

**Israel-Hamas war**

## **Visual analysis: Gaza's last refuge becomes Israel's next target**



Satellite images show how vast numbers of displaced people have transformed the border city of Rafah — that Israel now plans to attack

**Mai Khaled** in Rafah, **Mehul Srivastava** in London and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo 9 HOURS AGO

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Israel's four-month military campaign in the besieged Gaza Strip has trapped more than half of the enclave's population in a sliver of land between the Israeli ground offensive, the Mediterranean and the sealed border with Egypt.

It is a humanitarian crisis with few modern parallels. Now Israel has said its forces will target the city of Rafah in its campaign against Hamas, whose senior leaders in Gaza have evaded capture.

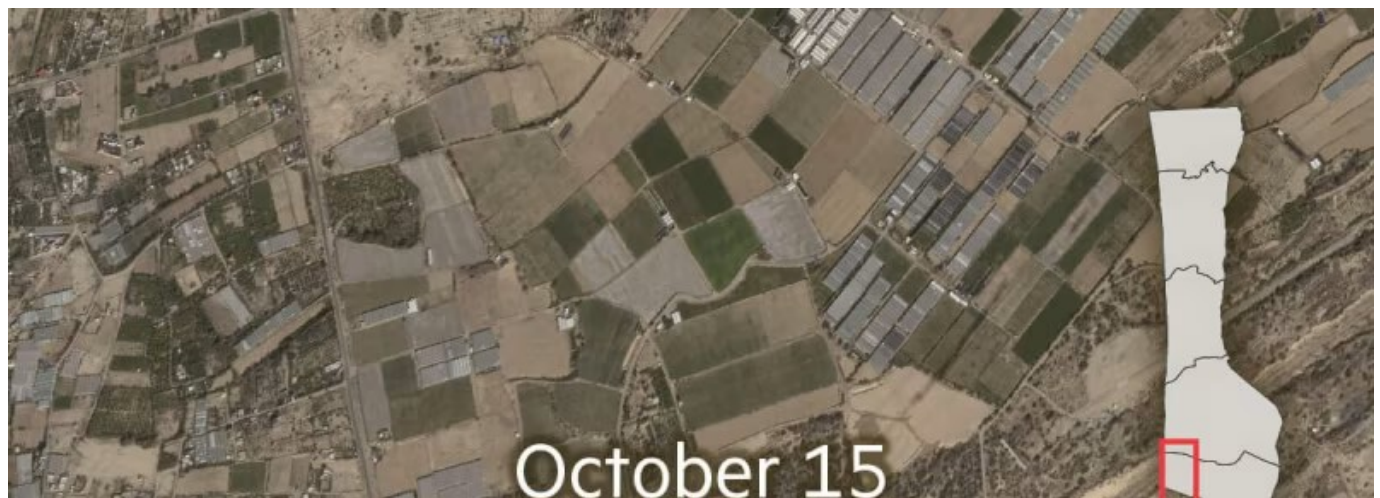
"We will also reach the places in which we haven't fought yet, and especially the last centre of gravity that remains in Hamas's hands: Rafah," Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant said on Monday.

The estimated 1.4mn people crammed into the southern border city, already enduring dire conditions and intermittent bombings, have nowhere further to flee.

Fear of the coming offensive pervades the sprawling tent camps in Rafah, lashed by winter rain, where most of the displaced live after Israel's military advanced from north to south, razing at least half of the strip's buildings.

Om Khaled Ashour, a mother of three, said her children have been asking her: "Will the tanks come to Rafah and kill us like they did in the north?" The family fled their home in northern Gaza and are living in a school-turned-shelter in western Rafah. "I try to reassure them that it won't happen, but they see the fear in my eyes," she said.

Recent satellite images, radar data on building damage and interviews with displaced people show the extent of the pressure on Gazans in Rafah and the dangers of any extensive Israeli military operations in the densely packed area.





