

Rafah invasion will be catastrophic



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OPINION

With the page seeming to have at least temporarily turned on a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, the promised Israeli invasion of Rafah is once again looming large. On Friday, a “high-level” Egyptian delegation arrived in Israel to continue attempts to negotiate a cease-fire, as Cairo’s fears of a large exodus of Palestinians from Gaza into the Sinai have been renewed.

Chances of success are dim, to say the least. According to reports, Egypt’s strategy is to try to first negotiate a release of some of the Israeli captives still being held in Gaza in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, another temporary “pause” in Israeli assaults, and an Israeli agreement to allow people to return to the areas they fled from in the northern part of Gaza. The idea is that if this agreement holds, it will delay the invasion of Rafah and hopefully lead to a permanent cease-fire. Meanwhile, Israel has set up thousands of tents a few miles north of Rafah to which they propose to “evacuate” people ahead of their invasion. But let’s be clear, this is not a humanitarian gesture, as Joe Biden and other American officials would present it. Israel isn’t intending an “evacuation”. It is the forced displacement of people who have already been forcibly displaced, many of them multiple times and in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law.



↑ Palestinians inspect a car hit by an Israeli strike in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on February 10, 2024.
● IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/REUTERS

Hopeless talks

Egypt, quite understandably, is trying to prevent an attack on Rafah that is very likely to force even more Palestinians across the border. Since October, between 80,000 and 100,000 Palestinians have fled Gaza into Egypt, according to the Palestinian Authority’s Ambassador to Egypt, Diab Alouh.

It’s worth noting that many of those who have gotten out are in some way privileged, either because they have connections that could help get them out or they had the means to pay some of the profiteers circling around Gaza and squeezing large sums of money out of desperate people. Most people in Gaza do not have such means, of course, which makes Egypt even more reluctant to see them cross the border. Since the first brief pause in fighting, when Hamas released 105 of the Israeli and foreign national captives it took, cease-fire talks have been little more than political theater. Neither Israel nor Hamas is willing to concede what the other side is demanding as a minimum. Israel uses the captives as rhetorical devices but has been uninterested in stopping the slaughter in Gaza. Hamas, for its part, is unwilling to settle for less than an end to Israel’s campaign, although it is willing to release a limited number of captives in a prisoner exchange if Israel will allow Palestinians to return to their homes in the north, which Israel has been reluctant to do.

Periodically, talks have broken down, and each side blames the other, but the reality is that there is little room for an agreement. Hamas has no reason to agree to anything less than an end to Israel’s operations in Gaza. All Israel has offered is a short delay in its genocidal operation. The cabinet of Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to “eliminate Hamas,” a goal that is and always was impossible.

While Israel and its supporters talk a great deal about the release of the captives, they have already seen that

ending the massacres in Gaza is the one and only thing that brings the captives home. They are uninterested in paying that price. Their crocodile tears for the captives are playing increasingly thin with the captives’ families and large portions of the Israeli public.

Hamas’ insistence that Palestinians be allowed to return to the areas of the north from which they had been driven out is more practical, but that, too, will yield little in terms of relieving the plight of Gaza. Israeli forces have left very little standing in the areas from which Palestinians were forced out, and the north is a virtual wasteland, where food and water are even scarcer than they are in Rafah.

This all means that even if Egypt succeeds in finding an agreement on a

delay in Israel’s invasion of Rafah, all it will do is delay the inevitable because there is no common ground to unearth between Israel and Hamas on a permanent agreement. Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that Israel simply doesn’t want one because a permanent agreement means the end of the military actions by both sides. For Netanyahu, that means that if all the rest of the captives die, if the entire Middle East becomes even more unstable, and even if the conflict widens — so be it.

Hasbara offensive

In fact, Israel, with the aid of governments at all levels in both the United States and Europe, is desperately trying to use this period before they invade Rafah to shore up their support around the world.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his supporters in Congress, from both parties, have scrambled to defend Israel, using the now-blunted weapon of characterizing protest against Israeli genocide as antisemitic.

The desperation has been apparent in the quick turn to police violence to try to quell student protests, actions which have only served to spur more students and others across the United States to join in solidarity with the people of Gaza. It is notable how much faster the turn to police violence has been this time around, as compared to protests against the Iraq War or even the Vietnam War (where demonstrations on campuses had been going on for two years before the police began using violence in 1967 at the Universi-

ty of Wisconsin).

Since the exchange of fire between Israel and Iran, Netanyahu has been hoping to recapture the false narrative that portrays Israel as a small country under siege. Others have gone even further, reviving and updating old red-baiting tactics by calling protesters agents of Hamas or of Iran. This “hasbara offensive” is meant to shore up support before the attack on Rafah, which is certain to be a calamity even by the standards of Israel’s actions in Gaza for the past six months. But it faces obstacles.

The ongoing recovery of more and more bodies in mass graves in areas that Israel has moved on from in Gaza remains in the news even though the shaded coverage of the campus protests is an open attempt to drown it out. Israel, of course, called the claims of mass graves their soldiers used to dump Palestinian bodies into “baseless,” but they are clearly anything but. Yet Israel, after that one statement, has done little so far to try to refute the facts. Instead, they are apparently hoping that driving up hysteria over “raging antisemitism on college campuses” will do that work for them.

The Biden administration, too, is trying to help. Biden himself baselessly and absurdly called the protesters antisemitic — never mind the outsized Jewish presence there. It is the latest in a long line of contentions from both Biden and Netanyahu that simply fly in the face of obvious facts but which have served for six months to maintain just enough support for Israel’s genocide to keep it going and make sure that centers of power remain disciplined in their support for Israel.

Rafah in Israel’s sights

With at least some parts of the mainstream media fully supporting the deception that the campus protests are antisemitic, Israel may well believe that, despite the ongoing negative public opinion, the atmosphere for a Rafah invasion is as good as it is likely



↑ Palestinians inspect the rubble of destroyed buildings of the Abo al Hanood family after an Israeli air strike in Rafah refugee camp, southern Gaza Strip, on April 17, 2024. Palestinian medics said several residents, including children, were killed in the air strike.
● ISMAEL ABU DAYYAH/AP