CHAPTER 7:

TURKEY’S IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY IN TRANSITION SINCE 2002:
THE CASE OF RELATIONS WITH PALESTINE

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Introduction

Diaspora policy has long been a contested area in a country’s foreign policy. Turkey has many expatriate communities abroad, as well as numerous ethnic connections to states like Azerbaijan and the Turkic republics of Central Asia. Since its establishment in 1923, the Republic of Turkey has pursued a diaspora policy towards Turkey-related communities abroad. This traditional approach has shifted significantly since 2002 towards pursuit of a more proactive engagement with its geographical neighbours, a policy shift that is principally linked to the ascendency to government in 2002 of the Justice and Development Party – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP). The implementation of Turkey’s diaspora policy was brought under the newly established office of the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı –YTB) in April 2010 under the auspices of the Prime Ministry. To understand this shift, it is imperative to scrutinize how particular diasporas emerge, how they shape policy-making and the ways in which Turkey demonstrates and builds ‘soft’ power among its akraba topluluklar (kin/related communities), as well as the extent and ways in which this policy regarding diaspora and perceived kin communities has increased Turkey’s influence worldwide. For instance, in time for the 2015 elections, 2,867,858 Turkish citizens living abroad were eligible to vote, and to that end, polling stations were set up at 33 different customs gates and 112 foreign representative offices in 54 countries (Adamson 2019; Turkish Office of the Prime Minister 2019).

Originally rooted in former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu’s vision of being a regional ‘soft’ power, Turkey began effectively to emphasize its historical and cultural links to neighbouring countries and countries with Turkish minorities across Europe, Central Asia,
the Caucasus and the Middle East. As Turkey’s regional influence grew, so did its economic strength, built in part on regional investments. As Chief Advisor to the Turkish Prime Ministry, Davutoğlu was the key architect of the AKP’s foreign policy doctrine, and he described the key pillars of Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Middle East in his book *Strategic Depth*, published in 2001. Although Turkey’s soft power, or the idea of Turkey as a ‘model’ of Muslim democracy, has lost much of its attraction during the second decade of the 2000s, Ankara has remained determined to exert ideological and Islamist influence abroad (Altunışık 2008).

Kerem Öktem views Turkey’s present diaspora policy as ‘selective’, a policy that “continues to treat communities differentially and makes available funds only to preferred groups would have exactly the opposite effect” (2014, 24). Thus, he describes Turkey’s present conception of its diaspora as an “exclusive and post-nationalist, but also a post-sectarian ‘global-nation’ [which] is certainly not yet a reality [and] possesses considerable risks and potential of competition between citizens and non-citizens” (Öktem 2014, 25).

This chapter aims to address Turkey’s diaspora policy through a specific case study of Palestine. The main objective is to explore the ideational motivation underlying the reconceptualization and rejuvenation of Turkey’s identity and the policies relating to its diaspora, as well as Turkish foreign policy since 2002, i.e., under the AKP government. In other words, this work will highlight Turkey’s ‘new’ ideological— i.e., Islamist— discourse as the country seems to be adopting a ‘new’ identity—i.e., religious as opposed to secular— as well as Turkey’s foreign policy in light of its strategies towards a specific *akraba topluluk*, or more specifically, a Muslim community, i.e., with Palestine and Palestinians.

**Aspects of re/making Turkish foreign policy**

Telhami and Barnett argue that, when deciding foreign policy, states take notice of other states’ identities before setting their agendas (2002, 8). To understand whether there has been a change in Turkey’s identity, or whether its foreign policy has become more heavily influenced by an Islamist vision, Turkey’s identity must not be taken as pre-given; instead, the ideational definition and demarcation of its diaspora should be examined. Thus, diaspora politics necessitates a focus on identities, beliefs and ideas that inform actors and their behaviours in the international system, as well as the mutual and shared understandings that guide relations. This view, therefore, rejects the primary realist assumption that actors’ interests are an a priori fact. Alexander Wendt claims that it is interactions with others that “create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another, [and that] structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process” (Wendt 1992, 394). Likewise, Martha Finnemore believes that: “The fact that we live in an international society means that what we want and, in some ways, who we are, are shaped by the social norms, rules, understandings, and relationships we have with others” (1996, 128).

