

# **Turkish Foreign Policy and Palestinian Issue: an Iranian Perspective (2002-2020)**

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## **Abstract**

The AKP's policy towards Palestine is the main core of this article. The Turkish authorities have tried to play as the mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and have attempted through various political and economic initiatives to support a peace agreement between both sides. However, after the 2008 Gaza war, the AKP government's foreign policy stance towards Israel began to change, at least officially. This war, alongside to other events such as 2009 Davos, the 2010 Low Chair and the 2010 Mavi Marmara, produced a public political conflict in the Turkish-Israeli relations. This tension extended from the 2008 Gaza war until the normalization deal between the two countries in June 2016. But this political tension did not have very impact on the other current fields of cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv. This emphasizes clearly that both countries were pragmatic in maintaining efficient and strategic ties.

The major research question can be stated as the following: What has been the Turkish government's policy on the Palestinian issue between 2002-2020? In addition we want to assess the proximity and distance of Turkey's policies from Iranian perspectives and positions.

In order to provide a deep analysis, away from repetition, speeches or the bias to one of the parties, this research is relying

on proofs and investigations. Based on a documentary research, we attempt to form our analysis by a content analysis combined with a descriptive explanatory.

**Keywords:** *Turkish Foreign Policy, Palestinian Issue, Israel, Constructive theory, Iran*

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## **Introduction**

The AKP government's policy has been a sort of interaction between several factors which contributed significantly to the formation of the country's orientation. It sprang from the history of Turkey, Turkish geopolitical and geostrategic location, the existence of internal polarization between various political parties and influential groups as well as regional and international developments. The conceptualizations of the AKP policy had also been influenced by the doctrine of strategic depth which was drawn up by Ahmet Davutoğlu. The core of this policy was based on strengthening the policy of zero problems with its neighbors, as well as the great importance of soft power in its political implementations. This soft power is displayed through the expansion of Turkish relations in various fields including trade, diplomacy, energy, tourism and security, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and the Middle East.

After 2002, the Turkish foreign policy witnessed more sensibility towards regional issues, especially those regarding Israel and Palestine

The AKP's policy towards Palestine is the main core of our essay. The Turkish authorities have tried to play as the mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and have attempted through various political and economic initiatives to support a peace agreement between both sides. However, after the 2008 Gaza war, the AKP government's foreign policy stance towards Israel began to change, at least officially. This war, alongside to other events such as 2009 Davos, the 2010 Low Chair and the 2010 Mavi Marmara, produced a public political conflict in the Turkish-Israeli relations.

This tension extended from the 2008 Gaza war until the normalization deal between the two countries in June 2016. But this political tension did not have very impact on the other current fields of cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv. This emphasizes clearly that both countries were pragmatic in maintaining efficient and strategic ties.

At the same time, the AKP headed government expanded its relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA). After Hamas won the parliamentary elections in 2006, most of the Turkish support (politically and humanitarian) turned towards Hamas and Gaza. The AKP government expressed their greater willingness to engage Hamas in the regional and international political field as well as to dismantle the imposed political isolation on them. Of course, this does not conceal the fact that the AKP government also attempted to maintain good diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority.

Relying on constructivist theory, Islamic and Turkish historical values, of course, as seen, presented and used by AKP, play a significant role for justifying internal legitimacy in the foreign policy.

As Turkey was inspiring the Arab peoples in their revolutions against dictatorial regimes, the AKP saw this as a great opportunity to fulfil the role of a leading country in the Middle East. Yet, at the same time, despite *redirection* of the Turkish political priorities, economic cooperation mechanisms with Israel remained in place, and various Turkish-Israeli secret meetings occurred in order to normalize the political relations between the two countries.

The major research question can be stated as the following: What has been the Turkish government's policy on the Palestinian issue between 2002-2020? In addition, we want to assess the proximity and distance of Turkey's policies from Iranian perspectives and positions.

As our hypothesis, we argue that the AKP government used the Palestinian issue, the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts and the

political conflict with Tel Aviv as a means to benefit from and reinforce its internal and external positions. Relying on our mixed conceptual framework, Turkish politics are relatively in line with Iran's perspectives insofar as it is inspired by national and Islamic values (i.e. Constructive theory) , but they, which in the framework of realism theory, are oriented very far from the path of Iranian politics.

In order to provide a deep analysis, away from repetition, speeches or the bias to one of the parties, this research is relying on proofs and investigations. Based on a documentary research, we attempt to form our analysis by a content analysis combined with a descriptive explanatory.

