



Containing the Gaza Conflagration

The Israeli military campaign in Gaza following Hamas's attack on Israel is taking an unacceptably high toll. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group urges the EU to call for a ceasefire and address the humanitarian emergency in the strip.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at a defining moment, one of its bloodiest and most volatile ever. The grievous Hamas-led attack in southern Israel on 7 October 2023 saw Palestinian militants kill over 1,100 Israelis and take nearly 250 hostages, mostly civilians; reports emerged that they also engaged in acts of sexual assault, torture and mutilation. Since then, Israel has undertaken a relentless military campaign in the tiny, densely populated Gaza Strip, killing over 26,000 people – most of them women and children.

Conditions for Gaza's 2.23 million inhabitants – already poor before the war, due to the blockade Israel had enforced for sixteen years – are now catastrophically bad, with 85 per cent of the population displaced at least once and 60 per cent of the civil infrastructure destroyed. Israel made the siege near total, cutting off water and electricity and severely restricting food supply. Palestinians in Gaza are facing starvation, with expectant and new mothers, as well as babies, at the highest risk, and aid agencies are warning of the spread of communicable disease. Israeli leaders have vowed unending war to eliminate Hamas, or at least its military wing, an objective that appears unachievable. Hamas is equally determined to continue the fight.

Meanwhile, the war has already rendered large parts of Gaza uninhabitable, with destruction increasing by the day. In an interim ruling

on 26 January, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found that “the catastrophic situation in the Gaza Strip is at risk of deteriorating further” and ordered Israel to take provisional measures in the service of preventing and punishing breaches of the Genocide Convention. In response to Israeli allegations that twelve staff members of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) had participated in Hamas's 7 October attack, several donor governments, including the U.S., temporarily suspended their financial support for the agency, which serves Palestinian refugees.

The conflagration is not limited to Gaza. Israeli army raids and settler violence in the West Bank, already at a twenty-year high, have escalated significantly. Conflict has also spread across the Middle East, with flashpoints in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. On 28 January, an attack by Iran-backed militias killed three U.S. servicemembers on Jordan's border with Syria, expanding the battlefield yet further. The U.S. is reportedly preparing a sustained military campaign against Houthi insurgents in Yemen, who have been targeting Red Sea shipping. The longer the war continues, the greater the human and political damage in Gaza, in Israel and throughout the region, and the greater the risk that tensions erupt into something far bigger and more dangerous than the present flareups.

Against this backdrop, the EU and its member states should:

- Press for an immediate ceasefire, recognising that the best way to serve both humanitarian needs and Israel's security concerns, and to lower the risk of regional war, is to bring the military campaign to a close. The most promising path to a durable end to the fighting would begin with a truce, followed by another hostage release and measures addressing restrictions on humanitarian aid. Interim governance arrangements excluding Hamas from a role and an extended ceasefire structured to reduce the threat it presents would come next in the sequence.
- On a parallel track, and consistent with the ICJ's interim ruling, insist that restrictions on aid, commerce and the provision of essential goods and services be lifted or eased, regardless of whether there is progress on a truce. This would mean enabling the supply of water and electricity; expediting

inspection procedures at entry points to the strip; narrowing the list of prohibited dual-use items, including fuel; allowing expanded commercial activity; and reopening the Erez border crossing in the north for aid and vital goods given the challenges of transporting them through Gaza from the two open crossings in the south.

- Taking into account the potential impact of cutting essential services to Palestinian refugees in Gaza and beyond, continue funding UNRWA at the same time as insisting on a full, transparent investigation of the accusations against it.
- Remain focused on developments in the West Bank as well as in Gaza, recognising that they are related, and both press for a halt to settlement expansion and take action (eg, in the form of visa bans like those imposed by the U.S. and UK) against those responsible for settler violence.

Devastation and Escalation

The 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas was the worst sustained by Israel since the state was founded in 1948. It shattered Israelis' sense of security, which remains in pieces with details of the attacks continuing to emerge, 136 hostages still in captivity – at least twenty are known to be dead – and approximately 200,000 residents still displaced from towns near Gaza and (because of Hizbollah's operations in support of Hamas) the Lebanese border. It also dealt a serious blow to Israel's image as a regional superpower, which rests largely on perceptions of military prowess and invulnerability to enemy incursion. In part to restore that image, and in part to mollify citizens who, infuriated by its failure to prevent the Hamas assault, are demanding that Hamas be removed from Gaza, the far-right government has spearheaded what are by far Israel's most intensive military operations in the strip to date. The devastation caused by the campaign, which has killed more

than 1 per cent of Gaza's population, nearly defies comprehension.

