

A port for Gaza – in Sinai?

Dr. Asaf Ashar, a leading port and international shipping expert, says setting up a port for the Strip in Egypt is the most practical solution

By YAAKOV LAPPIN

Setting up a secure shipping port for the Gaza Strip is seen by members of the defense establishment as a vital, positive step that will relieve pressure on the Gazan economy – held hostage by Gaza’s radical rulers, Hamas – and that can significantly delay the next conflict.

The next war with Hamas might begin when the Islamist regime feels the need to distract Gazans from the economic chaos it is leading them into. A port, enabling Gazan civilians to import from and export to the outside world, would ease pressure on the Strip’s long-suffering civilian population of nearly two million, and could have a deterrent factor on Hamas in the future.

While the debate in Israel about whether and how to build a port for Gaza continues, Transportation Minister Israel Katz has been the most vocal member of the cabinet on the issue. He has proposed the construction of an artificial island off the Gazan coast, with Israel being responsible for inspecting and securing all movement in and out of the deepwater port. A bridge, with a checkpoint, would connect the port to the Gazan mainland.

Yet a leading US-based Israeli ports and waterways expert has recently told *The Jerusalem Post* that while a port for Gaza is a necessity, the artificial island proposal is a nonstarter.

Dr. Asaf Ashar is a research professor (emeritus) with the National Ports & Waterways Initiative, a program of the University of New Orleans. Previously, Ashar was senior port planner with the Port of Seattle, and before that he was a senior adviser with the Israeli Ports and Railways Authority.

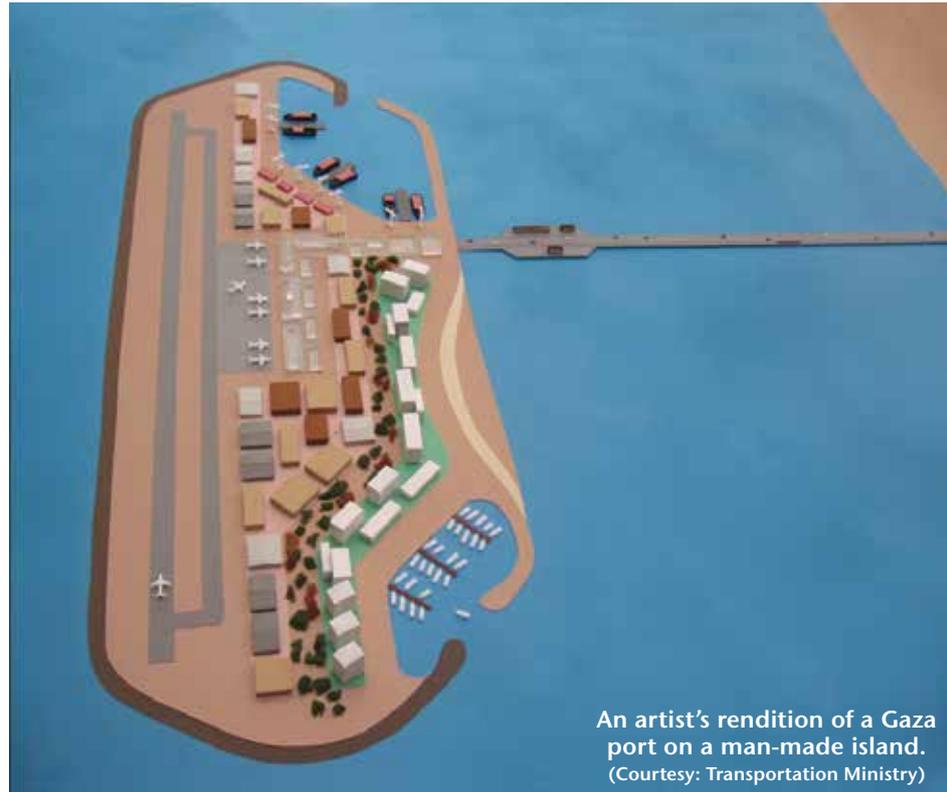
Ashar believes that a smaller port can and should be built in Egypt’s Sinai, in the coastal town of El-Arish, southwest of Gaza.

The capital of the North Sinai Governorate, El-Arish is due to expand its existing port in any case, Ashar said, and the running costs of building Gaza’s port there, rather than out at sea on a man-made island, are many times lower. The cost of building an artificial island and facilities could hit \$5 billion, Ashar said. A port at El-Arish, which can handle small container ships, could cost between \$300m. and \$500m. to build.

Ashar has spent the past 40 years working on ports, shipping and transportation systems in the US and 30 other countries. He has been involved in the strategic planning of national and regional port development plans, including deep-sea and short-sea ports (for coastal trade), among other projects. He is currently engaged in a study of the impact of the expanded Panama Canal and the larger ships that pass through it on US ports.

In the past, Gaza had a small port (not for containers) and an airport, which were bombed by Israel after Hamas took over and began rocketing the South. Since then, Hamas has demanded a new port, as a symbol of its independence.

Several years ago, Gaza’s chief port



An artist's rendition of a Gaza port on a man-made island. (Courtesy: Transportation Ministry)

engineer attended one of Ashar’s lectures in Israel. He told him of his wish to build a small port in Gaza, and the idea has been on Ashar’s mind, despite his dealing with faraway, large-scale international projects.

