



Wednesday, October 18, 2023

APPROACHING THE ABYSS: THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE GAZA STRIP

Bottom Line Up Front:

- Amidst devastating Israeli airstrikes and a full blockade of Gaza preventing the passage of critical supplies, civilians in Gaza are facing a burgeoning humanitarian crisis and are dangerously close to running out of water.
- An evacuation order for the over one million residents of northern Gaza by the Israel Defense Forces has displaced hundreds of thousands and strained supplies.
- The United States is spearheading an international diplomatic effort to ease humanitarian suffering in Gaza.
- The untenable conditions and well-documented human suffering inside Gaza, coupled with little success in alleviating those conditions thus far, could fuel instability in the broader region and the West.

Palestinian health officials said yesterday that an Israeli airstrike hit Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, killing more than 500 people, just hours before U.S. President Joe Biden was set to visit Israel. Images of dead bodies and rescue workers attempting to save the injured were circulating on international media, instigating protests and demonstrations in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Tunisia, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Yemen. In Amman, protesters attempted to storm the Israeli embassy. There were also protests in various European cities. Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has canceled a scheduled meeting with Biden. Later on, the Jordanian Foreign Minister said there would be no visit for Biden, announcing that a previously planned summit between Jordan, Egypt, the PA, and the U.S. President was canceled. Numerous countries in the region released statements condemning the attack on the hospital, including several countries that are signatories of the Abraham Accords, such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. According to the Wall Street Journal, Palestinian Authority Civil Defense Spokesman Mahmoud Basal was quoted as saying, “The massacre at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital is unprecedented in our history...While we’ve witnessed tragedies in past wars and days, but what took place tonight is tantamount to genocide.” The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) denied responsibility for the airstrike and blamed it on an errant rocket from Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

Amidst [Israel's airstrikes](#) and blockade of the Gaza Strip – which is preventing the passage of key supplies – a burgeoning humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Gaza. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has warned that Gaza is “running out of life,” as essential supplies of food, water, fuel, and medicine are reaching critical lows. The entire Gaza Strip is in danger of running out of water, and many have resorted to drinking from polluted sources, according to the UN, risking an increase in waterborne illnesses. Overcrowded hospitals and diminished medical supplies, which aid groups have thus far been unable

to resupply due to the blockade, will only be further strained by the clean water shortage. Dwindling fuel not only reduces hospitals' ability to operate, but the resource is also needed to operate water pump stations and desalination plants. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, at least 2,778 people have been killed, and 9,938 people have been injured in Gaza since [Hamas attack](#) killed approximately 1,400 Israelis and took nearly 200 people hostage on October 7. The death toll in Gaza has mounted to the point where the territory is running out of body bags, according to UNRWA.

Compounding the humanitarian crisis, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) issued a 24-hour evacuation order for the approximately 1.1 million people in northern Gaza – nearly half of the territory's entire population – on October 13, ahead of an expected ground invasion in the coming days. The World Health Organization (WHO) has deemed the evacuation a “death sentence for the sick and injured” with the head of the UNRWA warning the evacuation will push people in Gaza “into the abyss.” The evacuation order has displaced hundreds of thousands of people from northern Gaza, with many crowding into schools, hospitals, and the homes of friends and family, with many others sleeping out in the open on the streets – even as Israeli airstrikes continue. The order has precipitated the already dwindling resources and supplies resulting from Israel's siege of Gaza.

Even for those complying with the evacuation order, the chaos of war has rendered safety elusive. A convoy of civilian evacuees was hit by an airstrike while heading from northern to central Gaza along an Israeli-designated “safe route.” Hamas officials said the strike killed 70 and injured 200, mostly women and children. Hamas has blamed Israel for the attack, although the IDF has denied its munitions contributed to the strike. While some five hundred thousand Palestinian civilians have evacuated the northern area, many others have chosen not to evacuate, either out of a belief that the south would be no safer than the north, or out of concern that they would not be allowed to return to their homes, recalling the Palestinians' original 1948 mass displacement from what is now Israel. Despite direct orders from Israel, Al Quds Hospital in Gaza City, as well as other hospitals in the northern territory, have said they will not evacuate patients. Yesterday's airstrike on the Al-Ahli Baptista Hospital reportedly killed hundreds and left many others trapped underneath rubble. The complexity of evacuating many critically ill and fragile patients – including those in intensive care or on life support, newborns in incubators, those undergoing hemodialysis, women with complications during pregnancy, and others – could lead to imminent deterioration of their conditions or even death, according to the WHO. Even when possible, transporting patients is a severe challenge, as some ambulances have been bombed and destroyed in airstrikes, according to the Gazan health ministry. The Gazan government says 16 medics have been killed since Israel began its bombardment.

