

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF TURKEY'S GAZA POLICY ON PERSIAN GULF COUNTRIES: ANALYSIS BASED ON FIELD RESEARCH¹

Abstract

The Turkish Middle East policy initiated by the March 1 Resolution has evolved over time along with policies towards Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iran and finally Palestine, and it seems to have opened a new horizon for Turkish-Middle East relations. Turkey's response to the Gaza attacks may have been disturbing for some, both in Turkey and abroad, but one might claim that it created a new perception of Turkey in Arab society and its intellectual elite. Field research conducted in the region between January 19 and February 10 suggests that Turkey's new image meets strong approval in the Arabic Middle East, and that it is creating ever greater enthusiasm and trust among average Arab citizens, Arab intellectuals, influential social elites and even the region's ruling circles.

Introduction

On March 1, 2003, the Turkish Grand National Assembly rejected the resolution that would have allowed American troops to use Turkish territory to invade Iraq. This refusal constitutes a historical, cultural, and strategic milestone in Turkish-Middle East relations. Afterwards, since Turkey did not support the policy that aimed to isolate Syria, despite pressure from the US, along with the nation's strong reaction to the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006, and the nation's active role in resolving internal conflicts among rival Lebanese factions in March 2008, Turkey has become an important actor in the settlement of Middle East disputes. Turkey's role as a mediator in the peace talks carried out indirectly between Israel and Syria in 2008 increased the prestige and popularity of Turkey in Arab society. Turkey was at the forefront of the nations that protested most strongly against the Israeli Gaza operation that was launched on December 27, 2008.

¹ Middle East Strategic Research Center (ORSAM), March 2009,
<http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=11>

Prime Minister Erdogan, in statements made immediately after the onset of Israel's air operations, did not hesitate to describe Israel as the aggressor and as a threat to peace. On the day the air attacks were launched, Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, the first Islamic nation to recognize Israel, called on the United Nations and the international community to take action, and defined as a blow dealt against peace the military operations conducted against Gaza, which he described as "an open-air prison." Prime Minister Erdogan met with the General Secretary of the UN, Ban Ki Moon on December 27 and then began intensive diplomatic efforts in countries of the region in order to stop the clashes.(1) Similarly, through official statements issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel was called on to cease its military operations and the loss of the lives of numerous Palestinians in the military operation launched against Gaza was fiercely condemned. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its official statements, called on the international community not to remain unresponsive to the tragedy in Gaza and to begin humanitarian aid at once.(2)

On the other side, Turkey's sensitivity to both HAMAS and the Palestinian question and its reaction against Israel's attacks were interpreted in the Arab world as a continuation of Turkey's changing Middle East policy after March 1, 2003. Notably, by holding a meeting in Ankara with HAMAS authorities just after the December 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary elections gave HAMAS the majority required to establish a government, the AKP government indicated that, concerning the Palestinian question, it would adopt a political stance at odds with both pro-Western Arab governments and Israel. Indeed, notwithstanding efforts to refuse political recognition to HAMAS, a talk held by the AKP government on February 17, 2006 in Ankara with Halid Meshal, the Head of HAMAS's Political Bureau, and Abdullah Gul's direct participation as Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, sent an important message to both the Arab and the international community about the political recognition of HAMAS. Since 2006, Turkey's perspective on HAMAS and the Palestinian question has consistently differed from that of Israel and the US, and pro-Western Arab administrations, too.

