

Why Ukrainians should support Palestinians

Friday 20 October 2023, by [SABUROVA Daria](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2023).

How can we look at images of Gaza and not see Mariupol or Bakhmut?

As Israel's assault on Palestine continues, apparent similarities with Russia's invasion of Ukraine grow. Israel's "complete siege" of the Gaza Strip – cutting off water, electricity and food to more than two million inhabitants – echoes Russia's intentional destruction of our energy infrastructure last winter. This, among other things, earned Russia the label of a "terrorist state" among Ukrainians.

From the moment an evacuation order for northern Gaza's 1.1 million inhabitants was announced, Ukrainians must have known it would expose the most vulnerable – the elderly and sick – to certain death. We know that when people have no viable alternatives, they often prefer to stay.

The images of widespread devastation that reach us from Gaza, which suggest the Israeli army's disregard for international humanitarian law, also resemble those from Mariupol or Bakhmut last year. Israel – like Russia in Ukraine – has been accused of bombing residential areas, [evacuation corridors](#) and the only [exit point from the city, Rafah](#).

Of course, Hamas's brutal attacks on civilians in Israeli kibbutzim also appear similar to Russia's massacres in Bucha in March 2022. It is only right that these were condemned by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi and the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry. But their messages of support for victims and their families were accompanied by problematic assertions, including Zelenskyi's truly catastrophic conclusion that Israel has the unconditional right to defend itself.

Since then, Ukrainian officials have avoided talking directly about Israel's 'Operation Iron Swords', despite the death toll in Gaza having exceeded 3,500 in the 11 days since its launch, according to the Palestinian authorities.

But Ukraine's carte blanche to any response that Israel deems necessary makes little sense given historical or recent Ukrainian-Israeli relations, which have been marked by tensions over occupation and respect for international law. Given the security problems Ukraine faces, its foreign policy remains faithful to the promotion of two causes: respect for territorial integrity and nuclear disarmament.

Diplomatic tensions

Unlike the US and its European allies, Ukraine has systematically supported UN resolutions condemning the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, not without concern for consistency over its own territorial claim on occupied Crimea.

In 2014, Israel did not vote on a UN resolution that denounced Russia's annexation of Crimea and reaffirmed the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Two years later, Ukraine passed a resolution condemning Israeli settlements in Jerusalem – prompting Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to cancel a visit to Israel by a Ukrainian representative, then prime minister Volodymyr Groysman.

These tensions have become heightened over the past year - including when Kyiv [supported](#) two UN resolutions in November 2022. The first was for the nuclear disarmament of the Middle East, directed against Israel's nuclear program, and the second for the opening of an international investigation into Israel's "prolonged occupation, settlement and annexation of the Palestinian territory", reaffirming Palestinians' right to self-determination.

Then, in July 2023, the Israeli Ambassador to Ukraine, Michael Brodsky, [condemned](#) Ukraine's support for 90% of the UN's "anti-Israel" resolutions, which he described as an "abnormal situation, especially given the fact that Ukraine quite often turns to Israel for various requests". These requests have also been the subject of tension between the two countries, with Israel having sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine but refusing [to send weapons](#), including defensive weapons, saying that Israel, unlike NATO member states, can only rely on itself.

Israel has also been cautious in its stance on Russian aggression against Ukraine, seeking to maintain cordial diplomatic relations with Russia in light of its own military interests in Syria. It did not join many Western countries in imposing sanctions on Russia and abstained from voting on a UN resolution in favour of Russia's reparations for its destruction in Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion, Israel has welcomed 30,000 Ukrainians - including 15,000 Ukrainian Jews as part of a repatriation programme - far fewer than have been taken in by other countries.

Explaining the silence

Most Ukrainian politicians and diplomats likely consider the history between Israel and Palestine too complex to distinguish between aggressor and victim. But this does not explain their silence on Israel's violations of international law in recent days, which are not dissimilar to actions they have denounced previously. Their silence likely has three sources.

First, Ukraine has sought to distance itself as clearly as possible from Hamas - labelled ["the new Nazis" by Netanyahu](#) - and its ruthless methods, which have been used to arbitrarily target Israeli civilians. This is not least because Russia's justification for the invasion of Ukraine - the alleged need to "denazify" the country - has been effective in the Global South and in certain fringes of Western civil society. Yet in the dominant discourse set by Western governments it is impossible to distinguish between the actions of Hamas and the more general struggle of Palestinians for freedom and justice, which consists of multiple and varied forces. Ironically, [diplomats have warned](#) that the lack of support for Palestine will almost certainly result in diminishing support for Ukraine in the Global South.