### **I. Theoretical framework:**

In fact, there are interrelated factors across multiple levels, which determine Turkish foreign policy. Because of this complexity, the old paradigms or classical theories would be unable to provide a theoretical frame. In other words, this complexity has created many misunderstandings in academic and policy circles. This encouraged us to search for a more dynamic type of analysis.

Relying firstly on constructive approach or better to say, on Societal Constructivism and Identity, we try to shape our mixed framework, which seeks in parallel to apply some traces of neorealism.

Constructivism primarily seeks to demonstrate how core aspects of international relations are, contrary to the assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism, *socially constructed*, that is, they are given their form by ongoing processes of social practice and interaction. Alexander Wendt calls two increasingly accepted basic tenets of Constructivism "that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature" (Wendt, 1999:1)

The main assumptions of constructivism are "International

system” which is a set of ideas, a body of thought, a system of norms, and has been arranged by certain people at a particular time and place” (Jackson and Sorensen. 2010:160). So international system is socially constructed and changeable (Akam, 2019:6)

Constructivists hold that normative or ideational structures are just as important as material structures in defining the meaning and identities of an individual or a state (Ruggie 1998:860). In brief, constructivists highlight the significance of identity in international relations, and underline intersubjective opinions such as ideas and ideas (Akam, 2019:7).

The main conceptions of the constructivism approach could be stated as identity, ideas and norms. Constructivists put emphasis on the role of ideas, identity and norms which, as they discuss, play an important role in foreign policy (Flockhart, 2012:82).

## **II. Turkish Foreign Policy Formation**

Muslim identity of Turkey is one of the multiple identities it has. Turkey’s Muslim identity is domestically driven. It is originated from the Sunni sect of Islam, particularly the interpretations of the Naghshbandi and Sufi brotherhoods (Heper, 2013:144).

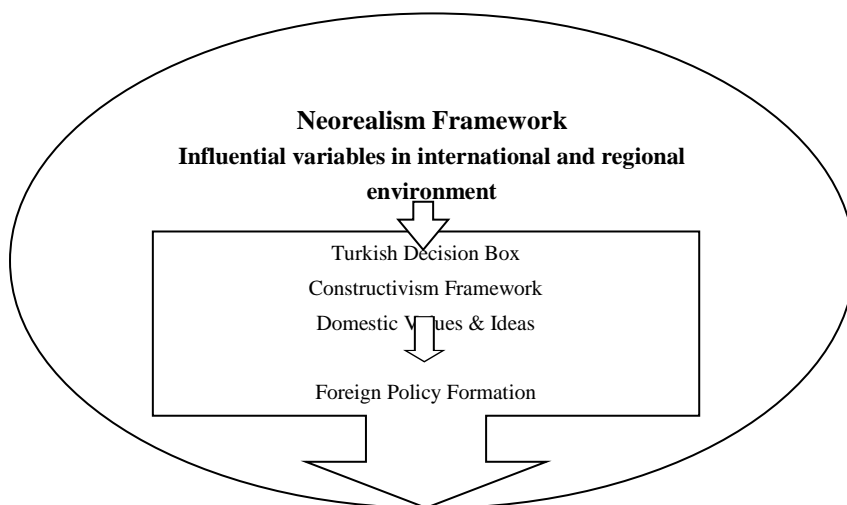
This Muslim identity has increasingly been raised since the end of the Cold War and particularly after the AKP came to power in 2002 (Dalay, 2013:125). As Jenny White (2014) argues, Turkey’s national identity has been in a process of redefinition from Islamism to Muslim-hood since 2002. Muslim-hood, according to her, implies a different understanding of personhood and a pluralist vision of an Islamic public sphere that allows people with different languages to have a collective identity. In this sense, Kurds, Arabs and Turks have a collective identity but they could still hold a second ethnic identity; that of Turks, Kurds and Arabs.

There is a common dogma that depoliticizes radical nationalism or Communism/Marxism(White, 2014). The Muslim-

hood identity aims for the integration of Turkey into the “Islamic community of nations” and presents Turkey as likely leader of the Islamic world, particularly the Sunni communities (Heper, 2013: 147).

The prevailing Islamic discourse, such as Muslim-hood, fellow brothers, etc., has influenced the formation of the country’s preferences and the construction of the national interests because they have created structural norms (Cornell, 2012:17). Cornell (2012) argues that Turkish foreign policy is largely ideologically driven because the two influential politicians, Ahmet Davutoglu and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have strong Islamic ideological incentives (Cornell.2012: 18-19). His analytical argument is based on speeches, writings and emphases on the Islamic values. For example, they define who is an enemy and who is a friend based on the Sunni branch of Islam. It defines the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad and Kurdish forces in Syria (Akam, 2019:13).

