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GAZA AIRPORT: STABILIZING THE STRIP WITH HUMANITARIAN AVIATION

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The need to address Gaza's deteriorating humanitarian situation has become urgent not only to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinians in the Strip, but to ensure stability in the area. Israel's recent proposal for an airport and seaport to be built on a manmade island off Gaza is demonstrative of the fact that Israel's political and military establishment largely acknowledge that the status quo is unsustainable. However, a more immediate and effective option might be a U.N. administered airport inside Gaza that will allow a humanitarian air operation as well as removing the barrier to movement in and out of the Gaza Strip. This paper discusses the merits of such a proposal, which will help stabilize the Gaza Strip.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ An airport could help accelerate Gaza's re-development process and would relieve Gazans' inability to travel in and out of the Strip
- ◆ Efforts to establish an airport in Gaza must account for the political, geographic, and military shifts in the Strip
- ◆ The project should be implemented in phases, with the ultimate goal of establishing an airport that operates efficiently, effectively, and independent of Gaza's crumbling infrastructure
- ◆ The United Nations has successfully conducted humanitarian air operations in countries impacted by conflict and natural disasters in the past, and can do so again
- ◆ An airport would alleviate the suffering of Gazans while addressing Israeli and Egyptian security needs

INTRODUCTION

United Nations humanitarian air operations are conducted throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in areas impacted by conflict and natural disasters. These operations seek to airlift or airdrop desperately needed supplies, aid, and relief items; transport workers and relevant individuals who serve populations with pressing needs; fly locals who are in urgent need of transportation services; facilitate the movement of equipment necessary for local humanitarian efforts; and establish aerial corridors to serve as lifelines in places lacking security or commercial options for transportation. After years of blockade and violence, an airport for functional purposes could help accelerate Gaza's re-development process and would relieve Gazans' chronic inability to travel in and out of the Strip.

Since the 1980s, the United Nations has been involved in significant and, at times, massive humanitarian air operations in countries such as Afghanistan, Liberia, Sudan (North and South), Mali, Libya, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Kenya, Pakistan, Nepal, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. While commercial aviation requires stability and calm conditions to operate, U.N. aviation specifically serves unstable regions where no commercial operators would fly.

One of the best examples that demonstrates how humanitarian aviation can be a helpful tool in the midst of sheer suffering and political gridlock is Operation Lifeline Sudan



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(O.L.S.). O.L.S. was a consortium of U.N. agencies and international N.G.O.s operating in South Sudan to deliver humanitarian aid and assistance throughout the war-torn and drought-afflicted regions. O.L.S. was established in 1989 after it became apparent that major intervention was needed due to the consequences of the Second Sudanese Civil War and a devastating famine. As a result of practical and detailed negotiations, the United Nations, the government of Sudan, and the Sudan People's Liberation Army agreed to deliver humanitarian assistance to all civilians in need, regardless of their location or political affiliation.¹

Civilians in need of travel were transported in and out of certain areas using various U.N. mechanisms, including aircraft. The northern Kenyan town of Lokichogio, and its airport, became a primary staging area for U.N. humanitarian air operations that serviced South Sudan. One of the significant aspects of O.L.S. is that it was the first operation in which the U.N. dealt with a non-state armed group out of necessity, but without conferring recognition upon it.²

Currently, several U.N. agencies use humanitarian aviation as a tool to support their operations. An entity that stands out is the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which is managed by the World Food Programme. It provides passenger and cargo air services to the humanitarian community, especially to remote locations, due to insecurity and lack of local infrastructure. UNHAS air facilities are deployed in support of humanitarian aid delivery and development programs during and after emergencies.³ The agency charters aircraft from a variety of air carriers such as UTair Aviation, Ethiopian Airlines, and Air Urga through a bidding system and operates a diverse fleet of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters.

