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Israel's Limited Incursion into Rafah and Campus Protests

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Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: Medium

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical, protests

May 13, 2024

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> Key Findings

- Israel has begun a limited incursion into Rafah, ostensibly to counter smuggling operations from Egypt, but also reportedly to pressure Hamas into agreeing to a ceasefire that is more favorable to Israel.
- Progressive limited operations into Rafah could see Israel avoid heavy international criticism that a larger assault would likely bring, while also achieving the domestic political aims of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
- Hamas will almost certainly remain a capable fighting force in the Gaza Strip, regardless of the outcome in Rafah.
- U.S. university protests have expanded globally, but protesters may move on to other targets as the school year ends but the war continues.
- Israeli Independence Day (May 14) and Palestinian al-Nakba Day (May 15) are traditional protest days for activists on both sides, but the commemorations and protests will likely be more disruptive because of the events in Rafah and ongoing campus protests.

| Details

On May 7, 2024, Israeli forces launched a “limited” offensive in and around eastern Rafah, while at the same time seizing the Rafah Bordering Crossing that connects the enclave to

Egypt.¹ While Israeli officials claimed the operation was in large part aimed at stopping weapons smuggling from Egypt, many observers believed that the move was also an effort to force Hamas into accepting a ceasefire.²

- In fact, as the assault seemed imminent, the militant group said it had agreed to truce terms.³ However, this claim was rejected by Israeli officials, who stated such an offer “didn’t exist.”⁴
- In the days since, the warring parties have failed to reach an agreement that would end the fighting, and Israel has slowly escalated its military operations, including expanding evacuation orders in the south of the city⁵—reducing the possibility of a ceasefire.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu very likely sees the extension of the conflict as crucial to remaining in office; numerous political rivals are demanding fresh elections at the end of the war.⁶ Netanyahu’s allies have also threatened to bring down the government if he accepts a truce at all (or one they deem to be too soft on Hamas).^{7,8,9}

- In this vein, one way to prolong the fighting is a piecemeal approach to the operation against Rafah, gradually expanding the conflict by attacking only a small number of areas of the city at a time.

1

[hXXps://www.timesofisrael.com/us-signals-backing-for-limited-op-after-idf-takes-over-gazan-side-of-rafah-crossing/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-signals-backing-for-limited-op-after-idf-takes-over-gazan-side-of-rafah-crossing/)

2

[hXXps://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/in-1st-comment-state-department-says-us-has-made-clear-to-israel-its-views-on-major-rafah-op/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/in-1st-comment-state-department-says-us-has-made-clear-to-israel-its-views-on-major-rafah-op/)

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[hXXps://english.elpais.com/international/2024-05-09/netanyahu-p pressures-hamas-with-rafah-invasion-to-unblock-ceasefire-talks.html](https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-05-09/netanyahu-p pressures-hamas-with-rafah-invasion-to-unblock-ceasefire-talks.html)

⁴ [hXXps://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-800163](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-800163)

5

[hXXps://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-orders-new-evacuations-in-rafah-as-it-gets-ready-to-expand-operations/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-orders-new-evacuations-in-rafah-as-it-gets-ready-to-expand-operations/)

6

[hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-war-cabinet-member-gantz-calls-september-elections-amid-gaza-assault-2024-04-03/](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-war-cabinet-member-gantz-calls-september-elections-amid-gaza-assault-2024-04-03/)

⁷ [hXXps://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/netanyahu-ceasefire-alon-pinkas-1.7196545](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/netanyahu-ceasefire-alon-pinkas-1.7196545)

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[hXXps://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-04-07/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-is-prolonging-the-gaza-war-and-israel-cant-afford-it/0000018e-b476-d50a-a1bf-fc7edelf0000](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-04-07/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-is-prolonging-the-gaza-war-and-israel-cant-afford-it/0000018e-b476-d50a-a1bf-fc7edelf0000)

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[hXXps://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/05/07/israel-and-hamas-are-not-that-far-from-a-ceasefire-agreement](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/05/07/israel-and-hamas-are-not-that-far-from-a-ceasefire-agreement)

- This strategy could be maintained even without the direct support of the United States and may blunt the international criticism that a large-scale, one-off invasion would bring.
- There is roughly an even chance that Netanyahu will seek to extend the war itself into November 2024, in the hope that former President Donald Trump prevails in the U.S. presidential election and decreases pressure on the Israeli government to end the war in the enclave and acquiesce to a two-state solution.¹⁰

The operation itself is very unlikely to end in the destruction of Hamas as a capable fighting unit. Even if Israeli forces declare the city cleared, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups will be able to reconstitute their forces in the city in the following weeks and months, as they have already done in the central and northern Gaza Strip.¹¹

| Campus Protests

Starting at Columbia University in mid-April, pro-Palestinian protesters have been occupying university facilities across the United States for nearly a month, calling on institutions to end partnerships and investments with Israel over the war with Hamas.¹² After initially occupying open areas on campus, protesters began targeting graduation ceremonies and occupying university halls, which precipitated police to forcibly remove protesters on some campuses.

