

# [***Blinken warns of stakes of Rafah offensive as Netanyahu again vows to press ahead***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BM2-TBJ1-DY7V-G01N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emerged from meetings in Tel Aviv emphasizing his clear warning to the Israeli government about the [*perilous stakes of an incursion into Rafah*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/19/politics/biden-israel-rafah/index.html), but with little evidence that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intends to heed his words.

The top US diplomat told Netanyahu and the war cabinet Friday that the US remains committed to the "lasting defeat of Hamas, including in Rafah," but "a major military ground operation in Rafah is not the way to do it."

"It risks further isolating Israel around the world and jeopardizing its long-term security and standing," Blinken told reporters after his meetings Friday. "It risks killing more civilians, it risks wreaking greater havoc with the provision of humanitarian assistance."

The top US diplomat's "candid conversations" with the prime minister and the war cabinet were the latest attempt by the Biden administration to pressure the Netanyahu government into changing course after five and a half months of war. Frustrations and impatience on the US side are becoming increasingly apparent in rhetoric from top administration officials, including Blinken, President Joe Biden, and Vice President Kamala Harris.

Still, there are few signs that the pressure is having an impact on Netanyahu.

Following his meeting with Blinken Friday, the Israeli Prime Minister's message on Rafah was unchanged, as he once again vowed he would launch a military offensive into the Gazan city where more than a million people have fled.

"I told him that I hope we will do it with the support of the USA, but if we have to - we will do it alone," Netanyahu said in a video statement.

The ongoing divergence between the US and Israeli governments threatens to further fray the relationship at a time when intensive diplomatic work is underway to broker a "sustained and immediate ceasefire" in exchange for the release of hostages held by Hamas. The divisions suggest it will be difficult to make progress in talks next week about "different ways" to move forward in Rafah.

US pressure has also yielded few results on the humanitarian front, as the top US diplomat once again called on the Israeli government to do more to allow critically-needed assistance into Gaza.

Blinken said he pushed the government officials on "the imperative of surging and sustaining humanitarian assistance for the people in Gaza," noting that "one hundred percent" of the population "is in need of humanitarian assistance."

Blinken discussed with the Netanyahu government the ongoing hostage negotiations, the latest round of which kicked off in Doha on Friday. He also met with the families of some of those hostages, as well as demonstrators in Tel Aviv calling for their immediate release.

Blinken on Friday noted that "we've made progress in the last couple of weeks on the hostage negotiations, closing gaps, but almost by definition, when you get down to the last items, they tend to be the hardest, so there's still a lot of work to be done."

The top US diplomat's stop in Tel Aviv capped his sixth round of shuttle diplomacy in the region since the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel. It followed visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where Blinken met with a coalition of Arab foreign ministers to discuss the situation.

"There's not only more consensus on the priorities - ceasefire, release of hostages, humanitarian assistance, and a clear pathway planned for the future - I think there is increasingly consensus on the steps needed to achieve that," Blinken said Thursday.

Blinken's visit to Israel also coincided with a vote at the UN on a US-sponsored Security Council resolution calling for an "immediate ceasefire" in the Gaza conflict.

The resolution was the first time the US had taken to the UN body to call for a ceasefire in the conflict, but they specifically tied the ceasefire to the release of the hostages held by Hamas.

"This Resolution is an opportunity for the Council to speak with one voice to support the diplomacy happening on the ground and pressure Hamas to accept the deal on the table," Nate Evans, the spokesperson for the US Mission to the UN, told CNN Thursday prior to the vote.

Russia and China vetoed the measure on Friday - a move sharply condemned by US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield.

"Once again, Russia put ***politics*** over progress," Thomas-Greenfield said after the vote.

By Jennifer Hansler, CNN

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