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**Research Notes****Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue**

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**Abstract**

*President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attributes great importance to the Palestinian issue, portraying himself as the defender of the Palestinians and of the holy Islamic sites in Jerusalem. One should consider his infatuation with the Palestinian cause, and especially Turkey's very robust relations with Hamas, the Palestinian radical Islamist movement, in the larger context of Erdogan and his party's, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), ideological and strategic goals. The Islamist inclinations of President Erdogan endanger the already strained relations with Israel. In addition, they can also undermine relations with the Palestinian Authority and threaten the multifaceted Middle Eastern arena. Moreover, it seems Erdogan dreams of building an Islamist army, on the Iranian model, to fight for the liberation of Palestine.*

**Keywords:** Erdogan, Hamas, Iran, Turkey**The Neo-Ottoman Vision**

Ahmed Davutoglu, the academic who published the book *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), international advisor for the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and later Foreign Minister (2009-2014), was nicknamed the "architect of the new Turkish foreign policy". Davutoglu's doctrine revolved around the concept of Ottoman greatness as rooted in a period of revivalism, during Sultan Abdulhamid II's rule in the late nineteenth century. He emphasized the Middle East, suggesting that Turkey had a responsibility to actively cooperate with the Muslim states in the area, because only by reaching out to them and others in the Muslim world could Turkey become a great power.[1]

Indeed, in the early years of Davutoglu's tenure as foreign minister, Turkey did pivot toward the Middle East and sought rapprochement with Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Gulf monarchies, and built good ties with countries as far away as Sudan. His policy, dubbed "Zero Problems with Neighbors," helped establish Turkey as a Middle Eastern power. The second tenet of Davutoglu's doctrine envisioned Turkey as powerful not just in the Middle East, but also throughout the Muslim world, assuming the mantle of the "protector of Muslims, from the Philippines and Somalia to Myanmar and Bosnia," carrying for Muslims around the world. Although a country with a secular constitution, Turkey took over the presidency of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2004 for a ten-year period.[2]

However, rather than being neo-Ottoman in a "secular" sense, the AKP's foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on Arab Islamists in particular and the Muslim Middle East more generally. The AKP views the world as composed of religious blocks, and this disposition colors its views of the region and the world. The subsequent anti-Western, anti-U.S., and anti-Israeli views have become a new paradigm promoted by pundits, think tanks, and newspapers close to the AKP.[3]

Some commentators claim that the AKP is a concealed form of an Islamist party more dangerous and cunning than Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. According to Mustafa Akyol, AKP is not Islamist because it does not intend to implement Sharia law in Turkey. Akyol prefers to use the term "Muslimist" ideology or "Muslim nationalism," which implies "an emotional affinity" to the Muslim Brothers around the world, and a presumption of being the rightful party in their disputes with non-Muslims.[4] Muslimism is wrong, argues Akyol, when it blindly supports Muslim Brothers regardless of whatever they do. Erdogan's rhetoric crossed that line when he failed to criticize the brutal crackdown on the Iranian opposition after the faked elections of June 2009, Ahmadinejad's threats to wipe Israel off from the map or when he dismissed the atrocities in Darfur by pretending that

“Muslims cannot commit genocide”.[4]

According to Kadri Gursel, the AKP’s foreign policy in the Middle East “has been infected with the viruses of Islamist ideology, populism, and emotionalism” and therefore cannot lead a Realpolitik policy.[5] Although Neo-Ottomanism helps present Turkey as a leader of the Sunni world, Turkey developed a multidimensional foreign policy. “I’m neither a Shiite nor a Sunni; I’m a Muslim”, declared Erdogan during his July 2008 visit to Iraq. Turkey’s popularity, after the 2009 Gaza war and the crisis of the Turkish *Mavy Marmara* ship bound to Gaza, not only grew in the Sunni street but also in the Shiite communities, where Erdogan attracted the support of Lebanon’s Shiites. In 2010, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah declared Erdogan “a Muslim hero.” Turkey’s defense of Iran, Syria and Hamas in international arena was criticized by the Western media and perceived as a shift in its pro-Western axis.[6]

