

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

From the New York Times, I'm Sabrina Tavernisi and this is The Daily.

President Biden arrived in Israel today as the crisis in the region deepened.

We have other breaking news, NBC News now learning between 200 and 300 people were killed in a bombing targeting a hospital.

These are people who were likely being treated for injuries related to the war already.

After a devastating blast at a hospital in Gaza ignited protests across the broader Middle East.

Palestinians in the West Bank very agitated.

Yes, there's chaotic scenes outside the US Embassy in Beirut, angry protesters, Lebanese as well as Palestinians.

My colleague Edward Wong on America's most difficult diplomatic mission.

There's not just toward Israel.

People are blaming the US administration.

Support its ally while also preventing a wider war.

It's Wednesday, October 18th.

So Ed, we have a deteriorating situation in the Middle East.

You've been very focused on American diplomacy in this moment and you've been traveling with American officials all over the region for the past week.

Tell us what they've been trying to do.

Sabrina, this is the most intense diplomatic scramble I've seen among US officials in the time I've been covering foreign policy and diplomacy in Washington.

And it's obvious because the stakes are very high.

The US wants to show full support for Israel, which is a very close partner in a region where many countries have been hostile to it.

Then there's this growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza as Israel carries out its airstrikes and prepares a ground invasion there.

And on top of all that, you've got the possibility of this becoming a wider regional conflict and US officials are desperately trying to head that off.

So from the very beginning of this crisis, American officials have been involved.

We saw the US immediately come out and condemn the attacks by Hamas right after they took place on October 7th on a Saturday.

And then over that weekend, there were a lot of intense discussions between President Biden and foreign leaders in the region to really try and get them on board with a consistent message about the attacks.

I know that the US officials and US leaders were intensely focused on showing strong and unwavering American support for Israel at that time and for whatever Israel planned to do.

Its military strikes, its retaliation against Hamas.

And they also wanted to speak with Arab leaders in order to try and persuade the leaders to condemn Hamas and condemn the attacks and show as much support for Israel as they could.

And Ed, why was it so important to get Arab countries to sign on to this, to condemn the attack?

Well, given the scale of the attacks, I think that the US felt they had an opening to try and get Arab nations and Arab leaders on board with what Israel was about to do.

As you know, Sabrina, the Palestinians are seen as victims by many Arab citizens across

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

the region.

I would say that the majority of people who live in the Middle East see Israel as an occupier and see America as the backer of this occupation.

So even an attack like the Hamas attack will be seen as justified by many just ordinary people in the region.

And I think that the US was hoping that the governments and the leaders of the region would help set the tone, will help guide public opinion by coming out and being more forceful in their condemnation of these attacks.

So what happens?

Do any of them condemn Hamas in the attack?

Well, there are a couple Arab countries that do come out strongly against Hamas.

Over that weekend to Monday, we see the United Arab Emirates put out a statement that forcefully says Hamas was not right in doing these attacks and naming Hamas.

And we also see Bahrain, smaller country in the Gulf region, also put out a similar statement and naming Hamas.

And what's interesting is that these two countries had signed on a few years ago to what are known as the Abraham Accords, which were these agreements that the Trump administration

really pushed in a diplomatic effort to try and get Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel.

But Saudi Arabia, for example, makes a statement that essentially says, oh, we told you for years that the Israeli occupation of Gaza would lead to reactions that you won't like.

Qatar, another Arab country, comes out with a statement that says Israel is solely responsible for these attacks.

And that did not please U.S. officials at all, of course.

Okay.

So the U.S. doesn't get much in this initial round of private calls, this initial flurry of diplomacy.

What does it do next?

So on the Tuesday after the attacks.

Good afternoon.

You know there are moments in this life, and I mean this literally when the pure unadulterated evil is unleashed.

President Biden comes out and gives what many people describe as one of the most emotional speeches of his career.

Young people massacred while attending a musical festival to celebrate peace, to celebrate peace.

He forcibly condemns the attacks.

He describes in detail how horrific they are.

Families hid their fear for hours and hours desperately trying to keep their children quiet to avoid drawing attention.

