

# Not Day After, Day During: Blinken Visits Israel

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

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**His trip will not bridge all bilateral differences over the war, but its success can be measured by how it deals with urgent short-term issues while deferring key postwar matters.**

**W**hen U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken visits Israel on January 9, his wide-ranging agenda will include discussion of their pronounced differences on certain aspects of the war against Hamas. Yet these differences on short-term issues are not as deep or numerous as in earlier phases of the crisis, and the allies appear to share similar views on three crucial matters: (1) that Israel needs to enter a “lower-intensity” phase of the war, (2) that work should continue toward another round of hostage negotiations with Hamas, and (3) that pushing Hezbollah back from Israel’s border is necessary to avoid a wider regional conflict.

To be sure, U.S. officials remain frustrated that Jerusalem has not articulated a “day after” strategy. They are also frustrated that Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has rejected pleas from the security services to release funds to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank in order to address the worsening economic crisis there. At the same time, however, the Biden administration is well aware that the war is not ending soon and understands the depth of the Israeli cabinet’s opposition to articulating a political horizon for the Palestinians at this moment. Blinken’s team therefore seems willing to defer long-term issues to a later trip and focus on short-term matters for now, particularly the question of how Israel views civilian authority in north Gaza as the main fighting moves south.

## Transition to a Lower-Intensity War

**B**linken’s trip may have accomplished one of its objectives even before his arrival. Earlier today, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Daniel Hagari told the *New York Times*

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/08/us/politics/israel-military-gaza.html>) that Israel will soon be fighting the war with fewer ground troops and airstrikes. Israeli politicians have not repeated this message to their public yet, though they have privately made it clear in backgrounders to reporters. Moreover, while Israel called up 360,000

reservists at the start of the war, more than half have been demobilized in the past month, leaving 170,000 in action—a figure that is expected to drop under 100,000 soon.

According to several Israeli officials, IDF chief of staff Herzi Halevi favors a shift to more pinpointed strikes for military reasons. The difficulties of sustaining a major reserve mobilization for nearly a hundred days since the October 7 attack may have played a role in the decision as well. Israel has not called reservists for more than sixty days since the 1982 Lebanon war, and officials have noted the negative economic impact of prolonged reserve duty.

Others say the shift is the result of pressure from allies like the United States. In a late November visit, Blinken reportedly told attendees at an Israeli cabinet meeting that they lacked sufficient “credit” to continue combat at such a high level for many months.

Transition to a lower-intensity effort should not be confused with ending the conflict, however. Halevi has emphatically announced that the war will continue for “many months,” while Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant have repeatedly made clear that the goal remains to eliminate or degrade Hamas’s military capabilities and kill or capture its leaders. Given that Saleh Arouri is the only top-tier leader killed so far (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-leader-dies-beirut>), the latter goal will presumably require quite a bit more time. Another potentially time-consuming objective is freeing the estimated 136 hostages still being held in Gaza.

## Northern Gaza a Test Case?

**A**ccording to Hagari, the IDF has broken up the command-and-control structure of up to twelve Hamas battalions comprising 14,000 fighters in north Gaza, but it needs more time to establish full control over the tunnel system in the north where a few thousand fighters remain. Until that objective is met, one cannot definitively say that Israel controls north Gaza—but U.S. officials believe the IDF will reach that goal soon.

Blinken therefore has ample cause to ask Israel for concrete details about its plans for the northern part of the Strip. The UN estimates that 250,000 of the estimated 1.25 million residents of north Gaza did not heed Israel’s repeated requests to head south and get out of harm’s way (their reasons varied, and in some cases included illness). Getting humanitarian aid from Rafah up to that partially evacuated combat zone is not easy, and Israel’s Erez crossing in the north is configured for the movement of people, not goods. When U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan visited Israel last month, a top goal was to open Israel’s southern Kerem Shalom crossing in order to expedite inspections and increase the flow of aid.

