Thursday, May 9, 2024 / Biden’s breaking point on Gaza

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It’s been a big week for the Israel-Hamas war.

SCORING <BUM BUM BUM>

SEAN: On Monday, Israel warned about 100,000 Palestinians to evacuate eastern Rafah.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZza4ryK1kk)*> TODAY RAFAH INVASION: The Israeli military used leaflets and text messages to tell Gazans to leave eastern Rafah…*

SEAN: Shortly thereafter they bombed targets and took the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing. While that was happening, we were getting conflicting news on a ceasefire. Hamas accepts a ceasefire deal! Wrong deal! Everything falls apart!

And while *that* was happening, it seemed like President Joe Biden was working towards an ultimatum. And then Wednesday night, in an interview with CNN, he articulated it:

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN ON CNN: If they go into Rafah, I’m not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities, to deal with that problem.*

SEAN: We’re gonna unpack it all and figure out whether any of it gets us closer to the end of this war on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

BUMPER <Arabic bumper - “You’re listening to Today, Explained”>

SEAN: Barak Ravid, politics and foreign policy reporter at Axios. Israeli Defense Forces took over the Rafah Crossing on Tuesday. We’re talking Thursday morning. What are they doing now?

BARAK: Yeah. I think the main thing that they did is to capture the Crossing – the Palestinian side of the crossing, obviously. It's on the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, and it's a strategic site for Hamas for several reasons.

SCORING IN <Luke Takes a Train>

BARAK: The one who controls the crossing controls the aid trucks. The one who controls the aid trucks has a lot of power inside Gaza. That's number one. Number two, Hamas collects taxes in this crossing. It's a lot of money. And third, and maybe most important, by the way, is the symbolic thing here because one of the goals that Hamas has and the goal that Israel has, which is completely the opposite, is, you know, this fight over whether Hamas is still ruling Gaza or not. And the Rafah Crossing was a main site that Hamas could use to say, ‘We're the boss, okay? We're the boss because we control the crossing. We're still standing on our two feet. We're still running the show.’ And when they're not in the Rafah crossing, Israel can say, ‘You see? We eliminated a big part of Hamas's governmental control over Gaza.’ In reality, I'm not sure that this is like a major achievement in the war for Israel or a major defeat for Hamas, or that it will have any influence on really where this thing is going. It's meaningful. It's interesting. It has influence, but it is not like something dramatic just happened in the war.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Is aid still getting into Gaza and getting to the Palestinians?

BARAK: So the answer is “Yes, but ….”

SEAN: Hm.

BARAK: Okay? Meaning: aid is still coming in, but it's coming in with several caveats. Meaning the Rafah Crossing is, is shut down. And it was one of the main entry points for aid trucks into Gaza. This hasn't happened in the last few days since Israel captured the crossing. And it's, you know, it's effectively shut down. What happened a day after – after, you know, a lot of you, a lot of pressure from the Biden administration and from President Biden himself in a conversation with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, is that Israel reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing, which is two miles from the Rafah crossing.

*<CLIP> JOHN KIRBY MAY 6 - 3: During the call, at the president’s urging, Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to ensure that the Kerem Shalom crossing is back open for humanitarian assistance for those in need.*

BARAK: In addition, you have several crossings in northern Gaza that are now focusing on getting aid to the northern parts of the Gaza Strip, which are the area which aid is most critical. Because, again, not to the situation in southern Gaza is great, but in the north it is terrible. And this is why, in any case, the main effort in the last few weeks was to reopen the Erez Crossing, which is on the northern part of the Gaza Strip, on the border between Israel and Gaza. It is a crossing that was attacked by Hamas on October 7th. It was completely destroyed in the Hamas attack, and it was closed since then. And just like a week or ten days ago, it was reopened. And it's – it's really a game changer when it comes to getting aid into the northern parts of Gaza.

SEAN: All of this is happening while we're getting news that there's this potential for a cease fire, this will-they, won't-they. It seems to be changing by the minute. What's the latest there?

BARAK: So, the latest is that we don't have a ceasefire yet, and we don't have a hostage deal yet. But I think it is clear to everybody who's dealing with this – both in the Biden administration, in the Israeli government, in the Qatari government, in the Egyptian government, and in Hamas – that the only way to get to a ceasefire in the foreseeable future – the only way – is if there's a hostage deal. I do not see any other route to get to a cease fire. And the thing is that for now, Israel and Hamas are exchanging proposals and counter proposals and counter-counter proposals and counter-counter-counter proposals.