As a result, the process of Turkish Decision Box in foreign Policy can be analyzed in two dimensions. Recourse to the theory of constructivism based on domestic values and ideas for internal legitimacy as well as recourse to the theory of neo-realism for playing safe in the regional and international arena.



**Figure 1. Framework of Turkish Foreign Policy Formation**

**AKP policy towards the Middle East:** Until 2002, Turkey followed Western prescriptions and guidelines in implementing its foreign policy. It also undertook efforts not to intervene in the Middle East political affairs. This was the main policy line, along with the impression that the state should be entirely away from the Ottoman structure, and should be based on secularism and nationalism.

Turkey under the AKP rule has become a key player in Middle East politics, basing its new foreign policy on the concept of strategic depth. This policy transformed Turkey into a central country in the region. Additionally, Turkey appeared as a model, which could unite both the Western democracy project and the Eastern political Islam project. The AKP policy towards the Middle East including its mediating role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as the Syrian-Israeli conflict has had widely contrasting interpretations from different scholars, politicians and journalists. Some of them have interpreted the new Turkish role in the Middle East as an attempt to cover the real goal, which the AKP government wanted to achieve.

**Palestinian Issue:** When the AKP came to power in 2002, Palestine has been considered as one of the main concerns of the AKP foreign policy. The AKP government firstly tried to play a balancing role in its foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Later on, because of the unstable domestic situation in Turkey, and because the Turkish internal politics and foreign policy are intrinsically interrelated, the AKP government took advantage of the Turkish conservatives' desire to support the Palestinian issue, especially after Hamas won the parliamentary election in 2006. The AKP labelled itself as the guardian of the Palestinian issue.

Following the Turkish efforts and initiatives to keep the Palestinian-Israeli process on track, Bülent Ecevit, the then Turkey's Prime Minister sent a message through his deputy under-secretary Ali Tuiygan to the Palestinian and Israeli leaders in order to encourage both of them to return to the negotiating table and



stop the violence (Hürriyet Daily News, 2002).

At the peak of tension in March 2002, Bülent Ecevit intensely criticized the imposed siege on Yasser Arafat, the former Palestinian president, and the Battle of Jenin, which took place in the Jenin refugee camp in 2002. Ecevit described these violent actions against the Palestinians civilians as genocide (Alsaftawi, 2017:87). Ecevit declared: “*Not only Arafat, but all of the Palestinian state is being destroyed step by step. In front of the world’s eyes a genocide is being committed*” (Asbarez, 2002).

The Palestinian issue was present within the Turkish political scene and especially within the AKP agenda. In a speech of İlker Başbuğ, the former Chief of Staff: “*Without a resolution of the Palestinian question, there could be no peace in the Middle East*” (Altunışık & Cuhada, 2010: 373).

A range of key parameters including domestic, regional, and international ones has affected the decision-making process in Turkey concerning the Palestinian cause.

**Domestic level:** Despite the fact that the Turkish Republic was born out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic could not totally separate itself from its Ottoman heritage. On the domestic level, there is a common cultural and historical heritage from the Ottoman Empire, as well as a shared sense of Islamic belonging that binds Turkey to Palestine (Saleh, 2014). The AKP support for the Palestinian cause did not stem only from an ideological background as many scholars have analyzed. In the political calculations of the AKP, the Palestinian cause is considered a silver bullet to win much more voters, either internally or externally.

According to Zeynep Kosereisoglu: “A pro-Palestinian stance highlights solidarity with a Muslim cause. Indeed, Erdoğan has been seen as the first Muslim leader in the last decade (outside Iran) to take a bold and leading stance in support of Palestine. This has not only enhanced Turkey’s profile but also increased Erdoğan’s popularity in the region. In this way, Palestine has been an effective vehicle for AKP to reach out to the Arab street”

(Kosereisoglu, 2013).

The AKP foreign policy's bias to support the Palestinian cause including mainly Hamas and the Gaza issue became particularly obvious after the start of the 2008 Gaza war, the 2009 Davos incident, the 2010 Low Chair incident and the 2010 Mavi Marmara attack. The AKP's support of Hamas and Gaza was used as an instrument by the party's elites to strengthen AKP's internal and external position. What deserves to be mentioned here is that despite the AKP's ostensible formal and informal bias towards the Palestinian cause, this support does not exceed the vision of the "two-state solution" and "the Arab-Israeli peace initiative", and does not harm the strategic interests of the regional and Western states, especially Israel.

