

EUBAM Rafah: Towards Stability in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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- The European Union Border Assistance Mission Rafah (EUBAM Rafah) was established in 2005 as a neutral, non-executive third party to assist the Palestinian Authority (PA) in managing the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt.
- After Hamas took control of Gaza in June 2007, EUBAM Rafah entered a standby phase. During that time, the mission focused on supporting the PA through training programs and capacity building. Since 2024, it has been preparing for a possible reactivation at the Rafah crossing.
- The current ceasefire agreement assigns significant importance to determining how the border between Gaza and Egypt, along with the adjacent Philadelphi Corridor, will be administered. At the end of January, the European Union decided to revive the mission and deploy personnel to the Rafah crossing. For now, EUBAM Rafah only carries out support and observation tasks.
- Discussions are ongoing about granting the mission an expanded executive mandate during a transitional phase to act as a neutral authority for enhanced border security. In this role, EUBAM Rafah could coordinate humanitarian aid deliveries, address security gaps, and support Gaza's reconstruction through effective border management.
- Once that transitional phase ends, the mission could revert to a non-executive mandate. This would allow it to assist a reformed PA with long-term administration of the border crossing and foster lasting stability.

Following Hamas's brutal terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Hamas-Israel war, months passed without a long-term ceasefire agreement. A particularly contentious issue in the negotiations was the control of the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, along with the adjacent Philadelphi Corridor.¹ Both areas were under Israeli control from late May 2024 until the current ceasefire, leading Egypt to keep the crossing closed during that period.²

When the ceasefire took effect on January 19, 2025, the first steps toward restructuring border management were taken. However, certain points still need clarification. The ceasefire agreement includes several phases, during which Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners will be exchanged, and humanitarian as well as security-related questions will be resolved incrementally.

Negotiations on the future administration of the Rafah crossing are crucial. On the one hand, the solution found must ensure humanitarian support for Gaza's population.

On the other hand, it must also safeguard Israel's security needs.

Following an announcement by EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, the European Union has deployed the European Union Border Assistance Mission Rafah (EUBAM Rafah) to the Rafah border crossing to coordinate with Palestinian and Israeli authorities. In its initial phase, the mission is focused on supervising and monitoring operations at the crossing. Since January 31, the team has been assessing and reviewing Palestinian border control management, playing a key role in strengthening trust in border control between the Israeli, Palestinian, and Egyptian sides.³

Background on EUBAM Rafah

EUBAM Rafah was launched by the European Union on November 24, 2005. It was established under the Agreement on Movement and Access to provide a third-party presence at the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt. Both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel invited the

mission to assume this role.⁴

During its initial years, EUBAM Rafah operated as an unarmed, non-executive mission, monitoring compliance with agreed principles and assisting the Palestinian Authority (PA) in managing the border crossing. As a „non-executive“ mission, it had no authority to enforce actions or make decisions. Its primary goal was to build trust between the Israeli government and the PA by observing, assessing, and reviewing the work of Palestinian border police and customs officials.

Between 2005 and the takeover of Hamas in June 2007, approximately 450,000 people crossed the Rafah border under EUBAM supervision. However, following Hamas’s takeover, the mission was suspended, and EUBAM withdrew from on-site operations and entered a standby phase. Since then, the mission had focused on preparing the PA for a potential return to border operations. Its activities have included capacity-building initiatives such as training programs, workshops, and study visits covering modern border management, risk assessment, anti-smuggling efforts, cross-border crime prevention, and cooperation between customs and judicial authorities. Human rights protection and gender equality have also remained key priorities.⁵

The mission is led by Bulgarian diplomat Nataliya Apostolova. Before EUBAM Rafah was deployed to the border crossing on January 31, 2025, it had 18 staff members, including 10 international experts from nine EU member states (Germany, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Romania, France, Spain, and Bulgaria) and eight local personnel. For the 2024/2025 mandate year, the mission was assigned a budget of €3,546,481.⁶ The number of staff has since increased significantly. Discussions among EU member states on additional funding and further personnel expansion are still ongoing.⁷

Political Context and Preparations

Since Hamas seized power in 2007, an extensive network of smuggling tunnels had evolved along the Gaza-Egypt border, known as the Philadelphi Corridor. These tunnels served Hamas as primary routes for weapons and other goods, fueling repeated conflicts in the region. This included the Gaza Wars beginning in 2008 and the terrorist attack on October 7, 2023. In May 2024, the Israeli army took control of the corridor, discovered more than

20 tunnels and 82 access points, and destroyed many of them to prevent Hamas from rearming.⁸

