Peace Movements and Policy: Lessons for Gaza and Ukraine

David Cortright

Cornell University

November 13, 2023

The theme of my talk is lessons from and for peace movements, based on my experiences in and study of the Vietnam peace movement of the 1960s and 70s, the nuclear freeze disarmament movement of the 1980s, and the opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq of the 2000s.

Today we peace movements face enormous new challenges. The vast human suffering in Gaza and Israel and the war between Russia and Ukraine challenge us in ways we have not experienced in many decades, perhaps in our lifetimes.

Rarely has it been more difficult to talk about peace and the role of peace movements, but never has it been more urgent to do so. We are pained by what we see, but we are uncertain what to say or do.

Some peace scholars and activists prefer not to talk about the situation. In late September I attended the annual conference of the Peace and Justice Studies association and found not a single panel or speaker addressing the war in Ukraine. Recently I was invited to speak at the annual meeting of a regional peace organization but was advised not to make the war in Ukraine the subject of my talk, since members of the group are sharply divided on the issue.

I've never been good at following orders, or shying away from controversy, though, so I talked about Ukraine anyway, and also about the deepening crisis in Gaza.

How could I do otherwise as a scholar and activist for peace? If we want peace, we have to address the challenges of war. If we believe that nonviolence is the superior approach for resolving conflict, we must show that it provides solutions to the problems violence purports to address, but in a better, less costly and more sustainable manner.

In this discourse I explain why movements matter and how they influence policy, looking principally at the Iraq antiwar movement and the nuclear freeze disarmament movement. I begin with general observations about the challenges of assessing policy impact and consider lessons from these movements for peace strategies in Gaza and Ukraine.

I look at parallels in the decision to use force in Iraq and Gaza, examining the research on countering violent extremism and evidence that military responses are ineffective and counterproductive. A worldwide movement has emerged against Israel's war in Gaza, calling for a ceasefire or pause in military action. I examine the debate on ending the war and the necessity of a new international diplomatic process for coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis.

As Russia's war in Ukraine nears the two-year mark, supporters of Ukraine's self-defense face the challenge of how to end to the war. Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons add to the danger, especially in light of the dismantlement of the arms reduction agreements that marked the end of the cold war. I argue for an international diplomatic process for a negotiated peace in Ukraine and the renewal of international arms control.

I

History shows that peace movements are able to shape policy if they can build large coalitions, have compelling and unifying demands, and are persistent in applying pressure for change.

The ways in which social movements influence policy are not always apparent. They often emerge in an unexpected manner, or have effects far into the future. "It is always too early to calculate effect," writer Rebecca Solnit observed.[1] We can never know how our actions today may influence events tomorrow. When we apply pressure, we can't predict how political establishments will respond. Movements may win even as they appear to lose.

[1] Rebecca Solnit, "Acts of Hope: Challenging Empire on the World Stage," *Mother Jones*, June 14, 2005.

The Iraq antiwar movement was unable to stop the invasion, despite massive global opposition, as more than 10 million people demonstrated in hundreds of cities around the world on February 15 2003, the largest single day of antiwar protest in history.

George W. Bush pushed ahead with the invasion despite the unprecedented opposition, but the global protests prevented Germany, Canada, Turkey and other countries from joining the so-called coalition of the willing, and the UN Security Council twice rebuffed US and British attempts to gain authorization for the use of force in Iraq.

Here in the US opposition to the war and occupation continued and helped Democrats win control of Congress in 2006 and establish a legislative mandate for the withdrawal of troops. Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination on the basis of his opposition to the war and as President followed through on his pledge to withdraw the troops.

II

As we address the conflict in Gaza it's appropriate to reflect upon the Iraq War and the movement against it. There are obvious, tragic parallels between that experience and the current crisis in Gaza.

When President Biden traveled to Israel right after the October 7 massacre, he warned Prime Minister Netanyahu not to repeat the "mistake" that the United States made in the aftermath of 9/11.

