

War on Gaza: Blinken Is Dragging the US Ever Deeper Into Israel's Quagmire

Hamas is willing to commit to the 'full and complete ceasefire' touted by Biden - but Washington continues to throw its full support behind an intransigent Tel Aviv

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It takes a lot to get the diplomats of the Middle East to agree on anything. The behaviour of one man over the last eight months of the [war in Gaza](#) has, however, forged a consensus rare among such a group: Antony Blinken cannot be trusted.

The [US](#) secretary of state's powers of turning reality on its head have raised the eyebrows of even practised cynics. It is a complaint that resounds from Doha to Amman, Cairo, Tel Aviv and Ankara.

Blinken is currently engaged in what one of his predecessors, James Baker, called "dead cat diplomacy". Baker's pupil, Aaron David Miller, [wrote on X](#) (formerly Twitter): "The objective is not to reach a deal but to ensure if it fails, the dead cat is on other's doorstep."

The more this plays out, more it resembles what my former boss James Baker called dead cat diplomacy. The objective is not to reach a deal but to ensure if it fails, the dead cat is on other's doorstep. Even if a deal is reached, likely won't go beyond phase 1 for that reason. <https://t.co/MaPBQzAydM>

— Aaron David Miller (@aarondmiller2) [June 12, 2024](#)

The dead, or dying, cat of the moment is a ceasefire deal in Gaza that holds.

Indisputably, Hamas is closer to accepting this deal than [Israel](#) is. The evidence for this is

mounting. Hamas signed a ceasefire deal presented by [Egypt](#) and [Qatar](#), under the gaze of CIA Director Bill Burns, which would have ensured a permanent halt to the war.

When Israel and the US walked away from it, Hamas welcomed the principles declared in President Joe Biden's speech, in which he urged Israel to accept a "[full and complete ceasefire](#)". It had the same reaction to the US-sponsored UN resolution.

Those principles are clear: that a permanent ceasefire should exist after an initial exchange of hostages; that there should be a full withdrawal of Israeli troops; that the people of Gaza should be free to return to their homes; that there should be no change in the territory or demography of Gaza; and that its people should have full access to humanitarian aid, alongside reconstruction efforts.

Sticking Point

Israel disagrees with each and every one of these principles. It has said consistently that no ceasefire should prevent the achievement of its war aims, which include the dismantlement of Hamas as a military power and as a government of Gaza. It continues to block aid through its land border crossings and has no intention of lifting the siege, especially after the war ends.

More critically, it has made no commitment to sticking to a ceasefire should negotiations between the first and second phases of the prisoner and hostage exchange fail.

This is the crux of the matter. There has been only one substantive issue preventing a ceasefire deal since the first [exchange](#) of prisoners and hostages last November.

Israel has yet to give any official response to either Biden's speech or the UN resolution. Blinken is doing all the talking for it. How curious, then, that Blinken, on his latest Middle East tour, placed all the blame on Hamas for not yet accepting the deal.

The talks are stuck on Israel's refusal to accept an upfront commitment to a permanent ceasefire. It is on Israel that Blinken should be applying all of Washington's pressure.

And yet, Blinken [declared](#): "Israel accepted the proposal as it was" – a comment that flies in the face of repeated public statements from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu casting doubt on the deal, in addition to recent remarks from National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi, who said it would take [another seven months](#) to destroy the military and governing capabilities of Hamas and [Palestinian](#) Islamic Jihad.

"Hamas could have answered with a single word – yes," Blinken said, surpassing himself in a brazen attempt to turn the truth on its head.

Hamas has now given its formal response, and Middle East Eye has seen a copy of that reply.

There are changes to the document, which are not, as it claims, minor – although they are more compatible with what Biden and the UN resolution said, than the Israeli position is. Hamas has included the Philadelphi Corridor in the list of areas that Israeli forces should withdraw from in the first 42-day stage of the deal. It also insists that prisoners to be released by Israel are in accordance with Hamas's list, which includes high-profile resistance leaders such as [Marwan Barghouti](#).

Shielding Israel

The most substantial change is to the wording of [paragraph 14](#), which deals crucially with the transition from stage one to stage two, and the key question of whether any party can withdraw unilaterally from this process and go back to war.

Paragraph 14 used to say that the temporary cessation of violence would continue into stage two “so long as the negotiations on the conditions for implementing stage 2 of this agreement are ongoing”, and that the guarantors of the deal would make “every effort to ensure that those indirect negotiations continue until both sides are able to reach agreement”.

The revised version from Hamas says the temporary ceasefire would continue “until a sustainable calm” is announced, by which is meant a full cessation of military activities on both sides, and that negotiations would continue until the two parties reach an agreement on an exchange of prisoners.

In addition, Hamas now demands that Israel lift its 17-year siege of Gaza and withdraw all its forces in the initial stage of the ceasefire deal.

These key changes address the meaning and substance of Biden’s speech and the UN resolution. But Israel will be implacably opposed to them, as they mean that once the first set of hostages and prisoners has been released, Israel will not be able to back out of a permanent ceasefire.

It does not take a genius to see that shielding an Israel that has no intention of abiding by Biden’s words, let alone the UN’s, is not doing anything to advance US goals.

These are clear: Biden’s overwhelming personal political interest as an ageing president, seeking re-election while not always being able to read his [teleprompter](#), is to shut this war down as soon as possible. He has even more interest in doing so before it spreads, as it shows every sign of doing, to [Lebanon](#) and then the wider region.

Blinken is doing the opposite. He is letting Washington get dragged ever deeper, and with more direct military involvement, into a regional quagmire of Netanyahu’s creation.