In this context, Prime Minister Erdogan's harsh criticism of Israel's policies shortly after the clashes had resumed between Israel and HAMAS in December 2008 enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of Turkey in the eyes of the Arab public. Despite attempts by Arab nations to hold HAMAS responsible for the conflict, Turkey's denunciations of Israel immediately after the eruption of clashes and its efforts to draw international attention to the problem were appreciated by Arab societies. At the onset of the Gaza attacks, the development that aroused the attention and interest of Arab populations and intellectuals in Turkey was the nation's call for Israel's expulsion from the UN in December 2008 and its denunciation of Israel for committing state terrorism against the Palestinians. Along with Prime Minister Erdogan, the Arab public closely followed the positions of the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the opposition parties, none of whom remained silent concerning Israel's attacks. Accordingly, while the Saadet Party was organizing a nationwide "Palestinian Solidarity Demonstration," the CHP administration was severely criticizing the Israeli government. Hakkı Süha Okay, CHP Group vice-president, criticized Israel in one of his statements: "It is a humanitarian disgrace and state terrorism. Unfortunately, this is not the first time."(3) On the other hand, *Al-Jazeera*, broadcasting from Qatar, and *Al-Manar TV*, affiliated with Hezbollah, and broadcasting from Lebanon, played an important role by helping Arab populations to track developments in Turkey with regular broadcasts of the protestors gathered to demonstrate against Israel's attacks in various parts of Turkey. In particular, these television channels broadcast live the demonstrations in Istanbul's Caglayan Square and conveyed the reactions of Turkey to Arab society through high profile interviews. The Ministry of Education's nationwide call for one minute of silence to protest the Gaza attacks in all elementary schools was also seen as quite meaningful. Written and visual Arab media transmitted the intense protests made against the Israeli basketball team, Bnei Hasharon, which was to compete with Turk Telekom on October 6 in Ankara, as a news flash to their readers and audiences. Above all, Prime Minister Erdogan's fierce criticisms of the Israeli president at the "Gaza: Peace Model in the Middle East" session held at the World Economic Forum in Davos had tremendous repercussions on Arab society as on the world. Many Arab media organs, notably *Al-Jazeera*, prepared special programs and news broadcasts concerning Erdogan's policies. For

instance, Turkey's criticism of Israel was openly discussed in a specially prepared program just one day after the Davos incident on the Arabic broadcast channel of *Al-Jazeera*. Abdül Bari Atwan, who participated in the newscast from England and who is the executive editor of the *El Kuds El Arabi* newspaper, which is published in Arabic in London, criticized Arab leaders fiercely while praising Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, and defined Prime Minister Erdogan, whom he described as the grandson of the Ottomans, as a folk hero for his anti-Israel policies and called on Arab society to support Turkey.(4) As a matter of fact, Turkey's reactions to the Gaza attacks promoted Turkey's image and stature in Arab society. Observations based on field research indicate that Turkey's policies concerning the Gaza War have significantly increased its influence on Arab society, Arab intellectuals and politicians.

The Views of the Gulf Countries Concerning Turkish Foreign Policy

People displayed a poster of a Turkish Prime Minister for the first time in street demonstrations carried out in Bahrain during attacks on Gaza and severely criticized Arab regimes and leaders who kept silent vis-à-vis Israel's attacks. The members of the committee that organized the demonstration constantly repeated the name of Prime Minister Erdogan during the demonstrations in Bahrain and Turkey's active opposition to the Israeli attacks was appreciated. The elected members of the Chamber of Deputies (Parliament) in Bahrain delivered a note of thanks to Turkey in order to show their gratitude for Turkey's policies concerning the Gaza attacks. In our interview, the President of the Chamber, Khalifa Al-Dhahrani, after saying that the reaction of Turkey and her people to the Gaza War was quite important and that they want to improve their relations with Turkey, explained: "That Turkey turns her face to the Middle East is quite an important development. Turkey's approach to Palestinian question pleased us and was highly appreciated by us as well as all Arab society. As a Parliament, we wrote a note of thanks to him. Erdogan plays an active role in the resolution of regional problems." Dr. Mansoor M. Al-Alarayedh, a former deputy who is close to the administration in Bahrain, and also holds the presidency of a research center called the Gulf Council for Foreign Relations, explained in our interview that the role of Turkey during the Gaza crisis was of high importance, that

Turkey had won the favor of all Arabs, and that Turkey's star was in the ascendant in the Middle East. Sheik Adel Al-Mouwda, one of the former leaders of the *Al-Asalah Islamic Society* Party--the main Salafist political party in Bahrain--and currently a member of the Chamber of Deputies also stated that, contrary to expectations, Iran did nothing during the Gaza attacks, while observing that Turkey exerted significant efforts to halt the attacks. Sheik Mouwda also said that the prestige of Seyid Hasan Nasrallah, who became a hero to Arab society during 2006 Lebanon War, fell behind the sensitivity displayed by Erdogan and Turkish people, and that Arabs were ready to regard Turkey as a regional leader. According to Mouwda, following the last Gaza crisis, it was further understood and accepted that Turkey is the most important state, and the state most capable of solving the problems of the Arab Middle East.

