

BLINKEN'S VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST: AMERICA'S DIVIDED ROLE

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



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 11th visit to the Middle East since October 7, 2023, underscored the Biden Administration's efforts to calm the situation. During his five-day visit from October 21-25, 2024, to Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, Secretary Blinken met with important regional partners to look for a sustainable solution. His main agenda included the release of hostages, ending the “conflict”, addressing the urgent humanitarian crisis, and, above all, the post-conflict planning phase.¹

The visit came at a time when the escalation had reached new heights, engulfing other countries in the region including heightened tensions between Iran and Israel following the counter attacks by Iran. As a result, officials in the U.S. and Israel had been discussing the response in recent weeks. Israeli officials have told Washington that they will refrain from attacks on Iranian nuclear or energy sites that could lead to dramatic escalation between the countries.²

During his visit to Israel, Secretary Blinken met with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Herzog, and Defence Minister Gallant. The discussions revolved around ‘capitalizing’ on Tel Aviv's mission against Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar, securing release of hostages, and the end-game to the Gaza situation

¹ “Secretary Blinken’s Travel to Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Kingdom,” Press Release, U.S. Department of State, October 21, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-the-middle-east/>

² Michael Crowley, “Blinken to Visit Israel in Latest Push for Gaza Cease-Fire,” New York Times, October 21, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/21/world/middleeast/blinken-israel-gaza-cease-fire.html>

that ensures lasting security for Palestinians and Israelis. Discussion were also held on the post-conflict framework, reconstruction in Gaza, situation in Lebanon, humanitarian aid into Gaza, and a mutual agreement along the Blue Line including implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Secretary Blinken also met with the Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, to discuss mutual efforts to secure peace and security in the region by addressing the Gaza situation and larger conflict in the region. Matters relating to hostage release, diplomatic resolution in Lebanon, end to the conflict in Sudan, and greater integration in the region were also discussed.

In Qatar, Secretary Blinken met with Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. The discussions revolved around the same agenda as was in Israel and Saudi Arabia. Renewed efforts to secure hostage release and end to the Israeli war in Gaza remained at the forefront. In addition, matters of security, governance, and reconstruction in post-war Gaza, political progress in Lebanon, protection of civilians, and flow of humanitarian assistance also came under discussions.

Diplomacy and Contradictions

More than one year since the Israeli military onslaught against Gaza, Secretary Blinken's visit concluded without an end-game in sight. The trip was more of a diplomatic face-saving as the Biden Administration had come under increased criticism with U.S. elections on the anvil. Whether this was an act of sincere diplomacy or a quick damage control exercise remains to be seen. While the U.S. reiterated its support for the end of the crisis in Gaza, humanitarian assistance, and regional security, it at the same time assured Israel of iron-clad commitment and support to its security.

Regardless of the efforts made by the U.S., its overall approach continues to be baffling. For its part, Netanyahu made his stance clear on the continuation of war. Many in the U.S. believe that Israel may choose to wait for President Trump to assume office before considering any steps towards a ceasefire deal. There also seem to be differing views between the U.S. and Israel on the path of ceasefire, peace deals, humanitarian aid, and the way away from the war.

In addition, there is growing frustration in the region, especially among the Arab partners of the U.S. During a press briefing, the Qatari Prime Minister referred to the expansion of the war despite the efforts being made to contain it. Moreover, while the negotiations have gone through multiple phases, they remain fruitless, each step closer to a deal resulted in multiple steps back.

While the visit rendered no concrete results, there were plans of another negotiating delegation from the U.S. visiting Qatar in the near future to meet with counterparts from Israel. The negotiations will be focused on hostage release and ceasefire deal as well as options to bring the war to an end.³

The prospects of peace in the region at a time when Israel is embroiled in war in Gaza and expanding it regionally – particularly normalization of relations among countries in the region – seem unlikely and limited at best. While the Biden Administration has encouraged de-escalation and a possible diplomatic resolution, the U.S. approach is nonetheless complicated by its continuous military support to Israel as it remains its largest supplier of weapons and defence resources even at present. The dual stance of advocating a settlement and de-escalation while supplying weapons used in the ongoing Israeli war against Palestinians raises questions about Washington's credibility as a mediator.

The behavior of the U.S. to the crisis in Gaza reflects its dual and contradictory stance in pursuance of the so-called peace initiatives driven more by domestic and international pressure than genuine commitment to ending the war. While on one hand it is calling for peace, it is simultaneously supplying weapons to fuel the very violence and vetoing resolutions for ceasefire. Since October 7, 2023, Washington has not only supplied weapons worth billions of dollars to Israel including artillery shells to 2,000-pound bombs to precision-guided munitions but also approved billions more in major weapons platforms that will be delivered in the future.⁴

The duality in U.S. policy approach is raising more questions about Washington's seriousness in finding a solution to Israeli aggression in Gaza and an end to the genocide of Palestinians. In addition, with a new U.S. Administration under Donald Trump in the offing, a just resolution of the crisis has become even more unpredictable. As long as the U.S. chooses geopolitical interests — driven by military and strategic alliance — the prospects of peace in Gaza would remain uncertain.

³ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani at a Joint Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, October 24, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-qatari-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-mohammed-bin-abdulrahman-al-thani-at-a-joint-press-availability-4/>

⁴ Linda J. Bilmes, William D. Hartung, and Stephen, "United States Spending on Israel's Military Operations and Related U.S. Operations in the Region, October 7, 2023 – September 30, 2024," Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, October 7, 2024, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2023/2024/Costs%20of%20War_US%20Support%20Since%20Oct%207%20FINAL%20v2.pdf