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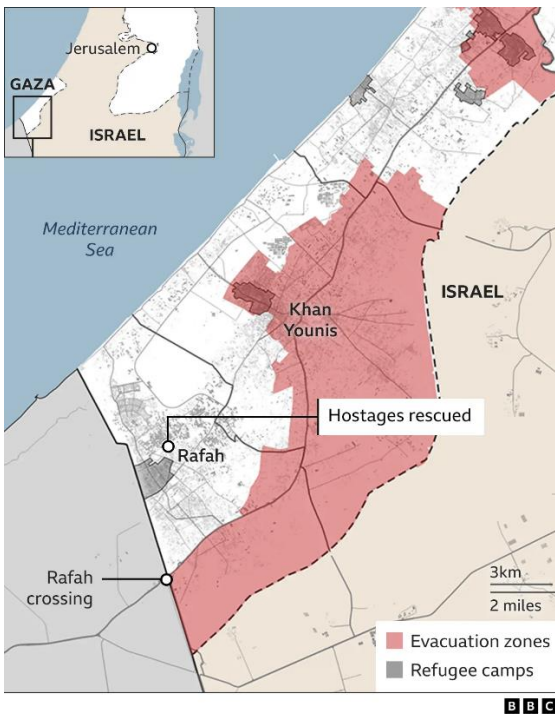National Security of America

Urging Israeli Restraint Against Hamas Might Enable Group's Survival

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A looming operation against Hamas's last remaining stronghold in Gaza's southern city of Rafah could accomplish both of Israel's major objectives of freeing the hostages and destroying Hamas. Yet, Biden administration statements urging Israeli restraint risk undermining Israel at a critical moment while ignoring Israel's unparalleled efforts to reduce civilian harm during combat. Calling Israeli operations "over the top" risks validating Hamas's disinformation strategy of putting civilians at risk and blaming Israel for it.

What Happened?

- The morning of February 12, amid increasingly intense Israeli airstrikes against targets in Gaza's southern city of Rafah, forces from the Israeli navy, police counterterrorism unit, and Shin Bet special operations unit rescued two hostages—Fernando Merman, aged 60, and Luis Har, aged 70—during a raid in Rafah.

- During a February 8 press briefing, U.S. State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said, "we have yet to see any evidence of serious [Israeli] planning for such [a military] operation [against Hamas in Rafah]. And to do—conduct such an operation right now with no planning and little thought in an area where there is sheltering of a million people would be a disaster."

- During a press conference on February 8, U.S. President Joe Biden said, "I'm of the view, as you know, that the conduct of the response in Gaza, in the Gaza Strip, has been over the top," a comment that White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre noted on February 9 was "about Israel's conduct in Gaza."

  » Jean-Pierre also said that Biden has "been clear that the US wants to see the Hamas terror organization defeated. That is a shared goal that we have with Israel," and "at the same time, the president has also been very clear that they must do so by ensuring that their operations are targeted and conducted in a way that they are protecting innocent civilians."

- During a February 12 press briefing, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said that while the administration never asked Israel to avoid operating in Rafah to dismantle Hamas, "we don't believe that it's advisable to go in in a major way in Rafah without a proper, executable, effective, and credible plan for the safety of the more than a million Palestinians that are taking refuge in Rafah."

Source: *BBC*

Why Is It Important?

- Israel's successful rescue of two hostages in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah demonstrates that Rafah is not only Hamas's sole remaining center of gravity but also the likely location of the remaining 134 hostages. U.S. pressure to restrain Israel risks imperiling Israel's and the United States' goal to neutralize Hamas fighters and infrastructure and rescue the hostages. Furthermore, accusations from members of the Biden administration and the president himself that Israel's operations against Hamas are unjustifiably destructive and devoid of adequate planning to protect civilians overlook the IDF's many efforts to mitigate civilian harm. The comments also ignore that it is Hamas's entrenchment among Gaza's civilian infrastructure that chiefly endangers Palestinian civilians.

- Rafah appears to be the location of both the last remaining concentration of Hamas fighters and commanders as well as the 134 hostages still held by Hamas, highlighting the importance of the impending Rafah operation for Israel's ability to achieve both of its stated objectives of destroying the terrorist group and freeing the hostages.

  » On February 9, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said in a statement that "it is impossible to achieve the goal of the war of eliminating Hamas by leaving four [remaining] Hamas battalions in Rafah."

  » As JINSA's Julian and Jenny Josephson Senior Vice President for Israeli Affairs IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish pointed out during a January 25 JINSA webinar, "[the IDF has] to cut the supply lines to Hamas from Rafah," through which the terror group can smuggle ammunition and weaponry via tunnels from Egypt.

  » Similarly, JINSA Distinguished Fellow IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror argued during a February 8 JINSA webinar that after helping civilians evacuate the combat zone, the IDF will need to capture Rafah to destroy Hamas's remaining battalions.

