

## 1. WHY ERDOGAN'S WHITE HOUSE VISIT WON'T HAPPEN NOW

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# Why Erdogan's White House visit won't happen now

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS\*

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy is marked by a pattern of unpredictability, evident once again in the recent developments surrounding his planned visit to the White House on May 9. In recent years, the Greeks have experienced how their most important neighbor changes policy from one day to the next. The sudden cancellation – officially there is talk of a postponement – of the Turkish president's planned visit to the White House on May 9 fits this pattern.

Securing a prestigious reception at the White House has long been a priority for Erdogan, with both Turkish and American officials investing significant efforts toward this end. The abrupt reversal of plans raises questions, particularly regarding the underlying reasons for the cancellation: "We have not been able to reconcile the schedules of the two sides," is the unconvincing explanation given by the US Embassy in Ankara.

Beyond mere protocol, substantive political interests play a pivotal role in the unraveling of the summit. Media reports allude to differences of opinion about the level of the visit and the quality of the hospitality offered.

According to one account, Erdogan was expecting the kind of lavish receptions the White House stages in exceptional cases for special guests of state. The Americans reportedly planned just two hours for the guest from Anatolia, not even a dinner at the White House was on the agenda.

Still, the decisive factor for the cancellation – or postponement – at short notice is probably less a matter of protocol (although this plays an important role for Erdogan, who is concerned with status), but rather tangible political interests – on both sides. With Ankara throwing in the towel in the end.

For years, profound differences have overshadowed bilateral relations. Erdogan's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system has poisoned relations more than almost any other issue. Conflicting stances over Syria, where Ankara is militarily fighting Kurdish militiamen, who are the Americans' most



US President Joe Biden (right) and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan are seen at a meeting on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11, 2023.

important allies, have been irreconcilable.

Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine has created new tensions, as Ankara has only hesitantly and by no means comprehensively participated in Western sanctions against Russia.

Recently, there have been signs of rapprochement between Ankara and Washington: In a protracted process reminiscent of scenes at an oriental bazaar, Washington wrested approval from the Turks for Sweden to join NATO in return for the delivery of ultra-modern F-16 fighter jets for the outdated Turkish Air Force. A reception for Erdogan at the White House was to crown the political swap deal.

The war in Gaza has further complicated matters. Ankara and Washington are on opposite sides in the Middle East, the differences could hardly be greater. The Gaza policy has also long taken on domestic political dimensions – for both Erdogan and Biden.

One reason for Erdogan's defeat in the recent local elections is the rise of the Islamist New Welfare Party, which has been successful in accusing the president of lacking solidarity with Palestine. Since then, Erdogan's anti-Israeli rhetoric has increased in intensity. Most recently, the Turkish president has also publicly attacked America for its support for Israel. Erdogan may have thought that none of this fits in with

amicable gestures in the White House.

For Biden, the all-important elections are still to come: For the US president, TV pictures with Hamas-ally Erdogan in the halls of the White House pose political risks as they could play into the hands of his opponents. That said, the suspension of the visit has a positive domestic political side for the American president. However, the turn of events is a serious setback for relations between the USA and Turkey. Initial commentaries suggest that this would benefit Russia's Putin in particular, as the thwarted visit signals weakened cohesion within the Western Alliance. There are two reasons why this argument is not convincing.

Firstly, Turkey's alignment with the Western community in the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East is somewhat limited, as its own interests and independent initiatives take precedence. Moreover, similar to the current dynamics with Biden, Putin too has become a victim of the unpredictable nature of the Turkish president. Despite Moscow's repeated announcements, the anticipated visit of the Russian president to Turkey has been postponed multiple times – and is yet to materialize.

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