

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu dismisses US and UN pleas for Israel not to attack Rafah

Major military operation in area where most Palestinians have fled would be 'disaster', Washington says



An estimated 1.4mn displaced Palestinians are living in makeshift accommodation in and around the southern border town of Rafah
© Mohammed Abed/AFP/Getty Images

James Shotter in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered Israel's military to draw up a "combined plan" to expand its Gaza offensive into Rafah and to evacuate the city's civilian population, in spite of US and UN pleas not to mount a major offensive.

More than 1mn people are sheltering in [abject conditions in Rafah](#) in south Gaza, having been forced from their homes by [Israel's offensive](#) in other parts of the enclave, and in the past 24 hours officials from the US and UN have both said a military operation in the city would be a "disaster".

However, Netanyahu's office on Friday said Israel could not achieve its goal of eliminating Hamas "by leaving four Hamas battalions in Rafah", and that he had told the military to draw up "a combined plan for evacuating the population and destroying the battalions".

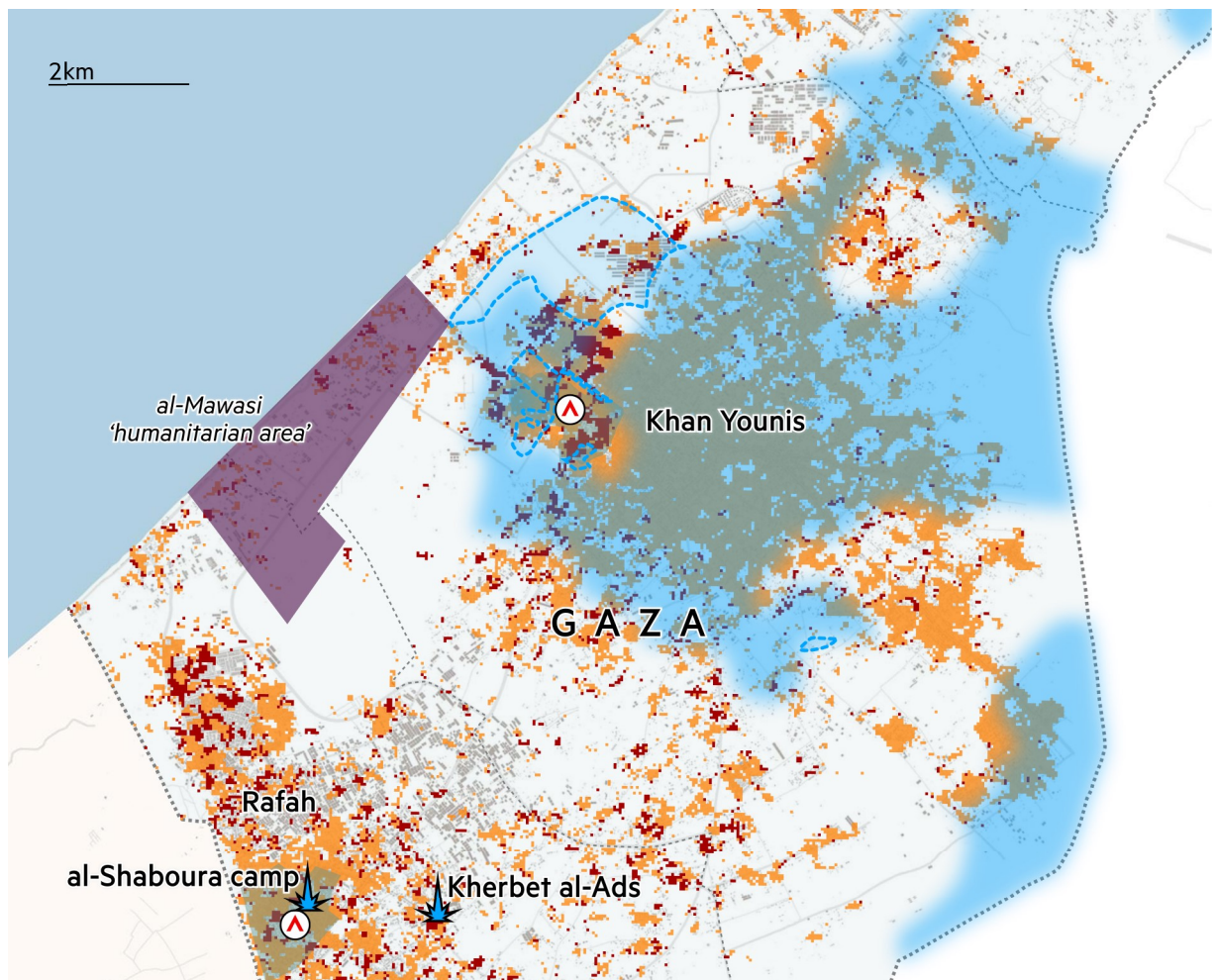
Netanyahu's comments came after Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, and US national security spokesperson John Kirby both urged Israel against attacking Rafah, with Kirby warning the US would not support a military operation in the city "without any kind of due consideration" for the civilian population.

