



Israel Begins Limited Military Operations in Rafah

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After weeks of signaling its intent to launch a ground incursion to destroy Hamas in its last bastion, Rafah, the IDF has begun limited operations around the area. On May 6, the IDF began distributing evacuation guidelines to civilians in eastern Rafah and subsequently took control of the Gazan side of the Egypt-Gaza border in Rafah. Even as the IDF implements extensive measures to protect civilian lives, Israel seeks to leverage military action to pressure Hamas to accept an acceptable ceasefire and hostage agreement.

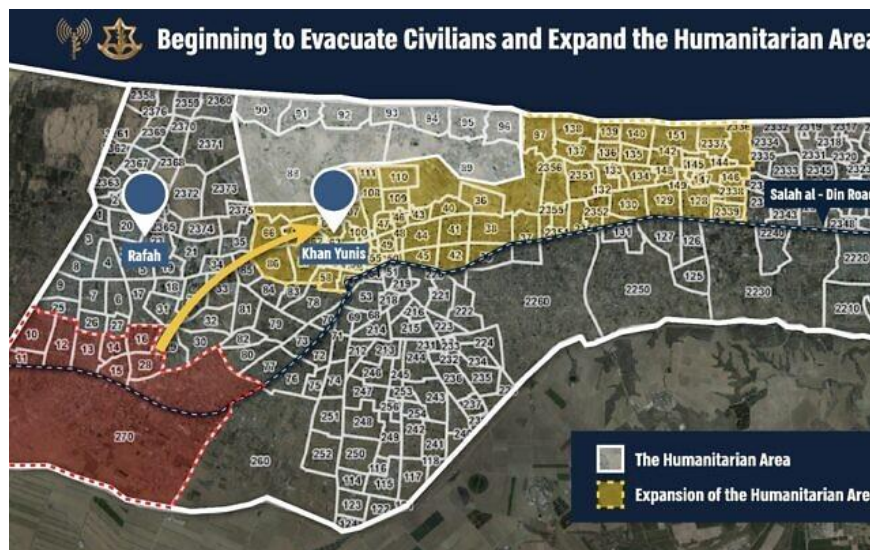
The Biden administration continues to oppose, and has now begun withholding munitions for, a major Israeli military operation in Rafah, despite its vital importance for Israel's strategic goals of defeating Hamas and recovering the hostages. The United States should instead ensure that Israel maintains an adequate supply of precision munitions, and it should make clear via a "no daylight" policy that it supports Israeli military efforts to destroy Hamas in the terror group's last territorial holdout and recover the hostages.

What Happened?

- On May 6, *The Times of Israel* [reported](#), "the IDF is now beginning to drop flyers in eastern Rafah, send text messages, and make phone calls to Palestinians with instructions on the zones that need to be evacuated and which routes to take to a designated humanitarian zone." The IDF released a corresponding map outlining the zones.
- Shortly before 1:00 PM EST on May 6, Barak Ravid of *Axios* [reported](#) that "Hamas says in a statement it has accepted the Egyptian-Qatari ceasefire proposal," but the office of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu subsequently [indicated](#) that the deal's terms were unacceptable.
- The IDF [announced](#) on May 6 at 3:18 PM EST that it "is currently conducting targeted strikes against Hamas terror targets in eastern Rafah in southern Gaza."
- On May 7, the IDF [announced](#) that it carried out "a precise counterterrorism operation to eliminate Hamas terrorists and infrastructure within specific areas of eastern Rafah [that] began overnight, based on intelligence."
 - » The IDF said further that it "managed to establish operational control of the Gazan side of the crossing following intelligence that the Rafah Crossing in eastern Rafah was being used for terrorist purposes."



Source: [IDF Arabic-language spokesperson Avichay Adraee](#)



Source: [Israel Defense Forces](#)

Why Is It Important?

- Israel's initial military actions against Hamas in Rafah could signal the initial steps of an extensive military operation to destroy Hamas's remaining fighters in the southern Gazan city and compel the release or enable the rescue of hostages—developments that Hamas seeks to forestall.
 - » The IDF's preceding evacuation instructions to civilians in Rafah underscore the extent to which Israel attempts to minimize civilian harm during military operations, even ahead of an operation so [integral](#) to Israel's war aims.
 - » Despite the operation's importance, the Biden administration's continued opposition, and lack of viable alternatives, to a full-scale Israeli operation against Hamas in Rafah threatens to strain U.S.-Israel relations during a time of unprecedented Iran-led regional threats against Israel and the United States.
- An IDF operation in Rafah is vital to accomplishing Israel's goals of destroying Hamas's ability to constitute itself as a political and military force in Gaza and recovering the hostages who are likely being held there.