Prevailing Western discourse is often seen to conflate anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel - another reason why the Ukrainian government is particularly careful with its official statements in the international arena. This is in part because Ukraine is one of the countries most marked by the Holocaust, with nearly 1.5 million Jews killed between 1941 and 1945, but also because Ukrainian nationalist movements, which sheltered people directly responsible for these massacres, have been whitewashed and heroised inside Ukraine.

And finally, Ukraine's position may simply be geopolitical pragmatism. Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union provides a clause on "convergence on foreign policy and security issues" that requires Ukraine to align itself with positions expressed by European officials. And its dependence on Western humanitarian and especially military aid predisposes its leaders to line up behind its allies, particularly the US, at the risk of being deprived of this support. The fact that Hamas maintains [privileged links](#) with Russia only reinforces this loyalty.

A [recent statement](#) from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, published on 17 October, reflects the

ambiguity and the competing principles of Ukraine's foreign policy. It reaffirms support for Israel's "efforts to counter terrorist acts", but it also "advocates the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with the help of political and diplomatic means".

The following day, after the strike on the Al-Ahli Hospital that killed hundreds of Palestinians, which both Israel and Hamas deny responsibility for, Ukrainian officials released their [first statement](#) on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The statement stresses that both parties should "abide by the rules of warfare and respect the norms of international humanitarian law" but fails to call for an immediate ceasefire.

The need to speak out

While Ukraine's official position is dictated by pragmatic diplomatic considerations, Ukrainian civil society is not obliged to echo its government's silence on Israel's punitive operation against Gaza.

Israel's injustices in Palestine, as well as Russia's in Ukraine, go far beyond mere failure to respect the laws of war. Ukrainians rightly repeat that Russia's war against the Ukrainian people did not begin on 24 February 2022. It has occupied part of Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the colonisation by the Russian Empire of the peoples who inhabit Ukrainian territories dates back to the 17th century.

This history, which continued during the Soviet era, involves episodes of a genocidal nature. These include the Holodomor, a great artificial famine that killed several million Ukrainians in 1932 and 1933, and massive displacements of populations such as the 238,000 Crimean Tatars deported from Crimea to other Soviet republics under Stalin's orders in 1944. Almost half of the Tatars died of starvation and disease during the following years.

Similarly, Israel's war against the Palestinian people did not begin on 7 October 2023. It began with the [Nakba](#) of 1948, when more than 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from their lands. In 1967, at the end of the Six Day War, Israel occupied the rest of the Palestinian territories, causing a new Palestinian exodus and the installation of new Israeli colonies.

Palestinians often say that the Nakba is a perpetual process, since the dispossessions and colonial crimes have never ended. They have been fragmented and experience different situations depending on whether they live in the West Bank, Israel, Gaza or are refugees. But all are affected by the apartheid regime. Gazan Palestinians particularly suffer from the blockade imposed by Israel since 2006 with the collaboration of Egypt, making the Gaza Strip the world's largest open-air prison.

The evil that has killed both Israeli and Palestinian civilians in recent days is rooted in the continued occupation and colonisation by Israel of the Palestinian territories. In this sense, the oppression of the Ukrainian and Palestinian peoples has similarities: it is about the occupation of our lands by states with nuclear weapons and overwhelming military force, which mock the resolutions of the UN and international law, putting their causes above any diplomatic dialogue.

As Ukrainians, as supporters of the Ukrainian cause, we have a special responsibility to understand and raise our voices in the face of what is happening. We must point out the inconsistencies of Western governments that support our anti-imperialist struggle while backing Israel's colonial violence. The tragedy we are currently experiencing must sharpen our sensitivity to similar human experiences.

Following Russia's invasion, we discovered how little the international community knew about the history of Ukraine. But what do we know about the history of Palestine? In a world where

polarisation is increasing, where colonial wars of staggering scale and violence are resurgent, only solidarity between oppressed peoples and curiosity about our respective struggles, beyond geopolitical divisions, can show us the way to just and lasting peace.

Daria Saburova

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-israel-palestine-russia-zelenskyi-hamas-gaza-offensive/>