

War on Gaza: Global Leaders Must Find the Courage to Hit Israel and the US Where It Hurts

Non-binding UN votes will never stop the Gaza genocide. Only boycotts, banning weapons sales and severing diplomatic ties will force Israel and the US to heed the clamour for peace

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As the world looks forward to 2024, holiday celebrations are being overshadowed by humanity's failure to halt the [genocide](#) in [Gaza](#) and the active [complicity](#) of the [United States](#) that enables it.

As the rest of the world condemns the massacre as a genocide and a [crime against humanity](#), [Israel](#) and the United States stand isolated in their insistence that their atrocities are somehow justified by the indiscriminate violence committed during Hamas's break-out from Gaza on 7 October.

On 8 December, the UN [Security Council](#) invoked [article 99](#) for only the fifth time in UN history. Article 99 is an emergency provision that allows the secretary-general to summon the council to respond to a crisis that "threatens the maintenance of international peace and security".

The previous occasions were the Belgian [invasion of the Congo](#) in 1960, in [East Pakistan](#) (now Bangladesh) in 1971, the [hostage crisis](#) at the US embassy in [Iran](#) in 1979 and [Lebanon's civil war](#) in [1989](#).

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [told](#) the security council that he had invoked article 99

to demand an “immediate ceasefire” in Gaza because “we are at a breaking point”, with a “high risk of the total collapse of the humanitarian support system in Gaza”. The [United Arab Emirates](#) drafted a [ceasefire resolution](#) that quickly garnered [97 co-sponsors](#).

The World Food Programme reported that Gaza was on the brink of mass [starvation](#), with nine out of 10 people spending entire days with no food. In the two days before Guterres invoked article 99, Rafah was the only one of Gaza’s five districts to which the UN could deliver any aid at all.

The secretary-general stressed that

“the brutality perpetrated by Hamas can never justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people... international humanitarian law cannot be applied selectively. It is binding on all parties equally at all times, and the obligation to observe it does not depend on reciprocity”.

Guterres concluded:

“The people of Gaza are looking into the abyss... the eyes of the world – and the eyes of history – are watching. It’s time to act.”

US Security Council Vetoes

UN members delivered eloquent, persuasive pleas for the immediate humanitarian ceasefire that the resolution called for, and the council voted 13 to one, with the UK abstaining, to approve the resolution.

But the one vote against, [by the US](#), one of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council, killed the resolution, leaving the council impotent to act as the secretary-general warned that it must.

This was the 16th US Security Council veto since 2000 – and 14 of those [vetoes](#) have been used to shield Israel and/or US policy on Israel and Palestine from international action or accountability.

While Russia and China have vetoed resolutions on a variety of issues around the world, from Myanmar to Venezuela, there is no parallel for the US’s extraordinary use of its veto primarily to provide exceptional impunity under international law for one other country.

The consequences of this veto could hardly be more serious. As Brazil’s UN ambassador, [Sergio Franca Danese](#), told the council, if the [US hadn’t vetoed](#) a previous resolution drafted by Brazil on 18 October,

“thousands of lives would have been saved”.

And as the [Indonesian representative asked](#):

“How many more must die before this relentless assault is halted? 20,000? 50,000? 100,000?”

‘Israeli Myth-making’

After the US slammed the Security Council door in Palestine’s face on 8 December, the UN General Assembly took up an identical resolution on 12 December. The resolution passed by a vote [of 153 to 10](#), with 33 more yes votes than a previous General Assembly vote in October. While General Assembly resolutions are not binding, they do carry political weight, and this one sent a clear message that the international community was disgusted by the carnage in Gaza.

On 13 December, the [BBC spoke to](#) Richard Dalton, former British Consul General in Jerusalem and ambassador to Libya and Iran, about the crisis and the US role in it.

“The US is weak,” Dalton said. “It hasn’t used any leverage so far. It is bleating about potential strategic defeat for Israel and criticism of indiscriminate warfare, but not backing that up in any way. Israel is reading the United States’ intentions quite differently [as a green light]. I am deeply pessimistic.”

“I think that one of the key difficulties for making peace is to roll back current Israeli myth-making,” Dalton continued. “We hear that it is not possible to find a partner for peace because the Palestinians want a state from the river to the sea. The conclusion that has been drawn from this in Israel is that it is they who should have the state from the river to the sea.

“It is time for a much more robust attitude by all Israel’s allies to make clear that the two-state solution requires fundamental change: more change in Israel than on the Arab side.”

As the death toll passed 20,000 and the UN human rights office published a [report](#) that Israeli forces had summarily executed at least 11 unarmed men in front of their families in Gaza City, diplomats at the UN Security Council spent the week before Christmas repeatedly postponing and rescheduling a vote on a new resolution that would be weak enough to avoid an Israeli-dictated US veto.

By Friday 22 December, they appeared to have found a formula that the US and Israel could accept – but other countries objected that it was too weak to make a difference. The resolution did not order an immediate ceasefire, and it would allow Israel to keep blocking life-saving aid.

Parallel ceasefire negotiations continued in Egypt, where Hamas refused to free any more Israeli hostages or prisoners of war before Israel ended the massacre, while Israel vowed only further escalation.

Genocide Convention

Another instrument the world can use to try to compel an end to the massacre is the [genocide convention](#), which both Israel and the United States have ratified.

It only takes one country to bring a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the convention and, while cases can drag on for years, the ICJ [can take interim measures](#) to protect the victims.