**Regional level:** From the beginning, the Palestinian issue was not just an internal Palestinian affair, but it was a regional or even international matter. Given the importance of the Palestinian issue and its impact, many political leaders rushed to find a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Within this context, the AKP government has been instrumental in the Palestinian cause as well as in its mediating role in order to increase its influence in the regional and global arenas. Besides, it facilitates the rebuilding of Turkish relations with Arab countries, especially after the Kemalist policy tended to distance themselves from the region (Cohen & Freilich, 2014: 44).

This gave Turkey an opportunity to play a major role in the region where this issue is crucial. As Meliha Altunışık has pointed out: "If you want to have popularity in the Arab world and if you want to be a regional power, you need to lead the Palestinian issue; Iran was doing the same thing, and in the Lebanon war, Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad became very popular in the Arab streets. With the Gaza war of 2008, this has changed, and suddenly it was Erdoğan. I see that in the context of regional strategic competition" (Altunışık, 2016).

**International level:** The AKP government shows itself to the world as a modern democratic government that believes in the

principles of human rights, public freedoms, human civilization and the right of peoples to independence. Therefore, the AKP government has explained its interference in the Palestinian issue.

Internationally, the Turkish position was based on the rejection of the gradual Israeli move to the occupied territories. What is more, the AKP support for the Palestinian cause was limited since the Turkish financial assistance to the Palestinians only consisted of aid and humanitarian relief projects, as well as some infrastructure support.

This is because, primarily, the AKP had a commitment to its broad lines including the Turkish National Security. Besides, the AKP government tried to prevent any Arab concern regarding the Turkish support to the Palestinian cause, especially from Egypt. Ahmet Davutoğlu acknowledged that: *“The Turkish role can be helpful or complementary, but not a replacement for the Egyptian role”* (Rahman, 2010).

Additionally, the AKP government was impatient not to harm the strategic interests of the regional and Western states, especially Israel. Within these political restrictions, the AKP support for the Palestinian cause does not exceed the vision of the “two-state solution” and “the Arab-Israeli peace initiative” (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2011).

Up until now, Turkey has hardly played as a mediator role in the Conflict. Meanwhile, it should be notified that Turkey has refrained from pursuing a “power politics” strategy as third party intervention, but rather preferred softer strategies of conflict transformation and structural prevention. Power mediation would require a third party to not only facilitate communication between the parties and suggest options, but also bolster these suggestions with rewards and punishments in order to make the parties accept and implement these options. Turkey did not have enough leverage on the parties to set a negotiation agenda, suggest options, and use its muscle to implement these suggestions and the reward and punishment mechanisms effectively (Çuhadar Gürkaynak, 2007:103).

### III. The Turkish positions on various Conflictual events

**Hamas Election Victory:** The Turkish-Palestinian relations witnessed vast improvement with the victory of Hamas in the PLC election. The Islamic background of both parties contributed to deepening the relationship. Of course, there was a prior relationship between Hamas and the AKP. This relationship was based on sharing the same intellectual ideology. In the 1990s, various youth meetings and shared conferences brought together the leaders of the two parties.

Furthermore, the Turkish government recognized the results of the 2006 elections and demanded that the rest of the world respect the Palestinians' vote (Saleh, 2014). Turkey under the leadership of the AKP was diplomatically engaged in the Palestinian issue, attempting to increase its influence and stature. The AKP government tried to engage Hamas with international politics and granted it legitimacy. This became evident when the then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated, *"I do not see Hamas as a terrorist organization. Hamas is a political party"* (Haaretz, 2011).

The AKP claimed that they could push Hamas away from its doctrinaire past, towards more practical and open-for-compromise politics.

Despite the international boycott of the government of Hamas, Turkey did not stop dealing with the caretaker government led by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Additionally, the Turkish government condemned the existing blockade of the Hamas government. The AKP government considered Hamas to be democratically elected by the Palestinian people, and to be an important player in the Palestinian political scene. They urged the other regional governments to give Hamas some space to prove itself and asked the international community to take a positive stance on the Hamas government.

Khalid Mashaal's visit created a shock in the international community. This visit also created a heated debate inside the Turkish Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, AKP's openness towards

Hamas was criticized from Israel. Israel directly reacted to this visit through its Ambassador to Turkey Pinhas Avivi (Demirelli, 2006).

Turkey made different efforts to support the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks and in the same vein tried to involve Hamas indirectly in these talks. The AKP tried to push Hamas away from its dogmatic past, towards more practical and open-for-compromise politics. However, all of the Turkish government's attempts encountered problems, and in the end, were not very effective in making a positive change in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This follows the lack of real power that the Turkish authorities' government could exercise over Israel.

