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**Operation Guardian of the Walls from the Turkish Perspective:
Erdogan as the “Defender of Palestine”?**

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During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Turkey was one of the countries that expressed extreme criticism of Israel's policy. Turkey's vitriolic rhetoric was accompanied by diplomatic efforts, mainly but not exclusively direct, at leaders of Muslim countries. Turkey also took extensive action through government media aimed at the international community. Following the escalation, the Turkish Foreign Minister threatened that the Muslim world would send an international force to Jerusalem in order to prevent any recurrence of the measures taken by Israel. Despite its efforts, Turkey's influence on events on the ground during the operation itself, both in the Gaza Strip and in Jerusalem, was extremely limited.

During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Turkey was one of the countries that expressed extreme criticism of Israel's policy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [tweeted in Hebrew](#) to condemn "the despicable Israeli attacks" on al-Aqsa. Statements by decision makers in Ankara repeatedly accused Israel of being a "terrorist state." As part of Turkey's criticism, Erdogan [accused](#) United States President Joe Biden of having "bloody hands" for having approved the arms transaction with Israel. In response to further accusations by Erdogan, which were reminiscent of ancient anti-Jewish blood libels, a US State Department spokesperson [condemned](#) his antisemitic statements.

In addition to the extreme rhetoric, Erdogan spoke by telephone about the situation with leaders of many countries, mainly in the Muslim world (Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Pakistan, and Malaysia, among others), as well as with the Russian president and the Pope. The matter was raised during the visit to Riyadh by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu – after four years with no such visit, due to the tension between the two countries, in part because of the crisis following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. Ankara also took advantage of the fact that the president of the United Nations General Assembly was Turkish to gain a favorable position at the special General Assembly session convened to discuss events in the Israel-Hamas theater. At the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference, the Turkish Foreign Minister called for taking concrete measures to deter Israel and support the Palestinians. Cavusoglu also [talked about](#) the Islamic world sending an international

force to Jerusalem in order to prevent a recurrence of the May events, and Erdogan [stated](#), "If we remain silent to the oppression in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkestan, Karabakh today, we know that these oppressors may one day be on our doorstep." Following the operation, Turkey also withdrew the invitation it had sent in April to the Israeli Minister of National Infrastructures, Energy and Water Resources to the Antalya Diplomacy Forum.

Furthermore, during the campaign in Gaza, there was extensive activity by the Turkish government's international media, especially the Anadolu Agency and TRT World websites, through which the Turkish government tries to influence global opinion. The situation in Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank has been the main topic covered by the websites of these two organizations – which appear in Turkish, English, Arabic, Farsi, and French, among other languages – since the tension in Jerusalem began. Making effective use of the various social media formats at their disposal (articles, commentary, video clips), TRT World and Anadolu disseminated highly biased content that fully embraced the Palestinian narrative and the Turkish government position. Hamas was portrayed as a resistance organization, not a terrorist organization. Coverage of the tension in Jerusalem focused on violence by the Israel Police and actions by extremist Jewish groups. Reports of fatalities concentrated only on Palestinian casualties. There was almost no mention of the Arab rioters in the coverage of the violence in mixed Arab-Jewish cities in Israel. In addition, allegations portraying Israel as an apartheid state were cited frequently, and "historical" articles and video clips attacking the Zionist vision and challenging the legitimacy of Israel's existence were published. Furthermore, a number of reports, albeit in less systematic fashion, criticized the countries that normalized their relations with Israel in the past year. Therefore, Turkey and its media, along with other media outlets such as al-Jazeera, played a key role in disseminating anti-Israeli narratives.

The major emphasis placed by the Turkish government on the recent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians can also be understood as a way of diverting public attention in Turkey from domestic problems. The tension in Jerusalem began at a sensitive time in Turkey. The country was under a complete lockdown as a result of a severe wave of COVID-19, the economic situation was in a tailspin following the fall in the value of the Turkish lira and the effects of the health crisis; and the opposition was highly critical of the government's management of the economic crisis and vaccination program. In addition, the Turkish political system has been shaken by YouTube clips starring a Turkish mafia boss, allegedly located in United Arab Emirates, talking about connections between people associated with the government and the underworld; these clips have scored millions of hits. The emphasis on the clashes between Israel and the Palestinians therefore enabled Erdogan and the government to deflect the discourse on domestic affairs and to muffle criticism against them. For example, the Communications Director

of the Turkish presidency accused the head of the opposition, who called for early elections, of making "political cheap shots when Jerusalem is crying blood." When the chairwoman of the Turkish Good Party (IYI) compared Erdogan to Netanyahu, she aroused the anger of the ruling party, and Erdogan sued her for the comparison.

Beyond the efforts to take advantage of the round of violence between Israel and the Palestinians for internal Turkish political needs, from the outset of the campaign an overwhelming majority of Turkish society took the Palestinian side. The local media, which does not usually cover international events in depth, devoted much attention to the various stages of the conflict, and adopted a staunch position against "murderous" Israel. The view in the political system was unanimous, with all of the parties severely criticizing Israel. Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), an ally of Erdogan's party, [threatened](#) a regional or world war, and called on the Turkish nation to step in for a new guard duty in Jerusalem if necessary. The opposition also expressed firm criticism of Israel's actions. The largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, raised a huge Palestinian banner on its building. Various Turkish groups, including organizations of workers and students, organized events in condemnation of Israel and in support of the Palestinians. At a time when the country was still in full lockdown, the demonstrations against Israel, including in front of the Israeli consulate in Istanbul, were the only unrestricted public events allowed by the police.

Two important features of the response by the Turkish political system to the violence in the Israeli-Palestinian theater should be noted. First, despite their extremely violent rhetoric condemning Israel, there were no calls for Israel's destruction from the parties sitting in the Turkish parliament, and all of them further expressed support for the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. Second, even if the Turkish left wing movements expressed themselves somewhat differently than the government, for example with the use of anti-imperialistic rhetoric, they too were full partners in the calls to "defend Jerusalem and al-Aqsa." This phenomenon indicates a cognitive success for political Islam in Turkey, which has made al-Aqsa a symbol uniting all parts of the Turkish population, including those who call themselves secular.

Despite its extensive rhetorical and diplomatic efforts, Ankara's influence on events on the ground during the round of violence between Israel and Hamas was limited. The authorities in Ankara did not take extreme measures to damage Israel. Had they chosen to disrupt trade relations between the two countries, Turkey, which has a positive balance of trade with Israel, would have suffered more damage than Israel. Despite the threats by the Turkish Foreign Minister that the Islamic countries would send an international force to Jerusalem if necessary, even sending limited military forces like Turkish navy ships to

the Gaza Strip coast, either as an independent Turkish initiative or under the auspices of some international organization, still appears unlikely. At the same time, Erdogan's comparison of events between Israel and the Palestinians to the situation in Syria, Libya, and Karabakh, theaters in which Turkey has intervened militarily, demands attention. Furthermore, growing indications that Hamas members that reside in Turkey are using their presence there for the purposes of furthering the organization's military efforts constitute an ongoing problem for Israel. The extreme rhetoric adopted by Turkish leaders and media have a cumulative effect on Israel's public image, including in Israel itself, among the Arab minority. In the processes toward reaching arrangements following the ceasefire – and particularly if these are unsuccessful – the nature of Turkish involvement must be included in the array of Israel's considerations vis-à-vis Hamas. After it was reported in previous months that Ankara intended to improve relations between Turkey and Israel, the Turkish activity during the recent round of conflict highlights the fragility of these hopes, and the fact that the points of dispute between Jerusalem and Ankara have not changed.