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Israel's Military Operation in Rafah: Security Implications of Palestinian Displacement

By Ghada Farag Sayed Soliman

SYNOPSIS

As diplomatic efforts to halt the military operations in Gaza continue, the security implications of displacing so many Palestinian civilians relentlessly can no longer be minimised. As the next-door neighbour, Egypt will face particular challenges going forward. At the same time, Southeast Asia can be affected too.

COMMENTARY

While Hamas has shown interest in negotiating [an Israeli three-phase ceasefire proposal](#) as referred to by US President Joe Biden, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has maintained that the Gaza war would only end once Israel's objectives were achieved. It has also been reported that the US is considering [direct negotiations with Hamas](#) to secure the release of American hostages.

On the ground, Israeli military actions in Rafah, the Palestinian city in southern Gaza Strip situated next to the border with Egypt, continue. There is heavy civilian casualties. Many Palestinians in Rafah are at risk of further displacement. According to the latest update, the number of Palestinians who have evacuated Rafah has reached more than 700,000.

Beyond the humanitarian crisis, there are security implications for the region depending on where the displaced civilians move to next. There are two scenarios worth monitoring.

Scenario 1: Displacement towards Northern Gaza

One possible scenario revolves around a plan for civilians to move from Rafah to northern Gaza as Israel has set up a new border crossing at Zikim. This crossing is

near the northwestern edge of the Gaza Strip in the sea areas of Beit Lahia. The existing Erez crossing, also known as the Beit Hanoun crossing, is another that is located in northern Gaza and is expected to receive more humanitarian aid supplies.

The [Israeli media](#) has reported that the Israeli government purchased 40,000 tents from China in anticipation of the Rafah evacuation.

Scenario 2: Displacement to New Rafah City in Egypt

Another possible scenario is the displacement of Palestinians to the Egyptian [New Rafah City](#), which Egypt has announced is close to completion. New Rafah City is located approximately five km away from Egypt's border with the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

When asked if Egypt would temporarily allow Gaza refugees to enter if there is military action across the border, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said in a press conference, reported [by CNN on 21 March 2024](#), that Egypt will continue to act in the best interests of the Palestinian people.

Security Implications of Further Palestinian Displacement

Egypt Being Dragged into the Conflict

The military attack on Rafah that may result in the displacement of Palestinians to New Rafah City in Egypt can potentially escalate tensions and widen the number of actors involved in the conflict, especially Egypt. This has already begun to unfold.

A tragic event occurred involving [the deaths of two Egyptian soldiers](#) on 27 May 2024 during an exchange of fire with Israeli troops near the Rafah crossing on the Egypt Sinai border. This incident took place after Israel's attempt to retake control of the Philadelphi Corridor, which Egypt has warned would be a violation of the peace treaty between the two countries.

On the other hand, while Egypt's foreign minister was not clear whether Palestinian refugees would be allowed into Egypt when Rafah is attacked, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi stated in a press conference reported by [Al Jazeera six months ago](#) that he would not allow refugees from Gaza into Egypt as it would make the Sinai Peninsula a target for Israel. If New Rafah City is to absorb the Palestinians displaced from the Rafah operation, this scenario can lead to a potential escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas to spill over into neighbouring Egypt.

If forced into a more direct role, Egypt would have to address the military implications of hosting displaced Palestinians on its territory. Moreover, if Israel decides to extend its operational tentacles into New Rafah City to deal with Hamas militants who have fled with the displaced civilian population, then Egypt will need to respond accordingly.

Egypt's security challenges in dealing with extremism can be made more acute with the arrival of more Palestinians in the country. According to the [Palestinian Ambassador to Cairo, Diyab al-Louh](#), there are already as many as 100,000

Palestinians who had fled to Egypt since the start of the Gaza war; moreover, these Palestinians lack identity documents.

This creates a challenge for the Egyptian authorities to differentiate between genuine Palestinians seeking refuge and those with more worrisome intentions. The absence of a clear criteria to distinguish between innocent civilians and those who pose a potential security threat can give way for terrorist groups to infiltrate the refugee population.

The domino effect of Palestinian displacement can extend beyond the Middle East region to reach even Southeast Asia. Given the close ties between [Malaysia and Hamas](#), evidenced through free visa access for Palestinians to enter the country, this relationship can facilitate the relocation of many Palestinians to Malaysia.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Malaysia, there are [currently around 602 Palestinian students](#) studying in various universities and institutions across Malaysia, underscoring the potential for a bigger presence of displaced Palestinians in the Southeast Asian country.

Potential Spread of Violent Extremism

The mass influx of Palestinian refugees due to the Rafah military operation can create fertile grounds for radicalisation by terrorist groups. The assassination of a Jewish-Canadian businessman Ziv Kipper in the Egyptian city of Alexandria on 8 May 2024 by the [Vanguards of Liberation – the group of Mohamed Salah](#), is a case in point. While the group claimed responsibility for the attack in response to Israel's military operation in Rafah, Egyptian security sources have stated that they had no information of the existence of this group in Egypt.

The Twitter-posted video of the assassination was called "[Shalom-Sons of Gaza](#)" and had many responses from followers who showed support for the terrorist act. The unceasing Israeli operations in Gaza provide opportunities for extremist groups to deepen the sense of Palestinian and Muslim victimhood, which underlie extremist ideological narratives.

The experience of further displacement can serve as a potent recruitment tool for extremist groups seeking to exploit grievances related to perceived injustices, discrimination and oppression. By framing their ideology within the context of resistance or injustices inflicted upon Palestinians, extremist organisations can attract individuals who are disillusioned with mainstream political processes or feel disconnected from traditional forms of activism.

Moreover, the lack of prospects for a peaceful resolution to the Israel-Hamas conflict can reinforce narratives propagated by extremist groups that advocate violent means as the only way to achieve justice or liberation.

Conclusion

Amid ongoing Israeli operations in Rafah, concerns on the repercussions mount. These repercussions extend to the international system with the displacement of

Palestinians and the spread of new waves of violent extremism that can impact the international humanitarian framework, and security within the Middle East and beyond.

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