

Israel-Hamas war

Satellite images show Rafah transformed into combat zone

Satellite images show impact of Israel's offensive in southern Gaza



Tents have disappeared from many parts of Rafah after the IDF's evacuation order © Planet Labs; FT

Heba Saleh and **Mai Khaled** in Cairo, **Jana Tauschinski** in London and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

At the start of May, the southern Gazan city of Rafah was bustling with more than 1mn displaced people. Now, most tents have vanished and the remaining Palestinians in Rafah are contending with at least five Israeli combat brigades on the ground.

By Tuesday, Israeli military vehicles were close to the central Awda roundabout as they pursued their offensive; by Wednesday, Israeli forces claimed “tactical” control of the Gaza-Egypt border along the city’s edge. That, said a military official, would enable Israel to “cut off the oxygen line” of tunnels to Egypt that Israel says the Palestinian militant group Hamas had used to supply and rearm.

Israel’s campaign against Hamas has repeatedly transformed the city this month. Satellite images show tents disappearing and some buildings hit by air strikes as Israel attacked what it considers Hamas’s last stronghold.

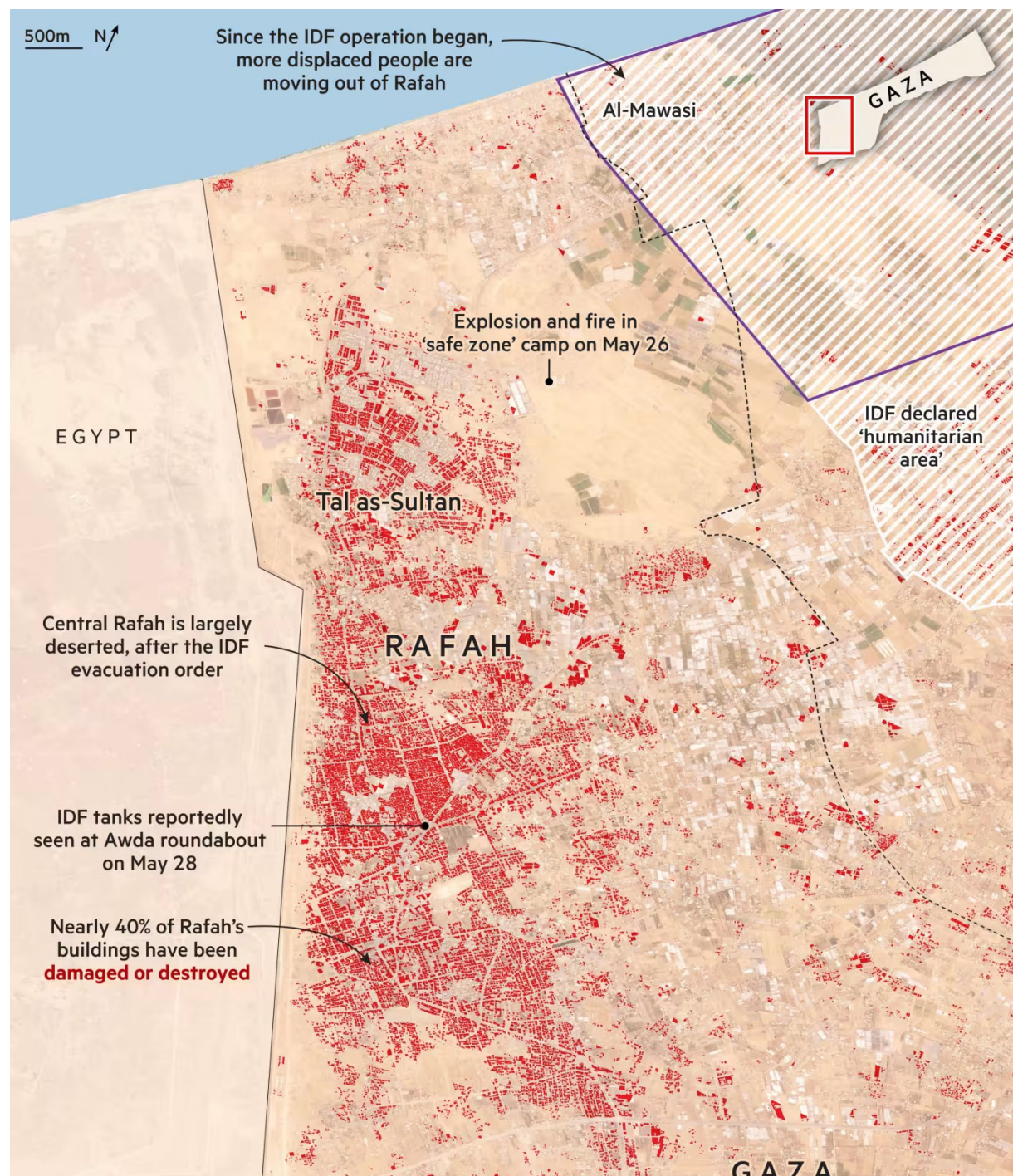
The assault came despite warnings from Israel’s allies not to proceed because of the human cost to Palestinians in the densely packed area who have already endured nearly eight months of brutal conflict.

