

How Blinken Can Seize Opportunity After the Deaths of Sinwar and Nasrallah

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Brief Analysis

The United States has a short window to advance crucial goals in Gaza and Lebanon, including efforts to draw in Gulf support, establish a legitimate post-Hamas entity, and urge Beirut to start reasserting its sovereignty.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken began his important visit to Middle East capitals this week, starting with a trip to Israel, where his two-and-a-half-hour talk with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu likely included ideas for capitalizing on the recent killing of Hamas military leader Yahya al-Sinwar and promoting de-escalation. This trip's itinerary (which takes him to Saudi Arabia tomorrow) is more flexible than usual to allow Blinken to seize any openings in his talks around the region. Meanwhile, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein continues to hold talks in Beirut.

Looming over these developments is the expectation that Israel will **soon respond** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-israel-should-focus-iranian-military-and-security-targets-not-oil>) to Iran's massive **October 1 missile attack** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-missile-defense-performance-views-gulf>), perhaps as early as this week. It is unclear if this operation would be launched while Blinken remains in the region, but President Biden has stated that he knows when Israel will be striking Iran and what it will be hitting. Against this backdrop, what should Blinken's priorities be regarding Gaza and Lebanon?

Change in Hamas Center of Gravity

Perhaps most important, Blinken's visit should focus on leveraging Sinwar's death to conclude the hostages-for-ceasefire talks that have been essentially dormant since July. The sudden loss of Hamas's top leader in Gaza has thrown off the political center of gravity within the group's decisionmaking, presenting an opportunity for the United States to see what can be done to fill the (temporary) vacuum. Specifically, decisionmaking appears to be shifting away from the remaining military commanders in Gaza and toward the political leadership based in Qatar. Two of

the main players are former Hamas political chief Khaled Mashal and Khalil al-Hayya, the core negotiator on the hostages-for-ceasefire deal. If this shift proves durable, it may give Blinken an opportunity to lean hard on fellow mediator Qatar, pressing officials to use their leverage over Doha-based Hamas figures.

Alternatively, power could wind up splitting between Doha and Gaza, with each faction claiming to speak for Hamas. In that scenario, Sinwar's younger brother Mohammed will likely demand that he and other military commanders on the ground in Gaza have the final say in any talks.

One Phase or Multi-Phase?

Assuming that talks proceed, two interlinked questions will loom large. First, will Washington stick to its format of a three-phase hostage deal in exchange for six weeks of quiet that can be extended, or will it go for a one-phase deal that requires Israel to pull out of Gaza? Second, will Israeli forces maintain their deployment along the Philadelphia Corridor parallel to Gaza's border with Egypt?

A one-phase deal would take the more humane approach of releasing all the hostages at once after a year of captivity and suffering, while a three-phase approach would get an estimated one-third of them out at first. Notably, after Sinwar's death, Netanyahu publicly offered free passage from Gaza to anyone who releases a hostage.

From the Israeli government's perspective, the disadvantage of a one-phase deal is that it would force an immediate withdrawal from Gaza. In contrast, a three-phase deal would delay withdrawal negotiations until the second phase, after a partial hostage release in phase one.

These options raise a political dilemma for Netanyahu. A new poll conducted by Israel's Channel 13 indicates that 52 percent of respondents want the government to prioritize the hostages even if it means stopping the fighting. Yet among Netanyahu's Likud Party voters, 78 percent say Israel should prioritize the fighting over the hostages. A one-phase approach would also nullify Blinken's previous "bridging proposal," which suggested that Israel thin out rather than fully withdraw its forces as a first step. Regardless of the moral imperative to get all the hostages out as soon as possible, Netanyahu is unlikely to defy his base by withdrawing from Gaza and the Philadelphia Corridor up front as required in a one-phase deal; instead, he will presumably try to defer this thorny issue via a multi-phase approach.

Day After in Gaza

Discussions on the "day after" Hamas rule have been impeded for months, with Netanyahu insisting that such talks were premature as long as fierce combat persisted in Gaza. Domestic political dynamics have also shaped Netanyahu's stance—two far-right cabinet ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, have repeatedly threatened to bring down his government if he agrees to let the Palestinian Authority return to Gaza after it was violently pushed out by Hamas in 2007. Moreover, Netanyahu may believe that Washington is not well-positioned to press Israel on the eve of a national election.

