

U.S. Government Failures to Evacuate U.S. Citizens, Legal Residents, and Their Families from Gaza

Why Palestinian Americans have resorted to
fundraising for their families' escape

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eight months after the horrific October 7 attacks and into the Israeli government's brutal war in Gaza, nearly one thousand (known) American citizens, legal permanent residents, and family members of Americans remain trapped in the Gaza Strip with no clear avenue for escape. This report captures how the Biden administration and Members of Congress have systematically failed to coordinate evacuations for U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, and their loved ones from the Gaza Strip after October 7. As a result of their government's failures, Palestinian Americans in the U.S. have been forced to turn to alternative, expensive pathways to attempt to organize their loved ones' escapes. To raise money to get people out, many have turned to crowdfunding platforms to pay the preposterously expensive fees to get their family members' names on daily exit lists. But Palestinian Americans interviewed in this report are more than aware of the limitations of their fundraisers on saving their families, and since the Israeli government closed the sole exit out of Gaza open to Palestinians during the war – the Rafah border crossing – it has become clear that such an alternative cannot replace U.S. government action.

INTRODUCTION

Mass bombardment, starvation, and destruction in the Gaza Strip have reached unimaginable levels. In previous violent crises, including in the Middle East, the State Department conducted evacuations for U.S. citizens, legal residents, and their family members. During Lebanon’s July 2006 war, for example, the U.S. safely evacuated 15,000 American citizens and their family members from the country. According to one attorney interviewed in this report, the U.S. “landed planes down in the middle of absolute carnage and chaos” to get them out. Immediately following the horrific October 7, 2023 attacks, the U.S. Department of State reportedly prepared evacuation plans for the 600,000 Americans and Israeli-American dual nationals in Israel in the event of a full-scale regional war. In the month following the attacks, the State Department evacuated 1,500 U.S. citizens and their families from Israel by air and sea, out of the 5,600 seats made available. No such effort took place in Gaza.

Before the Israeli government’s incursion into eastern Rafah and its complete closure of the Rafah border crossing on May 7, the only way for individuals to escape the besieged and blockaded Gaza Strip was to cross the Rafah border into Egypt. Crossing the border was only possible for those on the Egyptian government’s list of people permitted to cross each day or for some critically injured or ill Palestinians. Foreign governments could intervene to get people — such as their nationals or nationals’ family members — onto the list, but there was no crossing the border without being on the list. Even U.S. citizens could not automatically cross.

Even when the State Department submitted names of people it wanted to evacuate from Gaza, it could take weeks, and even months, before that person could actually evacuate. Close to one thousand of the Palestinians currently trapped in the besieged strip are U.S. citizens, legal residents, and eligible family members. Between the beginning of November and the beginning of December 2023, the State Department facilitated the evacuation of at least 1,100 Americans and their relatives from the Gaza Strip by getting their names on the evacuation lists, but many are still stuck. In December 2023, the U.S. State Department said at least 350 American citizens, in addition to about 600 permanent residents and immediate family members of Americans, were still trapped. The number may be significantly higher, as the White House previously admitted to not knowing exactly how many Americans are trapped in Gaza, let alone their relatives. All these evacuations took place through the Rafah border crossing since the U.S. did not prepare any large-scale air or sea evacuation plans for American nationals, legal residents, and immediate family members in Gaza.

Previously, the State Department only committed to providing evacuation assistance to U.S. citizens and their dependents, which included spouses and minor children, in the case of crisis. However, one month into the war in Gaza, the State Department announced it had expanded evacuation assistance “to include parents of U.S. citizens [...] and siblings of U.S. citizens where both are unmarried and under 21.” Notably, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, and even siblings over the age of 21 or married do not qualify. For U.S. green card holders, even parents are excluded from these evacuation guidelines.

