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Israel Prioritizes Civilian Safety in Southern Gaza Campaign Despite Hamas Efforts

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Even as it has expanded its military campaign to eliminate Hamas into the southern Gaza Strip, Israel has taken numerous, unparalleled measures aimed at reducing harm to civilians, including designating humanitarian safe zones, regularly updating a map on social media giving advance notice of those neighborhoods in which it will and will not strike, continuing to operate humanitarian corridors to evacuate Palestinian civilians to safety, and facilitating increased shipments of humanitarian aid by opening additional border crossings. Hamas, meanwhile, continues to exploit these Israeli precautions to launch attacks, steal humanitarian assistance, and attempt to delegitimize Israel.

Despite Israeli efforts to protect civilians, it faces increasing criticism of its conduct. The United States and likeminded partners and allies should ensure that Israel's operations are fairly characterized in diplomatic discussions and public remarks and that Israel is not subjected to an arbitrary 'political clock' after which international support for its operations will evaporate, hindering Israel's objective of defeating Hamas.
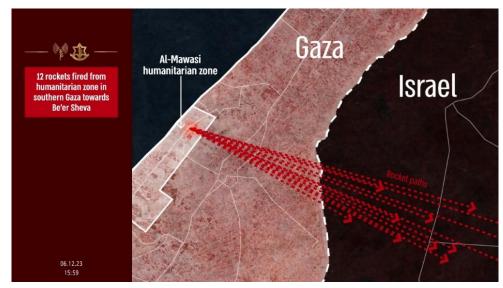
What Happened?

- Even before beginning major combat operations in southern Gaza, following Hamas's violation of the week-long combat pause on December 1, Israel undertook extensive humanitarian measures to protect and assist civilians, including designating a 9-mile-long humanitarian zone for Palestinians to seek refuge.

  » On October 18, Israel designated the uninhabited farmland area of al-Mawasi, a roughly 9-mile-long strip of farmland along the Mediterranean coast, as a humanitarian safe zone to which civilians could go for shelter and receive aid or medical care.

- Since hostilities resumed following Hamas's violation of the combat pause on December 1, Israel has undertaken further humanitarian measures to protect Palestinian civilians, including opening a new border crossing for both humanitarian aid and commercial goods, releasing a map of areas in which it will be striking, and designating approximately 150 safe zones in southern Gaza in which it will not strike.

  » On December 18, Israel permitted commercial goods for private sector transactions, as opposed to humanitarian goods, to enter Gaza for the first time since the war began. The goods entered Gaza through the Rafah crossing on the Egypt-Gaza border.

  » On December 15, Israel announced it would open its Kerem Shalom crossing with Gaza for direct humanitarian assistance flows into Gaza, which began on December 17.

- Since the war began, Israel has [facilitated](#) the entry of over 70,000 tons of aid into Gaza, as well the entry of at least 1,750 trucks carrying food, 600 trucks carrying medical equipment, 650 trucks carrying bottled water, 640 trucks carrying shelter equipment, and 100 trucks carrying additional items.

  - Israel has also [facilitated](#) the entry of approximately 6,500 tons of medical supplies and 43 ambulances into Gaza.

» On December 1, the IDF [released](#) an interactive, frequently-updated map that divides Gaza into 623 zones and which can be [accessed](#) on the IDF's X account and through QR codes contained on leaflets the IDF has dropped throughout Gaza.

  - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby [stated](#) on December 6, "that's something not a lot of modern militaries would do – lay out a map and say: here's where you don't want to be. There's a certain amount of risk that the Israeli Defense Forces are taking by doing that, and we understand that."

» On December 6, *The Washington Post* [reported](#), citing local Palestinian residents, that Israel is using low-flying drones to display messages warning civilians to move from certain areas and specifying where to relocate.

» On December 4, the IDF [announced](#) on X that it was opening new humanitarian corridors from northern Gaza to southern Gaza after the old corridor, the Salah al-Din Road, became a "battlefield" due to persistent Hamas attacks. The IDF said the new humanitarian corridors, which have been [opened](#) for several hours on a daily basis since December 4, would be along the coastal road of al-Rashid Street and the central road of al-Shuhada Street.

Why Is It Important?

- Israel's measures to protect civilians in southern Gaza—such as designating a large area called al-Mawasi in southern Gaza as a humanitarian safe zone, releasing an interactive map that it continually updates giving advance notice of those neighborhoods in which it is about to launch operations, continuing its practice of a humanitarian corridor, and facilitating increased flows of aid—undermine an increasingly prevalent narrative that depicts Israel as targeting civilians, or blatantly disregarding them at best.

- Israel's establishment of the al-Mawasi safe zone underscores the extent to which Israel has gone to protect civilian life in southern Gaza.

