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A Gaza Seaport That Doesn't Endanger Israel? Not a Pipe Dream With This Expert's Plan

A novel proposal to build an inland port for Gaza could boost its economy while ensuring security for Israel — all at a low cost

Amir Tibon | Oct 05, 2017 9:40 AM

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Fishing boats float in the Mediterranean Sea in the port of Gaza City, Monday, Oct. 20, 2014.

Credit: AP

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A leading expert in the field of constructing sea ports has come up with a new plan for the construction of a port that would serve the Gaza Strip, without harming Israeli security. The plan has been reviewed by senior officials in Israel, one of whom told Haaretz that "it's a very interesting idea — complicated, but not impossible."

Dr. Asaf Ashar, an Israeli who resides in the Washington, D.C. area, has been dealing with the construction of seaports for more than 30 years. He has worked for the Israeli Port Authority and the port of Seattle, Washington, and is a professor at the University of New Orleans' National Ports & Waterways Institute. In recent years, he has advised some of the largest port-building projects in the world, including projects in China and Dubai. Now, he hopes to convince Israeli, Egyptian and Palestinian officials to adopt a plan he has

drawn up for an “inland port” that would serve the 2.1 million residents of Gaza.

Ever since the 2014 Gaza war, Israeli officials have been examining different proposals for improving the economic situation in Gaza, in the hope of avoiding another outburst of violence there. Hamas, the Islamist movement controlling the Palestinian coastal enclave, has demanded that Israel allow it to build a seaport on Gaza's shores, in order to export and import goods. Israel rejects this demand, mainly because its intelligence agencies believe that Hamas will use such a port to smuggle weapons into Gaza and carry out terror attacks against Israel.

Realizing that improving Gaza's economy is a vital Israeli interest, but that Hamas' demand for a seaport within Gaza is unacceptable, Israel has considered a number of alternative proposals. The best known one is a proposal by Israel's Minister of Transportation, Yisrael Katz, to build an artificial island in the Mediterranean that would serve as a remote sea and airport for Gaza, under Israeli security supervision.

Ashar believes that Katz's plan, which has received a lot of international media attention over the last year, is too expensive and almost impossible to implement.

The cost of Katz's plan is estimated at over \$5 billion, and the Israeli minister has stated publicly that if Hamas uses it for terrorism or military buildup, Israel could always bomb the infrastructure on the island, or the bridges connecting it to Gaza. “Why would world countries invest so much money in this kind of project, knowing that one disagreement between Israel and Hamas could turn their entire investment into rubble?” Ashar told Haaretz in an interview conducted last week in Washington.

He added that Katz's artificial island would either have to be built within Gaza's territorial waters — giving Hamas a veto on its construction and a legal case for fighting against Israel's security oversight of it — or, it would be built deep in the Mediterranean, in an area with high tides and deep water. According to Ashar,

"constructing an artificial island in open sea, 22 kilometers offshore, at a water depth of more than 200 meters, and connecting it via bridges to the shore is prohibitively expensive and, perhaps, technically infeasible."

Ashar offers, instead, an idea which he admits is "not nearly as sexy" as creating an artificial island, but that according to him, could actually be implemented at a cost of less than \$200 million for the initial stages, and create an operating port within two to three years.

His plan is to use the existing border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip at Kerem Shalom, at the Gaza Strip's southern edge, as an "inland port" that would be connected, through a simple road, to a shore-based, relatively-small seaport on the Egyptian side of the border.

As of today, there is only one border crossing for the transport of goods between Israel and Gaza: the Kerem Shalom crossing. Every day, more than 800 trucks arrive at the Israeli side of the crossing and drop their goods there. After going through Israeli security inspection, the goods from those trucks are then picked up by Palestinian trucks on the other side of the crossing. Kerem Shalom is Gaza's de-facto lifeline, since all the other border crossings — including the Rafah crossing with Egypt — are shut down most of the time.

Ashar proposes transforming Kerem Shalom from an entry point for goods going to Gaza, into an "inland port" with an industrial zone attached to it, that, in the long term, would become a logistic trade hub and a source of employment for adjacent communities in Gaza, Egypt and Israel.

How would it work? On the Egyptian side of the border, a small port would be built, on an area of approximately three kilometers of shoreline. This small port will be only a docking and loading area: The ships arriving there would be able to unload their goods, but there will be no large-scale storage area on the shoreline. Instead, the goods will immediately be loaded onto trucks that would take them directly to the Israeli side of the Kerem Shalom crossing. A

new, designated-highway connecting the docks to the crossing would be paved on the Egyptian side of the border, allowing the vehicles to make the 10-kilometer trip within a few minutes.



A diagram of the proposed plan for an "inland" seaport for Gaza. Credit: Dr. Asaf Ashar

Once they arrive at Kerem Shalom, the goods will be inspected by Israel before going into the Gaza Strip. The inspection will rely on the process and infrastructure that already exists within the border crossing today.

Ashar explains that in the professional jargon, his idea is called a "detached dock," and that it is common "in ports with limited waterfront land." It's a good fit for Gaza, not only because Israel will only grant approval to a port that gives it security oversight, but also because of limitations created by the congestion within the Gaza Strip. "Kerem Shalom is located at the widest and least populated

section of Gaza, where empty, developable space is still available," he explains. The empty areas around the border crossing, and along the designated road that would connect it to the dock on the Egyptian side, could be used for the construction of warehouses and small factories, of the kind usually built next to active seaports anywhere in the world.

