

Middle East war

**US seeks to sideline Hizbollah in Lebanon**

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Biden does not push for rapid ceasefire as state department sees opportunity for fresh Lebanese presidential vote

James Politi and Steff Chávez in Washington, Raya Jalabi in Beirut and Andrew England in London  
4 HOURS AGO

US President Joe Biden did not press Benjamin Netanyahu to halt Israel's escalating offensive in Lebanon when the pair spoke this week, as a government spokesperson said the US views the conflict with Israel as an opportunity to sideline Hizbollah politically.

Two weeks after the US called for a swift temporary truce in Israel's conflict with the Lebanese militant group, Biden did not reiterate that call when he spoke to Israel's prime minister on Wednesday for the first time since the invasion of Lebanon, according to the White House.

He did tell Netanyahu on their call that a "diplomatic arrangement" was needed for Lebanese and Israeli civilians to return to their homes on both sides of the "blue line" — the de facto border between the countries. Biden called for Israel "to minimise harm to civilians" in [Lebanon](#).

Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the state department, said on Wednesday that "what we want to see come out of this situation, ultimately, is Lebanon able to break the grip that Hizbollah has had on the country. And remove Hizbollah's veto over a president, which has kept the country in a political stalemate for two years and kept it from moving forward in electing a president."

The US would also like to "remove Hizbollah's ability to block the state from being the sole entity that can exercise force in southern Lebanon", Miller added.

The comments marked a sharp contrast with the [US's call](#) two weeks ago for a rapid 21-day ceasefire between Israel and the Iran-backed Lebanese militant group, and followed a call by Netanyahu this week for the Lebanese population to "stand up and take your country back" from Hizbollah, which is the country's most powerful political force as well as a militant group.

Miller added that "our position remains that we want to see an ultimate diplomatic resolution to this conflict. But the situation on the ground has changed over the past few weeks. And Hizbollah's leadership has been degraded."

An Arab diplomat said that "the Americans and French have been pushing this [the idea of new elections in Lebanon], but it's still too early to say what's coming . . . They want to restart it, but you can't restart elections as long as there is war.

"They all think it's an opportunity, [but] it doesn't mean Hizbollah won't have a role, and it could backfire because in war sometimes these groups become more popular, not less."

Biden's call with Netanyahu came as Israel was preparing its retaliation against Iran for a ballistic missile attack on its soil this month. It followed repeated calls by the US for Israel to show restraint in its conflicts with Hamas in Gaza and with Hizbollah in Lebanon, most of which have had little impact.

Israel has intensified its assault against Hizbollah over the past two weeks as it shifted its focus from Gaza to the northern front. It has killed Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, launched air strikes across Lebanon, and sent troops into Lebanon's south for the first time in almost two decades.

Israeli air strikes have killed more than 2,100 people over the past 12 months, according to the Lebanese health ministry, and forced 1.2mn from their homes, mostly during the past two weeks of intensified bombing.

On Thursday, Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati said he was in talks with Washington and France to try to revive the ceasefire, an apparent reference to the diplomatic efforts to secure a truce last month.

That initiative, spearheaded by the US and France and backed by the G7, EU and Arab states, called for a 21-day ceasefire between Israel and Hizbollah to allow space for a diplomatic resolution.

Despite first agreeing to the proposal, according to a US official, Netanyahu then rejected it, choosing instead to escalate his country's campaign against Hizbollah by killing its longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah and launching a ground invasion days later, frustrating US officials.

The White House did not say whether Biden and Netanyahu discussed Israel's looming response to Iran, though the US president has warned the Israelis away from striking nuclear facilities and energy infrastructure.

There are widespread doubts over Biden's influence over [Netanyahu](#) after the Israeli prime minister repeatedly ignored Washington's pleas for more limited military operations and increased diplomatic engagement since the war in Gaza broke out in October 2023.

Biden and other top US officials have repeatedly been irked and even angered by Netanyahu's unwillingness to heed their advice, but they have been unwilling to make any big changes in US policy to raise the pressure on Israel, such as an arms embargo.

"Biden has been unwilling to use his leverage over Netanyahu because of the president's persona, policy and domestic politics, especially so close to one of the most consequential elections in modern American history," said Aaron David Miller, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"Biden's margin for pressuring Netanyahu contracted, [while] Netanyahu's margin for resisting that pressure expanded," he added.

In recent weeks, US officials have acknowledged that Israel has made what they see as tactical gains against Hizbollah in Lebanon after it killed its leader and damaged much of the group's capacity to strike at Israel.

But Washington has also warned Israel against overplaying its hand, insisting there should be a path back to a truce.

When Netanyahu on Tuesday warned the Lebanese people in a [video](#) address to root out Hizbollah or face similar destruction to what Israel inflicted on Gaza, Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, responded: "We cannot and will not see Lebanon turn into Gaza — into another Gaza."

Netanyahu had earlier said that the aim of Israel's operations in Lebanon was to ensure that 60,000 Israelis displaced by the conflict could return home.

Other US officials have said Israel needs to develop a better long-term vision for its place in the Middle East.

"The challenge going forward is to turn tactical wins in battle into a strategy that secures Israel's people and its future," said Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, at an event at the Israeli embassy in Washington this week.

"That takes real discipline, it takes courage, it takes foresight to match the conduct of war to a clear and sustainable set of objectives. That is never easy, but it's imperative," he added.

But many in Washington say US diplomacy towards Israel has floundered. "US policy has been trying to both deter and de-escalate at the same time, and realistically speaking, you can most

effectively do one or the other, but trying to do both seems to have limited effects in both directions," said Jonathan Lord, an analyst at the Center for a New American Security.

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