

# Protesters want a ceasefire. Why won't they speak out in support of Biden's plan for one?

Just when public pressure on Hamas and Israel matters most, the streets fall silent



Hundreds of Israelis participated in a protest in Tel Aviv on June 1, demanding a hostage swap deal and ceasefire. Photo by Ori Aviram/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images

Senior Columnist [Rob Eshman](#) June 3, 2024

After President Joe Biden announced his three-part plan for a ceasefire and hostage release on Friday, I visited the campus of UCLA, where I was overjoyed to see thousands of students demonstrating for Hamas and Israel to accept the deal. Their sea of signs read, “Hamas: Take the Deal!” and “Bibi: Say Yes!”

I’m kidding. There was nothing. No one. Bupkis.

Where, just weeks ago, hundreds of protesters erected a tent encampment and chanted for a free Palestine, there were empty lawns and vacant plazas. Two students dressed in graduation gowns and mortarboards shared a bottle of champagne. Nearby, two women snacked on cheese and wine in the sculpture garden.

Why? Just when a deal is in the offing, one that would give the protesters what they want — a ceasefire — and the Israelis what they need — their hostages back — the lawns, quads and streets have fallen silent.

There has been understandable outrage against war, but where is the fervor for compromise?

Some campuses are still alive with protest. At UC Santa Cruz last week, for instance, police broke up a student encampment, arresting 80 demonstrators as students chanted, “Cops off campus! Glory to the martyrs!”, according to the [LA Times](#).

This week, faculty and graduate student members of the University of California union, which represents 48,000 academic workers, plan to expand their ongoing strike. One of their claims: That UC officials violated members’ rights in acting against pro-Palestinian protests and encampments.

Yet amid all this, few Americans seem to be targeting their protests at the two parties — Israel and Hamas — who could stop the war.

That isn’t the case in Israel, where after Biden announced the [ceasefire deal](#), 120,000 people took to the streets of Tel Aviv to push the government to accept it.

“This might be the last chance to save lives,” Gili Roman, whose sister-in-law Carmel is being held hostage by Hamas, told [Sky News](#).

The public protests add to domestic and international pressure for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept the ceasefire, even at the cost of losing his current governing coalition. Wouldn’t adding thousands of American voices to the demand that Hamas also say yes increase the chances that both sides will come to the table?

“I don’t think so,” said Hussam Ayloush, executive director of [CAIR-LA](#), an advocacy group that, among other services, provides legal assistance to students and others facing retribution for their pro-Palestinian positions. “It seems all that the Biden administration has been trying to do is buy time while Israel continues with its mass murder in Gaza. It’s just about buying time.”

But wouldn't a ceasefire and hostage exchange at least allow Gazans some breathing room, while both sides worked out their deeper issues? What's the downside of protesters taking to the streets demanding Israel *and* Hamas say yes to the deal?

"We have zero strings to pull with Israel or Hamas," he said. "We have some influence on our own government. So that's where our energy is."

Is that true? We know Hamas — and its Iranian supporters — pay attention to American voices. Iran's ayatollah [posted on X to share support](#) for campus demonstrators as part of the "resistance front."

"We want constant rage," former Hamas leader [Khaled Mashal said](#) at a conference in Turkey last month.

Placing all the blame on one side in a conflict is, often, a good way to perpetuate that conflict. But that appears, depressingly, to be an approach that a large segment of the protest movement seems to endorse.

Ayloush, whose group has mounted billboard campaigns along southern California highways demanding a "Ceasefire Now," insisted that the only meaningful subject of protests is Netanyahu.

"Only one party holds the key," Ayloush said. "It's not Hamas, not the Palestinians. It is not the U.S. It's not Qatar. It is Israel, and specifically Netanyahu and his coalition."

[IfNotNow](#), the American Jewish movement that has been active in protesting against Israel's war in Gaza, took to the streets last week to denounce Israel's invasion of Rafah, but it has no plans to call on Hamas and Israel to sign Biden's deal.

"The reason that people have been focused on the U.S. support for Israel is because our government provides billions of dollars of weapons to Israel," said Matan Arad Naeem, the group's Israeli-American deputy communications director.

I mentioned that a more cynical person might conclude that the reason protesters won't direct their demands at Hamas is that their real goal isn't building up a ceasefire, but tearing down Israel.

“The vast majority of people who have taken to the streets over the last several months are motivated by a profound horror of the level of bloodshed that we’ve seen,” he said, “and I think it’s fair to lay the blame for that with the Israeli government.”

Singling out only one side for blame is also true for the many people in the pro-Israel camp who oppose the Biden plan. They seem to have bought into the fantasy of “total victory,” an America-versus-the Axis replay in which Hamas, crushed like Imperial Japan, sues for surrender then dissolves.

Yet good strategy tends to come down to sacrifice. A strategy of “total victory” at the cost of Israel’s international and economic isolation, with no plan for the day after, is, as members of Netanyahu’s war cabinet have stated publicly, a recipe for Israel’s ruin.

Palestinians and Israelis both need this deal to go through. Yet too many of their supporters seem unwilling to acknowledge how essential it is — or to take steps to press for it. Hamas may want “constant rage,” but Gazans and Israelis deserve better. I can only hope a third camp will arise to take to the streets, demanding that both Hamas and Israel say yes.

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