



Crowds of civilians line the streets of Rafah on May 7, 2024, as many rushed to flee parts of the city. **AFP**

With a Gaza cease-fire in balance

Netanyahu maneuvers to keep power



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OPINION

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, is known as a man who likes to play for time and postpone big decisions. But he may not be able to do that much longer.

Domestically, his coalition partners on the far right threaten to break up the cabinet if he agrees to a cease-fire and does not try to clear Hamas out of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip.

Militarily, the strategic logic is to complete the dismantling of Hamas by taking Rafah and controlling the border with Egypt. But diplomatically, his allies, especially the United States, are pushing him to agree on a cease-fire, and skip Rafah and the potential civilian casualties a large-scale operation would cause.

So, Netanyahu is now negotiating and maneuvering on several fronts at once, all of which have a significant effect on the conduct of the war and his own future as prime minister.

His recent warnings to Palestinians in parts of Rafah to move to areas Israel has designated as safe, followed late Monday night by the Israeli military's seizure of the Gaza side of the Egyptian border, signaled to his far-right cabinet coalition, to Hamas, and to the Biden administration that he would continue to prioritize Israel's security interests. More importantly, Israel's more narrow war Cabinet, which includes senior opposition figures, backed those decisions.

The seizure of the Rafah crossing to Egypt, to try to complete Israel's security control of Gaza's borders, has, for now, avoided a large-scale and contentious military operation in Rafah itself, which is filled with displaced civilians. It may signal that Israel is preparing at long last to agree to at least a temporary cease-fire in Gaza, even as the outcome of those negotiations remains uncertain.

"Netanyahu is being pulled in various directions," with pressure mounting on him to respond, said

Daniel Kurtzer, a former US ambassador to Israel now at Princeton University.

Foremost is Netanyahu's desire to avoid new elections, which could mean loss of power and a renewal of the various court cases against him. "Political survival always ranks first in Netanyahu's calculations," Kurtzer said.

Then, there are the competing pressures on him from "extremists in his own coalition who want to continue the war," he said, and from the captives' families, who want the cabinet to prioritize a cease-fire and a release of more people seized in Israel during the Hamas-led October 7 attacks,

together his governing coalition, which has 64 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, or parliament, a narrow majority.

His far-right partners, Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, together control 14 seats, and they have vowed to leave the cabinet if the prime minister makes too many concessions and agrees to a cease-fire in Gaza, leaving Hamas to claim victory. They have insisted, as Netanyahu has also done, that the military will move on Rafah.

Gadi Eisenkot, a former general and opposition member of the war Cabinet, accused the two men of "political blackmail" and of

It would also bring more captives home — not all of them, but some of the most vulnerable, as well as some who are dead and could be buried by their families. That could help diminish the anti-cabinet rallies often spearheaded by the families of the captives.

It would also go some way to pacify President Joe Biden, who could claim a diplomatic victory with a cease-fire, which would also allow much more humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza, allow more civilians to move to safer areas and even to the north, after they are screened by Israeli troops, and avoid a full-scale attack on Rafah.

nels under Rafah is strategically more important to Israel than the Hamas fighters left in Rafah.

Despite Egyptian denials of extensive smuggling into Gaza, Israeli officials believe that much of the extraordinary arsenal and the building supplies that Hamas accumulated in Gaza came through tunnels from Egypt.

Nitzan Nuriel, a reserve brigadier general and former director of the counterterrorism bureau of the Israeli National Security Council, worked with Netanyahu for several years. "Rafah is important not because of the four Hamas battalions that are still there," he said. "Rafah is im-

genuinely believes an operation in Rafah is central to Israel's overall goals — not merely in going after the remaining Hamas forces, but in cutting off their ability to re-supply via smuggling through the Egyptian border."

The military operation "also puts pressure on Hamas to relent on some of its more expansive demands in the cease-fire negotiations," Sachs said.

Diplomatic concerns

Netanyahu is under enormous pressure diplomatically — from allies including the United States and Germany, from the United Nations, from the European Union, and from regional Sunni Arab states — to avoid a major operation in Rafah. They want him to allow in much more humanitarian aid to Gaza and agree to a deal with Hamas that could, at least, promise what the current draft text calls a "sustainable calm," rather than a permanent cease-fire.

But such a deal still would not resolve the fundamental divide between Israel and Hamas over how to conclude the conflict.

Hamas wants the war to end now, with the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza and the release of all captives in exchange for a large number of Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

Israel wants to ensure that any cease-fire is temporary so that Hamas cannot claim victory and begin to restore its control over Gaza.

Still, after Hamas' most recent concessions, coupled with the Israeli military moves to control the Egyptian border, a cease-fire deal seems much more possible than before — perhaps even desirable for Netanyahu.

But Gaza residents are wary and mistrustful of Israeli statements. Mkhaimar Abusada is a Gaza political scientist whose university in the enclave, Al-Azhar, has been destroyed in the fighting. Now in Cairo with his family, Abusada said he is convinced that "no matter what the international community says, Netanyahu is going to go into Rafah."

Netanyahu "wants to keep his coalition government, to avoid early elections, to stay prime minister and not go to jail," he said. "I just hope he does it in a way that deals in a humane way with the Palestinian civilians."

But in the end, Abusada said, Netanyahu "and Israel cannot be victorious after this war, not with this much death and destruction, with all the Palestinian civilians and children dead."

The full article first appeared on *The New York Times*.



A person in prison clothes wears a mask depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a demonstration against the Israeli government in Tel Aviv on January 6, 2024. **ALEXANDRE MENECHINI/REUTERS**

Externally, the pressure comes from Biden administration officials and some in Congress "who are losing patience over the humanitarian situation," he noted. They want a cease-fire and oppose a major onslaught on Rafah. Finally, there is "the real, continuing threat of escalation, especially from Hezbollah," he said.

Here is a closer look at the political, military, and diplomatic concerns Netanyahu confronts as he weighs his next steps.

Political concerns

Netanyahu is desperate to hold

standing in the way of the return of at least some captives.

But new elections would almost certainly produce a new coalition without Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, so Netanyahu has some room to maneuver.

Agreeing to a form of temporary cease-fire in stages, as proposed in the current negotiations, could allow Israel to deal with what it says are the four Hamas battalions in and under Rafah at a much slower pace, over many weeks, especially now that the strip of Gaza along the Egyptian border has been seized.

"Netanyahu is in no hurry to end the war," said Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator who now leads the US/Middle East Project, a nonprofit policy institute. "He doesn't want a cease-fire deal that threatens his coalition or his ability to continue the war after a pause. He wants to drag it all out because once the war is over, what is the excuse for not having new elections?"

Military concerns

Israeli military officials and analysts emphasize that cutting off the smuggling of arms and equipment from Egypt through the tun-

portant because the message to the Palestinians who live in Gaza is that Hamas will not be able to control Gaza for good."

Otherwise, he said, Palestinians in Gaza would "stay afraid of Hamas and therefore will cooperate with Hamas."

Even a modest operation in Rafah "fits several of Netanyahu's goals simultaneously," said Natan Sachs, director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Like many Israeli officials, including those who want a cease-fire deal now, Sachs said, "Netanyahu