

Israeli officials double down on threats to assault Rafah

Andre Damon
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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on Sunday reiterated Israel's intention to assault Rafah, the southernmost city in the Gaza Strip, where more than a million displaced people are sheltering.

In a televised speech, Netanyahu rejected demands for a permanent ceasefire, reaffirming his intention to assault Rafah.

" Hamas remains entrenched in its extreme positions, first among them the demand to remove all our forces from the Gaza Strip, end the war, and leave Hamas in power," Netanyahu said. " Israel cannot accept that..."

" Victory," Netanyahu said, is " the only way to guarantee our existence and our future."

In making these statements, Netanyahu showed the absurdity of claims by the Biden administration that Israel is seeking a " ceasefire." The terms being offered by Israel would amount to a delay in the planned assault on Rafah by a matter of weeks, coupled with a perpetual military occupation of the Gaza Strip. These are the terms that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called " extremely generous."

After Netanyahu spoke, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant made clear that if Hamas leaders did not accept the terms being offered, Israel would assault Rafah. " We recognize alarming signs that Hamas actually does not intend to follow any agreement with us," he said. " This means action in Rafah and the entire Gaza Strip in the near future."

He said that Israel was preparing a " powerful operation" in Rafah, and " the order will arrive very soon."

In a post on Sunday, Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir declared, " Netanyahu, go to Rafah now!" Earlier, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich shouted, " Rafah now!" at a rally in

Jerusalem.

These threats were accompanied by an escalation of the bombardment of Rafah. Over the past 24 hours, at least 16 people were killed by Israeli airstrikes in Rafah, taking place in at least two locations in the city.

After days of negotiations in Cairo, a Hamas delegation left Sunday with no agreement. Reuters cited an unnamed official who said, " The latest round of mediation in Cairo is near collapse."

The same day, the Israeli government announced that it had shut down the operations of broadcaster *Al Jazeera* in Israel. The Netanyahu government moved to confiscate *Al Jazeera*'s equipment, block its broadcasts and ban its website inside Israel. Later on Sunday, Israeli police raided *Al Jazeera*'s offices in East Jerusalem.

The *Al Jazeera* Media Network condemned the move, calling it a " criminal act" that " stands in contravention of international and humanitarian law."

Gaza's government media office said in a statement that the ban of *Al Jazeera* in Israel is a " scandal and a blatant violation of freedom of opinion and expression." It continued:

We condemn the shameful silence of many countries that consider themselves guardians of the world and human rights, while they are engaged in a war of genocide and participate in the war to silence media professionals, journalists, and their media outlets.

Reporters Without Borders likewise denounced the shutdown, declaring that it " strongly condemns freedom-threatening legislation that censors a TV

network for its coverage of the war in Gaza.”

Omar Shakir, director of Israel and Palestine for Human Rights Watch (HRW), condemned the move to shut down *Al Jazeera*, stating, “Their offices have been bombed in Gaza. Their staff have been beaten in the West Bank. They’ve been killed in the West Bank and Gaza.” He concluded, “Rather than trying to silence reporting on its atrocities in Gaza, Israel should stop committing them.”

Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, told the network, “I can tell you as a viewer, not as a commentator or writer, that for me, the last seven months of *Al Jazeera* English have been one of the most important sources of information about what’s going on in Gaza.” He continued, “To close it down means closing down the option of a free press.”

Levy, who is a commentator for the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, declared, “*Al Jazeera* is a Qatari network, and Qatar is one of those countries that are pulling and pushing for a settlement [to reach a truce deal in Gaza]. Netanyahu is doing everything possible in the last two or three days to sabotage a deal.”

Also on Sunday, Israel announced that it had closed the Karem Abu Salem crossing in Rafah, the main crossing point for humanitarian aid to enter Gaza.

The same day, Israel carried out a strike on a facility used by the UN’s agency for Palestinian refugees, claiming it was being used as a Hamas “command and control center.”

In a statement, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) Philippe Lazzarini warned that Israel was carrying out “an increase in the denial of humanitarian access and attacks on humanitarian workers and convoys.”

He noted:

Only in the past two weeks, we have recorded 10 incidents involving shooting at convoys, arrests of UN staff, including bullying, stripping them naked, threats with arms, and long delays at checkpoints forcing convoys to move during the dark or abort.

On Saturday, Cindy McCain, the head of the World

Food Programme, warned that a “full-blown famine” was already happening in northern Gaza and spreading to other parts of the country. “It’s horror. It’s so hard to look at, and it’s so hard to hear,” she said.

As Israel has deepened its genocide in Gaza, the US media has become increasingly aggressive in advocating war crimes against the population of Gaza. In an op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal*, Elliot Kaufman, the newspaper’s letter editor, openly called for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza, condemning the public position of both Egypt and the Biden administration opposing the “forced displacement of Palestinians.”

Kaufman wrote, “When you hear that Gazans are ‘trapped,’ you are encountering a Biden policy choice. It didn’t have to be this way.”



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