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Turkey: No peace deal without Palestinian unity



It will be impossible to reach a Middle East peace deal without reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas militants, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned Friday. "The process of unity between Fatah and Hamas, this has to be achieved. If this reconciliation is not achieved, then I don't believe that a solution or result will come out of the Israeli-Palestinian discussions," Erdogan told a Washington think-tank during a visit to the United States. He was speaking after confirming following talks Thursday with US President Barack Obama that he planned to visit the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank sometime next month despite US opposition. The dual stops mean Erdogan would meet with the Hamas rulers of Gaza as well as with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, likely in Ramallah. "I place a lot of significance on this visit in terms of peace in the Middle East. I'm hoping that that visit will contribute to unity in Palestine," the Turkish leader said Thursday at a joint press conference with Obama. Washington had urged Erdogan to postpone any visit to the impoverished Gaza Strip, saying it would be a "distraction" from its efforts to revive the moribund Middle East peace process. "As we've said consistently, we oppose engagement with Hamas, a foreign terrorist organization which remains a destabilizing force in Gaza and the region," State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters later. "We urge all parties who share our interest in the creation of a Palestinian state to take steps that promote the resumption of peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel." Erdogan's announcement that he would also visit the West Bank appeared aimed at soothing US anger that he would meet with militant Hamas leaders in Gaza. There has been a renewed effort by Washington since Secretary of State John Kerry took office in February to galvanize international efforts to kick-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks stalled since late 2010. Kerry is returning to the Middle East region next week and is expected to make his fourth visit to Israel in three months.