

ISRAEL & PALESTINE

A Whirlwind for Chicago Cease-Fire Politics

Mayor Brandon Johnson announces support for a cease-fire as the city council delays a vote on a cease-fire resolution.

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Protestors shut down DuSable Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, blocking traffic outside Senator Dick Durbin's (D-Ill.) home on Saturday, January 6, to demand an end to Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

PHOTO BY JACEK BOCZARSKI/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

highly anticipated Chicago City Council vote will have to wait.

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The council delayed voting on a cease-fire resolution that was originally scheduled for Wednesday, a move urged by more than two dozen alderpersons that does not necessarily indicate how they might ultimately vote.

But on the same day, Mayor Brandon Johnson—in a major announcement—declared his support for the resolution and called for a cease-fire.

“I condemned the actions of Hamas, but, at this point now, I believe we’re looking at 25,000 Palestinians that have been killed during this war, and the killing has to stop,” Johnson said during a news conference. “So yes, we need a cease-fire.”

Meanwhile, the delay on the vote for a cease-fire resolution in the city council was framed as necessary because of its concurrent timing with Holocaust Remembrance Day, reasoning that leading Chicago progressive Jewish groups calling for a cease-fire described as “disgraceful.”

“I see this attempt at delay as a *shonda*—that’s a Yiddish word that means a disgrace, or an utterly shameful act,” says Maya Schenwar, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace, Jewish Fast for Gaza, and editor-at-large of *Truthout*, according to [WBEZ](#). “To me, there is no better way to remember the Holocaust than to pass a resolution demanding an end to an ongoing genocide.”

The mayor’s announcement and the council’s delay come as calls for cease-fire have become increasingly common and the majority of U.S. voters continue to support an immediate end to the violence in Gaza. So far, more than 25,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7.

On Monday, for example, the two-million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU) also joined the call for a cease-fire, becoming the largest U.S. union to do so and joining other major unions like the United Auto Workers and the American Postal Workers Union in the call for an immediate and lasting peace.



SEIU president Mary Kay Henry (right) and Congressman Jesús “Chuy” García (left) join airport workers demanding better pay and working conditions in Arlington, Va.

PHOTO BY TASOS KATOPODIS/GETTY IMAGES FOR SEIU

“Wherever violence, fear and hatred thrive, working people cannot,” SEIU’s president Mary Kay Henry said in a statement, according to *Common Dreams*. “SEIU members understand that working people often feel the impact of war most deeply and bear the brunt of its terrible consequences.”

Chicago has emerged as a national locus for the cease-fire movement since the violence began October 7 with what have been a seemingly countless number of persistent marches, nonviolent direct actions and other efforts to demand immediate peace and an end to the occupation and system of apartheid in Palestine.

One of the most high-profile of these efforts came earlier this month when the storied Rainbow PUSH Coalition, founded by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., held an “Emergency Summit for Gaza.” That gathering saw many of the nation’s leaders who are calling for a cease-fire descend on a snowy Chicago to strategize on how to further peace efforts in the face of Israeli and U.S. governments that do not appear to have any interest in slowing the war machine.



Summit attendees converse in the pews of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition headquarters in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood.

PHOTO BY PAUL GOYETTE

Rep. Abdelnasser Rashid (D-Ill.), the only Palestinian American in the Illinois State Legislature, used his platform at the conference to urge the Chicago City Council to follow the will of the American public and join the growing cease-fire chorus.

“The city of Chicago ... could be the largest city in the country calling for a cease-fire,” Rashid said at the conference. “Call every single alderman in the city of Chicago and ask them to cosponsor the cease-fire resolution led by Alderwoman Rossana Rodriguez [Sanchez] and Alderman [Daniel] La Spata.”

A city of Chicago’s size calling for a cease-fire would no doubt be impactful on the public discourse around the Israeli government’s assault on Gaza. Chicago is home to the largest population of Palestinians anywhere in the country. U.S. cities that have already officially called for a cease-fire include San Francisco, Detroit and Atlanta, among others.

“We should ask every single member of Congress to insist—to commit—that they will not vote to send a single [additional] dollar to Israel until this issue is resolved,” said Rashid. “So cease-fire and no more military aid.”