He evokes the history of persecution against Jews.

This attack is brought to the surface, painful memories, scars left by a millennia of anti-Semitism and genocide of the Jewish people.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

He tells Americans, we stand with Israel, and we will make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens, defend itself.

And he describes in American people how he promised to the Israeli leader that the United States would support Israel in whatever actions it takes.

He's atrocities, he's been sickening, we're with Israel, let's make no mistake, thank you.

And Sabrina that same day, I was also getting a flurry of messages from the State Department telling me to pack my bags, because Tony Blinken, the Secretary of State, was about to go on one of the biggest diplomatic trips of his career.

So publicly, this overwhelming support for Israel in this moment by the U.S. But at this point, Israel has also started bombing in Gaza, right?

So how is the U.S. viewing that?

And what's it saying to Israel about it, you know, either in public or behind the scenes?

So that's interesting, Sabrina, because this was something that I watched change as I was following Tony Blinken around the region during this past week.

So when Blinken arrived in Tel Aviv, he put out a very strong message of unwavering and unconditional support for Israel.

He stood next to Netanyahu and talked about how Israel had an obligation to defend itself and that the U.S. completely understood what Israel was about to do in Gaza.

But as Blinken is traveling around the region and going to visit with Arab leaders in a total of around a half dozen Arab countries in the area, he hears a lot of concerns about the civilian casualties.

And so I think that this really impacted the thinking of U.S. officials.

And President Biden and Blinken were talking intensely during Blinken's trip.

And we saw Blinken as he stood next to Arab officials giving press conferences across the region talking more and more also about the need to address the suffering of the two million people in Gaza.

And just to remind listeners here, Israel had shut off power, water, and food to Gaza.

The bombing has been causing this deepening humanitarian crisis.

I'd imagine this was pretty worrisome to a lot of Arab leaders.

That's right, Sabrina.

They really are pushing for the U.S. to tell the Israelis, please back off from this cutoff of water, this cutoff of electricity, this cutoff of food.

And we're seeing all these images coming out of people fleeing the cities of the rubble and bodies being pulled out of the rubble.

And I know that U.S. officials at this time were then really pressing the Israelis to start restoring some of these basic services.

And were Israelis heeding what U.S. officials were telling them?

Were they doing that restoration of services?

Well Netanyahu and his top aides felt justified in using the most intense forms of warfare against Gaza.

I think that the magnitude of the violence that Hamas carried out in Israel, these terrorist attacks, really struck at the psyche of Israelis around the country.

You hear that when you talk with Israelis.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

But they do start thinking about what the U.S. officials are telling them.

What about food and supplies?

Well, Sabrina, there's only one land border crossing into Gaza, and that's through Egypt.

It's a place called Rafa.

And so U.S. officials start negotiating with people from different governments.

So they talk to the Egyptians.

The Egyptians say they definitely want to make sure that A gets through that border.

Israelis are very reluctant to open it.

They have argued that over the years Hamas has gotten weapons through that border and they don't want that border to be open as they're waging war on Hamas.

They've even done some airstrikes dropping bombs right around the border.

And so the Americans are talking to Israel to try and get them to hold back from doing airstrikes or bombing on that border and trying to persuade them that getting humanitarian aid to Gaza is a valid effort.

And we have to also remember that it's not Israel that controls that border.

Hamas does control that border.

And so the Americans are also trying to pass messages via officials in Qatar to Hamas, to try and tell Hamas we want to bring humanitarian aid through and please open the border when the trucks start coming through.

Qatar is a country in the Gulf that has in the past, passed messages to Hamas, had relations with Hamas and is close.

Therefore that's how the U.S. is communicating with Hamas.

That's right.

And another important point about this border is that American officials have been trying to get Palestinian Americans out of Gaza via this border crossing.

So they've been trying to talk to these countries to open up the crossing to American citizens with valid documents.

And we know that other governments are also talking with Egypt, with Israel to try and get the border crossing open for their citizens too.

So Blinken is working on getting Americans out and aid in, but what about everybody else in Gaza?

I mean, there are two million people there, presumably some number of civilians there would leave if they could.

