

## BLINKEN'S GAZA DIPLOMACY TOUR; TAKEAWAYS FROM ISTANBUL

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken commenced his week-long diplomatic tour from January 4 to 11, 2024, beginning with meetings in Istanbul with senior Turkish officials, before proceeding to Greece. The primary objective of his trip is to address and alleviate escalating tensions across the Middle East, particularly exacerbated by Israel's military operations in Gaza since October, 2023. Blinken is set to visit several countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and the occupied West Bank. His messages revolve around the de-escalation of the conflict, addressing the humanitarian crisis, and planning for the post-war scenario.

Washington aims to engage regional countries, including Turkiye, in the reconstruction, governance, and potential security arrangements in Gaza. Blinken's fourth visit since October 2023, comes against a backdrop of concerning developments beyond Gaza, spanning areas such as Lebanon, northern Israel, the Red Sea, and Iraq. These developments have significantly strained the previous U.S. efforts to avert a regional crisis in the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, there is a noticeable increase in global criticism directed at Israel's military operations.

U.S. Secretary of State Blinken met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, along with Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) head Ibrahim Kalin, Erdogan's Chief Adviser Akif Cagatay

Kilic and U.S. Ambassador to Ankara Jeff Flake.<sup>1</sup> Blinken emphasized several key points including the imperative to prevent the conflict from spreading, secure the release of hostages, expand humanitarian assistance, and minimize civilian casualties.<sup>2</sup>

Blinken also stressed the crucial need to work towards broader and enduring regional peace, ensuring both Israel's security and progress towards the establishment of a Palestinian state. He emphasized the need to prevent the conflict from spreading, secure the release of hostages, expand humanitarian assistance and reduce civilian casualties, and work toward broader, lasting regional peace that ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of a Palestinian state.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking in Crete, Blinken underscored the importance of Turkiye's role in using its influence and ties to prevent the escalation of the conflict. The discussions delved into Ankara's potential contributions in the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, covering areas such as Palestinian-led governance, security, and rebuilding efforts. The talks also focused on collaborative efforts with other stakeholders aimed at fostering more enduring, resilient peace, and enhancing security throughout the region.

It is worth noting that President Erdogan had skipped a previous meeting with Secretary Blinken in November 2023 expressing dissatisfaction with the U.S.'s strong support for Israel during the Gaza assault. The strained relationship between the U.S. and Turkiye also extends to other foreign policy issues, including disputes over NATO and Iraq.

Blinken also met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, with discussions centering on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Fidan highlighted Israel's escalating aggression, emphasizing the threat it poses to the entire region, the immediate need for a Gaza ceasefire, the permanent delivery of aid, and a swift return to two-state solution negotiations.<sup>4</sup>

The Turkiye -U.S. relationship has faced challenges beyond the current conflict, with issues like the delay in Congress approval for a fighter jet deal and disagreements over Sweden's NATO

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<sup>1</sup> Alperen Aktas, "With Mideast in crisis, US' Blinken meets Turkish president, foreign minister in Istanbul," Anadolu Agency, January 6, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/with-mideast-in-crisis-us-blinken-meets-turkish-president-foreign-minister-in-istanbul/3101839#>

<sup>2</sup> Alperen Aktas, "With Mideast in crisis, US' Blinken meets Turkish president, foreign minister in Istanbul," Anadolu Agency, January 6, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/with-mideast-in-crisis-us-blinken-meets-turkish-president-foreign-minister-in-istanbul/3101839#>

<sup>3</sup> "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Turkish President Erdogan," Press Release, U.S. Department of State, January 6, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-turkish-president-erdogan-2/>

<sup>4</sup> "US Diplomat Blinken Meets Turkey's Erdogan, Kicking Off Gaza Diplomacy Tour," al Jazeera, January 6, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/6/us-diplomat-blinken-meets-turkeys-erdogan-kicking-off-gaza-diplomacy-tour>

membership bid. Blinken addressed the progress in Sweden's NATO membership process during his discussions with Turkish officials.

Blinken's trip holds three main focal points: de-escalation of the conflict; addressing the humanitarian crisis; and planning for the post-war period. The U.S. seeks involvement from regional countries in reconstruction, governance, and potential security in Gaza, focusing on progress in talks about Gaza's governance after achieving the goal of 'eradicating' Hamas.

There is an increasing understanding in the U.S. of the consequences of the Israeli aggression in Gaza and its spill-over effects. Blinken's visit to Turkiye highlights how it can leverage its influence and ties to effectively prevent the spread of conflict in the Middle East and its potential role in the post-conflict scenario for Gaza. This encompassed addressing the intricate issues of governance, Palestinian-led governance, security, and rebuilding.

In his previous tour to the region in 2023, Secretary Blinken could only garner limited success in efforts to forge a regional consensus on how best to ease civilian suffering in Gaza as Israel intensified.

Since October 2023, Israel's aggression has caused at least 2300 deaths including 9,600 children. Through the Gaza diplomacy tour, the Biden Administration is seeking a buy-in, or at least consideration, of potential monetary or in-kind contributions to reconstruction efforts and some form of participation in a proposed multi-national force that could operate in or adjacent to the territory.<sup>5</sup> Since October 2023, Turkiye has been the harshest critic of Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the prosecution of the war and the impact it has had on Palestinian civilians as well as the region at large.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Lee "Blinken Opens Latest Mideast Tour in Turkey Amid Fears Gaza Conflict May Engulf Region," Time, <https://time.com/6552732/blinken-mideast-tour-turkey-gaza-war-fears/>