

Former U.S. diplomat says Gaza atrocities will haunt Antony Blinken for the rest of his life



A protester interrupts Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a speech at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, on January 14 [Luis M Alvarez/AP Photo]

Washington, January 18 (RHC)-- Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza — and the United States' support for it — will “haunt” outgoing Secretary of State Antony Blinken for the rest of his life, says a former diplomat, who quit in protest over the war last year.

Hala Rharrit told Al Jazeera in a phone interview that the administration of President Joe Biden is skirting the US's own regulations by continuing to arm Israel despite well-documented abuses in Gaza.

“They are willfully — and I don't say that word lightly, willfully — violating and evading US law,” said Rharrit, who resigned from the US State Department in April.

“When I became a diplomat, I swore an oath to defend the Constitution. They are circumventing the process to continue the flow of arms, knowing how catastrophic that is. For me, it's really unforgivable, and it is criminal.”

There are several U.S. laws that prohibit weapon transfers to human rights abusers, including a ban on security assistance to countries that block Washington-backed humanitarian aid.

The Leahy Law also restricts US aid to military units that are credibly accused of gross human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings, torture and rape.

Moreover, the Biden administration has adopted a policy, dubbed National Security Memorandum 20, requiring allies that receive U.S. weapons to provide credible assurances that they are not using the arms in violation of international humanitarian law.

Despite these safeguards, the US has continued to supply Israel — a country that leading rights groups say is committing genocide in Gaza — with billions of dollars in weapons.

Israel has killed at least 46,876 people in Gaza. It has also imposed a suffocating siege on the territory that sparked a deadly, man-made hunger crisis.

Last year, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defence minister, Yoav Gallant, on charges of war crimes, including using “starvation as a method of warfare”.

Yet, Blinken has certified to Congress that Israel is not blocking humanitarian assistance to Gaza — an assessment that aid groups have rejected.

Blinken's State Department has also been accused of failing to act on allegations of abuse by Israeli soldiers under the Leahy Law, prompting a recent lawsuit against the Biden administration, led by Palestinians and Palestinian Americans.

And so, critics say Blinken has been instrumental in ensuring that Israel continues to receive the U.S. weapons it uses to decimate Gaza. Blinken also oversaw the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, which vetoed four Security Council resolutions that would have called for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The top U.S. diplomat — who has a long history of staunch pro-Israel advocacy — has faced Palestinian rights protesters at congressional hearings, in the streets and even in front of his home.

Just this week, several activists interrupted Blinken's remarks at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, calling him the “secretary of genocide.” And on Thursday, at Blinken's final appearance in the State Department's press briefing room, a journalist was forcibly removed for repeated questions about Blinken's complicity in Israel's alleged war crimes.

Rharrit said it is natural to object to “massacres and human beings being butchered”, predicting that Blinken will continue to be confronted by protesters after leaving his post on Monday.

“This will haunt him for the rest of his life,” the former diplomat told Al Jazeera.

“History, for sure, will judge him, and it is already doing so today. The question is: In future administrations, will there actually be accountability for the crimes that were committed under this administration?”

The war in Gaza appears to be nearing a conclusion after a ceasefire agreement was reached this week, following reports of intervention from incoming President-elect Donald Trump.

For months, Israeli officials have pledged to push on with the war, and Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has openly bragged about thwarting attempts to reach a deal that would end the conflict and lead to the release of Israeli captives in Gaza.

However, Blinken continues to insist that Hamas “played the spoiler” in talks over the deal. “I’ll tell you very bluntly, Blinken is lying,” Rharrit said.

The ex-diplomat worked at the State Department for 18 years and served as an Arabic language spokesperson before quitting last year. She is one of several US officials who resigned from the Biden administration over the uncompromising US support for Israel.

Rharrit said she is grateful that she left her post because she felt like she was being “silenced” when voicing concerns about US policy.

“I don’t think as diplomats we are meant to enforce or implement illegal or inhumane policies and also ones that are fundamentally contradictory to US national security interests,” she told Al Jazeera. “So there was no way for me to be able to remain under those conditions.”

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