In contrast, it could be argued that the AKP government does have substantial political leeway concerning the Palestinian cause. This stems from Turkey and Palestine's shared historical geographical unity, mutual culture and religion.

**The Israeli military operation in Gaza (2008):** The Israeli military operation in Gaza in 2008 and the news of an increase in casualties provoked a sharp reaction from Turkey, leading to a deterioration in relations between the two countries. The lead cast operation against the people of Gaza came exactly three days after Israeli President Ehud Olmert visited Ankara to thank Turkey for its mediation in resolving the Israeli-Syrian conflict. Erdogan was outraged by the operation. Erdogan has made it clear that he no longer considers Olmert a "peace partner" and has lost confidence in Israel. Erdogan refers to one of the verses of the Torah in Hebrew which states: "thou shall not kill" (Efron, 2018:8).

In the weeks since the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, Turkish-Israeli relations have been reduced. However, despite these positions, Turkey has worked hard to end the Gaza war in any way possible. Erdogan's senior foreign policy adviser Ahmet Davutoglu appears to have played a key role in convincing Hamas to end rocket attacks on Israeli headquarters after Israel unilaterally announced that it had ended military operations on January 17, 2009 in the north and east of Gaza.

**Davos case:** The heightened political tension in the Turkish-

Israeli relations was increased during a panel debate titled *Gaza: The Case for Middle East Peace* at the World Economic Forum in Davos, in Switzerland on 29 January 2009, after just about eleven days from the termination of the *Operation Cast Lead*. Erdoğan pulled out from the Forum because he was prevented from replying to the comments made by Shimon Peres regarding the attack on Gaza. The reason behind Erdoğan's anger was Peres' refusal to recognize the humanitarian toll, which was the result of Israeli attacks on Gaza, as well as Peres' defense of Israel as "*a state exercising its legitimate right of self-defense*" (Migdalovitz, 2010).

Erdoğan had a public confrontation with the then Israeli President. He described the Israeli military offensive activities in Gaza as a *war crime*. The discussion of the Gaza attacks was lively, with contributions from Ban Ki-moon, the former Secretary-General of the UN, Amr Moussa, the former Arab League secretary-general, Peres and Erdoğan (Kastoryano, 2013). Erdoğan spoke to Peres: "*You are speaking with a raised voice. This is the psychology of guilt. You know very well how to kill.*" Moreover, Erdoğan continued to quote from the Torah: "*Article 6 of the Old Testament reads: Thou shalt not kill.*" After Erdoğan departed, Peres said: "*Turkey would have reacted the same way if rockets had been falling on Istanbul*" (Bennhold, 2009).

The Davos incident opened a new dimension in the Turkish-Israeli political tension. The Davos incident can be considered as the first public strong rhetoric from Erdoğan towards the 2008 Israeli military operation. This incident contributed to increasing the atmosphere of mistrust between Ankara and Tel Aviv (Alsaftawi, 2017:192).

**Mavi Marmara:** Turkish-Israeli relations soured in May 2010 with the deployment of several humanitarian ships to Gaza to break the siege of the region and the deadly clash of its passengers with the Israeli navy. The ships were expedited on the initiative of Turkish NGOs, and Ankara was aware of that.

Tensions between the two countries continued throughout 2010. Meanwhile, Turkey's emphasis on Israel's official apology

to the country for attacking the peace ship, the cancellation of the two countries' military maneuvers and the cancellation of the Turkish Foreign Minister's visit to Israel added to the strained relations. Turkey has asked an official Israeli apology for attacking the peace ship and declared it as a condition for improving relations.

In September 2011, Erdogan announced that the Mavi Marmara incident could pave the way for war, and that the Turkish navy had been instructed to provide shipping security in the region. The Turkish Foreign Minister even called on the United Nations to take action against Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip (Akgün, 2014:6).

A year and a half after the incident, in March 2013, Benjamin Netanyahu will finally formally apologize due to Barack Obama's mediation (Arbell, 2014: 1-2). The United Nations has sent an investigation team led by the Prime Minister of New Zealand to investigate the incident (Akgün, 2014:5).

Meanwhile, some news sources reported that the Israeli Minister of Industry had a secret meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister in Brussels, which showed the special views of the two countries for the continuation of political relations.

Following the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey reduced its relations to the level of second secretary, and Israel recalled its ambassador. Until 2016, relations between the two countries fluctuated in a series of fluctuations and two series of negotiations, until finally, the two sides decided to strengthen relations again in June 2016.