Ashar says that of all the possible locations that have been discussed over the years for building a port for Gaza, his suggested location is the only one that could allow the necessary space for this industrial rear. One quick look at a map of Gaza proves his point: In all other parts of Gaza, the distance between the shoreline and the closest neighborhoods is too small for housing the industrial backbone and infrastructure necessary for the operation of a port. The area between the coast and Kerem Shalom, however, especially on the Egyptian side, is mostly empty. In Ashar's vision, the Kerem Shalom border crossing and the area around it would eventually turn into a "Special Economic Zone" serving Israel, Egypt and a future Palestinian state.

Ashar says that over the last year, he has examined all the other proposed solutions to the Gaza port question — from keeping in place the current situation to building Katz's artificial island — and has not identified a plan that could be more efficient and safe than the "inland port" one. "I studied nine different plans that have been discussed over the years," he told Haaretz. "My guiding principals were that each plan had to allow Israel a necessary level of security, and the Palestinians, a necessary level of sovereignty. That, in addition to being technically possible to implement." His conclusion was that the "South Gaza Plan," as he calls it, was the only one that could give the Palestinians their own port, in a viable way, without creating security threats for Israel.



Kerem Shalom crossing into the Gaza Strip. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

During the vetting process, Ashar also concluded that the inland port plan is better than a previous plan he himself had suggested in 2016, which included the creation of a dock for shipments to Gaza within a new port that Egypt is going to build in the town of al-Arish, 55 kilometers south of Gaza. "Having an autonomous Palestinian terminal in al-Arish, deep inside Egypt, with Palestinian trucks moving Palestinian goods on Egyptian roads, mandates much deeper Egyptian involvement," he explains.

Ashar visited Israel this summer and presented his plan to high-ranking Israel Defense Force officers and to officials in the Intelligence Affairs Ministry, as well as to other relevant authorities. Ashar hopes that his plan will come to the attention of the team within the Trump administration that is dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Jason Greenblatt, Trump's special envoy for the peace process, toured Kerem Shalom during his last visit to the region, and said that he was encouraged to see the economic and humanitarian activity taking place at the border crossing.

"Kerem Shalom is a success story," Ashar says. "The South Gaza Port plan would build on this success. I hope that the Trump administration will look for ways to improve the economic situation

in Gaza, instead of trying to once again solve the unsolvable 'core issues' of the conflict."



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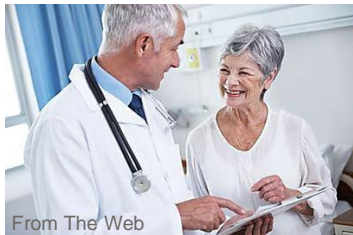
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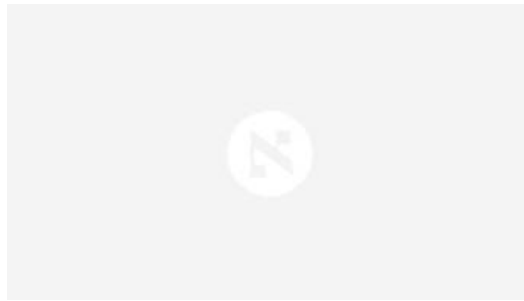
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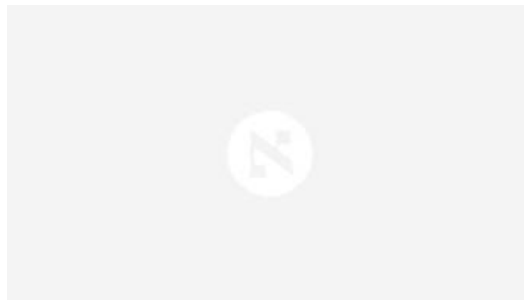
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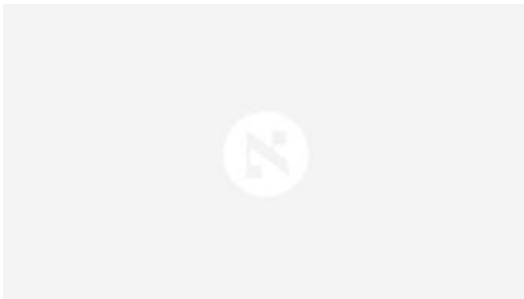
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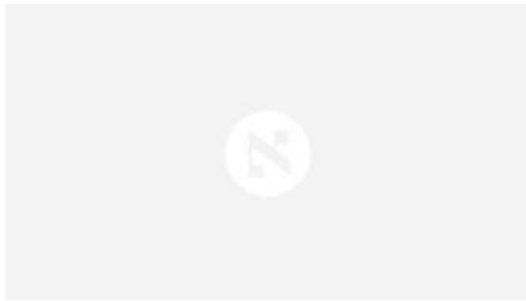
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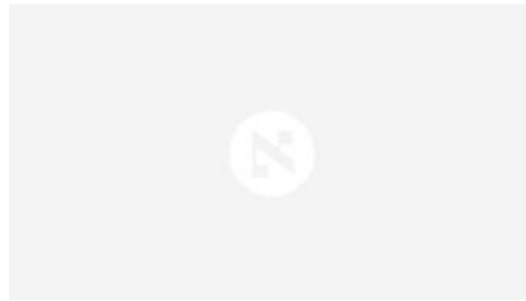
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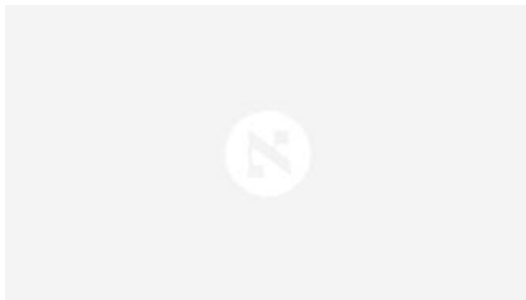
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