Most scholars of constructivist thinking have examined the impact of a politics of identity in shaping the foreign policies of states. Constructivism seems to be relevant in understanding
the role of identities and preferences in states’ behaviours because they perceive the international system as a catalyst for prompting debates over national identity. This reveals that state and national identities are not always coterminous. The reason behind this stems from deeply rooted sub-state or supra-state loyalties and identities. For example, due to the existence of multiple affiliations in the post-Ottoman lands – namely Islamic, tribal, and parochial, as well as Pan-Arabist – the project of nation-building has not been completed in most of these territories. These unconsolidated loyalties have been gradually replaced either by ‘supra-state’ (e.g., Islamist) or ‘sub-state’ (e.g., tribal) affiliations since World War I. In this regard, the shift in the understanding of ‘nation’ from ummah (global Muslim community) to watani (territorial) identities has become central to understanding states’ foreign policy-making in this region. The debates over the politics of identity thus highlight why different foreign policy discourses, practices, and behaviours occur.

It has been widely argued that the AKP began to change the direction of Turkish foreign policy in 2002, making it more dynamic and multi-levelled, and giving it a wider geographical scope and a more focused ideological drive than in the previous Republican-Kemalist approach. In other words, foreign policy-making under the AKP government has undergone a drastic structural change that has run parallel with a shift in Turkey’s identity-building processes. This ‘new’ identity formation is primarily associated with the AKP’s Islamist orientation and credentials, and the shift in Turkey’s proactive foreign policy towards its eastern neighbourhood is to a large degree intertwined with the National Vision Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi) and the ideology of neo-Ottomanism (Ataç 2018).

The roots of Turkey’s new identity and diaspora politics under the AKP

There is a growing literature on Turkey’s identity and foreign relations that explores the question of whether or not it has undergone a ‘shift of axis’ or a drastic departure from the West and its allies (Yeşilyurt and Akdevelioğlu 2009, 40; Kardaş 2011). These works either support or refute the argument that the primary determinants and principles of Turkey’s foreign policy have been undergoing structural transformation since the AKP’s victory in 2002.

When the AKP first came to power, the party described itself as a Conservative Democrat Party (Çınar 2018, 8), but its ideology was in fact taken from Turkey’s Milli Görüş school. The tradition of Milli Görüş rested on a political rhetoric disassociating Westernization from modernization, with a specific reference to and advocacy of Islamism. The origins of Milli Görüş and Islamist activism in Turkey can be traced to the early years of the Turkish Republic. The founding Kemalist principles and ideology had been historically located at the core of Turkey’s political model and state-formation; the policy excluded Islamists from the political scene with the aim of fortifying the secular character of the new republic. The ascendancy of the AKP in 2002, therefore, marks the beginning of a new era that can be labelled as ‘post-Kemalist’, and a restoration of Turkey’s previous ideological discourses and courses of action (Dağı 2012).
In this regard, analysing the transition in Turkey’s identity is central to analyzing the great changes in its foreign policy strategy, a process closely linked to the AKP’s growing ties with Turkey’s neighbours and related communities abroad. In this regard, an in-depth analysis is necessary to understand the rise of the Islamist movement in Turkish history. Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, nation and state formation were primarily guided by Kemalist principles and reforms (Esen 2014). Berk Esen defines Kemalism as an ideology of national development: “Kemalism remains as the guardian of a modern, secular Turkey, though a ‘neo-Kemalist’ variant that emerged in the 1990s has shifted its focus from the official discourse to the popular level to enlist mass support” (Esen 2014, 603). On the one hand, the secular character of Kemalist ideology precluded Islamist actors from mobilizing religion in the public sphere, while on the other, Kemalism posited Islam exclusively in the private sphere.

The roots of political Islam in Turkey are most often seen as linked to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the abolition of the caliphate by the Turkish Republic in 1924. In this context, the Millî Görüş Hareketi occupies a central place in analysing the roots of Islamism, Islamist activism and the politicization of Islam in Turkey. Its ideology is mainly shaped by the 19th-century Islamism that grew out of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the colonization of former Ottoman lands.