As conditions inside Gaza continue to deteriorate rapidly, aid groups are positioning themselves to respond quickly if humanitarian access is restored. Yesterday, approximately 160 trucks filled with Egyptian aid moved closer to the Rafah border from al-Arish in the Sinai Peninsula, where hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid have reportedly been waiting for a delivery agreement. No agreement has yet been reached to deliver the aid, and the Palestinian side of the border crossing remains closed due to airstrikes. Early yesterday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had agreed with Israel to “develop a plan” to get humanitarian aid into Gaza. Concerns that the aid could be used as cover to transport weapons or seized or destroyed by Hamas reportedly hampered a planned delivery earlier this week. World leaders and government officials – including Pope Francis, Canadian President Justin Trudeau, Mexican Foreign Minister Alicia Bárcena, and Ukraine's foreign ministry – have called for Israel to establish a humanitarian corridor to allow aid into the territory, while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the European Union would launch a humanitarian air corridor into Gaza via Egypt this week. Meanwhile, a UN Security Council Resolution proposed by Russia to establish a humanitarian ceasefire, which omitted any mention of Hamas, failed to pass Monday after France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States voted against it.

The untenable conditions and well-documented human suffering inside Gaza, coupled with little success in alleviating those conditions thus far, could fuel instability [in the broader region](#) and the West. Tens of thousands demonstrated last Friday across the Middle East in support of Palestinians and against the Israeli bombardment of Gaza. In Beirut, the waving of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Hezbollah flags by Hezbollah supporters was punctuated by chants supporting Gaza and calling for “death to Israel.” In Baghdad, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in Tahrir Square for a protest organized by Muqtada al-Sadr, an influential

Shia cleric. In Germany and France, pro-Palestinian protests have been banned, and several Western countries have stepped up security at synagogues and Jewish schools as fears that the palpable tensions could lead to violence. Pro-Palestinian protest marches with hundreds of people have taken place throughout the United States, from New York City to San Diego, and in some instances, scuffles broke out between pro-Palestinian activists and pro-Israeli counter-protestors, including on some college campuses. Although the protests have largely been organized by left-leaning groups and Islamic political organizations, the pro-Palestinian cause has even been coopted by some white supremacists and figures on the far-right. An increase in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic rhetoric tied to the events in Israel and Gaza has FBI officials and police on high alert for violence. The brutal murder of a six-year-old Muslim boy in Illinois, as well as the fatal stabbing of a teacher in northeastern France in what the government is calling a terrorist attack, both indicate that the roiling conflict between Israel and Hamas – and the actions taken in Gaza – will have an impact far beyond the Strip.

Tuesday, October 17, 2023

NO END IN SIGHT, HARD QUESTIONS AHEAD FOR UKRAINE AND ALLIES

Bottom Line Up Front:

- The disappointments of a slow, grinding counteroffensive are just one factor threatening the long-term prospects for Ukraine's Western support.
- Even at its most active positions, the counteroffensive has only pushed a handful of kilometers through the frontlines after more than four months.
- While it is unlikely that the loss of support from any single European state – whose support is currently at risk as war fatigue sets in – would dramatically change prospects for the Ukrainian military, U.S. political divisions and dysfunction could strongly diminish the durability of the pro-Ukraine coalition.
- Partnered with a rudderless U.S. House of Representatives, the Biden administration is attempting to push more aid for Ukraine by bundling it with a weapons deal supporting Israel's war against Hamas.

Four months into Ukraine's [counteroffensive](#), the battle lines have hardly budged, offering evidence the war could become a protracted conflict that Ukraine's allies may not have the appetite to support. If this proves to be true, the West must figure out how to square early pledges to support Ukraine's armed forces 'for as long as it takes' to reclaim every last inch of Ukrainian soil with growing political pressure at home to end the war, or at least their military support of it. Across the coalition, some signs are emerging that maintaining the reliable support Ukraine has counted on since February 2022 will be an uphill battle in the year ahead.

