

Gaza: Why is 'Ceasefire' considered a Dirty Word?

Major media never mention that brokering an end to the war in Gaza might stem the violence in the Red Sea and elsewhere, too

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In the weeks leading up to President Joe Biden's announcement that U.S. forces and a group of allies [launched](#) a series of strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, major media outlets were acutely aware of the risk that Israel's war on Gaza could grow into a wider regional conflict.

Yet, in the breadth of stories that covered the Biden administration's desire and efforts to avoid such an escalation, mainstream media rarely mentioned the clearest non-military pathway to easing regional tensions: helping to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

The Houthi leadership in Yemen has said their attacks will not cease until Israel's "crimes in Gaza stop and food, medicines and fuel are allowed to reach its besieged population" according to Houthi spokesman Mohammed al-Bukhaiti [in December](#). Who can tell if that's true, but evidence suggests that the attacks in the Red Sea and in Iraq and Syria all but stopped during an earlier brokered "pause" in Gaza in November.

But this is never discussed. In the first weeks of January, major media outlets maintained that the Biden administration was grappling with how best to manage the conflict and ensure that it did not extend beyond Gaza. Between October 7 and January 14, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal ran over 60 articles that focused on some aspect of the threat of escalation in the Middle East. At least 14 of them focused on the Biden administration's decision-making process.

"Attacks Heighten Fears of a Wider War for the Middle East and U.S.," [reported](#) the New York Times.

"Tensions in the Middle East are rising beyond Israel. Here's where," [said](#) the

Washington Post.

“U.S. Steps Up Diplomatic Push to Avert Broader Middle East War,” [added](#) the Wall Street Journal.

Even following the Jan. 13 strikes in Yemen, media reports contended that the Biden administration was committed to avoiding escalation. “Mr. Biden and his top aides have been loath to take steps that could draw the United States into a wider war in the region, [according to](#) the New York Times.

But of those 14 articles, only five mention the demands of U.S. adversaries in the region, namely that Israel allow food and medicine into Gaza and end its bombing campaign. In most cases, the articles only briefly note that the Houthi attacks were being carried out “in solidarity” with suffering Gazans. But nowhere in the [series](#) of [stories](#) about the potential crisis was the pursuit of a ceasefire mentioned as an option.

Instead, the articles mostly framed the options as maintaining the status quo or pursuing a military solution.

“Senior officials said they must decide whether to strike Houthi missile and drone sites in Yemen, or wait to see whether the Houthis back off after the sinking of three of their fast boats and the deaths of their fighters,” reported the New York Times on December 31, after a U.S. helicopter sunk three Houthi boats in the Red Sea.

“Mr. Biden and his top aides have sought since the Oct. 7 attacks to contain the conflict between Israel and Hamas to the Gaza Strip,” reads the New York Times’ January 3 [story](#) on the Biden team’s efforts.

“The Pentagon dispatched two aircraft carriers and doubled the number of American warplanes to the Middle East to deter Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq from widening the war.”

If there were critics of the Biden administration, they always preferred a more aggressive path. “Critics of the administration’s approach have called the retaliatory strikes insufficient,” said the Washington Post on November 8, following U.S. strikes in Syria.

Meanwhile, the reports ignored experts who have been pointing to ceasefire as an option for weeks.

In making an argument for Washington to take the lead in pushing for an end to violence in November 2023, three fellows at the [Century Foundation](#) offered that a ceasefire would “reduce tensions regionally, lessening the risk—currently increasing daily—of a broader war that draws in the United States.”

A few hours before the strikes in Yemen on Jan. 11, RAND Corporation researcher Alex Stark made the case that pushing for an end to the war in Gaza was the most effective way for Washington to de-escalate tensions with the Houthis.

“Like it or not, the Houthis have linked their aggression to Israel’s operations in Gaza and have won domestic and regional support for doing so,” she [wrote](#) in Foreign Affairs. “Finding a sustainable, long-term approach to both conflicts will be critical to de-escalating tensions across the region and getting the Houthis to call off their attacks on commercial vessels.”

Following the U.S. operations, the New York Times did [note](#) that countries like Qatar and Oman “had warned the United States that bombing the Houthis could be a mistake, fearing that it would do little to deter them and would deepen regional tensions. They have argued that focusing on reaching a cease-fire in Gaza would remove the Houthis’ stated impetus for the attacks.”

Experts have said that the inability to link Houthi aggression with the ongoing war is a strategic miscalculation. “That refusal to see the linkage between Gaza and the Red Sea means we also fail to see the overriding security-strategic imperative here: to avoid a further escalation regionally, and to move towards possibilities that are de-escalatory,” [wrote](#) the Carnegie Endowment’s H. A. Hellyer on X.

“[I]t’s about avoiding a situation that gets out of control quickly and easily, and which could have the potential to drag much of the region into a destructive war. We have a number of clear good pathways in that regard, but we’ve rejected them.”

To be sure, it is unclear how the Houthis or militias in Iraq and Syria would respond to a pause in hostilities in Gaza. But the short-term humanitarian pauses in Gaza in mid-November led to the only period of [relative calm](#) in the region since the outbreak of the war, particularly in terms of attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.

According to a [tracker](#) from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as of January 16, there have been 152 anti-U.S. strikes since October 18 in those two countries. None of them took place between November 23, when the short-term ceasefire was announced, and December 3, two days after the truce expired.

There was also a notable decrease in Houthi attacks in the Red Sea during that timeframe, according to a [timeline](#) compiled by the maritime risk intelligence firm Ambrey Analytics.

“During the ceasefire that was in place in November their attacks dramatically decreased, providing a degree of empirical evidence that the ceasefire had a strong likelihood of being an effective option to stop the attacks,” said Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute. “The media never had to endorse this option. And they could also rightfully be scrutinizing and be skeptical about it. But by not mentioning it at all, they deprived the American public awareness that the option even existed, leaving Americans with the false impression that the only option was to do nothing or to escalate by bombing Yemen.”

Meanwhile, momentum in the push for a ceasefire in official Washington also appears to have hit a snag after Congress’s return from the holiday recess. In the weeks following the start of Israel’s offensive, perhaps influenced by polls that showed [strong public support](#), the number of members who explicitly called for a ceasefire increased steadily, reaching a total of [62](#) by December 21.

Since then, however, only one new member has joined the calls.

Several lawmakers from both parties did [criticize](#) the White House for not consulting Congress before bombing Yemen.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) took it a step further, drawing the [direct link](#) between Washington’s unwillingness to call for a ceasefire and the potential for escalation in the region. “This is why I called for a ceasefire early. This is why I voted against war in Iraq,” Lee

wrote on X. "Violence only begets more violence. We need a ceasefire now to prevent deadly, costly, catastrophic escalation of violence in the region."

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