It is unclear if Israel will prohibit Gazans from returning north until all hostages are released, but news reports (<https://news.walla.co.il/item/3634294>) indicate this is the position that will be presented to Blinken. Given the scope of destruction in the north, Israel has explored providing temporary prefab housing from abroad to house civilians, just as it did for immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Another open question is who will secure public order in north Gaza and deliver basic services once the main combat phase is completed there. In one plan formulated by Gallant and recently leaked to the media, Palestinians would provide civilian services there, apparently referencing professional ministerial bureaucrats and structures at the municipal and district level that are unaffiliated with Hamas. Currently, the PA pays the salaries for many Gazan bureaucrats who might fill such a role. Yet when faced with hard-right cabinet opposition, Netanyahu stated that the PA will not be permitted to return to Gaza.

## Hostages

**B**linken is sure to convey the new “lower-intensity” Israeli strategy to Arab leaders on his regional tour. Some of these leaders have privately supported the idea of Israel smashing Hamas’ most violent Islamists in their own

countries be emboldened by the war. Yet they also worry about the public toll of media reports about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and they are likely hoping that Israel's new strategy will partially ameliorate this problem.

Previous stops on Blinken's tour included Qatar and Egypt, both key interlocutors in the hostage negotiations. Neither country has cited Arouri's killing as a reason to suspend those talks, though Qatari officials **recently told** (<https://www.axios.com/2024/01/07/israel-hamas-hostages-qatar-hostage-arouri>) a delegation of hostage families that the highly sensitive Beirut attack in which he was targeted is complicating the negotiations. Just before Arouri's death, Hamas had noted that ending the war was no longer a precondition for resuming talks. The negotiations now seem focused on securing the release of humanitarian cases—the forty or so elderly, female, or injured hostages—in return for at least a two-week humanitarian pause.

## Lebanon

**B**linken will likely reiterate the administration's position, consistent since October 7, that it is worried about potential regionalization of the war and would prefer that Israel not escalate against Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen. In Washington's view, however, such escalation is distinct from engaging in border skirmishes with Hezbollah or defending against Houthi missile/drone salvos.

Immediately after the October 7 attack, Gallant and apparently the entire IDF General Staff called for a preemptive strike on Hezbollah. This was thwarted by two developments. First, former IDF chiefs Benny Gantz and Gadi Eizenkot warned that they would not join the government's new war cabinet unless Israel focused its efforts on Gaza. Second, the Biden administration reassured Israel that Iran and its proxies were not launching a regional war, and simultaneously pledged to deploy an aircraft carrier in the eastern Mediterranean to prevent Israel's Iron Dome batteries from being overwhelmed if Hezbollah did employ its massive arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles.

Just before Blinken's visit, the administration sent presidential envoy for Israel-Lebanon affairs Amos Hochstein to Jerusalem, in part to pursue a diplomatic solution that would keep Hezbollah's elite Radwan commandos away from the northern border. Early in the war, Israel evacuated 80,000 citizens from that frontier out of fear that Radwan units would seek to replicate Hamas atrocities if the conflict broadened. Last week, Hezbollah seemingly pulled back a few kilometers amid sustained IDF strikes.

Israel also insists that Lebanon honor UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was passed after the 2006 war with Hezbollah and stipulates that the group not deploy south of the Litani River. Neither the Lebanese Armed Forces nor the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has ever truly enforced Resolution 1701; for the most part, they do not even deploy along the border, let alone confront Hezbollah. The Lebanese government has apparently floated a compromise in which Israel would concede some of their thirteen border disputes in return for moving Hezbollah away from the frontier. Yet Hezbollah does not accept Israel's legitimacy as a state, so it is unclear whether border demarcation alone would resolve the conflict.

## West Bank

**B**linken is also concerned that 120,000 West Bankers have not been allowed to resume their jobs in Israel since October 7, leading to further economic deterioration in the territory and heightening tensions with the PA. U.S. and Israeli officials do agree there has been improvement in one key area. Soon after the war began, some IDF reservists reportedly stood by as Israeli extremists engaged in violence against West Bank Palestinians, but the military has since kept such violence to far lower levels and prevented reservists from escorting or otherwise assisting extremists.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Blinken's visit will not bridge all bilateral differences over the war. Yet its success can be measured by how it deals with urgent short-term issues while deferring key postwar matters for the time being.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.* ❖

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