

DAILY COMMENT

CAN WHITE HOUSE DIPLOMACY HELP PREVENT ESCALATION IN GAZA AND BEYOND?

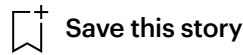
It is not a simple matter for the Biden Administration to be, on the one hand, the backstop for Israel's looming actions in Gaza and, on the other, a voice for strategic caution and the initiator of a diplomatic track.

By Bernard Avishai

October 15, 2023



The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, at a press conference on Thursday, in Tel Aviv, to address the recent Hamas attacks in Israel. Photograph by Jacquelyn Martin / Getty



In Tel Aviv, on Thursday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters what President Biden had said passionately earlier this week—that the Administration has “Israel’s back.” For Israelis, mourning more than thirteen hundred murdered in the Hamas and Islamic Jihad attack from Gaza, stunned by the defensive breach, fixed on the fate of an estimated hundred and fifty kidnapped, and mobilizing three hundred and sixty thousand reservists, the Administration’s statements of support were timely. Blinken, standing next to Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, alluded to his family’s acquaintance with the sorrows of the Holocaust, and said, “You may be strong enough on your own to defend yourself—but, as long as America exists, you will never, ever have to.”

What precisely the Administration and Netanyahu’s government—now expanded to include the opposition leaders Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, both former chiefs of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, in the security cabinet—are coördinating has not been made public. But the Pentagon, according to Politico, had already begun airlifting air-defense missiles and other munitions to the I.D.F., and it has repositioned the U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, which includes eight squadrons of attack and support aircraft, to the eastern Mediterranean. On Saturday, the Administration confirmed that it was dispatching a second carrier group, the U.S.S. Dwight D. Eisenhower, to join the Ford. Blinken and Netanyahu’s most urgent joint priority seems to be deterring Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. (The carrier group “sends a strong signal of deterrence should any actor hostile to Israel consider trying to escalate or widen this war,” a White House National Security Council spokesperson told Axios’s Barak Ravid.) Hezbollah is no longer the ragtag force it was when its artillery barrages forced Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon in 2000; in 2020, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that Hezbollah had up to twenty thousand active fighters and some twenty thousand reserves.

It is reported to have more than a hundred thousand rockets, thousands of medium-range missiles, and hundreds of long-range missiles with guidance systems. The great danger is that it will add its rockets and missiles to those already coming from Gaza.

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Yet, if by having Israel's back, the Administration also means to support the Israeli government's foreseeable military response in Gaza—Israel has warned more than a million civilians to evacuate northern Gaza—then Blinken must focus on what has been staring Israelis in the face, at least since May, 2021, the last time that Hamas and Islamic Jihad precipitated major violence by firing rockets at Israeli cities. This is the clear danger of an escalatory spiral, which could drag Israel into a Bosnian-style war with unknowable implications for the region. As Israel's indispensable ally, but with diplomatic reach and other clients in the region, the Biden Administration is the only party, now, with the standing to both express rage at Hamas and still open a diplomatic track to deal with the Palestinians' "legitimate aspirations to live with equal measures of security, freedom, justice, opportunity, and dignity." That was Blinken's own formulation in the press conference on Thursday, spoken as Netanyahu looked on uncomfortably; but Blinken's words aimed to make plain only what Hamas cannot deliver, rather than pledge what America will *try* to deliver.

Hamas's attack in 2021—and Israel's predictably harsh response to it—now seems a portent of the current threat of the escalation. The more that Israel had pummelled Gaza, in an effort to degrade Hamas military infrastructure, the greater was the suffering of Gazan civilians. Their terrible fate provoked disturbances in the West Bank and Jerusalem, which the Palestinian Authority

contained, and threatened to provoke Hezbollah's aerial bombardment from the northern border. The retaliation also triggered attacks from some Arab youths in mixed Arab-Jewish cities in Israel; according to a study, thirty per cent of Israeli-Arab males between nineteen and twenty-four were neither in school nor employed. And it threatened to roil Palestinian refugee camps in and around Amman, Jordan. The I.D.F. and the police did not have an obvious deterrent to such situations, and still do not. The veteran Israeli journalist Ben Caspit writes that the Israeli Army had thinned out its forces at the Gaza border last Saturday because it had been deploying huge numbers of troops into the West Bank "in response to a growing wave of Palestinian terrorism and violence against Israelis, promoted in part by the violence of Jewish settlers."