At least a million Palestinians have left [Rafah](#) in recent weeks to flee Israel’s

intensifying attacks. Suze van Meegen, head of operations in Gaza for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said roads to the north were thronged with desperate people seeking refuge after yet another forced displacement.

“Many cars have run out of fuel, so people have been pushing their vehicles loaded with all their belongings,” she said. “People who are still in the south are doing all they can to move north from Rafah.”

Van Meegen this week described Rafah as “now comprised of three entirely different worlds: the east is an archetypal war zone, the middle is a ghost town and the west is a congested mass of people living in deplorable conditions”.





Source: FT research; Planet Labs; damage analysis of Copernicus Sentinel-1 satellite data by Corey Scher of CUNY Graduate Center and Jamon Van Den Hoek of Oregon State University; Microsoft Building Footprints

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After Israeli tanks reached the centre of town, said Abdul Rahman Shaath, a resident of Tal as-Sultan in north-west Rafah, “many families are stuck in the area unable to move . . . [The Israeli military has] also destroyed all the buildings in the east of Rafah.”

“We are no longer able to see any buildings on the horizon in that direction.”

The IDF’s chief spokesperson, Daniel Hagari, said on Tuesday that [Israel](#) was working “in a precise way, more accurate, more safe, and sometimes slower” than past operations elsewhere in the strip.

But there have still been mass casualties. At the weekend an Israeli air strike targeting two senior Hamas commanders in the north-west Tal as-Sultan neighbourhood [killed about 45 people](#). The Israel Defense Forces said it was investigating what caused the massive fire that tore through the makeshift encampment.



Source: Planet Labs

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The attack, which van Meegen said was close to a UN building, has shattered any remaining sense of security even for those who had fled on Israeli instructions to al-Mawasi, an already overcrowded narrow coastal strip west of Rafah with no infrastructure, drinking water, toilets or sewage system.

Despite the dire conditions, van Meegen said, “previously this area felt protected; it felt quite far from the worst of the violence.

“But overnight and through the day we hear artillery fire and explosions, which send clouds of smoke in the sky that are visible from the coast for several hours.”

Israel’s offensive in Gaza has killed more than 36,000 people, according to Palestinian health authorities. Israel launched its campaign in response to the October 7 cross-border attack by Hamas that killed 1,200 people, with another 250 taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities.



Palestinians have fled Rafah amid Israeli strikes © Haitham Imad/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock





Some of the 1mn Gazans who have left Rafah have gone to al-Mawasi, while others headed further north © Bashar Taleb/AFP/Getty Images

While some of the displaced families moved from Rafah to al-Mawasi, many others headed farther north towards the cities of Khan Younis and Deir al Balah.

Van Meegen said she had seen “huge numbers of people on the road with all of their belongings moving north”. “The roads are so congested with people walking, or riding donkey carts and bikes,” she added.

But many, exhausted and already displaced multiple times, say they have run out of options.

“Where can we go?” asked Ibrahim Hamad, displaced from the north of Gaza to Rafah. “There’s no room anywhere and there is no safe space. Israel is pushing us towards the sea, but the sand is not going to produce food or water for hundreds of thousands of people.”



Last week Israeli troops had moved through the eastern al-Shaboura refugee camp in Rafah, engaging with Hamas fighters and working to eliminate weapons and rocket caches

CACIES.

The overall goal, say Israeli officials, is to “dismantle” the militant group’s last four standing battalions in the territory and rescue Israeli hostages, who they maintain are still being held in the Rafah area.

Since the start of the war, Rafah has been the main base of the humanitarian operation in Gaza, but the latest offensive has further undermined the efforts of aid agencies already severely constrained by tight Israeli controls and months of war.

Van Meegen said the fuel shortage meant the Norwegian Refugee Council’s own car fleet is at much-reduced capacity: several vehicles have empty tanks.

Several aid agencies are relocating to Deir al Balah in central Gaza, said van Meegen, and needs are huge. “We expect even more displaced people will follow there,” she said.

Since Israel’s push into Gaza’s south, the critical Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt has been closed. Angered by Israel’s takeover of the crossing, Egypt stopped allowing aid trucks through, and only at the weekend resumed sending trucks to Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing from Israel.

Nineteen international aid agencies warned this week that “as Israeli attacks intensify on Rafah . . . the humanitarian response is in reality on the verge of collapse”.

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