

The Israeli offensive in Rafah against the backdrop of a humanitarian disaster

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In the second week of May, Israel launched an invasion of the southern part of the Gaza Strip (the Rafah region) and resumed massive ground & air attacks in the north (including on the city of Jabalia). Since then, its army (the Israeli Defence Forces, IDF) has taken control of the border crossing with Egypt (which had hitherto been used as the main point for importing humanitarian aid) and began entering the city of Rafah itself. As a result, Israel now fully controls land access to Gaza, which it has consistently blocked since the start of the offensive.¹

Before the Israeli offensive in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, an area roughly covering 65 km² contained about 1.5 million Palestinians, mostly refugees from the north residing in tent camps. When the offensive began, over 300,000 of them were ordered to evacuate further, this time to the central part of Gaza. A similar order was given to 200,000 people in the north; based on Israeli directives, they were instructed to move to Gaza City, which has largely been ruined and lacks food.

Despite international criticism and the unanimous opinion of all aid organisations that continuing the war in Gaza (let alone expanding it) will inevitably lead to mass civilian deaths and worsen the humanitarian disaster (including famine), Israel is determined to continue the invasion. The vast majority of Israeli society supports it (the dilemma is whether the recovery of hostages should take priority over the destruction of Hamas).² Continuing the military operation also serves the interests of the ruling elite, especially Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who realises that halting the invasion could collapse the coalition of his supporters and initiate the process of holding him politically accountable for the attack of 7 October 2023.

The humanitarian situation

The Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip following the attack on 7 October 2023³ (in which Hamas killed 767 Israeli civilians and 376 soldiers and officers), has now lasted over seven months, and is

¹ E. Farge, 'Gaza is 'choked off' from aid since crossings shut, UN agencies say', *Reuters*, 7 May 2024, [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com).

² 'A Majority of Jewish Israelis See a Hostage Deal as a Higher National Priority Than Military Action in Rafah', *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 13 May 2024, en.idi.org.il.

³ M. Matusiak, 'Israel attacked', *OSW*, 9 October 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://www.osw.waw.pl).



the bloodiest chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in terms of both the number of Palestinians killed and the level of material destruction, as well as the scale of the humanitarian disaster Israel has caused. According to data from the Palestinian Ministry of Health, which – despite the Israeli government’s protests – most international organisations (including the UN) consider reliable, Israel has so far killed around 35,000 Palestinians and injured over 78,000.⁴ These statistics do not include people buried under rubble (50–70% of all buildings have been destroyed or damaged), so the actual number of dead should be estimated as even higher.

Additionally, the healthcare sector in Gaza has collapsed due to the war, so it is increasingly difficult to gather data on the number of casualties. The ratio of civilians to

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combatants killed remains unknown; however even using Israel’s own, most favourable, ratio (2:1),⁵ the number of civilian casualties in Gaza significantly exceeds the number of civilians killed by Russia in Ukraine over nearly two and a half years of war (in February this year the UN reported 10,582 verified casualties in that conflict). Considering that over 40% of Gaza’s population are children under 14, it is assumed that their share of the victims is at least the same (as of early March, UNICEF estimated the number of children killed at 13,000). Furthermore, humanitarian organisations classify about 20,000 victims as ‘wounded child, no surviving family’.⁶

The destruction of infrastructure, the mass displacement of the population (1.7 million), and above all Israel’s consistent blocking or hindering of humanitarian aid deliveries⁷ have all caused a famine in Gaza. Aid organisations have been warning of this for months, but since March this threat has become reality in northern Gaza and is now spreading to its other parts.⁸

Given the fact that most of the population lives in makeshift tent camps without running water or sanitation, and has only basic – if any – access to medicines and medical care, diseases are spreading rapidly, and the number of deaths not caused by military actions is constantly increasing. 24 out of the 36 hospitals which operated in Gaza before the war have already been destroyed;⁹ Israel claims this has been necessary because Hamas reportedly used them for military operations. The remaining hospitals are functioning to only a limited extent. Medical aid is mainly being provided to the population in field hospitals and medical stations set up by humanitarian organisations. However, they are struggling with severe shortages of medicines and medical supplies, which often makes it impossible to help even those with non-fatal injuries.¹⁰

