

## US—Israel Relations Amid Growing Disagreement Over a Military Operation in Rafah

Eldad Shavit and Chuck Freilich | No. 1839 | March 25, 2024

Israel's plan to launch a military offensive in Rafah is at the center of the growing disagreement between the United States and Israel. The Biden administration is pressuring Israel to avoid such an operation, stating that Israel can achieve its objectives through other means. This adds to the existing differences between the two countries, including the US demand for Israel to establish a clear post-war strategy and address the humanitarian situation in Gaza. These topics, along with a possible hostage deal in exchange for a six-week ceasefire, will be the focus of discussions in Washington during the visit of high-ranking Israeli officials. Additionally, there is a public clash between the leadership of both countries, with the Americans directly criticizing Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Biden administration's patience is wearing thin, and if Israel launches a military offensive in Rafah, without coordination with it, this could become a turning point in the administration's stance toward Israel and could push it from rhetoric to action. Another significant issue is the construction of a pier in Gaza and the presence of thousands of American soldiers that will be involved in this, which could limit Israel's military freedom of maneuver and further escalate the tensions between the two countries.

After more than a month without communicating, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Biden recently held a phone conversation. While White House spokespeople continue to express US support for Israel's right to defeat Hamas, [a summary](#) of the leaders' conversation and [a briefing](#) by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan highlighted the key disagreements between the United States and Israel regarding the conduct of the war in Gaza. These differences will be the focus of comprehensive discussions initiated by the US administration, which will be held during the upcoming visit of high-ranking Israeli officials to Washington, as well as Minister of Defense Gallant's first visit to Washington since the war began. Three main topics will be discussed:

**A Strategic Plan**—The administration has reiterated to Israel the importance of having a comprehensive strategy with clear objectives for the military campaign. In his last conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Biden expressed doubts about whether Israel has such a strategy and emphasized the need for a “coherent and sustainable strategy” to achieve the shared “goal of defeating Hamas.” The administration has made these references amid claims that Israel is deliberately not formulating post-war plans. Meanwhile, the US administration has presented its vision for the post-Hamas period, which includes advancing greater and more stable peace and security for Israel through deeper regional integration, including normalization with Saudi Arabia, and realizing a two-state solution. US

Secretary of State Blinken visited the Middle East in recent days to discuss the “regional architecture.”

**Military Operation in Rafah**—The administration is deeply concerned about a potential military operation in Rafah. According to its view, Israel’s focus should be on stabilizing the situation in Gaza and consolidating its gains to prevent Hamas from regaining control in areas that have already been cleared. Instead, Israel is considering a large-scale operation in Rafah, which the administration views as a “huge mistake” that could potentially lead to a “disaster.” During his conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the president expressed “deep concern” about an operation in Rafah if it was similar to those conducted in Gaza City and Khan Yunis. The administration asserts that Israel has not yet presented a plan for safely relocating over a million refugees currently sheltering in Rafah, neither to them nor to the international community.

Moreover, the administration believes that a military operation in Rafah would severely hinder humanitarian efforts from Egypt to Rafah, and it could even strain relations with Egypt, which has already voiced concerns about such an operation. The administration dismissed Israeli claims that pressure to avoid a military operation in Rafah would undermine Israel’s ability to defeat Hamas, labeling this as “nonsense,” and believes that the central objectives in Rafah could be achieved through alternative means. During the Israeli delegation’s visit to Washington, the administration plans to outline its concerns and propose alternative strategies for undermining key Hamas targets in Rafah without resorting to a military operation. It will also focus on preventing cross-border smuggling, while ensuring border security with Egypt.

**The Humanitarian Situation in Gaza**—The administration is deeply concerned about the humanitarian crisis and the spread of anarchy in areas where Israel has operated but has not yet been able to stabilize the situation. According to the Biden administration, air drops of humanitarian supplies by the United States and other countries is an insufficient response, and it plans to establish a floating pier to facilitate aid delivery. The administration believes that Israel should take additional measures to facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza and that the IDF should protect the proposed pier and oversee control mechanisms in Gaza to improve distribution and prevent Hamas from seizing humanitarian shipments.

The administration recently joined others in the international community in expressing concern over the worsening hunger crisis in Gaza. Secretary Blinken emphasized that “according to the most respected measure of these things, 100% of the population in Gaza is at severe levels of acute food insecurity. That’s the first time an entire population has been so classified.” He added that it is Israel’s responsibility to prioritize aid distribution to those most in need. Blinken referred to a UN report known as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), managed by more than a dozen UN agencies and aid organizations, which assesses regions for hunger. According to the report, over one million people, approximately half of the total population of Gaza, are in a state of “catastrophic hunger.”

With focused conversations between Israel and the United States about the future of the war in Gaza in the background, the public clash between the leaders of both countries has gained

attention. President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have strongly criticized Prime Minister Netanyahu's conduct. Biden asserted that "Netanyahu is hurting Israel more than helping," while Vice President Harris has distinguished between the US approach to the policies of the Israeli government and to the Israeli people. In Congress, even close allies of Israel are increasingly criticizing the Israeli government's actions. Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer went as far as to state that Netanyahu is an obstacle to peace and has called for elections in Israel to replace him. In response, Netanyahu criticized these statements in a series of interviews with American media outlets, calling them interference in Israel's internal affairs. Netanyahu also criticized the US administration's opposition to a military operation in Rafah, arguing that it is the only way to defeat Hamas—a point he also discussed with Biden over the phone.

Following months in which the coordination, support, and assistance provided by the United States to Israel played a central role in determining Israel's room for maneuver, recent developments now threaten to further constrain the Israeli leadership's decision-making regarding the continuation of the war in Gaza. US criticism also amplifies global criticism against Israel. While the administration continues to emphasize that it shares the goal of defeating Hamas and has refrained from calling for immediate ceasefires, many countries, including those in Europe, have significantly intensified their criticism of Israel, with some even announcing practical measures. The US administration has not yet taken any practical measures to translate its criticism into action, except for imposing sanctions on settlers accused of using violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and compelling Israel to sign a new declaration that requires it to use American weaponry in accordance with international law. In her most recent statement, however, the vice president refused to rule out practical measures in the future.

This policy, which reflects President Biden's deep concern for Israel's security and the belief that Hamas should be prevented from operating in Gaza, also signals the administration's optimism that a hostage deal can be achieved in exchange for a six-week ceasefire. Secretary Blinken stated that a deal is imminent and estimated that the gaps between the negotiating sides are narrowing. The administration anticipates that a ceasefire will allow for significant improvements to the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and progress toward a permanent ceasefire, including promotion of the regional "architecture" that it deems crucial. However, the administration is also preparing for the collapse of negotiations and the continuation of hostilities. This is why it seeks to prevent an expanded military operation in Rafah, which it believes would worsen the humanitarian situation, result in many more casualties among the Gazan population, and make it harder for it to maintain its support for Israel. The administration's doubts regarding Israel's ability to achieve its primary goal of evacuating one million civilians from Rafah while maintaining basic humanitarian conditions was the basis for its request that a senior Israeli delegation visit Washington to discuss the alternatives.

Israel should consider the potential drawbacks of constructing an American pier in Gaza. Its construction, which is expected to take about two months, will involve the presence of thousands of American engineering, logistics, and Navy troops. One major concern is that this could restrict IDF ground, air and sea freedom of maneuver, and hinder its plans for continuing

the war. Furthermore, the pier could become a source of friction between American and Israeli forces, potentially escalating tensions between the two countries, especially if Hamas attempts to instigate hostilities, such as by intentionally causing friendly-fire incidents.

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