

Will Erdogan Visit Gaza?

by [Fadi Elhousseini \(/experts/fadi-elhousseini\)](#)

Jun 28, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Fadi Elhousseini \(/experts/fadi-elhousseini\)](#)



Brief Analysis

Despite the Turkish leader's strong desire to visit Gaza, his proposed trip faces serious complications that likely entail further postponement.

Over the past two years, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly expressed his interest in visiting Gaza. Yet even before mass protests erupted in Istanbul last month, the prospect of such a trip was already clouded by numerous political and logistical concerns, including a divided Palestinian polity, the need for Egyptian consent, and the difficulty of making the visit yield anything more substantial than a series of goodwill gestures.

BACKGROUND

In 2006, the Turkish government revealed its official relationship with Hamas when it invited Khaled Mashal, head of the group's political bureau, to Ankara. Additional visits by various Hamas officials followed (e.g., Mashal attended the ruling Justice and Development Party's major congress in 2012, then visited Ankara again last month with group leader Ismail Haniyeh). Meanwhile, Turkey maintained its traditional ties with the Palestinian Authority and President Mahmoud Abbas, who has been visiting the country frequently.

Erdogan first expressed interest in visiting Gaza during his September 2011 trip to Egypt. He reaffirmed that interest during a November 2012 visit to Berlin. In 2013, he has repeatedly mentioned the idea: in March, he said he would visit Gaza the following month; in April, he said the trip would take place "by the end of May"; and after meeting with President Obama last month, he said he would visit both Gaza and the West Bank at the end of June. Amid these delays, Erdogan stated on Turkish television, "There is no question of delaying this trip."

THE U.S. POSITION

Washington has clearly expressed its opposition to such a trip, with State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki noting that the United States opposes engagement with Hamas, "a foreign terrorist organization which remains a destabilizing force in Gaza and the region." During his April visit to Turkey, Secretary of State John Kerry reportedly asked Erdogan to delay the visit out of concern that it would upset U.S. efforts to revive Turkish-Israeli ties and Middle East peace talks. The request provoked staunch Turkish objections; for example, Foreign Minister

Ahmet Davutoglu argued that "the main parameter of Erdogan's visit to Gaza is not what Kerry said, it is the reconciliation talks between the Palestinians."

THE PALESTINIAN POSITION

The Palestinian Authority has denounced all official visits to Gaza by foreign leaders, arguing that they only deepen the internal Palestinian rift. President Abbas has also emphasized the need to differentiate between humanitarian support and formal political visits, since the latter imply that Gaza is a separate entity from the West Bank.

Regarding Turkey, Abbas has responded to Erdogan's announcements by reiterating that officials should not visit Gaza to express solidarity at a time when Hamas and Fatah remain apart. In contrast, Hamas has welcomed the announcements, depicting a Turkish visit as a natural response to the blockade on Gaza. Meanwhile, Palestinian public opinion is divided.

Some Palestinians view the prospect of Erdogan in Palestine as a rare opportunity. Speaking to the German Press Agency in April, Hamas deputy foreign minister Ghazi Hamad stated, "Erdogan's visit will be an important and historic event for all Palestinians." Other supporters opine that the trip could mitigate some of the restrictions on Gaza and help "lift the siege," as noted repeatedly by Ismail Haniyeh and other Hamas officials. Still others believe that Erdogan's presence could help bridge the Fatah-Hamas rift.

Yet some Palestinians view the outspoken candor of Erdogan's announcements as nascent support for declaring a new independent entity in Gaza, and hence as an encroachment on the Palestinian national cause. Many PA officials have expressed this concern, including President Abbas himself when he uttered his discontent with political visits to Gaza. Indeed, the notion that Erdogan and his ruling party have a clear slant toward Hamas has become widespread. As Palestinian writer Husam al-Dajni has noted, Fatah believes a Turkish state visit would signal flagrant support for Hamas and bolster the group's rule and policies.

