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BULLETIN

Palestine in Turkey's Foreign Policy

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Turkey is strengthening its role in the Middle East as the main political patron of the Palestinians. Turkish policy towards Palestine is reinforced by the tensions in relations with Israel, the country's desire to be a world leader of Islam, and the growing rift between the Palestinians and their Arab allies. Turkey will use its involvement in Palestinian affairs in its regional rivalries. Opposition to Israeli-Arab normalisation and close ties with Hamas will diminish Turkey's relations with the U.S.

The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in Turkey in 2002 marked the start of a deepening of Turkish-Palestinian relations. The Turkish authorities under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have sharpened their criticism of Israeli activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip while increasing political and material support for the Palestinians. This included an attempt to break Israel's maritime blockade of Gaza Strip, co-organised by Turkish non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The "Freedom Flotilla" attempt in 2010 was intercepted by the Israeli navy, resulting in the death of 10 Turkish citizens, which led to the breakdown of historically close relations between Israel and Turkey. The event perpetuated a pro-Palestinian shift in Turkish foreign policy, which continued even after relations with Israel were restored in 2016.

The Nature of the Relations. Turkey's policy towards the Palestinians is characterised by parallel cooperation with both Fatah, which governs the Palestinian Authority (PA), and close ties with Hamas, which rules Gaza Strip. Turkey, like Russia, does not recognise Hamas as a terrorist group and provides it active political support, in part because of the Islamist nature of the organisation. Hamas leadership meets with the highest echelons of power in Turkey. President Erdoğan met the previous chairman of the Hamas political bureau, Khaled Mashal, in 2015 and 2016, and the current one, Ismail Haniyeh, in 2019 and this year. Turkey's support helps Hamas break out of international isolation. A Hamas office and related foundations operate on Turkish territory, and according to media reports, a group of its members obtained Turkish citizenship this year. Israel has repeatedly accused Turkey of facilitating Hamas terrorist activities. The U.S. State Department officially condemned Erdoğan's recent meeting with Hamas leaders on the U.S. terrorist wanted list.

Simultaneously, Turkey is developing close relations with the PA government of President Mahmoud Abbas. Turkish politicians have harshly criticised the U.S. administration's decisions regarding the Palestinians, including the announcement of the Trump peace plan in January. Turkey uses its activity in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to defend the Palestinians, including at a summit convened by Turkey in 2018 when the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem was condemned. Turkey is one of the most important economic partners for Palestine—Turkish statistics show a trade volume of around $84 million—and also a significant donor to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA, $43 million in 2015–2019). An important policy tool is the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which runs development projects (e.g., building a hospital in Gaza Strip) and distribution of humanitarian aid (e.g., assistance to fight the COVID-19 pandemic) in the Palestinian territories. Also, it is important for the PA that Turkey provides Palestinians with Ottoman-era archives—used in legal disputes with Israel—certifying Palestinian ownership of real estate and land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Political Significance. Relations with Palestine fulfil two functions in Turkish foreign policy. First, they serve as a tool for building Turkey's image, and in particular that of President Erdoğan, who aims to be the spokesman and leader of the Muslim world. Apart from religious aspects it is also part of the narrative used by Turkish decision-makers

evoking Ottoman heritage, such as underlining that historic Palestine with Jerusalem was part of the Ottoman Empire. Erdoğan uses Turkey's role as a patron of Palestinian causes in domestic politics, such as the 2018 election campaign

The second purpose is that it lets Turkey tout its activity on the Palestinian issue in the regional rivalry to weaken the influence of its strongest competitors: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Turkish actions are reinforced by the apparent decline in the commitment to a Palestinian state by Arab allies as reflected in recent normalisation of relations with Israel, first by the UAE and supported by the U.S. Arab-Israeli normalisation announcements. Turkey strongly opposes this process, viewed as the consolidation of a hostile bloc. Its criticism of the Gulf states' actions and the cooperation with Qatar, which provides financial support to Gaza Strip, enhances Turkey's credibility among the Palestinians. This allows Turkey to foster an image of a state immune to external pressure and strengthens Erdoğan's popularity with the people of its Arab rivals who are generally pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel—in opposition to their leaders' policies.

An area of the regional rivalry in which Turkey is trying to replace Egypt is mediation between Fatah and Hamas. Turkey, like Russia, is actively involved in the reconciliation process and hosted negotiations in Istanbul in September. The outcome was a declaration by both parties to held overdue elections in the PA, for which the Turkish authorities announced that they would provide help. Another element of the regional rivalry, as well as an expression of support for the PA leadership, was the Turkish attack on Mohammed Dahlan, the former leader of Fatah and a close associate of the UAE government. Dahlan, considered the main political rival of President Abbas, was accused of supporting the failed coup in 2016 in Turkey, among other charges. The Turkish authorities issued an Interpol "red notice" for him in December. Another source of tensions is Turkish involvement (e.g., via TIKA) in the restoration of Muslim sites in Jerusalem, marking a symbolic rivalry with Jordan, the official custodian of Islamic holy places in the city, and Saudi Arabia.

Perspectives. Turkey will intensify its cooperation with the Palestinians, even if Turkish-Israeli relations improve. An opportunity for deeper involvement will be provided with the developments in the political processes in Palestine (elections for PA institutions, the planned change of Hamas leadership) and a long-term truce between Hamas and Israel, which would allow an increase of Turkish support and investments in Gaza Strip. Deepening cooperation may be blocked by Turkey's weakened economy, which might hinder an increase of material aid. Another limitation is the current focus of Turkish decision-makers on other areas. Apart from its presence in Syria, in the last several months Turkey has involved itself in regional conflicts (Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Eastern Mediterranean).

Although it is not fully plausible to replace the support from Arab states with Turkish aid, the Palestinians—especially the PA authorities—will strive to tighten relations with Turkey, especially in the face of progressive Israeli-Arab normalisation. Turkey will use these relations in regional disputes, such as the activities of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EGF). Turkey perceives the EGF as an anti-Turkish project and is in conflict with its members, including Egypt and Greece. As part of the EGF, the PA could act as a promoter of Turkish interests, hindering the effectiveness of the organisation.

The criticism of Israeli-Arab normalisation and active support for Hamas are not well-received by the U.S. administration, which deepens the ongoing crisis in Turkish-American relations. However, if Trump is re-elected, Turkey could play a role as Palestinian spokesman in relations with the U.S. if PA authorities decide to unfreeze suspended contacts. Turkey's credentials would make it possible to mediate talks with the American diplomacy and turn the Palestinian position more flexible. However Turkey's return to its former role as a mediator between the Palestinians and Israel is unlikely.

Turkey's actions to hold the overdue elections in the PA remain in line with the EU's interests. However, the lack of Turkish interest in the de-radicalisation of Hamas is unfavourable because without such a change, it is impossible for the EU to recognise Hamas' participation in elections to Palestinian institutions. Turkey's involvement in development and humanitarian aid for Palestinians is a potential area of cooperation with Poland, which is also engaged in projects in the PA. This could, however, antagonise the Israeli authorities, who are critical of the Turkish activities.

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