The perceptions of public opinion makers and politicians have undergone a radical change since the last Gaza crisis. Sayed Zahra, one of the writers for *Akhbar Al-Khaleej* (El Haliç), a Bahraini daily, told us in an interview that HAMAS enjoyed strong grass-root support and in this framework the policies pursued by Turkey during the Gaza crisis had great repercussions on the entire Arab world. Sayed Zahra, who is an Egyptian Arab Nationalist and holds a prominent position among Arab intellectuals, told us that even his own family watched the Turkish demonstrations closely and severely criticized the policy pursued by the Egyptian regime towards the Gaza attacks. According to Zahra, after the Gaza attacks, the tendency to regard Turkey as the region's natural leader has a strong basis in Arabic opinion and on the Arab street. According to Sayed Zahra, who stated that Arabs have great respect for Turkey and Prime Minister Erdogan, the reactions of both decision-makers and the Turkish people to the latest attacks had a significant influence on the perception of Turkey as a regional power by Arabs. In particular, Zahra explained that the participation of hundreds of thousands in anti-Israel demonstrations created an important turning point for Turkey in the Arab community. In Zahra's view, the Gaza crisis enhanced the role of Turkey in Middle East, and, following Turkey's political conduct, it will be more difficult for either Iran or Egypt to play a leadership role in Middle East. Ali El Sherifi, who writes for *El Vasat*, a Bahraini daily, told me during our interview that Turkey's policy during the Gaza attacks heralded a new

era in the whole Arab world and that everyone hopes that Turkey will be even more engaged in the problems of Middle East. In Sherifi's view, who claimed that Prime Minister Erdogan won an important place in the hearts of Arabs, Turkey has unarguably become the most important state in the region. Dr. Manor Al-Jamri, another key leader of the Shiite opposition, claimed that Turkey's influence in the Middle East increased following to the Gaza attacks. Dr. Al-Jamri, after specifying that Turkey, along with Iran and Egypt, became a prominent actor in the region because of its economic, military and historical mission, explaining that Egypt could no longer lead the Arab world due to its policies during the Gaza attacks, as well as its economic and regime problems, while Turkey could unarguably play this role. According to Jamri, Turkey became such a prominent actor both by working to settle problems in the Middle East and by relieving the security concerns of the Gulf countries. Walid Noueihed, a Lebanese journalist, argued that reactions to the Gaza attacks further increased peoples' convictions that Turkey had begun to play an important role in solving the problems in the Middle East since March 1, 2003. According to Noueihed, none of the Arab leaders could have assumed the role played by Prime Minister Erdogan during the Gaza crisis. This situation naturally led to an increase in affection for and commitment to Turkey.

On the other hand, Turkey's image after the Gaza attacks is more positive than that of any Arab regime and leader, especially among Arabs. Arabs that we met in Bahrain, from both Sunni and Shiite sectors, stated that they attentively followed the demonstrations held in Turkey and Erdogan's statements, and that they were convinced that Turkey was the only power capable of solving the Arab-Israel problem. Shiites said that they preferred to watch Turkey's efforts via *Al-Manar TV* broadcasting from Lebanon, while the Sunnis told us that they were informed about Turkey's policies more clearly via broadcasts by *Al-Jazeera*. In this framework, Turkey's avoidance of denominational approach and her independent policy free from her relations with Israel, played an important role in Turkey's receiving support both from Shiites and Sunnis.

On the other hand, Dr. Ligaa Maki, a journalist employed by *Al-Jazeera*, specified in our interview that Turkey's policy towards HAMAS profoundly affected all Muslim society, in particular, Qatar and Arab people. Dr. Ligaa, also pointed out that the Arab street was highly influenced by Turkey's anti-Israeli statements and policies. According to Dr. Ligaa, "At the same time, Turkish policy reduced support for Iran and Hezbollah in the streets. After the Gaza attacks, people will question why Iran and Hezbollah did not declare war against Israel. In fact, they have already started." Dr. Ligaa stated that as a journalist he found Turkey's efforts quite convincing.

