

# Blinken's Window Dressing Tour of Arab Capitals

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The expectation raised by the United States in allowing a UN Security Council resolution on Gaza pass through on December 22, 2023 without having to exercise its veto — albeit a watered-down one that stopped short of calling for ceasefire — was that the manifest international isolation facing Washington and Tel Aviv would inevitably impact Israel's options going forward.

However, there are contrarian trends. Israel started the new year by ordering the withdrawal of part of its military forces from Gaza, but the spokesman of the IDF Daniel Hagari emphasised that the war will continue in 2024 and called this withdrawal in line with the renewal of forces and new organisation of Israeli army. Speaking on New Year's Eve, Hagari said,

"Tonight, 2024 begins and our goals require a long war, and we are preparing ourselves accordingly. We have a smart plan to manage our deployments, taking into account reserves, the economy, families, and resupply, as well as the continuation of combat and training."

Hagari's ambivalent hint that the military has wrapped up major combat in northern Gaza was buttressed with the claim that the forces would "continue to deepen the achievement"

in northern Gaza, strengthen defences along the Israel-Gaza border fence and focus on the central and southern parts of the territory.

On Thursday, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also presented a plan of a shift toward less intense military operations. The minister's office said in a statement,

"In the northern region of the Gaza strip, we will transition to a new combat approach in accordance with military achievements on the ground." But Gallant added, "It will continue for as long as is deemed necessary."

Under Gallant's plan, the war in Gaza will continue until all of the hostages are released and remaining military threats are neutralised.

Basically, Hagari's remarks and Gallant's plan can be seen as a nod to the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken who is expected in Israel later this week after visiting Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Israel has, typically, also ratcheted up tensions by a series of belligerent acts in the recent days.

There has been a new escalation of cross-border fighting between Israel and Hezbollah. Besides, the targeted killing of a top Hamas political leader Saleh al-Arouri in a Hezbollah stronghold of Beirut last week; the killing of a senior IRGC commander and four others in the suburbs of Damascus; terrorist attacks in Kerman (Iran); killing of the commander of the elite Radwan forces of Hezbollah; — all these within the space of the past week are attributable to Israeli intelligence one way or another.

These events in turn have added to the resurgent fears lately that an Israel-Hamas war could erupt into a broader conflict. Earlier today, Hezbollah deputy leader Naim Qassem, [said in a televised speech](#) his group did not want to expand the war from Lebanon, "but if Israel expands, the response is inevitable to the maximum extent required to deter Israel."

The pattern of Israeli behaviour needs to be understood from different angles. This is an incredibly complicated matrix. First and foremost, the Israeli operation in Gaza so far has been a failure. It turned the world opinion, especially in the Global South, heavily against Israel — South Africa's petition to the International Criminal Court over war crimes in Gaza being the most telling evidence of it — while Israeli military came a cropper in terms of its agenda to decimate Hamas.

Tel Aviv has reached none of its stated goals in the Gaza war, which are annihilation of Hamas or disarming of Hamas and release of captives held by Palestinians in Gaza. That brings the security and military establishment in Tel Aviv, whose reputation has been seriously dented following the October 7 attack, under immense pressure. On the other hand, there has been a cover-up of the heavy casualty suffered by Israeli troops in the Gaza operation. The Kerman terrorist attack and the killing of Saleh al-Arouri actually betray a high level of frustration.

In political terms, there is a convergence between the security and military establishment and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (whose political future hangs by a thread) and the ultra-rightist fascist forces aligned with him, whose interests lie in an extended war.

The only external force capable of pressuring Israel is of course the US administration. But it is too much to expect President Biden to draw the 'red line' to Israel — that is, even

assuming that he has the political will to do so — given the Israel Lobby's control of the Congress and its seamless capacity for making or destroying the careers of US politicians.

Washington has not changed the intensity of Israeli military operation. On the other hand, the US has shipped to Israel 10,000 tons of arms to Israel in the recent period alone. In fact, it cannot be a coincidence that every single Blinken visit to the region since October 7 has witnessed a particularly brutal Israeli attack to up the ante. In effect, the US is broadly in support of the Israeli policy and a commitment to the destruction of Hamas, in particular.

Therefore, Biden's interest narrows down to prevent the war from spreading in the region lest direct American military intervention becomes necessary. The US rhetoric and diplomatic posturing largely aims at damage control in Washington's relations with its erstwhile allies in the region. Quintessentially, Blinken's mission comes down cheap window dressing — viz., to bringing the regional states to the same page that Israel is facing an existential crisis. But it does not take into account that the region has changed radically.

What truly distinguishes the present crisis is that the Arab world is profoundly concerned and feels outraged by the barbaric Israeli behaviour toward hapless Palestinians — 'animals,' as Israeli politicians have described them. The Arab psyche is convinced that an enduring final settlement of the Palestine problem cannot be postponed indefinitely. Something has fundamentally changed even for Saudi Arabia which had clandestine dealings with Israel for decades and was inching toward establishing formal relations with it.

A Saudi [statement](#) said that while receiving Blinken in Al 'Ula on Monday, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman "stressed the importance of stopping military operations, intensifying humanitarian action, and working to create conditions for restoring stability and for a peace process that ensures that the Palestinian people gain their legitimate rights and achieve a just and lasting peace." The Saudi statement is at sharp variance with the [readout](#) by the US state department.

Interestingly, an [article](#) in the Saudi daily Asharq Al-Awsat focused on Blinken's forthcoming visit highlighted fundamental differences between Riyadh and Washington on a range of issues — ceasefire in Gaza ("not just a humanitarian truce or exchange of prisoners, but rather a comprehensive halt"); security of the Red Sea ("the responsibility for security in the Red Sea lies with the riparian countries first, and with a UN-international responsibility in the second place"); Israel's culpability for "expanding the scope of the war"; futility of "talk about post-war phase" at this point.

The article ended on a sombre note:

"If the American administration wants Blinken's visit to Saudi Arabia and the region to succeed, and if it wants to maintain its partnerships in the region, and preserve its role as a sponsor of peace in the Middle East at a time when international forces hostile to Washington are searching for a foothold in the region, it must adhere to neutrality, and not use the region's interests and future as a card in the upcoming American elections. It must deal with the disease and not with the symptom as it is doing now."

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*Featured image: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (R) met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in AlUla, January 8, 2023 (Source: IP)*

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