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**PRIME MINISTER RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN'S VISIT TO ISRAEL:
THE VIEW FROM TURKEY****Yossi Eli**
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Viewed through the prism of the Turkish media, the visit to Israel of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was not just another visit of a Turkish state dignitary to yet another foreign country. That is because Turkish-Israeli relations are widely seen, not as a "bilateral" matter, but rather as part of a much broader and more intricate framework containing major Middle Eastern, European and, of course, American components.

Thus, writers such as Soli Özel (at "Z Raporu") and Murat Yetkin (from the newspaper "Radikal") claimed that Erdoğan's visit had a lot to do with a Turkish initiative to improve relations with Washington following a severe deterioration in Turkish-US ties in recent months. The term that was used by these commentators to describe the visit was "Türkiye'ye Amerikan vizesi" – an American visa for Turkey. In the process of getting that visa, Jerusalem seemed to be the most obvious gateway to Washington. Özel, moreover,

claimed that the ploy worked and that Erdoğan might get a "rendez-vous" with President Bush by the beginning of June. Thus, Israel is depicted as the gatekeeper to Washington and it is argued that Turkey, if wants good relations with the superpower of the world, must "be nice" to the gatekeeper, even if the same Erdoğan, just a few months before, had described Israel as a "terrorist state."

What really aroused the ire of Özel, Yetkin and Cengiz Çandar ("Z Raporu") was their Prime Minister's offer, during the visit, to serve as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "On what grounds," they asked, "can Turkey mediate? What is Turkey's leverage? Does the Turkish foreign ministry have the capacity to handle such a delicate and volatile conflict?" Their answers to these questions, of course, were mostly negative. Cengiz Çandar even complimented – though with a touch of cynicism -- Israel's polite rejection of the offer. And other commentators, like Türker Alkan, wondered how


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Turkey can be a mediator if Turkish foreign policy is in so many ways one-sided, meaning in favor of Israel. After all, he noted, Erdoğan spent so much time with the Israelis but devoted only 2 ½ hours to his meetings with the Palestinian leadership.

However, although conspiracy theories concerning the true nature of Turkish-Israeli relations were evident in many of the comments on the Turkish Prime Minister's visit, several other aspects also featured prominently. Erdoğan came to Israel with an army of businessmen bursting with great ideas concerning the development of Turkish-Israeli economic relations. The Turkish business sector is very aware of the importance of Israel as a business address. After all, one cannot overlook a \$2+ billion trading partner, said the newspaper *Hürriyet*. This observation represents an important shift in Turkish perceptions. For the first time, Turks began to discuss Israel as a major economic partner, at least in the immediate neighborhood. Murat Yetkin, for example, emphasized the proposed new natural-gas pipeline to run from Baku, Azerbaijan, through, Ceyhan, Turkey to Haifa, Israel. At the same time, Turkey offered the Palestinians economic aid to help in the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. That suggests that, in addition to expectations of an American "visa," Erdoğan came with a grand economic vision for the whole area. In their discussions of these issues in the media, Turks acknowledged that Israel is much more than just an extension of America's presence in the

Middle East.

However, public opinion consists of more than just what appears in the media. Indeed, Turkish public opinion includes elements that are absent from, or even contrary to media coverage. The "Turkish street" does not necessarily hold a fully-formulated view on this visit, in particular, or on Turkish-Israeli relations, in general. Certainly there is evidence, e.g., street posters, of hostility to Israel, the United States and Britain (the latter, perhaps, as one of the oppressors of Iraq). Yet, there is also considerable evidence of public antipathy toward and contempt for the Arab world. This is mainly due to historical memories of Arab "betrayal" of Turkey during World War I and Arab policies during the Cyprus crisis of 1974 and the oil crisis of the late 1970s. It is therefore possible to find Turks, such as *Büyük Oyunlar*, who claim, on the one hand, that Israel is a strong player in the high-stakes geopolitical games of the region, one that uses Turkey for its own purposes and even sometimes against Turkish interests (as in Iraq), but one that is also Turkey's only viable and reliable ally in a very unstable Middle East.

In short, it is very unclear what Turks really think about an event like Erdoğan's visit or about the larger issue of Israeli-Turkish relations. The best guess is that on these issues, the "Turkish street" is ultimately afflicted with the same ambivalence that characterizes the Turkish media.

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