Accusations of war crimes

Since the beginning of the invasion, Israel has been accused of violating the principles of international law of armed conflict, and even of committing acts of genocide. Due to the latter suspicion, the Republic of South Africa brought a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice in the Hague

⁴ ‘Humanitarian Access Snapshot – Gaza Strip, 1–30 April 2024’, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 10 May 2024, ochaopt.org.

⁵ M. McCluskey, R.A. Greene, ‘Israel military says 2 civilians killed for every Hamas militant is a ‘tremendously positive’ ratio given combat challenges’, CNN, 6 December 2023, edition.cnn.com.

⁶ Tweet from Christiane Amanpour, 16 May 2024, x.com.

⁷ See ‘Humanitarian Access Snapshot – Gaza Strip, 1–30 April 2024’, *op. cit.*

⁸ See ‘GAZA STRIP: Famine is imminent as 1.1 million people, half of Gaza, experience catastrophic food insecurity’, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, March 2024, ipcinfo.org; K. Guilfoil, ‘World Food Programme Director Cindy McCain: Northern Gaza is in a ‘full-blown famine’’, NBC News, 3 May 2024, nbcnews.org.

⁹ ‘Satellite images reveal the destruction of hospitals in Gaza’, Al Jazeera, 18 April 2024, aljazeera.com.

¹⁰ ‘Exclusive: Live From Gaza, American Nurses Trapped’, Breaking Points, 15 May 2024, youtube.com.

at the end of last December. It was subsequently supported by about 30 countries, primarily those with Muslim majorities and South American nations, but also by such countries as Ireland and Slovenia.

Due to the absence of foreign correspondents on the ground (as a result of Israeli decisions) and the limited presence of international organisations, it is challenging to verify suspicions that the laws of armed conflicts have been violated. However, some of these allegations have been confirmed or substantiated by humanitarian organisations and investigations conducted by international and/or Israeli media. These include:

- airstrikes on areas designated as safe for civilians (see the NBC investigation)¹¹;
- mass destruction of civilian infrastructure unrelated to military operations (see for example the *New York Times* article,¹² the investigation by Bellingcat,¹³ and the video footage published by Israeli soldiers themselves on social media¹⁴);
- deliberate restriction of humanitarian aid deliveries, resulting in the starvation of Gaza's population (see for example statements by Michael Fakhri, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food,¹⁵ and by Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs¹⁶);
- torturing prisoners (see for example the CNN report)¹⁷;
- violation of the principle of proportionality fundamental to the law of armed conflicts, by accepting permissible civilian casualty rates of 15–20 people when attacking a regular member of Hamas; also consistent killing of Hamas militants (regardless of rank) in their homes, along with other residents of the buildings (see the *+972 Magazine* report)¹⁸;
- the establishment of so-called 'kill zones' – arbitrarily selected and unannounced areas where any person is considered a legitimate target (see for example the publication by the *Haaretz* daily,¹⁹ the footage obtained by Al Jazeera²⁰ and the videos Israeli soldiers have published on social media²¹);
- IDF soldiers blurring the distinction between militants and civilians (see for example the report by the UK's Channel 4 News)²²;
- attacks on aid workers (see the Human Rights Watch report,²³ the statement by Doctors without Borders²⁴ and Forensic Architecture's investigation²⁵);
- attacks on Palestinian journalists (see the UN statement).²⁶

¹¹ H. Gorani, B. Sowden, 'NBC News investigation reveals Israel strikes on Gaza areas it said were safe', *NBC News*, 26 April 2024, [nbcnews.com](https://www.nbcnews.com).