Considering these restrictions on who qualifies for U.S. government evacuation support and the delays in evacuations even for those who are qualified for U.S. assistance, people began resorting to an alternative way of getting their loved one’s name on an exit list: paying fees to anonymous intermediaries for “coordinating” a passage through Rafah. A state-owned Egyptian tourism company, Hala

Tourism and Consulting, offers services to manage transportation and facilitate the process of registering names on the Egyptian government's list of people approved for entry. Before the Rafah crossing's closure on May 7, the cost of a single person's escape from Gaza was enormous, having risen from around \$4,000 per person at the beginning of the war to up to \$10,000, which the vast majority of people in Gaza cannot pay alone. Americans with loved ones stuck in Gaza know that time is running out to save them, and they're doing everything in their power to do so. As many contend with the U.S. government's lack of urgency to end the war and inaction to securely evacuate their family members, they have turned to what some describe as the "last resort": private charity.

But at the time of writing, the Israeli government has seized and closed the Rafah border, after months of threats by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he would invade Rafah. As a consequence, millions are now stuck in Gaza with absolutely no way out. While the State Department was able to rescue 17 American doctors and healthcare workers out of a total of 20 who were trapped at the European Hospital due to the border closure, there does not seem to be similar evacuation efforts for other U.S. citizens and their family members who also find themselves trapped in Gaza.

This report centers the stories of just a few of the hundreds of Americans in the United States who have been systematically failed by the U.S. government and have chosen to run online fundraisers in an attempt to save their loved ones from Gaza. It reveals the ongoing efforts they've undertaken to engage the U.S. government – both the administration officials in charge of evacuations and congressional representatives meant to help their constituents navigate federal bureaucracy – with no success. As Americans took this life-or-death matter into their own hands, they revealed the horrific implications of the U.S. government's policy failures.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT MET WITHOUT ACTION

Before turning to GoFundMe and other crowdfunding platforms, most Palestinian Americans with immediate or extended family members trapped in Gaza exhausted all avenues of government engagement and pressure. They reached out repeatedly to the White House and executive departments that are meant to support citizens and their families abroad, and asked their congressional representatives to work with them to get the administration to take action. Some even filed lawsuits against the Biden administration to try to force the government to take their loved ones' plight seriously. To understand the realities faced by those working to evacuate individuals from the Gaza Strip, we spoke with several individuals who have been involved in raising funds and advocating for evacuations. These individuals were identified through their sponsorship of online fundraisers and interviews were conducted via telephone and video conference to better understand their experiences.

No one interviewed for this report has had any success in engaging their government representatives to find a solution to save their families.

Shifa, a Palestinian American lawyer born and raised in Texas, has about 50 family members stuck in Rafah that she hopes to save. Her family members, who were living in northern Gaza at the start of the war, have been displaced four times since October 7. Some of them were killed by Israeli air strikes, while some have died as a result of the aid blockade exacerbating the humanitarian catastrophe. Others

disappeared, potentially killed or kidnapped, and are now unreachable by phone.

“We've exhausted absolutely every avenue to save their lives,” Shifa said. “We submitted correspondence to the State Department. We've submitted all the applications to expedite this process. We've reached out to immigration attorneys. We have done it all, no response.”

Her American family members in the U.S. have been actively reaching out to the State Department. A local chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) sent a letter on behalf of Shifa's grandmother, a U.S. citizen, to the State Department seeking to have her daughter, Shifa's aunt, placed on an exit list. But they also received no response. Shifa watched as local collectives including CAIR and Houston Palestinian Liberation, of which she is a part, attempted to engage with Shifa's congressional representative and asked her to meet with Palestinian Americans to hear their grievances and call for a ceasefire. But, according to Shifa, her representative “consistently denied those requests.”

After hearing stories of U.S. citizens, including her own friends, who found themselves trapped in Gaza without U.S. government support, Shifa's expectations for help from her government were limited, but neither the administration nor her congressional delegation could meet even her low bar. She eventually abandoned her efforts to push government officials: “If they didn't bother to care or feel compelled to move to action when their own constituents were stuck in Gaza, on what planet would they be concerned about the family members of a constituent, right?”

A Palestinian American elementary school teacher living in Wisconsin, Yasmine, similarly tried various engagement avenues to obtain support from the U.S. government to save about 30 family members. Like Shifa's, Yasmine's family also lived in northern Gaza and was displaced further and further into southern Gaza as the Israeli military deepened its offensive.