According to Dr. Ligaa, this was a very important and historical moment. Ligaa continued as follows: "Turkey's policy towards HAMAS started a new argument. The Arab street started to praise Ottoman Empire. In many quarters, opinions demanding the return of Turks began to be written and articulated. This statement began mustering up support both at the level of peoples and governments. The efforts exerted by a NATO member country to include HAMAS in the political process positively affected all parties, in particular, the government of Qatar. Erdogan became a folk hero in the eyes of Arabs."

Abdülaziz I. Al-Mahmoud, executive editor of the *Al-Arab Newspaper*, a Qatari daily, asserted that the Gaza attacks again enhanced the power and influence of Turkey in the Arab world. Al-Mahmoud explained his observations after his interviews with Arab society and leaders as follows: "Arab society only consents to the intervention of Turkey in Iraq and Palestine. It will not react to this and will support such an intervention. The 2003 War brought really new conditions to the region. No one trusts Egypt in the Middle East. Both politically and economically, Egypt is not a power capable of solving the problems of the countries in the region. Furthermore, the Egyptian regime is accepted neither by its own people, nor by other Arab people. On the other hand, Erdogan is a prominent leader who by now has won the trust of Arab peoples. His attitude and policy concerning the Gaza question promoted him as a folk hero for Arabs." Al-Mahmoud claimed that the attitude adopted by Turkish society was not seen in any Arab country, and therefore Arabs began to consider Turkey a friendly and sister country, as well as a great power.

Turkey's reaction to the Gaza attacks was considered an important step in many sectors. Aiman Abboushi, a Palestinian writer for the *Gulf Times* newspaper in Qatar, said in our interview that Turkey's sensitivity to the Palestinian question was considered important by all Arab society. Abboushi continued: "Turkey took the clearest stance vis-à-vis Gaza attacks. These policies removed the existent historical doubts about Turkey and enlarged the influence of Turkey in the Middle East region. Turkey won the approval and the heart of Arab people with its stance during the Gaza crisis. The support of the Arab street for Turkey is immeasurable. Arab society especially regards Erdogan as a leader who accomplished what no Arab leaders did. In terms of influence, it is obvious that Turkey is the most respectable country in the Arab world. In particular, the Palestinians' view of Turkey is quite different."

Dr. Tarik El Sheik, a journalist of Sudanese origin at the *Gulf Times*, the Qatari daily, argued that Turkey's foreign policy during the Gaza attacks unarguably promoted Turkey as the most important country in the eyes of Arabs. According to Tarik, Turkey's stance against Israel heralded a new era in Arabs' view of Turkey. In Dr. Tarik's opinion, who also claimed that there was a problem with leadership in Arab world, "Turkey is the leading country most capable of playing a leadership role in the Middle East, given its democratic sense of rule, as well as its historical and cultural heritage, its economic and industrial development, and its relations with the West." In fact, again Turkey's orientation towards the Middle East benefits both the region and Turkey. Turkey won the heart of the Arab people with its foreign policy during the Gaza crisis. Thus Turkey's leadership was consolidated by its role in this crisis.

On the other hand, Ambassador Abdul Rahman M. Al-Khulaifi with whom we met in Doha and who is influential in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that the Middle East policy pursued by Turkey since 2003 was considered quite important by them and was supported both by Arab society and its leaders, and in this framework Turkey was regarded as a reliable nation for settling inter-Arab problems and the Arab-Israel question.

On the other hand, a political adviser close to the Qatar administration depicted that Turkey exerted great efforts in the cessation of Gaza attacks and Arab society regarded Turkey's attempts as efforts of a friendly country and supported her. According to the adviser, Turkey will inevitably become a pivotal power provided that she maintains her aforementioned foreign policy in the coming years. The adviser asserted that this role will be also supported by countries in the region.

