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U.S. advises Erdogan postpone Gaza trip, pushes for Turkey-Israel



Secretary of State John Kerry said on Sunday the United States had told Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan it would be better for him to delay a planned trip to the Palestinian Gaza Strip expected at the end of May.

Erdogan, who has for years spoken of his desire to visit the Palestinian enclave, said last week he would go there after an official visit to the United States next month. But Kerry said a Turkish visit might distract from efforts to revive Middle East peace talks.

“We thought that the timing of it is really critical with respect to the peace process we are trying to get off the ground and that we would like to see the parties begin with as little outside distraction as possible,” Kerry told a news conference in Istanbul.

The planned trip also would come at a sensitive time for Turkish-Israeli relations, with Washington keen to avoid spoiling a rapprochement between them following an Israeli apology in March for the killing of nine Turks in 2010.

Kerry said at a news conference that he had a “prolonged and constructive” discussion with Turkey’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, about “the importance of completing the task with respect to the renewal of relations between Turkey and Israel.”

He added that he believes Davutoglu and Erdogan “are deeply committed to fulfilling all of the obligations of that understanding. I think they are committed to doing so.”

President Barack Obama has made both issues foreign policy priorities for his second term and Kerry was pushing them in meetings with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and Davutoglu.

On a trip to Israel last month, Obama secured a pledge from Turkish and Israeli leaders to normalize ties that broke down after a 2010 Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla that killed eight Turks and a Turkish-American. However, the rapprochement has been slow, sparking concerns that Turkey may be backsliding on its commitment.

U.S. officials say they are hopeful that a meeting this week of Israeli and Turkish diplomats to discuss Israeli compensation for victims of the flotilla raid will jumpstart the process of restoring full diplomatic relations and exchanging ambassadors between the two countries that Washington sees as key strategic partners in the volatile Middle East.

Erdogan is due to visit Obama at the White House on May 16 and U.S. officials are keen to see substantive process by then.