BY YOSSI KRAUSZ

A CLOSER LOOK

ANALYZING THE NEWS THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Though Israel left Gaza in 2005, it has remained a thorn in the side of the country ever since. Rocket volleys and attack tunnels have been a physical threat, while the propaganda use of Gaza—due to the continuing Israeli control of most access points to the seaside region—may almost be as threatening.

That Israel is preventing an enemy sworn to its destruction—Hamas, initially elected to power by the people of the Gaza Strip—from getting weapons seems hardly of concern to Europeans and BDS supporters who rail against the Gaza blockade. According to these opponents of Israel, Gaza is an "open-air prison" and Israel is a cruel jailer. And they have used that to attack Israel in the media.

At the moment, Gaza's legal imports and exports come almost exclusively through Israeli-controlled border crossings. Despite being open on one side to the water, Gaza has no port. But Likud MK Yisrael Katz, who is both Transportation Minister and Intelligence Minister, has been pushing a plan in recent days that would fix that, as has been reported on in international media.

His idea? Create an island off the coast of Gaza that would serve as a port. Connect that island to the mainland with a causeway that would be controlled by Israel, allowing security to be maintained. Israel would be able to ensure that weapons and other tools of the terrorist would not be brought into Gaza.

Gilead Sher, a senior research fellow and the head of the Center for Applied Negotiations at the Institute for National Security Studies, recently wrote an article outlining the importance and prerequisites for a Gaza port. As he pointed out, contracts for the construction of a port in Gaza were already being signed in 1994 and construction actually started in 2000, until Israel halted it soon afterward. The security threat was just too great, with Hamas in charge of Gaza.



"It's not a purely technical issue, as some would like to present it." —Gilead Sher

In his analysis, Sher pointed out that a seaport controlled by Israel will likely not satisfy Hamas in its demands for a port. At the same time, it will enable the Gazan populace to do business more easily and rebuild their damaged infrastructure.

Sher pointed out that there were a number of different ideas about a port for Gaza. It could be built on the Gaza shore. It could be built offshore, like Minister Katz's proposal. It could be built in Ashdod, next to the Israeli port, and designated for Gazan import and export. Or it could even be built in Cyprus.

In an interview with *Ami*, Sher said, "All these options are secondary. But the primary concern is security. It's not a purely technical or infrastructural issue, as some would like to present it. And we can't make the same mistakes that have been made in the past."

But Minister Katz's spokesperson made it clear, in emails to *Ami*, that his plan for a Gaza island goes beyond merely making a port to supply Gaza with a way to do business. In fact, his Gaza island would be a way of entirely cutting off Gaza from Israel, once and for all.

"For years, I have been calling to promote the 'civil separation' plan," Katz said in a statement, "[with] cessation of the supply of electricity, water, fuel, food and all other products, demilitarization of Gaza from rockets and tunnels and creating a border between Israel and Gaza."

The Rafah border with Egypt, now normally closed, would have to be opened. And the island would supply everything else that Gaza needs.

"On the island, there will be built a port, energy and desalination facilities and eventually an airport. It would also be possible to build hotels on the island. The island will be connected to Gaza by a bridge

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Port of Gaza

Will an Island for Gaza Bring Peace?

A FAR-FETCHED PLAN OR A VISIONARY ONE?

that will have a security checkpoint and it will be fully controlled by international security forces for one hundred years, with Israeli control at sea. The Palestinians will take part in the operation of the port and the airport and the running of the hotels. Private homes will not be built on the island.

"Thus Israel will no longer have responsibility for the Palestinians, and they will be allowed full civil liberties. Israel will maintain its security, without fear of weapons smuggled by sea or of aerial threats. Operation of the island will be contingent on the continued demilitarization of Gaza.

"In the case of Gaza being militarized, the crossing will be blocked at the checkpoint and any activity will be stopped. Israel will maintain a strong deterrent capability at the border with Gaza, and will forcefully respond to any fire directed at its territory, or to attempts to violate the demilitarization arrangements."

In a sense, Katz's plan would leave Gaza to its own devices. At the same time, the security bridge would allow Israel to cut off Gaza from its lifeline whenever hostilities arise. (An article in the *Washington Post* suggested that the bridge could easily be bombed by Israel.)

Would such a radical plan be acceptable to the world at large? That's unclear. Since Katz's plan calls for the international community to pay for the construction of the island, they would have to find the interest.

At the moment, the relationship Israel has with Hamas doesn't seem likely to enable the Katz plan to go forward. At the same time, it appears that the minister believes that a leap forward is necessary for defanging Hamas.



A computer-generated image of what such an island would look like off the coast of the Gaza Strip.

Would such an island really blunt European criticism of Israel? Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky, a research associate at INSS who studies international stigmatization of Israel, told *Ami* that alleviating the economic and infrastructure problems of Gaza would undoubtedly greatly decrease the pressure being brought to bear on Israel.

"Nevertheless," she noted, "such a humanitarian gesture should be part of a larger peace process between Israel and the PA aimed towards the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Criticism of Israel will continue so long as the status quo and the lack of an Israeli-Palestinian process persist.

"The ongoing humanitarian problem in Gaza is certainly not in Israel's interest and if Israel can play a creative, constructive and substantial role in alleviating the situation—further [pointing] to Hamas' inability to cater to the Palestinian population's needs—this, in my opinion, is a welcome initiative."

It sounds like a strange fantasy, but an island off the coast of Gaza might make a welcome change from the current reality. ●

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