Al-Jazzier's Jasim El Azzawi, of Iraqi origin, indicated that Turkey used to be perceived differently in the Arab world. However, the nation's policy during the Gaza crisis promoted a new image of Turkey and raised its prestige to the highest level. In Azzawi's view, Erdogan's anti-Israel statements made him a hero in the eyes of the Arab people. At the same time Arab society appreciated and admired Turkey's efforts. Azzawi added that the street demonstrations held by the Turkish people during the attacks, the protests made against Israeli sportsmen and the resignations from the Turkey-Israel Inter-parliamentary Friendship Group triggered a tremendous admiration for Turkey among Arab people."

The Arabic department of *Al-Jazeera*, broadcasting from Qatar, substantially contributed to the transmission of Turkey's foreign policy to the Arab community during the Gaza attacks. According to Wadah Khanfar, the executive editor of *Al-Jazeera*, "Erdogan's rhetoric during the Gaza crisis reinforced the Arab peoples' confidence and belief in him. In fact, Turkey won the hearts of Arab people, which is a historical event."

In the United Arab Emirates, we met with the authorities of the *MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Corporation)* channel, which broadcasts to 22 Arab countries, and they stated that the confidence of Arab peoples towards Turkey and the Turkish people had reached the highest levels. According to the authorities of the channel where the Turkish TV programs and movies *Çemberimde Gül Oya*, *Ihlamlar tında*, *Gümüş*, *Elveda Derken*, *Kırık Kanatlar*, *Yersiz Yurtsuz*, and *Babam ve Oğlum* are broadcast in

Arabic, "Arab society grew more closely acquainted with Turkey by watching Turkish movies and TV programs. The societies noticed that they did not espouse different values as they got to know each other culturally. After these broadcasts, the number of Arabs visiting Turkey was seen to increase significantly. Arab society began to better understand the structure of Turkish society and to free itself from prejudices. Now tours are regularly organized to Istanbul. The reactions to the Gaza attacks led to an increase in positive opinions about Turkey. On the other hand, the idea that Turkey will destabilize the Middle East receives support neither from Arab society, nor from Arab regimes. All these developments indicate that Turkey's role in the Middle East increased." According to Darwish Mohammed Al-Darwshan, a Syrian journalist employed in MBC channel as a broadcaster, stated how Turkey's Gaza policy was perceived by Arab society from a different standpoint: "Erdogan has become the number one leader in the Middle East after his policies vis-à-vis the last attacks. In the eyes of us, Arabs, Turkey acted more chivalrously than all Arab countries. Erdogan voiced what we laid in our hearts."

In fact, Dr. Mustafa Alani, the director of the security program at the Gulf Research Center, with whom we met in Dubai also expressed the same opinions. Alani claimed that Turkey had become a significant power that could have an impact on the region because of Arab society's positive image of the nation. Alani continued: "The Arab street did what Arab leaders should have done during the Gaza crisis. Turkey is now involved in the domestic policies and problems of Arab countries. It plays an important role in the Israel question, in Lebanon and Syria-Israel Agreement, as well as in the Gaza crisis. Arab society's positive perceptions of Turkey boost its ability lead on even further." According to Alani, Arab society trusts Turkey's foreign policy and supports her steps in this regard. Its reaction to the Gaza attacks has made Turkey the leader of the Middle East.

The people and political decision-makers of another Gulf country, Oman, supported the Gaza policy of Turkey. The Omani people and administration have quite strong feelings for Prime Minister Erdogan and Turkey, especially after the Davos showdown. Former Ambassador Essa bin Mohammed Al-Zedjali, one of the most

esteemed journalists of Oman, titled his editorial in the *Times of Oman* as “Erdogan Deserves the Honour of Arabs.”(5) He explained in an interview we held with him for the *Times of Oman* newspaper that Turkey had earned great esteem in the hearts and minds of all Arabs.