Other opponents describe the planned visit as "electioneering" intended for public consumption in Turkey, rather than a genuine effort to achieve tangible results in Gaza. In an April 20 interview with Aljazeera, Fatah official Yahya Rabah asserted that "such visits to Gaza are aimed at personal publicity and don't have any political content," whether in terms of "lifting the siege" or bringing about "Palestinian reconciliation."

LOGISTICAL ISSUES

Any visit to Gaza would have to be conducted through Egypt, since Israel controls the other borders and the sea. Obtaining Cairo's consent could prove tricky, however -- Egypt considers itself a natural leader of the Arab world and believes that Turkey is trying to muscle into the traditional Egyptian sphere of influence in the region.

Moreover, the need for Egyptian consent has applied to all previous high-level trips to Gaza, including visits by the emir of Qatar, the prime minister of Malaysia, and influential Muslim cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Tunisia's president was due to visit in January but cancelled at the PA's behest. And in February, outgoing Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said he would like to visit Gaza "if allowed" following his visit to Egypt, though nothing came of the statement.

WHAT COULD ERDOGAN DELIVER?

Given that Gaza visits by other foreign officials have achieved little or no results, Erdogan would likely aim to ensure that his own trip highlights Turkey's new stature in the region. Yet this cannot happen unless his arrival bears valuable fruit beyond solidarity speeches and funding pledges.

Thus far, his avowed goal for the visit is to promote Palestinian reconciliation, not to "embrace" one political faction at the other's expense. He has already stated that no progress can be expected in the Palestinian-Israeli peace

process without reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Toward that end, some observers believe he might urge Hamas to accept the conditions set forth by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia) for recognizing the group's political legitimacy. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Erdogan asked Quartet envoy Tony Blair to involve Hamas in peace negotiations back in 2010. This position also dovetails with remarks by Turkish officials who justified Khaled Mashal's 2006 Ankara visit, calling it an opportunity to prod Hamas on renouncing violence against Israel, among other things.

Other possibilities include the following:

- If Erdogan decided to visit the West Bank as well, some observers would argue that he was merely attempting to placate Washington. Yet he may have his own reasons for insisting on such a side trip, namely, preserving Turkey's relationship with the PA. This would mean entering the West Bank first in order to be received by President Abbas, then traveling to Gaza afterward -- the proper protocol if Ankara wants to show that it regards the Palestinians as unified and the PA president as their head of state.
- Any travel between the West Bank and Gaza would presumably involve a short flight or drive via Israel, increasing the chances of Erdogan stopping off to meet with Israeli officials.
- Erdogan might delay his plans until after Palestinian reconciliation so that he could conduct the visit alongside President Abbas. On April 22, Foreign Minister Davutoglu stated, "If the Palestinians agree, it may be possible [for Erdogan] to go to Gaza with Abbas." Abbas made the same suggestion during his mid-May visit to Cairo: "If the Palestinian national reconciliation is provided, we can visit Gaza with Erdogan."
- Erdogan could succumb to American pressure and call off the trip entirely. U.S. and Turkish officials alike have emphasized the significance of their bilateral relationship, describing it as "a model of cooperation." Erdogan might also be swayed by his strong personal relationship with Obama (e.g., in a January 2012 interview with *Time* magazine, Obama named the Turkish premier as one of five foreign leaders with whom he had forged "bonds of trust").

CONCLUSION

Recognizing Erdogan's interest in preserving good relations with Washington, the PA, and Hamas, one can infer that any plans to visit Gaza are susceptible to indefinite reprieve, particularly in light of Turkey's recent domestic troubles. The trip has already been postponed several times, and in the end, Ankara may decide to wait for Fatah-Hamas reconciliation before committing to a firm itinerary.

Fadi Elhousseini is an associate research fellow (ESRC) at the Institute for Middle East Studies-Canada and a doctoral candidate at the University of Sunderland in Britain. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)