In Eastern Europe – perhaps the continent's strongest enclave of support for Ukraine – recent national elections have revealed some troubling trends for the future of that backing. In [Slovakia](#), the public's support for Ukrainian refugees in the country is waning, and polling shows that Slovakian citizens are increasingly blaming Ukraine and the West for starting the war. The country was once one of the largest European donors to Ukraine's war effort in terms of share of its gross domestic product. The far-left populist party that won last month's national parliamentary elections had campaigned on a pledge to cut off military aid to Ukraine altogether. By contrast, after Poland's current prime minister announced his country would no longer supply Ukraine with any new arms beyond what it had already agreed to furnish, his far-right Law and Justice party appears poised to lose its parliamentary majority. The pushback on Ukraine aid was seen as a move to secure nationalist vote shares – a tactic in other European contexts

that has politically unified the far-left and far-right – at a time when Polish farmers have been complaining about the distortion of Eastern European grain prices by an influx of cheap Ukrainian agricultural products.

Although [the cost-of-living crisis](#) – which has been in ways directly linked to European voter's fatigue and [dissatisfaction](#) with aid to Ukraine – as well as [migration](#) have become seminal issues for voters in several elections, the outcomes of these elections cannot merely be seen as referendums on the war. The issue does not appear to be a major undercurrent for the Netherlands' November elections, for example. In August, the Dutch defense minister expressed confidence that there remained a national consensus to support Ukraine support even after its recent government collapse. The Netherlands has been another important European partner to Ukraine, helping spearhead a training program for Ukrainian [fighter pilots](#) and being among the first countries to express willingness to donate F-16s to the cause. Last month, the defense minister said the first batch of Dutch fighter jets would arrive in Ukraine sometime next year. The severity of the winter will also test Europe's resolve for [sanctioning](#) Russian energy. While it is unlikely that losing support from any single European state currently on the fence would dramatically change short-term forecasts for Ukraine, a four-year, \$21.3 billion weapons financing plan for Ukraine is contingent on an agreement being reached by all 27 members of the European Union. The outcome of upcoming European parliamentary elections in 2024 could see long-term support shift, if far-left and far-right parties demanding an end to aid in Ukraine either win more seats in the European Parliament or are able to pull more centrist parties further over on the issue, as seen on the issue of migration.

Perhaps the gravest threat, however, lies with the [political dysfunction](#) of Ukraine's greatest supporter, the United States, whose contributions are unparalleled amongst Ukraine's allies. Two weeks ago, members of the U.S. Congress' lower House of Representatives elected to vacate their Speaker from office for the first time in history, while the legislature has been kicking a government budget deal down the road for months with temporary stopgap measures. With the next government funding deadline coming up in November, this lack of legislative coordination is an especially glaring vulnerability. If a new agreement to fund the government is not reached, the United States will not be able to approve any new aid beyond what has already been agreed upon until the stalemate is resolved.

However, some lawmakers are working with the Biden administration to pass Ukraine appropriations by combining it with support for Israel's war against Hamas. Military aid for both countries is reportedly being tied together into a \$2 billion aid package that could be presented to Congress as early as this week. Nonetheless, anti-Ukraine sentiments are becoming increasingly prominent among Congressional Republicans, while some pro-Ukraine advocates have called for increasing support, perhaps by increasing the number of U.S. military advisors on the ground in Ukraine. With one year left until the U.S. presidential election, where Donald Trump is widely expected to claim the Republican nomination, whichever party takes the presidency will undoubtedly seize major influence over Ukraine policy.

To keep allies on board, Ukraine must not only prove it is making good use of Western aid by delivering significant battlefield victories and demonstrating how Ukraine's success is essential for Western interests but also contend with legitimate corruption concerns. Earlier this month, Politico reported that a confidential report by the U.S. Department of State called out "high-level corruption" in Ukraine as a serious liability for allied support. Over the past year, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has fired over a dozen officials, including his defense minister, for various reasons related to corruption.

Despite slow progress in the southern oblasts where it has focused its counteroffensive, Ukraine did achieve some tactical victories this summer, particularly around Crimea. This included blowing up a section of the Kerch Bridge which connects Russia to Crimea, though this has reportedly since been repaired. Yet, Ukrainians have only made a small dent in Russia's defenses after spending months trying to cut off their supply lines into Crimea, a mission the U.S. intelligence community assessed this summer would fail. Where Ukraine has managed to penetrate Russian defenses, its forces have not been able to exploit these breakthroughs to re-take territory more than ten kilometers beyond the frontline, according

to mapping by the Institute for the Study of War. One of the first major strategic targets along this axis, a transportation hub in the city of Tokmak, still lies some 20 kilometers away from Ukraine's forwardmost positions. Meanwhile, the distance from the frontline to the Sea of Azov – the furthest the military would have to travel to cut off this land bridge – is at least one hundred kilometers. These gains do, however, place many logistical corridors within range of Ukrainian artillery, making the Russian positions in and around Crimea more vulnerable.