In the early days of the war in Gaza, Rafah was mostly unaffected. Fighting was concentrated in the north and displaced people had not yet started arriving.

But by mid-January the small border city had transformed into a teeming camp for displaced people, housing around 60 per cent of Gaza's 2.3mn population.

Tents have sprung up on nearly every free patch of land, pushing up against the limits of the Mediterranean Sea and Egypt.



Egypt has closed its border with Rafah, only permitting a few injured civilians and foreign nationals to leave on rare occasions after Israeli agreement.

The Egyptian government fears that an exodus of Palestinian refugees would be destabilising, and has begun adding reinforcements on its side of the border.

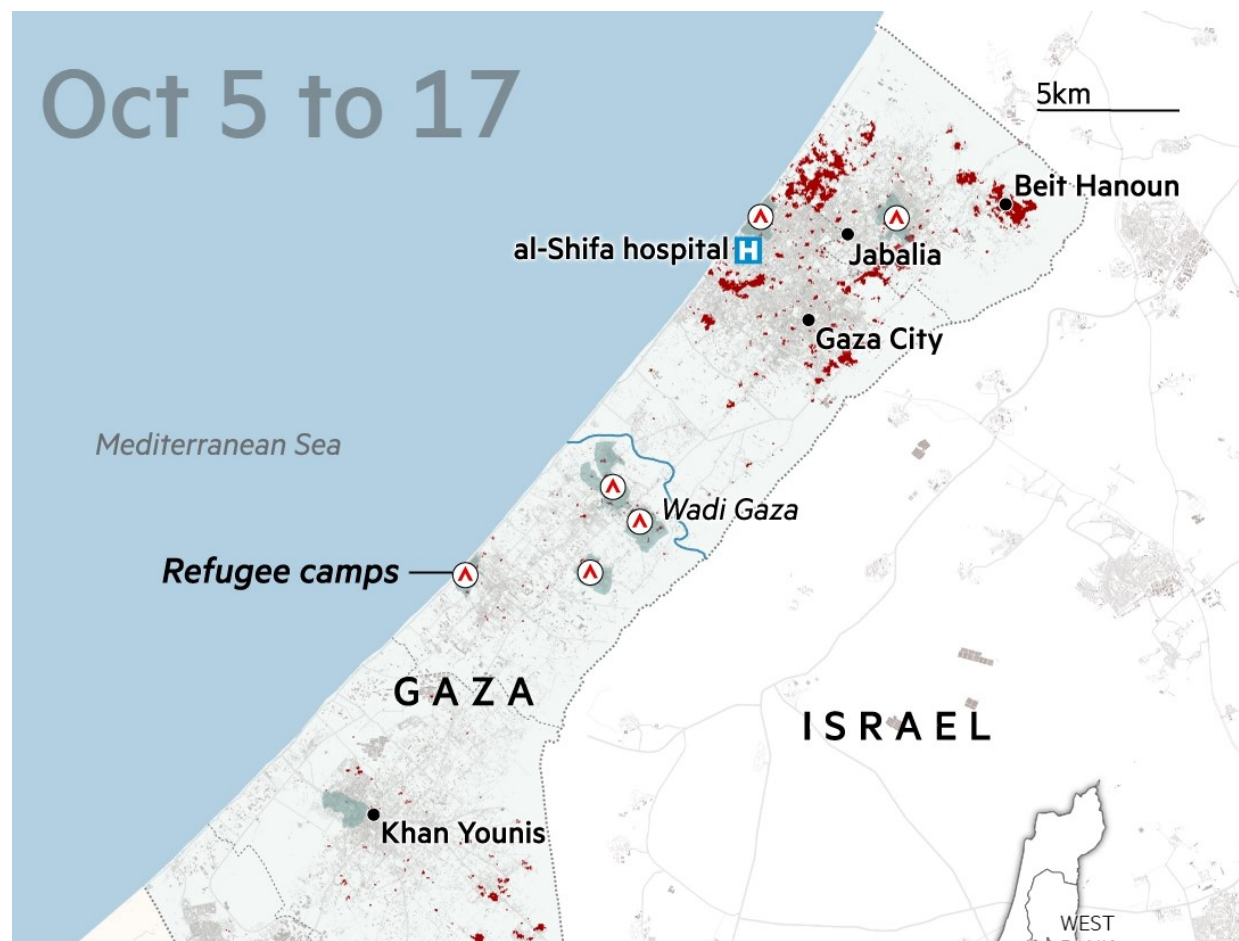


In Rafah, Ashour's five-year-old daughter, Lama, has been contemplating a fear worse than death, asking: "Mama, if I am martyred will you bury me here in Rafah and go back without me and leave me here alone?"

The radar data shows that her mother has nothing to return to in the north. Some 80 per cent of northern Gaza's homes and buildings have been destroyed.

When it invaded Gaza, the Israeli army had demanded civilians head south — and most of them did, heading first to Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city and a Hamas stronghold.

Then, in early December, the Israel Defense Forces started operating in Khan Younis, which by then had swollen with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. The city was devastated by mid-January and civilians fled further south to Rafah.





Satellite data showing building damage in Gaza © FT • Sources: FT research; OpenStreetMap; damage analysis of Copernicus Sentinel-1 satellite data by Corey Scher of CUNY Graduate Center and Jamon Van Den Hoek of Oregon State University

The Israeli army sees Rafah as the last refuge for Hamas's leaders behind the October 7 attack, one it has pledged to eliminate before [the war](#) ends. About 1,200 people were killed in that assault, according to Israeli authorities, and Palestinian militants took 250 hostages.

Israel's offensive since the attack has killed at least 27,500 Palestinians, according to local health authorities in the Hamas-controlled strip.

The IDF has bombed several locations in Rafah, including launching assaults this week. Air strikes have preceded ground manoeuvres in the past.