That mistake was not in the tactics of military operations, as some commentors suggested, but in the fundamental decision to go to war, to wage a so-called Global War on Terror. It proved to be a colossal strategic miscalculation.

The Iraq antiwar movement was born in the debate about how to respond to 9/11. Peace, human rights and religious groups came together to say that war is not the answer. We warned that military intervention will lead to more terrorism not less.

Students began to organize. These were the early days of the internet and an online petition quickly gained more than half a million signatures, one of the first

to go viral, calling for “sober restraint” and a “just and effective response” to the 9/11 attacks.

The National Council of Churches, the US Catholic Bishops and many other religious voices pointed to the human cost of war and the many innocent civilians who would die war from war in the Middle East. They endorsed a statement published in the *New York Times* in November 2001 which read “Let us deny [the terrorists] their victory by refusing to submit to a world created in their image.”

Catholic ethicist Rev. H. Bryan Hehir wrote that countering terrorism is a function of police and legal networks: “War is an indiscriminate tool for this highly discriminating task.”

Many national security experts echoed that judgment. Former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft wrote an extraordinary article in the *Wall Street Journal* warning that an invasion of Iraq “could generate a worldwide “explosion of outrage against us.”

Peace researchers identified alternatives to the use of military force. Support the UN Counterterrorism program for international police and intelligence cooperation, we wrote. Make greater efforts to resolve the conditions that give rise to conflicts, through diplomacy and peacebuilding and greater investment in economic and social development.

In Iraq we argued for a more effective UN arms embargo and targeted sanctions to contain the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. We joined with diplomats at the UN in calling for renewed UN inspections to test the claim of weapons of mass destruction. “Inspections not war” was our slogan.

The core message was then and remains today that we can win the fight against violent extremism without war. “Win without War” became the slogan and the name of the organization we created. The group still exists as a leading voice for progressive foreign policy. Arguing for nonmilitary solutions in Gaza, Ukraine and beyond.

A 2008 study by the RAND Corporation found that most terrorist groups end through effective policing and political agreements. Military force accounted for the demise of terrorist groups in only 7 percent of the cases. Audrey Kurth Cronin’s significant work, *How Terrorism Ends*, came to similar conclusions. Her

study of hundreds of cases of counterterrorism policy found that violent repression does not work, and is often a catalyst of extremism.

The lesson for peace movements is obvious. Show that there are constructive alternatives to war, and that military intervention often makes matters worse.

III

Groups like Hamas commit atrocities and maximize civilian casualties precisely to provoke a disproportionate response from their declared enemy. Their goal is to increase the overall level of violence and polarization, generating additional recruits and support for their cause.

Waging war to counter terrorism is a fool's errand. A trap that entangles the warring state in prolonged costly and debilitating wars of counterinsurgency and military occupation. Sadly Israel has fallen into that trap.

No one can deny Israel's right to defend itself or the necessity of preventing future terrorist strikes, but the massive bombing of densely populated neighborhoods and killing of thousands of civilians, including so many innocent children, is unconscionable. It's immoral and illegal. It is also counterproductive to the goal of enhancing Israeli security.

The siege of Gaza perpetuates the cycle of violence that has afflicted the region. It also distracts attention from the heinous crimes committed by Hamas.

Look at the press coverage and social media. It's mostly about Palestinian suffering, with little attention to the more than 1200 Israelis who were massacred on October 7. Or the fate of the more than 200 hostages illegally abducted by Hamas. The longer the killing of people in Gaza continues, the worse the situation will be for Israel.

I support justice for the Palestinian people, but nothing can justify the crimes Hamas has committed in their name. Even if one accepts the right of resistance, there can be no justification for intentionally targeting unarmed civilians. I recommend the incisive commentary on Hamas's multiple war crimes by Cornell Law Dean Ohlin in *OpinioJuris*.

People all over the world, including many in the US, are now protesting against Israel's military assault and calling for a ceasefire. The appeal for a ceasefire has

become the core political demand for ending the violence. It can serve as the basis for a genuine international peace movement for Gaza and Israel.