CIRCUMSTANCES IN GAZA

Since 2007, the circumstances for the people of Gaza have sharply deteriorated as a result of the Hamas takeover of the coastal enclave and the subsequent imposition of a blockade by Israel. Theoretically, the siege is meant to prevent the smuggling of weapons, fighters, and materials that could be used in the production of arms by militant groups in Gaza. However, the consequences of sealing Gaza off from the rest of the world have primarily impacted the lives of

Gazan civilians. Semi-permanent border closures have meant that hundreds of thousands of people cannot travel freely to study abroad, receive medical treatment, conduct business, or visit family. The economic toll has been disastrous for Gaza's local economy, with unemployment reaching as high as 40 percent.⁴ Desperation and radicalization have increased as a result of the population's isolation from the rest of the world.⁵ In some ways, Hamas and other armed factions have become stronger as a result of the blockade, as was evident in their fighting capabilities during the last war in the summer of 2014.⁶ Gaza's infrastructure is in catastrophic conditions, with electricity barely on for a few hours per day, clean water running out rapidly, sewage pollution at an all-time high, and little progress toward building new facilities that can increase capacity and address shortages.⁷

Since the 2014 summer war, there is an increasing awareness in Israeli and intelligence circles that something different must be done about Gaza. The idea is that after almost 10 years of blockade and multiple rounds of deadly fighting between the I.D.F. and armed factions in the Strip, Israel's overall Gaza strategy is not making Israel safer. The most recent example of this recognition was evident in statements made in February by the chief of the I.D.F.'s

Military Intelligence Directorate, General Herzl Halevi. While addressing the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, he said that "the

“After almost 10 years of blockade, Israel’s overall Gaza strategy is not making Israel safer.”

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humanitarian condition in Gaza is progressively deteriorating, and if it blows up, it’ll be in Israel’s direction.”⁸ He agreed with a U.N. report that warned Gaza would become uninhabitable by 2020 if its economy is not quickly strengthened. He noted that despite the difficult situation in Gaza, Hamas continues to be uninterested in war with Israel at this time and is making efforts to control other factions in the Strip to prevent rocket fire toward Israel.⁹

Retired Major General Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council, wrote in a 2015 op-ed that, for the sake of Israeli security, the international community should let Gaza rebuild. He even went as far as advocating for the establishment of a seaport in Gaza, as long as a strong international mechanism is created to prevent the facility from being misused and abused by Hamas or other groups.¹⁰ The attitudes and sentiments expressed by both Halevi and Eiland are shared by several others in the defense establishment, including Major General Sami Turgeman, who believes that Hamas can be turned into a partner to maintain quiet, calm, growth, and prosperity in Gaza.¹¹

AVIATION AND GAZA

Over the past 15 years, establishing an airport in Gaza (including the revival of the short-lived airport which was destroyed in 2002) has generally been of marginal sig-

nificance in the overall equation between Israel and Palestine, though it has become a Palestinian demand in recent years.¹² In June 2016, there was talk about an Israeli proposal by the minister of intelligence, Yisrael Katz, to build an artificial island off the Gaza coast and to construct a seaport and an airport on it. The plan calls for connecting the island to the Strip via a 3-mile long bridge to serve as an access valve and can be easily shut off when Israel feels the need to do so.¹³

Katz alleges that this proposal has deep support within military and strategic circles in Israel. Although the plan exists as a paper study with some drawings, it has not been discussed with Hamas nor with the Palestinian Authority. There appears to be Israeli optimism that the idea is not fantasy and can actually be done.

Regardless of the merits of the plan, the fact that Israeli military, intelligence, and some political circles are discussing a Gaza airport is indeed a promising sign. It indicates a strategic approval of having aviation as a service available to the population in Gaza, as long as it is done in a manner which is consistent with Israeli security needs. However, the proposal suffers from several hurdles that have yet to be explained.