By late 2024, the Biden administration and the German government indicated that EUBAM Rafah could play a key role in future ceasefire agreements between Hamas and Israel. As a neutral mission, EUBAM can monitor and potentially implement agreements reached on short notice. While the European External Action Service worked on the necessary political parameters, EUBAM Rafah entered a “reactivation phase” to prepare for a possible deployment.⁹

New Developments at the Rafah Crossing

The ceasefire agreement, which came into effect on January 19, 2025, allows for the gradual reopening of the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. The withdrawal of Israeli forces from the adjacent Philadelphi Corridor is scheduled to take place no later than 50 days after the agreement’s implementation. In the initial phase, primarily wounded or ill Palestinians, including injured Hamas fighters, are permitted to cross into Egypt via Rafah. However, humanitarian aid deliveries continue to be routed mainly through the Kerem Shalom crossing between Israel and Gaza.¹⁰

At the invitation of both parties to the conflict and with Egyptian mediation, a team from EUBAM Rafah has been on-site since late January 2025, following its original 2005 mandate. The mission maintains established contacts with key actors in the region: on the Palestinian side, the General Administration for Border and Crossings (GABC) and the Ministry of the Interior of the Palestinian Authority; on the Egyptian side, the Consulate; and on the Israeli side, institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT).

Drawing on previous deployments in various conflict zones, especially at the Rafah crossing from 2005 to 2007, EUBAM brings extensive experience and specialized expertise. In an environment marked by distrust, the mission’s credibility can significantly enhance stability, as it not only handles technical monitoring tasks but can also serve as a mediator when needed.

Currently, Italy is sending nine Carabinieri officers, who are part of a military police force. France is deploying

a militarized law enforcement force responsible for border security, customs control, and maintaining order at the crossing. Due to the tense security situation, personnel from Italy, Spain, and France are currently armed for their own protection.¹¹ Germany is also considering sending trained personnel. However, due to security concerns, this would require deploying armed officers. As a result, the government is reviewing its 2005 cabinet decision to authorize such armed deployment.¹²

It also remains undecided who will officially administer the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing in the future. According to the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, personnel from Gaza who are not affiliated to Hamas should be employed, though it is denied that these individuals formally represent the Palestinian Authority. Egypt insists that the border crossing is primarily administered by Palestinians. All individuals departing through the crossing undergo a security check by the Israeli domestic intelligence agency Shin Bet.¹³

EUBAM Rafah's current deployment is limited to the end of the first phase of the ceasefire; whether and how the mission will continue afterward is still unclear.

Possibilities for a Mandate Expansion During an Interim Phase

The World Health Organization estimates that at least 15,000 Palestinians currently require urgent medical care, which Gaza's war-damaged health system cannot provide. In addition, the Egyptian Red Cross reports that about 3,000 trucks carrying humanitarian aid are positioned near the Rafah crossing. To route more of these shipments through Rafah rather than solely through Israeli crossings, however, border management capacity must be considerably expanded. This requires additional staff, enhanced security measures, and sufficient funding.¹⁴

Countries such as Germany must therefore move quickly to make the necessary political decisions so that, if needed, armed and properly trained personnel can be

deployed under EUBAM Rafah. In this context, experts familiar with the mission discuss granting it an expanded mandate with executive power until Gaza's future governance structures become clearer.

This would allow EUBAM Rafah to carry out border management and security checks independently and temporarily manage border traffic directly. Any transfer of authority would require approval from the European Council as well as from Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority. According to conversations with experts, there are also considerations of whether other actors—such as the United States or a coalition of Arab states—might assume an interim role in overseeing the border.

Perspectives and Strategic Choices

For EUBAM Rafah to have a lasting impact during the ceasefire phase and beyond, it must be given clear responsibilities and authority, which may include an executive mandate. This could be a way to ensure effective border management, support reconstruction, and build long-term trust. Under favorable conditions, the EU could also help revive the stalled peace process. A functioning border administration is essential to prevent smuggling while promoting Gaza's economic development.

In the long term, close coordination with other EU missions—such as EUPOL COPPS, which has supported the Palestinian Authority's police and judicial institutions since 2006—seems prudent. Extending that mission's mandate to Gaza could help avoid a power vacuum and maintain public security.

A consistent EU foreign policy approach calls for a coordinated strategy that aligns humanitarian, security, and economic goals. Relaunching EUBAM Rafah in close collaboration with other EU initiatives could not only advance Gaza's reconstruction, and cater to Israel's security needs but also lay the groundwork for a sustainable European foreign policy in the Middle East.

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