

In Hours of Israel-Gaza Crisis Coverage, a Word You'll Seldom Hear: 'Ceasefire'

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Since the October 7 Hamas attacks, and the subsequent, ongoing Israeli airstrikes, US TV news has offered extensive coverage of Israel and Gaza. But as casualties mount, most outlets have paid scant attention to the growing calls for a ceasefire.

After Hamas killed more than [1,400 people](#) in Israel on October 7 and took some 200 hostages, Israeli bombing killed over 5,000 people in Gaza, as of October 22—including more than 1,400 children—and at least 23 [journalists](#) and 35 UN staff (UN News, [10/23/23](#)). Ninety-five Palestinians have been [killed](#) in the West Bank as well, by both Israeli government forces and settlers. With Israel enacting a "[complete siege](#)" of Gaza, [cutting](#) off power, food, water and medical supplies, and nowhere for civilians to seek safety, a broad spectrum of critical voices have decried the humanitarian crisis and insisted on a ceasefire and an end to the siege.

Jewish-led protests in New York and other cities on October 13, and again in Washington, DC, on [October 18](#), made a ceasefire their central message. Progressive lawmakers on October 16 [introduced](#) a House resolution "calling for an immediate de-escalation and ceasefire." And a recent Data for Progress poll ([10/20/23](#)) found that 66% of likely US voters agree that "the US should call for a ceasefire and a de-escalation of violence in Gaza."



Source: [Democracy Now!](#)

Internationally, the [head of the UN](#), the UN human rights [expert](#) on Palestine, a [growing list](#) of [scores](#) of legal scholars, and hundreds of human rights [groups](#)—including Save the Children, [Oxfam](#) and Doctors Without Borders—have likewise spoken out for a ceasefire.

But the Biden administration has actively tried to suppress discussion of de-escalation. **HuffPost** reported on [October 13](#) that an internal State Department memo instructed staff not to use the words “de-escalation/ceasefire,” “end to violence/bloodshed” and “restoring calm” in press materials on the Middle East.

At the UN Security Council, a Russian resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire was [voted down](#) last Tuesday by the US, Britain, France and Japan; a Brazilian resolution the next day seeking “humanitarian pauses” in the violence was [vetoed](#) by the US alone. (On October 24, however, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that “humanitarian pauses must be considered” to bring help to Gaza civilians—ABC, [10/24/23](#).)

Broadcast Nightly News

US television news outlets appear largely to be following the administration’s lead, minimizing any talk of ceasefire or de-escalation on the air. FAIR searched transcripts of the nightly news shows of the four major broadcast networks for one week (October 12–18) in the Nexis news database and [Archive.org](#), and found that, even as the outlets devoted a great deal of time to the conflict, they rarely mentioned the idea of a ceasefire or de-escalation.

While **ABC World News Tonight**, **CBS Evening News**, **NBC Nightly News** and **PBS NewsHour** aired a total of 105 segments primarily about Israel/Gaza and broader repercussions of the conflict, only eight segments included the word “ceasefire” or some form of the word “de-escalate.” (The word “de-escalate” never appeared without the word “ceasefire.”)

NBC and **PBS** aired three segments each with ceasefire mentions; **CBS** aired two, and **ABC** aired none.

"Ceasefire" or "De-escalate" on Broadcast Evening News

Taken from shows on Oct. 12–18, 2023.

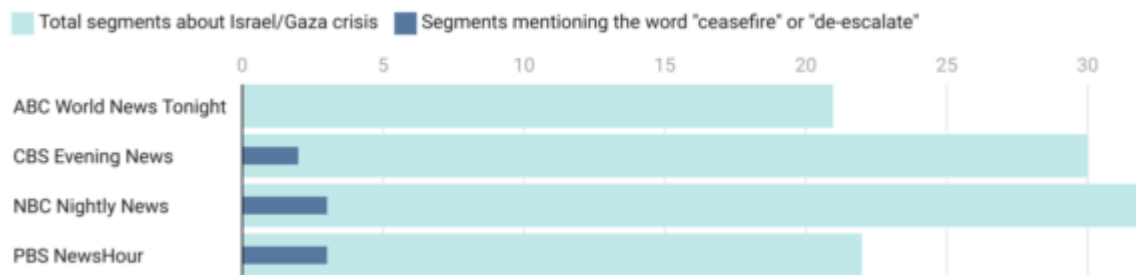


Chart: Keating Zelenke • Source: LexisNexis and archive.org • Created with Datawrapper

The October 18 protest on Capitol Hill led by [Jewish Voice for Peace](#) and If Not Now demanding a ceasefire—a peaceful protest that ended with over [300](#) arrests—accounted for half of the mentions, briefly making the evening news that night on all the broadcast networks except **ABC**. (The protesters’ demand was mentioned in two segments on **NBC**.)