Necmettin Erbakan defined the Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) as “the political expression of the Turkish part of the ummah” (Yıldız 2003, 187). Yılmaz considers the Millî Görüş as an Islamist movement in Turkey, as its main discourses and practices are framed through an antagonism between ‘the West and Islam’.

In line with this argument, it is also crucial to indicate that Islamists in Turkey – as well as the AKP today– have sought to falsify Orientalism in building their agenda. In other words, they have rejected the notion that political Islam emerged in Turkey as a result of a clash of civilizations, as with the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other branches around the Arab world.

It is also imperative to state at this point that the changeover in Turkey’s identity and its subsequent impact on Turkey’s foreign policy occurred in two stages, the second initiated upon the second victory of AKP in parliamentary elections, thus primarily post-2009-2010. The AKP first exhibited a departure from the long tradition of the Kemalist era and backed the UN-sponsored Annan Plan to solve the intractable Cyprus Problem during 2003/2004. Meanwhile, Turkey pursued a more European approach when the US intervened in Iraq in 2003, which also led to the emergence of new debates on the ‘Europeanization’ of Turkish Foreign Policy (Özcan 2008). Moreover, Turkey’s new foreign policy options embraced building close ties with the European Union (EU) as well as reinforcing the inauguration of accession negotiations with the EU for full membership. Thus, while perhaps small, the AKP’s steps towards implementing a new approach marked the beginning of an era of Europeanization in Turkey’s foreign policy. However, this stance of the AKP government did not last long. The failure of the Annan Plan and the subsequent deterioration of EU-Turkish relations regarding
the accession negotiations led to a drastic change in the Western/ liberal view of the AKP and encouraged them to incorporate more ideological foreign policy tools. Thus, we see a shift from “Muslim Democrat to Political Islam” (Çolakoğlu 2019).

**New Turkey’s New Middle East**

Despite a shared past and long-standing cultural-historical connections with the Arab Middle East, Turkey could not build strong commercial and political-cultural ties with its eastern neighbours who had also been part of the Ottoman Empire. With the end of the Cold War, however, Turkey began to manifest its regional power status via engaging in the Gulf War of 1990-1991 after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, although it remained detached from the Middle East region and its politics. This detachment is, in fact, twofold: a product of Cold War politics and its ramifications and derivative reflections across the entire region; and the result of an historical mutual suspicion and conflicting perceptions rooted in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. These factors discouraged both sides from working to build close ties. With the ascendancy of the Justice and Development Party in 2002, a new political elite arose to contest the established Republican-secular elite, and the AKP transformed Turkey’s guarded position towards rapprochement with this conflict-ridden region. As part of this identity transition, Turkey began to proactively pursue a new regional policy in 2009 under the banner ‘zero-problems with neighbours’ (Tocci 2011). However, this new foreign policy strategy faced some complications with the onset of the Arab protests in late 2010 and early 2011. On the one hand, the Arab uprisings prompted Turkey to expand and diversify its priorities and preferences towards the region, for example, by showing support to the Arab protests in general and to the Ikhwan of Egypt in particular. Turkey also engaged in a more complex pattern of behaviour with its old strategic Western allies– specifically the USA.

Turkey has also displayed a pro-Palestinian stance since 2006, with the parliamentary victory of Hamas in Gaza—a drastic move that led to a rapid deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. In this regard, the spill-over effects of the new problems of the Middle East can be said to have prolonged the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as US President Trump’s Jerusalem and Golan Heights decisions; these have put Turkey in an uneasy position vis-à-vis the US.

Turkey initiated relations with Israel in 1948 with the proclamation of the state, when it became the first country with a majority Muslim population to recognize the state of Israel. Turkey’s relations with Israel primarily derived from Turkey’s relations with the West, as a pillar of its NATO and US partnership. Relations between the two countries took a turn during the 1990s; this rapprochement was established in the military and economic realms, and was later characterized by ups and downs precisely due to divergent views of both sides regarding the Palestine-Israeli conflict. Both countries, from the beginning, were particularly sensitive to developments related to the Arab-Israeli conflict (Altunışık 2009), but Palestine / the Palestinians were not the primary force shaping threat perceptions.

