

FOREIGN POLICY

FOR AMERICA

Crisis in Israel and Gaza

Background and Key Points

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Background and Latest Updates

Five months after the horrific October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and the ongoing Israeli campaign to eradicate Hamas, more than 1,200 people in Israel and 31,000 people in Palestine have been killed. Around 100 hostages taken in the October 7 attack remain inside Gaza. Below are some of the key updates on the situation in Gaza.

Negotiations Continue While the Humanitarian Crisis Worsens

Negotiations for a temporary ceasefire remain ongoing, facilitated by the United States, Egypt, and Qatar, as the two sides struggle to find agreement on the specific terms of a deal. On Monday, March 18, an Israeli delegation led by its Mossad chief arrived in Doha for additional talks aimed at obtaining a six-week truce and the release of around 40 mostly civilian hostages in return for around 700 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. Israeli officials say that the current negotiations could take at least two weeks.

Until the sides reach such an agreement, the humanitarian crisis is only likely to worsen. On March 18, food security experts [warned](#) that the entire Gazan population is at risk of famine, with famine being “imminent” in Northern Gaza between now and May. USAID Administrator Samatha Power [described](#) the “catastrophic levels of hunger and malnutrition” as being “unimaginable in the current era, but for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, this is the reality.”

The United States and Partners Work to Increase Aid

In response to the worsening humanitarian conditions, the Biden administration has stepped up efforts to bring in aid, particularly for Northern Gaza. Since [March 2](#), U.S. Central Command has conducted over a dozen air drops of humanitarian assistance, [most recently](#) providing over 28,800 meals and 34,500 bottles of water. During the State of the Union address, President Biden also [announced](#) plans to build a temporary port system on the coastline of Gaza to provide a new route for humanitarian assistance. This port system could take up to 60 days to become operational, at which point officials say it would allow for the daily delivery of around 2 million meals. Meanwhile, a civilian ship containing 200 tons of food assistance supplied by the World Central Kitchen charity [arrived](#) in Gaza from Cyprus, marking the first time aid has been provided through a maritime route.

As the Biden administration has [emphasized](#), these actions are part of a larger effort by the international community to get more aid into Gaza, including by increasing the flow of aid through land routes. On March 13, Secretary of State Tony Blinken and his counterparts from Cyprus, the European Commission, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar issued a [joint statement](#) stressing that “there is no substitute to land routes via Egypt and Jordan and entry points from Israel into Gaza for aid delivery at scale.”

On Monday March 18, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [noted](#) “the need for Israel to do everything in its power and even more than it has already done to address the humanitarian crisis.” In recent days, some Israeli officials have made statements and taken steps that reflect the need to facilitate more assistance into Gaza. Last week, the Israeli government [allowed](#), for the first time, six trucks carrying aid from the World Food Program to enter the northern Gaza Strip using an Israeli military road running alongside the Gaza border fence. Separately, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [observed](#) preparations for the new humanitarian route in Northern Gaza, calling the provision of aid a “central issue.”

Netanyahu Continues to Prepare for an Offensive into Rafah with a Plan Not Seen by the US

Even as the Israeli government has taken some actions that have permitted some additional aid into Gaza, Netanyahu [continues](#) to state his intent to proceed with a military offensive into Rafah, where Israeli officials [say](#) four Hamas battalions remain but also where more than 1.3 million Palestinians are currently seeking refuge. On Friday, March 15, the Prime Minister’s office [announced](#) that he had approved operational plans for military action in Rafah that would include an evacuation of the civilian population. The Biden administration and [governments across the world](#) have warned that a ground operation into Rafah would be a disaster without, as President Biden [told](#) Netanyahu in February, “a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety and the support for civilians in Rafah.” As of March 18, [according](#) to National Security Advisor Sullivan, “Israel has not presented us or the world with a plan for how or where they would safely move those civilians, let alone feed and house them and ensure access to basic things like sanitation.”

On Monday, March 18, during a call between President Biden and Netanyahu, Netanyahu [agreed](#), at President Biden’s request, to send officials to Washington to hear U.S. concerns about a major Rafah offensive and to lay out an alternative targeted approach.

Key Points

- The United States remains committed to ensuring the long-term security of Israel.
- In their most recent phone call, President Biden [reiterated](#) to Prime Minister Netanyahu that the United States recognizes “the need to defeat Hamas in Gaza

while also protecting the civilian population and facilitating the safe and unhindered delivery of assistance throughout Gaza.”

- As National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [stated](#), “the United States has learned a vital lesson over the course of several wars: a military plan cannot succeed without an integrated humanitarian plan and political plan.”

Achieving a Ceasefire and the Release of Hostages

- The Biden Administration [continues](#) to engage tirelessly in sustained diplomacy to move the Israeli government and Hamas ever closer to reaching a ceasefire agreement that includes the release of hostages.
- A negotiated ceasefire, even if temporary, will help create the conditions necessary to permit a significant ramp up of desperately needed humanitarian assistance into Gaza.
- With a famine imminent in Northern Gaza and so many hostages still in captivity, a negotiated ceasefire is the only viable path forward to address the crisis.

Humanitarian Catastrophe

- The humanitarian disaster is beyond words – an imminent famine, nearly the entire population displaced and without access to basic needs, and over 13 thousand children already [killed](#) – yet the situation will get significantly worse without immediate changes.
- As ceasefire negotiations continue, the Israeli government must continue to facilitate a dramatic increase of aid into Gaza.
- The Biden administration extraordinary decision to provide assistance through airdrops and the development of a maritime corridor are potentially important steps that will save lives.
- These efforts are important, but as the Biden administration has acknowledged, given the scale of the humanitarian crisis, they are no substitute for land routes.
- The Israeli government and the others involved in aid delivery must reduce wait times for convoys going through security checkpoints and ensure their safety as they reach their destinations.
- Ultimately, a ceasefire is needed to create the conditions to deal with the humanitarian crisis.

Rafah Offensive

- With most of the population of Gaza displaced and currently seeking refuge in Rafah, any offensive into Rafah would result in far too many civilian deaths and shut down critical operations for distributing humanitarian aid.
- The Netanyahu government has yet to provide the United States with its plan to evacuate civilians before a military operation. With much of Gaza’s infrastructure destroyed in the conflict, there is nowhere safe left in Gaza for the Palestinian people to go.
- Much of Northern Gaza, from where many of those currently seeking refuge in Rafah have fled, is no longer inhabitable and littered with dangerous explosive devices.

- An attack on Rafah, the main humanitarian aid crossing, would jeopardize its distribution operations and prevent Gazans from obtaining lifesaving assistance.
- As the White House has advocated the Israeli government should [pursue](#) an “alternative approach that would target key Hamas elements in Rafah and secure the Egypt-Gaza border without a major ground invasion.”

Items to Amplify

- [Foreign Policy for America, Press Release](#): If the Rafah Operation Goes Forward, President Biden Should End his Support for Netanyahu's Gaza Campaign, February 15, 2024
- [J Street, Press Release](#): President Biden Must Forcefully Oppose Netanyahu's Rafah Escalation Plans, Stress Unavoidable Consequences, February 15, 2024
- [Carter Center, Press Release](#): Carter Center Calls on Israel to Halt its Plan to Force 1.3 Million Palestinians Out of Rafah, February 9, 2024
- [Mercy Corps, Press Release](#): Military Offensive into Rafah Will Push an Already Catastrophic Humanitarian Situation Into the Abyss, February 9, 2024