SEAN: <laughs>

BARAK: But the main gaps are still there. And let's, you know, let's talk about one big gap that is not about details. It's about the strategic idea of where this thing is going. This is about whether this hostage deal, if implemented in full, will end the war or not.

SEAN: Mm.

*<CLIP> CHANNEL 4 NEWS: Today, Binyamin Netanyahu said he was prepared to pause the fighting but not prepared to end the war and leave Hamas in power.  
NETANYAHU: <translation> We’re not willing to accept a situation in which Hamas’ battalions leave their tunnels, re-establish control over the Gaza Strip, rebuild their military industries, and go back to threatening the citizens of Israel in the communities near Gaza, the cities of the South, and throughout the country. In such a case, the next October the 7th would only be a matter of time.*

BARAK: Hamas says, ‘You want a hostage deal? No problem. After the last hostage is released, we want this to be the end of the war and want to know that it's the end of the war in a very early stage of the implementation.’ And Israel says, ‘Listen, we are ready to go into this process, but we don't promise you that that's the end of the war. We'll see. We'll get into the process. You release the hostages.’ And because the process is, if fully implemented, you're talking about something like three months of ceasefire. They say, you know, in three months, we'll decide whether we resuming the war or not. This is the. That's the bottom line.  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
BARAK: Everything else is details. Some of them are more boring. Some of them are more interesting, some of them are more important, some of them are less important, but they're not the deal breaker or the deal maker. The main issue is whether this hostage deal process – that is going to take, you know, between 2 to 3 months – whether it's going to end with the end of the war or not.

SEAN: And that's why it's taking so long. Because that's a very complicated question?

BARAK: On the one hand, it's a complicated question. On the other hand, it's very simple. All the details themselves are much more complicated. You know which hostages will be released on which day, and which Palestinian prisoners will be released in return? And what's going to be the sequence? That's much more complicated. But the big decision, it's a political decision. It's a political decision, and it has to do with – mainly with the Israeli government priorities. Whether it says the hostages are the main priority or the destruction of Hamas is the main priority. Those two priorities, and I think it's clear to everybody after seven months of war, cannot live together.

SEAN: Mm.

BARAK: At least not now. Maybe they could in an early stage of the war, but right now you have to choose. And every choice you make has both national security strategic implications and domestic political implications, because Netanyahu has radical right wing political partners in his coalition that tell him, ‘If you take this deal, we're going to leave the coalition. If we leave the coalition, this means election. And if there are elections, most likely Netanyahu will lose.’

SEAN: And we don’t know for sure, but that might be the reason we have IDF troops at Rafah Crossing?

BARAK: This is – it's not a question mark. It's an exclamation mark!

SEAN: Mm!

BARAK: Nobody's hiding it. Because I'll tell you what happened. You have a situation where, on the one hand, you have the hostage talks, which are sort of stuck, and Netanyahu and his war cabinet say, you know, we need some leverage. How do we get leverage? We need to take the Rafah Crossing. Okay. That's one.

SEAN: Mmm.

BARAK: But there's another thing because, two days before the IDF captured the Rafah Crossing, Hamas conducted an attack on an Israeli force that was positioned right outside the Gaza Strip on the Israeli side of the border near Rafah. And four Israeli soldiers were killed. And the government was under huge pressure to show that they're doing something because the attack came from Rafah. And Netanyahu's coalition partners, the radical right wing coalition partners, pressed him to do something. So it's always this combination between the goal of getting leverage in the hostage talks and the need for Netanyahu to maintain his coalition and sort of calm down his radical right wing coalition partners. So it is not the question of whether there's domestic politics here. There is definitely domestic politics here. And there are, you know, other considerations. It's never just one and not the other.

SEAN: Do we have any idea how much of what might be happening in the next days, what's happening right now in Rafah, might prolong a ceasefire agreement?

BARAK: Look, I think it's still unclear. At least as long as the IDF does not go into the city itself, I don't see a real influence on the hostage talks. And I'll tell you why, because I thought that right after – the day after - Israel captured the Rafah Crossing, the talks in Cairo needed to resume. And I was sure that the Egyptians will say, ‘You know what? You just captured Rafah Crossing, forget about it. Don't come here.’ And that Hamas will say, ‘You just captured the Rafah Crossing. We're not sending a delegation.’ And I was wrong!

SCORING IN <Vector Mode>  
  
BARAK: The Egyptians started the talks, hosted the talks. Hamas sent a delegation. Israel sent a delegation. CIA director is in Cairo. So it did not have real influence on, on the hostage talks, at least until now.