The humanitarian emergency in Gaza has left hardened aid workers aghast. The death toll keeps climbing, and the numerous uprooted families have been forced to move repeatedly to escape bombing and shelling. Most Palestinians in Gaza are descendants of people made refugees in the 1948 war attending Israel's founding. In past conflicts, they have sought shelter in schools and other facilities run by UNRWA. The 155 UNRWA buildings, particularly in Rafah, the southernmost governorate where the displaced are now concentrated, are packed far beyond their intended capacity. Fleeing people have found shelter in the remaining large structures that sit at a distance from designated evacuation zones, including municipal buildings and mosques.

Military operations are the primary reason for the enormous destruction and displacement

caused by the war, but Israel's "complete siege" on Gaza – declared two days after the Hamas attack and relaxed only slightly since – has taken a huge toll as well. Two weeks after Israeli authorities cut off the electricity supply on 11 October, fuel reserves at Gaza's sole power plant were depleted. Fuel remains in short supply since the amount Israel allows does not cover Gaza's basic needs, even for aid operations. Medical services are badly affected: as of 3 January, the World Health Organization reported, only thirteen of Gaza's 36 hospitals were even partly operational.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands are desperately hungry. Before 7 October, 60 per cent of Gaza's food was imported with most of the remaining 40 per cent locally grown. Today, imports have fallen precipitously, and the agricultural sector has been heavily damaged. Repeated telecommunications shutdowns hinder efforts to distribute the insufficient food aid that is getting in. As a result, in December the Famine Review Committee (an international mechanism activated to assess situations of extreme food insecurity) established 17 per cent of the population have surpassed "catastrophic" levels of food insecurity, signifying "starvation, death or extremely critical acute [sic] malnutrition levels". Meanwhile, 42 per cent are estimated to be within the emergency threshold of "acute malnutrition and excess mortality". Aid officials say the situation has worsened in the five weeks since, a deterioration that is unlikely to be reversed without a ceasefire.

Israel disputes that there is an overall food shortage in Gaza or suggests that any scarcity owes to theft of supplies by Hamas (a claim for which U.S. officials say they see no evidence), even as aid workers aver that Israeli measures are compounding the problem inside the strip. The convoluted process of importing goods has limited imports to a meagre flow. The inspection process is unpredictable and, for a single truck, sometimes takes up to two hours. Dual-use goods, ie, those which Israel says have civilian as well as military uses, face arbitrary and inconsistently applied restrictions. Even if

assistance were coming in at greater speed and volume, Gaza's market-based food system cannot function without some level of commercial imports; aid agencies provide a supplement either in the form of staples or cash, but they do not provide complete food rations.

Moreover, getting goods into Gaza is only part of the problem. Once they enter the strip, there are many obstacles to distribution. The most important ones are the lack of fuel and Israel's refusal to coordinate deconfliction with its military operations, without which movement is dangerous or impossible. With the two operational crossings both in Gaza's south – Rafah and Kerem Shalom – hardly any aid makes it to the north. Other obstacles include crowding in Rafah, which makes many roads impassable; damage to roadways; lack of fuel and trucks; and the inability of residents to safely make their way to distribution points.

Yet for all the anguish and destruction the events of 7 October and subsequent war have wrought, no end is in sight. Israel continues to reject the notion of a ceasefire. It has no clear exit strategy and does not appear close to achieving either of its two main war goals of eradicating Hamas and securing the hostages' release. Hamas fighters have taken shelter in the group's extensive tunnel network, emerging to launch painful hit-and-run attacks on Israeli soldiers and at times firing rockets into Israel. Even if the Israeli military does manage to dismantle the group's armed wing or significantly degrade its capacity, the anger and grievance it has created through years of occupation and blockade, not to mention the present campaign of decimation, all but guarantee that both political and violent resistance to Israel will continue.

Indeed, as Crisis Group has long argued, the only way for Israel to achieve a lasting peace is through negotiations with the Palestinians that recognise their rights and aspirations to self-determination. Today's Israeli government, however, flatly rejects those aspirations, and the far-right flank of the governing coalition is even floating ideas about rebuilding Israeli

settlements in Gaza and encouraging “voluntary emigration” of Palestinians to third countries. These notions are resoundingly rejected by both Palestinians and people in the Middle East; in some cases, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been compelled to distance himself from them. Egypt and Jordan oppose any possible relocation of Palestinians from Gaza or the West Bank to their territory.