What about them?

Well, what we know is that Israel will do its offensive in northern Gaza.

They've been telling people in the north of Gaza to move down to the south.

And there's a lot of people who want to get out of Gaza through the south, through this land border.

But as American officials travel around the region and talk with Arab leaders, they're discovering that the refugee issue is a very complicated one.

Arab nations are reluctant to take the refugees for various reasons.

They don't want a refugee crisis in their own borders, but they also don't think that Israel should be forcing the relocation of Palestinians.

There are intense historical echoes of what happened decades ago to Palestinians.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

And I was even hearing from Palestinians and Palestinian Americans who were outraged by the fact that Israel was calling for people to move out of northern Gaza.

And also they were afraid that once Palestinians left Gaza entirely that they would not be able to go back.

So there's a very complicated set of considerations here.

Okay.

So the stakes are extremely high here, right?

I mean, 2 million Gazans, they have nowhere to go effectively.

There's a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Israel is attacking from the air and clearly preparing for a ground invasion.

Is the U.S. exerting pressure on Israel at all to ease its approach or even to reverse its plans to invade?

Well, what we're hearing from U.S. officials is that they're still fully behind whatever offensive Israel is planning in Gaza.

They know that Israel has been deeply wounded in physical and spiritual and psychological ways by the Hamas attacks.

And also that Israel needs to show its adversaries around the region, namely other militias and Iran that it can protect itself.

And so the U.S. feels strongly supportive of that.

And for example, we know that Pentagon officials are talking with Israeli officials about lessons that the U.S. has learned over decades of doing urban warfare and what fight in Gaza city might entail.

But at the same time, we're also hearing lots of anxiety from American officials about the prospects of a much wider regional war.

They think that once the ground invasion of Gaza starts and we see even bloodier images that there will be massive concerns around the region and that other armed groups that are supportive of Hamas will start taking part in the war.

And the U.S. officials that I've been traveling with this week, one of their big pushes is to really try and keep this war from becoming a huge regional conflict that could draw the U.S. in and put the U.S. military squarely back in the Middle East again.

We'll be right back.

So Ed, you said that the U.S. officials you're talking to are very worried that this war could turn into an even bigger conflict, one that spills out into the broader region.

Let's start to unpack that.

Well, Sabrina, we've been talking all this time about Hamas, which is this group that's based in Gaza on the southern side of Israel.

But up in the north, Lebanon borders Israel, and there Israel faces attacks from a very powerful militia, Hezbollah, that's based in south Lebanon.

And give us a primer on Hezbollah.

Remind us why it's such a threat to Israel and the U.S.

Well, Hezbollah has a very unique position in Lebanon.

There's a political wing that has seats in the government, and there's also a very powerful military wing.

This military wing has many fighters who are well-trained.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

They have thousands of rockets, and they get a lot of backing from Iran, which is one of the most powerful countries in the region.

In the 1980s, it carried out some of the most devastating terrorist attacks against U.S. interests.

It carried out a bombing of the American embassy in Beirut in 1983, and it also carried out another bombing, this one of Marine barracks in Lebanon.

The U.S. has designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

And Hezbollah has, similar to Hamas, made its mission to fight and destroy Israel.

That's right, Sabrina.

But Hezbollah is the much more powerful actor.

It's better funded, it's better organized, its fighters are better trained, and its weapons systems are more powerful and more sophisticated.

So Hezbollah, a militia in Lebanon, is similar to Hamas in many ways, including being funded by Iran.

But it's also different because it's a more effective, more powerful fighting force.

And of course, it kept having wars with Israel over that border into Israel's north.

I, myself, covered one of those wars in 2006, and it was extremely taxing for the Israeli military, tied up their ground forces, took them weeks to extract themselves.

So it has been quite a force in Israel's north for many, many years.

But what about now, with the attack on Israel last weekend?

We've seen an uptick in some of the exchanges between Hezbollah and Israel in the north.

So Hezbollah has been firing more rockets, and Israel has recently told its citizens who are living up in those towns bordering Lebanon to start moving south.

