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The US Must Force Israel to Stop a Catastrophic Military Campaign in Rafah



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The U.S. must attempt to deter a possible Israeli military slaughter of Palestinians in the city of Rafah. President Biden needs the support of Congress to adopt past presidents' actions to accomplish that objective.

Without a military invasion of Rafah, an opportunity still exists for Israel to pursue a lasting peace, not continuous war.

Why Is Israel's Army invading Rafah?

Israel Prime Minister Netanyahu confirmed that his military will engage in a “powerful” assault on Rafah to flush out Hamas militants from hideouts in Rafah and free Israeli hostages being held there.

Consequently, it has begun to hammer Rafah in preparation for a ground assault as Israeli tanks shelled the eastern sector of the city overnight on Feb 13.

The city’s residents now live in fear of the Israeli army entering the town and systematically going building to building in search of Hamas militants, whom Israel believes are dug into and under many structures, including apartment buildings and medical centers.

Israel is revenging the savage invasion by Gaza’s ruling Hamas party into Israel on October 7. The Israeli death toll was 1,139, with over 200 of their civilians kidnapped and taken back to Gaza, where most remain.

Meanwhile, Gaza health authorities, which collect data primarily from hospitals, police, and the U.N. authority in Gaza, estimate that over 28,000 Gaza residents have been killed to date. That number would also include Hamas fighters, but most are residents. And, unless the dead person is holding a gun, who’s to say if they were a Hamas fighter?

Rafah’s Current Condition

Rafah had a pre-war population of about 300,000; now, it teems with half of Gaza’s 2.3 million people squeezed into tent camps and makeshift shelters.

Most of them sought safe refuge there because Israel told them to leave northern Gaza as Israel’s military invaded and bombarded northern Gaza four months ago.

Although Israel says that its military is making plans to evacuate Palestinian civilians, no plan has been made public. Meanwhile, aid agencies say the displaced have nowhere else to go.

United Nations aid chief Martin Griffiths said in a statement on February 13, “Military operations in Rafah could lead to a slaughter in Gaza. They could also leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death’s door.”

A joint statement from our other allies was released, critical of Israel’s threats to invade Rafah. The prime ministers of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand said they are “gravely concerned” about potentially “catastrophic” Israeli military operations in Rafah and called for an immediate ceasefire.

America should respond by taking the following actions if Israel invades Rafah.

The US could condition or hold up future military aid except anti-missile technology to Israel. Biden at first said that was a “worthwhile thought,” but days later, his officials

ruled that proposal out on the Sunday talk shows. But that was before Israel declared its intention to invade Rafah.

Biden's officials may be back at this Sunday's morning talk shows. If they are, they must be questioned on why they couldn't restrict or deny additional arms to Israel in light of what its military is preparing to do to Rafah.

Biden should consider how President Truman refused to provide military assistance to Israel during its war of independence, although he conferred recognition on the new State of Israel. He was fair to Israel, but he was tough in setting boundaries.

Biden has some executive authority over the budget to allow him to hold up military aid to Israel as leverage to cancel the invasion. However, he recognizes that Congress's sizable bipartisan pro-Israel contingent could pass veto-proof legislation to work around his executive order.

For example, before Israel invaded Gaza, approximately three-quarters of the House of Representatives — split relatively evenly between Democrats and Republicans — went on record supporting continued security assistance to Israel without conditions that 15 liberal Democrats wanted the House to consider.

Despite this political constraint, Biden must be a strong voice for achieving long-term peace in the Middle East. If Israel invades Rafah, that voice will likely be ignored since Biden will be seen as an ineffective leader in stopping or even slowing down the humanitarian crisis spinning off of Israel's ground war in Gaza.

The U.S. could vote for a U.N. resolution condemning an Israeli attack on Rafah while still recognizing Israel's right to exist. President Johnson had the U.S. vote for a United Nations Resolution condemning Israel when it invaded the West Bank with the understanding that the U.S. would not be obliged to support all of its military actions.

Taking such a stand will also give the U.S. more credence with Muslim nations that are now questioning their willingness to work with Israel since they have decimated Gaza. This position would help the U.S. be an effective negotiator to not only bring an end to the war but also build an alliance of Muslim nations who want to see a stable democratic Gaza and West Bank emerge without Hamas.

For instance, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is being pressured by domestic leaders to not stand idly by if Israel continues its aggression on Rafah. Egypt is a significant player in bringing about a long-term Muslim acceptance of having a Jewish state living peaceably alongside multiple Muslim nations.

Creating a foolish humanitarian crisis in Rafah would result in over a million refugees trying to cross into Egypt. Suppose that is the Netanyahu Administration's plan on how to get rid of Gaza residents. In that case, it will lead to the demolition of the 1978 Camp David Accords, which has averted an Israeli war with Egypt since then.

The Biden administration has conveyed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that "under current circumstances," with no plan to protect civilians crammed into Rafah, an Israeli assault on the southern Gaza City would be a "disaster." Biden told Netanyahu that to ensure civilian safety, a ground invasion "should not proceed" without a plan. Israel has not revealed any such plan.

Now, Biden needs to show that the U.S. is a cooperative ally but not to the extent of contributing to the death and destruction that Netanyahu's administration is determined to pursue until Hamas is eliminated. That is an unattainable goal. The Israelis could kill every Hamas military leader, and still, a future fanatical group will surface more intent on destroying Israel.

Indeed, Hamas needs to be removed as an authoritarian power in Gaza, but destroying Gaza will not accomplish that. Israel's actions will only feed the belief that Jews and Muslims will never live peaceably side by side.

The U.S. is uniquely positioned to exert leadership in pushing for a rational, long-range solution. President Trump's Abraham Accords offered a glimpse of how Israel can work peacefully with Muslims in the Middle East. The declaration established bilateral agreements on Arab-Israeli normalization between Israel and three Muslim countries in 2020.

However, that effort will not halt future conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians until the governments of both nations have non-fundamentalist leaders. The U.S. should direct our help to Israel and Palestine to have leaders that choose diplomacy, not perpetual revenge wars.

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