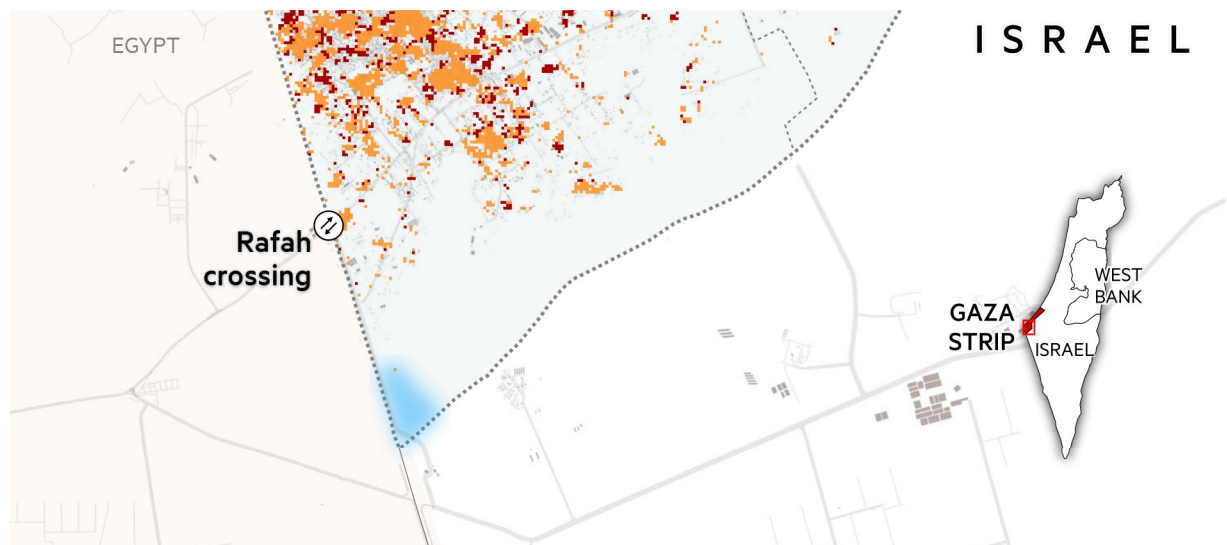
“Any major military operation in Rafah at this time, under these circumstances, with more than a million — probably more like a million and a half Palestinians who are seeking refuge [there] — without due consideration for their safety would be a disaster,” Kirby said on Thursday.

His comments came as US President Joe Biden issued his bluntest criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza since the start of the war, describing its offensive in the enclave as “over the top”.

“There are a lot of innocent people who are starving, a lot of innocent people who are in trouble and dying, and it’s got to stop,” Biden told reporters at the White House.

Israel strikes Rafah overnight as US and UN urge against offensive in southern border city





Last updated: Feb 9 4pm GMT. Sources: FT research, Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, Gisha, 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

Israel launched its offensive after Hamas militants stormed into Israel on October 7 in an attack during which they killed 1,200 people and took another [250 hostage](#), according to Israeli officials.

Israeli's assault on Gaza has killed more than 27,500 people, according to Palestinian officials, as well as displacing about 1.7mn of the enclave's 2.3mn population and destroying so many apartment blocks and other buildings that huge swaths of the [area are uninhabitable](#).

Biden and other US officials have repeatedly criticised the soaring civilian death toll from Israel's operations, though the US has continued to supply the Jewish state with munitions.

On Thursday, Biden issued a memorandum requiring recipients of military aid from the US to provide "credible and reliable written assurances" that they are complying with international law. The memorandum did not refer to any specific countries, but comes amid mounting calls in the US for the country to attach conditions to its support for Israel.

Netanyahu insisted on Wednesday that Israeli forces going to Rafah would be

“providing the civilian population safe passage to safe zones”.

However, given the scale of devastation elsewhere in Gaza, and the huge numbers of people trapped in the enclave, aid organisations say such pledges will be nigh-on impossible to fulfil.

“You have 1.4mn people, you have tens of kilometres of people living in the streets in plastic makeshifts . . . and you try and figure out a military offensive in the middle of these completely exposed, vulnerable people, it’s a recipe for disaster,” UNRWA’s Lazzarini told a press conference on Friday.

“I am almost becoming wordless, I don’t know how to describe this . . . How do you move hundreds of thousands of people because you want to go into the city? I don’t know. If you move them to the middle of nowhere, what facilities will they have?”

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