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# Fight for Gaza's Khan Younis Puts Israel, U.S. on Collision Course

Biden administration has warned against exacerbating a humanitarian disaster

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TEL AVIV—The southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis is a critical target for Israel's military—strategically and symbolically. The centuries-old market town is the suspected hiding place of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and the militant group's most significant remaining military stronghold.

But the fight to capture it risks putting Israel on a collision course with the Biden administration, which has called on Israel to minimize civilian casualties and ease humanitarian deprivation in Gaza, and to hew to a more limited war aim of expelling Hamas from power.

Khan Younis, a city of 400,000 people in normal times, almost doubled in size as Gazans fled there from the bombed-out remains of Gaza City. That makes it a treacherous battlefield as Israel fights militants in the midst of crowded neighborhoods.

Winning control of southern Gaza's biggest city would allow Israeli troops to surround Hamas's remaining fighters and effectively remove the U.S.-designated terrorist group from power in the Gaza Strip.

Israel would need to decide whether to keep waging conventional war against remaining Hamas forces with the airstrikes, ground forces and artillery that have impaired the militants' fighting power but also caused civilian casualties. Or it could begin to shift to limited special-forces operations to target remaining Hamas cells, a potentially yearslong fight that would have U.S. support but also require a long-term presence that could be criticized as occupation.



Israeli military near the border with the Gaza Strip on Sunday. PHOTO: JACK GUEZ/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES



A square in Gaza's southernmost city, Rafah, where thousands of Palestinians have fled to escape the fighting in Khan Younis. PHOTO: MOHAMMED ABED/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

In Israel last week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told officials in Israel's war cabinet that the Biden administration believed the conflict should end in weeks, not months, said U.S. officials with knowledge of the discussions. Israeli officials made no guarantees but expressed their interest in a return to normal, particularly so that the country doesn't take a hit economically, the officials said.

"We all recognize the longer this war goes on, the harder it gets for everybody," said a U.S. official.

The U.S. and Israel have also used different rhetoric about war aims, with the U.S. focusing on ending Hamas's reign in power and some Israeli officials, including Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu, talking about eradicating the militant group—something Washington sees as impossible.

There is also some daylight between the U.S. and Israel positions on how much aid to allow into Gaza and when to negotiate for the release of hostages, which include at least eight U.S.-Israeli dual nationals. Israeli officials say their goals remain aligned with the U.S., even if the messaging sometimes differs.

Looming over all of it is a sense that domestic political pressure on President Biden, who is heading into an election year, has put a time limit on such active American support for the Israeli war effort. Biden's support for Israel has hurt him with left-leaning Democrats, polls show, as images of dead children and other innocent civilians proliferate across news pages and social media.



President Biden's support for Israel has hurt him with left-leaning Democrats. PHOTO: ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

Officials in Hamas-controlled Gaza have said the death toll in the enclave has risen past 16,000 in the war, a figure that is mostly women and children but doesn't distinguish between militants and civilians. Israel began its military action in response to Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks on Israel, which Israel has said killed 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and included terrorist attacks on kibbutzim and a dance party.

Blinken has said he told Israeli officials that the high civilian death toll from Israel's assault on northern Gaza mustn't be repeated in the south. However, U.S. officials have said that no explicit consequences were laid out. Withholding U.S. aid to Israel and other potential penalties aren't yet on the table, officials said.

U.S. officials said they hope their pressure campaign will persuade the Israelis to view limiting civilian casualties as an imperative. They point to Netanyahu's initial unwillingness to permit aid into Gaza, something he eventually allowed.

U.S. concerns about the execution of the conflict and the way in which the Israelis have described their aims have grown increasingly public. While U.S. officials had for weeks positioned themselves as being in lockstep with Israel, there are signs that patience with Israel's current approach is running low.

"I have repeatedly made clear to Israel's leaders that protecting Palestinian civilians in Gaza is both a moral responsibility and a strategic imperative," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum in California on Saturday. "And so I have personally pushed Israeli leaders to avoid civilian casualties, and to shun irresponsible rhetoric, and to prevent violence by settlers in the West Bank, and to dramatically expand access to humanitarian aid."

Giora Eiland, a former Israeli general and national security adviser, said the American demands on aid and objections to mass evacuations of civilian areas are counterproductive.

"We are fighting with one hand tied behind our back because we are supposed to take care of the population in Gaza," Eiland said. Of the Biden administration, he said: "With one hand they are helping us, and with the other, they are helping Hamas."

Israeli military spokesman Lt. Col. Richard Hecht said Israel has no intention of letting up until its goals are achieved. "This could take time. There could be certain stages to this," Hecht said. "Israel won't back down, for as long as it takes."

Beyond Khan Younis, the U.S. and Israel are also divided over how to respond to the Iran-backed Houthi forces who control northern Yemen and have been firing drones and ballistic missiles at Israel for weeks. Israel and the U.S. have shot down most of these airborne threats, but the U.S. has told Israel to let the American military respond to the Houthis, instead of risking an Israeli response that could expand the conflict, U.S. and other government officials said.

In Gaza, Israel has sought a middle way to keep Washington on its side. It has kept humanitarian aid flowing since a cease-fire ended last week, and Israeli military officials say they are increasing the capacity to let more in daily. It has also sectioned off Gaza into

hundreds of numbered blocks and broadcasts each day to Gazans which blocks are unsafe—a move Gazans have said is hard to follow but that U.S. officials say is an unprecedented step to minimize civilian deaths.

Israel has warned Gazans to leave areas in central and eastern Khan Younis, as it moves tanks and troops into the heart of the city and continues punishing airstrikes. Those warnings are pushing thousands more Gazans into the strip's southernmost city, Rafah, where people are already sleeping on the street, on benches and in parks, and food, water and fuel are scarce for most people.



Palestinians carry their belongings after strikes in Khan Younis on Saturday. Israel has warned Gazans to leave central and eastern areas of the city. PHOTO: AHMED ZAKOT/REUTERS



People wait to receive clean water from a water station in Khan Younis on Tuesday. The city's prewar population of 400,000 people has nearly doubled in size. PHOTO: AHMED ZAKOT/ZUMA PRESS

Israel hasn't telegraphed whether it would take the fight to Rafah after Khan Younis. Rafah

presents an even more challenging humanitarian picture than Khan Younis, with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians trapped between the military and the Egyptian border. The U.S. has said displacing Gazans outside their territory is a line Israel shouldn't cross.

“Lately, I have been asked whether we have the legitimacy to continue fighting, and to that I answer: We do not have the legitimacy to stop,” said Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. “There is only one legitimate thing to do: to win against Hamas, to strike them and eliminate them—destroying their governing and military capabilities, and bringing the hostages home.”

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