If the determination of Turkey to make Israel apologise for the Mavi Marmara incident was viewed in Turkey as the restoration of Turkish national honor and the acknowledgement of its superiority, the acceptance to apologize was considered a huge insult in Israeli circles (Goren, 2012: 128).

**Jerusalem issue:** In the case of the transfer of the Israeli government headquarters to Jerusalem, Erdogan told US officials that Jerusalem was the red line in the Muslim world. Netanyahu

eventually accused Erdogan of killing his compatriot Kurds and helping Iran escape sanctions and collaborating with terrorists (Zaman, 2017).

Erdogan's serious confrontation over the transfer made him the hero of this confrontation. While the main allies of the West Bank Autonomous Government, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, only verbally opposed (Efron, 2018:28).

On May 14, 2018, when the United States recognized Jerusalem as the center of the Israeli government, following the subsequent events of the repression of the Palestinians, Erdogan accused Israel of genocide and described it as a terrorist state. (Independent.UK's Largest Quality News Brand, 2018) Even Turkey declared three days of public mourning (Alkaç, 2018).

#### **IV. Turkish Orientation and Iranian perspectives**

According to our mixed conceptual framework, Turkish politics are relatively in line with Iran's strategies insofar as it is inspired by national and Islamic values, but they, which in the framework of realism theory, are oriented very far from the path of Iranian politics.

Mir Hosseini believes that Turkey and Israel in the Middle East have overlapping interests in vital areas of security-military, and both have a completely security and confrontational view of the axis of resistance, especially Syria, Iraq and Iran. Because, first, Syria and Iraq are the refuge of the opposition of Turkey and Israel, and the Kurdish groups and the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance against Israel are present there.

According to his analysis, "in the case of Iran, Turkey sees Iran as its main regional rival, which has achieved regional power and balance in its favor, and on the other hand, Iran is the main and ideological enemy of Israel" (Mir Hosseini, 2020:319).

Turkey's general policy has fluctuated in favor of Palestinian rights and non-hostility to Israel. There are the signs indicating that the AKP's policy has been a moderate one: Erdogan's reaction to Israel's invasion on Gaza and Rafah, criticizing Israel's influence in



the Kurdistan Regional Government, deepening ties with Hamas, condemning Israel's attack on Lebanon in summer 2006, suspending military exercises in 2009 following Israel's repressive operation against the Gaza Strip. If the AKP adopted a pro-Palestine and anti-Israel policy, it would face domestic problems (questioning its legitimacy by military and laic parties) on the one hand and foreign problem (decreasing the West's economic and military aids) on the other. Thus, the AKP's foreign policy has been fluctuated between pro-Palestine and pro-Israel trends.

Therefore, it can be argued that tensions between Turkey and Israel in this period within the dominant norms of Turkish foreign policy do not mean to deny Israel's legitimacy but they mean to protest Israel's performance or to correct it. The reason for this claim is that these tensions have never culminated in a crisis cutting their relations. The definition of Turkey's identity on a mixed basis has caused that this state's politics be influenced by both Western and Islamic norms and manifested a character, which is the result of this identity combination. In fact, Turkey's policy based on strategic alliance with Israel and approaching Islamic countries have been accompanied by a kind of moderatism that gives Turkish Islamism a particular and unique nature in the Islam World (Soleimani Poorlak, 2012:124-5).

**General differences:** There are fundamental differences between Turkey and Iran. First, despite profound Islamization processes, Turkey has a Sunni majority and its regime maintains liberal characteristics; while revolutionary Iran is a Shiite religious state.

Second, both Turkey and Iran, each for various historical, geographical and material reasons, see themselves as a regional – if not global –power, which may over time result in heightened competition and even overt rivalry between the two. Iran and Turkey also disagree on the nature of the desired regime in Iraq, the situation in Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Furthermore, Turkey is closely tied to the West (Guzansky, 2011:2).

Despite the ties between Iran and Turkey, therefore, the

potential for disagreement and competition for regional dominance also exists. In general, Turkey does not share Iran's ideology or interests, and in its conduct, it still seeks to maintain a balance between East and West to help it preserve its regional status. Thus in the long term, strengthening Iran's status at the expense of other elements in the region would be problematic from Turkey's perspective (Guzansky, 2011:2).

Another possible locus of friction between two states is the struggle over image and leadership in the Muslim world. It has been claimed that Turkey's image in the Arab world today is the most positive that it has been since World War I (Guzansky, 2011:2).