SCORING <Vector Mode>  
  
SEAN: We’re going to talk to Barak Ravid about President Biden’s breaking point on Rafah when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

BUMPER <Hebrew bumper - “You’re listening to Today, Explained”>

SEAN: Barak, now that we’ve established what’s going on in Rafah and in Israeli politics, I want to talk about what’s going on in the White House, because we’ve had a lot of big news this week.

BARAK: For something like 3 or 4 months now, the Biden administration has been telling the Israelis, both in private and in public, that it opposes, you know, an invasion of Rafah, a major ground operation into the city without a credible plan to, you know, protect the more than a million Palestinians that have been taking shelter there since the beginning of the war.

SEAN: Mm.

BARAK: So I think, that, you know, while at the beginning, like three months ago, the messages were very subtle. Every week that we got closer, the messages became much clearer. You know, last Sunday, I, I published a story about, you know, the Biden administration putting on hold a weapons shipment to Israel, which was the first time that such a thing happened since October 7th.

*<CLIP> CBS WEAPONS: President Biden issuing a warning to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: the US will not supply weapons that Israel could use in an assault in the southern city of Rafah.*

BARAK: And this was like, sort of a, you know, warning signal…

SEAN: Mm hm.

BARAK: …for the Israelis, somewhat of a passive aggressive warning signal about whatever.

SEAN: <laughs>

BARAK: And, yeah. And, it was, you know, a U.S. official actually, you know, described it to me as a passive aggressive warning signal…

SEAN: Hm!

BARAK: …which was, you know, which was really funny. It's not like my, it's not my, my definition. And then, you know, we saw President Biden give an interview on CNN and, you know, saying publicly for the first time that if Israel invades Rafah, he will suspend the shipments of bombs for fighter jets and artillery shells and other offensive weapons, which is also something unprecedented in U.S.-Israel relations.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN ON CNN: I’ve made it clear to Bibi and the war cabinet: they’re not gonna get our support if in fact they go into these population centers.*

BARAK: And I think a lot of people were, were shocked, especially people in the Israeli government that sort of told themselves that, you know, things will be okay. Biden will not, will not do this because, you wouldn't want to have a political fight domestically with Republicans, with Jewish organizations, with others, with people within his own party. And then when it happened, I think they were, they were sort of, you know, had a reality check.

SEAN: It's interesting. Right? The timing of it. The day before he, he goes on CNN, he's at a Holocaust memorial talking about anti-Semitism and then the next day he's saying, we're not going to give you any more arms. Is this a breaking point for President Biden, do you think?

BARAK: I think we are definitely close to a breaking point. So, for example, what I heard from White House officials is that, you know, this, the capture of the Rafah crossing is definitely not crossing Biden's red line, and it's not the breaking point. And then they said, but, *but,* if they go into Rafah City, if they really invade, this will be a breaking point.

*<CLIP> STATE DEPT SPOX MATTHEW MILLER: We will continue to make clear that we oppose a major military operation in Rafah. Make that clear to them privately, as well as publicly.*

BARAK: Joe Biden doesn't say that he doesn't care about Israel’s security or anything. He says, we don't support the kind of operation that the Israelis are going to do in Rafah. Therefore, we're not going to be a part of it, and we're not going to, you know, support it with U.S.-made weapons. But he said at the same time that he is going to continue to support, you know, Israel's security when it comes to attacks from Iran or attacks from Hezbollah.

SEAN: Yeah.

BARAK: And I think this is where he draws the line when he says, if Iran attacks as well tomorrow, I'm going to do exactly what I did on April 14th and help Israel defeat the Iranians. If Hezbollah tomorrow attacks Israel, you know, there's fighting on between Israel and Hezbollah every day since October 7th. But, I mean, if Hezbollah goes out and takes the those skirmishes along the border and turn them into like an all out war, Biden will step, step up and step in and, and, and help Israel defend itself. But if it's about an Israeli operation into Rafah, he doesn't want to be part of it. And that's, that's where he draws the line.

SEAN: Can we talk about the mechanics of pausing arms shipments to Israel? Is that symbolic, or is that going to directly affect Israel's ability to conduct this war?

BARAK: At this point right now, it's still symbolic.

SEAN: Hm.