However, since the 2009 crisis at the Davos Summit (between Erdoğan and Peres) and the Mavi Marmara Incident in 2010 (The Guardian 2010), Turkey has downgraded its diplomatic
relations with Israel three times, most in 2011. In May 2018, Turkey again expelled the Israeli ambassador after Israel Defence Forces killed dozens of Palestinians during violent clashes in the Gaza Strip; Israel followed suit and expelled the Turkish consul in Jerusalem (Al Monitor 2019). While Turkey and Israel normalized relations in 2016, and share significant economic and geostrategic interests, developments since 2009 have been marked by deep divisions between the two countries on central issues, most notably the status of Palestine and Palestinians.

**Turkey’s relations with Palestine and Palestinians as a perceived kin community**

Turkey established official relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1975, and was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State established on 15 November 1988. The establishment of relations was in fact an integral part of Turkey’s relations with the Arab world, as well as in Turkey’s policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict. During the Cold War years, Turkey’s ties with the Arab Middle East were partially based on resentments tracing back to World War I and the Arab revolt led by the Sherif of Mecca (Emir Hussein) against the Ottoman Empire. This threat perception has shaped Turkey’s relations with the Arab world since 1923.

Although Turkey opted to establish cordial relations with the Arab world, including the Palestinians, ‘Islam’, or the goal of cultivating a ‘Muslim community’, was not a pillar of these relationships. These rapprochement efforts have been explained by Turkey’s need of Arab support on the Cyprus Problem during the 1970s (and also due to OPEC’s quadrupling of oil prices) (Doğan 2016). This motivated Turkey to exhibit a pro-Palestinian stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the aim of gaining the endorsement of the Arab countries vis-à-vis Greece at the international level. However, in 2002 the AKP governments began to pursue a pro-Palestinian stance regarding the Arab-Israeli dispute—a shift first prominently displayed in 2006, when the AKP government hosted Hamas and its leader, Khaled Mashal, in Ankara just before Hamas’s parliamentary victory in Gaza. Later, in January 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan stormed out of the World Economic Forum at Davos over a harsh argument with Israeli President Shimon Peres about the Gaza crisis. Later, however, he explained in a press conference that his reaction was to the moderator and not Peres, and Israeli officials stated that relations would not be damaged (Yeşilyurt and Akdevelioğlu 2009, 55).

To contextualize and understand the significance of Palestine in Turkish foreign policy, it is crucial to refer to statements by Turkey’s former Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. For instance, in 2010 he stated: “One day they will pray in al-Aqsa Mosque”, later adding: “We will one day pray in East Jerusalem” (Milliyet Gazetesi 2010). Davutoğlu was also moved to tears during a visit to the Gaza Strip, and embraced former Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas about the Gaza crisis. Later, however, he explained in a press conference that his reaction was to the moderator and not Peres, and Israeli officials stated that relations would not be damaged (Yeşilyurt and Akdevelioğlu 2009, 55).

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Turkey’s active relations with Palestine cover various areas, from trade to cultural heritage. Going back primarily to 2013, the two countries established a founding protocol for a bilateral economic cooperation council, a customs agreement, and a Friendship Agreement among municipalities in Palestine and Turkey. Palestinian Minister of the National Economy Abir Avde and Turkish Minister of Trade Ruhsar Pekcan in September 2018 signed an agreement that aims to foster cooperation in areas such as education, trade, protection of cultural heritage in Palestine, customs, free trade, transportation, investment, the service sector, commercial affairs and energy. In addition, in February 2018, Turkey provided 10 million US dollars of aid to the Palestinian Authority (Amer 2018). Meanwhile, a cooperation agreement was also established between TİKA and the Palestine International Cooperation Agency.

The bilateral trade volume between the two parties exceeded 400 million US dollars in 2016 (Amer 2018). Moreover, both countries also reinforced cooperation regarding education and scientific activities, which led to an agreement between the Palestinian Higher Council for Innovation and Excellence and the Turkish TÜBİTAK.