The quest for “strategic autonomy” is the ultimate goal of this multidimensional approach. Examples include the Brazilian-Turkish-led negotiations on the Iranian nuclear dossier in 2010 and the uninterrupted dialogue with Hamas since their victory in the Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections in 2006.[7]

But all these policies were challenged after the 2011 Arab uprisings, as the status quo in the region changed. At the beginning of the uprisings many observers suggested that Turkey will emerge as the leader of a Sunni bloc. Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, stated that “democratic Turkey is the template for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood.” Indeed, the AKP government had positioned itself very well for the exceptional events, bolstering its credibility in Islamist circles by actively supporting Hamas in its competition with the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority and against Israeli attempts to isolate it in Gaza; by supporting Sudanese Islamist President Omar al-Bashir, accused of genocide in Darfur; by maintaining excellent relations with the Syrian regime; and by improving its position in Lebanon by courting all the parties in conflict.[8]

### ***The Palestinian Factor***

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.[9] 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.”[10]

Erdogan’s speeches are imbued with great sympathy for the Palestinian people and he often mixes it with emotions and identification. In September 2017, he declared at the United Nations General Assembly in New York: “I call on the international community to support our Palestinian brothers and sisters in Eastern Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in their struggle for an independent and geographically unified Palestinian State”.[11] Erdogan manifests his support for the Palestinians by symbolic gestures. In 2012, he met with Aaed al-Tamimi, a 13-year-old girl who provoked IDF soldiers and was invited to Turkey where she received an award from Erdogan in recognition of her bravery.[12] In December 2017, he hosted a 14-year-old Palestinian boy with Down syndrome, who was detained by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank.[13] In January 2018, he hosted a Palestinian teen who became a symbol of Palestinian opposition to the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.[14]

### ***The Special Relations with Hamas***

Since the AKP took office in November 2002, the party’s pro-Hamas rhetoric and conduct as well as government-

sponsored Hamas fundraisings and gatherings, have for the first time turned the traditional Turkish sympathy for the Palestinians into sympathy for Hamas. Thus, young Turks have been exposed to a worldview of “good Hamas versus evil Israel,” while whitewashing Hamas’ violent actions. [15] In March 2006 Erdogan invited a high-level Hamas delegation to visit Turkey, immediately after its success at the January 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Erdogan argued that the visit created an opportunity for the Turkish authorities to “sincerely convey the expectations of the whole humanity to the Hamas delegation.”[16]

The AKP government called on Western countries to “recognize Hamas as the legitimate government of the Palestinian people,” while labeling Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as “head of an illegitimate government.”[17] Turkish officials repeatedly refer to Hamas as a democratically elected group that was denied the chance to govern and call on the international community to engage with Hamas. [18] AKP Group Acting Chairman, Eyup Fatsa, claimed that as Arafat and Fatah in the past negotiated a peace with Israel “this may also be possible with Hamas.” According to him it was explained to the Hamas leadership during the 2006 meetings that “the struggle should continue on a democratic platform; that it should contribute to the peace process; that weapons and democracy cannot coexist; that if it intends to assume political responsibility, it should lay down arms; that Israel and Hamas should reciprocally recognize each other; that this process cannot continue with armed struggle.”[19]

Many Turkish newspapers like the pro-Islamic daily *Yeni Safak* and the center-right daily *Sabah* expressed support for Hamas’ leader Khaled Meshal visit and presented it as a Turkish attempt to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hakan Albayrak in *Yeni Safak* asked Ankara to “put pressure on Israel to force it to withdraw from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip instead of urging Hamas to renounce violence, cooperate with Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, and recognize Israel.”[20] However, Kerim Balci in the pro-Islamic *Zaman* argued that contacts should be held “when the time is right” and warned that it is “imperative for lasting peace” that Arab countries and leaders accept Hamas. He wondered whether “Arab countries [will] accept Hamas as their interlocutor? Will they be able to make peace with an ideology that views the destruction of Israel as the first step of a rooted revolution in the Muslim world? Will Hamas leaders be able to embrace the Arab leaders whom they have been declaring infidel, hypocrite, traitor, spy, and convert?”[21]