On 23 January 2020, the court did [exactly that](#), in a case brought by Gambia against Myanmar, alleging genocide against its Rohingya minority, after tens of thousands were killed, 740,000 had fled into Bangladesh and a UN-backed fact-finding mission found that the 600,000 who remained in Myanmar “may face a greater threat of genocide than ever”.

China vetoed a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Security Council, so Gambia, itself recovering from 20 years of repression under a brutal dictator, submitted a case to the ICJ under the genocide convention.

That opened the door for a unanimous preliminary ruling by the ICJ that Myanmar must prevent genocide against the Rohingya, as the genocide convention requires. Since its final ruling on the merits of the case might be many years away, the court ordered Myanmar to file a report every six months to detail how it was protecting the Rohingya, signalling serious ongoing scrutiny of Myanmar’s conduct.

So, will one country step up, as the Gambia did, to bring an ICJ case against Israel under the genocide convention? Activists are discussing that with a number of countries. Roots Action and World Beyond War have created an [action alert](#) that you can use to send messages to 10 of the most likely candidates (South Africa, Chile, Colombia, Jordan, Ireland, Belize, Turkey, Bolivia, Honduras and Brazil).

There has also been [increasing pressure](#) on the ICC to take up the case against Israel. The ICC has been quick to investigate Hamas for war crimes but has been dragging its feet on investigating Israel.

During a recent visit to the region, ICC prosecutor Karim Khan was prevented from entering Gaza by Israel, and he was criticised by Palestinians for visiting areas attacked by Hamas on 7 October but not visiting the hundreds of illegal Israeli settlements, checkpoints and refugee camps in the occupied West Bank.

After [Ben Ferencz](#) and others spent their [lives campaigning](#) for a court to enforce universal accountability for war crimes, this perpetuates a shameful pattern in which the ICC prosecutes only defendants from non-western countries.

Having It Both Ways

As long as the world is faced with the US’s tragic and debilitating abuse and non-recognition of institutions the rest of the world depends on to enforce international law, economic and diplomatic actions by individual countries may have more impact than their collective actions through the UN and international courts.

While about two dozen countries have never recognised Israel, Belize and Bolivia have also now severed ties with Israel over its assault on Gaza, while others – Bahrain, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Jordan, South Africa and Turkey – have withdrawn [their ambassadors](#) or diplomats.

Other countries are trying to have it both ways – condemning Israel publicly but maintaining their economic interests. At the UN Security Council, Egypt [explicitly](#) accused Israel of genocide and the US of obstructing a ceasefire. And yet Egypt’s long-standing partnership with Israel in the blockade of Gaza and its continuing role, even now, in restricting the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza through its own border crossing, make it complicit in the genocide it condemns.

If Egypt means what it said in the Security Council, it must open its border crossings to all the humanitarian aid that is needed, end its cooperation with the Israeli blockade and reevaluate its obsequious and compromised relationships with Israel and the United States.

Qatar, which has worked hard to negotiate ceasefires in Gaza, was eloquent in its denunciation of Israeli genocide in the security council. But Qatar was speaking on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. Under the so-called [Abraham Accords](#), the sheikhs of Bahrain and the UAE have turned their backs on Palestine to sign up to a toxic brew of self-serving commercial relations and hundred-million-dollar [arms deals](#) with Israel, while Saudi Arabia was until recently [preparing to follow](#) in their footsteps.

The UAE sponsored the 8 December resolution in the Security Council, where its representative [declared](#):

“The international system is teetering on the brink. For this war signals that might makes right, that compliance with international humanitarian law depends on the identity of the victim and the perpetrator.”

And yet neither the UAE nor Bahrain has renounced their Abraham deals with Israel, nor their roles in the US’s “might makes right” policies that have wreaked havoc in the Middle East for decades.

Over a thousand US Air Force personnel and dozens of US warplanes are still based at al-Dhafra airbase in Abu Dhabi, while Manama in Bahrain, which the US Navy has used as a base since 1941, remains the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

One government that has followed through on its support for Palestine is the Houthi government of Yemen, which is enforcing a blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the south end of the Red Sea against Israeli ships and ships bound to or from Israel.

After it fired at, boarded or detained several ships, four of the five largest shipping firms in the world are [rerouting](#) their ships around the Horn of Africa to avoid mushrooming insurance premiums and dangers to their ships and crew.

Many experts compare [apartheid Israel](#) to apartheid South Africa. UN resolutions helped to bring down South Africa’s apartheid regime, but real change didn’t come until countries around the world embraced a global campaign to economically and politically isolate it.

The reason Israel’s die-hard supporters in the United States have tried to ban, or even criminalise, the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) is precisely because boycotting, sanctioning and divesting from Israel may be an effective strategy to help bring down its genocidal, expansionist and unaccountable regime.

US Alternate Representative to the UN Robert Wood [told](#) the Security Council that there is a “fundamental disconnect between the discussions that we have been having in this chamber and the realities on the ground” in Gaza, implying that only Israeli and US views of the conflict deserve to be taken seriously.

But the real disconnect at the root of this crisis is the one between the isolated looking-glass

world of US and Israeli politics and the real world that is crying out for a ceasefire and justice for Palestinians. While Israel is killing and maiming thousands of innocent people with US bombs and howitzer shells, the rest of the world is appalled by these [crimes against humanity](#).

The grassroots clamour to end the massacre keeps building, but global leaders must move beyond non-binding votes and toothless investigations to boycotting Israeli products, putting an embargo on weapons sales, breaking off diplomatic relations and other measures that will force Israeli and American leaders to roll back the myths and lies they have conjured up to weaponise their peoples' fears and justify endless atrocities.

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