

US foreign policy

Antony Blinken pushes for 'enduring' Gaza peace deal on regional tour

US secretary of state will also travel to Qatar to reassure allies and pursue hostage release



Antony Blinken, left, US secretary of state, in Riyadh on Monday with Musaed Al Aiban, Saudi Arabia minister of state and national security. The US considers normalisation of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel as an important step towards a permanent end to the crisis in Gaza © Mark Schiefelbein/AP

Felicia Schwartz in Washington and **Andrew England** in London YESTERDAY

Washington's top diplomat arrived in Egypt as the US pushed for an "enduring" end to the four-month Israel-Hamas war and the release of the remaining hostages held in Gaza.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken held talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Tuesday before he was due to head to Qatar. Both Arab states are working with the US to secure a deal between Israel and Hamas that would lead to a weeks-long pause in the [war in Gaza](#) and the release of the remaining hostages held by the Palestinian militant group.

The mediators are waiting for Hamas to respond to the latest proposal, which the militants, who still hold more than 130 hostages, have said they are studying.

The initiative, which calls for a six-week pause in the conflict, comes after officials from Qatar, Egypt and the US met Israeli intelligence chiefs in Paris nine days ago in an effort to break a deadlock that has stymied mediation efforts.

Weeks of negotiations had become bogged down over Israel's refusal to accept Hamas's demand for a permanent ceasefire at the end of a multiphase arrangement — something mediators were also pushing for — people briefed on the negotiations said.

The latest iteration agreed in Paris no longer guaranteed a permanent truce.

Blinken is also keen to reassure Arab states that the US is seeking to [de-escalate hostilities in the region](#) triggered by the Israel-Hamas war, after American forces launched a wave of retaliatory strikes against Iranian-backed militants over the weekend.

Blinken met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Monday to discuss the “urgent need to reduce regional tensions, including a cessation of Houthi attacks undermining both freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and progress on the Yemen peace process”, according to the US state department.

The US has launched [multiple strikes against the Houthis in response to attacks by the Iran-backed rebels on commercial shipping and naval vessels](#). The escalation comes as Saudi Arabia, which intervened in Yemen’s civil war in 2015 to fight the rebels, has been working on a peace process with the Houthis and is seeking to exit the conflict.

“The secretary and crown prince continued discussions on regional co-ordination to achieve an enduring end to the crisis in Gaza that provides lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike,” said a state department spokesman.

He added that they also discussed “the importance of building a more integrated and prosperous region and reaffirmed the strategic partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia”.

The US and Arab states have been working on an initiative under which the normalisation of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel could be an important element of a broader plan to secure a settlement to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and create a pathway for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

US-led talks for an Saudi Arabia-Israel deal were gaining momentum last year, but faltered after the Hamas attack on Israel that triggering the war in Gaza.

But Blinken’s visit — his fifth to the region since the start of the conflict — comes amid mounting concerns that the US is being drawn into a wider regional conflagration.

Israel’s offensive against Hamas in the besieged strip has killed more than 27,000 people, according to Palestinian health officials. Some 1,200 people were killed in the October 7 attack, according to Israeli officials.

The US launched retaliatory strikes in Iraq, Syria and Yemen at the weekend in retaliation for a drone attack on a base in Jordan last month that killed three American troops.

At the Pentagon on Monday, press secretary Major General Patrick Ryder said the US damaged or destroyed more than eight targets at seven sites, three in Syria and four in Iraq, and warned of more strikes to come.

“This is the start of our response and there will be additional actions,” Ryder said. The strikes in Syria and Iraq targeted Iran’s facilities linked to Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards for the first time.

While the US military was still analysing the strikes and said there were some casualties, those did not include Iranians, Ryder said.

Blinken is due to fly to Israel after meeting Qatari officials in Doha.

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