Despite these obstacles, Blinken should still see what he can do to address this problem even if he cannot resolve it completely. For instance, although he is unlikely to persuade Netanyahu to accept the PA as a partner at this time, he could insist that any entity granted governance over Gaza has at least a loose relationship with the PA.

In doing so, Blinken could remind Israel that U.S. efforts are key to attracting reconstruction funding and assistance from Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. (U.S. talks with Abu Dhabi in particular have been extensive.) Without such support, chaos could take root in Gaza, the bulk of the Palestinian public could side with Hamas remnants, and Israel might even be forced to reoccupy the territory, setting its Gaza policy back two decades. Yet Gulf states insist that they will only enter Gaza under two conditions: if invited by a legitimate Palestinian organization, and if negotiations are under way that would eventually lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Months ago, Washington was at best lukewarm to a substantial Gulf role, but sources now say that the Biden administration is ready to embrace the idea. Israeli and Gulf officials have already been involved in quiet talks on establishing a governing reconstruction authority in Gaza alongside multinational security forces. This proposed entity would apparently have a relationship with the PA, suggesting that Gaza and the West Bank will ultimately be joined. U.S. officials should pursue this option and see where it leads. Having a Palestinian technocrat with a proven track record lead a new Gaza reconstruction authority would give the Gulf states confidence that their money is not being wasted on corrupt enterprises.

Another priority for Blinken is establishing agreed metrics with Israel to ensure proper humanitarian access. U.S. officials have acknowledged that the ongoing problems with Gaza aid delivery are not solely Israel's fault—indeed, after Israeli authorities inspect aid at the main crossing point of Kerem Shalom, large portions of it are systematically looted by Hamas, according to official U.S. sources. Last week, however, Blinken warned Israel that U.S. military support could be at risk if it does not take steps to expedite aid deliveries to northern Gaza within thirty days. In response, Israel took steps such as removing customs duties on aid and broadening truck access, which had been restricted in recent weeks. Some observers have speculated that the purpose of Blinken's letter was to preempt congressional critics of Israel who believe the administration is not sufficiently implementing a relevant U.S. law, which requires countries that receive U.S. weapons to fully cooperate with U.S.-backed humanitarian assistance campaigns. Whatever the case, U.S. and Israeli officials now need to agree on metrics to judge humanitarian access.

Lebanon Talks

In off-the-record backgrounders, Israeli military commanders have indicated that their cross-border hunt for Hezbollah weapons should end in the next seven to ten days. Among other objectives, Israel wants to make sure there are no more antitank rockets or other short-range projectiles that could hit northern border towns—a prerequisite for returning residents to the homes they left under fire last year.

Relatedly, Israel is eager to hear Hochstein's report on the current Beirut talks. So far, Israel is not pressing for a security zone in Lebanon, having learned that this was not a panacea in 1982-2000 given the increasing range of rockets even then. Hochstein was correct in his [recent assessment \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-825490\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-825490) of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted to address the 2006 Lebanon war and its aftermath: "There is no one who can look at the last eighteen years and say that anyone did anything to implement 1701. The lack of implementation over those years contributed to the conflict that we are in today. That must change, because both sides simply committing to 1701 is just not enough."

The organizing principle of implementing 1701 must be [bolstering the Lebanese state \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-enduring-ceasefire-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roadmap-enduring-ceasefire-lebanon) so that it can wrest sovereignty back from the nonstate actor Hezbollah. To meet this goal, the Lebanese Armed Forces need sufficient capacity, resources, and political will to enforce the resolution, even if it means confrontation with formidable Hezbollah forces. Ultimately, the Lebanese state must have a monopoly on the use of military force within and from its borders, consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for disarming Lebanese militias long ago.

An American Moment

In the Middle East, moments of flux sometimes open before the proverbial terrain hardens again. The killing of terrorist leaders Hassan Nasrallah and Yahya al-Sinwar has created such a moment. If Washington does not seize it quickly, the opportunity will be lost.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, and creator of its long-running podcast [Decision Points](#)

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