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The Need for Immediate Ceasefires in Ukraine and Gaza



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

If ever there were a need for immediate cease-fires, it is the wars between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas. The Ukrainian counter-offensive over the past six months has led to a Ukrainian advance of less than 15 miles. The Israeli advance over the past several weeks in Gaza has been marked by the deaths of innocents for the most part, primarily the elderly, women, children, and even infants. There is no evidence that Israel

has annihilated the leaders of Hamas or even registered significant gains against the fighting forces of Hamas, which may number as many as 30,000 to 40,000 fighters.

Making matters far worse is the fact that Russia and Israel are committing heinous war crimes in their operations. Ever since Russian forces were turned back from Kyiv, Kherson, and Kharkiv in the early stages of the war, Moscow has been targeting civilians and civilian facilities in order to convince the Ukrainian public to demand an end to the fighting. President Vladimir Putin has found it easy to target civilians. The same could be said for the Netanyahu government in Israel. The Russian tactic has failed miserably, and there is no sign of Ukraine's interest in ending the fighting without regaining all Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory, particularly Crimea.

Israeli war crimes are horrific witness the Israeli campaign that is targeting hospitals, schools, mosques, and even essential facilities of the United Nations. Israel has the right of self-defense and the right to retaliate against Hamas, but its war crimes include its failure to allow civilians to escape the brutal Israeli assaults, and the denial of such essentials as food, fuel, and water to civilians caught in the crossfire. Israel is violating major tenets of just war, particularly the tenet of proportionality, given the high number of Palestinian deaths. Israel's actions demonstrate the genocidal intent of Israeli leaders who have treated Palestinians as less than human for decades. This intent also reflects the fact that Netanyahu has never sought peace with the Palestinians. The far right-wing composition of his government was designed in part to make sure there would never be meaningful talks with Palestinians, let alone a two-state solution.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's arguments against a cease-fire are particularly self-aggrandizing because he is primarily trying to keep himself in power and out of jail, as he is facing serious charges involving bribes and fraud. The former chief of the Israeli Defense Forces, Major General Amos Malka, stated last week that Netanyahu is focused on his own political "survival" and not the war in Gaza. Last summer, during the mass protests over Netanyahu's so-called judicial reforms, Malka said that he would rather resign from the IDF than serve an "extreme messianic dictatorship."

Netanyahu maintains that there can be no cease-fire until Israel's military objectives are met. He disingenuously compares his tactics to U.S. efforts against the forces of ISIS in Iraq and elsewhere. However, the forces of ISIS included huge numbers of foreign fighters who simply chose to go home or to fight elsewhere. The fighters of Hamas are Palestinians who are deeply embedded in Palestinian society and have nowhere to go.

Netanyahu himself approved the emergence of Hamas 17 years ago in order to avoid the pressure to negotiate with the more moderate Palestinian Authority.

Neither Netanyahu nor the United States for that matter have any reasonable ideas for the state of governance in Gaza even if the forces of Hamas are sufficiently degraded. Secretary of State Antony Blinken endorsed the idea of a role for the Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza, which is a non-starter to Netanyahu and probably the Palestinian residents of Gaza. Netanyahu has no ideas regarding governance and is endorsing indefinite Israeli occupation. The wanton destruction of Gaza's infrastructure suggests that the Israelis want to make sure that Palestinians have no way to return to their homes; they presumably hope that a sufficient number will try to enter Egypt in one way or another. In other words, the Israelis are pursuing a second Nakba: the first Nakba forced 700,000 Palestinians from their homelands in 1948; the second Nakba, if successful, will ensure that 2 million Palestinians have no homes in Gaza and no access to the West Bank.

Netanyahu presumably realizes that if he were to be successful against Hamas, there would be no Palestinian leaders to negotiate with. The Palestinian Authority lacks credibility on the West Bank, and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is a sickly octogenarian who is not fully supported by his own forces. Meanwhile, the fighting in Gaza continues at great cost to the Palestinian community; to Israel's standing in the international community; to the detriment of the Biden administration and U.S. domestic stability, and—last, but far from least—to the possibility of an expanded war in the Middle East that could involve Lebanon, Iranian-backed militia groups, and even Iran itself. The ominous presence of two U.S. carrier task forces as well as 3,500 U.S. military forces in Syria and Iraq adds to the dangerous scenarios that could unfold in any escalatory cycle.

The case for a cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine is less compelling but no less essential. Ukraine's commander-in-chief, General Valery Zaluzhny, has conceded that "just like in the first world war we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate." He believes that it would take a "massive technological leap to break the deadlock," but he expects "no deep and beautiful breakthrough." Sadly, editorials in the mainstream media, particularly the *Washington Post*, similarly argue that a "new technological leap" could make a difference.

As I have argued for the past year, the war is unwinnable, and Russia's superiority in manpower, resources, and weaponry ensures that Ukraine has no path to victory. Like the war over Gaza, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict assures continued civilian losses, a devastating war of attrition, and an expanded conflict that could involve NATO countries

on the Russian border as well as the United States. There will have to be territorial exchanges, but Ukraine could come away with a path to membership in the European Union and perhaps the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The reconstruction effort in both Gaza and Ukraine will be beyond the capacity of the regional players in the Middle East and East Europe, respectively. The United States will be the key player in both scenarios, but there are already signs of war weariness in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Russia has made a huge mistake in believing that its military power could overwhelm Ukrainian forces and create a new political alignment in Europe. When the war ends, Russia will be increasingly isolated and will find new NATO member states on its Western border.

Israel has been similarly foolish in believing that, once again, it can use overwhelming military power to deal with Hamas. This failed in 2009 and 2014. Israeli military power in 1982 led to the creation of Hezbollah, which is in a position to do great harm to Israel if it chooses to do so. Israeli politicians believed that a terrorist and unstable force such as Hamas would allow Israel to avoid negotiations with a more moderate force, the Palestinian Authority, on the West Bank. The end of Netanyahu's scorched earth campaign will find Israel even more isolated than it was in 1956 when it conspired foolishly with Britain and France to maintain Western colonial control of the Suez Canal.

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