The messaging in many of the rallies is one-sided and divisive, however, and alienates people who otherwise support the antiwar cause, including many progressive Jews. Especially troubling is the slogan “from the river to the sea.” While it may be intended as an aspiration for the freedom of all people in Israel and Palestine, many hear and fear it as a call for the elimination of the Israeli state and perhaps its people. Phrases that are so divisive and open to conflicting interpretation are an obstacle to building the broad coalitions that are necessary for successful movements.

There is division among governments and activists over the question of “pause” versus “ceasefire.” The most important point about the word ceasefire is its directionality. It makes ending the war an essential strategic objective, and it affirms there is no military solution to this conflict.

Opponents of the war can be agnostic about the choice of words, I believe, as long as the intention is clearly to stop the killing. Any step that halts the violence, even if for a limited time, is welcome. It provides a basis for demanding a more permanent pause. It opens space for humanitarian assistance, and also for political efforts to start to resolve the crisis.

I’m reminded of the Iraq debate, when activists lobbied Congress in 2007 for the withdrawal of US troops. Supportive members of Congress substituted the word “redeployment” for “withdrawal,” as a tactic for winning support among moderate legislators. The new wording meant the same thing regarding the removal of troops from Iraq, although some activists were skeptical. They supported the newly worded measure, however, which was approved by both houses of Congress, and ultimately became US policy.

Linguistic debates also emerged during the freeze movement when the US Catholic bishops issued a widely anticipated pastoral letter in 1983 that urged a halt to the arms race but did not use the word freeze. Some argued this was a setback, but the bishops remained steadfast in supporting nuclear arms reduction and disarmament.

Whether we call it a pause or ceasefire, a cessation of hostilities is necessary. But it is not enough. Peace research tells us that ceasefires break down frequently. They are often merely a pause. The sustainability of a ceasefire depends upon effective third-party monitoring, and a political process for addressing underlying grievances.

In this case a ceasefire or pause must be tied to a long-term political process, ideally under UN authority, for attempting to achieve a just political settlement between the Israeli and Palestinian people.

Many will roll their eyes at such suggestions. Give me a break! It can't work. It's been tried and failed. There are too many spoilers. Yes, the obstacles are many and seemingly endless, but ultimately there is no alternative to negotiations.

War and violence have been tried, repeatedly, endlessly, and they are rampant now, but they have not brought peace to Palestine and never will. The only hope for peace is through a negotiated political process in which the UN must play a role.

We can't be naïve about the enormous difficulties all of this will entail, or the length of time required. For starters we don't even have legitimate negotiating partners, on either side.

Hamas has disqualified itself. Its leaders belong in the docket at the Hague not at the negotiating table. They do not want a political agreement. War is their strategy, and the destruction of Israel their goal. A new form of political representation in Palestine will be needed. How that will occur we don't know.

In Israel as well, the Netanyahu government has utterly failed in its most fundamental duty of protecting its citizens from attack and has forfeited whatever diminishing political legitimacy it may have had.

We must remain relentless, however, in demanding an end to the violence and working with the UN and other states to establish an internationally monitored ceasefire, and diplomatic negotiations to achieve a just political settlement that assures the security of both Palestinians and Israelis.

IV

It’s a sad commentary on the savagery of the Gaza War that it has eclipsed coverage of the brutal war in Ukraine, as that story slips out of consciousness. The carnage continues, however, after almost two years of relentless industrial-scale war, with no end in sight and still no clarity among many peace advocates about what to say or do.

The Ukraine war is similar to the Iraq War as a blatant example of military aggression, in direct violation of the Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter, which prohibits states from using military force against another state except as self-defense against an attack.

The fact that that the US also violated the Charter by invading Iraq is no justification for Russia doing the same in Ukraine, although Washington’s double standard has made it more difficult for the US to mobilize support for Ukraine.