“We sent letters and called, we sent emails. And we didn't really hear anything. We just got a bunch of ‘there's nothing we can do,’” Yasmine said. She and her family have continuously tried to contact members of the government. Her parents overnighted letters to the White House, including to President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. They sent letters to their congressional representatives. “The GoFundMe was a last resort.”

“The GoFundMe was a last resort.” Yasmine

GoFundMe was also the last resort for the majority of the clients of Maria Kari, a private attorney based in Texas, working to evacuate U.S. citizens, green card holders, and relatives of citizens from Gaza. She said that every single one of her clients who has not been able to escape Gaza has started a GoFundMe campaign or has had their family members start GoFundMe campaigns on their behalf.

As an attorney representing people trapped in Gaza who are legally eligible to come to the U.S., she has used every legal tool available – including several lawsuits against the Biden administration – on behalf of her clients.

**“It took us
filing
lawsuits, and
not even the
lawsuits were
enough.”
Maria Kari**

In addition, she co-created The Gaza Family Project (GFP), a humanitarian initiative led by the Arab-American Civil Rights League to identify potential legal avenues for U.S. citizens and permanent residents who are unable to leave Gaza or who wish to bring family members currently in Gaza to the United States. Through the program, she has been in touch with hundreds of families, for whom she and her colleagues have filed humanitarian parole applications.

But the GFP has been constrained by several factors, Maria says. First, the fact that so many families are still trapped in Gaza renders them unable to access an American embassy for consular processing, which is the second step of a humanitarian parole application. And second, she argues, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) lack of urgency to expedite the filed humanitarian parole application. Maria said that USCIS has repeatedly made it clear that to fully process a humanitarian parole application, the beneficiary would have to be able to attend an interview at the U.S. embassy. At the same time, they have also made it clear that a partially approved humanitarian parole application will not assist individuals with exiting Gaza. In other words, Maria said, even having a partially approved humanitarian parole application – in which all the beneficiary needs to do is show up in Cairo at the U.S. embassy – is not a ticket out of Gaza.

In touch with hundreds of Americans who are stuck or have family stuck in Gaza, Maria has example after example illustrating the failures of the Biden administration in protecting them. One of her clients, a young American man living in Austin, Texas, is newly married to a Palestinian woman in Gaza. Maria was close to having the wife's green card petition approved until the U.S. embassy in Cairo informed her the only way for the wife to obtain the green card – which they had agreed to expedite and approve – was for her to get to Egypt. Yet the government refused to support her evacuation to Egypt. “We were back at square one,” Maria said. The wife of the U.S. citizen was working as a nurse at a hospital in Gaza and was detained by the Israel Defense Forces. After nine days, she resurfaced near Rafah. While the U.S. government said they submitted her name to be added to the evacuation list, they claimed that their Israeli and Egyptian counterparts had the final approval. However, Maria asserted, “We all know final approval is with COGAT {Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories}.” She argued the U.S. government had the power to exert much more pressure on the Israeli officials to facilitate getting the wife's name on the evacuation list – yet they didn't do so, despite saying she qualified for evacuation and approving her green card.

“The State Department's website clearly stipulates that spouses qualify for evacuation,” and yet, Maria said, “They did nothing, [gave] the same boilerplate responses we kept receiving.”

Maria had clear expectations when the war broke out that the U.S. government would ensure U.S. citizens and their families were safe. “It's not like we're powerless here in this region. We have some of our biggest allies in the world operating in this region [...]. You have a region that's on the ocean, so you can pull up a ship.” Pulling up a ship is just one of the things the U.S. government did to offer evacuation to U.S. citizens from Israel in the wake of the October 7th attacks, but no such efforts have been forthcoming for those trapped in Gaza.

FUNDRAISING ALTERNATIVE WITH NO GUARANTEED ESCAPE

GoFundMe and other crowdfunding platforms were the last resort for hundreds of families in the United States. Yasmine's father, a U.S. citizen living in Wisconsin, was the one who decided their family needed to start a GoFundMe page after he ran out of money he could afford to send to help get people out of Gaza.