Due to its small size, an island port would struggle to deal with containers and large cranes which are set features of modern shipping, Ashar argued. An eight- to 10-lane road for trucks bringing in and removing goods would also be needed, and there would be no room for such traffic on a small island and through the congested Gaza City.

Modern shipping consists of container vessels, Ashar told the *Post*. Each container is six to 12 meters – the length of a truck, he said. With large ships today the size of four soccer stadiums, many square kilometers are needed around the port itself to deal with goods. In heavily populated, crowded Gaza, there is no room for building access roads and freeways for transiting containers, Ashar said.

Additionally, there must be room for an industrial area to grow around the port, such as those that can be found near Ashdod and Haifa.

Ashar envisaged the El-Arish port area turning into a regional hub by acting as a feeder port to larger regional ports. He also envisaged a free trade zone there.

“Light industries need to be set up around the port area,” he said. “In Gaza, there is no free space, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad are all highly armed and would not give up space. I’ve seen evacuation zones for ports in Indonesia and Brazil turn into shooting zones [due to unwillingness by residents to leave their homes],” Ashar said.

A port at El-Arish could bypass such problems and fulfill the requirements needed to

create a new reality for Gaza. It could even enable a rail link with Gaza and the West Bank, Ashar added.

“El-Arish already has a rail line. If we link up the line to Hebron or, maybe, to Nablus, the container trains can travel via Beersheba to El-Arish, and from there to Gaza. It is not such a problem to build. No bridges or islands are needed. This is practical,” he said.

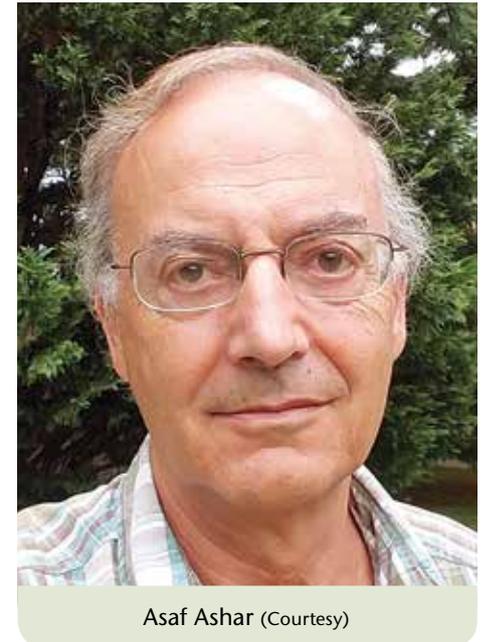
That, in turn, would enable El-Arish to become the “International Port of Palestine,” serving the whole of the Palestinian territories, he added. It is not technically feasible to set up rail links for container cargo trains that are over a kilometer long on a small, man-made island, he stated.

While building an island would take years and could create a host of ecological problems, such as a runaway sand accumulation problem stretching from Sinai to Tel Aviv, or disruption of littoral (coastal) streams, a port at El-Arish would circumvent such hazards.

A port on the Sinai Peninsula would be able to deal with container ships, facilitating trade, and let Gaza import other cargoes such as gasoline, grains and fresh produce.

Ashar said the idea of countries leasing international ports to others is well established. Landlocked Bolivia, which lost its Pacific coastline after a 19th-century war with Chile, has a 99-year port leasing agreement with Peru. Egypt itself leased the Suez Canal to the Suez Canal Company for 99 years in the previous century.

Egypt would benefit financially from a port at El-Arish, Ashar said. “The Egyptians would be very happy if someone built a port there. There would be many economic



Asaf Ashar (Courtesy)

and political benefits to the impoverished and terror-stricken region of northern Sinai. They also do not want a time bomb going off in Gaza,” he added.

Responding to Ashar’s comments, Katz said that Egypt is not at all willing to provide Gaza with a port under Egyptian supervision.

Katz said Ashar’s proposals “remind one of the story about how to catch a bird by placing salt on its tail,” the minister told the *Post*. “If the Egyptians were willing to do this, there would be no problem. The only realistic solution is setting an artificial island off the Gazan coast, and to build a seaport on it. This will give Gaza a humanitarian and economic outlet to the world, without endangering Israeli security.”

The Egyptian Embassy in Tel Aviv did not immediately comment on the issue.

“The logic I see is that this would bring the Egyptians a lot of economic benefits,” Ashar said. “The Palestinians and Egyptians will considerably save on the construction cost by sharing in the cost of building breakwaters, digging access channels and installing navigation aids. Hence, the cooperation will benefit both parties.”

Gaza would see tangible differences in its economic outlook. Should the idea turn into reality, “suddenly, an economic horizon would appear in Gaza,” Ashar said. “A whole industry would pop up around it. Tens of thousands of people could work there,” he added. “At the moment, Hamas has nothing positive that it can show its people.”

Addressing security concerns, Ashar said Egyptian and international inspectors could use gamma or X-ray machines to examine every container. “The Egyptians already do this for their own cargo. The Egyptians want to develop northern Sinai, where Beduin also lack an economic horizon,” he said. That, in turn, could help decrease Islamic State terrorism in Sinai.

“It is in our and Egypt’s interest for Gaza to have its own port,” Ashar said. ■