Against this backdrop, on 26 January, the ICJ found it plausible that Israeli conduct alleged by South Africa would violate the Genocide Convention. The court ordered Israel to take provisional measures with respect to the prevention and punishment of genocidal acts and incitement; the immediate and effective provision of humanitarian assistance; and the preservation of evidence. Although the court stopped short of ordering a ceasefire, it is hard to see how Israel can implement the provisional measures it ordered absent either that or a dramatic scaling-back of its military operations. Because the ICJ lacks enforcement power, the primary result of its decision will likely be to increase diplomatic and political pressure on Israel.

Separately, in response to Israeli allegations that twelve UNRWA staff members had participated in Hamas’s 7 October attack, several donor governments, including the U.S., temporarily suspended their financial support of the agency, imperilling its operations. Cutting aid to the agency, which provides essential services and the bulk of aid to Gaza, even as its population starves, is short-sighted in the extreme. The consequences will extend beyond Gaza to all Palestinian refugees served by UNRWA, including in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The European Commission has announced that it will review decisions about

future funding for UNRWA after the investigation the UN plans.

Meanwhile, the conflict’s regional reverberations are becoming increasingly serious. Israel’s assault on Gaza has outraged Arab public opinion and been condemned by many leaders. From Lebanon, Hizbollah has skirmished with Israel across its northern border in support of Gaza, causing Israeli communities in the area to empty out; Israel has threatened extensive destruction in Lebanon if the escalation continues. Iran-backed “axis of resistance” militias based in Iraq and Syria have engaged in over 150 attacks on U.S. troops in both countries, leading to several U.S. counterstrikes – mainly in Syria but also in Iraq (threatening Washington’s partnership with Baghdad). On 28 January, a drone strike on a U.S. base in north-eastern Jordan killed three U.S. service-members. President Joe Biden attributed the strike to Iran-backed militants and committed to hold the attackers accountable at a time and in a manner of Washington’s choosing. Perhaps most consequentially, the Houthi insurgents who control much of Yemen have attacked shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, provoking the U.S. to form a coalition with the mission of guaranteeing safe passage. Neither the U.S. presence nor its mounting attacks on Houthi targets in Yemen have stopped the insurgents from continuing their salvos, and Washington is now reportedly preparing for sustained operations in Yemen.

Each of these fault lines could become something much bigger – even though neither Tehran (which supports Hizbollah, the Iraq-based militias and the Houthis in various ways) nor Washington appears to see a regional conflagration as being in its interests.

Political Backdrop

The challenges in forging a resolution to the current situation are compounded by a crisis in political leadership on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. The Palestinian Authority (PA) – dominated by the Fatah party (a bitter rival of

Hamas) – enjoys partial governance over the West Bank. The PA was created in 1994, pursuant to the Oslo accords, under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The PLO hoped the PA would become the nucleus of a

future Palestinian state, but Israel and the PLO have not held negotiations since 2014.

The Israeli government's actions in the West Bank also undercut the PA's authority. The present Israeli government is rapidly expanding settlements in the West Bank, and several ministers are themselves settlers who come from and represent a base that openly advocates Jewish supremacy in the entire West Bank. Settler violence has spiked since 7 October, often with Israeli soldiers' active participation, with over 1,000 Palestinians driven from their villages. Against this backdrop, Palestinians not surprisingly see the PA as a subcontractor for the Israeli occupation. They resent that the PA does not protect them from the violence of settlers and Israeli soldiers even in the 18 per cent of the West Bank it is supposed to control (known as Area A). They are angry as well that it arrests Palestinians wanted by Israel. Starved of funding, the PA was collapsing and at risk of fragmenting politically even before 7 October.

At the same time, Israel's leadership, too, is in crisis. Prime Minister Netanyahu remains on trial for corruption charges (which he denies); prior to 7 October, his far-right government was facing unprecedented mass demonstrations (with many elite combat and air force reservists among the participants) against its plan to overhaul the judiciary. The military establishment warned that this unrest was undermining Israel's national security. The 7 October attacks sapped Netanyahu's popularity even further. But they rallied the Israeli public around the war effort and enabled his coalition to also continue destructive policies in the West Bank. With the Israeli public increasingly calling on Netanyahu to step down, deep splits within the war cabinet on how to prosecute the war and frustration among military officers with the lack of a day-after plan, Netanyahu has an interest in dragging out the war to remain in power. He thus continues to pander to the far-right base that paved his return to power in 2022.