That was the only day **CBS Evening News**([10/18/23](#)) mentioned a ceasefire or de-escalation, though correspondent [Margaret Brennan](#) also noted in that episode, in response to a question from anchor Norah O’Donnell referencing the protest, that Biden “refrained from calling a ceasefire. In fact, the US vetoed a UN resolution to that effect earlier today.” Brennan continued:

Given that there have now been 11 days of bombing of Gaza by Israel, with thousands killed, there is a perception in Arab countries that this looks like the US is treating Palestinian lives differently than Israeli lives.

Of course, one doesn’t have to live in an Arab country to see a double standard.

Only twice across all nightly news shows did viewers see anyone, guest or journalist, advocating for a ceasefire—both times on **PBS NewsHour**.

The **NewsHour** featured a phone interview with Gaza resident Diana Odeh ([10/12/23](#)), who described the dire situation on the ground and pleaded: “We need help. We don’t need money. We don’t need anything, but we need a ceasefire. People are getting worse and worse.”

A few days later, the **NewsHour** ([10/18/23](#)) brought on Marc Garlasco, a former Pentagon analyst currently serving as military advisor at PAX Protection of Civilians, who said: “You’re talking about 6,000 bombs in less than a week in Gaza, which is the size of Newark, New Jersey. It’s just incredibly dangerous to the population, and we need to have a ceasefire and get an end to this conflict as quickly as possible.”

Sunday Shows and Cable

Across the agenda-setting Sunday shows, which are largely aimed at an audience of [DC insiders](#), the word “ceasefire” was entirely absent, except on **CNN State of the Union**([10/15/23](#))—but there, only in the context of reporting on a poll from earlier this year that found a strong majority of Gazans supporting the ceasefire that had previously been in place between Hamas and Israel.

Looking at the broader cable news coverage, where the 24-hour news cycle means much more coverage of the conflict, viewers were still unlikely to encounter any mention of the idea of a ceasefire. Using the [Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer](#), FAIR found that mentions of “cease” appeared in closed captioning on screen for an average of only 19.7 seconds per day on **Fox**, 11.1 seconds per day on **CNN**, and 9.2 seconds per day on **MSNBC**. (FAIR used the shortened form of the word to account for variations in hyphenation and compounding; some false positives are likely.)

Meanwhile, mentions of “Israel” did not differ substantially across networks, averaging 18–20 minutes per day. (Note that this is not the amount of time Israel was discussed, but the amount of time mentions of “Israel” appeared onscreen in closed captions.)

Ceasefire Mentions on Cable TV

The number of minutes the word “cease” appeared in closed captioning on cable news channels CNN, Fox and MSNBC, Oct. 12–18, 2023.