The massive cost—over \$5 billion, which is a modest estimate given the enormity of the proposal—is one hurdle, particularly given that Israel has declared that it won't pay a cent.¹⁴ It will also take many years—over six estimated—to complete such an island, which would mean continued suffering in Gaza for the foreseeable future. Immediate action is required to alleviate the inability of residents to travel in and out of Gaza freely and continuously—six-plus years is

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simply far too long a wait. The environmental impact on Gaza's fish populations would also be significant, and has to be taken into account.¹⁵

In recent years, China has become recognized for its ability to construct and build artificial islands with air strips in the South China Sea. In fact, Katz and others in Israel have floated the possibility of China being a logistical and a financial backer of the construction of the proposed island.¹⁶ However, the rapid rate at which China was able to construct artificial islands with air strips cannot be replicated in Gaza. The Strip would be entirely dependent on external financial and material support to

complete the project. Coordinating such a large-scale effort will likely take longer than envisioned, and cost over-runs will make the implementation even more challenging.

A PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE

A humanitarian airport that fulfills strictly utilitarian needs, implemented as part of the U.N.'s model for humanitarian air operations, can be a practical framework to bring aviation into the coastal enclave. Whether it is done through UNHAS or by establishing a dedicated agency to run the facility and flight operations, such an airport can be implemented in ways that address the complex and nuanced needs of all parties involved—and soon.

During the 1950s and 60s, the United Nations operated a small airport in the Gaza Strip to support the then-active U.N. Emergency Force. The facility also transported humanitarian cargo and provided weekly passenger flights from Gaza to Lebanon and Cyprus, among other destinations. This aviation history provides a significant precedent to contemporary efforts to bring U.N. aviation to Gaza.¹⁷

Future efforts to again establish an airport in Gaza must account for the major changes in the current conditions of the coastal enclave. Political shifts include the departure of the Palestinian Authority from Gaza and Hamas' control of the Strip. Geograph-

ic changes include the spread of smuggling and attack tunnels near the old airport location in the southeast, which has become a common site for armed clashes. The old location was not ideal for an airport, given the crosswind factors and close proximity to the airspaces of Egypt and Israel. The presence of settlements on 40 percent of Gaza's land at the time reduced access to alternative locations for the airport. Military shifts include the unprecedented heavy activity of the Egyptian Air Force over northern Sinai and eastern Egypt, whose airspace was in the past used to vector flights in and out of Gaza. Strategically, Israeli security paradigms for dealing with Gaza require monitoring the movement of people and goods in and out. Israel may continue to be reluctant to approve an airport should it require aircraft to fly close to Israeli airspace, as was the case with the 1998 airport.

A new airport in Gaza would require a fresh approach to achieve utilitarian gains for people in the Strip. A new location away from Egyptian and Israeli borders must be considered to provide alternate routes for incoming and outgoing flights over the Mediterranean Sea and protect the site from being too close to military confrontation zones.¹⁸ The most practical and suitable location for an airport inside Gaza is on the southwestern coast of the Strip between Khan Yunis and Rafah on the grounds of the former "Gush Katif" settlement. The area, also known as al-Mawasi, has enough depth that would accommodate a 3,000

meter long runway. The most significant aspect of this location is that it will enable flights to take off and land adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea.

The project should be implemented in phases, with the first pertaining to land acquisition, leveling the site, walling off the area, and constructing the most essential facilities needed to operate an airport. This could cost anywhere from \$200 to \$500 million dollars, a fraction of the cost of

“The presence of settlements on 40 percent of Gaza’s land reduced access to alternative locations for the airport.”

Katz's proposed artificial island. With adequate political, material, and technical support, the first phase could be accomplished in 12 to 18 months.¹⁹ After the facility is established, focus should be turned toward creating a workforce that can operate and regulate the airport, as well as establishing the charter contracts for the aircraft that will serve the Gaza Strip. The benefit of phased implementation is that it avoids pouring in large sums of money before knowing with certainty that the project is proceeding accordingly. Milestones should be set, and upon their achievement, subsequent phases should be commenced to expand the airport's capacity. With time, more critical installations should be built to help

the facility operate efficiently, effectively, and independently of Gaza's crumbling infrastructure.