On 21 September 2018, the first Palestinian school – Jasmine International School – was opened in Turkey by the Minister of Palestinian Higher Education, Sabri Sidem, who described its opening as a symbol of the strong historical ties and friendship between Palestine and Turkey (Amer 2018). According to Oraib al-Rantawi, a Jordanian-Palestinian analyst and director of the Amman-based Quds Center for Political Studies: “despite its difficult economic status and its uneasy relationship with the Donald Trump administration, Turkey has been a staunch supporter of Palestine … Turkey is one of the strongest supporters of Palestine. They coordinate at the highest level with both the PLO and Hamas” (Al Monitor 2019). Professor Nasır Abdul Kerim of the Arab Cenin University also evaluated Turkey-Palestine relations as not only an endorsement of economic cooperation, but a relationship that goes beyond technical cooperation and connotes a political meaning (Al Monitor 2018).

Deputy Prime Minister Hakan Çavuşoğlu stated: “This year [2019], Turkey’s Directorate General of Foundations delivered 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid and food to Gaza. The handover of 320 houses built in Gaza was also completed last week”. Meanwhile, Turkey has carried out 71 projects in East Jerusalem and the West Bank since 2005 – primarily organized by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA, Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı) – including the restoration of the Dome of the Rock (also known as Qubbat al-Sakhrah) that is inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex, building the Al-Quds University 400-student female dormitory, as well as restarting the Nabi Musa celebrations (Hürriyet Daily News 2019).

While Turkey is ideologically perceived to have good ties with the Hamas – which is the Ikhwan’s branch in Palestine— Turkey wants to retain cordial ties with Palestinians living in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip without risking ties with one at the expense of the other. According to Adnan Abu Amer, “Hamas hasn’t benefited from the Turkish financial aid offered to the Gaza Strip, as the assistance is provided directly to targeted poor Palestinians, those in need and people with disabilities, without using an intermediary” (Amer 2018). He also argues:
… the Turks don’t seem anxious to provide Hamas with other financial assistance out of fear that the United States and Israel will accuse it of supporting terrorism. Turkey’s further rapprochement with the PA and, to a lesser degree, Hamas, affirms that Ankara does not want to overlook either party in the Palestinian arena, although said approach is unsatisfactory to both Hamas and the PA’s Fatah movement: Each wants Ankara standing exclusively by its side. (Amer 2018)

Why Palestine matters in Turkey’s new foreign policy strategy: The issue of Jerusalem

Turkey’s policy towards Palestine and Palestinians has been primarily a derivate of the religious magnitude of Jerusalem and the AKP’s attachment to the Muslim community worldwide. Due to this fact, Turkey is a strong supporter of a two-state solution for solving the Palestine-Israeli conflict, and also calls on the parties to the dispute to commit to going back to 1967 borders. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, which is also known as the 6-Day War, the Palestinian territories –West Bank and Gaza Strip –are under Israeli control and there is an ever-greater number of Jewish settlements in the West Bank territories. Another paramount issue in this regard is the contestable status of Jerusalem, which for Turkey and Palestinians is not a matter of debate, who believe that East Jerusalem must be given to Palestinians. According to Avi Shlaim; the Declaration of Principles (DOP) reached at Oslo Accords “is completely silent on vital issues such as the right of return, borders, settlements and Jerusalem” (1994, 34). Nevertheless, it was also envisaged in the 1993 Oslo Accords that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank constitute Palestinian territories, while the current situation is far from respecting this provision. In addition, the Kingdom of Jordan is also one of the strongest defenders and guardians of the two-state solution, given that the Hashemite Kingdom still retains its custody over the religious areas in East Jerusalem, the Al Aqsa Mosque and Harem al-Sharif (Telegraph 2014). Accordingly, King Abdullah II of Jordan lately has told US President Donald Trump’s senior adviser Jared Kushner that “a lasting Middle East peace can only come with the creation of a Palestinian state on land captured by Israel in a 1967 war” (Al Jazeera 2019). In addition, the King stressed the need for settling the Palestinian issue through a “comprehensive and lasting peace based on a two-state solution … with East Jerusalem as its capital” (Al Jazeera 2019).