Yasmine posted a TikTok about the page, and within the next two days, she and her family raised \$10,000. Within a week, they got about \$25,000. They progressively raised their goals, with a final goal of \$100,000 in mind – the massive sum it would take to evacuate 30 family members. To spread the word beyond her TikTok community, Yasmine sent the GoFundMe page to influencers, some of whom posted it on their pages.

So far, Yasmine's family's efforts have helped seven people escape Gaza and make it into Egypt. Despite all the money they have raised on GoFundMe, supplemented by another family member selling his personal belongings and donating the proceeds, Yasmine is not confident that they will reach their goal of saving all 30 family members. Donations have stagnated and she has become increasingly aware that, with hundreds of GoFundMe pages up for Palestine, fundraising has turned into "a game of who needs it more, which is so horrible. It's like a competition for a sympathy card."

Shifa was deeply touched by the way the online community not only rallied for her GoFundMe page, but for the hundreds of pages listed on the GoFundMe website to save Palestinians in Gaza. “It all adds up. That speaks to the conscience of the society as a whole. Leaders and politicians like Biden do not represent their citizens [...] we have people paying to save people’s lives.”

“My heart goes out to all families who don’t have families abroad to send money, travel there, fundraise for them. There are millions who won’t get a chance at living simply because they can’t afford it.” Shifa

But simply raising enough money to pay the exorbitant “coordination fees” – which in itself is an almost impossible task – is not the sole challenge. Even before the recent Rafah border closure, as Palestinian Americans raised the funding necessary to get their loved ones’ names on the list of those permitted to exit Rafah, the crossing was extremely bottlenecked. Approvals from the Egyptian and Israeli governments to get on the list was taking months, and while the Egyptian terminal could process 500 people daily, at least 10,000 people reportedly wanted to be on the list. As the list of eligible evacuees grows longer, so does the backlog.

Like Yasmine’s family, Shifa and her family were able to combine the money raised through their GoFundMe campaign with funding pulled together from their savings to pay for the escape of seven family members. Yet this enormous sum of money did not immediately secure their rescue to Egypt. Their funds sat with Hala, who indeed had their names on an exit list but, according to Shifa, they had several thousand people ahead of them. It was not until around one month after Shifa’s family sent the funds that their relatives were able to escape.

We [were] waiting in the queue,” Shifa said. Even if Palestinians have the funds required to escape, they cannot. And as Israeli forces shut down the Rafah border crossing, evacuations into Egypt have stopped altogether.

The waiting game is not only exhausting, it’s terrifying. “They’re out of time,” Shifa argued. “In order to feel any type of security, they should have been out yesterday.”

With such limited funding and sky-high crossing fees to pay, people like Shifa are being forced to make unforgiving decisions. The funding she raised was not enough to save all her family members from war.

“We had to sit there and pick and choose who to evacuate first. How do you do that? It’s a disgusting situation I never wish anyone to be in.” Shifa

**“Time is of the essence. We’ve exhausted every avenue possible. They’re waiting to either leave or die.”
Shifa**

CONCLUSION

Recommendations for congressional offices

This report showcases only a few of the many Palestinian Americans whose loved ones the U.S. government has systematically failed to protect. To this point, neither the Biden administration nor their congressional representatives have done very much to help them in the kind of crisis where you need your government on your side. Yet congressional offices in particular are well-placed to assist their constituents at this moment. Below are key steps Members of Congress and their staff can take to support Palestinian Americans trying to evacuate their loved ones from Gaza.

Engage with impacted constituents

The Palestinian Americans interviewed in this report tried, with no success, to engage with their congressional representatives before starting their GoFundMe campaigns. Members of Congress should prioritize meeting with Palestinian Americans in their districts and states whose family members are trapped in the Gaza Strip to learn about the limitations and failures of the U.S. government's evacuations from Gaza. Members should learn what their families have experienced, and how the government can most effectively support their families' needs in the face of the war.