Turkish center-right and conservative newspapers opposed the visit and columnist Cengiz Candar claimed that Ankara could have conveyed its messages to Hamas through its ambassador in Syria. Criticizing Meshal’s visit, columnist Emin Colasan argued that the great importance the AKP administration attached to Hamas was due to the organization’s plan to “establish an Islamic state.... That suits the AKP very much,” he wrote.[22] AKP’s government clear support to Hamas and its violent strategy became obvious during the 2008 Israeli *Cast Lead* operation in the Gaza Strip, following the massive launching of rockets against Israeli territory. Erdogan expressed his anger towards the Israeli government and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert personally, claiming that he was betrayed by the Israeli PM for not informing him beforehand about the projected operation while he was engaged in mediating between Israel and Syria.

In reality this was a well-prepared move. Erdogan and his government did not utter a word against the rocket attacks of Hamas on Israeli territory before and during the operation. Erdogan’s aggressive and undiplomatic verbal attack on Israeli president Shimon Peres at the now famous Davos meeting on January 29, 2009, raised the tension between the two countries at its utmost. Moreover, Erdogan and his government not only fervently supported Hamas but delegitimized PA President Mahmud Abbas, claiming that his legal term ended on 9 January 2009, thus raising Abbas’ suspicions and anger concerning the real goals of Turkey. Ramallah worried about the way in which Turkey became one of the chief supporters of Hamas and the enemy of Al-Fatah, showing its shifting toward the radical camp in the Middle East.[23]

Columnist Cuneyt Ulsever deplored the rapprochement with Hamas “because it isolates Turkey in the world and incites anti-Semitism in the county,” for instance after the minister of national education issued a circular requiring primary school children to condemn Israeli raids on Gaza. Her suggested that the AKP minister should have also protested the Hamas brainwashing of the five- and six-year-old children by making them wear

military fatigues and handing them rifles.[24]

### ***Hamas' Militant and Terrorist Activities Supported by Turkey***

Turkey's operative support to Hamas materialized when the *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish ship carrying a sizeable Turkish militant group from the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı - IHH) leading an international flotilla, tried to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip in May 2010. In spite of Israel's attempts through diplomatic channels to convince the Turkish government to transport the humanitarian aid convoy to Gaza through the Israeli border, the Turkish leaders preferred to support the provocative aid flotilla which terminated in an Israeli military operation and the death of nine violent Turkish militants of the IHH.

IHH is a Turkish Islamist NGO established two decades ago in Istanbul, an affiliate of the Union of Good (*İtilaf al-Khayr*), a Saudi-based organization. In the mid-1990s, the IHH was associated with radical Islamist groups in Algeria and Iran and one of the NGOs financing and supporting terrorist jihadist activities in Chechnya and Bosnia. The former head of the French judiciary's counterterrorism unit, Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere, testified that the IHH played important logistical roles in the facilitation of bogus passports and other counterfeited documents, the trafficking of weapons, recruitment of fighters, and the infiltration of *mujahideen* into various war zones.[25] *Hurriyet* columnist Semih Idiz stated that the Erdogan government has close relations with the IHH and stands morally and politically behind this group and argued that events like the flotilla clash endanger Turkey's long-term interests. This happened, he noted humorously, "because the NGO in question is... a 'GNGO': a 'governmental-non-governmental-organization.'" Another columnist of the same daily, Barcin Yinanc, wondered if the Turkish government mourned the flotilla activists killed by Israel because they "have become martyrs" and went to Gaza not for humanitarian purposes but for jihad.[26]

