

Israel-Palestine War: Gaza Hospital Strike Haunts Biden's Visit to Israel

Protestors try to storm US embassies and Washington's closest Arab allies turn a cold shoulder to US president as he lands in Israel

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US President Joe Biden's visit to the Middle East was in peril on Wednesday after US allies cancelled a summit of Arab leaders in Jordan, and Iran-backed forces called for "a day of rage", following a deadly strike on a [Gaza hospital](#) housing hundreds of wounded and displaced [Palestinians](#).

Protests erupted at US embassies across the region on Tuesday night in an outpouring of fury at the US for supporting Israel after the blast ripped through al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City leaving more than 500 Palestinians dead.

In Beirut and Baghdad demonstrators tried to break through security barriers at US embassies, while protestors in Amman, where US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was staying, denounced Biden.

Biden said he was "outraged and deeply saddened" by the strike and that "the United States stands unequivocally for the protection of civilian life during conflict."

Palestinian officials and leaders across the Middle East, including Washington's closest Arab allies, have blamed Israel, whereas Israel has said a malfunctioning rocket launched by Islamic Jihad was responsible for the blast. The group has denied the allegation.

The strike underscores how Washington's unconditional support for Israel since the 7 October attacks on southern Israel by Palestinian fighters is breeding resentment towards the US in the Arab world.

Such anger could jeopardise Washington's stated desire to prevent a widening of the war.

The hospital bombing has already yielded one diplomatic casualty.

As Biden's Air Force One took off for the region, Jordan announced it was cancelling a summit in Amman between the US president, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

King Abdullah called the bombing a "heinous war crime," while Sisi condemned it as a "clear violation of international law".

Even the UAE, one of Israel's key allies in the region, said Israel had attacked the hospital.

The cancellation means Biden will only meet Israeli leaders during his visit, a move likely to further fuel criticism that the US is not addressing regional concerns about the war's impact on Palestinians and the security complaints of its Arab allies.

"The complete siding with Israel is unprecedented," Marwan Muasher, a former Jordanian foreign minister who served as Amman's first ambassador to Israel told MEE, warning that the rage against Israel and the US in the Arab world had reached "boiling level".

"There is anger everywhere now in the Arab world. And a sense that the US is totally insensitive to a Palestinian population under siege."

Biden's trip comes as Washington's top diplomat, Antony Blinken, came out empty-handed in a round of shuttle diplomacy this week that involved trying to broker a deal to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza from Egypt.

While analysts say getting aid into Gaza is a priority for the administration, Biden aims to demonstrate solidarity with Israel after the 7 October attack, which Israel and its allies have compared to 11 September 2001 and Pearl Harbor in the US.

To that end, the Biden administration has thrown its full weight behind Israel.

US military aid is pouring into the country with no conditions, according to John Kirby, a spokesman for the National Security Council.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has said that the security assistance will be "non-negotiable" and continue to "flow at the speed of war".

In previous wars fought by Israel, Washington has stood by its ally, but then gradually nudged it into negotiations.

During the 1973 war, the US withheld military aid to Israel as it engaged in combat against Syria and Egypt to bring them to the negotiating table, laying the foundations for an Egypt-Israel peace deal

More recently, Biden came out in strong support for Israel during its 2021 attack on the Gaza Strip, but eventually nudged it into a truce with armed groups in Gaza brokered by Egypt.

To be sure, for critics of Israel, none of those US attempts have gone far enough - but they have kept a lid on simmering tensions and allowed Washington to lean on traditional Arab

partners like Jordan and Egypt to help stabilise the region.

'Eliminate Hamas'

James Jeffrey, a former US ambassador in the region who now heads the Wilson Center's Middle East programme, said Washington's response to this war had to be viewed differently because of the sophistication demonstrated by Hamas during its recent assault on Israel.

The group's military capabilities caught both the Israelis and Washington off guard.

The surprise attack on 7 October left at least 1,400 Israelis dead. In response, Israel launched a devastating bombing campaign on the besieged Gaza Strip that has killed more than 3,500 Palestinians, including more than 1,000 children and 936 women.

"This is a turning point in the Middle East," Jeffrey said.

"Hamas' ability to overcome an entire Israeli military defence line puts this war at the level of Yom Kippur," he added, referencing the 1973 war between Israel and Arab states that resulted in the US military going on Defcon 3 alert, the highest state of peacetime readiness.

"No recent war has threatened the US-based Middle East system so much as this, and that is how the administration views it," he said.

"In order to eliminate Hamas, Biden has been willing to accept a dramatic risk of civilian casualties and humanitarian disaster."

While the administration continues to back Israel, in the last few days there has been a subtle rhetorical emphasis on limiting civilian casualties from US officials, including Blinken, who called for Israel "to use every possible precaution to avoid harm to civilians".

