



# Pragmatic Options for Gaza

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Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib is a Palestinian-American humanitarian activist from Gaza based in San Francisco and founder of Project Unified Assistance, which advocates for the establishment of an internationally-operated, IDF-approved airport in the Strip.



### Brief Analysis

**S**eptember 14, 2017

Ever since Hamas violently ejected the Palestinian Authority's forces from Gaza in 2007, report after report has detailed the degradation of infrastructure and the inevitability of crises. The United Nations has warned that Gaza will become unlivable by 2020 – a warning repeated almost annually since 2012, louder and sterner since the 2014 war between Hamas and Israel. Though it might sound counterintuitive, big strategic plans for the reconstruction and development of Gaza are of little use for the time being. What is urgently needed are calculated, pragmatic, and tactical steps to shake up the status quo, without requiring unrealistic prerequisites prior to the initiation of such actions.

These calls of crisis have not gone unnoticed. Over the past decade there have been a number of proposals aimed at stabilizing and developing Gaza, from American, Israeli, and Palestinian think tanks, corporations, and politicians, to name but a sampling. None of these plans have been implemented.

Blame for this failure is often distributed among various players: Hamas, with its intransigent control of Gaza; Israel's unrelenting restrictions on movement and exchange in and out of Gaza; the Palestinian Authority's inability to outmaneuver Hamas and support the interests of the people; Egypt's politically-motivated closure of the only non-Israeli border; the United States' failure to broker a deal between the Palestinians and Israelis; the indifference of most Arab states towards the Palestinian problem; and the relative failure of the international community to actively focus on improving lives in Gaza, instead of continuously insisting that it is the exclusive responsibility of Israel.

Though these proposals differ in their details and philosophies, they are united by common threads, especially their lack of practical applicability to Gaza's extreme conditions. Most are built on two assumptions which have not and will not become a reality for the foreseeable future: Palestinian political unity under the umbrella of the Palestinian Authority and all of its relevant agreements and commitments; and an Israeli willingness to fully remove restrictions on movement and trade to and from Gaza.

As long as Hamas, and other groups in the Strip, adopt violence as a strategy in their political opposition and fight against Israel, there will be neither an internationally-accepted Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas, nor will there be a full lifting of the Israeli blockade against the coastal enclave. This reality, coupled with the unpredictability of the Palestinian political discourse, makes it nearly impossible to plan for the long term. Hamas adopts a pragmatic approach when dealing with friends and foes, such as its rotating alliances with regional players, or its crackdown on Islamic State-affiliated groups in Gaza. Meanwhile, against this bleak backdrop, Gaza's residents are paying a heavy price for the failure of the Palestinian political system to address their needs while dealing with the issues which are the cornerstone of conflict with Israel.

The best way forward is to take pragmatic steps at the tactical level to stabilize Gaza, improve quality of life, plant non-costly seeds for future large-scale infrastructure and economic development, and accept the reality of separation between Gaza and the West Bank. While political unity between Gaza and the West Bank is important to preserve the prospect of a two-state solution, both areas have unique political, economic, and societal differences, opportunities, and challenges. Unity and solidarity do not imply homogeneity of development needs. If opportunities exist to improve conditions for Gazans prior to the realization of ever-more elusive unity with the West Bank, they should be pursued.

Bringing in international coordination and assistance to the Gaza Strip is the only way to address the sheer suffering of the population while accounting for an international community which does not wish to entrench Hamas. Although Gaza has numerous unfulfilled needs, two key issues could serve as starting points for improving safety and security for Gaza's residents: electricity management and freedom of movement.

Given the geography and political nature that govern the operation of the Erez and Rafah crossings, people are held hostage by circumstances over which they have no control.

An overlooked piece of history may offer a resolution that addresses a significant slice of the suffering in Gaza while accounting for Israeli security and geopolitical considerations. After the 1956 Suez Crisis, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was established in Gaza to maintain peace in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, and achieved precisely that until the misguided decision by then-Egyptian President Abdul Nasser to expel the force in an effort to intimidate the Israelis. UNEF operated an airport in Gaza and the facility served both the international forces and also Gaza's residents, who flew on UN planes to multiple destinations such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Cyprus.

Israeli suspicion towards the UN is no secret. Despite this, a UN umbrella comes with several advantages. First, the UN has vast experience in humanitarian air operations in areas suffering from conflict and instability. The UN's Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) model can easily be implemented in Gaza. This agency operates under entirely different terms than other UN organizations which are viewed with suspicion and dislike by Israel, such as UNRWA and UNDP. Second, the UN umbrella is the best hope there is for introducing large numbers of international monitors and peacekeepers (to be confined to the airport complex), without the local population perceiving such presence as a "foreign occupation." This is especially the case given the historic and contemporary presence of various UN agencies in Gaza, where close to two thirds of the population receive some sort of assistance from the Organization.

