



[The Growing Frustration of Americans Trapped in Gaza](#)

By Jacob Van Veldhuizen

Late last week the U.S. government reported that five to six hundred American citizens are currently trapped in Gaza. After almost a month of being stranded, the U.S. State Department announced that Americans would be allowed to exit via the Egyptian border. Although government officials assert they have explored every avenue to “bring our people home,” there has been a stark contrast between efforts to evacuate Americans from Israeli ports compared to the Rafah crossing. Ships and planes were chartered for the former, yet families of Palestinian-Americans still in Gaza have openly expressed frustration at the contradictory and slow pace of government efforts.

The State Department and the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, adamantly stressed that it was Hamas that prevented Americans from leaving through Rafah. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated this on October 31st, citing Hamas as the singular roadblock to evacuation efforts. U.S. officials have even claimed that Hamas physically prevented anyone from moving through the border. The attempt to shift blame to the militants, however, was finally debunked when Matthew Miller, a Department of State spokesperson, acknowledged that Hamas is not at those gates. In fact, Egyptian authorities control the crossing, having allowed it to open only rarely and unofficially since 2006.

Under an Egyptian Israeli agreement a third party, The European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), is meant to monitor the Kerem Shalom crossing point at Rafah. This was effectively shut down when Hamas won elections in 2006 and the Israelis decided to place the Gaza Strip under siege thereafter. According to Camera.org, the “shutdown of Kerem Shalom crossing point into Gaza meant that the EUBAM monitors, who are based in the nearby Israeli city of Ashkelon and pass through Kerem Shalom *en route* to Rafah, could not work. And because the [Agreed Principles for Rafah Crossing Point] APRC dictates the Rafah terminal can’t operate without EUBAM, the terminal was closed. (According to EUBAM, the group is based in Israel because the security situation prevents it from moving to its intended base inside Gaza.)” Humanitarian aid, therefore, is sometimes allowed through albeit unofficially. But since October 7th, the Israelis have bombed the crossing on several occasions and only a handful of Americans have been permitted to leave as of this writing.

On November 1, a few hundred foreign nationals and the critically wounded were given permission to cross the border into Egypt. There are conflicting reports on whether Americans were a part of those who exited; and numerous reports indicate that some of the wounded who did not have their travel documents were turned back, with claims that some passed away due to the severity of their wounds. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and President Joe Biden claimed Americans passed through; but citizens on the ground say they were told that Americans would have to wait. The government’s approach has not only been contradictory but also facile, given that the Israelis cut off communication and electricity to the Strip.

Following the Israeli declaration of war, the State Department published an online Crisis Intake form where American citizens and their eligible family members stuck in Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, or the West Bank can submit a request for evacuation. The State Department points to this resource as evidence that the U.S. government is trying to bring its citizens safely home. The form is the only method of communication with the U.S. government currently available for those trapped in Gaza. However, since telecommunication has been severed with only intermittent availability, the Biden Administration does not appear to have a contingency plan for remaining in touch with its citizens even though it insists it has spared no effort in ensuring their safe extraction.

One example highlighting the inconsistencies between official and field accounts is the case of Abood Okal, Wafaa Abuzayda his wife, and their one-year-old son, Yousef. Okal relays how he feared for his life trying to access cell reception in an open field where he could easily be mistaken as a militant. He eventually was able to contact his lawyer as well as send voice notes to major media outlets expressing his feelings that he and his family were abandoned in a war zone. American outlets like CBS news, the Boston Globe and others picked up the story.

According to Okal and his lawyer, Sammy Nabulsi, the only people at the border are Americans waiting to leave and the Egyptian military. The Okals and other families say they were told by the State Department to go to the border at Rafah and await further instruction. However, after hours of waiting, they were then contacted by the State Department and informed they would not cross that day. As they waited near the crossing, Israeli shelling continued to fall on or near the crossing.

Another Detroit resident, Zakaria Alarayshi, expressed frustration at the muted effort to evacuate him and his wife, saying he feels like a second-class citizen because of the President's seeming indifference. He told the media he "did everything right to ... live honorably," paying his taxes and even voting for Biden; but that he felt abandoned. Alarayshi has since filed a lawsuit against the Biden Administration naming Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin as defendants and claiming U.S. officials showed "disparate treatment" and violated "constitutional provisions that ensure equality under the law."

Administration officials have done little to mitigate the perception that Palestinian-Americans were not a priority. The State Department and the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, contradicted themselves in private correspondence with those in Gaza. They publicly blamed Hamas yet informed Americans stuck in Gaza that delays were "the result of a failure to lock up a diplomatic agreement among Israel, Egypt and the terrorist group." They have been providing conflicting narratives to convince the public that they indeed have the situation under control. However, families in Gaza and their representatives have exposed Administration claims as inaccurate at best. The U.S. appears to be either unable or unwilling to make any significant headway as relates to American citizens in Gaza. The official statements come across as a deflection of any accountability or blame for the government's inaction; and the outcome of the Alarayshi lawsuit may affect how future administrations deal with similar situations.