While Israel decided on an Independent Public Commission with international observers to examine the maritime incident and to cooperate with the UN investigative panel appointed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Turkey formed a national commission under the coordination of the prime minister's office, with the participation of bureaucrats from the Foreign, Justice, Transportation and Interior Ministries for investigating "the treatment to which persons in the convoy had been exposed." No word about investigating Turkey government's responsibilities in the incident and its relations with IHH. Following the events of the May 2010 Gaza flotilla, Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhawi, a spiritual leader of Hamas, praised Turkey for its contribution: "All the *shahids* are from among our Turkish brothers – scions of Muhammad the Conqueror and his mighty brothers." He also thanked the Turkish participants, adding that "another flotilla will avenge the deaths" of the Turkish activists.[27] It seems the Turkish government was interested to achieve at all costs the end of the Gaza blockade and Hamas' international isolation in its bid for the leadership in the Palestinian issue, growing influence in the Arab world and strategic rapprochement, at that time, with Syria and Iran. The Palestinian issue is also an important card on the Turkish internal arena, a rallying populist flag for the Islamist masses.

When at the end of August 2010, the already difficult peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority finally resumed in Washington after a ten months long stalemate, Hamas staged two terrorist attacks in the West Bank, killing four Israelis and wounding two others, in an attempt to derail the fragile process. Mahmoud Zahar, the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, rejected in a fiery speech any compromise with Israel, took responsibility for the shootings and indicated that more attacks could be expected. He attacked Palestinian Chairman Mahmoud Abbas who, he claimed, has no right to represent the Palestinian people. [28] Turkey's reaction to these events was to welcome "the resumption of direct talks between Israel and Palestine," and to declare that "it was important to avoid unilateral acts which would negatively affect the process", without mentioning the Hamas responsibility for the "heroic" murder of four innocent civilians or publicly appealing to its leaders to stop the use of terrorism. [29]

While many years have passed since the 2006 Hamas leader's visit to Ankara, argued Cuneyt Ulsever, Hamas did not take the slightest notice of Turkey's peaceful appeals. "Did it hand over a single rocket? Could [Turkey]

prevent Hamas rockets...from raining on Israel? he asked.[30] Hamas has refused to recognize Israel and work with the Palestinian Authority in uniting the Palestinian people. “A true friend of the Palestinians would support them to take the road to peace, not that of death, destruction and disunity”, argued Hayri Abaza, another Turkish journalist.[31]

Since the *Mavi Marmara* diplomatic and political crisis between Turkey and Israel in 2010, and more so since the 2011 agreement between Israel and Hamas to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners and the expulsion of 10 operatives to Turkey, Turkey has become a “second home” for Hamas militants and terrorists. There they invest efforts to recruit members, build financial resources and cooperate with other actors against Israel. According to the Turkish media, once they arrived in Turkey the Hamas militants were supposed to be under surveillance of Turkish intelligence and not permitted to circulate unaccompanied. However, Turkey did not require them to remain in the country or forbid them to go to another country if they so desired.[32]

Since 2014, Turkey is host to Salah al-Arouri, a senior Hamas political bureau member and the major operative commander responsible for establishing, funding and strengthening the Hamas military-terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, operating out of his headquarters in Istanbul. Between May and August 2014, the Israeli security forces detained 94 Hamas members in the West Bank and Jerusalem suspected of involvement in establishing a military-terrorist infrastructure to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel. The network was headed by Riyad Nasser and included cells in Nablus, Bethlehem, the Yatir region, Jerusalem and Tulkarm. Riyad Nasser was recruited and his network’s activity directed by Saleh al-Arouri from Istanbul.[33] According to the Israel Security Agency (ISA), one of the network’s objectives, still in its first stages, was to overthrow the Palestinian Authority and Mahmoud Abbas’ rule. The then-leader of ISA, Yoram Cohen, traveled personally to Ramallah to inform Mahmoud Abbas, who thanked Israel for its assistance. [34]