¹² 'What Israeli Soldiers' Videos Reveal: Cheering Destruction and Mocking Gazans', *The New York Times*, 6 February 2024, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

¹³ N. Waters, "'We've Become Addicted to Explosions' The IDF Unit Responsible for Demolishing Homes Across Gaza', *Bellingcat*, 29 April 2024, [bellingcat.com](https://www.bellingcat.com).

¹⁴ 'Co tak naprawdę dzieje się w Strefie Gazy i skąd to wiemy? Wojna Izrael–Hamas dziś', *OSW*, 20 February 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

¹⁵ I. Tyab, E. Lyall, T. Reals, 'Israel accused of deliberately starving Gaza civilians as war plans leave Netanyahu "increasingly isolated"', *CBS News*, 27 February 2024, [cbsnews.com](https://www.cbsnews.com).

¹⁶ 'EU's Borrell accuses Israel of using starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza', *Associated Press*, 18 March 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

¹⁷ 'Israeli whistleblowers detail abuse of Palestinians in shadowy detention center', *CNN*, 10 May 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

¹⁸ Y. Abraham, "'Lavender': The AI machine directing Israel's bombing spree in Gaza", *+972 Magazine*, 3 April 2024, [972mag.com](https://www.972mag.com).

¹⁹ Y. Kubovich, 'Israel Created 'Kill Zones' in Gaza. Anyone Who Crosses Into Them Is Shot', *Haaretz*, 31 March 2024, [haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com).

²⁰ 'Gaza drone video shows killing of Palestinians in Israeli air attack', *Al Jazeera*, 22 March 2024, [aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com).

²¹ See, for example, Younis Tirawi's tweets of 16 May 2024: [1], [2].

²² 'Israeli soldier speaks out on war in Gaza', *Channel 4 News*, 23 April 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

²³ 'Gaza: Israelis Attacking Known Aid Worker Locations', *Human Rights Watch*, 14 May 2024, [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org).

²⁴ 'Why we won't accept the narrative of 'regrettable incidents' in Gaza', *Doctors without Borders*, 5 April 2024, [msf.org](https://www.msf.org).

²⁵ 'Attacks On Aid In Gaza: Preliminary Findings', *Forensic Architecture*, 26 April 2024, [forensic-architecture.org](https://www.forensic-architecture.org).

²⁶ 'Gaza: UN experts condemn killing and silencing of journalists', *The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 1 February 2024, [ohchr.org](https://www.ohchr.org).

All this information confirms what representatives of international humanitarian organisations have been saying since the beginning of the conflict: there are in fact no ‘safe places’ in Gaza. They also undermine the credibility of Israel’s narrative that it is making a special effort to protect the civilian population.

The course and objectives of the war

Israel has given the following objectives for the invasion: the recovery of hostages, the defeat of Hamas and securing the country from future attacks from Gaza. Additionally, Prime Minister Netanyahu has publicly asserted that “deradicalisation” of the population in this area is also one of the objectives, which in practice would mean the need to implement a programme of mass compulsory re-education.

The invasion so far has developed as follows: on the day of the Hamas attack, Israel began massive air raids on the Gaza Strip and has continued them ever since without interruption. On 27 October, Israel commenced a phased ground offensive from north to south. After the Israeli defence minister Yoav Galant officially announced the defeat of Hamas in the city of Khan Yunis (the second-largest city in the central part of Gaza) in early February this year, the IDF’s ground presence in Gaza was gradually reduced. On the eve of the current offensive against Rafah and the resumption of operations in the north, the IDF’s presence was limited to two brigades (from over 20 at its peak to nine) and it only has physical control of the so-called Netzarim Corridor, which has been cut across the Gaza Strip south of Gaza City.

This tactic (which in part has been driven by the IDF’s desire to avoid becoming an occupying force responsible for the civilian population’s condition) combined with Israel’s rejection of any political

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solutions that would allow for the creation of a new administration in Gaza, means that Hamas is returning to areas vacated by the IDF. This situation reinforces the impression, even within the Israeli security establishment,²⁷ that Israel is conducting the war either without any political plan at all, or alternatively, with the deliberate intention of continuing military operations in Gaza indefinitely. This approach would allow Israel to counter external pressures to implement political solutions under the pretext that the war is still ongoing.

