



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*



Source: dpa.com

*Peace Talks presently: neither Talks nor Peace*

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In recent months, the global spotlight on the Ukrainian theatre of war has been overshadowed by escalating tensions in the Middle East. The Israeli military operation, initially confined to Gaza and the West Bank, has now expanded into Lebanon, with direct strikes on targets in Iran, Syria, and Yemen. This broader regional conflict has diverted international attention from Ukraine, raising questions about global priorities.

With the US elections bringing Trump back to power, his campaign promises have resurfaced discussions about ending quickly the war in Ukraine through negotiations. However, the ongoing Middle Eastern conflict has seen little diplomatic momentum, as the USA appear to have given Israel a free hand to pursue its objectives—objectives that remain unclear and potentially uncoordinated within Israel's broader strategy.

While the USA and Western powers back Israel unconditionally, alliances on the opposing side seem fragile. Apart from formal condemnations and symbolic support for the Palestinian cause, Sunni Arab nations and Turkey have shown no intent to engage in decisive interventions. Meanwhile, China and Russia remain passive observers.

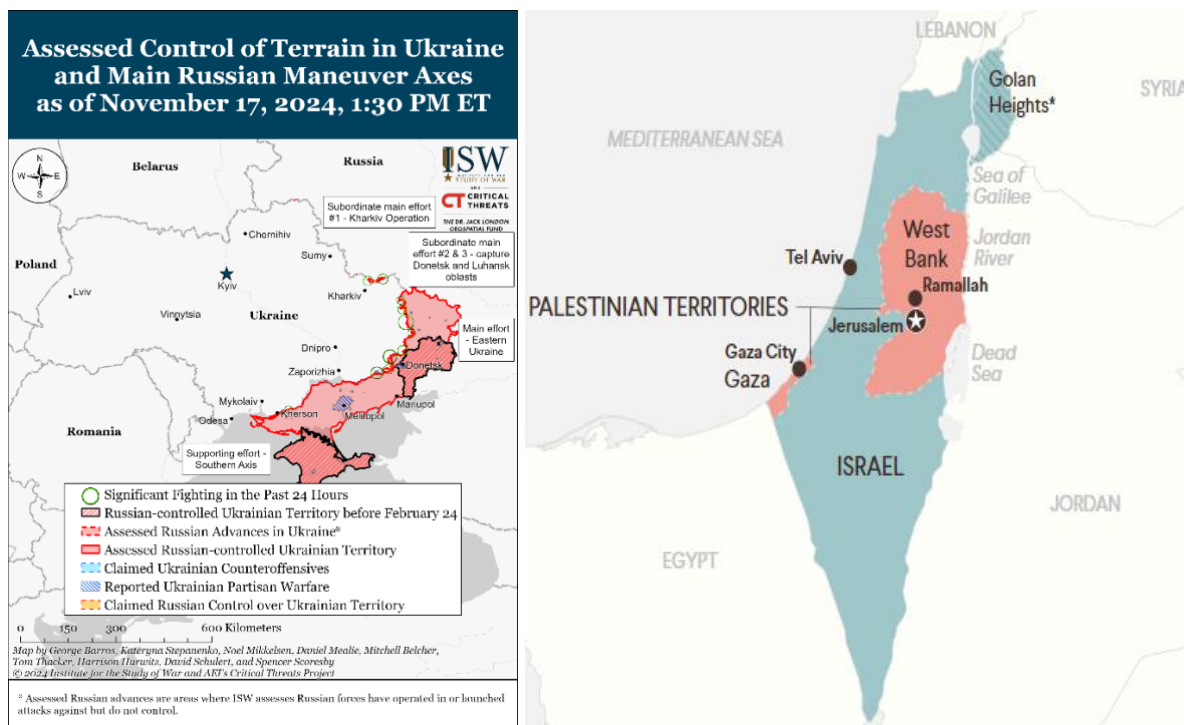
Efforts to engage international bodies like the UN or the International Court of Justice have largely been limited to media optics and to psychological effects. Calls for ceasefires and negotiations have been equally ineffective. Although Qatar and Turkey, alongside the USA, initially facilitated discussions on hostage exchanges involving Hamas when Israel's focus was on Gaza, these efforts have lost momentum as Israel broadened its offensive. The campaign now targets not only Hamas but also Hezbollah in Lebanon and key figures across Syria, Iraq, Iran and Yemen.