Saleh al-Arouri was behind the Hamas cell responsible for the abduction and murder of three Jewish youths in Gush Etzion on June 12, 2014. This was followed by a major operation by the IDF in the West Bank and finally led to the 50-day *Protective Edge* operation, beginning 8 July 2014, in the Hamas ruled Gaza Strip. On August 20, 2014, al-Arouri told the participants of the fourth conference of the World Union of Islamic Sages (held in Turkey) that Hamas was behind the abduction and murder of the three Jewish youths in Gush Etzion. [35] With increased attention on al-Arouri, including concern over the fact he was headquartered in the heart of a NATO country, the U.S. Treasury designated him as a terrorist in September 2015. According to media accounts, the Hamas leader was then deported from Turkey in December 2015. President Erdogan, Prime Minister Davutoglu, and Hamas leader Meshal agreed that al-Arouri would “voluntarily” depart the country and not return, though Hamas will be allowed to continue other operations on Turkish soil. While al-Arouri was the most prominent member of Hamas, ten senior Hamas officials were believed to be still in Turkey before the rapprochement talks between Israel and Turkey by mid-2015. [36]

More recently, the Israeli Security Agency announced that on 1 January 2018, a Turkish citizen, Cemil Tekeli, a lecturer in law, was arrested on suspicion of aiding Hamas terrorists in Turkey. On 21 January, Dara’am Jabarin, an Israeli citizen, was also arrested. The two had been recruited in Turkey by senior Hamas terrorist Zaher Jabarin, released in the Shalit deal. He is responsible for Hamas’ budget and promotes terrorist operations in the West Bank on instruction from Salah Arouri, who serves these days as the deputy chairman of the organization and head of its operations in the West Bank. Investigation findings have revealed wide-ranging Hamas activity in money laundering in Turkey on instruction from Zaher Jabarin.[37] Tekeli admitted during the investigation that Turkey contributes to the military strengthening of Hamas via the SADAT company, established at the behest of Adnan Tanriverdi, an adviser close to the Turkish establishment. The company was founded to assist with funds and war materials the creation of the “Palestine Army,” the goal of which is to fight Israel. One of its employees even helped senior Hamas officials to visit a 2015 weapon show in Turkey, where they expressed interest in UAVs. [38]

Interestingly, when in March 2013 Erdogan decided to reach a reconciliation agreement with Israel, Turkey asked for support from Hamas to recognize his move as a “victory”. Hamas applauded Erdogan for having

won the apology from Israel and informing Hamas political chief Khaled Meshal that Netanyahu promised to “lift the siege on the Palestinian people.”[39] Some Hamas voices complained that Erdogan did not stand to his pledge to “accompany the Palestinians during the liberation of al-Quds (Jerusalem).” [40] The day after the deal was made public, Erdogan called the Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and heard bitter words from him for having negotiated Palestinian concerns with Israel without so much as briefing Ramallah, even though the Jerusalem-Ankara deal specifically states that it would be the Palestinian Authority, not Hamas, which shall administer Turkish aid to Gaza.[41]

The Islamist ideology of the AKP and Hamas contributed to a deepening of their relationship, as they share common values and vision. Hamas has encouraged Erdogan many times to take an active role regarding the Palestinian issue. In June 2016, for example, Hamas praised Turkey’s “continuing role in supporting the Palestinian issue and in ending the siege totally and “to stop Israel’s aggression against our people, lands and foremost al-Aqsa”.[42] Following President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyye called Erdogan in December 2017, praising the brave attitude of Turkey and its determination to thwart the decision. He stressed that Turkey had a major regional and international role in the region and in the issue of Jerusalem.

### ***Relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA)***

Under Erdogan’s rule, Turkey-PA relations were not very close, as the Chairman Mahmud Abbas disliked the warm ties between Turkey and Hamas. However, both sides have attempted to portray an image of cooperation and solidarity. In 2014-2015 the cooperation became stronger as Turkey made efforts to support Palestine’s status as an observer at the United Nations. In January 2015, Mahmud Abbas was the first guest hosted in the new palace of Erdogan, inaugurated after the latter was elected president. The efforts made by Erdogan to reconcile between PA and Hamas were welcomed by both sides.[43]

