

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

[Refugees in Gaza](#)

By Colin Bailey

As Israel prepares to mount a ground invasion into the Gaza Strip, thousands of Palestinian refugees continue to migrate south in hopes of finding refuge from the war. Over a week since the escalation of the conflict, the supply of food and water has dwindled as the refugees are unable to leave the territory. Despite Arab nations declaring their support for the Palestinians, none has been willing to take in refugees.

Since the Ezzeldin AlQassam Brigades, the paramilitary arm of Hamas, launched an offensive that resulted in 1,300 Israeli dead, the Benjamin Netanyahu government declared war on Gaza. Hospital and media reports confirm that over 3,500 Palestinians, a third of whom are children, have been killed because of Israeli bombardment.

Thousands of Palestinians have been displaced since the Israeli Defense Forces issued a “24-hour notice” for civilians to evacuate the north, instructing approximately 1.1 million to move towards the Rafah border in the south. The deadline has since been extended ostensibly to allow civilians more time to evacuate; but thousands have yet to leave either due to physical incapacity or a refusal to leave their homes. Other noncombatants are unable to comply due to a combination of the volume of migrants, transportation limitations, and damage or detours on the major roads leading to the southern tip.

Israeli objectives appear contradictory. Despite the displacement order to move south, Israeli Defense Forces have shelled targets there claiming they are Hamas outposts. An airstrike hit the Rafah Crossing on October 17th, complicating efforts under way to open the crossing. Civilians have amassed in or around the area awaiting permission from the Egyptians to leave, as well as allow humanitarian convoys to enter. Some families have decided to move back to Gaza City. Statements from the Abu Marasa family underscore what many inhabitants have concluded: “Why should we be martyrs in Khan Younis? We would better die as martyrs in our houses. Let the whole building fall on our heads,” Saleem Abu Marasa explained as his family prepared to turn to Gaza City.

Egypt and Jordan, two countries with land borders on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, have announced they will not accept refugees from Palestine, fearing the Israelis are machinating a forced exodus. While in a meeting with the chancellor of Germany, Jordanian King Abdullah II said, “This is a situation that has to be handled within Gaza and the West Bank.” Abdullah II has called for a ceasefire and has condemned Israel’s missile bombardment of Gaza.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi has also denounced Israeli missile strikes. The Egyptian government has prevented anyone crossing from Gaza into Egypt, stating, “The threat there is significant because it means the liquidation of this [Palestinian] cause. It’s important for its people to stay steadfast and exist on its land.”

Forcing large portions of the population to leave would embolden the Israelis to establish more settlements in the occupied territories making the refugee situation permanent rather than temporary. Even if civilians could leave northern Gaza, their ability to leave the entire enclave rests with the decisions of neighboring states. These states dealt with nearly a million Palestinian refugees during the Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948. Over 500 Palestinian

villages were destroyed making way for Israeli settlements and real estate developments. The expropriation of the land makes it extremely difficult for Palestinian refugees and their descendants to reclaim their properties, even while many continue to demand their right of return. The same fear is felt once again at the prospect of Israel forcing the displacement of Palestinians in Gaza to delegitimize their claim on the land.

A lockdown of Gaza has been the status quo since Egypt and Israel established a land, air, and sea blockade on the enclave in 2007, restricting access to the outside world. Movement across the borders is heavily curtailed with an extensive 7-meter stone wall along the entirety of the Gaza-Israeli border, colloquially known as the "Iron Wall." The border is also enforced with a 6-meter-tall, barbed wire fence with observation towers stationed along the line of the 1950 Armistice Agreement reached with neighboring Arab states. Sensors have been installed along its entirety, with remote control machine guns used to deter people from entering within 100 meters of the border. The border is also kept under 24-hour surveillance by armed guards.

With no functional airports in the enclave, travel in and out of the territory is restricted between three border crossings. The Erez Crossing and Kerem Shalom Crossing are located along the Gaza-Israeli border and are heavily militarized. Movement through these crossings is permitted largely for non-Palestinians and laborers and is the only checkpoint where food and supplies are permitted to enter the country under Israeli surveillance. Since the Hamas attacks on October 7th, transit through these checkpoints has been shut down, preventing any goods from entering the enclave.

The third access point is the Rafah Border Crossing, which is the only checkpoint along the Egyptian-Gaza border; and it has a 14-kilometer buffer zone in place on the Egyptian side of the border. It is restricted primarily to foreign nationals and Gazans with designated travel permits which are hard to acquire and oftentimes take several months to years to be approved.

Observers estimate that nearly one million civilians have already been displaced due to the bombs in northern Gaza, with these numbers expected to increase in the weeks to follow. With nowhere else to go but within the Strip, United Nations' schools-turned-shelters have become overcrowded as thousands try to seek haven elsewhere. A sea of tents has been constructed outside the major cities of Rafah and Khan Yunis for the refugees. Conditions are expected to grow more dire as food and water run scarce. In addition, the lack of clean water and electricity has effectively shut down the healthcare system as well as caused significant concerns about the spread of disease. Unless the international community intervenes, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is expected to increase exponentially in the weeks ahead.