Pressure the White House for more effective, expanded evacuations

Because of the extreme bottlenecking and now complete closure of the Rafah border crossing, people who are qualified to evacuate are unable to do so. Further, even before the Rafah border closure, the criteria for family evacuations were so narrow that U.S. citizens were being separated from their loved ones whose names had not been added to the exit lists. Congress should hold oversight hearings on the evacuation processes from the Gaza Strip, and find out more information on exactly how many U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, and immediate eligible family members remain trapped in the Gaza Strip and how the process to get them out can be fixed. Members of Congress should exert pressure on the Biden administration to expand the evacuation criteria for the families of U.S. citizens and permanent residents as part of expanding evacuations. In addition to conducting oversight over the evacuation processes, members of Congress should call for oversight over how and why the Rafah border crossing – as the only exit from Gaza and one of the only pathways for humanitarian aid – was shut down.

Calling and/or continue calling for a permanent ceasefire

Ultimately, the safest and simplest way of ensuring the safety of U.S. citizens, green card holders, and their family members in the Gaza Strip is to end the war now. All Members of Congress who have not yet explicitly called for a lasting ceasefire in Gaza should do so immediately, and exert continuous pressure on the Biden administration to use all of its U.S. military and diplomatic leverage to establish a ceasefire deal immediately. For the time being, as Shifa urged during the interview, the Biden administration must enforce U.S. law and suspend arms transfers to the Israeli government. “Actions speak louder than those empty words,” Shifa stated, referring to President Biden’s oft-stated desire for a ceasefire. Any call for a ceasefire must be matched with an end to the weapons transfers that have enabled the Netanyahu government’s brutal military campaign.

Ensuring the invasion of Rafah ends now

The impact of the Israeli government's invasion of Rafah has been catastrophic, not only because of the slaughter, displacement, destruction, and humanitarian crisis it has produced but also because of the horrific halt on evacuations – including evacuations of U.S. citizens. The sole exit out of the Gaza Strip for Palestinians is through the Rafah border crossing, and the crossing cannot safely re-open unless the Rafah invasion ends. Members of Congress must join the calls of international leaders, humanitarian groups, and the International Court of Justice in calling for an end to the Israeli military's operations in Rafah.

Recommendations for the Biden administration

Bolster resources dedicated to Gaza evacuations

The Biden administration must immediately deploy substantially more resources to dramatically scale up their existing evacuation procedures. It shouldn't be accepted that U.S. citizens and others are victims of a months-long backlog to find safety and refuge from the war in Gaza – delays that essentially force them to wait in deadly conditions. The administration must listen to Palestinian and Palestinian Americans' accounts of complications through the evacuation processes to better understand the scale of their failures, at what stages their processes did not support those to whom they owe protection, and find ways to rectify those failures.

Get a more specific sense of who is still in Gaza

It should not take lawsuits to get U.S. citizens and other qualifying people on the list of evacuees. At the beginning of the war in Gaza, the Biden administration admitted to not knowing the exact number of U.S. citizens trapped in Gaza, meaning the number of their immediate relatives who also qualify for evacuation is even more unknown. As it expands the evacuation process, the Biden administration can and should create a more systemized method of accounting for the Palestinian Americans and qualifying Palestinians it is responsible for evacuating.

Expand criteria for eligible evacuees

There continue to be severe restrictions on the U.S. government's evacuation assistance, which bars U.S. citizens' uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, and even siblings over the age of 21 or married from qualifying for evacuation. Even parents are excluded for U.S. green card holders. Considering the scale of the deadly crises in Gaza, where Palestinians are facing the dual threats of famine and bombardment, the Biden administration must expand the U.S. criteria for evacuation assistance.

Ensure the Rafah invasion ends and a ceasefire is established

Ultimately, the U.S. government will have a significantly easier time evacuating civilians from the Rafah crossing if a ceasefire is in place across the strip. Not only that, those who were impacted by the backlog in crossings from Rafah to Egypt will at least find reprieve from the incessant bombardment as they wait their turn. The Biden administration must join other world leaders in calling for a halt to the Israeli military offensive in Rafah and use all points of leverage – including enforcing U.S. and international humanitarian law and stopping all weapons shipments to the Israeli military – to ensure the Israeli government's war in Gaza ends immediately.

“There's going to have to be a reckoning that America has with regard to accountability and reparations to the Americans who lost hundreds and hundreds of immediate relatives who went through this traumatic process of coming back to safety.” Maria Kari