The question over Jerusalem has been triggered in the wake of the US President Donald Trump’s recognition of the city of Jerusalem, and as the corollary of this policy, moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This drastic repositioning of US foreign policy regarding the Palestine-Israeli conflict has alarmed the international community as well as Turkey, and led Turkish President Erdoğan to immediately and urgently invite all members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to hold an extraordinary session on this particular issue on 13 December 2017. The Summit meeting ended with issuing the İstanbul Declaration, which stated that all the participant states declare that they recognize the Palestinian state with its capital city East Jerusalem (TRT Haber 2017). In this session of the Islamic Summit Conference, which was held in İstanbul, the OIC stressed the following points:
- Reaffirming once again the vital importance of preserving the sanctity and historical status of Al Quds and Haram al-Sharif for the whole Muslim Ummah (MFA 2017);
- Reiterating their solutions adopted by the United Nations on Palestine and Al Quds, in particular the Security Council Resolution 478, adopted in 1980 (MFA 2017);
- Saluting the exceptionally peaceful resistance that the entire Palestinian people, especially the residents of Al Quds, sustained and accomplished through many sacrifices against the reckless violations at Al-Haram al-Sharif in July, 2017 (MFA 2017).

**Relations at the grassroots level: Turkey’s soft power**

One of the key instruments of Turkish diaspora policy towards the Arab world has recently revolved around the manifestation of Turkey’s soft power. Turkey’s attractiveness in the Middle East and North Africa has been galvanized with the perceived political and economic transformation of Turkish foreign policy as well as its growing cultural impact through TV programs and cultural associations launched in various countries across the region.

In a survey conducted from 5 August-27 September 2010 by TESEV in eight different countries in the region— Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and Iran— Turkey’s image was estimated at 80 percent positive. The positive perception behind this public opinion in the region is rooted in the economic and political transformation of Turkey (Altunişık 2009, 1-2). More precisely, Turkey opted to pursue a policy of representing a democratic country having a large Muslim population where the significance of religion and belonging to the Muslim community (umma) mark the ideology for building ties with primarily the Arab people.

**Yunus Emre Institute**

In implementing this policy, in 2014 Turkey established in Jerusalem the Yunus Emre Enstitüsü (YEE) Kudüs Türk Merkezi (Jerusalem Turkish Centre of Yunus Emre Institute). Annually, YEE teaches hundreds of Palestinians the Turkish language, and the first-degree students (20) are sent to Turkey for summer school. According to the Director of YEE in Jerusalem, İbrahim Furkan Özdemir, there 150 students studying the Turkish language in Jerusalem, and there are also students learning Turkish in Ramallah, the West Bank and Gaza (TRT Haber 2018). As of 2018, more than 5000 Palestinian students have graduated from these language courses (TRT Haber 2018).

In addition to the YEE and its activities, the Association of Turkish Graduates (Filistin Türkiye Mezunları Derneği) also plays an important role in building ties with Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza. The Association organized iftars in Ramallah this year in June, which the head of the Association Mahmood Matar explained as a way to keep up relations between Palestinian graduates and Turkey (Anadolu Ajansı 2019). In addition, the President of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities has supported a total of 89,000 Palestinians studying in Turkey (Hürriyet Daily News 2019).
In 2005 TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı) also launched an office in Palestine, with the aim of empowering education, women's rights, public health, emergency aid, the water supply and production sector in both the West Bank and Gaza. Today, TİKA continues its activities with projects carried out in every field in Palestine. The Sultan Abdulhamid Water Dispenser was opened after the completion of its restoration in 2014. In 2012, the water treatment system that TİKA created for seven schools in Gaza will began to provide clean water to the schools via the water pipeline, which is adjacent to one of the schools (TDBB 2014).

