

Why Blinken Will Have a Tough Sell

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Articles & Testimony

The Biden administration cannot solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem today, but it can shrink the conflict by helping both sides take small steps toward a two-state solution.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in Israel today. His visit comes on the heels of President Joe Biden's successful behind-the-scenes US-led crisis diplomacy to end the 11-day Gaza War between Israel and Hamas.

Amid criticism at home and abroad, Biden effectively navigated political minefields in pursuing something he has favored throughout his half-century of political involvement on the national stage. He has always believed in personal relationships as the key to his involvement in foreign policy.

Critics of Biden romanticize use of public pressure as a panacea. However, the administrations of George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump each used the lectern as a form of public pressure, in times of war and peace, often with little success. Going back to the Second Intifada, Bush publicly called on Israel to stop, but Israel continued the campaign at the time for another month, as it believed lives were at stake.

The Obama administration also used the public microphone at several points to express displeasure with Israel during the 2014 Gaza War ("Operation Protective Edge"), but it was not decisive. The war continued for 51 days—not the 11 of this round. Further, the number of Palestinian casualties in the 2014 war was about 2,500, or eight times the number killed during the recent round according to Palestinian estimates.

The Trump administration thought its bully pulpit last year could be used to twist the arms of the Palestinians to accept its controversial peace plan, but to no avail.

Biden's dual approach was more focused. He was publicly unequivocal about the right of Israel to defend itself from Hamas attacks, while working with the parties behind the scenes. He understood that public pressure would only put

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a defiant posture for domestic political reasons and would simultaneously embolden Hamas to press onward. A senior White House official said a key moment in the behind-the-scenes diplomacy came as Egypt succeeded in getting Hamas to stop firing on the Tel Aviv area for a period of time, as a sign that Cairo would be able to move the terror group to a ceasefire.

Does this mean that Biden has endured his last Gaza crisis? No. At best, successful deterrence would mean the interval gap before the next conflict could widen. Why the pessimism? Hamas was not firing because it sought a two-state solution, but because it doesn't accept Israel at any size. It has agreed to ceasefires so it can use the quiet to rearm. This explains why early polls suggest that Israelis may not be thrilled with the ceasefire—because they know Hamas is not going away. It is not due to the Biden administration, but it is because this chronic problem remains.

Before Blinken's departure for the Mideast, Biden said he would like the Palestinian Authority (PA) to have more of a role with Gaza, even as Hamas is not dislodged. Blinken will probably not be asking Abbas to return to Gaza, but even an enhanced role from the outside will not be easy. Blinken is the first US secretary of state to meet President Mahmoud Abbas since the PA boycotted the US in 2017, and he may find even this is a tough sell.

That is because the dirty secret of four wars between Israel and Hamas in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and today is that nobody, including Israel, Egypt, and the PA, wants to send troops on the ground to disarm Hamas. Yet, once disarmament is off the table, one is left with bad choices. The next conflict may be deferred, but not eliminated.

If Hamas retains its arms, Abbas will want to keep an arm's distance from Gaza—even if everyone wants him to come back. Some recall the 2014 war, but few remember its aftermath. There was an international donor conference for Gaza in Egypt and over five billion dollars was pledged, but the money did not arrive. Why? Abbas understood that if Hamas remained armed, he would have responsibility without authority. He would be blamed when the Hamas rockets go off against Israel. And he has stayed out ever since.

Moreover, without a legitimate government that can be trusted by the international community, who would invest the billions needed to rehabilitate Gaza? Reconstruction is very different from emergency humanitarian assistance that is likely to begin. Arab governments do not want to risk providing cash to Hamas so it can divert the funds for more rockets against Israel.

Therefore, Blinken's visit will not be easy. What is required is the same deft regional diplomacy that Biden pursued during the crisis itself. The Arab leaders need to tell their publics that so long as an armed Hamas runs Gaza, there is no massive international reconstruction desperately needed in Gaza. The handling of the Palestinian election and its cancellation was a self-inflicted wound. He needs to be shored up, but it should come from the regional Arabs and not just from Washington.

Yet, Biden and Blinken also have a message for Israel and not just the PA. Biden stands out for correctly declaring that there is no peace “until the region says unequivocally they acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as an independent Jewish state. There is no shift in my commitment to the security of Israel. No shift. Period.”

Yet, Israel also needs to hear the end of Biden's sentence. He concluded, “What we still need is a two-state solution. It is the only answer.”

Indeed, if there is no progress to a two-state solution, the Palestinians and their sympathizers in the US will press for a misguided one-state solution which is certain to fail. Yet, a militarily and economically strong Israel is not about to collapse and renounce Zionism, its *raison d'être*.

Yes, there is enormous complexity that only becomes magnified if one expects the two-state solution to be resolved. The Biden administration has tried to stay very far away from final-status issues and concentrate its priorities elsewhere in the globe. However, between solving the conflict and managing the conflict, there is shrinking the

conflict. Among other things, this means the US and regional Arab governments assisting those who stayed out of the conflict: the PA and Jordan. It can find ways for the parties to take gradual steps and avoid shutting the door to two states, even if that cannot be implemented now.

It was striking that Israel's police minister said during the Gaza crisis that Israel moved troops out of the West Bank to deal with intercommunal strife. That means the PA was effective in keeping order. Gulf states could be helpful in doing economic projects in the West Bank.

Of course, there is an oceanic difference for the Biden administration to engage in crisis diplomacy, like it did in Gaza, versus conflict resolution, as it wants to turn its foreign policy sights elsewhere. However, the fact is that six Arab states have normalized ties with Israel. None cut ties over Gaza, since they see benefits for themselves and the region. Moreover, they see Hamas as destabilizing. This suggests that there could be a few moves to shrink the conflict, even if you don't solve it right away. Biden's quiet diplomacy suggests he may have the stuff to point the way, even if it is not possible to go all the way at this time.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points \(https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/\)](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/), and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israel-s-most-important-leaders-shaped-its\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israel-s-most-important-leaders-shaped-its-destiny). This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website \(https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-blinken-will-have-a-tough-sell/\)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-blinken-will-have-a-tough-sell/). ❖

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