- Any U.S. attempt to pressure Israel to restrain or delay its Rafah operation increases the likelihood that the terrorist group's political and military capabilities survive and the hostages remain in captivity due to a slow-down of Israel's military momentum, or, if U.S. pressure evolves into advocacy for a ceasefire, a cessation of Israeli operations.
  » According to reports from early February, Hamas police officers deployed in certain parts of Gaza City a month after Israel withdrew most of its forces from the area, demonstrating that Israeli military pressure, not restraint, diminishes the threat from Hamas.
    – However, because Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza, it must ensure that its current operations are as thorough as possible by dismantling Hamas in Rafah, or the remaining hostages might not be freed, and Hamas might resume its attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers.
  » Netanyahu argued during an interview with *ABC News* that aired on February 11 that "those who say that under no circumstances should we enter Rafah are basically saying lose the war. Keep Hamas there."
- The United States understood the importance of prosecuting counter-terrorism operations until its adversary is rooted out of its main stronghold when it fought against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
  » On October 26, 2017, ahead of Iraqi forces' operation to drive ISIS from its sole remaining stronghold in the Iraqi town of Qaim, officials of the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve to defeat ISIS said in a statement published on the U.S. Department of Defense's website that they "welcome" the start of the operation and praised the Iraqi soldiers' dedication to "ridding Iraq of ISIS."
  » The statement also noted that despite the liberation thus far of "approximately 95 percent of land once held by ISIS," "much work remains to consolidate gains as operations continue to destroy ISIS' remaining capabilities."
- Insinuations from Biden administration officials that Israel is not adequately implementing civilian harm mitigation measures, and the president's claim that Israel's conduct in Gaza has been "over the top," overlook the IDF's many efforts to minimize civilian harm and remarkably low combatant-to-civilian casualty ratio.
  » JINSA's Director of Research Jacob Olidort and Policy Analyst Yoni Tobin have pointed out that during its operations in Gaza, Israel has implemented humanitarian corridors, delivered fuel and medical supplies to hospitals in Gaza, called off airstrikes if civilians were nearby, and dropped leaflets with evacuation instructions for civilians, among other communication methods.
    – These evacuation instructions partly explain why Rafah is currently quite crowded—the IDF has urged civilians to flee there and the coastal Mawasi area to escape intense combat, and Netanyahu has said that Israel is devising plans to help civilians flee the forthcoming combat in Rafah.
  » In a January 31 op-ed, chair of urban warfare studies at West Point's Modern War Institute John Spencer argued that Israel's steps to mitigate civilian harm are unprecedented in the annals of urban warfare.
    – Spencer pointed to several measures including weeks of warning ahead of ground operations; dropping non-lethal munitions on the roofs of buildings to warn residents to evacuate ahead of a strike, or "roof-knocking"; outlining evacuation instructions to civilians via 520,000 pamphlets, 19,734 live and approximately 6 million pre-recorded phone calls and 64,399 texts; implementing four-hour combat pauses several days in a row to permit civilians to leave combat zones; and publishing detailed maps that outline safe zones and areas in which the IDF will engage in combat.

» As analyst Yaakov Katz [outlined](#) on January 23, Hamas's claims that roughly 25,000 people have been killed in Gaza—if taken at face value—and the IDF's claims that approximately 9,000 of those killed were combatants indicate that the ratio of combatants to civilians killed is between 1:1.5 and 1:2. This is remarkably low when compared to UN claims that civilians generally comprise approximately 90 percent of warfare casualties, or a 1:9 combatant-to-civilian ratio, as Katz noted.

- Given these extraordinary measures, admonishing Israel for civilian casualties in Gaza risks validating, even if inadvertently, Hamas's years-long efforts to entrench itself within Gaza's civilian infrastructure and use its population as human shields. It also risks rewarding the group's information warfare to falsely paint Israel as a serial human rights violator and compel a halt to its legitimate military operations.

  » As JINSA detailed in its [assessment](#) of the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, Hamas placed military assets underneath, inside, or near infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and mosques, which the IDF strives to protect, in an effort to impede the IDF's operations.

  – Hamas has continued this illegal strategy in the decade since—in a particularly egregious example, the IDF recently [discovered](#) a Hamas data center underneath the headquarters of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN branch tasked with providing for Palestinian civilians.

  » JINSA's 2014 Israel-Gaza war [assessment](#) also noted that "Hamas proved very effective at exploiting images of civilian deaths, particularly children, to gain international sympathy to their cause and a high degree of international opposition to the Israeli cause," a tactic that the terror group has continued in the current war, most brazenly when it [falsely](#) blamed an Israeli airstrike for an October 17 explosion near Gaza's al-Ahli hospital actually caused by a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) rocket.