Progress in Iran's nuclear program has several negative implications for Turkey-Iran relations. First, the Turks have on numerous occasions stated that they oppose nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. While this pronouncement primarily targets Israel's nuclear policy, Turkey is in principle still opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons (Guzansky, 2011:3).

**The Israeli-Palestinian conflict:** Even with the current poor relations between Israel and Turkey, Turkey still supports a settlement, whereas Iran denies the basic legitimacy of the State of Zionist regime. Iran lies outside of the Arab-Israeli /Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it is doing all in its power to undermine any possible settlement by financing, training, and shipping arms to Palestinian organizations such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. By contrast, the relationship between Turkey and Hamas (Turkey recognized the Hamas government as early as 2006 and even hosted Khaled Mashal in Ankara that same year) stems not necessarily from a desire to strengthen the organization's control of the Gaza Strip, rather from its stance that to advance negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians (Guzansky, 2011:5).

Beyond this, Turkish public opinion has long empathized with the Palestinian struggle; there is also some sense of responsibility for the fact that the Palestinian problem was created during the end of the Ottoman era. The result, at least for the Palestinian

issue, is that Erdoğan is trying to position Turkey somewhere between the Arab/Muslim world and Israel/the West, thereby impeding Iran's attempt to take exclusive control of the issue as a way of increasing its influence on Arab public opinion above the heads of Arab leaders (Guzansky, 2011:5-6).

By exploiting the Palestinian issue, Erdogan tries to present Turkey to the Arab public as a leading power in the Middle East, to gain Islamic legitimacy, and to build an economic infrastructure in the region.

Speaking in September 2014 in New York at the Foreign Relations Council (CFR), one of the leading think tanks of the United States, Erdogan declared: *"The Palestinian issue is an important issue that has an impact not just on the Palestinians, but on all the Muslims and everyone who has a conscience in the world. And in fact, the Palestinian issue lies in the heart of many of the issues in the region. And the Israeli government, although they know this sensitivity very well, has not refrained from putting its own people and the people of the region on fire"* (Karmon, 2018:75).

Farhad Rezaei speaks about an odd Turkish policy. He claims "while Iran's efforts to support Palestine and oppose Israel have been exploited to enhance its popularity in the Arab world, Turkey's assertive support for the Palestinians has been an important factor that has contributed to the deterioration of Iran's popularity in the Arab world. This particular Turkish policy has been interpreted by Tehran as a threat to Iran's role as the main state sponsor of anti-Israel movements"(Rezaei, 2017:65). Rezaei's comments present a special image of the issue :*"There are a number of other issues that are causing tensions between Turkey and Iran including the fact that Turkey, which considers itself to be a leading regional leading power due to its democratic political system and high economic growth rate, has become a model for the political development of countries in the region"* (Rezaei, 2017:65).

Turkey was allied with Hamas in its fight for ending the Gaza siege by Israel, its search for domination in the internal Palestinian

arena and its quest for gaining international legitimacy. But at the same time Hamas has been strategically allied since 1992 with Iran, which has bolstered its military capabilities and largely financed its resistance activities against Israel. Moreover, Iran, like Hamas, openly professes the destruction of the Zionist Regime.

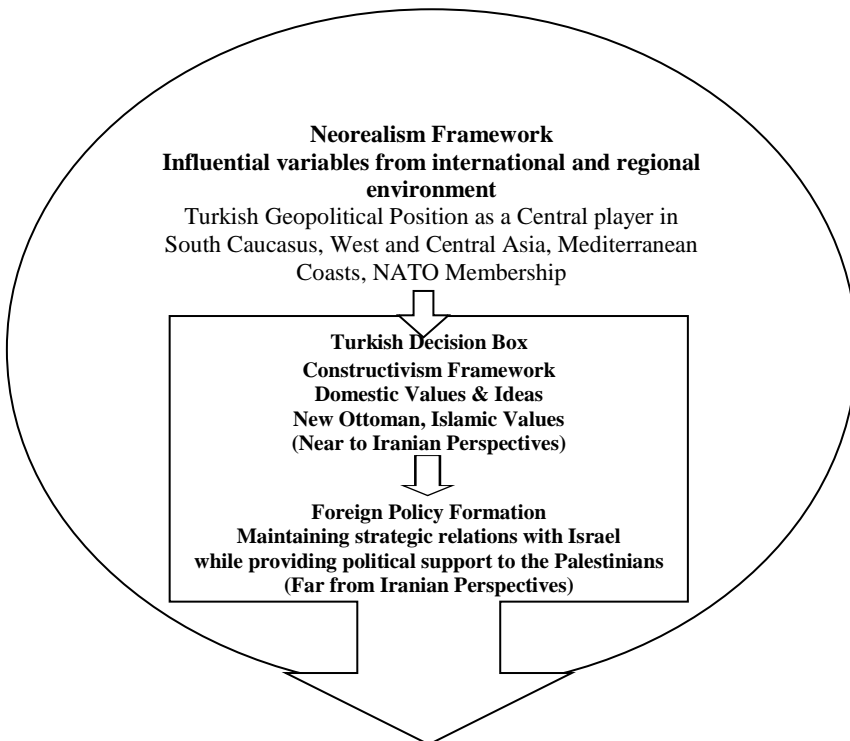
In this sense, there is a constant competition between the two regional powers, Turkey and Iran, for the “hearts and minds” of the Palestinian people and close relations with Hamas. The sectarian war in Syria and the larger Sunni-Shia conflict have tilted Hamas towards Erdogan’s Turkey while relations with Iran have suffered ups and downs since 2012. The change of regime in Cairo and the closing of the Gaza border and destruction of the smuggling tunnels by Egypt have limited Iran’s military and financial support to Hamas (Karmon, 2018:80).