Following Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem, Turkey and the PA have strengthened their ties. In May 2017, at the International Jerusalem Foundations Forum (Kudüs Vakıfları Forumu) in Istanbul, Erdogan emphasized the importance of Jerusalem to Islam and called to the Muslims to visit Jerusalem to defend it by challenging occupation and oppression by Israel. He demanded that Israel desist from harming the holy sites of Islam in Jerusalem, “the harassments and assaults against the Al Aqsa Mosque, our first kiblah...The Haram al-Sharif, covering the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, with its 144 dunam land, is a whole, belongs to Muslims and will remain so forever. We will never consent to such provocations, aimed at changing the characteristics”.[44]

### ***Relations with the Northern Wing of the Arab Islamic Movement in Israel***

Since AKP’s ascending to power, the relations with the Northern wing of the Islamic Movement in Israel have become stronger as both share a common ideology and aim to promote Jerusalem as issue in radical Islamic discourse. In November 2015, Sheikh Raed Salah, the leader of the northern branch, declared that “the victory of AKP in the Turkish elections will contribute to defend the issue of the oppressed and al-Aqsa mosque”. [45] Turkey tried to penetrate east Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa plaza through two dedicated representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, Raed Salah and Akrima Sabri. According to east Jerusalem sources, it is the Israeli activists at the mosque plaza who hang the Turkish flags on al-Aqsa. The main institution out of which Akrima Sabri operates is the *Association of Love for Protecting Children in Distress* in Ras al-Amoud, which is funding the purchasing of buildings that will become a center for Turkish activity in east Jerusalem. Along with Akrima Sabri’s establishment, the government agency called *Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency* (TIKA), led by Dr. Serdar Cam, a close ally of Erdogan, works in all territories of the Ottoman Empire to rehabilitate the old Ottoman heritage.[46]

According to a report by Israeli journalist Nadav Shragai, since 2004 some \$63 million donated by the Turkish

government have gone, mainly through TIKA, to organizations in eastern Jerusalem dedicated to defending and strengthening the Muslim heritage and character of Jerusalem, used for various building or restoration projects. Some money has funded the Murabitoun (formed of male militants) and Murabitat (formed of female militants), two organizations tied to the northern branch of the Islamic Movement. Declaring themselves the ‘Garrison of the Temple Mount’, the Murabitoun and Murabitat organize groups of radical Islamists to harass and physically assault Jews visiting the Temple Mount.[47]

Another Turkish association that cultivates the Islamic heritage of Jerusalem is the Turkish Islamic Association, “Irade”, which has ties to Hamas and the northern branch of the Islamic movement. [48] On September 28, 2014, it launched an online campaign called, “Al-Quds Amanati” in order to strengthen Jerusalem’s Islamic identity. The campaign gained the support of various Islamic organizations in Muslim countries. Kamal Khatib, a leader of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, was interviewed for “Irade” in September 2014 and he emphasized the importance of al-Aqsa Mosque to the Muslim world and the campaign on the subject.[49] On the website of the city of Umm al-Fahm, a stronghold of the northern branch, one can find a propaganda video of the “Irade” organization regarding the importance of resistance to Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount.[50]

The Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement, headed by Sheikh Raed Salah, which denies Israel’s right to exist, calls for replacing the State of Israel with an Islamic caliphate and does not recognize governmental institutions; it was outlawed by Israel in November 2015. According to the Israeli authorities, a significant body of evidence demonstrates that the Northern Faction is closely related to the Hamas terrorist organization and clandestine cooperation between the two groups is ongoing. [51] Raed Salah was previously convicted for his links to Hamas and for contact with an Iranian agent. Most recently, in October 2017, he was sentenced to eleven months in prison on incitement charges. The Israeli government also banned the two groups funded by Salah’s Northern Branch, the Murabitoun and Murabitat.[52]

