



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Blinken's visit to the Middle East – the anger containment mission



Antony Blinken, US State Secretary, had scheduled a significant trip to the Middle East in his calendar for October, which went according to plan. However, everything else happened contrary to Washington's expectations, and far from the outcomes it had anticipated.

Blinken's Middle East trip was supposed to be the final step leading to the Israel-Saudi Arabia agreement, a probable game-changer for the region.

Instead, it became a peace-saving mission once Hamas launched terrorist strikes against Israel.

The region has slipped from the well-trodden path towards stability into a potential war that current generations have not experienced in just one week.

It is impossible to predict how long the Saudi-Israel agreement will stay off the agenda. Blinken brought it up during his conversations with regional leaders. However, it is currently at the bottom of the list due to the priorities that have developed in the meantime.

The head of Saudi diplomacy, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, left a glimmer of hope regarding this process. "Given the difficult time we are in now in the region, I think it's an important opportunity for you and I to chat and for the US and Saudi Arabia to continue their cooperation towards regional security", said the Saudi minister before meeting Blinken in Riyadh last Saturday.

Preventing conflict from spilling over

Blinken's primary job in Israel, the West Bank, the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Egypt is to ensure that the conflict from Israel's south does not spread to the region.

To achieve this, he will have to find points of the long-term interests of the Arab states in the region, which often move in different

directions. But at the same time, with much higher stakes to ensure that short-term, almost daily problems, do not escalate.

One of the most significant is restraining Israel in its action against Hamas, protecting civilians and not slipping into committing war crimes.

The second part of the United States' approach to the current conflict is Blinken's trip to the region, particularly to Israel. In the first part, the US granted Israel unconditional support to defend itself, thereby giving Israel the "green light" to deal with Hamas terrorists.

Nothing less was expected from the US in this situation as the biggest and most significant ally. President Biden has demonstrated strong political support for Israel's counterattack since the crisis began, and the US backed him up by dispatching two groups of aircraft carriers to the Eastern Mediterranean, with clear military support for Israel.

Civilians – key word

Blinken's mission aims to keep Israel's response within a framework that will allow him to defend it before the world. That is why the word "civilians" dominated Blinken's messages to the Arab leaders in the region, but also during the meeting with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

The US thus provides the necessary material to the regional capitals, whose principal interest is to protect the Palestinian population. The US is also trying to keep everyone in a partner position towards Israel and itself for the post-conflict phase when long-term solutions will be on the table.

Blinken emphasised the position of the US and stated that Hamas, as a proven terrorist group, could not be a representative of the Palestinians. That position was particularly significant in his talks with the head of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, in Jordan.

Mr Abbas wanted to hear this position of the

US, as a confirmation of his own legitimacy in the politically divided Palestinian community, but also as a promise that the PA would be a factor in discussing the status of the Palestinians in the post-conflict period.

Perhaps even about the future governance of Gaza, from which Hamas ousted the PA in 2007, even though the PA would not want to give the impression that it returned to Gaza with the help of the Israeli army.

At the same time, with this message, the US obliged the authorities on the West Bank not to allow the conflict to spill over into its territory, which is currently the greatest risk for such a thing to happen at the moment.

Strategy towards the Palestinian Authority

Blinken's conversation with Abbas confirms that the prevailing Western strategy is to work with the Palestinian Authority as partners, not adversaries, despite their refusal to condemn Hamas's terrorism.

A hint of such an approach was seen at the beginning of the week within the EU when Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi explicitly announced the immediate end of the Union's financial support to the Palestinian Authority and an urgent review of all ongoing projects.

However, in less than 24 hours, the administration in Brussels refuted its own "minister". They announced that money to Palestine (close to € 700 million per year) would not be blocked, even though some projects would be subject to review.

The softening of the European position towards Palestine was sudden, clumsy and left the impression of considerable confusion at the top of the administration in Brussels, but also understandable if it was the result of the decision to treat the PA as an ally in the stabilisation of the region, and not as an opposing party.

The Arab nations in the region have a great interest in cooperating with the US in preventing the spread of the conflict from the south of Israel. Given the scale of Hamas's crimes in southern Israel, it will not be difficult for them to respond to the US insistence that it must be isolated and rejected.

But, in return, they will demand maximum protection of Palestinian civilians as the conflict continues, which the US is trying to achieve, judging by Blinken's rhetoric during the visit when he said that protecting civilians is at the centre of Washington's attention.

The long-term success of all efforts for stabilising the region, which were far behind before Hamas's action, will depend on this crucial aspect.

The process of normalising conditions in the region might continue where it left off in the short term if the US works with Israel to provide the maximum civilian protection during the military operation in Gaza.

This will not be easy at all because they will ask President Biden's administration not to reduce political and military support for the Israeli action against Hamas while at the same time keeping it within the framework of the protection of Palestinian civilians.