To re-establish air operations, there should be a limited number of destinations, accessible via the Mediterranean Sea, to regional hubs to allow passengers to travel anywhere in the world. The facility should be secured by a tight perimeter and include a residential complex for operations staff who come from outside of Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority would have significant representation in the facility to assist with passport and visa acquisition matters. Israel's security would be guaranteed by the United Nations through a variety of verifications-based measures to ensure that the facility is for civilian use only and to prevent smuggling. Egypt would be relieved of the negative humanitarian consequences of closing the Rafah border due to terrorism in northern Sinai. Egypt would also be assured that the airport is under an international umbrella, which would not compromise its historic influence in the Strip.

Some may question the feasibility of an airport in Gaza, given its current political, security, and economic hardships. Yet,

“Israel’s security would be guaranteed by the United Nations through a variety of verifications-based measures.”

it is precisely those conditions that make an internationally run airport necessary and useful. Since its 2005 disengagement from Gaza, Israel has been eager to disentangle itself from the Strip's affairs and has stressed that its interests there are security related. This means that an airport serving the Palestinians in Gaza, while ensuring appropriate use of the facility and preventing the smuggling of arms and restricted items, should be digestible to Israeli military and political establishments.

As for the Palestinians, it is understandable that they would resent not having control over the airport, given that the Oslo framework and the 1998 Wye River Agreement stipulated Palestinians' right to having civilian airports in the territories. However, because of the complete shift in the geopolitical atmosphere since the days of Oslo, it is impossible to make any progress on obtaining an airport using the Wye River framework, because that was tied to the Final Status Negotiations. Gaza cannot wait until the stalled peace talks resume. As such, Palestinians must demonstrate flexibility to get an airport that can be part of the infrastructure of a future Palestinian state, should negotiations mature into a comprehensive peace deal. U.N. management of the airport will guarantee the sustainability and survivability of the facility until the Palestinians can run it themselves. Any financial proceeds from the airport would go to cover the operational expenses of the facility, which should ultimately become

self-funding, even if the first few years of its operations require substantial donor investments.

Hamas has demonstrated flexibility toward proposals for having either a seaport or an airport under international management and supervision in the Gaza Strip. In response to stories in the Palestinian press about a proposal to establish a U.N.-operated and regulated airport in Gaza on the site of the former Gush Katif settlements, several Hamas leaders, including Khalil al-Hayya, Ziyad al-Zaza, and Yahya Moussa, have expressed openness to the concept.²⁰ As recently as February 2016, al-Hayya stated that Hamas wants international management and supervision of the airport and that “no illicit items or weapons would be smuggled through the facility.”²¹ To hold Hamas accountable to its promises and neutralize any threats to safety or security, regional players such as Qatar could prove vital in ensuring that the group does not interfere with the establishment and operation of the airport.

TURKEY-ISRAEL DEAL AND GAZA

The recent agreement between Israel and Turkey announced in July 2016 to restore diplomatic relations after years of tensions may seem like a step in the right direction geopolitically, given Ankara’s need to balance its interests with Israel and Russia.

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Under the deal, Israel will pay compensation to the families of Turkish activists who were killed in 2010 onboard the Mavi Marmara ship which attempted to break the maritime blockade of Gaza. In exchange, Turkey will be able to deliver humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza via the Israeli port of Ashdod, and will be able to embark on infrastructure projects pertaining to water and electricity in the coastal enclave.²² However, when it comes to Gaza, the move is ultimately limited in its impact and may complicate the political atmosphere in Gaza. This is due to the opposition of the Palestinian Authority and Egypt to having Turkey take on a major role, which could overshadow Egyptian and Palestinian Authority influence in the Strip.