US reactions

The United States, which is the only country with any real leverage over Israel (provided there is the political will to use it), has publicly communicated its dissatisfaction with Israel’s conduct of the war in Gaza for many months – while continuously providing military aid and diplomatic support. In a March interview with MSNBC, President Joe Biden stated that the incursion into Rafah was viewed as a “red line” by the US.²⁸ The Israeli government’s decision to gradually begin the invasion met with public criticism from Biden and the suggestion of a possible halt in the delivery of certain categories of weapons²⁹ if Israel proceeded further. However, in Washington’s opinion Israel thus far has not crossed these red lines, which should be seen as a forced adjustment of the American stance and a manifestation of the limits of its real influence over the Israeli government.

²⁷ ‘IDF chief said to upbraid Netanyahu for failing to lay out postwar strategy for Gaza’, *The Times of Israel*, 12 May 2024, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).

²⁸ ‘Exclusive Interview: Biden pressed on red line with Israel’, *MSNBC*, 10 March 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.msnbc.com).

²⁹ K. Liptak, ‘Biden says he will stop sending bombs and artillery shells to Israel if it launches major invasion of Rafah’, *CNN Digital*, 9 May 2024, [edition.cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com).

Amid President Biden's re-election campaign this year, his administration faces a difficult position regarding the war in Gaza. On one hand, a portion of the Democratic Party's electorate is increasingly critical of Israel and the American government's stance as evidenced by the spread of pro-Palestinian protests on university campuses (prominently involving young American Jews critical of Israel). On the other hand, major Jewish organisations³⁰ and pro-Israel megadonors to the Democratic Party (such as Haim Saban)³¹ have sharply criticised Biden for even suggesting the possibility of restricting and politically conditioning US military support for Israel. Former President Donald Trump also reacted negatively to Biden's remarks, calling them "shameful" and an indication of "siding with terrorists".³²

Prospects

The official objectives of the gradual invasion of southern Gaza that began in the second week of May are to obtain the release of the hostages and dismantle Hamas's remaining military structures. In practice, however, these goals are not clear, nor is the actual planned scope of the operation. The release of hostages is a priority for Israel, but only under certain conditions. The government in Jerusalem will not agree to a complete discontinuation of military operations, the withdrawal of troops from Gaza, or for the civilians to return to abandoned areas in exchange for such a release.

This appears to be linked to the fact that, despite the seven months of fighting in Gaza and the enormous scale of destruction caused (rendering a significant part of the Strip uninhabitable), politically Israel has not achieved anything that would allow it to recover from the failure of 7 October and rebuild its lost deterrence capability. Prime Minister Netanyahu has also failed to reverse his negative polling trends. Thus, Israel does not seem interested to end the conflict any time soon, and the Prime Minister may indeed not be aiming for it at all. Additionally, there are recurring calls in Israeli public debate (including from members of the government and parliament) to raze Gaza to the ground and restore Jewish settlements in the area after the war.³³ However, the way in which Israel has been conducting military operations (that is, piecemeal incursions into Gaza) gives it considerable leeway regarding the further development of the conflict.

³⁰ 'Jewish Leaders Disappointed and Dismayed by President Biden's Remarks on Aid to Israel', *Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations*, 9 May 2024, [conferenceofpresidents.org](https://www.conferenceofpresidents.org).

³¹ A. Thompson, B. Ravid, 'Biden's big donors fume over Israel criticism', *Axios*, 10 May 2024, [axios.com](https://www.axios.com).

³² 'Trump accuses Biden of siding with Hamas', *France 24*, 9 May 2024, [france24.com](https://www.france24.com).

³³ See, for example, 'Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich calls for 'utter destruction' in Rafah', *Middle East Eye*, 30 April 2024, [youtube.com](https://www.middleeasteye.com).