When the Palestinians express their preference between Tehran and Ankara, it is found that a significant strata, from the resistance and the negotiation streams alike, they are inclined more towards the former’s adoption of their cause more than the latter’s support (Abu Amer, 2013:8-9).

However, after a period of tension and uncertainty and on the backdrop of Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, Tehran and Hamas recently took steps to improve their relationship. Tehran may be finding comfort now that Hamas is returning to the Iranian orbit. In October 2017, a senior Hamas delegation visited Tehran and met with top Iranian leaders. In January 2018, the Hamas representative thanked for their support to the “anti-Israeli resistance front”. Soon after Trump’s announcement, both President Hassan Rouhani and Ex-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani (martyred by US Force) called leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups to pledge Iran’s “all-out support” for their struggle against Israel (Karmon, 2018:80).

Turkey supports a settlement between two sides, while Iran does not accept the legitimacy of Israel’s existence. Iran believes in full supporting resistance groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Lindenstraus, 2011: 2).

While Ankara and Tehran have not been willing to coordinate their policies on Palestine, from the Iranian perspective Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance is indicative of the changes within the country. The issue of Palestine has been at the heart of the revolutionary ideas of the Islamic Republic since 1979, and while Iran is not willing to concede its role for regional leadership in that regard, it routinely displays an automatic proclivity towards countries like Turkey that embrace the cause for Palestinian statehood (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018: 5).



**Figure 2. Theoretical Framework of Turkish Foreign Policy Formation towards to Palestinian Issue**

## Conclusion

Palestinian issue is not only historic, religious or sentimental issue for Turkey, it is instrumental in managing Turkey's relationship with the Arab world, with Israel and the West, and a domestic issue

due to its sensitivity. As the controversy after Trump Declaration of December 6, 2017, moving US Embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem showed Turkish government reacts, and will react in the future to any kind of arrangements about Palestinian territories and will not remain indifferent to changes in Palestinian problem.

Palestinian question is also helping the governments to mobilize people in domestic politics and provide a source for support, especially from the right constituents. Supporting the Palestinian cause and degrading relations with Israel is also regarded as proof of “independent foreign policy” and deviation from the “old-fashioned secular establishment” and liberating itself from the tutelage of the military.

Apart from yield in domestic politics, supporting the Palestinian cause plays important role in Turkish Foreign Policy. Moving away from its alliance with Israel, Turkey sends positive message to Arab countries that they are more valuable for Ankara. With this, Turkey hopes to improve its image, its trade and tourism with the Arab world. Turkey also uses its deviation as a leverage to the United States, tries to play a role in Arab affairs. Assuming the role of guarding Palestinian rights, especially that of Hamas’, Turkey also portrays itself as a pro-democracy power in the region. This message is also being used for domestic expenditure.

It can be said that Turkey will continue to use its support to the Palestinian cause. Israeli military operations in Gaza will further escalate the tension and open a field for Turkey to maneuver in diplomacy. Despite the fact that Turkey is, and probably will remain as a part of Western security institutions like NATO, Turkey is looking for other options to make Turkish foreign policy more independent.

Consequently, the AKP's pattern that has accepted the Western secularism and civilization, on the one hand, and respects Islamic traditions, on the other, actually is a combination that makes peaceful coexistence with the West possible and prevents from identity crisis and radicalism among Muslim groups. On this basis, among Muslim states, Turkey established the warmest relations with Israel.

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