

Under pressure, Egypt inclined to accept Israel-US push to host Palestinians potentially displaced by Israeli offensive

Wednesday 18 October 2023, by [Mada Masr](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2023).

Egypt is on the verge of accepting an agreement that would allow foreigners and dual nationals to traverse the Rafah crossing into North Sinai, having set as a precondition the approval of the entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, according to informed sources. The agreement would come as Gaza experiences the fiercest Israeli assault in decades and following days of pressure and disagreement over the details, the sources say.

While negotiations to allow foreign citizenship holders through to Egypt are all but finalized, the question of allowing large numbers of Palestinians to be displaced to Sinai in the event that an unprecedented Israeli military operation and complete siege forces them there remains a politically fraught issue laden with historical weight. Egypt has so far rejected such a scenario of a mass displacement but is coming under pressure from Western countries who are also offering economic incentives in an effort to come to a deal.

Over the past week, Mada Masr spoke with 21 informed sources, including Egyptian government, security and diplomatic sources close to the halls of power, in addition to foreign diplomats working in Cairo and Washington DC, as well as researchers with access to sovereign bodies and eyewitnesses at the Rafah border crossing to learn more about the negotiations and the accompanying pressures and to better understand their implications on the ground.

Nine of the sources indicated that several international parties discussed various economic incentives with Egypt in exchange for its acceptance of large inflows of displaced Palestinians into Sinai, which all of the parties expect to happen with an Israeli assault. According to six of the sources, there is an inclination to accept these terms within Egypt's political decision-making circles.

Several news agencies on Saturday prematurely reported that an agreement to allow foreign passport holders through had been struck and evacuations had begun, following Israel's pledge to not target the exit route from Gaza into Egypt, which is yet to reopen after being bombed by Israel three times earlier this week. However, while a deal is close, the evacuations stalled after Cairo insisted that authorizing the crossing of foreigners into Egypt must be accompanied by allowing entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, according to a security source and a government source.

In the meantime, to further tighten control over the border, Egyptian authorities erected a series of concrete blocks on the Egyptian side of the border on Saturday.

The United States sought to exert pressure in that regard, implying on Friday that it was considering evacuating foreigners by sea. But Egypt remained [adamant](#) in its position, regarding it as a necessary measure in an effort to diminish the magnitude of any eventual mass exodus, according to

a security source. Dozens of US nationals and Palestinians who hold US passports are therefore still stuck on the Palestinian side of the border crossing, having arrived there upon receiving notice from the US embassy that their evacuation had been arranged, according to an official on the Palestinian side of the border.

But this back and forth appears to be close to giving way. The all-but-sealed agreement on the exit of foreign nationals nearly reached by Egypt, the United States and Israel — which dispatched a Mossad delegation to Cairo on Friday — with [Qatari participation](#) is a first step in a broader discussion that continues both in public and behind closed doors about the possibility that Israel's assault on Gaza may compel masses of Palestinians to seek refuge from the violence in Egypt.

Israel's position on the matter is unambiguous. On Friday morning, Israeli planes dropped leaflets across the northern Gaza Strip, warning Palestinians in Gaza to head to the southern half of the coastal enclave. In the early hours of the same day, the United Nations said that the Israeli military informed them that all residents of the northern Gaza Strip — estimated by the UN to be over 1 million people — were to leave for the south in 24 hours. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) relocated its operations to the southern part of the strip, a UN source told Mada Masr.

Israel is openly advocating for this mass movement southward to continue into Egypt, with Israeli general Amir Avivi calling on the United Nations and the “international community” to speak to the Egyptian president about opening the border and allowing Palestinians into Sinai, during a televised BBC [interview](#) on Friday.

Instead of pressuring Israel to halt its bombing campaign, protect civilian life and let in humanitarian aid, various foreign governments have instead worked to try and broker a deal with Egypt to open its borders and let in large numbers of Palestinians fleeing the assault. As the United States and European Union try to pressure Egypt into accepting this reality, several Arab countries are also contributing to that effort, according to four government officials and a security source. The talks are taking place among various parties, with the exception of the Palestinians themselves.

The details are still subject to intense and ongoing negotiations, as Egypt's resistance to these pressures is a function of several factors, according to the sources.

Chief among them are Cairo's security considerations. Opinions vary within Egypt's decision-making circles, according to sources, as to how to absorb a potentially large number of displaced Palestinians. The only viable area is a five-kilometer area of the [buffer zone](#) directly on the Egyptian side of the border. But there are concerns about the capacity to accommodate a large number of Palestinians in such a confined area, and about how this may affect Egypt's ability to control its eastern border in practical terms.

In addition, the Egyptian government evacuated this area — Egyptian Rafah, which had an estimated population of around 100,000 — as part of its battle against the Province of Sinai. The government has faced significant pressure in recent months to allow the residents of Rafah to return. Residents were eventually promised they would be allowed back to their lands by October 10 after they staged protests this past summer. Though they were [never permitted](#) to return. Given the complications in the area, some officials have proposed allowing Palestinians to be hosted across Egyptian governorates, a proposal that has not garnered broad acceptance.