In the early stages of the finalization of the recent Israel/Turkey deal, Egypt asked for “clarifications” from Israel regarding any progress in talks with Turkey. Cairo expressed discomfort about reconciliation, which would result in the loosening of the blockade or the establishment of a maritime corridor connecting Gaza to Turkey.²³ Senior Israeli officials have tried to mediate between Turkey and Egypt in order to alleviate the tension and soften Egypt’s opposition to Turkish involvement in Gaza, but to no avail so far. One official noted that Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was worried that any concession made to Turkey on Gaza will damage Israel's strategic ties with Cairo, which is angry with Ankara over the latter's support for the Muslim Brother-

“The Palestinian Authority has repeatedly opposed major Turkish influence in the coastal enclave.”

hood in Egypt and Gaza.²⁴ Moreover, after the Turkish rapprochement with Israel and Russia, it remains to be seen whether similar reconciliation efforts could be successful with Egypt, especially after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that steps taken for a possible reconciliation with Egypt would be different than the processes with Russia and Israel.²⁵ In essence, it is expected that Turkish-Egyptian relations will continue to be tumultuous in the near term. The Palestinian Authority has repeatedly opposed major Turkish influence in the coastal enclave as it fears that such a role could further divide the Palestinian Territories and could ultimately create a mini-state in Gaza, which is geographically and politically separated from the West Bank.²⁶

Despite the deal between Israel and Turkey, Gaza's needs remain woefully unfulfilled. Any meaningful and sustainable solutions to Gaza's shortages or Gazans' inability to

travel must be implemented under an international umbrella, with support from the Palestinian Authority, which is the legitimate representative of the people and guardian of the territories. Under an international umbrella, any nation or entity, including Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, other Gulf states, the European Union, the African Union, international NGOs, and others, can contribute to the rebuilding of Gaza. This would avoid entangling the Strip in narrow geopolitics pertaining to some regional players, while ensuring an international commitment to Gaza's recovery, and ultimately, its political reunification with the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority.

THE U.N. MUST DO MORE IN GAZA

When addressing the European parliament, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin called for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip and declared that doing so is in Israel's interest. He stated that “the dire economic straits, poverty, and lack of infrastructure in Gaza” hinder the achievement of any permanent agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians. He added that “Israel considers the rehabilitation of Gaza, as the economic development and equalizing of life standards on both Palestinian and Israeli part, to be both an ethical and security interest.”²⁷

Due to the complexity of the geopolitics that govern Gaza's affairs, hundreds of

thousands of people are facing the consequences of a situation over which they have no control. Even if some components of the blockade on the Strip must be maintained to prevent rearmament and smuggling operations by militants, something urgent must be done to reverse Gaza’s “de-development,” as it was described in the U.N.’s own report in which it warns that Gaza may not be livable within a few years.²⁸ People’s inability to travel freely (in a manner consistent with Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) is a significant component of why life is becoming untenable in the Strip.

Establishing a U.N.-run and managed humanitarian airport at a new location inside the Gaza Strip will turn the Gaza airport issue from a sidelined subject into a strategic and pragmatic opportunity to stabilize the Strip. It would alleviate the sheer suffering experienced by Gazans from their inability to travel freely while addressing Israeli and Egyptian security needs. It would serve as a guarantee to the Palestinian Authority that Gaza will not be a breakaway region from the territories envisioned to constitute a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders. In such an arrangement, Hamas would stay out of the operation of the airport, just as it already does with current U.N.-run services and programs in the Strip. Lastly, humanitarian air operations in Gaza would set the stage for sustainable long-term arrangements to

prevent more rounds of fighting between Israel and armed factions in the coastal enclave. The short-lived European Union Border Assistance Mission (EU-BAM), which managed the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, could be a model for U.N. administration of the proposed airport.²⁹

The United Nations must do everything possible to creatively address the chronic hardships and issues Gazan civilians experience simply because they are born and live in Gaza. The United Nations does great work supporting the local Palestinian population, but it can do more, particularly with humanitarian aviation, to extend its reach to the coastal Strip.

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In his most recent, and perhaps final, visit to Gaza as the U.N.’s secretary general, Ban Ki-moon stated that the situation in Gaza constitutes “collective punishment,” noting that some 70 percent of Gaza’s population is in need of humanitarian assistance and that “over half of Gaza’s youth have little to no job prospects or horizons of hope.”³⁰ Ban reiterated that he stands with the people of Gaza, telling them that “the U.N. will always be with you.”³¹

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