Protests in the United States have diminished somewhat, with protesters having fewer graduation ceremonies to target, some groups being forcibly removed, and others agreeing to disband voluntarily after reaching agreements with their universities over cutting ties with Israeli institutions.

¹⁰

[hXXps://www.timesofisrael\[.\]com/smotrich-lauds-trump-for-courage-and-integrity-in-rejection-of-two-state-solution/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-lauds-trump-for-courage-and-integrity-in-rejection-of-two-state-solution/)

¹¹ [hXXps://www.understandingwar\[.\]org/background/iran-update-may-8-2024](https://www.understandingwar[.]org/background/iran-update-may-8-2024)

¹² [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2024/05/09/business/columbia-protests-divestment-invs/index.html](https://www.cnn[.]com/2024/05/09/business/columbia-protests-divestment-invs/index.html)

- Some institutions have agreed to end their partnerships with Israeli institutions, while others have agreed to be more open about where university endowments are invested.¹³
- However, violent disbandments of student occupations are still occurring, with police raids on pro-Palestinian protesters at the University of Arizona, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and University of Pennsylvania all occurring on the evenings of May 9 and 10.¹⁴
- Similar protests have spread globally. The largest protests outside of the United States are at campuses in Europe's largest cities (like Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam) and across the United Kingdom.¹⁵¹⁶ Large protests are also taking place in Mexico City.¹⁷
- Campus protests are highly likely to escalate on May 14 when Israel celebrates its Independence Day, which Palestinians mark on May 15 under the name al-Nakba (catastrophe) day.¹⁸

Leading pro-Palestinian protest groups welcomed the Biden administration's decision to suspend some weapons shipments to Israel but vowed to continue protesting.¹⁹ Protests could expand if Israel's incursion into Rafah results in high casualties. It is unclear where campus protesters will demonstrate once graduation season ends. Some will likely continue to target university campuses, but—after achieving some success in getting their schools to divest from Israel—they may choose to target corporations, government facilities, corporate events, and retail outlets with close ties to Israel.

¹³

[hXXps://www.naharnet\[.\]com/stories/en/305108-pro-palestinian-protesters-across-us-demand-endowment-transparency](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/305108-pro-palestinian-protesters-across-us-demand-endowment-transparency)

¹⁴

[hXXps://apnews\[.\]com/article/mit-arizona-pennsylvania-campus-protests-encampment-police-7d9cd0a1f4ac7eac441b38de798a2217](https://apnews.com/article/mit-arizona-pennsylvania-campus-protests-encampment-police-7d9cd0a1f4ac7eac441b38de798a2217)

¹⁵ [hXXps://www.naharnet\[.\]com/stories/en/305075-pro-palestinian-campus-protests-spread-to-uk-universities](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/305075-pro-palestinian-campus-protests-spread-to-uk-universities)¹⁶

[hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/international/20240508-student-gaza-protests-in-europe-spread-sparking-clashes-and-dozens-of-arrests](https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20240508-student-gaza-protests-in-europe-spread-sparking-clashes-and-dozens-of-arrests)

¹⁷

[hXXps://www.eleconomista\[.\]com\[.\]mx/internacionales/Estudiantes-propalestinos-acampan-en-la-UNAM-piden-romper-relaciones-diplomaticas-con-Israel-20240502-0110.html](https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/internacionales/Estudiantes-propalestinos-acampan-en-la-UNAM-piden-romper-relaciones-diplomaticas-con-Israel-20240502-0110.html)

¹⁸ [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/MrAndyNgo/status/1789745876186919086](https://twitter.com/MrAndyNgo/status/1789745876186919086)¹⁹

[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/us/bidens-israel-weapons-pause-wont-dent-gaza-protests-organizers-say-2024-05-10/](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/bidens-israel-weapons-pause-wont-dent-gaza-protests-organizers-say-2024-05-10/)

- Major athletic events—like the European Championships in Germany from mid-June to mid-July 2024 as well as the Paris Olympics in July—are likely targets for physical protests.
- The Eurovision song contest being held in Sweden in May 2024 is actively being targeted by protesters.²⁰
- Campaign events related to the European Union-wide elections from June 6–9 and the U.S. elections are also likely targets. Grocery stores, food producers, restaurant chains, manufacturers, and weapons producers that conduct trade with Israel could also be targeted via online petitions or calls to boycott, as well as physical protests at their stores.

| Conclusion

As hopes for a ceasefire dim, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Israel-Hamas war could drag on for several more months, to the short-term benefit of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the chagrin of protesters worldwide. Furthermore, although President Biden announced that he is prohibiting the transfer of some bombs to Israel to prevent a larger operation against Rafah, the United States is still allowing the delivery of billions of dollars worth of weapons and munitions that will allow Israel to maintain offensive operations in the enclave for the foreseeable future.²¹

²⁰ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-68986410](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68986410)

²¹

[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/middle-east/israel-due-get-billions-dollars-more-us-weapons-despite-biden-pause-2024-05-09](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-due-get-billions-dollars-more-us-weapons-despite-biden-pause-2024-05-09)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%