Israel knows that things could heat up very quickly there.

Okay.

So there's been rocket fire since the attack on Israel.

How has the United States been viewing that?

Well, U.S. officials are very anxious about this.

They're afraid that Hezbollah might decide to mount a full-on assault on Israel as Israel carries out its war against Hamas in the south.

So the U.S. is watching this very carefully.

And to try and deter Hezbollah from doing anything, it has sent two aircraft carriers to the region.

One of them, the Gerald R. Ford, is already there.

And the other one, the Eisenhower, is moving there right now.

It's also sent a few thousand troops to the region, but it says that those troops for now will not get involved in combat.

So the Americans are effectively reading the tea leaves of this bit of rocket fire that started last week from the north, from Hezbollah.

They're worried about a wider war, and they're sending these ships to the region, presumably to try to stop that from happening.

Right.

U.S. aircraft carriers are among the most powerful weapons in the U.S. military system.

And other countries know that.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

So the U.S. is hoping that Hezbollah and its main backer, Iran, will read this, and they'll realize that if Hezbollah starts military assaults in northern Israel, that they will incur a great cost.

And so they're hoping that there's a big deterrence factor to having these warships there.

We all know that Israel is planning a huge ground invasion of Gaza.

And if it goes into Gaza with troops and do street-by-street fighting, it could get very bloody and very violent there.

We'll see many civilian casualties probably even beyond what we're seeing with airstrikes right now.

And then Hezbollah might feel obligated, or they might feel the desire to open up a northern front there in Israel.

And many people who've looked at Israel's military say that military, even though it's very well-trained, is not powerful enough to fight a two-front war.

And I think U.S. officials are also wary of another scenario, which is Iran getting directly involved.

That's one of their biggest fears.

Their assessment right now is that Iran doesn't want to get involved in a regional war, but a downward spiral of events could end up drawing Iran into a war.

They can't discount that possibility.

Okay, so these are some of the calculations that U.S. policymakers are making.

And the big fear is that there will be a second front in Lebanon with Hezbollah, or even that Iran itself, Hezbollah's backer, would get involved.

What is the U.S. doing to try to head this off?

Well, that's where we're seeing a lot of urgent diplomacy taking place.

So I've witnessed that this past week as I've been traveling around the region with Tony Blinken and his aides, they're trying to communicate to Iran.

They're trying to get partner countries, even some of their rivals, to pass messages on to Iran.

So for example, they've spoken about this with Qatar, which is a U.S. partner.

And they're telling Qatari officials to talk to one of their other partners, which is Iran, that Iran should hold back.

And there was even one day during his travels here when Blinken decided to call Wang Yi, China's top diplomat, because he wanted to try and tell China to persuade Iran to stay out of the fight.

So Ed, as we know, President Biden has made the choice to travel to Israel at this incredibly sensitive moment.

What do you think he's trying to accomplish with this visit?

Well, Biden is trying to do several things.

He wants to show full support for Israel for the war that it's waging.

He also wants to make sure that Israel and other governments in the region commit to getting humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza.

That's becoming a much bigger crisis.

And he also wants to, again, send that message of deterrence to other adversaries of Israel

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

and say, I'm here, America's here.

And if you get involved in this war, then you'll feel America's wrath.

But of course, it's also a very fraught time for him to be going to Israel.

The air strikes are intensifying in Gaza.

We're seeing many more images of civilians who've been killed in these strikes.

And just today, we got news that there was an explosion at a hospital in Gaza where hundreds of people were killed.

And some of the images of the aftermath are absolutely horrific.

Hamas came out with a statement saying that this was the result of an Israeli air strike.

And Israel has said that's not the case.

Fighters in Gaza might have fired an air and rocket that landed on the hospital.

Yeah.

The videos circulating online do, as you say, show these unbelievably horrific images.

Clearly, the details of what exactly happened there are still coming to light.

Israel has said it wasn't them.

But the images are out there circulating and make this an incredibly wrenching moment for the Palestinians.

And Biden's trip is set to place him in the middle of this, which presumably makes his job of preventing the conflict from spreading harder.

