



SHUSHAN STREET: BIDEN ADMINISTRATION MUST HOLD THE LINE ON RAFAH

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Israeli security forces are reportedly readying for an offensive in the city of Rafah at the southern tip of Gaza. According to Israeli media, two brigades will be [transferred](#) to central Gaza in order to free up the [Nahal Brigade](#) to join with additional forces in planned offensives in Rafah and central Gaza, and the IDF has [approved](#) a plan. A government spokesperson has stated that Israel is "[moving ahead](#)" with a ground operation, but gave no timeline. All that remains is for the Netanyahu government to give the green light.

Following the horrific attack by Hamas on October 7, Israel has the right and responsibility to protect its citizens, particularly given Hamas' stated [intent](#) to repeat the atrocities it committed. Israeli officials have [stated](#) that, of six remaining Hamas battalions in Gaza, four are in Rafah. Israel has a legitimate interest in preventing Hamas forces from ever again harming its people, governing the Gaza Strip, or utilizing tunnels to smuggle weapons from Egypt into Gaza.

At the same time, the Biden Administration has correctly assessed that a major Rafah operation would have dangerous repercussions. In a February call with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Biden asserted that "a military operation in Rafah should not proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the more than one million people sheltering there." In March, while [stating](#) that "Israel has a right to go after Hamas," President Biden called an offensive in Rafah a "[red line](#)" and insisted that Israel "cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead as a consequence" of an attack. Multiple [consultations](#) between senior US and Israeli officials notwithstanding, the Biden Administration has reportedly [concluded](#) that a major Israeli military operation cannot go forward, given its assessment this would cause mass civilian casualties.

The Biden Administration must hold to this line and, as a group of Senators put it in a [February letter](#), "use all the tools at its disposal to stop any major military operation."

The population of Rafah has swollen to at least five times its prewar size, with over one million people relocating there for their safety, at Israel's [instructions](#). A [recent airstrike](#) in Rafah that killed six children and two women, among a total of nine dead, raises red flags that Israel is not fundamentally changing its military conduct from a bombing campaign that President Biden previously called "[indiscriminate](#)."

Israel's procurement of 40,000 [tents](#) for future civilian evacuees from Rafah and [satellite imagery](#) of tent encampments established near Khan Younis provide insufficient reassurance regarding plans for civilian relocation. While the "humanitarian zone" in the narrow strip of coastline known as [al-Mawasi](#) is a designated refuge – and Israel has [undisclosed plans](#) to expand it – conditions there are squalid. There is insufficient space there and in other locations for the number of people who would need to flee from a major offensive, even if the zone is expanded, and al-Mawasi itself has not been spared from bombing.

Beyond the issue of the civilian population, Rafah has also been the key entry point for aid into Gaza. Anything that results in the closure or damage of that crossing would further compound the humanitarian disaster and increase the dangers of widespread starvation. The Biden Administration has made clear [multiple times](#) that plans presented to it by the Israeli government still fail to address its concerns.

A major Rafah offensive would also pose dangers for Israeli security. The peace between Israel and Egypt, once an implacable foe, has been a [key feature](#) of Israel's security for the past 45 years. While consultations between the Israeli and Egyptian governments are [ongoing](#), the latter strongly opposes an Israeli offensive in Rafah, [assessing](#) that it "would lead to massive human massacres, losses, [and] widespread destruction." It has warned that it may [suspend](#) the Camp David peace treaty if Israel moves ahead. Egypt fears that Palestinians will be pushed into Egyptian territory en masse, sparking not only a massive refugee crisis but also the potential that Hamas and other militants could "infiltrate and use Sinai as a launch pad for terrorist operations against Israel or Egyptian security forces." There is reportedly an "[urgent concern](#)" among security circles in Egypt that this could revive the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist extremists who "would declare jihad against Israel from Sinai...plunging the region into an endless cycle of instability." Egyptian analysts [warn](#) that a battle in Rafah also raises the prospect of an accident or miscalculation that could lead to a confrontation between Israeli and Egyptian forces.