### ***The Israeli Factor***

Mehmet Ali Birand claims that Erdogan’s speech at the 2009 AKP’s third congress represented a “historic crossroads” when it proclaimed the “New Turkish Republic,” a more religious country by changing the contents of the old secularism concept. By proclaiming loudly his criticism against Israel, Erdogan became “a very respectable leader in Middle Eastern countries.”[53] Even in his bid for the presidency, Erdogan used the Palestinian issue to feed nationalist feelings among his supporters. Erdogan was able to divert public attention by stoking popular discontent against Israel’s military operations in Gaza.[54] According to some experts, Turkey puts more emphasis on value-driven policies, standing against Israel’s alleged human rights violations, specifically with regard to the situation in Gaza, as a way to present Turkey as a moral actor.[55] It stands to reason that Turkey thereby hopes to distract from its repressive policies against its own important Kurdish minority, and the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

In an analysis of Erdogan’s political activity co-authored by Prof. Shaul Kimhi, based on his personality and psychological profile, it was found that when it comes to Israel, it is Erdogan who calls the shots, and he is personally responsible for the deterioration in bilateral relations. One source noted that Erdogan has strong anti-Israeli sentiments, based on deeply rooted religious beliefs. American diplomats, cited in Wikileaks documents, reported that sources both inside and outside the Turkish government confirmed that Erdogan simply abhors Israel.[56]

### ***The Competition with Iran***

Turkey is 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 terrorist activities against Israel. Moreover, Iran, like Hamas, openly professes the destruction of the Jewish state.

In this sense, there is an ongoing 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.

However, after a period of tension and uncertainty and on the backdrop of president 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 spokesman thanked for their support to the “anti-Israeli resistance front”. Soon after Trump’s announcement, both President Hassan Rouhani and Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani called leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups to pledge Iran’s “all-out support” for their struggle against Israel.[57]

Turkey, and its ally Qatar, have been lately hampered in their freedom of action and support to Hamas in Gaza, mainly due to the Egyptian government’s firm stand and the Cairo alliance with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates and their own intervention in the internal situation in Gaza. Fatah’s Abbas Zaki, a known Iran supporter, told *Al Mayadeen* TV in Lebanon that if Turkey abandons the Palestinians in the wake of the agreement with Israel, it will mark the end of the Palestinian issue. He expressed confidence that this will not happen, saying that the agreement is a fruit of circumstances that will change and that Turkey supports “every Palestinian” (and not only Hamas). [58] At the same time the Turkish – Iranian relations have improved, on the backdrop of their alliance with Russia in the civil war in Syria and with their common interest to sabotage any Kurdish steps to independence, in Syria and Iraq.

It would appear that lately Turkey has passed from a regional political and ideological competition with Iran to a kind of emulation of the Iranian strategy to support Islamist and jihadists groups in the region.

### ***Erdogan Builds His Own Islamist Guards. Palestine Major Target?***

In recent times, Turkey’s policy and relationships with Middle Eastern Islamist movements, jihadist organizations, and even ISIS, have been widely discussed in academia, political and defense circles, and in the media.[59] However, the special relationship Turkey and its president Erdogan have with the Palestinian Islamist and terrorist organization and Gaza regime which is Hamas, merit distinct attention as it impacts on one of the most sensitive, and at times explosive, conflicts in the region. It is quite clear that Turkish support cannot serve as compensation for the loss of support by the Muslim Brotherhood regime of president Morsi in Egypt, nor can it replace Iran as a military bulwark for Hamas. In this respect, Turkish-Hamas relations point to the limits of Turkey’s influence in the Middle East, as some of the Arab/Muslim states are trying to curb Turkey’s attempts to gain more influence.[60]

According to Emrullah Uslu, Turkish support to jihadists is not merely a tactic aimed at removing Assad from power but rather a strategic decision by the Turkish regime to influence Middle Eastern affairs through non-state actors, much as Iran has been doing since the Khomeinist revolution. Turkey’s support of jihadists transiting into Syria and its establishment of close ties with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are joint aspects of this strategy.[61]