BARAK: Okay. Because, you know, Israel has, A, Israel manufactures its own munitions and and artillery shells and things like that. It depends also on U.S.-made weapons. But again, in the immediate term this is not going to change, okay? Israel doesn't need this shipment that was held up or other U.S.-made weapons in order to go into Rafah. It can go into Rafah anyway. But they think if Israel goes into Rafah, this will become from a one-off to something which is more permanent. And then within a few weeks or a few months, Israel will be in a situation where it will need to start this, you know, ammunition economy.

SEAN: Hm.

BARAK: Meaning you need to start thinking, okay, how many shells am I going to use? Okay. Which bomb am I, am I going to use? How many?

SEAN: Hm.

BARAK: Is this target important enough for me to, like, quote-unquote waste a 2,000 pound bomb on it? And when you start getting into this situation, you need to start thinking more about whether this is really an important target to hit. Does it really have a military value or not? And I think that's one of the goals of Biden's decision. Because when you need to start making those considerations, then you, you are more thoughtful and you count to ten and sometimes to 100 before you decide to bomb something.

SEAN: How is Netanyahu responding to this ultimatum from President Biden?

BARAK: So, you know, there's, there’s a funny thing because Bibi's people started telling reporters that on the last phone call that Biden had with Netanyahu, on Monday. He told Biden after the president told them that if you go into Rafah, we will, you know, suspend military aid? So they said that Netanyahu told them ‘If Israel has to, it will fight with its fingernails.’

SEAN: Hm!

BARAK: And, you know, after this thing started circulating on, on Twitter, I started getting messages from U.S. officials who were on the call that said, ‘Dude, he didn't really say the fingernails stuff.’

SEAN: Huh!

BARAK: <chuckles> And I said, so what did he say? They said, well, he said that he understands the message, but the word fingernails didn't come up. And then I went back to Netanyahu's people and they said, ‘You know, we, we stand by what we said. He did say fingernails.’ Which is sort of funny… <laughs>

SEAN: Okay.

BARAK: Funny argument, but it tells you something about what Netanyahu wants people to know about where he stands.

SEAN: Hm.

BARAK: Meaning he wants to deliver the message that, ‘You know what, Joe Biden? You don't want to give me weapons. No problem. I don't need you. We will fight to our last bullet. We will fight with our fingernails. We will do whatever.’

*<CLIP> NETANYAHU INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE: I say to the leaders of the world: no amount of pressure, no decision by any international forum, will stop Israel from defending itself.*

BARAK: You know, regardless of whether he really said it to him on the phone call or not. That's the message Netanyahu wants, wants to to come out, at least in public and especially for domestic consumption. And I think he also wants this message to be heard by people in America, especially by Republicans, and that this will create more pressure on the Biden administration to sort of walk back its threats to stop military aid.

SEAN: Yeah. It's interesting to think about the political position President Biden puts himself in by drawing this red line – by, by vocalizing his breaking point here. What do we think led to that decision?

BARAK: So, you know, Biden said, a few days ago, reporters shouted a question to him and said whether the protest on campuses change his policy regarding the war in Gaza.

SEAN: Mm.

*<CLIP> Reporter: Mr. President, have the protests forced you to reconsider any of the policies with regard to the region?*

*Biden: No. Thank you.*

BARAK: But honestly, you know, when you look at his, not his rhetoric, but at his actions, it is clear, okay, that, you know, those demonstrations have their influence. If Israel goes into Rafah, this means that this war is going to escalate and going to continue for many more months. And for many more months people in America will open their television sets and will see pictures of chaos in Gaza. And when you're six months away from an election and people, ordinary people, not experts on the Middle East, you know, they, they, they see and say just chaos. And when there's chaos, there's one guy who's responsible. That's the president.

SCORING IN <Neutral Irene>

BARAK: At the end of the day, the big question, there’s, it's all on one thing: whether there is a hostage deal and whether you can get to a point where, the both parties can get into some sort of an agreement that one side says we didn't commit to end the war, and the other side says we got a commitment that the war is going to end. You need to be Harry Houdini or Nadia Comăneci to get this very complex balancing act. I'm not sure there is anybody that can get us there at the moment.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Barak Ravid. Read his scoops at axios.com.

Our program today was produced by Avishay Artsy and Amanda Lewellyn. They had help from Matthew Collette and Amina Al-Sadi, Laura Bullard, Hady Mawajdeh, David Herman and Patrick Boyd.   
  
We also have on our team Haleema Shah, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Rob Byers, and joining us this week, Denise Guerra.

We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder. Miranda Kennedy is our executive producer. Noel King is my co-host. I’m Sean Rameswaram.

*Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox, which is totally free thanks in part to contributions from our listeners. Join us at vox.com/give.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]