  » In modern combat history, the establishment of a safe zone by a combatant party, rather than a third-party like the Red Cross or the United Nations, is virtually unprecedented.

    - According to the United Nations, only 13 such zones have been [established](#) worldwide in conflict zones since 1949, despite dozens of wars during that time.

    - The Red Cross's International Humanitarian Law Database [notes](#) that "for the most part, these zones did not arise from the initiative of the Parties to the conflict but of a third party."

  » Israel has [allowed](#) considerable amounts of aid into the safe zone, including structures for temporary shelter and winter gear, in recent days.

  » In addition to al-Mawasi, a representative from the Israeli Ministry of Defense stated on December 7 that Israel has [designated](#) an additional 150 "shelter areas" across Gaza, including schools and medical clinics that it does not conduct operations in, in close coordination with the United Nations and international NGOs.

- Exploiting Israel's humanitarian measures, Hamas subsequently embedded within the civilian population in al-Mawasi and fired rockets from within the safe zone.
  - » Between October 18 and December 13, Hamas launched at least 116 rockets from the humanitarian zone, 38 of which misfired and landed inside Gaza.
    - – On December 9, Hamas launched three rocket barrages from the designated humanitarian safe zone of al-Mawasi. These included two barrages of a total of four rockets that misfired and landed in Gaza, and a later barrage of "numerous rockets," according to the IDF, that entered into Israeli territory.
    - – On December 6, Hamas fired a salvo of 12 rockets into Israel from al-Mawasi and later fired a salvo of three more rockets from al-Mawasi into Israel. Earlier that day, Hamas launched another rocket from al-Mawasi which misfired and landed in Gaza.
  - » Hamas embedding within in the civilian population, in particular humanitarian zones like the al-Mawasi safe zone, enables its top field operatives to avoid detection and avoid being targeted even if they are detected due to Israel's strong reluctance to inflict civilian casualties.
  - » Additionally, Hamas is likely hiding in and firing rockets from al-Mawasi in an attempt to provoke an Israeli kinetic response and then subject Israel to the undesirable optics of having launched a military operation in an area it had designated as a safe zone.
  - » IDF Major General (ret.) and JINSA Distinguished Fellow Yaakov Amidror, former National Security Advisor of Israel, said during a JINSA webinar on December 7 that Israel elected not to retaliate following Hamas's rocket launches.
  - » Maj. Gen. Amidror (ret.) stated, "we decided that we are not striking in these areas because [al-Mawasi] is very crowded with refugees which moved from the north based on the promise that [al-Mawasi] will be the designated safe haven. So we decided not to retaliate in this area."

Source: Israel Defense Forces

- Israel's increasing facilitation of aid flows into Gaza, in addition to demonstrating Israel's moral ethos, is also a prudent measure that will mitigate the risk of civilian instability such as rioting and help avoid the outbreak of disease.
  - » On December 7, Israel announced that it would open the nearby Kerem Shalom Crossing on the Israeli-Gaza border to inspect aid trucks before they enter Gaza through

the Rafah Crossing, enabling far more than 250 trucks to enter daily. Israel had already been facilitating the daily entry of up to 250 aid trucks through Egypt's Rafah Crossing.

- Already, despite its unparalleled efforts to protect civilians, Israel has received condemnation from Western politicians for its conduct in its combat campaign in southern Gaza.

  » Rep. Pramila Jayapal said on *CNN* on December 4 that "[Palestinians] are being told to move to south Gaza. Then south Gaza's being bombed," and stated, referring to the October 7 attack, that "we cannot say that one war crime deserves another."

  » U.K. Foreign Minister David Cameron said on *CNN* on December 7 that Israel should "behave differently in the south of Gaza" than it did in the north of Gaza and that "we want them to minimize civilian casualties."

    – Contrary to Foreign Minister Cameron's implication that Israel has not minimized civilian casualties to date, Israel's combat efforts in northern Gaza were quite effective at keeping civilian casualties low.

    – Israel has maintained better than a 2:1 ratio of civilians to combatants killed throughout its operations in the Gaza Strip, with roughly 7,000 terrorists killed and approximately 13,000 civilians killed.

- As internal Israeli fears grow of a ticking 'diplomatic clock' – an arbitrary timeframe after which global backing for Israel's operations will subside – the United States and likeminded partners and allies will need to address misinformation about Israel in the public discourse, and support Israel's right to conduct operations on the basis of achieving its objectives rather than being guided by arbitrary deadlines.

  » On December 4, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Israeli military commanders feel they are "working against a political clock" before international support for Israel's operations prematurely ends and pressure mounts on Israel to conclude its campaign, regardless of whether or not it has achieved its objectives.