

‘Unfathomable Catastrophe’ Looms in Gaza. “Giving Israel a green light to do anything it wants.”

There is no realistic scenario in which this assault goes ahead and there isn't massive loss of innocent life.

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Michael Wahid Hanna [calls](#) on the U.S. to avert further catastrophe in Gaza:

It is hard to imagine things getting worse, but an assault on Rafah would up the ante. The US is the only power that can stop it. To do so, it will have to exert a degree of pressure it has so far been reluctant to apply.

Hanna is right, and I said something similar in my [column](#) this week. Unfortunately, the Biden administration has no intention of doing anything to discourage an Israeli ground assault on Rafah. Politico [reported](#) yesterday that multiple administration officials said that “no reprimand plans are in the works, meaning Israeli forces could enter the city and harm civilians without facing American consequences.”

This report is being correctly [interpreted](#) as giving Israel a green light to do anything it wants. In case it wasn't clear enough, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby [said](#), “Oh, we never said that they can't go into Rafah to remove Hamas.” When pressed about possible consequences, Kirby refused to discuss “hypotheticals.”

The administration previously said that the operation shouldn't “proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the more than one million people sheltering there,” but it is obvious that they aren't going to object when the operation goes ahead anyway. As usual, there is never an “or else” attached to these warnings, and that makes them easy to ignore. Even when the U.S. seems to be putting a limit on its support, it never means anything in practice.

This has been the pattern throughout the war. U.S. officials issue statements that sound like red lines that Israel shouldn't cross, and then almost immediately the administration clarifies that absolutely nothing will happen if Israel crosses them. The warnings that the U.S. gives are the thinnest smokescreen imaginable for the real policy of full backing for whatever the Israeli government chooses to do.

Having driven more than half of Gaza's population into this tiny corner of the Strip, the Israeli government is now telling them they should evacuate somewhere else after Israeli forces have laid waste to most of the territory. Consider how cruel and insane this is. The people are being deliberately starved by Israel's blockade, and at least half a million are already in famine conditions right now. Almost the entire population has been displaced by the war. Every "safe" place they have been told to go comes under Israeli attack. Now more than a million people are supposed to flee yet again when they have nowhere safe to go and no reason to believe that they won't be attacked when they try to move.

The World Health Organization [warns](#) that an assault on Rafah would cause an "unfathomable catastrophe" and "would even further expand the humanitarian disaster beyond imagination." The U.N. emergency relief coordinator Martin Griffiths [said](#) that it could "lead to a slaughter." He added that it could "leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door." Launching an attack on Gaza's tenuous lifeline to the outside world can only exacerbate the appalling humanitarian disaster that has been underway for months.

There is no realistic scenario in which this assault goes ahead and there isn't massive loss of innocent life. The U.S. has the leverage to prevent the assault and the catastrophe that will follow, but the administration is signaling to the world that it isn't going to use it. Failing to prevent this horror is a disgrace that will haunt the United States for decades to come.

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Featured image: Palestinian girl Eman Al-Kholi, whose limb was amputated after being wounded in an Israeli strike that killed her parents, looks on as she sits in a wheelchair at the European Hospital, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, December 28, 2023. REUTERS/Arafat Barbakh

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