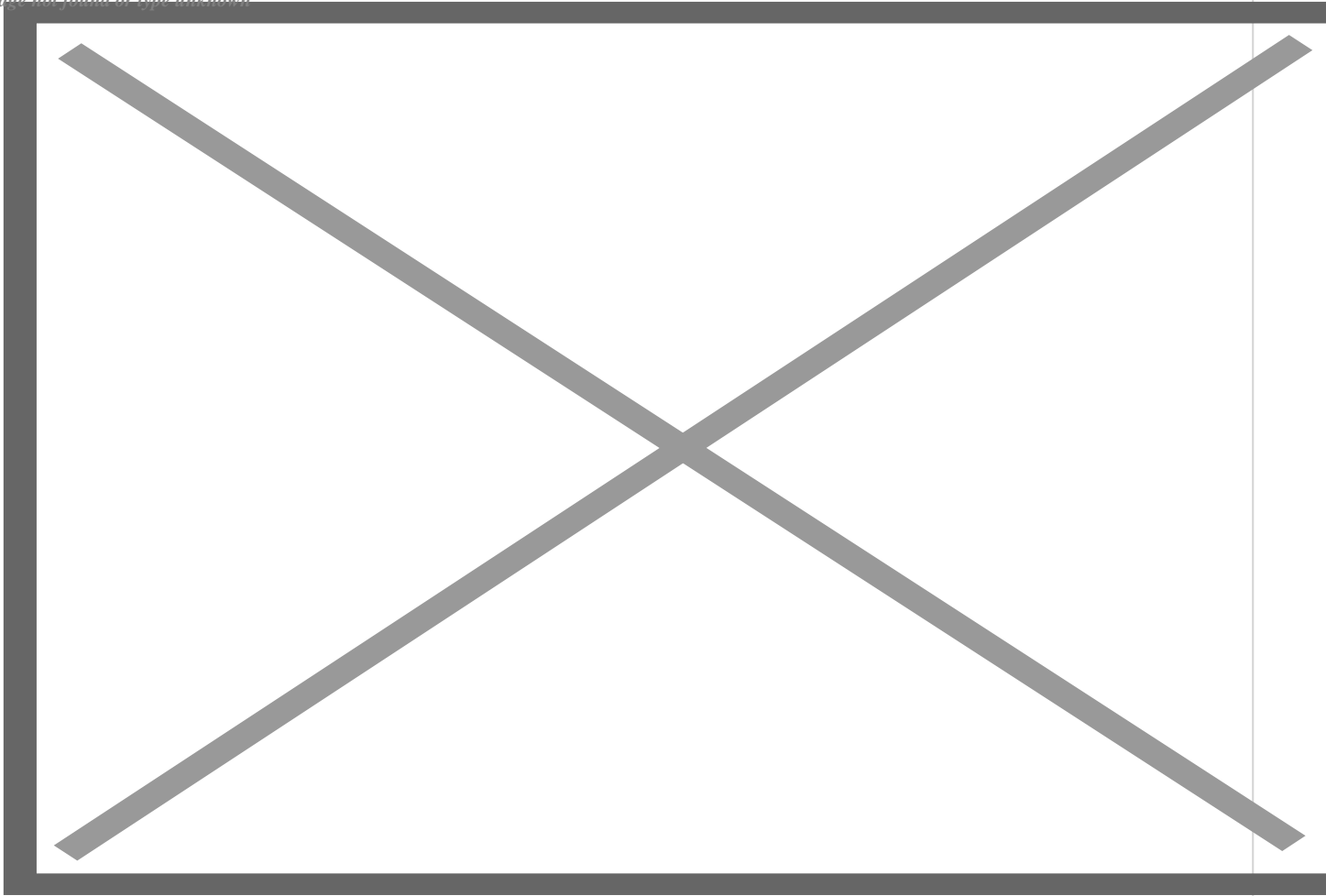


U.S. top diplomat Blinken to visit Israel and West Bank

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to visit Israel as well as Palestinian Authority leaders in the West Bank next week [File: Mandel Ngan/Pool via Reuters]

Washington, May 22 (RHC)-- Washington's top diplomat is expected to visit Israel and the occupied West Bank this coming week, just days after a ceasefire was reached between Israel and Palestinian faction Hamas to end 11 days of deadly Israeli bombardments of the Gaza Strip.

An unnamed source told the Reuters news agency on Saturday that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken would visit Israel as well as Palestinian Authority leaders in the West Bank on Wednesday and

Thursday.

The State Department has not yet released the full details of Blinken's travel plans, but the source told Reuters that Blinken would also visit Egypt and Jordan. The trip comes days after Egypt helped broker a ceasefire to end Israeli attacks on Gaza that killed at least 248 Palestinians in the besieged coastal territory, injured nearly 2,000 others, and destroyed buildings and critical infrastructure.

US President Joe Biden's administration had faced widespread pressure, including from progressive legislators in Biden's Democratic Party, to pressure Israel to end its military assault on Gaza.

Biden hailed the ceasefire announced on Thursday, but reiterated that "the United States fully supports Israel's right to defend itself against indiscriminate rocket attacks." In a statement that same day, the State Department said Blinken in a phone call with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi also welcomed the ceasefire, as well as Egypt's mediation efforts to reach the deal.

Department spokesman Ned Price said Blinken "will meet with Israeli, Palestinian, and regional counterparts in the coming days to discuss recovery efforts and working together to build better futures for Israelis and Palestinians" during his visit to the region.

Al Jazeera's James Bays, reporting from West Jerusalem, said "the bigger question for the Blinken visit is whether this changes the calculations of the Biden administration."

Since coming into office in January, Biden and his top officials had sought to "de-prioritise" the Israel-Palestine issue amid a string of other foreign policy priorities, including the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and efforts to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal.

Critics have questioned the Biden administration's approach to the conflict, urging the US president to publicly pressure Israel – which receives nearly \$4 billion in U.S. military aid annually – rather than pursue "behind-the-scenes" diplomacy.

Progressive lawmakers are also pushing to cancel a \$375 million weapons sale to Israel, arguing last week that the US should not be arming the Israeli military as it dropped bombs on Palestinians in Gaza.

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