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# Israel's Rafah Incursion: How Far Can Netanyahu Go on Ignoring US Policy?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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## Unit for Political Studies

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Ignoring warnings from his international allies, especially in Washington, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on 6 May greenlighted a “limited” military incursion into the eastern neighbourhoods of Rafah. The Israeli forces seized the Rafah crossing into Egypt and about 3.5 km from the Salah al-Din (Philadelphi) Corridor, which extends along the border between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. The assault on Rafah came only hours after Hamas announced it had accepted the terms of a truce brokered by Egypt and Qatar in coordination with Washington.

## Background

In the past several months, decision-makers in Israel have expressed almost unanimously their conviction that, following the Battle of Khan Yunis, occupying Rafah is crucial to achieving the declared war goals of eliminating Hamas’ governing and military capabilities in the Gaza Strip and recovering Israeli captives. On 6 April 2024, the Israeli army withdrew from Khan Yunis about four months into fighting without achieving any of its goals.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently only about five battalions of the Israeli army remained in the Gaza Strip, compared to more than 25 battalions in the occupied West Bank during the same period. The five battalions were stationed on the road built by the Israeli army in the centre of the Gaza Strip (Netzarim Corridor), which divides it into northern and southern halves, to prevent displaced Palestinians from returning to the northern Strip.

The hesitant US position has prevented Israel from carrying out a full-scale operation to occupy Rafah, so the Israeli army has remained stagnant in the Gaza Strip in recent weeks without achieving any significant goals other than further killing Palestinian civilians. In light of Netanyahu’s insistence on carrying out a large-scale military operation in Rafah, the Biden administration agreed to a “limited” military operation in Rafah, with the aim of pressuring Hamas to make more concessions in the prisoner exchange negotiations.

## Limited Military Operation

Several factors forced Israel to settle, at least for the time being, for a “limited” military operation in Rafah. First, despite Washington’s support for Israel’s declared objectives of its war on the Gaza Strip and its provision of various forms of military, economic and political assistance to achieve them, the Biden administration and the extreme right-wing government of Netanyahu differ on multiple issues related to the war, including Washington’s reservations about a large military operation in Rafah, fearing the loss of large numbers of civilian lives. Currently, about 1.3 million Palestinians in an area of land that does not exceed 64 square kilometres, in addition to the dispute over what the plans are for the “day after” and Israel’s lack of commitment to allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza, which has led to famine in the north. Netanyahu strongly opposes the US administration’s vision for the Gaza Strip the day after the war, which calls for the withdrawal of the Israeli army after achieving the war’s goals, the return of a “revived” Palestinian Authority in government, and creating political

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Harel, “The Israeli Army Evacuated Its Forces from Khan Yunis without Achieving Its Basic Objectives There,” *Haaretz*, 8/4/2024, accessed on 14/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3yjQqBW> [Hebrew]



unity between the West Bank and Gaza as part of vision for a future Palestinian state. But Netanyahu continues to reject the establishment of a Palestinian state, even in exchange for expanding its normalization with Arab countries.

In order for the Biden administration to approve a large-scale military operation in Rafah, it demands the existence of a clear Israeli plan to ensure the evacuation of displaced Palestinians from Rafah to other “safe” zones in the Gaza Strip. Israel, which opposes the return of displaced Palestinians from Rafah to their homes in the northern and central Gaza Strip before reaching a prisoner exchange agreement, has presented several plans to transfer more than a million Palestinians to the Al-Mawasi area and the city of Khan Yunis, of which the White House remains unconvinced. The tiny area where Israel intends to transfer the Palestinians is small and lacks the basic necessities of human life. The White House is also wary of growing opposition within the US to the genocide, which has so far claimed more than 35,000 martyrs and left at least 7,000 persons missing and more than 78,000 wounded, ahead of the upcoming elections this November. The administration fears the fall out of any occupation of Rafah could lead to a widespread displacement of Palestinians to Sinai, threatening crucial Israeli-Egyptian relations. Furthermore, Washington fears that the attack on Rafah will threaten the lives of captives with US citizenship.

Second, although the Israeli military establishment agrees with the need to occupy Rafah, it has reservations about doing so before the Israeli government sets a vision for the future of Gaza. Chief of the General Staff, Herzl Halevi, believes that the absence of a vision for the day after, which includes finding an alternative to Hamas’ rule in the Gaza Strip, facilitates the latter to reestablish its rule once the Israeli army withdraws. However, if Israel plans to continue its occupation of the Gaza Strip, the army will need to set up a military regime there to administer the strip, which requires allocating at least two divisions to achieve this goal.

