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## Israel pledges to assault 1.4 million Gaza refugees in Rafah city



Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu on Face the Nation, February 25, 2024. [Photo: CBS News/Face the Nation]

Yesterday, on CBS News’ “Face the Nation,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would order an assault on Rafah, whether or not there is progress in negotiations with Gaza authorities.

Currently, 1.4 million Palestinians, nearly two-thirds of Gaza’s 2.3 million population, have fled to tent cities in Rafah. They are living there under horrific conditions, as nearly 30,000 Palestinians have died amid Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza. An Israeli assault on the defenseless refugee camps in Rafah would cause catastrophic new Palestinian casualties, and risk triggering a wider war with neighboring Egypt and other regional powers.

Nonetheless, Netanyahu pledged to launch an assault on Rafah, no matter what. “Once we begin the Rafah operation, the intense phase of the fighting is weeks away from completion,” Netanyahu claimed. “We’ve already destroyed 18 of the 24 Hamas terrorist

battalions, and four of them are concentrated in Rafah. We can't leave the last Hamas stronghold without taking care of it. Obviously, we have to do it."

Netanyahu said he had Washington's support for an attack on Rafah, stating: "We're on the same page with the US on this."

Netanyahu added that the Israeli armed forces would not give up the plan to assault Rafah, whether or not a deal is reached on a release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas forces in Gaza. He said, "We're not going to give it up. If we have a [hostage] deal, it'll be delayed somewhat. But it'll happen. If we don't have a deal, we'll do it anyway. It has to be done. Because total victory is our goal, and total victory is within reach."

Netanyahu attempted to downplay the genocidal implications of the plan to assault Rafah. Asked by CBS journalist Margaret Brennan if there would be civilian casualties, he claimed his troops would move Rafah's 1.4 million refugees "north of Rafah, to the places we have already finished fighting in." He claimed that "the intense phase of the fighting is weeks away from completion—not months, weeks away from completion."

Netanyahu's downplaying of the threat to civilians, like his claims intense fighting is nearly over, is a lie. He did not explain, and Brennan did not ask, what would happen if civilians in Rafah refused Israeli troops' orders to move at gunpoint wherever Netanyahu tells them to go. But in reality, an Israeli assault on Rafah threatens a vast escalation of the genocide in Gaza and of war across the Middle East.

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Israeli, US and European officials are placing pressure on Egypt's military dictatorship to build detention camps for Palestinians—on the assumption that Israeli troops will push them not north, but south from Rafah, out of the Gaza Strip and into Egypt. Egyptian officials have warned that this could lead to the collapse of the 1978 Camp David Accords and Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

"There is limited space and great risk in putting Rafah under further military escalation due to the growing number of Palestinians there," Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said at a February 10 press conference, adding that an assault on Rafah would have "dire consequences."

The day before Shoukry spoke, the *Wall Street Journal* carried an article citing anonymous Egyptian diplomats' account of talks with Israeli officials about an attack on Rafah. "Israeli officials are trying to get Egypt to agree on some cooperation regarding the ground invasion, which Egyptian officials are resisting, they said," the *Journal* wrote. Egyptian officials, it added, were warning that the type of assault Netanyahu is now preparing against Rafah could lead to war.

According to the article: "Egyptian officials warned that if any Palestinians were forced to cross into the Sinai Peninsula, or if Israeli troops moved into Rafah, a decades-long peace treaty between the two countries would be suspended. Egypt, which fears a flood of Palestinians will try to flee the war zone, is reinforcing its border fences, adding cameras, watchtowers and sensors."

The Egyptian military regime, which forced the Muslim Brotherhood out of power in a 2013 coup aiming to crush the revolutionary struggles of the working class, fears an influx of Palestinians from Gaza into Egypt. This is in part because Hamas officials in Gaza are in political sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Egypt. More broadly, however, they fear explosive anger in the Egyptian and Middle Eastern working class, should they agree to serve as jailers of the Palestinian people, if they were expelled from Gaza.

But Israeli officials are vowing to intensify not only pressure on Egypt, but also their attacks to the north on Lebanon. Yesterday, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant boasted that Israel's targeted assassination program against Hezbollah in Lebanon was having success and pledged to escalate strikes, even if there was a temporary cease-fire to the south in Gaza.

"We are planning to increase the intensity of fire against Hezbollah, which is unable to find replacements for the commanders we are eliminating ... In the event of a temporary truce in Gaza, we will increase the fire in the north independently," Gallant said.

Israeli officials' call for an onslaught on Rafah exposes the complicity of the NATO imperialist powers, who are enabling the Gaza genocide. They have made empty, hypocritical warnings on the planned Israeli assault on Rafah. White House spokesman John Kirby said the assault would be a "disaster," while German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and French President Emmanuel Macron both said it would lead to a "humanitarian catastrophe."

At the same time, however, they are all continuing to arm Israel to perpetrate the genocide, and threatening or attacking anyone in the Middle East they see as a threat to Israel.

On Saturday, US and British jets bombed 18 Houthi militia targets in Yemen, including weapons storage facilities, air defense systems, radars and helicopters, in retaliation for Houthi attacks in the Red Sea on shipping bound for Israel. The strikes reportedly killed at least one man and wounded six. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said US strikes would “further disrupt and degrade the capabilities of the Iranian-backed Houthi militia.” The Houthis said they would defy US-UK threats and keep striking Red Sea shipping bound for Israel. Their spokesman Yahya Saree pledged to “confront American-British escalation with more qualitative military operations against all hostile targets in the Red and Arab Seas.” The Houthis, Saree added, “persist in upholding their religious, moral and humanitarian duties towards the Palestinian people, and their military operations will not stop unless the aggression stops and the siege on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip is lifted.”

The Zionist regime’s genocidal, imperialist-backed war is provoking mass protests around the world and, significantly, within Israel itself. On Saturday, one of the largest anti-war protests during the war to date shook Tel Aviv. Thousands blocked streets in the city center, demanding new elections and Netanyahu’s removal.

The Netanyahu government sent water cannon and horse-mounted police to assault and try to disperse the protest.

Families of Israeli hostages taken by Hamas and its allies in the October 7 uprising staged their 20th weekly rally in Tel Aviv since the war began, demanding a halt in the fighting in order to secure the release of their loved ones. Shahar Levy, the son of hostage and taxi driver Eitan Levy who died in captivity, addressed the rally, saying: “Enough risking the lives of the abductees, who are in inhumane conditions, enough dragging out the time. Every minute, every hour, every day, we are running out of chances for them.”

These protests point to the great potential to build a mass movement to stop genocide in Gaza and avert an even bloodier regional and global war. However, such a movement cannot limit itself to appeals to capitalist national governments, which are rapidly plunging the world into war. The way forward is to develop and internationally unify the growing opposition to the Gaza genocide into an international, socialist anti-war movement of the working class.

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