- » Addressing the aims of the IDF's operations in Rafah, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#) on May 7, "Israel will not allow Hamas to restore its wicked rule in the Strip," and "Israel will not allow it to rehabilitate its military capabilities in order to keep working toward our destruction."
 - As Vice Admiral Michael Connor, USN (ret.), Lieutenant General Eric Fiel, USAF (ret.), and Lieutenant General Richard Mills, USMC (ret.) recently [argued](#), "to prevent another October 7, eliminate an Iranian proxy right on its border, and free Gazans who have lived under Hamas's boot for two decades, an Israeli ground operation is absolutely critical."
- The IDF's May 7 [announcement](#) that it secured operational control of the Gazan side of the Rafah crossing "following intelligence that the [crossing] in eastern Rafah was being used for terrorist purposes" may indicate that Israel prioritized securing a position from which it can more easily interrupt above- and below-ground smuggling efforts, perhaps through the installation of [sensors](#) to monitor such threats.
 - » On January 25, JINSA's Julian and Jenny Josephson Senior Vice President for Israeli Affairs IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish [noted](#) during a JINSA [webinar](#), "[the IDF has] to cut the supply lines to Hamas from Rafah," referencing tunnels that Hamas can utilize to smuggle weapons to sustain its military capabilities. Israel reportedly [believes](#) that a minimum of 12 tunnels connecting Gaza and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula remain.
 - As JINSA Policy Analyst Yoni Tobin and former JINSA Intern Myles Behar have [noted](#), "effective security monitoring of the ground beneath the [Egypt-Gaza] border is essential not only to combat weapons smuggling into Gaza, but also to prevent Hamas leaders from fleeing from Gaza to safe havens abroad, and to prevent future October 7-style attacks."
- Hamas's obstinacy in negotiations to reach a hostage deal and ceasefire agreement has increased Israel's sense of urgency to conduct the Rafah operation, both to increase pressure on the terrorist group to agree to a deal and, ultimately, to destroy it and free the remaining hostages.
 - » Hamas had repeatedly rejected proposals that do not commit to a permanent end to Israel's military campaign.
 - » During a May 1 meeting with Israel's President Isaac Herzog, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#), "we are determined to get a cease-fire that brings the hostages home and to get it now, and the only reason that that wouldn't be achieved is because of Hamas."
 - » After months of failed negotiations, in early May Israel publicly signaled that it would no longer tolerate Hamas's persistent refusal to reach an acceptable deal.
 - According to a *Wall Street Journal* [report](#) from May 3, Israel informed Hamas that the IDF would begin an operation in Rafah if the terror group did not accept a ceasefire deal within a week.
 - Prime Minister Netanyahu [indicated](#) on May 6 that Israel seeks to leverage continued military operations in Rafah to secure an acceptable hostage deal with Hamas.
 - » Hamas's sudden [claim](#) that it accepted a ceasefire proposal amid Israel's preparations for a Rafah operation underscore that Israel was right to believe that undertaking the Rafah operation was necessary to compel concessions from Hamas, even if the terrorist group's offer is insufficient and insincere.
 - Hamas likely seeks to forestall further IDF advances and perhaps trick Gazan civilians into disregarding the IDF's evacuation instructions, allowing the group to

- preserve its military and political rule in Gaza as well as the presence of civilians whom the terror group exploits as [human shields](#).
- According to [reports](#) from February, Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s leader in Gaza, has calculated that civilian deaths during an IDF operation in Rafah and ensuing international outrage will compel Israel to withdraw its troops.
 - The IDF’s efforts to evacuate civilians from Rafah before beginning its large ground operation there underscores its commitment to minimizing civilian casualties.
 - » The IDF [said](#) in a statement that it “calls on the population, which is under the control of Hamas, to temporarily evacuate from the eastern neighborhoods of Rafah to the expanded humanitarian zone” in the al-Mawasi and Khan Younis regions, and “this matter will progress gradually, according to an ongoing assessment of the situation.”
 - » The IDF also said that “there has been a surge of humanitarian aid going into Gaza,” that it will attempt to maintain the same level of aid entering Gaza.
 - » One flyer that the IDF dropped [said](#), “in [the al-Mawasi] area the expanded humanitarian aid will continue. The IDF will continue fighting the terror organizations that use you as human shields. Therefore: Gaza City is a dangerous fighting zone; avoid crossing to the north of Wadi Gaza.”
 - Another flyer meant for civilians in eastern Rafah said, “the IDF is about to operate with force against the terror organizations in the area you currently reside, as the IDF has operated so far,” and “anyone in the area puts themselves and their family members in danger.”
 - The IDF’s attempts to communicate evacuation instructions to Palestinians in Rafah through flyers, text messages, and phone calls are in line with the IDF’s commitment to mitigate risk to civilians throughout Operation Swords of Iron.
 - The Biden administration’s continued insistence that it does not support a major Israeli military operation in Rafah risks straining the U.S.-Israel relationship as Israel faces attacks from the Iranian regime and its proxies in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.
 - » On May 1, Secretary Blinken [said](#) to reporters in Israel that the Biden administration’s position is that “there are other ways ... better ways of dealing with the real ongoing challenge of Hamas that do not involve a major military operation in Rafah,” without providing any specifics.
 - » During a press briefing on April 9, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [said](#), “the United States does not believe that a massive ground invasion of Rafah — where 1.3 or more million people are sheltering, having been pushed out of other parts of Gaza that are now destroyed, into the area where humanitarian assistance comes in — this is not the best way forward.”
 - » Likely alluding to these positions, a White House [readout](#) of a May 6 call between President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu said that “the President reiterated his clear position on Rafah.”
 - Because the Biden administration opposes a major IDF operation in Rafah yet has not outlined viable alternatives, there is a risk that the administration might [lessen](#) its military support for Israel’s campaign to destroy Hamas.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- As Israel commences the initial stages of its operation against Hamas's remaining fighters in Rafah, the Biden administration should [ensure](#) that Israel maintains an adequate supply of [crucial](#) weaponry, particularly Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) kits that convert unguided, or "dumb," bombs into precision missiles that help minimize civilian harm.
- The United States should adopt a "[no daylight](#)" policy vis-à-vis Israel's operation against Hamas in Rafah and clearly assert in public messaging that it supports Israel's efforts to destroy the terror group in its last bastion.