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Prospects for a Gaza Seaport

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In light of the growing concern that Gaza's poor economy and high unemployment could foment unrest and lead to renewed hostilities between Israel and Hamas, many leading Israeli defense officials have voiced support for a Gaza seaport, if coupled with necessary security arrangements. So far, the Israeli government has not endorsed such plans publicly, mindful of the interests of Israel's regional partners as well as security. However, two ministers have individually supported the construction of a seaport in Gaza: Yisrael Katz, Minister of Transportation, Intelligence, and Atomic Energy, and Yoav Galant, Minister of Housing and Construction.

Hamas's demand for a seaport is founded on three objectives. First, an independent Palestinian port in Gaza, which would connect the Strip's coast with the outside world, would grant the Palestinians freedom of movement for goods and people and the sense of autonomy and self-determination. Second, it would reflect an important victory for Hamas within the Palestinian theater and raise its status as a regional player. Finally, the port could boost Gaza's weak economy; indeed, Gaza never received the majority of the billions pledged for its reconstruction, and suffers from the world's highest unemployment rate.

Israel has a strong interest in a long term ceasefire with Hamas, and thus Gaza's development is a matter of strategic value. The humanitarian situation in Gaza, combined with anti-Israel incitement, is a ticking bomb directed at Israel. At the same time, Israeli security officials understand that a Palestinian port in Gaza without adequate security arrangements presents a major threat. Through the port, Hamas could increase its arsenal of weapons, including mid and long range missiles, air defense systems, and guided anti-tank missiles, and become a point for entry and exit for Hamas operatives and members of other terror organizations.

Background

The idea of constructing a seaport in Gaza was discussed at the outset of the Oslo process, and found its way into the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government

Arrangements (DOP) signed by Israel and the PLO in 1993. Eight months later, the Gaza-Jericho agreement spelled out these ideas and held that plans for the construction of the port, its location, and other related matters should be negotiated further in accordance with the necessary security arrangements, in particular, arrangements pertaining to the international passages that continued to be controlled by Israel. The Interim Agreement of 1995 reiterated previous commitments.

From the outset, Israel's security establishment has had serious reservations regarding a Palestinian port in Gaza, fearing it could turn into another crossing for the entry of weapons and terrorists. In the view of the Israeli government, only the IDF could guarantee effective monitoring of vessels and shipments entering the port. Thus, even though contracts for the port construction were signed as early as 1994, continued disagreement over the port's operations and security arrangements, then planned as a PA port under Israeli supervision, prevented its actual construction. Eventually, plans for the seaport were stipulated in the 1999 Sharm-el-Sheikh Memorandum: construction would start right away; and effective security and custom inspections of people and goods would be established, along with a designated checking area. Work in fact started in the summer of 2000 and was supposed to be completed within two years. However, construction was halted by Israel shortly afterward, and the site was subsequently bombed and destroyed during the second intifada. At the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada the donor states ceased funding the project, and work on the port stopped. Following the ceasefire that ended Operation Protective Edge, indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas, via the Palestinian Authority, were supposed to take place. The port was one of the topics for discussion.

Although Israel fully evacuated Gaza more than ten years ago, important actors in the international community still perceive the Strip as a territory under Israel's responsibility. More particularly, the naval blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel for security reasons continues to affect Israel's image in the world, eclipsing the fact that Israel has indeed upheld its humanitarian commitments to the population. Therefore, Gaza's current situation continues to be Israel's problem, including with regard to the international community.

What Now?

If the Israeli government decides to engage in serious negotiations about construction of a Gaza seaport, it will face two distinct options. The first is to permit the construction of an actual seaport in Gaza City, whether on its coast or off shore. The second option is to build a port *for* Gaza, not *in* Gaza, but rather on Egyptian territory in el-Arish, or in Israel's Ashdod port, with distinct quays for shipments aimed for Gaza.

If the first option is implemented, Hamas could claim a political victory. A Palestinian-run Gaza seaport would be an answer to the Hamas demand for autonomy. The question then would be how such a plan could be reconciled with Israel's security needs. First, regardless of whether Hamas would consent to any Israeli supervision of the port, it is very unlikely that Israel would risk sending its own personnel to Gaza to check and inspect goods and persons entering Gaza via the Mediterranean. However, if Israel or a third party supervises the port, then this will frustrate Hamas's aspiration for freedom of movement, autonomy, and political achievements. Another crossing like Kerem Shalom, but on the sea, will not satisfy Hamas.

Egyptian opposition, and to a lesser degree, opposition by the Palestinian Authority, is one of the main reasons why Israel's political leadership has not publicly endorsed the seaport plan. Israel has no interest upsetting Egypt, the important regional actor, which opposes both a strengthened Hamas and Turkish plans for the reconstruction of Gaza, and perceives Hamas and Turkey as enemies. Likewise, the PA does not seem fond of such ideas and fears that Hamas could gain further support by scoring such a notable political achievement.

Therefore, it appears that the debate on the Gaza seaport should be guided by three main considerations. First, the port proposals should address the Gaza population and Hamas's acute needs for the flow of goods and easier movement of people to and from Gaza. If the port eventually becomes just another crossing, perceived by Palestinians as a symbol of Israeli occupation, it will not substantively change the situation. The fundamental question, then, is how to meet these needs but without granting Hamas significant political gains.

Second, the port must meet Israel's and Egypt's security concerns. For a capable third party to supervise the port, it must have the relevant equipment, technical devices, and the mandate to prevent the transfer of weapons and dual use materials and machines as well as the exit and entry of terrorists. However, without actual supervision at the locations where building materials as well as other dual use materials are to be used, these arrangements will continue to allow Hamas to divert these materials for terrorist and military purposes, for example the construction of offensive tunnels.

Third, construction of the port should include some form of political understanding between the regional parties that also includes a long term ceasefire. Neither Israel nor Hamas seeks another round of hostilities anytime soon. An agreement on the port should therefore be put in the context of the 2014 ceasefire, which called for indirect negotiations on construction of a seaport.