



# Egypt Must Do More to Aid Gazans

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*Especially in the context of a pending Israeli military operation to destroy Hamas's last battalions in Rafah, U.S.-led efforts to surge aid supplies into Gaza by air and sea may mitigate, but will likely not avert, the Strip's worsening descent into humanitarian catastrophe and potential anarchy. This makes temporary refugee facilities in nearby Sinai in Egypt an increasingly attractive and urgent option to alleviate civilian suffering and help ensure Hamas's defeat as quickly and effectively as possible. Working with its Arab and European partners, the Biden administration must begin serious talks with President Sissi to overcome Egypt's objections and ensure such infrastructure rapidly becomes available, as part of larger U.S.- and Arab-led efforts to help build a better future for Gaza and counter shared Iran-led threats.*

## What Happened?

- The Biden administration recently [initiated airdrops](#) of humanitarian supplies into Gaza, and announced a new “maritime corridor” in partnership with the European Union (EU) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to deliver additional aid to Gaza via Cyprus.
- Reports emerged last month, in anticipation of a possible Israeli offensive in Rafah, that Egypt started building an eight-square-mile [fortified camp](#) capable of accommodating more than 100,000 people in Sinai, adjacent to Egypt's borders with Gaza and Israel.
  - » On March 13, Israel [announced](#) plans to direct Gazans currently displaced in Rafah to temporary “humanitarian islands” nearer the center of the Strip.

## Why Is It Important?

- Despite Cairo's [official refusal](#) to accept refugees – a position [backed](#) by the Biden administration – temporary safe haven in the largely empty quarter of northeastern Sinai offers the most hopeful and impactful short-term measure to help both forestall Gaza's spiraling humanitarian crisis and hasten the end of the war.
  - » As explained in a [new report](#) from JINSA and The Vandenberg Coalition, urgent large-scale relief efforts are needed to avert Gaza's looming humanitarian catastrophe and potential chaos, which would only benefit Hamas and Iran's larger “axis of resistance.”
    - Making the case that Gazans have been liberated, and that Hamas bears responsibility for their misery, will be undermined if humanitarian conditions continue worsening.
  - » Together, existing aid vectors – Egyptian and Israeli border crossings, airdrops, a maritime corridor, and humanitarian islands – are unlikely to ensure that [sufficient](#) material reaches the already large, and growing, numbers of civilians inside Gaza who need it most.

- Already an estimated three-quarters of Gaza’s total population are internally displaced, and nearly 600,000 people are on the [brink of famine](#).
- Amid ongoing combat operations, and the absence of Palestinian police or any other force to guard convoys and airdrops and ensure equitable distribution inside Gaza, growing amounts of aid are likely being [looted](#) by Hamas and criminal gangs or [stampeded](#) by desperate civilians.
- As the UN’s humanitarian [coordinator](#) in Gaza asked recently, “What happens after the aid arrives at the [new] harbor? How does it get on trucks and out to distribution? The problem we are facing right now is that many of the roads are not operational, or on the roads that are open, it’s difficult to get through the crowds and congestion.”
- In late February, President Biden’s humanitarian [coordinator](#) for Gaza said that, “since the departure of police escorts, it has been virtually impossible for the U.N. or anyone else ... to safely move assistance in Gaza because of criminal gangs.”
- » Though Gazans still could receive assistance, and though Israel will continue taking precautions to minimize civilian harm in its military operations, temporary safe havens in Sinai under Egyptian control – with reliable access for international and nongovernmental aid organizations outside of Gaza’s chaos – would alleviate civilian suffering by ensuring larger and more manageable aid delivery, and by robbing Hamas of its ability to shield itself illegally behind civilians in its last major bastion in Rafah.
  - By the same token, this would help resolve the White House’s dilemma of supporting Israel’s self-defense and dismantlement of Hamas, while also minimizing collateral damage and ending the conflict as quickly as possible.
  - Egypt’s extensive network of military forces and security services offers a sizable and ready manpower pool to help provide security at such temporary encampments, ensure the steady flow of aid there, and prevent refugees (and any members of Hamas or other terror groups who may seek to flee to the camp) from disappearing into the rest of Egypt.
- Moreover, a temporary refugee solution in Sinai would ease strains on U.S.-led humanitarian efforts via air and sea in Gaza, which already pose their own difficulties and risks:
  - » Jordan-based airdrops, and the Cyprus-based maritime corridor, have long [logistical](#) tails, inefficiencies, and high costs – most obviously, the [projected](#) sixty-day window and major manpower draw of 1,000 U.S. servicemembers to build a temporary port.
  - » A large floating pier and causeway full of American personnel also brings its own force protection costs to prevent this infrastructure from becoming a large stationary target for Hamas and/or other extremist groups still operating inside Gaza.
    - In early March, the Pentagon press secretary [warned](#) it’s “certainly possible” that Hamas or others could target these U.S. forces operating offshore.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration needs to begin serious talks with Egypt's President Sissi on an urgent but temporary U.S.-endorsed program to provide safe haven in Sinai for Gazans voluntarily seeking refuge from conflict and chaos across the border.
- The United States should mobilize key European and Arab partners to reinforce its diplomacy with Sissi, particularly countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE that have often played vital roles in [bailing out](#) Egypt's ailing economy.
  - » These states should also be pressed to cover the expenses related to such a safe haven.
  - » To this end, the United States also should work with its European allies to convince Egypt to do more to help Gazan refugees, especially in light of Sunday's [agreement](#) in which the EU agreed to provide \$8 billion in much-needed economic aid in return for Cairo's help managing migrant and refugee flows, among other issues.
- To address Egyptian, Palestinian, and wider Arab concerns that this program would be [perceived](#) as enabling a second "Nakhba" that permanently displaces Palestinians and adds to the already-formidable burdens on Egypt's economy, the United States, Israel, and other countries should:
  - » Provide explicit public guarantees that such arrangements are strictly temporary and that all Gazan refugees will be repatriated once Israel concludes major combat operations in Gaza.
    - This should be paired with less formal but direct messages that the absence of such a program works directly against shared U.S.-Egyptian interests by worsening Gazans' humanitarian plight and thus, counterproductively, increasing the risk of their chaotic and much less controllable self-displacement into Sinai anyway.
  - » Frame its request to Egypt as part of a broader U.S. strategy to more effectively counter Iran's larger "ring of fire" that extends well beyond Hamas – most worryingly from Cairo's vantage, the Houthis in Yemen whose attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea are driving a [40 percent](#) year-on-year decline in Egypt's Suez Canal revenues, and which threaten to destabilize Egypt's already-fragile economy even further.
  - » Make clear that the administration, and members of Congress, remain ready to consider withholding certain parts of America's \$1.3 billion in annual foreign military financing (FMF) for Egypt, having already [withheld](#) \$130 million in 2022 over human rights issues.
- The Biden administration should frame this program in terms of a broader Arab-led, U.S.-backed initiative that addresses Egypt's concerns about enabling a "second Nakhba."
  - » As recommended in the new [JINSA-Vandenberg](#) report, this should take the form of a standalone International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction, ideally with Egyptian input and participation, that would enable the promptest possible return of refugees from Sinai to Gaza and the establishment of a post-Hamas administration capable of one day joining with the West Bank as a credible peace partner for Israel – in addition to scaling up humanitarian relief efforts inside Gaza and providing security to help ensure its equitable distribution.