This pattern seems to be playing out again, with much higher stakes. Rallies against bombardment in Gaza have been reported in Ramallah, Hebron, and other West Bank cities. Reuters reports that, on Friday, Jordanian riot police dispersed hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters trying to reach a border zone with the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and thousands of others held anti-Israel demonstrations across the country. And rockets are now falling sporadically in the north of Israel, some launched by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, some by Hezbollah. Since hundreds of thousands of reservists have left their jobs to serve, the I.D.F. cannot adopt a purely deterrent posture indefinitely, waiting for Hezbollah to escalate; there is a danger that I.D.F. commanders will argue for a preëmptive strike in the north irrespective of what happens in the south.

"Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is doing just enough to show continuing support for Hamas without provoking war," Amos Yadlin, the former head of the Israeli Institute of National Security Studies, told Israel's Channel Twelve. "But we can't make the mistake we made with Hamas—we have to assume that Hezbollah's preparations for attack suggest their *intention* to attack, and Gantz and Eisenkot, both former heads of the Northern Command, will draw the operational conclusions."

Blinken, echoing Biden, emphasized the importance of Israel holding to the international laws of war, as if revealing that the Administration does indeed

expect a ground assault in Gaza, and that ordinary Gazans—not only hostages—will be used by Hamas as shields against Israel’s firepower. For now, the I.D.F. has told large civilian populations to vacate their homes in northern Gaza and move to already densely populated cities in the south, thus leaving Hamas fighters exposed to Israeli assault without human shields—a strategy that risks catastrophe but which the I.D.F. apparently believes makes the best of bad moral choices, and may satisfy Washington, though certainly not the Arab world and many observers globally. Even before Israel’s evacuation order, the Palestinian Health Ministry reported that more than thirteen hundred Gazans had been killed, and more than six thousand had been wounded. Israel has also cut power and water to Gaza, which threatens to make even bread-baking impossible. Al Jazeera reports that more than three hundred and thirty thousand Gazans have already been rendered homeless.

Meanwhile, Reuters reports that Egypt refuses to open a humanitarian corridor at the Rafah Crossing for Gazans to flee into Sinai, though Gilad Erdan, Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations told CNN’s Jake Tapper on Friday afternoon that talks are ongoing with Egypt and international agencies, and he “hopes” that a corridor might be opened “very soon.”

In any case, more such scenes from Gaza, broadcast or tweeted over many weeks, will almost certainly prompt some West Bank Palestinians and Arab Israelis, otherwise sickened by terror, to lash out at Israeli civilians and police, while giving Israeli messianists an opening to galvanize moderate Israelis. On Thursday, a Palestinian opened fire on a Jerusalem police station, injuring two, before being fatally shot himself; and settlers reportedly opened fire on a Palestinian ambulance in a-Sawiya, killing a father and son. (The ambulance was carrying the bodies of four others whom settlers had killed earlier in nearby Qusra.) But it seems necessary to note in this context that when Gazans were polled by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Palestine’s most authoritative opinion-research firm, just before the aborted P.A. legislative elections in May, 2021, Hamas barely scratched thirty per cent. So one might assume that two-thirds of Gazan civilians who have now been killed or

displaced were likely not Hamas supporters. (Correspondingly, it seems equally tragic that many of Hamas's victims on Saturday at both the Nova music festival and in the kibbutzim along the border—Be'eri, Kfar Aza, Nahal Oz, and others—were supporters of Israel's democratic peace movement; in the November, 2022, election, about ninety per cent of the votes in these ravaged kibbutzim supported parties either advancing or open to a two-state process.) Israel's strategic-affairs minister, Ron Dermer, told Bloomberg that Israel will “exact such a heavy price” that Hamas will not threaten Israel or “any civilized” country around the world. In this environment, it is not a simple matter for Blinken to be, on the one hand, the backstop for Israel's looming actions in Gaza, and, on the other, a voice for strategic caution and the initiator of a diplomatic track. But there is a precedent. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, to which this week's surprise attack is often compared, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—whose family, like Blinken's, was scarred by the Holocaust—in effect, created a window for Israel's military encirclement of the Egyptian Third Army, thereby trapping it on the eastern side of the Suez Canal; he and President Nixon's National Security Council even put the U.S. on DEFCON 3, the highest state of armed-forces readiness for peacetime, when the Soviets threatened to intervene. But then Kissinger restrained the Israeli government, making clear that the U.S. would not tolerate Israeli plans to bombard and decimate the Third Army. He wanted to insure that Israel would not be defeated, but he also saw that the appearance of military stalemate, and the war's disruption of the status quo, had created diplomatic opportunities.

