



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Turkey has been tightening its attitude towards the crisis in the Middle East—a precedent or a new Erdogan's manoeuvre?



Turkey has been sharply tightening its position regarding the Gaza crisis, with the ambition to become the primary representative of Palestinian interests on the international stage. Ankara has simultaneously been applying intense pressure on Israel to cease operations in Gaza, given that it wants to play a larger role in resolving the Middle East situation.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, however, has been making moves that appear to be a solo act going out of the framework of Turkey's alliance within the Western Alliance.

However, the experienced Turkish leader has had so many incidents of deviating from the shared allied policy to even mention a risky precedent. Following each of those solo performances, he remained in the saddle, embraced by his allies.

It was surprising when President Erdoğan **cancelled** his trip to Washington and the meeting with President Joe Biden, planned for May 9.

None of the capitals provided detailed explanations for cancelling the visit, apart from protocol reasons, which are difficult to accept, with the exception that Ankara requested the postponement.

Explanations that it was a scheduling mismatch, given that the Turkish president has not visited the White House since 2019, when he met with Donald Trump, have been implausible.

Postponing such a long-awaited visit must have more serious reasons than a full schedule because there is hardly a more important meeting for the Turkish leader than the meeting with the US president. It is a "pretty big deal", said Soner Cagaptay, an expert on Turkey at The Washington Institute, regarding the postponement of the visit.

New downhill in relations with the US

The talks in the White House were supposed to focus on the progress of defence and trade ties, given that only three months ago, one of the biggest obstacles to mutual relations was removed and Congress finally **approved** the sale of 40 new F-16 aircraft to Turkey for \$23 billion.

However, after that relief, due to the multi-year dispute between the two largest military powers in NATO, the postponement of the meeting at the White House returned communication to a cooler level.

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The next opportunity for President Biden and Erdoğan to talk might be in July during the anniversary NATO summit in Washington, but that will only be a partial compensation for the missed conversation at the White House.

Simultaneously with the cancellation of the trip to Washington, President Erdoğan hosted the leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, and thereby strongly fuelled speculations about the possible move of the Hamas leadership from Qatar to Turkey.

Doha, which, after 12 years of hospitality to the leadership of Hamas, openly talked about the possibility of ending it due to the frequent objections of US officials, supported these hints.

New manoeuvring space

Even though President Erdoğan **said** that he does not believe that the leaders of Hamas will move out of Qatar, the fact that **he met** with Ismail Haniyeh in Istanbul just a few days before that statement suggests otherwise.

Turkey has been a frequent host to Hamas delegations, and opening the door to

establishing a base for their leadership would be a step that fits the picture of strong Turkish opposition to the Israeli operation and support for the Palestinian struggle.

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However, until that possibility becomes a reality, Erdogan will have a card in his hand that will give him room to manoeuvre and increase his share in creating a post-conflict arrangement in the Middle East.

He will take a risk of standing on the opposite side of his Western allies, particularly the US, as a factor with an extremely antagonistic policy towards Israel in those processes.

Leadership in the pro-Palestinian bloc

Therefore, the most extreme aspect of the package—which also involves meetings with the head of Hamas and delaying his trip to Washington—was probably his unprecedented decision to sever all trade relations with Israel until it agreed to a ceasefire.

By unilaterally terminating trade relations worth about \$7 billion per year, with almost 80% going to Turkish exports to Israel, Erdogan wants to take primacy within the bloc of supporters of the Palestinians.



Erdogan's radicalisation of the position towards the Middle East counts on Turkey's irreplaceability in seeking a way for peace between Russia and Ukraine

It is an acceptable risk for him to move towards that goal with a series of near-simultaneous decisions directly confronting America. This puts Washington in a position to carefully weigh its response to Erdogan, given that the quality of this alliance affects not only the crisis in the Middle East but also the war in Ukraine.

Erdogan is also aware of Turkey's significance in solving that crisis, so his radicalisation of the position towards the Middle East at the same time counts on Turkey's irreplaceability in seeking a way for peace between Russia and Ukraine.