It definitely ties Biden and America much closer to this war that Israel is waging, this war that Israel feels is justified.

But it will evoke a strong reaction from Arabs across the region and even from some governments that the US usually relies on to be its partners in the region.

So Ed, I want to step back for a minute here.

You've just spent seven straight days traveling with American officials around the Middle East.

They're racing to contain the threat of wider war.

How do you see this moment based on what you're hearing from them?

Well, I think it's a very anxious moment.

I think it feels like we're in the edge of an abyss potentially.

If this widens into regional war, it could be the biggest event in the Middle East in many years, perhaps since the American invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring and those revolutions.

And I think that the American officials are very, very worried about the US getting involved in another major war in the Middle East.

They know that our country has been scarred by these wars.

And some of the conversations that I've had with the US officials as I've been traveling around with them have been among the bleakest I've had since covering this diplomatic beat.

There's a very grim atmosphere.

They definitely know things could get much, much worse.

But also, these US officials tell me they need to stand strong with Israel.

They say Israel is a partner.

It's an ally.

And that America has promised to defend Israel through the decades against its enemies.

Ed, we started this episode asking how the US was getting involved in this conflict

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

and how it was trying to thread a needle, support Israel, even if it goes down the road to ground invasion, while at the same time easing the humanitarian crisis and containing the broader war.

In some ways, what we're seeing now, images from the hospital and the bombings of the past week, is potentially just the beginning.

So you're talking to officials.

What price will US officials be willing to pay for the support of Israel?

Well, the officials tell me that their support and their resolve is steadfast.

But I think what's going to happen is when you see that tested many, many times over the coming weeks and the coming months.

This is just the start of the war.

The Israelis say they're ready to fight a long war against Hamas and against any other adversaries that get involved.

And in these areas, there are many, many civilians.

I think that both the Americans and the Israelis are gritting their teeth and saying, we're going ahead.

But then the question is, as these images keep coming out, and as public opinion starts to turn more against Israel, how resolute will these American officials be?

Will they start to wonder whether they'll pay a political price, for example, for continued support of Israel?

Will they decide they need to push back against some of Israel's military tactics in the area?

I think these are all questions that will become even greater in relevance as this war goes on.

Ed, thank you.

Thanks, Sabrina.

On his diplomatic trip to the Middle East, President Biden had planned to visit Jordan, where he would meet with Palestinian leaders.

But on Tuesday afternoon, that summit was abruptly canceled after the blast at the hospital.

The situation deteriorated throughout the evening, with defiant crowds of protesters clashing with security forces in Amman and in Beirut.

And in Iran, the country's foreign minister, who on Monday had warned that multiple fronts would open against Israel if attacks against Palestinians continued, said that time was up.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you should know today.

The tellers agree in their tallies that the total number of votes cast is 432, of which the Honorable Jim Jordan of the state of Ohio has received 200 votes.

Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, the ultra-conservative Republican seeking to become the Speaker of

the House, failed to win the job during a vote on Tuesday, when a determined bloc of moderate Republicans blocked his path.

Jordan, an ally of Donald Trump who led the congressional effort to overturn the 2020 election, fell 17 votes short of the majority he needed.

Not a single Democrat supported him.

[Transcript] The Daily / The Diplomatic Scramble to Contain the Israel-Hamas War

And one of them, Representative Pete Aguilar of California, delivered an unusually sharp rebuke of Jordan's record from the House floor.

A vote today to make the architect of a nationwide abortion ban, a vocal election denier, and an insurrection insider to the Speaker of this House would be a terrible message to the country and our allies.

Jordan plans to call for a second round of voting this morning, but it's unclear whether he can win over enough skeptical Republicans to secure the speakership.

If he fails, the House will remain leaderless and paralyzed.

Today's episode was produced by Ricky Nevetsky, Olivia Natt, Shannon Lin, and Carlos Prieto.

It was edited by Patricia Willins and Lisa Chow, contains original music by Diane Wong, Dan Powell, and Pat McCusker, and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Lansverk of Wonderly.

That's it for the Daily.

I'm Serena Tavernese, see you tomorrow.