“Never waste a crisis,” Steven Simon, a former national-security adviser in the Obama White House, and the author of “Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East,” told me. “The U.S. should establish a small contact group of important players, including Saudi Arabia, to validate and sell a post-conflict plan. This would entail the handoff of Gaza to the U.N., once the guns have cooled, pending the invigoration of the Palestinian Authority and commitment to Palestinian national rights.” Biden's Administration had already opened a diplomatic track of this kind, which Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran may well have been trying to derail—namely, the

effort to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which the Administration has been pursuing for the past year, as a complement to the Abraham Accords. The more recent effort was designed to include various new concessions to the P.A. Granted, Netanyahu and his annexationist allies had tried to insure that any concessions would be too trivial to provide Palestinians a horizon for any form of self-determination. And some have concluded that this initiative is a casualty of the violence: it is “for now, off the table,” Ian Bremmer, of the Eurasia Group, a political-consultancy firm, said. But the Palestinian issue seems the thorniest reason that the Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman, has so far refused to consummate a deal. It might be possible for Blinken to double-down on the plan now—and more important, to stipulate a process that widens the scope of Palestinian rights and confirms control of the Jordanian Waqf, its Islamic religious trust—over the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Does analysis of Palestinian opinion justify intensified diplomatic effort? Khalil Shikaki, the director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, in Ramallah, told me, “If the option right now is survival in an environment in which the only way you can have your basic rights is through violence, then Hamas is the answer, and Hamas will be very popular.” Nor is the prospect of Hamas prompting a much wider escalation “far-fetched.” If, however, Palestinians “have real choices, viable choices between diplomacy and violence, good governance or Hamas’s authoritarianism, well, I think the answer is pretty clear. The overwhelming majority would want diplomacy over violence. The overwhelming majority would want good governance over authoritarianism.”

What, then, should any expanded Palestinian component of a notional Saudi deal promise? “You have three issues,” Shikaki said. “You have the misery in Gaza and the impossibility of governing it. You have the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and the need to renew that. And you have the Israel-Palestine dimension that is purely about peace—that is the two-state solution and making it viable.” First, in Gaza, people need “rule of law” and “living conditions that are sustainable,” he said. “And that isn’t really going to happen

under Hamas rule.” Rather, Gaza “has to be part of the West Bank and the Palestinian Territories,” which means that “the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has to be the Palestinian Authority in Gaza as well.” But, Shikaki said, that means, second, that the P.A. needs to seem plausible again by holding an election, which is the eventual path to unification and legitimacy. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President, “will likely wait and see Israel destroying his rival and show Gazans and West Bankers both that Hamas cannot deliver prosperity or stability.”

As for the Biden Administration, Shikaki speculated that “it still hopes that Abbas can be a partner to deal with Saudi Arabia.” And, if the Administration wants to pursue this, it should make the two-state solution seem viable—“land for peace.” The challenge is public cynicism. “The most dramatic means of reversing public opinion would be to transfer at least a large part of Area C”—the sixty per cent of the West Bank that is entirely in Israeli hands, and where most of the settlements are planted—“to the Palestinian Authority. That would certainly be sending the signal to both the extremists in Israel and to Palestinians who have come to the conclusion that the two-state solution is dead,” Shikaki said. He added, “It’s complicated, absolutely. But if the Administration thinks that the Saudi deal might be sufficient to make this happen, so let it be.”

This may all seem merely hypothetical. Mohammed bin Salman, whose relations with the Biden Administration have been strained, would be key to rehabilitating Gaza, building Palestine, and integrating Israel in the region. But the U.S. is key to Saudi defenses and long-term integration into Western financial and technological markets. And for the U.S., Israel, and the Gulf states, Iran remains a reason to pull together. Blinken, in any case, is not a stranger to reasonable ideas. And American diplomacy, advanced warily when guns are firing, could perhaps organize responses when guns fall silent. ♦

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