The absence of clear interlocutors for broader negotiations raises serious challenges. Hamas represents a stateless population, advocating for the creation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders—a proposition unacceptable to Israel without robust guarantees of security and recognition of its right to exist. Israel's historical withdrawals, such as from Gaza in 2007, have fuelled scepticism about the viability of such agreements.

Complicating the matter further, Israel's military objectives include territories it has controlled for 57 years, such as the West Bank, Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and Gaza—areas it has refrained from formally annexing, but continues to manage under occupation. Repeated peace plans, over 15 to date, have failed to secure lasting agreements.

In parallel, Israel's military strikes against state actors like Iran and Syria highlight another dilemma: why should sovereign nations rely on third-party mediation when direct diplomatic channels, even during hostilities, are traditionally available? Yet, in the Middle East, communication between adversaries often occurs indirectly, through media statements or, more potently, through military or terrorist actions.

This lack of negotiation frameworks underscores a concerning reality: political and military interests on all sides seem more inclined to perpetuate conflict than to seek compromise. For Israel, this approach may optimise post-war scenarios, while for divided Palestinian leadership, it ensures short-term survival amidst internal factionalism.



Source: left ISW, right Council of Foreign Relations.

### *Ukraine: A Parallel Theatre*

The dynamics in Ukraine echo similar themes. Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories, achieved through traditional military tactics, has reshaped the battlefield. Russia's gradual advance, marked by infrastructure-targeted missile strikes and territorial devastation, aims at creating uninhabitable buffer zones. These areas, once defined as a "security belt", could hypothetically emerge as new borders in eventual negotiations.

Currently, Russia controls approximately 18% of Ukraine—106.000 square kilometres out of the country's total 603.000 square kilometres. Ukraine's counteroffensive in Russian territory, such as in Kursk, has yielded minimal gains, covering about 850 square kilometres.

Demographically, Ukraine's population has dwindled from 41 million pre-conflict to an estimated 29 million, following territorial losses and mass displacement. Population flows include 2,5 million in Russia and 6 million in Europe. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and parts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia in 2022 have also shifted local demographics, with around 6,8 million people.

Ukraine's leadership, constrained by the war's realities, has resisted direct negotiations with Russia, recognising the impossibility of bargaining from a position of weakness. Instead, President Zelensky has focused on securing international support, particularly from the West. This backing, while substantial in financial aid and military supplies, has achieved limited success, halting Russian advances but falling short of reversing territorial losses.

Efforts to weaken Russia through sanctions have similarly had limited effects, leaving its economy and political stability largely intact. Meanwhile, the toll on Europe, particularly Germany, has been noticeable, with diminished industrial capacity and growing political instability. In contrast, Putin's grip on power remains firm, bolstered by high approval ratings. This asymmetry has marginalised Europe's potential role in brokering negotiations with Russia, relegating it to a secondary player. The recently elected US president now faces pivotal choices: assume direct responsibility for negotiations with Russia or disengage from Ukraine, forcing Europe to chart its path. The latter scenario could empower Europe to play a decisive role in post-war reconstruction and in redefining continental security architecture—a key Russian demand.

Early attempts at dialogue, such as those by German Chancellor Scholz, have been tentative, while Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's overtures were dismissed as inadequate. A prolonged conflict, however, may serve US strategic interests, keeping Europe dependent on American security guarantees while preventing its rise as an autonomous global power.

## ***A Landscape of Conflict Without Resolution***

Whether in the Middle East or Ukraine, the absence of credible mediators underscores the difficulty of achieving peace. Talks, if they occur, remain confined to media narratives, leaving the prospect of genuine dialogue remote.

For Russia, a protracted conflict could strengthen its position. Its “war economy” has proven resilient, enabling steady territorial gains and maintaining some of its strategic objectives: opposition to NATO expansion, protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and weakening the industrial, energy and military infrastructure of Ukraine.

Yet, as the USA recently allowed Ukraine to use long-range missiles capable of striking Russian territory, the stakes are escalating with a new Russia intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) fired against Dnipro. While such actions may pressure Russia into concessions, they risk provoking a broader conflict. A retaliatory response beyond Ukrainian borders could not only derail negotiations, but also ignite a larger confrontation.

In both theatres, peace remains elusive. Without negotiators, the rhetoric of peace talks masks the reality of enduring conflict, driven by entrenched political and military agendas.