However, even if the Palestinians do not leave the strip, the mass displacement of Palestinians from northern Gaza to its south near the Egyptian borders represents a “ticking [security] bomb” for Egypt, according to the security source.

Nevertheless, sources indicate that decision-makers in Egypt are being forced to discuss the possibility of a mass influx of Palestinians because of the realities on the ground. If hundreds of thousands of Palestinians move toward Sinai as Israel continues its deadly assault with a possible ground invasion on the horizon, Egypt will have no choice but to allow them to enter. In that case, the question would no longer be whether Egypt will receive Palestinians in the event of their displacement. The questions would then be how, when, and under what conditions, according to one government source.

The security source adds that one estimate indicates that as many as 300,000 Palestinians could be displaced from Gaza during the war. "We cannot allow all 300,000 to enter," the source says, "[but] we will have to allow some in." According to the source's estimates, it could start with a few thousand and later increase to 50,000-60,000. "But no more than 100,000 should be allowed," the source says. Across all conversations, sources informed on the matter implied that calculations of how many Palestinians Egypt might host are based on rough estimates and are dependent on the developments of the field situation and the extent of the destruction caused by Israel in the coming period.

Although Egypt hopes that any Palestinians forcibly displaced to Egypt would not stay longer than a few months, the possibility that they will be able to return to Gaza is slim, according to one researcher close to sovereign agencies, who explained that in the case they cannot return, they will only be allowed to leave the buffer zone to travel to another country.

In return, Egypt is expected to obtain a package of financial aid and incentives that it is in desperate need of amid a severe economic crisis and record-high rates of inflation. These details are still under discussion. "Egypt is not at all keen to host Palestinians," says a diplomatic source working in a Western capital. "But if Egypt is forced to do so, there must be some financial compensation."

A high-ranking government source explains this logic: "You are facing a very difficult and complicated financial situation, with numerous creditors and very significant burdens. Now you have an offer to significantly reduce the size of these burdens and write off a large portion of the debt. So why not?"

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Armed Forces have continued preparations throughout the past week as the situation evolved rapidly on Egypt's eastern borders and does not appear to be leaving anything to chance.

According to eyewitnesses and two government sources in North Sinai who spoke to Mada Masr on Saturday, the military is cordoning off the Rafah buffer zone with barbed wire fence, while heavy military vehicles have been stationed along the borders of the area within the Egyptian side of the border.

The sources added that military forces began moving toward North Sinai at the end of last week. Over the course of the week, the scale of the deployment has increased significantly. Since their arrival, the military has been setting up barbed wire fences five kilometers from the border with the Gaza Strip, marking the endpoint of the buffer zone.

While one eyewitness confirmed that army-affiliated bulldozers paved a wide area of land around Masoura School in Rafah, the only school there, Arish International Airport continued to receive tons of aid from several countries, which are being stored in Arish Stadium, awaiting a green light for them to be transported to Gaza.

According to a source at the Egyptian Red Crescent in North Sinai, the airport has received about

100 tons of humanitarian aid from Jordan, Turkey, the UAE and the World Health Organization.

The source added that the Red Crescent's warehouses in Arish are full, which led them to use Arish Stadium to store the aid, which includes medical supplies, food, subsistence aid and x-ray devices.

Absent from all of these negotiations are the Palestinians themselves, whose fate is being decided without their consultation. And yet as the expectation around an Israeli ground invasion continues to build, there is little sign that anyone in Gaza is rushing to flee. A high-ranking Egyptian government source drew attention to the fact that, up to this point, there has not been an indication of a movement of Palestinians toward the Egyptian border despite the unprecedented Israeli bombardment. "The fact that this has been the reality for the past six days indicates that the Palestinians do not want to leave Gaza," said the source, who spoke to Mada Masr on Thursday. "They do not want to be forced into another displacement outside of Palestine."

Despite the suffocating Israeli siege, which has escalated in the last week to include a complete halt in the provision of water, food, electricity and fuel supplies from entering the strip, many Palestinians are afraid that they will be deprived of their right to return to Gaza, as has repeatedly happened to those displaced from Palestine over generations.

"The only just humanitarian option is to de-escalate and stop the barbaric military assault on Gaza's population," Tareq Baconi, president of the board of Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network and author of *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, tells Mada Masr. "This is no longer about retaliation," he says. "It is rather Israel's effort to fulfill long-held plans to expel the Palestinians in Gaza. Suggestions for a humanitarian corridor is nothing more than an endorsement of a second Nakba for Palestinians and is complicity with Israel's ethnic cleansing aspirations."

Mada Masr

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

MadaMasr

<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2023/10/15/feature/politics/under-pressure-egypt-inclined-to-accept-israel-us-push-to-host-palestinians-potentially-displaced-by-israeli-offensive/>