Conclusion

Within the framework of the field research carried out in countries in the region between January 19 and February 10, 2009, Turkey’s Middle East policy, launched with Resolution of March 1, 2003, and developed as it extended into Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Iranian and finally, by Palestinian policies, heralded a new era in Turkish-Middle Eastern relations. Despite the fact that Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Gaza attacks disturbed certain circles, both in Turkey and abroad, it can be asserted that it created a new and different perception that is likely to have a long term effect on Arab society and its intellectual elites. Considering the arguments, Turkey’s Gaza policy has been criticized for two reasons. The first of these is the criticism that Turkey is too close to the radical group, HAMAS, which represents Iran and Syria. As for the second, it is the argument that maintaining relations with Israel is necessary in terms of national interest. To start with the second criticism, Israel currently has serious problems with Iran and Hezbollah, along with the Palestinian question. However, beyond all these, the Mubarek regime in Egypt, located in the immediate vicinity of Israel, has lost the public support. Possible regime change in Egypt means turning back to the 1960s for Israel. In other words, Israel may face threats coming from Egypt in the West, Hezbollah and Syria in the North, Iran in the East. The aforementioned developments that may occur in the Middle East are certain to increase the security concerns of Israel. Therefore, the rational foreign policy for Israel to pursue cannot include facing the opposition of Turkey. Meanwhile, Israel may while pursue an irrational foreign policy. However, this course of action risks more losses than gains for Israel. To deal with the first criticism, strong concerns among Middle East countries relating to the idea that Turkey is moving toward the radical axis led by Iran were not observed during the field research. On the contrary, during our interview with the authorities of MBC channel established by Saudi Arabia, they stated that Turkey’s recent foreign policy had

weakened Iran in the region. In our interview, the vice executive editor, explained that Abdullah Gul's long visit to Saudi Arabia after Davos had forestalled such concerns and said that Saudi authorities had full confidence in Turkey's foreign policy. As a matter of fact, Abdullah Gul made a speech in the Shura Assembly during his Saudi Arabia visit, and thereby became the first President of a Muslim country to address the Shura Assembly. During President Gul's visit to Saudi Arabia, his statements supporting the Arab Initiative for settling the Palestinian question proved that Turkey would not act as part of the radical bloc led by Iran. The Gulf nations feel the Iranian threat most, and they deem Turkey's effective dealings with HAMAS after Lebanon to be a development that will restrict the power of Iran in the Middle East. Furthermore, certain Arab intellectuals point out the potential of the Syria-Israel peace talks to cause Syria to drift away from Iran in their final stages, and are thus greatly disturbed by the role Turkey has begun to play in the Middle East. As a matter of fact, we came across attitudes and statements supporting the aforementioned arguments in interviews we had with Iranian and Syrian writers, academicians and politicians during the field research we carried out in Syria in August 2008 and in Iran in October 2008.

In conclusion, the new image of Turkey that is beginning to take root in the Arab Middle East, starting with average Arab citizens, and including Arab intellectuals, the elites that shape public opinion and lastly, the sectors that wield political power, is creating a lot of excitement and a feeling of confidence in Turkey. As a matter of fact, a survey conducted in West Sheria and Gaza Strip after the Gaza attacks by the branch of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung chaired by Hassan Katip in Jerusalem revealed that 89.6% of the Palestinian people were content with Turkey's policies. The other striking thing is that Turkey enjoyed greater support than all other countries and institutions.⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, the basic expectation in Arab society is the uninterrupted continuation of the aforementioned policies vis-à-vis any kind of external pressures. In other words, it is expected that by foiling US and Israeli attempts to influence Turkish foreign policy by means of economic or other instruments, Turkey will be able to engage even more actively in the resolution of the Middle East's problems. In fact, the Arab administrative elites whom we met during

our field research showed a strong tendency to support to Turkey's efforts in this context.

**This study was prepared on the basis of field researches conducted in the countries of the region with the support of TUBITAK between January 19th and February 10th.*

Endnotes

(1) "Erdoğan: Israel's attack is a blow against Peace", 29 December 2008, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/470442.asp>, (Last entry: February 16, 2009)

(2) Statements No. 221 and 222 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued on December 27 and 28, 2008.

(3) "Israel's Gaza attacks", December 29, 2008, <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?im=yhs&hn=26536>,

(Last entry: February 16, 2009)

(4) *Al-Jazeera* Television Arabic broadcast, January 30, 2009.

(5) Essa bin Mohammed Al-Zedjali, "Erdogan Deserves the Honour of Arabs", *Times of Oman*, February 7, 2009.

(6) *Palestinians' Opinions After the Gaza War*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Press Release, "Poll No:67, January 2009.