It is true that often, most UN aerial assets are deployed for UN-specific uses, either to transport humanitarian workers or to move UN aid, supplies, and equipment. There are times when UN aircraft transport patients and civilians in need, outside the usual operational framework, as was the case after the Nepal earthquake or the Pakistan floods. It is conceivable that a model could be devised where the UN supervises aerial operations for the transportation of Palestinian passengers, and that the agency could operate a small airport to serve people's need for travelling via an independent passageway not controlled by Israel or Egypt. Instead of pouring billions of dollars into

the facility, a small investment, up to \$200 million could ensure initial operating capability. The site of the former Israeli settlement of Gush Katif on the southwestern coast of the Strip is the most viable location for a future airport in Gaza. Mostly undeveloped, this site would allow flights to depart and land immediately adjacent to the Sea, and thus, avoid the need to use airspace over Israeli and Egyptian territories.

In 1989, after it became apparent that major intervention was needed because of the second Sudanese civil war and a devastating famine, Operation Lifeline Sudan provided humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need regardless of their location or political affiliation. Those in need of travel were transported in and out of certain areas using various U.N. mechanisms, including aircraft. The UN dealt with a non-state armed group out of necessity, but without conferring recognition upon it.

Some observers might be quick to point out the UN's failure in South Lebanon in preventing Hezbollah from stockpiling mass armaments. Gaza's circumstances, however, are entirely different and the UNIFIL model will not be replicated in Gaza. South Lebanon, unlike the spatially-constricted Gaza, is a vast area, with topography and geography that make smuggling easier to disguise. Additionally, Syria, which shares large borders with Lebanon, is a willing partner in smuggling arms to Hezbollah, unlike Egypt, which has actually shut down smuggling tunnels and routes. It is important to note that an airport is a finite, well defined point of entry and exit, and is dramatically easier to monitor and control.

Securing the facility and preventing Hamas from interfering with its operation will be of utmost interest to Israel, Egypt, and the United Nations. Despite the valid threats, no security issue is insurmountable. The airport should be almost entirely self-sustaining, and should function as a state within a state. It should be walled in, fully secured against infiltration attempts, and saturated with security cameras which can be accessed by Israeli authorities if necessary. Senior airport staff and managers should be from outside of the Gaza Strip. Members of the European Mission to Rafah which operated the land crossing can be used as part of the international police force to protect and administer the airport complex. Recruits need to have elite training and must have demonstrable integrity and should be compensated well to avoid any risk of bribery.

It will also be easier to secure since it contains open spaces that can support a large complex.

Having the airport operate as a standalone installation, isolated from the politicized environment in which it exists, would guard against potential efforts by Hamas to interfere in the operation or administration of the facility. In the last war with Israel, Hamas demanded that an airport and seaport be established in Gaza to agree to the ceasefire. Some might worry that any airport would present a political victory to the Islamist movement. However, an airport which Hamas cannot control and, would not reap financial returns from is politically and tactically useless to the group. It should not come as a surprise that what's good for the people of Gaza is often contradictory to what's good for Hamas.

Initially, the airport should focus on fulfilling Gazan's unmet need to travel for studying, working, receiving treatment, conducting business, and participating in professional and personal activities. Eventually, it can be transformed into a humanitarian and economic cargo lifeline for the Strip and can assist in rejuvenating Gaza's stagnant economy. Additionally, the airport can help with the movement of NGO workers, diplomats, journalists, and international professionals.

The airport concept will assist in stabilizing Gaza, attracting potential investors, preventing a new war, giving people a breather, and planting seeds for further development. It could act as a small-scale, relatively cheap model for a seaport, a power plant, water desalination facility, and other big ticket items.

The chronic deterioration of the electricity problem, coupled with the never ending back and forth between the PA and Hamas, points to the inevitable reality that this issue will not improve so long as it is managed by the

Palestinians. Just as the World Bank set up the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility, the organization responsible for water and sanitation services in Gaza, a similar arrangement could place the management of electricity under competent and neutral international management. Shifting the management of power generation, distribution, collection of user fees, maintenance of the infrastructure, and oversight to an international organization or body could create an effective, professionally-run system which will alleviate the suffering of Gazans and can eventually be turned over to Palestinian control when the circumstances permit doing so.

Though the Palestinian Authority is currently applying harsh measures to pressure Hamas into giving up control, ten years of intransigence have demonstrated how futile such efforts are. Palestinians have used UN measures to achieve symbolic victories against Israel in recent months. Instead of focusing on meaningless resolutions and declarations, the PA should welcome UN internationalization, which would provide unconventional entry into the Strip and would hold Hamas accountable.

Of all the relevant stakeholders in Gaza's affairs, Israel is one of the best hopes that Gazans have for a pragmatic partner, deeply interested in a long-term truce and letting Gaza develop. After the issue of the Israeli soldiers' bodies and current captives in the Strip is resolved, we can expect Israeli decision makers, both current and future ones, to pragmatically support initiatives that improve Gaza's conditions while accounting for Israel's legitimate security needs. Addressing Gaza's electricity shortages and establishing an internationally-managed and protected humanitarian airport for the Strip's inhabitants will help stabilize the region, aid Gazans, and importantly, strategically benefit Israeli interests. ❖



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