine, and the value of Jerusalem to all Muslims. Politically, the Palestinian–Pakistani relationship is of a particular nature, as the Pakistani political leadership considers the Kashmiri issue as similar to the Palestine issue. This was expressed by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in an interview, where he said that there were two reasons why Pakistan could not recognize Israel; First, “The situation in Kashmir is exactly the same situation in Palestine. If we recognize Israel’s takeover of Palestine territories, then we also have to recognize what India has done in Kashmir, so we completely lose moral standing.” As for the second reason, Khan recalled Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan’s policy regarding the issue, who said that unless injustice done to the people of Palestine is removed and unless the people of Palestine were given their homeland, Pakistan could not recognize Israel.¹⁵⁸

Despite the pressures exerted on Pakistan in 2020 to push it towards normalizing relations with Israel, Pakistan remained steadfast. A report in the Israeli media said that the US and another country, which could have been KSA, were pressuring Islamabad to recognize Israel. The report said that the KSA “holds a strong card: a \$2 billion loan which keeps Pakistan afloat, but whose extension is in doubt.” It also referred to the role of the Pakistani army “that really manages diplomacy in Pakistan,” and “is actually encouraging its favorite journalists to appear on Israeli news channels to present the case.” This implies that there is a possibility of relations being established between Pakistan and Israel.¹⁵⁹

Support for the Palestine issue can be quite easily observed in official Pakistani political statements. In March 2020, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs modified the category to which members of the Palestinian community in Pakistan are subject to in terms of entry and residence visas to an easier and more flexible category. The Pakistani foreign minister affirmed the Pakistani government’s firm position supporting the Palestinian people’s rights to freedom, independence, self-determination, and the establishment of their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. He also stressed his country’s rejection of the Deal of the Century.¹⁶⁰

Despite its firm stance in not recognizing Israel, Pakistan has opted to support the political solution endorsed by the Palestinians. In other words, the lack of normalization is linked to the Palestinians’ acceptance of a political solution to be achieved through the peace process. Prime Minister Imran Khan stressed, “I have no second thought to recognize Israel unless there is a just settlement, which satisfies Palestinians.”¹⁶¹

In the same direction, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it had made it clear to the UAE that “Islamabad cannot recognize Israel until a ‘concrete and permanent settlement’ ” of the Palestine issue is reached. Pakistani Minister of Foreign Affairs Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, “I categorically presented Pakistan’s stance on Israel to the UAE’s foreign minister that we will not and cannot establish a relationship with Israel until a concrete and permanent solution to the Palestine issue is found.” Islamabad also denied reports that it secretly sent a messenger to Tel Aviv.¹⁶²

As for the position on the Israeli aggression on the GS in May 2021, Pakistan called on the UN Security Council to take the necessary steps to hold Israel responsible for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁶³



Fifth: Responsiveness of the Muslim Public to the Palestine issue

Throughout 2020–2021, the Muslim peoples showed support for the Palestine issue and the Palestinian rights, while rejecting any form of normalization with Israel. In 2020, many demonstrations were held condemning Emirati and Bahraini normalization with Israel. In Indonesia, non-governmental organizations condemned the Israeli-Emirati normalization agreement, and the Indonesian Coalition Defending Baitul Maqdis perceived the normalization of relations with Israel as “a crime in terms of diplomacy, culture and economy, among others.” It stressed that any countries that normalize with Israel “agree with its crimes against Palestine.”¹⁶⁴

In the same context, the Secretary-General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars Ali al-Qaradaghi stressed that “normalization with the occupiers of *al-Aqsa* Mosque and Jerusalem is forbidden and is considered a treason.” An Islamic conference in Canada canceled the participation of the Chairman of the Emirates Fatwa Council Sheikh ‘Abdullah bin Bayyah in its activities because of his position in support of Emirati normalization with Israel.¹⁶⁵

In the context of Islamic popular support for the Palestine issue and in defense of its holy sites, different cities across the Muslim world witnessed dozens of demonstrations condemning the Israeli aggression on the GS in May 2021. In Istanbul, demonstrators hoisted Palestinian flags and demanded the world hold Israel accountable, and they condemned its aggressions against holy sites in Jerusalem amidst international silence. In the Pakistani capital Islamabad, protests demanded an end to the Israeli war on GS, and the demonstrators denounced what they described as the inaction by international organizations and the OIC.¹⁶⁶