Several members of the Illinois congressional delegation, including Rep. Delia Ramirez (D-Ill.), have joined and led the calls for a cease-fire while others have stayed silent or refused to participate in the discussion.

One of those Illinois members of Congress calling for peace at the emergency summit was Rep. Jesús “Chuy” García (D-Ill.) who noted that “more members of Congress are confronting the reality of this moment.”

“The group of members calling for a cease-fire is growing every week, thanks to the work of so many people out there,” said García. “But even as the cease-fire coalition grows, even as organizers around the world demonstrate for peace and accountability, the United States is still materially supporting Israel’s war.”

Despite the postponed vote, cease-fire supporters who had already planned to pack Chicago City Hall Wednesday morning still showed up en masse to demand political support and leadership in the call for peace. While many of the alderpersons who requested the delay have not indicated what their ultimate stance on the resolution may be, opposition to the cease-fire resolution could indicate their separation from the majority of U.S. voters—and especially from an increasing number of young people.

Organizers of the emergency summit released data at the conference finding that “voters are substantially more likely to back candidates for Congress if they know those candidates favor de-escalation,” according to [The Nation](#). The poll also found that, “by a two-to-one margin, voters reject the notion that the United States should give unrestricted military assistance to Israel as long as Israel is putting Palestinian civilian lives at risk.”

James Zogby, founder and president of the Arab American Institute (AAI), presented the [data](#), which was collected from an online poll of 1,000 likely voters and commissioned by the AAI and Rainbow PUSH Coalition. Another finding of the data is that support for Israel has decreased as the violence against Palestine, which boasts more support from people of color and 18-29-year-olds, continues. Many voters are also questioning Biden’s response to the violence.



James Zogby speaks on stage at the summit

PHOTO BY PAUL GOYETTE

If there were single weekends or series of days in the United States since October 7 that signaled the shifting conversation toward a cease-fire, one of them may have been the weekend of the summit, when there was also a major march for Palestinian liberation in Washington, D.C., and a convening of hundreds of leaders of Jewish Voice for Peace in California, among other actions and events.

The summit also coincided with the landmark case brought by South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice, which, among other things, asserts that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people.

During the summit, Omar Shakir, Israel and Palestine director for Human Rights Watch, decried the U.S. government's lack of courage and leadership "in ending the atrocities."

“The United States risks complicity in the war crimes of the Israeli government through its provision of military aid, and, given the position of the Biden administration, it’s all the more important that there are strong voices coming from civil society, from a diverse range of constituencies, that are calling for action,” said Shakir.

He added that mass gatherings surrounding a cease-fire, such as the summit, are becoming increasingly important in the movement for peace.

The summit “builds on a long history of activism and action to challenge human rights abuse and the government’s role in it,” said Shakir, “and hopefully it doesn’t stay confined to these discussions but can carry into actions and folks raising their voices and continuing to push for change beyond these two days in Chicago.”

Whether or not the Chicago City Council will approve the resolution, or whether the delay is a signal of a “no” vote to come, is still an open question. But Johnson raising his voice in favor of a cease-fire may open up windows and avenues for more alders to follow suit.

Since October 7, some of those on the council have proven quick to condemn statements and efforts for Palestinian liberation, and invoking Holocaust survivors as part of the conversation around a cease-fire is already being seen as specious and manipulative to some supporters of the resolution.

“The fundamental disagreement right now is when it’s appropriate to talk about the loss of Palestinian life,” says Rodriguez Sanchez, one of the sponsors of the resolution, according to WBEZ Chicago.

“I certainly want to be sensitive towards Holocaust survivors. Absolutely. And I also want to be sensitive about Palestinians, and the fact that they are also losing life, they are losing their nation,” she says. “And I think that Holocaust Remembrance Day should also be a time to remember why we shouldn’t do this to anyone ever.”

But even as the city council deliberates over the resolution, Johnson has now joined leading Chicago voices in the call for cease-fire, including Jackson.

So perhaps it’s fitting that Jackson had the clearest message at the summit, and at the end of the conference’s first day, he led attendees in a simple, but powerful chant:

“Stop the violence, save the children, free Palestine.”

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