Only one party benefits from a continuous war in Gaza and a new front opening up in Lebanon, and that is the Religious Zionist extreme right. Netanyahu cannot abandon that party. Benny Gantz’s defection [from the war cabinet](#) would be nothing politically next to Itamar Ben Gvir’s exit. The moment that happens, Netanyahu knows he has a challenger for the leadership of the ruling right-wing coalition.

That Sinking Feeling

Accordingly, Netanyahu has responded to every failed round of negotiations by going on the military offensive.

After his rejection of the ceasefire deal hammered out during the debacle in Cairo and Doha, and amid the increasing possibility of being served with an international [arrest warrant](#) for war crimes, his response was to launch the offensive on Rafah.

Here again, the Israeli national interest called for caution. He showed no hesitation in

jettisoning the support of the Egyptian army, which if he thought about things strategically, as a real leader should, he would realise that Israel will need after this conflict is over.

Egypt's generals could make life painful along Israel's eminently porous 200-kilometre border with Sinai, by releasing the brakes they apply on the drug smugglers and warlords who roam the desert.

Instead, Netanyahu has humiliated them – and adding insult to injury, deprived them of a personal source of hard currency by closing the Rafah border and occupying the Philadelphi corridor.

The unwritten understanding between them was that any such closure would be temporary. But Netanyahu has now broken that understanding too, leaving the generals with egg on their face. Not a wise thing to do, in this region.

Similarly, Netanyahu's response to Biden's speech was to launch a hostage rescue in [Nuseirat camp](#), whose beneficial effects on domestic public opinion lasted all of 24 hours.

Wild jubilation at the release of four hostages – Israeli networks interrupted their recorded programmes on Shabbat to go live – gave way to sober reflection on the total cost of this operation.

It was not repeatable. It was not a replacement for negotiations. Israel lost a [special forces police officer](#) in the extraction, and if Hamas is to be believed, three other hostages as well.

State of Chaos

But more puzzling still was the US claiming a decisive role in the hostage release. As the Palestinian death toll [soared past 270](#), you might have expected National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to distance himself from such a disaster. He did the opposite, [taking credit](#) for what he termed a “[daring operation](#)”.

The exact part that US intelligence or their hostage release team played in this operation is not known. Israeli helicopters were, however, captured on camera taking off and landing on the beach, a few metres from the pier the US Navy built to provide aid for Gaza.

Centcom, the US military command that oversees the Middle East, [said that](#) while Israel used an area south of the US-built pier as a landing zone, “the humanitarian pier facility, including its equipment, personnel, and assets were not used in the operation to rescue hostages”.

But a US defence official, [speaking with Middle East Eye](#), said Israel's use of the beach, with the pier a stone's throw away, “implies we were part of it”.

Furthermore, the US would have been notified of Israel's exfiltration plan via the beach because it [maintains](#) an air defence system at the pier.

US cooperation with a hostage release operation that killed more than 270 Palestinians, and possibly also a further group of hostages, puts US policy on hostage release in a state of total chaos.

Its policy goal is to persuade Israel of the obvious truth that the hostages themselves, and

their families, scream often and loudly about: the only killer of hostages is Israel's continuing bombardment.

US military involvement in such a murderous operation does the opposite. "Israel's argument has always been that it doesn't need a ceasefire to rescue hostages," Frank Lowenstein, the former special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the Obama administration, [told MEE](#). "The rescue operation is likely to deepen Israel's resolve on that."

US Weakness

This is not in US interests. Netanyahu is perfectly logical in his conclusion that Biden is weak and getting weaker by the month.

He is fundamentally unable or unwilling to apply a brake to Israel's offensive. He threatened very publicly to withhold heavy bombs for Netanyahu's offensive on Rafah. Netanyahu went ahead with it anyway, and Biden backed down.

Channel 13 recently [reported](#) that "significant progress" had been reached towards "understandings" that would allow the suspended shipment to arrive in Israel in the near future: "Within the framework of the understandings being developed between Washington and Tel Aviv, Israel will be forced to make commitments to Washington that it will not attack with certain bombs that will be supplied by the Biden administration, in populated areas, including populated areas in Rafah."

So Israel can have the heavy bombs Biden promised to withhold, and continue with the operation in Rafah that Biden warned it not to proceed with.

At every stage in this eight-month war, US diplomacy has showed its weakness, and it bears a heavy responsibility for where this has now landed both Israel and US forces in the region.

As things stand, and with the active complicity of Blinken, the gap between Israel and Hamas will not be bridged, even though the truth is that that the gap between the US and Israel is much larger than that between the US or the UN and Hamas.

Both Hamas and the US, and the [13 other members](#) of the UN Security Council that voted for the resolution, want an immediate and permanent ceasefire. Israel is in a minority of one in making sure that does not happen, knowing that neither Blinken nor Biden has the political capital left to stop it.

A New Low

To carry on the war in Gaza is to ensure that the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah will continue, with each side striking deeper into each other's territory. The surest method of de-escalation on the northern border is to secure an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

I cannot think of any other time during the 76 years of this bitter conflict, when an Israeli leadership has been so obdurate in pursuing war aims that are unachievable - and a US president so weak and powerless to stop it.

James Baker or George Shultz were giants of diplomacy and resolve compared with the likes of Blinken.

I previously thought that the combination of Netanyahu and former President Donald Trump had brought the situation to an all-time low. But I was proved wrong; worse was to come.

All the concessions Israel got during Trump's presidency – the Golan Heights, the moving of the [US embassy](#) to Jerusalem, the Abraham Accords – pale into insignificance compared with the backing Biden has given Israel to pursue and continue its war on Gaza with this savagery, and for this long.

It proved to be the combination of Netanyahu and a Democratic president that led this conflict to its most dangerous and murderous moment.

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Featured image: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv, Oct. 12, 2023. – Secretary Antony Blinken on X

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