In Bangladesh, thousands demonstrated in the capital Dhaka, to condemn and protest the Israeli war on GS. Activists of various political parties marched in the streets, after Eid al-Fitr prayers, to condemn the attacks. Raising the Palestinian flags, the demonstrators called on the international community to boycott Israel “for launching terrorist attacks against Muslims.”¹⁶⁷

In the same sense, the Indonesian Coalition Defending Baitul Maqdis put forward a program to support *al-Aqsa* Mosque and GS, in which about a thousand mosques and dozens of organizations and associations participated. Due to COVID-19 and

the difficulty of organizing large crowds in the capital Jakarta, alternative mass events were held in hundreds of mosques from the far east of Indonesia to its far west. The participants issued the “Indonesia Declaration to Save *al-Aqsa* Mosque and Liberate Palestine,” warning Israel against harming *al-Aqsa* and demanding a halt to settlement expansion in addition to the release of Palestinian prisoners, especially children. The participants also called for the boycott of Israel.¹⁶⁸

Apparently, the normalizations that swept the Arab world have not affected the levels of Muslim public support of the Palestine issue yet. This is because of its profound status in the conscience of Muslim peoples who perceive Jerusalem as the first Qiblah (the direction that should be faced during prayers) in Islam.

Sixth: Normalization and Israeli Relations with Muslim Countries

In 2020–2021, Israeli attempts to expand the circle of normalization with Arab and Muslim countries did not stop. Despite Donald Trump, who pressed for normalization with Israel, losing his attempted reelection, it seems that the Biden administration does not mind and may even want to expand the Abraham Accords, although in a manner different from Trump’s.

Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen revealed, in late 2020, that secret talks had taken place between Israel and Niger regarding the normalization of bilateral relations. “Niger is the largest Muslim country in West Africa, with a population of more than 25 million,” Cohen said, adding that “agreements expected between Israel and other Muslim states in Africa will help regional stability.”¹⁶⁹ Israeli interest in normalizing relations with Niger comes as the latter is one of the largest exporters of uranium in the world.

The years 2020–2021 witnessed several Emirati-Bahraini attempts to push Arab and Muslim countries to join the normalization agreements, whether directly and publicly or through secret channels. In this context came the meeting of the Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto with the Israeli Ambassador to Bahrain, Itay Tagner, during the Manama security conference,¹⁷⁰ which also witnessed the participation of the head of the Israeli NSC Eyal Hulta.



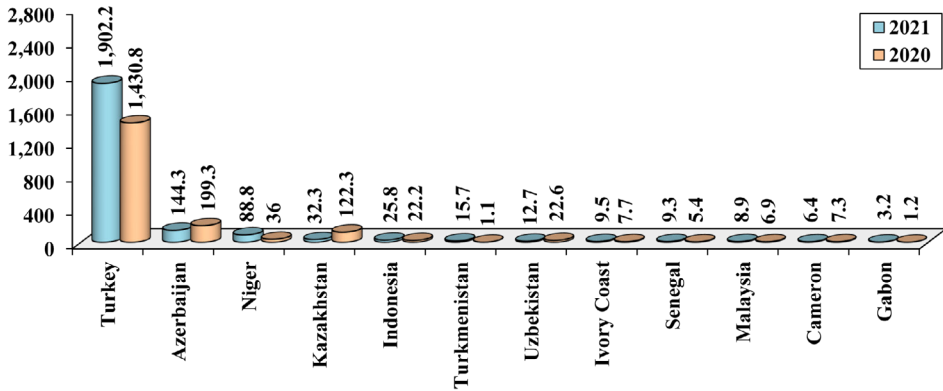
Muhyiddin Junaidi, deputy chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council and foreign relations official, rejected Emirati normalization with Israel and said UAE's move was a betrayal of the Palestine issue. Junaidi stressed that the Emirati move served Israel's interest, while harming the struggle of Muslim and Palestinian peoples, making it difficult for Palestinians to gain their freedom and establish an independent state.¹⁷¹

Noticeably, Pakistan and Turkey, in addition to four Arab countries, namely Tunisia, the UAE, Morocco and Egypt, participated, along with Israel, in the huge military maneuvers led by the US and Ukraine in the Black Sea, which started on 28/6/2021 and ended on 10/7/2021.¹⁷²

