



## [U.S. Secretary of State Blinken's Latest Diplomatic Visit to the Middle East Highlights the Importance of a Permanent Cessation of Israeli Hostilities in Gaza](#)

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken has embarked on yet another trip to the Middle East amid Israel's ongoing War on Gaza, his fourth since the outbreak of the conflict back in October. While Blinken's expressed aim with this latest visit to the region is to try to contain the war and curb Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, one of the consistent themes that has been relayed to him by government officials across the Middle East is that the United States must pressure Israel to stop the war – not merely seek temporary pauses for potential hostage release deals, but instead a complete cessation of hostilities which can then pave the way for diplomatic negotiations. In their discussions with Blinken, Turkish officials, for example, were particularly concerned with the dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza. They emphasized that Israel's escalating aggression posed a threat to peace and stability in the region, and therefore stressed the need for an end to their military actions in Gaza which among other things would allow for the critical delivery of much-needed humanitarian aid. Officials in Qatar and Saudi Arabia also echoed the calls for a permanent ceasefire, pointing out that the constant images of death and destruction in Gaza are troublingly desensitizing people to the horrors of what is taking place.

During his meetings with regional leaders on the diplomatic tour, several expressed to U.S. Secretary of State Blinken that the alarming civilian death toll in Gaza and disturbing accounts of the devastation caused are justifiably fueling global outrage over Israel's actions. For months, human rights activists, United Nations officials, and others have been demanding a permanent cessation of hostilities, highlighting that the devastating bombardment of the Palestinian enclave must end first and foremost in the face of mass civilian killing and displacement before serious discussions can begin regarding Gaza's post-war future. There has also been increased criticism and questioning towards U.S. military aid to Israel, with prominent elected officials such as U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders urging Congress to hold back billions in military funding for Israel due to the nature of its brutal and immoral assault on Gaza. Sanders and others have warned that the ongoing Israeli military campaign will be remembered among some of the darkest chapters of modern history, given the appalling number of Palestinian civilians, journalists, and humanitarian workers that have been killed in the preceding months.

It has been estimated that more than 23,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, a distressing number of which have been children. Additionally, journalists and aid workers have been targeted, with the latter lamenting the detrimental impact that Israel's assault on Gaza has had on the health infrastructure there, and accusing Israel of denying access to more of the region for humanitarian relief trucks. The indiscriminate bombardment has also forced much of the hospital staff and patients to flee to shelters in other areas of the Gaza Strip, which have still been subjected to devastating assaults. Israeli airstrikes and ground operations have decimated entire neighborhoods, public buildings, and landmarks, and displaced at least 85% of residents in Gaza. According to the United Nations, approximately 60% of the Palestinian enclave's infrastructure has been destroyed as a result of the Israeli offensive. On top of this and the horrendous death toll, the Gaza Strip has faced a devastating humanitarian crisis, with severely limited access to food, clean drinking water, and medical supplies.

In addition to attempting to address humanitarian concerns, one of the other main stated goals of Blinken's meetings in Israel during the week-long trip is to make progress towards the return of Palestinians to their homes and ensure that they are not forcibly displaced outside of Gaza. Blinken and other Biden administration officials were reportedly irked over recent statements by bigoted Israeli ministers including Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir which called for the forcible resettlement of Palestinians to areas outside of Gaza. Smotrich has advocated for finding countries that would take Palestinians in and has said that civilians in the Gaza Strip were not innocent. He also suggested that Palestinians in Gaza make way for Israelis who could "make the desert bloom." Meanwhile, Ben-Gvir has claimed that the forced displacement of Gazans would be "the right and humane solution" to the ongoing war in Gaza.

The remarks were condemned publicly by U.S. officials as "inflammatory and irresponsible," but did not come as a surprise to human rights and social justice activists who drew parallels to the Israeli government policies of mass land dispossession and forcible displacement of Palestinians which has been taking place ever since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Furthermore, a paper by an Israeli government ministry proposing that Palestinians in Gaza could be transferred to Egypt's Sinai Desert sparked an outcry as well regarding the potential of forced displacement. Following his meetings with Israeli officials, Blinken did comment that "extremist settler violence carried out with impunity, settlement expansion, demolitions, evictions, all make it harder, not easier, for Israel to achieve lasting peace and security," a sentiment which activists have been attempting to draw attention to for decades.

With this latest diplomatic visit to the Middle East, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken is also seeking to prevent Israel's ongoing bombardment of Gaza from devolving into a wider-scale regional conflict. This is especially relevant in the face of tensions between Israel and Hezbollah along the Israel-Lebanon border, increasing Israeli settler violence in the West Bank, and the crisis in the Red Sea. All of this has led Blinken to express that he is focused on trying to calm what he has called a "moment of profound tension" in the region. For many impartial experts and observers though, success in averting the outbreak of a wider-scale conflict hinges on putting an end to the destructive Israeli military campaign in Gaza and striving towards a legitimate and peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.