Third, Egypt has expressed clear opposition to any Israeli military operation in Rafah, as it conflicts with the bilateral agreements signed between Egypt and Israel, including the Camp David Accords, which determine the number of Israeli forces allowed to be present near the Egyptian-Israeli border, where Israel has mobilized more than two military divisions, far exceeding the permitted presence of only four Israeli battalions in the area adjacent to the Egyptian border.

Fourth, in light of the growing international opposition to the occupation of Rafah, including countries considered close to Israel, fears exist in the Netanyahu government that the occupation of Rafah will trigger international economic and political sanctions against Israel, especially in the event that the Israeli army commits war crimes in the process.

Fifth, Israel fears that the International Criminal Court Prosecutor, Karim Khan, who is facing pressure to move forward, will file an indictment against Israeli officials, including Netanyahu, Halevi, and Defence Minister Yoav Galant,<sup>2</sup> and the occupation of Rafah could motivate Khan to file an indictment against Israeli officials, especially if the US and other allies ease their pressure on him not to file an indictment if Israel attempts to occupy Rafah.

<sup>2</sup> Chen Mani and Yonathan Liss, “In Israel They Are Trying to Prevent Arrest Warrants, but the Effort May Not Succeed,” *Haaretz*, 28/4/2024, accessed 14/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4ajLWbj> [Hebrew]

Sixth, the process of occupying Rafah may prompt the International Court of Justice to issue an order to stop the war on Rafah, especially in light of the increasing restrictions imposed by Israel on the entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip and its occupation and closure of the Rafah crossing, cutting off the flow of the humanitarian aid that was officially requested by the State of South Africa in following the start of the attack on Rafah and the closure of the crossing.

## The Boundaries of Israeli-US Understanding on Rafah

Seeking to minimize the repercussions of the Israeli attack on Rafah and the occupation of the crossing, Biden explained that the Israeli military operation in Rafah is limited, and that the Israeli army has not entered the dense population centres. Thus, it has not yet breached the red line that the White House set for Netanyahu.<sup>3</sup> But Biden, in an effort to demonstrate the seriousness of his opposition to a large-scale military operation in Rafah, confirmed that his administration had suspended the shipment of weapons to Israel, including 1,800 bombs weighing 900 kilograms each, and 1,700 bombs weighing 225 kilograms each. Biden also stated that he informed Netanyahu and the Israeli War Cabinet that the United States would not supply Israel with offensive weapons if it launched a large-scale attack on and occupied Rafah.<sup>4</sup> Despite the understanding between Biden and Netanyahu on the limits of this military operation, there is no guarantee, especially if it is prolonged, that Israel would adhere to these red lines, especially as Netanyahu does not believe the White House will take serious and effective measures if it expanded its incursion.

In addition, the limits of the understanding between the American administration and Netanyahu regarding the scale of its operation in Rafah and its time frame, are unclear, nor is there an answer to any question regarding the future of the area, or its plans for the Rafah crossing and its occupation of the Philadelphi corridor. Netanyahu continues to refuse to define Israel's policy towards the Gaza Strip the day after the war.

As time goes by, the conviction in the ranks of the Israeli military, security and political establishment is increasing that there is the goal of eliminating the rule of Hamas and its military power in the Gaza Strip is incompatible with the goal of recovering the Israeli captives alive. This position was recently expressed by the former chief of staff of the Israeli army, Aviv Kohavi, who stated that there is no way to bring back the detainees without ending the war.<sup>5</sup>

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3 "Biden: If Israel's Attack in Rafah Continues We Will Stop Supplying It with Offensive Weapons", *Haaretz*, 14/5/2024, accessed 14/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3yfB3dL> [Hebrew]

4 "Biden: Israel Will Not Get Our Support If It Enters the Population Centres in Rafah", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 5/9/2024, accessed 14/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4bkauD0>

5 "Kokhavi: There Is No Way to Return the Abductees without an End to the War", *Haaretz*, 8/5/2024, accessed 14/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4bhWlGn> [Hebrew]



## Conclusion

The limited military operation in Rafah, unanimously approved by the Israeli War Cabinet, serves Netanyahu's goal of prolonging the war in order to maintain his current government coalition as long as possible. But Netanyahu may not be able to convince the War Cabinet and the Army Chief of Staff to launch a large-scale military operation to occupy Rafah. This depends on several variables, the most important of which is how serious the US administration is in pressuring Israel to restrict the operation in Rafah and on the acquiescence of Halevi and the opposition leader Benny Gantz, without which Netanyahu will struggle to pass a decision to expand the operation. Moreover, the expansion of the Rafah incursion may lead to the imposition of political, legal and economic sanctions against Israel and its political and military leaders and the killing of Israeli captives, a major concern to wide sectors of Israeli society.