Many peace activists are implicitly pacifist and have difficulty accepting the concept of a just war. If such a thing exists, however, Ukraine's struggle to defend itself surely qualifies as a just cause. It is a battle for national survival, against a declared intention to exterminate Ukraine as a separate country and culture. Pope Francis, stalwart defender of peace and disarmament, has said that Ukraine’s defensive war is “not only licit, it’s also an expression of love toward one’s homeland.”

Even when war is for self-defense, however, it must be viewed with sorrow. War “is always a defeat for humanity,” declared Pope John Paul II. We have a moral duty to work for an end to armed conflict and to build the conditions for sustainable peace. This means seeking a just termination of this war. This is especially so now as the struggle has become a war of attrition, as even the Ukrainian military commander-in-chief has admitted. These considerations create a moral imperative for pursuing a diplomatic strategy to end the war.

Many Ukrainians share President Zelensky’s skepticism about peace talks, but there is nothing to fear from diplomacy, and much to gain with the right strategy. Negotiations are not a concession to the enemy, and there would be no need to abandon defensive military operations, at least not at first. The goal would remain to assure the withdrawal of Russian troops and the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over its territory.

The goal of negotiations also should be to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, and to restore the shattered foundations of US-Russian nuclear arms limitation. Russia has used the threat of nuclear weapons as a shield to pursue its military aggression in Ukraine. When Putin launched the invasion, he ordered Russia's nuclear forces "to a special regime of combat duty." Foreign Minister Lavrov called Western weapons shipments to Ukraine "a legitimate target" for attack, adding that the risk of nuclear war is "real," and "cannot be underestimated." Dmitry Medvedev, former president of Russia, said "Every day when they provide Ukraine with foreign weapons brings the nuclear apocalypse closer."

Russia's nuclear threats come on the heels of the systematic erosion of the arms reduction and disarmament agreements that ended the cold war. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, the Conventional Forces in Europe agreement, the Open Skies Treaty, all are gone. The START nuclear reduction treaty is hanging by a thread. Just this past week Putin signed a law ending Russian participation in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

We are in a moment of unprecedented nuclear peril, as the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists symbolized recently by moving its Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than ever before. The disutility and danger of nuclear deterrence are starkly revealed.

V

The dismantlement of negotiated arms reduction takes with it the historic legacy of the peace and disarmament movement. During the 1980s, at an earlier time of nuclear anxiety, citizen activism played a significant role in generating political pressure for arms reduction and an end to the cold war.

Recall the nuclear freeze campaign and the mass mobilizations for disarmament that swept through Western society in the 1980s. Scientists, physicians, religious leaders, former diplomats and military commanders, citizens in every walk of life in the United States and Western Europe spoke out for ending the arms race and abolishing nuclear weapons. In the United States a million people marched to Central Park in June 1982 to call for freezing and reversing the arms race.

At the heart of this movement was a proposal developed by MIT researcher Randall Forsberg, the call for a bilateral US Soviet freeze on the testing, production

and deployment of nuclear weapons. That proposition was presented to 18 million voters in nonbinding referenda in 1982. The freeze was approved in 9 out of 10 states and in dozens of major cities where it was on the ballot.

During the 1980s citizen pressures stopped the deployment of the MX mobile missile system and curtailed funding for nuclear testing, the Strategic Defense Initiative and other unnecessary and dangerous weapons systems. As Matthew Evangelista has written, citizens played an important role in reducing the nuclear danger and ending the cold war. In response Ronald Reagan altered his bellicose rhetoric and promised to negotiate for peace with the Soviets. He followed through on those pledges when Gorbachev came to power and the two leaders negotiated agreements for unprecedented nuclear weapons reductions.

This university had a role in these events. Scientists here helped to initiate the historic pledge signed by more than 7,000 US physicists, mathematicians and other physical scientists vowing not to work on the Strategic Defense Initiative. The papers of freeze founder Randall Forsberg are archived here at Cornell University Library at the initiative of the Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies. The Reppy Institute also convened a valuable symposium in 2018 to reflect on the posthumous release of Forsberg's study on abolishing war, which was published by Cornell University Press.

