

**Israel-Hamas war**

**Iran told US it did not want Israel-Hamas war to escalate**

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Hossein Amirabdollahian says Tehran has used back channels to convey fears of conflict in Gaza spreading across region

**Najmeh Bozorgmehr** in Geneva 9 HOURS AGO

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Iran's top diplomat has revealed that Tehran told the US through back channels that it did not want the Israel-Hamas war to spread further, but also warned Washington that regional conflict could be unavoidable if Israeli attacks on Gaza continue.

“Over the past 40 days, messages have been exchanged between Iran and the US, via the US interests section at the Swiss embassy in Tehran,” foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said in an interview, while ruling out the possibility of direct talks between the two foes.

“In response to the US,” he added, “we said that Iran does not want the war to spread, but due to the approach adopted by the US and Israel in the region, if the crimes against the people of Gaza and the West Bank are not stopped, any possibility could be considered, and a wider conflict could prove inevitable.”

Iran, the main supporter of [anti-Israel Islamist militants in the region](#), has said it was not informed in advance of Hamas's devastating attack on Israel on October 7 — a position that US officials have confirmed.

But western states hold Iran responsible for its extensive support for “resistance” groups against the Jewish state — including Hamas and Lebanon's Hizbollah — which Iran sees as an essential pillar of its security strategy.





Shrouds in Tehran symbolise the children who have died in Gaza: Iran is warning that ongoing war in Gaza could result in wider conflict © Majid Asgaripour/WANA/Reuters

Iran's foreign minister has toured the region since the Gaza war began, a flurry of diplomacy that has taken him to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. He has also met Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh in Doha and Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Amirabdollahian maintained that Hizbollah and other Islamist militants in Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen were not Iran's proxy forces, saying each had an independent political identity. But he warned that these groups "are not indifferent towards the killing of their Muslim and Arab peers in Palestine".

In western capitals, there are concerns that Iran could push its proxy forces, notably Hizbollah — the most powerful of the so-called "[axis of resistance](#)" — to escalate hostilities in the region.

The US has built up its military presence in the region over the past month, dispatching two carrier strike groups to act as a deterrent.

Amirabdollahian said the US had not threatened that Iran could be hit if Hizbollah launched an all-out assault on Israel. However, he accused Washington of inviting Tehran "to exercise restraint" while it was itself escalating the war in Gaza with massive support for Israel.

## **It is now the time for a face-to-face confrontation between the Palestinian resistance groups and Israeli forces**

Hossein Amirabdollahian

He said the US's messages to Hizbollah similarly urging restraint "would fail to make the resistance group cautious in its decision-making".

"Our military officials are of the opinion that the deployment of US aircraft carriers near our region, which makes them accessible, is not a strong point for the US. Rather, it makes them more vulnerable to possible strikes," Amirabdollahian said.

"The war has already expanded in the region," he added. "The fact that the Yemeni army [Iran-backed Houthi movement] . . . attacks the occupied lands with missiles and drones means the war has begun to expand. The fact that Hizbollah is fighting

with a third of the Israeli army shows the war has expanded.”

Gaza, home to 2.3mn people, has been enduring a devastating humanitarian crisis since Israel launched its offensive in response to Hamas’ assault on October 7.

Iran has been calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. But Iranian analysts in Tehran have noted that the war has already created diplomatic opportunities for the country, helping to lessen its political isolation abroad.

The Islamic republic has seized the moment to narrow the gap with Arab and regional leaders, whose pro-Palestinian positions have shifted closer to Iran’s since the war began.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi travelled to Saudi Arabia’s capital Riyadh at the weekend and met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the first such visit by an Iranian president in more than a decade.



Supporters of Hezbollah — the most powerful of the so-called “axis of resistance” — hold portraits of fallen fighters in Lebanon © Wael Hamzeh/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Raisi also met Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi for the first time, on the sidelines of a Riyadh summit of the Organization of Islamic Co-operation on Gaza — a rare meeting between leaders of the two countries, which still do not have full diplomatic relations.

“This war has been a victory in white gloves for Iran,” said one analyst in Tehran. Another said: “Iran has so far successfully stayed away from any direct involvement in

Amirabdollahian said. Iran has so far successfully stayed away from any direct involvement in the war and improved its relations with Arab states.”

Iranian-backed militant groups have attacked US bases and personnel in Iraq and Syria more than 40 times since the Gaza war began, according to the Pentagon. US officials said the military had in response targeted facilities in Syria used by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran-affiliated militias.

Amirabdollahian said one of these centres — near al-Bukamal, a town in Syria near the Iraqi border — was formerly used by Iran’s “military advisers in the fight against terrorists, but that place was empty of any Iranian forces or supplies at the time of the attack”.

He added that “no Iranian forces were struck”, noting Iran’s response otherwise would have been “tough”.

Palestinian militias had “never” asked Iran to enter into the war, he said. “They have everything, and they produce missiles and drones themselves. Palestinian resistance groups have the capability to produce the military equipment they need inside Palestine,” he said.

He did not rule out the possibility of a protracted conflict, saying the “real confrontation” in the Hamas-Israel war had only begun in recent days. Should the war drag on, it could benefit militant groups that fight guerrilla-style, rather than Israel with its conventional army, he argued.

Israel on Tuesday began searching the enclave’s largest hospital, al-Shifa, in Gaza City after a land offensive to surround the city, which is Hamas’s main political and military base in the strip. Israel has said the hospital sits on top of underground Hamas command centres.

“It is now the time for a face-to-face confrontation between the Palestinian resistance groups and Israeli forces. This is what the resistance groups have been waiting for for weeks,” said Amirabdollahian.

“The Palestinian resistance sees this phase to its benefit and believes ground invasion means Israel’s paralysis [in Gaza],” he added.

“I can say clearly, considering the knowledge we have and following meetings with leaders in the region, that the fate of this war will be determined by resistance groups, not Israel.”

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