To understand the close ties between Palestine and Turkey, a discussion of the role of TİKA is paramount. For instance, Palestinian Ambassador to Ankara Faed Mustafa once thanked TİKA’s President Serdar Çam saying “we will not forget what you have done in our country and for the Palestinian people” (Sabah 2016). In 2016, Ambassador Mustafa presented Çam with the Medal of Excellence and Merit of the Palestinian State at a ceremony held at the embassy in Ankara. As of 2018, TIKA had implemented a total of nearly 553 projects (Time Türk 2019). Among these projects, 332 were launched in the West Bank, 130 in Gaza and around 80 in East Jerusalem. TİKA has recently undertaken several new projects, including building a modern 180-bed hospital, and last year completed a 320-flat public housing project in Gaza (Anadolu Ajansı 2018).

Bülent Korkmaz, the former Coordinator of TİKA in Palestine, who is extremely well-regarded in Palestine, stressed the role of TİKA in building ties with the 170 different countries worldwide that have a TİKA agency headquarters and he specifically pointed out the special status of Palestine in the eyes of Turkey, saying: “Undoubtedly, every country and geography we are in is very special for us, but Palestine and Jerusalem have a different position” (Anadolu Ajansı 2018). Turkey’s special attachment to Palestine can also been seen in various TİKA-led projects, such as the thousands of Palestinians being educated in six TİKA–sponsored schools in different cities of Palestine. Moreover, the Al-Halil Turkish School is the most modern school of the city –with a current capacity of 550 students (Anadolu Ajansı 2018).

TİKA, which initiated the school project with the motto ‘A School for Every City of Palestine’, now has 18 classrooms, 2 computer laboratories, 3 executive rooms and a warehouse built on an area of 2000 square meters in Nablus in the West Bank, the second largest city of Palestine, as well as the Nuri Pakdil Girls School. In addition to the six new schools it has built in Palestine, TİKA has also undertaken the renovation and restoration of nine schools, provided hardware support to 20 educational institutions and established computer laboratories for 13 educational institutions. TİKA also supports many universities in Palestine with computer labs and similar projects, and it aims to complete in two years the 400-bed female dormitory project of the University of Jerusalem, which was initiated in June 2018 (Anadolu Ajansı 2018; Haber Türk 2018).

TİKA has recently taken part in giving iftar (breaking of Ramadan fast) during the last Ramadan in Palestine (Time Türk 2019). In a written statement made by the Vice President of
TİKA, Birol Çetin, Ramadan packages were distributed to 500 families in need in East Jerusalem, and 500 people were also given iftar in Haseki Sultan Tekkesi, which was built by Hürrem Sultan, the wife of Ottoman Emperor Kanuni Sultan Süleyman during his visit to Jerusalem in 1552. Ramadan packages were also distributed in Ramallah, Al-Halil and Eriha cities in the occupied West Bank, as well as to 2,500 Palestinian refugees in camps in the same region (Time Türk 2019). Moreover, the Palestinian Bedouins in the village of Han al-Ahmer and the Bedouins of Jehhalin in the rural areas of East Jerusalem (which Israel decided to demolish) were also given aid during the period of Ramadan. As stated by the TİKA Coordination Office, 5000 orphans participated in the iftar programs organized in the city (Time Türk 2019).

The Ambassador of Palestine to Turkey, Faed Mustafa, and the former Coordinator of TİKA in Palestine, Korkmaz, on behalf of the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, presented TİKA a medal of achievement at a ceremony held at the embassy in Ankara with the participation of Turkey’s Consul General in Jerusalem, Ambassador Gürcan Türkoğlu, Serkan Kaya, Vice President of TİKA, and the ambassadors of various Arab countries. Ambassador Mustafa, speaking at the ceremony, emphasized that TİKA is one of the pioneer agencies working in Palestine, and acknowledged that Turkey has a strong political will to support the Palestinian issue. Regarding TİKA’s scope of work in Palestine Mustafa stated: “TİKA, Turkey’s humanitarian arm, initiated many signature projects in Palestine and has helped to ease the burden of the Palestinian people” (Time Türk 2019).