For most in the Arab world, that refrain is less than lip service, as Israel continues to impose a complete blockade of Gaza preventing the entry of nearly all food, fuel and water. But analysts say within Biden's visit of support for Israel, there is a note of caution.

President's Prestige

Firas Maksad, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, told MEE that while the Biden administration had sent a clear "green light" for Israel to invade Gaza, the trip was also a way to gain some breathing space in order to forestall an Israeli ground invasion likely to cause huge casualties on both sides.

"The White House does not want to risk the prestige of the presidency and have Biden in Israel when it launches a bloody incursion into Gaza," Maksad said.

"In the administration's thinking Biden's visit buys them time on the invasion, at least three days, maybe four."

The clearest indication that the Biden administration is looking to shape Israel's response to the Hamas attack was Biden's warning in a CBS 60-Minutes interview on Sunday that any move by Israel to occupy the Gaza Strip "would be a big mistake".

“It’s remarkable that statement came out publicly,” a US official speaking to MEE on condition of anonymity said.

The official said the US is asking Israel what its plans for the Gaza Strip would be after a potential ground invasion and providing input on the hazards of urban warfare from the US’s recent experience in the 2004 battle for Fallujah and campaign to oust the Islamic State group from Mosul.

The US also wants to avoid an Israeli military response that could draw in Iran and its proxies, especially Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement. Iran’s foreign minister warned on Monday that it would activate its network of militias on “multiple fronts” against Israel if it continued attacks on Gaza.

Can the US Deter Hezbollah?

The exchange of fire between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon’s south intensified on Tuesday. So far the skirmishes have been carefully managed to avoid escalation, experts say.

“What’s been happening is a choreographed version of peace fighting. Israel and Hezbollah are sending diplomatic demarches by rocket as opposed to courier. But that can change fast,” Jeffrey said.

If Israel is forced to fight Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north it could suck the US into a new Middle East war during an election year.

In a bid to deter Iran, the US has dispatched the USS Gerald R Ford Carrier Strike Group to the eastern Mediterranean. A second carrier group, the USS Dwight D Eisenhower, is also en route.

The US is sending a rapid response force of about 2,000 Marines and sailors to the eastern Mediterranean that could be deployed in a non-combat role, and is gearing up to deploy even more.

The build-up of forces in the eastern Mediterranean has been “unprecedented”, a former senior US official told MEE, and in line with US war planning of steps to take should Israel face an existential military threat.

“Prior to this crisis, the US had stripped the majority of its high-end combat forces from the region. The cruisers, destroyers and military aircraft that could deter Iran were taken out. The US has shown with a lot of speed that it can rapidly put them back in place when needed,” the official said.

But the fragility of the situation was underscored after the al-Ahli al-Arab Hospital strike when Hezbollah called for a “day of rage”. On Wednesday, the US issued a “Do not travel” alert level for Lebanon and allowed some embassy workers to leave the country.

The last time Israel fought a full war with Hezbollah was 2006. Since then the group has massively expanded its missile arsenal from about 14,000 to 150,000 analysts say. Its troops have also been battle-tested in Syria.

Mick Mulroy, a former CIA officer and Pentagon official, said the “unprecedented” US force

posture “should be enough to give pause to Hezbollah,” but the Biden administration has to be willing to use it: that would mean ballistic missile defence systems on US destroyers shooting down a Hezbollah rocket if the situation escalated.

“Bluffing does not work in this area of the world.”

Normalisation Shattered

Muasher, the former Jordanian diplomat who is now a vice president at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said he is less concerned that Hezbollah would escalate the conflict, and more concerned the US was ignoring the roots of the war by ignoring a two-state solution, and instead “laying the stage for a mass expulsion of Palestinian civilians from the Gaza Strip”.

Both Egypt and Jordan have framed any attempt by Israel to evict Palestinians from Gaza or the occupied West Bank into their countries as a red line.

“That’s where the real risk of expansion of the conflict lies,” he said.

“For years, the US has publicly reduced peacemaking to normalisation agreements between Israel and the Arab world, giving the impression that regional peace is possible even if peace with the Palestinians is not.

“This argument has been shattered,” he said.

The Biden administration’s efforts to broker a normalisation deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel have collapsed amid the fighting. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (known as MBS) has voiced strong support for Palestine and refused to condemn Hamas.

And instead of speaking to Israel, Riyadh is talking to Tehran.

MBS held his first phone call with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi last week and on Wednesday, Riyadh convened a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Countries to address the war. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian will attend the event, according to [Iranian media](#).

All of this will weigh on Biden’s mind as he prepares to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government is weighing what would be a bloody invasion of Gaza.

The White House says Biden plans to ask Netanyahu “tough questions” and discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza, along with Israel’s plans going forward in the war.

If Biden’s visit does buy the US time, it is going to be welcomed by US diplomats. Washington needs every second.

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