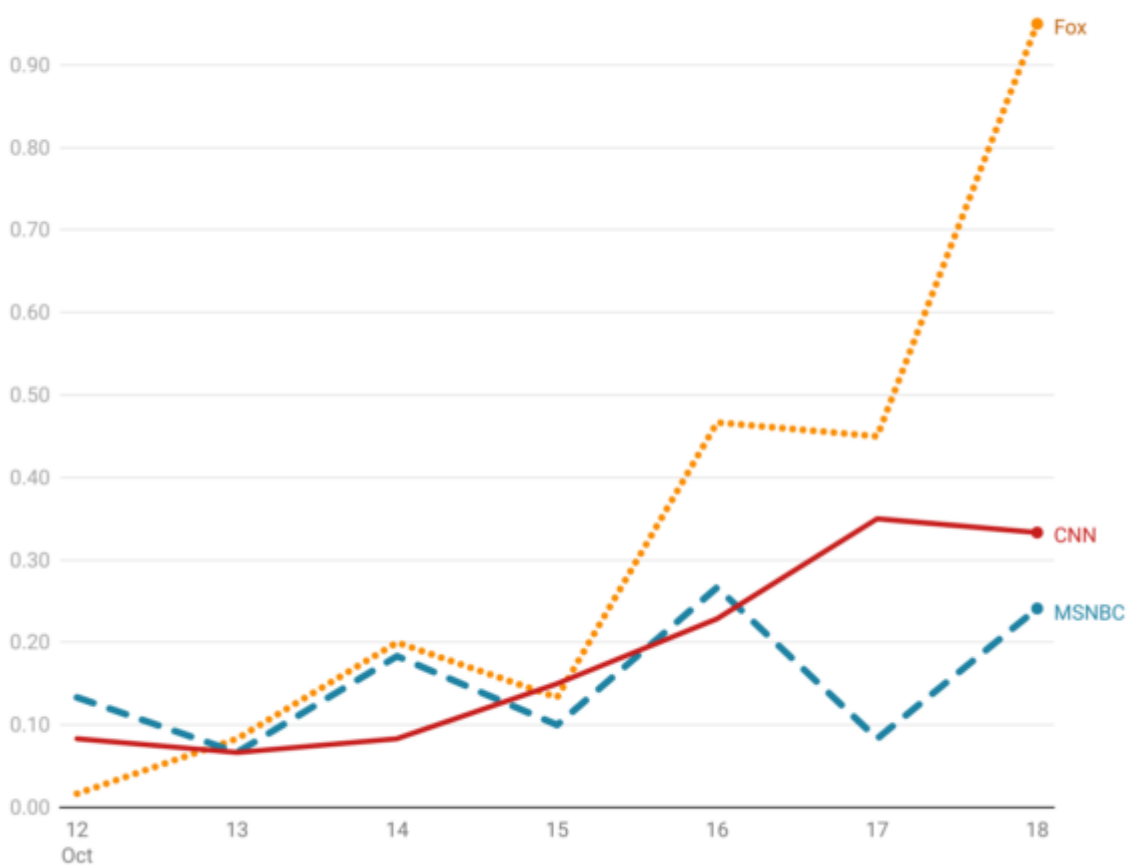


Chart: Keating Zelenke • Source: Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer • Created with Datawrapper

Fox mentioned a ceasefire roughly twice as often as either **CNN** or **MSNBC**, largely to ridicule those on the left who called for one, as with host Greg Gutfeld’s comment ([10/18/23](#)):

Enough with the ceasefire talk.... I mean, Jewish protesters calling for a ceasefire is like the typical leftist pleading not to arrest their mugger because he had a bad childhood.

Fox also frequently compared Jewish peace advocates unfavorably with January 6 rioters (**Media Matters**, [10/19/23](#)).

CNN on a few occasions featured a guest advocating a ceasefire, such as Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, the leader of the Palestinian National Initiative party. On **Situation Room** (10/17/23), Barghouti argued forcefully:

The only way out of this is to have immediate ceasefire, immediate supply of food, drinking water to people immediately in Gaza and then to have exchange of prisoners so that the Israeli prisoners can come back home safe to Israel.

On **CNN's** [most-watched](#) show, **Anderson Cooper 360**, the possibility of a ceasefire was mentioned in three segments during the study period—each time in an interview with a former military or intelligence official, none of whom supported the idea. For instance, with former Mossad agent Rami Igra on the show ([10/16/23](#)), Cooper asked about negotiating the release of hostages. Igra noted that Hamas had “twice already” said they were “willing to negotiate the release of the prisoners,” contingent upon a ceasefire and release of Palestinian prisoners. But Igra insisted Israel should not negotiate:

IGRA: Israel will do all it can in order to release these prisoners, and some of them will or maybe all of them will be released, but by force.

COOPER: That’s the only way.

IGRA: The only way to release prisoners in this kind of situation is force.

Meanwhile, the only time viewers of **MSNBC's** [popular](#) primetime show **The Beat** heard about the possibility of a ceasefire was when guest Elise Labott of **Politico** told host Ari Melber ([10/12/23](#)) that, for Israel, “this is not a ceasefire situation.” Melber responded:

If you said to someone in the United States, if ISIS or Al Qaeda or even a criminal group came into their home and murdered children or kidnapped children or burned babies, the next day you don’t typically hear rational individuals discuss a ceasefire or moving on. You discuss resorting to the criminal justice system or the war machine to respond.

Melber’s eagerness to lean on the “war machine” left his argument a muddle. Obviously, those calling for a ceasefire are not suggesting simply “moving on”—in fact, a “criminal justice system” response is more than compatible with a ceasefire, as you don’t try to bomb someone that you’re seeking to put on trial.

Netanyahu has been trying with limited success to equate Hamas with ISIS for many years now (**Times of Israel**, [8/27/14](#)), and the Israeli government continues to try to paint Hamas’s tactics as so barbaric as to justify the mass killings by Israel. (See **FAIR.org**, [10/20/23](#).) But it’s passions, not reason, that allow individuals like Melber to gloss over the deaths of thousands of civilians—a child every 15 minutes, according to one widely circulated [estimate](#)—in their thirst for revenge.

With Israeli bombing intensifying and a ground invasion appearing imminent, US television news outlets’ refusal to give more than minimal airtime to the widespread calls for a ceasefire fails to reflect either US or global public opinion, and fuels the warmongering march to follow one horror with another.

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