This trend has accelerated since the attempted military coup of 15 July 2016. A Turkish opposition website, *Sound of Silence Group (SoS)*, one of the few active after the arrest of 231 journalists and closing of 149 media outlets by the Turkish government, claims, like some other observers and analysts, that the coup was actually “self-staged” in order to permit Erdogan the massive purge and enhanced control of the state.[62]



One of the main documents published on the SoS website is a comprehensive analysis of the SADAT organization, actually identifying a longer list of paramilitary organizations in the service of President Erdogan personally, like IHH–Human Rights and Freedoms Humanity Aid Charity, Ottoman Hearths, IBDA–C Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front, KKT–Stay Brothers Turkey and others.[63]

According to its website, SADAT A.S. International Defense Consulting “is the first and the only company in Turkey, that internationally provides consultancy and military training services at the international defense and interior security sector.” It was founded under the presidency of Brigadier General (Retired) Adnan Tanriverdi, by 23 Officers and NCOs retired from various units of Turkish Armed Forces and began its activities in February, 2012. “SADAT Inc. aims at establishing the cooperation among the Islamic Countries in the sense of military and defense industries, in order to assist the Islamic World to take the rank it deserves among the Super Global Powers as a self-sufficient military power, by submitting them the services regarding the organization of Armed Forces, defense consultancy, military training, and ordnance”. Depending on requests, SADAT A.S. has ability to perform the basic and advanced trainings and orientation programs effectively with the training teams composed from professionals chosen from a large circle of reserves at all fields of Armed Forces of Friendly Countries in their own territories.[64]

Erdogan employs SADAT, alongside with other paramilitary organizations, to serve his covert agenda in- and outside of Turkey. One major act attributed by some to SADAT was its role in the coup on 15 July 2016. Substantial indications also show that SADAT adopts a Salafist–Jihadist ideology. There are serious claims about SADAT, which range from providing weapons and guerrilla training to Salafist–Jihadist Al Nusra, Al–Qaeda and ISIL militants to establishing a pro–Erdogan Salafist–Jihadist militia in Turkey and abroad.[65]

SADAT can be compared with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which may provide the potential trajectories for SADAT’s involvement in Turkish politics, still an unexperienced institution which seems to be following the footsteps of its Iranian counterpart in many respects. SADAT, with the support of Turkish Intelligence (MIT), serves as an agent for foreign missions, which is similar to the Quds Force in the IRGC. In parallel to what the Iranian counterpart has been doing for decades by creating its own proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, SADAT has been working with radical groups within the Syrian insurgents, including al–Nusra Front, Ahrar ash-Sham & Jaysh al-Islam and also the extremist groups in Libya, linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL.[66]

The latest worrying event has been the proposal by SADAT, in December 2017, ahead of the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) called by Erdogan in Istanbul, as published by the Turkish pro-Erdogan daily *Yeni Safak*, to form a joint “Army of Islam” by the member states of the OIC, to besiege and attack the state of Israel. According to the article, if the member states of the OIC unite militarily, they will form the world’s largest and most comprehensive army and could play a major role in the Jerusalem issue. The number of active soldiers would be at least 5,206,100, while the defense budget would reach approximately \$175 billion, dwarfing the Israeli army, which numbers 160,000 active soldiers and Israel’s defense budget of \$15.6 billion. Turkey may play an important role as an operational center and an army ranking second among NATO members. The article also mentions the nuclear capabilities of the OIC member Pakistan.[67]

Possibly this proposal is related to the information provided to the Israeli Security Agency by the Turkish militant Cemil Tekeli about SADAT, indicating that it is actually Turkey, helping Hamas to form a “Palestinian Army”. According to the Israeli paper *Makor Rishon*, Tekeli, who has since been deported to Turkey, is a close associate of Adnan Tanriverdi. The report links this proposal to the growing Turkish activity in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem issue and features a photo of Tekeli with Tanriverdi. Does the Palestinian Army envisioned by SADAT represent the first phase in Erdogan’s battle for Jerusalem?[68]

Israel, but also the international community, should follow closely the disturbing policies of Turkey, an active member of NATO and close associate, in principle, of the European Union.

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