In presenting the Mahmood Abbas medal to TİKA and Turkey, Faed Mustafa stressed that he was “proud to present this medal to Korkmaz, and also wanted to thank Turkey and the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”. Mustafa also underlined the meaning of this symbolic medal and said: “The owner of this award is the Turkish people and President of the country Erdoğan” (Time Türk 2019). In light of the weakened relations between Turkey and Israel, Israel has been alarmed by the many facilities and activities that TİKA has offered to Palestine. Last year, Israel opted to restrict TİKA’s activities in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Former Ambassador of Turkey, Uluç Özülkü, has recently evaluated Tel Aviv’s move as “selectively taken steps towards Turkey” (Sputnik 2018).

Regional ‘spill-over’ effects of Turkey’s Palestine policy: Where to go?
Today Turkey is caught between a prolonged war in Syria, which includes a huge influx of Syrian refugees across its southern border, and a complex geopolitical environment in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings (which led to the overthrow of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as well as developments in Saudi Arabia, Libya and Iraq). The fluctuation in the distribution of power and the changing nature of building partnerships/alliances in the Middle East in the post-2011 era have resulted in Turkey’s relative isolation, particularly in the East Mediterranean. In other words, Turkey’s reduced political and diplomatic relations with Egypt and Israel have galvanized an anti-Turkey camp in the region, with the successive gas explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Within this framework, Turkey’s
policy towards Syria refugees was revolved around non-refoulement and hosts a considerable number of refugees crossing Turkey’s southern border. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) records, Turkey is currently hosting nearly 3.5 million Syrian refugees—in fact, the unofficial records provide higher estimations (UNCHR 2019).

The aforementioned geopolitical atmosphere highlights the need for Turkey to develop pragmatic foreign policy strategies that could repair and normalize its ties with the incumbent regimes in Egypt, Israel, and Syria (despite its questionable legitimacy). To this end, Turkey has begun to strengthen its relations with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, particularly with the extraordinary session of the OIC Summit held in Istanbul in 2017 over Trump’s controversial decision on Jerusalem’s status. Turkey’s assertive policy backing Palestinians and calling for a two-state solution has resonated with Jordan’s King Abdullah II. One main issue for Jordan’s pro-Palestinian stance, in this regard, is closely tied to the aforementioned religious custody over the holy places in East Jerusalem and also to the perceived threat in the contentious rhetoric of ‘Jordan is Palestine’. Historically, Jordan has been home to a huge number of Palestinian refugees and the Kingdom is the only Arab country that grants Palestinians citizenship. And, in fact, this has motivated the Israeli Likud Party to describe Jordan as ‘an alternative homeland’ (al-watan al-badil) for Palestinians in the diaspora. This rhetoric appears to ignore Jordan’s more than 30-year-long policy of ‘Jordan is Jordan’ and ‘Palestine is Palestine’ announced by King Hussein (Abu Odeh 1999; Köprülü 2012). Thus, the stars are aligned over the ultimate status of Jerusalem in re/making and reinforcing an ideological partnership between Turkey and Jordan.

Nevertheless, Turkey insists on its pro-Palestinian stance, and accordingly President Erdoğan recently stated: “Turkey, will never turn its back on the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people. We will continue to share all opportunities with our brothers” (CNN Türk 2019). But, in fact, Turkey necessities multileveled policy towards Israel and Palestine reinforcing complex-interdependency that may strengthen its role and potential for being a partner in the region. In addition, because of Turkey’s support for the Ikhwan both before and after the overthrown of Mohammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US view Turkey as against their interests— not to mention the AKP’s Islamist credentials, which heighten this reading.

Palestine occupies a central place in Turkey’s re/making of its foreign policy after 2002. Prior to the AKP’s ascent to government, Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East, as well as in the Palestine-Israeli dispute, rested on a ‘balancing’ of the two side and was not constructed on a pro-Palestinian and Islamist basis. However, with the AKP government, it can be clearly seen that Palestine and Palestinians as a part of global Muslim community are central in rebuilding Turkey’s new diaspora and kin-community policy overseas. The lingering Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean region, highlight the inevitability of reinvigorating a more complex and more interdependent approach in Turkey’s foreign policy through normalizing its ties with its former partners—Egypt and Israel in particular.
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