The genius of the freeze was that it applied to both sides, the US and the Soviet Union. Previous disarmament campaigns in the US were aimed largely at Washington, rightly so, since the US was the driver of the arms race initially and constantly pushed for the development of ever more deadly nuclear weapons systems. But campaigns directed only at the US faced the false charge of being communist-inspired and pro-Soviet. When groups such as SANE campaigned for a test ban in the late 50 and early 60s they were often accused of having communist connections. The organization was seriously damaged by red-baiting attacks from members of Congress and the press.

The freeze changed all that. It was an appeal directed at both sides. European disarmament activists also applied the bilateral logic of the freeze by directing their protests at both NATO and Soviet missiles, with the slogans, "no to Cruise and Pershing, not to SS-20." The even-handed approach of opposing nuclear

weapons on both sides helped to inoculate the movement from charges of being pro-Soviet. It made it easier for diverse groups to support the freeze.

The legitimacy of the disarmament movement was also enhanced by the support it received from religious communities. Practically every religious body in the US endorsed the freeze and urged a halt to the arms race. Especially important was the support for disarmament of the Catholic bishops. No one could credibly claim that the fiercely anti-communist and conservative prelates of the Catholic Church were communist.

These dimensions of the freeze movement offer additional lessons for mobilizing opposition to the wars of today. Calls for ending the siege in Gaza will be more effective if they combine the demand for a cessation of Israeli military operations with a firm condemnation of Hamas' October 7 atrocity. They will also be more effective and have greater legitimacy if they have the backing of representatives from all three faith traditions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

VI

A dual approach is also needed for Ukraine. The US should continue to provide aid for Ukrainian self-defense, contrary to what some on the far left and Republican reactionaries in Congress are urging, but we should also press for negotiations to end the war, ideally through a broad international process. A peace agreement in Ukraine will need vigorous third-party monitoring and should be tied to a UN-authorized diplomatic process for resolving the status of the illegally annexed territories.

The current US and EU sanctions against Russia can provide leverage for encouraging negotiations. Pressures should be intensified to cut Russian energy earnings and imports of weapons and military-related technology, while the offer to ease and lift sanctions can be used as an inducement to encourage Russian concessions.

To date the Biden administration has argued that the question of negotiation is up to the Ukrainian government. In light of present political realities and the stalemate on the battlefield, however, this is no longer a viable position. It is necessary for the US and the European Union to use their leverage with Ukraine

to urge participation in a diplomatic process for reaching a political solution to the conflict, working with China, Turkey and other countries that have offered to help.

This war affects the security of the entire world, and a broad international diplomatic process is needed in which many states cooperate under UN authority, to negotiate and implement provisions for peace, with security guarantees for Ukraine's future.

The horrors of the Ukraine war and the increasing nuclear danger are inextricably intertwined, and they need to be resolved in parallel. Agreements to resume nuclear arms reduction and restructure East-West security relations need to be part of a diplomatic strategy for ending the war.

Negotiating for disarmament means returning to the Reagan-Gorbachev agenda of nuclear arms reduction that animated East-West policy just 35 years ago. That era of striving for a nuclear-weapons free world may seem hopelessly distant now amidst the sorrows of war, but it is necessary to maintain the vision, and attempt to move in that direction.

As we witnessed during the Iraq antiwar and nuclear disarmament movements, people have the power to influence policy and make history. We must exercise that power now to hasten the end of the bitter conflicts of today.

To forge a more unified movement to end the siege of Gaza and begin a new political process for the mutual security of the Israeli and Palestinian people.

To initiate an international diplomatic process to end the war in Ukraine and resume the process of nuclear arms reduction to protect global security.

Perhaps this great university can play a leading role again now as we confront the present dangers, helping to illuminate pathways to negotiation and cooperation rather than hostility and war.