

Biden Backs Israel Over Gaza Hospital Blast

Summit in Jordan with Arab leaders is canceled as fears grow of regional escalation

By William Mauldin and Jared Malsin

TEL AVIV—President Biden, reaffirming U.S. support for its longtime ally in the war with Hamas, appeared to absolve Israel of responsibility for a deadly blast at a hospital compound in Gaza that has demonstrated the [volatility of the conflict](#) and heightened fears of escalation.

“I was deeply saddened and outraged by the explosion of the hospital in Gaza yesterday, and based on what I’ve seen, it appears as though it was done by the other team—not you,” Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on a visit to Israel. “But there’s a lot of people out there not sure, so we’ve got a lot—we’ve got to overcome a lot of things,” Biden said.

The explosion at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza has sparked mass protests around the Middle East and prompted Arab leaders to cancel their planned meetings with Biden. Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and nongovernmental groups including Doctors Without Borders blamed the explosion on an Israeli airstrike.

The Israeli military has denied bombing the hospital compound and said the blast was caused by an errant rocket launched by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another militant group based in Gaza.

The Gaza Health Ministry said the blast killed more than 500 people. The death toll hasn’t been independently verified.

Biden on Wednesday reiterated the U.S.’s unwavering support for Israel following the Oct. 7 assault on the country by Hamas militants.

“The fact is that Israel, as they respond to these attacks, has to continue to ensure you have what you need to defend yourself, and we’re going to make sure that occurs,” Biden said at his meeting with Netanyahu, who greeted him at the airport in an unusual display of hospitality for a visiting head of state.

“I want to thank you for coming here today and for the unequivocal support you’re giving Israel over these trying times,” Netanyahu told Biden.

The U.S. president's high-stakes trip to the Middle East had begun to splinter before he even left Washington. The leaders of Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, blaming Israel for the blast, pulled out of a planned summit with Biden in Jordan in protest against U.S. support for Israel.

Biden and his entourage touched down amid a political maelstrom, with [street protests raging](#) in cities across the region and anger directed at the U.S. over its backing of Israel. The tumult threatened to undermine Biden's [efforts to free hostages](#) and create safe passage out of Gaza for foreign nationals.

With the Jordan leg of the trip canceled, Biden was to speak with key Arab leaders by phone and still planned to address the [humanitarian crisis in Gaza](#), with a focus on getting international aid to the besieged enclave, the White House said.

As of Tuesday, the Health Ministry in Gaza said about 3,000 people had been killed before the hospital-compound blast and more than 12,500 wounded. In Israel, the death toll has reached at least 1,400.

Biden is seeking to combine messages of staunch support for Israel with an appeal to uphold humanitarian standards and minimize the civilian death toll in Gaza, a priority for the U.S.'s Arab partners.

"The world is looking, Israel has a value set, like the United States does and other democracies and they are looking to see what we are going to do, to the people of Israel, their courage, their commitment, their bravery is stunning, it's really stunning—I'm proud to be here," he said in Tel Aviv.

Biden's visit comes as Israel is preparing an expected ground invasion of the Gaza Strip that Israeli officials say will aim to remove Hamas from power. A land incursion into Gaza is likely to significantly raise the death toll of the current war, which is already higher than any in Gaza in the past two decades.

Israel hasn't yet laid out how it will use military power to accomplish its political aim of toppling Hamas, nor what its plans for Gaza are after the fighting ends.

Biden will "get a sense from the Israelis about the situation on the ground and, more critically, their objectives, their plans, their intentions in the days and weeks ahead," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on the president's flight from Washington to Tel Aviv.

Even before the explosion, Biden's hastily organized [trip to Israel](#) was fraught with risks. It will raise the political stakes for Biden who, at the onset of his presidency, vowed to end the "forever wars" that had consumed the U.S. for the past two decades, while at the same time pledging his steadfast support for Israel.

“If it comes to light that it was a mistaken strike by Israel, the president’s influence over Netanyahu will be quickly tested,” said Jonathan Panikoff, director of the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council and a former career U.S. intelligence officer. “If it turns out to have been PIJ or another Gaza terrorist organization, the president will have even more moral high ground to try to cajole Arab leaders, and especially King Abdullah and [Egyptian President] Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, to enable conditions for humanitarian relief.”

The rising tide of public anger against Israel’s actions in Gaza is heaping pressure on U.S.-backed Arab governments across the region. Protests took place on Tuesday night in Jordan and in the West Bank, where Palestinian Authority security forces exchanged fire with militants and clashed with demonstrators who took to the streets to denounce the hospital-compound blast, which they blamed on Israel.

“As public anger rises across the region, the U.S. is going to be increasingly blamed alongside Israel as the death toll continues to rise,” said Timothy E. Kaldas, deputy director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, a Washington-based think tank.

“It’s going to be increasingly damaging for America’s partners across the region like Egypt and Jordan,” Kaldas said. “Western capitals have to get much more serious about de-escalating this conflict. It’s creating a lot of anger throughout the region.”

The State Department said late Tuesday that it authorized the voluntary departure of some staff at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut after protests outside the diplomatic compound. Embassy workers’ families would also be allowed to leave under a new travel advisory.

In Israel, Biden also plans to meet with the families of victims in the Oct. 7 attack and relatives of those being held hostage by Hamas, as well as Israeli first responders.

As concerns intensify that the conflict could spread through the region, the U.S. hopes Biden’s trip will serve as a warning to any third parties—whether they are other countries or militant groups such as [Lebanon’s Iran-backed Hezbollah](#)—that the U.S. was prepared to act if they join the conflict.

By traveling to the region, the president is putting his credibility on the line and is appearing to step deeper into the conflict, even as Biden and top administration officials asserted that U.S. combat troops wouldn’t be sent into another war.

“He understands the stakes,” said Dennis Ross, counselor and distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who served in senior national security positions in four administrations.

Sabrina Siddiqui and Vivian Salama contributed to this article.