During the war, Gazans have sought to take shelter in their homes, to flee along dangerous evacuation routes and to reach the remaining functional hospitals. But for those in Rafah, there are even fewer options among the dire conditions.



Displaced Palestinians line up to fill plastic containers from a water tank in a camp near the Rafah border crossing © Mohammed Talatene/dpa

Rafah has been transformed by the deluge of those forcibly displaced from the north. Some live with friends or relatives, dozens to a flat, with the men and women taking turns to sleep. "Living like sardines in a can," one person said.

But most displaced people shelter in vast tent cities that now stretch from the south-west edge of Rafah, along the Egyptian border, to near the sea on the west.

Running water is rare, toilets overflow and fresh food is too expensive for most. Israel has laid siege to the strip since the war began, and only limited aid has entered; people rely on intermittent deliveries of [food and medicine](#) trucked in by the UN and others.

The shops are bare in Awda Square, in downtown Rafah. Tens of thousands of people throng the streets; the main thoroughfare, which runs five kilometres from the square to the sea, is constantly congested. Several schools, run by the UNRWA, the agency for Palestinian refugees, are now shelters, each housing thousands.

Ibrahim Kedr, who fled Gaza City with 28 family members, spent hours walking to find food this week. After selling a bag of flour he received from the UNRWA for cash, he made a two-hour journey to a market but found he could not afford anything. "What does the world expect me to do? Steal?" he asked.

With little fuel allowed into the enclave, donkey carts transport the sick and elderly.

Aisha Asfour, 67, cares for her four orphaned grandchildren and sleeps on the ground in a tent with other displaced people. "We get food from the volunteers who cook on the street and [when] the food runs out before it is our turn, we don't eat," she said.

She walks an hour to reach a public bathroom, carrying water to clean herself. As soon as she is inside, others begin knocking on the door, telling her to hurry up. "This is not life," she lamented.

*Satellite and data visualisations by Jana Tauschinski and Steven Bernard*

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