Hamas' release of propaganda videos of Hersh Goldberg-Polin and other hostages has only underscored the [urgency](#) of securing the release of the remaining hostages, including Israelis and Americans, held in Gaza. While some may [cite](#) the need to release the hostages as a rationale for invading Rafah, Israeli military operations have, it appears, tragically and inadvertently [killed](#) more captives than they have freed. By contrast, the temporary ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November – a result of [intense diplomatic efforts](#) by the US, Qatar, and Egypt – [liberated](#) 105 hostages. A new Israeli hostage release [proposal](#), reportedly [formulated](#) jointly by Israeli negotiators and Egyptian intelligence and characterized by Secretary Blinken as "very generous," represents an opportunity for a breakthrough. As the US and 17 other countries recently [stated](#), Hamas must release the hostages it holds in clear contravention of international law. Parties to the talks should do everything possible to secure an agreement. Should the negotiations fail, however, it will still be imperative that Israel not move ahead with a major offensive in Rafah.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has shown [ample willingness](#) to buck the Biden Administration, and he will likely try to do so again regarding Rafah. When President Biden set out his "red line" on Rafah, Netanyahu [responded](#): "We'll go there [to Rafah]. I have a red line. You know what the red line is? That October 7 doesn't happen again." Having promised an invasion of Rafah for months and with his right-wing allies [demanding](#) it, Netanyahu's [extremist partners](#) have made clear that his political survival depends on moving ahead.

Following Netanyahu's disastrous policy of [strengthening](#) Hamas, he has refused to accept responsibility and instead attempted to persuade Israelis that he can lead them to "[total victory](#)." Desirable as that might be, Netanyahu's promises of Hamas' absolute defeat are "[delusional](#)" at best, and a mirage meant to justify prolonging the fighting to keep himself in power at worst. Gadi Eisenkot, a minister in Netanyahu's war cabinet and former IDF Chief of Staff, has called it a "[tall tale](#)."

Regarding Israel's security going forward, three things are worth noting here. First, as Israeli security veterans have [emphasized](#), humanitarian disaster in Gaza threatens Israel's national security and it is not only morally and legally incumbent on the Israeli government to facilitate a significant expansion in aid delivery, but also in Israel's essential national interests to do so.

Second, Israel must prioritize maintaining its partnership with key allies. Crucially, this includes the US, which has reaffirmed its commitment to Israel with massive [security assistance](#). Arab and European partners, which together with the US spectacularly [repelled](#) Iran's recent attack against Israel, are also vital. It would be folly to pursue a dangerous notion that Israel can [go it alone](#) – including in terms of how it deals with Hamas.

Third, security for both Israelis and Palestinians [depends](#) on establishing and implementing a [plan for the “day after”](#) fighting ends in Gaza that will provide an alternative to Hamas. This must include securing, rebuilding, and administering Gaza and a gradual transition to Palestinian rule on a path to statehood.

At this juncture, it is crucial that the Biden Administration do the following:

1. Stand by its [opposition](#) to a large-scale Rafah operation that does not protect Palestinian civilians and ensure the flow of humanitarian aid, using all available leverage to this end. The Biden Administration should ensure that, for more limited operations, it approves plans developed and executed by Israeli forces both to protect Palestinian civilians sheltering in Rafah and reroute humanitarian aid supplied via Rafah to alternative entries.
2. Focus on the multilateral efforts to negotiate an immediate bilateral ceasefire, including the [release of hostages](#) and a pause in the fighting that allows for a massive surge of aid. This is essential to mitigate the impact of the [famine unfolding](#) in northern Gaza – [according](#) to the Biden Administration – while addressing the dire humanitarian situation in the rest of the Strip.
3. Engage deeply in multilateral diplomacy to ensure that there is a viable post-conflict [plan](#) for administering Gaza and moving toward Palestinian statehood.

President Biden has demonstrated his unquestionable and unwavering commitment to Israel's security, while his Administration has [emphasized](#) that “there are other ways to deal with” Hamas' presence in Rafah than a major military offensive there. The Biden Administration has made clear that it will not accept Israeli action in Gaza that does not adequately address the security and humanitarian needs of Palestinian civilians – and it must hold this line.

In the days and weeks ahead, President Biden must ensure that the Netanyahu government does not undertake an operation in Rafah that would worsen the already catastrophic situation for civilians in Gaza and further damage Israel's long-term security interests and international standing. Instead, Israel must pursue alternative means of addressing Hamas' continued presence. For the sake of the hostages, Palestinian civilians, and US national security, it is time to double down on diplomacy and a political horizon, en route to reconstruction and conflict resolution.