Israel's Western Friends: Discomfort without Pressure

Uncomfortable as Israel's U.S. and European partners may be with its conduct of the campaign, there has been little if any attempt to restrain it in a meaningful way, much less impose costs. Washington provides weapons without any apparent strings attached; claims that it is not even monitoring whether Israel is using U.S.-supplied arms consistent with international humanitarian law; has blocked resolutions at the UN Security Council meant to pressure Israel toward a ceasefire; and issued a 100-day commemoration of the 7 October attacks that failed to mention the horrific fallout that they have had for the Palestinian people.

The EU has attached somewhat more caveats to its support. While expressing solidarity with the Israeli people after the shock of 7 October, states like Spain and Ireland made clear from the start that it would be important for Israel to proceed with restraint, though

others like Austria and the Czech Republic were more or less unconditional in their backing. That said, even some of Israel's staunchest European supporters have gradually shifted their positions. Israel's closest European friends (like Germany and, outside the EU, the UK) have called for a "sustainable ceasefire" – which appears intended to give Israel more time to eliminate Hamas. By contrast France's call for an "immediate and durable" truce conveys a greater sense of urgency. None of this rhetoric amounts to serious pressure on Israel to change tack, however, and the EU and its member states have failed to collectively endorse calls for a ceasefire. As suggested above, the ICJ ruling, which the EU has acknowledged, could bring a harder diplomatic and political push for a truce, but the practical impact is difficult to predict.

What the EU and Member States Can Do

Both the EU (as the largest provider of external assistance to the Palestinian territories) and member states (through their bilateral ties to Israel in some cases, and to the PA and surrounding states in others) have a powerful voice when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the risk of regional escalation. In using their political and economic influence they should focus first and foremost on the following goals.

For both urgent humanitarian reasons and to manage the risk of a regional conflagration, reaching a ceasefire is an immediate imperative. Due to national sensitivities and divergent views, European policymakers are still struggling to agree on a collective call for a ceasefire and are instead putting a lot of energy into discussions of what they call “the day after”. Europeans, however, need to come to terms with the fact that the starting point for any way out of this crisis – one that can address both the humanitarian emergency and Israel’s security concerns – will inevitably need to be a ceasefire. The most promising sequence of events to pursue would include a truce that precedes another release of hostages and sees the removal of all restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid and facilitation of its distribution; the development of interim governing arrangements with Hamas relinquishing the civilian administration of the strip; a more extended ceasefire guaranteed by outside powers; and, ideally, the reinvigoration of a meaningful political negotiating track between the parties.

At the same time, in light of Gaza’s urgent needs, increasing the availability of essential goods and services in the strip cannot await a ceasefire. Mortality in Gaza from lack of food, water, fuel, medicine and shelter is already rising. Thus, the EU and member states should continue funding for UNRWA even as they demand that the agency undertake a full,

transparent investigation of the accusations against it. They also should press Israel for an immediate ceasefire, and in keeping with the ICJ ruling, simultaneously insist that it immediately restore the provision of essential services to the strip (including water and electricity), while ensuring the systematic distribution of sufficient volumes of aid and sufficient commerce to sustain the population. This would require Israel to:

- speed up inspections of goods coming into the strip;
- narrowly tailor the list of prohibited dual-use goods, exempt those essential for saving lives, including fuel, and ensure that the list is consistently applied;
- permit a broader reactivation of commercial activity, since aid alone is insufficient to ensure the basic needs in Gaza; and
- reopen the Erez border crossing in the north for aid and vital goods, since it has become extremely difficult to transport anything into northern Gaza.

Finally, the EU and its member states should not allow Gaza to distract them from what is happening in the West Bank, as the two areas are directly interconnected. EU actors should press Israel to halt settlement expansion while taking direct action against settler violence by imposing visa bans – like the U.S. and UK have begun to do – on violent settlers. It should also insist that Israel uphold the historical status quo on the Holy Esplanade in Jerusalem. The more clarity and unity Europeans can show in these demands, the more meaningful their contribution can be to ending the violence and putting the region on a path toward peace. ■