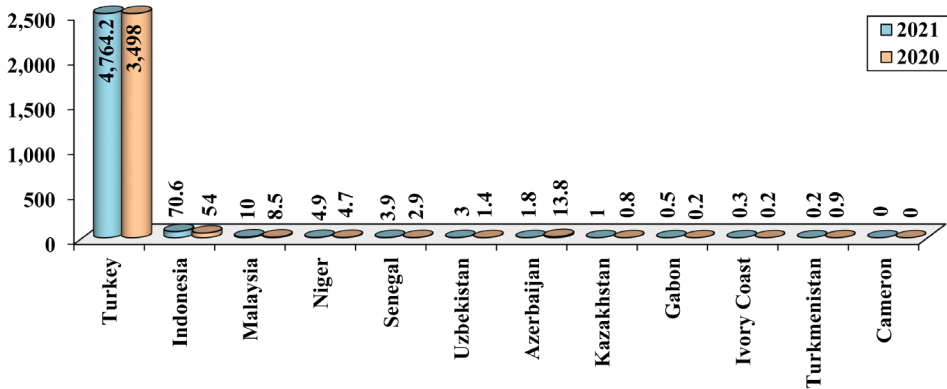
Table 3/7: Israeli Trade Volume with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2019–2021 (\$ million)¹⁷³

Country	Israeli exports to:			Israeli imports from:		
	2021	2020	2019	2021	2020	2019
Turkey	1,902.2	1,430.8	1,757.6	4,764.2	3,498	3,208
Azerbaijan	144.3	199.3	113.9	1.8	13.8	0.8
Indonesia	25.8	22.2	30.5	70.6	54	43.7
Niger	88.8	36	165.5	4.9	4.7	6.3
Kazakhstan	32.3	122.3	34	1	0.8	15.5
Malaysia	8.9	6.9	3.4	10	8.5	16.9
Turkmenistan	15.7	1.1	0	0.2	0.9	0.9
Uzbekistan	12.7	22.6	18.5	3	1.4	1.7
Senegal	9.3	5.4	14.7	3.9	2.9	4.4
Ivory Coast	9.5	7.7	6.8	0.3	0.2	0.5
Cameron	6.4	7.3	5.1	0	0	0
Gabon	3.2	1.2	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.2

Israeli Exports to a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2020–2021 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2020–2021 (\$ million)



Conclusion

The OIC maintained its traditional policy towards the Palestine issue in the years considered in this report, although its interaction seemed less than the past. Several of its member states embraced normalization and established official relations with Israel, while other central countries opened or activated channels of relations under the table, awaiting the maturation of more suitable conditions to reveal them.



Turkey maintained its general policy towards the Palestine issue, while strongly confirming that Jerusalem remained a red line, criticizing Israeli practices and attacks against the Palestinian people and calling for the lift of GS siege. The government made room for many activities in support of the Palestinian people, and its relations with the PA and the PLO leadership improved further. It also maintained its good relations with Hamas, but it became more reticent about hosting the movement's leaders or about their stay in Turkey.

Given the challenges that Turkey faced in the past two years, especially the economic difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the depreciation of the Turkish lira, and the desire of the ruling party, led by Erdoğan, to win the 2023 elections, the government sought to ease tension in many sensitive regional files, including with countries that opposed it because of the “Arab Spring.” Consequently, it improved its relations with Israel, where their trade increased, and Turkey became Israel's fifth biggest trading partner in the world and the first in the Muslim world. Turkey also took several steps to enhance political relations with Israel. Accordingly, the coming stage may witness further development and improvement of Turkish-Israeli and regional relations, while providing less space for Hamas and the resistance forces to operate in the Turkish arena.

As for Iran, it upheld its consistent stances and policies towards the Palestine issue, refusing to recognize Israel and supporting the Palestinian resistance. Its support of Palestine was not limited to political and media positions but also included military and financial aspects. The past two years have witnessed an improvement in the Hamas–Iran relationship. Iran is expected to be more able to manage its regional files and the file of its Palestinian relations in light of restoring the nuclear deal with the US and European powers, which will also provide it with better funding sources and better economic relations.

Israel is still trying to achieve normalization breakthroughs in the Muslim world, and there are indications of some non-public contacts and relationships. However, the popular mood, in general, has demonstrated widespread rejection of normalization with Israel and continued sympathy and support for the Palestine issue.

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2020–2021, the 12th PSR to be published.

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

This report is the result of collaborative work of 15 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 internal situation in Israel, politically, economically and militarily; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference, 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 2020 – 2021



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations
مركز الزيتونة للدراسات والاستشارات

P.O. Box: 14-5034 Beirut - Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 803 644 | Tel-Fax: +961 1 803 643
info@alzaytouna.net | www.alzaytouna.net



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