

Israel vows to attack Rafah “safe zone” as White House approves US air strikes in Iraq and Syria

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Defence Minister Yoav Gallant declared Thursday that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will expand its genocidal onslaught on Gaza to the “safe zone” of Rafah, where over 1.5 million Palestinians are crammed side-by-side on the Egyptian border. The pledge came as US television network CBS reported that the White House had approved a series of air strikes on targets in Iraq and Syria in what Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin described as a “multi-tier” attack.

Asserting that Hamas’ Khan Younis brigade had been disbanded, Gallant wrote on X that “we will complete the mission there and continue to Rafah ... We will continue until the end, there is no other way.”

The completion of the “mission” in Khan Younis has included the devastation of the city’s two remaining hospitals, al-Amal and Nasser, which are running out of oxygen to treat patients, according to the United Nations. Both facilities have been repeatedly shelled, including the deliberate targeting of a team from the Palestinian Red Cross Society (PRCS) on Wednesday.

The IDF has besieged Al-Amal for 11 days, according to the PRCS. The organisation reported Thursday that there had been “repeated raids into the courtyards of the hospital and the association’s headquarters, and direct fire on the buildings, which threatens the lives of the staff and the displaced.” In the area around Nasser Hospital, the Palestinian Health Ministry stated that 30,000 people were stranded without food, water, or baby formula.

Doctors Without Borders took note of the “deteriorating lack of health care” for pregnant women throughout Gaza. It reported, “Women stuck in dire conditions are giving birth in tents and public buildings. Those who manage to deliver in a hospital often return to makeshift shelters hours after undergoing a caesarean.”

Reporting from Rafah, *Al-Jazeera*’s Hani Mahmoud summed up the atmosphere following Gallant’s remarks, saying, “For many it has increased the level of panic. They don’t have anywhere else to go to. This is the last refuge for

Palestinians in Gaza. Beyond it is only the Egyptian border.”

The Israeli government’s plan all along has been to forcibly expel Gaza’s population to make way for direct Israeli control over the area’s “security.” In October, just weeks after the IDF launched its murderous onslaught, a leaked document from Israel’s Ministry of Intelligence called for the IDF to “evacuate the civilian population to Sinai.” Government officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, far-right Finance Minister Bezalil Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, have all made statements backing the mass expulsion of the Palestinians.

Haaretz reported Thursday that IDF soldiers are systematically burning down unoccupied homes in Gaza to prevent residents from returning. “After the structure is set on fire along with everything inside it, it is allowed to burn out until it is rendered useless,” the Israeli daily reported.

In addition to military force, Israel has intentionally withheld aid deliveries to create horrific conditions in the makeshift camps where many Palestinians now reside. The group Physicians for Human Rights Israel noted that some 560,000 of the 1.7 million Palestinians displaced since Israel’s bombardment began are now in tent camps in the southern Gaza Strip. They face “inadequate infrastructure, harsh weather conditions, flooding, poor hygiene conditions, and the risk of disease transmission.”

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the World Health Organisation, said the threat of famine is growing “each day.” He added, “Over 100,000 Gazans are either dead, injured, or missing presumed dead.”

The policy of ethnic cleansing has been intensified over the past week with Israel’s determined push, backed by the imperialist powers, to destroy the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). With allegations that 12 of the agency’s 13,000 Gaza-based employees participated in the Hamas-led uprising on October 7, Israel and its allies succeeded in slashing funding

for the organisation that plays a critical role in coordinating humanitarian aid for Gaza's 2.3 million people. The coordinated attack on UNRWA, designed in part to divert attention from the International Court of Justice ruling that Israel has a case to answer following charges of genocide, coincided with a "Victory of Israel Conference" last Sunday attended by government ministers and Knesset members. The conference was addressed by fascists and subtitled, "Settlement brings security."

The imperialist powers unreservedly endorse Israel's barbaric agenda because it complements their pursuit of war throughout the Middle East against Iran. A US-led coalition including Britain, Australia and Canada has repeatedly bombed the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen over the past three weeks, seizing on the group's attacks on merchant ships bound for Israel in the Red Sea. Israel continues to fire missiles and shells daily into southern Lebanon, and to strike targets in Syria, where three Iranian personnel were reportedly killed Friday. Washington has deployed vast quantities of military hardware to the region, including aircraft carrier battlegroups and a nuclear-capable submarine.

Having destroyed entire societies across the Middle East and Central Asia during more than 30 years of war, US imperialism is deploying its overwhelming military supremacy to secure its dominance in the energy-rich and strategically important Middle East against its rivals, above all China and Russia. The Middle East is one front in a developing third world war waged by the North American and European imperialists for a redivision of the world. Other fronts have been opened against Russia in Ukraine and China in the Indo-Pacific.

Addressing a press conference Thursday, Austin stated that the Middle East faces a "dangerous moment." Admitting that Washington does not know whether Tehran was directly involved in the drone strike Sunday that killed three US soldiers at the Tower 22 base on the Syria-Jordan border, Austin continued belligerently, saying, "it did not matter since we do know that Iran sponsors these groups and funds these groups, and in some cases trains these groups."

Austin bluntly stated that Washington's escalatory actions in the Middle East were aimed at sending a message to rivals like China. Pledging to continue the strikes on Yemen, he said, "We are going to be serious about freedom of navigation or not. There are others in the world watching to see how serious we are and we are serious." This was a clear swipe at Beijing, the target of repeated "freedom of navigation" provocations by the US and its allies in the South China Sea and Taiwan Straits.

President Biden is expected to visit the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware today, where he will formally receive the

remains of the three US soldiers. The event will be exploited to intensify the propaganda campaign for all-out war with Iran.

In a televised speech, Iran's President Ibrahim Raisi declared: "We will not start any war, but if anyone wants to bully us they will receive a strong response. Before, when they [the Americans] wanted to talk to us, they said the military option is 'on the table.' Now they say they have no intention of a conflict with Iran."

Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime has faced systematic economic and diplomatic bullying by the imperialist powers, above all the US, through punishing sanctions that have devastated the population's living standards. But it has nothing progressive to offer as an alternative. Raisi's boast that Iran's military power will guarantee the "security" of the region ignores the fact that the imperialists have already turned the Middle East into a war zone. Any military action by Iran, much like Putin's US-provoked invasion of Ukraine, will be seized upon by Washington and its European allies to launch direct hostilities that will put millions of lives across the region and beyond at risk.

The only social force capable of preventing a further escalation of war in the Middle East is the international working class. The millions of people who have protested around the world over recent months against the imperialist-backed genocide by Israel must turn to the fight to mobilise the working class in a global anti-war movement on a socialist programme. Fusing the widespread strikes by masses of workers in the imperialist centres against attacks on their jobs and worsening social conditions with the broad-based opposition to imperialist barbarism, this movement must struggle to put an end to the capitalist system that is the root cause of war.



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